

Pain You Can See Through

By Ned David Bratspis, MA, LMFT

Pain, in various forms; physical, mental, psychological, psychic, biological, emotional, metaphysical, spiritual and transpersonal often appears solid and continuous. The process of its manifestation, its sources and its evidence has a value as a message of damage and vulnerability. It is human to want it to stop or make effort to avoid it. Everyone's personal history has enough of it to pre-condition these responses. Many of our emotions are associated with impulses to assist in that effort when we recognize the abovementioned forms of pain, distress and discomfort.

Added to this perception of solidity and impulse to escape is the weight of the appraisal we add to the content of our inclination to respond. This consists of our thoughts, beliefs, judgments and criticisms; an amalgamation of unpleasant feelings and forms of habitual approach. When these are conditioned, repetitive, and automatically taken to be true and accurate, our response to pain becomes suffering, an additional, unkind reaction to what is or may be happening. Finding ways to adapt to and cope with these difficult moments of our lives has been a human aspiration throughout the world across history.

Recent research and understanding about human consciousness, neuroscience, perceptions and learning have created the potential for links to be made between traditional psychological and spiritual practice and current alternative healing necessities. Such approaches are beginning to fit into a more intuition and creative choice based paradigm, which can be complimentary to and supportive of healing, offering true and positive hope when combined with sound coordination of care with traditional medical professionals. 1

Where will we find the practices most suitable to the reduction of suffering? By first finding that which assists us in dealing with the pain we experience across the lifespan. In Buddhist psychology, we train continuously both in formal Mindfulness practice and in the practice of mindfulness in our everyday actions, known as informal practice. This training serves to bring awareness to each moment. In order for this to take place, the mind must be trained to be present. There are many thought contents that pass through the mind that seem to cloud the awareness. With regular practice, the mindful practitioner gets glimpses of the unobscured and unclouded heart. (By way of being present in the awareness of the body-much of the energy this being with the body focuses on the heart- a living metaphor for the core of awareness and compassion). This open heart is tender and vulnerable and is a window into human nature, especially the natural aspiration to kindness and compassion. These findings dwell in the spaciousness (gradual lessening of both the need to control events; restfulness, stillness and acceptance) of the aware practitioner-they do not have to be achieved-they are abided states of being when we see through conditioning. The traditional name for this open hearted state of being is "Bodhicitta." It is the unprotected, vulnerable breathing heart. In the practice life, it is not so much the "goal" as the natural aspect waiting to be found if we drop our agendas,

limiting beliefs and critical self judgments. When we see through the clouds of conditioning and habit; and the endless material content that “takes up space in our heads without paying rent” (well-known 12 step reference), we open the possibility to see through pain. Beyond laying bare the vulnerable heart, the spaciousness created by the practice becomes a container vast enough to potentiate the dilution of difficulty, obstacles and pain. The Buddha, seeing this potential 2500 years ago called mindfulness of the body a route to insight through the heart. There was a brilliance to the connection to all beings interrelated to a primary connection to the self-loving, caring, respectful, kind. This became the part of the practice of the Buddha’s Noble Truth-Kindness is what matters-starting with the self, eventually to all that can be reached, universally. This is the “Heart Practice,” which is the heart of mindfulness meditation practice.

“The Heart Practice is to use illness and all our other problems to generate Bodhicitta, the altruistic thought to achieve enlightenment for the sake of other living beings... The I is the source of all our emotional problems and of all the obstacles to our own success and happiness and to bringing success and happiness to numberless other living beings...it is dependent arising...has to come from positive intention...just by wishing benefit to others, one collects merit as vast as the sky...” 2

Such is the practice of a tradition which has quickly developed into an adjunct to traditional methods, that mindfulness is now considered along with other methods to assist service members in the treatment of trauma by the Department of Veterans Affairs. Please refer to reference on RelaxingOne.com writings section. 3

There is beginning to be more thorough investigation into the validity of the mindfulness approach based upon the gradual acquisition of the dedicated meditation practitioner of empathy and compassion for both self and other. Richard J. Davidson, Neuro-researcher at the University of Wisconsin, reported more highly developed areas of the brain connected to the social functions of empathy, compassion and neuroplasticity often equated with adaptability, in his study of brain-scans of long-term, experienced meditators. 4

There is a connection between these areas of the brain and neurons with specialized potential in the areas of awareness, attention, intention and learning. These neurons have been variously called mirror neurons, see and do neurons and Dalai Lama Neurons.

Mirror Neurons, special nerves that are active when people experience an emotion, and when they see another person experiencing an emotion have been measured as involved in empathy in various studies with the use of fMRI, EEG and MEG, and with follow up self-report questionnaires, as reported by Christian Keysers at the Social brain lab. 5

“Researchers at UCLA found that cells in the human anterior cingulate, (of the prefrontal cortex area of the brain), which normally fire when you poke the patient with a needle (“pain neurons”), will also fire when the patient watches another patient being poked. The mirror

neurons...it would seem dissolve the barrier between self and others..." 6 Perhaps it is not much of an extension of these potentials to note that part of human nature is a connection that is positively encouraged and enabled through the recognition of the natural energy that can be found between us that gradually shifts our relationship to being, including the dissolution of the illusion of our separateness with a resulting increased capacity for social interrelatedness. Personal Neurobiology theorists are on the trail of how the internal system messages in our consciousness and awareness connect our sense of pain and between its internal and external contexts, and link us toward care for the difficulties of one another.

. In the brain mapping research done at UCLA, this area of the personal neurobiology is calling attention to the functions of pain perception, recognition of attention and intention of self and other, as well as the capacity for wellness and compassion and meaning each in their own way is mediated through this same region of the prefrontal cortex; an area that is "thicker," (more highly developed), in those studied individuals who have a contemplative practice (like mindfulness meditation). These findings may be significant to our basic quest towards the attainment of happiness. If we concentrate our pursuit of happiness from the approach of a series of attempts at pleasure and the avoidance of pain, a typical conditioned and learned response, we are also bound to become attached to the hedonic measures of well-being that are fleeting and lead to excess, illness and suffering. Eudaimonic forms of well-being are rather based on equanimity (a middle path), and the qualities of "autonomy, mastery of the environment, positive relationships, personal growth, self-acceptance, and meaning and purpose in life." In a big-picture perspective, coming from a place of self-acceptance and equanimity allows us to approach life situations more often, as needed, whether pleasant or not. Thus, mindfulness practice, it might be said enables us to use our practice to eventually work with the way our system is being wired; neuro-plasticity, which gradually enables us more adaptability, attunement with self and others, with an enlarging perspective afforded by awareness and the experience of skillful and effective action and being. 7

Methods of this inner-work have been taught in many contemplative traditions. In future writings, further connection will be drawn between the search for spiritual and psychological paths and the way the practitioner's lives (even their brains), are changed by them. Regardless of the tradition, striking similarities can be drawn about the quiet and profound influence of the expansion of consciousness, dispelling of illusions of separation and aloneness, and the oneness of all life. Perhaps it is true that some pain will come to every life, yet along with that provision is the capacity, and the vision to see through it as well as to see it through. Compassion is that capacity, and it is developed and discovered is born into our being like a window we can see through, once it is cleared by observation and kindness. It is the pane we can then see through.

Much of the inner-work that has over time been connected to the enhancement of awareness of the interdependent being of people has involved the inclusion of the subtle energy found in moments of silence and the consciousness of the body, especially the heart. A route to these connections is the practice of mindfulness meditation. One such mindfulness practice is Tonglen Meditation.

American Buddhist Nun, Pema Chodron, states "Tonglen reverses the usual logic of avoiding suffering and seeking pleasure. In the process, we become liberated from very ancient patterns of selfishness. We begin to feel love for both ourselves and others; we begin to take care of ourselves and others. Tonglen awakens our compassion and introduces us to a far bigger view of reality...work with a personal situation-any painful situation that's real to you. Traditionally you begin by doing Tonglen for someone you care about and wish to help. However...if you are stuck, you can do the practice for the pain you are feeling and simultaneously for all those just like you who feel that kind of suffering...you breathe that in for yourself and all others in the same boat, and you send out the confidence...or relief in any form you wish..." 8

There is a Hindu parable that paints a picture story about the value of building the skill of enlarging spaciousness, consciousness, and how through these processes one can see through the pain. The experience of skillful means in working with the gamut of experience through moment to moment access to the wisdom in that experience speaks directly and practically to the discovery of insight through the difficulty itself.

"An aging master grew tired of his apprentice complaining, and so, one morning sent him for some salt. When the apprentice returned, the master instructed the unhappy young man to put a handful of salt in a glass of water and then drink it. 'How does it taste?' the master asked.

'Bitter 'spit the apprentice.

The master chuckled and then asked the young man to take the same (measure) handful of salt and put it in the lake. The two walked in silence to the nearby lake, and once the apprentice swirled his handful of salt in the water, the old man said, 'Now drink from the lake.'

As the water dripped down the young man's chin, the master asked, 'How does it taste?' 'Fresh,' remarked the apprentice. 'Do you taste the salt?' asked the master. 'No.' said the young man.

At this, the master sat beside this serious young man who so reminded him of himself and took his hands, offering, 'The pain of life is pure salt; no more, no less. The amount of pain in life remains the same. But the amount of bitterness we taste depends on the container we put the pain in.

So when you are in pain, the only thing you can do is enlarge your sense of things...stop being a glass. Become a lake.' 9

Using the perspective of the inevitability of numerous life's problems, obstacles, and pain, we begin a practice of immense human potential for creative choice and learning that assists us in mustering the tremendous courage needed to find our way. Ultimately, we encounter many joys and sorrows. There is much salt along the way. With the skill means available of mindfulness meditation practice, we can remember to practice when these encounters occur. In the Tibetan

culture, the definition of mindfulness is incomplete if it does not include remembrance- a remembrance to practice in the midst of life. It is applying awareness, in this moment, without judgment, lest we forget; Being with heart.

" We have all heard the expression "grist for the mill," which is often related to how all the contents go in, and become part of the whole later; the whole of the grain plant is ground to eventually become flour, a product we can use, to make bread; to sustain our life. In similar ways, all of our experience is useful to our practice and useful eventually to our lives. Even difficult moments, emotions and experiences are useful, because one day we may meet someone who is going through something identical or quite similar, and our previous trouble becomes a well of empathy and compassion; allowing us to provide kindness, support, and understanding that resonates and mirrors the need before us.

In this way, obstacles, emotional turmoil, and even pain can have an unseen eventual usefulness. We do not need to seek painful experiences out and attempt to have more difficulty with the eventual goal of becoming more compassionate, but rather, gently remember to practice." By remembering to practice, we may be more aware of the clouding over of the heart that seems often to be the conditioned response to working with difficulty. Self-kindness can then be synonymous with taking breaths into the heartspace (mindfulness of the body). Gradually, practice allows a softening of the approach to the varieties of emotional experience. Are we in this life not like stones on the shoreline?

Like the edges of a stone on the shoreline, the sea sends numerous waves... who knows when the stone has become smooth?" 10

1 Head First; The Biology of Hope and the Healing Power of the Human Spirit, Norman Cousins, Penguin Books, New York, 1989

2 Ultimate Healing; The Power of Compassion, Lama Zopa Rinpoche, Wisdom Publications, Somerville, MA, 2001

3 Adaptive System Messengers, Ned David Bratspis, MA, LMFT, www.RelaxingOne.com , Writings Section, Gig Harbor, WA, 2011, Internet Published Essays

4 Davidson, R.J. & Kabat-Zinn, J., Schumacher, J., Rosenkranz, M., Muller, D., Santorelli, S.F. et al (2003) Alterations in brain and immune function produced by mindfulness meditation. Psychosomatic Medicine, 65(4), 564-570

5 Jabbi, Swart and Keyesers, NeuroImage, 2006 [7]
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.neuroimage.2006.10.032>

6 Ramachandran, V.S. (January 1, 2009). "Self-Awareness: The Last Frontier, Edge foundation web essay" (http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/rama08/rama08_index.html).

7 The Mindful Brain; Reflection and Attunement in the Cultivation of Well-Being, Daniel J. Siegel, M.D., W.W. Norton & Co, Inc., New York, 2007

8 When Things Fall Apart; Heart Advice For Difficult Times, Pema Chodron, Shambhala Publications Inc., Boston, 1997

9 Mark Nepo (A Hindu parable, Author unknown, published at www.ijourney.org 5/07/2001

10 Mindfulness Group Commentary, Working with Difficult Emotions, Ned David Bratspis, MA, LMFT, Archives, www.RelaxingOne.com Gig Harbor, WA 11/12/2011