

What a Tibetan monk taught me about my chronic neck pain — and how to relieve it

By Benjamin Shalva

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On and off for over twenty-five years, I have suffered chronic pain in the form of a stiff neck. I discovered the depth of my discomfort, and the ecstasy of its release, long ago as a college student living and studying in Dharamsala, India, the de facto capital of the Tibetan diaspora.

As a budding student of religion, I wandered the city in awe. I also wandered it in pain. My shoulders hurt. My neck ached. Looking back, I see how the combination of an altered diet, lack of exercise and the stress of being a foreigner exacerbated my symptoms. At the time, however, I didn't care why I hurt—I just wanted the pain to stop.

[The genius inventor who says he'll eliminate chronic pain with a simple device]

Fortunately, I was in the right place. In my travels, I had heard that, while one might choose a Western clinic for broken bones or amoebic dysentery, traditional Tibetan medicine worked wonders for chronic pain. I began to ask around to locate a Tibetan doctor, and, within a few days, I found myself seated in the living room of an elderly Tibetan monk who doubled as a doctor of Tibetan medicine.

To address my neck pain, the doctor asked me to remove my shirt and lie face down on his sofa so he could practice "Cupping," an ancient Asian practice used to release chronic pain and stress by improving blood flow. Without a word of explanation, he began vacuum-sealing teacup-sized glass vials to different areas of my back and shoulders. When he ran out of vials, the doctor picked up actual teacups from his coffee table. He then lit small pieces of paper, threw them in the cups and slapped the cups onto my back. The sudden lack of oxygen extinguished the flames and created an equally effective vacuum seal.

A virtual porcupine, back striated with glass, I lay there thinking: This is so cool! Then, a second thought crossed my mind: Whoa, I don't feel so good.

I awoke with no idea where I was. Opening my eyes, I looked up into the smiling face of an old Tibetan man. "Hello," he said, eyes twinkling, cradling my head in his lap. A few seconds more and it all came back to me. This smiling face belonged to the doctor, who was now helping me up and ushering me to the door.

Before leaving, still in somewhat of a haze, I turned to the doctor and asked one more question. To help with the chronic pain, should I make any changes in my lifestyle or behavior?

The doctor smiled. "Yes," he answered. "Relax."

I left the doctor's home, thanking him with hands pressed together in prayer. I felt incredible. My body felt simultaneously grounded to the earth and light as air. My neck pain and shoulder tension—completely gone.

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By the next morning, however, my stiff neck had returned. My body, loose and relaxed a day ago, started stockpiling tension minute by minute. No, I had not received a miracle cure. I had been granted a temporary release. A taste of freedom.

Still, I had the doctor's prescription. Relax. If I wanted a life without chronic pain in my neck, I needed to relax. But how? When the doctor suction-cupped my back, he flushed anxiety from my body. He reminded me what it might feel like to live without fear gnawing at my nerves.

The doctor had provided me a taste of liberation, but he had not articulated a strategy for accomplishing this same feat on my own. How could I fulfill the doctor's prescription without daily doses of suction-cupping and fainting? How would I relax?

Over and over, I replayed the treatment in my mind. When the doctor cupped my back, the resulting relaxation in my body triggered relaxation in my mind. Physical relaxation had produced psychological relaxation. Could this chain reaction operate in reverse?

If bodily sensation rippled through the mind, couldn't thoughts ripple through the body? Could an anxious mind, burdened by subtle, subconscious fears, trigger a detectable, flesh-and-bone tension? If so, might I look to my stiff neck not as a nuisance, but as a reliable, early warning system, a canary in the coal mine of consciousness?

What if, in fact, nestled reliably upon my shoulders dwelled my most dependable ally? As fears, even subconscious fears, began to build, this highly sensitive instrument for measuring stress would respond. First, a barely perceptible discomfort. Then, a dead-tissue numbness. Finally, a painful stiffening, accompanied by fused jaw and rising shoulders. All in direct relation to stress.

[You're missing out on your experiences. A meditation expert explains how to get the most out of every moment]

If I listened to my neck in these moments, if I stepped back on the path of relaxation by stopping my desperate chase, taking a breath and offering a prayer of gratitude for the miracle of my life, perhaps the process would reverse. My shoulders would edge back from my ears. My jaw would release. My neck would loosen.

And so, after waking up in that Tibetan doctor's arms with a loose neck and an open heart, I started listening to my disagreeable, cranky, incredulous, wise and wonderful stiff neck.

I continue to listen, for example, on those mornings when, my wife having already left for work, I am up with our two children getting them ready for school. I start the morning blearily mixing oatmeal and arranging backpacks, eyes darting from clock to kids to clock again. We have to be out the door by 7:30 a.m. If not, they'll be late to school, their future delinquency resting squarely on my shoulders.

My kids, on the other hand, could care less about the clock. They want to commandeer my cell phone. They want to fight. They want to build a tower of Legos. As our interests collide, my stress increases. I frantically run up and down stairs to fetch socks and toothbrushes. I take shallow breaths if I breathe at all. It's 7:21! Will we make it?

On such a perfectly average morning, living the suburban dream, attacking parental responsibilities with a more or less winning record, my neck has begun to throb. So I listen. I stop, take some deep breaths and look around.

There sit my two children, fighting over who can use the purple crayon. My hands cradle a cup of coffee, sweet and warm. I feel my feet on the floor and roll my weight over the whole of each foot, relishing this secret little dance. African-style electric guitar riffs whine from my favorite online radio station. It is cold or hot, rainy or sunny, and we are okay.

As I notice all this and, at least for the moment, let go of the clock, my neck pain subsides. As I indulge in the morning's sensations, the muscles in my neck, shoulders and jaw respond with release. A warmth floods my jaw, a comforting heaviness settles in my shoulders and I even feel some goose humms down my arms. I've given in to my

comforting heaviness settles in my shoulders and I even feel some goose bumps down my arms. I've given in to my neck's demands and now receive its tribute and gratitude.

Those of us with chronic pain have our own unique versions of this stiff neck, this part of our body that, lacking the convenience of an on-off switch, provides minute-by-minute reports on our emotional and spiritual well-being.

Perhaps our neck and shoulders ache. Or we get migraines. Maybe our lower backs give out. Whatever the early warning system, when fear courses down our spines, when stress tangles our nerves, our bodies respond. Whether we like it or not, our bodies are truth tellers, pointing out our issues, acknowledging the fear we've furtively tried to sweep under the rug.

When our bodies rumble, we can run to the doctor. We can reach for the latest pharmaceutical fix. We can pour ourselves another scotch. We can even buy a ticket to India and get cupped in the Himalayan hills. Or, we can stop treating our body like a dutiful servant and start seeing it as a treasured friend. We can honor our flesh. We can value bodily missives, even the ones we find inconvenient.

Just as our friends don't always make sense, don't always do what we want, and don't always return our calls, and just as we dilute disappointment with love and forgiveness, we can do the same now with our ungainly bag of bones. We can take a leap of faith and, listening to our bodies, relax.

This story has been updated.

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