

## Letting Go Pain is Natural; Suffering is Optional

By Barry Kapke

Originally published in *Massage & Bodywork* magazine, April/May 2000.  
Copyright 2003. Associated Bodywork and Massage Professionals. All rights reserved.

"If you let go a little you will have a little peace, if you let go a lot you will have a lot of peace, if you let go completely you will have complete peace."<sup>1</sup>  
-- Ajahn Chah

Many difficulties begin to fall away as we learn to loosen our grip on the perception of "how things are" -- and how we want them to be. In learning to let go, our body provides a vast laboratory for exploration and discovery. Through paying attention to what is here now, we are able to move from the abstract realms of mind, through which we filter our experience, to an actual "lived" experience of life in process. Massage is a natural tool for such re-education of the body and mind, as is meditation.

The term "meditation," as it has entered our vernacular, conjures up many ideas. For some, meditation is thought to be simply sitting still, doing nothing. Some think it is like a dream or a reverie. For others, it is seen as a contemplative form of thinking. Meditation, in the conventional Buddhist usage, is none of these. The Pali<sup>2</sup> word for meditation is "bhavana," or mind training. In meditation, the mind is engaged, focused and directed toward some object. Through concentration, the mind becomes calm. Through the stillness, the mind observes its own nature, not as discursive thinking but as experience and the illumination of insight.

The body is a fruitful object for meditation and a wise teacher. In Buddhist practice, meditation is turned to the breath, the body, feelings, perceptions and the mind itself. Through this sharpening of the mind, the letting go of fixed views, and the direct experience of physical and mental phenomena, we learn skillful ways of living with ease, rather than conflict and suffering. Meditation, as such, is not about beliefs. It is a tool to be used and a skill to be practiced and refined.

One thing all meditators and bodyworkers commonly deal with is pain. Shakyamuni Buddha taught on one subject -- the understanding of "dukkha" and the ending of "dukkha." "Dukkha" is often translated as "suffering" or "unsatisfactoriness." Thanissaro Bhikkhu<sup>3</sup>, a Theravada monk and scholar, translates dukkha as "stress." The Buddha saw clearly that birth, aging, sickness, death, sorrow, grief, weeping and despair is dukkha. Not getting what you want is dukkha. Getting what you want and losing it is dukkha. Getting what you don't want is dukkha. Born into a body that is impermanent and subject to disease and death is dukkha.

The pangs of "unsatisfactoriness" must be understood clearly before they can be dispelled. However, there are two kinds of dukkha. Part and parcel of the world we live in, and over which we have little control, is the dukkha of mortality, disease, accident, poverty, prejudice, war, famine, homelessness, greed, hatred and ignorance. The second dukkha is the suffering we create ourselves through our reactions. In understanding the nature of dukkha, we come to understand that the experience of suffering is optional. Pain may be present, but the suffering component is something extra we add to it. Meditation helps us to see the onset of suffering, to stand outside of it, and, rather than fueling it, to let it subside and pass away.

## Listening Within

"Most of us do not know how to listen to our bodies. Long ago we turned off the body's voice. The body obediently went silent as we agreed not to notice our emotional life."<sup>4</sup>

Jack Kornfield, a psychotherapist and Dharma teacher, often mentions in his talks about meditation a line from James Joyce: "Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body." I'm certain

every bodyworker has had a Mr. Duffy or two on his massage table or mat. Our society does not teach us skills for listening to or understanding our bodies. One of the most significant tasks of the bodyworker and the meditator is not to eradicate pain, but to learn and teach how to live skillfully and wakefully in the body.

There is a strong tendency to identify with what we feel and to be bound up with it. Someone complements you and a feeling of happiness arises. "I am happy," you think to yourself. You may be feeling a happy emotion but "you," whatever that is, is separate from that which is being experienced. In the case of happiness, the consequence of such a false identification is harmless enough, but serious trouble can ensue when we start to conflate our identification of self with feelings of agony, depression or rage. Meditation helps us to see that "I am suffering" really consists of three objects that our consciousness can observe -- there is the mind, there is the body, there is the pain. The pain is not the body. The pain is not the mind that is aware of the body or of the feeling of pain. If we accept "I am suffering," there is little to be done. "There is pain" is a more skillful view. If we see the nature of things as they are, we can watch pain arise, change and pass away.

### Pain Without Suffering

Any painful feeling can be used as a means to gain understanding. Pain and discomfort are often why clients seek our help. When we experience pain, our immediate reaction is to want to get rid of it. This is also typical of how we live our lives -- trying to avoid pain and clinging to pleasure. Experience teaches us that this cannot be done. When seeking pleasure and running from pain becomes our modus operandi, we set ourselves up for suffering. It is not uncommon for many massage therapists, particularly in the beginning, to develop an adversarial relationship to pain -- it needs to be rubbed out. In my work, I am much more interested in helping bring awareness to the body, which often means being more aware of pain and discomfort in the body. If we are aware of it, we can learn from it. If we see its true nature, we need not suffer about it.

My first Dhamma teacher, Ayya Khema<sup>5</sup>, died in November 1997 from breast cancer. Her body was in pain, but she was not suffering. She died as she had lived, mindfully and compassionately. She did not despise pain, nor view it as an enemy. It was there, so she accepted it. It did not deter her from living fully and dying peacefully.

In accepting pain, I am not suggesting one should do nothing. Where pain exists in the body, it is sensible and wise to try to discern its cause and do what can be done to treat it. Yet, at the same time, the opportunity is presented to understand the phenomena of pain and to realize that suffering is what is added to pain by the mind. Suffering is not the experience of pain, it is something extra. Pain should be recognized. Once we've gotten the message, the point is to act skillfully and do what can be done, rather than kill the messenger.

### Sitting Meditation

In sitting meditation, one sits, unmoving, for extended periods of time, focused on some meditation object -- the breath, sensations, inner sounds, mental processes. Often, pain arises. Sometimes it may seem unbearable. When pain arises, we can use our awareness skillfully to make the pain our meditation object. Shifting our attention to the general area of uncomfortable sensation, we let the mind relax, accepting the feeling, letting it be, observing the physical sensations. The pain is still there, but our relationship to it has now changed. We can intensify our looking, noticing the various qualities of this sensation we label "pain." The more the mind examines what actually is being felt, the more concentrated the mind becomes. Next, we can try to locate exactly where the pain is most intense. As the mind focuses there, often it will seem that somewhere else is more intense, so you move your mind to that place. Sometimes the pain will appear in a completely different part of the body. Sometimes it will simply disappear.

"You'll find a sense of peace and calm by accepting the pain that you have and letting go of it, the relief comes not by rejecting the pain, but by allowing it to be the way it is."<sup>6</sup>

Occasionally during meditation you'll find that pain seems unbearable and you simply must move. Move. We are not sitting to create more suffering, but to find the end of suffering. Asked what to do when pain seems intolerable, Ajahn Amaro, a Theravadin monk, replied that he would shift his position to alleviate the unbearable feeling, but that he would do so out of kindness to the body, not out of aversion to the pain.

#### Applications in Bodywork

Working with clients, this same attitude of investigation can be beneficial. A focus on exploring pain in the body and creating an accepting spaciousness around it can help us to feel the body, especially where such awareness has previously shut down. Compared with pain during meditation, trying to pinpoint pain in a bodywork session is not so clear-cut. A painful point is found, as you stay on the point, the client is certain you have moved your finger, because that's not the spot at all. Pain, like all things, has no permanent identity. It changes. It arises and passes.

Accumulated knots in the fabric of our body, previously undetected, begin to reveal themselves as we open. As we become conscious of the pain they have held, we may also notice feelings, memories or images connected specifically to each area of tension. As we gradually include in our awareness all that we have previously shut out and neglected, our body heals.<sup>7</sup>

We will all experience pain in our lives. It is wise, therefore, to face it directly and learn how to work with it. Pain exists in the world. Suffering is optional.

Barry Kapke is the program director of Asian Bodyworks at San Francisco School of Massage and the founder of Insight Bodywork®