Bestselling author of
Buddhism Plain and Simple

Buddhism
is not what you think

Finding Freedom Beyond Beliefs

Steve Hagen

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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BUDDHISM IS NOT WHAT YOU THINK

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To all my students

The foolish reject what they see, not what they think; the wise reject what they think, not what they see.

—*Huang Po*

Prologue

See for Yourself

People say that practicing Zen is difficult, but there is a misunderstanding as to why. It is not difficult because it is hard to sit in the cross-legged position, or to attain enlightenment. It is difficult because it is hard to keep our mind pure and our practice pure in its fundamental sense.

—*Shunryu Suzuki*

THIS IS NOT A feel-good self-improvement book about how to become more spiritual. It's an intensely practical book about how to live our daily lives openly and honestly, with wisdom and compassion. It's a book about being awake to Reality—about being fully human.

In many ways this book reflects the words and actions of Gautama Siddhartha, known more commonly as the Buddha ("one who has awakened"). This book, however, is not an exploration of what the Buddha said and did; rather, it explores what the world reveals to all of us, right now, in *this moment.*

In his talks and dialogues, the Buddha was only pointing out what he saw and experienced directly. This book is based on the fact that this same vision and experience are available to all of us, without exception, right now.

The Buddha was not interested in theology or cosmology. He didn't speak on these subjects and in fact would not answer questions on them. His primary concerns were psychological, moral, and highly practical ones:

- How can we *see* the world as it comes to be in eachmoment rather than as what we think, hope, or fear it is?
- How can we base our actions on Reality rather thanon the longing and loathing ofour hearts and minds?
- How can we live lives that are wise, compassionate,and in tune with Reality?
- What is the experience ofbeing awake?

Can there be any questions about life that are more practical, down-to-earth, and immediately relevant than these?

After he responded to such questions, however, the Buddha asked people not to mindlessly accept his words but to investigate for themselves the immediate experience of Mind. "Be a light unto yourselves," he told his listeners. "Don't look for refuge to anyone besides yourselves." Over and over, he urged people: "Purify your own minds."

Yet the Buddha wasn't talking about wiping our minds clean of foul thoughts or inclinations. Such efforts can easily turn into a denial of our humanity—and, anyway, they don't work. Actively trying to purge ourselves of unwholesome thoughts only cuts us off and sets us apart from others. Soon we develop notions of how we're superior to those who don't follow our way. Such an approach itself gives off a foul odor. How can we purify our minds in this way when the very impulse to do so is already born of impurity?

In saying "purify your own minds," the Buddha was pointing to something very different. That "something very different" is the subject of this book: waking up.

This is why the Buddha urged people not to blindly follow traditions, reports, hearsay, opinions, speculation, or the authority of religious texts but to *see* and *know* for ourselves what is True—and, when we do, to take it up. He also urged us to *see* and

know for ourselves what is hurtful and divisive—and to give that up. The emphasis is always on *seeing* and *knowing,* not on thinking, calculating, and believing.

Two points should be mentioned here. First, as we will see, what we call "mind" turns out to be vastly more than the thoughts, images, emotions, explanations, and questions we think our brains churn out. In fact, there is another aspect of mind that is boundless and not limited to our personal experiences of thought and thing, yet it's completely accessible in every moment.

Second, certain themes necessarily emerge and reemerge as we investigate the subject of mind: attention, intention, honesty with oneself, wisdom, true compassion, and the pure, genuine, undiluted desire to wake up. These themes will intertwine more or less continuously throughout this book's forty-three chapters.

This book is organized in three sections. In part 1 we look at our confusion. Generally, for us, the world is muddy water. We don't *know* what's going on. We think we do, of course, much of the time. But when we look carefully, as we do in part 1, we can see a great deal of confusion within many of our common, unquestioned, everyday views of the world.

In part 2 we look again at our experience but now with a view that is less bound by our common assumptions, which are the source of virtually all of our confusion.

Finally, in part 3, we become aware that direct experience is the pure experience of Mind itself, yet it is not at all what we think.

This book focuses on the common yet generally unheeded confusion that underlies virtually all of the moment-by-moment questions and choices we face. It does not, however—and cannot—provide answers and correct options for you. Instead, it can help you do something far more valuable: recognize the

inappropriateness, and the futility, of how we usually approach life's most troubling issues. More valuable still, it can help us fully know lives of joy and freedom through the practice of pure awareness. In short, it can help us wake up and *see* Reality for ourselves.

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Those who do not understand the distinctions between the two truths (relative andAbsolute) do not understand the profound truth embodied in the Buddha's message.

—*Nagarjuna*

When we see a relative truth—as in "I see the book before me"—we employ the conventional use of the term "to see." The *seeing* of ultimate Reality, however, is quite another matter. When such objectless Awareness—*seeing, knowing,* etc.—is referred to in this book, the word will be italicized. This should not be mistaken for merely emphasizing those words.

Similarly, initial capital letters will be used in words that reflect the Absolute aspect of experience—i.e., Truth, Awareness, Reality, etc.

PART ONE

Muddy Water

1

Paradox and Confusion

IF YOU VISIT a Buddhist temple in Japan, you'll likely encounter two gigantic, fierce, demonlike figures standing at either side of the entrance. These are called the guardians of Truth, and their names are Paradox and Confusion.

When I first encountered these figures, it had never occurred to me that Truth had guards—or, indeed, that it needed guarding. But if the notion had arisen in my mind, I suspect I would have pictured very pleasing, angelic figures.

Why were these creatures so terrifying and menacing? And why were the *guardians* of Truth represented rather than Truth itself?

Gradually, I began to see the implication. There can be no image of Truth. Truth can't be captured in an image or a phrase or a word. It can't be laid out in a theory, a diagram, or a book. Whatever notions we might have about Truth are incapable of bringing us to it. Thus, in trying to take hold of Truth, we naturally encounter paradox and confusion.

It works like this: though we experience Reality directly, we ignore it. Instead, we try to explain it or take hold of it through ideas, models, beliefs, and stories. But precisely because these things *aren't* Reality, our explanations naturally never match actual experience. In the disjoint between Reality and our explanations of it, paradox and confusion naturally arise.

Furthermore, any accurate statement we would make about Truth must contain within itself its own demise. Thus such a statement inevitably will appear paradoxical and contradictory. In other words, statements about Truth and Reality are not like ordinary statements.

Usually we make a statement to single something out, to pin something down and make it unambiguous. Not so if our business is Truth. In this case we must be willing to encounter, rather than try to evade, paradox and confusion.

Our problem with paradox and confusion is that we insist on putting our direct experience into a conceptual box. We try to encapsulate our experience in frozen, changeless form: "this means that."

Ordinary statements don't permit paradox. Rather, they try to pin down their subjects and make them appear as real and solid as possible. Ordinary statements are presented in the spirit of "This is the Truth; believe it." Then we're handed something, often in the form of a book or a pamphlet.

But all statements that present themselves in this way—whether they're about politics, morality, economics, psychology, religion, science, philosophy, mathematics, or auto mechanics—are just ordinary stuff. They're not Truth; they're merely the attempt to preserve what necessarily passes away.

When we claim to describe what's Really going on by our words, no matter how beautiful, such words are already in error. Truth simply can't be re-presented.

We want Truth badly. We want to hold it tightly in our hand. We want to give it to others in a word or a phrase. We want something we can jot down. Something we can impress upon others—and impress others with.

We act as though Truth were something we could stuff in our pockets, something we could take out every once in a while to show people, saying, "Here, this is it!" We forget that they will show us *their* slips of paper, with other ostensible Truths written upon them.

But Truth is not like this. Indeed, how could it be?

We need only *see* that it's beyond the spin of paradox that Truth and Reality are glimpsed. If we would simply not try to pin Reality down, confusion would no longer turn us away.

What we can do is carefully attend to what's actually going on around us—and notice that our formulated beliefs, concepts, and stories never fully explain what's going on.

Our eyes must remain open long enough that we may be suddenly overwhelmed by a new experience—a new awareness—that shatters our habitual thought and our old familiar stories.

We can free ourselves from paradox and confusion only when we set ourselves in an open and inquiring frame of mind while ever on guard that we do not insist upon some particular belief, no matter how seemingly well justified.

If it's Truth we're after, we'll find that we cannot start with *any* assumptions or concepts whatsoever. Instead, we must approach the world with bare, naked attention, *seeing* it without any mental bias—without concepts, beliefs, preconceptions, presumptions, or expectations.

Doing this is the subject of this book.

2

Stepping on Reality

THE FIVE PRECEPTS, listed here, are generally recognized by most Buddhists, though they're expressed in a variety of forms. They're not commandments but descriptions of the moral stance that would necessarily be taken by one who is on the path to Awakening.

1. A follower of the Way does not kill.
2. A follower of the Way does not take what is not given.
3. A follower of the Way does not abuse the senses.
4. A follower of the Way does not speak deceptively.
5. A follower of the Way does not intoxicate oneself or others.

There are additional precepts in Buddhism as well. In all cases, however, if we are to think, speak, and act as moral agents, what we do must come out of wisdom and compassion—from *seeing*—and not from some structure imposed upon us.

There's a Zen story about a student who made a special point of keeping all the Buddhist precepts. Once, however, while walking at night, he stepped on something that made a squishing sound. He imagined that he must have stepped on an egg-bearing frog. Immediately he was filled with fear and regret, for the precepts include not killing. When he went to sleep that night he dreamed that hundreds of frogs came to him, demanding his life in exchange.

When morning came, he went back to the place the incident had occurred and found that he had stepped on an overripe eggplant. Suddenly his confusion stopped.

From that moment on, the story says, he knew how to practice Zen and how to truly follow the precepts.

Like many people who practice Buddhism sincerely, this student erroneously thought of the precepts as a training manual or code of behavior. Identifying himself as someone who had mastered this training and who could keep the precepts, he created all kinds of trouble for himself and for others. Although he could expound upon the precepts at length, when he stepped on something squishy in the night, his understanding of the precepts did nothing to bring him peace or stability of mind. In fact, it did just the opposite: he needlessly tortured himself with guilt.

The student's problem was that he thought he understood something that he didn't. He thought he had stepped on and killed a frog, but he hadn't. He also thought that he understood the precepts, but he was wrong here, too. In both cases, rather than honestly admitting and facing what he didn't know, he imagined he did know.

Because he had only an intellectual understanding of the precept against taking life, he was thrown into anguish. He had completely forgotten that in Reality he didn't know what he stepped on. And instead of living with that uncertainty, he made up an explanation for what happened—and made himself miserable believing it.

This story reminds us that if you hold the precepts in your mind, then you don't understand them, for the precepts are not anything you can grasp or package up into concepts.

To keep the Buddhist precepts, we simply must be *here*, immediately present with what's going on and not lost in thought

or speculation. We need to *see* what's going on in *this moment*—including what's going on in our own mind.

And when we don't know what's going on—when, for example, we step on something in the dark—then it means fully realizing that we don't know. This is the deeper understanding of this story—to *know* when you don't know.

We often think we *know* things when in fact it's only our imagination taking us further and further away from what is actually happening. What we imagine then seems very real to us. Soon we're caught up in our imaginary longings and loathings.

But if you're *here*—truly present—you realize there's nothing to run from or to go after. You can stay calm, even if you did accidentally step on a frog. Just be with *this moment* and *see* what's going on. Know your own mind.

This story is about how we conjure up imaginary worlds and trap ourselves in them. But if we would only look carefully, we would *see* that the world is not the way we think it is—and that it can never be the way we think it is.

We strive to master and control our imaginary worlds. We create all kinds of rules and regulations, goals and values, do's and don'ts, and we strive to become skilled in dealing with them all. This is where we expend so much of our time and energy yet exercise so little of our awareness.

What the Buddhist precepts are about is noticing how we do these things all the time. The precepts direct us to notice what's going on from moment to moment—to *see* what's going on in your mind right *now*. How does it lean—toward this or away from that?

The precepts help us to come back to *this moment*—where Reality is immediately experienced—before we interpret anything.

But any belief that evil is (or could ever be) separate from us leaves us struggling to keep evil ever at bay.

We see ourselves as divided and separated from experience. We see ourselves as experiencers of "that, out there." And when that, out there, seems to please or protect us, we call it good. Similarly, when it appears threatening or strange or terrifying, we call it evil. Thus our feeling of separateness is precisely what creates notions of good and evil in the first place.

Were we to *see* the world as it is, however, thoughts of good and evil simply would not arise.

Consider the utter foolishness with which we repeat (and feed) the cycle. First we imagine complete separateness, then we react emotionally to what we imagine. Then, based on our emotional responses—we fear this, we want that—we imagine mental objects that we call good and evil. But they're not real, as we imagine. They're phantoms we've created in response to other phantoms.

This problem has a more profound aspect. In our desperation to create and maintain our separateness from evil—in our futile attempts to do the impossible—we create all kinds of problems for ourselves and others. These problems in turn also get branded as evil. Sometimes we get branded as evil as well. And so the chain goes on and on. We would rather call down war upon ourselves and others, wallowing in and grasping at our conceptual distinctions, than notice the ungraspable world of Wholeness and Totality that we're already immersed in.

The fact is that we're always in (and part of) Totality. We cannot remove ourselves or anything else—any thought, any thing—from it.

If we were to *see* this, we'd have a completely different take on this matter of good and evil, one that would cease to embroil us in pain and confusion.

This is not to say that we don't experience things that are painful or sorrowful or difficult. But the awakened mind, which *sees* all experience as a Whole, doesn't see evil as such. It doesn't interpret experience as "something out there that threatens me." By the same token, it doesn't see good "out there" either, as something apart and separate.

In awakening to our experience as a Whole, we realize that it's this kind of thinking itself that is the problem. Here is the root of all our sorrow, pain, suffering, and confusion.

According to the Buddhadharma (the teaching of the Awakened), our effort is to live fully and compassionately in this world of muddy water without churning it up all the more. To do this, we only need to realize that whatever comes our way is already of the Whole and cannot be done away with. We need to take care of it on *this* ground where we find ourselves.

This is not to condone whatever brutality, rage, vengefulness, or destructiveness may arise. If there's confusion, maybe we can shed a little light. If there's pain, perhaps we can do something to ease it. If there's violence, it may be possible to absorb it—while also doing what can be done to reduce it.

The first thing *you* need to do, however, is observe your own mind.

We need to *see* that we're not—and never were and never will be—separate or removed from others. We need to look at our own minds honestly and dispassionately, noticing how they lean toward and away from the innumerable distractions and concepts they imagine.

This is why, in the *Dhammapada,* the Buddha gives us the admonition to purify our own minds. It's the last place we may want to look, but it's only *here* that we can live freely in the world without seeing others, or ourselves, as evil.

Our very quickness to express things in terms of good and evil is what creates divisiveness and human misery. When we *see* this, we can begin to act wisely.

When we catch ourselves adrift in our divisive thoughts, or when we get caught up in our judgments about "them" (or "us"), we can bring ourselves back to *this.* All we need is a little bit of attention, a little bit of reflection, and a little bit of patience.

See confusion as confusion. Acknowledge suffering as suffering. Feel pain and sorrow and divisiveness. Experience anger or fear or shock for what they are. But you don't have to think of them as evil—as intrinsically bad, as needing to be destroyed or driven from our midst. On the contrary, they need to be absorbed, healed, made whole.

Like ourselves, whatever we may want to call evil is already a part of the Whole and cannot be removed. To *see* in this way is to purify your own mind.

4

We've Got It All Backward

MANY PEOPLE put religion and science in separate, hermetically sealed boxes. Most of us, however, don't realize that many aspects of religion and science were conjoined for many centuries before we put them into these boxes. In fact, at one time, before science really came into its own, science and religion were one and the same.

This isn't really so strange when we note that their common origin lies in our deep desire to *know*, to *realize* Truth.

Consider, for example, what religion is actually about. The word *religion* came from *religio,* which meant "to bind back or very strongly to Truth." Thus the heart of religion is about *seeing* or experiencing Truth—not about holding a set of beliefs. *Religio* comes out of our deeply felt desire to get back to Truth. We don't want to be deceived.

Like religion, science is also about getting to Truth. The term *science* comes from the Latin *scire,* "to know." Science, as I've often heard it said by scientists themselves, is about knowing, not about believing.

But the place we tend not to look—the place we really get it backward, the place we really go wrong—is this area of belief. Indeed, as we commonly think of science and religion, each claims an attribute that more naturally (and properly) belongs to the other. While religion is commonly thought to be about belief, its natural

concern is actually with Knowledge, with *knowing*. And while science is thought to be about actual Knowledge, and fancies itself to be independent of belief, it is in fact inherently quite dependent upon it.

An article appeared not too long ago in the *New York Times* entitled "Crossing Flaming Swords over God and Physics." It was about a debate between Steven Weinberg, the Nobel laureate in physics, and John Polkinghorne, a knighted physicist and Anglican priest. It was presented as a match between the "believer" (Polkinghorne) and the "nonbeliever" (Weinberg). But, in fact, that's not what it was at all. Their interaction, as described in the article, almost "deteriorate[d] into a physical fight."

If Dr. Weinberg had been genuinely a nonbeliever, there would have been no problem. In fact, this event was not a debate between a nonbeliever and a believer but a confrontation between two ardent believers. It was a standoff between two men who believed two very different views.

The real issue is not science versus religion or even belief versus nonbelief. The most angry and virulent debates in the world (and the worst violent clashes) are inevitably between one believer and another. Once two headstrong believers spar off, the odds of coming to any amicable resolution are nil.

The fact is that science needs belief. It can't function without it. Science requires that we construct conceptualized versions of the world. It needs us to break the world apart so that we can examine it. This isn't wrong; indeed, there's great value in it. In this sense, then, science makes *greater* use of belief and is more dependent upon it than is religion.

world—that will save us, something that will serve as a go-between.

This all comes out of our confusion and out of the fear that we're somehow removed from Truth, that there's some innate separation in the first place.

But there isn't. And what we most need to do as human beings—and what religion, in its purest form, can help us do—is quiet down and realize this.

Shunryu Suzuki wrote in his first book, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind,*

> *I have discovered that it is necessary, absolutely necessary, to believe in nothing. That is, we have to believe in something which has no form and no color—something which exists before all forms and colors appear. This is a very important point.*

Or, as the ninth-century Chinese Zen teacher Huang Po put it, "The foolish reject what they *see,* not what they think; the wise reject what they think, not what they *see.*"

Instead of putting faith in what we believe, think, explain, justify, or otherwise construct in our minds, we can learn to put our trust and confidence in immediate, direct experience, before all forms and colors appear. Religion, in its most essential expression, can help us do this.

This is faith in its purest form: trust in actual experience before we make anything of it—before beliefs, thoughts, signs, explanations, justifications, and other constructions of our minds take form.

This is the great sanity, the great compassion, the great wisdom that religion holds for us. This sanity, compassion, and wisdom all come out of simply learning to trust that Truth is right at hand.

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