

GET REAL
A PAINFUL TRUTH:
VIOLENCE WEARS A TRICKY MASK
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Recently, in reading about—of all things—torture, I discovered something profound. I had always fancied myself someone who'd never, ever participate in torturing another human being (and note, I never have), but...I came across the Milgram Study.

The Milgram Study is a well-known study conducted at Yale in 1960. Imagine this: you're in a room with a doctor in a lab coat and a trussed-up student. The doctor asks the student, let's say, a math question. The student gets it wrong; the doctor tells you to electrically shock the student. You do.

This continues, and with every new instance of a wrong answer the doctor tells you to increase the level of the electricity. So, you do.

Soon the student is shrieking, "Please stop!"

You look to the doc to end the ordeal. Instead he calmly assures you this is all expected, "The experiment must continue; you aren't responsible for the effects."

So, the test continues, and again, the student answers incorrectly. This time you're told to use a dangerous voltage. You hesitate, but the doc reassures you this is all quite beneficial. You proceed.

And thus we have the Milgram Study.

The results of this bizarre scenario were astounding. The truth is that the doctor and the student were both actors. The people in your position, the shockers, were the test subjects. And *more than half* of these test subjects cooperated with the doctor. Even when the "student" was screaming with pain, pleading not to continue, over half the shockers followed directions and zapped away.

This is the total abandonment of humanity.

The Milgram Study concluded, among other things, that ordinary people would carry out torture under two conditions: an authority assuring them a) the responsibility would fall on someone else and b) the act would be beneficial.

Psychologist Stanley Milgram wrote, "It is psychologically easy to ignore responsibility when one is only an intermediate link in a chain of evil action but is far from the final consequences of the action."

Consider this: another study exploring how prison guards became torturers found several characteristics always present: The torturers 1) believed torturing was for the good of the country; 2) believed they were properly following their superior; and 3) regarded their victim(s) as sub-human.

Such are the ingredients for civilized ruin!

Torture is the extreme of inhumane action. But there are thousands of social facets—pollution of the environment, disregard of animals, disrespect for education, tolerance of war, and so on—which we allow to exist, not because these things are unchangeable, but because trusting our humanity, challenging the norm and owning personal responsibility is all enormously difficult.

When I realized I myself could have "cooperated" in the Milgram scenario, I knew I had to make a vow. So, here's my vow: I am determined not to be a cog in the machine. I will always strive to be governed by my humanity. I will resist the great

comfort of mindlessly following authority. And, in a sense, I re-pledge the Victory Over Violence Pledge we made last year.

Human life is dynamic. Any one of us is capable of any form of behavior. The struggle to conduct oneself in an altruistic way, to tap into Buddhahood, is the great struggle that will help us reject the certain cruelties of society.