

Media Q&A for
Richard S. Ellis, author of
Blinding Pain, Simple Truth:
Changing Your Life Through Buddhist Meditation

Approximately 12 minutes

We would like to welcome Richard S. Ellis. Richard has written a book, titled *Blinding Pain, Simple Truth: Changing Your Life Through Buddhist Meditation*, about how Buddhist teachings and daily meditation can heal the suffering caused by physical and emotional pain.

Chronic pain affects the lives of one sixth of the U.S. population, including Richard, who suffered from incapacitating headaches that nearly destroyed his career.

Richard is here to discuss why he embraced meditation and how it, and Buddhist teachings, have changed his life.

Q. Richard, it is nice to have you here. Your book describes how you managed your pain. What kind of pain did you have?

A. I had headaches, which struck in February 2000. They were so intense that eyeglasses became impossible to wear. The pressure of even the most lightweight pair caused insufferable pain to radiate through my forehead and nose. It is clear that the headaches had a neurological basis, but I was never able to get a definitive diagnosis.

Q. How did the pain interfere with your life?

A. I am a professor in the Department of Mathematics and Statistics at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. I teach courses at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, direct the Ph.D. dissertations of graduate students, do research in mathematics, probability, and applications to physics, and I am involved with several committees. The work is intense and never ends.

When the headaches started, the pain was severe, but I don't recall ever missing work because of it. My way of dealing with the pain at the university was to hide it, not talk about it, and maintain a calm exterior, all of which made the pain much worse. It all seems so unnatural now. However, learning how I could skillfully integrate my experience of pain with my career has been a learning process of more than a decade.

Of course, many people lose work because of pain. According to the [American Academy of Pain Medicine](#), “. . . pain is a significant public health problem that costs society at least \$560-\$635 billion annually, an amount equal to about \$2,000.00 for

everyone living in the U.S.” However, that was not my experience. At work I kept the pain a secret. At home I dealt with the pain by anger, avoidance, and fear, which only compounded my suffering. I was snippy, unhappy, lost in self-pity, and self-absorbed. In a metaphor used by the Buddha, the pain was the first arrow, and the suffering I caused myself because of how I dealt with the pain was the second arrow. I suffered intensely.

Q. Could you please explain how the headaches nearly destroyed your career?

A. The headaches nearly destroyed 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 was a path of non-stop labor to prove the next theorem, publish the next paper, write the next research proposal, prepare for the next conference, dazzle my students, impress my colleagues. And I pushed myself to do all this while trying to be a husband, a father, and a son. No wonder my head exploded. Soon after the headaches had erupted, I saw with blinding clarity that my career was to blame. It took me years to overcome this negativity and blame and to realize that my career is a valuable spiritual path.

Q. How did you come to use meditation to treat your pain?

A. A friend had introduced meditation to me in 1980 during an earlier episode of headaches, and it had completely healed me. But in 2000 it would not be so simple. I was inspired to return to meditation by one wise doctor, Dr. Nagagopal Venna of Massachusetts General Hospital.

In the meditation that I do, I focus on the breath as it moves through the nose. Unfortunately, this is the same place where my headache pain tends to be the most intense. To my horror, during the first year after the headaches had erupted, the act of focusing on the breath often made the headache pain much worse.

Q. Did you drop meditation because of that experience?

A. I continued to suffer 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. Further, my meditation practice was greatly deepened by my attending the mindfulness-based stress-reduction program at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in Worcester.

My work with Jean Colucci 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, three and a half years after the headaches had begun, 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. 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 it to become my best teacher.

As in my case, many people find that their pain is essentially untreatable using traditional methods. Yet meditation is still an effective tool because it addresses the mental state associated with the pain, and that can be changed. Further, it can be used alone or in combination with traditional treatment.

Q. What actually is Buddhist meditation and how does it help a person afflicted with pain? Do you have to become a Buddhist to meditate?

A. Let me start by answering your second question with an emphatic no. The Buddhist meditation that I practice has nothing to do with religion, and therefore one does not have to become a Buddhist to do it. It is open to everyone, whether religiously observant or not, and everyone can benefit from it.

There are many forms of Buddhist meditation. The meditation that I do is called *insight* meditation. It calms my mind, focuses my attention on the present moment, and leads to self-transformation. When I do insight meditation, I focus on my breath and then expand my awareness to open up to sounds, to bodily sensations, including discomfort and pain, and to mental phenomena, including thoughts and emotions. The purpose of insight meditation is to cultivate *mindfulness*. This is the calm and direct awareness — without judgments, concepts, or ego — of what is happening in the present moment, in my body, in my mind, and in the world around me.

With practice I learned to observe pain as I actually experienced it: as pulsing or stabbing or throbbing. I learned to see pain, not as an impenetrable steel wall, but as an energy flow, constantly changing and moving, surging and vanishing.

I now come to a subtle point. The goal of meditation is not to *treat pain*; rather, the goal is to *alleviate the suffering* caused by pain. That happened for me when I learned to see my pain as it actually is.

Meditation healed my suffering by enabling me to slow down, to be in the moment, and to pay attention — with a light touch and without judgment — to what is pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. Meditation taught me not curse the pain and push it away, but rather to accept the pain as my best teacher.

Q. Did your family support you in this non-traditional way to manage pain and alleviate suffering?

A. At the beginning my wife found it awkward when I went off to meditate in a corner of the house. However, when she saw the positive effects of meditation, she embraced it. Meditation creates peace, not only within us, but also for those with whom we interact. The changes in my personality and in our relationship were so positive and life-affirming that it was clear to her how worthwhile this practice is.

Q. How did you learn to meditate?

A. I learned to meditate by attending several retreats at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts and at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. I also read several books. Although meditation is easy to describe, it took years before I felt comfortable doing it.

Like many people, I was skeptical when I started. What is the point of sitting for 30 minutes and following my breath? The boredom one feels when first meditating can be overwhelming.

The headache attack of 2000 was a major stimulus to take up meditation again because traditional medicine was not helping me. With the help of my therapist, Jean Colucci, I learned the power of meditation. It calmed my mind and brought equanimity. It taught me to accept whatever happens with perfect trust. It enabled me to connect with the wisdom of my body and the wisdom of the present moment, and it allowed the innate wisdom planted within me to blossom. It eventually became clear to me that this a practice with infinite rewards.

Q. Here is a question that is probably on many listeners' minds.

Does meditation heal pain?

A. Meditation can definitely help people cope with pain. But that is not its goal. The goal of meditation is to help people cope with the suffering caused by pain. It is so easy to confuse the two concepts; in fact, there is a legal term, “pain and suffering,” that refers to distress for which one may seek damages in a legal action. However, one of the most fundamental and helpful teachings of the Buddha is that pain and suffering are different. While pain is unavoidable, suffering can cease. Suffering can arise in many ways; for example, when we try to push pain away or deny it or try to hide it or feel victimized by it. Meditation helps 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.

Q. In your book you discuss how meditation can also help *emotional* pain. Please explain.

A. Almost all of us suffer from physical pain, emotional pain, or the pain of the human condition. Dealing with emotional pain has many features in common with dealing with physical pain. For most of us the initial response to pain is either to push it away and deny it or to get pulled into the drama and react with anger and fear. However, both responses typically make the pain much worse and increase our suffering. The second response has the added disadvantage that it can make us feel like a victim. Meditation is a skillful alternative to these two responses. It teaches us how to deal intelligently with pain by accepting it and allowing ourselves to learn from it.

Q. How does feeling like a victim prevent healing?

A. This is an excellent question, which I can answer from personal experience. When the headaches first struck, I certainly felt that I was a victim of the pain. This emotion sets up a harmful

duality: pain is on the outside victimizing me on the inside. This caused severe suffering and prevented healing because it does not correspond to what really is happening. Pain is not on the outside, I eventually realized, but rather is an integral part of my life.

My experience is that the feeling of being victimized is a choice we make. It is a dangerous choice because it denies us the capacity to respond skillfully to the pain. Feeling like a victim can become a role we play with ourselves and others.

If we instead let pain become our best teacher and open ourselves up to its wisdom, then we will realize that pain is inevitable but suffering is optional, that by quieting the mind meditation allows the body's natural healing powers to flourish and allows suffering to end.

Q. Did Buddhism play any role in your life other than provide a format for meditation?

A. Yes it did. Buddhist teachings eventually became an artful, all-encompassing approach to my entire life, having applicability to every situation. Because the truths of Buddhism are so clear, they also opened me up to the wisdom of my own tradition, which is Judaism. Using Buddhist ideas, I was able to decode the deep spirituality of Judaism into a language that I could finally understand.

Q. How did it all change your life, Richard?

A. The onset of chronic headaches in 2000 could have ended my career and converted me into a bitter, angry person. Because of my daily meditation practice, that did not happen. Rather, the meditation has allowed me to transform the headaches from a brutal enemy into my best teacher, a wise guide who continues to reveal new insights about life and pain and suffering and letting go and love.

In comparison to the person I was in 2000, I feel that I have almost totally changed. In 2000 I viewed the headaches as a terrible curse. Now I view them as a blessing. How fortunate I was to have opened myself up to the wisdom of the pain.

Q. If one of our audience members is experiencing pain and wants to use meditation to help, what should they do?

A. First, they should understand 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 should first be evaluated by a physician, or maybe more than one physician, to rule out organic, treatable causes.

Many people who experience pain find complete relief and healing by taking advantage of Western medicine. However, other people find that their pain and suffering cannot be treated within the treatment confines of Western medicine. These people should

investigate other holistic paths to healing, including acupuncture, biofeedback, hypnotherapy, massage, meditation, nutritional counseling, Pilates, and Yoga. While meditation was the correct path for me, it does not necessarily work for everyone. It is worthwhile pointing out that any of these holistic techniques can be used as an adjunct, along with traditional pain treatment, to *alleviate suffering*.

Q. You've written a detailed account of your successful battle with the suffering caused by your pain, *Blinding Pain, Simple Truth: Changing Your Life Through Buddhist Meditation*. How can our viewers get a copy?

A. They can purchase it through my website RichardSEllis.com, at Amazon.com and BarnesandNoble.com, or by calling 1-800-431-1579. It is also available as a Kindle ebook and a Nook ebook.

Thank you, Richard.

For more information on Richard's book, *Blinding Pain, Simple Truth: Changing Your Life Through Buddhist Meditation*, as well as how to find a meditation center near you, visit our website at ...

Resource Pages

Richard S. Ellis

- Telephone (413) 687-1840
- Email: rsellis@math.umass.edu
- Author's website: RichardSEllis.com. This website lists other resources.
- University website: www.math.umass.edu/~rsellis

***Blinding Pain, Simple Truth: Changing Your Life Through
Buddhist Meditation***

- ISBN 978-1-56825-125-7, a trade softcover (\$16.95).
- Available at Amazon.com and BarnesandNoble.com and through retailers nationwide as a softcover book, a Kindle ebook, and a Nook ebook.

Pain Resources

- American Academy of Pain Medicine (www.painmed.org)
- American Pain Society (www.ampainsoc.org)
- EFT, healing the emotional roots of disease (eftuniverse.com)
- Managing Pain, chronic pain management information for patients and caregivers (www.partnersagainstpain.com)
- The Pain Web, a website for health professionals dealing in research, assessment, and treatment of pain (www.thepainweb.com)

Meditation Resources

Find a Meditation Center Near You

- Meditation Center Guide (www.gosit.org/Index.asp)

Websites Featuring Instruction in Insight Meditation

- Beginning Insight Meditation (www.vipassana.com/meditation/beginning_insight_meditation.php)
- How To Practice Insight Meditation (www.shambhalasun.com/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=1465)
- Insight Meditation Online (www.buddhanet.net/insight.htm)
- Introduction to Insight Meditation (www.budsas.org/ebud/ebmed012.htm)
- Gil Fronsdal: Meditation Instruction (www.insightmeditationcenter.org/books-articles/meditation-instruction)
- Joseph Goldstein: Instructions for Sitting and Walking Meditation (www.dharmaseed.org/teacher/96/talk/1293)