

The Seekers Forum Transcript

# Where Does It Hurt?: Healing Wounds From the Past and Present

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The Seekers Forum  
Awaken To Your Life

Welcome to The Seekers Forum. We're going to be talking this evening about healing wounds from the past and present.

Last month we were discussing our relationship to pain on the spiritual path and the fact that some folks believe that the end goal of spiritual practice is to help us stop feeling pain. Some of us harbor this insidious, unspoken belief that if we just get enlightened enough, or balanced enough, or calm enough, or compassionate enough, we are going to somehow rise above the common run of humanity and float free of painful emotion and discomfort.

Of course, this is a fallacy, since the point of spiritual practice is not to stop feeling pain, but to stop taking pain personally. In other words, when pain comes, we begin to see it as 'the pain,' the discomfort, the sadness or anger, or whatever the cause of the pain might be, rather than as 'our pain.'

The importance of this shift from 'my pain' to 'the pain' cannot be overstated, because it enables us to observe our pain without believing that it is ours, or that the pain 'is' us. We learn to dis-identify with our pain and the image of ourselves that is founded, and feeds, on pain from the past and present.

We come to realize through practice and witnessing our inner process that we are the watcher, not the pain. And this awareness is the first step to breaking the identification with what Eckhart Tolle calls the "pain body," the accumulation of emotional pain, past and present, that becomes like a separate entity within us, a kind of a parasite feeding on its host.

How does the pain body feed on its host?

The answer is through the activity of the unobserved mind. The mind that's unobserved, that's out of control, and runs riot through us, that besieges us with a constant stream of thoughts, many of them negative, repetitive, and self-critical, is the feeding mechanism of the pain body within us. Our compulsive thoughts are the fuel that we shovel into the mouth of the parasite.

For example, let's say that you're someone who felt victimized for whatever reason during your childhood. This sense of victimization, of seeing yourself as a victim, became a mental habit for you, and created an image, a relationship to Self that's connected to feeling like a victim. Not only have you suffered the blows of this condition, which is very painful, but you have come to identify so strongly with being a victim that your sense of self is constellated around victimhood and the painful feelings that are associated with it.

You come to carry this victim pain body around with you throughout your life and since most of our thoughts are repetitive and self-referential, you continue to think of yourself in this way, to tell yourself this victim story, to believe victim thoughts about yourself, and create situations in your life that support this version of who you believe you are.

This isn't a conscious process, of course. It's a function of our natural tendency to cling to what we know and to the self with which we're familiar.

This is a very important and paradoxical point. Even though we believe that we want to be free of pain and we make efforts to fight pain off, and to resist its pull, this resistance actually does nothing more than strengthen our identity and our identification with the very things that we want to be free of. In other words, the thought '*I don't want to be a victim*' or the affirmation '*I am not a victim*' is just as counterproductive as telling ourselves that we are victims.

This is hard to get at first, but the fact is that they're equally unskillful means for dissolving the pain of victimization. That's because the ego fights for its own survival, regardless of how unhappy it is.

If your self-image is attached to being a victim, you're going to fight to protect that victimized self, regardless of how painful it is, because the fact is that we're far more wired to protect our self-image than we are wired for happiness. We would much rather be strong in our familiar victim role than risk letting it go and losing our sense of self, even though this would be the beginning of freedom.

The only way to break this cycle is by watching how it plays out in us and realizing that we are the watcher, the witness, and not the thoughts or the story. Only by dis-identifying with the pain body can we starve it of what it needs to persist. Like every other entity in creation, this pain body wants to live and can only do so through unconsciousness. That's why the ego resists awareness of how we keep ourselves in bondage.

The moment that we stop this cycle and practice awareness and bring consciousness to this pain body, which is, as I said, the last thing that it wants, we break the identification and the pain body begins to dissolve.

Even though we're aware, most of us, that we're partially responsible for perpetuating our own pain, very few of us are willing to admit that, in fact, we are the ones creating the pain ourselves. We're so in the habit of blaming others, blaming circumstances, blaming bad luck, or losses, or adversity for our pain that it rarely occurs to us that this is an inside job. When it is suggested that we're creating our pain and feeding this pain body within us, our first reaction very often is denial or anger or defensiveness. "How can you say that to me?" "How can you blame the victim?" This is, of course, how the pain body keeps itself alive.

Remember, anything that threatens our sense of self, even when that self is miserable, will be automatically rejected by the ego, whose primary ambition is its survival reflex, which is to protect and hold onto its identity. It can be terribly threatening to admit that we are our own perpetrators. I wouldn't be surprised actually if some of you listening to this talk are resisting this unpleasant idea even as I say it. Just notice what happens in your mind when I say those words—that you are, in fact, your own perpetrator.

Is there a kick back inside you, a push back, some kind of a knee-jerk response to owning this, to realizing how you create your own suffering? Because that realization can be quite traumatizing. It's bad enough to be in pain, no less to be forced to admit that we're feeding it unconsciously most of our lives. When the tables turn on us this way, it's a shock, but it's a healthy shock. It's a life-saving shock, because we realize that the whip is in our own hands. And what this does is gives us our power back.

The objective is not to blame ourselves, but to stop this self-punishment, to stop feeding this pain body, and to free ourselves of the illusion that emotional pain is being inflicted upon us from outside. This is not to deny that life is full of hardship, of loss and trouble. It's vital that we acknowledge adversity and stay gentle with ourselves when we're hurting, while at the same time bringing awareness to this process and cultivating the strength of the watcher.

The mind feeds the pain body through the power of association. There are two kinds of emotional pain: the pain from the past and what we are creating now.

When we have thoughts and experiences that resonate with the types of pain we've had in the past, the pain body will become activated. This is how post-traumatic stress works, and, in fact, all forms of compulsive, obsessive thinking. The soldier who returns from war and jumps when he hears traffic noise. The minority person who has suffered persecution overreacts to harmless innuendo. The individual who's experienced betrayal and is ever vigilant, seeing betrayal about to happen all around him. The person who's been wounded by humiliation and who feels humiliated by almost nothing at all. The angry person who walks around fuming, set off by the slightest thing.

We all engage in our own version of this dynamic.

Ask yourself, what are the constituents of your particular pain body?

What is the nature of your own particular wounds?

Are you aware of repeating patterns of pain that seem impossible to leave behind and if so, what are they?

Be specific. This is actually where writing can be such a powerful tool for clearing the debris of denial and habit and realizing how we create our own pain.

Examine your wounds. Notice their shapes, their depths, their texture. Give them names. Listen to their voices because every wound has its own story, its own history, its own plot line, its own characters, its own trajectory, and its own predictions and expectations.

We've spoken a lot in The Seekers Forum about the storytelling mind that we inherit as *homo narans*, the storytelling ape. We're the creature that makes sense of experience by creating stories to contain and manage life on a frightening and mysterious planet.

What is your pain story?

How do you explain and justify your own suffering to yourself?

What happens when you articulate this pain story in writing, for example, or in therapy?

Do you believe your own narrative?

And if not, what parts defy credibility?

What elements of truth do you leave out in order to keep the story alive?

That's a very, very important question. What elements of truth do you leave out in order to keep your story alive?

And what is the payoff for feeding such thoughts to your pain body and identifying with your sad, sad tale?

Be brutally honest with yourself about this and resist the mind's masochistic tendency to use this information against yourself, because once again, that's just the pain body sort of gorging itself on its own negativity.

Let me give you an example of how this works. Recently I began working with a woman who was in a great deal of pain. In fact, she described her life as a tragedy and herself as a non-entity who didn't deserve to live. She described her existence as one of taking up space on the planet and added that on many days she believed that the world would be better off without her and that she would be better off dead. This was, as it were, her opening folly. Her sad, self-hating story was obviously well honed from years of repetition. And I was amazed by how easily she rolled it out. This self-image had been established at an early age in a family where she was criticized by a bullying mother, and she was abandoned by a father who she adored after her parents divorced. Her only sister was a bully, too.

This woman had become the family punching bag, the scapegoat, victimized on a regular basis for not being—fill in the blank: physically beautiful, she was an introvert, creative—and so on.

In response to this early abuse, she had sided with her perpetrators against herself. And in the style of "*If I do it harder, theirs won't work, theirs won't hurt,*" she developed an image so hateful to herself that nothing anyone else said could come close to how much she despised her own life. Without realizing it, she had learned to derive a perverse kind of strength from her own self-loathing, a negative narcissism that vilified her and defined her as being someone undeserving of happiness, what she described as "a piece of human garbage."

To free herself of this constant pain, she had become addicted first to dangerous sex with strangers and then to mood-altering medications, both of which gave her temporary respite from her agony, but no relief from her pain.

With the help of a therapist she had finally managed to kick both of those habits, but instead of making her happy, it had left her in a grey zone of depression, a kind of holding pattern, unable to get at her pain and how it continued to dominate her life.

Listening to her story, I couldn't help but notice that behind this pain, which was clearly real, was something that was harder to identify, a kind of reveling in it, a kind of a pleasure in her own misery. This was obvious in the language that she used to describe her own situation—words like garbage, disgusting, abominable, worthless—the hyperbole of self-condemnation that seemed both authentic and well-rehearsed.

This was masochism clear and simple. It was the case of a woman who coped with early pain by turning pain into a reason for being her fundamental identify, even a source of erotic fulfillment.

As we were saying a couple of months back, speaking of Eros and talking about passion, both the life instinct and the death instinct can give us a sense of being alive through either negative or positive passions.

And this woman had clearly hooked to a sense of aliveness through self-destructive thinking. In fact, she wrote in one of her pieces that the only time she ever felt alive was in her addictions.

This became obvious and her connection to this pain body could not be ignored when we began working together, because she shot down every positive suggestion I made with expert precision. Nothing I suggested could get through the barricades of pre-emptive negativity that she had erected to protect herself from disappointment and pain. For every potentially helpful idea that I suggested, she had three to shoot it down.

When I brought this to her attention, she told me that she was just being realistic. That's how identified she was with her pain body and the image of herself as a damaged and despicable person. That pessimism and self-abnegation were for her synonymous with what constituted reality.

At first she was very angry at me for suggesting that she seemed to be deriving some pleasure from her pain. She threatened to stop working together, in fact, which was fine with me. But before we said goodbye, I felt like I needed to tell her what I was seeing and that it seemed obvious to me that she was repeating her usual pattern of rejecting people before they could reject her.

Ever since our first email exchange—this was an online student—I had watched her anger boiling over, how much she despised herself. It was in every sentence. In fact, it seemed to me

that she was trying to seduce me into believing a story that she had been dining out on for most of her life, but which was now eating away at her like a parasite.

I told her that I wasn't really buying it, because I could see through this fusillade of self-loathing that there was a great deal of light in her, a lot of humor and life trying to get through the darkness.

After a week or so, after we had this argument, where she argued with me and I didn't back down, she actually came back to me and said that I was right about this pattern and that she wanted to continue working and hoped that I would put up with her. I told her that that wouldn't be a problem.

In time she has come to see that by feeding her pain body gluttonously every day of her life, with every horrible thought she could think about herself, indulging every guilty temptation toward self-laceration, that she had actually become her pain body.

This is what happens. We become our pain body. In her case there was no separation between the parasite and the host and the vampire was running the show.

This student is a highly creative person who had abandoned her own creative dreams very early in life. I told her about this gusto, this creativity, this gusto that I sensed in her right below the surface, like the life force wanting to burst out and take form.

At first she had a very hard time hearing this because as a narcissist, she was as equally self-hating and self-important. She was insecure and highly ambitious. That's partly why nothing she ever did was vaguely good enough—the magazine wasn't big enough, the story wasn't perfect enough. When I challenged her pain, she really didn't know what to say at first. She wanted to believe me, but she was afraid to. Finally she admitted that she secretly believed that she had talent but clearly that was just a delusion.

Still, she liked to write and even jotted down a poem every now and then, she finally told me. I asked her to send me one of her poems and, not surprisingly, it was beautiful. And when I told her that, it was so moving. She seemed to melt a little bit. It's not that her defenses dropped completely, but a chink appeared and through this chink I could see the earnest wounded eyes of a little girl who had somehow gotten lost, lost behind her pain body.

Today I'm happy to say that she's committed to writing her way out of this dilemma, out of this maze, and there's a tone of real hope in her voice for the first time since we met. The parasite is no longer running the show.

The moment we bring awareness to our own wounds and shine the light of attention on them, healing happens spontaneously. We come to realize that within each wound that we suffer is potential for power, growth, and insight. Experience teaches us that transformation only comes

with adversity and that without pain there would be no growth, and even though that doesn't make this a pleasant fact of life, it does reverse how we frame our own pain.

We come to realize that every loss is a rite of passage, and that every disillusionment is a step toward wisdom. In fact, we are blessed by our wounds on the path of awakening. But until we become the watcher, we can't know that. When we learn to step back from the pain body, we realize that our wounds are not us, but instead are the markings of wisdom. They're evidence of how life has carved itself into us.

The word character comes from the root term for etching. Pain etches our lives into us and forms our unique shadows and our particular depths. The moment we're able to recognize the gap between the wound and the watcher, we begin to get our lives back. We're then able to be more compassionate with ourselves when we're hurting, instead of ceding control to the pain body at the very moment when we most need kindness.

Before I close, I would just like to recap.

Number one: The more we identify with the unobserved mind, which tends to be repetitive and self-critical, the more we suffer.

Number two: The pain body feeds itself on resistance, judgment, and negativity; also, by repeating painful stories from the past.

Number three: The pain body can be either dormant or active and is kicked off by material that resonates with it. It needs you to identify with it. But when you see the pain body for what it is, the identification is broken and pain automatically decreases.

Number four: Like every other entity in creation, the pain body wants to survive. The ego will do everything in its power to divert us from seeing how this works. It feeds on our unconscious fear of facing it.

And number five: When the watcher is active, we're able to sever the link between the pain body and consciousness. Then we're able to transmute suffering into awakening. That's the alchemy of mindfulness and witnessing. Pain itself becomes fuel for consciousness.

That's what I wanted to say to you tonight about the pain body.