

SESSION 4 AVOID PAIN INTERACTION OF INSTINCTS DECLINE OF INSTINCTCS



You are going to run into problems in your meditation. Everybody does. Problems come in all shapes and sizes, and the only thing you can be absolutely certain about is that you will have some. The main trick in dealing with obstacles is to adopt the right attitude. Difficulties are an integral part of your practice. They aren't something to be avoided. They are something to be used. They provide invaluable opportunities for learning.

The reason we are all stuck in life's mud is that we ceaselessly run from our problems and after our desires. Meditation provides us with a laboratory situation in which we can examine this syndrome and devise strategies for dealing with it. The various snags and hassles that arise during meditation are grist for the mill. They are the material on which we work. There is no pleasure without some degree of pain. There is no pain without some amount of pleasure. Life is composed of joys and miseries. They go hand-in-hand. Meditation is no exception. You will experience good times and bad times, ecstasies and frightening time.

So don't be surprised when you hit some experience that feels like a brick wall. Don't think you are special. Every seasoned meditator has had his own brick

walls. They come up again and again. Just expect them and be ready to cope. Your ability to cope with trouble depends upon your attitude. If you can learn to regard these hassles as opportunities, as chances to develop in your practice, you'll make progress. Your ability to deal with some issue that arises in meditation will carry over into the rest of your life and allow you to smooth out the big issues that really bother you. If you try to avoid each piece of nastiness that arises in meditation, you are simply reinforcing the habit that has already made life seem so unbearable at times.

It is essential to learn to confront the less pleasant aspects of existence. Our job as meditators is to learn to be patient with ourselves, to see ourselves in an unbiased way, complete with all our sorrows and inadequacies. We have to learn to be kind to ourselves. In the long run, avoiding unpleasantness is a very unkind thing to do to yourself. Paradoxically, kindness entails confronting unpleasantness when it arises. One popular human strategy for dealing with difficulty is autosuggestion: when something nasty pops up, you convince yourself it is pleasant rather than unpleasant. The Buddha's tactic is quite the reverse. Rather than hide it or disguise it, the Buddha's teaching urges you to examine it to death. Buddhism advises you not to implant feelings that you don't really have or avoid feelings that you do have. If you are miserable you are miserable; this is the reality, that is what is happening, so confront that. Look it square in the eye without flinching. When you are having a bad time, examine the badness, observe it mindfully, study the phenomenon and learn its mechanics. The way out of a trap is to study the trap itself, learn how it is built. You do this by taking the thing apart piece by piece. The trap can't trap you if it has been taken to pieces. The result is freedom.

This point is essential, but it is one of the least understood aspects of Buddhist philosophy. Those who have studied Buddhism superficially are quick to conclude that it is a pessimistic set of teachings, always harping on unpleasant things like suffering, always urging us to confront the uncomfortable realities of pain, death and illness. Buddhist thinkers do not regard themselves as pessimists - quite the opposite, actually. Pain exists in the universe; some measure of it is unavoidable. Learning to deal with it is not pessimism, but a very pragmatic form of optimism. How would you deal with the death of your spouse? How would

you feel if you lost your mother tomorrow? Or your sister or your closest friend? Suppose you lost your job, your savings, and the use of your hands, on the same day; could you face the prospect of spending the rest of your life in a wheelchair? How are you going to cope with the pain of terminal cancer if you contract it, and how will you deal with your own death, when that approaches? You may escape most of these misfortunes, but you won't escape all of them. Most of us lose friends and relatives at some time during our lives; all of us get sick now and then; at the very least you are going to die someday. You can suffer through things like that or you can face them openly - the choice is yours.

Pain is inevitable, suffering is not. Pain and suffering are two different animals. If any of these tragedies strike you in your present state of mind, you will suffer. The habit patterns that presently control your mind will lock you into that suffering and there will be no escape. A bit of time spent in learning alternatives to those habit patterns is time well-invested. Most human beings spend all their energies devising ways to increase their pleasure and decrease their pain. Buddhism does not advise that you cease this activity altogether. Money and security are fine. Pain should be avoided where possible. Nobody is telling you to give away all your possessions or seek out needless pain, but Buddhism does advise you to invest some of your time and energy in learning to deal with unpleasantness, because some pain is unavoidable.

When you see a truck bearing down on you, by all means jump out of the way. But spend some time in meditation, too. Learning to deal with discomfort is the only way you'll be ready to handle the truck you didn't see.

Problems arise in your practice. Some of them will be physical, some will be emotional, and some will be attitudinal. All of them are confrontable and each has its own specific response. All of them are opportunities to free yourself.

Problem 1

Physical Pain

Nobody likes pain, yet everybody has some sometime. It is one of life's most common experiences and is bound to arise in your meditation in one form or another. Handling pain is a two-stage process. First, get rid of the pain if possible

or at least get rid of it as much as possible. Then, if some pain lingers, use it as an object of meditation.

The first step is physical handling. Maybe the pain is an illness of one sort or another, a headache, fever, bruises or whatever. In this case, employ standard medical treatments before you sit down to meditate: take your medicine, apply your liniment, do whatever you ordinarily do. Then there are certain pains that are specific to the seated posture. If you never spend much time sitting cross-legged on the floor, there will be an adjustment period. Some discomfort is nearly inevitable. According to where the pain is, there are specific remedies. If the pain is in the leg or knees, check your pants. If they are tight or made of thick material, that could be the problem. Try to change it. Check your cushion, too. It should be about three inches in height when compressed. If the pain is around your waist, try loosening your belt. Loosen the waistband of your pants if that is necessary. If you experience pain in your lower back, your posture is probably at fault. Slouching will never be comfortable, so straighten up. Don't be tight or rigid, but do keep your spine erect. Pain in the neck or upper back has several sources. The first is improper hand position. Your hands should be resting comfortably in your lap. Don't pull them up to your waist. Relax your arms and your neck muscles. Don't let your head droop forward. Keep it up and aligned with the rest of the spine.

After you have made all these various adjustments, you may find you still have some lingering pain. If that is the case, try step two. Make the pain your object of meditation. Don't jump up and down and get excited. Just observe the pain mindfully. When the pain becomes demanding, you will find it pulling your attention off the breath. Don't fight back. Just let your attention slide easily over onto the simple sensation. Go into the pain fully. Don't block the experience. Explore the feeling. Get beyond your avoiding reaction and go into the pure sensations that lie below that. You will discover that there are two things present. The first is the simple sensation - pain itself. Second is your resistance to that sensation. Resistance reaction is partly mental and partly physical. The physical part consists of tensing the muscles in and around the painful area. Relax those muscles. Take them one by one and relax each one very thoroughly. This step alone probably diminishes the pain significantly. Then go after the mental side of

the resistance. Just as you are tensing physically, you are also tensing psychologically. You are clamping down mentally on the sensation of pain, trying to screen it off and reject it from consciousness. The rejection is a wordless, "I don't like this feeling" or "go away" attitude. It is very subtle. But it is there, and you can find it if you really look. Locate it and relax that, too.

That last part is more subtle. There are really no human words to describe this action precisely. The best way to get a handle on it is by analogy. Examine what you did to those tight muscles and transfer that same action over to the mental sphere; relax the mind in the same way that you relax the body. Buddhism recognizes that the body and mind are tightly linked. This is so true that many people will not see this as a two-step procedure. For them to relax the body is to relax the mind and vice versa. These people will experience the entire relaxation, mental and physical, as a single process. In any case, just let go completely till your awareness slows down past that barrier which you yourself erected. It was a gap, a sense of distance between self and others. It was a borderline between 'me' and 'the pain'. Dissolve that barrier, and separation vanishes. You slow down into that sea of surging sensation and you merge with the pain. You become the pain. You watch its ebb and flow and something surprising happens. It no longer hurts. Suffering is gone. Only the pain remains, an experience, nothing more. The 'me' who was being hurt has gone. The result is freedom from pain.

This is an incremental process. In the beginning, you can expect to succeed with small pains and be defeated by big ones. Like most of our skills, it grows with practice. The more you practice, the bigger the pain you can handle. Please understand fully. There is no masochism being advocated here. Self-mortification is not the point.

This is an exercise in awareness, not in sadism. If the pain becomes excruciating, go ahead and move, but move slowly and mindfully. Observe your movements. See how it feels to move. Watch what it does to the pain. Watch the pain diminish. Try not to move too much though. The less you move, the easier it is to remain fully mindful. New meditators sometimes say they have trouble remaining mindful when pain is present. This difficulty stems from a misunderstanding. These

students are conceiving mindfulness as something distinct from the experience of pain. It is not. Mindfulness never exists by itself. It always has some object and one object is as good as another. Pain is a mental state. You can be mindful of pain just as you are mindful of breathing.

The rules we covered in Chapter 4 apply to pain just as they apply to any other mental state. You must be careful not to reach beyond the sensation and not to fall short of it. Don't add anything to it, and don't miss any part of it. Don't muddy the pure experience with concepts or pictures or discursive thinking. And keep your awareness right in the present time, right with the pain, so that you won't miss its beginning or its end. Pain not viewed in the clear light of mindfulness gives rise to emotional reactions like fear, anxiety, or anger. If it is properly viewed, we have no such reaction. It will be just sensation, just simple energy. Once you have learned this technique with physical pain, you can then generalize it in the rest of your life. You can use it on any unpleasant sensation. What works on pain will work on anxiety or chronic depression. This technique is one of life's most useful and generalizable skills. It is patience.

Problem 2

Legs Going To Sleep

It is very common for beginners to have their legs fall asleep or go numb during meditation. They are simply not accustomed to the cross-legged posture. Some people get very anxious about this. They feel they must get up and move around. A few are completely convinced that they will get gangrene from lack of circulation. Numbness in the leg is nothing to worry about. It is caused by nerve-pinch, not by lack of circulation. You can't damage the tissues of your legs by sitting. So relax. When your legs fall asleep in meditation, just mindfully observe the phenomenon. Examine what it feels like. It may be sort of uncomfortable, but it is not painful unless you tense up. Just stay calm and watch it. It does not matter if your legs go numb and stay that way for the whole period. After you have meditated for some time, that numbness gradually will disappear. Your body simply adjusts to daily practice. Then you can sit for very long sessions with no numbness whatever.

Problem 3

Odd Sensations

People experience all manner of varied phenomena in meditation. Some people get itches. Others feel tingling, deep relaxation, a feeling of lightness or a floating sensation. You may feel yourself growing or shrinking or rising up in the air. Beginners often get quite excited over such sensations. As relaxation sets in, the nervous system simply begins to pass sensory signals more efficiently. Large amounts of previously blocked sensory data can pour through, giving rise to all manner of unique sensations. It does not signify anything in particular. It is just sensation. So simply employ the normal technique. Watch it come up and watch it pass away. Don't get involved.

Problem 4

Drowsiness

It is quite common to experience drowsiness during meditation. You become very calm and relaxed. That is exactly what is supposed to happen. Unfortunately, we ordinarily experience this lovely state only when we are falling asleep, and we associate it with that process. So naturally, you begin to drift off. When you find this happening, apply your mindfulness to the state of drowsiness itself. Drowsiness has certain definite characteristics. It does certain things to your thought process. Find out what. It has certain body feelings associated with it. Locate those.

This inquisitive awareness is the direct opposite of drowsiness, and will evaporate it. If it does not, then you should suspect a physical cause of your sleepiness. Search that out and handle it. If you have just eaten a large meal, that could be the cause. It is best to eat lightly before you meditate. Or wait an hour after a big meal. And don't overlook the obvious either. If you have been out loading bricks all day, you are naturally going to be tired. The same is true if you only got a few hours sleep the night before. Take care of your body's physical needs. Then meditate. Do not give in to sleepiness. Stay awake and mindful, for sleep and meditative concentration are two diametrically opposite experiences. You will not gain any new insight from sleep, but only from meditation. If you are very sleepy then take a deep breath and hold it as long as you can. Then breathe

out slowly. Take another deep breath again, hold it as long as you can and breathe out slowly. Repeat this exercise until your body warms up and sleepiness fades away. Then return to your breath.

Problem 5

Inability To Concentrate

An overactive, jumping attention is something that everybody experiences from time to time. It is generally handled by techniques presented in the chapter on distractions. You should also be informed, however, that there are certain external factors which contribute to this phenomenon. And these are best handled by simple adjustments in your schedule. Mental images are powerful entities. They can remain in the mind for long periods. All of the storytelling arts are direct manipulation of such material, and to the extent the writer has done his job well, the characters and images presented will have a powerful and lingering effect on the mind. If you have been to the best movie of the year, the meditation which follows is going to be full of those images. If you are halfway through the scariest horror novel you ever read, your meditation is going to be full of monsters. So switch the order of events. Do your meditation first. Then read or go to the movies.

Another influential factor is your own emotional state. If there is some real conflict in your life, that agitation will carry over into meditation. Try to resolve your immediate daily conflicts before meditation when you can. Your life will run smoother, and you won't be pondering uselessly in your practice. But don't use this advice as a way to avoid meditation. Sometimes you can't resolve every issue before you sit. Just go ahead and sit anyway. Use your meditation to let go of all the egocentric attitudes that keep you trapped within your own limited viewpoint. Your problems will resolve much more easily thereafter. And then there are those days when it seems that the mind will never rest, but you can't locate any apparent cause. Remember the cyclic alternation we spoke of earlier. Meditation goes in cycles. You have good days and you have bad days.

Vipassana meditation is primarily an exercise in awareness. Emptying the mind is not as important as being mindful of what the mind is doing. If you are frantic and you can't do a thing to stop it, just observe. It is all you. The result will be one

more step forward in your journey of self-exploration. Above all, don't get frustrated over the nonstop chatter of your mind. That babble is just one more thing to be mindful of.

Problem 6

Boredom

It is difficult to imagine anything more inherently boring than sitting still for an hour with nothing to do but feel the air going in and out of your nose. You are going to run into boredom repeatedly in your meditation. Everybody does. Boredom is a mental state and should be treated as such. A few simple strategies will help you to cope.

Tactic A: Re-establish true mindfulness

If the breath seems an exceedingly dull thing to observe over and over, you may rest assured of one thing: You have ceased to observe the process with true mindfulness. Mindfulness is never boring. Look again. Don't assume that you know what breath is. Don't take it for granted that you have already seen everything there is to see. If you do, you are conceptualizing the process. You are not observing its living reality. When you are clearly mindful of breath or indeed anything else, it is never boring. Mindfulness looks at everything with the eyes of a child, with the sense of wonder. Mindfulness sees every second as if it were the first and the only second in the universe. So look again.

Tactic B: Observe your mental state

Look at your state of boredom mindfully. What is boredom? Where is boredom? What does it feel like? What are its mental components? Does it have any physical feeling? What does it do to your thought process? Take a fresh look at boredom, as if you have never experienced that state before.

Problem 7

Fear

States of fear sometimes arise during meditation for no discernible reason. It is a common phenomenon, and there can be a number of causes. You may be

experiencing the effect of something repressed long ago. Remember, thoughts arise first in the unconscious. The emotional contents of a thought complex often leach through into your conscious awareness long before the thought itself surfaces. If you sit through the fear, the memory itself may bubble up where you can endure it. Or you may be dealing directly with that fear which we all fear: 'fear of the unknown'. At some point in your meditation career, you will be struck with the seriousness of what you are actually doing. You are tearing down the wall of illusion you have always used to explain life to yourself and to shield yourself from the intense flame of reality. You are about to meet ultimate truth face to face. That is scary. But it has to be dealt with eventually. Go ahead and dive right in.

A third possibility: the fear that you are feeling may be self-generated. It may be arising out of unskillful concentration. You may have set an unconscious program to 'examine what comes up.' Thus when a frightening fantasy arises, concentration locks onto it and the fantasy feeds on the energy of your attention and grows. The real problem here is that mindfulness is weak. If mindfulness was strongly developed, it would notice this switch of attention as soon as it occurred and handle the situation in the usual manner. Not matter what the source of your fear, mindfulness is the cure. Observe the emotional reactions that come along and know them for what they are. Stand aside from the process and don't get involved. Treat the whole dynamic as if you were an interested bystander. Most importantly, don't fight the situation. Don't try to repress the memories or the feelings or the fantasies. Just step out of the way and let the whole mess bubble up and flow past. It can't hurt you. It is just memory. It is only fantasy. It is nothing but fear. When you let it run its course in the arena of conscious attention, it won't sink back into the unconscious. It won't come back to haunt you later. It will be gone for good.

Problem 8

Agitation

Restlessness is often a cover-up for some deeper experience taking place in the unconscious. We humans are great at repressing things. Rather than confronting some unpleasant thought we experience, we try to bury it. We won't have to

deal with the issue. Unfortunately, we usually don't succeed, at least not fully. We hide the thought, but the mental energy we use to cover it up sits there and boils. The result is that sense of uneasiness which we call agitation or restlessness. There is nothing you can put your finger on. But you don't feel at ease. You can't relax. When this uncomfortable state arises in meditation, just observe it. Don't let it rule you. Don't jump up and run off. And don't struggle with it and try to make it go away. Just let it be there and watch it closely. Then the repressed material will eventually surface and you will find out what you have been worrying about.

The unpleasant experience that you have been trying to avoid could be almost anything: Guilt, greed or problems. It could be a low-grade pain or subtle sickness or approaching illness. Whatever it is, let it arise and look at it mindfully. If you just sit still and observe your agitation, it will eventually pass. Sitting through restlessness is a little breakthrough in your meditation career. It will teach you much. You will find that agitation is actually a rather superficial mental state. It is inherently ephemeral. It comes and it goes. It has no real grip on you at all. Here again the rest of your life will profit.

Problem 9

Trying Too Hard

Advanced meditators are generally found to be pretty jovial men and women. They possess that most valuable of all human treasures, a sense of humor. It is not the superficial witty repartee of the talk show host. It is a real sense of humor. They can laugh at their own human failures. They can chuckle at personal disasters. Beginners in meditation are often much too serious for their own good. So laugh a little. It is important to learn to loosen up in your session, to relax into your meditation. You need to learn to flow with whatever happens. You can't do that if you are tensed and striving, taking it all so very, very seriously. New meditators are often overly eager for results. They are full of enormous and inflated expectations. They jump right in and expect incredible results in no time flat. They push. They tense. They sweat and strain, and it is all so terribly, terribly grim and solemn. This state of tension is the direct antithesis of mindfulness. So naturally they achieve little. Then they decide that this meditation is not so exciting after all. It did not give them what they wanted. They chuck it aside. It

should be pointed out that you learn about meditation only by meditating. You learn what meditation is all about and where it leads only through direct experience of the thing itself. Therefore the beginner does not know where he is headed because he has developed little sense of where his practice is leading.

The novice's expectation is inherently unrealistic and uninformed. As a newcomer to meditation, he or she would expect all the wrong things, and those expectations do you no good at all. They get in the way. Trying too hard leads to rigidity and unhappiness, to guilt and self-condemnation. When you are trying too hard, your effort becomes mechanical and that defeats mindfulness before it even gets started. You are well-advised to drop all that. Drop your expectations and straining. Simply meditate with a steady and balanced effort. Enjoy your mediation and don't load yourself down with sweat and struggles. Just be mindful. The meditation itself will take care of the future.

Problem 10

Discouragement

The direct upshot of pushing too hard is frustration. You are in a state of tension. You get nowhere. You realize you are not making the progress you expected, so you get discouraged. You feel like a failure. It is all a very natural cycle, but a totally avoidable one. The source is striving after unrealistic expectations. Nevertheless, it is a common enough syndrome and, in spite of all the best advice, you may find it happening to you. There is a solution. If you find yourself discouraged, just observe your state of mind clearly. Don't add anything to it. Just watch it. A sense of failure is only another ephemeral emotional reaction. If you get involved, it feeds on your energy and grows. If you simply stand aside and watch it, it passes away.

If you are discouraged over your perceived failure in meditation, that is especially easy to deal with. You feel you have failed in your practice. You have failed to be mindful. Simply become mindful of that sense of failure. You have just re-established your mindfulness with that single step. The reason for your sense of failure is nothing but memory. There is no such thing as failure in meditation. There are setbacks and difficulties. But there is no failure unless you give up entirely. Even if you spend twenty solid years getting nowhere, you can

be mindful at any second you choose to do so. It is your decision. Regretting is only one more way of being unmindful. The instant that you realize that you have been unmindful, that realization itself is an act of mindfulness. So continue the process. Don't get sidetracked in an emotional reaction.

Problem 11

Resistance To Meditation

There are times when you don't feel like meditating. The very idea seems obnoxious. Missing a single practice session is scarcely important, but it very easily becomes a habit. It is wiser to push on through the resistance. Go sit anyway. Observe this feeling of aversion. In most cases it is a passing emotion, a flash in the pan that will evaporate right in front of your eyes. Five minutes after you sit down it is gone. In other cases it is due to some sour mood that day, and it lasts longer. Still, it does pass. And it is better to get rid of it in twenty or thirty minutes of meditation than to carry it around with you and let it ruin the rest of your day. Another time, resistance may be due to some difficulty you are having with the practice itself. You may or may not know what that difficulty is. If the problem is known, handle it by one of the techniques given in this book. Once the problem is gone, resistance will be gone. If the problem is unknown, then you are going to have to tough it out. Just sit through the resistance and observe that mindfully. When it has finally run its course, it will pass. Then the problem causing it will probably bubble up in its wake, and you can deal with that.

If resistance to meditation is a common feature of your practice, then you should suspect some subtle error in your basic attitude. Meditation is not a ritual conducted in a particular posture. It is not a painful exercise, or period of enforced boredom. And it is not some grim, solemn, obligation. Meditation is mindfulness. It is a new way of seeing and it is a form of play. Meditation is your friend. Come to regard it as such and resistance will wash away like smoke on a summer breeze.

If you try all these possibilities and the resistance remains, then there may be a problem. There can be certain metaphysical snags that a meditator runs into which go far beyond the scope of this book. It is not common for new

meditators to hit these, but it can happen. Don't give up. Go get help. Seek out qualified teachers of the Vipassana style of meditation and ask them to help you resolve the situation. Such people exist for exactly that purpose.

Problem 12

Stupor Or Dullness

We have already discussed the sinking mind phenomenon. But there is a special route to that state you should watch for. Mental dullness can result as an unwanted byproduct of deepening concentration. As your relaxation deepens, muscles loosen and nerve transmission changes. This produces a very calm and light feeling in the body. you feel very still and somewhat divorced from the body. This is a very pleasant state and at first your concentration is quite good, nicely centered on the breath. As it continues, however, the pleasant feelings intensify and they distract your attention from the breath. You start to really enjoy that state and your mindfulness goes way down. Your attention winds up scattered, drifting listlessly through vague clouds of bliss. The result is a very unmindful state, sort of an ecstatic stupor. The cure, of course, is mindfulness. Mindfully observe these phenomena and they will dissipate. When blissful feelings arise accept them. There is no need to avoid them. Don't get wrapped up in them. They are physical feelings, so treat them as such. Observe feelings as feelings. Observe dullness as dullness. Watch them rise and watch them pass. Don't get involved.

You will have problems in meditation. Everybody does. You can treat them as terrible torments, or as challenges to be overcome. If you regard them as burdens, your suffering will only increase. If you regard them as opportunities to learn and to grow, your spiritual prospects are unlimited.

Mindfulness Meditation Can Reduce Physical Pain by 90 Percent,

Three American psychologists once asked a group of students to watch cartoons and rate how funny they were.

Some were asked to hold a pencil between their lips, forcing them to mimic a scowl. Others watched the cartoons with the pencil between their teeth, simulating a smile. The results were striking: those forced to smile found the cartoons funnier than those compelled to frown. Smiling had actually made them happier.

The process works in reverse too. Frowning makes you unhappy. And a tense neck, back, or shoulders can trigger anxiety and stress. But it's not just emotions that are driven by such vicious cycles. Pain is too.

Pain creates tension in the body, which feeds back into the brain, which responds by turning up the 'volume' on its pain amplifiers, creating even more suffering.

As I explain in our book *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Relieving Pain, Reducing Stress and Restoring Wellbeing*, meditation is a powerful way of halting such vicious cycles. Clinical trials show that it can reduce pain by around 90 percent. With practice, you can watch as your pain and suffering evaporate like the mist on a spring morning.

Last week's Body Scan meditation began this process but you also need to work with the body on a more physical level too. Your body needs to 'unlearn' its tension and this is what you'll begin this week with the Mindful Movement meditation.

This meditation should be carried out once per day. Follow the instructions opposite, or download the audio track (which contains extra exercises)

Dr Danny Penman is the co-author of the bestselling *Mindfulness*. His latest book *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Relieving Pain, Reducing Stress and Restoring Wellbeing* is published by Piatkus.

Mindful Movement Meditation

The aim of this meditation is to 'tune into' your body and breath as you move. This will help release any pent up tension.

Wrist rotations

Relax the shoulders and breathe as naturally as you can. Gently hold and support your right elbow with your left hand. Smoothly rotate your right hand around the wrist in a circle for 30 seconds. Keep the breath soft and even. Turn your wrist in the other direction for another 30 seconds. Relax your arms.

Notice the effects of the movement on your right hand and arm. Does this side feel different from the left? More alive, perhaps?

Repeat the movements for the other hand. Then relax your arms so they hang loosely at your sides. Close your eyes. Gently shake your hands and arms. What sensations do you feel?

Warm, hugging arms

Start with your arms hanging loosely at the sides of your body. Tune into the breath for a few moments.

On the in-breath, extend both arms outwards to shoulder level, palms facing forwards. As you breathe out, very gently draw both arms across your chest, cross the arms and give yourself a light hug. As you do so, feel the upper back broadening and opening. Imagine the hug is saturated with warmth and kindness.

On the in-breath, open your arms until they are fully extended. As they open, feel a corresponding opening in the chest, with the shoulder blades gently drawing together.

Repeat this movement for one minute (or for as long as you feel able). Let the hands hang loosely at your sides and give them a little shake. Feel the breath in your whole body and the sensations of being alive.

The Meditation Instinct

One reason that images from nature are used as a meditation focus is that your body is part of nature. We don't see into our bodies, but we can see many of the same natural processes. We don't hear our hearts beat usually, but we love rhythmic sounds. We don't see our blood circulate through our veins, but we love to look at rivers flowing. We don't see our breath flowing in and out, but there is something enchanting about watching waves washing in and then receding. We don't perceive individual thoughts arising in our brain, but we can watch the sun set.

In meditation research, I often emphasize the restful aspect of meditation, because it is so life-changing. You really have to experience it to believe it. But meditation is not just about the resting instinct. It is something much more exciting. Meditation is the meeting ground for all your instincts. It is a place where all of who you are can come together, at last, to bond and commingle and communicate and work out how to better survive and thrive in this magnificent world we live in.

It makes sense that if nature or God would create beings as complex as humans, it, she, or he would also provide, as a courtesy, a means to unify the whole mess into harmony. Or at least a semblance of accord.

When you begin to meditate, you will see that while you are in your deepest state of rest, your body will start to eagerly anticipate the next time you are called on to perform, to do any function you enjoy. You will find yourself dreaming, experiencing your fantasies and your deepest longings in Technicolor. You will feel yourself healing, recovering from broken dreams, repairing the shattered structures of what were your hopes and yearnings for a better world.

Later, when you are in the midst of your activity, you may notice that you are doing with less effort. You are more elegant in your motions through the activities of life. There is less wasted effort. This is called grace when we witness it in athletics, and when someone is walking around with minimal effort, we call it "natural grace." Nature loves elegance, getting the most amount done with the least amount of effort.

It often seems as if Life, whatever Sacred Impulses watch over meditation, do

not really care about you getting rest so much as they will do whatever it takes to tune you up, heal you from past hurts, train you and encourage you so that you get up out of meditation and go kick some butt in the outer world – but you kick with great harmony and aplomb. I am not saying this to make a bizarre metaphysical point, it's just that my main job the last 30+ years has been to listen to meditators talk about what they are experiencing in the moment.

Meditation is definitely in the service of love, although that love manifests differently in every person. As you know, love shows up as making babies and caring for them – and all the actions prior and subsequent to that. Love shows up as work, love shows up as protecting the people we care for, love shows up as scientific research and inquiry.

Love has much to do with accepting things as they are, people as they are, and yourself as you are. Then there is a tiny shift that is all important – from trying to change things and people and yourself to fit an ideal, which is the road to hell, to making a contribution, doing what you can to create a better atmosphere for everyone to thrive in. This quality of acceptance may be one of the most underrated gifts of meditation.

I learned to meditate accidentally, in a physiology lab at the University of California in 1968. They had been doing brain wave research on all sorts of things – yoga breathing, hypnosis, meditation and guided imagery. There was an experiment on brain wave biofeedback going on, and I signed up. When I arrived at the lab for the first session, I was put in the control group. This meant I was to get no instruction and no feedback, just sit in the totally dark, climate-controlled, soundproofed room, in an overstuffed lounge chair, with brain wave monitoring wires attached to my head, for several hours a day every day for a couple of weeks. There were no instructions and no feedback of any kind. I had never heard of meditation (it was 1968, and I wasn't a Beatles fan) and I had no conception of what to do.

I drifted and dissolved into the dark. I didn't fall asleep, I fell into something else. For some reason, we never talked about it, the graduate student running the lab let me stay there for over two hours each day, sometimes three hours. I gathered later that he was watching my brain waves and waited until I had returned to ordinary brain activity before tapping on the door of the room and telling me to get ready to come out.

In surfing, one thing you do is paddle out, stay as long as you can, then come in and lie on the beach soaking up the warmth of the sun. If you have ever been in cold water for an hour at a time, you know how ecstatic it is to get out and lie down on hot sand. Perhaps doing this for a lifetime trained me in how to let go, but I certainly was not a relaxed person. I was very intense and tense.

So I knew from direct experience that meditation happens naturally. Just two years later, after being trained as a teacher, I forgot that, and would be offended if people told me they taught themselves to meditate, or learned from a book. I didn't realize that I was an elitist snob, (it's possible that elitists never do). Even though, thousands of times, people would walk into a room with me and be meditating a couple of minutes later. I thought it was the technique that was so good, not people.

It was a couple of years before I realized that people did just fine on their own, or with the sketchiest of instructions, and sometimes, just knowing there was such a thing as meditation and then making up their own.

Usually meditation is approached in a sacred context, because the spiritual traditions of the world have done such a fantastic job of preserving the teachings. It may seem odd that I am approaching meditation as an instinct. Aren't the instincts base, the Seven Deadly Sins? Well yes, they can be. But the sins are all about overuse of an instinct without letting it be balanced by the other motions of life.

The ancient meditators often lived in nature, with the nearest town a few days away on foot, there were no electric lights, tigers were stalking in the mountains.. We live in a very different world. Most of my friends practice meditation in the context of an imported religious tradition, one of the innumerable forms of Buddhism or Hinduism. They have statues of Buddha or Ganesh or Shiva on their altars, and they mix and match among religious elements they like, choosing this guru or that lama to call their own.

I love the East and have benefited immeasurably from its teachers and teachings. Imported "Hinduism Lite" is great stuff for many people and for me. But it is no more universal than hamburgers and cola.

The instinctive path is about the wisdom of life you find in yourself and all around

you, not that which comes from very special Asian males.

The impulses that guide meditation love all the instincts and use them in the service of something greater, the wholeness of life. When all the instincts are playing in you during meditation, you will have at times a sense of melody, as if you are a symphony sounding forth. You may feel electrical currents flowing through you.

The instincts connect you to all life. When you meditate with the instincts, you relate in awareness to the lives of your cells, organs, the circulation of your blood and lymph and vital energies, as well as with other living things and the large system in which we live and move and have our being. When you cherish the instincts, you are not above life looking down at it as an alien. You are in it. Everything feeds, excretes, rests, grooms, socializes.

The instincts are the passions. Thus, instinctive awareness is the practice of compassion, being with the passions, from the inside.

The instincts help you to answer the call when your body or heart call for healing of some kind. The natural interaction between the inner and the outer realm of the instincts helps you connect your life and make a seamless tapestry of it.

Your body is designed to function best in the free flow of all instincts – this is the situation that we call health. Full vitality is using all the instincts, but everyday life often or usually leads us to overwork some, deny others. When we don't live in the fullness of body wisdom, imbalances often occur and then become somatic, physical ailments. Illness is often correlated with blocked instincts, where you remain in one and do not give over to the others in a rhythmic alternation.

We have many instincts, many ways of accessing life's mysteries.

A couple of years ago I was standing in the self-help section of a bookstore. A woman walked in and asked the staff, "Where can I find a book on meditation?" The staff person, Sherry, said, "That is really complicated. There are books on meditation all over the store. There is Eastern Religion, of course, but also the Western Religion and Christianity sections have books on meditation. Over here in Alternative Health, and also in Women's Health, are dozens of books that have instructions on how to meditate. In self-help, there are many more books with approaches to meditation that different psychologists have

worked out. In the Sports section there are books on Yoga that have sections on meditation. Over there in Addiction and Recovery, quite a few of the books are about meditation. What approach to meditation are you looking for?"

Sherry's exposition wasn't complete, actually. She did not mention, or did not know, that in the Sexuality section there are wonderful books on how to meditate as preparation for and part of lovemaking; in the Biography section there are books detailing the writer's experiences in meditation; in the New Age section there are many different approaches to meditation, and in the Outdoors section are books on tracking, hunting and meditation.

Each of these approaches is wonderful in its own way, and I cherish them. They each tend to treat meditation through the lens of one or two instincts. And quite a few books treat meditation as if the real spiritual thing to do is run away from everything, go to a foreign country, shave your head, give your money to the ashram, change your name, and sit on the dirt there for a few years.

One of the truly great things about meditation is that you can give yourself space to let all your life energies flow through you without restriction. You are not acting out, so what does it matter if you let it all zoom? So even though you are not living every impulse, you are there to let it give you its gift of energy, hormones, activation, perception and feeling.

Probably there are instincts you do not feel your life can accommodate. Maybe you can't live out your desire to travel, or be wild and free, or to beat people up, or to retreat from it all and stay in your nest. In meditation you can open up a space in your heart to keep your yearnings alive. You may not be able to live them in the outer world, but you can let them flow through your inner world, nourish you and be integrated with the totality of your being.

This is why meditation is such a great space for yourself. When you meditate you can be with these sacred powers and let them live inside of you. They are like vast wildernesses, forests, mountains, oceans. You can call them impulses, the wise motions of life, the gods, the instincts, the animal powers.

For this reason, you may find that a more "primitive" conceptual framework is a better context for your meditation – shamanism, hunting, tracking, for example. There is a beauty and simplicity in Native American teachings that has been lost

in the “advanced” teachings of the more formal meditation schools.

A great thing about approaching meditation through the instincts is that everything in nature becomes your teacher: animals, plants, the weather, forests and mountain.. You don't have to read meditation books – you can read biology, ethology, anthropology.

There is an outer and an interior aspect of each instinct. Each leads you both out into the world and inward.

You can meditate on any aspect of nature, using your interior senses, and the instincts texture the tone of that relationship.

In the past, meditation was practiced under close personal supervision in closed-door religious communities. Part of the adaptation to life in a religious order was to give up your personal desires.

In the present, only a small percentage of meditators are working with a teacher, guru, shaman, yogi or lama. If you are in this situation, then the authority and the spirit of guidance must be within.

If you are on your own, you need to bring your own gut instincts into play, learn how to fly by the seat of your pants.

If you are in the yoga tradition, you may know that yoga has years of training for the seat of your pants – there are more exercises for tending to your tailbone, working your butt muscles, anus, sacrum, and pelvic area than you could ever imagine. So the seat of the pants is taken care of by tradition.