Blinding Pain, Simple Truth

Changing Your Life Through Buddhist Meditation

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For Alison,

for Melissa, Ken, Noah, and Lilah,

and for Michael and Lauren.

May God protect you. May you be safe.

May God enlighten you. May you be enlightened.

May you see God’s face in every face you see and thus find peace.
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We set up a word at the point at which our ignorance begins, at which we can see no further, e.g., the word “I,” the word “do,” the word “suffer”: — these are perhaps the horizon of our knowledge, but not “truths.”

John Banville, *Shroud*

Restraint is for this: to see the difference between pain and suffering. Pain is inevitable, but suffering is not. Suffering arises when I fight the world’s lawfulness, the dharma. When I desire things to arise differently from how they do arise, there is suffering. When I desire that things which arise not pass away, there is suffering.

Sharon Cameron, *Beautiful Work: A Meditation on Pain*

The challenge must be to come unstuck, resist habit — the same things over and over … — to wake up, pay attention, try to face how strange, miraculous and fearful it is, every life, every day. That hurts too, waking up, finding oneself so small and vulnerable, knowing nothing. But suffering holds gifts, rich and mysterious gifts concealed in the dark folds of pain….

Kathryn Walker, *A Stopover in Venice*

[Life is an extraordinarily vast thing. And when you use the word “life,” it is all the oceans and the mountains and the trees and all of human aspirations, human miseries, despairs, struggles, the immensity of it all.*

J. Krishnamurti, *Krishnamurti on Education*
Preface

Even in the midst of great pain, Lord,
I praise you for that which is.
Stephen Mitchell, A Book of Psalms

In 2000 the blinding pain of incapacitating headaches nearly destroyed my career. The wisdom about pain, suffering, and healing that the headaches would reveal is the subject of this book. It describes how Buddhist teachings and daily meditation can empower you, the reader, to heal the suffering caused by physical and emotional pain. As the book shows, Buddhist teachings also provide a new lens for reading the Bible, yielding fresh insights into fundamental questions of birth and death, ego and enlightenment, sickness and health — insights that speak in surprisingly relevant ways to spiritual seekers and to those who want to heal themselves. My goal in writing the book is to inspire you to reexamine your experiences with suffering and pain and eventually to embrace your life with equanimity, gratitude, and joy.

The blinding pain blinded me to the liberating, simple truth that is the heart of the Buddha’s teaching. Pain is unavoidable, but suffering can end. A path that leads to the end of suffering is mindfulness, which is cultivated by meditation. This book relates my experience in trying to understand the wisdom expressed in these two, short sentences. It took many years because the truth, though simple, cannot be grasped intellectually. You must live with the pain and accept the pain and breathe with the pain and breathe through the pain before you can discern the vast landscape that opens up beyond it, a landscape created by the pain itself.
This book is not about me. It is about our shared humanity, what causes suffering and what brings happiness. This book is about the wisdom of Buddhist teachings, which can change your life if you open yourself up to them. I will share this wisdom using my life as a lens, filtering my experiences with awareness, compassion, and honesty. In so doing, I will share insights that have benefited me and that I hope can therefore benefit you.

My story is easily summarized. After decades of searching I didn’t see that I was lost. Then it found me. It saved me. It gave me wings that lifted me up out of the suffering caused by chronic headaches by inviting me to face the pain rather than curse the pain and try to push it away. It healed me with my wounds. It opened me up to the wisdom of my own body, bestowing on me, but only when I was ready, two radical insights. The truth is in my pain. The truth is in my face.

What saved me from drowning in the whirlpool of my former existence was the net of Buddhist insight and wisdom. These teachings lay out a systematic path to alleviate suffering, bring inner peace, and awaken the innate wisdom that sleeps within us. While this claim might seem far-fetched, in my experience it is absolutely true. My experience is based not on detached, intellectual curiosity, but on chronic headaches, debilitating, incapacitating headaches that could flare up without warning in the middle of my face. A phone call, a careless remark, a careful remark, missing an elevator, being followed too closely by another car: anything could trigger them and everything did.

When the headaches first erupted in February 2000, I suffered from the pain and even more from my outrage over the pain. What did I do to deserve this? With one exception, all the doctors I consulted ranged from being clueless to disastrous. The many
pills they prescribed were ineffective and even dangerous as they changed my personality and sucked up all my intellectual and emotional energy.

Desperate, unable to find relief from medication, I turned to meditation. As this book describes, the meditation has helped me deal with the headaches much more effectively than I ever dreamed. It has taught me not to react. It has taught me to see. Healing me with my wounds, meditation has blossomed from a practical technique for dealing with headaches into an all-encompassing approach to my life. As I have learned, so can you also learn.

If like me you suffer from chronic pain, then you are not alone. In an article in *Time Magazine* Claudia Wallis points out that approximately one-sixth of the U.S. population suffers from chronic or recurrent pain, and of these about half find no good solution. If you are one of these people, then perhaps aspects of my experience will be familiar to you. Perhaps you are now in the place where I was when the headaches first erupted. If so, then there is hope because, as my story shows, in the dark folds of pain healing can bloom.

However, if you are not a chronic-pain sufferer, then perhaps the descriptions of my suffering will strike you as the yammering of an obsessive mind. There are numerous health issues much more serious than my own.

But the Buddha (meaning “the awakened one”) is subtle and wise. My suffering from pain is symptomatic of the human condition, in which the Buddha saw suffering in a much wider and deeper sense. His term was *dukkha*, which includes but goes far beyond suffering from illness and pain. The Buddha explained it in the First Noble Truth (translation by Walpola Rahula).
The Noble Truth of suffering (Dukkha) is this: Birth is suffering; aging is suffering, sickness is suffering; death is suffering; sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering; association with the unpleasant is suffering; dissociation from the pleasant is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering — in brief, the five aggregates of attachment are suffering.

Dukkha is pervasive and deep. It is the uncertainty and angst arising from our sense that things are not quite right because we don’t have enough and can’t hold onto what we have and what we have doesn’t bring lasting satisfaction and therefore we must persist acquiring and doing rather than being. Often subtle, dukkha is huge, the specter that haunts us while we are asleep and while we think we are awake, always craving, always unhappy, always searching. The Buddha said that he taught one thing and only one thing: dukkha and the end of dukkha. The goal of his teachings was to expand our awareness of this fundamental aspect of our human existence, awareness leading to change leading to peace.

Most of us suffer, whether from physical pain, emotional pain, or the dukkha of the human condition. What is your suffering? I have suffered, not only from headaches, but also from a complex relationship with my father, who taught me so much but never let me get close to him, and from the chaos of my graduate-school years when the Vietnam War draft gagged and blindfolded my literary soul, and from a research-level math book published in 1985, and from the “great Jewish novel” that I spent fifteen years writing but could never publish, and from having to say goodbye to my children when they grew up. All of which exploded in the headache attack of 2000. As the Buddha
taught, my suffering was rooted in illusion, attachment, aversion, and ego. But I was not to see this until I faced the pain and learned from the pain and the pain woke me up.

The pain, once my brutal enemy, has become my beloved teacher, inviting me to let go and to accept. To let go of the suffering. To let go of the image of myself as a victim. Above all, to let go of the past: the complex relationship with my father, the Vietnam War draft, the 1985 math book, the great Jewish novel I couldn’t publish. To accept the present moment with perfect trust.

One cannot learn how to alleviate dukkha before one becomes aware of it. If reading my story, the wisdom of Buddhist teachings, the wisdom of the Bible, and insights into pain, suffering, and healing helps you become more deeply aware of the dukkha in your life, then I will have succeeded.

Although only my name appears on the title page, I did not write this book alone. From the preconscious, Garden-of-Eden years of my youth until today, my life has been blessed by infinite richness, wisdom, and wonder, a boundless web of interdependence and love. First of all, I would like to thank my family. What my wife, Alison, has given me is so vast, yet so textured and intimate that words cannot describe it. My parents, Helen and Murray — may his memory be for a blessing — provided a safe and supportive home, in which I was raised to love learning and to love being Jewish.

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I would like to express my deep gratitude to Michael, my son, who grasps the Buddhist teachings intuitively. He read several versions of this book, and his suggestions improved it greatly. May the teachings continue to enlighten him as he and they have enlightened me.

It is a blessing to be alive. It is a blessing to have opened myself up to the wisdom of the pain. I hope that by reading this book, you too will understand how pain can become your best teacher.