

## **The Positive Psychology of Self-Sacrifice**

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There is a tragic ring to the term self-sacrifice. It conjures up images of Christ crucified, soldiers killed on battle fields or suicide-bombers blown to pieces along with their innocent victims. How can self-sacrifice be positive? Is self-sacrifice the highest expression of virtue or the worst form of human folly? Who benefits from self-obliteration? How can one reconcile self-sacrifice with self-actualization? During my recent trip to Hong Kong and China, I began to gain some insight to these puzzling questions.

### **They died fighting for a life worth living**

I visited the birth place and former residence of Dr. Sun Yat sen, (<http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~dee/MODCHINA/SUN.HTM> ) who overthrew Qing Dynasty to establish the first Republic of China. I also visited the tombs of young revolutionaries who gave their lives for the vision articulated by Dr. Sun.

Millions have died fighting for the same ideals of freedom, democracy and equality. The cost of their self-sacrifice is immeasurable when we take into account the pain and grief of their surviving loved ones. Have they died in vain? What have they achieved with their ultimate sacrifice? Corruption, oppression, injustice and inequality are still with us. Once in power, successful revolutionaries tend to repeat the evil of their predecessors. This again calls for a new wave of idealists to risk their lives for a better world. Thus, the struggle for illusive ideals continues indefinitely, because power and privilege tend to erase the bloody lessons from history.

Is it worth sacrificing so many precious lives for some abstract ideals? But what is the alternative? Just imagine a world in which no one is willing to stand up for what is right, and no one dares to challenge the corrupt dictators. When the righteous go hiding, evil will spread unchecked. When the fragile flame of idealism is extinguished, there will be no more hope for the suffering masses, and no more escape for the oppressed.

Many have died fighting for ideals, because they loved these ideals more than their own lives, and they loathed a miserable, meaningless existence more than death itself. In fact, one way to discover the meaning of life is find out whether we have something worth dying for. If we consider life is not worth living without freedom, democracy and equality, then fighting and dying for these ideals is worth it. This kind of sacrifice is unique to the human species, because they are

not fighting for mere survival – they are prepared to die fighting for a life that is worth living. Dreams never die as long as there are people willing to die for their ideals.

### **Idealism versus terrorism**

But there is a dark side to idealism. What immediately springs to mind are the suicide-bombers. Are they martyrs or are they terrorists? What is the difference between idealism and terrorism? Is it simply a matter of different perspectives?

There are at least three ways to work through this ethical entanglement. The first question to consider is: **What is the objective for their self-sacrifice?** Are they motivated by their love for freedom, justice and equality or are they driven by hostility and hate?

The second question to ask is: **What is their means of achieving their ideals?** Martyrs achieve their ideals through living and dying for what they believe -- they are persecuted and killed for their ideals. Suicide bombers, on the other hand, are terrorists because they pursue their ideals by killing innocent people.

Finally, we can ask: **Who is doing the self-sacrifice?** Is the act of self-sacrifice performed by people of sound mind and free will or committed by fanatics and puppets? We can no more separate the sacrifice from the sacrificer than we can disentangle the giving from the giver.

More vigorous philosophical analysis is needed to work through the above three criteria. For the time being, these simple guidelines at least point out some possible ways to differentiate between the positive, beneficial kind of self-sacrifice and the negative, destructive type of self-sacrifice.

### **Self-sacrifice and Chinese positive psychology**

Let's now consider in more detail the positive kind of self-sacrifice. When I prepared for a talk on Chinese positive psychology in Hong Kong, I could not help but think about the spirit of self-sacrifice prevalent in traditional Chinese families. Chinese positive psychology is collectivistic and paradoxical. The good life is defined by what is good for the family, for the group, rather than just for the self. It is through self-sacrifice for the larger good that one experiences true joy and fulfillment.

It is common for individuals to sacrifice themselves for the welfare of their family: Children show filial piety by putting their parents' interests above their own. Similarly, in poor families, parents toil day and night to send their children to college; brothers and sisters are willing to combine their resources to support the one with the best prospect of academic success; and older siblings are expected to assume the responsibility to look after younger ones.

The same kind of self-sacrifice and caring can also be found in villages, where neighbors and village elders often work together to help individuals with a pressing problem. As they work together to solve the problem, the burden is lightened. There is power in numbers, strength in unity and joy in harmony. Nothing seems insurmountable when people band together with one mind and one heart.

It makes perfect sense that collective coping should take over, when individual coping mechanisms prove inadequate in the face of overwhelming difficulties. The resilience of Chinese people throughout their long and often turbulent history is largely due to their culture that values self-sacrifice for the collective good.

Historically, the system of dynasty in China has been a fertile ground for breeding corrupt tyrants. When people cannot depend on the Government to take care of their problems, and when the central Government is the main source of their troubles, the only option left is for the citizens to depend on each other for survival. Through sticking together, they have survived many natural and man-made disasters for more than five thousand years.

In a civil society, people are expected to bear the burden of the less fortunate by giving their time and money to help others. In a traditional collectivistic society, self-sacrifice goes much deeper than mere charity; it is a way of life to survive in a harsh environment.

### **Self-sacrifice versus self-actualization**

The spirit of self-sacrifice may sound jarring and foolish in the Western culture which emphasizes personal success and happiness. How can one attain self-actualization if one practices self-sacrifice? Since each of us lives only once, how can we afford to sacrifice our own dreams and aspirations for others?

George Palmer (<http://www.authorama.com/nature-of-goodness-7.html> ) has provided an insightful solution to this dilemma. He argues that self-sacrifice is a form of self-enlargement, because society and the individual are supplemental to each other. "Society is nothing but the larger individual; so that he alone realizes himself who enters most fully into social relations, making the well-being of society his own."

Self-sacrifice is essential for self-actualization, because we are all interconnected and interdependent. One's well being is closely linked to the common good of the group one belongs. The positive psychology of self-sacrifice teaches us that individual well-being depends on co-creating a positive community through voluntary self-sacrifice.

Those who care only about their own interest in fact cut themselves off from the tree and become isolated branches without roots. Those obsessed with self-aggrandizement may actually diminish themselves by fragmenting the community to which they belong. The isolated self cannot find true fulfillment, because we are hard-wired for community. What really matters is the conjunct, interrelated self, which cannot be separated from family, friends, and society. In short, the positive psychology of the self cannot be sustained without a positive psychology of community.

The aim of self-sacrifice is not to negate ourselves but to voluntarily suffer personal loss for the greater good. Palmer has put it eloquently: "We must die to live. Our lower goods are found incompatible with our higher. Pleasure, comfort, property, friends, possibly life itself, have become hostile to our more inclusive aims and must be cast aside. It is true that when the tragic antithesis is presented and we can reach our higher goods only by loss of the lower, hesitation is ruin."

### **Self-enlargement through self-sacrifice**

Perhaps the noblest case of self-sacrifice involves the complete giving of oneself without any consideration of personal benefits. Paradoxically, "no self" or death to self actually results in self-enlargement. This wisdom can be found in major spiritual traditions.

For example, right after his announcement to his disciples about his forthcoming death, Jesus told them, "I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds" (John 12:24). "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men

to myself" (John 12:32). Indeed, through dying on the cross, Jesus has attracted millions of followers. He challenges every Christian to follow his example of self-sacrifice. "Anyone who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 10: 38-39).

In this Christmas season, millions of people around the globe are remembering the birth of Jesus Christ more than 2000 years ago. No other person has impacted human history more than Jesus. The power of Christianity flows directly from the sacrificial love of Jesus and his followers.

Another instructive example is Gautama Siddhartha, who later became the Buddha. Gautama renounced his secular life as a royal prince in order to find the path to enlightenment. Buddhism teaches that enlightenment necessarily involves willingly letting go one's delusion about the ego as a solid entity apart from other beings, and abandoning one's attachments to earthly possessions. Practice of the true Dharma (Buddhist teaching) requires self-denial and moral disciplines on a daily basis. Paradoxically, by giving up everything to embark on the Buddhist path, one's consciousness is liberated and expanded to include everything. To attain the state of "no self" actually leads to the experience of true inner peace and harmony with the cosmos.

## **Conclusion**

Are you tired of all the struggles, disappointments and pains associated with self-seeking? Are you longing for meaning and purpose? You may want to try self-sacrifice. When you identify self-interest with the larger interest of a community or a higher calling, self-sacrifice will not only lead to self-fulfillment but also to the betterment of society.

Self-enlargement occurs only when self-actualization is surrendered to self-sacrifice. Whoever gives up his life will find it; whoever renounces worldly desires will find true riches. We discover life through dying, joy through suffering, and fulfillment through emptying ourselves. By opening our hearts and minds for others, our own lives are enlarged and enriched. Such paradoxical effects can be found experientially and experimentally, but we need to at least entertain such a glorious possibility.