

How Hinduism Views Pain and Suffering



Sarah M. Whitman, M.D.

**Clinical Assistant Professor
Drexel University College of Medicine
Department of Psychiatry
10/8/08**

Sarah M. Whitman, M.D.

Pain Medicine Psychiatrist

Comprehensive treatment for pain conditions

- Medication
- Pain management therapy
- 8-week support groups
- HowToCopeWithPain.org



What I'd like to consider with you this morning...

1. What is chronic pain?
2. How does Hinduism approach pain and suffering?
3. How might Hindu traditions help people with pain?



What I'd like you to consider this morning...

1. **What is chronic pain?**
2. How does Hinduism approach pain and suffering?
3. How might Hindu traditions help people with pain?

First of all...

What *type* of pain
are we talking about ?

Not...



Chronic physical pain



“I was on my way out to the shops, in the act of opening the garage door, when I had a sudden attack. An attack: it was just that: the pain hurling itself upon me like a dog, sinking its teeth into my back. I cried out, unable to stir.”

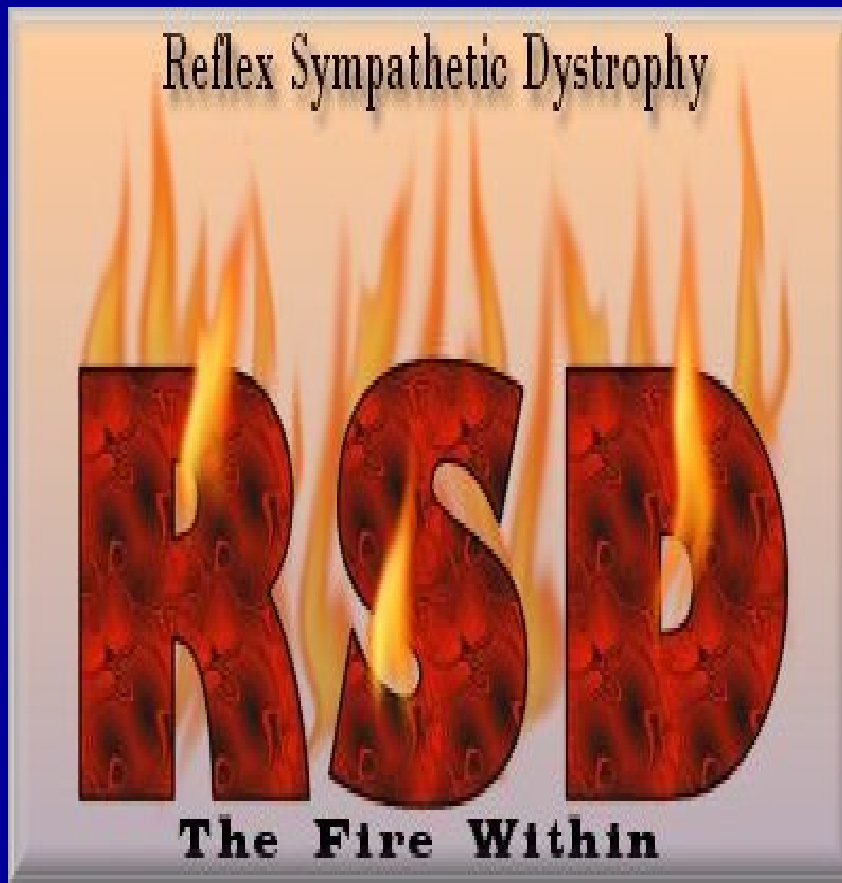
~ J.M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron*

Chronic physical pain



“The pain feels like a hot poker striking randomly within your head... someone punching you in the head, being hit with a hammer, and an ice pick continuously jabbing you in the head. Some experience pain only when we move our head in one way or another, while some have pain no matter if they hold their head still.” ~ Amy Browne

Chronic physical pain



“Imagine your hand was doused in gasoline, lit on fire, and then kept that way 24 hours a day, and you knew it was **never** going to be put out. I sometimes sit there and am amazed that no one else can see the flames shooting off of my body.

Imagine that hand now has the skin all burned off and is completely raw. Next, rub some salt on top of it and then rub some sandpaper on top of that!

~ Keith Orsini, RSDHope

Chronic physical pain

Diabetic Neuropathy



What does pain feel like?



What would pain change in your life?

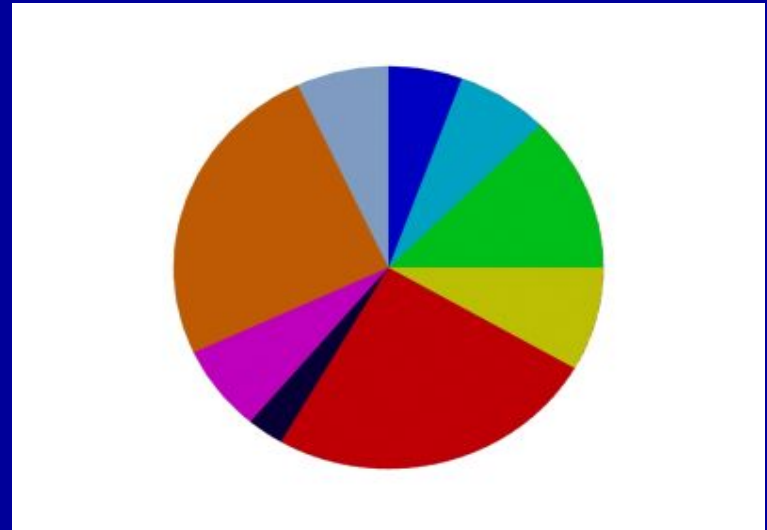
Changes in...

- emotions
- cognitive function
- relationships with family / friends
- work
- hobbies
- spirituality



Treatment of pain

- Medical
 - medication
 - procedures
- Psychological skills
- PT
- Complimentary
- **Spiritual resources**



**What are the resources from
your own spiritual / religious
tradition?**

What I'd like you to consider this morning...

1. What is chronic pain?
- 2. How does Hinduism approach pain and suffering?**
3. How might Hindu traditions help people with pain?



Hinduism

1. Overview of Hinduism
2. How does Hinduism view suffering?
3. Studies in pain medicine about *acceptance*



Hinduism

1. **Overview of Hinduism**
2. How does Hinduism view suffering?
3. Studies in pain medicine about *acceptance*



Overview of Hinduism

- Indian origin
- 900 million practitioners
- 3rd largest religious community in the world, after Christianity and Islam
- Hindus live primarily in India, Nepal, and Bali
- 2% live outside India
- 1.5 million live in the US



Central concepts of Hinduism

God / The Ultimate

- *Brahman*
- multiple deities as aspects of God

Karma

- the principle that governs the unfolding of events
- based on the integrity of previous lives
- not punitive (laws within universe)

Samsara - the process of successive rebirths until reaching *moksha*

Moksha – release from the cycle of rebirths





Samsara is a
bit like this
Itchy.

Central concepts of Hinduism

Aspire to...

- live with integrity
- cause no harm
- progress on spiritual path

How...

- live according to *dharma*
(stage-of-life guidelines or one's "sacred duty")
- work to become detached from over-involvement in the world, and turn towards God/The Ultimate



4 different paths in life...

- 1) devotion (prayer)
- 2) ethical action
- 3) knowledge
- 4) mental concentration

Hinduism

1. Overview of Hinduism
- 2. How does Hinduism view suffering?**
3. Studies in pain medicine about *acceptance*



How Hinduism views suffering

Mental or physical suffering...

- part of the unfolding of *karma* and is the consequence of past inappropriate action
- an expected part of living until reaching *moksha*
- physical suffering is “real” - we do experience physical pain as we are bound by the laws of our world

How to cope?

- **accept** it as a just consequence
- experience it to satisfy the debt for past behavior
- understand that the soul isn't harmed; suffering is temporary

Arjuna, a seeker of wisdom
in *The Bhagavad-Gita*, is told:

“The self embodied in the body
of every being is indestructible.”

“Weapons do not cut it,
fire does not burn it,
waters do not wet it,
wind does not wither it.
It cannot be cut or burned;
it cannot be wet or withered;
it is enduring, all-pervasive,
fixed, immovable, and timeless.”



How Hinduism views suffering

How to cope? (continued)

- suffering, like all things, is a manifestation of God/The Ultimate
- suffering is not *solely* bad...
 - can lead to progress on a spiritual path
 - can even be *embraced* as an opportunity
- ***detach*** from desire for things to be different than they are

Acceptance

Hindu traditions view *acceptance* in 2 ways...

1. a logical attitude towards pain and suffering, because all is seen as the just working of *karma*
2. the practice of acceptance is also a means to a greater end, *detachment*. Accepting your life lessens your desire for things to be different than they are.

As desires fall away, detachment is achieved.

Detachment and Attachment

- relate to your level of involvement in this world and to the power this world holds over your state of mind
- **attachment** signifies over-involvement in this world
 - having desires for things that you don't have
 - clinging to things you have
 - prevents achieving *moksha*, keeping you in the cycle of *samsara*

Detachment and Attachment

- ***detachment*** is a positive state of objectivity toward this world, where relationships, objects, and circumstances hold no power over your state of mind
- perfect detachment creates an “...even disposition in the face of either happiness or sorrow”
- nothing, including pain, causes you to suffer. You become neutral in the face of whatever outcome occurs.
- no desperate striving for pain relief

Arjuna, a seeker of wisdom
in *The Bhagavad-Gita*, is told:

“Arjuna, you must learn to endure
fleeting things—they come and go!
When these cannot torment a man,
When suffering and joy are equal
for him and he has courage,
he is fit for immortality.”

Detachment and Attachment

How do you achieve detachment?

- follow *dharma* (appropriate action) but be unconcerned with the outcomes of your actions

“Be intent on action,
not on the fruits of action;
avoid attraction to the fruits
and attachment to inaction!
Perform actions, firm in discipline,
relinquishing attachment;
be impartial to failure and success -
this equanimity is called discipline.”

Detachment and Attachment

How do you achieve detachment? (continued)

- refocus away from pain to *dharma*
- meditation and yoga
 - understand and control of your mind, and see beyond your mind to God/The Ultimate



Hinduism

1. Overview of Hinduism
2. How does Hinduism view suffering?
3. **Studies in pain medicine about acceptance**



Pain Medicine and Acceptance

Acceptance

from a nonreligious perspective
has been studied in pain research

Pain Medicine and Acceptance

Acceptance-based strategy

Goal:

- feel emotions and bodily sensations without avoidance
- notice thoughts without reacting to them
- uncomfortable thoughts / feelings delinked from behavior

Improvement:

- *not necessary to reduce* these for improvement to occur

Control-based strategy

Goal:

- decrease problematic thoughts, feelings, or experiences

Improvement:

- *reduce* these for improvement to occur

Treat anxiety

Acceptance-based strategy

Goal:

- feel emotions and bodily sensations without avoidance
- notice thoughts without reacting to them
- uncomfortable thoughts / feelings delinked from behavior

Improvement:

- *not necessary to reduce* these for improvement to occur

Control-based strategy

Goal:

- decrease problematic thoughts, feelings, or experiences

Improvement:

- *reduce* these for improvement to occur

Treat pain

Acceptance-based strategy

Goal:

Improvement:

Control-based strategy

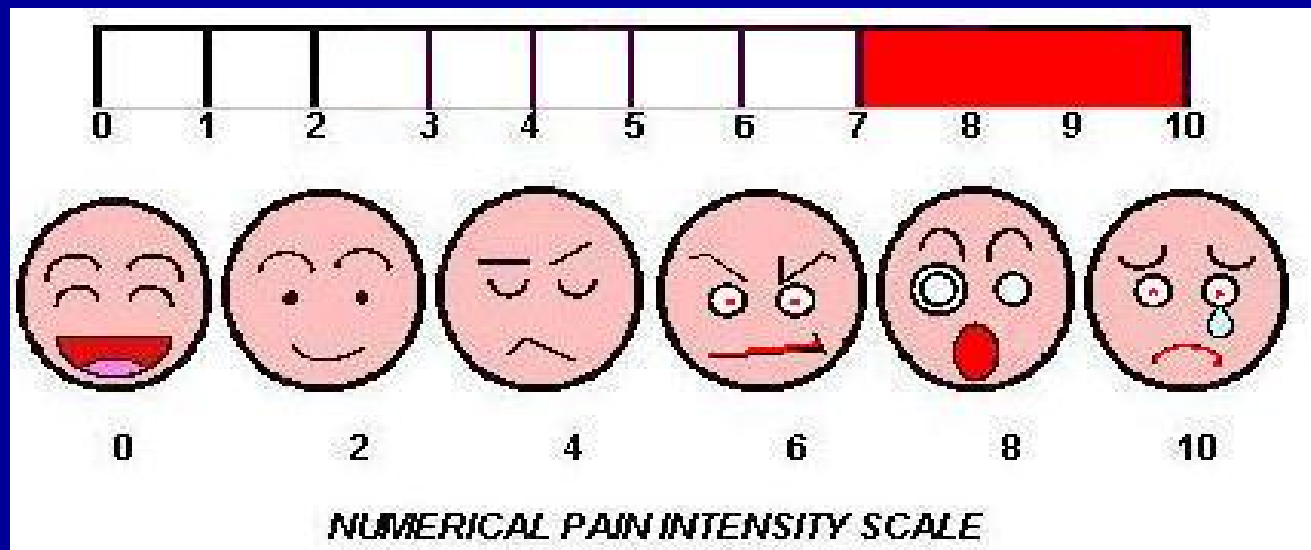
Goal:

Improvement:

Control-based strategy

Risks of control-based strategy...

- chronic pain will not resolve – pts have little success
- avoid activities until “all is better”
- avoid positive activities which happen to increase pain
- paradoxical increase on pain (“How much pain do I have? ... how about now? ... and now?”)



Pain Medicine and Acceptance

Acceptance of chronic pain....

“Living with pain without reaction, disapproval, or attempts to reduce or avoid it.”

“No longer struggling with pain, but taking a realistic approach to pain and pain-related circumstances, and engaging in positive everyday activities.”

Research studies

Greater acceptance of pain →

- lower reports of pain
 - less anxiety
 - less avoidance
 - less depression
 - less disability
 - better work status
- * independent of pain intensity



Mindfulness meditation

Mindfulness meditation for chronic pain...

- *focus* on your current state and *accept* that state

Study:

10-week program

90 chronic pain sufferers

Improvement in:

- pain
- body image
- activity
- mood
- medication consumption



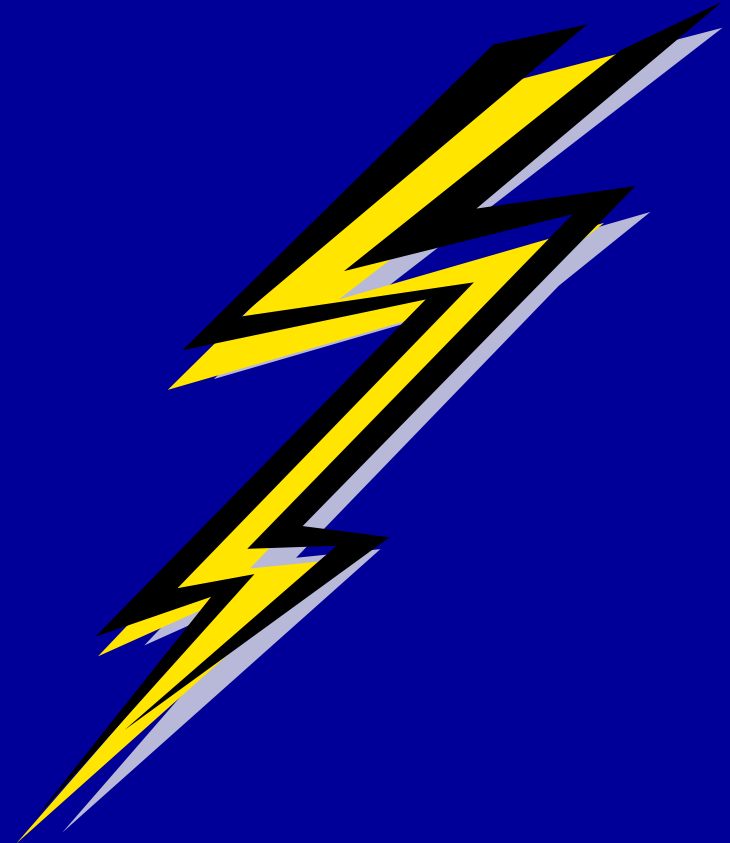
Experimentally-induced pain

Acceptance-based vs cognitive control-based strategy

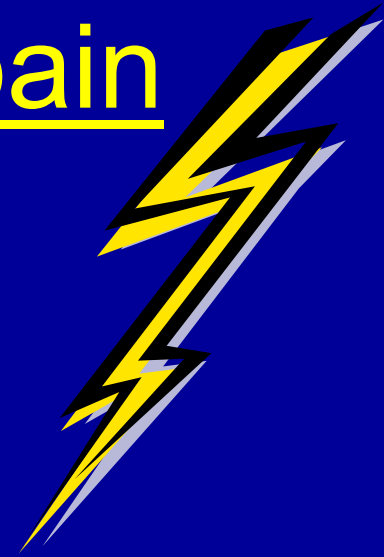
Experimentally induced shocks

Prior and post-strategy:

- tolerance of shocks
- self-reports of pain



Experimentally-induced pain



Acceptance subjects:

- higher tolerance to pain
- most continued at “very much pain” rating
- impact more pronounced in subgroup that tolerated longer and more frequent shocks

Control subjects:

- greater reduction in self-reported pain for individual shocks
- no increased pain tolerance
- ↑ number stopped at “very much pain” rating

Conclusion: Avoiding or controlling pain not effective in increasing tolerance, especially with more intense or longer-lasting pain.

Experimentally-induced pain

Cold pressor task

Acceptance-based

Notice thoughts and feelings

Not allow these to control actions

“I can’t stand this pain” → observe thought

not act on it (e.g. remove hand from cold water)

Control-based

Control thoughts and feelings to modify and regulate pain

Positive self-talk, breathing, imagery (e.g. pleasant scene)



Experimentally-induced pain

Results:

- Acceptance group showed greater tolerance of pain, as measured by length of time subjects could tolerate the painful stimuli
- No difference in subjective measures of pain, sensation, and unpleasantness

Conclusions

1. Control strategies not effective to \uparrow tolerance to pain
2. Control strategies did not \downarrow level and unpleasantness of pain - unexpected



“Let me not beg for the stilling of my pain
but for the heart to conquer it.”

~ Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941)
Indian Hindu mystic philosopher

