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UMass professor finds meditation relieves debilitating headaches

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Richard S. Ellis [1] of Amherst is a professor of mathematics and statistics at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and an adjunct professor in the Judaic and Near Eastern Studies department. Though he has achieved recognition in those fields, he also has expertise in another completely different subject - debilitating, blinding headaches.

Those headaches and how he deals with them are the subject of his new book, "Blinding Pain, Simple Truth: Changing Your Life Through Buddhist Meditation" (Rainbow Books).

Told in the first person, the book chronicles Ellis' experience with intense headaches that flared up without warning and describes how he discovered that meditation - the ancient mind-body practice that can help promote feelings of calm and relaxation - could help him deal with that pain.

"I thought my experience might help other people," Ellis said during a recent interview at his Amherst home.

Ellis, 63, emphasizes that he is by no means promoting meditation as a simple cure-all for headaches, or as a replacement for a doctor's care.

"I would say to anyone, see a doctor first," he said. "I'm saying, if medication works, then by all means take advantage of it. But if it's not working, consider trying something else."

For him, that "something else" has been daily meditation, which he usually does at home in the afternoon for about 30 minutes. Ellis says that the calm and focus he found through meditation changed his reaction to his pain. He used to rail at his headaches, he says, feeling anxious, angry and victimized. Now he believes these emotions only made his pain worse.

"I think that thinking of yourself as a victim exacerbates the pain. I'm sure that's what happened with me," he said. "As I look back at it, I really do think my level of pain was compounded by my mental state." By lowering the intense negativity and stress surrounding his headaches, Ellis says, he has been able to lessen - though not completely banish - his pain.

As touchy-feely as that may sound, many doctors are no longer scoffing at the kind of experience Ellis had.

In a piece about chronic pain in the March 7 issue of Time magazine, Dr. Mehmet Oz, professor of surgery at the New York-Presbyterian Columbia University Medical Center, noted that "researchers are exploring the pain-control power of mind quieting and focusing techniques that athletes use to improve performance and that Buddhists preached thousands of years ago. Meditation may benefit chronic-pain sufferers by reducing the emotional impact of their condition. A settling transcendent state puts the pain in perspective and helps it dwindle in importance."

Ellis says he has never known for certain what causes his headaches - but in 2000, when he began to suffer some of his worst, almost anything could, and did, set them off: "A phone call, a careless remark, missing an elevator ..."

To get help, Ellis consulted health professionals and tried pain-relieving medications. In seeking help from both doctors trained in Western medicine and alternative practitioners, Ellis wasn't, in fact, doing anything unusual. About 40 percent of Americans now do that, according to the National Center on Complementary and Alternative Medicine. The center is an arm of the federal government's National Institutes of Health that studies the effectiveness of meditation and other practices such as massage and acupuncture. While the center says evidence of the effectiveness of various alternative therapies is still more anecdotal than scientific, it's clear that many Americans are willing to give them a try.

In a recent interview at his Amherst home, Ellis talked about his experiences with headaches and with meditation. What follows are edited excerpts from that and follow-up interviews.

Q: There are many people - and I'm one - who found great relief from migraines in a combination of medications. But they can make some people feel tired, out of it. What was your experience?

A: They sometimes took the pain away, but my wife felt that in some way they changed my personality. And one wonders about side effects - who knows what these medicines do? I don't know. It just seemed to me that medicines treat the patient as a passive entity.

Dr. Nagagopal Venna, my neurologist at Massachusetts General Hospital, suggested I get rid of them by tapering off. I wasn't abusing them, but these are potent medications.

Q: Did your experience leave you feeling that the Western medical approach had nothing to offer?

A: No, not at all. The doctors are very important. If I had brain cancer, I would still want the best neurologist in the world. And, in trying to find a cause for the headaches, I got an MRI, which said everything looked OK. Western medicine has given us an amazing understanding of the human body, but in my case, with my headaches, it didn't work.

Q: People who have never meditated might assume it's difficult or hard to do. Is it?

A: It's not complicated; it's probably the simplest thing there is. You sit and follow your mind, follow your breath, in and out. The instructions couldn't be simpler, but the practice is challenging. It takes awhile.

Q: At the beginning did you have to struggle to make meditation a daily practice? Did it take awhile to feel like it's a regular part of your life?

A: Yes, at the beginning I certainly struggled with this. But because of the pain and, even more, because of the suffering that I brought upon myself ... I was highly motivated to make meditation a daily practice. I was greatly helped by the mindfulness-based stress reduction program at the UMass Medical School in Worcester, in which I participated soon after I began meditating daily. After a few months it finally became a regular part of my life.

Q: Are there still times when you meditate and find that you're thinking about the errands you have to do later on?

A: Yes, although I meditate daily, I have these experiences all the time. It can be really difficult to focus on meditation in the midst of a busy life. This was particularly common when I started to meditate. But I have learned to go easy on myself. Sometimes the meditation is agitated, and sometimes totally peaceful. Sometimes I fall asleep, and sometimes I have deep insights. We learn to observe experience rather than to become attached to experience, which can cause suffering. With practice, we begin to experience life as a flow in which we swim, not as a problem that we must solve.

Q: You write that meditation changed your relationship to pain, that when you stopped fighting it, the pain eased. You know, a lot of people will say that just sounds nuts.

A: That's true, most people don't see pain as a teacher. It goes against the conventional understanding, which is that pain is bad. The Buddhist teaching is that pain is unavoidable but that suffering is optional - and it can end. It's the mental state associated with the pain that brings on suffering. We think of pain as a solid block of metal that will never, ever go away.

Q: But what is the pain teaching you? What has it helped you accept?

A: The pain, once my brutal enemy, became my best teacher, and I opened myself up to its wisdom. The pain invited me to let go of the suffering, to let go of the past, and to let go of the image of myself as a victim. It invited me to accept the present moment with perfect trust and to let go of control. It taught me to slow down, to try to avoid potentially stressful situations, to accept that I cannot figure out the headaches and cannot figure out life. These teachings allowed me eventually to transform the suffering into healing.

Q: Besides the meditation, are there other things you do to keep the headaches at bay? Do you exercise?

A: Oh my God, yes, exercise is crucial. A doctor had told me to try aerobic exercise. I bike, and that helps, and I try to avoid stress. And I try not to work too hard.

Q: So in the end, you're not saying that meditation made the pain go away for good.

A: No, that's right, it didn't. It helped me accept it. I still don't know what caused them [the headaches], and I don't know if they will ever completely go away.

Richard Ellis will talk about his book, "Blinding Pain, Simple Truth: Changing Your Life Through Buddhist Meditation," on April 14 at 8 p.m. at Amherst Books, 8 Main

St. The book is available at Amherst Books, Broadside Bookshop in Northampton and amazon.com.

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