

Working With Physical Discomfort During Meditation

First a terminology note: In this discussion I'll be using the word pain in its broadest sense to include the entire spectrum of discomfort from minor irritations to convulsive agony.

In many cultures, the practice of meditation is closely associated with another practice...asceticism. Asceticism is voluntarily exposing oneself to discomfort and deprivation in order to achieve a spiritual goal. The notion of asceticism can be confusing. There is so much unavoidable pain in the world, why expose yourself to more? For many people, the idea of voluntarily making oneself uncomfortable seems stupid and offensive, if not downright pathological. Indeed the nature of asceticism is very easily misunderstood, not only by the general public but even by individuals who themselves advocate and practice it. Is pain good for our spiritual growth? Is it bad for our spiritual growth? Why is asceticism and even self-torture so prevalent in human cultures worldwide? Let's see if we can bring some clarity to this fascinating and highly relevant question.

Highly relevant? I realize that you're probably not planning on adopting the practice of self-flagellation or Sioux Sundancing in the near future. But consider the range of unavoidable discomforts that you will certainly encounter in this life. Carefully examine your moment by moment experience. At a subtle level, you will find that you are constantly assailed by minor physical discomforts of one sort or another. We cope with this pervasive, subtle malaise by diverting our attention to avoid it and fidgeting our bodies to temporarily relieve it. At the gross level we know that there is a truly terrifying spectrum of pain that we are potentially subject to. Sooner or later we will probably have to face the reality of severe pains through illness, injury and the aging process. Our usual coping strategy for this is denial, "I'll deal with that when the time comes," or "Doctor's will find a way to deaden the pain." But when the time does come and there is no way out and the pain is severe, relief becomes the sole preoccupation of our existence.

Is there something else we can do with pain besides just coping through distraction, denial, wishful thinking and numbing anesthetics? Is there a universal strategy that can be applied to all pains regardless of their type, intensity or the causes that produce them? Is there a psychologically healthy way of making pain meaningful, a simple systematic way to harness its energy in the service of life? If so, this would be good news indeed! We could then effectively "use" the unavoidable discomforts of day-to-day life to foster personal growth. It would be comforting and empowering to know that should you encounter major pain which cannot be relieved by any of the standard methods, you have another option available. Meditation represents such an option.

In order to understand the nature of pain and its relationship to the spiritual path, let's go back for a moment to the topic of pleasure. In "Meditation and Pleasure," I make some careful conceptual distinctions. The particular words that I chose to use in making those distinctions are not really important. For you, a different choice of vocabulary may convey the same meaning. What is important is the concepts. I defined satisfaction (or fulfillment) as a particular way of experiencing pleasure. Any given pleasure can either be experienced completely or not. When it is experienced completely, it yields something called satisfaction. Completeness has nothing to do with the intensity, variety or duration of the pleasure. Completeness requires just two things: an unbroken contact with the pleasure and an absence of interference with the pleasure. Absence of interference means that the pleasure is not mixed with grasping, either at the conscious or the subconscious level. Grasping

is a kind of tension or viscosity that impedes the natural flow of the pleasure. It's a kind of tightening around the arising and the passing of the pleasure. To experience pleasure without grasping is to experience it with equanimity, meaning not aloof withdrawal but radical self-permission to feel the pleasure. Pleasure which is not mixed with grasping could be called pure pleasure. Pure pleasure purifies consciousness and permanently raises our base level of appreciation for life. The situation with pain is perfectly parallel to that of pleasure. Any given pain can either be experienced completely or incompletely. When it is experienced completely it is not experienced as suffering, that is to say it does not turn into a problem. Does it hurt? Yes. Does that eclipse the perfection of the moment? No. Complete pain means pure pain, pain which is not mixed with resistance, either at the conscious or subconscious level of neural processing. Resistance is a kind of inner friction that interferes with the natural flow of the pain. Not resisting pain is to have equanimity with the pain, to give yourself radical permission to feel the pain. Pure pain purifies. The "matter" of the pain becomes converted into energy which massages and softens the very substance of your soul.

Let me try to make this process a little more tangible. In the undistracted meditative state, if pain should arise, one can clearly observe the interaction of the pain and one's resistance to it. For example, an uncomfortable sensation may arise in your knee as you're meditating. At the same time, you observe that, in reaction to the pain you are clenching and tightening other parts of your body, and in your mind a stream of judgments and aversive thoughts erupts. The sensation in your knee is the pain. The tension is your bodily resistance. The judgments are mental resistance. The resistance can be clearly distinguished from the pain itself. As you consciously relax the tensions and drop the judgments, you notice that even though the pain level is the same, it seems to be less of a problem. Later when the resistance returns you notice that the pain has become a problem again. So once again you drop the judgments and clenching, and the sense of suffering immediately diminishes, albeit perhaps only slightly. But you are making your first steps in learning how to experience pain skillfully. Subsequent steps involve letting go of progressively more subtle mind and body resistance until the deep subconscious resistance begins to break up. At that point the pain starts to flow. It feels like you're being massaged and nurtured. You experience the pain as working on your consciousness at a very deep level: it is as though your consciousness were dough and the pain wave is kneading that dough, working out the lumps and the kinks, transforming it at a molecular level into something soft, pliant and malleable. With continued practice this skill becomes internalized and integrated into your being. When discomforts are encountered in the course of daily life, you *automatically* go into equanimity.

So is it necessary to experience discomfort in order to deepen one's spiritual practice? Absolutely not! The skills that allow you to experience pleasure with heightened satisfaction are the same skills that allow you to experience pain with diminished suffering. Skill with pleasure leads to skill with pain and conversely because what you're really learning is a general skill with feeling. If discomfort arises during meditation, you can take measures to relieve it or you can explore it, the choice is yours. Of course if you encounter pain in daily life that cannot be relieved, then you have no choice because the only alternative to experiencing it skillfully is to experience it as abject suffering. In this life we must sometimes spend time in purgatory (an uncomfortable place of spiritual purification). If you understand how to meditate, then the purgatory won't turn into hell (a terrifying place of meaningless suffering). Spiritually there's a big difference between hell and purgatory. But the idea of voluntarily staying with pain may still seem a little radical to you. Please remember that we are mostly talking about working with small manageable doses of subjective discomfort that do not objectively harm the

body. And yes, this is a radical thing to do! In the original Latin, "radical" means addressing an issue at the root or most basic level.

Perhaps the following metaphor will help. Consider the standard medical procedure called vaccination. When you get a vaccination, you're given a real but quite manageable dose of a serious disease. As a result your body goes through a natural change. It learns how to deal with the disease. After vaccination you are immune and need not fear exposure to the full force of the disease itself. However, there is a price you have to pay. You may have to put up with a little discomfort. Your arm gets sore. You feel weak and feverish for a short time. But we're happy to pay that price because the reward is so great and the alternative so horrendous. Vaccination is a delicately skillful process that uses disease to overcome disease. It has vastly improved the quality of human life.

When you sit and meditate you may sometimes be subject to discomforts, aches and pains, sleepiness, body sensations of agitation and impatience, itches and awkwardness from the posture. These discomforts are real but quite manageable. In the meditative state you can experience them with more mindfulness and equanimity than you would in daily life. As a result the mind and body go through a natural change, a deep learning process that affects the unconscious levels of neural processing. Your deep mind learns a healthy way to deal with pain. As a result when you encounter real pain in the real world, you discover that you are not suffering the way you used to. By not suffering I mean that the pain does not obscure the perfection of the moment, does not distort your perception or behavior, does not alienate you from your spiritual source or from your fellow beings.

True asceticism is a delicate skillful process that uses pain to overcome pain. When properly understood and practiced, it deepens our humanity, elevates our satisfaction with life and break up blockages in the deep reaches of the mind. When improperly understood, asceticism ceases to be delicate and skillful and degenerates into something pathological. One pathology is extremism, which can end up harming the body and weakening mental focus. A second pathology is spiritual macho, seeing how tough you can get. A third pathology is spiritual masochism, exposing yourself to discomfort because you consider yourself to be a worthless worm who deserves to suffer. Spiritual machismo and spiritual masochism both subtly reinforce a fixated ego; on the other hand, authentic asceticism shows us how to become free from the suffering self.

So now you can understand why many people are quite happy to put up with discomfort during meditation. *They view it as a vaccination against future suffering.*

The preceding remarks about the relationship between meditation, pleasure and pain can be summarized in four compact formulas. If you hate math, please bear with me for a moment, the clarification will be worth it!

The area of a rectangle is a function of two variables, its length and its height. This relationship can be expressed in a mathematical formula: $\text{area} = \text{length} \times \text{height}$. In the same way, suffering is a function of two variables, the pain and the degree to which the pain is resisted. The relationship can be expressed as: $\text{suffering} = \text{pain} \times \text{resistance}$ (suffering is equal to pain multiplied by resistance). Likewise, satisfaction is a function of two variables, pleasure and the degree to which pleasure is experienced without grasping.

So here are the formulas. Please remember that the word pain as I use it here includes any physical (or emotional!) uncomfortable sensation, major or minor. Likewise, pleasure refers to any physical or emotional pleasant sensation, big or small. We might call these formulas the Fundamental Theorem of Human Happiness.

The Fundamental Theorem of Human Happiness¹

H1. SATISFACTION = PLEASURE x EQUANIMITY

H2. FRUSTRATION = PLEASURE x GRASPING

H3. EMPOWERMENT = PAIN x EQUANIMITY

H4. SUFFERING = PAIN x RESISTANCE

¹Note for those of you with science backgrounds: Strictly speaking, these formulas represent linear approximations of more complex relationships, probably power functions. See the pioneering work of S. S. Stevens of the Harvard Psychophysics Lab.