

## **Working With Pain in Meditation and Daily Life (Week 1 Part 2)**

*Transcribed and lightly edited from a talk by Ines Freedman 09/13/06*

The next meditation is called, “Free floating within the discomfort.” This is to deepen your skill with directly working with discomfort and pain. This is turning your attention directly towards the pain, but doing it in little bite-sized pieces.

[Guided Meditation]

*So, go ahead and close your eyes and get into a comfortable position.*

*Touch base with your posture. If you’re seated, gently straighten your spine. If you’re lying down, make a strong resolution to stay alert.*

*Take a deep, slow in-breath, and as you breathe out, feel your whole body relaxing and settling into your posture.*

*We’re going to do a practice called, “free floating within the discomfort.” Let your awareness be pulled to wherever the discomfort arises within your body, and mentally label the location.*

*For instance, if it’s in your jaw, just label it “jaw”. Stay there for maybe 3 seconds, and try to really feel that spot where the discomfort drew your attention. Then allow yourself to be pulled anywhere else that there’s pain or discomfort. Again, label the location.*

*Try to experience the sensation with as much precision and acceptance as you can.*

*You may be pulled to areas of intensity, or to areas where the discomfort is rather mild. You don’t need to control where the awareness goes. Let your awareness be spontaneously pulled to different areas of the discomfort.*

*Label it silently, gently. Most of your attention should be on the actual felt sense of the area you’re noticing.*

*So it sounds like this: face... (5 second pauses) hands... whole body... and so forth.*

*Just stay in the area for a few seconds, and that’s time to really experience and connect with. Then let the awareness be pulled to somewhere else.*

*If you’re pulled to the same area over and over again, allow yourself to move within that area. So, maybe one moment you’re paying attention to the right side of that area, then the next just a few inches over to the left side of the area. Label it that way: right side... left... middle... center... overall.*

*It doesn’t matter whether you stay in one area of pain or whether your mind goes from one area of discomfort and pain to another. If you’re staying in the same area, just keep floating around that thin area; the different parts of it.*

*Pay close attention to that sensation for just a few seconds and then move on. You only have to focus on one location at a time for just a few seconds. For those few seconds, do the best you can to have a complete experience of that sensation. If possible, totally open up to it, and accept the sensation.*

*If you get pulled into thoughts, let go of them, and come back to the body. Continue to free-float within the body.*

*(silence)*

*Continue to let your awareness freely float as you've been doing, going from one area to the next. Now, we're going to look more deeply at the quality of the sensations instead. You might notice the different "flavors" of pain. Burning... aching. Instead of the location, label those flavors. Shooting... itching... pressure... and so on.*

*Notice the size and the shape of the painful area. Pay particular attention to the outline; to the edges. Is it long? Is it round? Is it deep? Is it uniform, or does it have areas of more intensity than others? Pay careful attention.*

*Use the labels to keep you on track and paying attention.*

*Allow your awareness to move from one discomfort to another at a very leisurely pace; to any discomfort that gets your attention.*

*Again, if only one area calls you, pay attention to the different aspects of that area: right side... left side.*

*When things are changing, try to watch with curiosity. If things are staying the same, try to rest in the stability. Relax.*

*Now, let go of the labeling. Bring your awareness to the entire area of discomfort, however large or small it is. Simply be with it. Penetrate it with your awareness. Observe the area carefully as if the pain were a living being in its own right. As if it were a lizard on the wall. How and when will this creature move? Will its borders change? Will it get stronger or weaker?*

*Watch carefully and notice that every few seconds the pain may change, even if it's only in a tiny way. Every time it changes, relax your whole mind and body into it, and observe it without judgment.*

*I'm going to ring the bell in a moment. Before you open your eyes or move, remind yourself to stay mindful in this transition. We're not going to stand up, we're just going to stay sitting and open our eyes. But stay mindful and keep your continuity.*

[Bell sounds]

So, any questions or comments with that meditation?

Student 1: I got so involved that I lost pain. I got so interested in the process and in your voice and focus of what I was doing that there was no pain for a bit. It was wonderful.

Ines: That's great.

Student 2: I was noticing that what was happening with the floating meditation what was happening in a short time usually happens in a day or week. So it was interesting to watch it almost speed up.

Student 3: I injured both my knees doing a similar [aggressive] yoga practice. I insisted on continuing as well, being very un-mindful of what my body was telling me for a couple of years. I ended up having 3 surgeries on my right knee and one on my left. The pain has made me angry. Since the last surgery was two years ago, so, as soon as the pain comes up (which it does frequently) it is now arthritic. I just get angry, and I get unmindful and push through and aggravate it and make it worse. So I found in the practice getting into the describing the flavors, there was a real shift from my usual, “darn it, it’s hurting again” to some gentleness and some empathy and some much softer feelings about the pain. I’ll really try to stay with [this practice], and be mindful, because I think it will be more helpful in dealing with this chronic situation.

Ines: Yes, kindness is always called for. If you have anger, it’s important to be kind to yourself about the anger and allow that to be there, too. So, great, thank you.

I want to add a word about smiling. Smiling and laughing produces chemicals in the brain called endorphins that actually decrease pain. Thich Nhat Hanh recommends that every time you meditate, you have just a little slight smile on your face. For some people that’s really easy. Other people feel like that’s phony. But, it simply connects your practice. There’s a biofeedback method where they hook up electrodes to you, and they found it so helpful with pain to smile. A lot of people, especially if you’ve had chronic pain, sometimes you have nothing to smile about. A lot of people have lost the ability to smile easily and their muscles have actually atrophied and gone weak. So, practicing smiling is training your mind that it’s easier to smile. The more you practice, the easier it is.

They actually have “smile rehabilitation”! It’s like lifting weights, you actually practice to pump up your muscles. It’s kind of silly, but if you smile over time, at different times of the day, it will just gradually decrease your pain a little bit.

Another thing I want to share is a breathing exercise that I think is incredibly helpful to do during the day. It’s a way of bringing mindfulness to your day. If you work at a sedentary job, I recommend you do this every single hour. It takes one minute. It is 5 breaths. Everybody can do that. You can do it when you’re stopped in a car at the traffic light. You can do it at a lot of different times during your life.

Let’s do it together, it’s a very easy, very simple exercise.

You take the first breath, make it a deep breath, where you expand your abdomen, your chest, your upper chest. When you exhale, you focus on relaxing the bottom part of your body: your thighs, your legs, and your feet. Just let go of those areas.

Breathe at your own pace. I’m going to guide it, but don’t try to keep up with the pace I’m recommending.

On the second deep breath, when you exhale, you relax your abdomen. Really pay attention as your abdomen relaxes, we tend to contract that a lot. Relax your pelvis and low back.

On the third breath, relax your chest and mid-back.

On the fourth breath, relax your shoulders, your neck and your arms.

On the fifth breath, relax your face and jaw. That’s a great time to smile!

So, just go through the body from the bottom up, gradually relaxing each section. If there is particular area that you often tighten up, add that to the mix.

So, how was that for you? Is it something you think you might incorporate in your day? I think it's really helpful to pick a few times in your life that you can do it. The time I like to do it is when I come back from the bathroom. I've broken the cycle of work, I sit back down again to the work, and it's a great time to remember to do it. Another great time is when we eat, because we tend to rush when we are eating. Just take this minute to let go of all the tensions in our body.

I successfully eliminated 25 years of constant jaw pain by learning how to do this. I had a degenerated disk in my jaw. It had a dull ache there most of the time, but because I learned to keep my jaw relaxed 24 / 7, it's not an issue. So, just learning to relax our bodies and the way we hold our bodies is incredibly helpful.

One of the primary things we work with in meditation is resistance. Resistance occurs in both the body and the mind. Conscious resistance in the mind is when we're judgmental, afraid, "I hate the pain", "I can't stand it", "when it is going to stop?" That's mental resistance. The conscious resistance in the body takes the form of tension and holding. You have a pain in the leg, but you grit your teeth. Those behaviors are not helpful at all. They decrease your circulation and cause other secondary pains.

Much of our habitual resistance to pain begins at a pre-conscious level. So by the time we consciously experience pain, it has already been converted to suffering by our unconscious resistance. Most of us can't remember experiencing pure pain. What people call pain is usually a combination of pain and resistance. Shinzen Young has a formula that describes this: Suffering equals pain times resistance. If there is no resistance, there is no suffering. There might still be pain, but there is no suffering.

Most people also haven't experienced pure pleasure either. Most of what people call pleasure is a combination of pleasure and grasping.

So, what we're doing by dropping resistance and grasping is slowly training our unconscious mind to begin to do the same thing.

I'd like to do the last meditation of the evening. This is called, "working with local intensity and global spread."

[23:13 Guided meditation]

*So, I'd like you to close your eyes. If you're sitting, sit upright and relaxed.*

*Take a couple of deep breaths.*

*Bring your awareness to the discomfort. It will take one of three patterns: Either you are going to have one intense location, or several disconnected areas of intensity, or it may cover the whole body.*

*We're going to call the part of the body where there is no discomfort, or the discomfort is not very strong the "secondary regions." The area where the pain is very strong is called the "primary region." So we're going to look at our bodies in two separate areas: The primary pain (primary*

region) and everything else, even though there might be a mild pain in it will be the secondary region.

*What I want you to do is get a very clear sense of the secondary region of the body. Let your awareness really float in it moving from place to place. Again, noting the locations there, and sensing those areas intimately before moving on.*

*So, just generally roam the secondary areas, the areas that don't hurt. Just gently land in an area, for example, the cheek. And just label the cheek and feel what a cheek feels like. Then just go on to another area where there is no pain or where the discomfort is very mild. Try not to be pulled into the primary area. Try to resist the gravitational pull of the intense area. Keep your awareness freely circulating within the secondary area, moving your attention from one place to another every few seconds.*

*(silence)*

*Continue to free float in the secondary area. You may notice influences from the primary discomfort. Little pressures or subtle pains. Things that spread from the local intensity into the secondary parts of your body. It may not happen at all... there may not be any influence that way. Either of these is fine.*

*If the pain spreads anywhere beyond the primary area, focus all your attention to where it has spread. Notice locations. The discomfort that spreads from the primary area is usually much milder. Therefore, it's possible that you may be able to notice it and experience the spread of equanimity and acceptance.*

*(silence)*

*Now, place some awareness in the local intense area, but also maintain an awareness of your body as a whole. Notice each time there's a change in the intensity or shape of the local sensation that it may cause a global spread. Let that happen. Keep watching any interplay between your primary pain and the secondary areas of the body.*

*(silence)*

*It's like a pond where there's a local splash, and a ripple spreads throughout the whole pond releasing the pressure and the energy. See if you can get into that rhythm. Local splash... global spread, and then let it release throughout the body in all directions.*

*(silence)*

*In a moment, I'll ring the bell. Make an intention to stay mindful in the transition before you open your eyes.*

[Bell sounds]

So, any questions or comments about that meditation?

Student 4: Something interesting happened to me. I don't have pain, except when I walk. But, I found that I could focus on a little pain in my back, which I only get here sitting in a chair.

Ines: Do you normally sit and meditate in a chair?

Student 4: I do, but it's normally comfortable to me, it's a different shaped chair.

Ines: You might want to use a pillow.

Student 5: Many of us are older now. When I was younger, I didn't think I had any pain in my body until I started vipassana practice. I really was oblivious. I think the practice has fine tuned my ability to be more attuned to discomfort throughout the body.

Student 6: I'm wondering more about the relationship between silence and pain or emotional pain. The phrase, "suffering in silence" seems to group the two words. And when I think of the healthy responses to emotional pain, they are noisy: lamentation, rejoicing. And yet we're learning how to work with pain silently.

Ines: In this particular practice, the silence is really helpful because we're trying to connect with the pain from the inside. We're trying to notice emotional responses. It's not about expressing. There are a lot of practices of expressing our pain that are very skillful that can be done through dancing, through art, through music. There are wonderful possibilities of how to express the pain, and use pain as an energy. But, what we're looking at is resistance to pain, and that is what causes our suffering.

Pain is there, it is a human condition. We lose people we love. We lose the ability to do things as we get older. So, loss is part of life, and that hurts. It's a very healthy thing to express that hurt. But often what we are experiencing is not that basic hurt, but it's all these other layers of stuff that we put on top of it. I hope that clarifies that.

One of the things I would like everyone to keep in mind: no matter how much you're hurting, exercise decreases your pain. No matter what condition you are in, exercise is appropriate. Even if a person is completely bedridden, they can move their hand back and forth maybe. For some people, just being in a rocking chair is good enough, it gets your circulation going. Any form of regular activity decreases pain.

In particular, what a lot of people do (and I've been guilty of this): I'll go out and do one hour of exercise in the morning, "Ok, I've done my exercise for the day" and then I spend the rest of the day completely sedentary. So it's really important to move throughout the day. Motion restores circulation, gets toxins out of the area. I could say a lot more about exercise. Mindful movement is a really important part of our day. We can do walking meditation, for example to and from the car. We can stay mindful during our movement.

If you have a sedentary lifestyle, and a particular pain often makes you be even more sedentary, really try to put in times of movement throughout the day. Break up your day by walking to the kitchen and back instead of waiting.

In the the handout, it briefly summarizes these meditations, including one that we'll do next week. It also mentions Shinzen's book and a couple other books. It mentions some guided meditations on our web site. The breathing exercise. These little summaries are not the complete thing, so if you really feel you want to work with them (unless they really come natural to you) I really recommend that you get Shinzen's book and use the guided meditations on that CD, I think it's really worthwhile.

If all this is new to you, take your time. I give three different techniques. You don't want to work with all three at the same time. You want to work with maybe two techniques. Getting really good at any of the techniques will make the others easier.

It's like any other skill, work with it over a period of time. It will get easier and better with time.

They did a study in mindfulness-based stress reduction. In just 8 weeks with people meditating 20 minutes every single day, they were able to reduce the levels of pain significantly. So the daily practice is really a key ingredient here.

One thing totally off the topic that I want to add is that there are a lot of things nutritionally that affect our pain levels. I recommend one book here not because it's the greatest, but because it's very broad and touches on a lot of different things. So, I suggest that if you are dealing with chronic pain you might want to look at the anti-inflammatory diets and things like that.

They have found that high levels of sugar increase pain. If there's nothing else that you do nutritionally: Get off the sugar! It makes quite a significant difference in your perception of pain. So, stop sugar.

That's all I wanted to say tonight.

If anybody is new to the center, everything we do at the center is given freely, but the center and our teachers are supported by donations. So, if you'd like to offer a donation, there is a donation box by the door with two slots, one for the teacher, one for the center. Any donation will be appreciated. We don't suggest an amount, we don't require anything. This teaching is given out of the joy we have in sharing what we've gained from this practice.

So, thank you very much.

[End of Week 1, Part 2]