

Worldly Problems: Purpose and the Dimension Involved

Why Is Enduring Worldly Problems and Hardships Hard for Me?

It is likely that all of us have either expressed or heard such statements when facing the worldly problems, such as:

“O God, why haven’t you answered my prayer?

Why didn’t you give me what I wanted?

Why this suffering? Why this illness?

Why did I get cancer?

Why did I go bankrupt?

Why did divorce happen in my life?

Why haven’t I married?”

There is an important point regarding these types of questions: which “I” am I referring to when I complain about my problems?

Comprehensive knowledge about the dimensions of our existence helps us differentiate between the various kinds of “I” and the problems and issues related to each part. In this way, our type and level of reaction to the hardships and troubles of each dimension will correspond to the significance of that part of our being. Our type of personality indicates which “I” within us holds greater importance and authenticity.

In addition to self-knowledge, understanding the philosophy of hardships helps us to have a different perspective on worldly problems. In this lesson, we will try to identify the factors that make problems seem significant to us, and by interpreting these issues from another viewpoint, we will uncover their essence and truth.

Problems of the World: A Gym for Growth

In the early lessons, when we discussed the dimensions of human existence, we referred to various aspects of the “self.” Our existence is a combination of the estimative self, the imaginal self, the inanimate self, the vegetative self, the animal self, the intellectual self, and the supra-rational self. The only true self is the supra-rational self. But is this self dominant in all of us? How can we understand which aspect of our existence controls us?

It remains unclear which self we have chosen until we find ourselves in conflict between the eternal self and the imaginal, estimative, inanimate, vegetative, and animal selves. Martyr Morteza Motahhari states: “Man must tolerate hardships and suffer difficulties to attain his appropriate level of being. Conflict and turmoil are the whips of development. Living beings traverse their path towards perfection through this whip. This law applies to the world of plants, animals, and especially human beings.”¹

Depending on which aspect of our being we have prioritized and nourished, we will react differently to challenges. Some issues, such as family and emotional matters, are particularly related to our animal dimension; thus, if difficulties like divorce, not

¹. Murtadha Mutahhari, *Divine Justice*. Qom: International Center for Islamic Studies, 2004, p. 116.

marrying, and family disputes press upon us, it indicates that our animal self is active and experiencing these pains.

God interacts with each of us based on our existential structure, much like a coach who behaves with each student according to his abilities. What makes us stand against God, unwilling to accept divine will and lacking patience in the face of difficulties, is a difference in perspective regarding the definition of the true self. From God's viewpoint, only our human self is truly existent, and the matters unrelated to our human aspect do not hold authenticity in God's eyes. However, since we perceive other selves as authentic, we lose our patience in facing hardships and begin to complain.

If we know ourselves and the purpose of our creation, and accept God as our mentor and nurturer, we understand that everything given to us, whether blessings or hardships, is for our benefit and serves as a means for our growth. God has provided the grounds for some of us to grow through blessings, for others through illness, for some through poverty, and for others through health. Believing in this truth prevents us from falling into the trap of comparison, from measuring what others have against what we lack, and from complaining about difficulties and problems.

Some limitations and challenges in this world exist so that obstacles are removed from our path, allowing us to find solitude with God. Yet many of us are unwilling to relinquish the world for the love of God, and as soon as God takes even a small part of our worldly possessions away, we raise our voices in protest. Sometimes, God intends to perform surgery on our lives by altering our circumstances to help us get rid of undesirable traits we have acquired, just like a doctor who intervenes

in the mother's womb to correct an extra limb in a fetus, God uses these hardships to purify us and make us more like Himself. Unfortunately, instead of appreciating this opportunity, we mourn the separation from our natural attachments such as spouses, children, food, and wealth because we love these aspects more than we love God.

In fact, one of the philosophies behind the tests and challenges of this world is to create conditions where we can choose between our true and fitri self and our natural and false selves. Many of us perceive worldly problems as significant due to our excessive attachment to the natural aspects of our existence. In other words, our complaints and dissatisfaction with difficulties stem from a lack of understanding or from our attachments to lower and non-human perfections. The more we sacrifice our lower aspects for our human dimension, the closer we become to God; conversely, the more we tend to these lower aspects, the further we drift away from Him. One of the consequences of distancing ourselves from God is the feeling of pressure when faced with worldly problems.

Worldly Problems Edify Human Beings

We can look at difficulties and problems from various perspectives. If we view them merely as obstacles meant to cause us distress, we will undoubtedly complain and grumble. However, hardships serve different purposes. They test us, cultivate, our talents, purify us, foster spiritual growth, prevent future calamities, preserve and enhance faith, and ultimately, make us true human beings.

Edifying trials and tribulations are the challenges that separate us from our natural, animalistic, and sexual instincts. These difficulties indeed trouble the natural aspect of our being, but they empower our *fitrah* and draw us closer to God.

When our ego or natural aspect experiences hardships, we must feel gratitude, as this type of affliction strengthens our *fitrah* or human dimension. This is, of course, provided that we view such afflictions as opportunities rather than threats to increase our reliance on, attention to, and love for God. “We should not be inattentive to the point that tribulations are only a blessing if a person makes use of them and makes his soul reach perfection with patience, perseverance, and by facing the hardships that create tribulations. But if a person chooses to flee and complain in the face of hardships, in such a case, afflictions are truly an affliction for him.”²

Contrary to popular belief, not all worldly problems and calamities are detrimental to us. Sometimes, the very affliction we endure brings us back to God, liberating us from polytheism, and granting us dignity and self-worth. Many of us can find examples in our lives where problems, despite being apparently unpleasant, have been beneficial and fruitful, ultimately leading to our growth and inner peace in many aspects. The characteristic of blessed and good tribulations is their ability to edify us.

Worldly Problems: A CT Scan of the Soul!

Sometimes, doctors need to see inside a patient's body, using tools and methods like CT scans and MRIs to diagnose and treat illnesses. Similarly, we sometimes

². Ibid.

need to gain insight into our true self. One of the tools that helps us in this journey is worldly problems. If we view our pains and hardships as a knife that slices through our being, dividing it into true and false parts, we will no longer complain about them and will endure them more easily. These problems touch upon the sensitive and painful points of our souls, prompting us to identify them. For example, someone suffering from resentment or stinginess will find that his greatest pain comes from his conflicts with others or his inability to forgive. The challenges he faces become a gym to identify and confront these undesirable traits.

All sorrows, discomforts, feelings of inferiority, loneliness, and helplessness relate to the unreal aspects of our existence. These aspects act like a veil over the truth, and if we can push them aside, we will see that we are truly embraced by God.

An important point in interpreting the sorrows and worldly problems is to understand which aspect of our being is targeted by these hardships: ego or *fitrah*. If we know ourselves correctly, our perspective on hardships will also change. However, if we define our ourselves based on worldly and natural aspects, we will become depressed and disheartened when facing worldly problems.

In this lesson, we learned that depending on the significance and authenticity of our various selves, problems and hardships affect different parts of our being. If our lower, natural selves dominate us, we will perceive challenges as burdensome and heavy, leading us to complain about them. However, when our human self prevails, we see worldly problems as tools that polish and refine us, aiding us on our path to becoming more like God.

Why do you think the worldly problems seem heavy to us? We would love to hear your thoughts!