

Suffering = Pain x Resistance



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Buddha famously proclaimed that attachment is the root of all suffering, but I didn't really get this until a western meditation master, Shinzen Young, translated Siddhartha's insight into the title of this essay. This psychological formula should be taken quite literally as an algebraic expression, with pain being an independent variable and resistance being a voluntary action that can either amplify or eliminate suffering. If this is the case then suffering must be regarded as voluntary, which certainly fits my own experience.

The dramatic leverage that resistance can apply to a given pain is apparent in the anxiety, whimpering and screaming of the toddler who fears the inoculation he cannot avoid. In fact, the pain that the needle actually inflicts is insignificant compared to the pain involved in the continuous stream of collisions, falls, and abrasions that he happily absorbs at play. It is the toddler's extreme resistance to the idea of the needle that causes his suffering in one situation, and his total surrender to the flow of play that precludes it in the other.

There is a certain gesture of resignation that everyone recognizes, perhaps a shrugging of shoulders or a throwing of hands in the air, which signifies that no further effort will be expended on the object of frustration. *"To hell with it!"* or, more gracefully, *"Oh, well!"* or even *"Oh!"* In all cases further resistance has been foresworn and suffering has been extinguished, though pain might well remain. The difference among these tones of resignation will determine how you may proceed. It may be that you continue to engage the object of your frustration, especially if it is your spouse or child, but without resistance. If so, you will find that you can be far more effective when you are not suffering, and that suffering is voluntary. Trust me. Call me.

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