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Natural Pain Relief

How to
Soothe &
Dissolve
Physical
Pain with
Mindfulness



SOUNDS TRUE
Boulder, Colorado

INTRODUCTION

If you are reading these words, chances are you have a pain issue that remains unresolved. Perhaps you have tried other methods of relieving your pain, such as prescription medications or physical therapy, but have yet to find the relief that would allow you to live your life in a fully focused and present way, without being at the mercy of your discomfort.

As soon as pain arises in the body, the mind becomes preoccupied with how to get relief. If we can remove the cause of the pain or numb it with analgesics, well and good. But most people, at some time in their lives, face significant pain that they cannot escape. And hundreds of thousands of people, victims of disease or injury, must live each day in unavoidable and often excruciating pain.

If we cannot escape from the pain, must we then experience abject and meaningless suffering? Definitely not! There is an alternative, a way to escape not from the pain but into it. We can apply Mindfulness Meditation to the pain. This is a way of focusing awareness on the pain and observing it with precision, while at the same time opening to it and dropping resistance. As you develop this skill, the pain causes less suffering and in many cases "breaks up" into a flow of pure energy. This may sound too good to be true, but it is a fact that has been independently discovered by thousands of individuals.

To be honest, it takes time, effort, and determination. On the other hand, growth of this skill "snowballs." That is to say, the more you practice, the faster you grow. Anyone can learn to develop this skill with regular practice, just as with sports or musical skills.

This approach to working with pain presents us with two challenges. The first challenge is conceptual: to understand the pain process in a new way, radically different from the usual. In the development of science, such fundamental changes in viewpoint are called paradigm shifts. Often it takes time and struggle before the new paradigm is accepted, but it is well worth it, because the new way of looking at things gives us so much power and clarity.

The second challenge is practical: to acquire the focusing skills and concentration needed to actually experience pain in a new, empowering way. This can be achieved through the systematic, sustained practice of mindfulness exercises.

Natural Pain Relief addresses both challenges. The book provides you with the necessary concepts, and the CD guides you in techniques for working with your pain. You can use these guided

meditations frequently, even many times a day, if pain is a major issue in your life. Continue to use them day after day, until you develop the ability to meditate on your own.

This book is the culmination of many years of research and practice, and I am pleased to be able to share it with you to aid you in overcoming your own pain issues.

Many of the stories and examples in this book describe transcendence of intense or prolonged pain, but it is important to remember that the principles you will be learning here are very broad. You can use them to reduce or eliminate suffering due to any discomfort in your body, including minor aches and pains, or temporary discomfort due to tiredness, hunger, heat, cold, long hours standing or sitting, and so forth.

You can even apply what you learn here to sports activities and working out, by meditating on the body sensations that occur during such activities. With time, this can greatly increase your physical endurance and vastly deepen the euphoria sometimes known as "runner's high."

So, although I will frequently speak about working with "pain," in point of fact what I am really describing are strategies for working with any uncomfortable body sensation. This includes the body sensations of uncomfortable emotions such as anger, fear, sadness, embarrassment, impatience, guilt, confusion, jealousy, and so on.

Learning the methods presented here will increase your freedom of choice regarding what you do to manage pain. These methods will work in conjunction with an aggressive drug-based pain-management plan to help with pain that gets past the

medication. They can also be used as an alternative to either reduce or eliminate the use of pain drugs.

After thirty years of using meditation practice to help people alleviate pain, I am still amazed at just how well these techniques work. People who could barely function before are often able to resume their lives as a result of regularly practicing meditation. The process is not always easy, but with intention and determination you can make these techniques work for you.

CHAPTER ONE

My Own Story

I came to the principles contained in this book through the practice of Buddhist meditation and through my own struggles in dealing with pain. I would like to share my story with you so you will understand how my understanding of these techniques developed.

My earliest memories are of being physically “wimpy.” I can remember that if I stubbed my toe or was injured in any way, I would scream and cry. My mom tells me that I was what mothers call a difficult baby—very sensitive and hard to take care of in the first few years of life. I was easily upset, very finicky about foods, and so on. As a child, I did everything in my power to avoid physical discomfort. I would try any kind of trick or ruse I could think of to avoid going to the dentist or getting a shot. So I am not by

nature a calm or patient person. In fact, I was probably drawn to meditation because I was the opposite type of person.

In junior high I began to develop what was then an unusual interest: the study of Asian cultures. My best friend in junior high was a third-generation Japanese American. One Friday afternoon, my friend asked me if I would like to go with his family to see Japanese movies. I was not really interested, but I did not want to offend them, so I agreed. The first movie on the bill was a love story set in modern Japan, and I was completely bored. But the second one was a samurai movie, and I was mesmerized. It was set in eighteenth-century Japan, which seemed so incredibly exotic that it might as well have been another planet.

From that time on, every Friday I would go with them to see Japanese movies, and eventually they began to teach me the Japanese language. Then I discovered that there is an entire education system for Japanese American children that runs parallel to the public schools, analogous to *heder*, or Hebrew school, for Jews. Classes met on weekdays when public school was over and all day on Saturdays. I began to attend Japanese school, where I was the only non-Japanese student. My knowledge of Japanese was very limited when I enrolled, of course, but eventually I caught up. I graduated from Venice High School and Japanese language school in the same week. At Japanese school, I was chosen to be one of the valedictorians. I will never forget that scene: my parents sitting in the audience, listening proudly but not understanding a single word.

I majored in Asian languages at UCLA and enrolled in a study abroad program to go to Japan during my senior year. By that

time I could already speak, read, and write Japanese virtually like a native. During that year abroad, I had my first encounter with Buddhism. My initial interest was sparked by the fact that Buddhist temples resembled the sets of the samurai movies I had fallen in love with as a kid.

Then, during a visit to a temple, something happened that had a deep impact on me: a monk reached out and took my hand, and that simple gesture was a seminal moment for me. I thought, "These people have a secret, and they would be happy to share it, but they are not going to push it on me. Rather, there is an outstretched hand here."

When I returned to UCLA for graduation, I spoke to my favorite professor about Buddhism and Buddhist culture, and he suggested that I enter the University of Wisconsin's PhD program in Buddhist studies. At this point, during the culture shift brought about by the Vietnam War, government money was being poured into Buddhist studies because we needed to have the Buddhists on our side in Southeast Asia. I ended up with a large government grant that allowed me to attend graduate school with an emphasis in Buddhist studies.

When I completed my coursework, the university sent me back to Japan. I was supposed to do research on the Shingon school of Mount Koya. Shingon is a distinct school of Japanese Buddhism that involves practices somewhat similar to those of Tibet. At that time it had never been studied by a Westerner. My plan was to become the sole expert in the Western world on this school of Buddhism, but the monks in residence at Mount Koya would not teach me anything because I was merely intellectually

curious. They said, "If you want to learn about Buddhism, you have to practice."

That was the beginning of my meditation career. It was very difficult at first, because I was asked to sit bolt upright and with crossed legs for an hour without moving. Very quickly, my only focus was on the physical pain caused by sitting. By the end of the hour, I would be devastated, holding on for dear life. I would clench my fists as my whole body shook. Often I was on the verge of tears, in agony from the physical discomfort of keeping the body motionless for that long.

But I respected the people who were teaching me, and they said, "This is the time-honored way," so I continued to try. Every sit ended up feeling like a torture session. The monks gave me a breath meditation, similar to the one I present on Track Five of this integrated book/CD. The breath focus did help somewhat, but very quickly I was back in pain, having all my usual reactions to the pain.

After a number of months of daily practice, I started to get a little bit of concentration, and was able to hold my attention without distraction, which felt really good. My breath slowed down naturally, and I noticed that my internal talk was not as loud. Although I did not notice it at the time, in retrospect, I realize that not only did my internal talk quiet down, but my mental images and emotional reactions to the pain were also reduced. Because, like most people, I was centered on self-talk, what I initially noticed most prominently was a quieting of the "internal dialogue." That was my initial breakthrough.

After a few months, it was suggested that I attend a *sesshin* at a Zen temple. In Japanese, *sesshin* refers to a week-long intensive

meditation retreat in the Zen tradition. Well, the first sit felt great, the second sit felt great, the third sit started to hurt a little. By the fourth sit, I realized I was in trouble. There were going to be about twenty such half-hour sits each day, and this was only the first day of the week!

Things got worse and worse. By the last sit of the last day, my mind was becoming grossly distorted by the pain; I was losing contact with reality and having paranoid ideas that the monks were making the sits longer just to torture me, a foreigner. The pain was literally driving me insane. During that last sit, my whole body shook violently, and I realized I was on the verge of tears. I started to scream to myself, inwardly, "You're not a baby, don't cry. You're not a baby, don't cry."

Then suddenly, out of nowhere, everything just dissolved. The pain turned into waves of energy. My internal conversation vanished into deep quiet, and my mental screen dissolved into vibrant white light. My body completely relaxed; the pain was simply energy. At that moment, I experienced a kind of restfulness of soul unlike anything I had known in this life. This experience continued for ten or fifteen minutes, then the bell rang, and the sesshin was over. But those few minutes changed me forever.

That next winter, I entered a hundred-day, isolated training on Mount Koya. One of the masters there finally offered to teach me, and gave me the Buddhist name Shinzen. "We'll start at the winter solstice," he said. "The training will last one hundred days, it will be in isolation, and you'll have no source of heat, but if you want to do the traditional training, this is the way it's done."

There was an added surprise when I actually started this training: It turned out that, three times a day, I was expected to go to a wooden cistern, break through the ice on top, fill a wooden bucket, and pour the freezing water over myself. This was required before each of the meditation periods.

On day three, I was pouring the water over my head and attempting to dry myself, and the towel was freezing in my hands. At that moment, I had an epiphany. I had noticed during the first three days that every time my mind wandered, my sense of suffering increased, and every time I regained my concentration, my sense of suffering was diminished. It became crystal clear to me that I had only three choices: either I would spend the next ninety-seven days in abject misery, or I would give up and return to America, or I would spend those ninety-seven days in a concentrated state, twenty-four hours a day. There was no fourth option. I did not want to give up, and I certainly did not want to spend ninety-seven days in misery, so I vowed to do my best to stay in a continuous concentrated state.

My only source of solace was this state of concentration. As I see it now, this retreat in isolation was a hundred-day biofeedback device to assure unbroken concentrative work. I went in one person and I came out a different person. It was intense, but it was a small price to pay for a new life, or, more accurately, a new kind of life. From the time I finished the training until this very moment, the concentrated state has never entirely left.

After I completed my hundred-day training, I stayed on in Japan for two more years. During that time, I continued to train at Mount Koya in the Shingon tradition, as well as attend Zen retreats in Kyoto, the old capital of Japan.

During one of those Zen retreats, I met someone who fundamentally changed the direction of my life. The retreat was about to begin and I was already seated in the meditation hall when I noticed that there was another foreigner present—and not just a foreigner, but a Roman Catholic priest. When he came into the meditation hall, I thought, “How strange, a Catholic priest at a Zen retreat. He sure doesn’t know what he’s in for!” but then he sat down in perfect lotus posture and immediately entered what was obviously a deep meditative state. He looked like a seasoned Zen monk.

During one of the break periods, I went up to him and introduced myself. This man who had piqued my curiosity turned out to be Father William Johnston, a Christian missionary from Ireland who indeed had practiced Zen meditation for several decades.

Growing up Jewish, I had little contact with the Christian world and virtually no contact with Catholicism. Eventually Father Bill and I became good friends, and through him I came to a startling realization: prior to meeting him, I had assumed that the special states of consciousness I was experiencing in Buddhist meditation were unique to Buddhism. Through my conversations with Father Johnston I came to realize that Buddhist meditation is just one representative of a broad universal experience found within all religions, as well as within secular contexts. This put my Buddhist experience within a much larger, more universal framework.

I began to avidly study the mystics and meditators of the Christian, Islamic, Taoist, Hindu, and Jewish traditions. I was captivated by the medieval Christian text known as *The Cloud of Unknowing* and the works of St. Teresa of Avila, Jalal-uddin Rumi,

Isaac Luria, Thomas Merton, and many others. In particular, I was amazed and delighted to discover that, although meditation is not central to Judaism, as it is to Buddhism, there had been a Jewish meditative tradition, and that there was an entire technical vocabulary in Hebrew that described the very experiences I had encountered while doing Buddhist practice!

From that time on, I have viewed meditative states not as a "Buddhist thing" but as a universal human experience. Shortly before I was to leave Japan, I had a final meeting with Father Johnston. He was very excited about an article he had read regarding scientists who were studying meditative states. Father Johnston was a member of the Jesuits, an order which historically drew from the intellectual elite of Catholic Europe, a tradition that has continued to this day. The idea that Western science could perhaps validate Christian and Buddhist experience was intellectually riveting for him, and for me, too.

I thought to myself, "I'm going back to the Western world, where science originated. Maybe I should use this as an opportunity to learn something about science." Shortly after my return to the United States, I participated in a retreat at the International Buddhist Meditation Center in Los Angeles with Dr. Thich Thien-an, a Vietnamese monk I had known before I went to Japan. I asked him if he had heard that scientists were studying meditation. As Dr. Thien-an was himself an educator and an intellectual, I thought he would be interested in such topics. In fact, he told me that not only did he know about this research, but that three of the primary researchers were at that very retreat. Talk about serendipity!

After the retreat, I introduced myself to the researchers. This was the beginning of a significant new direction in my life. It occurred to me that often in history, two areas of knowledge that developed independently have at some point found a common ground, cross-fertilized one another, and produced a radically new direction in human knowledge. Looking at the big picture, it seemed to me that in the broad sweep of human history the two most impressive discoveries are the external science of the West and the internal science of the East. "What a weird and wonderful hybrid child might be born of their cross-fertilization," I thought. From this coming together of East and West, perhaps a whole new direction in human understanding and a whole new technology for human improvement could be evolved.

I have spent the last three decades exploring that possibility. But, initially, I had one enormous problem: I had failed all my math and science classes in high school and college. I suffered from math phobia and had a dismal academic record in the sciences. Fortunately, though, I now had meditation skills: I had concentration abilities; I had some ability to listen to my negative tapes without believing them; I had some ability to observe my emotions without being distorted by them. When the belief that I would fail arose, I could often observe the internal talk, the mental images, and the emotional feelings of this belief without buying into them. The equanimity and concentration power I had gained through meditation training allowed me to overcome the limiting influence of the past and actually become quite accomplished in the areas of math and science. In fact, I eventually went on to teach such subjects at the college level.

In turn, my scientific studies have dramatically influenced the way I teach meditation. I attempt to bring the spirit of rigor, quantification, and experimentalism that characterizes Western science into my teaching of Buddhist meditation. The results have been deeply and powerfully satisfying.

I set myself a life goal: to apply what I learned in math and science to teaching meditation in the attempt to find better ways to teach mindfulness practice based on the spirit and methods of Western science. Of course, I am not so arrogant as to think that I can totally redesign the methods passed down to us for centuries and millennia, but I do think it is possible to make significant improvements, and furthermore to describe the entire process in the universal secular vocabulary of science, making it accessible to anyone in the contemporary world.

After I returned from Japan, I lived at the temple of Dr. Thich Thien-an for many years, dividing my time equally between the practice of my own meditation and the study of science. I never officially proclaimed myself a meditation teacher. Rather, because people found my approaches contemporary and clear, word spread, and more people began to study meditation with me.

Among those students were people with physical pain issues. I began to work with them, knowing from my own experience the steps one must go through to transcend and eventually transmute pain. I became known as someone who could explain mystical states, but also as someone who knew about the nuts and bolts of dealing with physical discomfort.

Eventually, in 1982, I opened my own center in the Korea Town area of Los Angeles, with a small community of residents who

meditated together. Each morning during our group meditation I would give interviews with the residents, discussing their practice. Traditionally in such interviews the student and the teacher discuss the practice, and then the student is sent back to the cushion to implement the results of that discussion, but I started to experiment with a somewhat different approach: I would sit in front of the students as they meditated for an hour or more. At the beginning of the session, I would give them a meditation procedure, have them practice it, and then three or four minutes later query them about what they had experienced. Based on what they reported, I would give them feedback in various forms. I might say, "The best thing to do is to continue what you're doing," or, "Let's make the following modification to what you're doing," and so forth, depending on what they had reported. A few minutes later, I'd query them again, modifying the procedure if needed, and offer interpretation or encouragement, share my own experiences with them, or give them a range of choices as to what we might explore next.

The first thing I discovered about this "interactive" method is that it was much more effective than the standard "Here's the teaching, there's the cushion, now do it" approach. In the early stages of meditation practice, a lot of time is typically spent just spinning one's wheels; beginning students are often lost in daydreams, preoccupations, sleepiness, confusion, and so on. By way of contrast, if they have a meditation coach sitting in front of them, the internal distractions are greatly diminished. They are much more likely to be focused on their procedure for the entire sitting time. After experiencing what a "quality sit" is like

under such guidance, they are better able to replicate it when sitting alone.

The other discovery I made was that the students' perception of time was dramatically altered through this interactive process. They were able to work for long periods without perceiving that much time had passed. Thus, this method of interactive guidance allows students to do extended practice without it seeming burdensome.

Finally, and most importantly, I found that this method was an optimizing procedure. Here is what I mean by that: I believe that, literally every minute, Nature is presenting us with windows of opportunity for transcendence. The problem is that most people don't recognize them, let alone make use of them. When I interactively guide a student, I share my expertise. I point out those windows of opportunity and suggest ways to utilize them.

Even to this day, after years of exploring this process, I still do an analysis after each session to see what worked and what didn't work. I've thus been able to continuously hone the procedure into a detailed algorithm of transcendence. The techniques I give you on the CD represent the broad outline of that algorithm.