

Healing the Stress of Academic Life

Talk at College of Public Health, Ohio State University

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by Richard S. Ellis

I am deeply grateful to Stan Lemeshow¹, my friend of many years, for making this talk possible. In discussing stress in academic life I feel like a pioneer entering a new landscape that is waiting to be explored. Metaphors aside, we are dealing with a really strange situation here. Stress is a major component of academic life, but almost no one addresses the huge but obvious question. How can we deal with stress and perhaps even heal it?

In small doses stress could be helpful. However, when it is out of control, stress is a corrosive acid having extremely negative effects on our mental and physical health. The following is taken from an [online article in *Insight Journal*](#).

“When stress becomes chronic, lasting for long periods of time without any moments of rest or relaxation, serious physical or psychological problems can result. Some of these include: anxiety or depressive disorder, heart disease and stroke, weight [gain or loss],

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sleep difficulty, [problems with] concentration and memory, pain, gastrointestinal disorders.”

The list goes on and on: impairment of the immune system, diseases of the reproductive system, addiction, and more.

We teachers, researchers, and students work in an environment of potentially great fulfillment and satisfaction. However, as we all know, the reality is often different from the potential because of the frequent deadlines, the never ending pressures, the competition, and the ongoing necessity to prove oneself. The pressures are everywhere, and the pressures can cause stress. It’s a culture of pressures: publishing papers, applying for research grants, teaching, doing committee work, attending conferences, answering email. The wheel never stops turning because there is always more to do. Tenure and promotion are major achievements, but because the standards are so high, earning them is often fraught with anxiety and fear.

How does one gain insight and wisdom in this culture of pressure, competition, overwork, money, power, and ego? Specifically, what can we do to alleviate the pressures and stress of academic life? In answering this question, we must

recognize that there are many pressures and that each set of pressures requires its own skillful response. There are two approaches. The first is to try to change the system, or at least that part of the system giving rise to a particular set of pressures. An ambitious goal, and one that is fraught with its own pressures and stress. Instead, I will focus on a second approach, which is to **change the way we respond** to a particular set of pressures. This approach rests on a fundamental insight into the difference between the pressures and the stress and suffering that the pressures could cause. This insight might sound simple, but in fact it is deep; namely, the pressures are unavoidable but the stress and suffering can end. A path to the end of stress and suffering is the path of meditation, which I have followed for 13 years.

This talk has three parts. First, I will discuss my background and my experience with chronic headaches. Second, I will talk about meditation and how it can help heal the stress and suffering of academic life. Finally, I will discuss practical steps for helping our colleagues, graduate students, and undergraduate students. I hope that when you hear my story, my experiences will inspire you to recognize the sources of stress in your life, to find a path to healing and peace, and to learn how to approach your creative work with wisdom. I certainly don't want to cause any

stress today by speaking too long. I will speak for about 45 minutes, leaving time at the end for questions and discussion.

I start by describing how in February 2000 my successful career was nearly destroyed by incapacitating headaches. In order to help you understand how difficult this ordeal was, I must explain in what ways my career was successful. As you will see, it was filled with achievements, which are the currency of academe, but unfortunately it was also lacking in wisdom. In 1975 I joined the Department of Mathematics and Statistics at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, three years after receiving my Ph.D. My career shifted quickly into high gear. Success in research led to early tenure and a Sloan Foundation Fellowship in 1977, grants from the National Science Foundation, and early promotion to full professor in 1981. In 1985 my first book, *Entropy, Large Deviations, and Statistical Mechanics*, was published by Springer. The book highlights a useful theorem, which, to my total surprise, came to be called the Gärtner-Ellis Theorem. Jürgen Gärtner is a German mathematician whose work I had generalized. In 2006 the book was republished by Springer in their *Classics in Mathematics* series.

My family and I lived in Israel for three extended stays during the 1980s. Inspired by my experiences there, I worked hard to improve my Hebrew, studied the

Hebrew Bible, became active in Jewish affairs at my university, and taught the Hebrew Bible at my synagogue. These activities led to my being appointed in 1998 as an adjunct professor in the Department of Judaic and Near Eastern Studies at UMass Amherst, where I have taught courses on the Hebrew Bible and the work of Franz Kafka. In 1997 my second research-level math book, co-written with Paul Dupuis of Brown University, was published by Wiley. I also published articles on the Bible, literature, and anti-Semitism and the Holocaust and had other achievements, including election to fellowship in the Institute of Mathematical Statistics and an outstanding faculty award for research awarded by my university.

Despite the successes.... No, let me start the sentence again. Because of the successes, in the fateful year 2000, as I was completing a research paper on statistical mechanical models of turbulence, the turbulence swirling just beneath the surface of my life for decades erupted in an earthquake that exploded inside my head. The pills prescribed by the many doctors I consulted changed my personality and drained all my intellectual and emotional energy. I suffered from the pain and even more from my outrage over the pain, which I reacted to with anger, fear, and self-pity, all of which made my pain and suffering much worse. “How could this have happened?” I shouted. “Why me? Why now? I don’t deserve it.”

Although I had difficult experiences with all the doctors I saw but one, it is important to emphasize that meditation is **not** a substitute for medical treatment and medication, and it is not a quick fix. Pain is frequently a symptom of an underlying problem. Therefore, any pain, including headaches, should first be evaluated by a physician, or maybe more than one physician, to rule out organic, treatable causes.

One of the spiritual causes of my suffering was the fact that I blindly accepted the conventional understanding of society. This understanding says that pain is evil. That pain must be forcibly banished, the quicker, the better. That pain is a terrorist with a forged passport who has no right to cross over the boundaries into MY life, MY body, MY consciousness. Until the headaches erupted, I followed the rules, and for the most part I succeeded. Hence when the headaches came, I continued to follow the rules by blindly accepting the conventional understanding of society. Doing so allowed the blinding pain of incapacitating headaches to nearly destroy my career, not because they made it impossible to work, but because they sucked all the meaning and pleasure out of my work. The relentless, pounding pain, from which there was no escape, plunged me into an existential crisis of the first degree. It forced me to question, doubt, and reject the value of the professional path I had chosen. As I painfully realized, it was a path of achievement, not of wisdom. It

took me years to overcome this negativity and blame and to realize that my career is a valuable spiritual path.

The existential crisis had another painful component. Having spent a lifetime achieving, controlling, solving, and knowing, I was unable to figure out why the headaches had begun and why they were continuing. The words of Emily Dickinson, the poet laureate of Amherst MA, uncannily describe the process that I underwent, as if Emily had known me personally:

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down -
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing - then -

What I just read is the last stanza of a poem titled ["I felt a Funeral, in my Brain."](#) As Emily understood, something indeed had died within me. It was the achieving, controlling, solving, and knowing Richard S. Ellis. What made this insight so frightening was that I had no idea what would replace it. Paradoxically, the suffering and fear caused by being plunged into this place of not-knowing would eventually blossom into insight and growth.

The agent for change was Buddhist meditation. After suffering for two and a half years, in September 2002 I sought help from Jean Colucci, a psychologist who based her therapy on meditation and Buddhist teachings. My work with her set the stage for a transformative experience in the summer of 2003. It happened while I was participating in an eight-day retreat at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. While meditating on August 5, 2003, I experienced the truth about the headaches and the suffering they had caused. This truth is so simple, yet so deep: it is not the pain that causes suffering, but the mental state associated with the pain. The mystery of this wisdom. It had taken me three and a half years to understand deeply what I could now express in a single short sentence. Eventually I learned not to push the pain away, or to react to the pain with anger and fear, but rather to accept it. Accepting the pain allowed me to embrace a conceptual paradox. The pain, which I had hated because it had tortured me, became my best teacher, a wise guide who continues to reveal new insights about life and pain and suffering and letting go and love.

After the retreat in August 2003, I have continued meditating daily. Meditation has empowered me to let go of the image of myself as a victim and eventually to transform my suffering into healing. It has invited me to give up knowing what causes the headaches and why they return on some days and not on others. It has

invited me to give up knowing what role stress plays and what I should do to make the headaches go away. It has given me the insight that pain is not an impenetrable steel wall. The word “pain,” I eventually learned, is a conceptual abstraction because whenever I meditate, the pressure in my face dissipates and starts to flow. Meditation has done all this and much more, opening me up to the vast landscape on the other side of pain, to the unknowable mystery and grandeur of life, of which the headaches and their comings and goings are a symbol.

My daily practice has convinced me that meditation is, quite simply, magic. It healed the suffering caused by chronic headaches and bestowed other rewards of infinite value. Because meditation goes beyond words and concepts, I would rather not use words and concepts to explain it. It would be much more consistent with the spirit of meditation to invite you to spend a few minutes experiencing it yourselves. Perhaps then you will be closer to understanding how its magic happens.

There are as many ways to meditate as there are to write a poem, sing a song, cook food, or raise children. The meditation I practice is called insight meditation. In Pali, the language of the Buddha, it is known as *Vipassana*, which means to see reality as it is. The Buddha discovered this meditation technique 2,500 years ago

and prescribed it as a path for understanding how suffering arises and how one frees oneself from suffering.

Here are brief instructions for insight meditation, which I invite you to follow. I will then let you meditate for about five minutes.

If you would like to participate, then I invite you to sit up straight in your chair. Feel your body in the chair and your feet on the floor.

Relax and be comfortable in this space. Close your eyes. Gently focus on your breath. If you are distracted by a sound, then make a mental note of that distraction. You can't change the sound or stop it, so just let it go. Similarly, if you are distracted by a thought, then make a mental note of that distraction. Let the thought float through your mind like a cloud through the sky, and let it go. When you are able to, bring your attention back to your breath. Relax into it. Keep your attention soft and precise. Let your mind become quiet by focusing on the always changing and recurring breath. ... When you feel relaxed and present, open your eyes.

What happened during the time that you just meditated? If you have done it before, then you might have experienced an ease in quieting the mind and remaining in the

present moment. On the other hand, if you have never meditated, then you might have been surprised to discover that the mind has a mind of its own, jumping from thought to thought, unable to stay quiet and focused. If so, then you experienced what the Buddhists call “monkey mind.”

Even in the short time that you just meditated, I hope that you felt less agitated, more aware, and more present. To attain this state of awareness and relaxation, we use the breath as a point of focus to keep us centered and calm. We also observe the mind as it deals with distractions such as sounds and thoughts. We observe, trying to remain nonattached and not to react. Although we normally consider sounds as being external and thoughts as being internal, as mental phenomena they are on the same level, just like pain. Eventually the distractions cease to distract, and they become part of the passing show. Wisdom and peace arise when we learn to accept them, just as we accept the rhythmic flowing of the breath. As we focus on the breath, our mental landscape expands. Personal concerns exert less pressure in the expanded space. Because the breath sustains life, focusing on it can give rise to gratitude for the miracle of being alive.

Perhaps after meditating, you might be able to appreciate how simple this practice is to explain and how difficult to do. You might also be able to appreciate that this

practice can eventually transform how the mind works, heal suffering, help us accept whatever happens with perfect trust, make us feel at one with the present moment, and bring peace and lasting happiness.

What is relevant for this talk is that among its many other rewards, meditation can help us cope with the pressures of academic life and heal the stress that arises from those pressures. Here are some relevant points.

I start with the most important point, which is based on the relationship between pain and suffering, on the one hand, and the pressures and stress of academic life, on the other hand. When I talk about pain, I interpret it in a general sense by including physical pain, emotional pain, and what the Buddha called *dukkha*, which is the pain that comes from being human, the dissatisfaction and the sense of lack that are pervasive in our lives. I would like to share with you the Buddha's deep insight into the difference between pain and suffering. When you first hear it, this insight might seem strange because it is so easy to confuse the two concepts and even think they are the same. In fact, there is a legal term, "pain and suffering," that refers to distress for which one may seek damages in a legal action.

The Buddha's insight is that pain and suffering are not the same. Pain is unavoidable, he taught, but suffering can end. Suffering can arise in many ways; for example, when we push pain away or deny it or hide it or feel victimized by it. When meditating, we learn to observe our thoughts and emotions without pushing them away and without grabbing them and holding tight. Meditation can help heal suffering because it allows us to see pain as it really is, as an unpleasant sensation in the body or a difficult emotion in the mind. Seeing pain as it really is can then invite us to respond skillfully by accepting it or by investigating its texture or by letting it go. Or we can choose not to respond at all, which is often the most skillful response of all.

The insight gained from meditation is called mindfulness. This is the calm and direct awareness of what is happening in the present moment, in your body, in your mind, and in the world around you. By focusing your attention on the present moment, mindfulness cultivates wakefulness and wisdom.

SHOW TRANSPARENCY

The Liberating, Simple Truth
at the Heart of the Buddha's Teaching

- Pain is unavoidable, but suffering can end.
- A path that leads to the end of suffering is mindfulness, which is cultivated by meditation.

- The pressures of academic life are unavoidable, but stress can end.
- A path that leads to the end of stress is mindfulness, which is cultivated by meditation.

As with pain and suffering, so with the pressures of academic life and the stress that might arise from those pressures. Just as suffering arises from responding unskillfully to pain, so does stress arise by responding unskillfully to the pressures. Like pain, pressures are an unavoidable aspect of academic life. And like suffering, stress can also end because stress is not inevitable. It arises from our response to the pressures. Meditation can help heal stress because it allows us to see the pressures as they really are, an act of mindfulness that can then invite us to respond skillfully. Skillful responses include becoming aware of our limits and deciding, when possible, to do less. Don't check your email every five minutes. Don't reply immediately to every email. Don't agree to serve on every committee you are asked to serve on. Don't apply for so many research grants. If any of your decisions involves other people, then try to explain your decision in order to avoid new pressures and possible resentment.

Here is an example, in which I refer to a fictitious Dean, certainly not to Stan Lemeshow. You are the chair of the Personnel Committee in your department. At 5:00 PM after a long day, just as you are ready to leave the office, your

Department Head emails you to say that the Dean needs an updated personnel memo by 9:00 AM the next morning. Could you please email the document to the Department Head by 7:00 AM? The pressure caused by this request is compounded by the fact that you promised your daughter that you would go to her piano recital tonight. Does this sound familiar? Before you can decide what to do, you are feeling nervous and angry. The pressure of the request explodes immediately into stress. You go on automatic pilot. Work on the memo now? Not go to the recital? Go to the recital, then work on the memo afterwards? More anger and more stress.

There is another way, the way of mindfulness. After reading the email, you close your eyes to meditate. You have an image of academic culture as a New York City of frenetic activity. How can you find peace and happiness? Meditation is an answer, a particularly skillful answer because it changes you. In the center of this New York City of frenetic activity there is a huge, quiet space, a Central Park of peace and equanimity, which you can discover by becoming quiet yourself. It is a space offering wisdom, not knowledge, offering mindfulness and insight, not success or fame. Shut your eyes. Become aware of your breath. Stop achieving. Stop thinking. Stop controlling. Stop knowing. Slow down. Relax. Breathe. Be.

After fifteen minutes of meditating, you open your eyes and calmly send an email to your Department Head. You write that you will be able to work on the memo tomorrow morning right after class, acknowledging that it will be a little late but that under the circumstances this is the best you can do. You also apologize for being a little late and for possibly causing the Department Head some discomfort. You are at peace because you have acted skillfully by putting a gap between the stimulus and the response and by filling that gap with mindfulness and insight. You leave your office, go home, enjoy your family and the recital, and have a good night's sleep.

This is the path of meditation and mindfulness. One of its deepest gifts for me is that the rewards of meditation and mindfulness are potentially infinite. If you study Buddhist teachings, then you will see that the Buddhists love lists. Here is my list titled "Seven Infinite Rewards of Meditation." Each of them is a priceless jewel that brings peace and wisdom into our lives.

SHOW TRANSPARENCY

Seven Infinite Rewards of Meditation

1. Meditation calms the mind and brings equanimity.
2. It teaches us to accept whatever happens with perfect trust.

3. It enables us to connect with the wisdom of our bodies and the wisdom of the present moment.
4. It helps us cope with pain, reduce stress, and alleviate suffering.
5. It allows the innate wisdom planted within us to blossom.
6. Through meditation, we heal ourselves.
7. Calming our minds creates peace within us and peace for those with whom we interact.

Let me end this talk by addressing how you can help your colleagues, graduate students, and undergraduate students. You have been meditating for several weeks, have gained real insight, and have found that life has become easier and calmer. You walk into your building one day and see many unrelaxed people. All of a sudden you can see it in their faces. But everyone is so busy that they do not have the time to explore the stress, fear, anxiety, and competition that seem to be an unavoidable aspect of academic culture. Nor is stress a favorite topic of conversation. But as meditation has taught you, pushing away the problem makes it only worse. You look at your young colleagues and ponder your own past and ask how one finds the time and energy for what matters most: family and children.

All these things happen after you have been meditating for a while, and you would like to share your wisdom. But wisdom teaches you to act skillfully. No one will

welcome your wisdom unless he or she is ready for it. So wait and be patient.

Above all, move slowly and mindfully and start on a small scale. The first thing I did, starting about five or six years ago and continuing into the present, was to start each class with a short meditation exercise, which I did without using the language of meditation. With small variations here are my instructions.

If you would like to participate, then I invite you to close your eyes, sit up straight in the chair, and start breathing slowly. Just relax. Give yourself the gift of doing nothing but breathe. As you become aware of your breath, start to feel present.

I also discuss issues of stress with the students. I know it's working. For example, in the 20 course evaluations in a probability course that I taught in the fall, 10 students commented favorably on the meditation exercise or remarked that I had created a stress-free learning environment.

During the current semester I wanted to go further, building on an article about stress in academic life that was published in my departmental newsletter. First I spoke with my Department Head, who strongly supported me in this endeavor. I also spoke with two Associate Deans in my college, who also strongly supported me. Their expressions of support inspired me to organize a group of graduate

students in my department with whom I meet once a week to discuss issues of stress and how meditation might help heal that stress. I can see in their faces that our discussions are having a profound impact. These graduate students, having grown up in a culture of competition and overwork, are thirsty for the wisdom of mindfulness. It is so interesting to see, as the weeks go by, how the students feel more and more comfortable sharing their experiences with stress and how they dealt with the stress, sometimes skillfully and sometimes not. Next year I would like to expand this gathering to include students from other departments. Another possibility is to invite faculty.

Perhaps you could do something similar with your colleagues or your students. If you are interested, then I would be happy to share my experiences with you. I also gave each of the graduate students a CD containing the ePub version of my book, *Blinding Pain, Simple Truth: Changing Your Life Through Buddhist Meditation*, and I recommended some material in it to read.

It was only after years of dealing with pressure unskillfully by stress and overwork that I discovered the path of mindfulness and peace, or rather let that path discover me. Although I had meditated for years, still I waited and was patient before I proposed to the graduate students that we meet. I waited

and was patient because I understood the seventh infinite reward of meditation, which is that calming our minds creates peace within us and peace for those with whom we interact. So even before you speak one word of the wisdom that meditation has bestowed upon you, you will have already begun changing the world.

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Resources

- Richard S. Ellis, *Blinding Pain, Simple Truth: Changing Your Life Through Buddhist Meditation*, Rainbow Books, 2011. Website: <http://RichardSEllis.com>
- Joseph Goldstein, *Insight Meditation: The Practice of Freedom*, Shambhala, 2003.
- Dharma Seed <<http://www.dharmaseed.org>>: a website offering Western Buddhist Vipassana teachings by [Joseph Goldstein](#) and other teachers
- Audio Dharma <<http://www.audiodharma.org>>: an archive of Dharma talks given by [Gil Fronsdal](#) and other teachers at the [Insight Meditation Center](#) in Redwood City, CA