

Suicide: A Spiritual Perspective

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“[W]hen the body is killed the self is not killed.”¹

– Chāndogya Upanishad 8:7–12

“All living beings have two bodies, the material body and the Dharma body.”²

– Chih-tao

“How do I know that loving life is not a delusion? How do I know that in hating death I am not like a man who, having left home in his youth, has forgotten the way back?”³

– Zhūangzi

“I begin to think [that] the only real sin is suicide, or not being one’s self.”⁴

– George Tyrrell

Abstract

Throughout history, suicide has evoked a remarkably broad range of reactions—from perplexity and condemnation, to glorification and empathy. Many have tried to understand this phenomenon through the lens of psychology, psychiatry, sociology, and anthropology, but much still seems to be amiss. A key factor in our current unprecedented mental health crisis is the undiagnosed impact of modernism and post-modernism; in other words, how has the loss of the sacred contributed to the

present-day alienation from ourselves, each other, and the earth? It is only through a fully integrated “science of the soul”—informed by metaphysics and the spiritual wisdom traditions of humanity—that we can, not only better understand suicide, but be properly equipped to avert tragic outcomes.

Keywords: Suicide, Psychology, Metaphysics, Philosophy, Religion.

Introduction

Suicide rates continue to climb worldwide and are not limited to just one region for this is now a global health phenomenon. Despite the efforts of mental health providers to understand and predict suicide risk, this has not led to any discernable improvements. There is also a growing awareness of how the reporting and portrayal of suicidal behavior in the media are having a negative influence and are, themselves, contributing factors in a worsening situation. The terminology employed when describing suicidal behavior can reinforce stigma and discourage vulnerable groups from obtaining much-needed support. Suicide is very complex in its psychological factors, which are not easy to comprehend. It goes without saying that any consideration of this difficult subject requires a deep sense of humility and compassion.

Without understanding how the weakening of religious belief has contributed to the spiritual crisis of the modern world, any conclusions we reach will remain shortsighted, if not superficial. Wanting to end one’s life can be an understandable response to a world that appears to be upside-down and without meaning. This goes to the heart of understanding our lives in the face of widespread psychic turmoil and instability. If we are able to understand this, then we may get closer to fathoming the motives of those who seek to end their lives.

The discipline of psychology, and the field of mental health, have been challenged by a lack of clarity as to how to define suicidal occurrences, which corresponds to the lack of a well-defined terminology. Yet, if we cannot properly identify suicidal ideation and behavior, how can we manage or treat it? Also, worth noting is that some behaviors are designated as suicide attempts when they are not so.

Not only has the discipline failed to grapple with this quandary, but mental health providers are at an elevated risk of suicide themselves compared to the general population. Many notable psychotherapists and psychiatrists have ended their lives: for example, Wilhelm Stekel (1868–1940), John B. Watson (1878–1958), Viktor Tausk (1879–1919), Anna Freud (1895–1982), Bruno Bettelheim (1903–1990), Lawrence Kohlberg (1927–1987), Robert L. Moore (1942–2016), Michael J. Mahoney (1946–2006), Petruska Clarkson (1947–2006), and Jon Driver (1962–2011).

The Failure of Profane Approaches

Many of the religions recognize the preciousness of human life, which enables us to return to the Divine by journeying on one of the divinely revealed spiritual paths. Accordingly, the eighth-century sage Shankara states: “human birth is difficult to obtain”⁵ and should not be taken for granted. Because the development of Western psychology became severed from metaphysics, it lost its ability to comprehend the deeper movements of the human psyche, interpreting behavior and cognition, including our true identity, in a way that is devoid of any spiritual considerations. This undermined its grasp of the deeper facets of human existence, including the phenomenon of suicide which resulted, according to Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), from internalized anger that had originally been directed at another person: “[N]o neurotic harbours thoughts of suicide which he has not turned back upon himself from murderous impulses against others.”⁶ Austrian physician and psychologist

Wilhelm Stekel, who was an early follower of Freud, affirmed a similar outlook: “No one kills himself who has never wanted to kill another, or at least wished the death of another.”⁷ The pioneer of radical behaviorism, B.F. Skinner (1904–1990), had this to say about the phenomenon: “Suicide is another form of self-control.”⁸

While there may be some validity to these theories, they do not get to the heart of this phenomenon. American psychiatrist Karl Menninger (1893–1990) wrote: “[S]uicide must be regarded as a peculiar kind of death which entails three internal elements: the element of dying, the element of killing, and the element of being killed.”⁹ At a psychoanalytic symposium on suicide in Vienna in 1910, Freud summarized the discussions as follows (and in a way that also reflects the reality of present-day psychology): “[De]spite ... the valuable material that has been brought before us in this discussion, we have not reached a decision.... Let us suspend our judgment till experience has solved this problem.”¹⁰ In 1936, psychiatrist and historian of psychiatry Gregory Zilboorg (1890–1959) observed that “It is clear that the problem of suicide from the scientific point of view remains unsolved. Neither common sense nor clinical psychopathology has found a causal or even a strict empirical science.”¹¹

In summary, psychology and mental health care today have more questions than answers, in spite of the considerable resources that have been devoted to them. The Canadian clinical and forensic psychologist Antoon A. Leenaars simply admits that “No one really knows why human beings commit suicide.”¹² Even though American psychologist James Hillman (1926–2011) avowed that “Suicide is the most alarming problem of life,”¹³ the discipline has not been able to sufficiently contend with this troubling phenomenon.

Freud postulated the theory of the death “drive” or “instinct” (German: *Todestrieb*), suggesting that all human beings have an innate propensity for self-destruction. He articulates this bleak

prognosis for humanity: “The aim of all life is death.”¹⁴ He further outlines this notion and introduces what he has unfortunately termed the “Nirvana-principle”:

Whatever it is, we must perceive that the Nirvana-principle, which belongs to the death-instincts, underwent a modification in the living organism through which it became the pleasure-principle, and henceforth we shall avoid regarding the two principles as one. It is not difficult to infer what force it was that effected this modification, that is, if one has any interest at all in following this argument. It can only be the life-instinct, the libido, which has thus wrested a place for itself alongside the death-instinct in regulating the processes of life. In this way we obtain a series, a small but an interesting one: the *Nirvana*-principle expresses the tendency of the death-instincts, the *pleasure*-principle represents the claims of the libido and that modification of it, the *reality*-principle, the influence of the outer world.¹⁵

It is apparent that Freud’s notion of the “Nirvana-principle” is limited to the horizontal domain of the empirical ego and does not serve to integrate the human psyche back to its source in the Divine. This is something that Freud himself describes as “the extinction ... of the tensions of the instinctual needs.”¹⁶ The so-called “Nirvana-principle” is a fundamental misinterpretation of the Buddhist tradition which is essentially a transformation of consciousness that is universal and found across all sapiential traditions. With that said, although Freud inappropriately called this theory the “Nirvana-principle,” it discloses the true character of the modern individual; paradoxically, his entire psychoanalytic framework comprises a psychology that is eminently suited for the fallen humanity of our times.

It was the Enlightenment philosophers who started to conceive suicide in entirely secular terms, focusing just on the characteristics of individuals and their social environment. David Hume (1711–1776) directly assaults the position held by the Christian tradition in his essay *Of Suicide* (1783). Hume disagreed with the notion that

suicide violates the sacred order established by God for this world, and that it usurps a divine prerogative that determines when a person is to die. His position can be summarized by the assertion that suicide should “be free from every imputation of guilt or blame”¹⁷ and that this was “the sovereign antidote”¹⁸ to superstition and religion.

In his classic work on the subject, French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) put forward the core of his thesis: “The social suicide-rate can be explained only sociologically. At any given moment, the moral constitution of society establishes the contingent of voluntary deaths.”¹⁹ This perspective solely accounts for the covariance of suicide rates and the level of social integration across various cultures. It takes into consideration how participation in a spiritual tradition fosters resilience by protecting against the harms of suicidality. It is not difficult to make the case that increased religious participation supports spiritual integration, which is often associated with lower suicide rates.²⁰

We recall that William James (1842–1910), known as the “father of American psychology,” wrote a provocative essay entitled *Is Life Worth Living?* (1895). In this work, James writes: “My final appeal is to nothing more recondite than religious faith.”²¹ He adds: “We have a right to believe that the physical order is only a partial order; we have a right to supplement it by an unseen spiritual order which we assume on trust.”²² In turning to the metaphysical roots of spiritual traditions, we are able to reconcile the unseen with the visible world which can, in turn, support us in our search for the meaning that is necessary to bring healing and wholeness in our lives.

The experience that human life has no intrinsic meaning is a tremendous problem in the modern world. Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl (1905–1997) writes: “There is nothing in the world ... that would so effectively help one to survive even the worst conditions as the knowledge that there is a meaning in one’s life.”²³

Life in the modern world, due to its desacralized ambiance, tends to look at existence as merely accidental which has led to a profound nihilism. When large segments of humanity are alienated from themselves, other people, and the natural environment, the implications can only be deleterious.

French psychiatrist Étienne Esquirol (1772–1840) writes: “Suicide [shows] all the characteristics of mental alienation.”²⁴ Our gradual forgetfulness of the Divine, due to its overthrow by materialism and scientism, has caused our direct vision of higher realities (the “eye of the heart”) to become veiled, leading to a host of individual and collective problems for humanity. It is worth adding here that when humanity comes to privilege its life at all costs, due to its estrangement from the sacred, it fails to see that the death of the planet is, itself, an unspoken form of inevitable suicide: “The destruction of the world is the last, almost desperate attempt, to save myself from being crushed by it.”²⁵

The Disfiguration of Humanity

The events of the Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution, culminating in the post-Enlightenment era, did not only subvert the essential role of religion in the Middle Ages but also gave birth to an aberrant notion of what it means to be human. This gave rise to individualism, which had its beginnings in the European Renaissance,²⁶ and which, arguably contributed directly to the growing crisis of suicidality that ensued over time in the West, thanks to its repudiation of anything higher than the isolated individual.

Contrary to modernist narratives that view the Middle Ages as fundamentally regressive, what we find is that the phenomenon of suicide was uncommon at that time. It has been said that “suicide [is] the one crime of violence which was rarer then than now.”²⁷ It may be true that “suicide is evidently as old as the human race”;²⁸

however, this does not therefore imply, as some sociologists have claimed, that it is less prevalent today than it was in the pre-modern world of the First Peoples.²⁹ The increase in suicide in the present day appears to be directly linked to the rootlessness and nihilism of the modern world.

It is precisely the loss of a sense of the sacred—which is inseparable from our identity as human beings and our connection to all life—that contributes to the current predicament facing humanity. Furthermore, that the phenomenon of suicide was known to the First Peoples of the world does not disprove the data that indicates a significant increase in suicidal behavior with the rise of modernism. The term *suicide* was coined by the English physician Sir Thomas Browne (1605–1682) and was first used in his book *Religio Medici* ('The Religion of a Doctor') in 1643. *Suicide* derives from the Latin *suicidium*, from *sui* ('of oneself') and *caedere* ('to kill').

The ending one's life by suicide can be the result of an unbearable pain that has no means of resolution—it may not be about giving up on life altogether, as much as wanting a different kind of life. Suicide is the attempt to resolve the ordeal of an afflicted self in this realm. The ego does not see that this as an attempt to steal life from the Spirit, because from the relative sphere of the ego, everything within its purview appears to be absolute. If we are trapped in a separated self, we cannot see that there is another reality beyond its immediate experience.

If we could ask the ego what it wants in seeking death, it would likely be to overcome the misery that afflicts it, rather wishing to kill the body. A paradox exists here because the ego cannot kill itself in the same way that it cannot transcend itself. What is needed is a discernment between the relative and absolute orders of reality, so that we may see who we truly are despite our transient circumstances in this world. This distinction can be immensely useful as a support for our mental health.

For the person attempting suicide, a sense of control is sometimes felt regarding what may occur after they die. American psychologist David Bakan (1921–2004) explains that an “act of self-injury ... puts death under the control of the will, giving the illusion that otherwise there is immortality.”³⁰ The modern mindset is distinguished by a debased notion of permanence, sometimes referred to as the “immanentization of the eschaton”³¹ or the “counterfeit of Eternity.”³² From a metaphysical perspective, what is born must die when the causes and conditions that brought it about inevitably exhaust themselves; yet the Real is timeless and cannot perish. Most people do not see things as they are and, without understanding this truth, they cannot know what truly serves their ultimate interests.

Inwardly, someone may feel utter anguish and be confused by the contradictory forces that are pulling their lives apart. They may not be able to see beyond this moment of despair and long for an entirely different life or reality. This predicament was poignantly expressed by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832): “Nature has no way to escape from the labyrinth: her powers are exhausted; she can contend no longer, and the poor soul must die.”³³

Until we are purged of all identification with what is not divine, we will continue to be challenged by our life in this body. Julian of Norwich (c. 1342–c. 1416) explains how we are all confronted in some way, no matter what our personal circumstances may be: “For we are all in part troubled, and we shall be troubled.”³⁴ However, we are always called to return to the present moment which is a doorway to the eternal; for it is from here that we can appreciate the full plenitude of the human person and its need to bind itself to the Spirit. Boethius (480–525) writes:

If you thought of all the things that have happened to you, what kind of things they were, and whether they were happy or unhappy things, you would not be able to say you have not been fortunate up to now. On the other hand, if you do not consider that you have been lucky because your onetime reasons for

rejoicing have passed away, you cannot now think of yourself as in misery, because the very things that seem miserable are also passing away.... You know there is no constancy in human affairs, when a single swift hour can often bring a man to nothing.³⁵

While we are free to pursue the awakening to our primordial nature or true Self, we are also capable of betraying it. Titus Burckhardt (1908–1984) provides a compelling insight into the choices that we make in this life:

Freedom being everywhere what it is, that is, without inner constraint, it may be said that man is free to damn himself, just as he is free to throw himself, if he wishes, into an abyss; but as soon as man passes to action freedom becomes illusory in so far as it goes against truth: to cast oneself voluntarily into an abyss is to deprive oneself by the same act of freedom to act. It is the same for a man of infernal tendency: he becomes the slave of his choice, whereas the man of spiritual tendency rises towards a greater freedom. Again, since the reality of hell is made of illusion—the remoteness from God can only be illusory—hell cannot exist eternally beside Bliss, although it is unable to conceive its own end, this inability being, as it were, the counterfeit of Eternity in the states of damnation. Thus it is not without reason that Sufis have insisted on the relativity of everything created and have affirmed that after an indefinite duration the fires of hell will grow cold; all beings will finally be reabsorbed into God. Whatever modern philosophers may think, there is a contradiction between freedom and the arbitrary; man is free to choose what is absurd, but inasmuch as he chooses it he is not free. In the creature freedom and action do not coincide.³⁶

The Deathless Self

The spiritual and philosophical traditions of the world hold varied views of what it means to end one's life by suicide, although we

also find a striking unanimity among some. Goethe speaks to the reoccurring need to ponder anew this important theme: “Suicide is an event of human nature which, whatever may be said and done with respect to it, demands the sympathy of every man, and in every epoch must be discussed anew.”³⁷

We recall the celebrated words from *Hamlet*: “To be, or not to be.”³⁸ Considered in a metaphysical context, “to be” refers to not entering the world of action, but transcending it through one’s submission to the Divine; while “not to be” is not about ending our life by suicide, but about engaging with the world and entangling oneself in its endless activities. The first is about cleaving to the one and only true reality, and the second to the illusory flux of temporal phenomena.³⁹ Through the lens of metaphysics, suicide can be considered from a higher vantage point in which one is seen as not living up to our primordial nature—that is, suicide as that which defies the reason for our birth in this world, and which aims to sever what is, in effect, our unbreakable bond to the sacred.

Socrates (469–399) provides two possible reasons why suicide is prohibited. The first is that “we ... are in a kind of prison and must not set ourselves free or run away”;⁴⁰ the second is that “the gods are our guardians, and ... we are a possession of theirs.”⁴¹ These reasons indicate that we are born into this temporal world for a reason and cannot arbitrarily remove ourselves from it without grave consequences. Socrates states that “any man who has the spirit of philosophy, will be willing to die, though he will not take his own life, for that is held not to be right.”⁴² However, Socrates also adds that, in certain cases, it may be unavoidable: “...only at some times and for some persons it is better to die than to live.”⁴³

The Stoics, on the other hand, viewed suicide differently in that a noble purpose could justify it, while others thought that any reason was good enough. Seneca (c. 4–65) upheld that “sometimes it is an act of bravery even to live.”⁴⁴ The orator and philosopher Cicero (106–43) considers when it might be an acceptable act as follows:

“When a man’s circumstances contain a preponderance of things in accordance with nature, it is appropriate for him to remain alive; when he possesses or sees in prospect a majority of the contrary things, it is appropriate for him to depart from life.”⁴⁵ In Greek and Roman antiquity, suicide was conceived as an act that could be morally justified—or even called for—under certain unavoidable circumstances.

The early church fathers of the Christian tradition uniformly condemned suicide. This is evident when Justin Martyr (c. 100–165) addresses the conflation between suicide and martyrdom, and while not directly speaking about suicide, nonetheless explains that it is not permitted: “Lest any one should say to us, ‘All of you, go, kill yourselves and thus go immediately to God,’” he replies “if we do act thus, we ourselves will be opposing the will of God.”⁴⁶ For St. Augustine (354–430), “anyone who kills himself is a murderer.”⁴⁷ We are reminded that our “bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 6:19).

The sixth commandment, “Thou shalt not kill” (Exodus 20:13), applies not only to one’s neighbor but also to oneself. From a conventional point of view, it is difficult to make sense of the following assertion: “The man who kills himself, kills all men.”⁴⁸ But, metaphysically speaking, each human being—being unique—represents, in principle, the whole of humanity in their own person.

St. Augustine underscores the deeper motivation to die: “So the will’s desire for death is not a desire for nonexistence but a desire for peace. When someone wrongly believes that he will not exist, he desires by nature to be at peace; that is, he desires to exist in a higher degree.”⁴⁹ By this, he indicates that although the person is seeking an end to their suffering, which is understandable, his action is nonetheless misplaced. Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) adds: “Unendurable pain and fear of a worse death seem ... the most excusable motives for suicide.”⁵⁰ St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) makes the point that “to bring death upon oneself in order to escape

the other afflictions of this life, is to adopt a greater evil in order to avoid a lesser ... to take one's own life ... does oneself a very great injury, by depriving oneself of ... needful ... repentance."⁵¹

God gives human beings free will, which has good and bad consequences in the world. While we can aspire to live our lives in perpetual remembrance of the sacred, we can also choose to live in forgetfulness: "As the ego itself cannot cast itself into nothingness, it falls as a consequence of its destructive act into the seeming nothingness."⁵²

The Islamic tradition has this to say about suicide: "[S]lay not yourselves. Truly God is Merciful unto you" (Qur'ān 4:29). We also find the following prophetic saying: "He who commits suicide by throttling shall keep on throttling himself in the Hell-fire."⁵³ Suicide is forbidden by Islamic Law because the decision to live or die is not ours but God's alone.

According to the Hindu tradition, it is said that "After leaving their bodies, they who have killed the Self go to the worlds of the *Asuras* [Titans], covered with blinding ignorance"⁵⁴ (Isha Upanishad 3). Of course, we need to distinguish the transpersonal Self from the false one, and while we cannot kill the unborn and eternal identity that we truly are, the human body is itself considered sacred: "The body [is] the house of the Spirit"⁵⁵ (Chāndogya Upanishad 8:7–12).

Those who do not understand the meaning of this life, and its connection to the other worlds, and die by suicide are negligent of the following pronouncement: "Into blinding darkness enter those who worship ignorance"⁵⁶ (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad 4:4:10). Or "Miserable are those worlds enveloped by (that) blinding darkness (ignorance). To them, after death, go those people who are ignorant and unwise"⁵⁷ (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad 4:4:11).

Śrī Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950), discusses suicide from the perspective of pure nonduality:

A question arises, why there should be suicides.... Why does one do it? Because he is unhappy and desires to put an end to his unhappiness. He actually does it by ending the association with the body which represents all unhappiness. For there must be a killer to kill the body. He is the survivor after suicide. That is the Self.⁵⁸

Metaphysically speaking, each of us is unknowingly enacting suicide as long as we are neglecting to realize our true Self. The Sage of Arunachala explains: “The eternal, blissful, and natural state has been smothered by this life of ignorance. In this way the present life is due to the killing of the eternal, pristine Being. Is it not a case of suicide?”⁵⁹ A similar teaching is expressed in this scripture: “[The] human body ... is like a ... boat—so difficult to secure ... the man who does not strive to cross the ocean of Samsāra [cycles of birth-and-death], is verily a suicide”⁶⁰ (Uddhava Gītā 15:17). Shankara points out: “The man who having by some means obtained a human being ... is foolish enough not to exert for self-liberation, verily commits suicide, for he kills himself by clinging to things unreal.”⁶¹

When a devotee asked Śrī Ānandamayī Mā (1896–1982) about suicide, she responded in the following manner: “To whom belongs the body that you speak of destroying? Is this the way a human being talks? For shame!”⁶² Elsewhere, the Divine Mother elaborates:

One who commits suicide enters such a deep darkness out of which it is very difficult to be liberated. One may remain in it for ages, unless someone who has power has compassion and frees one from it. Suicide is a heinous sin. In that condition one cannot meet anyone [in the afterlife]. The human body is born in order to enjoy and suffer the fruit of one’s deeds.... To try to escape from this by suicide is most foolish and only prolongs the agony indefinitely. No one who is in his senses can take his life; at the moment of doing such a thing the person is out of his mind. Suicide does not solve anything, on the contrary.⁶³

Śrī Rāmakrishna (1836–1886), the Paramahansa of Dakshineswar, concurs: “Suicide is a heinous sin.”⁶⁴ When Śrī Nisargadatta Maharaj (1897–1981) was asked what the problem with suicide was, he responded:

Nothing wrong, if it solves the problem. What, if it does not? Suffering caused by extraneous factors—some painful and incurable disease, or unbearable calamity—may provide some justification, but where wisdom and compassion are lacking, suicide can not help. A foolish death means foolishness.... Endurance is usually the wisest course.⁶⁵

In the *Pārājika*, the Buddha Shakyamuni remarks: “Whatsoever Bhikkhu [who] incite[s] another to self-destruction, saying ... ‘[M]y friend ... what good do you get from this sinful, wretched life? [D]eath is better to thee than life!’ ... [H]e, too, is fallen into defeat, he is no longer in communion.”⁶⁶ While the Buddha taught an attitude of non-attachment (Pāli/Sanskrit: *alobha*) towards all things in this life, this was not a nihilistic teaching but an exhortation to attain Awakening:

Such indeed is how the steadfast act:

They are not attached to life.
Having drawn out craving with its root,
Godhika has attained final Nibbāna.⁶⁷

As one of the Buddha’s five precepts is to abstain from killing any living thing, the prohibition on suicide follows as a matter of course. It is worth also adding that “the strong Buddhist objection to suicide ... is based on the very proper ground that ... something more powerful than a dose of poison [is needed] to destroy the illusion of I and Mine.”⁶⁸ Mou Tzu (Mouzi), the second-century Buddhist and Taoist philosopher, writes: “The spirit never perishes. Only the body decays”⁶⁹ and explains: “If one has the Way, even if one dies one’s soul goes to an abode of happiness. If one does not have the Way, when one is dead one’s soul suffers misfortune.”⁷⁰

Mencius (Mengzi, 372–289), the second great Chinese sage after Confucius (551–479) wrote:

Fish is what I want; bear's palm is also what I want. If I cannot have both, I would rather take bear's palm than fish. Life is what I want; dutifulness is also what I want. If I cannot have both, I would rather take dutifulness than life. On the one hand, though life is what I want, there is something I want more than life. That is why I do not cling to life at all costs. On the other hand, though death is what I loathe, there is something I loathe more than death. That is why there are troubles I do not avoid.... Yet there are ways of remaining alive and ways of avoiding death to which a man will not resort. In other words, there are things a man wants more than life and there are also things he loathes more than death.⁷¹

The shadow side of our “precious human birth” is the taking of one's life by suicide. This is tragic, whether understood in a religious or secular context. 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 his journey out of this abyss led him to a far-reaching transformation of his being. We can be greatly tested on the spiritual path, which is liable to cast doubt on our faith, and our sense of proximity to the Spirit. Accordingly, our suffering may appear akin to a mental health crisis. As St. John of the Cross observes:

[W]hen this Divine contemplation assails the soul with a certain force, in order to strengthen it and subdue it, it suffers such pain in its weakness that it nearly swoons away ... for sense and spirit, as if beneath some immense and dark load, are in such great pain and agony that the soul would find advantage and relief in death.⁷²

There are points along the path that appear to be too much to bear: “When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me” (Psalm 73:16) or “I am troubled; I am bowed down greatly; I go mourning

all ... day long. For my loins are filled with a loathsome disease: and there is no soundness in my flesh” (Psalm 38:6–7). In binding our hearts and minds to a spiritual tradition, we can protect ourselves from this encroaching darkness. It is not possible to be free of trials in the temporal world (*dunya*): “[D]id you suppose you should enter Paradise without God know[ing] who of you have struggled and who are patient” (Qur’ān 3:142).

We are exhorted to always “choose life” (Deuteronomy 30:19) and live in proximity to the Divine—“the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6)—regardless of our individual circumstances. The increasingly widespread incidence of suicide worldwide is truly heartbreaking, and reflects a widespread loss of a sense of the sacred. The belief that we have complete agency to determine our own fate overlooks the truth that this world is a test. Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998) wrote:

To this false life is opposed a true death: the death of passion; this is spiritual death, the cold and crystalline purity of the soul conscious of its immortality. To false death is opposed a true life: the life of the heart turned toward God and open to the warmth of His love. To false activity is opposed a true rest, a true peace: the repose of the soul that is simple and generous and content with God, the soul that turns aside from agitations and curiosity and ambition in order to repose in divine beauty. To false rest is opposed a true activity: the battle of the spirit against the multiple weaknesses that squander the soul—and this precious life—as in a game or dream.⁷³

It is the misconception of a confused and distorted mind that believes suicide will provide an escape from human suffering. Such a person likely does not recognize their soul’s longing to return to its source and be healed in the sacred; yet the impulse to end their life implies (metaphysically) a wish to change the conditions of existence. From the point of view of eternity, however, what matters is that we should endure our lot in this world and accept its

mystery, however hard that may seem in light of the appalling suffering we see all around us.

In the ancient West, philosophy was considered the art of dying properly. A remarkable example of this is found in Plato's (429–347) dialogue *Phaedo*, in which Socrates is awaiting his execution. In this record of his final moments of life, a discussion takes place that focuses on the question of death and its implications for living:

It may be that the rest of mankind are not aware that those who apply themselves correctly to the pursuit of philosophy are in fact practicing nothing more nor less than dying and death. If this is so, it would indeed be strange that men who had throughout their lives sought precisely this, should grumble when it came—the very thing which they had, for so long, desired and rehearsed.⁷⁴

One often finds in religious texts the importance of attaining a 'spiritual death' in this life, as Meister Eckhart (1260–1328) makes clear, stating "The kingdom of God is for none but the thoroughly dead,"⁷⁵ or what the Jewish tradition calls the "cessation or annihilation of existence" (*bittul ha-yesh*); that is, by dying in the Absolute. This implicit teaching was made explicit in the renowned words of the Prophet of Islam: "Die before ye die" (*mūtū qabla an tamūtū*).

Metaphysically speaking, we could look at this phenomenon, not from the outward perspective of ending a life, but as a transfiguration of our inner world; in other words, a hidden desire for a new mode of existence by forcing our own death. In therapeutic terms, "When we are no longer able to change a situation ... we are challenged to change ourselves."⁷⁶ As Hillman has suggested, a suicide attempt is an "urge for hasty transformation."⁷⁷ However, such radical renewal requires that we engage with the sacred; something that is, for the most part, completely lacking in conventional psychotherapy. The following

testimony—of a person who made an attempt on their life—reflects a spiritual crisis that is typical of what we find in the modern world:

I really wanted to kill myself but I didn't really want to die. I pictured myself being like one of those people in stories, who would die and then come back to life after they saw heaven or something. I thought that either I would die completely, so maybe I'd see that light people talk about, or it would change other people's lives and then somehow change mine. I remember sitting there after taking the pills, waiting, and thinking, "Maybe I'll see God and find out that I am special." Finding that out was important, because I felt there had to be something deeper than what was going on here.⁷⁸

In seeking to end her suffering and isolation, this person wanted to restore a sense of the transcendent, represented here in the relationship with her father:

I wanted the experience of some deeper spiritual connection, to someone or something, because the [relationships] I had weren't satisfying at all. I was also taking my last real chance to be mad at my dad. I was tired of being alone. I wanted him here, with me. At the very least, I thought that I'll finally find my dad.⁷⁹

Through this spiritual death and rebirth, we can begin to discern the deeper meaning of suffering. This will not always alleviate our immediate pain but, rather, may shift our focus towards a higher life that pervades it, thus allowing us to achieve "the peace ... which passeth all understanding" (Philippians 4:7). Accordingly, to not seek wholeness and liberation from our fallen state is itself a form of suicide in light of our creation in the "image of God" (Genesis 1:27).

If we are not aware of how influential are the dominant secular narratives of what life is, and what it means to be human, we may come to forget the significance of this unique opportunity known as human birth. This may cause us to live an infra-human life of profound confusion and spiritual amnesia, making it easier to be led

astray by the disintegrating forces of the *Zeitgeist*. On the other hand, by living in remembrance of our own primordial nature, and its connection to what lies beyond this life, we are sure to find guidance on a spiritual path.

Due to the temporal cycle and our fallen or *samsāric* consciousness, human existence is not without “travails in birth” (Galatians 4:19), reflecting God’s intention to “greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children” (Genesis 3:16); however, no matter how 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); and likewise the prophetic saying: “He who knows himself knows his Lord.” This wisdom will allow us to endure and even flourish despite what may occur in the world of manifestation.

Conclusion

As the saints and sages of all traditions attest, there is no trauma from which we cannot heal, or a predicament that we cannot move beyond, no matter how bleak it may appear. 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). Some may object that the immense scale of the current suicide epidemic serves to demonstrate, on the contrary, that human souls are clearly being burdened beyond their ‘capacity’ to endure the overwhelming sorrow, pain and disappointments of life. However, one might respond that when we are firmly grounded in a religious tradition, we are given the necessary spiritual support to withstand such hardships, including thoughts of wanting to take our own lives. Such thoughts are the result of turning away from the sacred, which can only deprive us of the supports that are needed to overcome such despair.

It is especially tragic when religious authorities commit suicide, seeing as they have been entrusted with the pastoral needs of others. What can be said about this is that the religions themselves are susceptible to the same disintegrating forces that have caused the mental health crises that we see in the rest of society. What we need to understand is that religions and their representatives must similarly confront such challenges in our unprecedented times, yet remain steadfast in the timeless wisdom that is made available to us by humanity's spiritual traditions.

For the person who turns their heart and mind to the Divine Mercy will realize that support and sustenance is ever present, even in the darkest of times. "Despair not of God's Mercy. Truly God forgives all sins" (Qur'ān 39:53) and "I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance" (Luke 15:7). As it has been said, "We must never doubt Mercy; that would be the sin of bitterness. A life that ends in prayer and in trust is never lost; the most wretched of human beings finds himself in the antechamber of Paradise—or under the Blessed Virgin's mantle—the moment he prays with sincerity and hope."⁸⁰ Yet the problem is that we rarely regard our lives as gifts of grace, and all too often only see this in hindsight only, or when it is too late.

All spiritual traditions affirm that our transpersonal Self cannot be lost because we are never deprived of the Divine Presence—"Grace is always there."⁸¹ To be confined to our traumas, pain, and struggles in this life prevents us from becoming who we truly are. Human suffering stems from our identification with a self that is cut off from the Divine. Śrī Nisargadatta Maharaj frames it as follows: "You are never alone. There are powers and presences who serve you all the time most faithfully. You may or may not perceive them, nevertheless they are real and active."⁸²

By restoring a sacred psychology that is rooted in the spiritual traditions of humanity, we will be better equipped to assist people in

coping with the existential assaults that would normally drive them to leave this world prematurely. It is only a properly integrated “science of the soul” that can provide an intelligible framework for understanding our troubling situation in the world, and thus help us to better understand what it means to be fully human. Our search for meaning is inseparable from the quest for Ultimate Reality or the Absolute.

Through immersion in a life of faith, we can come to see our connection to all sentient beings and the world around us, which can assist to remedy the ills of alienation and nihilism that are ubiquitous today. In this way, we may be able to foster an enduring sense of belonging to the created order of existence. In closing, we need to exercise utmost humility when discussing this subject, and honestly admit that we may never fully understand the enigma of suicide. Yet, only in an outlook grounded in sacred metaphysics do we have the best prospect of responding to this tragic phenomenon with true wisdom and compassion.

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