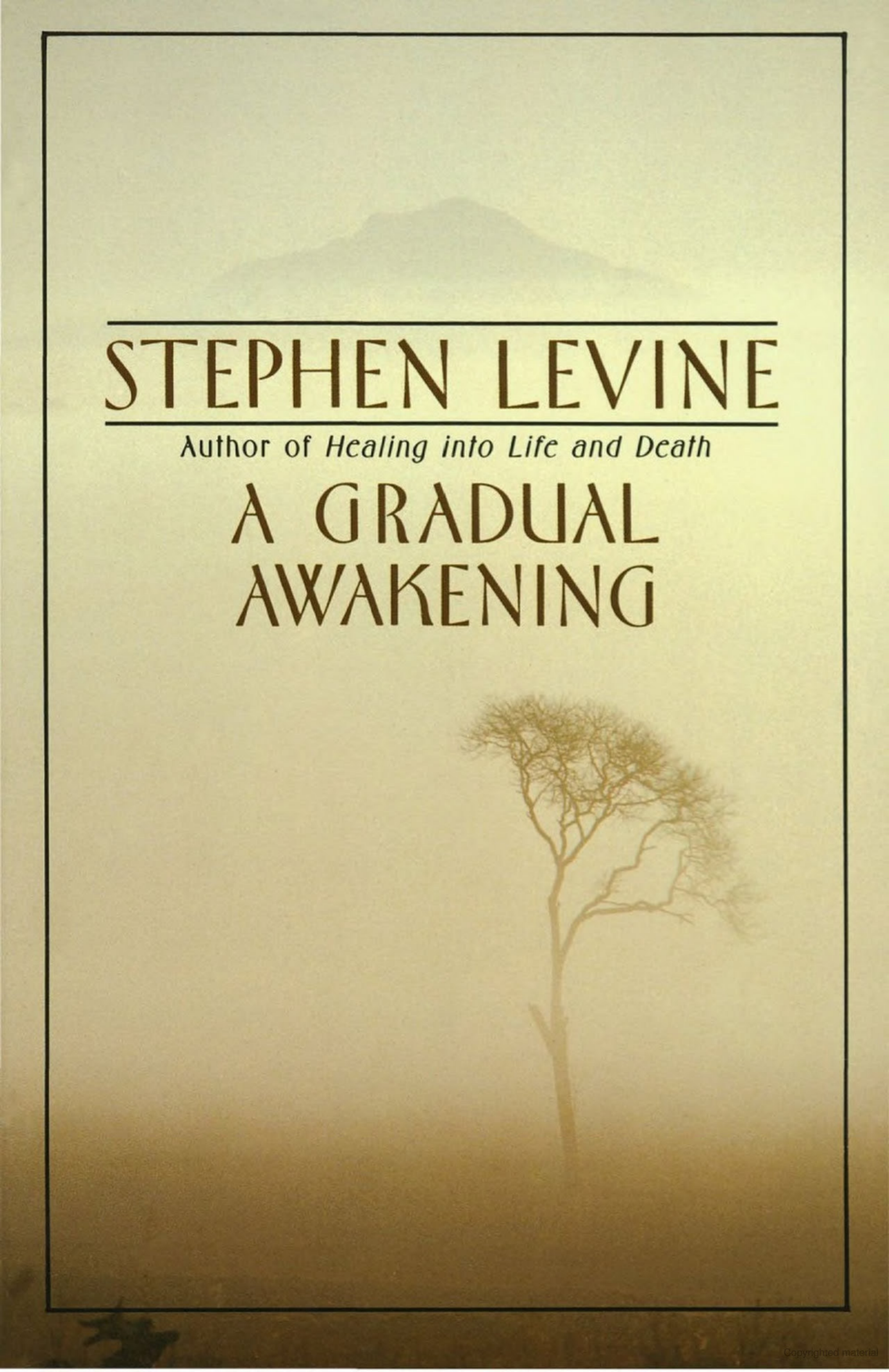




STEPHEN LEVINE

Author of Healing into Life and Death

A GRADUAL
AWAKENING



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Preface for A Gradual Awakening

When my Guru wanted to compliment me, he called me simple; when he wished to chide me, he called me clever. This book about vipassana meditation is simple . . . clear and familiarly comfortable. It just is what is. This simplicity surprises me when I realize that the book deals with profound topics that I have often fruitlessly pondered in ancient tomes of Buddhist lore. I always knew in my heart that these matters were quite simple, and so it is a delight to see them so presented.

Besides its simplicity, there is another treasure in this book. It concerns social responsibility. There has always been a dialogue between the Mahayana and the Theravada Buddhists concerning social responsibility. Does one hold back from liberation in order to assist all sentient beings to end their suffering, or does one go for broke?

Although this debate involves numerous fine philosophical points, for most of us it seems rather academic. Our problem is not one of holding back liberation: rather, day by day we patiently struggle to extricate ourselves from the vast, clinging karmic web in which we are enmeshed.

So for us the issue of social responsibility is a daily matter of whether to sit or serve, to retreat or leap into the fray.

Again and again I am asked how I can justify sitting in meditation while there is so much suffering going on all about me. The intellectual answer is that the root of suffering is ignorance and that meditation is the best way of cutting the bonds of ignorance. But when confronted with a hungry child, the pains of physical illness, the intractable violence in others, or the fear of dying, such justifications sometimes seem dissatisfyingly abstract and hollow.

Stephen Levine deals with meditation and social responsibility in a way that is neither abstract nor hollow: This is practical stuff for day-to-day living. His ability to do this comes from his own life in which he has shown a continuing sense of social consciousness.

I first met Stephen in the early days of Haight-Ashbury when he edited the *San Francisco Oracle*, which was among the first voices of the consciousness awakening of the sixties. Later I knew him as a poet, as an articulate friend of and spokesman for the men on death row at San Quentin, as a successful editor-publisher, as a father of two superb children, and most recently as a companion-guide to those who would approach death as an opportunity to awaken. And through all of this he has continued to deepen his meditative practice and to carry the resulting clarity of mind into his social action.

And there is one more jewel of which I would recommend that the reader take note. It is the weaving of the domains of heart and mind. So often spiritual practices have emphasized the false dichotomy between practices of the heart and practices of the mind. Much of this confusion is due to defining the heart space in terms of emotions, and to con-

sidering pure mind as rather antiseptically dry. Of course such polarization is naïve, but it too often catches us. Thus it is refreshing to see in both the Metta meditation and the discussion which follows, a sensitive mind-heart integration that allows for both a moist warmth and a clear spaciousness.

Buddhism is often referred to as the Middle Way. Some meditation books are for the beginner who has never really thought of meditating; some books are for the advanced practitioner. *A Gradual Awakening* would seem most beneficial to those in the middle stages of the Middle Way. That is, readers who realize there is a journey and have embarked upon it. To them, I wish Godspeed.

May all beings realize liberation.

RAM DASS

Introduction

Twenty years ago I sat in great confusion before a plaster dime-store Buddha and asked to be taught how to meditate. I discovered a few early translations of Buddhist texts and the first encouraging works of D. T. Suzuki and Alan Watts, but there was no actual method offered for the direct experience of these truths. Often I had the frustrating feeling of reading a travelogue of some extraordinary terrain I wished to visit but for which no access map was available.

It was a few years before I met Rudi, my first teacher, sitting at his desk in the back of an oriental art shop in New York City. Twice a week for the next several months he pointed out various states of mind as illustrated in the faces of passers-by as we sat on folding chairs before his shop on Seventh Avenue. Repeatedly he told me to let go of my thinking mind, but instead I analyzed and sifted his words, I sought "meaning" instead of freedom. I could not hear the Buddha in either of us.

My pull to Theravada (the Way of the Elders) and Zen Buddhism continued without the benefit of a teacher or any but an intuitive method of self-exploration. Slowly I

was acquiring a way of thinking, but nothing more profound or useful.

Then, in the mid-sixties, a friend returning from study in Burma brought with him a booklet of instructions in *vipassana*, the mindfulness or insight method of Buddhist meditation. He said that of all the teachings he had received in four years as a Buddhist monk, this simple meditation was the most useful. These teachings by the much respected Burmese meditation master Mahasi Sayadaw immediately drew me into deeper practice and discovery.

Working with the method described in this booklet, I established a rather irregular practice over the next few years, until I met a young Theravadin Buddhist monk who offered me more complete instruction and guidance. By helping me to acknowledge the conditioning and confront the blind spots which had made practice without a teacher a slower and often less enthusiastic commitment, he led me to the establishment of an ongoing practice.

After a couple of years of work with this young monk, I met Jack Kornfield and Joseph Goldstein, two accomplished insight meditation teachers with whom I have continued to practice and who first encouraged me to begin teaching three years ago.

I began to teach in Soledad Prison in 1976, and occasionally was able to tape record the groups. A few of these transcriptions were the basis for chapters included here. During this period, Ram Dass invited me to teach mindfulness meditation at his retreats, and soon we put together a book *Grist for the Mill*. At that point, the Hanuman Tape Library, distributor of Ram Dass's tapes, moved to Santa Cruz, and it seemed appropriate to begin

weekly classes there. The greater part of this book is taken from transcriptions of these meetings. During this grace-filled time, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross invited me to teach with her at her workshops; there are various transcriptions included here from these gatherings as well.

These words are offered not as Absolute Truth, but rather as the outcome of a process of learning out loud. I offer this book to that confused fellow, sitting twenty years ago in his cottage in Florida, just dropped out of college, wondering which way to freedom.

Stephen Levine
Santa Cruz, California
August 1978

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Awareness

Meditation is for many a foreign concept, somehow distant and foreboding, seemingly impossible to participate in. But another word for meditation is simply awareness. Meditation *is* awareness.

The motivation for meditating is often quite different for each person. Many people come to meditation because of their love for the qualities of some teacher or their desire to know God. Others because of a desire to understand mind. Some begin not even knowing what meditation is, but with a great longing to be free from some sadness, some pain, some incompleteness in their lives.

Here is offered a simple Buddhist mindfulness practice to come to wholeness, to our natural completeness. The basis of the practice is to directly participate in each moment as it occurs with as much awareness and understanding as possible.

We've all developed some degree of concentration and awareness. Just to be able to read a book, to live our complicated lives, takes awareness and concentration. They're qualities of mind present in everyone.

Meditation intensifies those qualities through system-

atic, gentle, persevering techniques. To develop concentration, we choose a single object of awareness, the primary object, that the attention is “re-minded” to return to and encouraged to stay with. A basic difference between various meditation forms—such as TM, or Sufi dancing, or confronting Zen koans, or sitting meditations, or Christian prayer, or chanting mantra, or listening to the inner sound current, or cycling light, or observing sensations in the body, or visualizing techniques, or watching the breath—is the primary object on which concentration is developed. We choose a primary object and work with it; whether it is something we generate in the conceptual realm, like a verbal repetition or the idea of loving-kindness, or something that is always present, like the sensations in the body.

Mindfulness of breathing is a powerful means of developing concentration. The breath is a superb object because it's constantly a part of our experience. Also, because our breathing changes, the awareness must become very subtle to accommodate itself to it. Awareness watches the sensations that occur with the natural coming and going of the breath. Awareness penetrates the subtle sensations that accompany each breath. When we bring attention to the level of sensation, we are not so entangled in the verbal level where all the voices of thought hold sway, usually lost in the “internal dialogue.”

The internal dialogue is always commenting and judging and planning. It contains a lot of thoughts of self, a lot of self-consciousness. It blocks the light of our natural wisdom; it limits our seeing who we are; it makes a lot of noise and attracts our attention to a fraction of the reality in which we exist. But when the awareness is one-pointedly

focused on the coming and going of the breath, all the other aspects of the mind/body process come automatically, clearly into focus as they arise. Meditation puts us into direct contact—which means direct experience—with more of who we are.

For instance, if we watch the mind as though it were a film projected on a screen, as concentration deepens, it may go into a kind of slow motion and allow us to see more of what is happening. This then deepens our awareness and further allows us to observe the film almost frame by frame, to discover how one thought leads imperceptively to the next. We see how thoughts we took to be “me” or “mine” are just an ongoing process. This perspective helps break our deep identification with the seeming solid reality of the movie of the mind. As we become less engrossed in the melodrama, we see it’s just flow, and can watch it all as it passes. We are not even drawn into the action by the passing of a judgmental comment or an agitated moment of impatience.

When we simply see—moment to moment—what’s occurring, observing without judgment or preference, we don’t get lost thinking, “I prefer this moment to that moment, I prefer this pleasant thought to that pain in my knee.” As we begin developing this choiceless awareness, what starts coming within the field of awareness is quite remarkable: we start seeing the root from which thought arises. We see intention, out of which action comes. We observe the natural process of mind and discover how much of what we so treasured to be ourselves is essentially impersonal phenomena passing by.

We discover we don’t really need to ask anyone any questions, we needn’t look outside ourselves for the answer.

As we penetrate the flow, the flow is the answer. The asking of the question is itself the answer. When we ask, "Who am I?" who we are is the processes asking the question.

When awareness penetrates a bit deeper, we discover that we've invested the thinking mind with a reality which it doesn't independently possess, an absolute reality, not understanding that it is a relative part of something much greater. By not being addicted to thinking, we discover that we usually notice only a bit of the extraordinary activity of consciousness; attachment to thinking has blocked the rest. Thinking mind is quite other than the choiceless, open awareness that allows everything to unfold as it must. Thinking is choosing thoughts, it's working, it's measuring, it's planning, it's creating a reality instead of directly experiencing what's actually happening each moment.

When we attend to the ongoing mind we see that even "the watcher" becomes part of the flow. The who that's asking "Who's watching?" is another thought-flash we see go by; there's "no one" watching, there's just awareness. When the "I" becomes just something else observed in the flow we see we're not different from anything else in the universe. The true nature of being becomes apparent because there's nothing to remain separate, nothing to block our totality. We see that what moves one thought into another is the exact same energy that moves the stars across the sky. No difference. We are natural phenomenon as full of change as the ocean or the wind, a product of conditions.

We see that the nature of consciousness works a bit like the hand of God in the famous Sistine Chapel painting which is reaching out to give life to a waiting being, a being about to receive the spark. Moment to moment we're re-

ceiving the spark. That spark is consciousness, the knowing faculty, the perception of which arises from the contact of awareness and its object; from sight and the tree seen, from hearing and the music heard, from touch and the earth felt, from taste and the water tasted, from smell and the flower smelled, from thought and the idea imagined. Moment to moment, consciousness arises anew in conjunction with each object of the senses, including the mind sense of imagination and memory. This is the arising and passing away of all that we know of our life experience. For mindfulness to enter this process is to discover genesis moment to moment, the continual creation of the universe.

Interestingly enough, it is this act of creation which is the greatest cause of misunderstanding in our life. Or to be more precise, it is our identification with this ongoing process as "I" which becomes the problem. It is the wrong view of this natural unfolding which forms the basis for most of our drowsy blindness and illusion. Consciousness results automatically from the contact of awareness and its object. This "knowing" is the result of a natural process which exists of itself without necessity of a "knower," or any added "I" which somehow supposes responsibility for this essentially non-personal process. This interposed "I" keeps us from participating in the direct experience of this flow, the direct experience of the universal nature of our being.

Aurobindo said, "To be fully is to be all that is." Experiences come and go. If we identify with them, claim them as "me" or "mine" by judging or clinging, if we stick to any part of the ongoing flow, we don't see that what we call "me" is constantly being born and dying, is a process

when we deeply understand that nothing is permanent, our wisdom grows. The next thing we discover is that nothing we want can give us lasting satisfaction because everything is in flux and nothing stays for ever. Whatever it may be—the finest food, the most gratifying sex, the greatest sense pleasure—nothing in the universe can give lasting satisfaction, it will all come and go. It is this condition which gives us that subtle, queasy dissatisfaction we carry about with us most of the time, even when we get what we want, because deep down we know eventually it will change.

It's not that we're the same and only the world is changing. We're part of the world. Mind is always changing. That's why we're happy one day and unhappy the next. It's not just outside things changing. Everything is changing, and that pulls against our concepts of how things are because our concepts are solid, imaginary things which don't reflect change. The concept of tree, for example, is one solid, steady thing; not a growing, changing organism, subtly different from any other of its species, altered by weather and exposure and conditions. We have stiff, unchanging conceptual labels in a world full of change which, of course, causes a split between the concept and the reality, and a resulting tension. We don't really see reality. We see only the shadows that it casts and those shadows are our concepts, our definitions, our ideas of the world. Clinging to these concepts creates a desire that the world reflect our idea of how it should be; but change often confronts our concepts with a much different reality than we imagined, and can cause us to feel angry or defeated; somehow isolated from the truth of things by our tightly held point of view.

In the midst of all this change it is interesting to note