

Pain-Bodies

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1. Introduction

*“Every emotional pain that you experience leaves behind a residue of pain that lives on in you. It merges with the pain from the past, which was already there, and becomes lodged in your mind and body. [...] If you were truly conscious of it, the pattern would dissolve, for to want more pain is insanity, and nobody is consciously insane.”*¹

It is quite safe to say that everyone has encountered pain-bodies before, in one way or another. I discovered the term through a spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle, who is best known as the author of, “The Power of Now” and, “A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose”. Simply stated, “pain-bodies” are those remnants of negative emotions from the past that burst into an ongoing conflict, often causing emotional havoc and erratic behavior. In my personal experiences, I had always recognized a certain subconscious suffering from conflicts in relationships, or in daily obstacles. However, after reading Tolle’s spiritual perspective on emotion, I was able to explicitly put a term to the negative experiences I would encounter during conflicts. This image that Eckhart painted of the “pain-body” gave me a whole new perspective of that difficult emotion, which enabled more peaceful resolutions. I was intrigued. What is happening in the brain during these spiritual techniques? Can the latest research in neuroscience support Eckhart’s teachings? Neuroscience, with new brain imaging technology, is uncovering more and more each day how humans process emotions, but spiritual teachers have long recognized the power of self-awareness in striving for more peace. Can there be a scientific explanation to ancient wisdom?

My research will derive from sources such as books, interviews, videos, websites and personal memory. I will first describe a personal negative experience in childhood that had unknowingly impacted certain emotional conflicts during my adolescence. Then I will draw an outline of Eckhart’s timeline of a pain-body which helped me become aware of how the two events are linked. After which I will explore in more depth the basic tenets of Eckhart’s teaching upon which he developed his theory of a pain-body. Finally, I will examine how some of the latest

¹ Tolle, The Power of Now 2020, p. 31

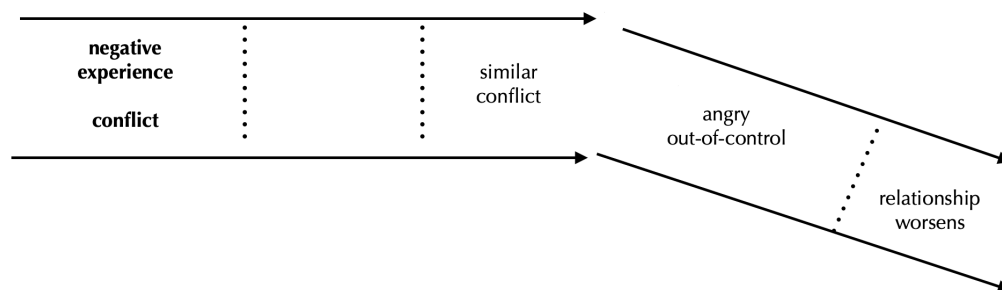
neuroscience findings appear to validate Eckhart's approach to finding peaceful resolutions and possible freedom from past emotional pain.

2. Conflict

Humans have emotions. Emotions play an essential role in how we perceive the world and make decisions. But what happens when emotions are counterproductive, uncontrollable, or too strong for our own good? Conflict has always been deeply rooted in the history of humanity, and is a strong source and typical example of emotion. Tense situations, misunderstandings, arguments or overreactions with the people we interact with can cause pain and trauma that can slowly accumulate over time.

In my personal experience, I was often exposed to conflict, whether it'd be my family dynamics, education environment or my social entourage. Having moved to a different continent at age ten, unlearning and relearning cultural differences, speaking a new language and adapting to a completely different environment was a big turning point in my life. That big change created turmoil, and increased risks for conflict. As a child, I did not realize how much these struggles would impact my later self, still affecting my emotions to this day.

Suffering from the problems that came with these changes created a form of accumulated trauma, and I retained the memories that were associated with the pain. As an example of a personal experience that highlights the timeline of the pain-body, I remember my parents often getting into disputes after our move to Europe. Multiple times, my mother would get so upset with my father that she would take the car without warning and leave the house for several hours. This would leave me in a situation where I felt alone in a new house, in a new country, with a father who was still upset as well. These incidents created intense negative memories, and stayed with me in a subconscious state as I grew up.

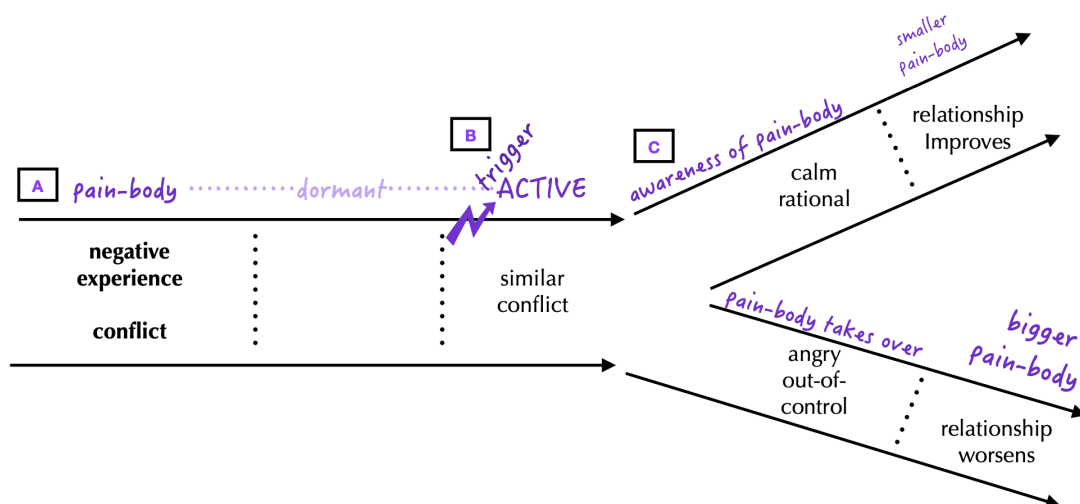


Later on, when I began dating and had relationships of my own, I discovered that I would get all of a sudden very upset and angry when the person I cared for would walk out in mid-discussion, or distract themselves with another activity. I would often find myself overreacting, or resentment would build in myself, to only accumulate and explode later. Unbeknownst to me, these negative sentiments were the reflection of my past pain from my childhood, and I was hanging on to the thought of my mother leaving with the car when I experienced someone leave me emotionally in a similar way years later. But because I did not connect the two events, I was both frustrated and angry with myself that I could not control how I felt, even as I knew it was not a helpful way to interact.

3. Pain-Body

With time, as I learned about Eckhart's term "pain-body", I soon understood this pattern, and was able to identify when and why I felt so triggered by something so small. Instead of giving into the impulse of getting angry and accusing the other person of "abandoning" me, I thought through my emotions as would an observer, or a witness, giving me the right tools to communicate to my partner to find a better solution for everyone.

Eckhart's definition of a pain-body, as mentioned previously, is the intensification of the ego through negative emotions. This series of actions can be described in three stages.



3.1 Stages of a pain-body

A

The first stage is the past trauma. From a spiritual representation, Eckhart explains that these past painful experiences create a blockage of energy that survives within you, by feeding off of past accumulated emotional pain or trauma that has not been fully processed or released. The pain body functions similarly to a viral infection. It can be illustrated as a virus that infects a host entity. One of the most fascinating ideas that this image provides, is that the pain-body almost has an entity/life form of its own, that resides in your energy field. Tolle explains that it has two modes of being: dormant and active. When unprocessed pain or trauma stores itself in the host's energy field, it doesn't necessarily manifest right away. Eckhart names this state of pain-body as dormant. This energy gets trapped and stored in our energy field, and accumulates there until it is awakened. This means we continue our daily lives without experiencing any direct consequences from that pain.

B

The second stage consists of the trigger moment. A dormant pain-body can be triggered by any trivial incident that links the person to a past pain or trauma. When it is triggered, it activates and manifests itself through negative emotional reactions and suffering one way or another.

C

The final stage of the pain-body is the resolution. There are two options for resolving this. The first is to let the pain-body take over your emotions. This often means anger, out-of-control behavior and worsening of the situation. By taking this route, the pain-body gets fueled, and feeds off more pain to grow. It then eventually returns to its dormant state as a bigger and stronger blockage of energy. The other option would be to stay mindful during a trigger. Un-identifying with our ego and separating our impulsive emotions from our sense of self allows us to catch when it happens. By observing it as a witness, we can stay calm and rational. This allows us to find a mindful resolution and reduce the pain-body over time.

According to Eckhart, the key to avoiding being led by our past unconscious pain is to be aware and catch the pain-body before it gains momentum. But this is a practice that is exceptionally difficult when negative emotions are so intense, as fear, anxiety and stress often accompany negative memories. What can be helpful is to practice being “aware” in times when there is little to no stress, Tolle advises. But to be aware of what exactly?

4. Disidentifying with MIND and Observing Presence

“When you live through the mind-made self comprised of thought and emotion that is the ego, the basis for your identity is precarious because thought and emotion are by their very nature ephemeral, fleeting.”²

The human mind, according to Eckhart, is a tool that can be very useful, but *80 to 90 percent of most people’s thinking is not only repetitive and useless, but because of its dysfunctional and often negative nature, much of it is also harmful.*³ Most of the time, our mind is engaged in compulsive thinking that is addictive. And the reason we are addicted to thinking is because we identify with it, deriving our sense of self from our thoughts. *“...the content of your mind is of course conditioned by the past: your upbringing, culture, family background, and so on. The*

² Tolle, A New Earth 2018, p. 60

³ Tolle, The Power of Now 2020, p.18

*central core of all your mind activity consists of certain repetitive and persistent thoughts, emotions and reactive patterns that you identify with most strongly.”*⁴ But we are not our minds, says Eckhart. This is the awareness we need to cultivate. *“So the single most vital step on your journey toward enlightenment is this: learn to disidentify from your mind. Every time you create a gap in the stream of mind the light of your consciousness grows stronger.”*⁵

4.1 Ego

For Eckhart, the unconscious identification with the mind is what he calls “ego.” Note that Tolle’s use of the term “ego” is different from the common usage of the word “ego.” The definition of ego in the dictionary is “personal pride”. When we express that something has made us feel embarrassed or lose our confidence, we tend to say that the incident or person “hurt our ego”. In my personal past experience, I always perceived the ego as self-centered, or selfish, as we would describe a person with too much “personal pride” to be “egotistical.” However, Eckhart Tolle employs the term “ego” in a very different sense. *To the ego, the present moment hardly exists. Only past and future are considered important. This total reversal of the truth accounts for the fact that in the ego mode the mind is so dysfunctional. It is always concerned with keeping the past alive, because without it - who are you? It constantly projects itself into the future to ensure its continued survival and to seek some kind of release or fulfillment there.*⁶ For Eckhart, the ego is merely a separate entity from us, that clings to form to prove its existence and ensure its survival.

Ego will fight to keep itself alive, by claiming an identity through any form, as long as it exists. In a similar way that pain-bodies feed off of more painful experiences to survive and grow, form (usually thought forms) is food for the ego to identify itself with, and prove its existence. They can, Tolle explains, include physical forms, thought forms or emotional forms. *“When the ego is at war, know that it is no more than an illusion fighting to survive.”*⁷ When the ego clings to

⁴ Tolle, A New Earth 2018, p. 59

⁵ Tolle, The Power of Now 2020, p.17

⁶ Tolle, The Power of Now 2020, p.18

⁷ Tolle, A New Earth 2018, p.77

form, it's comparable to an entity that fights to survive. His books address the basic mechanics of the ego, in order to recognize it. He explains, *"Unless you know the basic mechanics behind the workings of the ego, you won't recognize it, and it will trick you into identifying with it again and again."*⁸ This is a very compelling comment, as he points out in the very start of his book "A New Earth," that the ego is not you, but an illusion created by something impersonating you.

4.2 Mental positions

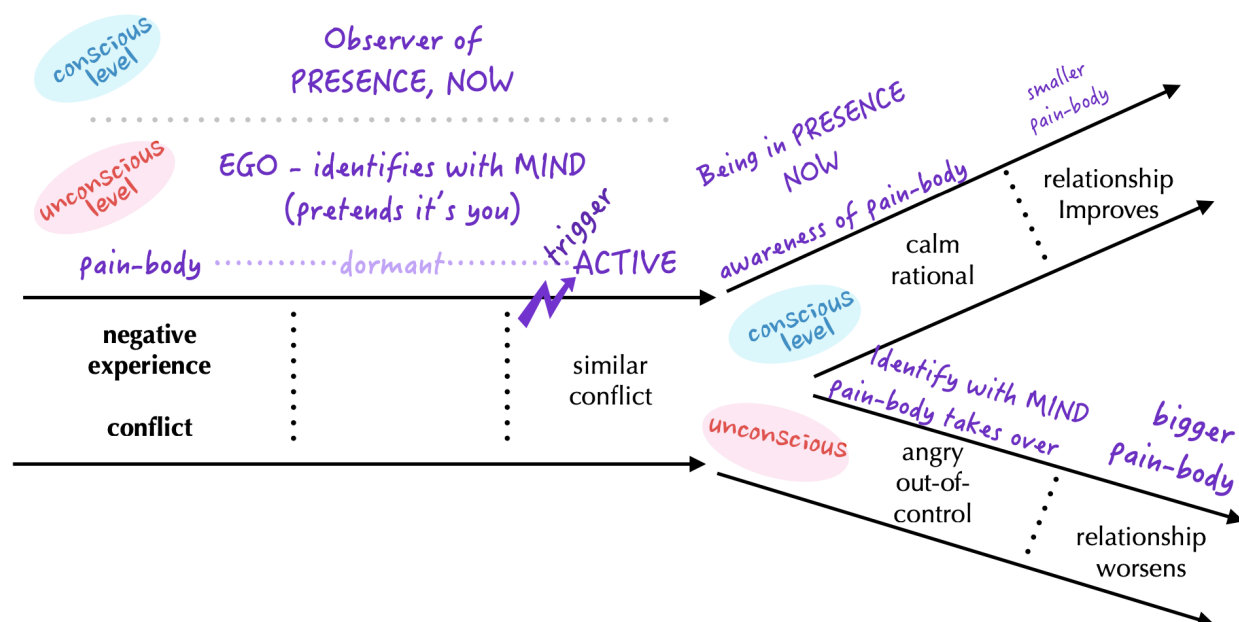
In Eckhart's writings, there are many different examples of the characteristics of the ego, and explanations of its tendencies. I found one of these examples particularly interesting for its simplicity, and its relevance to apply to anyone's personal situation. The example explains that the ego defends itself when it feels threatened. To be in the right strengthens the ego and places it in a position of "moral superiority in relation to the person or situation that is being judged."⁹ Being right gives a stronger sense of self to the ego, and can be seen as "identifying with a mental position." A mental position can be a perspective, an opinion, a judgment or a story, for example. As a silly example, I can strongly believe that milk should be poured into a bowl before the cereal, but someone will claim this to be wrong, and insist on the reverse; the cereal before the milk. If we identify ourselves to our ego, and our ego identifies itself to certain opinions and streams of thoughts, we automatically become incapable of accepting any other opinion that crosses our perception. We essentially identify *with* thought, and the ego does anything in its power to protect that identity that it associates itself with. Unfortunately, this very ego mechanism can be seen in cultural differences, and disagreements between countries, starting wars and tensions leading to catastrophic consequences.

4.3 Awareness

⁸ Tolle, A New Earth 2018, p.8

⁹ Tolle, A New Earth 2018, p.67

The first step to getting rid of something, is recognizing its existence. The most logical way of proving the essence of something is finding the opposite. The opposite of darkness is light; as soon as the power of consciousness/light shines through, you don't have to fight anything. Your mere awareness is already enough to diminish the attachment of the ego to the pain. The process of un-identifying with form (which can occur for example with pain-bodies) is through the presence of the "Now", or in other words the awareness of the present moment. By focusing on the now, it allows one to take on a so-called "witnessing Presence" of our thought forms. *"What a liberation to realize that the "voice in my head" is not who I am. Who am I? The one that sees that. The awareness that is prior to thought, the space in which the thought- or the emotion or sense perception- happens."*¹⁰



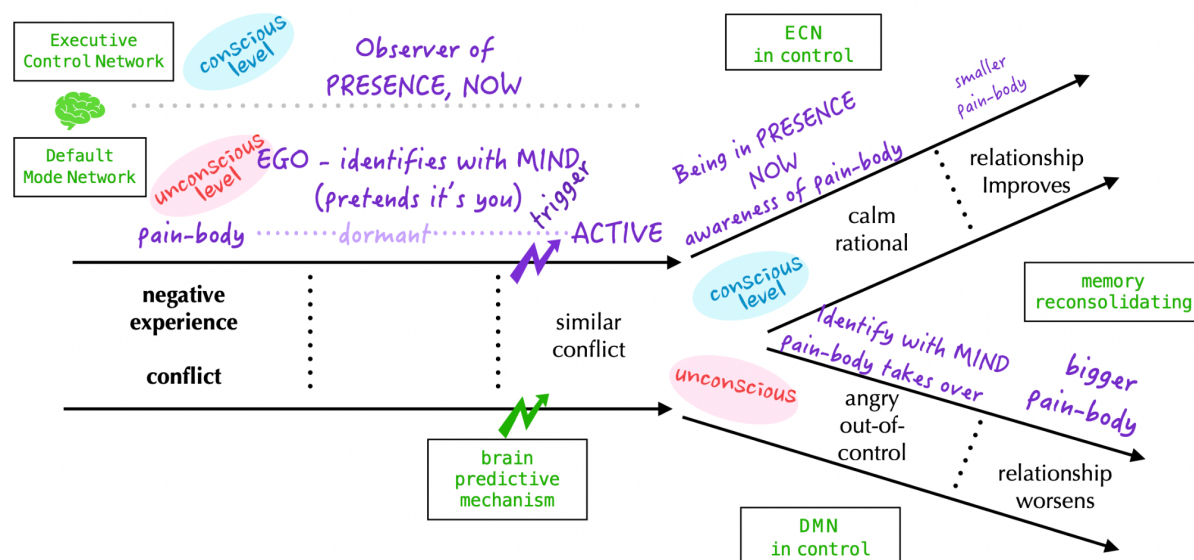
When I heard this, my first thought was of relief. Somehow by separating myself from my ego and giving myself the space to observe my thoughts and forms, I felt untouchable. My sense of self was rising above thought, it was observing them. This took away a sense of judgment or fault. There was nothing to be ashamed or guilty of, since the voice in my head wasn't the true me, but the ego. It isn't to be mistaken as an excuse to let it happen, because the more we allow ourselves to identify with the unconscious egoic patterns, the more suffering we endure and create.

¹⁰ Tolle, A New Earth 2018, p.22

This liberation from the ego when encountering pain-bodies led to a sense of awareness, and gave me no reason to escalate negative emotions for something I wanted, since I understood that what I thought I wanted was merely what my ego wanted. The forms and ideas it was attaching itself to were simply to protect its existence; its identity.

In my personal example, the form that my ego would be attaching itself to would be the thought that I was being abandoned, or that the other person was intentionally trying to hurt me by dropping the conversation. If I had stuck to that truth, I would be blindly protecting my ego's thought forms, therefore its identity. By staying present and being a witness to my own stream of thoughts, I was able to create distance between my ego and my true self, the observer. (p.78) I consciously realized that although I felt hurt by the triggering action of the person leaving the discussion, the pain did not derive from that trivial action. By observing my thought forms, and tracing back my memory to past pain that I could have felt relating to this situation, I understood that the person was not intentionally trying to hurt me, but rather give space to resolve the situation in a calmer state of mind. This is the path that leads to awareness, and therefore breaking the system of the pain-body's feeding mechanism.

5. Neuroscience



5.1 Default Mode Network

Until recently, doctors and scientists had very limited understanding of how our brain functions. They could examine brains during autopsies, or infer certain ideas about brain functions by investigating brain anomalies, but these approaches were not very precise. However, recent modern technology like brain imaging allow scientists to study the brain in great detail without ever opening the skull. There are several brain-imaging techniques, one of which is called magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), which looks at the structure of the brain and another is functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), which looks at the brain's function.

One of the most interesting accidental discoveries in neuroscience imaging is the default mode network. *"The concept of a default mode network was developed after researchers inadvertently noticed surprising levels of brain activity in experimental participants who were supposed to be "at rest"—in other words they were not engaged in a specific mental task, but just resting quietly (often with their eyes closed)."*¹¹ What's more, as neuroscience research using fMRI increased dramatically, data started to accumulate which showed a distinct pattern about this theorized neural network. When the brain is actively engaged in a task that requires focused attention to the task at hand, the activity in the DMN decreases. By contrast, when the brain is not involved in a specific mental exercise, activity in the DMN would increase.

Could this DMN be the unconscious mind that Eckhart Tolle speaks of? While there is no universal consensus on how to interpret DMN data yet, there have been studies which show that meditation decreases the activity in the DMN.¹² This seems to support Eckhart's assertion that when we can be fully present and aware, without getting caught up in the thoughts of the mind, we are much more able to attain inner peace.

Furthermore, there have been numerous studies connecting DMN with depression. *The default mode network (DMN) is one system that has attracted great research interest in major depression. One reason for this relates to its importance in the generation of self-referential*

¹¹ Know Your Brain: Default Mode Network

¹² Meditation leads to reduced default mode network activity beyond an active task

*thoughts, negative rumination and depressive symptoms.*¹³ Research results often show that there is increased or unstable activity in the DMN with major depression. This data also appears to support Eckhart's explanation of why when we allow the ego, the thoughts of the mind, or the pain-body to take over, our lack of awareness often results in out-of-control negative outcomes.

There is still much more research needed to fully understand the default mode network, but the current theory of DMN is already being used by mental health advocates. In August 2021, Dr. Dawn-Elise Snipes posted a video on "The Default Mode Network (DMN) in Neuropsychiatric Issues," aimed to help counselors, social workers, marriage and family therapists, case managers, addiction counselors and clergy in their work in the mental health field. In the video, Dr. Snipes describes the function and interactions of the Default Mode Network (DMN), the Salience and Emotion Network (SEN) and the Executive Control Network (ECN).¹⁴ Snipe's analysis of network dysfunction as a result of physical or emotional trauma actually matches quite closely with Tolle's description of evolution of a pain-body. She describes our state of mind when the DMN is in control as being in "autopilot mode." This auto-pilot mode can get stuck in a loop following a traumatic incident, cutting off the Executive Control Network. Similarly Eckhart describes our state of mind when triggered; if we are not present and aware, our unconscious egoic state or pain-body will feed off any thought forms to sustain itself. Another parallel can be seen in how Snipes describes that the Executive Control Network (ECN), when working in collaboration with the SEN, may facilitate superior adaptive behavior and decrease the activity of the DMN. It is very similar to how Eckhart advocates for us to be present in the Now, and how that awareness can keep us beyond the thoughts of the unconscious mind.

5.2 Brain Predictive Mechanism

If you take a juicy lemon, cut it open, take a slice and bring it to your mouth to taste, before the lemon reaches your mouth, your mouth will most likely already be salivating in anticipation of the acidity. As you are reading this paper, if I write that I had gone to the library to borrow a

¹³ Instability of default mode network connectivity in major depression

¹⁴ DMN and the Amygdala in Neuropsychiatric Issues

_____. Did your brain already anticipate the word “book?” Neuroscientist Dr. Lisa Feldman Barrett devoted an entire chapter in “Seven and a Half Lessons About the Brain” to the predictive mechanism of the brain. In Chapter 4 - Your Brain Predicts (Almost) Everything You Do, Barrett writes, *“Neuroscientists like to say that your day-to-day experience is a carefully controlled hallucination [...] an everyday kind of hallucination that creates all your experiences and guides all your actions. It’s the normal way that your brain gives meaning to your sense data, and you’re almost always unaware that it’s happening.”*¹⁵ In a way, the brain’s predictions are just a way that the brain is talking to itself. A group of neurons makes a guess at what is about to happen based on the sensory data or what the brain is conjuring. Then more data comes in, another set of neurons will adjust, and so on. And what is astounding is that the brain is designed to initiate action before we are aware of them because brains are not wired for accuracy, but for survival.¹⁶

That goal for survival also means that the brain has a negative bias because it is more important to retain the information that can harm us and threaten our survival. *Neuroscientific evidence has shown that there is greater neural processing in the brain in response to negative stimuli. And as humans, we tend to:*

- *Remember traumatic experiences better than positive ones.*
- *Recall insults better than praise.*
- *React more strongly to negative stimuli.*
- *Think about negative things more frequently than positive ones.*
- *Respond more strongly to negative events than to equally positive ones.*¹⁷

Combine the brain’s negative bias with its predictive mechanism, and it provides a perfect neurological explanation to Eckhart’s pain-body trigger. When the pain-body is dormant, the negative memory is still residing in the brain. As soon as something similar to the initial conflict occurs, the brain will find the memory to predict a future conflict, and because there is a negative bias, the likelihood and speed of recall is much faster and stronger. And all this can happen quickly before we are even aware of what is going on.

¹⁵ Barrett, Seven and a Half Lessons About the Brain 2021, p.71

¹⁶ Barrett Seven and a Half Lessons About the Brain 2021, p.74-77

¹⁷ What Is the Negativity Bias?

5.3 Memory Reconsolidation and Neuroplasticity

Scientists have long known that memories evolve and do not remain static. This is because each time a memory is recalled, it is subject to a reconsolidation process, during which new information can be added to the old memory.¹⁸ The fact that memory can be manipulated can be problematic if accurate recall is needed, like in a courtroom. But in the case of painful or traumatic memories, the fact that memory can be changed is a good thing. Each time a memory is retrieved means there is an opportunity to reduce the pain or trauma if the conditions are right. Therapies like EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) or CBT (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy) is based on the idea that each time memory is reconsolidated, if the person experiences the recall in a safe and calm state and environment, the negative intensity of the memory will decrease.¹⁹ This approach is similar to Eckhart's advice on staying aware and in the Now so that the pain-body does not take over and increase. If successful, the pain-body will diminish as it had nothing to fuel it, much in the same way that painful or traumatic memories can be reconsolidated with less intensity with EMDR or CBT therapy. Of course the opposite can also happen if the recall of the memory encounters a new negative experience. The neuroplasticity of the brain is a mechanism that can create both positive and negative results. With the guidance of sound neuroscience and the wisdom of spiritual teachers, we can thankfully know which path to follow to ensure a positive outcome.

6. Conclusion

Eckhart's books are eye-opening reads that helped and encouraged me and people around me to embark on a journey of discovery towards inner peace. His words and concepts help people gain a feeling of control and empowerment in their daily lives, by first revealing what was underneath our common human struggles, describing its functionalities to get a better understanding of how we can transcend our suffering. The realization that we are not our egos helps to identify the unconsciousness in our daily conflicts which perpetually provoke old negative emotions.

¹⁸ What Is Memory Reconsolidation?

¹⁹ What Is EMDR Therapy?

My sense of self had shifted, and made space for my truest self, the witness. Realization of the falsehood of my ego created a protective barrier between myself and feelings of fault finding, guilt, shame and negative emotion. The identification of the insufferable actions committed by the illusion of “I” to the ego, as a separate entity impersonating me, allowed healing; a crucial step to empowerment in daily situations.

The universal nature of this spiritual journey made me curious about how these spiritual truths might correlate to the scientific realm. Upon finding correlations in the field of neuroscience, I became more convinced than ever that a shift in understanding human conflicts in terms of pain-bodies is accessible to all. We can understand the struggle between awareness and the unconscious mind in terms of a toggling between the Executive Control Network and the Default Network. We can engage in meditative practices to recognize pain-body triggers, or we can acknowledge that our brain has a negative bias and is in constant predictive mode. We can practice staying in the present moment, the Now, as past pain-bodies arise so that they can diminish, or we can utilize our memory reconsolidation process to change the state of our neurons so that we can positively shift our inner emotional state.

Having shown that the latest research in neuroscience supports Eckhart’s teachings, this glimpse of inner peace is what I strive to pursue everyday, what I intend to work on for a long time to come. Since this subject applies to my daily life, as well as everyone else’s lives, it sparked my interest immediately, and continues to inspire me. I firmly believe that if Eckhart Tolle’s words brought me and his audience such profound insights, that it can help many others as well. This is my wish. Through this written thesis, I hope to help spread this collective awareness, and to take part in, as Eckhart says, the “New Earth”.

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8. Declaration

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work, which I have completed on my own and without the assistance of any third party. In accordance with the principles of scientific integrity, I have indicated all passages that I have either cited verbatim or paraphrased from published or unpublished sources.

St. Gallen, 29.05.2022

Signature

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'C. H. Z.', written in a cursive style.

9. Appendix

Conflict



Pain-bodies



Observer/awareness



Dis-identification with Mind/Ego

