

Inside the Pain Box

Climber and philosopher Bill Ramsey has a theory about self-improvement that anyone can grasp. Appreciating the agony is the hard part—unless you're Bill Ramsey.

By Phil Hagen

There will be pain. The only question for Bill Ramsey on this day, as he faces his latest nemesis on Mount Charleston, is what kind.

After 40 attempts, there is little mystery about the pain of the climb itself. That's a given. The vast crag of limestone is called "The Hood" for good reason. Life up here is hard and somewhat dangerous, which is why sport climbers from all over the world come to test their skills and wills upon its steep walls. It's extra hard and somewhat more dangerous along an indented section called "Compton Cave," especially Ramsey's chosen route along it, known as a "5.14."

Though most sport climbing routes are no more than 100 feet long, those in the 5.10 family are extremely difficult (the scale goes from the easy 5.0s to the near-impossible 5.15s). There are not many humans who can climb a 5.14. At this level, the routes are more than steep, they are actually overhangs. The holds along the way—the places to which a climber clings with his fingers and feet—are small and far apart. Sometimes they are so small that there's barely a finger-size outcropping or hole to work with. Sometimes they are so far apart that an average-size man like Ramsey cannot reach them without lunging. Now combine those two challenges into one crucial move and put that package near the end of the route, at which point the climber has already spent a considerable amount of energy and tolerated a fair degree of pain without an opportunity to rest. That's what you call the crux of a 5.14, simply put.

But it's often more complicated in reality. In Ramsey's route, for example, he has to use that one-finger hold to pivot his entire body up and over to the next position. And while the middle finger of his left hand facilitates the move—not only sustaining his entire 145 pounds for a moment but carrying the full force of the movement—his right hand makes a lunging stab at a three-finger pocket, followed by his right leg swinging

over to a tiny footpad. “It’s a momentum thing,” Ramsey says. “But at this point you’re tired, you’re breathing hard and you have to make this very long leap for a very small hole. And you have to be accurate.”

If that were not tough enough, what makes that first hole extra snug around his crucial pivot finger is a limestone burr, which unkindly rips into his skin each time he attempts this move. So much so that last year’s six-week run at Compton Cave ended with a splattering of blood. This time, after more than a month of training and tries, he’s got it cornered. “I’m very close,” he says. “I might do it today.”

But there’s intermittent rain on this Thursday afternoon in August, and humidity is no friend of rock climbers, who habitually chalk their fingers between moves even under perfect conditions. There is no wind to dry the rock, either—another bad sign. And the thunder that cracks with an extra kick up here at 8,000 feet only adds inauspiciousness to an atmosphere already conducive to the type of pain Ramsey likes least.

* * *

“The aim of the wise is not to secure pleasure,” Aristotle said, “but to avoid pain.”

Wrong, Bill Ramsey says. “What he should have said is that the aim of the wise is to endure the sorts of pain that lead to the deeper forms of pleasure.”

With a joint Ph.D in philosophy and cognitive science, as well as several scholarly publishing credits under his belt, Ramsey has the credibility a man needs to challenge a hall-of-fame philosopher. What’s more, he is 48 years old and still at the top of the sport climbing game, which makes him a) unheard of, and b) wise enough to have formed his own theory about pain.

He calls it the “Pain Box.” With the premise that pain and suffering are unavoidable in life, Ramsey came up with a rectangle to represent the amount a person has at any given time. The key to the box is a dividing line that separates what Ramsey says are two “very different types of pain and suffering.” On the left “is all the pain associated with sacrifice and hard work,” whether mental fatigue from long hours of studying or physical fatigue from strenuous training sessions. On the right side is failure, and the frustration and disappointment that accompany it.

What Ramsey realized over the course of his climbing and philosophy careers is that if you endure more pain in the left side of the box, you push the divider to the right. The

result is pain reallocation. While the amount of total pain doesn't change, the good kind of pain (hard work and sacrifice) takes up more of the box than the bad kind of pain (failure).

That may sound suspiciously like “No Pain, No Gain” on the surface, but the Pain Box is more practical self-improvement concept than T-shirt slogan. “One nice thing about the box, besides the clarity of the imagery,” Ramsey says, “is the way it quantifies something that is often nebulous, and this can be a great motivator.” *Want less failure in life? Try a little more pain reallocation.* And less failure means more reward, which leads to deeper pleasure in life.

He's drawn the Pain Box on the chalkboard for his Introduction to Philosophy classes, and he's scratched it in the dirt for young climbers. And that's as far as Ramsey ever intended the theory to go, although he did happen to mention it to a friend who happens to be into marketing ideas. The last Ramsey has heard from the guy was that a Hollywood producer likes the concept. Something about the Pain Box as a character motivator.

Ramsey winces at the thought. “I told him, ‘You do whatever you want; it doesn't make any sense to me.’ It sounded like some horrible Hollywood movie, like *St. Elmo's Fire*.”

That's difficult for him to picture given that the Pain Box is designed to cut through our culture's marketing smoke about how we can get great abs and a big house without sacrifice. The Pain Box is about doing more to achieve more. In Ramsey's case, that's often doing more than even his climbing peers can believe.

“The Pain Box originally came up when I was thinking, ‘Why don't more people train like I do? I feel like I'm kind of weird in this way. Why don't they make the sacrifices that I make?’ I decided the answer was that it hurts. It hurts to train like that. Exertion is hard work. It's painful. People don't like pain. But they don't realize they have another kind of pain, too. So, it was a way of acknowledging that fact.”

* * *

Bill Ramsey doesn't spend a lot of time thinking about the type of pain caused by falling, but that's because sport climbing is relatively safe—not golf safe, but climbing safe. Unlike free soloists (unharnessed daredevils who get a rush from the fear factor),

sport climbers follow a path of pre-set bolts in the rock. Using carabiners, a climber clips his rope to these bolts as he goes, while the belayer below lets out the line. Especially because of the outward slant of 5.14 cliffs, falls normally aren't that big of a deal. But sometimes mistakes are made. Ramsey has known several climbers who've died or been seriously injured. One friend got his finger tangled in the rope, and when he fell, the finger didn't go down with him. Ramsey hasn't forgotten the screaming in the canyon.

This recollection came up while discussing the crux of his climb in The Hood. "It's a scary move," Ramsey says. "If you don't get into that thing [if it's not executed properly], while you're falling you have to concentrate on getting your finger out of the hole because you don't want to tear it off your hand. So as I'm falling I have to remind myself, *Pull your finger straight out of the hole.*"

Ramsey also has a few other matters to contend with up there on the crag. A 5.14-caliber climb demands a serious amount of study, stamina and skill, plus an exceptional strength-to-weight ratio. After that comes persistence. That this particular problem has taken Ramsey 40 attempts actually isn't bad. One climb, a 5.14 at the Virgin River Gorge called "The Route of All Evil," took him 80 tries before he conquered it.

Each climb comes with its own Pain Box. In the current case, the right side contains all the cumulative physical pain this climb has inflicted, and the frustration of each fall. There's only one cure: "I wanted to reduce that failure by climbing the route, and to do that I know I need to train harder."

* * *

Bill Ramsey is known for four things in the climbing world. The first is being a top-tier climber. He has conquered more than a dozen 5.14s and put many a vertical trail on the map. The second thing is his age. Most climbers in their 40s are merely relics. "When you look at the elders in the rock-climbing community, you talk about, 'Oh yeah he really blazed the trail for this or that,'" says fellow Las Vegas rock-climber Stephanie Forte, "but Bill's still performing at that level." Says Matt Samet, editor of *Climbing Magazine*: "I've routinely seen him out-climb people half his age." And the vast majority of today's top climbers are just that.

Ramsey's third type of fame helps explain the first two: "I'm kind of known for being a bit of a training fanatic," he understates.

Normally, 145 pounds isn't much on a 5-foot-11 frame, but Ramsey has about four percent body fat, and when he's up there working a climb it's a tough call as to which looks stronger, his chiseled muscle mass or the rock. Samet refers to this as "an innate, genetic brawn that you only see in a few guys at the very top," but he quickly also confirms that there's more to Ramsey's physique than DNA. "I remember one day driving home, after we'd spent two days in a row climbing at Rifle [Colorado], and I was so tired I couldn't do much more than slump in my seat. But Bill broke out some sort of Gold's Gym-looking, medieval spring-and-handle grip device and did repetitions on some hard setting the whole way home [about an hour]. And when we were home, he headed into the basement to lift weights and do weighted pull-ups on a fingerboard. In a word, he's indefatigable."

The "Kill Bill Workout," as his core routine is known in the climbing world, earns its infamy from its excruciating elements as well as the overall severity. "You should see what he does," says Forte, who, as Ramsey's next-door neighbor, often has. "His workouts are brutal."

On Thursdays in particular—that's "Death and Destruction Day." It starts at 8 a.m. in his garage's gym with one-handed dead-hangs on a one-inch edge, and then he straps on about 60 pounds for a multiple sets of fingertip pull-ups on an even smaller edge. After he climbs a system wall with a weight belt for a while (to work on his holds and hand strength), it's off to the indoor Red Rock Climbing Center to hone his techniques and do more conditioning. Then he heads to The Hood for a couple of 5.12 warm-up climbs, followed by a few runs at the Compton project.

* * *

On this Thursday he has saved enough strength for three attempts. And damn the weather, he's going for it. First, in preparation, he pops two ibuprofen and two Aleve—a combination he calls "Ibaleve"—for joint inflammation and the impending skin pain. Then he gets out the Super Glue, which he uses to adhere a square of tape to the back of his left middle finger. (He can't simply wrap the finger; that's how snug the hole is.) After a first helping of hand chalk, he's ready to climb.

The funny thing about watching a rock climber like Ramsey on such a difficult route is how easy he makes it look. As he nimbly navigates the limestone wall, the only signs of major exertion are his reddening, rippling back muscles and an occasional grunt.

Climbing is a like gymnastics, Forte says, in that it takes “delicate and precise movements that also need to be strong and powerful.” What makes gymnastics different — what has landed it as a prime-time Olympic sport — is that “when you see them flip through the air you think, ‘Oh that’s hard.’” Meantime, sport climbing was dropped from the X Games because it looked like the viewing audience could do it, too.

In just five minutes, Ramsey reaches the crux. Then, with a slip of his foot, it’s suddenly over, and Ramsey is left to dangle in his harness and evaluate what went wrong. He rests for a few minutes, trying to shake the feeling back into his compressed fingers. Then he begins again, at the point of the fall. This time he gets it right and proceeds to do the final move of the climb.

Of course, that doesn’t count. So, for an hour he rests at the base of Compton Cave, then tries again. On the second attempt, he makes it through the crux but slips during the finale. He rests for another hour, then tries one last time. The crux gets him again. He’ll have to wait till Sunday to overcome failure.

Meantime, Thursday isn’t nearly over yet. “I’m going to completely destroy myself tonight,” he says, “because then I’ve got two days off.”

Ramsey ended up leaving the mountain around 7:15 p.m. He headed back to the Red Rock gym for a 90-minute workout, which included something called “campusing,” an exercise in which, using only his fingertips, he hops up and down small wooden rungs on the wall in order to shock his tendons and recruit new nerve fibers. Then he went home to lift weights and do more sets of pull-ups. His Thursday finally ended at 12:30 Friday morning.

The Pain Box can only partly explain what keeps him going. Like all the effort that goes into his climbing — what does climbing do for him? There are no gold medals or rankings or even a consistent recording of feats in the sport. When Ramsey finally nails that 5.14, only he, his belayer and a few friends will ever know. Yet somehow that’s enough to inspire a 16-hour training day.

“It is drudgery, and it can be a real problem to maintain your psyche,” Ramsey says. “But the only other option is failing.”

* * *

The fourth thing that Bill Ramsey is known for among climbers is his equal intensity as a scholar. “I’ve taken quite a few trips with Bill,” Samet says, “and on rest days or at night he’d be hammering on his computer or rifling through abstracts and papers.” While Ramsey’s writings are respected in academia, a topic such as *Connectionism, Eliminativism, and the Future of Folk Psychology* doesn’t necessarily make for good campfire conversation. “I made the mistake once of asking him about his book project,” Samet says, “and his answer was so complex I had to tune out after about 30 seconds and pretend I was still listening.”

In the classroom, though, Ramsey is known for making his subjects accessible, useful, even provocative. This is why, during his 18 years at Notre Dame, he was the only professor to win all of the university’s major teaching awards that were possible to win. He was—and evidently is at UNLV, too—especially popular on campus for his Introduction to Philosophy course, in which he skips the which-philosopher-said-what stuff in favor of talking about ideas. “I try to offer radically different perspectives than their own,” Ramsey says. “I want students to see that certain theories aren’t crazy—that we don’t have free will, for example. I don’t care if they embrace them, but see that they can be intellectually defended. It broadens their perception, it makes them open-minded, and it increases their ability to accept a different perspective.”

“There’s a woman I met from Notre Dame,” Forte says, “and she said to me, ‘Bill’s one of those professors that when you interview students 30 years from now and ask them who made a difference in their lives, they’re going to say Bill Ramsey.’”

It was news in both the philosophy and rock-climbing worlds when Ramsey left his post in Notre Dame’s prestigious philosophy department for UNLV. But, after a lopsided devotion to his field for nearly two decades, he needed more balance. Like David Hume once said, “Be a philosopher, but, amid all your philosophy, be still a man.”

Here’s how Ramsey explained himself, in an essay titled “You Are Not Your Job,” which appears online (bdel.com/scene/word):

Despite being happy working at Notre Dame, I was generally miserable living in South Bend, Indiana. Much of my misery stemmed from the absurd amount of driving required to go climbing. I would clock over 800 roundtrip miles to climb at Kentucky's Red River Gorge, spending 14 hours behind the wheel each weekend. By contrast, in Las Vegas, superb year-round limestone and sandstone climbing will never be more than 45 minutes away. It was a classic career versus lifestyle decision. As some of my Catholic friends advocate, I chose life.

The situation has worked out nicely career-wise. Ramsey enjoys a more diverse student body at UNLV, the camaraderie and intellectual energy of his new philosophy department, and the irony of having “left the saints for the sinners,” including this detail: At Notre Dame, America’s headquarters for religious philosophy, he was the “village atheist”; here in Sin City he gets to teach the Philosophy of Religion.

And thanks to a buffet of top routes just a half-hour from his northwest Las Vegas home, the climbing couldn’t be better. It has inspired and enabled Ramsey to get in the best shape of his life and to achieve a better lifestyle balance. “Bill seems a lot happier in Vegas,” Samet says.

“A long time ago,” Ramsey says, “I decided that I wanted a life that was both intellectual and athletic. I wouldn’t be the best at either one, but I wanted to be pretty damn good at both. I always figured that would be a pretty rewarding life, to be a scholar and an athlete, and I think I’ve accomplished that.”

* * *

On Sunday, Ramsey’s pain was all good. He had reserved plenty of strength for the climb—there was no death-and-destruction routine beforehand. He felt that he had done enough pushing of the Pain Box bar on Thursday. And sure enough, on the first attempt of the day, he climbed the 5.14.

“There was a direct correlation between the kind of sacrifice I had the week before and the success I had on Sunday,” Ramsey says the next day over coffee.

And what did the man behind the philosophy feel?

“Ecstasy,” he says.

Overall, Ramsey looks more relieved than anything. Possibly because at this point he has mentally moved on, or maybe he's absorbed in a paper on "the ways we explain and predict human behavior" that he's trying to finish before school begins. But there's also this: He never knows when pushing harder in the Pain Box won't be enough. "I always have this doubt in the back of my mind when I go up there, *At what point am I not going to be able to do this? Am I going to hit the wall pretty soon?* And so when I succeed it's like, OK, I can reassure myself it's nice to know I'm not there yet."

Still, it makes you wonder what the rock climber and philosophy professor will do without each other some day. After all, Ramsey admits that "climbing is a critical dimension of who I am," and that, at age 48, it won't be long before there will be more failure than ecstasy. He can't go on forever.

If at this point you expect Ramsey to share the meaning of life, forget it. "Meaning is not *of* life but *in* life" is his standard reply. "It's in the various endeavors we pursue and relationships we develop that, if we are lucky, prove to be deeply gratifying."

But therein might lie the clue to how Ramsey will carry on: The teacher and climber will become one, and all the pain of not climbing at a high level will be reallocated by the deeper pleasure of helping others. Yes, it's the old athlete-retires-and-becomes-a-coach option, and Ramsey is OK with that. Besides, it's not exactly a whole new development in his life; the professor in him tends to come out when he's around young climbers. What might be exciting, though, is his potential influence on Las Vegas, which has world-class rocks and what he calls a "diverse and active" climbing community.

"Any climber there who's spent time with Bill will tell you he's immensely motivating," Samet says. "He's one of the best people to go climbing with, as when he's out there he doesn't screw around—he climbs. Some climbers seem more concerned with having a picnic *near* the rocks and flapping their gobs. Bill isn't one of them. I'm sure his skills and attitude are an injection of the good stuff right into the Vegas climbing scene's mainline."

Forte has already seen that influence. "Bill Ramsey is someone people know and respect. And because of his experience as a professor, he knows how to explain things in a manner in which people can learn. When he moved to town, it was a big deal. Every

climber under the age of 30 was hanging out in Bill's garage. It was like he's Bill the Apostle."

And yes, she confirms, the Pain Box is part of the doctrine.