



## **Finding Ease in the Midst of Pain**

Open with Metta Meditation

Metta is word from Pali - the language of the Buddhist texts. It is generally translated as lovingkindness. However, I think a better translation would be as kindness, or friendliness. We don't have to like the person to whom we are directing the metta, or approve of their actions. Instead we cultivate an empathy, an understanding, a sense of friendliness or kindness to all.

I have opened this evening with a meditation on metta, on friendliness. It is important to keep this in mind as we explore the relationship of meditation and pain. And I will speak directly on how metta can be, needs to be, part of this relationship.

My talk tonight is called Finding Ease in the Midst of Pain. I speak as a meditation teacher and as a nurse. My familiarity with pain comes from both worlds; it comes from a personal back injury; from just being human and of course from direct experience in my own meditation practice. It is impossible to truly practice meditation, without pain being at some point – unavoidable.

We will explore a little on kindness, on goals and aspiration, on the difference between suffering and pain, on resistance and letting go. I want to give you some background on the relationship between meditation and pain, to give you some ideas on how mindfulness can work specifically and to tell you that it does work.

You are welcome to ask questions at any time. I generally do better with questions and answers than I do with a straightforward talk. So please jump in.

Meditation is an art of happiness and it is an act of healing – healing of both mind and body. We come to meditation as part of our search for wellness, for completion at all levels. We have an inner sense that we could be more than we are now, that we are not in balance. Often people talk of their need for peace, or to end the pain that they are in.

Just as illness is a normal part of life – there is none of us here that have not had some form of illness in their life, so is pain a normal part of life. There are none of us here that have not been in pain. Pain is not only physical pain, when the body is injured, but is also of the mind, of the psyche – emotional pain. We don't have to have an ailing, failing body to know pain. There are so many forms of emotional pain available to us. There is fear and grief, anger and sorrow, loss, depression, stress, frustration, being overwhelmed – shall I go on? and on. When the physical pain also turns into emotional pain the damage goes deeper and is a more intrinsic part of ourselves, of who we think we are.

Going back into the tradition of Buddhism, the Buddha taught something that he called the Four Noble Truths. The first Truth is that pain and suffering exist - it is an intrinsic part of our life. The other Truths talk about how to move out of suffering into happiness. In the

Sanskrit language of Buddhist texts, suffering is dukkha and happiness is sukkha. The Buddha spent 45 years wandering the Ganges plains area teaching meditation, sukkha and the freedom from suffering. His emphasis was not on dukkha, but on finding our deep inner source of joy. In order to reach that though, the road, the path to happiness, needs to start with an understanding and acceptance of our own dukkha—our suffering and pain. A person can have good life, good fortune and health and in a moment a tragedy can occur and it all changes. Or dukkha can just arise because no matter how good it is, we are still aren't satisfied. To counter this tendency, in Zen there is the saying – 'regard the cup as already broken.'

Sometimes, since I see pain and difficulty daily in the people I work with, I forget how much this world is both fascinated by misfortune – as long as it is other's pain and suffering – and at the same time, does not want to really get close to suffering in ourselves or in others. Our approach to pain is initially to deny it. And this goes not only for our own experience, but for how we approach others who are in pain. It is interesting that within the medical world, there is now a whole teaching strategy out for nurses and doctors, that emphasizes that pain is what the person/the patient feels. We are taught that we need to rely on the patient's evaluation, not just on our own assumptions. It is quite telling that those of us working with people in chronic or acute pain, had to be continually reminded and taught to listen and empathize to overcome our initial reaction of denial.

Denial of pain in ourselves leads to a failure to address the message of the pain. Our denial has an impact on others around us. Denial keeps us in the dark, in fantasy not reality. Acceptance, and by this I don't mean passivity or indifference, leads to bringing light to the pain, its source and our reactions to our pain. Our acceptance allows our family and those around us to be clearer and cleaner in their feelings and responses.

There are countless examples of denial of our own pain in the medical literature. The classic one is found in the research on heart attacks. For effective treatment, people need to get into emerg within a few hours, yet many have all the symptoms of sudden onset of chest pain, yet don't go or delay.

I have a friend who was on a canoe trip this summer with a some other friends. They stopped to swim at an inviting sunny spot on a river bank. Well she did the classical – dove in off a high rock without checking the depth and her head impacted a rock, hidden in the brown water of the river. Lots of blood from a gash, worried friends and fortunately no paralysis. It was the first day of the trip – they paddled back for a visit to emerg and stiches. When I heard about it some weeks later, I asked how she was doing – oh not bad, slight headaches may be all. So I suggested the usual – chiro (that she already knew), osteopath, familiar acupuncturist as a preventative. Well a month later, it had progressed to neck pain, numbness and tingling in arms and hands and she was still not looking for help.

my own back injury

As denial is so pervasive, perhaps it is one of the first areas that meditation affects. One meditation teacher – Shinzen Young talks of the opposites that we see in how we approach life's difficulties:

The common approach is to shutdown and turn away.

What meditation requires of us is to open up and turn towards.

The turn away is often our normal approach to difficulties. In order to 'overcome' or unravel our suffering, we need to open up to it and turn towards it.

I started this evening with Metta Meditation, because I believe that without an underpinning of goodwill to oneself or to others, our meditation will be slow to flourish. At its root, metta embodies this open up and turn towards paradigm. Meditation is a training of the mind. And so even if friendliness seems hard to find in ourselves, we can gradually generate it. Metta is part of what is known in Buddhist teaching as the Brahma Viharas – the abode of the gods. Brahma is god and vihara means home or dwelling place. I have always been struck by this analogy – the places where the gods reside are the homes of

metta	friendliness, kindness, love
karuna	compassion
mudhita	sympathetic joy
upekkha	equanimity

Meditation is an action that embodies being, it is not an act of doing. It is not quite non-doing either. The words, the verbs are hard to find that accurately expresses the quality of meditation practice. Perhaps a way to describe the process is that it is one of 'letting go'. And the letting go includes our pre-conceived notions of what we will gain from the experience.

It is difficult to start any endeavour without goals or expectations. So for us it is better to turn the goals into aspirations or add in aspiration to being part of our expectations. Goals are inherently a grasping, a condensing of the will, of the mind. We form an idea, an expectation and then are happy or sad depending on how the outcome conforms to these ideas. The outcome is thus basically experienced and evaluated on the basis of our ideas or concepts or goals.

Aspiration is a better word to express a meditative point of view on the very human need for creating plans and goals. Aspiration from its root also means breathing in. It is an expansion, an opening up and a lifting up of the heart. It is sometimes expressed as having 'lofty goals' or desires that not only include what is good for me, but also what is good for others. In our aspirations, regarding our pain, we need to include a sense of altruism. In Buddhist teaching this aspiration is called Bodhicitta, the wish for awakening, for the ending of suffering for all beings. Pain is already self-absorbing, if we cannot find an aspiration for our healing, for our life, that includes others in the aspiration then we have reinforced this self-absorption.

So how does all this relate to pain? We need to be clear on our expectations, goals and our aspirations. When in pain, our natural response is to want it to end. So we start with the goal of ending our pain, for ourselves. Meditation is a path of healing, it is not a path of masking, of analgesia or pain medication. For healing to take place, it is necessary to go to the root of the problem and solve it there, not to just correct the symptoms. This is one of the powers of meditation, yet frustrating because we are looking for a fix from outside, similar to taking medication – we want a meditation pill. It is much, much harder to find the fix from within.

We also need to understand that pain and suffering are two different entities. "Most people equate pain with suffering." SY Meditation helps with pain, can aid in and be part of deep physical and emotional healing, but it's true worth is found in our eventual ending of our suffering. Our suffering is not the physical or emotional feeling of painful stimuli, but is found in our interaction with the stimulus, with what we call pain. We start with a sensation in the body or with an emotional feeling, that is very strong and conditioned to be perceived as unpleasant – we call it pain. But we can't just experience it as it is. We interpret it, we bring thoughts and

images of past pains and worries about how the future will unfold with this non-ending pain. There is a story built up that is associated with the stimulus. Stimulus - response. All of this occurs almost seamlessly and unnoticed. This is our story – the 'story of me'.

Suffering is created in the relationship of pain and our resistance to pain. Essentially without resistance, we have no suffering. We can have resistance in the body or in the mind. In the body, this is seen in the tightening, the muscle spasms, the protection around an area of injury or pain. Sometimes this is a useful protective device, but more often the spasms and tightening become as or more painful than the original injury. Our bodies are not perfectly or even well designed to handle all situations of disease and injury. Medically, for instance, we see way more damage from inappropriate inflammatory responses such as asthma, arthritis and just tissue swelling after a traumatic injury than the initial cause warrants. This body resistance can be both conscious and unconscious in how we hold our selves and tighten up in response to pain.

In the mind, unconscious resistance shows up just as a blocking or an inner turning away from our direct experience. It is the precursor of conscious resistance, which can be expressed in the form of judgments, of fear of the future, of blame, of anger. Part of the practice of mindfulness meditation is to have us pour awareness onto the pain. By doing this, we separate out the direct physical or emotional experience from the subsequent arising of words and images that take us away from the pain. We begin to separate the pain from the add-on of suffering.

Part of the problem with chronic pain, is that over time our resistance to it grows and our ability to cope diminishes. The actual pain sensation if we could truly measure it may stay the same but our perceived suffering can become unbearable.

So what do we do? "Dealing with pain from illness or injury becomes a major issue for most people" at some point "in their lives. Indeed for millions of chronic pain victims, it is *the* issue of every moment of their lives." So does this mean that after the options of medication, surgery and other treatments, that nothing can be done, that one is only left with meaningless suffering? (SY)

How do we integrate meditation into what can be an intolerable situation? Well slowly, with kindness, without expectations, with hope, with faith.

What is meditation? It is not an unknown state of mind – we all have experiences of meditative states. We all have had experiences in daily life of being present and aware; focussed on a task or activity and enjoying what we are doing, feeling fulfilled. And we all have times of being scattered. We fluctuate between these two poles. Meditation is a training, a cultivation of the body/mind that brings on this state of focus and awareness. Concentration brings its own sense of joy. We find it can arise in moments of danger – rock climbing, sports or it can come with relaxation and peace (making love or music or being in nature).

This training in focus is not one of forcing though, it comes paradoxically through letting go, letting go of everything that is not the object of meditation. It is finding the resistance and allowing it to dissolve. Since resistance by its very nature is a not liking, a non-accepting, the subtle inner shift that comes with metta, will give it the space to dissolve.

quote from Who Ordered This Truckload of Dung – poem by Jonathon

## it's too much to hope for

It's too much to hope for a life without pain,  
It's wrong to expect a life without pain,  
For pain is our body's defense.  
No matter how much we dislike it,  
And nobody likes pain,  
Pain is important,  
And,  
For pain we should be grateful!  
How else would we know,  
To move our hand from the fire?  
Our finger from the blade?  
Our foot from the thorn?  
So pain is important,  
And for pain we should be grateful!  
Yet,  
There's a type of pain that serves no purpose,  
That's chronic pain,  
It's that elite band of pain that's not for defense.  
It's an attacking force.  
An attacker from within  
A destroyer of personal happiness  
An aggressive assailant on personal ability  
A ceaseless invader of personal peace  
And,  
A continuous harassment to life!  
Chronic pain is the hardest hurdle for the mind to jump.  
Sometimes it is almost impossible to jump,  
Yet, we must keep trying,  
And trying,  
And trying,  
Because if we don't it will destroy.  
And,  
From this battle will come some good,  
The satisfaction of overcoming pain.  
The achievement of happiness and peace, of life in spite of it.  
This is quite an achievement,  
An achievement very special, very personal,  
A feeling of strength  
Of inner strength  
Which has to be experienced to be understood.  
So, we all have to accept pain,  
Even sometimes destructive pain.  
For it is part of the scheme of things,  
And the mind can manage it,  
And the mind will become stronger for the practice.

—Jonathan Wilson-Fuller

written when Jonathon was 9 years old

## Break

Talk after the break was interspersed with questions and flowed somewhat like the rough text below:

We approach pain in daily life in several ways. From the medical world, we help the body to heal, through surgery or physical therapy or sometimes with medications. We mask the pain or dull the experience through drugs. But generally people don't want the analgesia, the strong pain relievers. They would rather find distractions or sleep. And the distractions can be wholesome – work, play, reading, music, games, family, friendship.

With talking about pain in terms of meditation, often what comes up is the worry that the pain going to be the only thing that we feel. If we spend our life in medication or distraction, removing these, means that the pain is all that is left. Well no. The actual meditative approaches combine some of the same qualities of healing, pain relief and of distraction that are present in our daily lives.

There is healing that takes place on the physiological level, but this is not to be counted on for all or to be a complete solution. Meditation masters do get old and sick and die. The Buddha suffered from life-long back pain and his death from food poisoning was described as being quite painful. Meditation does reduce stress and brings deep balance, but the physical injury may not be healable. There is an analgesic effect from meditation. It has been shown to enhance the release of natural endorphins, that help block the pain. And part of the learning of meditation, is developing the power of conscious distraction or focus on areas that are not painful.

Since meditation combines awareness and concentration, we can look for and focus on the natural areas of relaxation, pleasure, or warmth in the body that will be there even when the back is aching or the knees are screaming. We can also do something that medication cannot do and that is go deep into the centre of the pain and see it directly, it may break up into its strong constituent parts. And each part may be a strong sensation, but it has lost its label of 'pain'.

This is the 'divide and conquer' approach. Pain, unexamined is often overwhelming when it is a big whole – the physical, along with the emotional side or perhaps just the deep pain or loss, the whole bag is often too big to take as whole all at once. So in meditation we learn to deconstruct this. The thinking breaks down into image and internal dialogue. Emotions are felt in the body. The physical is perceived and subdivided into locations and flavours.

Meditation is practising a particular way of using our minds. We already use this mode to some degree, but our world is weighted to what we will term the active or doing mode or function. So when we meditate, we shift our function towards being, whilst still maintaining energy in the more active, doing mode of "knowing" or mindfulness. This is the balancing act that we are practising – to stay alert and focused, but not to slip into control, results- oriented and at the same time, to be calm, relaxed, spacious, in equanimity.

This is why we start with learning to relax our bodies, this is training what has been called the relaxation response, and is in fact learning to turn on the parasympathetic nervous

system, (relax/ digest/ safety) which normally means that the sympathetic system (arousal/ danger/ adrenalin) slows down, but for our purposes, we are seeking to balance both.

Meditations:

- look specifically for the relaxation areas
- look for the smallest area of pain
- let it expand
- label it
- use the rest qualities
  - image rest using the eye door with closed eyes
  - talk rest using the ear door with the sound of the inner ears

Our mind in meditation, in life can be likened to water.

Shinzen: Our normal behaviour or coping mechanism with any sort of difficulty or pain is to close up and turn away. Our changing model is to open up and turn towards.

When we contract and hold back, the water of the mind turns to ice. When we relax, let go and deepen in equanimity, the mind turns to water. Like water, the mind penetrates the experience. In fact with equanimity, the experience is deeper, richer and unclouded. It is unclouded with thoughts, words, images, our history, our sense of me or I.

The talk closed with a reading from

<http://www.wildmind.org/meditation/pain/index.html>

One moment at a time, by Vidyamala

I am a forty-five-year-old woman who suffered a spinal injury thirty years ago that has resulted in a legacy of on-going physical pain. Of course this has been difficult to live with, but some twenty years ago I had a significant experience that radically changed my perspective on life and plunged me into the wonder of living in 'the present moment'.

I was in an intensive care ward at the time, with an acute deterioration of my condition. I had been bedridden for several months and unable to sit up, but on this occasion I had undergone a diagnostic procedure that required me to sit up for several hours afterwards. During this long night of intense pain I felt myself sliding towards the edge of madness.

I spent hours with two internal voices locked in combat - one voice convinced I could not stay sane till morning and the other willing me to do so. It was an incredibly intense, brittle, heart-breaking experience.

Then, suddenly, my experience completely changed when I heard a quiet inner voice saying: "You don't have to get through till morning; you only have to get through the present moment". It was like a house of cards collapsing, revealing the space that had been present all along, if only I could have recognised it. My experience immediately changed from an agonised, contracted state to one that was soft and rich - despite the physical pain. At that moment of relaxing into the present moment, just as it was, I intuitively knew I had tasted something true.

Close with sharing of merit.

Some additional notes – not developed into the talk

Within the training of mindfulness meditation, we learn to cultivate the state of being vs the state of 'doing' or of directed activity. Some opposing pairs are

control	letting be
Results orientation	Process orientation
Judging	Inquiring
identification	Being in the flow
Fixing	healing
Categorizing / ordering	Perceiving patterns

.. not seeking to change...Allowing "unpleasant" to be..... but not "detached" .... Equanimity

Suppression on one hand, identification on the other – in the middle is equanimity.

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December 14, 2006