

Pain Lasers and Love Lasers

by Bob Wentworth

In graduate school, I became an expert on lasers, devices that produce intense beams of exceptionally pure light. So, it's only natural that I sometimes use lasers as metaphors for how our minds work. I find the metaphor useful in understanding why some of us suffer as much as we do, and in charting a course towards more delightful ways of being.

To make a laser, you take a transparent substance that has been engineered to amplify light, and you put mirrors around it. A material that can amplify light will also spontaneously produce small amounts of light. When a tiny bit of light appears, if it is traveling in the right direction it will encounter the mirrors. Bouncing back and forth between the mirrors, with every pass through the amplifying material, it grows more and more intense. Typically one of the mirrors is designed to be only partly reflective, so some of the light will leak out, so that it can be used to do something useful. Some lasers produce light so intense that the light that leaks out can cut steel, or travel to the moon and back.

I have noticed that my mind works somewhat similarly. I spontaneously experience something slightly unpleasant or painful. I notice that discomfort or pain, and, if it is of a certain type (headed towards my mental mirrors), I'll have a reaction to it. Maybe it reminds me of some old unhealed pain, and that old pain starts flooding into my body-mind. Or maybe I think, "Crap! I don't want to feel pain -- why do I always have to put up with these unpleasant sensations!?" and as I think that, the pain and suffering increase, become more intense. In either case, the initial small unpleasantness has been amplified, and a more intense unpleasantness is now present. Typically, I react to this more intense experience in a way that further amplifies it, until it reaches an intensity of suffering that, although I'm all too used to it, is hard to endure.

This is what it's like to be a pain laser (or a more accurately, a suffering laser). It doesn't take much in the way of external circumstances to produce suffering--I'm so good at amplifying whatever whiffs of suffering naturally occur that I've spent much of my life with a constant background of significant inner suffering that I've felt at a loss to do much about.

I've shifted this pattern over the years so that it's less pronounced, but it's still often present. So, when a while ago I was thinking about acting to make my life better, it occurred to me that changing my external circumstances was never going to create the experience of life I wanted until I shifted this inner pattern. The key to whether or not this pattern will be active is this: When pain and suffering occur, will I react to it in a way that increases (amplifies) my suffering, or will I react in a way that soothes (decreases) my suffering? Because of the "mirror" effect, where I react to my reactions to my reactions to my reactions (and so on), changing my pattern modestly--from slightly amplifying to slightly soothing--if applied at every level of reaction, can have a dramatic effect in terms of my ultimate experience.

Usually the most pernicious reactions are the ones I notice the least, because I'm identified with them--they just seem like "me." So, I might have a lot of muscular tension, and some anxiety, present in my body. As I focus my attention on that tension and anxiety, I may unconsciously wrinkle my nose as if I'm smelling a foul odor, and experience a sense of disapproval towards that tension and anxiety, quietly thinking "It shouldn't be like that!" That disapproval acts like an amplifier for my suffering, cementing the tension and anxiety in place, and making them more intense. It's important for me to notice that disapproval. But simply noticing isn't enough. If I disapprove of that disapproval, things just get worse. But, if I can simply notice it, and trust that it's an expression of a beautiful longing for my well-being (this is where NVC comes in, with its insight that everything is simply an attempt to meet a beautiful human need), then the power of that disapproval begins to dissipate, and some of the tension and anxiety start to ease.

I can do more, by starting to change the way I think about what is happening inside me. I can trust that everything that happens is out of an intention of some part of me to care for me, to express its love for me. I can think that any signs of woundedness are not things to be chastised, but things to be nurtured.

Even as I work on eliminating the amplification of suffering, I can also turn to looking for ways I might start to amplify more life-serving experiences. Do I sense, anywhere in my body, a bit of well-being? Or even a bit of pleasure, or joy, appreciation, or love? Am I willing to let my attention rest there? In the absence of any negative reactions to what I'm witnessing, my attention can serve like a gentle breath blowing on an ember, inviting it to glow more brightly. If I do this often enough, those life affirming emotions

and inner experiences can start to habitually intensify. Maybe one day soon I'll be a "love laser," taking the glimmers of love that naturally arise and getting in the habit of amplifying those until I am saturated with love, and my "love light" shines intensely out into the world. Wouldn't that be something?

And wouldn't it *really* be something if we could all shut down our "pain lasers" and become "love lasers"? Would you like that? Is there any part of you that believes it might be possible? What's a small step you could take to get just a bit closer to being in the world in that way?

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