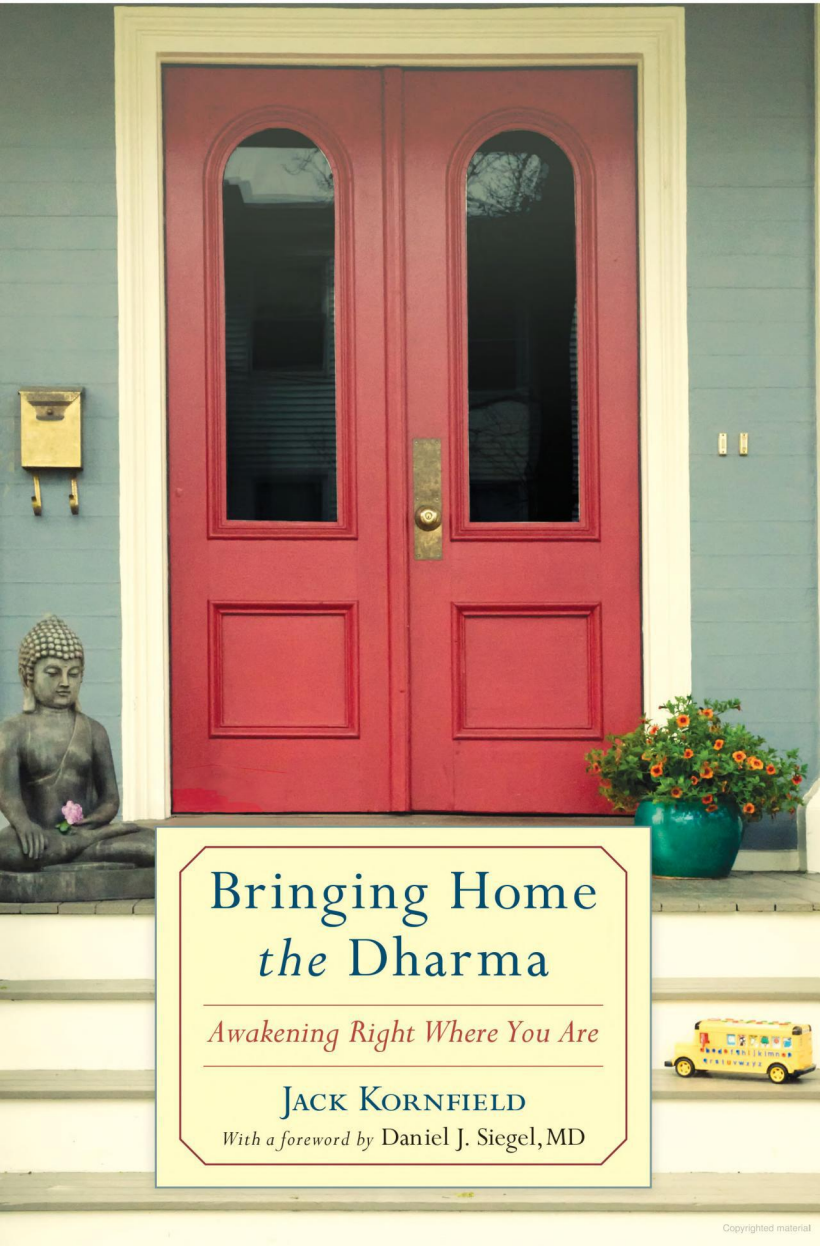

Bringing Home *the* Dharma

Awakening Right Where You Are

JACK KORNFIELD

With a foreword by Daniel J. Siegel, MD

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Contents

Foreword

Daniel J. Siegel, MD

Why would one of the world's most renowned teachers of mindfulness and Buddhist psychology ask a psychiatrist and mental-health educator to write the foreword to a book about everything from parenting to the nature of enlightenment? Perhaps because *Bringing Home the Dharma* is a compelling historical and personal exploration of the nature of the mind, and it contains teachings and perspectives that are important for our times.

The "dharma" is the nature of things, including the nature of our mental lives and the world in which we live. In these writings we learn about the Buddhist view of the mind and emotions and how personal transformation can be cultivated. We also see, through Jack Kornfield's wise and kind eyes, how his quest for nearly half a century has unfolded and informed his own experience. With great insight and humor, he shares the story of helping to bring Buddhist practice to the West, and he includes a captivating set of stories about the various teachers who have influenced this historic transfer of knowledge over the last century.

I first met Jack in preparation for a conference he had organized with a number of mindfulness teachers and Huston Smith, the celebrated authority on the world's religions. I am a scientist by training, and I had no background in the material Jack was presenting at the conference. I was also unfamiliar with Jack's writing and teaching. Yet at the meeting we found a tremendous common ground.

Listening to Jack and the other presenters, I could sense a deep devotion to understanding the nature of our mental lives—and how to

bring those lives from suffering to clarity. In many ways, this was the exact oath I had taken as a physician, and so I was surprised to find that Buddhist views were actually more about a science of mind and a method of healing than about a "religion." Here I encountered Buddhism as a system of thought and understanding devoted to alleviating mental pain. How odd, I thought as a psychiatrist, that something in the realm of religious practice was actually more akin to clinical work in the field of mental health. And so began a relationship with Jack that has become both a deep friendship and a professional partnership in which we teach together throughout the United States on the connection between science and spirituality, linking the mindful brain with the wise heart.

Though our collaboration, I have come to see that "awakening" involves the capacity to train the mind to move our brains, and our relationships, toward the open plane of possibility. Rather than being swept up into engrained patterns of thought or feeling, constrained by prior expectation and filtered perception, we can intentionally move our mental lives toward openness and creativity. From this new emergence arises a sense of vitality and clarity, which lie at the heart of well-being.

A host of carefully conducted scientific research projects now clearly demonstrates how attention shapes the firing of neurons in the brain, which then creates structural changes in the brain's very architecture. In other words, the mind can change the brain. And yet if the brain has a propensity to become stuck in familiar patterns, our mental lives can go on autopilot and we may be at risk of becoming stuck in a chaotic or deadened life.

One example is the isolation that many people experience in modern culture, surrounded by so many and yet so alone. And this sense of a separate self makes us at risk for highly problematic impediments to health: As individuals, we may have the negative outcomes to our body that come from perceived loneliness and isolation. Within relationships, we may feel apart even in the company of others. And we also have a relationship with the planet at large. Our planet itself is at risk if we continue a pattern of material acquisition and energy consumption in which the one with the "most toys wins." If "I" am not a part of the larger "we" of our common humanity, we are at grave risk of destroying life on this shared home we call earth. The self does not have to be seen as a singular noun, but rather as a plural verb in which we are all both

differentiated and linked to one another. This is the heart of integration, and the heart of awakening the mind.

We can promote a more integrated way of living through the power of mindful awareness. With integrative reflective practices, our relationships with one another can become filled with compassion and kindness. And for our planet, the hope of moving from "me" to "we" is filled with the potential of bringing health and healing to our precious and fragile home. This is the power and the promise of the paths to awakening the mind and integrating our lives.

Whatever your own background, this book is a treasure of discovery filled with jewels of wisdom that can elucidate both a secular and a spiritual understanding of this life we lead. We can be grateful to Jack Kornfield for sharing his illuminating journey and making the transformative practices of mindfulness and meditation accessible to all of us.

Introduction

Free your heart.
Travel like the moon among the stars.
—BUDDHA

What matters in life is simple. Are you free and loving? Are you bringing your gifts to the world that so badly needs them? The joyful news of the Buddha's way is that you can do so, you can live with freedom and compassion in every part of your life.

Mistakenly, people associate Buddhist teachings exclusively with sitting quietly in meditation. This error reflects our divided society where the body is relegated to the gym, work to the office, healing to the hospital, enjoyment to two weeks' vacation, and the sacred to weekly visits to church or temple. The wholeness of awakening is the message of this book.

All aspects of your life are your field of practice, the precise place to find freedom and compassion. From politics and parenting to meditation and education, from sex and drugs to poetry and art, every part of your life is sacred. This very life, your work, your family, your community is the only place for awakening. In Zen this is called "no part left out."

This was the Buddha's message to all he met. For forty-five years the Buddha wandered the dusty byways and cool woods of India, meeting with farmers and mothers, merchants and politicians, priests and scholars, cobblers and gardeners, barbers and weavers, artisans and kings. His instructions could not have been more clear. All parts of your human experience must be included in an awakened life.

The Buddha's own words explain that awakening and freedom are found:

When sitting, standing, walking, and lying down;
through right speech, right action, right livelihood;
inwardly and outwardly,
with the whole body, feelings, mind, and relationships;
in solitude and community;
in prison, hut, farm, or palace;
in times of war or peace;
in sickness and in health.

These are empowering and ennobling words. Your life provides the perfect conditions for awakening freedom and compassion. Enlightenment and liberation are not found in the Himalayas, nor in some ancient monasteries. They are only found where you are. Thus they are possible for you! We can sense this truth. There is a way of moving wisely and graciously through the world, bestowing blessings and happiness upon yourself and others, in times of trouble and ease.

To find this freedom, you must learn how to quiet the mind and open the heart. This is the purpose of meditation. The teachings in this volume offer helpful directions in many dimensions of meditation. And then you must discover ways to embody this wisdom and compassion in the world. In these pages there are practical and visionary teachings on parenting, engaging in politics, creating community, and embodying a spiritual life. These chapters have been gathered and woven together from twenty-five years' of writings. Each of these chapters invites your wisdom to expand. They give permission, direction, and specific guidance so that your heart and body, mind and action can awaken together.

The perspectives and teachings in this book are dear to my heart. For over forty years I have been practicing in this way. I have become more tolerant, kinder, more understanding, joyful, and free. Not only in the meditation hall but in the grocery store, on the highways, at work, and at home. You can too. This is not idealistic. I can also still be foolish, awkward, and unconscious. But I have learned to bow with compassion to this too, to accept what Oscar Wilde calls the "tainted glory" of our humanity. And then to smile like the Buddha.

As the marvelous teachings of liberation spread to far lands, the Buddha counseled his disciples to "teach in the vernacular of the times."

In China and Japan, Ch'an and Zen arose. In Indonesia and Afghanistan, Tibet and Mongolia, Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhist teachings flowered in new forms. Now Buddhism in the West has begun to appear. It is an honor to join together in this creation.

Read these words, consider, discover, practice, and embody their value and let your heart become wise and your life an expression of freedom.

May it be so.

Jack Kornfield
Spirit Rock Center
2011

PART ONE

Becoming Who We Are

1

The Liberating Practice of Mindfulness

In myths from around the world, men and women have searched for an elixir that will bring protection from suffering. Buddhism's answer is mindfulness. How does mindfulness work? Let me illustrate with a story that became the basis for the 1988 film *Gorillas in the Mist.* This movie is about Dian Fossey, a courageous field biologist who managed to befriend a tribe of gorillas. Fossey had gone to Africa to follow in the footsteps of her mentor, George Schaller, a renowned primate biologist who had returned from the wilds with more intimate and compelling information about gorilla life than any scientist before. When his colleagues asked how he was able to learn such remarkable detail about the tribal structure, family life, and habits of gorillas, he attributed it to one simple thing: he didn't carry a gun.

Previous generations of biologists had entered the territory of these large animals with the assumption that they were dangerous. So the scientists came with an aggressive spirit, large rifles in hand. The gorillas could sense the danger around these rifle-bearing men and kept a far distance. By contrast, Schaller—and later his student Dian Fossey—entered their territory without weapons. They had to move slowly, gently, and above all, respectfully toward these creatures. And, in time, sensing the benevolence of these humans, the gorillas allowed them to come right among them and learn their ways. Sitting still, hour after hour, with careful, patient attention, Fossey finally understood what she saw. As the African-American sage George Washington Carver explained, "Anything will give up its secrets if you love it enough."

Mindfulness is this kind of attention. It is a nonjudging, receptive awareness, a respectful awareness. Unfortunately, much of the time we don't attend in this way. Instead, we react, judging whether we like, dislike, or can ignore what is happening. Or we measure our experience against our expectation. We evaluate ourselves and others with a stream of commentary and criticism. When people initially come to a meditation class to train in mindfulness, they hope to become calm and peaceful. Usually they are in for a big shock. The first hour of mindfulness meditation reveals its opposite, bringing an unseen stream of evaluation and judgment into stark relief. In the first hour many feel bored and dislike the boredom. We can hear a door slam and wish for quiet. Our knees hurt and we try to avoid the pain. We wish we had a better cushion. We can't feel our breath and we get frustrated. We notice our mind won't stop planning and we feel like a failure. Then we remember someone we're angry at and get upset, and if we notice how many judgments there are, we feel proud of ourselves for noticing.

But like George Schaller, we can put aside these weapons of judgment. We can become mindful. When we are mindful, it is as if we can bow to our experience without judgment or expectation. "Mindfulness," declared the Buddha, "is all-helpful."

Peter, a middle-aged computer designer, came to a meditation retreat looking for relief. He was coping with a recently failed business, a shaky marriage, and a sick mother. But meditation quickly became an agony. The anger and disappointment that pervaded his current situation rose up in the quiet room to fill his mind. His attempts to quiet himself by sensing his breath felt hopeless; his attention was repelled away from his body like water on a hot skillet. Then it got worse. A restless woman seated nearby began to cough loudly and frequently. She began to fidget and move and cough more as the first day wore on. Peter, who was struggling just to be with his own sorrow, became frustrated and angry and, as she continued coughing, enraged. He sought out my coteacher and good friend Debra Chamberlin-Taylor and insisted that meditation was the wrong approach and that he wanted to leave. Debra asked Peter to close his eyes and mindfully notice the state of his body. It was filled with tension and hurting. With Debra's help, Peter found he could hold the tension and hurt with more acceptance and kindness. He breathed, relaxed a little, and recognized that the medicine he needed was nothing other than attention to directly understand his own pain.

The next instruction he was given was simple: as you sit, keep a gentle mindfulness on your body and notice whatever happens. After only a few minutes, his fidgety neighbor began a long coughing spell. With each cough Peter felt his own muscles clench and his breath stop. Now he became more curious, interested in how his body was reacting. He began to notice that hearing each cough produced an internal clenching and a wave of anger, which subsided as he practiced relaxing between the spells. Finally, at the end of the sitting period, he got up to walk down to the lunchroom. As he arrived, he noticed this same difficult woman in line just ahead of him. Immediately he noticed how his stomach clenched and his breath stopped—just seeing her! Again, he relaxed. After lunch when he returned to the meditation hall he checked to see what time his name was listed for a private interview with his teacher. Farther down the same list he read the restless woman's name. Still paying attention, he was surprised. Just seeing her name made his stomach clench and his breath tighten! He relaxed again. He realized that his body had become a mirror, and that his mindfulness was showing him when he was caught and where he could let go.

As the retreat went on, his attention grew more precise. He noticed that his own anxious and angry thoughts about his family and business problems could trigger the same clenching and tightening as the woman's cough did. He had always tried to have things under control. Now that his life had proved out of control, the habits of anger, blame, and judgments toward himself were tying him in knots. With each reaction, he could feel the knots arise. After each one he would pause mindfully and bring in a touch of ease. He began to trust mindfulness. By the close of the retreat, he was grateful to the restless woman near him. He wanted to thank her for her teaching. With mindfulness Peter found relief. He also discovered the benefit of curiosity and openness, what Zen master Suzuki Roshi famously called beginner's mind. In Suzuki Roshi's words, "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."

MINDFULNESS AS FEARLESS PRESENCE

The art of listening is neither careless drifting on the one hand nor fearful clinging on the other. It consists in being sensitive to each

moment, in regarding it as utterly new and unique, in having the mind open and wholly receptive.

—ALAN WATTS

Sitting mindfully with our sorrows and fears, or with those of another, is an act of courage. It is not easy. Mary believed that to face her rage might kill her. John's son's cystic fibrosis brought terrifying images of wheelchairs and early death. Perry was afraid to face his infidelities and sexual peculiarities. Ron could hardly bear to think of the carnage he had seen during his work in Bosnia. For Angela, facing the recurrence of her cancer meant facing death. And Konda had longings and joy and creativity that she had never dared to express.

With patience and courage, they gradually learned how to sit firmly on the earth and sense the contraction and trembling of their bodies without running away. They learned how to feel the floods of emotions—fear, grief, longing, and rage—and to allow them to slowly release with mindfulness. They learned to see the endless mental stories of fear and judgment that repeat over and over, and with the help of mindfulness to let them go and relax, to steady the mind and return to the present.

In the Buddha's search for freedom he, too, turned his mindfulness to overcoming his fears. In a text called "Overcoming Fear and Dread," he recounts his practice:

> How would it be if in the dark of the month, with no moon, I were to enter the most strange and frightening of places, near tombs and in the thick of the forest, that I might come to understand fear and terror. And in so doing, 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 hold 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 in Thailand, we were sent to sit alone in the forest at night to practice the

meditations on death. Stories of monks who had encountered tigers and other wild animals were part of what kept us alert. There were many snakes, including cobras. 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. There were moments when I was really frightened. 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 one or several monks left alone to tend the fire in the dark forest. Then, as a practice, one monk would be left, remaining 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.

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, boredom; my frustrations and hurts. Sitting with these took more courage than practicing all night in 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.

Mindfulness does not reject experience. It lets experience be the teacher. One Buddhist practitioner with severe asthma learned to bring a mindful attention to his breath and limit his attacks by being patient as the muscles in his throat and chest constricted, slowly relaxing the stress in his body. Another man undergoing a painful cancer treatment used mindfulness to quell his fear of the pain and added loving-kindness for his body as a complement to his chemotherapy. Through mindfulness a politician learned not to be discouraged by his attackers. A frazzled single mother of preschoolers used mindfulness to acknowledge feeling tense and overwhelmed, and to become more respectful and spacious with herself and her boys. Each of these practitioners learned to trust the space of mindful awareness. With mindfulness they entered the difficulties in their own lives, and like the Buddha in the thick of the forest, they found healing and freedom.

FOUR PRINCIPLES FOR MINDFUL TRANSFORMATION

Learning takes place only in a mind that is innocent and vulnerable.

—KRISHNAMURTI

RAIN is a useful acronym for the four key principles of mindful transformation of difficulties. RAIN stands for Recognition, Acceptance, Investigation, and Nonidentification. A line from Zen poetry reminds us, "the rain falls equally on all things." Like the nourishment of outer rain, the inner principles of RAIN can be applied to all our experiences, and can transform our difficulties.

Recognition

Recognition is the first step of mindfulness. When we feel stuck, we must begin with a willingness to see what is so. It is as if someone asks us gently, "What is happening now?" Do we reply brusquely, "Nothing"? Or do we pause and acknowledge the reality of our experience, here and now? With recognition we step out of denial. Denial undermines our freedom. The diabetic who denies his body is sick and ignores its needs is not free. Neither is the driven, stressed-out executive who denies the cost of her lifestyle, or the self-critical would-be painter who denies his love of making art. The society that denies its poverty and injustice has lost a part of its freedom as well. If we deny our dissatisfaction, our anger, our pain, our ambition, we will suffer. If we deny our values, our beliefs, our longings, or our goodness, we will suffer.

"The emergence and blossoming of understanding, love, and intelligence has nothing to do with any outer tradition," observes Zen teacher Toni Packer. "It happens completely on its own when a human being questions, wonders, listens, and looks without getting stuck in fear. When self-concern is quiet, in abeyance, heaven and earth are open."

With recognition our awareness becomes like the dignified host. We name and inwardly bow to our experience: "Ah, sorrow. Now excitement. Hmm, yes, conflict; and yes, tension. Oh, now pain, yes, and now, ah, the judging mind." Recognition moves us from delusion and ignorance toward freedom. "We can light a lamp in the darkness," says the Buddha. We can see what is so.

Acceptance

The next step of RAIN is acceptance. Acceptance allows us to relax and open to the facts before us. It is necessary because with recognition,

there can come a subtle aversion, a resistance, a wish it weren't so. Acceptance does not mean that we cannot work to improve things. But just now, this is what is so. In Zen they say, "If you understand, things are just as they are. And if you don't understand, things are still just as they are."

Acceptance is not passivity. It is a courageous step in the process of transformation. "Trouble? Life is trouble. Only death is nice," Zorba the Greek declares. "To live is to roll up your sleeves and embrace trouble." Acceptance is a willing movement of the heart to include whatever is before it. In individual transformation we have to acknowledge the reality of our own suffering. For social transformation we have to start with the reality of collective suffering, of injustice, racism, greed, and hate. We can transform the world just as we learn to transform ourselves. As Carl Jung comments, "Perhaps I myself am the enemy who must be loved."

With acceptance and respect, problems that seem intractable often become workable. A man began to give large doses of cod liver oil to his Doberman because he had been told that the stuff was good for dogs. Each day he would hold the head of the protesting dog between his knees, force its jaws open, and pour the liquid down its throat. One day the dog broke loose and the fish oil spilled on the floor. Then, to the man's great surprise, the dog returned to lick the puddle. That is when the man discovered that what the dog had been fighting was not the oil but his lack of respect in administering it. With acceptance and respect, surprising transformations can occur.

Investigation

Recognition and acceptance lead to the third step of RAIN, investigation. Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh calls this "seeing deeply." In recognition and acceptance we recognize our dilemma and accept the truth of the whole situation. Now we must investigate more fully. Buddhism teaches that whenever we are stuck, it is because we have not looked deeply enough into the nature of the experience.

Buddhist practice systematically directs our investigation to four areas that are critical for understanding and freedom. These are called the four foundations of mindfulness—body, feelings, mind, and dharma—the underlying principles of experience.

Here is how we can apply them when working with a difficult experience. Starting with investigation in the body, we mindfully locate where our difficulties are held. Sometimes we find sensations of heat, contraction, hardness, or vibration. Sometimes we notice throbbing, numbness, a certain shape or color. We can investigate whether we are meeting this area with resistance or with mindfulness. We notice what happens as we hold these sensations with mindfulness and kindness. Do they open? Are there other layers? Is there a center? Do they intensify, move, expand, change, repeat, dissolve, or transform?

In the second foundation of mindfulness, we can investigate what feelings are part of this difficulty. Is the primary feeling tone pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral? Are we meeting this feeling with mindfulness? And what are the secondary feelings associated with it? Often we discover a constellation of feelings.

A man remembering his divorce may feel sadness, anger, jealousy, loss, fear, and loneliness. A woman who was unable to help her addicted nephew can feel longing, aversion, guilt, desire, emptiness, and unworthiness. With mindfulness, each feeling is recognized and accepted. We investigate how each emotion feels, whether it is pleasant or painful, contracted or relaxed, tense or sad. We notice where we feel the emotion in our body and what happens to it as it is held in mindfulness.

Next comes the mind. What thoughts and images are associated with this difficulty? What stories, judgments, and beliefs are we holding? When we look more closely, we often discover that many of them are one-sided, fixed points of view or outmoded, habitual perspectives. When we see that they are only stories, they loosen their hold on us. We cling less to them.

The fourth foundation to investigate is called mindfulness of the dharma. *Dharma* is an important and multifaceted word that can mean "the teachings and the path of Buddhism." It can also mean "the truth, the elements and patterns that make up experience." In mindfulness of the dharma we look into the principles and laws that are operating. We can notice if an experience is actually as solid as it appears. Is it unchanging or is it impermanent, moving, shifting, re-creating itself? We notice if the difficulty expands or contracts the space in our mind, if it is in our control or if it has its own life. We notice if it is self-constructed. We investigate whether we are clinging to it, struggling with it, or simply letting it be. We see whether our relationship to it is a source of suf-

fering or happiness. And finally, we notice how much we identify with it. This leads us to the last step of RAIN, nonidentification.

Nonidentification

In nonidentification we stop taking the experience as "mine" or part of "me." We see how identification creates dependence, anxiety, and inauthenticity. In practicing nonidentification, we inquire of every state, experience, and story, is this who I really am? We see the tentativeness of this identity. Instead of identification with this difficulty, we let go and rest in awareness itself. This is the culmination of releasing difficulty through RAIN.

One Buddhist practitioner, David, identified himself as a failure. His life had many disappointments, and after a few years of Buddhist practice, he was disappointed by his meditation too. He became calmer but that was all. He was still plagued by unrelenting critical thoughts and self-judgments, leftovers from a harsh and painful past. He identified with these thoughts and his wounded history. Even the practice of compassion for himself brought little relief.

Then, during a ten-day mindfulness retreat, he was inspired by the teachings on nonidentification. He was touched by the stories of those who faced their demons and freed themselves. He remembered the account of the Buddha, who on the night of his enlightenment faced the armies and temptations of Mara, a powerful demon of Buddhist folklore who personifies our difficulties and obstacles on the path. David decided to stay up all night and directly face his own demons. For many hours, he tried to be mindful of his breath and body.

In between sittings, he took periods of walking meditation. At each sitting, he was washed over by familiar waves of sleepiness, body pains, and critical thoughts. Then he began to notice that each changing experience was met by one common element, awareness itself. In the middle of the night, he had an "aha" moment. He realized that awareness was not affected by any of these experiences, that it was open and untouched, like space itself. All his struggles, the painful feelings and thoughts, came and went without the slightest disturbance to awareness itself.

Awareness became his refuge. David decided to test his realization. The meditation hall was empty so he rolled on the floor. Awareness just noticed. He stood up, shouted, laughed, made funny animal noises.

Awareness just noticed. He ran around the room, he lay down quietly, he went outside to the edge of the forest, he picked up a stone and threw it, jumped up and down, laughed, came back and sat. Awareness just noticed it all. Finding this, he felt free. He watched the sun rise softly over the hills. Then he went back to sleep for a time. And when he reawakened, his day was full of joy. Even when his doubts came back, awareness just noticed. Like the rain, his awareness allowed all things equally.

It would be too rosy to end this story here. Later in the retreat David again fell into periods of doubt, self-judgment, and depression. But now, even in the middle of it, he could recognize that it was just doubt, just judgment, just depression. He could not take it fully as his identity anymore. Awareness noticed this too. And was silent, free.

Buddhism calls nonidentification the abode of awakening, the end of clinging, true peace, nirvana. Without identification we can live with care, yet we are no longer bound by the fears and illusions of the small sense of self. We see the secret beauty behind all that we meet. Mindfulness and fearless presence bring true protection. When we meet the world with recognition, acceptance, investigation, and nonidentification, we discover that wherever we are, freedom is possible, just as the rain falls on and nurtures all things equally.

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2

The Art of Awakening

The Way of Meditation

A STORY IS TOLD OF THE BUDDHA when he was wandering in India shortly after his enlightenment. He was encountered by several men who recognized something quite extraordinary about this handsome prince now robed as a monk. Stopping to inquire, they asked, "Are you a god?" "No," he answered. "Well, are you a divine being or an angel?" "No," he replied. "Well, are you some kind of wizard or magician?" "No." "Are you a man?" "No." They were perplexed. Finally, they asked, "Then, what are you?" He replied simply, "I am awake." The word *buddha* means "one who is awake." How to awaken is all he taught.

Meditation can be thought of as the art of awakening. Through the mastering of this art we can learn new ways to approach our difficulties and bring wisdom and joy alive in our life. Through developing meditation's tools and practices, we can awaken the best of our spiritual and human capacities. The key to this art is the steadiness of our attention. When the fullness of our attention is cultivated together with a grateful and tender heart, our spiritual life will naturally grow.

For many people some healing of mind and body must take place as we start to sit quietly and meditate. To begin our healing, we must develop a basic level of calm and attention. We must find a way to develop our attention systematically and give ourselves to it quite fully. Otherwise, we will drift like a boat without a rudder. To learn to focus clearly, we must choose a prayer or a meditation practice and follow this path with commitment and steadiness, a willingness to work with our practice day after day, no matter what arises. This is not so easy for most people. They would like their spiritual life to show immediate

and cosmic results. But what great art is ever learned quickly? Any deep training opens in direct proportion to how much we give ourselves to it.

Consider the other arts. Music, for example. How long would it take to learn to play the piano well? Suppose we take months' or years' of lessons once a week, practicing diligently every day. Initially, almost everyone struggles to learn which fingers go to which notes and how to read basic lines of music. After some weeks or months, we could play simple tunes, and perhaps after a year or two we could play a chosen type of music. However, to master the art so that we could play music well, alone or in a group, or join a band or an orchestra, we would have to give ourselves over to the discipline for a long time. It is the same in learning computer programming, oil painting, tennis, architecture, any of a thousand arts; we have to give ourselves to it fully and wholeheartedly over a period of time—there has to be a training, apprenticeship, cultivation. Nothing less is required in the spiritual arts. Perhaps even more is asked. Yet through this mastery we master ourselves and our lives. We learn the most human of arts, how to connect with our true self.

Suppose we begin with a period of meditation in the midst of our daily life. What happens when we actually try to meditate? The most frequent first experience—whether in prayer or chanting, meditation, or visualization—is that we encounter the disconnected and scattered mind. Buddhist psychology likens the untrained mind to a crazed monkey that dashes from thought to memory, from sight to sound, from plan to regret without ceasing.

To start, meditation is very much like training a puppy. You put the puppy down and say, "Stay." Does the puppy listen? It gets up and runs away. You sit the puppy back down again. "Stay." And the puppy runs away over and over again. Sometimes the puppy jumps up, runs over, and pees in the corner or makes some other mess. Our minds are much the same as the puppy, only they create even bigger messes. In training the mind, or the puppy, we have to start over and over again.

When you undertake a spiritual discipline, frustration comes with the territory. Nothing in our culture or our schooling has taught us to steady and calm our attention. Finding it difficult to concentrate, many people respond by forcing their attention on their breath or mantra or prayer with tense irritation and self-judgment, or worse. Is this the way you would train a puppy? Does it really help to beat it? Effective training

of a dog or of our attention is never a matter of force or coercion. You simply pick up the puppy and place it where it needs to be; over and over, you gently return your attention to the here and now.

Developing a deep quality of interest in your spiritual practice is one of the keys to the whole art of attention. Steadiness is nourished by the degree of interest with which we focus our meditation. Yet, to the beginning student, many meditation subjects appear plain and uninteresting. There is a traditional story about a Zen student who complained to his master that following the breath was boring. The Zen master grabbed this student and held his head under water for quite a long time while the student struggled to come up. When he finally let the student up, the Zen master asked him whether he had found the breath boring in those moments under water. The focusing of attention on the breath is perhaps the most universal of the many hundreds of meditation objects used worldwide. Breathing meditation can quiet the mind, open the body, and develop a great power of concentration. The breath is available to us at any time of day and in any circumstance. When we have learned to use it, the breath becomes a support for awareness throughout our life.

Yet even with interest and a strong desire to steady our attention, distractions will arise. Distractions are the natural movement of mind, which is often like muddy or turbulent water. Each time an enticing image or an interesting memory floats by, it is our habit to react, to get entangled, or to get lost. When painful images or feelings arise, it is our habit to contract, to avoid them, or unknowingly distract ourselves. We can feel the power of these habits of desire and distraction, of fear and reaction. In many of us these forces are so great that after a few unfamiliar moments of calm, our mind rebels. We repeatedly encounter restlessness, busyness, plans, unfelt feelings, and these all interrupt our focus again and again. The heart of meditation practice is working with these distractions, steadying our canoe so to speak, letting the waves wobble us and pass by, coming back again and again to this moment in a quiet and collected way.

As you start to practice meditation, you will begin to recognize that certain external conditions are particularly helpful in developing concentration. Finding or creating a quiet and undistracting place for your practice is necessary. Select regular and suitable times that best fit your temperament and schedule; experiment to discover whether morning

or evening meditations best support the silent aspects of your inner life. You may wish to begin with a short period of inspiring reading before sitting, or do some stretching or yoga first. Some people find it extremely helpful to sit regularly with a group or to go off to periodic retreats. Experiment with these external factors until you discover which are most helpful for your own inner peace. Then make them a regular part of your life. Creating suitable conditions means living wisely, providing the best soil for our spiritual hearts to be nourished and to grow.

As we give ourselves to the art of attention, over the weeks and months we discover that our concentration slowly begins to settle by itself. As we continue, the development of concentration brings us closer to life, like the focusing of a lens. If you take water from a pond and put it in a glass, it appears clear and still. But under the simplest microscope it shows itself to be alive with creatures and movement. In the same way, the more deeply we pay attention, we notice that every place we feel breath in our body can come alive with subtle vibrations, movement, tingles, flow. The steady power of our concentration shows each part of our life to be in change and flux, like a river, even as we feel it.

As we learn to let go into the present, the breath breathes itself, allowing the flow of sensations in the body to move and open. There can come an openness and ease. Like a skilled dancer, we allow the breath and the body to float and move unhindered, yet all the while being present to enjoy the opening.

As we become more skillful, we also discover that concentration has its own seasons. Sometimes we sit and settle easily. At other times, the conditions of mind and body are turbulent or tense. We can learn to navigate all these waters. When conditions show the mind is tight, we learn to soften and relax, to open our attention. When the mind is sleepy or flabby, we learn to sit up and focus with more energy. The Buddha compared this with the tuning of a lute, sensing when we are out of tune and gently strengthening or loosening our energy to come into balance.

In learning concentration, we feel as if we are always starting over, always losing our focus. But where have we actually gone? It is only that a mood or thought or doubt has swept through our mind. As soon as we recognize this, we can let go and settle back again in this next moment. We can always begin again. Gradually, as our interest grows and our awareness deepens, new layers of our meditation open. We find periods

of deep peace and strength, like a great ship on a true course, although we can be distracted or lost sometime later. Little by little, we learn to trust our course and our steadiness grows.

Always remember that in training a puppy we want to end up with the puppy as our friend. In the same way, we must practice seeing our mind and body as "friend." Even its wanderings can be included in our meditation with a friendly interest and curiosity. Right away we can notice how it moves. The mind produces waves. Our breath is a wave, and the sensations of our body are a wave. We don't have to fight the waves. We can simply acknowledge, "Surf's up." "Here's a wave of memories from when I was three years old." "Here's a wave of planning the future." Then it's time to reconnect with the wave of the breath. It takes a gentleness and a kindhearted understanding to deepen the art of concentration. We can't be present for a long period without learning how to soften, drop into our bodies, come to rest. Any other kind of concentration, achieved by force and tension, will be short-lived. Our task is to train the puppy to become our lifelong friend.

The attitude or spirit with which we do our meditation helps us perhaps more than any other aspect. What is called for is a sense of perseverance and dedication combined with a basic friendliness. We need a willingness to directly relate again and again to what is actually here, with a lightness of heart and sense of humor. We do not want the training of our puppy to become too serious a matter.

The Christian desert fathers tell of a new student who was commanded by his master that for three years he must give money to everyone who insulted him. When this period of trial was over, the master said, "Now you can go to Alexandria and truly learn wisdom." When the student entered Alexandria, he met a certain wise man whose way of teaching was to sit at the city gate insulting everyone who came and went. He naturally insulted the student also, who immediately burst out laughing. "Why do you laugh when I insult you?" said the wise man. "Because," said the student, "for years I've been paying for this kind of thing, and now you give it to me for free!" "Enter the city," said the wise man. "It is all yours."

Meditation is a practice that can teach us to enter each moment with wisdom, lightness, and a sense of humor. It is an art of opening and letting go, rather than accumulation or struggle. Then, even within our frustrations and difficulties, a remarkable inner sense of support and

perspective can grow. Breathing in, "Wow, this experience is interesting, isn't it? Let me take another breath. Ah, this one is difficult, even terrifying, isn't it?" Breathing out, "Ah." It is an amazing process we have entered when we can train our hearts and minds to be open, steady, and awake through it all.

3

A Mind Like Sky

Learning to Rest in Awareness

MEDITATION COMES ALIVE through a growing capacity to release our habitual entanglement in the stories and plans, conflicts and worries that make up the small sense of self, and to rest in awareness. In meditation we do this simply by acknowledging the moment-to-moment changing conditions—the pleasure and pain, the praise and blame, the litany of ideas and expectations that arise. Without identifying with them, we can rest in the awareness itself, beyond conditions, and experience what my teacher Ajahn Chah called *jai pongsai,* our natural lightness of heart. Developing this capacity to rest in awareness nourishes *samadhi* (concentration), which stabilizes and clarifies the mind, and *prajna* (wisdom), which sees things as they are.

We can employ this awareness, or wise attention, from the very start. When we first sit down to meditate, the best strategy is to simply notice whatever state of our body and mind is present. To establish the foundation of mindfulness, the Buddha instructs his followers "to observe whether the body and mind are distracted or steady, angry or peaceful, excited or worried, contracted or released, bound or free." Observing what is so, we can take a few deep breaths and relax, making space for whatever situation we find.

From this ground of acceptance we can learn to use the transformative power of attention in a flexible and malleable way. Wise attention—mindfulness—can function like a zoom lens. Often it is most helpful to steady our practice with close-up attention. In this, we bring a careful attention and a very close focus to our breath, to a sensation, or to the precise movement of feeling or thought. Over time we can

eventually become so absorbed that subject and object disappear. We become the breath, we become the tingling in our foot, we become the sadness or joy. In this we sense ourselves being born and dying with each breath, each experience. Entanglement in our ordinary sense of self dissolves; our troubles and fears drop away. Our entire experience of the world shows itself to be impermanent, ungraspable, and selfless. Wisdom is born.

But sometimes in meditation such close focus of attention can create an unnecessary sense of tightness and struggle. So we must find a more open way to pay attention. Or perhaps when we are mindfully walking down the street, we realize it is not helpful to focus only on our breath or our feet. We will miss the traffic signals, the morning light, and the faces of the passersby. So we open the lens of awareness to a middle range. When we do this as we sit, instead of focusing on the breath alone, we can feel the energy of our whole body. As we walk, we can feel the rhythm of our whole movement and the circumstances through which we move. From this perspective it is almost as if awareness "sits on our shoulder" and respectfully acknowledges a breath, a pain in our legs, a thought about dinner, a feeling of sadness, a shop window we pass. Here wise attention has a gracious witnessing quality, acknowledging each event—whether boredom or jealousy, plans or excitement, gain or loss, pleasure or pain—with a slight bow. Moment by moment we release the illusion of getting "somewhere" and rest in the timeless present, witnessing with easy awareness all that passes by. As we let go, our innate freedom and wisdom manifest. Nothing to have, nothing to be. Ajahn Chah called this "resting in the One Who Knows."

Yet at times this middle level of attention does not serve our practice best. We may find ourselves caught in the grip of some repetitive thought pattern or painful situation, or lost in great physical or emotional suffering. Perhaps there is chaos and noise around us. We sit and our heart is tight, our body and mind are neither relaxed nor gracious, and even the witnessing can seem tedious, forced, effortful.

In this circumstance we can open the lens of attention to its widest angle and let our awareness become like space or the sky. As the Buddha instructs in the Majjhima Nikaya, "Develop a mind that is vast like space, where experiences both pleasant and unpleasant can appear and disappear without conflict, struggle, or harm. Rest in a mind like vast sky."

From this broad perspective, when we sit or walk in meditation, we open our attention like space, letting experiences arise without any boundaries, without inside or outside. Instead of the ordinary orientation where our mind is felt to be inside our head, we can let go and experience the mind's awareness as open, boundless, and vast. We allow awareness to experience consciousness that is not entangled in the particular conditions of sight, sound, and feelings, but consciousness that is independent of changing conditions—the unconditioned. Ajahn Jumnien, a Thai forest elder, speaks of this form of practice as *maha vipassana*, resting in pure awareness itself, timeless and unborn. For the meditator, this is not an ideal or a distant experience. It is always immediate, ever present, liberating; it becomes the resting place of the wise heart.

Fully absorbed, graciously witnessing, or open and spacious—which of these lenses is the best way to practice awareness? Is there an optimal way to pay attention? The answer is "all of the above." Awareness is infinitely malleable, and it is important not to fixate on any one form as best. Mistakenly, some traditions teach that losing the self and dissolving into a breath or absorbing into an experience is the optimal form of attention. Other traditions erroneously believe that resting in the widest angle, the open consciousness of space, is the highest teaching. Still others say that the middle ground—an ordinary, free, and relaxed awareness of whatever arises here and now, a quality of "nothing special"—is the highest attainment. Yet in its true nature, awareness cannot be limited. Consciousness itself is both large and small, particular and universal. At different times our practice will require that we embrace all these perspectives.

Every form of genuine awareness is liberating. Each moment we release entanglement and identification is selfless and free. But remember too that every practice of awareness can create a shadow when we mistakenly cling to it. A misuse of space can easily lead us to become spaced-out and unfocused. A misuse of absorption can lead to denial, the ignoring of other experiences; and a misuse of ordinary awareness can create a false sense of "self" as a witness. These shadows are subtle veils of meditative clinging. See them for what they are and let them go. And learn to work with all the lenses of awareness to serve your wise attention.

The more you experience the power of wise attention, the more your trust in the ground of awareness itself will grow. You will learn to relax and let go. In any moment of being caught, awareness will appear, a presence without judging or resisting. Close-in or vast, near or far, awareness illuminates the ungraspable nature of the universe. It returns the heart and mind to its birthright, naturally luminous and free.

While focused and absorbed attention might be familiar, and ordinary awareness more natural, the wide-angle practice of mind like sky may be less familiar. To amplify and deepen an understanding of how to practice with awareness as space, the following instructions can be helpful. One of the most accessible ways to open to spacious awareness is through the ear door, listening to the sounds of the universe around us. Because the river of sound comes and goes so naturally, and is so obviously out of our control, listening brings the mind to a naturally balanced state of openness and attention. I learned this particular practice of sound as a gateway to space from my colleague Joseph Goldstein more than twenty-five years ago and have used it ever since. Awareness of sound in space can be an excellent way to begin practice because it initiates the sitting period with the flavor of wakeful ease and spacious letting go. Or it can be used after a period of focused attention.

Whenever you begin, sit comfortably and at ease. Let your body be at rest and your breathing be natural. Close your eyes. Take several full breaths and let each release gently. Allow yourself to be still.

Now shift awareness away from the breath. Begin to listen to the play of sounds around you. Notice those that are loud and soft, far and near. Just listen. Notice how all sounds arise and vanish on their own, leaving no trace. Listen for a time in a relaxed, open way.

As you listen, let yourself sense or feel or imagine that your mind is not limited to your head. Sense that your mind is expanding to be like the sky—open, clear, vast, like space. There is no inside or outside. Let the awareness of your mind extend in every direction like the sky.

Now all the sounds you hear will arise and pass away in the open space of your own mind. Relax in this openness and just listen. Let the sounds that come and go, whether far or near, be like clouds in the vast sky of your own awareness. The play of sounds moves through the sky, appearing and disappearing without resistance.

After you rest in this open awareness for a time, notice how thoughts and images also arise and vanish like sounds. Let the thoughts and im-

ages come and go without struggle or resistance. Pleasant and unpleasant thoughts, pictures, words, and feelings move unrestricted in the space of mind. Problems, possibilities, joys, and sorrows come and go like clouds in the clear sky of mind.

After a time, let this spacious awareness notice the body. Become aware of how the sensations of breath and body float and change in the same open sky of awareness. The breath breathes itself, it moves like a breeze. If you feel carefully you will sense that the body is not solid. It is experienced as areas of hardness and softness, pressure and tingling, warm and cool sensation, all floating in the space of the mind's awareness.

Let the breath move like a breeze. Rest in this openness. Let sensations float and change. Allow all thoughts and images, feelings and sounds to come and go like clouds in the clear open space of awareness.

Finally, pay attention to awareness itself. Notice how the open space of awareness is naturally clear, transparent, timeless, and without conflict—allowing all things, but not limited by them.

The Buddha said, "O Nobly Born, remember the pure open sky of your own true nature. Return to it. Trust it. It is home."

4

Realizing Our Full Potential

Cultivating Love and Joy

With wisdom let your mind full of love pervade one-quarter of the world, and so too the second, third and fourth quarter. Fill the whole wide world, above, below, around, pervade the world with love-filled thought, free from any ill will, love abounding, sublime, beyond measure.

—BUDDHA

If we cannot be happy in spite of our difficulties, what good is our spiritual practice?

—MAHA GHOSANANDA

Who, being loved, is poor?

—OSCAR WILDE

We have within us an extraordinary capacity for love, joy, and unshakable freedom. One of my Buddhist teachers, Dipa Ma Barua, demonstrated this to me. When I studied with her, Dipa Ma was a grandmother and householder in Calcutta, India, and also one of the most accomplished meditators of the Theravada lineage. Until her mid-thirties, Dipa Ma had been an ordinary, devout Buddhist. Then in the space of a few years she lost two of her three young children to illness. Her engineer husband, devastated, died of a heart attack soon thereafter. After a year of lying in bed with paralyzing grief, Dipa Ma dragged herself to a temple to practice meditation. Desperate, she threw herself

into her practice, and through her ardent nature and innate ability, she emerged with a deep realization. Dipa Ma was then trained and became a master of dozens of kinds of meditation. Through her intense dedication and shining spirit, she became a revered teacher for many.

In the late 1970s, I traveled to Calcutta to see Dipa Ma again. I had been meditating for a month in Bodh Gaya, India. Because of difficulty with my airplane ticket, I had only one day to spend with her. It was a hot day, over a hundred degrees. The air in Calcutta was smoggy and dirty. After I paid my respects to her, we spent some hours in deep conversation. Although I had been teaching successfully for five years, I was having a hard time. I had been suffering severe back pain, I was upset about a failed relationship, and before coming to India I had been working sixty hours a week for months. Given all this suffering and stress, I told her that I had begun to doubt my own capacities and ability to embody the teachings. Though she could see how shaky I was, she encouraged me to be steady in spite of it all. When it was time for me to go, Dipa Ma gave me her usual Bengali bear hug. Then she said she had a special blessing for me. Because she was so tiny, when I got down on my knees for the blessing, I was equal to her in height.

With great care and attention, Dipa Ma stroked her hands across my head and my whole body. She blew her breath on me and recited loving-kindness chants at the same time. At first it seemed like a very long prayer, but as she continued blessing me, I started to feel better and better. After ten long minutes my whole body was tingling and open. I was smiling from ear to ear. "Go and teach a good retreat for all those people," she said at last. "Go with mother's blessings." I felt as though a loving grandmother had sent me off with her good wishes, amplified with special yogic powers. I was in bliss.

I walked out into the sweltering Calcutta street and caught a taxi to Dum Dum Airport (its real name). It took two hours to get there, with the driver leaning on his horn the whole way, dodging between rickshaws and traffic, cows and fumes and trash. At the airport I went through the tedious Indian Customs, hours of standing around while officials looked through my stuff, grilled me, and stamped my documents. Eventually I got on the airplane for the three-hour flight to Bangkok. Bangkok was also hot and busy. The airport had long lines and more Customs. Then I spent an hour and a half riding to my hotel through the slow, crowded Bangkok traffic.

All the while I could not stop grinning. Through the Customs lines, plane rides, taxi rides, and traffic jams, I sat there with this huge smile on my face. It did not wear off. I went to sleep smiling and woke up smiling. I smiled continuously for days and felt uplifted for months following Dipa Ma's blessing.

Dipa Ma and other Buddhist teachers demonstrate the remarkable possibilities of the awakened heart. In *Transformations of Consciousness,* Harvard psychologist Jack Engler reports on his study of Dipa Ma and other advanced meditators. He found a degree of mental health and well-being among this group of subjects that was remarkable and hadn't been previously described in psychological research.

Engler gave these meditation masters an extensive battery of tests, including the Rorschach and Thematic Apperception tests, which measure personality and perception. Dipa Ma's tests confirmed that she had cultivated an unusually peaceful mind, completely untroubled by anger, fear, greed, or conflict of any kind. Engler reports, "The tests show a cognitive-emotional transformation and integration that reflected the deepest levels of inner liberation. Dipa Ma spontaneously wove her test responses into an ongoing spiritual story, a narrative that revealed the whole teaching of the dharma and at the same time showed clear comprehension of the tests—a remarkable achievement none of the researchers had ever witnessed."

Dipa Ma shows what is possible when we return to our Buddha nature. But let us remember that this kind of shining of the heart is not unique to meditation masters or advanced practitioners. It is already present and available in all of us. My colleague Sharon Salzberg tells a story demonstrating this, from a daylong loving-kindness retreat in Oakland, California.

"Whenever I teach loving-kindness retreats in an urban setting," Sharon explains, "I ask students to do their walking meditation out on the streets. I suggest they choose individuals they see and, with care and awareness, wish them well by silently repeating the traditional phrases of the loving-kindness practice, 'May you be happy, may you be peaceful.' I tell them that even if they don't feel loving, the power of their intention to offer love is not diminished. On this day our retreat took place a few blocks from downtown Oakland. Since we were directly across the street from the Amtrak station, several people chose to do their practice on the train platform.

"When a train pulled in, one woman from the class noticed a man disembark and decided to make him the recipient of her loving-kindness meditation. Silently she began reciting the phrases for him. Almost immediately she began judging herself: I must not be doing it right because I feel so distant. I don't feel a great wash of warm feeling coming over me. Nonetheless, reaffirming her intention to look on all beings with kindness instead of estrangement, she continued thinking, 'May you be happy, may you be peaceful.' Taking another look at the man, who was dressed in a suit and tie and seemed nervous, she began judging him: He looks so rigid and uptight. Judging herself, she thought, Here I am trying to send loving-kindness to someone and instead I'm disparaging him. Still, she continued repeating the phrases, aligning her energy with her deep intention: to be a force of love in the world. At that moment the man walked over to her and said, 'I've never done anything like this before in my life, but I'd like to ask you to pray for me. I am about to face a very difficult situation in my life. Somehow, you seem to have a really loving heart, and I'd just like to know that you're praying for me.'"

THE FOUR RADIANT ABODES

The old Buddhist list makers had a joyous time mapping the highest possibilities of human development. They enumerate the four degrees of noble hearts, five spiritual powers, five ranks, eight satoris, ten ox-herding pictures, ten stages of a bodhisattva, and thirty-seven factors of enlightenment. But the most treasured description of human awakening, what we in the West might call optimal mental health, is the four radiant abodes.

These four radiant abodes are loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity (or peace). These abodes are the expression of natural human happiness. They are immediate and simple, the universal description of an open heart. Even when we hear their names—love, compassion, joy, peace—they touch us directly. When we meet another who is filled with these qualities, our heart lights up. When we touch peace, love, joy, and compassion in ourselves, we are transformed.

Love is our true nature, but it is often covered over by a protective layer of fear. Buddhist practices can help us to unearth the gold beneath the clay and return us to our natural goodness. Even though this love is

innate, the Buddhist path also uses systematic trainings to cultivate this love. They strengthen our capacity for love, compassion, joy, and peace. The practices that develop these qualities involve invoking and repeating certain intentions, phrases, visualizations, and feelings. These trainings have been employed by millions of practitioners to transform their hearts.

When the radiant abodes are developed, their complementary qualities help to balance one another. This balance is considered essential in Buddhist psychology. Because love, compassion, and joy can lead to excessive attachment, their warmth needs to be balanced with equanimity. Because equanimity can lead to excessive detachment, its coolness needs to be balanced with love, compassion, and joy. Established together, these radiant qualities express mental harmony.

The flow of these awakened qualities begins with natural inner peace. When consciousness is peaceful and open, we rest in equanimity. As our peaceful heart meets other beings, it fills with love. When this love meets pain, it transforms itself naturally into compassion. And when this same openhearted love meets happiness, it becomes joy. In this way, the radiant abodes spontaneously reflect and connect the whole of the world.

Awakening Love

Loving-kindness is the first of the radiant abodes, and there are practices for its cultivation. In the initial stages of loving-kindness practice, students are asked to direct love first toward themselves, repeating four or five tradition phrases of well-wishing, such as "May I be safe and healthy. May I be happy." Along with the recitation, students are encouraged to invite the quality of loving-kindness to be present in their body and mind.

The quality of loving-kindness develops as we repeat these phrases thousands of times, over days and months. Initially it can feel difficult to offer love to yourself: for many it can trigger feelings of shame and unworthiness. Yet it is a particularly powerful practice, because whatever we do not love in our own self, we will not accept in another. Buddhist teachings explain, "You can search the whole universe and not find any being more worthy of love than yourself."

After many repetitions, love and care for yourself can grow. Then

the same loving-kindness is systematically extended to others, by categories. First we visualize and offer love to our benefactors, then our loved ones, our friends, neutral people, and eventually difficult people, and then finally even to our enemies. Then we extend the well-wishing of loving-kindness further—to all humans, animals, and insects, to beings of the earth, water, and air, to beings large and small, young and old, visible and not visible—until beings in every direction are included. At each step of the process, we deliberately extend our field of loving consciousness. If we find difficulty opening to the next area of loving-kindness, we try to gradually let go and forgive, repeatedly offering loving intentions until the obstacles dissolve.

Ruby has been a Buddhist practitioner for fifteen years. Today Ruby exudes happiness and joy, but this is not because her life has been easy. Several years ago, Ruby asked me what might be helpful next steps in her training and development. In addition to her work as a university administrator, she was caring for her mother and helping with two grandchildren, so she could not go on long retreats.

To balance Ruby's caring for others, I suggested that she undertake a year of loving-kindness practice just for herself. At first she resisted. "You mean a year of wishing that I be happy? It feels so self-centered. I don't know if I could do it." But she decided to try it. In her morning meditation, and throughout the day, Ruby wished herself well, with loving intention, at work, driving, shopping. At times the meditation felt tedious and difficult, but she stuck to it. Over the year Ruby became happier and more radiant. Then, I suggested she attend a weeklong retreat of loving-kindness meditation.

After two days of resistance, Ruby dropped into a silent and concentrated stillness. Through her practice, Ruby had learned not to resist her resistance, to allow all her experience to be held in love. As she did, the loving-kindness grew. Over the next days Ruby experienced a stream of luminous energy filling up the core of her body, expanding to a boundless ocean of love. She was incredibly happy. "I have opened," she exclaimed one morning. "I am nothing and I am the whole world. I am the crab apple tree and the frog by the stream and the tired cooks in the evening kitchen and the mud on my shoes and the stars. When my mind thinks about past and future, it is only telling stories. In loving-kindness, there is no past or future, only silence and love."

Ruby had graduated. Love was no longer a training or a practice, it

was her life. It was love that Ruby brought to her mother's bedside through her long illness. Now Ruby tells me she doesn't practice loving-kindness meditation formally for herself or others much anymore, because "it just comes." She says, "We're not separate, and love is just what we are."

The experience of practicing loving-kindness in this systematic way illuminates new possibilities. For example, when we shift our attention from benefactors and friends to neutral people, a whole new category of love opens up. In this practice, neutral people are defined as people we see regularly but don't pay much attention to. We might choose our regular bank teller or a waitress at a local restaurant as our first neutral person. On one long retreat, I chose an old local gardener. I spent several days and nights picturing him and wishing him well in my meditation. Later I unexpectedly ran into him. Even though I didn't know his name, I was so happy to see him, I swooned: Oh, my beloved neutral person! Then I realized how many other neutral people I had ignored. As I included them in the practice of loving-kindness, my love grew deeper around me.

From neutral people, the practice of loving-kindness extends to difficult people and enemies. But this is not where we start. Only when our heart is open and our loving-kindness is strong do we bring in someone for whom we have strong aversion, someone by whom we've felt wronged, someone we've come to think of as an enemy. As we do, at first the heart shrivels and closes: After what you did to me, I'm never going to love or forgive you, ever. But as this hatred arises, we lose the joy of our own open heart. Seeing this, we understand the cost of hatred. We realize, for our own sake, that the cost is too high. Finally we think, OK, I'll forgive. I'll let even you into my loving-kindness—a little at first—so that I can keep my heart open. Through this repeated practice we learn to keep our heart open even in difficulty. As we cultivate this training in kindness, eventually we can end up like Dipa Ma, radiating love to all we meet.

My colleague Sylvia Boorstein tells of Phil, a Buddhist practitioner in New York who had worked with loving-kindness practice for years. One evening on a small side street in SoHo, a disheveled man with a scraggly beard and dirty blond hair accosted Phil, pointed a gun at him, and demanded his money. Phil was carrying more than six hundred dollars in his wallet and he handed it all over. The mugger shook his gun

and demanded more. Stalling for time, Phil gave him his credit cards and then the whole wallet. Looking dazed and high on some drug, the mugger said, "I'm gonna shoot you." Phil responded, "No, wait, here's my watch—it's an expensive one." Disoriented, the mugger took the watch, waved the gun, and said again, "I'm gonna shoot you." Somehow Phil managed to look at him with loving-kindness and said, "You don't have to shoot me. You did good. Look, you got nearly seven hundred dollars; you got credit cards and an expensive watch. You don't have to shoot me. You did really good." The mugger, confused, lowered the gun slowly. "I did good?" he asked. "You did really good. Go and tell your friends, you did good." Dazed, the mugger wandered off, saying softly to himself, "I did good."

Whenever our goodness is seen, it is a blessing. Every culture and tradition understands the importance of seeing one another with love. An old Hasidic rabbi once asked his pupils how they could tell exactly when the night had ended and the day begun (daybreak is the time for certain holy prayers). "Is it when you can see an animal in the distance and tell whether it is a sheep or a dog?" one student proposed. "No," answered the rabbi. "Is it when you can clearly see the lines on your own palm?" another asked. "Is it when you can look at a tree in the distance and tell if it is a fig or a pear tree?" "No," answered the rabbi each time. "Then, what is it?" the pupils demanded. "It is when you can look on the face of any man or woman and see that they are your sister or brother. Until then it is still night."

Natural Joy

When Harvard psychologist Jack Engler was doing his research with Dipa Ma, he asked her about one of the common misunderstandings of Buddhist teachings. "If we get rid of greed, hate, and ignorance, it sounds like life might become sort of gray and dull," he said. "Where's the juice?" Dipa Ma burst out laughing. "Oh, you don't understand! There is so much sameness in ordinary life. We are always experiencing everything through the same set of lenses. Once greed, hatred, and delusion are gone, you see everything fresh and new all the time. Every moment is new. Life was dull before. Now, every day, every moment, is full of taste and zest."

When love meets pain, it becomes compassion and there will be

many pages devoted to the path of compassion later in this book. When love meets happiness, it becomes joy. Joy is an expression of the liberated and awakened heart. A few years ago the Dalai Lama was cohost of a large scientific meeting in Washington, D.C. He met with physicians, neuroscientists, and several Buddhist teachers (including myself) to explore the latest clinical research on meditation and neurobiology. One morning a network television reporter interviewed him and asked about meditation and happiness. "You're the author of *The New York Times* best-selling book *The Art of Happiness,* and you frequently teach about happiness. Could you tell our viewers about the happiest moment in your life?" The Dalai Lama considered for a moment, smiled, and said, "I think, now."

When we live in the present, joy arises for no reason. This is the happiness of consciousness that is not dependent on particular conditions. Children know this joy. Maurice Sendak, author of *Where the Wild Things Are,* tells the story of a boy who wrote to him. "He sent me a charming card with a drawing. I loved it. I answer all my children's letters—sometimes very hastily—but this one I lingered over. I sent him a postcard and I drew a picture of a Wild Thing on it. I wrote, 'Dear Jim, I loved your card.' Then I got a letter back from his mother and she said, 'Jim loved your card so much he ate it.' That to me was one of the highest compliments I've ever received. He didn't care that it was an original drawing or anything. He saw it, he loved it, he ate it."

Joy can come spontaneously in deep meditation. Students describe trembling, tears of laughter, cool waves, ripples of ecstasy, floating joy, joy like turquoise water, bodily thrilling, grateful joy, playful and delighting joy, and ecstasy of stillness. They describe joy in the body, heart, and mind, joy in the beauty of the world, and joy in the happiness of others.

Nonetheless, sometimes people mistake Buddhism for a pessimistic view of life. Certainly the Noble Truths teach about suffering and its causes, and in Buddhist countries there are a few very serious, grim, duty-type meditation masters. I myself, like many other Westerners, sought them out. I was so determined to transform myself and maybe to discover some special experiences that I went to the strictest monasteries and retreats, where we practiced eighteen hours a day and sat unmoving in the face of enormous pain. And at these monasteries I learned many important things.

But somehow in the seriousness of my quest, I failed to notice the extraordinary buoyancy of the Buddhist cultures around me. Thai, Lao, Tibetan, Burmese, and Nepali cultures are lighthearted; the people are filled with laughter. The children enchant you with their happy smiles. The grown-ups work, play, and pray with a light spirit. Seeking austerity, we serious Westerners failed to notice that most Buddhist temples are a riot of colors, filled with elaborate paintings and statues and images of fantastic stories of angels, *devas*, bodhisattvas, and buddhas. We ignored the playful community life that centered around the temples, the cycles of rituals, dances, celebrations, feasts, and festivals. In our ardor, we did not appreciate how many of our greatest teachers—Ajahn Chah, Maha Ghosananda, Ananda Maitreya, the Sixteenth Karmapa Lama, Anagarika Munindra—had marvelous, easy laughs and an infectious sense of joy.

When I returned to the United States and began to teach, my colleagues and I tended to emphasize the Buddha's teaching on suffering and the need to awaken. We were young and the focus on human suffering gave our retreats gravitas. But suffering is not the goal, it is the beginning of the path. Now in the retreats I teach, I also encourage participants to awaken to their innate joy. From the very beginning I encourage them to allow the moments of joy and well-being to deepen, to spread throughout their body and mind. Many of us are conditioned to fear joy and happiness, yet joy is necessary for awakening. As the Persian mystic Rumi instructs us, "When you go to a garden, do you look at thorns or flowers? Spend more time with roses and jasmine." André Gide, the French novelist and philosopher, enjoins us, "Know that joy is rarer, more difficult, and more beautiful than sadness. Once you make this all-important discovery, you must embrace joy as a moral obligation."

Psychologists working with the Tibetan community in exile have noted the remarkable resiliency and joyfulness among the people, even though many are survivors of great trauma and loss. Most surprising are the responses of nuns and monks who have been imprisoned and tortured. According to a study by Harvard psychologists, many show few or none of the ordinary signs of trauma, but instead have deepened in compassion and joyful appreciation of life. Their trainings in loving-kindness, compassion, and wisdom led them to pray for their enemies. One old lama recounted that over the twenty years of prison and

torture, his only true fear was that he would lose his compassion and close his heart. If we want to understand optimal mental health, these monks and nuns are a striking example.

Debra Chamberlin-Taylor, a Buddhist teacher and colleague, tells the story of a community activist who participated in her yearlong training group for people of color. This woman had experienced a childhood of poverty, trauma, and abuse. She had faced the death of a parent, illness, divorce from a painful marriage, racism, and the single parenting of two children. She talked about her years of struggle to educate herself, to stand up for what she believed. She described how she had become a radical to fight for justice in local and national politics. Finally, at the last meeting, this woman announced, "After all the struggles and troubles I've lived through, I've decided to do something really radical! I am going to be happy."

Just as we can awaken to loving-kindness and compassion, we can awaken to joy. It is innate to consciousness. As we find it in ourselves, we can see it in others. On one long spring retreat, Lorna, a young woman, came to me to talk about her reaction to one of the retreatants. She was having trouble with a big man seated nearby. He moved too often. Bud was an old ex-marine whose T-shirts revealed lots of tattoos. He smelled of tobacco smoke. His energy frightened her. Lorna tried to understand. She used loving-kindness practice and discovered how Bud triggered her painful history with men. Gradually, Lorna realized that most of what bothered her was her own imagination. Still, it seemed like a scary thing to talk to someone like Bud. Then, in the last week of the retreat, Lorna came in to see me, grinning. "I'm not afraid of him anymore." She explained that after breakfast she had walked down to the stream below the dining hall. She came upon the marine there among the banks of flowers, cupping each one deliberately in his hands to smell its fragrance. On the last day of the retreat, I saw Lorna in a joyful and animated conversation with Bud, standing near the flowers.

Like loving-kindness, there is a practice for joy. We begin by picturing someone we love as they experience a happy moment. We feel their well-being. Then we recite the intention "May your happiness and joy increase. May the causes for your happiness increase," repeating these intentions again and again, through any resistance, through tiredness, comparing, or jealousy, over and over until our sense of joy becomes strong. Next, we systemically extend this practice to others we love, one

after another, until the quality of joy in their happiness grows even more available. Then we turn the practice of joy to ourselves, including our own joy and happiness in the well-wishing. From this we systemically and gradually open our practice of joy to all categories of beings. As we train ourselves to celebrate the joy and success of others, we awaken the radiant abode of joy. With joy, whatever we do becomes holy. Martin Luther King, Jr., understood this when he said, "If a person sweeps streets for a living, he should sweep them as Michelangelo painted, as Beethoven composed music, as Shakespeare wrote his plays."

As a support for the cultivation of joy, we can also include the practice of gratitude. Buddhist monks begin each day with a chant of gratitude for the blessings of their life. In the same way, Native American elders begin each ceremony with grateful prayers to Mother Earth and Father Sky, to the four directions, and to the animal, plant, and mineral brothers and sisters who share our earth and support our life.

Gratitude is a gracious acknowledgment of all that sustains us, a bow to our blessings, great and small. Gratitude is confidence in life itself. In it we feel how the same force that pushes grass through cracks in the sidewalk invigorates our own life. In Tibet, the monks and nuns offer prayers of gratitude even for the suffering they have experienced: "Grant that I might have enough suffering to awaken in me the deepest possible compassion and wisdom." Gratitude does not envy or compare. Gratitude receives in wonder the myriad offerings of rain and sunlight, the care that supports every single life.

As gratitude grows, it gives rise to joy. We experience the courage to rejoice in our own good fortune and in the good fortune of others. In joy, we are not afraid of pleasure. We do not mistakenly believe it is disloyal to the suffering of the world to honor the happiness we have been given. Joy gladdens the heart. We can be joyful for people we love, for moments of goodness, for sunlight and trees, and for the very breath within our lungs. Like an innocent child, we can rejoice in life itself, in being alive.

The world we live in is a temple, and the miraculous light of the first stars is shining through it all the time. In place of original sin, we celebrate original goodness. Saint Teresa of Ávila explains, "God does not desire the soul to undertake any labor, but only to take delight in the first fragrance of the flowers . . . the soul can obtain sufficient nourishment from its own garden." In every meeting of the eyes and every

leafing tree, in every taste of tangerine and avocado, a blessing occurs. This is true mental health.

FREEDOM HERE AND NOW

The radiant abodes express the fruit of mental development. When they are in balance, loving-kindness, compassion, and joy rest in an unshakable equanimity. This peace is not indifference or emotional resignation; it is the still point, the living reality of the present. This dynamic stillness is what Dipa Ma calls the crowning stage of Buddhist training, "where consciousness becomes a symphony of loving-kindness, playing in a silent ocean of equanimity."

We have now come full circle, arriving here where we started, and, as T. S. Eliot writes, "knowing the place for the first time." Coming to rest in the present, wherever we are, becomes the seat of awakening. We are now truly alive, able to care, to work, to love, to enter life fully, with an open heart. We see the lawfulness of life unfolding, the causes of sorrow, and the choice for freedom. We do whatever we can to reduce suffering, and all along we are free. This is the final message Buddhist teaching communicates to its followers: you are free. This freedom is the very nature of our own heart and mind.

Each of us will reflect our inner freedom in a unique way, through our temperament, body, and culture. There are those who express their freedom primarily through silence, others through joy. There are those who express freedom through peacefulness and others through service and love. A free and awakened consciousness is experienced as a many-faceted crystal. One facet is peace, another is love; one is strength, another is clarity; one is gratitude, others include integrity, compassion, courage, creativity, joyfulness, and abundance. Each of these qualities can fill consciousness and shine through our body, heart, and mind. This is not simply a metaphor. It becomes our actual experience. We are illuminated by these qualities, one or several at a time.

When we find freedom, even pain and illness become part of the grace of life, and they are our teachers. The Dalai Lama said, "When, at some point in our lives, we meet a real tragedy —which could happen to any one of us—we can react in two ways. Obviously, we can lose hope, let ourselves slip into discouragement, into alcohol, drugs, and unending sadness. Or else we can wake ourselves up, discover in ourselves an

energy that was hidden there, and act with genuine clarity and compassion." Imperfections are part of the display of life. Joy and sorrow, birth and death are the dance of existence throughout which our awakened consciousness can shine.

This perspective is called finding the goodness in everything. As proof of the human capacity to do so, here is a prayer written by an unknown prisoner in the Ravensbrück concentration camp and left beside the body of a dead child: "O Lord, remember not only the men and women of goodwill, but also those of ill will. But do not remember only the suffering they have inflicted on us; remember too the fruits we brought forth thanks to this suffering—our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of all this. And when they come to judgment, let all the fruits which we have borne be their forgiveness."

The Thai Buddhist teacher Ajahn Buddhadasa says that finding goodness everywhere allows us to be servants of peace. Buddhadasa means "servant of awakening" or "servant of peace." He called his monastery "the garden of peace." Amid the ancient forests, beautiful pools, bamboo, and stone sculptures, Ajahn Buddhadasa offered the teachings of loving-kindness, compassion, and peace. For fifty years, through cycles of war and truce, insurgency, simplicity, and modernization, tens of thousands came to hear his teachings of peace. As we awaken, we too become servants of peace, taking our place in the garden.

This is the culmination of the psychology of the wise heart. We are the beauty we have been seeking all our lives. We are consciousness knowing itself. Empty and spacious, compassionate and joyful, our very peace and equanimity begin to transform the world around us. Buddhist psychology helps us rediscover that freedom and joy are our original nature. "O Nobly Born, do not forget the luminous nature of your own mind. Trust it. It is home."

5

Make Your Heart a Zone of Peace

Dharma and Politics

Many Buddhist practitioners have questioned how to apply such teachings as mindfulness and loving-kindness in these turbulent times. The modern world is in need of a spiritual perspective. The dharma is a universal medicine. The teachings of generosity, virtue, loving-kindness, and wisdom are nonpartisan. The benefits of dharma teachings can be used by Republicans and by Democrats, by members of the Green Party and by Libertarians, by Iraqis and by Israelis. The dharma welcomes everyone and encourages all to awaken together.

But where, as dharma practitioners, do we start? In a complex political world how do we find a way toward peace? Our first task is to make our own heart a zone of peace. Instead of becoming entangled in the bitterness and cynicism that exist externally, we need to begin to heal those qualities within ourselves. We have to face our own suffering, our own fear, and transform them into compassion. Only then can we become ready to offer genuine help to the outside world. Albert Camus writes, "We all carry within us our places of exile, our crimes, our ravages. Our task is not to unleash them on the world; it is to transform them in ourselves."

Dharma practitioners who want to act in the sphere of politics must quiet their minds and open their hearts. Meditate, turn off the news, turn on Mozart, walk through the forest or the mountains, and begin to make yourselves peaceful. Make yourselves an example of peace, and allow the sensitivity and compassion that grows from our interconnec-

tion to extend to all beings. If we're not peaceful, how can we create harmony in the world? If our own minds are not peaceful, how can we expect peace to come through the actions that we take?

We can either react to terrorism and insecurity with fear—and create a frightened, barricaded society, a fortress America—or we can use the teachings of dharma to respond calmly, with both prudent action and a fearless, steady heart. Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh tells us of the boat people who fled Vietnam in the 1970s, writing, "When the crowded refugee boats met with storms or pirates, if everyone panicked, all would be lost. But if even one person stayed calm, it was enough. It showed the way for everyone to survive."

Through practice, we can learn to make our own hearts a place of peace and integrity. With a quiet mind and an open heart we can sense the reality of interdependence. Inner and outer are not separate. We are all in the same boat. Once we see this clearly, we can extend the same principles of love and mindfulness to every area. Buddhist teachings explain that life cannot be divided into compartments. Our relationships with others, right speech, right action, right livelihood, are all part of the eightfold path. They are factors of enlightenment. Our relations and our society as a whole are expressions of the enlightened heart. Thus we can understand Gandhi's challenge: "Those who say spirituality has nothing to do with politics, they do not know what spirituality really means."

As we understand this, our task is to see for ourselves what is needed to bring to benefit to the world. How does peace come about? What are the conditions for peace? The Buddha taught that peace is possible both individually and collectively but that it depends on skillful causes and conditions. Inner peace requires mindfulness, compassion, and respect. Outwardly, it grows from the same conditions. When asked about the creation of a wise society, the Buddha counseled visiting ministers that when a society comes together to make decisions in harmony, when it honors its elders and the wise ways they have established, when it cares for its most vulnerable members—women and children—when it respects the environment and listens to its citizens and its neighbors, it can be expected to prosper and not decline. For the Buddha, a wise society is not based on greed, on hatred or delusion, but on generosity, respect, mindfulness, and compassion.

In the modern political climate we are bombarded with propaganda from every political point of view. This dulls the senses and

overpowers our inner value system. Whatever our political perspective, we will encounter troubling images and feel anger, frustration, even outrage and impatience. If we stop and breathe and meditate, we will feel underneath these reactions our fear, and under this our caring and connection. If our actions come from this deep sense of caring, they will bring greater benefit and greater peace. From a quiet heart, we have the ability to look and see how our society treats its most vulnerable members. How does it treat the poor, the elderly, and the young? Is it acting in ways that foster greed, hate, fear, and ignorance? What can we do nationally and internationally to support generosity and respect, to end racism and exploitation, and to minimize violence? What rings true for each of us as followers of the dharma? We need to take an honest look and see what we are supporting as a society. And then we speak out truthfully, and stand up for what is wise.

America has sometimes confused power with greatness. But genuine greatness is not a matter of mere power; it is a matter of integrity. When we envision a society of compassion and justice—and as a nation we are called upon to do this—our actions can stem from respect for all beings, and peace is the result.

Once we have looked clearly, we can set a long-term intention and dedicate ourselves to a vision of a wise and compassionate society. This is a bodhisattva's act. Like setting the compass of the heart, this intention expresses our deepest values. If we set a long-term intention, it remains empowering no matter who wins a particular election, or what governments rise and fall. It becomes our way of practice. Thomas Merton taught, "Do not worry about immediate results. More and more you must concentrate on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself." With a dedicated intention we are willing to face the sufferings of the world and not shy away, to follow what we know is true, however long it takes. This is a powerful act of the heart, to stay true to our values and live by them.

A beautiful example of a long-term intention was presented by A. T. Ariyaratane, a Buddhist elder, who is considered to be the Gandhi of Sri Lanka. For seventeen years there had been a terrible civil war in Sri Lanka. At one point, the Norwegians were able to broker peace, and once the peace treaty was in effect, Ariyaratane called the followers of his Sarvodaya movement together. Sarvodaya combines Buddhist principles of right livelihood, right action, right understanding, and com-

passion and has organized citizens in one-third of that nation's villages to dig wells, build schools, meditate, and collaborate as a form of spiritual practice. Over 650,000 people came to the gathering to hear how he envisioned the future of Sri Lanka. At this gathering he proposed a five-hundred-year peace plan, saying, "The Buddha teaches we must understand causes and conditions. It's taken us five hundred years to create the suffering that we are in now." Ari described the effects of four hundred years of colonialism, of five hundred years of struggle between Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists, and of several centuries of economic disparity. He went on, "It will take us five hundred years to change these conditions." Ariyaratane then offered solutions, proposing a plan to heal the country.

The plan begins with five years of cease-fire and ten years of rebuilding roads and schools. Then it goes on for twenty-five years of programs to learn one another's languages and cultures, and fifty years of work to right economic injustice, and to bring the islanders back together as a whole. And every hundred years there will be a grand council of elders to take stock on how the plan is going. This is a sacred intention, the long-term vision of an elder.

In the same way, if we envision the fulfillment of wisdom and compassion in the United States, it becomes clear that the richest nation on earth must provide health care for its children; that the most productive nation on earth must find ways to combine trade with justice; that a creative society must find ways to grow and to protect the environment and plan sustainable development for generations ahead. A nation founded on democracy must bring enfranchisement to all citizens at home and then offer the same spirit of international cooperation and respect globally. We are all in this together.

Seeing clearly, we need to act. To empower our vision, we need to start now, and be willing to plant seeds, for however long it takes, to benefit our society and ourselves. At Spirit Rock Meditation Center, Sylvia Boorstein has taught a class called Informed Citizenship as Spiritual Practice, which encourages people to ask themselves, What can I do as a wisdom holder, as a bodhisattva, and as a member of this society to best contribute to the world in these times? It might be registering people to vote, or working politically, or making our vision heard in organizations of power or in the government, speaking up or writing. It might include working with children, or helping to create a business

climate of responsibility and integrity, or working internationally, or tending to poverty, racism, and injustice locally. Each person has to find specific steps to offer their vision and energy to society, and to empower those around them. If we don't do this, change won't happen. The vision will not be fulfilled.

The Buddha's teachings of compassion and wisdom are empowering; they encourage us to act. Do not doubt that your good actions will bear fruit, and that change for the better can be born from your life. Gandhi reminds us, "I claim to be no more than an average person with less than average ability. I have not the shadow of a doubt that any man or woman can achieve what I have if he or she would simply make the same effort and cultivate the same hope and faith."

6

Our Children Will Learn What They Live

Becoming More Conscious Parents

JUST AS THERE IS an environmental crisis, and just as there are social and political crises, there is also a crisis in parenting. The same loss of connection with nature, the same loss of community and village, the same loss of the values of the heart that creates these other crises creates the crisis in child rearing.

Some days, I find it a terrible thing to go to the supermarket. I'll see a two-year-old boy walking alongside his mother or father, and the boy accidentally knocks something over. Immediately the parent turns back, smacks the kid, and yells, "Don't you dare do that!" And the poor toddler is shaken up and doesn't understand. What do they want from me? he wonders. I'm just learning to walk. It was an accident. Right then, this child learns that he's bad, and he also learns that if you don't like what happens, you hit somebody.

It's not that these parents don't love their kids, but that they don't know what to do. Often mama and papa are tired. They've got three kids and financial troubles or a bad marriage, and they haven't been sleeping well. All those difficulties enter into the way they relate to their children.

Even when you don't actually see the parenting, you can see its effect on the children. From time to time, I used to volunteer in an elementary school class. Nearly half the children live in single-parent homes. When I worked in the classroom, I saw kids who lived in the

midst of family crises or were being raised primarily by TV and fast food. You can feel their pain, their fears, their confusion, and self-doubt.

At the other extreme are the many children suffering from the "hurried-child syndrome" or from the hovering of "helicopter parents," who seem always to be there, pushing their children to become successful even before they reach kindergarten. Frequently, the effect of all this is that by age eight these kids are being treated by doctors because they're suffering from stress, fatigue, and the fear that they will not get into an elite university.

But no one is allowed to say anything to parents in supermarkets and playgrounds or even to the parents of your child's classmates. It's a taboo, as if children are their parents' possessions. Yet parents are also beset by guilt, worry, pain, and fear of doing it right or wrong.

THE LOSS OF COMMUNITY

Our country's postindustrial culture has left us to raise our children apart from a community of neighbors and wise elders. There aren't many grandparents around—they all live somewhere else or they're at work, like most of the parents.

Instead of village elders, American parents have turned to various "experts" and whatever fad or theory those experts have come up with. In the 1920s, an influential school of child psychology actually taught parents that it was bad to touch their children. Several decades later, parents all across America read books that insisted that we bottle-feed (not breast-feed) an infant every four hours and that we should not pick up a crying baby but just let him "cry himself out."

Other cultures know that when babies cry, they cry for a reason, and that that is when to pick them up and feed them or hold them and comfort them. Countless educators and psychologists have been working in recent years to restore our respect for children from the first year of life.

When children are valued in this way, the whole of society benefits. In this spirit, there's a tribe in West Africa whose members count the birthday of a child from the day the child is first a thought in its mother's mind. On that day, a woman goes out and sits under a tree and quietly listens and waits until she can hear the song of her child. When she has heard the song, she returns to her village and teaches it to the

man whom she has envisioned as the child's father so that they can sing the song when they make love, inviting their child to join them. The expectant mother then sings this song to the child in her womb and teaches it to the midwives, who sing it when the child is born. And the villagers all learn the child's song, so that whenever the child cries or hurts itself, they pick it up, hold it in their arms, and sing the song. The song is also sung when the young man or woman goes through a rite of passage, when he or she marries, and then, for a last time, when he or she is about to die.

What a beautiful way for human beings to listen to and to comfort other human beings! To know each other's song. This is the spirit of conscious parenting, to listen to the song of the child in front of you and to sing that child's song to him or her. When a child is crying, we need to ask why this child is singing the crying song, what frustration this child is feeling.

CHILDREN WITH A HOLE INSIDE

Yet when our culture tells us to ignore our instincts, to distrust our intuition, children grow up raised more by electronic screens than by an adult. The average American child sees, via the modern media, tens of thousands of murders and violent acts, and an ocean of advertisements. We're raising our children on violence and materialism. We are feeding the next generation the recipe for the very greed and hate we later attempt to undo in our spiritual practice. With the highest rate of infant mortality of any industrialized nation and millions of "latchkey kids," we have given up caring for our children. An increasing number are raised by day care and TV. We will end up with a new generation of Americans more wired by texts and tweets and more connected to TV and video games (often violent ones) than to other people. We will have more wars and violent crimes than successful marriages. It is a questionable experiment to raise our children more with screens and electronics than with people. Yet when children are not held enough when they are young, not valued enough and respected enough, not listened to or sung to, they can grow up with a hole inside, with no real sense of what it means to love, with no real capacity for intimacy.

The Dalai Lama, speaking with a group of Western psychologists, said that he couldn't understand why he heard so much talk about

self-hatred and unworthiness. He was so astonished that he went around the room and asked everyone, "Do you feel unworthiness and self-hatred sometimes?" "Yes." "Do you feel it?" "Yes." Everyone in the room nodded yes. He couldn't believe it. He was also astonished that in our culture people more commonly talk about their difficulty with their parents instead of honoring their parents.

Contrast this with stories of the healthy childhoods of the people of the Buddha's time. The Buddha himself was raised by his mother's sister after his mother died, and he was given all the nurturance, natural respect, care, and attention that every child needs. Later, when he left home to practice as a yogi, he had the inner strength and integrity to undertake six years of intensely ascetic practice—he followed every available ascetic discipline, hoping through them to rid himself of his desires and fears, to overcome his anger, and to master his body and mind. The rigors almost killed him, but he did not succeed in the fight against himself.

Exhausted by this struggle, he sat down, and a vision came to him from his childhood that led directly to the path of his enlightenment. He remembered being a young boy sitting in his father's garden under a rose apple tree. It was at the time of the spring plowing festival. He remembered sitting there and experiencing a sense of stillness and wholeness, a state of great concentration and wonderful well-being. He realized that ascetic self-denial had taken him in the wrong direction and that the basis for spiritual life was well-being—not fighting against one's body, heart, and mind. From this great insight he discovered the Middle Way between denial and indulgence. He then took nourishment and began to care for himself. His strength returned, his loving-kindness returned, and eventually he became enlightened.

The Buddha had this vision of well-being from his childhood to draw upon in his practice. Many of us, though, have not had such an experience as children. And so the first years of our spiritual practice are spent dealing with grief, unworthiness, judgment, self-hatred, abuse, addiction, rage. This is common in our culture. Of course, spiritual practice brings us to face the deep grief and sorrow and pain of the world, but for Americans, much of our pain is a hole in our souls, and empty space in ourselves that longs to be connected, that longs for intimacy and love. We all face this to the extent that we didn't experience

a sense of well-being in childhood. For the next generation, this suffering will be even more pervasive unless we bring a healing wisdom to parenting.

PARENTING AS PRACTICE

Parenting is a labor of love. It's a path of service and surrender and, like the practice of a Buddha or a bodhisattva, it demands patience and understanding and tremendous sacrifice. It is also a way to reconnect with the mystery of life and to reconnect with ourselves. Young children have that sense of mystery. When my daughter Caroline was seven, I could see her sense of mystery getting fainter. That Christmas she announced, "I don't believe in Santa Claus anymore. My friends told me. Besides which, I don't see how he could fit down our chimney. He's too big."

At seven, she began to trade in the mystery of things for concrete explanations. Up until then she had mostly been living in a mythological, timeless world, where reindeer fly and Santa Claus appears. Then she grew bigger and decided to take out the tape and measure the width of the chimney. But long after she proclaims herself "too old" to believe in Santa Claus, there will be new mysteries. Anyone who has teenage kids is reminded that no one understands the mystery of sex. Teenagers don't ask you directly about it, but you can feel it in the air. As teenagers grapple with love and sex and hormones and embarrassment, we do too. "What did you do in school today?" a father asks his teenage son. "Oh, we had sex ed," he replies. "What did they tell you?" "Well, first a priest told us why we shouldn't. Then a doctor told us how we shouldn't. Finally the principal gave us a talk on where we shouldn't."

Children give us the opportunity to awaken, to look at ourselves, our lives, and the mystery around us with beginner's mind. Suppose we look at child rearing in the spirit of the Buddha's discourses on mindfulness. In the text, we are instructed to pay attention to breathing in and out; to be aware when standing up, bending, stretching, or moving forward or backward; to be aware when eating or sitting or going to the bathroom; to be aware when the mind is contracted, fearful, or agitated; and to be aware as we learn to let go, when the mind is balanced and filled with equanimity and understanding and peace. To further develop our awareness, the Buddha recommends sitting in meditation,

practicing by staying up all night and contemplating the sickness of the body or aging, developing a loving empathy for the suffering of all beings, and bringing wisdom and compassion to them.

Suppose the Buddha gave similarly detailed instructions for using parenting as practice. It would be a nearly identical teaching. We would be instructed to be as mindful of our children's bodies as we are of our own. To be aware as they walk and eat and go to the bathroom. Then, instead of sitting up all night in meditation, we can sit up mindfully all night when our children are sick. We can be mindful when they're afraid and when it's time to hold them or comfort them with loving-kindness and compassion. We can practice patience and surrender. We can become aware of our own reactions and grasping. We can learn to let go over and over and over again as our children age. This is giving generously to the garden of the next generation, for giving and awareness is the path of awakening.

CONSCIOUS PARENTING

Along with undertaking the practice of mindfulness, I suggest four other principles of conscious parenting: attentive listening, respect, integrity, and loving-kindness. The principle of attentive listening means listening to the Tao of our children's seasons, bringing awareness to our human intuition and our instincts, to our children. Here's a story about listening: A five-year-old boy was watching the news with his father during the Persian Gulf War. The boy kept asking his father questions: "How big is the war? How did it start? What is war?" The father tried to explain why countries went to war, why some people thought wars were necessary and other people thought wars were wrong. But the boy kept asking the same questions night after night. Finally, the father heard what his son was really asking, and he sat the little boy down and said, "You don't have to worry. We are safe here. Our house is not going to be bombed. We will be safe, and we will do whatever we can to help keep other families safe." Then the little boy became peaceful because that was the reassurance his heart had been asking for.

This is the principle of attentive listening. Do we hear what our children are trying to tell us? It's like listening to the Tao. How long should we nurse our babies, or how late should we allow our teenagers to stay out on dates? To answer those questions, we have to listen and

pay attention to the rhythms of life. Just as we learn to be aware of breathing in and breathing out, we can learn to sense how deeply children want to grow. Just as we learn in meditation to let go and trust, we can learn to develop a trust in our children so that they can trust themselves.

Some of us are confused by children's needs for both dependency and independence, and instead of listening to them, we impatiently hurry them along. In an article on dependency in *Mothering,* a parenting magazine I respect, Peggy O'Mara, the editor, wrote,

> We have a cultural bias against dependency, against any emotion or behavior that indicates weakness. This is nowhere more tragically evident than in the way we push our children beyond their limitations and timetables. We establish outside standards as more important than inner experience when we wean our children rather than trusting that they will wean themselves, when we insist that our children sit at the table and finish their meals rather than trusting that they will eat well if healthful food is provided on a regular basis, and when we toilet train them at an early age rather than trusting that they will learn to use the toilet when they are ready to do so.
>
> It is the nature of the child to be dependent and it is the nature of dependence to be outgrown. Dependency, insecurity, and weakness are natural states for a child. They're the natural states of all of us at times, but for children, especially young ones, they are predominant conditions and they are outgrown. Just as we grow from crawling to walking, from babbling to talking, from puberty into sexuality, as humans we move from weakness to strength, from uncertainty to mastery. When we refuse to acknowledge the stages prior to mastery, we teach our children to hate and distrust their weaknesses, and we start them on a journey of a lifetime of conflict, conflict with themselves, using external standards to set up an inner duality, a conflict between what is immediately their experience and how they're supposed to be. Begrudging dependency because it is not independence is like begrudging winter because it is not yet spring. Dependency blossoms into independence in its own sweet time.

We need to relearn how to value dependence and interdependence with patience and mindfulness; this is at the heart of both parenting and our spiritual practice. A more mature way to understand this dynamic is the emphasis Buddhist teaching places not on independence but on interdependence. When our children are taught to value their place in the web of life, they grow to honor their place and contribution at every stage of development. They learn to trust their bodies, their instincts, their feelings, and their own minds. With interdependence they also learn to value the feelings, connections, and collaboration with others. Unfortunately for all children, most especially for teenage girls, our ambitious society devalues these very qualities, and the wisdom of the feminine they carry is undermined along with their own vision and self-confidence.

This leads to the second principle for parenting, which is respect. All beings on earth—pets, plants, coworkers, lovers, children—thrive on respect, bloom when treated with respect. A story: A family settled down for dinner at a restaurant. The waitress took the orders of the adults, then turned to the seven-year-old. "What will you have?" she asked. The boy looked around the table timidly and said, "I would like to have a hot dog." "No," the mother interrupted, "not a hot dog. Get him meat loaf with mashed potatoes and carrots." As she turned to go, the waitress asked the boy, "Do you want ketchup or mustard on your hot dog?" "Ketchup," he said. "Coming up," she said, and she started for the kitchen. There was a stunned silence at the table. Finally, the boy looked at his family and said, "You know what? She thinks I'm real."

I saw the power this respect holds in traditional cultures on our family sabbatical to Thailand and Bali. My daughter Caroline studied Balinese dance for two months with a wonderful teacher, and he proposed to stage a farewell recital for her at his school, which is also his home. When we arrived, they set up the stage, got the music ready, and then started to dress Caroline. They took a very long time dressing a six-year-old whose average attention span is about five minutes. First they draped her in a silk sarong, with a beautiful chain around her waist. Then they wrapped embroidered silk fifteen times around her chest. They put on gold armbands and bracelets. They arranged her hair and put golden flowers in it. They put on more makeup than a six-year-old could dream of. Meanwhile, I sat there getting impatient, the proud

father eager to take pictures. It was getting dark. "When are they going to finish dressing her and get on with the recital?" Thirty minutes, forty-five minutes. Finally the teacher's wife came out and took off her own golden necklace and put it around my daughter's neck. Caroline was thrilled.

When I let go of my impatience, I realized what a wonderful thing was happening. In Bali, whether a dancer is six or twenty-six, she is equally honored and respected. She is an artist who performs not for the audience but for the gods. The level of respect that Caroline was given as an artist allowed her to dance beautifully. Imagine how you would feel if you were given that respect as a child. We need to learn respect for ourselves, for one another, to value our children through valuing their bodies, their feelings, their minds. Children may be limited in what they can do, but their spirit isn't limited.

Another measure of respect comes in the setting of boundaries and limits appropriate to our child. As parents, we can set limits in a respectful way, with a compassionate no and an explanation of why something is out of bounds.

Sometimes, if we didn't get respect ourselves when we were children, we may have such a hole in our spirit that we need therapy and spiritual practice to make ourselves whole again. We may need to relearn self-respect before we can treat our children with respect or teach them self-respect. Children are aware of how we treat them, but they are also aware of how we treat ourselves, how we treat our bodies, how we respect our own feelings. Is it OK for us to cry or to touch one another or to be sad or angry?

That leads me to a third principle, integrity. Children learn by example, by who we are and what we do. They watch us, and we communicate to them by the way we live, the way we talk about others, and how we treat people on the street. Another story: An old sailor gave up smoking when his pet parrot developed a persistent cough. He was worried that the pipe smoke was damaging his parrot's health. He had a vet examine the bird. After a thorough checkup, the vet concluded that the parrot didn't have a respiratory disease. It had merely been imitating the cough of its pipe-smoking owner.

This is how children learn. We teach them by our being. Are we at ease or are we agitated, are we impatient or are we forgiving? Students

used to ask the Tibetan master Kalu Rinpoche, "At what stage should we start to teach our children meditation and spiritual practice?" He said, "How do you know that you should teach it to them at all? Don't bother doing that. What your children need to learn is what you communicate from how you are. What matters is not that you give them any spiritual practice but that you do your own."

In a similar vein, Dorothy Law Nolte has written a poem:

Children Learn What They Live

If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn.
If children live with hostility, they learn to fight.
If children live with ridicule, they learn to feel shy.
If children live with shame, they learn to feel guilty.
If children live with encouragement, they learn confidence.
If children live with tolerance, they learn patience.
If children live with praise, they learn appreciation.
If children live with acceptance, they learn to love.
If children live with approval, they learn to like themselves.
If children live with honesty, they learn truthfulness.
If children live with security, they learn to have faith in themselves and in those about them.
If children live with friendliness, they learn the world is a nice place in which to live.

If we are to offer this kind of respect and integrity to our children, we have to slow down, to make time for our children, to participate in their schools. If you don't have a child of your own, befriend a neighbor's child, or help the children of a refugee family in your community. Often we think that we're too busy, that we should be working longer hours to earn more money; there's great social pressure to work and to produce. Let's not fall for that. Let's take the time to raise our kids, to play with them, to read to them. Let's allow our children to help each of us reclaim the spirit of our child.

The last principle of conscious child rearing is loving-kindness. The central image in the Buddha's teaching of loving-kindness is a mother "holding and protecting her beloved child." Develop loving-kindness for yourself, for your own children, and for all beings in the world.

Many of us try to control kids with discipline, by shaming them, by hitting them, by blaming them. But when we come to sit in meditation, we see how much pain we carry from blaming ourselves. We find judgment and shame and scolding whenever we try to sit quietly. How hard we are on ourselves. We were not born being hard on ourselves; we learned it from parents and at school. "You can't draw well," many of us were told. And we stopped doing the beautiful drawing that every child knows how to do, and we haven't drawn a picture since third grade. How sad it is when instead of receiving loving-kindness, a child is berated or shamed.

We live in a society that in many ways has forgotten how to love and support our children, that has lost the fundamental values of parenting. As the wisest traditional cultures remind us, we don't need more day care centers or more money, we need to regain respect and care and love for parenting. We all long to feel loving and to feel loved. We want to be the woman under the tree listening for the song of her child or the father making love and singing. We want to feel connectedness and community, to touch one another and to be held by one another, to feel that the child in each one of us is honored and respected.

Parenting gives us the chance to astonish ourselves with love. We've all heard stories of mothers and fathers doing superhuman deeds to rescue their children. I read in the newspaper about a paraplegic mother whose youngest daughter fell into a swimming pool. The mother rolled her wheelchair into the pool, and, somehow, grabbed her child, dragged her over to the side of the pool, and held on for hours until someone came to get them out.

Children can bring out this kind of love in us. They teach us that what really matters in life is love itself. As Mother Teresa said, "We cannot do great things in this life, we can only do small things with great love." It is through our parenting of our own children and the children around us and it is in supporting other parents and supporting our schools that we can reclaim or restore this love. The Buddha taught us that the only way we can begin to repay our own parents and all the generations before us is by bringing the dharma—which means respect, integrity, awareness, truth, and loving-kindness—to our parents, to our children, to all of life.

If we are to be a humane society, we must feed the children who are