

# Suffering Brings Consciousness

by Rosemary Wilkie

*"Grief is itself a medicine"*

William Cowper 1782.

No-one goes through life without being touched by grief and sorrow. Spiritual teachers tell us that this is how we learn and grow. I resisted this idea for years, sure that we could learn through joy if we put our minds to it! But experience has taught me otherwise.

We want to spare our children all suffering, and often project on to them our own idea of how their lives should develop. What we see as a mistake may be only from our perspective as parent, but precisely what the child needs to experience. What is certain is that if we don't allow our children to make any mistakes, they will never become responsible adults. They will remain shallow, dependent, and convinced that *they* should never have to suffer, and it must be 'someone else's fault'.

The Buddha taught that misery is of man's own making. So long as people remain identified with their physical, emotional and mental forms, and focus their desire on the material and the ephemeral, disappointment is guaranteed. This focus is, of course, exacerbated by advertising and the gossipy press.

When someone close to us is in real crisis, the very best thing we can do is to remain detached from the situation and simply let love flow through us, calming, supporting, reducing tension, and washing away toxic emotions. Just being there, radiating love, offers hope as it shows confidence and faith in the other person. The love must be directed to his or her inner being, not to the problems or circumstances they find themselves in. Love then helps them to accept what has happened and to become stronger and better able to solve their own difficulties.

Listen, yes, but never offer advice. The person in mourning or shock is in a very sensitive condition and may be in an almost hypnotic state. They may interiorise and subsequently act on what we say, which may not be appropriate for them.

The intense grief that follows a bereavement, for example, alternates with calmer periods, as if we are given only the amount of sorrow that we can handle at one time. We grieve not only for the dead but for

ourselves, the part of us that was identified with the old life, and the dreams that can never now be realized. The calmer periods become longer as we slowly come to accept the situation as it is, and not as we wish it to be. This is the purpose of mourning.

Once the original crisis is past, long-term suffering comes from denial, clinging to what was or what might have been. Or from repression, refusing to accept what has happened, and having a negative attitude to any suggestions of change, new ideas or activities.

Hardest to deal with is the death of hope. It is then so easy to slide into habitual misery, fuelled by constant references of 'my' bereavement, 'my' illness, 'my' redundancy, that wears down everyone around. It takes courage to help. It requires detachment – the ability to avoid identifying with the problem even if one empathises with it from having experienced the same great sorrow. It is pointless to say, *'I know'* or recount one's own experience. Grief, joy, despair and enthusiasm are not custom-made – in essence all emotions are the same for everyone but the sufferer experiences his or her pain as unique.

When we find ourselves suffering, it is time to consider what we are resisting. What is it that we desperately want to be different but are powerless to change? What is it that we are refusing to allow to be okay? Is it our attachment to what could or might have been, but never will be, that is causing our distress? Accepting what *is* transforms the situation.

Or is it our reaction to a situation that is making us miserable? For example, a wife abandoned by her husband for a younger woman might slide into long term self pity. Another might say, *'Oof! Free at last to live my own life!'* Same event. Different reaction.

When something upsets the tenor of our lives, it is very difficult to control, let alone stop, the exhausting circling of our thoughts. But if we take the event into our quiet time, into our meditations, it is easier to examine it with detachment, from the perspective of the Observer. To understand the causes and to accept what is.

This is how consciousness evolves, through the fire of suffering.

Contrary to what many think, and expect, the capacity to feel sorrow grows as we evolve. An advanced soul has ever-increasing sensitivity to pain as well as to joy. But he or she, having mastered the lower nature, remains free and detached, perceiving as the Observer in the clear light of love. ☒