



20

YEARS

20

TEACHINGS

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THE TRICYCLE 20TH ANNIVERSARY E-BOOK

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# 20 YEARS, 20 TEACHINGS

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We are delighted to share this e-book with you on our 20th anniversary. This book is a gift of gratitude to all of you who have supported our efforts over the years and to those of you who have just come aboard. In it you'll find some of the best of *Tricycle*. Our e-book *20 Years, 20 Teachings: The Tricycle 20th Anniversary E-Book* is a collection of articles selected from a range of traditions and perspectives that represent the diverse and inclusive ethic underpinning our mission.

It is fitting that we deliver these teachings to you via e-book. In recent years, building community has become the focus of our efforts, and the Internet allows us to pursue this in a way never before available to us. Tens of thousands of our online members have joined us in discussions, special events, and retreats. We continue to grow, and we will continue to expand our menu of offerings.

We look forward to your participation in the coming decades. It's your community and our pleasure to build it with you.

In gratitude,

James Shaheen  
*Editor & Publisher*

# SLEEPING WITH THE HUNGRY GHOST

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ANNE WALDMAN

Hungry ghost, a morphology all by itself between our realms  
Hungry ghost: that dwells in consciousness, torments our desire  
Sexy ghost, a performer, a demon, a gadfly  
To never have enough be enough get enough  
Dancing on coals  
In a state of mind, bewitched, unsettled over what he thinks or she  
thinks, what they think  
What the “I” thinks: hieroglyph for the hungry ghost  
Unsatisfied—dancing on nails!  
Jostled by waves, the real kind, that pull you under  
Turbulent in a shadow realm between waking and sleep  
Hungry ghost with sacrifices in the sand, hewn characters in the mind,

## SLEEPING WITH THE HUNGRY GHOST

arms and legs that are brisk strokes of gestures in air, in language,  
flailing about, writing with the skeletal stylus of the hungry ghost  
Sleeping with the hungry ghost who writes your book  
Hungry ghost: a web, a film, a trail, a latent thought set down that  
won't let go  
The watcher watching you in your hungry ghost fabrication  
Gloves off, anything can happen  
Hungry ghost, the war machine, sleeping with the humming war  
machine  
Hungry ghost that is a blur between worlds, thrumming on filaments  
of desire in a code that summons hallucination of "enemy! enemy!"  
Enmity of insatiable hunger for enemy  
Threads of desire constantly broken, strings plucked and snapped  
The connection, the fix is in for the hungry ghost who sings in  
lamentation  
Singing: *To be ghost and so very hungry, the fix is in, the fix is in*  
Attachment which is a ghost of yearning, watching the skies for  
strafing drones  
Yearning for existence, *the fix is in*  
Yearning for sustenance, *the fix is in*  
Hungry ghosts of the Jurassic, large omnivores startling you  
with appetite  
Hungry ghost ancient in mind, continuity of the mind of all primordial  
hungry ghosts  
Ravage and ravaging, ravaged and will have ravaged and will ravage  
and will have been ravaged  
Hues of glorious white light that pursue you everywhere, spotlight on

## SLEEPING WITH THE HUNGRY GHOST

desire  
Then so bright or fierce you can never rest  
How can we ever feed your ravenous hounds?  
Or radiant colors of seductive desire, illusive beauty adorn your  
tattered frame  
Although worn too, transient flickering  
Transmigrating through many lifetimes, hungry ghost  
Down & dirty on the street, shackled  
Body picked over, on a street in a distant street “over there”  
Other side of the hungry ghost world  
People willing to die there, fighting the hungry ghost  
Despots, tyrants, mercenaries, denizens of the hungry ghost world  
Stars, atoms, molecules, names family histories, all shackled  
The Hooghly River right in front of you  
Your rivers in lockdown  
Ganges in lockdown  
Yangtze in lockdown  
Bending over into the river of hungry ghost  
Torturer can do anything he wants to  
Maybe anyone can be “bumped” or “busted”  
Brown paper bags over the head: torture & death  
Wipe the mouth away  
Wipe the eyes away, wipe the ears away, wipe the “long ago” away  
A better hand of death will guide you from this hungry ghost world  
Gunned down on your own street  
Code of executioner’s light  
Exultant the civvies turned on to torture

## SLEEPING WITH THE HUNGRY GHOST

Wild laughter getting their kicks in the hungry ghost realm  
Set teeth to knuckles  
Set knuckles to knees  
Set fists to bloated belly  
A muzzle snaps  
The lights out & they are thrashing  
Thrashing: metal set to teeth  
Set teeth to neck  
Hungry ghost: a bloodsuckers paradise  
Being sexy again in a broken world, caress the body of the hungry  
ghost  
Chamber of greed & brutality  
The ghost that will never rest is your own grasping mind  
Cold savage beatings, mannerisms of the thumbs up  
A code of hungry ghost is your own mind  
Apprehension of the ghost, where next?  
Locked doors, low light, agony going down the hallway  
Agony in the hit in the stomach “or worse”  
Hungry ghost links memory to energy  
Atrocity which is silence  
Migrations of hungry ghosts walking toward a diminishing hope  
Memory erased, women & children disappearing overnight  
Hungry ghost an empty verbiage  
Sons “disappeared”  
Hungry ghost the seer will teach you how to be “ghosted”  
Hungry ghost with generations of progeny  
Wound that never heals

## SLEEPING WITH THE HUNGRY GHOST

What perpetuates hungry ghost? coercion without flavor of love?  
A culture that flees from love  
Hungry ghost an emphatic disruption, a cultural intervention  
Achieving power over millions on dark & bloody ground  
Simonides: *create a memory system for me lest I forget*  
Hungry ghost bursting out of superstitious darkness into Copernican  
    heliocentricity  
Hungry ghost in the half light of memory, lunar memory  
Rare native grasses, bed down here, hungry ghost: rest your spectral  
    bones  
Riparian habitat: bed down, rest by water: rest your salivating maw  
Shadows resting now in the charnel ground of hungry ghost  
Preble's jumping mice, coyotes, badgers, coming alive at the toxic  
    nuclear plant  
Swirl of ravens, and vultures hovering nearby in the mind  
A line of conifers won't shelter a hungry ghost  
A ligament or tendon pulls hard on the phantom bone, no shelter  
    for hungry ghost  
Tiny throat  
Distended bloated belly  
No comfort for hungry ghost  
Hungry ghost, broken fracture to haunt you, hungry ghost a crypsis,  
    a camouflage  
Hungry ghost: psychic lockdown  
Un-manifest identity without a body  
An expansion of unrecognizable things  
Phantom memories coiled one upon the other



## SLEEPING WITH THE HUNGRY GHOST

Hungry ghost without purpose except growing hungrier  
Oil! Oil! Oil! Oil!  
All you thought in terms of progress vanishes  
I awoke one night in the continuous present, we were all wired  
Bent over my own body of hungry ghost  
Stroked the desire of hungry ghost, stoked the fire of hungry ghost  
Nothing but cinder and ashes  
Imploding our planet of hungry ghost

*From the Summer 2011 issue*

**Anne Waldman** is the author most recently of *Manatee/Humanity* (Penguin Poets, 2009) and the antiwar epic *The Iovis Trilogy: Colors in the Mechanism of Concealment* (Coffee House Press, 2011), and coeditor of the anthology *Beats at Naropa*. Waldman and Pat Steir have collaborated on a project entitled CRY STALL GAZE, being printed and published by the Brodsky Center at Rutgers University in 2011.

# 1

## RENUNCIATION

Like a Raven in the Wind

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P E M A C H Ö D R Ö N

**P**ema Chödrön is an American nun in the Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, and the director of Gampo Abbey, on Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, the first monastery in the Tibetan Vajrayana tradition in North America. After practicing for almost twenty years, she now represents one of the most respected examples of the transmission of Buddhist teachings to American disciples. Born Dierdre Blomfield-Brown, Pema graduated from the elite Miss Porter's school and then attended Sarah Lawrence College and the University of California at Berkeley. At 21, she married and had two children. After a painful second divorce in 1972, she began looking for spiritual guidance, and soon became the student of the late Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche. In 1974, she received the nun's novice ordination from His Holiness Gyalwa Karmapa and, at his request, took the full nun's ordination in Hong Kong in 1981. *Like a Raven in the Wind* was adapted

from a talk given during a one-month practice period.

When people take refuge in the formal ceremony of becoming a Buddhist, they receive a name that indicates how they should work. I've noticed that when people get the name "Renunciation," they hate it. It makes them feel terrible; they feel as if someone gave them the name "Torture Chamber," or perhaps "Torture Chamber of Enlightenment." People usually don't like the name "Discipline" either, but so much depends on how you look at these things. Renunciation does not have to be regarded as negative. I was taught that it has to do with letting go of holding back. What one is renouncing is closing down and shutting off from life. You could say that renunciation is the same thing as opening to the teachings of the present moment.

It's probably good to think of the ground of renunciation as being our good old selves, our basic decency and sense of humor. In Buddhist teachings, as well as in the teachings of many other contemplative or mystical traditions, the basic view is that people are fundamentally good and healthy. It's as if everyone who has ever been born has the same birthright, which is enormous potential of warm heart and clear mind. The ground of renunciation is realizing that we already have exactly what we need, that what we have already is good. Every moment of time has enormous energy in it, and we could connect with that.

I was recently in a doctor's office that had a poster on the wall of an old Native American woman walking along the road, holding the hand of a little child. The caption read: "The seasons come and go, summer follows spring and fall follows summer and winter follows fall, and human beings are born and mature, have their middle age, begin to grow older and die, and everything has its cycles. Day follows night, night follows day. It is good to be part of all of this."

Renunciation is realizing that our nostalgia for wanting to stay in a

protected, limited, petty world is insane. Once you begin to get the feeling of how big the world is and how vast our potential for experiencing life is, then you really begin to understand renunciation. When we sit in meditation, we feel our breath as it goes out, and we have some sense of willingness just to be open to the present moment. Then our minds wander off into all kinds of stories and fabrications and manufactured realities, and we say to ourselves, “It’s thinking.” We say that with a lot of gentleness and a lot of precision. Every time we are willing to let the story line go, and every time we are willing to let go at the end of the out breath, that’s fundamental renunciation: learning how to let go of holding on and holding back.

The river flows rapidly down the mountain, and then all of a sudden it gets blocked with big boulders and a lot of trees. The water can’t go any further, even though it has tremendous force and forward energy. It just gets blocked there. That’s what happens with us, too; we get blocked like that. Letting go at the end of the out-breath, letting the thoughts go, is like moving one of those boulders away so that the water can keep flowing, so that our energy and our life force can keep evolving and going forward. We don’t, out of fear of the unknown, have to put up these blocks, these dams, that basically say no to life and to feeling life.

So renunciation is seeing clearly how we hold back, how we pull away, how we shut down, how we close off, and then learning how to open. It’s about saying yes to whatever is put on your plate, whatever knocks on your door, whatever calls you up on your telephone. How we actually do that has to do with coming up against our edge, which is actually the moment when we learn what renunciation means. There is a story about a group of people climbing to the top of a mountain. It turns out it’s pretty steep, and as soon as they get up to a certain height, a couple of people look down and see how far it is, and completely freeze; they

had come up against their edge and they couldn't go beyond it. Their fear was so great, they couldn't move. Other people tripped on ahead, laughing and talking, but as the climb got steeper and more scary, more people began to get scared and freeze. All the way up this mountain there were places where people met their edge and just froze and couldn't go any further. The moral of the story is that it really doesn't make any difference where you meet your edge; just meeting it is the point. Life is a whole journey of meeting your edge again and again. That's where you're challenged; that's where, if you're a person who wants to live, you start to ask yourself questions like "Now, why am I so scared? What is it that I don't want to see? Why can't I go any further than this?" The happy people who got to the top were not the heroes of the day. They just weren't afraid of heights; they are going to meet their edge somewhere else. The ones who froze at the bottom were not the losers. They simply stopped first and so their lesson came earlier than the others. However, sooner or later, everybody meets his or her own edge.

When we meditate, we're creating a situation in which there's a lot of space. That sounds good but actually it can be unnerving, because when there's a lot of space you can see very clearly: you've removed your veils, your shields, your armor, your dark glasses, your earplugs, your layers of mittens, your heavy boots. Finally you're standing, touching the earth, feeling the sun on your body, feeling its brightness, hearing all the noises without anything to dull the sound. You take off your nose plug, and maybe you're going to smell lovely fresh air or maybe you're in the middle of a garbage dump. Since meditation has this quality of bringing you very close to yourself and your experience, you tend to come up against your edge faster. It's not an edge that wasn't there before, but because things are so simplified and clear, you see it, and you see it vividly and clearly.

How do we renounce? How do we work with this tendency to block and to freeze and to refuse to take another step toward the unknown? If our edge is like a huge stone wall with a door in it, how do we learn to open the door and step through it again and again, so that life becomes a process of growing up, becoming more and more fearless and flexible, more and more able to play like a raven in the wind?

The animals and the plants here on Cape Breton are hardy and fearless and playful and joyful. The wilder the weather is, the more the ravens love it. They have the time of their lives in the winter, when the wind gets much stronger and there's lots of ice and snow. They challenge the wind. They get up on the tops of the trees and hold on with their claws and then they grab on with their beaks as well. At some point they just let go into the wind and let it blow them away. Then they play on it, float in it. After a while, they'll go back to the tree and start over. It's a game. Once I saw them in an incredible hurricane-velocity wind, grabbing each other's feet and dropping and then letting go and flying out. It was like a circus act. They have had to develop a zest for challenge and for life. As you can see, it adds up to tremendous beauty and inspiration. The same goes for us.

Whenever you realize you have met your edge, rather than think, "I have made a mistake," you can acknowledge the present moment and its teaching. You can hear the message, which is simply that you're saying "No." The instruction is to soften, to connect with your heart and engender a basic attitude of generosity and compassion toward yourself.

The journey of awakening—the classical journey of the mythical hero or heroine—is one of continually coming up against big challenges and then learning how to soften and open. In other words, the paralyzed quality seems to be hardening and refusing, and the letting go or the renunciation of that attitude is simply feeling the whole thing in your

## RENUNCIATION

heart, letting it touch your heart. You soften and feel compassion for your predicament and for the whole human condition. You soften so that you can actually sit there with those troubling feelings and let them soften you more.

The whole journey of renunciation, or starting to say yes to life, is realizing first of all that you've come up against your edge, that everything in you is saying "No," and then at that point, softening. This is yet another opportunity to develop loving-kindness for yourself, which results in playfulness—learning to play like a raven in the wind.

*From the Fall 1991 issue*

**Pema Chödrön** is an American nun in the Kagyü lineage of Tibetan Buddhism and the director of Gampo Abbey on Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, which she established in 1984 as the first monastery in the Vajrayana tradition for Westerners in North America. She studied under the late Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche from 1974 until his death in 1987. "Like a Raven in the Wind" is adapted from a talk given during a nine-month practice period.

# 2

## ENDURING THE FIRES

From Anger to Patience

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H.H. THE DALAI LAMA

**I**n August 1991, inside a vast tent pitched in a meadow in the Vezere Valley in the Dordogne region of France, His Holiness the Dalai Lama expounded the dharma to an audience of five thousand. The weeklong teaching took the form of a commentary on the Bodhicaryavatara (The Way of the Bodhisattva), the celebrated text written by the eighth-century Indian adept, scholar, and poet Shantideva.

The work of preparing the book of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama's teachings was entrusted to the Padmakara Translation Group. The transcript was published in French by Albin Michel, under the title *Comme un éclair déchire la nuit*—"like a flash of lightning cutting through the night," a reference to Shantideva's simile for the rarity of altruistic intentions. Recently, it was selected by one of the book clubs as "Major Book of the Month," an exceptional event for a book with a spiritual theme. Shambhala Publications issued an English edition under the title



*A Flash of Lightning in the Dark of Night* in 1994. (An updated edition appeared in 1997 as *For the Benefit of All Beings*.) The following excerpts on the practice of the paramita of patience come from the third chapter.

Patience is one of the vital elements in the bodhisattva's training. This third chapter of the *Bodhicaryavatara*, which deals with patience, and the eighth chapter, which deals with meditation, together explain the key points of *bodhicitta*.

1. *Good works gathered in a thousand ages,  
Such as deeds of generosity  
Or offerings to the Blissful Ones:  
A single flash of anger shatters them.*

2. *No evil is there similar to hatred,  
Nor austerity to be compared with patience.  
Steep yourself, therefore, in patience  
In all ways, urgently, with zeal*

As a destructive force there is nothing as strong as anger. An instant of anger can destroy all the positive action accumulated over thousands of kalpas through generosity, making offerings to the buddhas, keeping discipline, and so on. So we can say that there is no fault as serious as anger.

Patience, on the other hand, as a discipline which neutralizes anger, which prevents us from succumbing to it, and which appeases the suffering we endure from the heat of the negative emotions, is quite unrivaled. It is therefore of the utmost importance that we resolve to practice patience, and a lot of inspiration can be gained by reflecting on what is wrong with anger and on the advantages of patience.

Positive actions are difficult and infrequent. It is hard to have positive thoughts when our minds are influenced by emotions and confused by adverse circumstances. Negative thoughts arise by themselves, and it is rare that we do a positive action whose motivation, execution, and conclusion are perfectly pure. If our stock of hard-won positive actions is rendered powerless in an instant of anger, the loss is immeasurably more serious than that of some more abundant resource.

*3. Those tormented by the pain of anger,  
Will never know tranquility of mind,  
Strangers to every joy and pleasure;  
Sleep deserts them, they will never rest.*

Anger chases all happiness away and makes even the most peaceful features turn livid and ugly. It upsets our physical equilibrium, disturbs our rest, destroys our appetite, and makes us age prematurely. Happiness, peace, and sleep evade us, and we can no longer appreciate people who have helped us and deserve our trust and gratitude. Under the influence of anger, someone of normally good character changes completely and can no longer be counted on. Anger leads both oneself and others to ruin. But anyone who puts his energy into destroying anger will be happy in this life and in lives to come.

*7. Getting what I do not want,  
And that which hinders my desire:  
There my mind finds fuel for misery,  
Anger springs from it and beats me down.*

8. *Therefore I utterly destroy  
The sustenance of this my enemy,  
My foe, whose sole intention is  
To bring me sorrow.*

Whenever we think about someone who has wronged us, or someone who is doing (or might do) something we or our friends don't want—preventing us from having what we do want—our mind, at peace before, suddenly begins to feel slightly unsettled. This state of mind fuels our negative thoughts about that person. “What a nasty fellow he is!” we think, and our hatred grows stronger and stronger. It is this first stage, this unsettled feeling which kindles our hatred, that we should try to get rid of.

9. *Come what may, then, I will never harm  
My cheerful happiness of mind.  
Depression never brings me what I want;  
My virtue will be warped and marred by it.*

10. *If there is a cure when trouble comes,  
What need is there for being sad?  
And if no cure is to be found,  
What use is there in sorrow?*

We must make an effort to remain in a relaxed state of mind. If we cannot get rid of that unsettled feeling, it will feed our hatred, increase it, and eventually destroy us.

Hatred is far worse than any ordinary enemy. Of course, ordinary enemies harm us: that is why we call them enemies. But the harm they

do is not just in order to make us unhappy; it is also meant to be of some help to themselves or their friends. Hatred, the inner enemy, however, has no other function but to destroy our positive actions and make us unhappy. That is why Shantideva calls it “my foe, whose sole intention is to bring me sorrow.” From the moment it first appears, it exists for the sole purpose of harming us. So we should confront it with all the means we have, maintain a peaceful state of mind, and avoid getting upset.

What disconcerts us in the first place is that our wishes are not fulfilled. But remaining upset does nothing to help fulfill those wishes. So we neither fulfill our wishes, nor regain our cheerfulness! This disconcerted state, from which anger can grow, is most dangerous. We should try never to let our happiness be disturbed. Whether we are suffering at present or have suffered in the past, there is no reason to be unhappy. If we can remedy it, then why be unhappy? And if we cannot, there’s no use in being unhappy about it—it’s just one more thing to be unhappy about, which serves no purpose at all.

It is only natural that we don’t like suffering. But if we can develop the willpower to bear difficulties, then we will grow more and more tolerant. There is nothing that does not get easier with practice. If we are very forbearing, then something we would normally consider very painful does not appear so bad after all. If we can develop our patience, we will be able to endure even major difficulties that befall us. But without such patient endurance, even the smallest thing becomes unbearable. A lot has to do with our attitude. All of us have some altruistic thoughts, limited though they may be. To develop such thoughts until our wish to help others becomes limitless is what we call *bodhicitta*. The main obstructions to this development are the wish to harm others, resentment, and anger.

As the antidote to these, therefore, it is essential to meditate on pa-

tience. The more deeply we practice patience, the less chance there will be for anger to arise. Practicing patience is the best way to avoid getting angry.

Now, let's talk about love. In my opinion, all beings, starting with humans, appreciate love. Valuing love is a spontaneous feeling. Even animals like the people who are kind to them. When someone looks at you with a loving expression, it makes you feel happy, does it not? Love is a quality that is esteemed throughout all humanity, in all religions. Every religion, including Buddhism, describes its founder above all in terms of his capacity to love. Religions that talk about a Creator refer to his mercy. And the main quality of the Buddhist refuge is love.

When we describe a Pure Land filled with the presence of love, people feel like going there. But were we to describe those Pure Lands as places of warfare and fighting, people would no longer feel any desire to be reborn in such a place. People naturally value love and dislike harmful feelings and actions such as resentment, anger, fighting, stealing, coveting others' possessions, and wishing to harm others. So if love is something that all human beings like, it is certainly something that we can develop if we make the effort.

Many people think that to be patient and to bear loss is a sign of weakness. I think that is wrong. It is anger which is a sign of weakness, and patience a sign of strength. For example, a person arguing a point based on sound reasoning remains confident and may even smile while proving his cause. On the other hand, if his reasons are unsound and he is about to lose face, he gets angry, loses control, and starts talking nonsense. People rarely get angry if they are confident in what they are doing. Anger arises much more easily at moments of confusion.

*22. I am not angry with my bile and other humors,*

*A fertile source of pain and suffering;  
Why then be wroth with living beings,  
Victims too of such conditions?*

Suffering can result from both animate and inanimate causes. We may curse inanimate things like the weather, but it is with animate beings that we most often get angry. If we further analyze these animate causes that make us unhappy, we find that they are themselves influenced by other conditions. They are not making us angry simply because they want to. In this respect, because they are influenced by other conditions they are in fact powerless; so there is no need to get angry with them.

*24. Never thinking: 'Now I will be angry,'  
People are impulsively caught up in anger;  
Irritation, likewise, comes  
Though never plans to be experienced!*

*25. Every injury whatever,  
The whole variety of evil deeds:  
All arise induced by circumstances,  
None are independent and autonomous*

*26. Yet these causes have no thought  
Of brining something into being;  
And that which is produced thereby,  
Being mindless, has no thought of being so.*

*47. Those who harm me come against me:*

*Summoned by my evil karma.  
They will be the ones who go to hell,  
Am I not therefore the one to injure them?*

When others harm us, it is the result of our own past actions, which in fact have instigated them—for, in future, they will suffer because of the harmful act we ourselves have instigated.

When others harm us, that gives us the chance to practice patience, and thus to purify numerous negative actions and accumulate much merit.

Since it is our enemies who give us this great opportunity, in reality they are helping us. But because we are the cause of the negative actions they commit, we are actually harming them. So if there is anyone to get angry with, it should be ourselves. We should never be angry with our enemies, regardless of their attitude, since they are so useful to us.

One might therefore wonder whether, by thus causing our enemies to accumulate negative actions, we accumulate negative actions ourselves; and whether our enemies in so helping us to practice patience have accumulated positive actions. But this is not the case. Although we were the cause for their negative actions, by our practicing patience we actually accumulate merit and will not take rebirth in the lower realms. As it is we who have been patient, that does not help our enemies. On the other hand, if we cannot stay patient when we are harmed, then the harm done by our enemies will not help anyone at all. Moreover, by losing patience and getting angry we transgress our vow to follow the discipline of a bodhisattva.

If, for example, a person condemned to death were to have his life spared in exchange for having his hands cut off, he would feel very happy. Similarly, when we have the chance to purify a great suffering by

enduring a slight injury, we should accept it. If, unable to bear insults, we get angry, we are only creating worse suffering for the future. Difficult though it may be, we should try instead to think openly, on a vaster perspective, and not retaliate.

74. *For the sake of my desired aims,  
A thousand times I have endured the fires  
And other pains of hell,  
Achieving nothing for myself and others.*

75. *The present pains are nothing to compare with those,  
And yet great benefits accrue from them.  
These afflictions which dispel the troubles of all wandering  
beings:  
I should only delight in them.*

So far we have been, and are still, going through endless suffering, without this suffering doing us any good whatsoever. Now that we have promised to be good-hearted, we should try not to get angry when others insult us. Being patient may not be easy. It requires considerable concentration. But the result we achieve by enduring these difficulties will be sublime. That is something to be happy about!

90. *The rigamarole of praise and reputation  
Serves not to increase merit nor the span of life,  
Bestowing neither health nor strength of body,  
It contributes nothing to the body's ease.*

98. *Praise and compliments disturb me,*



*And soften my revulsion with samsara:  
I begin to covet others' qualities and  
Every excellence is thereby spoiled.*

Praise, if you think about it, is actually a distraction. For example, in the beginning one may be a simple, humble monk, content with little. Later on people may start to praise one, saying, “He’s a lama,” and one begins to feel a bit more proud and to be more self-conscious in how one feels and behaves. Then the eight worldly considerations become stronger, do they not, and the praise we receive distracts us, destroying our renunciation.

Again, at first when we have little to compare ourselves with, we do not feel jealous of others. But later we begin to “grow some hair,” and as our status increases so does our rivalry with others in important positions. We feel jealous of anyone with good qualities, and in the end this destroys our own good qualities. Being praised is not really a good thing—it can be the source of negative actions.

*99. Those who stay close by me, then,  
To ruin my good name and cut me down to size,  
Are they not my guardians saving me  
From falling into realms of sorrow?*

As our real goal is enlightenment, we should not be angry with our enemies, who in fact dispel all the obstacles to our attaining enlightenment.

*101. They, like Buddha's very blessing,  
Bar my way, determined as I am  
To plunge myself in suffering:*

*How could I be angry with them?*

102. *We should not be angry, saying,  
‘They are an obstacle to virtue,’  
Patience is the peerless austerity,  
And is this not my chosen path?*

It is no use saying that our enemies are preventing us from practicing, and that is why we get angry. For if we truly want to practice, there is no practice more important than patience. We cannot pretend to practice without patience.

If we cannot bear the harm our enemies do to us, and get angry instead, we are obstructing our own achievement of an immensely positive action. Nothing can exist without a cause, and the practice of patience could not exist without there being people who do us harm. How, then, can we call such people obstacles to our practice of patience, which is one of the fundamental practices of a Mahayana practitioner? We can hardly call a beggar an obstacle to generosity.

There are so many charitable causes, such as beggars, in the world; whereas those who make us angry and test our patience are very few—especially if we avoid harming others. So when we encounter these rare enemies, we should appreciate them.

107. *Like a treasure found at home,  
Enriching me without fatigue,  
Enemies are helpers in the bodhisattva life,  
I should take delight in them.*

When we have been patient toward an enemy, we should dedicate

the fruit of this practice of patience to him, because he is the cause of the practice. He has been very kind to us. We might think, why does he deserve this dedication when he had no intention to make us practice patience? But if objects need have an intention before they deserve our respect, then in that case the dharma itself, which points out the cessation of suffering and is the cause of happiness, yet has no intention of helping us, should not be worthy of respect.

We might then think that our enemy is undeserving because, unlike the dharma, he actually wishes to harm us. But if everyone was as kind and well-intentioned as a doctor, how could we ever practice patience? And when a doctor, intending to cure us, hurts us by amputating a limb, cutting us open, or pricking us with needles, we do not think of him as an enemy and get angry with him, so we do not practice patience toward him. But enemies are those who intend to harm us, and it is because of that that we are able to practice patience toward them.

If we really take refuge in the buddhas, then we should respect their wishes. After all, in ordinary life it is normal to adapt in some way to one's friends and respect their wishes. The ability to do so is considered a good quality. If, on the one hand, we say that we have heartfelt devotion and take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, but on the other hand, in our actual actions, we take no notice of what displeases them, and just walk over them, that is truly sad. We are prepared to conform to the standards of ordinary people but not to those of the buddhas and bodhisattvas. How miserable! If, for example, a Christian truly loves God, then he should practice love toward all his fellow human beings. Otherwise, he is failing to practice his religion: his words and deeds contradict each other.

In general, it is the notion of enemies that is the main obstacle to *bodhicitta*. If we can transform an enemy into someone toward whom

## ENDURING THE FIRES

we feel respect and gratitude, then our practice will naturally progress, like water following a downhill course.

To be patient means not to get angry with those who harm us and to have compassion. That is not to say that we should let them do what they like. For example, we Tibetans have undergone great difficulties at the hands of others. But we are not angry with them, since if we get angry we can only lose. This is why we are practicing patience. But we are not going to let injustice and oppression go unnoticed.

*From the Winter 1992 issue*

# 3

## INTO EMPTINESS

A Mother's Death.

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NORMAN FISCHER

**A**t first it was a shock to see her. She didn't look the same at all. Her face was ashen and all puffed up from the chemotherapy or radiation. Her arms were huge from it, her hair was matted and a different color, her voice had gone all croaky and harsh, and the medication had got her mixed up and disconnected. She'd sit up in bed all of a sudden, beside herself with anger or frustration, and yell to my Aunt Adeline, "No, turn me over, not that way, this way, no, not that way, I said like this, like that." Adeline and my father, and my Aunt Sylvia all looked at one another and at me.

She'd go in and out of consciousness. She'd see things. She'd say, "Don't let them make you do anything you don't want to."

She said, "You all think I'm crazy, but I know what I'm doing."

She said, "Throw away all the envelopes you can."

She said, "Why are you standing around here. It's ridiculous!"

Scram!”

And she said to me, “You’re a cute boy in that shirt.”

After a while it was very beautiful to see her living this simple, intense, painful, but somehow noble existence in the six-foot-by-three-foot space of hospital bed that had become her whole life. This bed, together with the unknown realms of space and time through which she was traveling.

She’d say, “Put my shoes in boxes over there.” We’d take shifts staying with her around the clock, and I would look forward very much to being with her, to be as intimate with her as I had been as a child and to experience a clearer, purer relationship with her. For a long time I had been a disappointment to her. She loved me very much, and I think, she felt frustrated in some area of her life and so needed me to afford her satisfaction in some way.

But this never happened. I had had an unusual kind of life, and this was hard for her. But now I could stroke her forehead and release the tension building up around her eyes. And I could breathe with her, which would calm her down a little bit. Sometimes, if she were making noise in her breathing, I’d make noise in the same way. But I couldn’t do that when others were around. Sometimes she’d sit up suddenly out of her unconsciousness and say to me, “Don’t make fun of me.” And I’d say, “I’m not making fun of you. I love you.” Late at night I could look at her in the lamplight and think of the many ways I could have been nicer to her or how much she’d loved me and how much she had given to me, and I could tell her then how much I loved her and it would make me cry. When she’d suddenly sit up and say, “My hat,” or “Get my shoes, we’re going out,” or “Where are the red and green charts, they should beep by now,” I’d tell her, “Don’t worry about that. Your life is very simple now. Just breathe.” And she would lie back down, reassured and calmer.

Gradually, over the course of days and nights, she began to give up everything. First her body became more relaxed, as though it wasn't hers anymore. Then she stopped having any sense of whether she liked or didn't like anything. Then she couldn't tell who anyone was or recognize anything in the room. All of the worries and cares of her life began to mingle in her delirium: her clothes, things she had to do at home or for my father, things at the office where she had worked. One by one she put them down, too. Finally there was only a dim awareness that grew finer and finer as her breath seemed to go more and more deep—more and more inward. It was as if the heavy earth of her body were dissolving into water. Then this water of the moving of her blood dissolved into the fire of images that receded in the distance. The fiery images dissolved into air and the air into space, endless space and endless consciousness.

My father cried and said, "It isn't fair," just as my sons, arguing with one another or carefully watching each other divide some special food might say "It isn't fair."

I knew she was gone but it didn't really make any sense that she was gone. She didn't go anywhere. And the gone that she was was really no different from the gone that she had usually been to me my whole adult life and even during my life as a child. In one way she was gone, but in another way she was very present. We stood there looking at her. She looked very noble, and we were all in awe of her. Then everyone wanted to leave, and I said, "Is it all right if I stay with her a while?" Yes it was, and they left.

It was nearly dawn. The light coming in the window was lovely and my mother looked lovely in the light. Her skin was a different color than it had ever been before. It looked very soft and gentle. I could see that she had many freckles on her face. I had never before noticed that she had freckles. I felt like talking to her. I said, "Don't be confused!"

Then quietly I recited the *Heart Sutra*: Form is emptiness, emptiness is form, everything that is form is emptiness, everything that is emptiness, form. Further, there is no eye no ear no nose no tongue no body and no mind. There is no color no sound no smell no taste no touch no mental object. And it says: There is nothing to have and the mind is no hindrance. It ends: Gone, gone, gone, completely gone, gone beyond everything. I have recited this sutra thousands of times but never had I felt so clearly as now what it meant then.

I looked out the window. The Florida hospital lawns were pale green in the dawn light, very quiet and pure, as if brand new, with no one around. My mother was all right. She had everything she needed. Far away on the lawn a workman appeared and tried to start a lawnmower. It took many pulls to get it going. Then silently and slowly he began to push it back and forth across the lawn.

Mama was all right. But it was going to be hard for the world with all its struggle and fragility and beauty to get along without her. It was then that I cried a lot for the world that didn't know any peace and perhaps never would.

*From the Spring 1992 issue*

**Zoketsu Norman Fischer** is a Zen priest, author, and poet. A former abbot (now guest teacher) of the San Francisco Zen Center, he is founder and teacher of the Everyday Zen Foundation ([www.everydayzen.org](http://www.everydayzen.org)). His latest collection of poetry is *Questions/Places/Voices/Seasons* (2011) other recent books include *Sailing Home: Using the Wisdom of Homer's Odyssey to Navigate Life's Perils and Pitfalls* (2008), *I Was Blown Back* (2005), and the award-winning *Taking Our Places: The Buddhist Path to Growing Up* (2003).



# 4

## HOW TO COOK A MACROBIOTIC MEAL IN A HOTEL ROOM

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MERCE CUNNINGHAM

**Y**ou carry a small portable rice cooker and an immersion heater, various plugs, extension cords, and converters for foreign exchange in your luggage. It is extremely important to be knowledgeable about the various shapes and forms and power of plugs for different countries. There have recently been advertisements concerning a single compact converter with a variety of plugs and outlets to be useful in any country, but I am skeptical, having had too many casualties for lack of a variety of appliances in one country or another. I still carry extra plugs for all. The wall plug necessary for England is a three-pronged monster, and you must have one with the proper amperes, wattage, power, whatever, or your dinner is a no-show. My carry-on satchel in which I place the cooker, the converter, the various extensions and plugs includes, for example, an extra-long plug to fit into modern hotel outlets that use recent-type vacuums with long plugs

to ward off such marauders as myself. The satchel also holds whatever food I carry to avoid the airplane cuisine. It requires dexterity and cunning to get all that is necessary into the satchel, but once on the plane and having looked at the menu the stewardess has grandly placed in my lap, I am overjoyed with my “carry-on.”

Upon arrival at the hotel and reaching your room, and after finding the mini-bar and removing the various liquids and plastic containers of nuts and candies the hotel provides, you open the suitcase that has clothes surrounding the various cooking essentials and staples to keep them protected from the horrors of airplane luggage compartments.

The rice cooker comes with two measuring cups (each a small useful plastic container, easily misplaced, and important to keep track of for measuring), one container rice to two containers water. Water, of course, is important. Bring with you or seek out immediately a source for a decent bottled variety, whether through the hotel or the nearest food store.

Okay, you have the staples, brown rice and beans, and now—more frequently than in the early macro-touring days—have obtained some fresh vegetables from a local health food store (they are increasing in number and in unlikely places—the Grand Appetit in the Marais, Paris, for example). You can embellish the meal with smoked salmon and lemon, a decent wholegrain loaf of bread or crackers, and a bottle of red wine, not necessarily macrobiotic, but convivial.

The next step is to search for the electrical outlet. If there is more than one, gratitude abounds. The finding of an outlet sounds simple, but more often than not, the only one is behind a large, heavy, and totally useless piece of furniture covered with the hotel’s printed material advertising its charms and what number to call to reserve a room in the next charming place in their chain.

If the search for an outlet is successful in a reasonable amount of

time, you go to the next step. But if, as often, the outlet remains invisible, you remember David Tudor's dictum: "There has to be one. The maid needs it for the vacuum." I recall a closet of a room in London where it was necessary to request the appearance of and aid from David Tudor. He searched and found it hidden behind the TV, invisible to all except his—and presumably the maid's—sharp eye.

Not all circumstances are as dire as that one. Some hotels, unpredictably, provide outlets in any number of places and free of encumbrances, making the cooking procedure a matter of choice as to which area is most suitable for the kitchen.

The beans are first, and if you have arrived the night before and have made suitable arrangements for bottled water, soaking is useful, reducing the cooking time, helpful when one pot has to serve. The beans are cooked with kombu seaweed broken up into small pieces, thyme, and bay leaf, and in recent trips a whole small clove of garlic, produced out of the food satchel. The cooking of the beans is done in the early morning during my yoga period, they only require an occasional stirring to keep their spirits up.

The yoga and the beans take roughly an hour, you turn them off (and if it's a nervous hotel, hide the container in a drawer) and leave for the day's schedule at the theater, which includes class and rehearsal. Coming back at four in the afternoon, eating a small amount of food before the evening show, and taking a nap, during which time the rice may be cooked, same procedure, same pot (one always carries various plastic containers for transferring food). With the rice, the cooker works automatically; once the four cups of water to two of rice have been used up, it turns itself off.

(Several of the dancers carry rice cookers, and start them cooking in the dressing rooms as rehearsal begins. On one tour, in a theater sadly

lacking in any affluence of electricity, it gave up as the fourth rice cooker was turned on, and there was a brownout).

Okay, basics are cooked. Next encounter is after the show, the curtain down to thunderous applause, and as soon as manageable one gets to the hotel, heats water in the pot to parboil vegetables (zucchini, broccoli, kale, string beans, sometimes carrots, even chard cut up), and, while this is going on, climbs into the bathtub to hope the muscular structure recovers some resilience.

When the vegetables are done, cooked through but still crisp, *al dente* if lucky, remove them, keep the cooking water for another day, put the mixture of rice, beans, vegetables with a small amount of Braggs Liquid into the pot to heat for some minor minutes, while the wine is opened—and if in Paris, the hors d’oeuvres are *celeri rémoulade*, carrot salad, endive, and, in season, tomatoes—and taste the wine.

One of the pleasant changes, particularly in Paris, is to find a plain roasted chicken, “All our chickens are cooked with nothing.” Hummus, tabouli too, can be found more often than not, as side tastes.

Once the entrée is hot enough, serve it, along with the salmon, lemon, watercress. Dessert, forget it! Have another glass of wine.

It requires diligence and attention to find suitable vegetables, especially when shopping in foreign markets, where they are often abundant but consist mainly of root vegetables, which take an inordinate amount of cooking time, carrots excepted if cut up small enough. (Where do the Turkish markets in Hamburg obtain all those green vegetables? The stalls are profuse.)

Plates? Well, carry reusable plastic types. I tried hauling so-called chinaware only once. It became china chips in my case. But I have found a usable knife-fork-spoon trio package in a small plastic case, spotted in one of those millions of catalogs that seem to make up the mail most

days.

Occasionally I eat out, if there is a couscous restaurant in the neighborhood or city, even miles away if recommended. It is a great cuisine, suitable to the macrobiotic world. Imagine cooking a whole dinner over one small fire. I stay with the macrobiotic cuisine. It is extremely suitable to my system, and under touring conditions with performance deadlines, that is an *a priori* of the first order. I also enjoy the tastes, the separate tastes of plain food that can make a dinner a pleasure even under these conditions.

*From the Spring 1994 issue*

**Merce Cunningham**, celebrated as one of the world's foremost modernist choreographers and dancers, first collaborated with the musician, writer, and thinker John Cage in 1944; they became life partners and continued to cook and work together until Cage's death in 1992. Both were influenced by their interest in Zen Buddhism. Cunningham remained active in the world of dance and theater until shortly before his death in 2009 at the age of 90.

# 5

## BEING INTIMATE WITH DEMONS

What is the Emotional Life of a Buddha?

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JANE HIRSHFIELD

**I**n Soto Zen, though there is no formal course of koan practice, students are often encouraged to practice with a question of their own. “What is the emotional life of a buddha?” is a question that poet Jane Hirshfield, a consulting editor to *Tricycle*, has been working with for many years, and she suggested that it be used as the basis for a special section, out of curiosity, to see how it might be addressed more widely.

At Tassajara, the Soto Zen monastery inland from Big Sur, where I lived for three years in the mid-seventies, a stone Buddha of great beauty and concentration sits on an altar. From his lotus throne he radiates both serenity and acceptance, the traditional half-smile on his face greeting whatever is brought into the room. In many ways, I found such a reminder of one’s own buddhanature quite helpful. Without such equanimity, how could one sit without moving amid the many hours of

thoughts, feelings, memories, physical pain, or even the joys, that are an inevitable part of Zen practice? Without such equanimity, how could one learn that it is possible to feel strongly without necessarily acting upon those feelings, without reifying or identifying with them, fearing or desiring them?

And yet, the experiences of my heart and mind continually failed to live up to this serene and imperturbable image. Some part of me believed that to experience the full range of emotions was a mark of ignorance and unripeness, and yet at some point I realized that a practice that required turning away from parts of my experience also didn't seem right. The Japanese Zen master and poet Ikkyu once described literature as a path of intimacy with demons—this, I realized, was closer. To be intimate with demons, to hold passion and feeling as fully a part of the field of Buddha's robe, might be a path of inclusion, not exclusion, and one that began from the moment by moment experience of my own life rather than some outer conception or goal.

I don't mean to imply that the particular teaching tradition in which I have studied caused my dilemma, and yet the issue was there. Where did the idea of exclusion come from? Some Buddhist teachings I encountered as a beginning student spoke of all thoughts and emotions as manifestations of illusion; others proposed the attitude "Offer your emotion a cup of tea, but you don't have to ask it to stay"; others suggested that thought-formations and sensory feelings be allowed to come and go as freely as the reflections of clouds in a lake; and still others used a language of self-control and will, and "uprooting" and "burning away" the impurities of anger, pride, sensuality. None of this was particularly well sorted through in my mind, and the result was a number of clashing, co-existent prescriptions for dealing with emotions. Also, within a mostly unarticulated community agreement, certain kinds of emotional behav-

ior were valued as signs of mature practice, others regarded as lapses—X’s temper versus Y’s evenness, A’s emotionality versus B’s solidity.

Stories and poems on the subject from various Buddhist traditions point in every direction. An interesting one is the Chinese Zen tale of an old woman who has supported a monk for twenty years. One day, she sends a beautiful young girl to deliver his meal in her place—in some versions, her daughter. She instructs the girl to embrace the monk and see his response. He stands stock still, and when asked afterward what it was like, replies, “Like a withering tree on a rock in winter, utterly without warmth.” Furious, the woman throws him out and burns down his hut, exclaiming, “How could I have wasted all these years on such a fraud!”

Paul Reps in his book *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* frames this story as a failure of compassion, a lack of lovingkindness on the part of the monk toward the girl. Suzuki Roshi, the Soto Zen priest who founded Tassajara, mused in a lecture he gave in Reed College in 1971, “Maybe a true Zen master should not be like a wall or a tree or a stone; maybe he should be human even though he practices zazen.” He then went on to add the opinion of the great thirteenth-century Japanese teacher Dogen, that all three showed good, steadfast practice: “The monk was great, the daughter was great, and the old lady was also great, they were all great teachers.” While I have no example of a tantric teacher’s response, it seems to me one might say that the point of awakening is not the utter cessation of desire that the monk seems to show (or for that matter of anger, fear, or any other emotion), but that in awakened consciousness such arising energies are seen as transient and without self, but not without power or usefulness.

There are also more Western ways of looking at this story. One might be through the psychological theory of the shadow, which says that if



we cut ourselves off from our feelings through suppression, negation, or willed dissociation, they will come back to haunt us in increasingly destructive ways. The monk's words ring over-insistent, and we have seen enough recent examples of sexuality seemingly run amok in spiritual leaders both Eastern and Judeo-Christian to be aware of the dangers of a simplistic denial. If we attempt to exclude the emotions from spiritual practice, this reading says, they will reappear in a form demanding that we face them: we will be thrown out of the hut.

Another Western perspective is to look at the gender roles. The male is shown denying desire and the body, the old woman insisting on their inclusion—significantly, not in or for herself, but simply as a test of valid practice. Her reponse to his failure is no dried-out statement of practice philosophy but an immediate, vivid, and full-bodied application of the bodhisattva Manjushri's sword of compassion. In this reading, the story can be seen as a call to include all sides of our life in Buddhist experience.

In Zen, there is no emotional life outside of the one that exists this moment. The question becomes not "What is the emotional life of a Buddha?" but "What is my own emotional life in its true nature?" In the moment of experiencing emptiness, what is my emotional life? What is it in the moment of experiencing loss? Is the spaciousness of the awakened heart/mind a state of detachment or a state of nonattachment? Between those two words and conceptions lie worlds of difference. One, detachment, says that the passions and emotions will either be cut off, or, in a slightly different description, will fall away of their own accord with increasing ripeness of practice. The other, nonattachment, says that so long as we dwell in this human realm, we will continue to feel anger, grief, joy, sensuality, passion, but that when these emotions exist free of a limited idea of self, we will neither suffer nor cause suffering in fueling them.

While it is not so simple a model to ponder as the unchanging figure

on the altar, I have come to imagine a buddha who feels the full range of emotions, yet feels them in a way not in the service of the self but in the service of everything. Perhaps such a buddha encounters each thing that arises including limitless suffering, including the end of limitless suffering—as simply what is: not standing back from this moment’s particular nature, but entering it more and more deeply, with awareness and compassionate intention. Compassion means to “feel with,” after all; the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara is the one who hears the cries of the world and comes. If one looks only with the eyes of the Absolute, there is nothing and no one to be saved, nothing in which to take refuge, no eyes, no ears, no tongue, no body, no mind, no heart. But if one speaks from the point of view where anything—the idea of compassion, the idea of the Buddha—is given entrance, all of it comes flooding in.

The experience of the practice itself teaches us that any conception or ideal of awakened being can only be a hindrance—neither practice nor awakening is about our ideas or images. And yet, however limited the finger-pointing at the moon, still we point, we turn to one another for direction. So I have come to think that if the bodhisattva’s task is to continue to practice until every pebble, every blade of grass, awakens, surely the passions, difficult or blissful, can also be included in that vow. And if awakening is also already present, inescapably and everywhere present from the beginning, how can the emotions not be part of that singing life of grasses and fish and oil tankers and subways and cats in heat who wake us, furious and smiling, in the middle of the brief summer night?

*From the Spring 1995 issue*

**Jane Hirshfield** is an award-winning writer, poet, and translator whose works most recently include *Come, Thief: Poems* (2011), *The Heart of Haiku* (Kindle Single, 2011), *Hiddenness*, *Uncertainty*, *Surprise* (2008), and *After* (2006). She practiced at San Francisco Zen Center, Tassajara, and Green Gulch Farm between 1974 and 1982, and received lay ordination in 1979.

# 6

## THE ROUNDTABLE: HELP OR HINDRANCE

Whether or not psychedelics have any usefulness to someone on a Buddhist path was the subject of four interviews conducted in 1996 by Allan Hunt Badiner and combined into the following roundtable discussion.

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WITH RAM DASS, JOAN HALIFAX,  
ROBERT AITKEN, RICHARD BAKER

**T**ricycle: Psychedelics is a huge category. We are focusing mostly on materials that are derived from plants, that when ingested in appropriate doses and in appropriate conditions may contribute to an expanded state of consciousness. Can use of psychedelics of this kind lead to enlightenment?

**Halifax:** In the earlier days, we defined psychedelic as “mind manifesting.” The way it was seen, particularly by LSD researcher Stan Grof and others, is that domains of the mind are evoked when certain substances are taken. Different plant teachers are like keys that unlock different doors within the mind. For example, mescaline produces a different kind of vision than psilocybin does, or yagé, and so on.

**Ram Dass:** From my point of view, Buddhism is the closest to the psychedelic experience, at least in terms of LSD. LSD catapults you beyond your conceptual structures. It extricates you. It overrides your habits of identification with thought and puts you into a nonconceptual mode very fast.

**Tricycle:** What about the so-called Buddhist pill, MDMA, aka ecstasy?

**Ram Dass:** I don't find it to be a Buddhist pill. I find that MDMA is wonderful for relational therapy. It enhances the quality of compassion, of loving, of seeing the beauty in people and all that, but not the experience of formlessness or emptiness. I don't like the speed component in it, the kind of jaw-clenching and all that stuff. I took about fifty trips of MDMA and decided that was enough. My guru, Neem Karoli Baba, commented on psychedelics once. "It's useful," he said, "but it's not the true *samadhi*. It allows you to come in and have the *darshan* of Christ, but you can only stay two hours and then you have to leave." And he said, "You can't become Christ through your medicine." The distinction between seeing and becoming is where Buddhism comes in.

**Tricycle:** Two hours of Christ doesn't sound so bad!

**Ram Dass:** It's not bad! But it can also trap you in a certain kind of experience. And experience isn't nonexperience. It's an analog of the thing but it's not the thing itself. It's like the *experience* of emptiness rather than emptiness itself.

**Tricycle:** Ram Dass, you mentioned the habit-override potential of psychedelics. But this is short-lived, isn't it?

**Aitken:** It's all very well to have a delightful experience of forgetting yourself, but what about afterward? The acid test is how this works out in the daily life of working for a living and paying taxes and raising kids and so on.

**Ram Dass:** Everybody's a little greedy for being enlightened immediately. What I've noticed in my own life over the thirty-five years since my first ingestion is that when I reenter, the habits come back in. But what I have in addition to the habits is the memory of the experience, the sense of knowing that it's possible. Knowing that it's possible changes the meaning of all spiritual practice that follows because you go in with a perspective that's not just from here, but from there as well.

**Aitken:** I think that there are both negative and positive experiences possible under psychedelics, but I think you must leave them behind if you want to take up Buddhist practice seriously. Many people came to Zen Buddhist practice through their experience with psychedelics. I don't meet any newcomers that have that experience now.

**Tricycle:** How did the refugees from psychedelica do?

**Aitken:** Drugs gave them a sense of religious possibility, but then they felt they had exhausted the potential and wanted to take up a practice that would lead them to religious insight. There were people during that period who tried to do zazen and take drugs at the same time. This really didn't work at all, because there was a quality of self-absorption in the experience of the people taking drugs that was quite out of keeping with the goal of practice.

**Baker:** We were in San Francisco right in the middle of the whole scene from '61 on. What Suzuki-roshi and I noticed was that people who used LSD—and a large percentage of the students did—got into practice faster than other people. Not always, but usually it opened them up to practice faster. But we also noticed that for the most part, those people leveled off after a couple of years and didn't advance much in Zen practice, particularly those people who used it a lot. My feeling is that psychedelics create a taste for a certain kind of experience. It seems that, because of the way their mental space was so strongly opened and conditioned by LSD, Zen practice was only fruitful when it related to this mental space. People who used it a lot, meaning fifty trips, two hundred trips, didn't advance much past what a good practitioner would after two years. Also in part because of a familiarity with such strong inner-mind language, it was harder for these students to recognize the more subtle inner-mind language that one learns to recognize in Zen practice.

**Tricycle:** Zen didn't get them high enough?

**Baker:** They got a taste for a certain kind of mental and spiritual excitement, and when it wasn't present, and the mind was in more the neutral category, their interest in practice diminished. Much of Buddhist experience occurs in the territory where you neither like nor dislike: so-called neutral territory. Neutrality, as in nongrasping, is the deepest kind of feeling, but you can't call it either good or bad. Psychedelic experience tends to have such a strong and exciting quality that it can block the more subtle internal language.

**Tricycle:** So it was easy to distinguish those who used psychedelics from those who didn't?

**Aitken:** Absolutely. There were people who would be training in our zendo during the week, and then smoke and drop or whatever on their days off; when they came back I would definitely notice the difference in their manner and in the quality of their practice. They would be quite scattered and unsettled instead of returning refreshed. We would have these fierce arguments, and although I wasn't a teacher in those days I was certainly an elder brother in the dharma, but they were not open to any kind of guidance.

**Halifax:** It's almost like a smell: you can pretty much tell who does and who doesn't. How I tell is; those who use are not as tightly knit as those who don't, in terms of the way the mind is woven. It took me quite a while to settle down on the cushion. Since I stopped taking psychedelics, my tendency toward dispersion has definitely ceased, and my reactivity has definitely diminished. I am relieved to have committed myself to the path of meditation.

**Tricycle:** Although for some time you must have found much relief in psychedelics.

**Halifax:** There is no doubt about that. Psychedelics are an extraordinarily powerful tool for opening the mindfield. I look at psychedelics as a kind of phase through which we pass when we're trying to become more truly who we are, more authentic, and more genuine. I feel like I graduated from psychedelics, but that they were definitely part of the evolution of my own psychological or developmental maturation. But it's really a different kind of mind that is cultivated in meditation, where the qualities of stability, and lovingkindness, and clarity, and humbleness are the primary qualities. Psychedelics don't necessarily cultivate those qualities.

**Tricycle:** Did you ever mix media?

**Halifax:** Of course I have. This was during the seventies, and in the late sixties when I first took LSD. But after a while I didn't find it was too successful an experiment, frankly. At least for me.

**Baker:** There were a small number of students at Zen Center who tried to smoke marijuana and practice. One student became upset and stopped practicing because I told him he couldn't be my student if he was smoking marijuana.

**Ram Dass:** A lot of people say that smoking grass helps their meditation, but I don't find that it does.

**Halifax:** I think everyone has their own response to psychedelics. I didn't find that they really worked with the kind of mind that emerged in meditation, free of psychedelics. As time went on, I became less and less interested in the qualities of mind evoked by psychedelics. I don't know many people who have managed to actually keep a psychedelic practice and a mature Buddhist practice going at the same time, except maybe Ram Dass.

**Ram Dass:** I don't see psychedelics as an enlightening vehicle, but I do see it as an awakening vehicle. I see them beginning a process that awakens you to the possibility. That's the way I'm using the word "awaken." It breaks you out, in the same way that trauma can do it, near-death experiences, and perhaps years of intensive meditation.



**Tricycle:** Once you have the memory and you start using methods that are perhaps more satisfying in the long run, your work then becomes collapsing the gap between that memory of freedom and your current experience of reality. Is that right?

**Ram Dass:** Yeah.

**Tricycle:** So do you still take drugs?

**Ram Dass:** I have.

**Tricycle:** And have you found it useful?

**Ram Dass:** Yes, and I'll tell you why: I saw that I could socialize any method. I could make any method work to keep my ego going. When someone does their first hit or goes on their first retreat they think, "Oh, my God! It's going to do it!"—this is going to bring enlightenment. And then you figure out the little corners of the mind, to play with it, to protect yourself. So I use one method against another continually as a check and balance to see where I'm conning myself.

**Tricycle:** But you can't always control or direct the experience, can you?

**Ram Dass:** I'm part of the psychedelic explorers club from back in the sixties, and I understand that the nature of the experience you have with psychedelics is a function of your set as well as your setting, and that as I do my spiritual practices my set changes. So I will go for two years of deep practices, and then I'll be interested to see where I am in relation to psychedelics. I'm at the point now where, if I never have them again,

it'll be fine, and if I do have them again, it'll be wonderful. I don't know and I don't care. That's a different set from which to do them, instead of "I need them to find reality."

**Aitken:** All you have to do is pick up a good Buddhist text, and there's reality. You don't have to take drugs to wake up to it. Most people that come to me now are awakened by reading. They just realize, "Oh, there's something more to my life." But it's correct to say that the acquisitive society is very seductive and draws us in. The average couple work very hard and they come home and, naturally, they want to unwind. So they want to have a drink, or look at TV. It's a kind of vicious circle. Zen Buddhism has its work cut out for it. We need to find ways that people can leave home without leaving home.

**Baker:** I also think it's true that the job of a culture is to be totally seductive and to offer no other alternative. And that's what Buddhism is always facing in every culture, how to break through this very convincing cultural, societal thought-sheath.

**Tricycle:** Many Buddhist teachers appear to be saying, "Do what I say, not what I've done" when it comes to psychedelics. Young people today seem very sincere about the quest and unwilling to take it on trust that certain methods are helpful or not helpful, particularly when they are controversial.

**Aitken:** I don't think drugs have particularly helped anybody arrive where they are. It's just that by the cultural circumstances of the time, in the sixties and early seventies, it so happened that people came to Zen through their experience with drugs. Before that they came to Zen by their experience in theosophy and other occult paths. And after that they came to Zen practice through their reading and their experiences

with yoga or aikido or Theravadan practice or whatever. It was just a peculiarity that at that particular time LSD was discovered and made widespread. It coincided with a lot of disillusionment with the Vietnam War and civil rights, and so on. People were in despair of standard forms. They were ready to experiment. But that was then. When I hear this talk, I feel transported back about thirty years. It seems like kicking a dead horse to me.

**Tricycle:** Robert Aitken, what is your experience with psychedelics?

**Aitken:** I have experimented with LSD, and several times with marijuana.

**Tricycle:** What did you learn?

**Aitken:** None of them were really satisfactory experiences. The marijuana experiences left me with a false impression of solidarity with peers (in fact, they weren't my peers—they were a lot younger than I). Anne Aitken and I had purchased a little house on Maui that later became the first Maui Zendo. But before we moved, we rented it to a group of young people and would go over and visit them. All of them smoked marijuana. On one occasion I was sitting in a circle with a group of young men, and we were passing the marijuana cigarette around. I had this wonderful feeling of solidarity with the circle. The women were in the kitchen cooking, and one of the women had a little baby that was very fussy. Anne came out and asked me if I would look after the baby while the women did their cooking. I refused. But then I thought to myself, what's the matter with me? I love little kids, and I can pacify any baby. What sort of delusion of solidarity am I under when I'm excluding the

rest of the world, so to speak? So that was my awakening to the limitations of marijuana.

**Tricycle:** But you had that realization as you were sitting there stoned?

**Aitken:** Yes.

**Tricycle:** Did you act on it?

**Aitken:** Oh, sure. I got up, left the group, and picked up the baby.

**Tricycle:** A reasonably short-lived delusion. What about the LSD trip?

**Aitken:** The one LSD experience was an experience of illusion. I was lying on my back in the tall grass, looking at the clouds and finding Roman legions in the clouds and so on.

**Tricycle:** Did you enjoy it?

**Aitken:** Well, I kind of enjoyed it at the moment, but then afterward there was this terrible comedown where everything looked ugly and I could see very clearly how wrinkled people's faces were and how disagreeable everything was. I suppose it's that experience that takes people back to the false kinds of delusions that they experience on LSD. It was only one experience, so I can't really judge on that narrow base.

**Tricycle:** Richard Baker, any notable experience here?

**Baker:** I do not use psychedelics. I would not recommend that my two

daughters use psychedelics. And although in the sixties I organized a conference on LSD in Berkeley, I have never taken LSD. In the late fifties, I took some peyote buttons and mescaline a few times, and maybe some psilocybin. I didn't like the lack of fluidity, and the way it kind of pushed my mental states around. I preferred the fluidity that I could develop in meditative concentration. One time I was in Chile with two native shamans and a friend who teaches shamanism. I was part of the group, so I drank all the brews that they did. I think they wanted to test the Zen teacher, so they loaded me up. I ended up having to stay up all night and take care of everybody. No big deal.

**Tricycle:** Joan, what was it like to immerse yourself in older, indigenous cultures and take psychedelics with them, and to do it by their rules?

**Halifax:** In so-called psychedelic cultures, cultures where hallucinogens are used and where the psychological technology is highly developed, I observed that the religious set is so utterly well articulated and elaborated. And of course it's culturally acceptable and not on the fringe of culture, like it is here. In the case of the Huichols or the Mazatecs or the Kayapos in Ecuador, you saw a world that was really harmonized to the use of hallucinogens and the visions that were given by these plants.

**Tricycle:** What about ayahuasca, or yagé? Ayahuasca in particular has taken the Buddhist world for a spin lately.

**Halifax:** Ayahuasca is just an amazing plant teacher.

**Ram Dass:** It's the current ritual of choice. But I think the rituals tend to keep you in dualism. Shamanic journeys are, for the most part, boring

to me because they are usually concerned with good and evil and power.

**Tricycle:** Are psychedelics a hindrance, Joan?

**Halifax:** Even asking that question is a hindrance. You know what I'm saying? Even Buddhism is a hindrance. What I ask is: what kind of mind do you want to bring forward? What qualities do you think would serve you and really serve other beings in this world? What do you think would really help you? What's the most healing thing to do? I try to ask those questions in a way that is noncondemning of any choice one might make. However, many of us wouldn't be comfortable on a cushion had we not taken psychedelics.

**Aitken:** When I look back on my first introduction to Zen, which was R. H. Blyth's *Zen in English Literature*, I can see lots of mistakes in that book. But it was very important for me at the time. That doesn't mean that I'm now going to tell people to read *Zen in English Literature* first, you see. It just happened that that was my experience back in 1943.

**Tricycle:** Ven. Dr. Ratanasara, a Sri Lankan monk who chairs the American Buddhist Congress, is fond of pointing out that when you act unskillfully, the worst damage is not external to you—not divine displeasure, karmic effects, or even the logical consequences—but rather the uneasy feeling or disequilibrium that lingers in the mind. Wouldn't using psychedelic drugs, on some level, create a hindrance just by virtue of the fact that they are illegal, or that studies find them harmful physically?

**Ram Dass:** Most of the data critical of psychedelics, claiming brain damage, or that they lead to harder drugs and all of that, come from

politically motivated research that does not stand up under independent study. As far as breaking the law is concerned, what we are really talking about is the politics of consciousness and control. Those vested with power fear the destabilization of society by forces that they can't control. The desire for drugs cannot be controlled. It's disrupting all the structures of society, it's overwhelming the judges and the jails. Drug policy has been a total failure.

**Tricycle:** What about bad trips?

**Ram Dass:** For the most part, bad trips can be prevented by care in the set and setting, and of course, the illegality of the material is itself part of the setting. But those that do occur usually consist of what I call the "outs" (on the way out), and the "ins" (on the way back in). On the way out, what may happen is that the person reaches a point where even the minimal structure needed for holding on to a sense of self is perceived to be in jeopardy. Some people who are not prepared for that push against it, and when you push against it, the whole paranoid process starts; energy is taken from the psychedelics, and a user-generated hell realm is created for you.

**Tricycle:** And on the way in?

**Ram Dass:** You're resting formlessly in peace, and equanimity, and awareness, and bliss. As the chemical wears off, you see what you're going back into, and it seems like such a prison, such a corruption, that you just don't want to go back and you push against reentry. It's a bad trip when you come back and everything's "yick." You don't like the people, and they all look plastic and false.

**Tricycle:** It isn't always pretty.

**Halifax:** To have the feeling that you're doing something against the social grain that could actually bring harm to yourself, or others, in terms of jail, and so forth, is not a very comfortable position to be in when you're trying to become more vulnerable and peaceful. I'm really glad that I've had those experiences in other cultures because, in fact, no matter how authentic we try to be in our own culture vis-à-vis creating a beautiful setting for psychedelics, whether it's in nature or whether it's having icons, music, incense, and candles around or whatever, there's something about an integrated vision—a spiritual vision that's part of a continuum of a culture—that is irreplaceable.

**Tricycle:** Can Westerners ever escape their conditioning? Can they legitimately partake in and fully benefit from these rituals?

**Halifax:** If I go to Japan or Korea or Vietnam and sit in a temple and have an authentic experience of samadhi while doing zazen in these environments, is that any different, for example, than somebody going to South America or Middle America and having a psychedelic epiphany in a particular cultural setting? I think it's fairly comparable. I think we can cross those boundaries. Meditation and this medicine are both powerful contexts for shifting our assemblage point out of the habitual mind of culture and into a new frame of reference.

**Tricycle:** Unlike our own psychedelic unfolding, we are now seeing a generation blur the distinctions between so-called psychedelics and hard drugs, and we see lots of crossover. A little LSD, a little heroin, a lot of pot, some pills—.



**Ram Dass:** But the distinctions are there. I think they can tell the distinctions among them. I think what we are generally dealing with is the attraction to altered states, to both the intensity of the experience and the excitement that comes from taking a risk.

**Tricycle:** Ram Dass, you are somewhat responsible for this, aren't you? We all recall a wild enthusiasm that you brought to the use of drugs.

**Ram Dass:** There's really a contrast between escape drugs and sacramental drugs, you know. There's clearly a great deal of drug-taking now that no one would want to endorse. Children and drugs just don't mix, for example. I've always said, "Become somebody before you become nobody." But drug use is like these pseudopods that shoot out from the culture and, in the case of crack and coke, represent clear statements of the failure of cultural mythology. Crack is used in reaction to the ceiling of opportunity for people in the inner cities. And in the upper class it's coke, which is used in reaction to the failure of the myth that success brings happiness. I mean, you win and you're still not winning. People with millions of dollars feel gypped somehow. I find the philosophical materialism that undercuts the society, and the zeal to keep it stable, are resulting in an oppressive atmosphere. I'm not upset about being part of something that shakes that system up.

**Tricycle:** What about marijuana? Ram Dass, do you still smoke it?

**Ram Dass:** I'm a light user of marijuana. I see it as an elevator to shift my planes of consciousness. That's kind of the technical way I would say that I'm using it. I like to watch the way my mind works—in all the

planes, and not in them at the same moment—on marijuana.

**Tricycle:** Does a new student of Buddhism need psychedelics to make real and rapid progress on the path?

**Ram Dass:** No. I don't see any reason why. Psychedelics are now just another method. They are even kind of an anachronism because of the politics of drugs in this culture. The paranoia connected with them renders them much less useful.

**Tricycle:** Do you have to have a spiritual context to make progress on the psychedelic path?

**Ram Dass:** You need some context in your life outside of drugs to create the proper setting. Buddhism is a good context for the psychedelic experience.

**Tricycle:** Is there something that psychedelics can teach us about death? Is there an advantage to using psychedelics to overcome the fear of death and promote one's acceptance of it?

**Ram Dass:** Yes, absolutely. Starting with Erik Kast's work back in the sixties at the University of Chicago. One quote from his work stands out in my mind. It was from a nurse who was dying of cancer and had just taken LSD. She said, "I know I'm dying of this deadly disease, but look at the beauty of the universe."

**Tricycle:** Joan, you have done, and are still doing, a lot of work around death and dying. Would you use psychedelics in this work again, or en-

courage others to?

**Halifax:** Not anymore. What I have found is that one's inner attitude, a quality of presence that one can bring to a dying person or that one can bring to oneself, is sufficient and in itself a profound comfort and relief. I've had some just incredible experiences with dying people without drugs having to mediate them. In the latter phases of dying, people are frequently in such altered states of consciousness that gilding the lily further doesn't seem necessary. What really works is a kind of a transmission of the heart, a flooding of love, a quality of absolute love and patience in the presence of dying. This magic of being both empty and full of compassion at the same time produces an incredible effect for both the caregiver and the dying person.

**Tricycle:** Richard Baker, so there are no herbs or plants in the bowl of the medicine Buddha, only sutras?

**Baker:** Buddhism is a religion and not a philosophy, because you only take refuge in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha and nothing else. And there's an alchemy to that which cannot be duplicated by sometimes taking refuge in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, and sometimes taking refuge in something else. For me, the chemistry or alchemy of Buddhism, of serious practice, really functions when you give yourself no other alternative.

One definition of an enlightened person is one who always has everything they need. At every moment what they need is there; they're not seeking anything. If you really are seriously practicing to be free and to simultaneously realize enlightenment, you never seek out of the immediate situation, no matter how bad it is. You transform the im-

mediate situation into what you need. You imagine that feeling that you need something as being exactly what you need. For instance, if I missed zazen one morning, I might think later in the day, “God, I wish I’d been able to do zazen this morning.” At that moment, I take that statement to mean not only that I didn’t do zazen, but also that what I need from zazen at this instant is the idea that I didn’t do zazen. You don’t try to change your state of mind, you always try to find exactly what you need in your present state of mind. So for me this is a kind of alchemy that has a psychedelic quality to it. But the pill is made from the ingredients of your immediate situation—not from attempting to change your state of mind, but changing through not changing

**Aitken:** I would add that there is a qualitative difference between the ecstasy that some people report from their drug experiences and the understanding, the realization, that comes with Zen practice. We seek understanding, not ecstasy.

**Ram Dass:** I feel sad when society rejects something that can help it understand itself and deepen its values and its wisdom. Just like the church ruling out the mystical experience. It’s not a purification of Buddhism. It’s trying to hold on to what you’ve got rather than growing.

*From the Fall 1996 issue*

**Robert Aitken Roshi**, founder of the Honolulu Diamond Sangha, was one of America’s most senior and respected Zen masters. **Zentatsu Richard Baker Roshi**, an American-born Soto Zen master, is the founder and guiding teacher of Crestone Mountain Zen Center in Colorado as well as the spiritual head of Dharma Sangha, with locations in Crestone and the Black Forest of Germany. **Ram Dass** is widely known for his psychedelic experiments at Harvard in the early 1960s and his subsequent embrace of spiritual life after a trip to India. In 1974 he established the Hanuman Foundation, a non-profit educational and service organization. **Roshi Joan Halifax** is the founder, abbot, and head teacher of Upaya Zen Center, a Zen Peacemaker community in Santa Fe. She has worked for decades in the fields of death and dying; meditation programs for prisoners; and environmental protection.

# 7

## A SANGHA BY ANOTHER NAME

A Buddhist and one of America's preeminent African-American writers applies the suffering of the First Noble Truth to the suffering of blacks in white America, and traces the history of the dharma among black artists.

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CHARLES JOHNSON

**T**he black experience in America, like the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha, begins with suffering.

It begins in the violence of seventeenth-century slave forts sprinkled along the west coast of Africa, where debtors, thieves, war prisoners, and those who would not convert to Islam were separated from their families, branded, and sold to Europeans who packed them into pestilential ships that cargoed 20 million human beings (a conservative estimate) to the New World. Only 20 percent of those slaves survived the harrowing voyage at sea (and only 20 percent of the sailors, too), and if they were among the lucky few to set foot on American soil, new horrors and heartbreak awaited them.

As has been documented time and again, the life of a slave—our

not-so-distant ancestors—was one of thinghood. It is, one might say, a frighteningly fertile ground for the growth of a deep appreciation for the First and Second Noble Truths as well as a living illustration of the meaning of impermanence. Former languages, religions, and cultures were erased, replaced by a Peculiar Institution in which the person of African descent was property systematically—legally, physically, and culturally—denied all sense of self-worth. A slave owns nothing, least of all himself. He desires and dreams at the risk of his life, which is best described as relative to (white) others, a reaction to their deeds, judgments, and definitions of the world. And these definitions, applied to blacks, were not kind. In the nation’s pulpits, Christian clergy in the South justified slavery by picturing blacks as the descendents of Ham or Cain; in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson dismissed slaves as childlike, stupid, and incapable of self-governance. For 244 years (from 1619 to 1863) America was a slave state with a guilty conscience: two and a half centuries tragically scarred by slave revolts, heroic black (and Abolitionist) resistance to oppression, and, more than anything else, physical, spiritual, and psychological *suffering* so staggeringly thorough it silences the mind when we study the classic slave narratives of Olaudah Equiano or Frederick Douglass, or see the brutal legacies of chattel bondage in a PBS series like *Africans in America*. All that was over, of course, by the end of the Civil War, but the Emancipation Proclamation did not bring liberation.

Legal freedom brought segregation instead, America’s version of apartheid, for another hundred years. But “separate” was clearly not “equal.” The *experienced* law of black life was disenfranchisement, anger, racial dualism, second-class citizenship, and, as the great scholar W. E. B. Du Bois put it in his classic *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903), “double-consciousness.” Can anyone doubt that if there is an essence—

an *eidōs*—to black American life, it has for three centuries been *craving*, and a quest for identity and liberty that, pushed to its social extremes, propelled this pursuit beyond the relative, conceptual realities of race and culture to a deeper investigation of the meaning of freedom?

If the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha are about *anything*, they are about a profound understanding of identity and the broadest possible meaning of liberty—teachings that sooner or later had to appeal to a people for whom suffering and loss were their daily bread. In the century after the Emancipation Proclamation each generation of black Americans saw their lives disrupted by race riots, lynchings, and the destruction of entire towns and communities such as the Greenwood district of black homes, businesses, and churches in Tulsa, Oklahoma, on May 31, 1921. These Jim Crow years witnessed the birth of the blues and a white backlash that fed poisonous caricatures of black people into popular culture and the national consciousness—films like *Birth of a Nation*, the writings of the Plantation School, and endless stereotypes that distorted black identity in newspapers and magazines—images that made the central question of the black self “Who am I? American? African? Or something other? Can reality be found in any of these words?”

During these centuries of institutionalized denial, black Americans found in Christianity a spiritual rock and refuge. Although first imposed on some slaves by their owners as a way of making them obedient, Christianity in black hands became a means for revolt against bondage. Then, in the twentieth century, the black church provided consolation in a country divided by the color-line. It became a common spiritual, social, economic, and political experience and was the place where black people could reinterpret Christianity and transform it into an instrument for worldly change. It became a racially tempered institution, one that raised funds to help the poor and to send black children off to college.

Historically, no other institution's influence compares with that of the black church, and I believe it will continue to be the dominant spiritual orientation of black Americans. It provides a compelling and time-tested moral vision, a metaphysically dualistic one that partitions the world into good and evil, heaven and hell, posits an immortal soul that no worldly suffering can harm, and through the agapic love of a merciful Father promises in the afterlife rewards denied in this one. Christianity, in part, made black Americans a genuinely Western people, on the whole identical in their strivings and sense of how the world works with Northern Europeans in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

But as early as 1923, Du Bois reflected deeply on the nature of black desires and a Western *Weltanschauung* in a speech entitled "Criteria of Negro Art." It was published in *The Crisis*, the official publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which Du Bois himself edited, and in this document he raises fundamental spiritual questions—what Buddhists might call dharma doors—for a people whose dreams were long deferred:

What do we want? What is the thing we are after? As it was phrased last night it had a certain truth: We want to be Americans, full-fledged Americans, with all the rights of other American citizens. But is that all? Do we want simply to be Americans? Once in a while through all of us there flashes some clairvoyance, some clear idea, of what American really is. We who are dark can see America in a way that white Americans can not. And seeing our country thus, are we satisfied with its present goals and ideals?

If you tonight suddenly should become full-fledged Americans, if your color faded, or the color line here in Chicago



was miraculously forgotten; suppose, too, you became at the same time rich and powerful;—what is it that you would want? What would you immediately seek? Would you buy the most powerful of motor-cars and outrace Cook County? Would you buy the most elaborate estate on the North Shore? Would you be a Rotarian or a Lion or a What-not of the very last degree? Would you wear the most striking clothes, give the richest dinners and buy the longest press notices?

Even as you visualize such ideals you know in your heart that these are not the things you really want. You realize this sooner than the average white American because, pushed aside as we have been in America, there has come to us not only a certain distaste for the tawdry and flamboyant but a vision of what the world could be if it were really a beautiful world; if we had the true spirit; if we had the Seeing Eye, the Cunning Hand, the Feeling Heart; if we had, to be sure, not perfect happiness, but plenty of good hard work, the inevitable suffering that always comes with life; sacrifice and waiting, all that—but, nevertheless, lived in a world where men know, where men create, where they realize themselves and where they enjoy life. It is that sort of a world we want to create for ourselves and for all America.

Others echoed Dr. Du Bois's question, "What do we want?" As early as the 1920s, some black Americans were quietly investigating Far Eastern philosophies like Hinduism and the Theravada and Mahayana traditions of Buddhism after experiencing Du Bois's "flashes of clairvoyance." Preeminent among these spiritual seekers was Jean Toomer, who regarded himself as "a psychological adventurer: one who, having had

the stock experiences of mankind, sets out at right angles to all previous experience to discover new states of being.” His classic work, *Cane* (1923), kicked off the Harlem Renaissance, the first outpouring of black American creativity after World War I. It is fitting, in a way, that *Cane* inaugurated the Renaissance, which scholar Alain Locke described as the dawn of “The New Negro,” for Toomer’s book is a hypnotic, language-rich montage of poetry and fiction that delivers a portrait of Southern black life as so mythic and shot through with elemental mysteries that it clearly belongs in the tradition of American Transcendentalism stretching back to Emerson and Thoreau. Furthermore, the year after its publication, Toomer began the first of many summers in Europe studying, then teaching the philosophy of George I. Gurdjieff, which remains an original restatement of esoteric wisdom influenced by Tibetan and Sufi teachings. For Toomer, the task was to transcend false concepts of dualism, ontologically restore to our sense of life its original wholeness, and emphasize the enduring mystery of being.

During his years as a teacher for the Gurdjieff Institute, Toomer declared, “I am of no particular race. I am of the human race, a man at large in the human world, preparing a new race”—a new man, whom he describes in his sweeping, Whitmanesque poem “Blue Meridian” (1937), a song of this country’s possibilities, which also offers us a bridge between the black experience and the profound reflections on selfhood long a part of Vedic literature. In that remarkable poem, Toomer prophesies that the new man of tomorrow’s America will be a “blue man.” He selects this color, I believe, to invoke the image of Krishna in Hindu pictorial art, where that deity’s skin, blue and borderless as the sky itself, suggests the infinity and nonduality of being.

Toomer’s “new (blue) man” is, therefore, emblematic of a being who has shed likes and dislikes, “prejudices and preferences.” A cross-cultur-

al being. A breaker of racial and gender polarities (“Free the sexes, I am neither male nor female or in-between; I am of sex, with male differentiations”). So that, when he writes, “It is a new America/To be spiritualized by each new American,” he urges us to avoid all forms of bondage and enslavement that arise from a racially fractured society, vulgar materialism, and naive naturalism.

Let go!  
Let it go that we may live.  
A pin, a watch-fob, a card of identification,  
A name, pain and emptiness,  
A will to perpetuate what has been, blind  
To distinctions between the useful and the useless,  
And, of course, an ego  
Let go!  
That which you have held has got hold of you  
And would sink you as it goes down.

In 1931, Toomer self-published a remarkable collection of aphorisms entitled *Essentials*. Therein he observed that “I is a word, but the worm is real,” letting us know that the self was in part a product of language, which can conceal as much as it reveals about the world (“In this multiple simultaneous world words only dole out one thing at a time”). He understood, as the earliest Buddhists did, that “the assumption of existence rests upon an uninterrupted series of pictures” and, more importantly, that “whatever is, is sacred.” He knew that all things were interdependent and transitory. He was no stranger to the renunciation of an illusory, empirical ego (“Unless a man dies consciously he will die.”) Indeed, Toomer even glimpsed, decades before Fritjof Capra, how nuclear

physics in the 1920s was revealing “matter” to be a construct beneath which whirled an invisible subatomic world of protons, electrons, and hadrons in constant movement, transformation, and mutation (“While the world produced by science is growing more immaterial, science itself is growing more immaterial”). Although his work after *Cane* was rejected by publishers, and he slipped into literary obscurity until the 1960s, Toomer was a spiritual trailblazer whose creative “journey to the east” inspired post-1960s authors, myself among them, to probe the “multiple simultaneous world” he first charted and took to heart such aphorisms as “The realization of nothingness is the first act of being” and “We do not possess imagination enough to sense what we are missing.”

If Toomer felt alone in his time (“It is as if I have seen,” he said, “the end of things others pursue blindly”), he might have been comforted by the fact that some black American soldiers returning from service overseas came home with exposure to the dharma—exposure that only increased as black soldiers returned home with Korean and Japanese Buddhist wives. In his superb novel *Kingsblood Royal* (1947), Sinclair Lewis writes the story of a white man who discovers he has a black ancestor; he seeks to better understand people of color, and realizes the great diversity of black Americans in his town—among them, writes Lewis, are Buddhists.

By the mid-1950s, as the Beats looked toward Zen, so did a few black musicians and poets; and of course by then the Civil Rights Movement was underway, led magnificently by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who took Mahatma Gandhi as his inspiration. After a pilgrimage to India in 1958, where he visited ashrams and sought to learn more about non-violence not simply as a political strategy but as a way of life, King came back to America determined to set aside one day a week for meditation and fasting. In the 1960s, he nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize the

outstanding Vietnamese Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. King was, at bottom, a Baptist minister, yes, but one whose vision of the social gospel at its best complements the expansive, Mahayana bodhisattva ideal of laboring for the liberation of all sentient beings (“Strangely enough,” he said, “I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. You can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be”). His dream of the “beloved community” is a sangha by another name, for King believed that “it really boils down to this: that all of life is interrelated. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”

The fourteen-year public ministry of Dr. King is emblematic of the philosophical changes that affected black Americans in the 1960s. Another milestone is the remarkable success of Soka Gakkai in attracting black Americans for three decades. Its members include entertainers with the high visibility of Herbie Hancock and Tina Turner. Although I do not belong to this Nichiren Buddhist group, which according to writer Jane Hurst represents 50,000 to 150,000 Americans (with 25 to 30 percent of these being black and Hispanic), my sister-in-law in Chicago and her friends are practitioners who have chanted *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* since the early 1970s.

In a recent conversation with my sister-in-law and one of her associates, I was informed that Soka Gakkai’s initial attraction for them came about because they discovered that through chanting they could transform their lives, in fact, that they alone were the architects of their own suffering and happiness. For my sister-in-law, raised Baptist and impoverished in a housing project on Chicago’s South Side, the black church with its white Jesus had always been an unsatisfying experience, one from which she felt emotionally distant since childhood; for her friend, a woman raised as a Catholic, Soka Gakkai provided—through its expla-

nation of karma and reincarnation and its foundation in the *Lotus Sutra*—a reason for the individual suffering she saw in the world, convincing her this was not due to the will of God but instead was based causally on each person's actions in this life and previous ones. Global peace is their goal. Chanting is their tool for self-transformation, empowerment, and experiencing the at-oneness with being they both had sought all their lives. *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*, they said, invested them with boundless energy, individual peace, and, as my sister-in-law's friend put it, "a natural high like I never had before."

Many white Buddhists new to the Zen and Tibetan traditions dismiss Soka Gakkai for what they consider its skewed, Christian-oriented, materialistic version of Buddhism. For me, Soka Gakkai is but one branch on the Bodhi tree. Yet its success in recruiting black Americans indicates that people of color find in Buddhism the depths of their long-denied humanity; centuries-old methods of meditation—very empirical—for clearing the mind of socially manufactured illusions (as well as personally created ones); an ancient phenomenology of suffering, desire, and the self; and a path (the Eightfold Path) for a moral and civilized way of life.

The emphasis in Buddhist teachings on letting go of the fabricated, false sense of self positions issues of Race as foremost among samsaric illusions, along with all the essentialist conceptions of difference that have caused so much human suffering and mischief since the eighteenth century. It frees one from dualistic models of epistemology that partition experience into separate, boxlike compartments of Mind and Body, Self and Other, Matter and Spirit—these divisions, one sees, are ontologically the correlates of racial divisions found in South African apartheid and American segregation and are just as pernicious.

More than anything else, the dharma teaches mindfulness, the

practice of being here and now in each present moment, without bringing yesterday's racial agonies into today or projecting oneself—one's hopes and longings—into a tomorrow that never comes. You watch the prismatic play of desires and emotions (for example: joy, fear, pride, and so-called "black rage") as they arise in awareness, but without attachment or clinging to name and form, and then you let them go. One is especially free, on this path, from the belief in an enduring "personal identity," an "I" endlessly called upon to prove its worth and deny its inferiority in a world that so often mirrors back only negative images of the black self. Yet one need not cling to "positive" images either, for these too are essentially empty of meaning. Indeed, you recognize emptiness (*shunyata*) as the ultimate nature of reality. In my own fiction I have worked to dramatize that insight in novels such as *Oxherding Tale* (1982), a slave narrative that serves as the vehicle for exploring Eastern philosophy; *Middle Passage*, a sea adventure tale about the slave trade (and a rather Buddhist African tribe called the Allmuseri); and *Dreamer* (1998), a fictional account of the last two years of Martin Luther King's life that highlights his globally ecumenical spirituality.

Buddhist insights continue to multiply among contemporary black authors. In *Right Here, Right Now*, a recent novel by Trey Ellis, which won a 1999 American Book Award, we are offered the story of a black man who creates a new world religion that borrows heavily from Buddhism and underscores the central theme of impermanence and change. And Octavia Butler, a MacArthur fellow and much celebrated science-fiction writer, features in *Parable of the Sower* (1993) a narrator in 2024 who broods on the fact that "everyone knows that change is inevitable. From the second law of thermodynamics to Darwinian evolution, from Buddhism's insistence that nothing is permanent and all suffering results from our delusions of permanence to the third chapter of Eccle-



siastes (“To everything there is a season . . .”), change is part of life, of existence, of the common wisdom. But I don’t believe we’re dealing with all that that means. We haven’t even begun to deal with it.”

Canonical Zen documents like the Ten Oxherding Pictures of twelfth-century artist Kakuan Shien also appear in recent black poetry. In the preeminent journal of black letters, *Callaloo* (Vol. 22, No. 1), the distinguished poet Lucille Clifton revisioned the Chan teachings of the the Ten Oxherding Pictures, in which the stages of Zen understanding are depicted by a man who follows the footsteps of an ox, which represents ego. He finally glimpses the ox, slowly tames it, then trains it to do what he wants, not what ego wants. Only after he has completely transformed himself does he happily ride his ox back into the marketplace. Clifton writes these lines for the eighth picture, in which both the ox and oxherder disappear; here, the emptiness suggests the dissolution and arising of forms, and the essence of interdependence is represented by a circle:

“The Ox and The Man Both Gone Out of Sight”

man is not ox  
I am not ox  
no thing is ox  
all things are ox.

Through meditation, Du Bois’s flashes of clairvoyance are sharpened and the internalized racial conflict of “double-consciousness” is transcended, enabling those of us who live in a violent, competitive society steeped in materialism to grasp the truth of impermanence (*anitya*) that first turned twenty-nine-year-old prince Siddhartha Gautama from the ephemeral sense pleasures of his palace to the pursuit of liberation and enlightenment. After one had abandoned experiencing the world through concepts and representations, after he realizes the cessation of



mental constructions, he perceives the interdependence of all things, how—as Thich Nhat Hanh says—“Everything is made of everything else, nothing can be by itself alone” (*anatman*) in a universe of ceaseless change and transformation. Then and only then is it possible to realize Dr. King’s injunction that we “love our enemies” in the struggle for justice because once one approaches the “enemy” with love and compassion the “enemy,” the Other, is seen to be oneself.

All things, we learn, are ourselves. Thus, practice necessarily leads to empathy, the “Feeling Heart” Du Bois spoke of, Toomer’s sense that all is sacred, and the experience of connectedness to all sentient beings. No matter how humble the activity—whether it be walking, sitting, eating, or washing the dishes—one approaches it with mindfulness, acting, and listening egolessly as if it might be the most important thing in the world, for indeed all that is, has been, and will be is contained in the present moment. In this nondiscursive, expansive spirit, discrimination is inconceivable. After the practitioner has charged his battery, so to speak, in meditation, he eagerly works and creates to serve others—all others—with humility, a boundless joy in giving, fearlessness, and disinterest in all personal “rewards.” And though the number of black Buddhists is small, they are growing in an increasingly multicultural America with the promise of more black people turning the Wheel of Dharma as a new millennium dawns. For through the dharma, the black American quest for “freedom” realizes its profoundest, truest, and most revolutionary meaning.

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## ONE DHARMA

As different Buddhist traditions take root in the West, is it possible to find an essential teaching that supports them all? In an adaptation from a talk given at *Tricycle's* Conference on Practice and Inquiry, Joseph Goldstein searches for the “One Dharma” of liberation.

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JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN

**T**his is a unique time in the history of Buddhism. Different Buddhist traditions are meeting and interacting with one another here in the West, often for the first time in centuries. Just as the dharma spread from India through many countries in Asia, each one finding its own voice, here, too, we're seeing the emergence of a Western Buddhism, something that is unique to our own time and culture.

The defining characteristic of this emerging Western Buddhism is a basic pragmatism, rather than an adherence to some philosophical system or sectarian viewpoint. What most characterizes the One Dharma of the West is an allegiance to a very simple question: What works? What works to free the mind from suffering? What works to accomplish the

heart of compassion? What works to awaken us from the dream states of our ignorance?

As Western Buddhist practitioners, we've been brought up to question and investigate, and this exploration can become a great strength of our dharma practice. The different teachings that are coming together and interacting here in the West are being tested and challenged by each other. We're hearing different teachings, we're reflecting on them, and we're practicing them and testing them in our own lives, in our own meditation experience. Many of us are practicing in several of these different traditions. It's not uncommon for people to list as their various teachers Tibetan Rinpoches, Chinese, Korean, or Japanese Zen masters, Thai ajaans, Burmese sayadaws, and Western teachers of every school. We may have various opinions about whether or not this mixing is a good idea, but it is what is happening. And so our challenge is to understand it and craft it in such a way that it becomes a vehicle for awakening.

As these ancient traditions meet, pressing questions emerge. Is the melting pot approach simply creating a big mess? Or is something new emerging that will revitalize dharma practice for us all? How much of our spiritual practice and discipline is embedded in cultural overlays from the East that are neither relevant nor helpful to us in our Western society? And on the other hand, do we sometimes water down, or even leave behind, the essence of the teachings simply because they take us beyond our Western physical or psychological comfort zone? How much can we pare away or alter before we start missing the point of it all?

Other questions, too, more personal and immediate, arose as I began my exploration of different traditions: What do you do when two of your most respected and beloved teachers say opposite things about that which is most important to you? What to do when you come to a fork in the road and both signposts seem to be pointing in the right direction?

As I struggled with these dilemmas, one question began to emerge: Is there One Dharma of liberation, One Dharma of freedom, that embraces all the viewpoints, even apparently contradictory ones?

In considering this question—Is there One Dharma underlying the various teachings and schools?—the first step for all of us is a willingness to let go of sectarian viewpoints. If we hold on to the idea that our way is the best, the highest, the fastest, the truest, it becomes impossible to consider a One Dharma of freedom. David Brinkley wrote a book with a wonderful title that captures the irony of the sectarian stance. The title of the book is: *Everyone Is Entitled to My Opinion*. And often we go through life with just that bias.

For many years I studied in the Theravada tradition, practicing vipassana meditation in India and Burma. Then, ten years ago, I also began some practice and study of Tibetan dzogchen meditation, with two very great dzogchen masters, Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche and Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche. They were wonderful beings and tremendously inspiring. But especially in that first year, as I was beginning this new practice, I was tormented by the comparing mind. Some Theravada teachings seemed quite different from the Tibetan teachings I was hearing. I was caught in the dilemma of trying to judge which was right, and then wondering how I could know? I went back and forth. Some Zen literature describes koan practice as swallowing a red hot iron ball that you can neither expel nor digest, and that's what this dilemma felt like to me.

After a month of intense questioning—Who's right? Which teachings are true?—my mind came to a sudden resolution, providing the framework for understanding the possibility of One Dharma. It was the understanding that all the teachings, all the words, all the sutras, are skillful means for liberating the mind, rather than statements of absolute truth. When we take words to be statements of ultimate truth, then

differences of opinion will inevitably result in conflict. This is where ideological wars come from, and we see in the history of the world an endless amount of suffering because of it. But if we see the words and the teachings as different skillful means for liberating the mind, then they all become part of a great dharma feast. How can I use this teaching to free my mind? How can I use this to open my heart?

All the Buddhist traditions converge in one understanding of what liberates the mind. It is summed up very succinctly in one teaching of the Buddha: “Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as ‘I’ or ‘mine.’ Whoever has heard this has heard all the teachings. Whoever practices this has practiced all the teachings. Whoever realizes this has realized all the teachings.” Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as “I” or “mine.” Non-clinging can be understood on two levels. The first level is non-clinging as a nonsectarian instruction for practice. What to do? Don’t cling. There’s no Buddhist school that says, “Cling.” How to practice in the world? Don’t cling. It hardly matters what form we build around that. We can not-cling in a Tibetan house, we can not-cling in a Zen house, we can not-cling in a Theravada house. The essence of One Dharma is the same. But non-clinging is not only an instruction of practice. On the second level, it is also a description of the awakened mind. If we want to know what enlightenment is like, what awakening is like, we can practice the mind of non-clinging, non-fixation, nonattachment to anything at all. It’s the mind of open groundlessness.

So how can we practice this? How do we practice the mind of non-clinging? Clearly, the more quickly we recognize where we do cling, the more quickly we can relax the mind into that space of openness, of ease, of freedom. And the Buddha was very helpful in pointing out where we do cling, just in case we’re missing it. The first arena of clinging is the obvious one: we cling to pleasant experience. We like what’s pleasant.

We like pleasant sights and sounds and tastes, pleasant sensations in the body, pleasant feelings. We like pleasant meditative states. There's no problem with the pleasantness of them; it's part of our life experience. The problem is that we often devote our life energy to the getting, sustaining, accumulation, and repeating of these pleasant experiences. It's as if our life revolves around getting one more hit of pleasantness. But, as we all know, these pleasant experiences don't last, so they don't really have the capacity to bring us happiness, to bring us completion, to bring us fulfillment. We're always seeking more—that's samsara, the endless wheel of becoming, fueled by wanting. The force of desire is not just a trivial habit; the habit of wanting what's pleasant is rooted so deeply in our conditioning.

At one point I had been practicing in India for quite some time, and as can happen in times of long-term, intensive meditation, my mind had become very open, clear, and shining; my body was open, the energy flowing. It was the kind of sitting where you think you will get enlightened any minute. I was happily in that state, sitting away, waiting for the big moment...and then the tea bell rang. What was served for tea in the evening was a cup of tea and a very small banana. So I'm sitting in this glorious state and the tea bell rings. What is my first thought? "I need my banana." And, sure enough, I got up from my "enlightenment-in-the-next-moment sitting" and went for the momentary pleasant experience.

Even someone as remarkable as His Holiness the Dalai Lama speaks of the strong force of desire in the mind. He told one story at a conference in Los Angeles. Every day on the way to the conference, he was driven down a street with shops selling the newest technological toys. As you know, he has a great interest in the latest technologies. On the last day of the conference, he recounted what had been going on in his mind as he was being driven past these stores. He said that by the end of the

week he found himself wanting some of these things, although he didn't even know what they were.

Again, it's not that there's a problem with having pleasant experience—it's just part of our lives. But when we make it the focal point of our lives, it becomes the basis for tremendous frustration, because it can never fulfill its promise for happiness. At the time of death, what meaning will all the various pleasant experiences have? What really will be of value at that time? What will be of most value is the ability of the mind to not hold on, to not grasp, to not cling. But we can't wait until the time of death to accomplish this. We need to practice it now.

The second arena of clinging that the Buddha pointed out is one that has tremendous consequences both in our own lives and in the world. This is the attachment we have to our views and opinions about things. We're very attached to our own points of view. We're attached to being right. What's so amazing is that we're often attached to our opinions regarding things we know nothing about. But that does not seem to weaken our attachment.

One example of this attachment to view—and the possibility of relinquishing it—happened when I was teaching at Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, in the first years after it opened. His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoche was due to speak, and there was a poster announcing the talk. Dudjom Rinpoche was the head of the Nyingmapa lineage of Tibetan Buddhism and was revered as a great enlightened being. It said on the poster that Rinpoche was the incarnation of Shariputra, who was one of the two chief disciples of the Buddha.

From the Theravada point of view, when you're fully enlightened you don't take rebirth. As I had been steeped in these teachings, I was sure that Shariputra, second only to the Buddha himself in wisdom, certainly didn't come back. But then I saw this poster about Dudjom

Rinpoche, incarnation of Shariputra. My mind went on tilt. How to hold this contradiction? In a moment of inspiration I suddenly realized that I had no idea whether or not Dudjom Rinpoche was the incarnation of Shariputra. I really didn't know. And it was such a relief to realize that because I didn't know, I didn't have to have an opinion about it.

We don't know a lot. We don't know much more than we know. And it's a relief to let go of our attachment to views, our attachment to opinions, especially about things we don't know. A new mantra began to form in my mind: "Who knows?" This not-knowing is not a quality of bewilderment, it's not a quality of confusion. It actually is like a breath of fresh air, an openness of mind. Not knowing is simply holding an open mind regarding these very interesting questions to which we might not yet have answers.

Of course, even more difficult is letting go of our attachment to things we think we do know. Even when our opinion is based on some experience, it's still limited. When we don't hold on to our viewpoints quite so tightly, it allows for the possibility of seeing from other perspectives. We might actually learn something from someone else. One of the great Japanese Zen masters, Bankei, had a wonderful line in his teachings. He said, "Don't side with yourself." This is a good reminder to keep an open mind. This is part of our practice.

The last attachment and clinging that I want to mention is the one that is the most deeply rooted, the most difficult to see through and understand—that is the attachment we have to the concept of, or belief in, self. Seeing through this illusion of self is the heart of the One Dharma of liberation. Every Buddhist tradition will talk of this, because it is this insight, this understanding, which is ultimately liberating; it is the seeing through the illusion, the concept, the belief, the idea of a self-center. But selflessness is also the most puzzling aspect of the Buddha's teach-



ings. If there's no self, who's sitting here? Who gets angry? Who falls in love? Unlike many other aspects of the teachings, selflessness is not easily accessible to our normal level of understanding. It takes a disciplined practice to investigate and explore the deepest nature of this mind/body process.

One image might help us understand the meaning of selflessness. Think back to the last time you saw a rainbow. You look up at the sky, see this beautiful rainbow, and feel the momentary joy that comes from that experience of beauty. But is there something in and of itself that is the rainbow? Or, is the rainbow an appearance arising out of the coming together of different conditions? There is air, moisture, and light arranged in a certain way, and out of those conditions a rainbow appears. But there's no substantial thing-ness to the rainbow: it's simply an appearance arising out of conditions.

Self, Joseph, each one of us, is like the rainbow. There is, indeed, an appearance of self, and on that level of appearance, self exists. Just like it is true that we have the experience of what we call rainbow. On the relative level, we do relate to one another as individuals. So it's not to deny the appearance of self, but to realize that it is only an appearance. When we go beyond, or see through, or begin to understand the conditions that are giving rise to the appearance, then we come to taste the profound teachings of the Buddha on emptiness. Emptiness does not mean that things aren't there; it means that they do not have some self-existing nature independent of conditions. When we see this in our experience, we begin to understand the selflessness of this whole life process. And the deeper the wisdom of selflessness, the more love and compassion flow freely. A Sri Lankan monk summed up the great value of realizing emptiness when he said, "No self, no problem."

More than 2,500 years ago, the Buddha set in motion this great

wheel of the dharma. It has rolled across continents and oceans and has touched the lives of countless beings. The dharma has been expressed in so many different cultures, each with its own language and idiom, expressing skillful means for liberating the heart and mind from grasping. Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as “I” or “mine.” This is the One Dharma of liberation, and all the teachings, all the words, point to that freedom.

I’d like to close with some words of my teacher, Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche. He said, “I would like to pass on one little bit of advice I give to everyone: Relax. Just relax. Be nice to each other. As you go through your life, simply be kind to people. Try to help them rather than hurt them. Try to get along with them, rather than fall out with them.”

*From the Winter 2001 issue*

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# 9

## LIKE A DRAGON IN WATER

What can we do when our monkey minds pull us off the cushion?  
Simple, says Pat Enkyo O'Hara: Just practice.

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ROSHI PAT ENKYO O'HARA

**T**hinking about steadiness in *practice* reminds me of when I was a little girl and would swim in the great breaking waves of the Pacific coast of Baja California. The surf was ragged, and sometimes treacherous, but for those who were accustomed to its rhythms, it was possible to swim through and around the currents, to bob up from under the fiercest waves. I think a key to this ability was sensing that one was part of the ocean and that to play in it was to let go into the wave, sometimes swimming under, sometimes alongside it. There were days when the ocean was utterly calm and days of wild intensity, and for a child, no matter what, there was that fish-like ease and joy of play.

Perhaps most of us enter meditation practice with the hope of finding that kind of natural joy in our lives, in the hopes of experiencing each moment fully, with the freshness of moment-to-moment aware-

ness. And in the initial stages of our practice, many of us manage to find the quiet space that opens us to our spaciousness and spontaneous nature. Buoyed by this experience, our practice gratifies us and propels us along for a while.

And then the inevitable distraction or doubt or difficulty arises. Whether it is a subtle change in our schedule or a disturbing loss of faith, we lose our footing, drop our practice, and often completely forget for weeks at a time that we even had a meditation practice! And it is so difficult to come back, to actually stop and sit down and practice again.

We know that we should “just do it,” but our ever-subtle and tricky “monkey minds” make that “should” and that “just” infinitely difficult, even interesting, and distracting. Instead of sitting down on our cushion or going to our meditation center, we think and talk and distract ourselves with all the reasons why not to do it. Or we simply “forget” to practice.

Now if the practice is so good for us, why is it so difficult to maintain a steady practice? It may be that the notion that practice is “good for us” is the very impediment—we all know how we can resist what is good for us at the table, at the gym, and on the Internet. This mechanical notion of practice, “if I practice, then I will be (fill in the blank),” leads to discouragement because it is not true that practice inevitably leads to happiness or anything that we can imagine. Our lives, like the ocean, constantly change, and we will naturally face great storms and dreary lulls.

How, then, to put our minds in a space where practice is always there, whether tumultuous or in the doldrums? It requires a completely radical view of practice: practice is not something we do; it is something we are. We are not separate from our practice, and so no matter what, our practice is present. An ocean swimmer is loose and flows with the

current and moves through the tide. When tossed upside-down in the surf, unable to discern which way is up and which is down, the natural swimmer just lets go, breathing out, and follows the bubbles to the surface.

And so it can be with our practice. Seeing our practice as our life, we just let go and do it. We just practice a steadiness in our daily meditation. Without expectations of any kind, we just practice, day in and day out, through the high points and the low. “I really doubt this practice is helping me. Okay, still, it is time to sit, right through this doubt.” Or “Oh, I didn’t sit all week! Okay, right now I’ll sit for twenty minutes.” And each time we come back to our practice, we *experience* it as more inherent to our life. Maezumi Roshi, based in Los Angeles, would often use the Spanish expression for “little by little” to indicate this patient quality of practice: “Being one with the practice, you are transformed, *poco a poco*.”

This understanding of our practice is expressed by the great thirteenth-century Japanese Zen teacher Dogen, when he says that our meditation practice “is not step-by-step meditation; it is simply the dharma gate of peace and joy. It is the practice-enlightenment of the Ultimate Way....When you grasp this, you are like a dragon in water, or a tiger in the mountains.”

*From the Summer 2002 issue*

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# 10

## A MIND LIKE A CLEAR POOL

Realizing happiness through training the mind

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SOGYAL RINPOCHE

**T**he great strength of the buddhadharma is its *practice*. It is incredible what this wonderful practice can bring about. When I hear the teachings of the Buddha transmitted through the great masters, and when I experience their truth in my own heart through the little practice that I know, then I feel their tremendous blessing. What is extraordinary is that you can actually experience the truth of these teachings. It is not something that is just based on belief or faith; it is something you can taste and realize for yourself, here and now.

The great Zen master Suzuki Roshi said:

Our purpose is just to keep this practice forever. This practice started from beginningless time, and it will continue into an endless future. Strictly speaking, for a human being there is no other practice than this practice. There is no other way of life

than this way of life.

From the basic teachings up to the highest, each teaching is like a jewel. Whatever path you follow, there is such a richness to each of them. Whether it be the Theravada, Mahayana, Zen, Vajrayana, Mahamudra, or Dzogchen, you just need to practice *that one* alone, and practice it fully and authentically. And the more you study and practice, the more you will understand the profundity of these teachings. As Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche often used to say: “The more and more you listen, the more and more you hear; the more and more you hear, the deeper and deeper your understanding becomes.”

Last year, His Holiness the Dalai Lama spoke to a gathering of Buddhist teachers in the West. He said, “It’s important to know *what Buddhism is*. Buddhism is a mental training to eliminate the afflictive emotions. So it is only when our physical, verbal, and mental effort has this motivation that it is Buddhism.” He advised: “First, study what Buddha said, and then experiment and gain experience. From that will arise a conviction that the Buddha’s teachings do actually benefit you. At the same time, you realize that your mind cannot penetrate the deeper nature of reality by itself. From that will come an appreciation of the teaching of Buddha; out of that will come a sense of devotion.”

Now, when Buddha himself was asked to summarize his teaching, he said:

Commit not a single unwholesome action,  
Cultivate a wealth of virtue,  
To tame this mind of ours.  
This is the teaching of all the buddhas.

To “commit not a single unwholesome action” means to abandon as much as possible all the unwholesome, harmful, and negative actions, which are the cause of suffering for both ourselves and the world.

To “cultivate a wealth of virtue” is to develop the positive, beneficial, and wholesome actions that are the cause of happiness, again for both ourselves and the world. As the great master Shantideva said:

Whatever joy there is in this world  
All comes from desiring others to be happy,  
And whatever suffering there is in this world  
All comes from wanting pleasure for myself.

Most important of all, however, is “to tame this mind of ours.” In fact, the great teachers, like the Dzogchen master Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, often used to say that this one line captures the very essence, the very heart, of the teachings of the Buddha. Because if we can realize the true nature of our own mind, then this is the whole point of both the teaching and our entire existence.

For the mind is the root of everything. In the Tibetan teachings, it is called *kun je gyalpo*, “the king who is responsible for everything,” or in modern translation, “the universal ordering principle.” Mind is the creator of happiness and the creator of suffering, the creator of what we call samsara and the creator of what we call nirvana. As Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche used to say, “Samsara is mind turned outwardly, lost in its projections; nirvana is mind turned inwardly, recognizing its nature.”

And as the great master Padmasambhava, who brought the teachings of the Buddha to Tibet, said, “Do not investigate the roots of *things*; investigate the root of *mind*!” That is why I find these words of Buddha so inspiring:



We are what we think.  
All that we are arises with our thoughts.  
With our thoughts we make the world.  
Speak or act with an impure mind.  
And trouble will follow you...  
Speak or act with a pure mind.  
And happiness will follow you.

If only we were to remember this, keep it in our hearts, and keep our heart and mind pure, then happiness would really follow. The whole of Buddha's teaching, then, is directed toward taming this mind, and keeping our heart and mind pure.

Taming the mind begins with the practice of meditation, where we allow all our turbulent thoughts and emotions to settle quietly in a state of natural peace. As Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche put it so wonderfully:

Rest in natural great peace this exhausted mind,  
Beaten helpless by karma and neurotic thoughts  
Like the relentless fury of the pounding waves  
In the infinite ocean of samsara.  
Rest in natural great peace.

How do thoughts and emotions settle? If you leave a glass of muddy water quite still, without moving it, the dirt will settle to the bottom, and the clarity of the water will shine through. In the same way, in meditation we allow our thoughts and emotions to settle naturally and in a state of natural ease.

The first practice on the Buddhist path of meditation is *shamatha*,

“calm abiding” or “tranquillity meditation.” Here we begin by focusing, lightly and mindfully, on the breath. The problem with us is that our mind is always distracted. When it’s distracted, mind creates endless thoughts. There is nothing that it will not think or do. Whatever thoughts arise, we let them sweep us away into a spiral of stories and illusions, which we take so seriously that we end up not only believing but *becoming* them as well.

When we abandon ourselves mindlessly to distraction and too much thinking, when we lose ourselves in thought and invite mental problems and anguish, the antidote is *mindfulness*. The discipline of the practice of shamatha is to keep bringing your mind back to the breath. If you’re distracted, then suddenly, the instant you remember, you simply bring your mind back to the breath. Nothing else is necessary. Even to ask “How on earth did I get so distracted?” is just another distraction. The simplicity of mindfulness, of continuously bringing your mind back to the breath, gradually calms it down, and the mind will settle, in the mind.

Slowly, as we perfect the practice, and as our mind settles, breathing, breath, and breather shade into one, and finally it’s as if we have become the breath.

What is very important, as the masters always advise us, is not to fixate while practicing the concentration of calm abiding. That is why they recommend you to place only 25 percent of your attention on mindfulness of the breath. But then, as you may have noticed, mindfulness alone is not enough. While you are supposed to be watching the breath, after a few minutes you may find yourself playing in a football game, starring in your own film, or becoming enlightened! So another 25 percent should be devoted to a continuous and watchful awareness, one that oversees and checks whether you are being mindful of the breath. The remaining

50 percent of your attention is left abiding, spaciously.

Sometimes simply being spacious, on its own, is enough to calm our mind down. In shamatha practice, when we blend spaciousness with the focus of mindfulness, gradually the mind will settle. As the mind settles, something extraordinary takes place: all the fragmented aspects of ourselves come home, and we become whole. Negativity and aggression, pain, suffering, and frustration are actually defused. In this moment, we experience a feeling of peace, space, and freedom, and out of this settling comes a profound stillness.

As we perfect this practice, and become one with the breath, after a while even the breath itself as the focus of our meditation dissolves, and we find ourselves resting in *nowness*. This is the one-pointedness that is the fruition and the goal of shamatha. Remaining in nowness and stillness is an excellent accomplishment, but to return to the example of the glass of muddy water, if you keep it still, the dirt will settle, and it will become clear, and yet the dirt will still be there, deep down. One day if you stir it, the dirt will rise again. As long as we cultivate stillness, we may enjoy peace, but whenever our mind is a little bit disturbed, deluded thoughts will set in again.

Remaining in the nowness of shamatha alone will not cause us to evolve, nor can it lead to enlightenment and liberation. There is a danger that nowness will become a subtle object, and the mind that rests in nowness a subtle subject. As long as you remain in the domain of subject-and-object duality, grasper and grasped, the mind is still within the ordinary conceptual world of samsara.

Through the practice of calm abiding, then, our mind has settled into a state of peace and found stability. Just as the picture in a camera will sharpen as you focus it, so the one-pointedness of shamatha allows an increasing clarity of mind to arise. As obscurations are gradually re-

moved, and ego and its grasping tendency begin to dissolve, the “clear seeing” or “insight” of vipashyana, begins to dawn. At this point we no longer need the anchor of remaining in nowness, and we can progress, moving on beyond our self, even, into that openness which is the wisdom that realizes egolessness. This is what will uproot delusion and liberate us from samsara.

As this “clear seeing” progressively deepens, it leads us to an experience of the intrinsic nature of reality, the nature of our mind. For when the cloudlike thoughts and emotions fade away, the skylike nature of our true being is revealed and, shining from it, our buddhanature, or *bodhicitta*, like the sun. And just as both light and warmth blaze from the sun, wisdom and loving compassion radiate out from the mind’s innermost nature. Grasping at a false self has dissolved, and we simply rest, inasmuch as we can, in the nature of mind, this most natural state that is without any reference or concept, hope or fear, yet with a quiet but soaring confidence—the deepest form of well-being imaginable.

When we connect with the purity of our inherent nature, our buddhanature, what is revealed is our fundamental goodness—the good heart. Kindness, compassion, and love simply exude. And the more you integrate the practice mindfully into your life, the more you will find that you are not only in touch with yourself but completely in touch with others also. You feel a sense of real oneness with them. There is no barrier standing any longer between you and them, nor even between you and yourself. You begin to understand others, you begin to see them as equal to you in every way, and when someone is suffering, your heart will go out to them.

Sometimes we do feel in touch with ourselves, with others, with the universe, and we really have the opportunity to experience a deep inner peace. As Ajahn Chah said:

Your mind will become still in any surroundings, like a clear forest pool. All kinds of wonderful rare animals will come to drink at the pool, and you will clearly see the nature of all things. You will see many strange and wonderful things come and go, but you will be still. This is the happiness of the Buddha.

Anyone who has had the good fortune to experience a little of this inner peace should resolve, there and then, to maintain it, not only for his or her own sake, but for the sake of the world. When you are in this state, what is extraordinary is that even though you may not do much, your very being can benefit others, even unintentionally, as long as you maintain that goodness and purity of mind and heart and being.

When you apply the teachings deeply in your life, you can begin to transform not only yourself but also the world around you. Things may look the same, but your motivation and your whole being are different. So your whole interaction with the world will be different. You may be able to make a tremendous contribution, through your actions, your words, or your very being. To practice like this is to become useful, and because you actually have the fruit of the practice within you, you can make a world of difference—even if it is only to one human being.

If individuals could really enact wisdom and compassion in their lives, it would make the world a better place. In fact, there would be every possibility of creating a more enlightened society. If only more and more people practiced in this way, there truly could be peace. It is in this spirit that we pray each day and dedicate the merit, so that all beings may eventually become enlightened, and on a more immediate level, there may be peace and harmony throughout the world. Let me

conclude with a prayer:

May the work of the eminent teachers of all the lineages go  
from strength to strength!  
May there be harmony among all the practitioners and holders  
of the teachings!  
May they overcome all difficulties, and find the ultimate  
happiness of enlightenment!  
May you be happy! May you be well!

*From the Fall 2002 issue*

**Sogyal Rinpoche** is the founder and spiritual director of Rigpa, an international network of Buddhist groups and centers ([rigpa.org](http://rigpa.org)). He is especially known for his interpretation of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*.

# 11

## THE DIGNITY OF RESTRAINT

Why you can't have your cake and enlightenment, too. Thanissaro Bhikkhu explains why we don't have to be slaves to our desires.

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THANISSARO BHIKKHU

**I**t'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 sacrificing 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,

## THE DIGNITY OF RESTRAINT

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.

*From the Spring 2004 issue*

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# 12

## HEALING MIND, HEALING BODY

A case study in how mindfulness practice can aid medical treatment

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JON KABAT-ZINN

**P**icture this: a person with psoriasis, standing practically naked in a cylindrical light box lined with vertical eight-foot-long ultraviolet light bulbs that form a complete enclosure. Her eyes are shielded by dark goggles to protect the corneas from UV damage; she is wearing a pillowcase over her head to protect her face. Her nipples are also shielded, as are the genitals in men. Fans whirl, circulating stale basement-office air through the bowels of the medical center. When the lights come on, bathing not just the light box and the patient inside it, but also, because the top is open, the entire room with an eerie, violet glow, their intensity is ferocious, irradiating every surface of the body that is exposed to specifically chosen and particularly potent wavelengths of ultraviolet light.

The treatment is known as phototherapy. In order to prevent the skin from burning, the person comes for treatment three times a week

for many weeks, and the length of exposure is gradually increased, from about thirty seconds at the beginning to maybe ten to fifteen minutes after a few weeks, depending on the patient's skin type. Over time, the raised, red, inflamed patches of skin, which in severe cases cover large parts of the body, begin to flatten and change color, looking more and more like the person's normal skin. When the treatment is complete, the skin looks entirely normal and clear. There are no more scaly patches.

The treatment is not a cure, however. The unsightly patches can return. Recurrent episodes are often triggered by psychological stress. Little is known about the genetic predisposition, the primary causes, or the molecular biology of the disease. It is an uncontrolled cell proliferation in the epidermal layer of the skin, but it is not cancer. The rapidly growing cells do not invade other tissues, nor does the disease result in ill health or death. It is, however, disfiguring in some cases, and psychologically debilitating. It can feel like having a plague.

I learned about psoriasis and phototherapy one day at a University of Massachusetts Department of Medicine retreat in the early 1980s. I happened to sit down for lunch with a young, cheerful-looking man who, as it turned out, was the chief of dermatology, Jeff Bernhard. We got to talking, and when he found out I ran the department's Stress Reduction Clinic, where we taught Buddhist meditation practices to the patients (albeit without the "Buddhism"), he asked me if I knew the book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, by Shunryu Suzuki.

I was amazed just to hear that he had read it and further amazed that he loved it. So we fell to talking about meditation and Zen, and about how we were offering the rudiments—and what we hoped was the essence—of just such training and practices to our patients. I saw the lightbulb go off in his head as he asked me if I thought we could train his psoriasis patients undergoing treatment in the phototherapy clinic to

relax while they were in the light box.

He then described the disease and its treatment pretty much the way I have just done. He also explained that undergoing phototherapy was a very stressful experience for his patients for a number of reasons. First, the patients had to come to the hospital three times a week for very short treatments—so short that finding a parking space could take longer than the treatments themselves. Then the patient had to undress and cover his or her body with oil, a messy proposition in its own right, put on the goggles and the pillowcase, and stand naked in the confining space and stale air of the light box, the oppressive intensity of the lights roasting the skin and motor noises filling the air.

Treatments took place only during the day, so having to do this three times a week for up to three months was a major disruption of one's daily routine, especially if the patient had a job. Worse, they were unable to read magazines or distract themselves in the usual ways patients do when they are undergoing treatment. The whole thing had a kind of undignified and burdensome quality to it. Was there any way, Jeff asked, that what we were doing with our patients in the stress reduction clinic might help his phototherapy patients to be more relaxed and deal with the stress of their treatments in a better way? He was concerned because many of his patients stopped coming regularly even before their skin cleared. Others just dropped out entirely because the treatments were so disruptive. Perhaps, because the disease was not life-threatening, the incentive to undergo the extensive course of the treatment wasn't so great, especially since it was usually for cosmetic reasons. Moreover, the effect of the treatment was only temporary.

Could meditation, Jeff wanted to know, make the whole experience of phototherapy more pleasant for his patients and increase their motivation for staying with the treatment protocol?



As he was saying this, and I was picturing what he was describing in my mind, lightbulbs (no pun intended) were starting to go off in my own head. Yes, I replied. We could certainly teach his patients effective methods to relax while they were in the light box, and for dealing with the unpleasant aspects of the treatment. It seemed to be a perfect situation for guiding them in the practice of standing meditation, since they had to be standing in the light box anyway. That could include breathing meditation, hearing meditation, feeling-the-light-on-the-skin meditation, and watching-the-mind-get-stressed-out meditation, in short, a full spectrum of mindfulness practices tailored to the patient's moment-to-moment experience in the light box. And I had no doubt that at least some would be more relaxed as a result and might actually enjoy their treatments more because they were engaging their own powers of attention, perhaps neutralizing some of the more onerous features causing the high dropout rates.

But we could do something even more adventurous. It struck me that the phototherapy paradigm was perfect for studying the important question of whether and how the mind might influence healing: in this case, a healing process that we could see and photograph and track over time. Why not train his psoriasis patients in these mindfulness-based methods as part of a controlled study to see whether we could detect effects of the mind itself on the rate of skin clearing? We could randomize potential subjects into two groups. In one, the patients would meditate while they were standing in the light box, guided by an audiotope designed specifically for the situation. In the other group, the patients would get the light treatments in the usual way, without meditation instructions. And, just to maximize the chance of finding something, I proposed that we include a visualization about the skin healing in response to the light as part of the meditation in the later stages of treat-

ment, when the sessions run longer, and there would be more time to hear such instructions.

We went ahead and set up a pilot study along these lines, just to see what would happen. What we found was that the meditators' skin cleared on average much more rapidly than in the case of the non-meditators. With this encouraging result under our belt, we set out to repeat the study to convince ourselves that it was not a fluke, and to do it with more patients and with a more rigorous study protocol. We used several different methods to rate the patients' skin status over time, including regularly photographing their most prominent lesions and having two dermatologists rate the photographs independently, without knowing which group the patients were in, or who they were.

Again, we found that the meditators healed faster than the non-meditators, and this time we were able to say something about how much faster. The statistics were showing that the meditators were clearing almost four times as rapidly as the nonmeditators.

While only preliminary, this study points to a potential for intentional healing that could be important. We hope that other dermatologists will attempt to replicate our study and extend it beyond what we were able to do.

I like to think of the result as reflecting a potential that is inherent in all of us, one we have seen expressed over and over again in different ways in the Stress Reduction Clinic when our patients are encouraged to become active participants in their own medical treatment and health care.

The psoriasis study is an example of what is now being called "integrative medicine," because it integrates mind-body interventions such as meditations right into the delivery of more conventional medical treatments. In this case, the mind-body treatment (the meditation and vi-

sualization) is completely co-extensive in time and space with the allopathic treatment (the UV light). You could say that they are orthogonal to each other, occupying the same space at the same time.

It is revealing to note that the subjects in the psoriasis study did not get to take home the guided meditation tapes, nor did they practice in any formal way on their own, unlike at the stress reduction clinic, where daily practice at home using mindfulness meditation practice tapes or CDs is a required and integral part of the program. This means that even short periods of time practicing under the right conditions might have major effects on the body, and, presumably, the mind as well.

Our study on healing and the mind has a number of implications. The most obvious is that the mind can positively influence healing under at least some circumstances. Something that the psoriasis patients in the meditation group were doing or thinking or hoping or practicing was in all likelihood responsible for the faster pace of their skins' clearing. It might have been the meditation practice itself, or the visualization, or their expectations or beliefs or intentions, or a combination of all of the above; we won't know for certain until further studies are conducted. But whatever was underlying the accelerated skin clearing we observed, we can say it was in some way or other related to the activity of the mind.

Another implication is that participatory medicine might be a big money-saver in some instances. Our study had the built-in feature of being a de facto cost-effectiveness study. Faster healing means fewer treatments necessary to reach skin clearing, and thus fewer medical charges for the meditators.

What is more, since ultraviolet light is itself a risk factor for skin cancer, fewer treatments would mean less UV exposure, which would mean lowered risk of skin cancer as a side effect of the phototherapy treatments. And since psoriasis is an example of an uncontrolled cell

proliferation, akin in some ways to cancer—in fact, certain genes that are implicated in psoriasis also seem to play a role in basal cell carcinoma—the demonstration that the mind can positively influence skin clearing raises the possibility that the much more dangerous uncontrolled cell proliferation in skin cancer might respond favorably, at least to some degree, to similar meditation practices and motivation.

*From the Spring 2005 issue*

**Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D.**, professor emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Medical School and founder of its Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, Society and its world-renowned Stress Reduction Clinic. A longtime practitioner of Buddhist meditation and hatha yoga, he has focused on clinical applications of mindfulness throughout his career and is the author of numerous scientific papers. His eight-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program, described in *Full Catastrophe Living*, is taught in medical facilities worldwide. This article was adapted from *Coming to Our Senses*, 2005, by Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D. Reprinted with permission of Hyperion.

# 13

## THE POWER OF SOLITUDE

Shambhala Mountain Center's Reggie Ray talks to *Tricycle's* Ted Rose about the value of solitary retreat.

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**R**eginald A. Ray studied Buddhism as a divinity student at the University of Chicago, and in 1968, when he read Chögyam Trungpa's *Born in Tibet*, he realized Buddha-dharma could be more than an intellectual pursuit. He met Trungpa Rinpoche two years later, and offered to drop out of divinity school and move to his Vermont retreat center. Trungpa said no, instructing Ray to finish his degree, to which the young man grudgingly agreed. Since then, Dr. Reggie Ray has become a respected scholar of Buddhism as well as a senior teacher in Trungpa's lineage. He teaches Buddhism at Colorado University and Naropa University, and leads meditation retreats at Shambhala Mountain Center, in Red Feather Lakes, Colorado. He has published several scholarly books including two authoritative volumes on the history, context, and practices of Tibetan Buddhism titled *Indestructible Truth and Secret of the Vajra World*. He spends at least three

months of every year in solitary retreat. Isolated retreat is a crucial component of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, and Reggie Ray may be the most vocal advocate for its utility in the modern Western context. Tri-cycle contributor Ted Rose spoke to Ray just before the teacher headed into isolated retreat in a wood cabin above Shambhala Mountain Center.

**When I mention my own experience of going into isolated retreat for ten days, most of my friends get a little suspicious. They think of another Ted who spent time in a cabin alone: Ted Kaczynski, the so-called Unabomber. Why do people often have such a negative impression of isolated retreat?** We are a very extroverted society. Even though within the Western tradition the practice of seclusion and retreat are very much a part of our own spiritual culture—the contemplative practices of Roman Catholicism, for example—most people are not aware that they are part of our heritage.

I think the other reason is that not only has the typical Western person spent little or no time alone, but many of us have an underlying fear of solitude. Possibly driving some of the misunderstanding of retreat is a deep-seated fear of being alone without distraction, without entertainment, without “work,” without other people around to constantly confirm our sense of self. We live in a culture driven by consumerism. Many of us feel, perhaps without realizing it, that unless we are “producing” in some sort of external, materialistic way, our legitimacy as a human being is somehow in question. We don’t really see where retreat fits in.

**What are the essential qualities of an isolated retreat? Is it possible to do without any meditation experience?** Many people who arrive at Naropa or up here at Shambhala Mountain Center have already had some experience of solitude. Without any real knowledge of retreat

practice or even meditation, they've gone off into the woods or mountains in search of solitude. One of the things they often discover when they get into those situations is that they've brought their whole world with them. Their anxiety, their disturbing emotions, their mental speed, their mental preoccupations are just as present in solitude as they are in ordinary life. In fact, they may be even more prevalent. The problem is that they don't know what to do with their mind.

Retreat combines solitude and the practice of meditation, where you begin to actually explore your own mind. What you find is that, through intensive meditation in retreat, you begin to attend to your mind in a direct and unmediated way: Your mind begins to slow down, your sense perceptions open up, you find yourself increasingly present to your life, and you begin to experience solitude in a deep and genuine way.

The environment is solitude, but the essential ingredient is meditation practice—what you actually do with your mind when you are alone. Simply being in solitude is not good enough.

**You mentioned the use of retreat practice in Roman Catholicism. Does that feature the same combination of solitude and meditation practice? Or is the structured meditation in retreat the unique offering from Buddhism?** Both Buddhism and Roman Catholicism employ structured “form” practices and the formless practices of working with awareness itself. Father Thomas Keating, who runs the Benedictine monastery in Snowmass, Colorado, teaches what he calls centering prayer. My understanding is that this is very much a mindfulness discipline, bringing the mind to a point and training it to be present, then allowing the inner wisdom to gradually unfold from that. If you look at the other contemplative orders in Roman Catholicism, I think you'll see quite similar practices.

Perhaps an important difference between Buddhism and Christianity is that, within the Christian tradition, there is usually a subject you are contemplating, whereas in Buddhism, especially with the formless practices, you are really opening the mind in and of itself; you are not contemplating a particular subject or figure. Ultimately, we are looking to simply open the mind and lay bare its depths. In Christianity you find that as well, so it's not an absolute difference but a difference in emphasis.

**In the Buddhist universe, it seems like Tibetan Buddhism is the greatest champion of isolated retreat. Is that accurate?** In the Western presentation of Buddhism, you do tend to find that the Tibetan tradition is advocating solitary retreat more than the other traditions. But in Asia, within both Zen and Theravada, you have a history of solitary retreat being very important.

For example, today, in all of the Theravada countries, in addition to the classical and conventional monasticism, there is a forest tradition. Within the forest tradition, monks live in isolation in the jungle, where they devote themselves to meditation all day and all night long.

In the Zen tradition, if you look back at the beginnings you find that the original Chan tradition was, to a large extent, a retreat tradition. These were people who also lived in the jungles and forests and practiced meditation in isolation. It was only later in the history of Chan that a more settled monastic tradition began to take precedence.

In the Japanese tradition, Dogen, who lived from 1200 to 1253, studied Buddhism in Japan, and he wasn't very happy with what he found. It didn't seem like the true dharma. He went to China and studied with a Chan master. When he came back to Japan, he established retreat centers in the countryside. Nowadays Zen is more associated with practice in the zendo and the community, but historically solitary retreat has



been very important.

**We've reached a point where people can see the value of practicing in a group but have a harder time seeing the value of being up in a cabin alone.** There is something uniquely powerful about meditating in a group—discovering community and a depth of discipline that people may not have individually. In a group retreat, the container is provided, a framework of discipline surrounds you, and you are actually able to engage a level of sustained practice that you might otherwise be incapable of. You begin to see a lot of your habitual patterns relating to others and you begin to discover new ways of relating to other people. You learn to be with other people in silence. That is a huge discovery for people. So there are unique benefits from sitting together, especially for people in the early stage of practice.

But something happens on solitary retreat that cannot happen in a group situation and certainly doesn't happen during individual practice at home. We see for ourselves that within each human being is the buddhanature. What is the buddhanature? It is a mind that is open and completely unencumbered. It is empty. And it gives birth to warmth and compassion for other people. As a doctrine, this can be clearly explained, but it's another thing—and very shocking—to discover this within oneself. What solitary retreat practice provides that I don't think is possible in any other way is freedom from the distraction and the reinforcement and confusion of interpersonal relationships, so over a period of time your mind is able to open up to a much greater depth than would otherwise be possible.

We talk about living in the moment, but it's just a concept for most people. In retreat you actually learn how to do it. In fact, it occurs naturally.

**What is the benefit of that kind of discovery?** The full benefit is not really realized in retreat itself. The whole point of retreat is to develop your mind and your state of being so that when you're living your ordinary life you are more present to yourself and to your life and to other people.

You can look at retreat as a practice to develop compassion for other people. When you know how to relax into that deeper sense of yourself, you can be there for people in a way that you never could before, in a way that is not driven by your ambition and habitual patterns but rather where you see what other people really need. You see their experience from their side. You are actually able to get outside of yourself. Far from being an antisocial practice, retreat practice frees you to love people in a uniquely powerful way.

Most of us would love to be kind to others, to be compassionate, and yet we are so tied up with our own hope and fear, our own emotions and our own preconceptions, that we just can't do it; not really. Through retreat practice, we learn the pathway to the person we most long to be.

**Let's step back a moment. What was your first retreat like? And how has your personal experience of retreat changed over the years?** Well, my initial exposure to the concept came when I first met Trungpa Rinpoche, in 1970. He had just come to the retreat center Tail of the Tiger [in northern Vermont], which is now called Karmê Chöling. He was talking about retreat practice. I saw that he was already sending people—people who had little meditation experience—into retreat, so I asked him, "Should I do a retreat?" And he said, "Absolutely." And I said, "Well, I've never done one before. I was thinking about doing a month." And he said, "That's great. You can do it. No problem." Even though I had never meditated in my life. So he had enormous confidence in retreat practice. He presented it as the heart of our dharma: "This is who

we are. We of the Kagyu lineage are practitioners and we do retreats. It's the point of our whole life."

So I planned a retreat. I did it in 1972 at Karmê Chöling. I didn't know what to expect. I had visions of peace and solitude and quiet and tranquillity. During the first week I discovered that I had the most agitated, chaotic, neurotic mind that I could have possibly imagined. My mind was insane. After one week, I couldn't take it anymore sitting in that little cabin hour after hour. I said, "I'm sorry, I just cannot do this." I made myself stay till the end of the week, and then I left. Actually, I left in the middle of the night, running down the hill in the dead of winter in my bedroom slippers and pajamas. I had to get out of there. That was my first experience.

When I got out, though, I noticed my mind worked better. It was clearer, my sense perceptions were more steady, and I experienced a kind of openness to other people that I had never experienced before. And I realized that although the experience of my first retreat had been torture, the benefit was completely undeniable. So I planned my next retreat, which didn't happen for a year. But I actually did a whole month in a tent on a mountaintop in New Hampshire.

Pretty much every year since then I've done retreat. This summer it's going to be about three months, and I'd like to eventually edge my way up to six months a year. As I get older—I'm 62 now—my stamina is becoming more of an issue, so I don't know how much longer I'll be able to go up on the mountain. There's a wonderful Kagyu saying: "When we are young, we don't realize the importance of dharma practice; when we are middle-aged, we think we are too busy to do it; and when we are old, it's too late." Now that I am finally, really realizing the tremendous, incalculable benefit of retreat, I am approaching a time when I won't be able to do it physically. This realization is not a little heartbreaking.

**Do you find that your experience of retreat has changed over the years?**

Truthfully, the first many years that I did retreat were spent working with a mind that was virtually without cessation, really very speedy, very tied up with thinking about things. I started to see that maybe ninety percent of the time in retreat my mind is in a very neurotic mode. And then there's this other thing, this depth of experience that seems to come out of nowhere. From the very beginning, I could tell that's where it was all heading, but I also realized it takes a very steady practice in order to cultivate that.

You can't just meditate for a few days and expect to live in the budhanature. It takes a lifetime of practice to develop. But I've discovered that if you do the practice, the results manifest themselves. Now that's huge. This is not wishful thinking. Real, undeniable, and lasting transformation is what's at stake. That's what I try to communicate to my students. Number one: it takes work. Number two: it gets you to a place in your own life where maybe you really want to *be* more than anywhere else. So it's definitely worth doing.

**HUT UPON THE PEAK**

The elegant taste  
of the renouncer of this world  
clearly is supreme  
it seems a boat launches forth  
on a sea whose waves are stilled

It seems a boat launches forth  
on a sea whose waves are stilled  
in the morning calm

## THE POWER OF SOLITUDE

no trace remains across the sky  
of last night's clouds

In the morning calm  
no trace remains across the sky  
of last night's clouds  
peaks ring the distance on all sides  
pure with the snow that covers all

Peaks ring the distance on all sides  
pure with the snow that covers all  
the leaves are fallen  
but at the hut upon the peak  
there is more to live for

The leaves are fallen  
but at the hut upon the peak  
there is more to live for  
the voice of the wind in pines  
makes the solitude familiar

*From the Spring 2005 issue*

**Reginald (Reggie) Ray, Ph.D.**, is the founder and spiritual director of Dharma Ocean Foundation, a study and retreat center in Crestone, Colorado ([dharmaocean.org](http://dharmaocean.org)), dedicated to the preservation of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche's living lineage. On the faculty of Naropa University from its inception through 2009, Ray has spent years in solitary and group retreat, has mentored hundreds of students worldwide, and is the author of several books, including *Indestructible Truth* and *Secret of the Vajra World*; his many audio teachings include *Touching Enlightenment: Finding Realization in the Body*. "Hut Upon the Peak" reprinted from *A Hundred Stanzas by Three Poets at Minase*, in *Japanese Linked Poetry* by Earl Miner, © 1979 by Princeton University Press.

# 14

## THE WORLD WITHOUT US

Environmental journalist Alan Weisman's best seller *The World Without Us* has refreshed and rekindled ecological debates. Here he speaks with contributing editor Clark Strand about global warming, population control, and what the world might look like when we're gone.

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**A**lan Weisman is an award-winning environmental journalist whose reports have appeared in Harper's, the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and *Discover*, and on National Public Radio; he teaches international journalism at the University of Arizona. His *New York Times* best seller *The World Without Us*, called by critics an "eco-thriller" and "one of the grandest thought experiments of our time," considers the fate of the earth were human beings suddenly to disappear. In August 2007, *Tricycle* contributing editor Clark Strand spoke with Weisman about impermanence, human responsibility, and the initiation into a new way of global thinking.

***The World Without Us* begins with a brilliant example of what Buddhists call "skillful means." You ask us to imagine that, for whatever reason, human beings have now become extinct. The problem in writ-**

ing about the kinds of environmental issues I raise in the book is that they produce so much anxiety. Readers just can't take them in. So I kill us all off right from the start and that anxiety is effectively gone. It's a way of saying, "Hey, don't worry. You can take your time and really look at all this stuff, because we're already out of the picture now."

**I was reminded of certain classical Buddhist visualizations in which one imagines the death and decay of one's own body. The result is much the same: you're left with an awareness that, because it is no longer centered upon, the self is greatly expanded in the kinds of truths it can take in. How much of this did you know already?** Certainly a lot of the more subversive, mind-boggling information in the book I discovered in the course of writing it. I mean, I seriously never understood how urgent and dangerous the situation with nuclear waste is. I'd been talking to antinuke people for years, but I never really got a sense of how much waste comes out of our reactors, or the fact that we really have no idea whatsoever what to do with it. So it's just sitting out there in temporary storage.

**And meanwhile we're just making more and more of it by the minute.** Absolutely. And we can't get rid of it, we can't hide it, and there's no safe way to contain it.

**But your eyes had been opened from so many years of reporting on events like the meltdown at Chernobyl.** Yes. But the truth is, I'd gotten to the point in life where I was getting so jaded by all the environmental coverage I'd done that I sometimes couldn't imagine going on with it.

**But with this book you found a radically new way of thinking about**

**the whole problem and of writing about it. People have described the experience of reading your book as a definitive moment in the development of a collective ecological awareness, like first encountering Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*.** Yes. One interviewer compared it to the first Earth Day, which was inspired by photographs of Earth taken from outer space. For the first time, we got far enough from the Earth that we could turn around and take a photograph of it, and what we saw completely changed our way of looking at the planet. We were mesmerized by how beautiful and utterly unique it was. And that new way of seeing the planet in its totality yanked our consciousness to a whole new level of reverence and of concern. Immediately the environmental movement sprang to life. That same interviewer suggested that *The World Without Us* gives a similar kind of distance by extracting human beings from the equation, allowing us to think about the planet on its own terms, apart from the innumerable distractions and noise of human life. It's a way of tearing down the walls that separate us from nature.

**You write about tearing down those walls in the chapter "Unbuilding Our Home." You quote a farmer who said that if you wanted to tear down a barn all you had to do was cut an eighteen-inch-square hole in the roof, then stand back and watch. How's that for impermanence!** Yes. Well, it's pretty much the same for everything else we have built. They begin to fall apart almost immediately once we're gone.

**You predict that within twenty years or so there would be a river flowing straight down Lexington Avenue through the middle of Manhattan because once the subways flooded, which would happen within a couple of days, it's just a matter of time before the streets above them begin to cave in.** New York City is in many ways the epitome of human



civilization. But, again, it's the same for almost everything else we've made.

**And yet, life goes on. As I read your book I kept coming back to a modern Buddhist description of Buddha as life itself, or even the “life force” inherent in nature. Does this concept make sense from your point of view?** It makes perfect sense. If I were asked to sum up what the book is about, I think I could bring it down to two ideas. The first is that there's something wonderfully mysterious and comforting in how indomitable life seems to be. Because the very worst stuff can happen—for instance, the Permian extinction, which occurred roughly 250 million years ago, where you have a million years of volcanic eruption through the carboniferous layer of the planet, and possibly an asteroid to boot, and so the planet gets whacked down to where there's almost nothing moving . . . and then life starts to crawl out of the sea again. Or there's the most infertile space you could possibly imagine, be it a highly contaminated chemical weapons site or the place where two very cold pieces of steel come together to form the union in a bridge. And given the least opportunity, life springs right out of those cracks. Life does amazing things to fit changing circumstances and survive.

**But surely it's not indestructible. Eventually the sun will explode.** Yes. But life may go on even after the earth has been reduced to a cinder, because despite our best attempts at perfect sterilization, microbes are attaching themselves to the crafts we send into outer space, and when those spacecrafts come back to earth they're still there. And so there are probably some on the *Voyager* spacecraft we sent out back in the 1970s along with a record of our music and everything else. So who knows?

**So what's the second idea?** The other thing is that, even though the world will go on without us in the event of our extinction, we shouldn't be too quick to give up on the human race. The whole book is really a way of getting people to imagine, first of all, how amazing the world would be without us, and second, how we might add ourselves back into this equation. We could still be a part of it. But then, there are a lot of things that we should do now in order to make sure that happens.

**Like finding renewable, nonpolluting energy sources and putting a halt on the production of nuclear waste?** Yes. But basically it's more urgent than that at this point. We're dealing with a numbers game here. Every single species out there whose population exceeds the limits of its resources eventually goes extinct, or at any rate finds its population scaled way, way back.

**"It gets too big for its box." That was the way you put it.** Well, yes. In other words, we run up against a population crash. And so we have the choice of correcting that trend ourselves or letting nature do it for us—which isn't going to be pretty, because nature is efficiently and magnificently brutal.

**But returning for the moment to a Buddhist perspective, aren't we really talking about a massive scaling back of what many practitioners might call "the self," with all its insatiable desires and ambitions, few of which have anything to do with what we actually need?** I would agree with you to a point. But my idea of the self is much more biologically than spiritually based. Though I believe that there's something transcendent and mysterious in life, I've stopped trying to define it. I think that our role as spiritual creatures is not to try to solve that mys-

tery but to learn to dwell in it. Also, you have to realize that our biological, selfish needs and desires aren't just ours. Other species have them, too. It's part of biology. A cat will hunt for the sheer pleasure of doing it and not just to satisfy his hunger. You've got a cat who's totally satiated, and if you put him outside and he sees a bird, he'll go right into hunting mode. We do that, too. It's wasteful, true, but it's also something in us that's just innate. And so even though chimpanzees stayed in the trees and didn't follow us into the savannas when we evolved, they also exhibit a lot of our behavior. They can be brutal, petty, acquisitive, and ruthlessly competitive.

**It's that survival-of-the-fittest energy.** True. And the survival of the fittest is great as long as you're the winner. If you're the loser, there's a downside. Every species goes extinct sooner or later—that's just the way it works. The reason things go extinct is sometimes because they have exhausted their available food resources, and sometimes because their environment has changed so much that they can't adapt.

**Or can't adapt fast enough.** Exactly. But in our case, we're the ones changing our own environment. But again, we're not the only species who do that. A swarm of locusts will work its way through all the available fields until it's eaten itself out of house and home. Then, suddenly, its population crashes. So this is not a new behavior. It's just part of the grand scheme of things. And, you know, I think the Buddha may have had a glimpse of just this.

**Yes, but it's one thing to say that all is impermanent, and quite another to apply that same logic to our own species.** Nature being what it is, we're all going to go extinct sometime. But because I live now, because

I love other *Homo sapiens*, and because I love the world that I was born into, I think—even if it's swimming against the inevitability of where the universe is ultimately headed—my role is to try to preserve the wonder of the world and the goodness that human beings create.

**Is it crazy to think that we can change our behavior as a species when we don't yet think of ourselves as part and parcel with the rest of nature?** Yes and no. The chances that we will limit our population are at the moment rather slim. And yet there are glimmers that we might do it. Ten or fifteen years ago, only a few very well-informed people were warning us about global warming. Everybody else was busy coming up with the reasons not to believe in it. And yet I think that today, except for a few diehards out there, it's understood to be real. And so now we're beginning to think, what the hell are we going to do about it?

**China has already tried to limit its population growth with its restriction to one child per family—which is the same solution you offer at the end of your book, noting that by 2100 we could scale back the human presence on Earth to nineteenth-century levels, with corresponding benefits to the overall health of the planet. But wasn't the Chinese experiment considered a complete failure?** Well, frankly, I don't think it was a *complete* failure. Their experiment with population control pointed out a lot of the pitfalls, some of which were deeply tragic, like taking little girl babies out to the forest to die. At the same time, it's also given us good ideas about how to start over once we realize we'll need to try it again, and on a much greater scale than just China.

**And the fact is, China did lower its birth rate, correct?** Yes. And India, which did not try that experiment, will exceed the population of China

by 2030, and on a much smaller land mass.

**That's just a little over twenty years from now.** That's why it was important to me to bring this argument back into the conversation, because the anti-abortion people in America had pretty much quashed it. When I began writing *The World Without Us*, I couldn't find a single zero-population growth movement in the United States anymore. They'd changed their names to something much less offensive to their enemies. In other words, they'd backed down.

**So what do we do when there are religious organizations, both in America and elsewhere, who tell us to do just the opposite of what clearly needs to happen to save the planet and ourselves?** Not only is the Chinese experiment not necessarily the failure that we think it is, there's actually another experiment going on right now that not only addresses the question of whether we can limit our population or not, but also responds to the religious issue of whether our spiritual authorities will permit us to. That example is called Italy.

Right now Italy has one of the best economies on the planet—next to Ireland, the best in Europe. It also has one of the lowest population-growth rates on the planet. And it happens to be the country that hosts the Vatican.

**That almost seems bizarre. Are Italian Catholics taking their religion less seriously these days?** Actually, I think Italians take their religion very seriously. If you ask them, most Italian Catholics will tell you that they believe in God, that they pray and go to Mass. The fact is, they seem to have discovered a way to be prosperous and happy and religiously inspired—and at the same time be responsible on the issue of population.

They have fewer kids and happier families, and their quality of life has improved.

**The Buddhist sutras frequently employ huge time spans in an effort to expand the minds of their listeners. Your book has a similar sort of effect in the way it deals with the geological record.** We can't really grasp geological time as human beings. We want to break time down to our scale, we want to think that human civilization as it's existed for the past three or four thousand years of recorded human history is the sum, or even the point, of creation. We want to believe that we are what the world is about.

**Yes. But your book really breaks that frame wide open, and shows us both an infinitely receding past, most of which did not include us, and a future that, with or without us, will go on into the infinitely distant future. It's hard not to feel humbled by that vision of time.** And yet there's a kind of paradox there too, isn't there? It's supposed to be a world without us, but the book is filled with people, too.

**True. The biologists and physicists and environmentalists and artists you interviewed are all right there on nearly every page of the book, speaking in their own voices about what would happen if we suddenly disappeared. In that respect, it's a very densely populated book.** The other day an interviewer said to me, "You know, *The World Without Us* is really a love letter."

**Well, I can definitely see that—a love letter to the planet.** Well, no. It's really a love letter to the human race.

## **What Would Happen Tomorrow If We All Disappeared Today?**

*1 Week:* The reserve fuel supply to the pumps that circulate cooling water to the world's online nuclear reactors would run out.

*1 Year:* Animals would begin returning to the sites of these reactors, which would by now all have burned or melted down. An estimated 1 billion birds that are now being killed each year would survive when electric power lines grow cold and the lights on communication towers go out.

*3 Years:* With no heat, pipes would burst in towns in cold or temperate zones, and the joints between walls and roof lines would separate as metal fixtures expand and contract.

*20 Years:* The Panama Canal has now ceased to exist, and North and South America are joined once more. Garden vegetables have reverted into wild strains and are no longer palatable.

*100 Years:* Without ivory trade, the world's population of elephants has increased to 10 million, whereas the populations of raccoons and foxes are in decline since domesticated cats have entered the food chain.

*300 Years:* Along with many other cities built on river deltas, Houston has now been mostly washed away.

*500 Years:* Suburbs have been completely reclaimed by forest. Only aluminum dishwasher parts, stainless steel cookware, bathroom tiles, and plastic handles remain.

## THE WORLD WITHOUT US

*1,000s of Years:* What's left of New York City is scraped clean by glaciers. Only some tunnels and other underground structures remain.

*35,000 Years:* The soil is finally clear of human-generated lead pollution; cadmium is still only halfway there.

*100,000 Years:* CO<sub>2</sub> may now have returned to prehuman levels.

*1 Million Years:* By now microbes may have evolved that are capable of biodegrading the human legacy of plastics.

*7,200,000 Years:* The faces on Mt. Rushmore are still discernible. PCBs and Dioxin compounds are probably still intact.

*4.5 Billion Years:* The half-million depleted Uranium-238 has now reached its half-life. Earth warms as the sun expands. Once more, microbial life rules the earth.

*5 Billion Years and Beyond:* The earth has been incinerated by the sun. Radio and television broadcasts still drift through deep space as relics of our presence on Earth.

*From the Winter 2007 issue*



# 15

## THE HEART-ESSENCE OF BUDDHIST MEDITATION

Exploring the common roots of various Buddhist meditative practices.

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LAMA SURYA DAS

Clinging to one's school and condemning others  
Is the certain way to waste one's learning. Since all dharma  
teachings are good, Those who cling to sectarianism  
Degrade Buddhism and sever Themselves from liberation.  
—*Milarepa, The One Hundred Thousand Songs*

**D**uring my initial private meeting with the Venerable Kalu Rinpoche, my first root guru, I asked him about the main points of meditation. He asked what kind of meditation I was doing, and I told him mindfulness of breathing. “What will you concentrate on when you stop breathing?” he asked.

That was a real eye-opener. Suddenly I realized that I might have to broaden the scope of my understanding of Buddhist practice. In time, I came to discover that it included a great deal more than any one meditation technique and also that the many forms of Buddhist meditation shared fundamental elements.

The philosopher Simone Weil characterized prayer as pure undivided attention. Here is where all contemplative practices have a common root, a vital heart that can be developed in an almost infinite variety of skillful directions, depending on purpose and perspective. Different techniques of meditation can be classified according to their focus. Some focus on the field of perception itself, and we call those methods mindfulness; others focus on a specific object, and we call those concentrative practices. There are also techniques that shift back and forth between the field and the object.

Meditation, simply defined, is a way of being aware. It is the happy marriage of doing and being. It lifts the fog of our ordinary lives to reveal what is hidden; it loosens the knot of self-centeredness and opens the heart; it moves us beyond mere concepts to allow for a direct experience of reality. Meditation embodies the way of awakening: both the path and its fruition. From one point of view, it is the means to awakening; from another, it is awakening itself.

Meditation masters teach us how to be precisely present and focused on this one breath, the only breath; this moment, the only moment. In the Dzogchen tradition we refer to a “fourth time,” the transcendent

moment of nowness. In Tibetan this is called *shicha*, a transcendent yet immanent dimension of timeless being that vertically intersects each moment of horizontal linear time—past, present, and future. Whether we’re aware of it or not, we are quite naturally present to this moment—where else could we be? Meditation is simply a way of knowing this.

Different Buddhist schools recommend a variety of meditative postures. Some emphasize a still, formal posture, while others are less strict and more focused on internal movements of consciousness. Tibetan traditions, for instance, advise an upright spine, erect but relaxed; hands at rest in the lap, with the belly soft; shoulders relaxed, chin slightly tucked, and the gaze lowered with eyelids half shut; the jaw is slack with the tongue behind the upper teeth; the legs are crossed. A Soto Zen Buddhist saying instructs us to sit with formal body and informal mind. The common essential point is to remain balanced and alert, so as to pierce the veil of samsaric illusion.

Although most Westerners tend to conceive of Eastern forms of meditation as something done cross-legged with eyes closed, in a quiet, unlit place, the Buddha points with equal emphasis to four postures in which to meditate: sitting, standing, walking, and lying down. The *Satipatthana Sutra* says: “When you sit, know that you are sitting; when standing, know you are standing. . . .” This pretty much covers all our activities, allowing us to integrate meditative practice into daily life. Learn to sit like a Buddha, stand like a Buddha, walk like a Buddha. Be a Buddha; this is the main point of Buddhist practice.

While many people today practice meditation for physical and mental health, a deeper approach to practice energizes our inner life and opens the door to realization. In Tibetan, the word for meditation is *gom*, which literally means “familiarization” or “getting used to,” and in this sense meditation is a means by which we familiarize ourselves with

our mind. The common Pali term for meditation is *bhavana*, meaning “to cultivate, to develop, to bring into being.” So we might then think of meditation as the active cultivation of mind leading to clear awareness, tranquillity, and wisdom. This requires conscious effort.

But from another—and at first glance contradictory—perspective, there is nothing to do in meditation but enjoy the view: the magical, mysterious, and lawful unfolding of all that is, all of which is perfect as it is. In other words, we’re perfect as we are, and yet there’s work to be done. In this we find the union of being and doing: we swoop down with the bigger picture in mind—the view of absolute reality—and at the same time we climb the spiritual mountain in keeping with our specific aspirations and inclinations, living out relative truth. “While my view is as high as the sky, my actions regarding cause and effect [karma] are as meticulous as finely ground barley flour,” sang the Lotus Master Padmasambhava, who first brought Buddhism to Tibet in the eighth century. By alternating between active cultivation and effortless awareness, we engage in a delicate dance that balances disciplined intention with simply being. By being both directive and allowing, we gradually learn to fearlessly explore the frontiers and depths of doing and being, and come to realize that whatever is taking place, whatever we may feel and experience, is intimately connected with and inseparable from intrinsic awareness.

“Not doing, not constructing, not fabricating, not altering or manipulating your mind, while remaining undistracted: this is my vital pithy instruction, the heart-essence of meditation.” So taught my own Dzogchen master Nyoshul Khenpo Rinpoche. “Beyond action and inaction, the sublime dharma is accomplished.”

Meditation is not about getting away from it all, numbing out, or stopping thoughts. Without trying to be rid of pesky thoughts and feel-

ings, we learn how to practice being aware of them in the fleeting immediacy of the very moment in which they present themselves. We can cultivate awareness of any object: sounds, smells, physical sensations, perceptions, and so forth. Everything is grist for the mill—even those things we find terribly unpleasant. As the Tibetan Dragon Master Gyalwang Drukpa says, “Everything must be meditated!”

Like the archer straightening his arrow and perfecting his aim, the practitioner of meditation straightens out the mind while aiming his or her attentional energy at its object. Learning to drop what we’re doing, however momentarily, and to genuinely pay attention in the present moment, without attachment or bias, helps us become clear, just as a snow globe becomes clear when we stop shaking it and its flakes settle.

This settling process of concentrated attention has four stages: first, the letting go of distracting inner objects—such as feelings, thoughts, attractions, and aversions—and all outer objects; second, the attainment of serene one-pointedness of focus; third, the refinement of this state of concentration into a subtler and purer awareness. The fourth and final stage is the attainment of a state of simple wakefulness and equanimity conducive to clear vision and profound comprehension, an awareness beyond subject and object.

Let’s take an example: In breath-awareness meditation—the technique known as mindfulness of breathing (*anapanasati* in Pali)—we first observe the breath by intently following the tiny movements and physical sensations associated with each in- and out-breath. When we are distracted, we simply bring the wandering mind back to the object of attention. (In this case it is the breath, but whatever the particular practice—mantra, visualization, and so forth—the principle is the same.) Then, gradually relaxing into the object, we notice the gentle tide of thoughts and feelings subside as we fine-tune our focus. Later, as our

awareness deepens, we abandon any dualistic notion of inner and outer as we become the breath itself. This calls to mind the haiku master Basho's saying that in order to write about a tree, he would watch the tree until he became the tree. We watch the breath until we become the breath. In this way, as it is said in Zen, we come to know the breath, ourselves, and all things intimately. In the beginning, concentration is key. Concentrative meditations (Sanskrit *shamatha*) are said to be the useful means but not the end. The stability of mind established by shamatha becomes the foundation for insight meditation, or *vipassana*, in which the critical faculties of mind discern the nature of samsara: impermanent, without self, and ultimately unsatisfactory.

There are many techniques for developing concentration and insight, but the point is to not be caught up in and overly influenced by the ever-running narratives and desires of the mind. All center on the vital principles of nonjudgmental openness and relaxation with applied and discerning awareness. As practice matures, effortless, innate wakefulness is balanced by the discipline of mindfulness. What we call "mindfulness meditation" can be broadly defined as any conscious activity that keeps the cling-free attention anchored in the present moment, allowing us to see clearly what is happening, to distinguish what is wholesome from what is unwholesome, and to perceive the interdependent working of things. In the *Satipatthana Sutra*, the Buddha identified four basic foundations of mindfulness: the body, feelings (in the sense that all sense impressions *feel* pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral), mind states and mental objects, and universal laws (dharma). Paying careful attention to these aspects of ourselves brings self-knowledge and wisdom.

Mindfulness is the tool we use to bring the mind back home, to the present moment, to what is, just as it is, and to who and what we actually are. Through mindfulness we learn how not to be so distracted by

thoughts, feelings, memories—our running inner narrative. That’s why buddhas are called jinas, “conquerors”: they have conquered their afflictive states of hatred, greed, and delusion, all of which obscure and diminish our innate buddhanature.

Mindful awareness frees us from habitual patterns, opening up a space between stimulus and response, allowing us to consciously choose how to respond to things rather than blindly react. With the discernment of mindfulness we no longer fall prey to karmic habits and unwholesome conditioning. As the pioneering Zen master Shunryu Suzuki said, “We pay attention with respect and interest, not in order to manipulate but to understand what is true. And seeing what is true, the heart becomes free.”

This is not just Buddhist double-talk. In the *Diamond Sutra*, the Buddha says of his enlightenment that he has obtained nothing that wasn’t in him all along, there for the finding. And the *Hevajra Tantra* teaches, “We are all buddhas by nature; it is only adventitious obscurations which temporarily veil it from us.”

There are various Buddhist schools with different approaches and practices, but committed meditation practice is, in short, the way we apply the Buddha’s final words: “Work out your own salvation with diligence.”

In Tibetan Buddhism it is said that detachment is the root of meditation and devotion is its head. *Bodhicitta* (the aspiration to attain enlightenment for the welfare of others) is its soul. Mindfulness is its breath, vigilance its skin, and nondistractedness its essence. Balance and harmony are the seat of meditation, and penetrating wisdom is its eye. Nowness is the time, and this place is the place. Self-discipline is the very bones of Buddha, and present-moment awareness is the heart of it all.

Milarepa said, “The ultimate view is to observe one’s mind, stead-

fastly and with determination.” When the Buddha stated, over twenty-five hundred years ago, that anyone could become enlightened through applying his teachings, he meant it. And many have reaped those blessed results. This is the promise of buddhadharma, of the wisdom of meditation.

## GUIDED MEDITATION: SIMPLY BEING

Sit comfortably, perhaps close your eyes, or lower your gaze. Take a deep breath or two and relax. Breathe slowly and let it all go. Release the tension and relax a little more.

Stop doing and settle back into just being. Let things settle without your direction or intercession. Let go. Wherever things fall is okay for now. Open to the wisdom of allowing, of inclusive acceptance. This is the inner secret to natural meditation.

Don’t get lost. Stay right here, at home and at ease. Befriend yourself; familiarize yourself with your own fundamental presence. Let awareness be uninterrupted by techniques or concepts.

If and when you feel lost, distracted, spaced out, or sleepy, get in touch with your breath. Watch the breath, observe the inhalation and exhalation as they effortlessly occur. Feel the breath moving in and out, anchoring you in the present moment while you again let everything go, without judgment, evaluation, or interference.

Opening gradually to the effortlessness of pure presence, turn your attention inward. All we seek can be found within. This is the process and practice of inner freedom.

Being Buddha, enjoy the buoyant peace, harmony, and delight of natural meditation.

*From the Winter 2007 issue*

**Lama Surya Das**, an American-born lineage holder in the Nyingmapa School of Tibetan Buddhism, is founder and spiritual director of the Dzogchen Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts. An author, translator, and poet, his many books include *The Big Questions; Buddha Is As Buddha Does*; and *Buddha Standard Time*.



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## THE WISE HEART

*Tricycle* chats with teacher Jack Kornfield about Buddhist psychology, everyday nirvana, and what all religions have in common.

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JAMES SHAHEEN

Just inside the gate to the grounds of Spirit Rock Meditation Center, in Woodacre, California, stands a modest “gratitude hut.” It honors teachers past and present who have inspired the inclusive style of this Vipassana retreat center nestled in the hills forty minutes north of San Francisco, in Marin County. Pictures of Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike paper the walls: the current Dalai Lama, Sri Ramana Maharshi, Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, Sayagyi U Ba Khin, Maha Ghosananda, Anagarika Munindra, Thich Nhat Hanh, Kalu Rinpoche—to name a few—along with some of today’s most well-known Vipassana teachers. The center’s leading figure and cofounder, Jack Kornfield, draws freely from a broad range of spiritual traditions, citing teachers, political leaders, poets, writers, and artists in what he describes as an effort to speak to people using the language and metaphors they know best.

*Tricycle* caught up with Kornfield on a midafternoon in March

2008, in a room used by teachers to interview students. Typical of the center, the room affords an incomparable view of the hills and valleys beyond. Kornfield has taken a break from leading a silent retreat and sits relaxed, casual, and ready to talk. His book *The Wise Heart: A Guide to the Universal Teachings of Buddhist Psychology*, has just been published.

**What do you hope people will learn from your latest book?** Two things: The first is that Buddhism as a psychology has a great deal to offer the West. It provides an enormous and liberating map of the human psyche and of human possibility. Second, Buddhism offers a holistic approach. Often people say, “This part of life is spiritual, that part worldly,” as if the two can be divided. My own teacher, Ajahn Chah, never made a distinction between the pain of divorce and the pain in your knee and the pain of clinging to self. They are all forms of suffering, and Buddhism addresses them all.

**One aspect of the Buddhist approach to psychology you call “behaviorism with heart.” Can you explain what you mean?** Western behaviorism grew out of rational emotive therapy, in which thought substitution—good for bad—and retraining an individual to establish healthy habits of mind were central. In behaviorism with heart, the Buddha instructs us to see that certain thoughts we have about ourselves or others are not compassionate. Through specific Buddhist trainings, like *metta* practice—a meditation in which we cultivate positive mind states toward ourselves and others—we can learn to release negative thoughts and replace them with positive ones. Where Western psychiatry has focused largely on mental illness, Buddhism focuses on the cultivation of a healthy state of mind through mindfulness, training in compassion, and so on.

**You believe in the fundamentally compassionate nature of the human heart. In our own Western tradition this has been debated for centuries. Saint Augustine wrote, “If babies are innocent, it is not for lack of will to do harm, but for lack of strength.” Wordsworth, on the other hand, wrote, “Heaven lies about us in our infancy!/Shades of the prison-house begin to close/Upon the growing Boy.” Buddhists differ here as well. Is Buddhist practice a question of cultivation or allowing our “pure nature” to manifest?** We can view our nature as being defiled and deluded, as Augustine might point out. Or we can view our nature as compassionate and loving. So then maybe we should add an “s” and talk about our “natures.” I believe it is most skillful to try to get people to focus on and cultivate the positive. In the Theravada sutras, the Buddha describes the nature of mind this way: “Luminous is the mind, brightly shining is its nature, but it is colored by the attachments that visit it.” [*Anguttara Nikaya* 1.49–51] I’ve found that pointing people to their fundamental goodness will awaken it. It’s more skillful than pointing to the negative. We are so loyal to our suffering and to seeing ourselves as damaged that it’s very easy to use spiritual practice to reinforce our self-judgment. That doesn’t help people become liberated.

**In your book you point out that Buddhist psychology is not especially focused on the interaction between student and teacher. In Western psychology, the therapist-client relationship is central. Can you say something about this distinction?** Of course the relationship between the student and teacher is important, and teacher-student contact is essential. But that’s only one part of it. Even more important are the inner practices, where much of the real transformation comes about. The root of Buddhist understanding of mind is that the mind can be trained and awakened to the nature of reality. Through training and practice we dis-

cover our true nature and find liberation. So this is a very different approach from focusing on two people sitting in a room together talking. You do the trainings your teacher offers, and through them you learn to transform and awaken yourself. This is what happens on our retreats.

**You talk about the content of our stories—whether it’s the details of our personal histories or just what’s going on right now. In Buddhist psychology, how important is it to understand those contents, and to what extent do they become a trap?** Content can be a trap, and ignoring content can also be a trap. So one of my tasks as a teacher is to listen to both. There’s a great freedom in just being aware of thought and seeing that it’s empty. But when somebody says, “I think all the time,” I’ll ask, “What do you think about?” If they answer, “My son just died six months ago,” I might ask, “How do you work with grief?” Or if they say, “I’ve just inherited \$4 million,” I might ask, “How do you work with planning and attachment?” So sometimes it’s helpful to know the content, and sometimes you don’t need to. When you see the content of thought, it’s not in order to rework it, it’s in order to see the whole pattern so that you can become free.

**You claim that Buddhist psychology goes further than Western methods do. For instance, you write of the Three Poisons (anger, greed, and delusion) that “we reach below the very synapses and cells to free ourselves from the grasp of these instinctive forces.” Do you mean to say that greed, anger, and delusion are dealt with once and for all?** If our goal is, as has sometimes been said in the Western psychological tradition, to reach an ordinary level of neurosis, then the goal of Buddhist practice takes us far beyond that. It is to free us from neurosis or to shift identity so that we are no longer subject to those forces in an ordinary

way; we are liberated from the power of those forces. And the fact that this is possible for us as human beings is tremendously good news.

**In your terms, nirvana is the Buddhist definition of mental health, the optimum goal of Buddhist psychology. You say that Westerners sometimes misunderstand nirvana as a transcendent state—I now refer to your previous book *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*—but are you selling nirvana short by giving it such a mundane cast?** When we're idealistic, we—and many practitioners in Asian Buddhist countries as well—imagine that nirvana exists somewhere high in the Himalayas, reserved for monks who have meditated for the whole of their life. My own teachers—and other wonderful masters like Shunryu Suzuki Roshi—emphasize that nirvana is to be found here and now.

In the morning and evening chanting in the forest monastery we recite the Buddha's words, that the dharma of liberation is ever present, immediate, timeless, to be experienced here and now by all who see wisely. Nirvana appears when we let go, when we live in the reality of the present. Sorrow arises when the mind and heart are caught in greed, hatred, and delusion. Nirvana appears in their absence. Nirvana manifests as ease, as love, as connectedness, as generosity, as clarity, as unshakable freedom. This isn't watering down nirvana. This is the reality of liberation that we can experience, sometimes in a moment and sometimes in transformative ways that change our entire life.

**So these moments in which we experience freedom from anger, greed, delusion—these, too, are nirvana?** They are what my teacher Ajahn Buddhadasa called “everyday nirvana.” They are tastes of nirvana resting in awareness, the reality of the liberated heart and mind. He said, “There's no difference between the absence of greed, hatred, and delu-

sion for a moment or for a lifetime.” This is not an esoteric notion of nirvana, that it is someplace far away to be attained only after a long time. Nirvana is to be known here and now. Sometimes we experience this through profound meditation, other times through the simple direct opening to freedom.

**Do you think it’s possible at some point in a person’s life that this experience of nirvana becomes complete—that one does not return to his or her earlier life or states of mind?** Certain people describe their experience that way; others who also seem deeply enlightened say not. But liberation is only found here and now, the direct experience of freedom, beyond the concepts of nirvana or enlightenment. In our life, we can actually experience what the Buddha taught: suffering, the cause of the suffering, and the release of suffering. This is a direct and immediate experience, and the cessation of suffering is the experience of nirvana.

I explain these teachings as “The Nature of Enlightenments”—there are a number of ways to experience nirvana. Nirvana can be experienced as emptiness, as the void. It can be experienced as the absence of greed, hatred, and delusion. It can be experienced as silence, as pure awareness, as peace, as wisdom, as boundless love and as true stability. It has a number of different dimensions, like facets of crystal.

**How, then, does traditional therapy fit into your teaching model?**

Western psychology also has skillful means to help us practice the Four Noble Truths: suffering, its causes, its end, and the means to that end. The best of Western psychotherapy is like a paired meditation: If you have a wise therapist, they can help you pay attention with compassion and mindfulness to difficulties that may not come up as you sit by yourself, or help you with past traumas that are too difficult to handle on

your own because the trauma is too great. A wise therapist can assist you to practice in areas where sitting in meditation alone may not suffice. There's tremendous value in some of the Western clinical tradition, and it can help you to know suffering, its causes, and find release.

**You outline twenty-six principles that you call universal to Buddhism. Yet the different Buddhist traditions are fraught with contradictions, and some scholars find, say, the Mahayana and Theravada worldviews incompatible. One way some Mahayanists have dealt with this is to divide schools into “higher” teachings and “lower” teachings, setting up a kind of progression. But you seem to have no problem lifting from the Mahayana tradition—and many others to boot.** Mystics and true practitioners don't look at liberation from a scholastic point of view, but rather from the point of view of inner realization. And for the mystics of each of the great Buddhist traditions these same common elements exist and are expressed. There is almost nothing that I can find in the Mahayana or the Vajrayana or the Pure Land that isn't also found in its root form in the Theravada. Within Theravada Buddhism there are teachings of what Vajrayana might call Dzogchen or Mahamudra and buddhanature. They're found within every tradition. My own teachers from the forests of Thailand, for instance, talked about the original mind or original nature, *jit derm* in Thai. While this is a common Mahayana concept, it's also the direct experience of Theravada monks. Likewise, my teacher Ajahn Chah and his lineage of Theravada forest monks talk about the unborn nature of consciousness, and I've heard these same teachings from Tibetan lamas.

**What did Ajahn Chah mean by “original mind”? Is it the same as buddhanature?** Yes, definitely. Ajahn Chah describes, “The original

heart-mind shines like pure, clear water with the sweetest taste. To know this we must go beyond self and no-self, birth, and death. This original mind is limitless, untouchable, beyond all opposites and all creations.” This is his description of buddhanature. He goes on, “When we see with the eye of wisdom, we know that the Buddha is timeless, unborn, unrelated to anybody or any history. The Buddha is the ground of all being, the realization of the truth of the unmoving mind. So the Buddha was not enlightened in India. In fact, he was never enlightened and was never born and never died, and this timeless Buddha is our true home, our abiding place.” The scholars tend to argue. The mystics look at each other and smile.

Traveling in Palestine and Israel recently, I was with this great mystic—a Hasidic rabbi—who said, “I’ve been reading about Buddhism. Tell me first about luminosity of consciousness,” and we talked about that. “Now tell me about the void.” And I said, “Well, there are different ways you can experience the void.” And he was so excited. He said, “Oh yeah, we have them too. And this is how our luminosity appears in our Hasidic practice.”

**Do you see the Buddha as a mystic, then?** Absolutely. By mystic I mean one who looks profoundly into the nature of reality. The Buddha didn’t take the teachings of anyone and simply copy them. He looked deeply and had this extraordinary vision of the nature of consciousness and how beings arise and pass away and what brings us to freedom.

**You draw from multiple traditions in your teachings. Your book is full of quotes from people outside of the Buddhist tradition—Mother Teresa, the popular American poet Mary Oliver, Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and Hindu sages, and so on. You even turn to a non-Bud-**



**dhist, Sri Nisargadatta, to describe emptiness. Why is that?** I believe that dharma is universal, and when Mary Oliver expresses the dharma of impermanence in a poem about a butterfly, and the ancient Zen master Ryokan expresses the dharma of impermanence in a poem about young bamboo, they're both teaching the same dharma. I use whatever expressions best help to awaken us.

**So in other words, you would see using material people are familiar with as a skillful means to teach the dharma?** Yes. I also use the language of science, because one of the beautiful things about both Buddhist psychology and Western science is that they are both experiential and they both undertake to study experience as it happens and to record it and to replicate it. There's a lot of commonality.

**Where do science and Buddhism part, then?** In the opening page of my book, I quote the Dalai Lama: "Buddhism is not a religion. It is a science of mind." But again, there isn't one Buddhism. Buddhism also functions as a religion for many people—there's devotion, religious rites and rituals, cosmology. In this way it functions as other religions do. But when you go back to the fundamental teachings, the Buddha's main focus was much more a science of mind: here is how the mind works, and this is how you liberate the mind and the heart from suffering, through compassion and generosity and the practice of meditation.

**So it's very phenomenological?** Absolutely.

**What happened, then? How did it become a religion?** I can't say I know, but in the Asian Buddhist cultures where I lived, Buddhism seems to function as both a religion and a science. There are some people who are

primarily devotional by nature. They find enormous support and solace in prayers to the Buddha, by making offerings, by faith. There's also another group that wants to do the practices of inner transformation in a systematic way, as the Buddha taught. Both are ways to meet the needs of humanity.

**Different teachings for different temperaments?** That's a much simpler way to say it.

**How is Buddhism different from the many traditions you draw from? For instance, as a Christian or Muslim you may think you have a soul. As a Hindu you may understand atman as a universal principle. You bring these teachings into your own teachings, but what is distinctive about Buddhism?** There are many forms of Buddhism, but in its essence, Buddhism has a tremendously clear and systematic way to put into practice and experience the wonderful principles we learn in many religious traditions. Christ speaks about turning the other cheek; Muhammad talks about the compassion of Allah. But within Buddhism there are methods that teach you how to develop and practice these principles. There are systematic trainings in compassion and forgiveness, for example. Buddhism also has a unique emphasis on selflessness. It places no emphasis on a creator god, so the emphasis is on our direct experience of liberation, not on the adopting of an external faith.

**Would you fall into the camp of thinking that fundamentally all of these traditions are talking about the same thing or hoping for the same goal?** I wouldn't go that far. All of the mystical traditions of Christianity and Judaism and Hinduism and so forth are trying to open us from the small sense of self to some greater reality. The ways that they do

so may lead us to different experiences. In many cases, there are really strong parallels, but not always.

There are many skillful means. Even within Buddhist lineages, between one Tibetan master and another, there are differences. They may say, “I’ve got a slightly different—and better—way to get you to freedom.” But they are all a part of the great mandala of awakening, skillful means.

**You’ve said that most American Vipassana teachers draw copiously from other traditions.** And have practiced in other traditions, sometimes quite deeply, yes.

**Why are they more likely than others—say, more traditional teachers or monastics—to do that?** It’s harder for monastics to go outside of their tradition because their vows and their way of life prevent it. With vows you’re dedicated to your monastery and to your lineage, in a very beautiful way. There is a lot less opportunity than a lay teacher would have to practice in other traditions.

Now in the West we have the riches of all traditions translated into English. We’ve got Tibetan lamas and Sufis and Hindu gurus and Hasidim visiting Richmond, Virginia, and Kansas City, Missouri, to teach. In our own community some of our greatest teachers from Burma, India, and Thailand have come to our centers. Before they returned to Asia, they blessed us and said, “Now it’s up to you.” They gave us a freedom to find skillful languages, skillful means, and also to draw on other languages or teachings that were complementary.

My own teacher, Ajahn Chah, told me, “What’s important are not the words of the dharma but teaching the way that people can free themselves, so that they learn compassion and generosity and liberation. If you do better calling that Christianity, call it Christianity. Call it what-

ever you need to call it. The words aren't important."

## SITTING IN THE DARK

An excerpt from Jack Kornfield's book, *The Wise Heart*.

Sometimes we forget that the Buddha too had fears: "How would it be if in the dark of the month, with no moon, I were to enter the most strange and frightening places, near combs and in the thick of the forest, that I might come to understand fear and terror. And doing so, a wild animal would approach or the wind rustle the leaves and I would think, Perhaps the fear and terror now comes. And being resolved to dispel the bold of that fear and terror, I remained in whatever posture it arose, sitting or standing, walking or lying down. I did not change until I had faced that fear and terror in that very posture, until I was free of its hold upon me .... And having this thought, I did so. By facing the fear and terror I became free."

In the traditional training at Ajahn Chah's forest monastery, we were sent to sit alone in the forest at night practicing the meditations on death. Stories of monks who had encountered tigers and other wild animals helped keep us alert. At Ajahn Buddhadasa's forest monastery we were taught to tap our walking sticks on the paths at night so the snakes would "hear" us and move out of the way. At another monastery, I periodically sat all night at the charnel grounds. Every few weeks a body was brought for cremation. After the lighting of the funeral pyre and the chanting, most people would leave, with only monks remaining to tend the fire in the dark forest. Finally, one monk would be left alone to sit there until dawn, contemplating death. Not everyone did these practices. But I was a young man, looking for initiation, eager to prove myself, so I gravitated toward these difficulties.

## THE WISE HEART

As it turned out, sitting in the dark forest with its tigers and snakes was easier than sitting with my inner demons. My insecurity, loneliness, shame, and boredom came up, along with all my frustrations and hurts. Sitting with these took more courage than sitting at the charnel ground. Little by little I learned to face them with mindfulness, to make a clearing within the dark woods of my own heart.

*From the Summer 2008 issue*

From *The Wise Heart: A Guide to the Universal Teachings of Buddhist Psychology* © 2008 by Jack Kornfield. Reprinted with the permission of Bantam Dell.

# 17

## A MORE COMPLETE ATTENTION

To really see each other, we have to bother to look.

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SHARON SALZBERG

### ADVICE

A young friend once came to me seeking advice. He had been to India, where he met a guru who had become very important to him. Now my young friend wanted to bring his father to that crowded, hot city, half-way around the world, to meet the guru. I thought about it for a moment, and then said to him, “You know, I don’t think it’s a very good idea. That particular city in India is very unpleasant. The food will be foreign, he may well get sick, and there will be annoying bugs. Besides, I myself found the scene around the guru kind of strange, and your father might well be repulsed by it. He may then dismiss all spiritual endeavor, which would be a terrible outcome. My suggestion is, don’t do it.”

The young man completely ignored my advice and did indeed go off to India along with his father. When he returned a few months later, I

immediately saw how very wrong I'd been in my counsel. His father just loved everything about India and felt right at home there. Not only did he admire the guru, he became his disciple. And not only that, he was determined to teach in the guru's lineage, and was initiating a complete life change. My friend and his father were extremely happy. Having been proven so wrong in my advice, the question was, could I be happy for them?

Sometimes we feel a need to be proven right as we look at someone else's life choices; it is not that they are necessarily doing anything wrong or hurtful, but they may be living in a different way than we have decided they should be living. Or perhaps our advice turns out to be unappreciated or incorrect, as mine was, and we come face to face with the fact that someone's happiness does not revolve around us and our fabulous prescience and good sense; instead, it is based on their own good sense, or even on sheer good luck. Can we let go of our need to try to dominate people's lives and our determination of what the correct outcome of their decisions should be?

Sitting with my young friend and hearing about the glorious experience of his father in India, I saw the cascade of emotions in my mind—embarrassment, skepticism, a touch of derision, and even a little resentment—and I knew I had a choice: sometimes kindness takes the form of stepping aside, letting go of our need to be right, and just being happy for someone.

Sometimes I intentionally ask myself the question, "What would I gain from this person's loss?" and it is quite clear to me that I don't benefit at all. The true benefit is in stepping off of center stage, and experiencing the kindness of delighting in someone else's good experience.

## RULES FOR KINDNESS

Once I was leading a meditation group in the D.C. area. The group had rented an elementary school auditorium for the day. All along the walls of the corridors were posted rules for being kind. During the breaks in the day, I would just stand and read them again and again. They seemed so simple, yet like many simple truths, if we were to live them rather than merely admire them, they could change our life. They rest on principles like dissolving the rigid boundaries we hold between ourselves and others, including rather than excluding, recognizing our actions (and words) are consequential, and being thoughtful.

Carderock Elementary School rules for being kind:

- Treat people the way you would like to be treated.
- Play fair.
- Respect everyone—other students and all staff.
- Everyone can play.
- Help others when they need help.
- Don't hurt others on the inside or the outside.
- Honor all of the pillars of ethics.

I decided that weekend that every week I'd take one of these rules and hold it as a touchstone: to remember, to make choices by, to experiment with deepening, to enjoy. One of the most provocative and poignant rules was "Everyone can play." When I first read that rule I imagined a child who was left out, staring at the in-crowd, feeling unwanted or unseen—then being beckoned forth, invited to join in, affirmed.

As I practiced this tenet, I seemed to notice more hints of loneliness



in those I encountered than I had seen before, more subtle echoes of that forlorn child than I expected. When I began to include others, I watched as something unfurled within them and began to flower. In making a point of including others in conversation, I felt some subtle walls within me dissolve as well. There was a growing sense of rightness, of balance, because, after all, everyone should get to play.

## PAYING ATTENTION

A friend once told me about repeated fights he and his wife would have early on in their marriage. Much of their conflict centered on how to have dinner. He liked to eat hurriedly, standing up in the kitchen, getting it over with as quickly as possible. She liked to set the table elegantly, sit down and eat leisurely, together. Many nights they fought instead of eating with each other. Finally they sought the help of a marriage counselor.

As they examined the layers of meaning hidden in the simple and familiar word “dinner,” they each discovered how much association, and how many people, they were actually bringing to that table. He talked about his father, a brutal man, often only home at dinnertime, which became a nightmarish experience he wanted to escape from as quickly as possible. She spoke of her fractured family, where her mentally ill brother consumed her mother with worry. It was mainly at dinner that an effort was made to talk to her, to find out about her day, where she felt she indeed belonged to a family. Dinner was rarely just dinner for either of my friends, and their partner was often not the person standing in front of them, but an “other” made of an amalgam of past hurts, long-held dreams, and tentative new yearnings.

Can we ever actually see another person? If we create an “other” out of our projections and associations and ready interpretations, we have made an object of a person—we have taken away their humanity. We have stripped from our consciousness their sensitivity to pain, their likely wish to feel at home in their bodies and minds, their complexity and intricacy and mutability. If we have lost any recognition of the truth of change in someone, and have fixed them in our mind as “good,” “bad,” or “indifferent,” we’ve lost touch with the living essence of that person. We are dwelling in a worldview of stylized prototypes and distant caricatures, reified images, and often very great loneliness.

Meditation practice is training in stepping back—in getting a broader perspective on what’s happening. Mindfulness, one of the tools at the core of meditation, helps us refrain from getting lost in habitual biases that distort what we’re seeing about our feelings. Without mindfulness, our perception is easily shaped by barely conscious decisions like “My stomach is roiling with what seems to be fear, but I could never allow myself to admit that. I’ll pretend it never came up.”

Mindfulness also helps us see through our prejudices about another person. For instance: “All older women are fuzzy thinkers, so she can’t possibly be as sharp as she is pretending to be.” Mindfulness works by showing us that conclusions like these are simply thoughts in our own mind. Mindfulness enables us to cultivate a different quality of attention, one where we relate to what we see before us not just as an echo of the past, or a foreshadowing of the future, but more as it is right now.

Making the effort to truly see someone doesn’t mean we never respond or react or take very strong action to try to settle the matter of dinner. We can and do attempt to restore a failing marriage, protest loud cell phones in public places, or try, with everything in us, to rectify injustice. But we can do it from a place that allows people to be as textured

as they are, and that admits our feelings to be as varied and flowing as they are. A place open to surprises. A place that listens, that lets the world come alive.

One essential step in learning to more genuinely see each other is to bother to look. If someone yells at us, or annoys us, or dazzles us with a gift, we do pay attention to them. Our challenge then is to see them as they are, not as we project or assume them to be. But if they don't make much of an impression on us, we have a different challenge; it is all too easy to look right through them.

In particular, the meditation exercise of offering lovingkindness to a neutral person confronts this tendency. We choose a person whom we don't strongly like or dislike—we feel, indeed, rather neutral or indifferent toward them. Very often it helps to select a near stranger, or someone who plays a certain role or function in our lives—the grocery store checkout person, for example, or the UPS delivery person.

When we send a neutral person lovingkindness, we are consciously changing a pattern of overlooking them, or talking around them, to one of paying attention to them. We are experimenting with the notion of “loving thy neighbor as thyself “ when we don't know the facts about their dependent elderly parent or at-risk teenager.

When we think of our neutral person, we haven't learned the story of their suspicious mole or empty evenings. We have no knowledge of their inspiring triumphs or their admirable philanthropy. We aren't seeing their tension after a disappointing job interview, or their sadness after their lover leaves. But we practice wishing them well anyway, simply because they exist, and because we do know the beauty, the sorrow, the poignancy, and the sheer, unalterable insecurity of existence, which we all share.

On trains, in the street, in our homes and communities, we practice

paying attention—through developing mindfulness and lovingkindness and through letting go of projections—partly because a more complete attention proffers many special gifts. These gifts can penetrate through the exigencies of social roles, the seeming hollowness of chance encounters, and even through terrible hurt.

Paying attention provides the gift of noticing, and the gift of connecting. It provides the gift of seeing a little bit of ourselves in others, and of realizing that we're not so awfully alone. It allows us to let go of the burden of so much of what we habitually carry with us, and receive the gift of the present moment.

*From the Winter 2009 issue*

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# 18

## STARTING FROM SCRATCH

A talk with Stephen Batchelor

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JAMES SHAHEEN

**S**tephen Batchelor never planned to be controversial. He began as a young and earnest practitioner, leaving his native Britain in 1972, at age eighteen, to study with some of the most revered Asian Buddhist teachers around at that time. He ordained first as a Tibetan monk, and then, later, as a monk in the Korean Zen tradition. Yet although he adopted his root teachers' languages, philosophies, and customs, he eventually found himself ill-suited to monastic life. In 1985, he returned to England, with his wife, Martine, a former nun in the Korean Zen tradition.

During his years back in England, Batchelor began to formulate a distinctly Western approach to the Buddha's teachings, and in his best-selling book *Buddhism Without Beliefs* (1997), he openly acknowledged his deep skepticism toward the doctrines of karma and rebirth. The firestorm of protest that followed—from traditional and even not-so-tra-

ditional Buddhists—surprised Batchelor. (He was characterized at the time as Buddhism’s bad boy at best and anti-dharma at worst.)

In his new, autobiographical book, *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist*, Batchelor has arrived at what he considers to be the bare bones of Buddhism, upon which, he argues, an entirely new practice and understanding of dharma can be built. As always, Batchelor is as articulate as he is frank. No doubt many will cry foul.

**You were a Tibetan and later a Korean Buddhist monk. Then you disrobed. Can you say something about that?** As a monk, I had to play a certain role in society; I was obliged to follow the precepts and injunctions that were necessary for a representative of the Buddhist traditions in which I was ordained. As much as I valued my monastic training, I also found myself frequently in social situations where I didn’t feel entirely comfortable playing the role of a Buddhist monk. This was particularly true in the West, where my robes alone declared that I belonged to a particular Asian tradition. But when I found myself trying to have a serious conversation with someone in Germany or Switzerland, I often felt a strong conflict between what I felt I was obliged to say as a Buddhist monk and what I actually felt to be the case on a particular issue. And so in that sense I felt that I was a bit of a fake—particularly when I began to have serious doubts about certain elements of Buddhist orthodoxy: the belief in rebirth, different realms of existence, and so forth.

**What do you hope to accomplish with *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist*?** I think dogma has become a problem in Buddhism. Ideas and doctrines that have evolved over the centuries since the time of the Buddha have come to be superimposed upon the dharma as we find it presented in the earliest known sources— for example, the Pali canon—just as

the myths of the Buddha's life have been imposed upon the historical fragments of his life that one likewise finds scattered throughout the canon. What I've done is to try to strip away the myths about Siddhattha Gotama, to try to arrive at a more historically grounded portrait of the Buddha as a human being. I've also tried to remove some of the dogmas that have developed subsequent to the material we find in the Pali canon, which are now entrenched as Buddhist doctrine.

**How do you do that?** The methodology I used was to ask myself, What is there within the Pali canon that is distinctively and originally a Buddhist idea? If I find a doctrine or teaching that talks of past or future lives, or liberation from the cycle of birth and death, I put that to one side as something that was already widely believed at the Buddha's time. And by this process of subtraction—by removing things that are either found in the Upanishads or in other earlier Indian teachings (and things that have a blatantly supernatural quality to them)—I can begin to isolate those teachings that are distinctive to what the Buddha was teaching in the fifth century B.C.E.

**What, then, did you conclude were distinctly Buddhist ideas?** Four things stand out. One is the principle of dependent origination, or “conditioned arising,” as I call it; the second is the practice of mindful awareness—being focused upon the totality of what is happening in our moment-to-moment experience; the third is the process of the Four Noble Truths, which includes the Eightfold Path; and fourth, the principle of self-reliance—how the Buddha really wanted his students to become autonomous in their understanding of the dharma, and not to generate dependencies upon either the memory of him or upon some authority figure within the monastic community.

By getting down to the bare bones of what the Buddha was teaching, one is then perhaps in a position to begin to rethink Buddhism from the ground up. And I feel the four points that I listed are entirely adequate for constructing a new vision of the dharma, both as a worldview and as a form of spiritual and ethical practice, which speaks to our condition here and now.

**Why do you think we need a new Buddhism?** Don't you risk arrogance here? I would be the first to acknowledge that in undertaking such an endeavor one risks falling prey to one's own conceits and confusions. If a particular traditional practice works well for a certain person, then I would only encourage that person to continue with it. But in my own case—as well as that of numerous others—it is clear that traditional Asian Buddhist approaches do not seem to work so well. Yet the great strength of Buddhism throughout its history is that it has succeeded many times in reinventing itself according to the needs of its new host culture. What is happening today in the West is no different. Historically, we can see that priestly Buddhist elites have tended to assume increasing authority over the majority of lay practitioners, and to some extent have lost sight of the aim that practitioners should become autonomous in their practice. Instead we often find a culture that is quite deferential, even dependent upon, devotion to a particular group of experts—be they lamas or roshis or ajahns. Such devotion certainly has its place in Buddhist training, but if we are to articulate the dharma in our own language, in the context of our own time, at a certain point I feel we need to respectfully detach ourselves from priestly and dogmatic authority in order to find our own authentic voice.



**Where does that leave you in relation to traditional Buddhist cultures and teachers?** In my own case, I feel no great need to go and sit any longer at the feet of traditional Asian teachers. But it may be that something will come up in my life or in my understanding that will necessitate further study and dialogue with Asian traditions. I don't know. It should not be forgotten that over the last forty or so years we've produced a generation of teachers and scholars and writers who have had a long-standing, full-time engagement with the dharma, comparable to that of many Asian teachers. That is, we now have a generation of Westerners with a considerable amount of experience and insight, which, I would hope, should enable them to stand pretty much on their own two feet. Such independence is, as I said before, something I believe the Buddha encouraged.

**Your book takes an autobiographical turn; it's not just about your beliefs, but how they evolved. Why?** I find I am less and less comfortable with assuming you can make such a clear-cut distinction between the ideas that you hold and the life that you have lived. I don't think the two are really separable, especially if you see Buddhism as a practice rather than just an object of academic interest. None of these texts and practices can be understood apart from their impact on your own subjective experience as a human being living in a particular place, being of a certain age, being in a particular situation. Buddhism has never flourished in a vacuum.

Excerpt from *CONFESSION OF A BUDDHIST ATHEIST*:

*“Stories are impossible but it’s impossible to live without them. That’s the mess i’m in.” —Wim Wenders*

On returning to England, I could have enrolled in a university, gained a degree in religious studies, and then pursued an academic career. Indeed, many of my peers, who had also trained with Tibetan lamas or Zen masters in Asia, chose this option after disrobing and returning to the West. But I found the entire academic approach to Buddhism chilling. Much as I valued the meticulous work of scholars in dissecting and analyzing Buddhist texts, I could not bring myself to adopt the clinical distance required for achieving such “objectivity.” To have done so would have felt like a betrayal.

*ON BUDDHISM WITHOUT BELIEFS*:

Instead of being the noncontentious introduction to Buddhism that was initially conceived, *Buddhism without Beliefs* triggered what Time magazine, in its cover issue on Buddhism in America, called “a civil but ferociously felt argument” about whether it was necessary for Buddhists to believe in karma and rebirth. I had proposed in the book that one could hold an agnostic position on these points—that is, keep an open mind without either affirming or denying them. Naively perhaps, I had not anticipated the furor that this suggestion would create.

The ensuing controversy showed that Buddhists could be as fervent and irrational in their views about karma and rebirth as Christians and Muslims could be in their convictions about the existence of God. For some Western converts, Buddhism became a substitute religion every bit as inflexible and intolerant as the religions they rejected before be-

coming Buddhists. I argued that Buddhism was not so much a creedal religion as a broad culture of awakening that, throughout its history, had shown a remarkable ability to adapt to changing conditions. For a while I hoped that *Buddhism without Beliefs* might stimulate more public debate and enquiry among Buddhists about these issues, but this did not happen. Instead, it revealed a fault line in the nascent Western Buddhist community between traditionalists, for whom such doctrines are non-negotiable truths, and liberals, like myself, who tend to see them more as contingent products of historical circumstance.

What is it that makes a person insist passionately on the existence of metaphysical realities that can be neither demonstrated nor refuted? I suppose some of it has to do with fear of death, the terror that you and your loved ones will disappear and become nothing. But I suspect that for such people, the world as presented to their senses and reason appears intrinsically inadequate, incapable of explaining this fraught and brief life on earth. One assumes the existence of hidden forces that lie deep beneath the surface of the contingent and untrustworthy world of day-to-day experience. Many Buddhists would argue that to jettison belief in the law of karma—a scheme of moral bookkeeping mysteriously inhering within the structure of reality itself—would be tantamount to removing the foundations of ethics. Good acts would not be rewarded and evil deeds not punished. Theists have said exactly the same about the consequences of abandoning belief in God and the divine judgment.

*From the Spring 2010 issue*

# 19

## THE NATURAL

How Jeff Bridges works with anxiety and maintaining a joyful mind.

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KATY BUTLER

Jeff Bridges enters the living room of his hotel suite carrying a dark blue Shambhala paperback by Chögyam Trungpa entitled *Training the Mind and Cultivating Loving-kindness*. “One reason I’m anxious—because I have some anxiety about this interview, like you do,” he says, as he arranges his long body on the couch, “is that I wish I could be more facile with these things that I find so interesting and care about and want to express to people.” He opens the book. “This will be a challenge for me,” he says. “But I’ll attempt it.”

Bridges is 61. Solidly built, he reminds me of an Andalusian carriage horse in late prime, trustworthy and sensitive. He is wearing jeans, clogs, a chambray shirt, and the Rolex Submariner watch that his late father, Lloyd Bridges, wore on the television series *Sea Hunt*. Were it not for his lightly mussed hair and that expensive watch, he could be a motorcycle mechanic.

We're talking in Austin, Texas, where he's filming a violent, darkly comic version of the Western *True Grit*—the first “period Oater” (as *Variety* put it) to be directed by the filmmakers Ethan and Joel Coen. In it, Bridges plays Rooster Cogburn, an aging U.S. Marshal who has, not surprisingly, a drinking problem. Like the washed-up country singer of *Crazy Heart*, the self-betraying lounge pianist of *The Fabulous Baker Boys*, and the reluctant ex-convict father of *American Heart*, Cogburn is one of a string of beautiful losers Bridges has portrayed teetering on the brink of some sort of redemption. His acting is so naturalistic and seemingly effortless, in fact, that you can forget that it's acting.

But anyone who mistakes Bridges for the beatific, potsmoking, Zenlike Dude of *The Big Lebowski* misses much of what quickens beneath the surface. He was born in 1949 in Los Angeles into an unusually stable movie family, to a loving mother made panicky by the recent loss of an earlier son to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. Anxious enough to stutter as a child, he still struggles with what his mother, Dorothy (who also practiced meditation seriously before her death last year), called *abulia*: difficulty committing to a path of action. He's been married for 33 years, has acted in 66 films, and helps fund the End Hunger Network of Los Angeles, dedicated to ending the hunger suffered by 16.7 million American children. On its website, he is quoted as saying, “If we discovered that another country was doing this to our children, we would declare war.”

In his hotel bedroom are his meditation bell (a travel-sized gong timer) and a stack of Buddhist books, including Thich Nhat Hanh's *Walking Meditation* and three by Pema Chödrön. Most days, before heading out to the film set he meditates for half an hour: following his breath, noticing his thoughts, sitting in a chair with his spine straight and his hands resting lightly on his knees.

Right now he's intently focused on the blue paperback he holds in his hand: Trungpa's interpretation of the *lojong* [mind-training] teachings—59 slogans distilled by the 12th-century Tibetan master Geshe Chekawa from the writings of Atisha, a 10th-century Indian Buddhist teacher. They are pithy guideposts along the Mahayana path: “Transform all mishaps into the path of Bodhi,” “Regard all dharmas as dreams,” “Be grateful to everyone,” “Don't seek others' pain as the limbs of your own happiness,” and “Always maintain a joyful mind.” Throughout our interview he keeps threading back to these slogans, some simple and others arcane. “The basic idea,” he says, as he opens Trungpa's book, “is that the things that come up, that we've labeled negatively—those are real opportunities and gifts for us to wake up.”

Turning pages, Bridges begins, “I just saw the word *joy*, and I see it's underlined twice, and I got a star beside it, so let me read this aloud and see if it's interesting. ‘As you are dozing off, think of strong determination, that as soon as you wake up in the morning you are going to maintain your practice with continual exertion, which means joy.’ We were talking earlier about anxiety, excitement. That's an exertion of sorts. But you can have that same exertion, but have this joyful attitude. Like I can study my lines for the day because I'm anxious about it, or I can just have fun studying lines. This word *joy*—another one of the slogans is ‘Approach all situations with a joyful mind’—I find in my practice joy is a big part of it. My parents were very joyful people. Whenever my father came onto a set to play a part, you got the sense that he really enjoyed being there, and this was going to be a good time. And everyone was just—[raises his arms] raised! When you relax like that, you're not trying to force your thing onto the thing. You're just diggin' it. My mother was the same way. That's what I aspire to.”

**So there's joy on the one hand—and you mentioned negative things, as an opportunity to wake up. Is this playing out in your acting in *True Grit*?** *[Long pause.]* It's difficult to talk about the work, because it's like a magician talking about how the trick is done.

**How about your character, then, the drunken, overweight U.S. Marshal who teams up with a 14-year-old girl to track down her father's killer?** I don't know if it has anything to do with the lojong thing, but most things do, in a weird way. A bunch of things are popping in my mind. *[Pause.]* "True grit" means that you're courageous. The habitual tendency when things get tough is that we protect ourselves, we get hard, we get rigid—*[makes a chopping gesture]*—*Bapbapbapbap*. But with this lojong idea, it's completely topsy-turvy. When we want to get hard and stiff and adamant, that's the time to soften and see how we might play or dance with the situation. Then everything is workable. In *True Grit*, my character—all the characters—are that way.

As an actor, fear comes up because I want to do a good job, an enlightened piece of work. You get attached to that, you overwork it, you overthink it. Then you come to the set, and people aren't saying the lines as you imagined. It's raining, and it's supposed to be sunny. You thought you were invited to a cha-cha party, you've learned the steps, and they're dancing the Viennese waltz! You can spend a lot of energy being upset, or you can get with the program—it's that right effort thing—get the beauty of the way it is. Even before I was aware of lojong, this was something I applied to my life anyway.

**Do you think of yourself as a Buddhist?** A Buddhistly bent guy sounds kind of right. I haven't taken the refuge vows.

**Why not?** I'm quite a lazy fellow.

**You've been in 66 movies. You paint, you take professional-quality photographs, you use the power of celebrity to end hunger. You're still married, and you play guitar and sing well enough to carry a CD of songs from *Crazy Heart*. I wonder if you're selling yourself short. One of the lojong slogans comes to mind: "Of the two witnesses, hold to the principal one."**

**Huh?** Always hold true to your own perception. Your own self is your main teacher. I have a lot of different feelings about my laziness. Sometimes I enjoy it, kind of like the Dude.

**Does it irritate you when people confuse you with the Dude?** Oh God no. There's a lot of stuff where we don't match up and a lot where we do. I admire the Dude. He's very true to himself, whereas I can get my hair shirt on and beat myself with my whips and say, *Why can't you take more interest in others?*

**You've been meditating for ten years, and you're close friends with Lama Dawa Tarchin Phillips, a Kagyü teacher in Santa Barbara, and with Roshi Bernie Glassman, with whom you share an interest in alleviating hunger. But I still don't get how you got started with Buddhism.** There's not really a hard edge to it. I'm just curious about all kinds of spirituality. Bernie's given me some tips on meditation—he's like a spiritual friend. I don't have a formal teacher. Everybody I come in contact with is my teacher. Other actors are certainly my teachers. One of the cool things about acting is to realize how accessible love is. You can invest a person, another actor, as your love. I'm familiar with that



feeling—I have this tight, strong relationship with my own wife. One of the reasons I’ve been married so long is that she has encouraged my art and my intimacy with other people. It’s important it’s not sexual—that can throw a wrench into the works. But when you get two people [on a set] opening their hearts to each other, that feeling of compassion and understanding is really accessible and quite deep. And the flip side is also true, of fear.

In the 1980s, I was a kind of a guinea pig for John Lilly, who invented the isolation tank. You sit in this tank of water at 98.6 degrees, you have no sensory input, and your mind produces all this output. It started very softly. *Oh, this is kind of interesting [Takes on a California New Age singsong voice] and John seemed like a nice guy. And then, He was wearing a weird jumpsuit. Did he have...breasts?* I let my mind run on that. Fear came—*whoosh!*—roaring into my body.

That’s the idea of *shenpa* [attachment or craving]: running, running, and pretty soon that fear is hard as rock! That’s the kind of thing you do in acting, consciously, all the time. Now, where were we?

**The isolation tank.** Oh, yeah. I went, *Wait a minute! That’s my mind!* Instead of jumping out I made a little adjustment. I noticed I could breathe in and out slowly and observe my breath and not be in control of it. It was my first experience with meditation, although I didn’t call it that.

I have a lot of Christian input, too. You’ve got to read this guy [Nikos Kazantzakis [author of *The Last Temptation of Christ*]. His whole thing was that Christ was just like us. And God was like an eagle with talons, coming into his head [*Picks up his own hair*], trying to pull him off the ground. Just like I have so much resistance to this Buddhist stuff. I’m attracted, but I’m a human being, I’m attached to myself, and I kind of dig it. You know?

**Oh, yeah.** This hunger thing, for instance. I mean, it's not like it's...

**Not like it's fun?** Well, it can be fun. It's a mindset. Werner [Erhard, founder of est training and one of the founders of the Hunger Project] said, "Here we have this condition that doesn't have to be that way. We can end it." I said to myself, *Yeah, that seems right.* And I noticed I had a resistance [to committing to do something], because I wanted to do other things with my time besides help people. So I said, *Well, maybe let both of those things exist at the same time.*

It's like this. Preparing for a role, sometimes I'll have to get in shape fast, lose a lot of weight. But I don't want to work out so hard the first couple of days that I'm sore and I don't like it. I thought I would apply the same thing to this hunger work. I would go toward the light, so to speak, but if it got too bright and too intense, 'cause basically what it's asking you is *Be Jesus, be Buddha—Give.* And I'm not there. I'm not light yet. [*Changes to another, higher voice.*] *So just because you're not there yet, are you not going to do it?* [*Cocks his head.*] So I go toward the light, and if my selfishness comes up too much I'll stop for a second. And then I'll take little baby steps toward it. I like to experiment with myself, to go against habitual self-gratification. And then you try it and you say [*high voice*], *Oh, hey, I kind of got off when I did that. That kind of felt good!* It's like taking a shit. Sometimes it's best to just pick up a magazine and get in there and sit, rather than *Aaaaargh* [*mock straining*]. It'll kink up that way. Or when I'm doing yoga, I'll go *Put your head on your knees, you son of a bitch, come on, oh you can't do it, oh you're—*

**Uh-huh.** Instead of just being gentle, kind. [*Breathes out.*] *Aaaaah.* That grandmotherly attitude. Show up. Bear witness. And then the loving-kindness comes naturally.

**Did anything change when you first started to formally meditate?** I did. And my wife noticed, too. Just kind of a calmness, not so stressed out. And I'm wondering if this lojong theme, which I'm kind of getting into now, has really been going on all my life. That the very things you avoid, those are the blessings. It might even be a thread in the characters I've played. One in particular comes to mind, *American Heart*. I don't know if you saw that.

**It broke my heart. The 1992 film you starred in and helped produce—inspired by Martin Bell's documentary *Streetwise* and Mary Ellen Mark's photographs of homeless Seattle kids.** In the [Bell] documentary, a kid visits his dad in prison. The way he expresses love for his kid is to say, in so many words, "Don't end up like me." Well, that kid ended up hanging himself in a bathroom. There's a scene of his father getting out of prison and looking at his kid in the casket and putting a Coke can to his [son's] lips. I thought, *What if that guy got out of prison and had to work with his kid?* So you remember the scene in *American Heart*, where [my character] just gets out of prison, he's in the bus station bathroom trying to get on his clothes, and here comes his kid. And he's like, *Oh, shit. Just what I need, I can't deal with you. I'll be lucky if I can survive myself.* And it turns out that his kid was a blessing, the key to his life. The thing he was avoiding—you can apply this to the hunger thing we were talking about.

**It occurs to me that making a movie is like making a Tibetan mandala of colored sand—you create a whole world on set, and then someone yells "Cut!" and the whole illusory world disappears.** Movies are a wonderful spiritual playground. The film you actually make is like a beautiful snakeskin that you find on the ground and make a hatband

out of. But the making of the movie is the snake itself. That is what I take with me. That includes hanging out with the other actors in the trailer after work, and getting into this position where you've empowered another actor to have a power over you, to affect you. That's a spiritual place to be.

*Crazy Heart*, for instance, is a gorgeous snakeskin. But the snake of the thing was playing all of that wonderful music by Steven [Bruton] and T Bone [Burnett.] And the director, Scott [Cooper], did it in 24 days! The atmosphere he created—so open, so fresh and joyful. It was really a blessing in my life. That's what you gamble for, and most of the time the movie falls short. And sometimes those high hopes are transcended, and it's beyond what everyone thought it could be.

Making a movie is just a wonderful analogy for how the world might look. A movie's like a child—if all the parents are doing their job, the movie is going to come out beautiful. That's one of the ways that the world might be realized, working together. One of the reasons we decided to focus on children at the End Hunger Network is that the condition of the health of our children is a wonderful compass for how our society is functioning. Even as a little kid, I thought, *Why can't we get together and make it a groovy trip for everyone?* There's that concern with the self, the tightening, which seems to be preventing that.

**Does being famous make it difficult for you to be in a sangha?** I think of the sangha as a very soft, open thing. I've got people I've practiced with in a deep way for many years, like my wife, and my dear friends. Right now you're in my sangha. We've touched in that way. Everyone I meet is in my sangha. I don't know if that's the proper definition, but that's the way I'm going to hold it in my mind.

**Final words for us?** My mom used to say it to me, and my wife says it now. There's even a slogan that says it! "Approach all situations with a joyful mind." When I head out the door to go to work, my wife always says to me [*Voice affectionate, up half an octave*], "Now, remember! Have fun!"

*From the Fall 2010 issue*

Freelance writer **Katy Butler** began sitting at San Francisco Zen Center in 1977 and was lay-ordained in 1990 by Thich Nhat Hanh into his Tiep Hien order. A former reporter for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, she was a finalist for a National Magazine Award in 2004 and has also written for the *New Yorker*. "What Broke My Father's Heart: How a Pacemaker Wrecked a Family's Life," appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* in June 2010.

# 20

## SOMETHING FROM NOTHING

A teacher of Buddhism reveals how the instruction “Do nothing” was the most challenging and freeing instruction of all.

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KEN MCLEOD

**W**hat is it like to do nothing? I mean, really do nothing, nothing at all—no recalling what has happened, no imagining what might happen, no reflecting on what is happening, no analyzing or explaining or controlling what you experience. Nothing!

Why would you even try? We struggle in life because of a tenacious habit of wanting life to be different from what it is: The room you are in is too warm, you don't like your job, or your partner isn't quite the person of your dreams. You adjust the thermostat, get a new job, or tell your partner what you need. Now it's too cool, you are earning less money, or your partner has found some flaws in you. The more we try to make life conform to our desires, the more we struggle, and the more we suffer.

The only way out of this vicious cycle is to accept what arises, completely: in other words, do nothing.

Paradoxically, such radical acceptance opens a way of living that we could hardly have imagined.

Years ago, I attended a three-week retreat in Colorado. I had done many retreats, including seven years in France during which I had no communication with the outside world. There the days were full. We started meditation sessions well before sunrise and ended late in the evening. We had daily and weekly rituals and much preparatory work and cleanup. We practiced different meditation methods, with set periods for practice, set periods for study, and a set number of days on each method. With so much to do and to learn, there was no free time.

This retreat was different. The only meditation instruction was “Do nothing.” “That’s it?” I thought. “I came here to do nothing for three weeks?” We met for meals, one teaching session in the morning, and one group practice session in the evening. We had a meditation interview every few days. The rest of the time was our own. Email, cell phone, text messages, all the usual means of communication weren’t available. With no practices to learn, no commentaries to study, no preparations for rituals, I had quite literally nothing to do except sit, lie down, or go for a walk.

My cabin was on a hillside that looked over a magnificent view of tree-covered hills, with a range of mountains just visible on the horizon. The silence was highlighted by the songs of birds, the wind in the trees, rain and thunderstorms, and the grunts, scuffles, or calls of animals in the dark. Every day the sun rose, crossed the sky, and set, with the moon and stars dancing in the night.

“What a relief,” I thought, “plenty of time to rest and practice.” But I soon found that doing absolutely nothing, not even entertaining myself,

wasn't so easy.

Ajahn Chah, one of the great Thai teachers of the 20th century, gave the following practice instruction:

Put a chair in the middle of a room.

Sit in the chair.

See who comes to visit.

One has to be careful with such instructions. I once gave this to a woman who came to see me and was surprised to learn that she put a chair in the center of her living room, sat in it, and waited for people to visit. When nobody knocked on her door, she decided that meditation wasn't for her. Ajahn Chah was, of course, speaking poetically. Nevertheless, in some sense, all of us are like this woman, waiting for something to happen.

No shortage of visitors for me! Relief, peace, a deep sense of relaxation, joy, and happiness all paid their respects. "Good," I thought. "All this will deepen, and wisdom or insight will come." After all, I had read in many texts that as the mind rests, it naturally becomes clear.

Instead, the visitors continued, but with a difference. The more deeply I relaxed, the more I became aware of stuff inside me, stuff stored in rusting boxes in mildewed basements. Along came memories, pleasant and unpleasant, stories about my life, old desires, boredom, and a sense of futility. I kept pushing these visitors away, or analyzing them, trying to understand them so I could be free of them. I was back in the old struggle, trying to control my experience. The visitors became more disturbing, more demanding of attention. Some harbored hatred and a desire for revenge. Others cried with unfulfilled longing and yearning. Still others drugged me into a dull lethargy. They had no awareness



of the beauty and peace around me. I began to lose hope that I would achieve anything in this retreat.

Hope is the one quality left in Pandora's box, and it is not clear whether it is a blessing or a curse. T. S. Eliot, in *Four Quartets*, writes:

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope  
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love  
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith  
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.

Wait without hope? The prospect seemed unimaginable. A chill crept down my spine, and I found myself slipping into hope's counterpart, fear. Was I going to sit on the side of this mountain and have nothing to show for it? A consistent theme in the many texts I had read and translated was "No hope, no fear." I had never thought of applying that instruction to my concern about achievement.

For most of us, the demands of each day keep us busy. Hope and fear come as reactions to specific situations—rumors about possible promotions or layoffs, our child's first competition or performance, illness in a parent, and so on. The deeper hopes and fears remain, untended, forgotten perhaps, but there all the same. Again, from *Four Quartets*:

And the ragged rock in the restless waters,  
Waves wash over it, fogs conceal it;  
On a halcyon day it is merely a monument,  
In navigable weather it is always a seamark  
To lay a course by: but in the sombre season  
Or the sudden fury, is what it always was.

One of my ragged rocks was hope for achievement. I feared an acute disappointment if, at the end of the retreat, all I had done was sit on a mountain and contemplate my navel. Slowly, I realized that to do nothing meant I had to let go of deeply cherished beliefs that I was just beginning to sense, the belief, for instance, that I had to achieve something.

Most of us are quite happy to do nothing for a few minutes, perhaps an hour or two, or, if we have had a particularly demanding stretch, for a day or two, a few days at the most. But to do nothing, to produce nothing, to achieve nothing for a month, a year, six years or more, is quite a different kettle of fish.

I thought of my own teacher, who had spent years in mountain retreats in Tibet. As he had told me himself, he would quite happily have stayed in the mountains, but his teacher had demanded (in the strongest terms possible) that he return to the monastery and teach training retreats. What was it like, I wondered, to be at peace with doing nothing day after day, month after month, year after year?

Then I thought about Longchenpa, the 14th-century teacher, whose text was the basis for this retreat. He had spent fourteen years in a cave near Lhasa. What had it been like for him to sit day after day doing nothing?

The depth to which these teachers, and many others like them, had let go of any concern with success or failure was like a knife in my heart. Here I was, practicing for a mere three weeks, worrying about whether I was going to achieve anything. Only now did I appreciate what letting go of hope, ambition, or achievement meant, and I found myself feeling a quite different kind of respect and appreciation for these teachers.

The classical texts have relatively little to say about the emotional turmoil that intensive practice often uncovers. Here too, these lines from Eliot apply, even though he was writing about old age:

...the rending pain of re-enactment  
Of all that you have done, and been; the shame  
Of motives late revealed, and the awareness  
Of things ill done and done to others' harm  
Which once you took for exercise of virtue.  
Then fools' approval stings, and honour stains.  
From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit  
Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire  
Where you must move in measure, like a dancer.

From the beginning of the retreat, space surrounded and permeated my experience, but I had been unable to relate to it. I had been completely caught up in trying to control my experience. Now I stopped ignoring it and just stared into space. My relationship with the emotional turmoil changed, subtly.

Space, I realized, has many dimensions. In front of me was the vast space of the sky. It didn't depend on anything, and nothing depended on it. I watched the play of light and colors as the day passed. When the sun set and the sky lit up with shades of rose and yellow and blue, the space that let me see the sunset didn't take on any color, yet it was not something apart. At night, it became an empty blackness, punctuated by a thousand points of light, but the panorama of stars was not separate from space. Likewise, thoughts, feelings, and sensations are not different from the space that is mind.

Silence is another kind of space. When everything is quiet and suddenly there is a noise, we ordinarily say the silence was shattered. But it's more accurate to say that we forget the silence and listen only to the sound. I started to listen to the silence, around me and inside me.

Time is another dimension. Kant once said that time is the medium

in which we perceive thoughts, just as space is the medium in which we perceive objects. Hopes and fears, projections into the future, regrets and joys are all thoughts that come and go in time. Because there was nothing to do with any of them, I began to experience them as comings and goings, like the mists that rose from the ground in the early morning, only to vanish as the day progressed. Some days, what arose was more of a thunderstorm, but, like the thunderstorms in the mountains, the turmoil came and went on its own, leaving the space as it was before and the ground and trees refreshed and rich with life.

I became aware of another dimension, an infinite internal space that had to do with my ability to experience my body. This dimension had more the quality of depth: it seemed to go down forever. There was no bottom. There was no me there. It was like looking into a bottomless abyss, except that sometimes I became the abyss. Years later, when I was discussing this experience with an aging teacher, he used the Tibetan phrase *zhi me tsa tral*, or “No ground, no root.”

Two young boys were playing together. One asked the other, “We stand on the ground and the ground holds us up. What does the ground stand on?” “Oh, my father explained that to me,” the second boy said. “The ground is supported by four giant elephants.” “What do the elephants stand on, then?” “They stand on the shell of a huge turtle.” “What does the turtle stand on?” The second boy thought for a long time and then said, “I think it’s turtles all the way down.”

Like the woman in the chair who waited for someone to knock on her door, I had been waiting for something to happen, some experience or insight that would make sense of everything, put all the ghosts to rest

and silence the “thousand voices in the night.” For decades, I had held the belief deeply embedded in our culture: Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

“You have to be kidding,” I thought. “I have to let go of belief in truth?” Slowly, it was becoming clear to me that there is no truth out there—or in there, for that matter. There is only the way we experience things. To let go of this belief required a very different effort. Again, from Eliot:

Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:  
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the  
dancing.

Here is where faith and devotion come into the picture. Devotion, whether to a tradition, a practice, a teacher, or an ideal, is the fuel for faith. I had practiced with devotion before, in the form of guru yoga, or union with the teacher. It’s a powerful practice, greatly valued in the Tibetan tradition, where there are numerous prayers with titles such as “Devotion Pierces the Heart.” The teacher at this retreat exemplified this. He felt such devotion for his own teacher that he could not talk about him without crying.

Faith and devotion do not come easily to me. Now, here, at this retreat, I felt a different kind of devotion for my teachers, and with that understood that there was nothing to do but to experience whatever came through the door.

We have a choice between two very different ways to meet what arises in experience.

The first is to rely on explanation. We interpret our experiences in life according to a set of deeply held assumptions. We may or may not

be conscious of the assumptions, but they are there. Even when we explore our experience, we are usually looking for evidence that supports or confirms them. These assumptions are never questioned. They are taken as fundamental. A self-reinforcing dynamic develops that results in a closed system in which everything is explained, the mystery of life is dismissed, new ideas, perspectives, or approaches to life cannot enter and certain questions can never be asked. This I call belief.

The other way is to open and be willing to receive, not control, whatever arises—that is, not only allow but embrace every sensation, feeling, and thought, everything we experience. In this approach, we allow our experience to challenge our assumptions. Here, there are no fundamental or eternal truths, and some things cannot be explained; they can only be experienced. This willingness to open to whatever arises internally or externally I call faith.

This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!

—*Rumi*

Early in the retreat, when difficult experiences arose, I would analyze them, trying to understand what had happened and why. I thought this would help to resolve them and then I wouldn't have to be bothered by them. Sometimes I would be completely swallowed by emotions and

sensations and only come to my senses a few minutes—or a few hours—later. Frequently, I just couldn't face what was arising. I shut it down, or went for a walk. In short, if what arose didn't fit my picture of what I wanted or needed, I would start doing something.

Gradually, I learned just to stare into space, in any of its dimensions—the sky, the silence, time, or the infinite depth in my own body. I recognized that the only way I could do nothing was, well, to do nothing. I had to receive whatever arose, experience it, and not do anything with it. I needed faith to experience powerful feelings of loneliness, worthlessness, despair, or shame, because I often felt I would die in the process. I recalled how many times my teacher had said this, albeit in different words: “Rest in just recognizing.” But no one had said that “just recognizing” might lead to pain so intense that I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. And I came to appreciate that all my efforts in previous practice had built the capacity so that I could now rest and just recognize.

When I did open to everything, there was no opposition—there was no enemy. I didn't have to struggle with experience. At the same time, there was no truth, no state of perfection, no ideal, no final achievement. Years later, in a conversation I had with another teacher about this experience, he said, “Don't worry about truth. Just develop devotion so strongly that thinking stops, and rest right there.”

Any concept of higher truth creates hierarchy, and with that, authority, boundaries, dualism, and opposition. What various religious traditions, including Buddhism, call truth is better described as a way of experiencing things. Such phrases as “All experience is empty” or “Everything is an illusion” are better viewed as descriptions of experiences: stories, in effect, not statements about reality.

What, then, do we make of all the teachings of various spiritual traditions and other forms of human knowledge? For me, God, karma,

rebirth, emptiness, brahman, atman, heaven, hell, all of these are stories that people use to understand, explain, or give direction to their lives. The same holds for scientific views, astronomy, biology, quantum mechanics, or neurology. If we wish to be free of suffering, to be free of struggle, then the way to look at experience is to know “There is no enemy” and stop opposing what arises in experience. Is it difficult and challenging? Yes, but it’s possible. And the way to learn to do that is to simply do nothing.

“How strange!” I thought, as the retreat came to a close, “Who would have thought you could find a way of freedom simply by doing nothing?”

*From the Winter 2010 issue*

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## THANK 4 NOTHING

On my 70th Birthday in 2006

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JOHN GIORNO

I want to give my thanks to everyone for everything,  
and as a token of my appreciation,  
I want to offer back to you all my good and bad habits  
as magnificent priceless jewels,  
wish-fulfilling gems satisfying everything you need and want,  
thank you, thank you, thank you,  
thanks.

May every drug I ever took  
come back and get you high,  
may every glass of vodka and wine I ever drank  
come back and make you feel really good,  
numbing your nerve ends  
allowing the natural clarity of your mind to flow free,

may all the suicides be songs of aspiration,  
thanks that bad news is always true,  
may all the chocolate I've ever eaten  
come back rushing through your bloodstream  
and make you feel happy,  
thanks for allowing me to be a poet  
a noble effort, doomed, but the only choice.

I want to thank you for your kindness and praise,  
thanks for celebrating me,  
thanks for the resounding applause,  
I want to thank you for taking everything for yourself  
and giving nothing back,  
you were always only self-serving,  
thanks for exploiting my big ego  
and making me a star for your own benefit,  
thanks that you never paid me,  
thanks for all the sleaze,  
thanks for being mean and rude  
and smiling at my face,  
I am happy that you robbed me,  
I am happy that you lied  
I am happy that you helped me,  
thanks, grazie, merci beaucoup.

May you smoke a joint with William,  
and spend intimate time with his mind,  
more profound than any book he wrote,  
I give enormous thanks to all my lovers,

beautiful men with brilliant minds,  
great artists,  
Bob, Jasper, Ugo,  
may they come here now  
and make love to you,  
and may my many other lovers  
of totally great sex,  
countless  
lovers  
of boundless  
fabulous sex  
countless lovers  
of boundless fabulous sex  
countless lovers of boundless fabulous sex  
countless lovers of boundless  
fabulous sex  
in the golden age of promiscuity,  
may they all come here now,  
and make love to you,  
if you want,  
may they hold you in their arms  
balling  
to your hearts  
delight.  
balling to your hearts  
delight  
balling to  
your hearts delight  
balling to your hearts delight.

May all the people who are dead  
Allen, Brion, Lita, Jack,  
and I do not miss any of you  
I don't miss any of them,  
no nostalgia,  
it was wonderful that we loved each other  
but I do not want any of them back;  
now, if any of you  
are attracted to any of them,  
may they come back from the dead,  
and do whatever is your pleasure,  
may they multiply,  
and be the slaves  
of whomever wants them,  
fulfilling your every wish and desire,  
(but you won't want them as masters,  
as they're demons),  
may Andy come here  
fall in love with you  
and make each of you a superstar,  
everyone can have  
Andy.  
everyone can  
have Andy.  
everyone can have Andy,  
everyone can have an Andy.

Huge hugs to the friends who betrayed me,  
every friend became an enemy,

sooner or later,  
big kisses to my loves that failed,  
I am delighted you are vacuum cleaners  
sucking everything into your dirt bags,  
you are none other than a reflection of my mind.

Thanks for the depression problem  
and feeling like suicide  
everyday of my life,  
and now that I'm seventy,  
I am happily almost there.

Twenty billion years ago,  
in the primordial wisdom soup  
beyond comprehension and indescribable,  
something without substance moved slightly,  
and became something imperceptible,  
moved again and became something invisible,  
moved again and produced a particle and particles,  
moved again and became a quark,  
again and became quarks,  
moved again and again and became protons and neutrons,  
and the twelve dimensions of space,  
tiny fire balls of primordial energy,  
bits of energy tossed back and forth  
in a game of catch between particles,  
transmitting electromagnetic light  
and going fast, 40 million times a second,  
where the pebble hits the water,

that is where the trouble began,  
something without substance became something with substance,  
why did it happen?  
because something substanceless  
had a feeling of missing out on something,  
not getting it,  
was not getting it  
not getting it  
not  
getting it,  
imperceptibly not having something  
when there was nothing to have,  
clinging to a notion of reality;  
from the primordially endless potential,  
to modern reality,  
twenty billion years later,  
has produced me and my stupid grasping mind,  
has made me and you, and my grasping mind.

May Rinpoche and all the great Tibetan teachers who loved me,  
come back and love you more,  
may they hold you in their wisdom hearts,  
bathe you in all-pervasive compassion,  
give you pith instructions,  
and may you with the diligence of Olympic athletes  
do meditation practice,  
and may you with direct confidence  
realize the true nature of mind.

THANX 4 NOTHING

America, thanks for the neglect,  
I did it without you,  
let us celebrate poetic justice,  
you and I never were,  
never tried to do anything,  
and never succeeded,  
thanks for introducing me  
to the face of the naked mind,  
thanx 4 nothing.

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**John Giorno** is a poet and performance author. He founded the artist collective Giorno Poetry Systems and created its mass communication experiment Dial-A-Poem. This poem is from *Subduing Demons in America: Selected Poems 1962–2007* by John Giorno and edited by Marcus Boon, © 2008 by John Giorno. Reprinted with permission of Soft Skull Press.