

Breathing LESSONS

GORDON WASELNUK TAKES YOU ON A JOURNEY TO THE GIFTS OF MEDITATION

Pain can be a great motivator.

It's what drove me several months after the death of my lover 10 years ago to pack my bags and head off to Asia for respite. In Yangshou, China, a small poster caught my eye. It offered a 10-day silent Vipassana retreat at a Buddhist monastery on a beautiful island in Thailand. Though I knew nothing about meditation or Buddhism, something inside said "go."

Two weeks later I was climbing a hill on Kho Phangan to the monastery Wat Kow Tham. The monks and nuns looked beautiful in their saffron and white robes. The golden images of the Buddha glistened in the tropical sunlight. Magical! If they only knew how screwed up I felt inside.

I didn't always feel that way. Many years ago I was a "successful" gay man with a great job, cool apartment, firm body and cute longtime lover, Richard. Life was fabulous! But in November 1989, Richard told me he was having stomach pain. Two months later, after numerous tests, we were hit over the head with a sledgehammer. Diagnosis: AIDS. My life fell apart. The next six months were a blur of hospitals, invasive therapies, anger, denial, bargaining and, finally, Richard withering away and dying. How could this happen to us? Intense anger, fear, anxiety, loneliness and an HIV diagnosis of my own followed. I felt lost in the dark, trapped in an unending storm. I needed a refuge.

This pain was what I carried with me — and maybe what carried me — up that hill to the monastery. At the introductory talk I sat at the back of the hall, ready to make a quick exit if the teachers started to sound like the Manson family. They explained the basics: Vipassana (insight, mindfulness) meditation is not a religion but rather a philosophy of living based on Buddhist teachings that is open to everyone — yes, it's queer friendly. There is no guru or higher being to worship and you can incorporate it with other beliefs. The goal is to lessen your suffering and ignorance and live for higher values such as compassion, understanding and loving-kindness for yourself and others.

I moved a bit closer as the teachers continued: Through a daily meditation practice, including reflection, our awareness is able to slowly expand. We become mindful of our thoughts, feelings, actions and reactions. As we become more aware, we'll be in a better position to understand the cause and effect of our actions. We need to practice on a regular basis to experience and understand these benefits.

I was sold.



Learning to surrender

My 10 days at the monastery involved daily lectures and meditation. The teachers' wish was for us to incorporate mindfulness and this philosophy of living into our everyday lives. As the days passed, I sensed deeply, experientially, that I'd found something very valuable. I learned to "be" with whatever was happening with acceptance, noticing the impermanent nature of everything. Sometimes grief would wash over me like a strong wave and tears would stream down my face. With the tools meditation was giving me, I could let myself experience this emotion fully but not attach any mental story to it. I kept coming back into my body to notice how this feeling manifested itself — my heart was beating faster, I felt a tightness in my stomach. Basically, I was experiencing grief but not fueling or resisting it with thoughts of fear, anger or doubt. My breath became more rhythmic, less shallow or heavy. The moment felt safer and saner.

This technique has become beneficial to me as someone living with HIV, at times, for instance, when I feel physical pain or side effects from drugs, and it works synergistically with pain medication. Sometimes we just don't feel well. If we can change that, great — if not, then we may as well accept it. It is in the acceptance that we eventually transcend it. We may not always have control over our health and environment, but we do have a say in how we *react* to it. This is a very powerful insight.

A decade has passed since that first retreat. The first year was a challenge but I persevered and kept practicing, going on five more retreats. Now I meditate every day. It has benefitted me emotionally, physically and spiritually in a huge way. By spending quiet time alone each day, I've been able to slowly develop a more intimate personal relationship with myself. Though friends, family and caregivers can offer us support, we can't depend on them to always be there for us. With meditation, I've found a refuge where I can nurture, comfort and support myself. That refuge is me.

Listen to your body

In the daily silence of my meditation practice, I am much more aware of subtle changes in my body. By paying attention, we can slowly develop our intuitive nature.

Are you listening to what your body is telling you? Immune dysfunction sometimes creeps up on us — a slight slide in energy, weight, muscle mass, libido, mild depression. Often we ignore it or are uncertain until it becomes a more serious problem. By noticing problems early on and being able to act, we are in a much better

position to slow down or reverse symptoms. We're also able to clearly describe the symptoms to our caregivers: how it manifests, what it feels like. Pieces of a puzzle. On the flip side, we can also recognize subtle benefits of therapy, such as surges in energy or a feeling of vitality. Noticing improvements can do wonders for the spirit and may help you maintain your adherence to whatever therapy you use.

You'll also have more energy, slow down the aging process and look prettier. I may not need to say more after that bombshell, but the truth is that meditation will beautify your soul and help remove some of the internal barriers we sometimes have.

Accentuate the positive

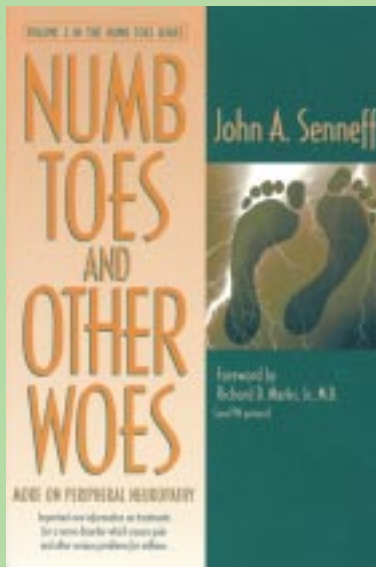
In the silence of meditation, we also begin to notice negative patterns, such as self-defeating behaviour and conditioning. Compassion, understanding, forgiveness, self-nurturing and loving-kindness are reflections and affirmations we voice and visualize after meditating. This is a powerful tool for breaking through those internal walls. You can create your own reflections and affirmations. I reflect on how fortunate I am to be growing. I ask to be grateful for simple things, which helps to alleviate any "poor me" feelings I may have from time to time. I ask to >

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MEDITATION STATION

- Find a quiet space. Unplug the phone, put out the cat.
- Sit comfortably in a chair or on a cushion with your eyes gently closed.
- Stay present. Let go of any thoughts.
- Slowly become aware of your breathing.
- Notice the air coming in and out of your nostrils or the rising and falling of your belly.
- Follow the rhythm of your breath.
- Don't try to control your breathing. Let it flow naturally. Some breaths will be longer, some shorter.
- To remain focused on the breath, simply note "in" as you inhale and "out" as you exhale.
- When your mind wanders, simply make a mental note of observance ("my mind is wandering" or "the cat is scratching at the door"). Then come back to noticing your breath without getting angry or frustrated.

I never said meditation doesn't take effort! Eventually it will become easier and habit-forming. Doing this practice twice a day for 20 minutes is ideal, but even five minutes can be beneficial. If you miss a few days, forgive yourself and begin again. It's in the trying where we grow.



**Numb Toes and Other Woes:
More on Peripheral Neuropathy**
by John A. Senneff
MedPress (San Antonio, Texas) 2001

NUMB TOES AND OTHER WOES: MORE ON PERIPHERAL NEUROPATHY

PEOPLE WITH HIV/AIDS, PARTICULARLY THOSE WHO USE THE “D” DRUGS — ddC, d4T, ddI — can develop a form of nerve damage called peripheral neuropathy (PN). The symptoms include shooting pain, tingling and numbness in the extremities — hands, arms, feet and legs. This pain can come at any time during the day or night and, if severe, can greatly affect one’s everyday activities. Unfortunately, PN tends to sneak up on people: At first there may be a little pain or a slight tingle and then, suddenly, full-blown pain appears. The bad news is that there is no cure for PN because repairing damaged nerves isn’t easy. The good news is *Numb Toes and Other Woes*, which offers the latest strategies for helping people manage the pain of neuropathy and regain control over their lives.

John Senneff, the author of this second book on PN (his first was *Numb Toes and Other Woes: Coping with Peripheral Neuropathy*, 1999), writes from the point of view of someone living with this problem. His reaction to his own PN diagnosis was to find out everything (and we mean everything) about the cause and treatment of this pain. The book is very well researched and organized, with plenty of practical tips, such as how to work with your doctor, and useful Web resources. Senneff offers extensive coverage of prescription, experimental, complementary and nutritional approaches to nerve healing and pain management. Although Senneff doesn’t have HIV, there’s clearly been a lot of collaboration with AIDS expert Lark Lands (see “*The 10 Commandments*,” page 4), which goes to show that true healing knows no boundaries. *Numb Toes* is an superb source of information on how to control PN and a valuable addition to the world of pain relief. ⚡

—Sean Hosein

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have more compassion and love for myself and others. How we view ourselves and the world determines our capacity for joy and peace of mind.

Meditation is also the best tool I’ve found for stress reduction. When I feel fear, doubt or worry, I simply note it and then focus on my breathing without reacting in my usual manner. By observing our thoughts and feelings — noting them but not being consumed by them — they eventually have less control over us, and we’re able to calm down and be more objective.

Research backs up what I’ve experienced. A University of Miami study of 450 HIV positive women found that those women who used meditation and group therapy were significantly less depressed than those who didn’t; plus, they had better adherence to their medication. Another study, of 21 HIV positive gay men using meditation, moderate exercise and positive affirmations, found that those who kept up these practices after two years were less likely to be in

denial about their diagnosis and had lower rates of progression to disease.

I encourage you to find a daily practice. It could be like mine — 20 minutes of sitting meditation plus reflection in the morning — or something that involves movement, such as yoga, tai chi or chi gong. Whatever does it for you. The key is to make a daily effort to live life more mindfully and lovingly.

A skilled teacher and group setting are ideal for beginners. (Be aware that people with mood disorders, schizophrenia or serious depression are not advised to practice.) Some retreats are by donation. Look for announcements in local health journals or new-age magazines or contact a local meditation group or AIDS service organization. I wish you a wonderful journey of discovery as you climb your own hill. ⚡



Gordon Waselnuk (at right) facilitates workshops on health promotion and meditation locally in Vancouver and across Canada. You can contact him at gwaselnuk@hotmail.com for more information or to conduct a workshop.