How Hinduism Views Pain and Suffering

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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?
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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…

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Hinduism

1. Overview of Hinduism
2. How does Hinduism view suffering?
3. Studies in pain medicine about acceptance
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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 punative (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) 3) knowledge
2) ethical action 4) mental concentration
Hinduism

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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
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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:
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- notice thoughts without reacting to them
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Control-based strategy
Goal:
- decrease problematic thoughts, feelings, or experiences

Improvement:
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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 ↑ tolerance to pain
2. Control strategies did not ↓ 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