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Sympathy

WHEN is sorrow accompanied by sorrow?
When one heart feels it and our heart feels it at the same time.

Duryodhana, the famous warrior, fell on the plain of Kurukshetra and his friends were so full of grief that when he lay on the ground and died, all Nature seemed in disorder. Headless creatures with many arms and legs danced dreadful dances over the earth; in lakes and wells the water was turned to blood; rivers flowed upstream instead of downstream; women looked like men, and men like women.

Here the poet teaches us that the suffering undergone by one being spreads through a wide, wide world. There was sympathy between the fallen king and thousands of living creatures.

Is this sympathy shown only in sorrow? No, it is shown both in joy and suffering.

Listen to the story of Nandiya the deer who was kind to his parents in times of peace and contentment and also in times of darkness and peril.

The King of Kosala often used to hunt in the forest where Nandiya lived with his father and mother in peace and mutual love. When he hunted, the King galloped through a wide stretch of country and many people from Kosala had to follow him as attendants; so many people were taken away from their work and they murmured at the loss they suffered.

Therefore they made a park with fences and gates and a pool in the middle, and went into the jungle to drive the deer into the park so that the King might have all the game at hand and would not need to go hunting with so many followers.

Nandiya saw the people coming, armed with sticks, as he
was feeding with his parents in a little wood.

“Stay here,” he said to his parents. “I shall go and meet these people.”

He came out of the wood alone and the people, assuming that there were no more deer beneath the trees, took him away and passed on.

All the deer, except the two old ones who had stayed in the wood, were now gathered in the park. The King was pleased, and from time to time he shot one of the herd with his bow and arrow. Nandiya’s turn, however, did not come for a very long time.

When at last it did come, Nandiya stood still before the king and did not try to run away.

The King was so struck by this unusual behaviour that he did not shoot. Lowering his bow, he paused.

“Shoot, O King,” said Nandiya.

“I cannot. There is merit in you, O deer. I grant you your life.”

“Will you not, O King, give freedom to the rest of the deer in this park?”

“I will.”

“And will you not, O King, show your favour to the birds of the air and the fish in the water?”

“I will.”

This deer, the old story says, was the Lord Buddha; he spoke to the King and taught him the Law of Mercy for all living things. And afterwards the King sent a messenger with a drum throughout the country to proclaim his protection for deer, birds and fish.

You will readily agree that Nandiya was right to protect his parents. It would also be good to help a brother or a sister. But you will notice in the next story that a noble Arab spoke of a man as his brother, even though he was not really his brother.
A caravan was crossing the desert, and water ran short. The Arab travellers were compelled to measure out the water so that each might have a small but equal share.

For measuring they used a cup with a stone in it. They poured the water from a water-skin until it covered the stone. This was the share of each one.

Only the chief men in the caravan had a share of water.

The first time that the water was measured out like this, Kab-ibn-Mamah was about to take the cup when he saw a man of the Namir tribe looking at him longingly. Kab said to the man who was giving out the water, “Give my share to this brother,” and pointed to the man of Namir.

The man drank eagerly. Kab had no water.

The next day, the time came again to share the water.

Once more the man of Namir looked on with longing. Once more Kab gave the cup to the “brother” as he called him.

But when the caravan was about to move on, Kab no longer had the strength to mount his camel.

He remained lying on the sand.

The others dared not stay lest they should all die of thirst. They covered him with blankets to protect him from beasts of prey and left him to die.

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You will have noticed that when sorrow is felt, it is soon felt by the heart of someone near. When Duryodhana fell, at once Nature grieved. When danger threatened his parents, Nandiya went out to protect them. When the man of Namir looked on in his thirst, the noble Arab chief immediately offered him his water.

Sorrow quickly follows sorrow and joy goes with joy.

When sympathy is slow to arise we do not value it so highly.

The famous poet Firdausi wrote the history of the kings of Persia and recited it to Sultan Mahmud; the Sultan was
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delighted and for some time he held the poet in great favour. The poem Shah-Namah was the work of thirty years, and the Sultan had promised to give the poet 60,000 pieces of gold on its completion.

Firdausi was disliked by the Sultan’s Vizier. This man persuaded his master that the treasury was depleted and that it would be only sensible to give the poet silver instead of gold. Mahmud heeded this advice and sent Firdausi some bags containing 60,000 pieces of silver.

Firdausi was at the bath when the bags arrived. He was so infuriated by the Sultan’s avarice that he would not even take the gift. He gave 20,000 pieces to the messenger who had brought the money, 20,000 to the proprietor of the baths, and 20,000 to a beer-seller who happened to be there.

Mahmud was informed of this insult and ordered the poet to be trampled to death by elephants. Firdausi was warned and fled to a distant city; at last he settled at Tus, his birth-place.

Soon the Sultan felt sorry that he had treated Firdausi so shamefully and wished to regain the poet’s respect. He sent a messenger to Tus, bearing him many presents: 60,000 pieces of gold, silks, brocades, velvets....

Alas! The presents arrived too late.

As the king’s messenger passed through one of the gates of the city, leading camels laden with Mahmud’s costly gifts, a bier with the remains of the poet passed out of another gate, carrying them to the resting-place of the dead.

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“Our Emperor is a just man,” said the people of China, “for he is always ready to lend an ear to the complaints of the poor.”

But a day came when the ear could hear no more. The Emperor suddenly became deaf. He could no longer listen to the song of the birds, the murmur of the wind or the voices of men.

The Emperor wept, and the nobles and officers who met
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with him in council made signs to him and wrote him words of
consolation begging him not to be so sad.

“Do not think,” he told them, “that I am sad for myself or
for any trouble that this infirmity will cause me. I am sad because
now I shall no longer be able to hear the prayers of the afflicted.”

There was silence, for no one knew how to comfort him.

“Ah,” he exclaimed suddenly, “I have found a way. Order
my people to stop wearing red clothes unless they have need of
my help. So whenever I see a man or a woman dressed in red, I
shall know that it is an appeal to me; my deaf ears will hear it
and I shall take care that help is given to the distressed.”

The kind-hearted Emperor did not cease to do his work
when he became deaf. He immediately thought of a new way of
seeking out the poor and the needy. To seek them out — for the
noble man does not wait for suffering to come to him, he tries
to seek it out.

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A number of Hindus formed the Dev Samaj Association in order
to do good works. In their monthly journal, things like these
were reported:

From Peshawar: Two ladies taught Hindi to women and
children two hours a day. Some men looked after sick people at
home or in hospital, took care of cows and picked up pieces of
broken glass from the road.

From Moga: Two ladies taught Hindi to girls. Men fed
animals and planted trees. One member of the Samaj gave free
lessons to a poor working-man.

From Ferozepore: Eight ladies cared for the sick. Boys went
about helping old and crippled cows, guided the blind, and wa-
tered plants. Another member found a friendless man lying in
the road, seriously hurt in a carriage accident. He took him to
the hospital. Another member visited villages and taught poor
people of low caste how to be more clean.
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*From Sialkot:* A widow visited another widow who had lost her only son, read to her and spoke comforting words.

You will notice that in some of these cases kindness took the form of teaching. The heart of a teacher is moved by ignorance: another being needs knowledge and he is ready to give it. And knowledge, like bread or water or clothing, is a gift that can be transmitted from man to man.

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Lord Rama was strong and skilful in hunting, and strong and skilful in the art of teaching. When he set out to hunt animals in the jungle, he took one of his brothers with him as a companion. When he rested and ate, his younger brother sat at his side and shared the meal. When the hero went to the house of his Guru to study, he learnt the four Vedas as others might learn a game or a song. Having filled his mind with the Vedas and the Puranas, he had no wish to keep the sacred words in the secrecy of his heart. He taught them to his brother.

Just as kindness loves to share good knowledge, it also loves to share good news. For example, how great was Hanuman’s joy when he could give joy to others. Listen:

Noble Bharata, Lord Rama’s brother, waited fourteen years while Rama was in exile from the city of Ayodhya. Rama, the all-beautiful, wandered in the forest and knew the perils of war. But Bharata did not know his brother’s fate. As the end of the fourteenth year drew near, he pined in grief, fearing that he would never see Rama’s face again, for he had no news of him.

One day more and the fourteen years would have passed. Bharata was sitting on a seat of sacred grass, his hair was braided, his body was thin, and he was sighing to himself:

“O Rama, Rama, Raghubati!”

Then there stood before him the monkey-king Hanuman, noble Hanuman who had served the hero Rama so faithfully in the wars.
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He brought good news, and he was so happy to bring it that his eyes were full of tears and in his heart he felt a world of joy at being able to change Bharata’s sorrow into joy. He said:

“The one for whom you mourn day and night has returned safe and sound. He has conquered his enemy in battle and heard the gods singing hymns in his praise, and now the Lord is on his way home with Sita and his brother.”

Bharata thought no more of his past sorrow.

“Who are you, who bring me such glad tidings?”

“I am Hanuman, the son of the Wind, and though I am a monkey, I am a servant of Raghupati, of Rama.”

Bharata embraced Hanuman.

“Tell me more,” he said, “yes, tell me all.”

And Hanuman told him all, and he was happy beyond words to be the bearer of good news, and to see the life come back to the haggard face of the once sorrowful Bharata.

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Does the human heart show mercy only to human beings? No, it feels sorrow for the sorrow of an animal and joy for its joy.

People passed by a certain woman in scorn. They called her a sinner.

This sinner saw a dog whose tongue hung out in terrible thirst. It was dying. Without a cry, the poor creature was begging for something to drink.

The sinner took off her boot and let it down into a nearby well; in this way she brought up a little water and gave it to the dog, and so its life was saved.

People changed their minds about her.

“The Lord,” they said, “has forgiven this woman’s sins.”

She may have been a sinner, but she understood the meaning of human kindness.

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And again:

A man came to the Prophet Mohammed and showed him a nest full of young birds wrapped up in a piece of carpet.

“I found these birds, my Lord,” he said, “as I came through the wood. Hearing the chirps of the nestlings, I looked into a tree and found this nest.”

“Put the nest on the ground,” said the Prophet.

Then the mother bird swooped down and perched on the edge of the nest, delighted to have found her children.

“Put the family back where you found them,” said Mohammed. And he added:

“Be kind to animals. Ride them when they are strong enough to carry you. Dismount from them when they are tired. Give them to drink when they are thirsty.”

In the records of Islam it is said that one day the angels of heaven said to God:

“O God, is there anything in the world stronger than rock?”

“Yes,” God replied, “iron is stronger, for it breaks rock.”

“Is there anything stronger than iron?”

“Yes, fire, for it melts iron.”

“And is there anything stronger than fire?”

“Water, for it quenches fire.”

“And what is stronger than water?”

“Wind, for it can move the waves.”

“And is there anything even stronger?”

“Yes, the kind heart that gives alms in secret, not letting the left hand know what the right hand is doing.”

Not that today giving alms is the chief way of being kind. Of course, we may help our neighbour with a kind-hearted gift. But the story means that, by a gift or in any other way, the power of kindness is the greatest power in the world for winning the affection and friendship of others.

Suffering is aroused by the suffering of others, and joy by their joy.

Such is the glorious nature of sympathy.