

# **The Metaphysics of Trauma**

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## **Abstract**

Trauma, which has become a hallmark of everyday life in the modern world, forms part of the broader mental health crisis that afflicts society today. It also, arguably, reflects a lost sense of the sacred. Throughout humanity's diverse cultures, suffering is understood to be intrinsic to the larger fabric of life in this world; trauma, therefore, is a direct consequence of not being able to properly integrate suffering into one's life. However, this is not to simply equate suffering with trauma, or trauma with illness. The prevalence of acute traumatic suffering has always been a major cause of disbelief in religion. Yet the increased weakening of faith in the modern world has provoked a particularly severe spiritual crisis, which could be dubbed the "trauma of secularism." Through recourse to traditional metaphysics, we can begin to understand the transpersonal

dimension of this phenomenon and thus accurately assess, diagnose and provide adequate treatment. It will be argued that healing and wholeness cannot take place outside the purview of a “sacred science,” the spiritual dimension of which transcends the limitations of mainstream psychology and its profusion of profane therapies.

Keywords: Trauma, Psychology, Metaphysics, Religion, Healing

“He knows the pain ... therefore he does not have it.”<sup>1</sup>

– Tao Te Ching

“God comes to you in the disguise of suffering.”<sup>2</sup>

– Ānandamayī Mā

“The spirit of a man will sustain his infirmity, but a wounded spirit who can bear?”

– Proverbs 18:14

“If you only knew the worth of suffering, / You would have chosen it ahead of anything.”<sup>3</sup>

– Angelus Silesius

“Where there is pain, the cure will come.”<sup>4</sup>

– Rūmī

## Introduction

To have experienced something so painful that words cannot describe it; to feel so wounded that we do not want to remember what happened to us, even though we cannot forget; to be trapped within the isolated confines of our own skin, as if held captive like a prisoner, yet feeling safe neither within ourselves or in the outside world; to be all alone with the turmoil inside us, our only companion being the troubling thoughts that assail our minds; to be unable to live in the world or to focus on our immediate experience and what transcends it, so that this inability becomes itself a reminder of the pain we feel; to know that this experience has come to define us, even though we are unable to free ourselves from its all-encompassing grip (all the while yearning to be liberated from this affliction): all of these ordeals offer a glimpse into the world of trauma.

As if out of nowhere, psychological *trauma* has become a commonly used term in everyday life. Although use of this word to signify a profound psychological wound is recent, it has long been used in the medical profession. Yet the reality of suffering goes back since time immemorial, recognized as central to human existence; and trauma may be understood as the inability to adequately integrate suffering into our lives. Many people experience traumatic events, yet not everyone becomes traumatized as a result. For this reason, it is important not to equate having lived through a potentially traumatic experience with trauma itself. What is distinctive about the present-day understanding of trauma or suffering is that it has become a problem to be ultimately resolved at a purely worldly level. In other words, that it can be eliminated from the human condition once and for all so that we may be allowed to live in a state of unfettered happiness. This is to overlook the nature of our existence in an ephemeral world that is replete with trials and tribulations. Alternatively, “We must not wish for the disappearance of any of our troubles, but grace to transform them.”<sup>5</sup> The so-called problem of trauma or suffering is inseparable from

the loss of a sense of the sacred, which is intrinsic to the condition of our *samsāric* or fallen state.

The fact that trauma, on a collective level, is so widely discussed today reveals not only our vulnerability, but the precarious state – if not spiritual crisis – of the modern world. This raises the question: Is there something triggering about the modern world itself that is creating these conditions? Or is it just a matter of us now having a heightened awareness of the different types of trauma that are prevalent today: complex trauma, historical trauma, and intergenerational trauma? There is something peculiar about this phenomenon, as just about everyone has been wounded by it, in a way that is inseparable from the larger mental health crisis in our topsy-turvy era.

### **The Wounds of Secularism**

On closer consideration, there appears to be a deeper dimension to the mass traumatization we see in present day, which often goes unnoticed. This is a form of anguish due to the loss of a sense of the sacred – what we might call the *trauma of secularism*. The vacuum that has been created in the modern world due to the loss of religion is not something that should be taken lightly, yet it is often unrecognized because of the hegemonic dominance of science and its empirical epistemology that rules out alternative ways of knowing reality. However, for many people, illness, suffering or trauma can – in themselves – impel a search for the sacred.

An important element missing in early attempts to define adverse experiences is the fragmentation that occurs within ourselves. This can occur when our transpersonal Self is lost sight of which, in turn, leads people to exclusively identify who they are with their mind-sense-body complex. A traumatic event can split our identity and cause a myriad of problems. Trauma can thus be defined as “an event in the subject’s life defined by its intensity, by the subject’s

incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organization.”<sup>6</sup>

The founder of the talking-cure, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), wrote: “We apply it [trauma] to an experience which within a short period of time presents the mind with an increase of stimulus too powerful to be dealt with or worked off in the normal way, and this must result in permanent disturbances of the manner in which the energy operates.”<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere he wrote: “Neurosis could ... be equated with a traumatic illness and would come about owing to inability to deal with an experience whose affective colouring was excessively powerful.”<sup>8</sup>

When human beings experienced suffering – prior to the emergence of the modern world – it did not cause them to lose their faith; yet the existence of trauma today is, in many cases, the chief cause of unbelief. The argument is that if a powerful and benevolent divine reality existed, why do we find so much evil and suffering in the world? As the wound inflicted on our collective psyche has become more palpable in the present age, there is perhaps nothing more urgent than the need to revive a true psychology – grounded in metaphysics – or “science of the soul” that can effect the healing required to restore our spiritual health.

### **The Significance of Anguish**

Among many spiritual traditions, illness, suffering, and trauma are viewed as a blessing because they provide an opportunity to purify and transform ourselves, thus strengthening our reliance on the Divine. As St. Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582) affirms: “Suffering is to purify this soul.”<sup>9</sup> However, this does not necessarily happen automatically for it often requires us to undergo the discipline of submitting to a divinely revealed therapy as found in all spiritual traditions. There is an intimate relationship between suffering or

trauma and the spiritual path, yet we need to be careful with our terminology here because we are not equating suffering with trauma or trauma with illness *per se*; but, rather, acknowledging that a transition through suffering or an illness is a component of healing trauma.

Through our participation in one of humanity's revealed religions, we may undergo *metanoia* or a profound 'change of heart,' which is the true source of all healing. The "dark night of the soul" as expounded by the Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross (1542–1591) conveys the experience of a total absence of divine light and hope. This necessitated a great deal of suffering for St. John, but the spiritual journey out of this abyss led him to a far-reaching transformation of his being. The Buddha taught that human existence consists of an abiding dissatisfaction, known as *dukkha* (Pāli; Sanskrit: *duḥkha*) and he became awakened to the 'Four Noble Truths' which are: (1) the existence of suffering; (2) the cause of suffering; (3) the end of suffering; and (4) the path leading out of suffering. Undertaking a spiritual path can thus be seen as a remedy to tackle the effects of suffering, pain, or even trauma, by restoring wholeness to our psyche.

With the rise of trauma-informed therapies, it is often overlooked that the anguish of living in a world devoid of spiritual nourishment is tremendously detrimental, as this has proven to be an invaluable support for human resilience and well-being. Psychology today attempts to assess, diagnose, and treat trauma without acknowledging the anguish caused by secularism. Without understanding the historical developments that led to the rise of modernity—the fruition of the Age of Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—it is difficult to understand how this profane trajectory radically undermined the collective psyche. The discipline of modern psychology has unapologetically participated in this anti-spiritual outlook which, at the same time – paradoxically and unknowingly – has also attempted to remedy the situation. Bereft of any metaphysical foundations, psychology today

remains adrift in a self-contradictory morass because it has failed to address the problem at its root.

By being born, we are subject to duality, which leads to an estrangement from the Absolute in this world. As such, entry into our temporal world of relativity inflicts a psychic wound in us. “The individual suffers because he perceives duality.... Find the One everywhere and in everything and there will be an end to pain and suffering.”<sup>10</sup> Human beings find themselves trapped in a realm of perishable forms that expose us to separation, suffering, and death. Beyond manifestation, there is no separate self that suffers or can be traumatized. Due to their fallen condition, Adam and Eve lost their capacity for direct spiritual knowing, causing alienation from the Divine and discord between themselves. This led to the infliction of the primordial wound – a loss of the sense of the sacred and the corruption of the Intellect or “eye of the heart”; that part of us which religious traditions assert is our means of discerning spiritual reality directly.

It could be said that this wound is exacerbated by all other suffering or trauma in that it keeps us bound to our experience of this temporal reality, especially when we face adverse events. To lose our intrinsic spiritual vision is to abide in a *cul-de-sac* of *profound darkness*. “The house without a window is hell” says *Rūmī*, adding: “The foundation of religion ... is to make windows!”<sup>11</sup>

The obscuration of our “eye of the heart” helps us to understand the well-known declaration by Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) that “Hell is other people!”<sup>12</sup> This outlook aptly frames the predicament of the modernist perspective which views everything, and everyone, as a problem.

Emotionally detrimental experiences can often provoke us to view others as hellish, but it is the hell we harbor within us of which we ought to be most fearful, because everything begins to mirror this overwhelming abyss that we project onto the world. This, in turn, prevents us from seeing our divine true self, which is immanent in

all people and living things. It is only by awakening the “eye of the heart” that life’s conflicts can be ameliorated and lasting mental health achieved.

Mainstream therapies are unable to treat the whole person as they often just target the treatment of symptoms, not the root cause of our mental health difficulties. Rarely do we hear asked: “What is behind the symptom?”<sup>13</sup> Yet if you trace this back to its source, we often find a traumatic event, which may be the “overarching rubric under which most other disorders are subordinated.”<sup>14</sup> Yet it could be said that, at the heart of all traumas, is our *samsāric* or fallen state. Many therapists and researchers are finding that numerous mental health diagnostic categories overlap and are triggered by a traumatic event. There is a strong connection between trauma, mental disturbance, physical illness, and addiction. Yet, through recourse to spiritual means, we may be better placed to access the foundations of trauma, to heal its wounds, and to restore wholeness.

At the root of the crisis in modern psychology is the ‘Cartesian bifurcation,’ the dualism between mind and body (along with matter) that has plagued the mindset of the contemporary West since the seventeenth century. In this myopic and truncated outlook, human beings become separate from reality, and everything is objectified, further entrenching the psyche in a subject-object dichotomy. This perpetuates the illusion of a fragmented worldview and an isolated self, which severs to undermine our relationship to the sacred. This leads to a truncated identity that desacralizes the cosmos and traumatizes humanity. When the Intellect or “eye of the heart” is restored to its integral condition, the person no longer views reality as fragmented but, rather, considers each phenomenon as mirroring the unity of this created order.

Every true “science of the soul” takes into account the human psyche in light of sacred cosmology:

In the Golden Age, all people experienced their essence, no holes. Then came the Silver Age as essence diminished and the holes



began to appear; then the Bronze Age. Now we're in the Iron Age. It's the darkest, heaviest. Iron is really nothing but defense. We can sometimes feel the quality of iron in our own defenses: the hardness, the determination to protect ourselves. So this is one way of viewing the present time—all defenses against holes.<sup>15</sup>

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947) acknowledges the connection between human behavior and the underlying cosmic order: “The pattern of man’s behavior is not to be found in any code, but in the principles of the universe, which is continually revealing to us *its own nature*.”<sup>16</sup> Today, psychology and the field of mental health do not consider cosmic cycles and how they determine the human mind according to the time and place in which it finds itself. Nor do they account for how these changes are connected to the gradual distancing of the human psyche from the Spirit, which is essential to any assessment, diagnosis, and treatment with a view to restoring wholeness.

Across the diverse traditional cultures of humanity, this bifurcation does not exist, as it is recognized that we are composed of Spirit, soul, and body. Within each of the world’s religions –Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and the traditions of the First Peoples – there exists a corresponding psychology that is fully integrated and grounded in the sacred. To provide wholeness and healing to the human psyche requires metaphysics to restore an ontological dimension to psychology so that it can become, once again, a true “science of the soul.” It is only through such a ‘salvific’ psychology that the discipline can be rehabilitated as something that will overcome the acute limitations of its modern Western form.

The spiritual traditions all teach that human faculties, including our emotions, need to be contained within their proper sphere in order to be properly harmonized. However, emotions are not to be elevated to the level of principles that guide our thoughts and behavior; to do so would lead to an unstable psyche. Contrary to the

notion that “The psyche is a self-regulating system that maintains its equilibrium just as the body does,”<sup>17</sup> it is, in fact, the spiritual dimension that regulates the soul and the body. The Intellect – being synonymous with Spirit – is above all the faculties, including the psycho-physical order, which integrates them.

The intermediary realm of the human psyche is mysterious, as has been acknowledged: “There is nothing so unknown to the soul as herself.”<sup>18</sup> For this reason, to understand and heal the human psyche requires a spiritual ‘infusion’ from what transcends it. If, when in a state of disequilibrium, emotions are allowed to direct our lives, then exposure to suffering and trauma will become considerably heightened. When we are feeling depressed or anxious, it does not necessarily mean that the entire world is out of balance; and likewise, if we are hurt, it should not suggest that the Divine is somehow unjust towards us. Similarly, if we encounter personal tragedy, this does not entail that the rest of creation has been harmed. We need to add a caveat here that, although the existential alienation that many feel today is a sign of a decline in the cosmic cycle, it needs to be made clear that not everything we experience in our lives is necessarily a consequence of the *Kali-Yuga* or “Dark Age.” Those who have sundered themselves from religion, may struggle more when experiencing suffering or may be ‘triggered’ to a larger extent than those who adhere to a revealed religion. According to Gai Eaton (1921–2010):

When misfortune strikes profane people they suffer on two levels and their pain is doubled. On the one hand, there is the misfortune as such and the pain they feel; on the other, there is the belief that it should never have happened and that its happening proves something very bitter and very ugly about the nature of the world (and if they bring God into it, then about the nature of God). They suffer because ‘something is wrong’; and then they suffer again because ‘everything is wrong’.<sup>19</sup>

Because human beings are subject to the constraints of time and cannot see into the future, they cannot fully grasp why certain things happen in the world or whether there is any divine purpose behind them. In other words, the significance of such events cannot be understood *sub specie aeternitatis* ('under the aspect of eternity'). The book of *Ecclesiastes* declares: "That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been" (3:15). The well-known Chinese allegory of the horse that ran away also comes to mind here:

The poor old man ... lived with his son in a ruined fort at the top of a hill. He owned a horse which strayed off one day, whereupon the neighbours came to offer sympathy at his loss. 'What makes you supposed that this is misfortune?' the old man asked. Later the horse returned accompanied by several wild horses and this time the neighbours came to congratulate him on his good luck. 'What makes you think this is good luck?' he enquired. Having a number of horses now available, the son took to riding and, as a result, broke his leg. Once more the neighbours rallied round to express sympathy and once again the old man asked how they could know that this was misfortune. Then the next year war broke out and because he was lame the son was exempt from going to the war.<sup>20</sup>

Existence in our ephemeral world consists of both gifts and losses. Much of our well-being depends on how we view these vicissitudes. According to the Austrian psychotherapist Alfred Adler (1870–1937): "We do not suffer from the shock of [traumatic] experiences ... we make out of them just what suits our purposes."<sup>21</sup> Because of the limited purview into our existence, we are unable to readily discern what is inimical to us or in our best interests, seeing as events in life may be other than how they appear. We recall that "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away" (Job 1:21).

The condition known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is well known today. It concerns the experience of terrifying events with which we cannot cope. There may also be flashbacks or a vivid

experience where the person relives certain aspects of a traumatic episode as if it were occurring here-and-now. Other symptoms may include nightmares, severe anxiety, or uncontrollable thoughts pertaining to the event. It is essential not to pathologize trauma and equate it with mental illness, as it is an event that *happened* to them; it is not who the person *is*. The same goes for a person suffering from mental illness; the diagnosis is not who we truly are. We cannot “treat” the impact of war, rape, molestation, natural calamities, or any other horrific encounter; what has occurred cannot be undone. With that said, we can treat the imprints of trauma on the human psyche and body.

Aeschylus (c. 525–c. 456) alludes to the wisdom that can be conferred by trauma:

“Knowledge won through suffering. / Drop, drop—in our sleep, upon the heart / sorrow falls, memory’s pain, / and to us, though against our very will, / even in our own despite, / comes wisdom / by the awful grace of God.”<sup>22</sup>

The arising of metaphysical insight may help us to see that trauma does not define us, and that suffering can never touch our true self. Furthermore, we are called to be receptive to what adverse experiences have to teach us, perplexing or enigmatic though they may be. The great mystical poet of Tibet, Milarepa (c. 1052–c. 1135), shares the transformative experience of the loss of his most prized possession, demonstrating the impermanence of all phenomena:

I once had a pot, now I do not....

This clay pot so important, the whole of my wealth,  
Becomes my lama [teacher] in the moment it breaks,  
Teaching impermanence, how amazing!<sup>23</sup>

Religion and spirituality are vital in supporting psychological integration and resilience. Yet, when cut off from sacred traditions,

people are more prone to become attached to their suffering, rather than seeing it as an inevitable feature of a finite, transitory, and imperfect world.

There are many cases today in which the effects of a traumatic event do not dissipate on their own, but rather fester and worsen: “The psychical trauma—or more precisely the memory of the trauma—acts like a foreign body which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work.”<sup>24</sup> Thus the soul’s response to trauma often becomes the problem more so than the traumatic event itself.

People will be unable to overcome traumatic events unless they acknowledge what has happened to them. Mainstream psychology often constructs a narrative to explain why a person thinks and behaves in the way they do. In the words of Sigmund Freud: “While the patient lives [the trauma] through as something real and actual, we have to accomplish the therapeutic task, which consists chiefly in translating it back again into terms of the past.”<sup>25</sup> Dating back to the earliest beginnings of the “talking cure,” it has been assumed that trauma “immediately and permanently disappeared when we had succeeded in bringing clearly to light the memory of the event by which it was provoked and in arousing its accompanying affect.”<sup>26</sup> However, this is not so easy to do, as traumatic events can transcend the limits of language and thus remain ineffable.

As trauma is pre-verbal, not having the language to speak about it can instill a great deal of fear and anxiety. William Shakespeare (1564–1616) writes: “O horror, horror, horror! Tongue nor heart cannot conceive nor name thee! Confusion now hath made his masterpiece!”<sup>27</sup> The saints and sages remind us that Ultimate Reality or the Absolute escapes all attempts to be captured in words. Although language cannot contain what transcends the psychophysical order, it can help point to the Real, if informed by traditional metaphysics.<sup>28</sup>

Words can be useful if we understand them in the way indicated by the Buddha; namely as a finger pointing at the moon. In the Taoist tradition, we find the affirmation: “The Way that can be told of is not an Unvarying Way.”<sup>29</sup> The mindful use of language can be therapeutic, as Shakespeare points out: “Give sorrow words: the grief that does not speak / Whispers the o’er-fraught heart, and bids it break.”<sup>30</sup> While mainstream talking therapies can contribute to symptom reduction or management, they are not enough to support healing and wholeness; a metaphysics with a sacred orientation is also needed to fully understand the non-verbal cues that are linked to the human ternary of Spirit, soul, and body.

As every person is fundamentally unique, we need to exercise extreme humility when entering into a therapeutic relationship with those seeking help. The importance of authentic presence and empathy, including silence and the willingness to listen deeply, is essential in treating people with trauma. What is missing from mainstream approaches to psychology is the transpersonal dimension, which no longer informs the discipline’s outlook.

### **Resolving Disturbance Through Metaphysics**

Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl (1905–1997) documents how faith provided strength and resilience to those who survived the atrocities of the Holocaust: “They were able to retreat from their terrible surroundings to a life of inner riches and spiritual freedom.”<sup>31</sup> Frankl starkly asserts that the “cure is self-transcendence.”<sup>32</sup> Fritz Perls (1893–1970) is correct, in principle, when he remarks that “You never overcome *anything* by resisting it. You only can overcome something by going deeper into it.... Whatever it is, if you go deeply enough into it, then it will disappear; it will be assimilated”;<sup>33</sup> however, without access to a reality that transcends the human condition, there is no agency to remedy our suffering or trauma, or to reintegrate the human psyche into the sacred.

It is the transpersonal dimension that guides the assessment, treatment, and healing of a person. Therefore, being a wayfarer on a spiritual path is indispensable. As St. John Cassian (c. 360–c. 435) writes: “The Doctor of our souls has also placed the remedy in the hidden regions of the soul.”<sup>34</sup> According to ‘Alī ibn Abī Tālib (d. 661): “Your cure is within you, but you do not know.”<sup>35</sup> Being an active witness to another person’s suffering can be therapeutic in and of itself when framed in a spiritual context. Rūmī says: “Your ears are turned entirely toward the cries of the distressed, and your eyes totally toward the weeping of those who have suffered injustice—thus you apply salve to their wounds and extend a helping hand.”<sup>36</sup>

*As the saints and sages of all traditions attest, there is no trauma that cannot be healed and from which we cannot move beyond. We were, after all, born whole and complete, and it is this fact that confers a much-needed context. In the words of Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998), trauma “has no right to be absolute; it is there to be overcome and to be assimilated in view of that which is the reason for being of our life and of our very existence.”*<sup>37</sup>

In essence, it is the way in which things are perceived (rather than events in themselves) that either supports our recovery and spiritual health or disturbs the equilibrium of the human psyche. *We recall that “God burdens a soul only to its capacity” (Qur’ān 2:286), and, likewise, “God ... will not suffer you ... above that ye are able ... to bear” (1 Corinthians 10:13).* We must not minimize human suffering, as each person has their own unique trials in this reality; however, we must also not forget that all suffering including trauma has an underlying meaning, for “A suffering which has no possible use would be pure evil.”<sup>38</sup>

Regarding the spiritual meaning of suffering, Śrī Rāmakrishna (1836–1886), said: “You are suffering; but your illness has a deep meaning.”<sup>39</sup> Śrī Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950) goes as far as to say: “Suffering is the way for Realisation of God.”<sup>40</sup> As Śrī

Ānandamayī Mā (1896–1982) stated: “By sorrow does the Lord dispel sorrow and by adversity does He destroy adversity. When this is done He sends no more suffering—this must be borne in the mind at all times.”<sup>41</sup> Hehaka Sapa, or Black Elk (1863–1950), voices the importance of self-sacrifice in the form of intentional suffering: “I shall ... offer my body and soul to *Wakan-Tanka* [Great Spirit] ... that our people may live.”<sup>42</sup> Meister Eckhart (1260–1328) addresses the spiritual significance of adversity: “Everything the good man suffers for God’s sake, he suffers in God, and God is suffering with him in his suffering. But if my suffering is in God and God is suffering with me, how then can suffering be sorrow to me, if suffering loses its sorrow, and my sorrow is in God, and my sorrow is God?”<sup>43</sup> Eckhart adds: “Since you ... know that it is God’s will ... do not consider any pain as pain.”<sup>44</sup>

Within the Christian tradition, the experience of suffering can unite the person with the suffering of Christ and its redemptive power. Syncretica (c. 270–c. 350) equates suffering to a medicine that can heal: “In the same way that a powerful medicine cures an illness, so illness itself is a medicine.”<sup>45</sup> St. Maximus the Confessor (c. 580–662) notes: “The person who truly wishes to be healed is he who does not refuse treatment. This treatment consists of the pain and distress brought on by various misfortunes. He who refuses them does not realize what they accomplish in this world or what he will gain from them when he departs this life.”<sup>46</sup> Similarly, the mystic and physician Paracelsus (1493–1541) upholds the same principle when he writes: “Decay is the beginning of all birth ... the midwife of very great things!”<sup>47</sup> Lilian Staveley (c. 1878–1928) observes: “We have no sufferings that are not useful to us.”<sup>48</sup> Within the Islamic tradition, there is the *ḥadīth qudsī*: “I am with those whose hearts are broken for My sake.”

The Sufi poet and mystic Rūmī (1207–1273) makes the following point about suffering (from the perspective of the Divine): “I have wounded your heart—lay no salve on the wound I inflict!”<sup>49</sup> In contrast to the prevailing secular mindset, some forms of suffering



or trauma require the person to actively surrender to the Divine in order to ask for healing, and thus to embark on a sacred journey to restore wholeness. Without the person knowing it, the purpose of this journey is not the healing in and of itself, but to draw the person closer to the Divine, seeing as our suffering – at its root – is caused by our separation from the spiritual realm. Rūmī stresses the importance of the human body as a vehicle for our life in this temporal world; also for the need to embrace our embodiment without becoming ensnared by it: “This body is a guest-house.... Every morning a new guest comes running. Beware! Do not say, ‘I am left with him on my neck,’ for in any case he will soon fly back to Nonexistence. Whatever comes from the Unseen World into your heart is a guest—welcome it!”<sup>50</sup>

Although our physical body is necessary for our existence in this reality, our true sense of safety needs to always be anchored in what is beyond the spatio-temporal order. Ānandamayī Mā elucidates the need to situate our consciousness in the Eternal or transpersonal order, even as we remain a guest in the human body: “My consciousness has never associated itself with this temporary body. Before I came on this earth ... I was the same. As a little girl, I was the same. I grew into womanhood; [but] still I was the same.”<sup>51</sup> If we trace suffering back to its genesis, the true source can be recognized: “The origin is the wrong identification of the body with the Self.”<sup>52</sup>

### **Uncovering Our Innate Wholeness**

No matter how hopeless someone may appear, they will always have an indwelling connection to the Spirit – something which can never be taken away. Each person, no matter what their circumstances, is born with an indestructible wholeness. Human beings are created in the “image of God” (Genesis 1:27), which can be distorted by sin but never eradicated. This is described by one Christian writer in the following way: “The *nous* [Intellect or Spirit

(*pneuma*)] is in effect the image of God in man. This image can be masked or soiled by sin, but it cannot be destroyed: it is the indelible mark of man's most profound being, of his veritable nature, the *logos* or constitutive principle of which cannot be altered."<sup>53</sup> Eaton writes: "Man cannot ... lose his theomorphism, his likeness to the divine image, however deeply this likeness may be covered in filth. Not even the most corrosive acid could ever destroy the divine imprint."<sup>54</sup> All spiritual traditions affirm that our transpersonal Self cannot be lost because we are never deprived of the Divine Presence – "Grace is always there."<sup>55</sup> To be confined to our traumas prevents us from becoming who we truly are. Human suffering stems from our identification with a self that is cut off from the Divine.

Salvific psychology views human beings as both geomorphic (of the earth) and theomorphic (of the Spirit) – both temporal and eternal – and who find themselves at the intersection of the horizontal and vertical dimensions of reality. *Duo sunt in homine* ("There are two [natures] in man")<sup>56</sup> was an axiom in the West prior to the emergence of the Renaissance that recognized both our corporeal and spiritual natures. Mainstream psychology focuses on the diagnosis and treatment of the outer human being, unaware that its materialist outlook excludes the "inward man" (Romans 7:22). All wounds in this life are limited to the surface of our being and cannot undermine our innermost Self. To be fully human is to recognize our fundamental relationship with the Spirit, which is to say that our true identity *in divinis* is the primordial state (*fiṭrah*), the "image of God" (*imago Dei*), Buddha-nature (*Buddha-dhātu*), or the Self (*Ātmā*). For this reason, the universal and timeless wisdom found throughout the world's diverse spiritual cultures teaches an essential truth: "Your natural state is one of happiness."<sup>57</sup>

In Buddhism, each of us is said to consist of five psycho-physical aggregates or "heaps" known as *khandhas* (Sanskrit: *skandhas*): (1) Form (*rūpa*); (2) Sensation or Feeling (*vedanā*); (3) Perception (*sañña*); (4) Mental formations (*saṅkhāras*); and (5) Consciousness

(*viññāṇa*). However, the existence of these aggregates does not exclude the existence of the Self (*Ātman*) that is not bound to birth, old age, sickness, and death. The Buddha does not take issue with the Hindu understanding of the Self (*Ātman*) as *neti, neti* (“not this, not that”) which, by means of a double negation, conveys an apophatic understanding that eliminates all determinate conceptions, leaving in its place only the consciousness of that which is – the Self alone; all that is not this is the non-Self (*anattā*).

This position is indicated in the Buddha’s words: “What is not self, that is not my [true] self” (*yad anattā ... na meso attā*) (*Samyutta Nikāya*, iii. 45, iv. 2).<sup>58</sup> An awareness of *neti-neti* helps us to dis-identify from the phenomena that arise in our consciousness; yet this does not mean that we become sundered from the psycho-physical order, because we are still required to be fully aware of our tripartite nature as Spirit, soul, and body. In other words, we need to abide in what transcends the psycho-physical order while, simultaneously, remaining with our body. By means of one of humanity’s hollowed paths of return, we are able to ground ourselves in what has been termed a salvific psychology that can heal and restore our wholeness.

*However challenging, deprived or traumatic our circumstances may be, we must not ignore that we are called to be “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). According to the Qur’ān, we were fundamentally “created to worship God” (51:56). This awareness will allow us to endure – and even flourish – despite the disturbing vicissitudes of the world. Additionally, the spiritual traditions teach us that to become who we are meant to be is to take a path that is far from easy; a life devoted to the sacred will inevitably be laden with challenges and difficulties. As Mencius (Mengzi, 372–289) remarked: “Sorrow and trouble bring life, whereas ease and pleasure bring death.”<sup>59</sup> Brother Lawrence (c. 1611–1691) articulates the ideal state of surrender to God: “Be satisfied with the condition in which God places you.... Pains and sufferings would be a Paradise to me, while I should suffer with my God; and the*

greatest pleasures would be hell to me, if I could relish them without Him; all my consolation would be to suffer something for His sake.”<sup>60</sup>

Ultimately, as we are taught in the Qur’ān, “Surely we belong to God, and to Him we return” (2:156) and, similarly, Black Elk reminds us that “Everything comes from Him, and sooner or later everything returns to Him.”<sup>61</sup> It is through participating in a valid religious tradition that our adverse experiences can be understood, healed, and utilized to strengthen our connection to the Divine: “In order to vanquish ... traumas ... man must avail himself not only of that sacramental grace which is Invocation, but also of his intelligence, of his will, and of prayer.”<sup>62</sup>

## **Conclusion**

We cannot conclude this essay without also mentioning the existence of a very unfortunate phenomenon that has emerged in the field of trauma studies. Trauma-informed practices have, in many ways, become a much popularized, profit-generating industry with countless experts and therapeutic programs proliferating throughout the world. This trend not only muddies the waters but, again, is a sign of the times in that it stems directly from the spiritual vacuum that distinguishes the present age.

Suffering is inherent to our life in this world – “for it must needs be that offences come” (Matthew 18:7); however, it is not that God wants us to suffer *per se* but, rather, that He wants us to fully surrender our hearts and minds. In many ways, our temporal ordeals are attributable to humanity’s estrangement from the Divine, which disfigures our primordial nature and obscures our supernal vision – for “their hearts were hardened” (Mark 6:52). Willingly offering our travails to the working of divine grace infuses them with spiritual value. The natural need to feel safe in body and mind is intrinsic to our psychological integrity and well-being, yet our sense of safety

can often be undermined by the earthly tribulations that fuel the anguish in our lives.

St. Teresa of Ávila writes about turning ourselves towards the Divine: “Until we are there where nothing can cause pain this suffering will not be taken away.”<sup>63</sup> In essence, the modern world has been triggered and traumatized by its disjunction from the sacred; the remedy is in returning to one of humanity’s divinely revealed spiritual traditions, and grounding ourselves in a saving wisdom that is neither of the East or the West.

Islam teaches that “God alters not what is in a people until they alter what is in themselves” (Qur’ān 13:11) and, according to a prophetic saying, “for every disease there is a cure.” Commitment to a religious tradition can offer the most effective means of ensuring spiritual resilience, sound mental health, and the effective healing of traumas. If we survey the trajectory of our lives, we often find that it is through the existence of illness, suffering, and other trials that a deep-seated transformation can be catalyzed in our hearts. We conclude with a prayer from the Buddhist tradition: “May all sentient beings be free from suffering and the causes of suffering.”<sup>64</sup>

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