



TRICYCLE TEACHINGS

12

**MONTHS OF DHARMA**

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A TRICYCLE E-BOOK

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JANUARY

THE DIGNITY OF  
RESTRAINT

Why you can't have your cake and enlightenment, too. A Thai forest monk explains why we don't have to be slaves to our desires

THANISSARO BHIKKHU

It's always interesting to notice how words disappear from common usage. We have them in our passive vocabulary, we know their meaning, but they tend to disappear from day-to-day conversation—which usually means that they've disappeared from the way we shape our lives. Several years back I gave a dhamma talk in which I happened to mention the word *dignity*. After the talk, a woman in the audience who had emigrated from Russia came up to me and said that she had never heard Americans use the word *dignity* before. She had learned it when she studied English in Russia, but she had never heard people use it here. And it's good to think about why. Where and why did it disappear?

I think the reason is related to another word that tends to disappear from common usage, and that's *restraint*: foregoing certain pleasures, not because we have to, but because they go against our principles. The opportunity to indulge in those pleasures may be there, but we learn how to say no. This of course is related to another word we tend not to use,

and that's *temptation*. Even though we don't have to believe that there's someone out there actively tempting us, there are things all around us that do, that tempt us to give in to our desires. And an important part of our practice is that we exercise restraint. As the Buddha says, restraint over the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body is good, as is restraint in terms of our actions, our speech, and our thoughts.

What's good about it? Well, for one thing, if we don't have any restraint, we don't have any control over where our lives are going. Anything that comes our way immediately pulls us into its wake. We don't have any strong sense of priorities, of what's really worthwhile, of what's not worthwhile, of the pleasures we'd gain by saying no to other pleasures. How do we rank the pleasures in our lives, the happiness, the sense of well-being that we get in various ways? Actually, there's a sense of well-being that comes from being totally independent, from not needing other things. If that state of well-being doesn't have a chance to develop, if we're constantly giving in to our impulse to do this or take that, we'll never know what that well-being is.

At the same time, we'll never know our impulses. When you simply ride with your impulses, you don't understand their force. They're like the currents below the surface of a river: only if you try to build a dam across the river will you detect those currents and appreciate how strong they are. So we have to look at what's important in life, develop a strong sense of priorities, and be willing to say no to the currents that would lead to less worthwhile pleasures. As the Buddha said, if you see a greater pleasure that comes from forsaking a lesser pleasure, be willing to forsake that lesser pleasure for the greater one. Sounds like a no-brainer, but if you look at the way most people live, they don't think in those terms. They want everything that comes their way. They want to have their cake and enlightenment, too; to win at chess without sacrific-

ing a single pawn. Even when they meditate, their purpose in developing mindfulness is to gain an even more intense appreciation of the experience of every moment in life. That's something you never see in the Buddha's teachings. His theme is always that you have to let go of this in order to gain that, give this up in order to arrive at that. There's always a trade-off.

So we're not practicing for a more intense appreciation of sights, scents, sounds, tastes, smells, tactile sensations. We're practicing to realize that the mind doesn't need to depend on those things, and that it's healthier without such dependencies. Even though the body requires a modicum of the requisites of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine, there's an awful lot that it doesn't need. And because our use of the requisites involves suffering, both for ourselves and for everyone else involved in their production, we owe it to ourselves and to others to keep pushing the envelope in the direction of restraint, to give up the things we don't need, so as to be as unburdensome as possible.

This is why so much of the training lies in learning to put this aside, put that aside, give this up, give that up. Developing this habit on the external level makes us reflect on the internal level: Which attachments in the mind would be good to give up? Could our mind survive perfectly well without the things we tend to crave? The Buddha's answer is yes. In fact, the mind is better off that way.

Still, a very strong part of our mind resists that teaching. We may give up things for a time, but our attitude is often "I gave up this for a certain while, I gave up that for so long, now I can get back to it." On retreat people tend to make a lot of vows—"Well, I'll give up cigarettes for the retreat, I'll give up newspapers"—but as soon as the retreat is over they go back to their old ways. They've missed the whole point, which is that if you can survive for three months without those things, you can probably survive for the rest of the year without them as well.

Hopefully, during those three months you've seen the advantages of giving them up. So you can decide, "Okay, I'm going to continue giving them up." Even though you may have the opportunity to say yes to your desires, you remind yourself to say no. This principle of restraint, of giving things up, applies to every step of the path. When you're practicing generosity, you have to give up things that you might enjoy. You realize the benefits that come from saying no to your greed and allowing other people to enjoy what you're giving away.

For example, when you're living in a group, there's food to be shared by all. If you give up some of your share so others can enjoy a bigger share, you're creating a better atmosphere in the group. So you have to ask yourself, "Is the gratification I get from taking this thing worth the trade?" And you begin to see the advantages of giving up on this level. This is where dignity begins to come back into our lives: We're not just digestive tracts. We're not slaves to our desires. We're their masters.

The same with the precepts: there may be things that you'd like to do or say, but you don't do them, you don't say them, because they're dishonest or hurtful. Even if you feel that you might get ahead or gain some advantage by saying them, you don't, because they go against your principles. You find that you don't stoop to the activities that you used to, and there's a sense of honor, a sense of dignity that comes with that: that you can't be bought off with those particular pleasures, with the temptation to take the easy way out. At the same time, you're showing respect for the dignity, the worth, of those around you. And again, this gives dignity to our lives.

When you're meditating, the same process holds. People sometimes wonder why they can't get their minds to concentrate. It's because they're not willing to give up other interests, even for the time being. A thought comes and you just go right after it without checking to see where it's

going. This idea comes that sounds interesting, that looks intriguing, you've got a whole hour to think about whatever you want. If that's your attitude toward the meditation period, nothing's going to get accomplished. You have to realize that this is your opportunity to get the mind stable and still. In order to do that, you have to give up all kinds of other thoughts. Thoughts about the past, thoughts about the future, figuring this out, planning for that, whatever: you have to put them all aside. No matter how wonderful or sophisticated those thoughts are, you just say no to them.

Now, if you've been practicing generosity and have really been serious about practicing the precepts, you've developed the ability to say no skillfully, which is why generosity and the precepts are not optional parts of the practice. They're the foundation of meditation. When you've made a practice of generosity and virtue, the mind's ability to say no to its impulses has been strengthened and given finesse. You've seen the good results that come from being able to restrain yourself in terms of your words and deeds. You've seen that restraint means the opposite of deprivation. Now, as you meditate, you've got the opportunity to restrain your thoughts and see what good comes from that. If you really are able to say no to your vagrant ideas, you find that the mind can settle down with a much greater sense of satisfaction in its state of concentration than could possibly come with those ideas, no matter how fantastic they are.

You find that the satisfaction of giving in to those distractions just slips through your fingers as if it had never been there. It's like trying to grab a handful of water or a fistful of air. But the sense of well-being that comes with repeatedly being able to bring your mind to a state of stillness, even if you haven't gone all the way, begins to permeate everything else in your life. You find that the mind really is a more independent thing than you imagined it could be. It doesn't need to give in to those

impulses. It can say no to itself.

The mind is even more independent when you develop the discernment that's able to dig out the source of those impulses and see where they come from, to the point where the whole issue of temptation is no longer an issue because there's nothing tempting. You look at the things that would pull the mind out of its stillness, out of its independence, and you realize they're just not worth it. In the past you were training the mind in a sense of hunger—that's what we do when we keep giving in to impulses: we're training ourselves in hunger. But now you train the mind in the direction of having enough, of being free, and you realize that the sense of hunger that you used to cultivate is really a major source of suffering. You're much better off without it.

It's important that we realize the role that restraint plays in overcoming the problem of suffering and finding true well-being for ourselves. You realize that you're not giving up anything you really need. You're a lot better off without it. There's a part of the mind that resists this truth, and our culture hasn't been very helpful at all because it encourages that resistance: "Give in to this impulse, give in to that impulse, obey your thirst. It's good for the economy, it's good for you spiritually. Watch out, if you repress your desires you're going to get tied up in psychological knots." The lessons our culture teaches us—to go out and buy, buy, buy; be greedy, be greedy; give in, give in—are all over the place. And what kind of dignity comes from following those messages? The dignity of a fish gobbling down bait. We've got to unlearn those habits, unlearn those messages, if we want to revive words like *dignity* and *restraint*, and to reap the rewards that the realities of dignity and restraint have to offer our minds.

**Thanissaro Bhikkhu** is the abbot of Metta Forest Monastery.

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FEBRUARY

WHAT LOVE IS

AYYA KHEMA

*Born in Berlin of Jewish parents, **Ayya Khema** (1923–1997) escaped Nazi Germany in 1938 with a transport of 200 children to Glasgow. She joined her parents two years later in Shanghai, where, with the outbreak of war, the family was put into a Japanese POW camp, in which her father died. Four years after her camp was liberated, Ayya Khema emigrated to the United States, where she married and had two children. While traveling in Asia from 1960 to 1964, she learned meditation and in 1975, began to teach. Three years later she established Wat Buddha Dhamma, a forest monastery in the Theravada tradition near Sydney, Australia. In 1979 she was ordained as a Buddhist nun in Sri Lanka. Until her death in 1997, she was the spiritual director of BuddhaHaus in Oy-Mittleberg, Germany, which she established. She has written numerous books in English and German, including *Being Nobody, Going Nowhere* (Wisdom Publications) and *When the Iron Eagle Flies* (Penguin Books).*

Most people are under the impression that they can think out their lives. But that's a misconception. We are subject to our emotions and think in ways based on our emotions. So it's extremely important to do something about our emotions. In the same way as the Buddha gave us the

Four Supreme Efforts for the mind, he also outlined the Four Emotions for the heart. The Four Supreme Efforts for the mind are (1) not to let an unwholesome thought arise which has not yet arisen, (2) not to let an unwholesome thought continue which has already arisen, (3) to make a wholesome thought arise which has not yet arisen, (4) to make a wholesome thought continue which has already arisen. The Four Emotions—lovingkindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), joy with others (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upekkha*)—are called the “divine abodes.” When we have perfected these four, we have heaven on earth, paradise in our own heart.

I think everybody knows that above us is the sky and not heaven. We have heaven and hell within us and can experience this quite easily. So even without having complete concentration in meditation and profound insights, the Four Divine Abidings, or Supreme Emotions, enable us to live on a level of truth and lovingness, security, and certainty, which gives life a totally different quality. When we are able to arouse love in our hearts without any cause, just because love is the heart’s quality, we feel secure. It is impossible to buy security, even though many people would like to do so. Insurance companies have the largest buildings because people try to buy security. But when we create certainty within, through a loving heart, we feel assured that our reactions and feelings are not going to be detrimental to our own or other people’s happiness. Many fears will vanish.

*Metta*—the first of the Supreme Emotions—is usually translated as “lovingkindness.” But lovingkindness doesn’t have the same impact in English that the word love has, which carries a lot of meaning for us. We have many ideas about love. The most profound thought we have about love, which is propagated in novels, movies, and billboards, is the idea that love exists between two people who are utterly compatible, usually

young and pretty, and who for some odd reason have a chemical attraction toward each other—none of which can last. Most people find out during the course of their lifetime that this is a myth, that it doesn't work that way. Most people then think it's their own fault or the other person's fault or the fault of both, and they try a new relationship. After the third, fourth, or fifth try, they might know better; but a lot of people are still trying. That's usually what's called love in our society.

In reality, love is a quality of our heart. The heart has no other function. If we were aware that we all contain love within us, and that we can foster and develop it, we would certainly give that far more attention than we do. In all developed societies there are institutions to foster the expansion of the mind, from the age of three until death. But we don't have any institutions to develop the heart, so we have to do it ourselves. Most people are either waiting for or relating to the one person who makes it possible for them to feel love at last. But that kind of love is beset with fear, and fear is part of hate. What we hate is the idea that this special person may die, walk away, have other feelings and thoughts—in other words, the fear that love may end, because we believe that love is situated strictly in that one person. Since there are six billion people on this planet, this is rather absurd. Yet most people think that our loveability is dependent upon one person and having that one person near us. That creates the fear of loss, and love beset by fear cannot be pure. We create a dependency upon that person, and on his or her ideas and emotions. There is no freedom in that, no freedom to love.

If we see quite clearly that love is a quality that we all have, then we can start developing that ability. Any skill that we have, we have developed through practice. If we've learned to type, we've had to practice. We can practice love and eventually we'll have that skill. Love has nothing to do with finding somebody who is worth loving, or checking out

people to see whether they are truly lovable. If we investigate ourselves honestly enough, we find that we're not all that lovable either, so why do we expect somebody else to be totally lovable? It has nothing to do with the qualities of the other person, or whether he or she wants to be loved, is going to love us back, or needs love. Everyone needs love. Because we know our own faults, when somebody loves us we think, Oh, that's great, this person loves me and doesn't even know I have all these problems. We're looking for somebody to love us to support a certain image of ourselves. If we can't find anybody, we feel bereft. People even get depressed or search for escape routes. These are wrong ways of going at it.

On the spiritual path, there's nothing to get, and everything to get rid of. Obviously, the first thing to let go of is trying to "get" love, and instead to give it. That's the secret of the spiritual path. One has to give oneself wholeheartedly. Whatever we do half heartedly, brings half-hearted results. How can we give ourselves? By not holding back. By not wanting for ourselves. If we want to be loved, we are looking for a support system. If we want to love, we are looking for spiritual growth. Disliking others is far too easy. Anybody can do it and justify it because, of course, people are often not very bright and don't act the way we'd like them to act. Disliking makes grooves in the heart, and it becomes easier and easier to fall into these grooves. We not only dislike others, but also ourselves. If one likes or loves oneself, it's easier to love others, which is why we always start lovingkindness meditations with the focus on ourselves. That's not egocentricity. If we don't like ourselves because we have faults, or have made mistakes, we will transfer that dislike to others and judge them accordingly. We are not here to be judge and jury. First of all, we don't even have the qualifications. It's also a very unsatisfactory job, doesn't pay, and just makes people unhappy.

People often feel that it's necessary to be that way to protect them-

selves. But what do we need to protect ourselves from? We have to protect our bodies from injury. Do we have to protect ourselves from love? We are all in this together, living on this planet at the same time, breathing the same air. We all have the same limbs, thoughts, and emotions. The idea that we are separate beings is an illusion. If we practice meditation diligently with perseverance, then one day we'll get over this illusion of separation. Meditation makes it possible to see the totality of all manifestation. There is one creation and we are all part of it. What can we be afraid of? We are afraid to love ourselves, afraid to love creation, afraid to love others because we know negative things about ourselves. Knowing that we do things wrong, that we have unhappy or unwholesome thoughts, is no reason not to love. A mother who loves her children doesn't stop loving them when they act silly or unpleasant. Small children have hundreds of unwholesome thoughts a day and give voice to them quite loudly. We have them too, but we do not express them all.

So, if a mother can love a child who is making difficulties for her, why can't we love ourselves? Loving oneself and knowing oneself are not the same thing. Love is the warmth of the heart, the connectedness, the protection, the caring, the concern, the embrace that comes from acceptance and understanding for oneself. Having practiced that, we are in a much better position to practice love toward others. They are just as unlovable as we are, and they have just as many unwholesome thoughts. But that doesn't matter. We are not judge and jury. When we realize that we can actually love ourselves, there is a feeling of being at ease. We don't constantly have to become or pretend, or strive to be somebody. We can just be. It's nice to just be, and not be "somebody." Love makes that possible. By the same token, when we relate to other people, we can let them just be and love them. We all have daily opportunities to practice this. It's a skill, like any other.

3

MARCH

WHAT CHANGES?

Psychotherapy, Buddhism, and a sense of boundless support

MARK EPSTEIN, MD

Not long ago, an editor who had been a patient of mine called to ask if I would write a piece for her magazine about what exactly changes as a result of psychotherapy. She wanted to know how to explain a successful therapy to her readers, many of whom might be reluctant to see a therapist, either because of the stigma attached or because they were unsure of how it could help. Write something about that, she suggested.

I was a little surprised at her request. She had been my patient for close to ten years, completing her work with me three years before she called. She was a very skilled editor and a talented writer. If anyone could talk about what changes in therapy, she would be the one, I thought. Perhaps she was sending me a not-so-subtle message, in line with what the composer John Cage has called his favorite Zen story, about the master who said, “Now that I’m enlightened, I’m just as miserable as I ever was!” Was that what the editor was implying about her work with me?

Nevertheless, after close to a year of procrastination, I gathered my thoughts to write the piece she requested. This same patient used to tell

me that she had stayed so long in therapy because I often surprised her. Whenever she thought she could predict how I might respond to a given issue in her life, I would come, mercurially, from an unexpected direction. When she told me this, I felt proud: it signaled something successful about my method. I had not tried to surprise her; I had always just responded honestly to whatever she was telling me. But I did have a secret method, one that derived from my immersion in Buddhist psychology. *Tread softly*, I would tell myself, remembering the Buddha's own emphasis on kindness. *Dwell in the stillness of mind*. And always look for the clinging.

It is a paradox of therapy that although impermanence is one of the fundamental laws of the universe, most people do not want to change. They hold fast to their ideas of themselves, to their interpretations of how things are, to their grievances, their anxieties, their identities, and their pain. Perhaps this is why my editor-patient took such delight in my unpredictability. Even if it might be difficult for her to change, at least she saw that *I* could change—in my role as a therapist, in any case. Maybe I embodied the principle of “reliable unreliability” that, while it creates anxiety in the outside world, is perversely comforting in the safety of the therapist's office.

Fear in life is fear of change, John Cage said, in one of his most famous pronouncements. His lifelong friend, the artist Robert Rauschenberg, often repeated Cage's aphorism, adding his own coda: “Nothing can avoid changing. It's the only thing you can count on. Because life doesn't have any other possibility, everyone can be measured by his adaptability to change.”

That is one way to phrase it, I thought. What changes in a successful therapy is one's adaptability to change. In many ways, just saying this much might be enough. The Buddha framed it somewhat differently,

though. Transformation happens, he taught, when suffering is known and clinging abandoned. This can happen through therapy as well as through meditation; it can even happen spontaneously without either one. In the case of therapy, if you're lucky you stop taking your gripes, your feelings of injustice, and your insecurities as seriously as you did when you began. This relaxation allows a more flexible and realistic attitude toward everything. It permits the self to adapt to the change that it is intrinsically part of, rather than trying to hold itself apart. And it permits a natural compassion to arise, both toward yourself, caught in whatever you still get caught in, and toward others, caught in their own pain.

There is a thread that connects the worlds of therapy and meditation, a thread pioneered by the British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott. To Winnicott, the very basis of human nature is a fundamental state of "essential aloneness" that paradoxically exists only "under maximum conditions of dependence." The psychoanalyst Michael Eigen calls this the "boundless, unknown support" of primary aloneness. "It seems to me," Eigen writes, "that something like a sense of a boundless unknown is part of the background sense of existence. It provides a basis for a sense of emergent trust and faith. If [we] cannot trust the environment to uphold our beings, we live in jeopardy." This sense of background support is what a successful therapy makes possible. Its emergence helps make the inevitable changes of life more tolerable, allowing suffering to be acknowledged and clinging observed with something akin to humor. Meditation, too, can bring this sense of boundless unknown support into awareness, but sometimes the personal relationship with a therapist is a particularly helpful means of achieving the same thing.

The model for this process comes from the study of infants and their caregivers. A baby needs the mother or father to be present but

not overly interfering so that it can settle into its own mind and body. Knowing that the parent is around, the child can relax. This relaxation permits the child to develop an internal life in which the mind begins a lifelong process of getting to know itself. “If something goes wrong with the support one does not know is there,” writes Michael Eigen, “the growing personality is affected.” Therapists often find themselves resurrecting this sense of background support for patients whose sense of primary aloneness was wounded for one reason or another. Buddhist meditation plays on this same theme. By creating a sense of background support through the calming and stilling of the mind, meditation makes possible the compassionate conditions that allow clinging to be released.

My thinking on this matter opened up in a workshop I taught with Robert Thurman and Sharon Salzberg. Some hours into the workshop, a woman with a worried look on her face raised her hand to ask a question that seemed to have been simmering for some time. “What can I do about my regret?” she began. “I’ve been feeling badly about ways I treated my mother, about things I said to her, and I can no longer apologize to her.” Bob took the question and responded immediately. “She’s not alive, is that what you mean? Because she’s dead you can’t apologize to her?” Bob has long defended the traditional Buddhist view of reincarnation, and it would have been easy for him to go off on a long tangent at this point. But he did not. “She can still hear you,” he said, as he began to explain the Buddhist notion of rebirth and the ways in which people remain connected life after life. Something in the woman’s face relaxed as he spoke, even as it was clear that she did not entirely share his belief in reincarnation. Bob seemed to notice this, and his tone changed. He looked at her directly. “She doesn’t want that apology from you, you know,” he told her. “She just wants you to have that sweet smile on your face that you have now. Go ahead and become a Buddha yourself. That

will be better than any apology.”

Everyone in the room could sense the psychological truth of Bob’s response. Although he was answering in a Buddhist context, his reply was very therapeutic. Of course a mother wants nothing more than for her child to be happy. The woman in the workshop, hampered by her regret, was actually blocking this maternal energy in herself. Her contact with unknown boundless support was full of static. Her mother might have dropped her physical body, but, as Bob was pointing out, she was not entirely unavailable. The room seemed to swell with a maternal energy as the woman in the workshop wrestled with his words. The importance of her apology receded amidst the palpable presence of her mother’s love.

Some weeks later, I encountered something similar from another unexpected source—an article in *The New Yorker* about Paul McCartney. Entitled “When I’m Sixty-four,” it appeared in the June 4, 2007 issue, just as McCartney was turning 65 and launching a new album, *Memory Almost Full*. The themes of reminiscence and loss running through the songs on the album reflect what the *New Yorker* writer John Colapinto saw as an “unmistakable sadness” in McCartney.

Once, years ago, as a college student, I found myself on the same flight as McCartney and his wife Linda. I snuck up the circular stairs to the First Class lounge, hoping to catch a glimpse of the star, and found him sprawled on a sofa asleep. I was flummoxed. Seeing him sleeping suddenly made him seem human—and vulnerable.

I sensed that same vulnerability as I read the *New Yorker* article. Linda, his wife of 29 years, had died of breast cancer some years before; he was ending, in a well-publicized catastrophe, his marriage to Heather Mills; and he was openly admitting to dyeing his hair. Though still an award-winning megastar, McCartney was now alone. Colapinto

described him eating by himself in an Italian restaurant and walking through London, continually accosted by passersby thrusting CDs at him to sign. It sounded grim. But then, as the article continued and McCartney began opening up to Colapinto, a funny thing happened. The same theme that had emerged in our workshop began to pour out of Paul McCartney.

McCartney's mother, Mary, was a midwife and the main financial support of the family. His father, Jim, was a jazz trumpeter and cotton salesman who had played in clubs in Liverpool in the 1920s. When Paul was 14 he swapped a trumpet his father had given him for his first guitar. That same year, his mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. A mastectomy followed, but she died after suffering an embolism while recovering from surgery. McCartney wrote his first song that year, a love ballad called "I Lost My Little Girl."

"I didn't think I was writing anything to do with my mum, but from this perspective I possibly was," he told Colapinto. "She died when I was 14, so you get that terrible thing of not being able to picture her face after a few years. It's sort of a horrific feeling of slipping away."

McCartney's mother continued to appear and reappear throughout the *New Yorker* piece. Though she was long deceased, her influence persisted, inspiring some of his most lasting work. Colapinto writes:

The melody to "Yesterday" . . . came to McCartney in a dream. He brought it to Lennon, unfinished, with nonsense lyrics as a place holder: "Scrambled eggs, oh my, baby, how I love your legs." The song became a standing joke between them for days while they tried to find words to fit the melody. McCartney finally wrote the lyrics during a three-hour car trip from Lisbon to the south of Portugal [that] he took with Jane Asher, his girlfriend at the time.

“The words are quite mature for a kid,” McCartney said. “Rather . . . dark. Yet [the song] doesn’t communicate itself as too dark somehow. But again, I wonder, psychologically, looking at that now, I sort of think of the words ‘Why she had to go, I don’t know, she wouldn’t say. I said something wrong, now I long for yesterday.’ Was that harking back to my mum?”

Reading McCarthy’s words, I couldn’t help but think of the exchange in our workshop. Love for the long-lost parent needs to keep finding new ways to express itself. It is part of the unknown boundless support of the mind. Death of a parent does not mean that the support ceases to exist. I was particularly struck that the melody of “Yesterday” had appeared to McCartney in a dream. Bubbling up from the unconscious, the trace of the mother made itself known. McCartney’s mother was still very present as the article came to a close. Colapinto wrote:

I was curious to know whether he thought of the sixties as a magical time. “I think I remember it that way,” he said, without conviction. “But, like everything, there’s the juxtaposition. When I wrote ‘Let It Be,’ for instance”—a song that begins “When I find myself in times of trouble/Mother Mary comes to me”—“I’d been partying too much. I had a sort of dream where my mum came to me and said, ‘It’ll be O.K. Let it be.’ That’s where the song came from. So I obviously wasn’t doing too great. It was not just the golden memories.”

McCartney’s recurrent encounters with his long-lost mother merged with Thurman’s words to the woman in our workshop who was mired in self-blame. Both of them seemed to be whispering the same advice:

“Let it be.”

The therapeutic implication of this advice was not lost on me. It supported the basic premise that John Cage, D. W. Winnicott, Michael Eigen, and the Buddha seemed to agree on. While the human impulse is to search for an *answer*—for restitution or reparation or repair in the case of early childhood wounds, and for ultimate release into an absolute heaven or God in the case of the spiritual search—these five men saw a different path to healing. In ways that are remarkably similar, albeit expressed in entirely different languages, they laid out a humble prescription: *Connecting with the boundless unknown support intrinsic to the mind is the key to psychological balance.*

Ironically, the cover of the *New Yorker* issue I had been reading shows Tony Soprano looking over his shoulder as he walks out the door of his therapist’s office for the final time. Called “Last Exit,” the illustration foreshadowed the closing episode of *The Sopranos*, in which Tony looks up from the table at someone entering the restaurant where he’s dining . . . and the television screen abruptly goes to static. We are left to presume that Tony has just glimpsed his assassin.

Death comes to everyone, even Tony Soprano. And therapy, even good therapy, comes to an end. Change is everywhere. Yet the support that has its origins in our most primary relationships need not be forsaken. Our mothers may die, or disappoint, but they still come to us in our dreams.

The editor who asked me to write about what changes in therapy eventually stopped coming to see me. “I feel like I’m just paying for your friendship now,” she told me one day, as she broached the topic that the psychotherapy profession ominously calls *termination*. I took her comment as a sign of success, although I felt my own pangs of regret upon hearing it. I loved my time with her, and it was not easy for me to

let her go, even though I knew she was right: she no longer needed me to remind her of the unknown boundless support that was intrinsic to her nature. In times of trouble, she now found that something ineffable would come to her aid. Whispering its own words of wisdom, the background energy of her being had its own intelligence. She might be just as miserable as she ever was, but she was no longer filled with regret about it, nor was she casting about for someone to blame.

“I said something wrong, now I long for yesterday,” Paul McCartney sang. The woman in our workshop said much the same thing as she reached out, with remorse, for her lost mother. My patient used therapy to navigate these same waters, as she struggled with love and loss, shame and sorrow. Yet her willingness to unburden herself to me paid a dividend: the Buddha’s teachings opened up to her. Not only was she more accepting of change, she was changed. There was a lightness to her, an irreverence, a jauntiness poking through the surface of her serious-editor persona. In fact, her energy reminded me a little of Paul McCartney’s. On his good days.

**Mark Epstein, MD**, is a psychiatrist and longtime Buddhist practitioner who has written extensively about Buddhism and psychotherapy. His most recent book is *The Trauma of Everyday Life: A Guide to Inner Peace*, published by Penguin Press in August 2013.

4

APRIL

THE ART OF REALITY

Bruce Wagner remembers the “simple but not easy” lessons of his teacher, Carlos Castaneda

BRUCE WAGNER

And I say to you: When someone leaves, someone remains. The point through which a man passed is no longer empty. The only place that is empty, with human solitude, is that through which no man has passed. —César Vallejo

*We sometimes passed a billboard in L.A. that digitally tallied how many had died that year—thus far—from smoking. (It is there still.) If I was driving, he'd literally cover his eyes when we approached, wincing in disapproval. Each time he made that gesture, I was surprised and moved: yes, it was true, he'd endlessly instructed how one should use death as an advisor—“I have said it until I am blue in the face”—but the roadside version wasn't at all what he meant. No learning, no urgent poetics came from numbers that might well have been a telethon's tote, and nothing evoked the teachings of his lineage: to intend awareness with each breath, for such is the birthright of the impeccable being who is going to die. None: merely another ad, a crude binding upon the clear green chakra of the heart, and it filled him with sorrow . . .*

Today the winds are high and piercing. They shake the house and shiver the skin: ineffable, gusty, gutsy, merciless. They come in wild, majestic packs—from left field—at once sentimental and indifferent. They do not care.

They blow in from *the ocean of awareness*.

From “the border” . . .

Their respirations conjure a major melancholy: *my teacher*. He is ten years gone—or something like that—I’m incapable of taking measurement. Of crunching the numbers. The space they whistle through isn’t really about my teacher anyhow, though I do miss him at this precise moment, terribly, which is unusual, because most times I feel like he was never here, and also that he never left.

He assuredly did not believe in goodbyes.

He used to speak of *ontological sadness*, what he called “the sadness of the microbe,” lost in the nebulae.

Perhaps it was this too: I once heard a rinpoche talk about the mixture of joy and sadness befalling those who take responsibility for the wellness, pain and ignorance of sentient beings. How to lead the blind?

There is a chant that begins with the Tibetan word *kyema*. Sadness, weariness, wariness. A certain sorrow.

The wind is haunting and brings its own effulgence:

The unbearable *clear light*-ness of being.

Of awareness—

The Nagual used to begin lectures with this simple entreaty: “Please suspend judgment.”

How harshly I have judged those who were privileged to write of their teachers, some in these very pages! I viewed such essays as pretentious exercises in false humility—anecdotal rose petals of self-importance flung at the sangha. Now here I am, writing of my “root guru,”

the Nagual Carlos Castaneda, with whom I studied, so to speak, for ten years. He always told me I was arrogant, and back then I wondered: *But how? In what possible way? How could he even think this?*

One day my teacher said that he was compelled to bring me “to the border.” He said he had failed to do that very thing, long ago, with another, and his debt must be paid.

Egotistically, I thought, “I have entered one of his *Tales of Power*. I might even rate a chapter in a new book.”

Sometimes it is a great teaching to be so wrong.

Only now am I beginning to understand the potent elegance of the phrase’s impossible simplicity: *to the border*.

The Nagual Carlos Castaneda was not an easy man to find, especially if one went looking. It is curious that our first encounter was at a brunch in Santa Monica.

I should briefly explain: *nagual* can denote many things. In my teacher’s case, the word was associated with the leaders of a distinct ancient lineage of Mexican sorcerers. For me, it is an honorific of great respect and affection as well, equivalent to *rinpoche* or *roshi*. He also used *nagual* in his books, to denote the realm of dreaming—“the second attention”—as opposed to “the first attention” of everyday life, or *tonal*.

I’ve always liked the employment of that word, *attention*. He told me that his teacher, the Nagual don Juan Matus, had literally saved his life. Carlos Castaneda asked what he could do to repay him. Don Juan Matus answered, “Give me your full attention.”

In my teens, transfixed by Henry Miller’s *Big Sur*, I threw away my wallet and hitched a ride north, winding up in a halfway house. In that place, I became obsessed with stowing away on a freighter to Peru. After this phase ended, I watched *Kwaidan* and read the ghost stories of Laf-

radio Hearn, cultivating a sudden, powerful desire to move to Honshu, where it seemed that both the living and the dead were startled to discover they had somehow changed places. I sobbed over Tobias Schneebaum's flamboyant attempts to obliterate his identity in *Keep the River on Your Right*. Even though this gorgeous memoir contained a well-known epigram from *The Teachings of Don Juan*, I had not yet read Carlos Castaneda. I was seventeen.

The quote Schneebaum chose was this:

Look at every path closely and deliberately. Try it as many times as you think necessary. Then ask yourself, and yourself alone, one question. This question is one that only a very old man asks. My benefactor told me about it once when I was young, and my blood was too vigorous for me to understand it. Now I do understand it. I will tell you what it is: Does this path have a heart? All paths are the same: they lead nowhere. They are paths going through the bush, or into the bush. In my own life I could say I have traversed long, long paths, but I am not anywhere. My benefactor's question has meaning now. Does this path have a heart? If it does, the path is good; if it doesn't, the path is of no use. Both paths lead nowhere; but one has a heart, the other doesn't. One makes for a joyful journey; as long as you follow it, you are one with it. The other will make you curse your life. One makes you strong; the other weakens you.

I've left the passage intact because Mr. Schneebaum's instincts were correct. The phrase "path of the heart" is too often removed from its original context. Torn from its nest, the abbreviated bird still sings the loveliest of songs, yet too easily becomes the dove of peace, a slogan, a greeting card emblem.

The Nagual told me that I needed *energy* to even find such a path. To do so, he encouraged me to *recapitulate* my life. While such a discipline has a parallel in meditation—the ends are the same, the means different—the *energetic act* of recapitulation remains unique to his tradition. During the recapitulation, attention is paid to inbreath and outbreath as one performs a studied remembrance of every single being one has ever known or encountered, from parents to intimates, lovers to friends, acquaintances to strangers. You begin by compiling a list; many of those on that list have names—many cannot. The compilation itself can take months. The very act of list-making distracts the mind; the *recapitulation* is a lifelong preparation for entering *silence*. (It was of curious note for me to read a lecture in which Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche spoke of a practice “known as *smṛti*, which means ‘recollection.’”) Another activity exclusive to Carlos Castaneda’s lineage is the discipline called *tenseg-rity*, a word my teacher borrowed from Buckminster Fuller to describe the vast suite of physical movements called “magical passes” that don Juan Matus taught his students, and which are taught to this day. The modern version of those ancient passes is another way of quieting the inner dialogue in order to court *silence*.

One night at dinner I told him, as Almodóvar put it, “todo sobre mi madre”—all about my mother. Afterward, we wandered outside. He pointed to the night sky and spoke with casual scholarship and warmth, as if the stars were old friends. He showed me Coma Berenices. Such was my ignorance that I’d never even heard of this constellation, yet I was touched because my mother’s birth name, a name she ultimately rejected, was Bernice. Again, he spoke about the act of energetically recapitulating one’s life, and I was reminded of a stunning chapter in *The Autobiography of a Yogi* called “Outwitting the Stars.” Paramhansa Yogananda wrote that man can escape the destiny imposed on him by the

stars, the constellations of which were actually there as a goad and reminder from his moment of birth. “The soul,” Yogananda wrote, “is ever free; it is deathless because birthless. It cannot be regimented by stars.” The shamans of Carlos Castaneda’s lineage described a force called the Eagle that devoured awareness as our bodies came to the end of their usefulness. The *recapitulation* provided a facsimile of one’s life experience that the Eagle accepted, allowing one to enter the realm of pure consciousness and be free.

I have always been devastated by the beauty of that.

Time is spherical. Now I was thirty-five and writing my first novel. Inspired by F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Pat Hobby Stories*, it was about an aspiring screenwriter whose spirit was broken by Hollywood. I met the Nagual at brunch in a private home. He was ebullient, *gemütlich*, gregarious. I liked him instantly. He told me of the studios’ attempts—even Fellini’s—to adapt his books. I couldn’t believe I was having this conversation with the man who wrote *Journey to Ixtlan*.

We had many lunches after that, and I slowly came to understand he was and would be my teacher.

We traveled to Mexico. He showed me places that had been of great significance on his journey. We visited the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City; the pyramids of the sun and the moon; the caves of Cacahuamilpa; and Tula, the Toltec capitol that figured in *The Eagle’s Gift* and *The Art of Dreaming*. At dusk, the church opposite our small hotel and the benches of the town square filled one with longing, blurring the borderlines.

But what were his teachings?

“They are simple,” he said, “but not easy.”

Last year, I had a pivotal dream. I was set upon by dogs that threatened to tear me apart if I mistepped. I was able to remain relatively calm;

eventually, with the help of bystanders, I escaped. But just before awakening, a voice informed, “These dogs are from another dimension. This is how it is going to *feel*—and this is how it is going to *smell*. This is *the beginning of how it is going to be*.”

In shock, I lurched to the computer and wrote everything down. What set this apart from a “normal” dream was this: rather than being feral, the dogs were bizarrely composed of purebreds, including poodles and chihuahuas. (The Nagual had spoken to me of just such incongruous indicators. He called them *scouts* or “foreign energy” that invited one to a broader awareness.) Since the vision had terrified me so, it needed to be closely examined, and manipulated by *intent*. I remembered something extremely useful he had said: One can change the course of dreaming through *intent*, just as the course of rivers are changed by the erosion of wind and Time. Through the act of recording my dream, I could see how my initial interpretation was malevolent, yet it slowly became clear that the dogs were bringing an enticement to awareness. This was their gift.

As I went deeper, I saw that the beasts were indifferent—reminders not to run from my responsibilities as a sentient being. Around the time of this dream, I’d been going through one of those periods in which everyday life seems pernicious and threatening. The dogs were warning me to stay sober and vigilant, to accept the help of the Other. (For me, the “Other” is that evoked in the *metta bhavana* prayer, or lovingkindness meditation: the friend or acquaintance, the parent or teacher, the lover, enemy, or stranger. From *The Way of the Bodhisattva*: “Those desiring speedily to be / A refuge for themselves and other beings, / Should interchange the terms of ‘I’ and ‘other,’ / And thus embrace a sacred mystery.”) They were herders and *border dogs*. The horror show had been provoked not by them but courtesy of the usual source: Bruce Wagner.

To lack awareness is the real terrain of nightmares.

The border is here, not elsewhere.

I didn't have the energy to follow those dogs—

But so what?

Of course, to become self-important because of one's small epiphanies is yet another turn of the dreaming screw. There is a superb quote from Khetsun Sangpo Rinpoche that evokes the same images: "When a dog comes upon lungs, it considers them to be so delicious it wants immediately to gobble them up; just the same, when we meet with any superficial teaching, whatever it is, we voluntarily sink ourselves into it or grab onto it."

In *Sleeping, Dreaming and Dying*, the Dalai Lama is in conversation with a group of social scientists and meditators. He speaks of the Tibetan tradition of dream yoga, noting that some people are able to access the *dreaming body* by natural talent alone. The Dalai Lama talks about a woman "of sound mind" who stayed on a mountain behind the Drepung Monastery. She spoke to him of having watched the disciples of an old lama fly from one side of the mountain to another. (At a retreat, Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche was asked, "But what should one do while lucid dreaming?" To which he replied, "Play around! Go to other worlds! Visit the realms of the gods!") The Dalai Lama and the Rinpoche were speaking of the Meditation of Non-Meditation—what Carlos Castaneda called *dreaming* or *not-doing*. I always thought I had failed miserably as a dreamer. It was hubris to think that *dreaming* could not be enacted in the "first attention"; that reality was a place of *no-mystery*—of *doing*, instead of *not-doing*.

Not to believe in the dream of everyday life.

It is so easy to conjure permanence.

To imagine paths leading to goals and endgames.

The Nagual's lineage taught that each of us has a "double," or *en-*

*ergy body*, that waits for us beyond the border—the home we return to upon rejoining the Source. He said the energy body could be accessed in ordinary life, but this act required impeccability. The double could be summoned only from a place of inner *silence*, of discipline and *acquiescence*. I now associate the dreaming or energy body with the deity or Buddha within; the Buddha that is sometimes visualized—or teacher, parent, Other, et cetera—during meditation, and even, as I have read, with the visualization of oneself in the form of the deity that occurs in the “transferring of consciousness” practices called *nirmanakaya phowa* and *sambhogakaya phowa*.

Why is it that the life and death of the body still takes us by surprise? (A devotee in Taxco was shocked when the Nagual excused himself to urinate.) My teacher said that whenever we needed to be reminded of our birthright as magical beings, we had only to note the profound shamanic act required of us daily in order to share the consensus of the social order. *The world*, he said, *is held together by spit*. He famously wrote of the moment that his own teachers left, how he saw a line of “exquisite lights” that reminded him of the plumed serpent of Toltec legend. Some who met Carlos Castaneda and were interested in the journey insisted on getting their money’s worth—a backstage *path* at Burning Man. They demanded their payment, in full: in rainbow body, in residue of amber relics, in Yaqui somersaults into the abyss. They could not fathom that when the alarm goes off in the morning, one is already forced to jump into the dream that is reality, the dream of affection and accountability, the dream that leads to the ultimate Other: the dreaming body. (*The Daily Double*.) To begin to know this is to begin a journey toward awareness, the border of personal power.

Once, with chilly directness, the Nagual told me, “I am not interested in sponsoring your absurdities.” It has been said that the foremost

teacher is he or she who exposes one's faults, and whose advice resonates. Carlos Castaneda was vibrantly empty, a screen that played the movies that run in our heads as we make angels or devils out of whomever we encounter. Often, those loops involve the parent: blaming the parent, competing with the parent, currying their favor, fearing and worshipping them, craving their love and attention. Teachers do not come into our lives to provide day care or psychoanalysis. I am enthralled that Ramana Maharshi's teacher was a mountain! In my experience, obsessing on guru-as-guru without recognizing the Other as the true teacher leaves one worse off. With a teacher, it is possible to simply find a new enemy—and a new sponsor for one's absurdities: oneself.

*Even a mountain can become one's enemy . . .*

A few years back, I took a guest to attend one of Kyozan Joshu Roshi's arcanelly poetic *teishos* in L.A.—afterward, my friend said the roshi was a confused old man who had wasted everyone's time. ("Time," Joshu Roshi said on that day, "is an activity of the Buddha." He also said that he liked the American tradition of hugging because when people hug it is a kind of meditation wherein they achieve "perfect time." My teacher called this "stopping the world." The Roshi also said that "the invisible realm cannot exist without the visible one.") At a satsang in Bombay, a woman railed at me because I'd let a pamphlet written by Ramesh Balsekar touch the ground, an act she said was careless and forbidden. (Ramesh would be the first to say that her anger had no meaning beyond an expression of genes and conditioning—as he would have said of my own unpleasant reaction.) On another occasion, I went to see Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche in Northern California. A visitor who came to give thanks sat in contemptuous judgment of a stranger before learning that the object of his scorn was the Rinpoche's awe-inspiring translator, Erik Pema Kunsang.

That scornful visitor was me . . .

I had made the pilgrimage to thank the Rinpoche for allowing me to generously quote from his *Bardo Guidebook* in one of my novels. Just as the pugnacious voice of Nisargadatta Maharaj in *I Am That* had eerily reminded me of the Nagual—the humor and eloquence, the heart-chakra emptiness—so did the essence of the being who had assembled the *Bardo Guidebook* remind me of the Nagual as well. They even shared an uncanny physical resemblance. Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche was “short and brown”—as Carlos Castaneda used to mischievously describe himself—with large, dimpled creases when he smiled. I thanked him as planned, before dramatically adding that I’d never gotten the chance to say goodbye to my teacher. (The Nagual died while I was celebrating the fortieth birthday of a close friend. He had urged me to attend the honoree’s party in New York.) I told him that I wanted to take *this* opportunity to say goodbye—*now*—and “hello” as well. I became emotional and began to choke on my words. The Rinpoche said, “I understand. There is no need for you to finish.” He touched his forehead to mine. “Your teacher and me—the same.” Then: “Perhaps we will meet again, in Tibet.”

He might as well have said “Beverly Hills.”

Or “Ixtlan”—

*Your teacher and me . . . the same.*

There is a perfect story written by Jorge Luis Borges called “The Garden of Forking Paths.” It’s about two men—a translator who has spent his life studying a mysterious manuscript that is also a labyrinth, and the respectful visitor who seeks him out. The cordial Translator tells the Visitor he has come to realize that the Book of Mystery is “infinite,” that it is about everything possible and impossible, imagined and unimagined, everything that is happening, everything that will happen, and everything that won’t, everything that has happened—all of Conscious-

ness and intent. The Translator mentions an occurrence in the *Arabian Nights*: because of a copyist's error, Scheherazade is forced back to the beginning of her tale, doomed to reach the part where, because of a copyist's error, she must start over again. (Perhaps this is the ultimate metaphor for awareness gone awry—or never realized. The Wheel of Karma.) The Translator tells the Visitor that it took him a long while to realize that the single word never used in this book of books is “time”; hence, the Translator deduces that Time must be its very theme.

In *The Wheel of Time*, Carlos Castaneda wrote: “[Shamans] had another cognitive unit called the *wheel of time*. The way they explained the *wheel of time* was to say that time was like a tunnel of infinite length and width, a tunnel with reflective furrows. Every furrow was infinite, and there were infinite numbers of them. Living creatures were compulsorily made, by the force of life, to gaze into one furrow. To gaze into one furrow alone meant to be trapped by it, to live that furrow.” (Reality, or everyday life, is simply one furrow; my teacher spent a lifetime showing others how to break the monopoly of ordinary perception by putting that furrow first.) The Nagual Carlos Castaneda's lineage believed that *time* was the essence of attention: the Eagle's “emanations” were *time* and *no-time* itself. In that sense, Borges's story is very much about the dream of the union of first and second attentions—the *tonal* and *nagual*—and also about what the Nagual called the three realms: *the Known*, *the Unknown*, and *the Unknowable*. The secret was to investigate the visible world, for, as Roshi implied, it contains the invisible as surely as a table contains atoms.

I am always interested in those who in rebuke, agitation, or enmity assert Carlos Castaneda's writings to be fiction. To me, such critics are from a long lineage of teachers themselves, and I say this without irony. Even a novelist like me needs to be reminded that all is fiction. I should

have said: even a novelist like me needs to be reminded that even fiction isn't real. It's a tonic to be reminded of the folly and "incoherence of philosophers"; that crazy wisdom is merely crazy; that the great and wondrous tales of Mahamudra may not or could not actually have occurred, nor could have Christ's more bizarre—or banal—travails; that after cogently telling his own followers to question and challenge his concepts, the Buddha up and died of food poisoning. One needs to be reminded that the least reliable witness to an event is always the eyewitness—and that there can be no outwitting the stars because there are no stars as we understand them to be; neither is there wit. One needs to be reminded of the Nagual's inherent or learned knowledge of *chacmools*—the famous stone reclining figures of Central Mexico and the Yucatan. According to Carlos Castaneda, the *chacmools* were warriors who had entered dreaming with the help of each other's gaze (*the double dreaming the Self and the Self dreaming the double; the merging of first and second attentions into the Buddha-field*), and the weights on their stomachs were energetic tools to aid their usherings—it is good to be reminded that this is an outlandish supposition, and rather, that some *chacmools* were in fact athletes holding discs used in ancient sporting events; and some were priests who propped up trays employed for burnt offerings or human sacrifice. It is good to be reminded that all is Fable, be it emanations of scholar, artist, academician, or Eagle; even this epic artful dream—especially this—of man's shared perception. It is good to know that amid this grand and grandiose fiction, the paths of the heart are indeed lonely hunters, and good too to be gently reminded of the axiom that no one gets out alive. Because in a dualistic cosmos, it agreeably follows that no one gets out dead either.

One must always be reminded that impermanence is permanent. I should have said: one needs to be reminded that impermanence

is *not* permanent, nor is it transitory. It is simply empty. In the end, it's of the essence to somehow grasp that Time, Space, and Memory are a fiction, and shall remain so against all of our efforts, even if one is enough of a magician to note that the truth of this fierce and beautiful planet—the appearance and events of *ordinary reality*—resides in select documents and myriad digital tote boards.

The Nagual talked a lot (until he was blue in the face) of the failure of syntax and the necessity to experience knowledge *bodily*, which is what he meant by “seeing energy directly.” He loved what T. S. Eliot said about Dante in a lecture: “It is therefore a constant reminder to the poet [substitutewarrior/bodhisattva/dharma student] of the obligation to explore . . . to capture those feelings which people can hardly even feel, because they have no words for them; and at the same time, a reminder that the explorer beyond the frontiers of ordinary consciousness will only be able to return and report to his fellow citizens, if he has a constant firm grasp upon the realities with which they are already acquainted.”

Carlos Castaneda left this earth in full awareness, just as he lived—in what Buddhists call “the natural state.” I am pleased to see him in everything each day, and when I lose my footing he is there, audacious yet indifferent, affectionate yet impersonal, overflowing yet empty.

He is in my father's hoarse voice, talking into the phone, post-chemo, as we continue the rapprochement my teacher urged me to begin so many years ago, and he is in my mother's eyes—in her rascal's smile and stolid vigilance, bound by boundless Time—my mother, who watches me like a hawk—an eagle!—with unbending affection—“a blank check of affection,” the Nagual used to call it—as I visit her for lunch.

Mother is so happy to see me that she subtly orchestrates the meal: its portions, the order in which I eat, when to pick up my glass and to

wipe my mouth. There was a time this irritated me. Last week, I went to her house. I called out but she didn't hear me. I entered her room as she lay sleeping. Backing out, I sobbed. (I'm now of the age when one comes across the startling, poignant image of an old parent, asleep.) That is an image of her I will always carry. I fear her death, and any agonies she will endure, but that is no nightmare.

No more than was my vision of the wild dogs . . .

Like the death of a child in a dream,  
Through holding the erroneous appearance  
Of the varieties of suffering to be true  
One makes oneself so tired.

Therefore, it is a practice of bodhisattvas when meeting with unfavorable conditions to view them as erroneous. (*from The Thirty-Seven Practices of a Bodhisattva by Ngulchu Thogme*)

In the end, pain and joy are the same, democratized by Time. They are paths, forking from the garden.

Feathers of the plumed serpent—

*Thank you again, my teacher, for doing your very best to show me. I am still not anywhere, and do not understand, though my blood is less vigorous. But now—at least this very instant, as I finish this puzzle piece—I can make out the one path that has meaning.*

*I will try to have the courage to take it.*

*I have heard that this path crosses the border.*

*I have heard that it leads nowhere.*

*I was once reminded that nowhere = Now Here.*

*A path with heart—how breathtakingly simple.*

*Simple but not easy.*

TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: 12 MONTHS OF DHARMA

*How clever I think I am, yet I'd never have known.*

And Nagual:

Why would I ever think of saying goodbye?

**Bruce Wagner** is a novelist, screenwriter, and filmmaker based in Los Angeles. His novels include *The Chrysanthemum Palace* and *Memorial*.

5

MAY

L I G H T E N U P !

Buddhism's not such a raw deal.

JAMES BARAZ

*Life, though full of woe, holds also sources of happiness and joy, unknown to most. Let us teach people to seek and to find real joy within themselves and to rejoice with the joy of others! Let us teach them to unfold their joy to ever sublimer heights! Noble and sublime joy is not foreign to the Teaching of the Enlightened One. Wrongly, the Buddha's Teaching is sometimes considered to be a doctrine diffusing melancholy. Far from it: the Dhamma leads step by step to an ever purer and loftier happiness.*

—Nyanaponika Thera (1901–1994)

“I didn’t know Buddhism was about being happy,” one of the wedding guests said to me after the ceremony. I had just officiated at the marriage of two friends, longtime dharma practitioners. As part of the ceremony, I had invited everyone to join in a lovingkindness meditation for the couple. “May you both be happy, may you be filled with joy and love,” we had silently repeated, our wishes deepening with each phrase. With the vibrant power of lovingkindness awakened, the guest’s conclusion that Buddhism is about happiness was understandable.

Despite pervasive images of the smiling Buddha, the practice and

teachings of Buddhism have had a reputation of being rather more somber than joyful. With so much emphasis on “suffering and the end of suffering,” there’s not much air time for happiness and joy. Some practitioners may even think that expressing those qualities is un-Buddhist. My friend Rick Foster, coauthor of *How We Choose to Be Happy*, frequently takes calls from listeners when he talks about his book on radio shows. He says he has come to expect that when a caller begins with “I’m a Buddhist . . .” almost invariably the statement will continue with something like: “and all your emphasis on getting happy seems to overlook the suffering in life.”

I went through a period of time in my own practice when I might have been one of those callers. For several long years, the truth of suffering became my primary guide. “Real” practice meant committing to “getting off the wheel,” freeing myself of lifetimes of suffering as I wandered through endless cycles of death and rebirth. The “end of suffering” got entangled in my mind with the “end of living,” which meant tempering aliveness and enthusiasm and fun. Perhaps it was a necessary stage in the awakening process, but the smiling Buddha who had so lovingly inspired me during my first years of practice had turned into a stern taskmaster. Practice became a *serious* endeavor.

Playing the guitar and singing had been a joyful pursuit for me since the days of the Beatles. Now I rarely did either, and when I did I noticed an underlying sense of guilt. How could I be a serious practitioner and spend my time just having fun? A lifelong sports fanatic, I felt conflicted when I’d get carried away yelling and screaming at the television as I watched my team play. My poor family and housemates had to deal with my somber persona as I suppressed my natural inclination to celebrate life. I carried this same tendency into my work as a dharma teacher, a slight wariness creeping into my attitude toward those aspects of life that

were fun and attractive, that might entice one to remain “on the wheel.” This focus on suffering actually had a numbing effect. Shutting down my vitality left me feeling rather disconnected from myself and others, and less able to respond compassionately to the suffering of those closest to me.

Through the struggle and crisis of those years, I learned something important: lack of aliveness and joy is not a sign of awakening. In fact, it is just the opposite. As one of the seven factors of enlightenment, joy is not only a fruit of awakening but also a prerequisite. Joy creates a spaciousness in the mind that allows us to hold the suffering we experience inside us and around us without becoming overwhelmed, without collapsing into helplessness or despair. It brings inspiration and vitality, dispelling confusion and fear while connecting us with life. Profound understanding of suffering does not preclude awakening to joy. Indeed, it can inspire us all the more to celebrate joyfully the goodness in life. The Dalai Lama and Bishop Desmond Tutu are good examples of people who have seen tremendous suffering and are still able to inspire others with an infectious joy.

We all know what it’s like to get trapped in dark, constricting states of mind—and how useless it is, in terms of awakening, to dwell there. That is exactly what the Buddha taught: we don’t need to stay stuck in greed, hatred, and delusion. Life can be lighter, more workable, even when it’s challenging. This lightening up, which I see as an aspect of joy, is the fruit of insight into *anatta*, the selfless nature of reality, and *anicca*, the truth of impermanence. When we are not attached to who we think we are, life can move through us, playing us like an instrument. Understanding how everything is in continual transformation, we release our futile attempts to control circumstances. When we live in this easy connection with life, we live in joy.

Joy has many different flavors. It might overflow from us in song or dance, or it might gently arise as a smile or a sense of inner fullness. Joy is not something we have to manufacture. It is already in us when we come into the world, as we can see in the natural delight and exuberance of a healthy baby. We need only release the layers of contraction and fear that keep us from it.

Methods for opening the mind to joy and happiness are found throughout the Buddha's teachings. One sure way is through skillful practice of meditation. Through seeing clearly, we can free the mind of grasping, aversion, and ignorance, allowing our natural joy to manifest. In fact, research has amply demonstrated that meditation increases activity in areas of the brain associated with positive emotions.

But formal meditation is not the only way to tap into joy. The teachings say that when we cultivate wholesome mind-states—generosity, love, compassion, happiness for others—we experience *pamojja*, translated as “gladness” or “delight.” In one of the discourses (*Majjhima Nikaya* 99), the Buddha says, “That gladness connected with the wholesome, I call an equipment of the mind . . . an equipment for developing a mind that is without hostility and ill will.” As I climbed out of my “dark night,” I was delighted to discover that those positive feelings—joy, delight, happiness, gladness—rather than being impediments on the path, actually facilitate awakening. They are part of our tool kit for keeping the heart open. Gladness and delight do not merely balance out negative tendencies, they actually heal the aversive mind.

Over the past year, I have been leading dharma groups focused on cultivating joy in our daily lives. Participants learned, some of them for the first time, that relating to the present moment with joy is a choice we can make. Discovering this can change our lives. Whether we are paying careful attention to wholesome states when they arise, reflecting on

gratitude, or feeling the delight of living with integrity (which the Buddha called “the bliss of blamelessness”), we can access joy by shifting the focus of our awareness to what uplifts the heart. The Buddha spoke of this as “inclining the mind” toward the wholesome. This doesn’t mean disregarding suffering; it does mean *not* overlooking happiness and joy. With so much fear and sadness in the world, it is healthy to let our hearts delight in the blessings of life. In waking up, it’s important to remember that in addition to the ten thousand sorrows there are also the ten thousand joys.

Ajahn Sumedho, abbot of Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, in England, writes, “Once you have insight, then you find you enjoy and delight in the beauty and goodness of things. Truth, beauty, and goodness delight us; in them we find joy.” When we open a channel to the wellspring of joy, the waters of well-being that flow into our lives are a gift not only to ourselves. As joyful bodhisattvas, we serve by inspiring spaciousness, perspective, courage, and goodness in the hearts of others. May you be happy and awaken joy in yourself and all those you meet.

**James Baraz** is a founding teacher of Spirit Rock Meditation Center and coordinates the Community Dharma Leader program and the Kalyana Mitta Network. **Shoshana Alexander** contributed to this article. She is the author of *In Praise of Single Parents* and *Women’s Ventures, Women’s Visions*. Together, the two wrote *Awakening Joy: 10 Steps to Happiness*, published by Parallax Press in 2012.

6

JUNE

GETTING ALONG

Loving the other without losing yourself

CHRISTOPHER K. GERMER

Over the years I've come to a conclusion: *Human beings are basically incompatible.* Think about it. We live in different bodies, we've had different childhoods, and at any given moment our thoughts and feelings are likely to differ from anybody else's, even those of our nearest and dearest. Given the disparities in our genetic makeup, conditioning, and life circumstances, it's a miracle we get along at all.

Yet we yearn to feel connected to others. At the deepest level, connectedness is our natural state—what Thich Nhat Hanh calls “interbeing.” We are inextricably related, yet somehow our day-to-day experience tells us otherwise. We suffer bumps and bruises in relationships. This poses an existential dilemma: “How can I have an authentic voice and still feel close to my friends and loved ones? How can I satisfy my personal needs within the constraints of my family and my culture?”

In my experience as a couples therapist, I've found that most of the suffering in relationships comes from disconnections. A disconnection is a break in the feeling of mutuality; as the psychologist Janet Surrey describes it, “we” becomes “I” and “you.” Some disconnections are obvious, such as the sense of betrayal we feel upon discovering a partner's

infidelity. Others may be harder to identify. A subtle disconnection may occur, for example, if a conversation is interrupted by one person answering a cell phone, or a new haircut goes unnoticed, or when one partner falls asleep in bed first, leaving the other alone in the darkness. It's almost certain that there's been a disconnection when two people find themselves talking endlessly about "the relationship" and how it's going.

The Buddha prescribed equanimity in the face of suffering. In relationships, this means accepting the inevitability of painful disconnections and using them as an opportunity to work through difficult emotions. We instinctively avoid unpleasantness, often without our awareness. When we touch something unlovely in ourselves—fear, anger, jealousy, shame, disgust—we tend to withdraw emotionally and direct our attention elsewhere. But denying how we feel, or projecting our fears and faults onto others, only drives a wedge between us and the people we yearn to be close to.

Mindfulness practice—a profound method for engaging life's unpleasant moments—is a powerful tool for removing obstacles and rediscovering happiness in relationships. Mindfulness involves both awareness and acceptance of present experience. Some psychologists, among them Tara Brach and Marsha Linehan, talk about *radical* acceptance—radical meaning "root"—to emphasize our deep, innate capacity to embrace both negative and positive emotions. Acceptance in this context does not mean tolerating or condoning abusive behavior. Rather, acceptance often means fully acknowledging just how much pain we may be feeling at a given moment, which inevitably leads to greater empowerment and creative change.

One of the trickiest challenges for a psychotherapist, and for a mindfulness-oriented therapist in particular, is to impress on clients the need to turn toward their emotional discomfort and address it directly

instead of looking for ways to avoid it. If we move into pain mindfully and compassionately, the pain will shift naturally. Consider what happened to one couple I worked with in couple therapy.

Suzanne and Michael were living in “cold hell.” Cold-hell couples are partners who are deeply resentful and suspicious of each other and communicate in chilly, carefully modulated tones. Some couples can go on like this for years, frozen on the brink of divorce.

After five months of unsuccessful therapy, meeting every other week, Suzanne decided it was time to file for divorce. It seemed obvious to her that Michael would never change—that he would not work less than sixty-five hours a week or take care of himself (he was fifty pounds overweight and smoked). Even more distressing to Suzanne was the fact that Michael was making no effort to enjoy their marriage; they seldom went out and had not taken a vacation in two and a half years. Suzanne felt lonely and rejected. Michael felt unappreciated for working so hard to take care of his family.

Suzanne’s move toward divorce was the turning point—it gave them “the gift of desperation.” For the first time, Michael seemed willing to explore just how painful his life had become. During one session, when they were discussing a heavy snowstorm in the Denver area, Michael mentioned that his sixty-four-year-old father had just missed his first day of work in twenty years. I asked Michael what that meant to him. His eyes welling up with tears, Michael said he wished his father had enjoyed his life more. I wondered aloud if Michael had ever wished the same thing for himself. “I’m scared,” he replied. “I’m scared of what would happen if I stopped working all the time. I’m even scared to stop *worrying* about the business—scared that I might be overlooking something important that would make my whole business crumble before my eyes.”

With that, a light went on for Suzanne. “Is that why you ignore me and the kids, and even ignore your own body?” she asked him. Michael just nodded, his tears flowing freely now. “Oh my God,” Suzanne said, “I thought it was me—that I wasn’t good enough, that I’m just too much trouble for you. We’re *both* anxious—just in different ways. You’re scared about your business and I’m scared about our marriage.” The painful feeling of disconnection that separated Michael and Suzanne for years had begun to dissolve.

From the beginning of our sessions, Michael had been aware of his workaholicism. He even realized that he was ignoring his family just as he had been ignored by his own father. But Michael felt helpless to reverse the intergenerational transmission of suffering. That began to change when he felt the pain of the impending divorce. Michael accepted how unhappy his life had become, and he experienced a spark of compassion, first for his father and then for himself.

Suzanne often complained that Michael paid insufficient attention to their two kids. But behind her complaints was a wish—not unfamiliar to mothers of young children—that Michael would pay attention to *her* first when he came home from work, and later play with the kids. Suzanne was ashamed of this desire: she thought it was selfish and indicated that she was a bad mother. But when she could see it as a natural expression of her wish to connect with her husband, she was able to make her request openly and confidently. Michael readily responded.

A little self-acceptance and self-compassion allowed both Suzanne and Michael to transform their negative emotions. In relationships, behind strong feelings like shame and anger is often a big “I MISS YOU!” It simply feels unnatural and painful not to share a common ground of being with our loved ones.

We all have personal sensitivities—“hot buttons”—that are evoked

in close relationships. Mindfulness practice helps us to identify them and disengage from our habitual reactions, so that we can reconnect with our partners. We can mindfully address recurring problems with a simple four-step technique: (1) Feel the emotional pain of disconnection, (2) Accept that the pain is a natural and healthy sign of disconnection, and the need to make a change, (3) Compassionately explore the personal issues or beliefs being evoked within yourself, (4) Trust that a skillful response will arise at the right moment.

Mindfulness can transform all our personal relationships—but only if we are willing to feel the inevitable pain that relationships entail. When we turn away from our distress, we inevitably abandon our loved ones as well as ourselves. But when we mindfully and compassionately incline toward whatever is arising within us, we can be truly present and alive for ourselves and others.

**Christopher K. Germer** is a clinical psychologist, specializing in mindfulness and compassion-based psychotherapy, and a coeditor of *Mindfulness and Psychotherapy*.

7

JULY

## THE DHARMA OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Charles Johnson argues that in cutting the root of our own suffering,  
we can't help but confront the suffering of society.

CHARLES JOHNSON

Whenever I'm asked if the dharma makes possible social transformations that are relevant for the specific and seemingly endless problems of the world today (and I'm asked this often), I find myself considering that question in light of a provocative critique presented forty-five years ago by Paul Tillich, the great Christian theologian, who called Buddhism "one of the greatest, strangest, and at the same time most competitive of the religions proper." In 1963, Tillich published *Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions*, a series of lectures he gave one year after his return from a nine-week lecture tour in Japan in 1960. In the book's third chapter, "A Christian-Buddhist Conversation," Tillich takes up the social and ethical consequences, as he sees them, of his religion in contrast to the Buddha-dharma. Regarding his faith, he states that a Christian's dedication to the passages in the New Testament that describe *agape*—an unconditional love for others—translates into an en-

ergetic form of the social gospel that emphasizes “the *will* to transform individual as well as social structures.”

“The Kingdom of God has a revolutionary character,” wrote Tillich. “Christianity . . . shows a revolutionary force directed toward a radical transformation of society. . . . Most of the revolutionary movements in the West—liberalism, democracy, and socialism—are dependent on it, whether they know it or not. There is no analogy to this in Buddhism. Not transformation of reality but salvation from reality is the basic attitude. . . . No belief in the new in history, no impulse for transforming society, can be derived from the principle of Nirvana.”

Tillich quickly concedes that a conquering, self-confident will may be problematic because it “leads to the attitude of technical control of nature which dominates the Western world.” But for Tillich, while Buddhism’s version of agape—*metta*, or lovingkindness toward all sentient beings—can lead to identification with the Other, and thus to empathy, nevertheless “something is lacking: the will to transform the other one either directly or indirectly by transforming the sociological and psychological structures by which he is conditioned.”

It is here that the dialogue between Buddhists and Christians (and possibly some social activists) reaches a “preliminary end” for Tillich. At the end of the chapter, Tillich imagines this exchange between a Buddhist priest and a Christian philosopher:

The Buddhist priest asks the Christian philosopher: “Do you believe that every person has a substance of his own which gives him true individuality?” The Christian answers, “Certainly!” The Buddhist priest asks, “Do you believe that community between individuals is possible?” The Christian answers affirmatively. Then the Buddhist says, “Your two answers

are incompatible; if every person has a substance, no community is possible.” To which the Christian replies, “Only if each person has a substance of his own is community possible, for community presupposes separation. You, Buddhist friend, have identity, but not community.”

The distinguished Zen teacher and scholar Masao Abe praised Tillich for being “the first great Christian theologian in history who tried to carry out a serious confrontation between Christianity and Buddhism in their depths.” His influence on spirituality in America has been wide and deep; among those he inspired was Martin Luther King, Jr., who based his goal of achieving the “beloved community” on the concept of agape and devoted his dissertation at Boston University to Tillich (“A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman”).

To my eyes, Tillich’s assessment of the social and political shortcomings of Buddhism leaves a good deal to be desired, especially since it does not account for the “engaged Buddhism” that emerged in the 1960s. Nevertheless, his sincere misgivings are shared by many non-Buddhists, as well as by some new members of the American convert community as they struggle to integrate their practice into a contemporary need for political activism, which for over two millennia was judiciously separated from the Buddha-dharma by traditional Buddhist monastics. As students of the dharma, we should be able to clarify Tillich’s questions - the relationship between Buddhist practice and our political commitments, and how *anatta* (no-self) fits with a sense of community. This begins with mindfulness of how key historical figures and principles of Buddhism anticipate and resolve the question “Is a will toward social transformation lacking in traditional Buddhism?”

For one answer, we need only look to the remarkable life and works of Ashoka, ruler of the Maurya kingdom from about 272–236 BCE. After waging but one military campaign, which conquered the Kalingas around 264 B.C.E (150,000 were deported, 100,000 were killed, and many more died), Ashoka was so appalled by the carnage and cruelty of war that he embraced the dharma and for twenty-eight years devoted himself to the creation of hospitals, charities, public gardens, education for women, the protection of animals, and caring for everyone in his kingdom. He exercised compassion toward lawbreakers and prisoners, cultivated harmonious relations with neighboring states, and encouraged the study of other religions.

The wise lay Buddhist Ashoka was hardly alone among leaders who translated the virtue of *ahimsa* (nonharm) into civic life. In his book *Inner Revolution*, Buddhist scholar Robert Thurman reminds us that the revered second-century monk Nagarjuna was the mentor of the South Indian King Udayi; he told him, “O King! Just as you love to consider what to do to help yourself, so should you love to consider what to do to help others!”

According to Thurman, Nagarjuna, whose counsel is recorded in the five hundred verses of *The Precious Garland*, “taught his friend the king how to care for every being in the kingdom: by building schools everywhere and endowing honest, kind, and brilliant teachers; by providing for all his subjects’ needs, opening free restaurants and inns for travelers; by tempering justice with mercy, sending barbers, doctors, and teachers to the prisons to serve the inmates; by thinking of each prisoner as his own wayward child, to be corrected in order to return to free society and use his or her precious human life to attain enlightenment.” Thurman observes: “This activism is implicit in the earliest teachings of the Buddha, and in his actions, though his focus at that time was on

individual transformation, the prerequisite of social transformation.”

Buddhist history, with which Tillich may not have been well acquainted, offers us time and again concrete examples of how the dharma has inspired enlightened social policies. But, like many Western intellectuals, Tillich was unable—or perhaps unwilling—to accept the doctrine of anatta, and worried a bit more than he should have about defining nirvana. Yet we cannot dismiss too quickly the pivotal questions he raised: Without a belief in true individuality, a discrete ego that is enduring, immutable, and independent from other essences, can there be a community of individuals in the dharma? Is there truly no will to transform the lives of others in Buddhism, but only the intention to secure one’s own salvation from reality?

Clearly, asking these questions from the standpoint of nirvana is as nonsensical as asking “What is the distance from one o’clock to London Bridge?” Ultimate truth (*paramartha-satya*) is a nonconceptual and nondiscursive insight into ourselves and the world. *Nirvana* literally means “blowing out” (Sanskrit *nir* “out,” *vana* “blown”) craving and a chimerical sense of the self, like a candle’s flame, allowing us to experience things in their true impermanence, codependency, and emptiness (*shunyata*). “In Buddhism,” Thich Nhat Hahn reminds us, “we never talk about Nirvana, because Nirvana means the extinction of all notions, concepts, and speech.”

However, Buddhism also acknowledges a region of conventional, relative truth (*samvriti-satya*) that is our daily, lived experience, and for this reason Shakyamuni Buddha in the sutras can refer to his disciples individually and by name. Here, in the realm of relative truth and contingency, of conditioned arising, each person presents to us a phenomenal, historical “substance,” which due to custom and habit we refer to as “individuality.” The *same* things have not happened to or shaped us all

since birth. Our lives differ so radically and with such richness that, personally, I prefer to see the Other as a great and glorious mystery about which I can never make any ironclad assumptions or judgments. The very act of predication is always risky, based as it is on partial information that is subject to change when new evidence arises.

Thus, what is required of us in the social world is nothing less than vigilant mindfulness. Even though we can say that each person has a “separate” history, the dharma teaches—as does quantum mechanics—that we are really a process, not a product: We are each an “individuality” ever arising and passing away, every one of us a “network of mutuality,” as Martin Luther King, Jr., famously said. In the ontology of the Buddha-dharma, everything is a shifting assemblage of five *skandhas*, the “aggregates” that make up individual experience, with no “essence” or “substance” discernible in the concatenation of causes and conditions that create our being instant by instant. For this reason, if I am practicing mindfulness, phenomena ever radiate a surprising and refreshing newness. The “cold” and “wetness” of the water I drank at noon can never be the same “cold” and “wetness” of the water I drink at night. My wife of thirty-six years is hardly—as she will quickly tell you—the same young woman I wooed when we were both twenty years old. (Nor am I the same naive young swain I was back then, thank heaven!) Far from being “salvation from reality,” as Tillich stated, Buddhist meditation is instead a paying of extraordinarily close attention to every nuance of our experience.

Something I find worthy of contemplation is how in the dialectic between samsara and nirvana, the dreamworld of samsara is logically prior to and quite necessary for the awakening to nirvana. Discussing Tantric Buddhism, scholar Gunapala Dharmasiri says, “We make a Samsara out of Nirvana through our conceptual projections. Tantrics

maintain that the world is there for two purposes. One is to help us to attain enlightenment. As the world is, in fact, Nirvana, the means of the world can be utilized to realize Nirvana, when used in the correct way.”

Perhaps a more concrete way of expressing this in terms of social action is to say we come to the buddhadharma precisely because the suffering we have experienced in the world of relativity forces us to relentlessly question “conventional” truth and the status quo, as Ashoka discovered after his slaughter of the Kalingas brought him no happiness, or as the Buddhist monk Claude AnShin Thomas realized after killing civilians during the Vietnam War. Or we can consider the case of a black American born in the late 1940s, as I was, a person who knows firsthand the reality of racial segregation in the South and North fifty years ago, and the subtler forms of discrimination in the post-Civil Rights period, which I call Jim Crow-lite. He (or she) discovers that many Eurocentric whites project fictitious racial “substance” (or meaning) onto people of color, never seeing the mutable individual before them—just as unenlightened men do with women. They dualistically carve the world up in terms of the illusory constructs of “whiteness” and “blackness” and, on the basis of this mental projection, create social structures—as Tillich declared—that fuel attachment, clinging, prejudice, and what the dharma describes as the “three poisons” of ignorance, hatred, and greed. A black poet expressed powerfully his pain at this reality when he wrote, “Must I shoot the white man dead/ To kill the nigger in his head?”

Fortunately, a black American who has been exposed to the Buddha-dharma sees that these racial illusions, so much a part of conventional reality—just as the caste system was in the time of the Buddha—are products of the relative, conditioned mind. He realizes that while he is not *blind* to what his own valuable yet adventitious racial, gender, or class differences reveal to him, neither is he bound by them; and those

very phenomenal conditions may, in fact, spark his dedication to social transformations intended to help all sentient beings achieve liberation. The Buddha employed *upaya kaushalya* (skillful means) when he taught the truth of anatta, and said he would teach a doctrine of self if his followers became attached to the idea of no-self. Always, his teachings bring to the foreground the importance of a radical freedom.

As the first line of the *Dhammapada* says, “All that we are is the result of what we have thought.” Thus, the transformation of sociological and psychological structures must take place initially in our own minds—and those of others—if we truly hope to address the root cause of social suffering. The Four Noble Truths, the five precepts observed by laity and monks alike, the Eightfold Path, and the ten *paramitas* (perfections) make up a time-honored blueprint for revolutionary change, first in the individual, then in the community of which he or she is a part.

We must, I believe, agree with Tillich when he proclaims that Buddhism is one of the “most competitive religions proper.” Without reliance on a higher power, it is competitive exactly to the degree that it is *noncompetitive* and *nondualistic*, an orientation toward life that avoids the divisions and divisiveness that are the primary causes of our social problems. This rare quality, together with an answer for how relative individuality can be reconciled with our nirvanic “original face,” is beautifully present in a biographical detail from the life of Hui-neng, the sixth patriarch of Zen. When he presented himself to the abbot of Tung-shan monastery in the Huang-mei district of Ch’i-chou in hopes of study, Hui-neng portrayed himself as a poor “commoner from Hsin-chou of Kwangtung.”

The abbot rebuked him: “You are a native of Kwangtung, a barbar-

ian? How can you expect to be a Buddha?”

“Although there are northern men and southern men, north and south make no difference to their Buddha-nature,” replied Hui-neng. “A barbarian is different from Your Holiness physically, but there is no difference in our buddhanature.”

**Charles Johnson** is a professor of English at the University of Washington in Seattle and is the author of many books, including *Turning the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing*. He is a *Tricycle* contributing editor.

8

AUGUST

FULL BODY, EMPTY MIND

Will Johnson explains that by turning our awareness to the full range of physical sensations, the body becomes a doorway to awakening.

In many Buddhist groups, the body is addressed only in basic instructions on posture for meditation, sometimes lasting no more than a few minutes. Many practitioners are drawn to body-based practices such as yoga, martial arts, or the Alexander technique to complement or even enable their sitting practice, but they are often on their own when it comes to integrating these traditions with their larger spiritual path. What is being lost in this gap? One of the most convincing voices for the importance of the body in meditation belongs to Will Johnson, author of several books on the topic, including *The Posture of Meditation; Aligned, Relaxed, and Resilient*; and *Yoga of the Mahamudra*.

Johnson, the director of the Institute for Embodiment Training in British Columbia, Canada, began his Buddhist practice in 1972 and was certified in the deep bodywork system of Rolfing in 1976. Drawing on his experience in these traditions, Sufism, and others, he now teaches embodiment training, what he calls “a path of awakening that views the body as the doorway, not the obstacle, to personal growth and spiritual transformation.” I exchanged emails with Johnson to discuss how meditators can explore the body and what they might gain from the practice.

—Andrew Merz

**You’ve said that in order to experience emptiness of mind, one must first experience fullness of body. While this intuitively resonates with many meditators, clear explanations of why that is true and how it can be integrated into a Buddhist meditation practice are hard to find. How do we start to understand this view in a Buddhist context, and how do we address it without feeling as though we are detracting from our usual sitting practice?** This focus on awareness of the body is what, for me, the teachings always kept leading to. The part of the Four Noble Truths that attracted me the most, for example, was the explanation about why we suffer. The Buddha’s observation that we create upset for ourselves when we’re in reaction, and that we manage to do this to ourselves through the twinned actions of desire and aversion, just rang true.

The teachings tell us that actions disturb our peace of mind, but what I’m suggesting is that we can’t just look to what we conventionally call our mind to sort this out. Reaction, clinging, and aversion are physical actions that the body performs and that, no matter how subtle, create muscular tension through the repeated motions of either “pulling toward” (desire) or “pushing away” (aversion). Repeat anything often enough, and you create holding patterns in the body that predispose you to continue doing that action. Sitting practices that focus on relaxing the underlying tensions and holdings you feel in your body, as well as restrictions to the breath, help you mitigate the legacy and habit patterns of reacting, clinging, and aversion.

As the eleventh-century Mahamudra teacher Tilopa said, “Do nothing with the body but relax.” When we start to relax, we start feeling the body. Tensions and contractions in the body serve as a numbing blanket

that keeps the tiny physical sensations that exist on every part of the body from being felt. Learning how to relax while remaining upright in the sitting posture allows the body's full range of sensations to come out of hiding and make their existence felt. It's always struck me as peculiar: If I know that sensations can be felt to exist everywhere in the body, then why don't I feel them? And what effect does blocking out awareness of feeling have on me? And finally, if the mind that is "lost in thought" is somehow dependent on my not feeling the sensations of the body, what happens to the mind if I let myself feel the entire body, head to toe, as an unbroken field of sensations? The sitting posture itself can be a kind of crucible for burning off the tensions and restrictions to body and breath that all too often keep us lost in thought and unaware of feeling presence.

A good place to start is examining what happens to the body when you're lost in thought. This, of course, is tricky to do, because when the mind is off wandering in involuntary thought, you're not very aware of the body at all. But if you can include an observation of the body while you're off in a thought, you'll find that the condition "lost in thought" is directly accompanied somewhere in the body by muscular contraction and tensing, stillness and rigidity, and a subtle contraction or holding quality to the breath. In other words, when you're lost in thought, you're tense in body. It follows, then, that if you can consciously work with the body during your sitting practice to soften and relax the tensions and allow more resilient and natural movement to accompany the passage of the breath, the chatter of the mind can be reduced, and your practice can start going really deep.

**Once we begin to burn off the tensions and restrictions, how is this release manifested in the mind and emotions?** Vipassana teachers speak of sankharas, the accumulated residues of resistance and reactions that

we store in our bodies and that, through long, focused hours of meditation, gradually come to the surface of awareness in the form of sensations (often not very pleasant ones). If we can simply feel them without reacting to them, they eventually burn themselves up and disappear, leaving a much more pleasurable shimmer in their place (that is, until the next deeper level of sankharas make their way to the surface to be felt, accepted, and released).

Wilhelm Reich, one of the earliest Western psychotherapists who became interested in how the energies of the body affect states of the mind, believed that what we call the unconscious is not stored in some remote repository in the brain but rather in the soft tissues of the body. Think about this for a moment, because it makes a lot of sense. Even though we know that sensations can be felt to exist on every part of the body down to the smallest cell, most people, most of the time, have very little conscious awareness of the felt presence of their bodies. In other words, we are unconscious of the presence of sensations, and so it is in the unfelt sensations of the body that the unconscious is to be found. I would suggest that most people, at any given moment, are probably only aware of 5 to 15 percent of their bodily sensations.

The work of Buddhism is to awaken, to come out of the sleepy dreams and notions of reality that we hold to be true and replace them with a direct experience of what is more accurately occurring. To awaken in this way, we need to become conscious of what's actually going on at the very depths of our experience.

**So when we unlock a particular physical tension, are we also releasing potentially difficult emotional aspects of the clinging or aversion that originally caused the tension? Many people report strong emotional reactions to bodywork—memories of a childhood trauma aris-**

**ing during massage therapy, for instance. In Buddhist terms, is this our karma stored in the tension in our bodies?** For Western somatic therapists and Theravada Buddhists alike, much of the work that needs to be done is to rekindle a felt awareness of the whole body as a field of vibratory sensations. I sometimes joke with people that as we start to become aware of bodily sensations, we very quickly realize why we haven't wanted to feel them! We may have visions of relaxing the body and opening to an awareness of shimmering bodily sensations that feel like soft falling rain, but more often than not what we are first going to have to go through is a phase in which we feel highly intensified, sometimes very painful sensations, and through these periods of practice we face our karma directly. When we silently weep in our meditation practice over the discomfort we might be feeling, it is likely that a sankhara of sadness has come to the surface and is being released through that sensation of pain. When we get angry and irritated in our meditation because of what we might be feeling, it's likely that a sankhara of aversion has emerged out of the repository of our unconscious.

So when I speak of relaxing the tensions and holdings in the body and breath through sitting meditation practice, please don't think that I'm implying that everything is going to proceed like a pleasant Sunday outing in the country. More often than not, large emotional and physical storms may occur during practice before the skies clear. But if we can be courageous enough to work with the simple principles of alignment, relaxation, and surrendered resilience during our sitting practice [see "3 Keys," below], these storms do seem eventually to abate, and what appears in their place is worth the price of admission. Sometimes the clearing of the storms can take quite a bit of time (this is not fast-food therapy), and it is for this reason that I increasingly prefer to enter into retreats that last several weeks. Meditation practices that instruct students

to focus solely on the activities and contents of what we conventionally call the mind may unwittingly contribute to keeping contained the deep unconscious sankharas, which always appear as sensation. Many techniques can bring about a calming effect at the surface level of the mind, but if we're sincere about wanting to truly awaken and become truly conscious, we really need to embrace the experience of the body as a focus of our practice and allow the deeply unconscious and unfelt sensations to start coming out of hiding. And yes, this can be a very intensive undertaking, one definitely not for the faint of heart! But what, really, is our choice? We either face our karma and release the accumulated tensions of the past, or we continue to avoid feeling the reality of the body and enshrine the tensions forever.

**As you say, this does indeed sound like an intensive undertaking and one that many practitioners today may feel they simply don't have room for in their busy lives. When we sit down and encounter our deepest unconscious feelings first thing in the morning, how do we then get up and go about our day effectively? How can we approach this work in a manner that doesn't threaten to make us fall apart completely?** The kinds of emotional storms that we're talking about generally only erupt during long, intensive retreats. When we return home to our more familiar environment, things will settle out after a day or two, and so I don't think you really have to worry about falling apart while driving to work. If we're sincere about truly going deep and purifying out some of the residue of our karma, then I think an intensive retreat at least once a year is very important. When we come back from retreat, it's helpful to keep up our formal practice by sitting daily for an hour or for however long our schedule permits.

As important as formal practices undeniably are, I feel that it is even

more important to view the rest of our lives as “informal” practice. What I mean by this is that the awareness of embodied presence need not be confined to the time spent sitting on our meditation cushion. Every single moment provides an opportunity to relax the tendency to create tension in the body and unconscious thought patterns in the mind, and this can be a very gentle process. If intensive retreats are like turning up the flame on the stove, informal practice is like simmering at a low and steady heat that is practically unnoticeable and so allows you to go about your daily life without the emotional upheavals that can occur during more intensive periods of practice.

I think of informal practice as “embodied mindfulness.” In truth, every single moment of our lives presents us with a choice: either awaken to the reality of the present moment, or stay sleepy and push aspects of that reality away. Sensations are here every single moment. Why don’t we feel them? The visual field, in all its dazzling play, is here every moment that our eyes are open. Can we remember to look and actually see? Sounds are here constantly. Blocking them from our awareness creates a great deal of tension in the body.

Let alignment, relaxation, and surrendered resilience be your physical guides not only in your sitting practice but also as you go about your day. These three keys allow you to stay in touch with embodied presence. Merging an awareness of body with the awareness of vision and sound allows you to truly become one with this present moment. As you bring alignment, relaxation, and resilience into your daily life, your breath automatically becomes fuller and starts moving through your entire body, just as the Buddha suggested in his description of meditation. Without forcing a thing, let your breath breathe you: breathe into your entire body, and breathe out just as effortlessly. This condition, nothing more, nothing less, is really the reward and benefit of the practice. And in this

way you can walk in full awareness through the city or countryside, like a knife cutting through the softest butter. Always be on the lookout not to bring any tension into this practice. Striving to attain this kind of awareness is simply self-defeating. Relax into presence. It's been there all the time.

EXERCISE: DISSOLVING THOUGHT  
INTO SENSATION

Sensation and thought cannot easily coexist. Another way of saying this is that sensation and thought cannot occupy the same space. So, locate where your next thought is positioned in space. It's probably going to be somewhere around or inside your head, but it's definitely somewhere in your body. Find out where it is. Plot out its spatial coordinates. Where does it start and stop in your body? What shape is it?

Now shift your awareness. Remember: sensations exist in every part of the body, and thought and sensation cannot occupy the same space. So relax and let yourself start to feel the tactile sensations, the feeling presence, that also occupies that space. Just let the feeling presence in this space start to come forward. Where is your thought now?

EXERCISE: EXPANDING SENSATION  
INTO PRESENCE

Never look upon the involuntary thought process of the mind as an enemy that needs to be subdued or vanquished. Look upon it instead as an infallible guide that is constantly "re-minding" you that you have momentarily lost awareness of sensations. Once you have dissolved thought into sensation in the area of your head, expand your awareness

of sensations to include your entire body. Without bringing any tension into this shifting of awareness, staying completely relaxed, feel the entire body from head to foot, all at once, as a unified field of tactile sensations.

Now expand your awareness to include the entire field of vision. Soften any tension around your eyes so that you can see the entire visual field all at once. Next include the entire field of sound. Be aware of every little bit of the ever-changing field of sound, as though you were listening to a symphony and hearing what every single instrument was playing.

Feel the entire body. See the entire visual field. Listen to everything that is here to be heard. Stay completely relaxed as you do this. In this condition of awakened presence, where have the thoughts gone? Where have YOU gone?

### 3 KEYS: ALIGNMENT, RELAXATION, AND SURRENDERED RESILIENCE

*Alignment:* The tallest skyscrapers and trees are only able to attain their remarkable height because of their vertical alignment. Gravity supports structures that are balanced and aligned in this way. If you can consciously, but effortlessly, bring the major segments of your body into a predominantly vertical alignment, gravity will support you as well.

*Relaxation:* The purpose of alignment is that it allows us to relax. A body that is not aligned relies on constant muscular tension to remain upright, for if it were to relax its tension, it would fall to the ground. Tension blocks out our awareness of sensations, so once we are able to relax, we can start to feel the body and our formerly unfelt sensations start emerging.

*Surrendered resilience:* To stay relaxed, the entire body must be able to remain in subtle but constant movement, like an amoeba that continually expands and contracts. Breath, for example, can be felt to move through the entire body, causing subtle movement to occur at every joint. If we resist this natural bodily movement by holding ourselves still, we will bring tension back into our body, forfeit our relaxation, lose awareness of sensations, and yet again become lost in the involuntary story lines of our mind.

—W. J.

9

SEPTEMBER

SKILLFUL EFFORT

Not too little, not too much

PETER DOOBININ

Some dharma teachers may be reluctant to encourage students to make strong effort. The Buddha, however, wasn't at all shy about urging his disciples to do so. In doing so, he often explained to his followers that he was exhorting them because he had compassion for them, because he wanted them to find an end to suffering.

It takes strong effort to follow the Buddha's path. It isn't a path for the lazy or halfhearted. Like any meaningful undertaking, dharma practice requires great effort. Think about anybody who has achieved a high level of proficiency in a particular area. Chances are, they've made exceptional effort. Very little in life is accomplished without a degree of perspiration. When we watch somebody display great expertise, it all may seem rather effortless; but the truth is, it takes a lot of practice to reach that seemingly effortless state.

As dharma students we're asked to make strong effort. But we're asked to make a certain *kind* of effort: skillful effort. During the course of our lives, most of us have probably had a rather unskillful relationship to the subject of effort. In making effort, in whatever context, we've probably cultivated bad habits. We've probably caused ourselves suffer-

ing. Most of us, of course, were never shown how to make skillful effort. On the contrary, the people who served as roles models for us—parents, teachers, bosses, and so on—probably showed us how to make unskillful effort. In all likelihood we’ve learned ways of making effort that aren’t useful in terms of finding true happiness in our lives.

So how do we make skillful effort?

As dharma practitioners we make effort in the service of abandoning the unskillful and developing the skillful. The Buddha explains:

And what, monks, is right effort? There is the case where a monk generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds and exerts his intent for the sake of the non-arising of evil, unskillful qualities that have not yet arisen . . . He upholds and exerts his intent for the sake of the abandonment of evil, unskillful qualities that have arisen. He . . . upholds and exerts his intent for the sake of the arising of skillful qualities that have not yet arisen. He generates desire, endeavors, activates persistence, upholds and exerts his intent for the maintenance, non-confusion, increase, plenitude, development, and culmination of skillful qualities that have arisen: This, monks, is called right effort. (*Samyutta Nikaya* 45.8; trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu)

In developing skillful effort we pay attention to (1) the quantity of our effort and (2) the quality of our effort.

It is important to be mindful of the quantity of our effort. Effort must be balanced. To this end we’re asked, in developing skillful effort, to discern whether we’re making too little or too much effort.

In observing the quantity of our effort, we step back and take a

broad view of our practice. Doing so, you may discern that you're not making enough effort. You may recognize, for instance, that you need to make greater effort to practice breath meditation. You've been meditating four or five days a week, but you realize it's not enough. In order to develop sufficient concentration you're going to need to meditate every day.

Conversely, you may discern that you're making too much effort. Perhaps you're putting too much time into "closed eyes" practice. As a result, you've been neglecting other parts of your life like your work or your relationships. All the meditation, you see, isn't actually supporting your efforts to end suffering.

We also observe the effort we're making from moment to moment as we're following the Buddha's path. Scrutinizing your efforts while meditating, you may discern that you're not applying sufficient effort. You're chasing after thoughts, and you're not making much, if any, effort to bring your attention back to the breath. Recognizing that your effort is slack, you increase it.

We increase effort largely by inclining to the skillful quality of effort. We assert the intention to make more effort. We tell ourselves: *More effort*. We have an innate ability to make effort. It may not be developed, but we have it. By inclining to this quality, shining the light of our awareness on it, we're able to connect to our capacity for making effort.

Examining your effort while meditating, you may notice that you're making too much effort. Gritting your teeth, dripping with sweat, you're pushing like a jogger with a twisted ankle trying to run up a hill. This sort of over-efforting creates tension and dis-ease. It prevents you, in fact, from developing concentration.

In the sutta "About Sona" (*Sona Sutta*), the Buddha explains how to cultivate skillful effort. Sona was a monk with a propensity for making

an inordinate amount of effort. It seems he was putting so much effort into walking meditation that his feet were bleeding. Clearly, the way Sona was going about things wasn't working, and he was getting discouraged. In fact, he was considering giving up the monk's life. When effort is unskilled, we often find dharma practice unpleasant, and, consequently, we build up an aversion to the practice. The aversion frequently leads to doubt. We doubt our ability to practice. We doubt the practice itself. Many practitioners get caught in this syndrome.

Luckily for Sona, the Buddha was clued in to his dilemma. He taught Sona to develop skillful effort:

“Now what do you think, Sona. Before, when you were a house-dweller, were you skilled at playing the *vina* [a lute or guitar]?”

“Yes, lord.”

“And what do you think: when the strings of your *vina* were too taut, was your *vina* in tune and playable?”

“No, lord.”

“And what do you think: when the strings of your *vina* were neither too taut nor too loose, but tuned to be right on pitch, was your *vina* in tune and playable?”

“Yes, lord.”

“In the same way, Sona, overaroused persistence leads to restlessness, overly slack persistence leads to laziness. Thus you should determine the right pitch for your persistence. . . .” (*Anguttara Nikaya* 6.55, trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu)

If effort isn't balanced, the Buddha says, we'll produce an untoward result, in the same way that a stringed instrument, if not tuned properly, will produce a dissonant sound. In dharma practice, our effort must

be “in tune.” Like a musician, the dharma student learns to discern the “pitch” of his effort. When he notices he’s making insufficient effort, he turns the effort up. When he’s making too much effort, he turns it down. Cultivating skillful effort, we learn to distinguish the “right” amount of effort. Not too little. Not too much. Just right. In tune. When we find the right pitch, our practice flourishes.

There have probably been times during your life, when you’ve been involved in certain endeavors, when you didn’t mind making a lot of effort. In all likelihood your strong exertion was in the service of doing something you wanted to do, something you enjoyed. This was my experience when I played soccer in high school and college. The sport required much effort, but I didn’t mind. On the contrary, I loved every minute of it. Putting effort into it wasn’t a problem; it was a joy.

In traversing the Buddha’s path, we have to learn to develop this same kind of heartfelt effort. We have to learn to practice heartfully. We have to learn to put our heart into the practice.

The heart quality that motivates dharma practice is compassion; we practice out of compassion for ourselves, so that we may end our suffering. You may not have a heartfelt relationship to dharma practice. But that’s okay; you can learn to put your heart into your practice.

It’s all about intention. If your intention is skillful, imbued with compassion, the quality of your effort will be skillful. And you can develop skillful intention.

As you practice the dharma, it’s important to pay close attention to the quality of your intention. As you scrutinize your practice, you may discern that the quality of your effort is unskillful. You may discern that your effort is informed by unskillful desire. Maybe you’re compelled by an excessive desire to obtain results.

Or, as you sit down to meditate, you may notice that you’re riddled

with aversion. You don't want to be doing what you're doing. Like a kid who doesn't want to play the piano, you're practicing, but you're not happy about it.

You may discern, when meditating, that your intention is marred by delusion. You're not in touch with a clear-cut intention. As you take your seat on the cushion or chair, you're like somebody who's been getting on the same commuter train every day for the past twenty years. You're just going through the motions.

As dharma students developing skillful effort, we seek to purify our intention. We recognize when our intention is unskillful, infused with desire, aversion, or delusion. Assuming the role of the observer, we step back from the unskillful mental quality. We get some distance from it. We stop feeding it. The unskillful quality, in turn, begins to lose its power.

Abandoning unskillful intention, we develop skillful intention. We develop skillful intention by (1) asserting directed thought and (2) connecting to a felt sense.

When we sit down to meditate, we see what the mind is like. Then we set a skillful intention. We assert that we're going to practice breath meditation, and we're going to practice out of compassion for ourselves. Then we connect to a felt sense of the heart, the feeling of compassion. It's important to set a skillful intention at the beginning of every period of formal meditation.

After my morning meditation and before attending to the day's affairs, I'll set an intention to keep the breath in mind as the day goes on. Asserting directed thought, I'll say something along these lines: "I'm going to make an effort to keep the breath in mind throughout the day. I'm going to practice out of compassion for myself." I'll put my attention on my heart center and apprehend a felt sense of compassion. During the

day I'll check my intention, looking to see if I'm making a wholehearted effort to keep the breath in mind. If I see that I've lost the thread, I'll reset my intention.

In order to move forward toward a greater happiness, we have to learn to make skillful effort. When effort is unskillful, our ability to move forward is greatly diminished. Think about Sona. Plagued by his out-of-tune effort, he came close to forsaking the dharma.

In many ways, it's the skillfulness of our effort that determines our ability to go on.

Sona, in fact, became fully enlightened, an arahant, not long after he learned to adjust his effort. And although we might not become arahants, we'll certainly come to know the fruits of the path if we learn to make skillful effort.

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10

OCTOBER

INTO THE DEMON'S  
MOUTH

Like the great Tibetan saint Milarepa, we can learn to  
face our fears with clarity and kindness.

AURA GLASER

The spiritual journey involves stepping into unknown territory with a hunger to know what is true. One of the essential elements of such a life is the understanding that everything we encounter— fear, resentment, jealousy, embarrassment—is actually an invitation to see clearly where we are shutting down and holding back. At some point we realize we can't manipulate life to give us only what we want: the rug gets pulled out regularly. So what do we do? Although our deep-seated tendency is to reject the unwanted in an effort to prevent suffering, it turns out that all the ways we resist actually limit our lives, bringing us pain. And yet how do we find the courage to open to, and accept, all of what we are and all of what is arising in our body and mind? How do we tap the confidence to live with that kind of openness and receive what is arising in the moment, just as it is, with clarity and kindness? How do we let life, with all of its disappointments and sorrows soften our heart? In the Tibetan tradition there is a story about the great cave-dwelling yogi

Milarepa that illuminates the often bumpy road we travel in the process of releasing resistance and making peace with ourselves.

One day Milarepa left his cave to gather firewood, and when he returned he found that his cave had been taken over by demons. There were demons everywhere! His first thought upon seeing them was, “I have got to get rid of them!” He lunges toward them, chasing after them, trying forcefully to get them out of his cave. But the demons are completely unfazed. In fact, the more he chases them, the more comfortable and settled-in they seem to be. Realizing that his efforts to run them out have failed miserably, Milarepa opts for a new approach and decides to teach them the dharma. If chasing them out won’t work, then maybe hearing the teachings will change their minds and get them to go. So he takes his seat and begins teaching about existence and nonexistence, compassion and kindness, the nature of impermanence. After a while he looks around and realizes all the demons are still there. They simply stare at him with their huge bulging eyes; not a single one is leaving.

At this point Milarepa lets out a deep breath of surrender, knowing now that these demons will not be manipulated into leaving and that maybe he has something to learn from them. He looks deeply into the eyes of each demon and bows, saying, “It looks like we’re going to be here together. I open myself to whatever you have to teach me.” In that moment all the demons but one disappear. One huge and especially fierce demon, with flaring nostrils and dripping fangs, is still there. So Milarepa lets go even further. Stepping over to the largest demon, he offers himself completely, holding nothing back. “Eat me if you wish.” He places his head in the demon’s mouth, and at that moment the largest demon bows low and dissolves into space.

One of the things I love about this story is that it doesn’t feed our romantic vision of spiritual life. We sometimes imagine that if we just lead

our spiritual life the “right” way, we won’t encounter life’s sharp edges. We will be on a direct path to ever-increasing tranquility and joy. We are not prepared for all of our unfinished business being exposed, all of our unresolved trauma pushing up from the depths like a geyser of black mud. The story of Milarepa feels much closer to the truth. Working with all that has been pushed down is a central part of the spiritual journey. And when those demons appear, it is not so easy to just relax and let go. We usually try a number of different approaches to get these uninvited guests to go back to the dungeon. This story takes us on a journey that includes the well-worn strategies and habitual maneuvers we attempt—and ultimately abandon—in the process of genuinely opening to ourselves and our lives.

The first stage of this journey is awareness. We begin to see what is happening. Milarepa comes back to his cave, and finds that it is full of demons—maybe they’ve been there all along, but now he clearly sees them. We experience this dawning recognition as we begin to see the things we have been running from, hiding from, or trying to push away. Our patterns of avoidance and denial can take so many different guises that often we don’t even really see them until our awareness begins to deepen. It may be 20 years before we realize, “Oh, I became a doctor because I wanted my parents’ approval.” Or “I am always taking care of people because I want others to need me.” Or “I was the life of the party because I felt empty inside.” A lot of times we look at the things that we do without recognizing that what’s really driving us is a need for approval, a need to be needed, or a need to fit in. And sometimes our most obvious destructive behaviors conceal something else that is even more difficult for us to acknowledge. We may, for example, be willing to acknowledge our anger, but unwilling to look at the fear and vulnerability beneath it. So we “work on our anger” without touching the raw place underneath.

I remember years ago when I was living with one of my closest friends how appalled I was when I realized how competitive I was with her. She was getting the attention I wanted for myself, and I was burning with jealousy and resentment. I thought of myself as a loving person who wanted the best for my friends, and the situation revealed a side of me I didn't want to know. Even more upsetting was the growing realization that beneath that jealousy was a deep sense of unworthiness. I came to see that I craved that attention in order to feel good about myself, and not getting it felt annihilating. There was no escaping this situation—I felt like I was in a pressure cooker, and it was incredibly painful. But not being able to hide or run away, I gradually discovered what compassion for oneself really means, and how it really is the basis of an authentic and openhearted life.

When we don't acknowledge all of who we are, those unacknowledged parts will land in what Jung called the "shadow" that we then project onto others. This is one way of seeing Milarepa's encounter with the demons. He was encountering his shadow—all that he had suppressed and rejected in himself—in the demons.

Often when a painful feeling arises, we short-circuit that experience; we don't listen to it. We're afraid to touch it. We turn on the television. We spend hours on the computer. We eat a bag of chips. We go to a movie. We shop. We drink too much. We find some way to keep ourselves busy and numb. We have many ways of distracting ourselves so that we don't feel the full impact of pain. Instead of being accepted into consciousness, the feeling goes underground and enters the cells of our body. It doesn't go away; it goes in. Anyone who has had deep body work, has done intensive meditation practice, or has engaged in somatic practices on their own has likely experienced how the body reveals our history in surprising—and sometimes unsettling—ways. Things we've

long forgotten, our body remembers with impeccable accuracy. We may imagine that spiritual awakening is something separate from our physical embodiment, but awakening and embodiment go together. To be embodied isn't just about feeling comfortable in our own skin—it's about a complete opening to life.

This is where awareness comes in. With awareness, even if we shut down, we see ourselves shutting down. That in itself begins to illuminate the territory. We may not be able to stop ourselves from doing the habitual thing, but we are watching ourselves do it. Most of us, when we do become aware of something unwanted in ourselves, have a knee-jerk reaction to it, and do just what Milarepa first did when he saw those demons. We ask, "How can I get rid of this thing?" This second stage on our journey is one of our habitual maneuvers. We see something, and if we don't like what we see, we want to expel it. We recoil. We judge. We attack. I can't begin to count the number of times I've sat with someone in therapy who wants me to help them figure out how to get rid of whatever they don't like about themselves. And sometimes this tendency can be even worse in those with long years, even decades, of dedicated spiritual practice.

We come upon our greediness, jealousy, or impatience, and the next impulse is to go to war with it. We don't realize that all the while we're strengthening the thing we're fighting against. It's like trying to push a beach ball into the water. Holding it down requires a huge amount of energy, and inevitably it pops back up with equal force, taking an unpredictable direction. But if you give the beach ball space and let it be, it will float effortlessly along the surface.

Some years ago I read a piece by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche in which he described the spiritual warrior as someone who is not afraid of space—not afraid to experience oneself, and one's world, fully. If we're afraid of who we are, we continually feel frantic about filling that space,

anything to avoid that persistent unease beneath the surface of our lives. The fearlessness of the warrior comes from stepping again and again into open space, with body, breath, and heart exposed. It is the fearlessness that is willing to be intimate with fear.

As Milarepa's story unfolds, we find that there is a discovery process at work. When the direct attack fails, as it inevitably does, he tries another approach—indirect manipulation. He begins this third stage when he decides, "I'm going to teach these demons the dharma." There is subtle fix-it energy at work here. The indirect manipulation looks like a greater acceptance and accommodation, but it is still rooted in the rejection of experience. We are still bent on avoiding and getting rid of what we don't like. We still don't want to face our most undesirable parts, and we're secretly hoping that maybe we can pass directly into freedom without doing that. There is a lot of room for self-deception here; this is where we can get caught in spiritual bypassing. We begin to use our spiritual practices and all the things we've learned to perpetuate a disconnection from experience and a disembodiment from life. Our idealized image of what it means to be a spiritual person doesn't allow for self-knowledge that contradicts it.

So the ego moves into a high-rise. It's possible to live for a long time in a luxurious penthouse in the ego's high-rise, while all the lower floors are rotting and decaying. If you're lucky, before you die the whole thing will collapse and you'll find yourself on the ground. The transcendence experienced at the level of ego's high-rise is not embodied. It has not penetrated the matter of our lives. The "gone beyond" of prajnaparamita, the perfection of wisdom, is not this. True transcendence is the deepest form of intimacy because nothing is excluded from its embrace. Transcendence is union. In the union of form and emptiness, our bodies and minds and the whole phenomenal world are not rejected but rather are

found to be direct expressions of the sacred. In spiritual bypassing we use spiritual practices and beliefs to avoid dealing with our painful feelings, unresolved wounds, and basic needs. Avoiding our full humanity actually stunts our spiritual growth and prevents real spiritual maturity.

There was an article a few years ago in *The New York Times Magazine* called “Enlightenment Therapy,” about a Western Zen master who had his high-rise collapse. After living for decades in what seemed to be a highly actualized spiritual consciousness, he began experiencing terrible depression, debilitating anxiety, and dark despair. His decades of meditation had not healed his core psychological wounds, and his life was coming apart. In desperation he went to see a therapist, and gradually he was able to open to and heal some of the profoundly fragmenting trauma that he’d experienced in his early life. His depth of meditation had allowed him to “rise above” these wounds until one day the wolves of his undigested pain came howling at his door. He understood, over time, that his “talent” for enlightenment experience was in part an expression of the ability he had developed early in life to dissociate from pain. Through opening to these buried conflicts he was able to move toward a genuine friendship with himself, and a more authentic wholeness.

This capacity to see every situation in our life as our path marks a shift from willfulness to willingness. This is the fourth stage in the story. Milarepa relinquishes his solutions and strategies and surrenders to the presence of the demons, and to whatever they may have to teach him. At this point we begin to see everything that arises as an opportunity to deepen our understanding and to soften our heart. We view our life situations as inherently workable. We are willing to be with our experience, whatever it is, without judgment, without trying to fix it or get rid of it. And somehow this willingness, this gentle allowing, starts to calm things down.

In order to be with ourselves in this complete way, we need to be in contact with our inner resources of self-compassion and lovingkindness. Our capacity to turn toward whatever scares or repels us, and remain present with it, depends on our access to inner goodness. When we are able to connect with this ground of inner goodness, it brings a level of confidence and ease that can embrace our full humanity in all its complexity. Without that, we won't be able to stay with whatever's arising. This connection to our inner goodness is like the rope a rock climber uses to stay in contact with the steep rock face. Without that rope of connection, we can free-fall into self-blame and self-hatred and actually intensify the existing wound. Transitioning into this fourth stage requires a bone-deep commitment to honesty. We really have to be willing to look at ourselves, and this takes guts. We aren't going to run away even if we see a demon staring back at us in the mirror. We are going to stick with ourselves no matter what, because we are more interested in what is true than in what is comfortable. As we begin to really look into our lives we ask, and want to know, "What is this uneasiness I don't want to touch?" "What is this unhappiness that is always there despite all my accomplishments?" "What is this anxiety that is always humming beneath the surface of my life?" We have the courage and strength to move toward that which we may have spent a lifetime hiding from.

Jung commented that we don't become enlightened by imagining beings of light but by making the darkness conscious. That is the work at this stage of the journey. We're retrieving all the lost and exiled places in our lives. In truth, it is life returning for itself. In our willingness to open, we are returning for the life that is still waiting to be received. All that we pushed aside is ever waiting to be received into the arms of our clear-seeing tenderness. Rumi said, "When you embrace hurt, it becomes joy." Is this true? What happens if we soften toward something when we

would usually harden? At this fourth stage, we begin to risk exploring the forsaken landscape of our lives. This terrain can be highly charged, and sometimes we find we don't have the resources in a given moment to move any closer. We get overwhelmed, and our brain starts melting out our ears, our belly starts to flip, we want to vomit, and our whole system feels like it's crashing. So we are present to that. We reconnect with our inner goodness, deepening our confidence, our well-being, and sense of basic trust. And then we try again. We discover that the journey is a dynamic process, full of alternating successes and failures. And we discover that failures are not dead ends. Every time we're up against the wall, we're also standing at a threshold. The invitation to open to our experience—whatever it is from moment to moment—is always there, no matter how many times we need to rediscover it.

This ultimately brings us to the fifth and final stage of complete letting go, where all resistance is gone. We no longer demand that life be on our terms. Instead, we begin living with the understanding that the source of wisdom is in whatever is in front of us—it is in whatever is arising in this moment. Wisdom is not somewhere else. It's not in someone else. It's right here in our own bottomless heart.

So Milarepa lets go of that last shred of holding back and places himself in the largest demon's mouth. The demon dissolves into space. In this space, wakefulness radiates with an unconditioned compassion that, in the words of the late Zen teacher Charlotte Joko Beck, "goes against nothing and fulfills everything."

**Aura Glaser, PhD**, is a dharma teacher and psychologist. She is the author of *A Call to Compassion*, a cofounder of the organization Jewel Heart, and a therapist in private practice.

11

NOVEMBER

THE GIFT OF GRATITUDE

Ajahn Sumedho recounts the joyful unfolding of a deep appreciation for his teacher and parents.

AJAHN SUMEDHO

*Even if one should carry about one's mother on one shoulder and one's father on the other, and so doing should live a hundred years . . . moreover, if one should set them up as supreme rulers, having absolute rule over the wide earth abounding in the seven treasures—not even by this could one repay one's parents. And why! Bhikkhus, parents do a lot for their children: they bring them up, provide them with food, introduce them to the world.*

*Yet, bhikkhus, whoever encourages their faithless parents, and settles and establishes them in faith; or whoever encourages their immoral parents and settles and establishes them in morality, or whoever encourages their stingy parents, and settles and establishes them in generosity, or whoever encourages their foolish parents, and settles and establishes them in wisdom—such a person, in this way repays, more than repays, what is due to their parents.*

—the Buddha, Anguttara Nikaya 2.32

My father died about six years ago. He was then ninety years old, and he had never shown love or positive feelings toward me. So from early childhood I had this feeling that he did not like me. I carried this feeling

through most of my life. I never had any kind of love, any kind of warm relationship with my father. It was always a perfunctory “Hello son, good to see you.” And he seemed to feel threatened by me. I remember whenever I came home as a Buddhist monk he would say, “Remember, this is my house, you’ve got to do as I say.” This was his greeting—and I was almost fifty years old at the time! I don’t know what he thought I was going to do.

My father was an aspiring artist before the Depression. Then in ’29 the crash came and he and my mother lost everything, so he had to take a job selling shoes to support us. Then the Second World War started, but my father was too old to enlist in the military. He wanted to support the war effort, so he became a ship fitter in Seattle. He didn’t like that job, but it was the best way he could help in the war. After the war he went back to his shoe business and became a manager of a retail store. He never really liked that work either, but he felt he was too old to find another profession. He had sacrificed his own preferences to support my mother, my sister, and me.

When I was at university in the 1950s, it was fashionable to study psychology. At that time the trend was to blame your mother for everything that went wrong in your life. The focus was on mothers and what they had done to cause us to suffer now. I didn’t realize then that suffering was natural. Of course my mother was not perfect, so naturally there were things she could have done better. But generally speaking, the dedication, commitment, love, and care were all there—and directed mainly to making the lives of my father, my sister, and me as good and as happy as could be. She asked very little for herself, and when I think back like this, *katannu*, Pali for gratitude, arises in my mind for my mother and father.

The Buddha encouraged us to think of the good things done for us

by our parents, by our teachers, friends, whomever; and to do this intentionally, to cultivate it, rather than just letting it happen accidentally.

My students who have a lot of anger toward their parents ask me how they can develop gratitude toward them. Teaching lovingkindness, or *metta*, on too sentimental a basis can actually increase anger. I remember a woman on one of our retreats who, whenever it came to spreading metta to her parents, would go into a rage. Then she felt very guilty about it. Every time she thought about her mother, she felt only rage. This was because she used only her intellect; she wanted to do this practice of metta, but emotionally felt anything but lovingkindness.

It's important to see this conflict between the intellectual and the emotional life. We know in our mind that we should be able to forgive our enemies and love our parents, but in the heart we feel "I can never forgive them for what they've done." So then we either feel anger and resentment, or we begin to rationalize: "Because my parents were so bad, so unloving, so unkind, they made me suffer so much that I can't forgive or forget." Or: "There's something wrong with me. I'm a terrible person because I can't forgive." When this happens, I've found it helpful to have metta for my own feelings. If we feel that our parents were unkind and unloving, we can have metta toward the feeling we have in our hearts; without judgment, we can see that *this* is how it feels, and to accept that feeling with patience.

Once I began to accept my negativity about my father rather than suppress it, I could resolve it. When we resolve something with mindfulness, we can let it go and free ourselves from its power. The resolution of such a conflict leads us to contemplate what life is about.

A life without gratitude is a joyless life. If life is just a continuous complaint about the injustices and unfairness we have received and we don't remember anything good ever done to us, we fall into depression—

not an uncommon problem these days. It is impossible to imagine ever being happy again: we think this misery is forever.

When I became a Buddhist monk in Thailand, I was very fortunate to meet a teacher, Luang Por Chah, known widely as Ajahn Chah, who became the catalyst for the gratitude in my life. At that time I was thirty-three or thirty-four years old, and I must say gratitude was not yet a part of my life's experience. I was still very much obsessed with myself, what I wanted, what I thought. However, after training as a Buddhist monk for some years, in about the sixth year of monastic life, I had a heart-opening experience that was very much the experience of *katannu katavedita*, or gratitude to one's parents.

I had been a Buddhist for many years before I met Ajahn Chah. I had tremendous interest and faith in Buddhism, as well as an eagerness to study and practice it. But it was still coming from the sense of my doing it, my studying it, my trying to practice it. When I became a monk, there was still this tendency: "I want to get rid of suffering. I want to be enlightened." I was not much concerned about other people, about my parents, or even about Ajahn Chah, with whom I was living at the time. I thought that it was very nice that he was helpful to me, but I did not feel a deep gratitude.

I had the idea that life owed all this to me—an unpleasant kind of conceit. When we are brought up in middle-class comfort as I had been, we take so much for granted. My parents worked hard to make my life comfortable, but I thought that they should have worked harder, and that I deserved more than what they gave me. Even though this was not a conscious thought, there was the underlying attitude that I deserved all I had: people should give me these things; my parents should make my life as good as possible, as I wanted it to be. So from that viewpoint, it was Ajahn Chah's duty to teach and guide me!

In Thailand, I practiced with diligence and was determined in my monastic life. After participation in five rainy season retreats (*vassas*), a monk is no longer considered a novice and is free to leave the monastery. I felt that being with a teacher was fine, but I wanted to go away on my own. I left for central Thailand from the northeast. After the vassa I went on a pilgrimage to India. This was in about 1974, and I decided to go as a *tudong*-bhikkhu, wandering from place to place as part of an austere form of monastic practice. Somebody provided me with a ticket from Bangkok to Calcutta, and I found myself in Calcutta with my alms bowl, my robe, and, abiding by the rules of monkhood, no money. In Thailand it had been easy, but in India the prospect of wandering around with nothing more than an alms bowl seemed quite frightening at first. As it happened, the five months I spent in India were quite an adventure, and I have very pleasant memories of that time. The life of a mendicant worked in India. Of all countries, it *should* work there, where the Buddha lived and taught.

I began to think of Ajahn Chah and to recognize the kindness he had extended to me. He had accepted me as his disciple, looked after me, given me the teachings, and helped me in almost every way. And there was his own example. If you wanted to be a monk, you wanted to be like him. He was a full human being, a man who inspired me, someone I wanted to emulate—and I must say there weren't so many men that I had had that feeling toward. In the States, the role models for men were not very attractive to me—John Wayne or President Eisenhower or Richard Nixon were not my role models. Film stars and athletes were given great importance, but none of them inspired me.

But then in Thailand, I'd found this monk. He was very small; I towered above him. When we were together sometimes that surprised me, because he had such an enormous presence. There was this feeling

about him that attracted people. So I found myself going over to see him in his hut in the evenings, or whenever it was possible; I wanted to take every opportunity I had to hang around. I asked him once what it was in him that drew people to him, and he said, “I call it my magnet.” He used his magnet to attract people so that he could teach them the dhamma. This is how he used the charismatic quality he had: not in the service of his ego, but to help people.

The Lord Buddha, after his enlightenment, at first thought that the dhamma was too subtle, that no one would understand it, so there was no point in teaching it. Then, according to the legend, one of the gods came forth and said, “Please Lord, for the welfare of those who have little dust in their eyes, teach the dhamma.” The Buddha then contemplated with his powerful mind who might understand the dhamma teaching. He remembered his early teachers but through his powers realized that both of them had died. Then he remembered his five friends who had been practicing with him before, and who had deserted him. Out of compassion he went off to find these five friends, and expounded his brilliant teaching on the Four Noble Truths. This makes me feel *katannu katavedita* to the Lord Buddha. It’s marvelous: here I am—this guy, here, in this century—having an opportunity to listen to the dhamma, and to have this pure teaching still available.

Just having a living teacher like Ajahn Chah was not like worshipping a prophet who lived twenty-five hundred years ago, it was actually inheriting the lineage of the Lord Buddha himself. Perhaps because of visiting the Buddhist holy places, my gratitude began to become very strong. Then, thinking of Ajahn Chah in Thailand, I remembered how I had thought: “I’ve done my five years, now I’m going to leave. I’m going to have a few adventures, do what I want to do, be out from under the eye of the old man.” I realized then that I had actually run away.

When I felt this gratitude, all I wanted to do was get back to Thailand and offer myself to Ajahn Chah. How can you repay a teacher like that? I did not have any money, and that was not what he was interested in anyway. Then I thought that the only way I could make him happy was to be a good Buddhist monk and to go back and help him out. Whatever he wanted me to do, I would do it. With that intention, I went back after five months in India and gave myself to the teacher. It was a joyful offering, not a begrudging one, because it came out of this *katannu*, this gratitude for the good things I had received.

From that time on, I found that my meditation practice began to improve. That hard selfishness cracked in me: my trying to get something, my desire for harmony, my desire to practice and have a peaceful life, free of responsibility. When I gave up all that, things seemed to fall into place. What used to be difficult, like concentrating the mind, became easier, and I found that life had become joyful to me.

The last time I went to see my father, I decided that I would try to get some kind of warmth going between us before he died. In the last decade of my father's life he was quite miserable and became very resentful. He had terrible arthritis and was in constant pain, and he had Parkinson's disease. Eventually he had to be put in a nursing home. He was completely paralyzed. He could move his eyes and talk, but the rest of his body was rigid. He was resentful of what had happened to him because before he had been a strong, independent man.

When I saw him, his body needed to be stimulated, so I said, "Let me massage your leg." "No, no, you don't need to do that," he said. "You'll get bedsores, because you really have to have your skin massaged. I would really like to do it." He still refused, but I could tell he was considering it. "I think it'll be a good thing," I told him. "So you'd really like to do it?" he asked me. "Yes."

I started massaging his feet, his legs, his neck, shoulders, hands, and face; he really enjoyed the physical contact. It was the first time he had been touched like that. Physical contact is quite meaningful, it's an expression of feeling. And I began to realize that my father really loved me, but didn't know how to say it. I had this great sense of relief and immense gratitude.

**Ajahn Sumedho** was the Abbot of Amaravati Buddhist Centre in England until his retirement in 2010. He is the most senior Western disciple of the late Thai meditation master Ajahn Chah.

12

DECEMBER

AS IF THERE IS  
NOTHING TO LOSE

How giving comes from gratitude.

SALLIE JIKO TISDALE

Once I was young and poor—and generous. I shared an old house with several people and slept on the porch and owned nothing more valuable than my bicycle. I volunteered many hours every week at community organizations. One day, when I had only five dollars, I treated a friend to dinner, and afterward we laughed about my now total poverty. It was easy to give away what I had; I never doubted that the world would somehow provide for me in turn.

Now I have a house and a car and a savings account, and I am not so generous. I do give—my money, my time, my attention—but sometimes I give reluctantly, with a little worry. Sometimes I want a nicer house, a newer car. I wonder if I have enough money saved. I want more time to myself. It is not just a matter of youth and age. I have many more things now, and that means I have more things to lose.

When I had little, everything I had was important. If I found a sweater I liked at the Goodwill, it felt like my birthday. In a way, having nothing meant everything in the world was mine. Even a sandwich was

cause for celebration, and nothing distracted me from enjoying it. Every gift was a delight, and I was grateful for everything I had.

Gratitude, the simple and profound feeling of being thankful, is the foundation of all generosity. I am generous when I believe that right now, right here, in this form and this place, I am myself being given what I need. Generosity requires that we relinquish something, and this is impossible if we are not glad for what we have. Otherwise the giving hand closes into a fist and won't let go.

This generosity, arising from abundance, is natural. We see it in the world around us all the time. Haya Akegarasu loved spring. "Young grasses," he wrote, "I can't help it—I want to kiss you." To him the spring grasses were great teachers, because they made a "whole effort" to simply live their lives. "Their growth is a long, wide tongue that covers the whole world," he said. I see a fearless generosity in the flowers and trees, in the way birds sing out at dawn, in the steady drumming of the rain. As I grew older and found I had things to protect, I forgot. I completely forgot that I had always had enough in the first place. Now I am trying to learn this once again—total abundance, nothing begrudged.

**Sallie Jiko Tisdale** is a dharma teacher at Dharma Rain Zen Center, in Portland, Oregon. Her most recent book is *Women of the Way: Discovering 2500 Years of Buddhist Wisdom*.