Does suffering have meanings?

Suffering as we define it is not just an unpleasant experience but all that may harm or could be perceived as harm to oneself. Buddha on the other hand explains in his sermon of the Four Noble Truths which are “dukkha” suffering, “samudaya” arising of suffering, “nirodha” cessation of suffering and “magga” path to cessation of suffering. But if asked is there meaning behind the pain and suffering I would say no, I do not think suffering inherently has meaning, like almost everything it is us humans that give it meaning.

The Buddha’s Four Noble Truths can basically be stated as what is suffering, what is the cause of suffering, what is the cure of suffering, and what are the ways to cure suffering. “Dukkha” in Sanskrit is suffering or sorrow and the first truth, Buddha says that the world has suffering but his definition of suffering is much broader than just pain. Suffering to him has three meanings mental-physical pain this being sickness, old age, etc. which all of us will experience without exception, Impermanence or change stating that nothing lasts, and everything changes thus since everything changes it will inevitably lead to pain or suffering, and all existence is conditioned meaning everything has conditions and since we cannot control those conditions it leads to helpless ness and thus suffering. Everything suffers even the ones who might be lucky enough and are not suffering right now are afraid that they might suffer in the future. When I think of meaning in suffering, I think of the change that suffering might have caused in one’s life for example, if a person is dying of cancer, they might look at life differently because of the cancer and appreciate what they have. Another way it could be meaningful I suppose is if the person took that as a learning opportunity, say their business tanked but, in the process, they learnt the ins and outs thus that suffering helped them in future ventures. However, I do not believe that there is a meaning behind him getting cancer, but that the meaning is a human derived thing and not inherent to suffering.

I personally have not found meaning in suffering yet, of all the times that I have suffered I do not think I have ever wished to have had suffered. If given the chance to go back and change something I would not wish to suffer again but to change it so that I do not have to suffer. But if I must give an example of meaningful suffering, I like to code and one time I went to a hackathon there I partnered up with a couple people and worked on the project for the entire duration and it was not easy but at the end I learned more about the craft met new people and won third. Here I could say that my suffering was the 24 hours I stayed up on monster energy drinks. From this experience I noticed in myself that I had become a better programmer which was meaningful to me. An example of suffering without meaning would be the death of my grandfather I do not think I can find anything meaningful in that. Here I am not saying that he should have never died, everyone has to die at some point, but I don’t see anything meaningful in this suffering.

In the meaningful example after I went through my suffering and saw the changes in myself, I interpreted it as me getting better at programming and thought maybe if I had not experienced that suffering, I would not have improved while in the other example I am unable to interpret any meaning in the suffering. I think adding meaning to suffering helps in justifying it or maybe coping with it, by saying “if I hadn’t gone through that I wouldn’t be this” I hear my uncle talking like this about strict to borderline abusive teachers he had in boarding school. Another form of suffering that I cannot find meaning is causing suffering to oneself to feel closer to something be it divine or otherwise, examples such as self-flagellation or starving oneself etc. It is these things that cement me more into the idea that suffering does not have meaning, because people will find meaning in even that.

Suffering does not have inherent meaning; humans make suffering meaningful as a defense mechanism by interpreting it in a way that helps them justify or cope with the trauma they experienced. Everyone suffers even the ones lucky enough to not suffer are worried about suffering in the future.