

The Icky-Sticky Creepy-Crawly It-Doesn't-Really-Hurt-But-I-Can't-Stand-It Feeling

Because meditation is a state of alert relaxation, it usually produces pleasant body sensations. Sometimes this pleasure is quite obvious, sometimes it may be wispy and subtle. Even when a person is experiencing discomfort during meditation, there is usually still some pleasure present, although one may not realize it. In the Buddhist tradition, there are several special technical terms to distinguish subtle nuances of meditation-produced pleasure such as *piti* (rapture), *sukha* (bliss) and *passaddhi* (lightness).

One of the tricks of the trade that meditators learn is how to use the intrinsic pleasure of meditation to deepen the meditation itself. This results in a positive feedback loop which carries the meditator into deeper and deeper states.

Here is how it works. The meditation produces relaxation and this feels good. The meditator can then focus on that pleasure skillfully, i.e. with equanimity and high concentration. This causes the pleasure to become more profoundly satisfying which in turn encourages even greater equanimity and concentration. This in turn causes the meditator to drop into an even deeper state of meditation producing more pleasure...

However, it is also true that meditators sometimes go through periods when the more they relax, the worse they feel! Specifically, there is a distinct kind of yucky body discomfort which occasionally arises in meditation. There is no single expression in the English language to denote this quality of sensation although we ought to have a word for it since it is such a common phenomenon. I once heard a famous Burmese teacher refer to it as "*samadhi* pain" because unlike other discomforts which immediately improve when you go deeper into *samadhi* (relaxation, concentration), this discomfort can get temporarily worse. The best I can do is try to characterize it in a few sentences. If you have ever experienced it, you will immediately recognize what I am trying to describe. For lack of a better term, I sometimes refer to this phenomenon as "relaxation pain."

It is an icky, sticky, creepy, crawly, jump-out-of-your-skin quality, a subtle cringing that may affect part or all of the body. The body may even move, shake or twitch as though it were in extreme agony, but there is little actual pain. *It seems unbearable, yet it doesn't actually hurt. The worst part is that the more you relax, the "yuckier" you feel.* When this phenomenon arises, it seems that the last thing you would want to do is to keep still for even a moment.

Of course this does not happen to everyone who meditates, so you may never be faced with it. But it is important to know about it because you could potentially encounter it at any point in your spiritual development. Even if you never meditate, you may experience this phenomenon, because it can arise as the result of just about any growth process. For example, a person may feel great while getting a massage or body work and then be ready to jump out of their skin a few hours or a few days later. Unless the body worker knows how to explain what is happening and what to do about it, the results could be confusing and discouraging to the client. This quality of sensation can also arise as the result of therapy, detoxification, diets and other growth modalities. In fact, people sometimes experience this quality of sensation for no apparent reason at all. When a

person encounters this phenomenon, there is a tendency to be confused, to wonder, "What am I doing wrong?" In point of fact, it is a sign that you are doing something right!

If for whatever reason, you encounter this phenomenon, you need to do four things:

1. Understand what causes it.
2. Know how to work with it.
3. Remember that it will eventually dissolve.
4. Be happy.

Be happy? Perhaps you think I am being facetious or lack compassion, but what I am going to share with you is based on two decades of very personal experience with this phenomenon.

What causes it?

It is entirely possible that this question can be answered validly in more than one way. At one level, there may be some bio-chemical or physiological process involved. This aspect is outside of my expertise. However, I can provide you with a very powerful paradigm which explains this phenomenon in terms of spiritual growth.

In my discussions of pain I present the concept that suffering equals pain multiplied by resistance ($S = P \times R$). I defined pain as any uncomfortable sensation and resistance as any push and pull, any craving and aversion that interferes with the natural flow of the pain. Suffering is a kind of internal civil war, a kind of pressure that develops when one part of ones being (the part whose job it is to make pain) clashes with another part of ones being (the mental judgments and body tensions that fight with the pain). Our language reveals this truth; agony literally means conflict in the original Greek.

The formula $S = P \times R$ is similar to the formula of a rectangle, $A = H \times L$. If the rectangle is 10 inches high and 20 inches long, its area will be $10 \times 20 = 200$ square inches. If we cut its height in half, we likewise reduce the area by one half: $(\frac{1}{2} \times 10) \times 20 = 5 \times 20 = 100 = \frac{1}{2} \times 200$. Likewise if we reduce its length by one half, we get the same effect: $10 \times (\frac{1}{2} \times 20) = 10 \times 10 = 100 = \frac{1}{2} \times 200$. If the height of the rectangle is very small, its area will also be small, even if its length is quite large. And of course if either length or height is reduced to zero, the area disappears entirely.

The formula $S = P \times R$ (although only approximately true) conveys a lot of useful information. It tells us there are three ways to reduce suffering: reduce pain, reduce resistance or reduce both at the same time. We can reduce pain by removing its cause or by numbing it with drugs. We can reduce resistance through a learning process such as meditation. Eventually, our tendencies to resist can be made so small as to be negligible.

I mentioned that the formula $S = P \times R$ is only an approximation. One reason for this is because the resistance is not independent of the pain. In fact in general, the resistance is *proportional* to the pain itself. Small pains cause small resistance; big pains cause big resistance. To put it alternatively, the more it hurts, the more we tend to fight it. A better but still approximate formula would be $S = P \times R = P \times P = P^2$. The reason that this is still an approximation is fascinating, but a bit technical. (If you are interested, consult the pioneering works of S. S. Stevens of the Harvard Psychophysics Laboratory.)

For example, pain at level 10 tends to produce resistance at level 10 resulting in suffering at level $10 \times 10 = 100$. Pain at level 30 produces resistance at level 30 resulting in suffering of level $30 \times 30 = 900$. Hence, increasing the pain by a factor of merely 3 magnifies the suffering by a factor of $3^2 = 9$! This is why pain can so quickly become utterly overwhelming.

At this point you may be asking what all this has to do with the yucky phenomenon that is the topic of this section. Well, remember I described "relaxation pain" as having two strange characteristics: the more you relax, the worse it gets (at least for a while) and though it doesn't hurt much, it seems to cause a lot of suffering.

From the viewpoint of spiritual growth, this is what is happening. The act of relaxing causes the mesh of ones consciousness to open. You become porous like diaphanous cloth. Psychological "impurities" (samskaras), deep seated fixating, can now percolate up to the surface in tangible form. Resistance per se is coming up with nothing particular to resist! The actual discomfort in your body may only be at level 2, but your perceived suffering may be at level 100. $S = P \times R$ implies that $R = S / P$. So you must be resisting at level $100/2 = 50$. You are experiencing almost pure resistance, pure craving and aversion. In other words you are experiencing pure impurity!

So now we have a model or paradigm to describe why these yucky, creepy crawly sensations take place, but what do we do about it? Nothing! Just try, to the best of your ability, to feel it and accept it. Sooner or later it will dissolve and break up. If you have made an effort to try to accept it, when it does break up, you will have released one "quantum packet" of poison and pain from the deep reaches of the unconscious mind. Of course the phenomenon may manifest again, but you haven't gone backwards. It is just that a deeper level of impurity has now percolated upward. Once again, try to the best of your ability to accept it. In this way, layer after layer of blockage from the deep unconscious, which would be very difficult to get to directly, percolates up to the surface and gets worked off. Admittedly this is challenging because those very sensations are the tangible manifestation of deep seeded tendencies of non-acceptance. Although it is challenging, it is also quite doable by anyone. Objectively, the suffering associated with this phenomenon is no greater than that associated with a rash or the flu. Anyone can learn to live with those kinds of sensations, but why would anyone want to? What is the payoff? The payoff is that consciousness is being cleansed at a radical level, a level that would perhaps be difficult to reach otherwise.

This is the reason that I said to be happy. Trying to contact ones innermost conflicting tendencies directly in the unconscious is very difficult. But when the phenomenon of the "icky-sticky" sensations arises, the endeavor becomes very simple. All you have to do is pay attention to those sensations, try to accept them and let time pass. Nature will do the rest.

I opened this section by describing how the pleasures produces by meditation can be used to create a positive feedback loop that deepens and motivates practice. Hopefully you now have a paradigm for how to work with the opposite phenomenon so that if you pass through a period where meditation exaggerates discomfort, it will not turn into a negative feedback loop which discourages you from practice. The mark of maturity in meditation is that *everything* becomes a positive feedback loop. The better it feels, the deeper you go! The worse it feels, the deeper you go!

I would like to conclude this section with a practical suggestion and an amusing personal story. First, the practical suggestion. If relaxation pain is getting to you and you can't just accept it, it may help to do something

intensely physical such as vigorous exercise or sitting in a steam room or hot tub. This usually gives me some temporary relief. Perhaps this has something to do with endorphins or their antagonists.

Now the story. Many years ago I was invited to give a lecture at an intervention program for compulsive eating disorders. This was an in-patient program. The patients, mostly women, stayed on a hospital ward for three weeks and were given intensive therapy and medical attention. The cost was astronomical, but in those days insurance companies would cover such procedures.

My lecture was on the use of meditation for overcoming compulsive behaviors. During the subsequent question and answer period, one patient asked if meditation could help with a peculiar phenomenon she was experiencing. She proceeded to describe a classic case of "relaxation pain." I gave a detailed answer, more or less along the lines of what you have just read.

I felt that my presentation had been well received, but as I was about to leave I was literally set upon by five or six women who brusquely pushed me into an empty room.

They then began to barrage me with questions about the phenomenon of "relaxation pain." It seems that many of the patients were experiencing it and it had become a hot topic of discussion among them. They had approached their doctors and staff but no one could give them a satisfactory explanation or any suggestions about what to do. One woman said, "With all the money I'm paying for this program, what you told us today was the most valuable thing I've learned so far."