Blinding Pain, Simple Truth: Changing Your Life Through Buddhist Meditation

by Richard S. Ellis

Introduction. Buddhist meditation has changed my life, healing me after years of suffering from chronic headache pain. I weave my experiences together with Buddhist teachings to find this truth: the pain has become my best teacher. My goal is to share insights into pain, suffering, and healing in order to help other people become aware of the suffering in their lives and to help them heal that suffering.

1. Letting Go of the Past. The notable successes of my life and career — as husband and father, as mathematician and writer, as teacher of Jewish texts — are faced with a series of debilitating headaches. The pain first occurs in 1980, and then in 2000 the pain almost ends my career. These experiences are the background to the transformation of my life that blossomed from the insight that the truth is in my pain.

2. Our Wounds Will Heal Us. Many of us suffer from illnesses for which medication is of no use. These illnesses can be cured through the practice of meditation, as I discovered with the suffering caused by chronic headaches that erupted in 2000. Not only can meditation heal the suffering, but also it can become an all-encompassing approach to our lives.

3. Waking Up to the Truth. Through no effort of my own, a flash of insight woke me up on August 5, 2003. While meditating that morning at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, I intuitively understood that the truth about the pain is in my face. This chapter, intimate and introspective, is the heart of the book because it addresses one of the central experiences of Buddhist practice: how we can end suffering by quieting the mind and giving truth the space to speak.

4. Face to Face with Jacob. As shown by the story of Jacob, Buddhist teachings also provide a new lens for reading the Bible. During the wrestling match with the unknown
adversary, a basic Buddhist teaching is conveyed to Jacob. Names, he learns, freeze experience and violate the universal law of impermanence and change. For Jacob, letting go of names was letting go of the past. He discovered, as I did, a new way of being, based not on achievement and control, but on insight and love.

5. Conceptual Thinking Banished Us from Eden. Buddhist teachings also yield innovative insights into the stories of creation and the Garden of Eden, which resonate with Buddhist teachings: the genesis of conceptual thinking, the blossoming of self-consciousness, the birth of the ego-self, and the possibility of enlightenment.

6. Becoming Job: Going Beyond Words. Of all the books of the Bible the Book of Job speaks the most eloquently about suffering, the search for justification, and spiritual growth. When pain afflicts us, we often act like Job, demanding explanations for our suffering and trying to rationalize it. But this doesn’t bring peace. We will find peace when our inner voice of wisdom — our Buddha nature — reveals the truth, as Job did when God spoke to him from the whirlwind.

7. What Pain Can Teach Us. Headache pain has been my best teacher. Physical or emotional pain can also be the reader’s best teacher, becoming a path to verifying the truth of Buddhist teachings. In order to inspire readers to reexamine their experiences with suffering and pain, I weave together personal narratives, experiences while meditating, medical reports, and my insights and Buddhist insights into the suffering I had brought upon myself by trying to push the pain away. This suffering was healed when I finally faced the pain and accepted it without judgment and without commentary.

8. Finding Equanimity on the Massachusetts Turnpike. The book ends with a vignette concerning how Buddhist teachings can bring equanimity to one’s life. The story is a remarkable confluence of events involving the meditation teacher, Joseph Goldstein, and an accident on the Massachusetts Turnpike, which happened while driving to a meditation program.