

## **PAIN musings for our POD paper**

Ellen / Lisa GG / Nick / Margie / Lilian, February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2017

### **Executive Summary**

*"Pain is the doorway to the here and now. Physical or emotional pain is the ultimate form of ground, saying, to each of us, in effect, there is no other place than this place, no other body than this body, no other limb or joint or pang or sharpness but this searing presence. Pain asks us to heal by focusing on the very center of the actual torment and the very way the pain is felt."*

- David Whyte, On Pain from *Consolations*

Our explorations of pain started from a myriad of places rooted in the personal experiences of pain and suffering of each of us individually. With the state of the world, this current moment is experienced in heavy, challenging and painful ways by large numbers of people globally, and our shared desire to progress and create life sustaining societies where we can all live our fullest potential. We considered the wisdom of the midwife, the one who is there to help give birth to life, to help be with the pain as a life giving force, guiding the birth giver through her pain. Through our explorations we made a distinction between pain and suffering, where pain is inevitable and suffering optional, depending on how we react to the pain we experience.

The Buddhist psychology of the three components in experiencing pain: the touch (or cause), the pain of the touch (or cause) and the aversion to the pain of the touch (or cause) were further explored as we experimented with an ice-cube exercise that will be shared in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Intensive. Ken Wilber also speaks of the way that as our perspective and compassion grow, things hurt more, but bother us less: i.e. there is more pain because we are able to relate more fully the pain of others, however, you suffer less because you are able to simply be present to the experience as it arises.

Our inquiry then developed into how the experience of pain might be different for different identities and perspectives. Lisa GG took us through a Big Mind process to explore how our perspectives of pain change as we evolve through ego-, ethno-, world-, cosmo-centric self, and when we are Big Heart. The experience was exceptional that it

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expanded our capacity in noticing the nature of pain/suffering in ourselves and the people or groups that we work with.

This paper gives a summary of our individual inquiry and reflection and key resources that we tapped into and our group journey.

*"When [holding an ice-cube] becomes an experience to be explored and unpacked with growing interest and understanding, rather than remaining a reflexive call to arms, we are well on our way to healing all that is flawed in ourselves and the world we create."*

- Andrew Olendzci, Pinch Yourself

### 1. Where we started

Here are the context and questions about pain we each asked ourselves as we were going into this process:

<b>Lisa GG</b>	Pain and suffering show up in so many ways in all aspects of my life. It is perhaps the question of how to relieve suffering that is one of the main drivers for the work that I do, for the spiritual path that I am on, and for my deep curiosity about how to better be in relationship with each other. So often, people's suffering can get in the way of the groups that I facilitate – conflict, past trauma, discrimination, stigma all become the things us apart, rather than an opportunity to work with and bring us together. <i>This inquiry is about how we can better name and bring forth suffering that is taking place so that we can feel it, be with it, and even transform it.</i>
<b>Nick</b>	I recall the moment the group started talking about pain in our world. My mind went to witnessing my wife in natural childbirth, to many years of competitive ultra distance racing and its pain, and ethnic group suffering. I felt blind to the pain I should have been aware in my field of work the people I work with and really myself too. I had also recently realized I had disconnected my heart from my mind and was inept at really being with another person in pain. <i>My curiosity in this journey was to learn how be a self as instrument, to serve the groups I work with, and to embrace "pain is inevitable, suffering is optional."</i>
<b>Margie</b>	When pain came up as a topic, I was relieved as I thought my years of exploring and sitting with pain would make this an easy topic for me to dive into and explore from a group facilitator perspective. <i>My curiosity had more to do with what I bring to a group and how my capacity for leaning in or avoiding impacts the group process.</i> When am I frozen around facilitating painful issues? How do we set boundaries around topics and support people gently in a group?
<b>Ellen</b>	When we first started talking about the topic of pain and suffering I came at it from the question: <i>How to stay grounded and resourceful facing the global situation (mess) we are in?</i> My curiosity was around my own growing capacity to be with 'the pain of the world' while also experiencing the larger evolutionary pull and journey we are on as humanity. How can I stay open and not disappear, feel completely overwhelmed? I had started to cultivate stillness to keeps me grounded (falling?) in the cosmic force of life.

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### Lilian

My starting point is my intention to do more work in facilitation for social issues, where the intensity of conflicts, emotions are often much higher than what I used to. As such, I start questioning, *how much pain / suffering I could be present with... whether I could be empathetic and "effective" at the same time that I wouldn't be overwhelmed with emotions and own fear to either give in or trying to fix...*

There is a resistance in truly embracing that "Pain is inevitable, suffering is optional" and what's getting in the way.

*In summary, the questions that we came together around were: How to be present with pain and suffering in ourselves and the groups we facilitate so that pain becomes a force for life? We used midwifery as a metaphor: How is life coming through the group, through our presence as facilitator even when pain is showing up? How can we be fully present with it, lean into it, so that we facilitate a life giving process? What does self as instrument help us discover? And how could the Big Mind process help us understand and work on our edges?*

## **2. “Pinch Yourself”: Different perspectives on pain and suffering**

In the path of Buddhism, the first noble truth states that ‘life is suffering’. Suffering is all around us, whether physical or emotional, whether in ourselves or in others. Physical pain and emotional pain arise. While we may not be able to control the way or frequency with which pain arises, what we can begin to do is distinguish between physical pain and the mental reaction to it. Although body and mind are closely intertwined, the mind does not have to share the same fate as the body. When the body feels pain, the mind can stand back from it. Instead of allowing itself to be dragged down, the mind can simply observe the pain, and even use the pain as a path to inner growth.

The Buddha compares being afflicted with bodily pain to being struck by an arrow. Adding mental pain (aversion, displeasure, depression, or self-pity) to physical pain is like being hit by a second arrow. The wise person stops with the first arrow. So, the practice that Buddhism proposes is to work with how to stop with the first arrow, how to observe the pain and not react to the pain.

Pema Chodron also speaks of the opportunity of pain, for without pain we may never long for freedom. Without suffering, we may never look for a way out, or be motivated to grow, change, develop. She also points to the three values of suffering: it humbles us; it opens us to real compassion for others in the same situation; and it motivates us to not add to our burden of pain when we could lighten the load.

David Whyte’s reflections on pain mirror much of what Buddhist teachings offer (full text of this writing is at the end of this paper):

- Pain opens us to alertness and particularity; it is the doorway to the here and now
- Pain teaches us humility
- Pain calls for a greater perspective
- Pain teaches us deep and real compassion
- Pain is appreciation for the possibility of living without pain

Another resource that resonated with us is called “Pinch Yourself: a physical sensation becomes something to be explored”, by Andrew Olendzci. It aims to draw a parallel

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between physical and emotional pain, and describes how according to Buddhist psychology there are at least three different components to experiencing pain: the touch (or cause), the pain of the touch (or cause) and the aversion to the pain of the touch (or cause). While pain is a unified experience, the three components all respond to a different brain system. The question then becomes: can we experience pain without the aversion and reflexive call to get rid of it? Can we distinguish between the pain and the feeling tone it triggers? And if we practice this, by pinching ourselves, or holding an ice cube, how will this help us experience emotional pain, in ourselves and in another being, with calm equanimity rather than tumultuous reactivity? Finally, are there different developmental lenses of being with pain?

In summary, the inevitability of pain is certain. However, pain need not be suffering, and in fact may be the path to deepen our humility, compassion and presence to the here and now.

### 3. Big Mind Process

What do we need to cultivate in ourselves to be able to experience the pain of others while not being overwhelmed and taking on suffering? How does *self as instrument* look in this context?

Lisa GG, at one of our POD calls guided us through the Big Mind process that surfaced how our experience of pain changes as we tap into the different conceptions or perspectives of self/ mind. Through the different developmental stages, we found that pain and suffering were experienced differently, as follows:

Mind/Self	Experience of pain/ suffering
Egocentric self	Thirst, hunger, physical pain, Isolated, not being respected and accepted (the cause: it's done to me)
Ethnocentric self	Conflicts within/ among family and group (the cause: being fixed / stuck in certain set of beliefs/ values, torn between differences)
Worldcentric self	Pollution to the earth, endangerment of species/ humanity (the cause: your suffering is my suffering, and the suffering is

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	enormous)
Kosmocentric self	Everything is one, no sense of pain/ suffering because there is no separation. Pain just is. (no cause as the identity of self has dissolved)

The exercise helped us to see how we need to grow ourselves to hold all of the developmental stages with compassion and to be available for pain/suffering to be expressed and processed. Our compassion will then be able to handle all of the different developmental lenses because we can lean in from all four levels. We also felt how getting really familiar and comfortable with the different levels allows us as facilitators to recognize when it is coming up in self and other, and therefore how to respond to the kind of pain that is present.

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### 4. Integral facilitation

How does / did this exploration support us in becoming better integral facilitators?

Lisa GG	In the work that I do, there is often a tremendous amount of pain and suffering, both in the areas that I work in (social justice, social change, power + diversity), as well as the people I work with. There is often an underlying history of trauma that comes out within the groups I am facilitating. This exploration highlighted for me the importance of tracking my own pain and suffering, and the power in growing my own compassion. As a facilitator, the more I can get to know my own pain and suffering, the more I can be aware of my own triggers when I am facilitating, and the more able I am to see clearly how pain and suffering shows up in a group along with how to most effectively respond. I am reminded again of Ken Wilber's phrase 'hurts more, bothers you less'. I feel that the bigger my heart grows and the more that I can really feel exactly what is happening in any moment, no matter how painful, the more I can be of service to the moment. Heartbreak and pain then just are heartbreak and pain, and the beauty that they open in me inspires continued action.
Nick	As we started to go deeper in this journey together, I became more aware of the pain a lot of people I work with express and experience. There are plenty of bruised egos in my world – professional people are often anything but kind and professional in their dealings. I also become more in tune with my own pain while facilitating and have been blessed to become more aware with myself as instrument. My teammates have taught me so much through their unique perspectives. I truly believe the big mind experience captured in this paper is something of value for all future participants in this program.
Margie	The impact of this exploration, especially the big mind exercise has helped me to increase my awareness on different levels as I experience pain – both mine and others. In this intense exploration of all things integral, it is difficult to tease out exactly where in this process the increase in awareness comes from, but the big mind exercise looking specifically at pain has become a touchpoint for me. A reminder that I am a part of the spaciousness and can access it intentionally. Since this experience, I have not had to facilitate a group with a pain focus, so am unsure if or how it will change my group presence in the face of pain.
Lilian	<p>The impact on me is that when I now encounter pain, I notice my discomfort, my fear, the "sinking" feeling of my heart/ stomach, the chill in my bones... and I take a breath to hold them, stay with them...</p> <p>I am more aware of the emotional tension in my facilitation and feel that I have an enhanced capacity to name them and work with them. The big mind process was particularly impactful to me, reminding me of who I need to grow into for the work that I aspire to do.</p>

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Ellen

This team exploration helped me experience pain and suffering in a different way. I was familiar with the Buddhist saying "Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional" but not in a deeper, more embodied way. And while I am not there now, I am paying attention in a different, more granular way. I picked up Joanna Macy's book called "Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in Without Going Crazy". She says (my interpretation): *If you are suffering with the world, bow to it, it is the most natural and wholesome, healthy thing we have in this world. Deal with the overwhelm by looking it straight in the eye. The heart that breaks open can hold the whole universe, it is that big.* The ice cube exercise was transformative as well. Experiencing the three different steps and moments, where each time I have a choice of how to relate to it, opened up a path of being more intentional. I now have a different way of being with pain and suffering, in myself, in my facilitation and how I support coaching clients. I am discovering a way of being with pain and suffering that is more expansive, and is about opening up as opposed to closing down.



## **5. Our group's journey**

Despite the time zone and work schedule challenges, we came together fairly regularly and all participated in the discussion and planning. The topic was decided by our 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting and we were soon gathering information and suggestions. We rotated leading individual meetings and keeping the minutes.

How did we gel as a team? Looking at this question through the three key attributes of a team – trust, a shared goal and commitment provided the following perspectives:

We seemed to come together with a sense of 'trusting the group' from the beginning – perhaps based on our interactions at the first intensive, we were not strangers and though unspoken, we were still working under the guidelines. In retrospect, the ones that stand out are "Be for each other," "Praise" and "Willing to be guided." When members were unable to make the meetings, others volunteered to additional meetings to bring us up to date on process and content. We were aware of each other's schedule and commitments that we passed the baton smoothly in keeping the group discussion going and formulating the paper and workshop process.

Other components of a successful team include a common goal – the overriding goal was defined by the project, but we had to negotiate and come together around our topic and the components of the process. These interactions were fairly fast about 2 or 3 meetings at the beginning and we came to consensus around topic. One of our team stepped forward and began drafting the paper and the process early – this was a real gift as we had some confusion around due dates and the race to the end would have been much harder without that strong beginning.

The last component of an effective group is commitment and this busy group was frequently torn between time zones, personal and work needs and being present with the group, but the underlying commitment pushed the project forward and all participated. What also helped us in being more effective and committed was the layout of an overall structure of our POD calls – setting all the dates of meeting and format at our first meeting, having a discussion of the overall flow of our work schedule and everyone's commitments. The strong Lower Right logistics and frameworks supported the deepening in relationship of the Lower Right.

All in all, this team was effective in reaching the goals set by the project with a difficult topic, both in creating a workshop outline we are excited to share and in coming together with shared leadership in a process of deepening our relationships and practice

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as facilitators and co-learners/co-creators. The practice of Integral Facilitation continues to come alive through the interplay of the I, We and It(s). In a time where pain and suffering are rife, this is a critical exploration.

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### **ADDENDUM: On Pain, by David Whyte**

Pain is the doorway to the here and now. Physical or emotional pain is the ultimate form of ground, saying, to each of us, in effect, there is no other place than this place, no other body than this body, no other limb or joint or pang or sharpness but this searing presence. Pain asks us to heal by focusing on the very center of the actual torment and the very way the pain is felt.

Pain is an introduction and then an apprenticeship to alertness and particularity. Through the radical undoing and debilitation of repeated pain we are reacquainted with the essentialities of place and time and existence itself. In deep pain we have energy only for what we can do wholeheartedly and then, only within a narrow range of motion, metaphorically or physically, from tying our shoe-lace to holding the essential core conversations that are reciprocal and reinforcing within the close-in circle of those we love. Pain teaches us a fine economy, in movement, in what we choose to do, in the heart's affections, in what we ask of our selves and eventually in what we ask of others.

Pain's beautiful humiliations followed fully make us naturally and sincerely humble and force us to put aside the guise of pretence. In real pain we have no other choice but to learn to ask for help on a daily basis. Pain tells us we belong and cannot live forever alone or in isolation. Pain makes us understand reciprocation. In real pain we often have nothing to give back other than our own gratitude, a smile that looks half way to a grimace or the passing friendship of the thankful moment to a helpful stranger, and pain is an introduction to real friendship, it tests those friends we think we already have but also introduces us to those who newly and surprisingly come to our aid.

Pain is the first proper step to real compassion; it can be a foundation for understanding all those who struggle with their existence. Experiencing real pain ourselves, our moral superiority comes to an end; we stop urging others to get with the program, to get their act together or to sharpen up, and start to look for the particular form of debilitation, visible or invisible that every person struggles to overcome. We suddenly find instead, our understanding and compassion engaged as to why others may find it hard to fully participate.

Strangely, the narrow focus that is the central and most difficult aspect of bodily pain, calls for the greater perspective, for a bigger, more generous sense of humor. With the grand perspective real pain is never far from real laughter – at our self or for another

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watching that self –laughter at the predicament or the physical absurdity that has become a daily experience.

Pain makes drama of an everyday life with our body and our presence firmly caught on stage and in the spotlight: we are visible to others in a way over which we have no choice, limping here or leaning there.

Lastly, pain is appreciation; above all for the simple possibility and gift of a pain free life- all the rest is a bonus. Others do not know the gift in simply being healthy, of being unconsciously free to move or walk or run. Pain is a lonely road, no one can know the measure of our particular agonies, but through pain we have the possibility, just the possibility, of coming to know others as we have, with so much difficulty, come to know ourselves."

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