Pain and suffering

For a few pages, I'm going to avoid my usual smart-alec tone. I won't be filling this column with jokes or sarcasm. The subject is pain, and it isn't funny. I'll talk about other forms of suffering in later chapters. This chapter is about dealing with physical pain.

I have experience of pain. For many years, I had very frequent and crippling migraines; knock-down drag-out headaches that would leave me vomiting every few minutes for hours on end, unable to move. I have been to the hospital for migraine treatments dozens of times. I've found myself literally crawling along the pavement, unable to stand, desperate to make it through the hospital doors.

I don't want your sympathy. I no longer suffer that way, thanks to the effects of modern pharmacology. I tell you this so you know that I'm not giving advice on something of which I have no experience.

Pain, like other forms of negativity in life, can be seen as a corrosive chemical in the brain. It wears your brain out. The more pain you're in, the more pain you're likely to be in later. It robs you of the joy of life, affecting your behaviour in every way. The constant undertone of pain in your life will emerge one way or another, limiting your ability to have fun and achieve Fun.

It wasn't until my medication allowed me live relatively (but never completely) free of pain that I began to consider myself as enlightened. Before that, I didn't really believe that I would ever achieve Fun. All the intellectual prerequisites were there, but my inability to concentrate for longer than the interval between pain episodes limited my state of grace to short periods. Pain would emerge in my spirit as violent and uncontrollable mood swings. The things that I did as a result of pain are not excused by it - I am completely responsible for them - but I felt helpless to control myself.

That's my experience, and it doesn't necessarily apply to you. If it did, I'd be telling you that you are unable to achieve enlightenment while you suffer. You may be stronger than me, and able to have Fun in spite of your pain. I have nothing but admiration for you.

Others among us, however, will never get there because of the suffering in our lives. This column is for them.

Most of the traditional roads to enlightenment speak of transcending suffering. By clearing the mind of the worldly, we are able to overcome pain and negativity in our lives. I agree to some extent. The problem is that this takes supreme efforts of self-control, something most of us don't have time for or the mental inclination to perform. Even if we understand and agree with the philosophies, it's practically impossible to do, and I suspect that most of this advice comes from people who don't suffer the way you might.

Pain is only one sort of suffering. There are so many forms of brain-distress that I can't even begin to list them, or this column would be a book in itself, and still incomplete. Some of those forms, such as starvation, can't be overcome with mental control. They have to be attacked on a physical level. No amount of meditation can put food in your belly, and no amount of meditation can overcome mood swings caused by low blood-sugar. You have to eat to live. Only a very tiny fraction of us have the strength to reach Fun while starving.

Seed of enlightenment: get thee to a doctor!

If you are in pain, feel free to take painkillers. You are not cheating. You aren't taking an immoral shortcut. Pain teaches you nothing. It is not a good master. It does not make you stronger. It does not build character. A pure negative like pain cannot make you a better person. If you have learned compassion from pain, you will never know that you couldn't have learned it as well without it - perfectly healthy people who lead pain-free lives are as capable of it. Compassion is more likely learned from witnessing suffering than from undergoing it.

For some reason, we feel like we're doing something wrong when we take medication. I have had the sad opportunity to have had an acquaintance who killed himself after going off his medication. His pain was mental rather than physical. He had allowed other people to give him bad advice: don't trust pills. He might still be alive if he had ignored those ignorant people who convinced him that pills were a form of evil. Life is meant to be fun, and everyone, including the disabled, has the right to have it.

Of course, I am most definitely not advocating the use of illegal and addictive substances to shortcut to fun. The bad aspects of these drugs overwhelms the short-term aspects sooner or later, and street drugs tend to be a form of sledgehammer to the brain, when what we need is minimal, least invasive surgery. I smoked pot for decades, because I thought it was the best thing for my problems. I have real medication now, and while I remain wary of the practices of the multi-national drug companies, I have no desire at all to return to that underworld. It is very hard to achieve enlightenment while you are forever looking over your shoulder for the approach of the constabulary.

Alcohol is another problem. Because it's legal, it is by far the easiest drug to become addicted to (nicotine is a toxin, not a drug). It's healthy in small happy doses, and lousy as an emotional support.

In fact, there are dozens of crutches available, such as religion, sex addiction, and violence in forms from video games to family abuse. I have my crutch - I'm ridiculously addicted to coffee. I'm so addicted to it that I get headaches from withdrawal from it. I have a history of addiction, and know whereof I speak. Addictive substances always end up causing more problems than they solve.

They are, however, evidence of the drive to fun that almost all human beings share. If it is impossible to achieve fun in your life, you may be driven to the point of destruction to find it by whatever method is available. Fun is one of the strongest drives a human being has. It can't be denied. People who have emotional limitations do whatever they can to feel good, but they never achieve enlightenment by this path.

There are some people right now who are saying that enlightenment and medication can't go together. That's because they have artificial concepts of what enlightenment is, descended from people in the past who had no access to modern technology. Transcending suffering is good advice when you have no alternative. Not suffering in the first place is far better advice.

Think of enlightenment as the finish line in a race. If you start your race in pain, you have a longer run ahead of you: you must learn to conquer pain, an arduous and usually impossible task. Pain will constantly be interrupting your learning to conquer pain. On the other hand, if you simply do away with pain altogether, you start your race a lot closer to the finish line. It isn't how far you run that matters; it's that you get there. Enlightenment is not a toy for a few lucky people - it is your god-given right as a human being.

Being able to bypass pain with drugs doesn't free you from the need to deal with the root causes of pain. Your body will last longer if you don't need drugs in the first place. It's your responsibility to take care of the temple of your soul, your body. You don't have to obsess about it - mental beauty is far more important than physical beauty - but a strong body that runs well will feel less pain than one that isn't and doesn't. Health is not an absolute must on the path to enlightenment, but it smooths the way and shortens the race. It also makes fun easier to have, and Fun easier to achieve.

I'm enlightened, but I'm not always perfectly happy. I find myself tense and grinding my teeth, tightening up my muscles around the knots of pain that exist within me. It's like having little blockages in my energy flow. I don't literally believe in *chi*, but I find it a good tool for understanding my body. Where pain exists, my chi doesn't flow smoothly, as if it were jammed by pain. I feel those jams behind my eyes, in my jaw, in my abdomen. When I close my eyes to rest, I can visualize each one of these little blockages. When your chi flows effortlessly throughout your body, you are pain free. It has never happened in my life.

A big pain is like a cancer. Your chi may cease to flow at all. A huge black knot of suffering will block every pathway, leaving you fatigued and desperate for relief. It will poison your spiritual bloodstream. That's not only bad for you; it lessens the total amount of Fun in the world, and the whole planet suffers. The universe will be grateful to you for finding ways to alleviate your suffering, and allow the universal chi to flow unimpeded through your body.

But that has nothing to do with enlightenment, which is an intellectual and emotional state of being; intellect and emotion together are known as the spiritual. It is the spiritual being which is most commonly associated with enlightenment, and which is your greatest weapon in overcoming pain. It is the strength of knowing that you do not deserve pain that should succor you in your worst moments.

We have a habit, we right-brain people, of blaming the victim. It's easy to tell someone that they earned their pain somehow, with a bad diet, or by being unhappy, or by being evil in a past life. We try to find easy explanations for what we can't alleviate with herbs and yoga. It somehow must be your fault, that cancer you have. It can't simply be God's mistake.

Very few people deserve the pain they feel. You aren't one of them. You have a right to a good life, a good energy flow and Fun. Even if you did cause your own suffering, you've probably more than paid for it already. Do not suffer unnecessarily.

Never forget this.