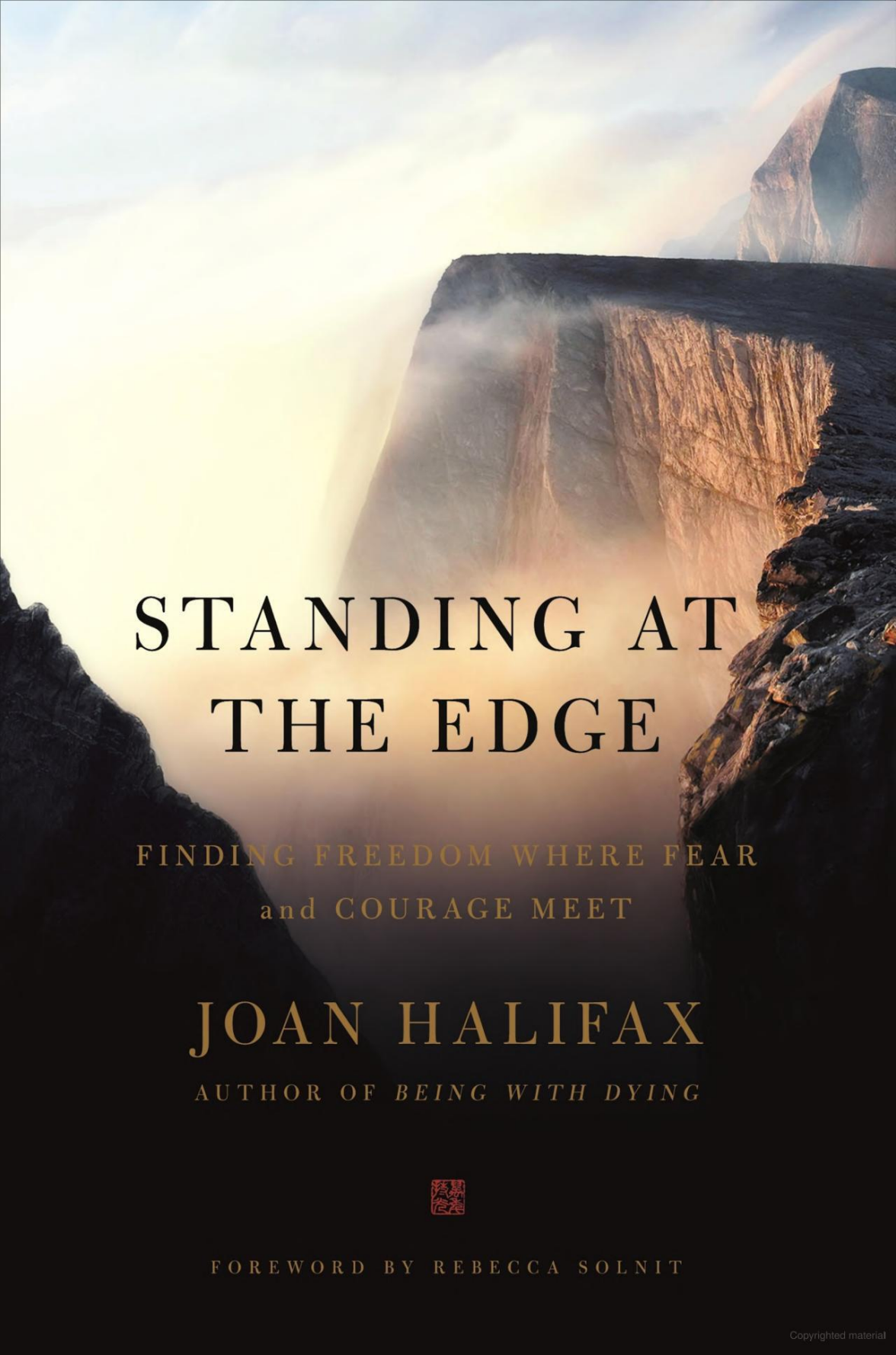

# STANDING AT THE EDGE

## FINDING FREEDOM WHERE FEAR and COURAGE MEET

JOAN HALIFAX

AUTHOR OF *BEING WITH DYING*

FOREWORD BY REBECCA SOLNIT

# STANDING AT THE EDGE

*Finding Freedom Where Fear and Courage Meet*

JOAN HALIFAX

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# FOREWORD

I'VE WALKED WITH Roshi Joan Halifax on the old traders' trails through the Tibetan plateau and straight up the pathless sides of mountains in New Mexico into the high country of clear streams and summer thunderstorms. I know she's circumambulated the great pilgrimage mountain of Kailash many times, wandered alone in the deserts of North Africa and northern Mexico, walked all over Manhattan, done walking meditation in her own Zen center and in many temples on both sides of North America and throughout Asia. She has broken glass ceilings on her journey as a medical anthropologist, Buddhist teacher, and social activist, and she's brought many along with her. She's a clearheaded and fearless traveler, and in this book she recounts what she's learned in journeys through areas many of us are just beginning to map or notice or admire on the horizon of individual and social change.

We have undergone a revolution in our understanding of human nature in the past few decades. It has overthrown assumptions laid down in many fields that human beings are essentially selfish and our needs essentially private—for material goods, erotic joys, and family relationships. In disciplines as diverse as economics, sociology, neuroscience, and psychology, contemporary research reveals that human beings originate as compassionate creatures attuned to the needs and suffering of others. Contrary to the 1960s "tragedy of the commons" argument that we were too selfish to take care of

systems, lands, and goods owned in common, variations on such systems—from grazing rights in pastoral societies to Social Security in the USA—could and in many places does work very well. (Elinor Ostrom, whose work explored successful economic cooperation, became the only woman to date to win a Nobel Prize in economics.)

Disaster sociologists have also documented and demonstrated that during sudden catastrophes such as earthquakes and hurricanes, ordinary human beings are brave, improvisationally adept, deeply altruistic, and often find joy and meaning in the rescue and rebuilding work they do as inspired, self-organized volunteers. Data also shows that it is hard to train soldiers to kill; many of them resist in subtle and overt ways or are deeply damaged by the experience. There is evidence from evolutionary biology, sociology, neuroscience, and many other fields that we need to abandon our old misanthropic (and misogynist) notions for a sweeping new view of human nature.

The case for this other sense of who we really are has been building and accumulating, and the implications are tremendous and tremendously encouraging. From this different set of assumptions about who we are or are capable of being, we can make more generous plans for ourselves and our societies, and the earth. It is as though we have made a new map of human nature, or mapped parts of it known through lived experience and spiritual teachings but erased by Western ideas of human nature as callous, selfish, and uncooperative, and of survival as largely a matter of competition rather than collaboration. This emerging map is itself extraordinary. It lays the foundation to imagine ourselves and our possibilities in new and hopeful ways; and suggests that much of our venality and misery is instilled but not inherent or inevitable. But this map has been, for the most part, a preliminary sketch or an overview, not a traveler's guide, step by step.

That is to say, most of this work points to a promised land of a better, more idealistic, more generous, more compassionate, braver self. Yet the hope that merely becoming this better self is enough may be naïve. In our best self, even on our best days, we run into obstacles, including empathic distress, moral injury, and a host of other psychic challenges that Joan Halifax charts so expertly in *Standing at the Edge*. She shows us that being good is

not a beatific state but a complex project. This project encompasses the whole territory of our lives, including our fault lines and failures.

She offers us something of extraordinary value. She has traveled these realms, learning deeply from her own experiences and those of others, including both those who suffer and those who strive to alleviate suffering, and she has come to know how the attempt to alleviate suffering can bring on its own pain and how to steer clear of that misery and draining of vitality. She has gone far and wide in these complex human landscapes and knows that they are more than lands of virtue shining in the distance. She has seen what many only point to from afar—the dangers, pitfalls, traps, and sloughs of despond, as well as the peaks and possibilities. And in this book she offers us a map of how to travel courageously and fruitfully, for our own benefit and the benefit of all beings.

*—Rebecca Solnit*

# A VIEW FROM THE EDGE

THERE IS A SMALL CABIN in the mountains of New Mexico where I spend time whenever I can. It is located in a deep valley in the heart of the Sangre de Cristo Range. It's a strenuous hike from my cabin up to the ridge at more than twelve thousand feet above sea level, from where I can see the deep cut of the Rio Grande, the rim of the ancient Valles Caldera volcano, and the distinctive mesa of Pedernal, where the Diné say First Man and First Woman were born.

Whenever I walk the ridge, I find myself thinking about edges. There are places along the ridgeline where I must be especially careful of my footing. To the west is a precipitous decline of talus leading to the lush and narrow watershed of the San Leonardo River; to the east, a steep, rocky descent toward the thick forest lining the Trampas River. I am aware that on the ridge, one wrong step could change my life. From this ridge, I can see that below and in the distance is a landscape licked by fire and swaths of trees dying from too little sun. These damaged habitats meet healthy sections of forest in borders that are sharp in places, wide in others. I have heard that things grow from their edges. For example, ecosystems expand from their borders, where they tend to host a greater diversity of life.

My cabin sits on the boundary between a wetland fed by deep winter snow and a thick spruce-fir forest that has not seen fire in a hundred years. Along this boundary is an abundance of life, including white-barked aspen,

wild violet, and purple columbine, as well as the bold Steller's jay, the boreal owl, ptarmigan, and wild turkey. The tall wetland grasses and sedges of summer shelter field mice, pack rats, and blind voles that are prey for raptors and bobcats. The grasses also feed the elk and deer who graze in the meadows at dawn and dusk. Juicy raspberries, tiny wild strawberries, and tasty purple whortleberries cover the slopes holding our valley, and the bears and I binge shamelessly on their bounty come late July.

I have come to see that mental states are also ecosystems. These sometimes friendly and at times hazardous terrains are natural environments embedded in the greater system of our character. I believe it is important to study our inner ecology so that we can recognize when we are on the edge, in danger of slipping from health into pathology. And when we do fall into the less habitable regions of our minds, we can learn from these dangerous territories. Edges are places where opposites meet. Where fear meets courage and suffering meets freedom. Where solid ground ends in a cliff face. Where we can gain a view that takes in so much more of our world. And where we need to maintain great awareness, lest we trip and fall.

Our journey through life is one of peril and possibility—and sometimes both at once. How can we stand on the threshold between suffering and freedom and remain informed by both worlds? With our penchant for dualities, humans tend to identify either with the terrible truth of suffering or with freedom from suffering. But I believe that excluding any part of the larger landscape of our lives reduces the territory of our understanding.

Life has taken me into geographically, emotionally, and socially complex geographies. Organizing within the Civil Rights and Antiwar movements of the sixties, working in a big county hospital as a medical anthropologist, founding and leading two practice and educational communities, sitting at the bedsides of dying people, volunteering in a maximum-security prison, meditating for extended periods, collaborating with neuroscientists and social psychologists on compassion-based projects, and running health clinics in the remotest areas of the Himalayas—all have introduced me to complex challenges, including periods of overwhelm. The education I've gained through

these experiences—especially through my struggles and failures—has given me a perspective I could never have anticipated. I have come to see the profound value of taking in the whole landscape of life and not rejecting or denying what we are given. I have also learned that our waywardness, difficulties, and "crises" might not be terminal obstacles. They can actually be gateways to wider, richer internal and external landscapes. If we willingly investigate our difficulties, we can fold them into a view of reality that is more courageous, inclusive, emergent, and wise—as have many others who have fallen over the edge.

## Edge States

Over the years, I slowly became aware of five internal and interpersonal qualities that are keys to a compassionate and courageous life, and without which we cannot serve, nor can we survive. Yet if these precious resources deteriorate, they can manifest as dangerous landscapes that cause harm. I call these bivalent qualities *Edge States*.

The Edge States are altruism, empathy, integrity, respect, and engagement, assets of a mind and heart that exemplify caring, connection, virtue, and strength. Yet we can also lose our firm footing on the high edge of any of these qualities and slide into a mire of suffering where we find ourselves caught in the toxic and chaotic waters of the harmful aspects of an Edge State.

*Altruism* can turn into *pathological altruism*. Selfless actions in service to others are essential to the well-being of society and the natural world. But sometimes, our seemingly altruistic acts harm us, harm those whom we are trying to serve, or harm the institutions we serve in.

*Empathy* can slide into *empathic distress*. When we are able to sense into the suffering of another person, empathy brings us closer to one another, can inspire us to serve, and expands our understanding of the world. But if we take on too much of the suffering of another, and identify too intensely with it, we may become damaged and unable to act.

*Integrity* points to having strong moral principles. But when we engage in or witness acts that violate our sense of integrity, justice, or beneficence, *moral suffering* can be the outcome.

*Respect* is a way we hold beings and things in high regard. Respect can disappear into the swamp of toxic *disrespect*, when we go against the grain of values and principles of civility, and disparage others or ourselves.

*Engagement* in our work can give a sense of purpose and meaning to our lives, particularly if our work serves others. But overwork, a poisonous workplace, and the experience of the lack of efficacy can lead to burnout, which can cause physical and psychological collapse.

Like a doctor who diagnoses an illness before recommending a treatment, I felt compelled to explore the destructive side of these five virtuous human qualities. Along the way, I was surprised to learn that even in their degraded forms, Edge States can teach and strengthen us, just as bone and muscle are strengthened when exposed to stress, or if broken or torn, can heal in the right circumstances and become stronger for having been injured.

In other words, losing our footing and sliding down the slope of harm need not be a terminal catastrophe. There is humility, perspective, and wisdom that can be gained from our greatest difficulties. In her book *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970), Iris Murdoch defined humility as a "selfless respect for reality." She writes that "our picture of ourselves has become too grand." This I discovered from sitting at the bedsides of dying people and being with caregivers. Doing this close work with those who were dying and those who were giving care showed me how serious the costs of suffering can be for patient as well as caregiver. Since that time, I have learned from teachers, lawyers, CEOs, human rights workers, and parents that they can experience the same. I was then reminded of something profoundly important and yet completely obvious: that the way out of the storm and mud of suffering, the way back to freedom on the high edge of strength and courage, is through the power of compassion. This is why I took a deep dive into trying to understand what Edge States are and how they can shape our lives and the life of the world.

## No Mud, No Lotus

Thinking about the destructive side of the Edge States, I recall the work of Kazimierz Dąbrowski, the Polish psychiatrist and psychologist who proposed a theory of personality development called *positive disintegration*. This is a transformational approach to psychological growth based on the idea that crises are important for our personal maturation. Dabrowski's concept is similar to a tenet of systems theory: living systems that break down can reorganize at a higher and more robust level—if they learn from the breakdown experience.

Working as an anthropologist in Mali and Mexico, I also observed positive disintegration as a core dynamic in "rites of passage." These are ceremonies of initiation that mark important life transitions, and are intended to deepen and strengthen the process of maturation. This notion of positive disintegration was also reflected in the work I did as a co-therapist with the psychiatrist Stanislav Grof, using LSD as an adjunct to psychotherapy with dying cancer patients. In the process of this contemporary rite of passage, I learned much about the value of directly encountering our own suffering, as a means for psychological transformation.

Years later, I was to hear the Vietnamese teacher Thích Nhât Hạnh—or Thây (as his students call him)—echo this wisdom as he spoke of the suffering he experienced while being in the midst of the war in Vietnam and then later on as a refugee. Quietly he would say: "No mud, no lotus."

Reflecting on the difficulties we can experience in serving others, from pathological altruism to burnout, the toxic side of Edge States can be viewed from the perspective of positive disintegration. The rotting mud at the bottom of an ancient pond is also food for the lotus. Dąbrowski, Grof, and Thây remind us that our suffering can feed our understanding and be one of the great resources of our wisdom and compassion.

Another metaphor for positive disintegration relates to storms. I grew up in southern Florida. Every year of my childhood, hurricanes turned our neighborhood upside down. Electric lines crackled in the wet streets, old

banyan trees were uprooted from firm earth, and terracotta tile roofs were blown completely off the Spanish-style stucco houses in our neighborhood. Sometimes my parents would take my sister and me to the beach to watch the hurricanes come in. We would stand at the water's edge, feeling the force of the wind, the slap of the rain. And then we would quickly return home, open all the windows and doors, and let the storm blow through.

I once read about a geologist whose special area of research was the study of beaches. He was being interviewed during a massive hurricane that was slamming into the Outer Banks of North Carolina. The geologist told the journalist, "You know, I'm excited to get out to that beach as quickly as I can."

After a pause, the journalist asked, "What do you expect to see out there?"

Reading this, my attention sharpened. I expected the geologist to describe a scene of total destruction. But he simply said, "There will probably be a new beach."

A new beach, a new coastline: gifts of the storm. Here at the edge, there is the possibility of destruction, suffering—and boundless promise.

Edge States are where great potential resides, and working skillfully within these states, understanding can be quickened. Yet Edge States are a fickle territory, and things can go in any direction. Freefall or solid ground. Water or sand. Mud or lotus. Being caught in strong wind on a beach or a high ridge, we can try to stand strong and enjoy the view. If we fall off the edge of our understanding, maybe the fall can teach us how important it is to keep our life in balance. If we find ourselves in the mud of suffering, we can remember that decayed matter feeds the lotus. If we are pulled out to sea, perhaps we can learn to swim in the middle of the ocean, even in the midst of a storm. While there, we might even discover how to ride the billowing waves of birth and death, alongside the compassionate bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara.

## Vast View

Sometimes, I imagine Edge States as a red-rock mesa. Its top is solid and gives us a vast view, but at its rim is a sheer drop-off, with no rocks or trees to slow

our fall. The edge itself is an exposed place where a lapse in concentration can cause us to lose our footing. At the bottom is the hard ground of reality, and the fall can injure us. Or sometimes, I imagine that we have fallen into a dark swamp, where we can get stuck for a long time. Whenever we try to extract ourselves, we are sucked deeper and deeper into the mud of suffering. But whether our fall ends in solid rock or a nasty cesspool, we are a long way from the high edge of our best selves, and the descent and landing take their toll.

When we find ourselves on the precipice—on the high side of altruism, empathy, integrity, respect, and engagement—we can stand firm there, especially if we are aware of what could happen if we lose our footing. This recognition can fuel our determination to act from our values, as well as our humility about how easy it is to make mistakes. And if we do trip and fall, or if the earth collapses beneath our feet, we have to somehow find our way back to the high edge, where our balance and ballast can keep us firmly rooted and the view includes the entire landscape. Ideally, we can learn to keep ourselves from falling over the edge—most of the time. Yet the itinerary is subject to reality, and sooner or later, most of us will fall over the edge. It is important that there is no judgment in that. It's what we do with that experience, how we use the fall as a place of transformation, that really matters.

I believe that we have to work the edge, expand its boundaries, and find the gift of balance among the diverse ecosystems of the Edge States, so that we can make a greater range of human experience available to us. At the edge is where we can discover courage and freedom. Whether we are encountering the anguish and pain of others or our own difficulties, we are invited to meet suffering head-on so that hopefully we can learn from it—and cultivate perspective and resilience, as well as open the great gift of compassion.

In one sense, the Edge States are all about how we see things. They are a fresh way of viewing and interpreting our experiences of altruism, empathy, integrity, respect, and engagement—and their shadow sides. Through nurturing a wider, more inclusive, and interconnected view of these powerful and rich human qualities, we can learn to recognize when we are standing at the edge, when we are in danger of going over the edge, when we've gone over the edge, and how to make it back to the high edge of the best of ourselves.

From there, we can discover how to cultivate a view that is embracing—a view within ourselves that we develop by nurturing deep awareness into how our hearts and minds operate in the midst of life's great difficulties. And also seeing the truth of impermanence, of interconnectedness, of groundlessness.

Vast view can open when we talk with a dying person about their wishes, when we hear the prison door clang, and when we listen deeply to our children. It can open when we connect on the streets with a homeless person, when we visit the wet tent of a Syrian refugee stuck in Greece, and when we sit with a victim of torture. It can open as well through our own experience of anguish. View can open almost anywhere; without it, we cannot see the edge before us, the swamp below us, and the space within and around us. View also reminds us that suffering can be our greatest teacher.

## Interdependence

Many influences have shaped my way of seeing the world and have contributed to my perspective on the Edge States. During the sixties, I was young and idealistic; it was a difficult and exciting time for many of us. We were outraged by the systemic oppression in our society—racism, sexism, classism, ageism. We could see how this oppression fed the violence of war, economic marginalization, and consumerism, as well as the destruction of the environment.

We wanted to change the world. And we wanted a way to work with our good aspirations—to not lose them, nor get lost in them. In this atmosphere of social and political conflict, I began reading books about Buddhism and teaching myself to meditate. I met the young Vietnamese Zen master Thích Nhất Hạnh in the midsixties, and through his example, I was drawn to Buddhism because it directly addresses the causes of individual and social suffering, and because its core teaching says that transforming anguish is the path to freedom and the well-being of our world. I also liked that the Buddha emphasized inquiry, curiosity, and investigation as tools of the path and that he did not recommend we avoid, deny, or valorize suffering.

The Buddhist concept of *interdependent co-arising* also gave me a new way of viewing the world: seeing the intricate connections between seemingly separate things. As the Buddha explained this concept, "This is, because that is. This is not, because that is not. This comes to be, because that comes to be. This ceases to be, because that ceases to be." Looking into a bowl of rice, I can see sunshine and rain and farmers and trucks driving on roads.

In a sense, a bowl of rice is a system. Soon after I started studying Buddhism, I began exploring systems theory, which is a way of seeing the world as a collection of interrelated systems. Each system has a purpose; for example, a human body is a system whose purpose (on the most basic level) is to stay alive. All parts of the system must be present for it to function optimally—without a working heart or brain or lungs, we'll die. The order in which parts are arranged matters; you can't mix up where the organs are.

Systems range from micro to macro, from simple to complex. There are biological systems (the circulatory system), mechanical systems (a bicycle), ecosystems (a coral reef), social systems (friendships, families, societies), institutional systems (workplaces, religious organizations, governments), astronomical systems (our solar system), and more. Complex systems are typically composed of numerous subsystems. Systems peak, move toward decline, and finally collapse, leaving room for alternative systems to emerge.

I mention this because, together, the Edge States are an interdependent system, influencing each other and forming our character. And systems are the ground in which Edge States develop—interpersonal relationships, the workplace, institutions, society, and our own bodies and minds. As systems decline, so also can we encounter ruin. Yet often, from collapse, a new and more robust perspective on reality can emerge.

## Futility and Courage

I have a friend who was a dedicated and skillful psychologist, but after years of practicing, he had caved in to futility. In a conversation with me, he confessed, "I just can't bear to listen to my patients anymore." He explained that

at a certain point in his career, he had begun to feel every emotion his patients were going through, and he was totally overwhelmed by their experiences of suffering. The constant exposure had eventually dried him up. At one point, he couldn't sleep, and he was overeating to relieve stress. Gradually, he had moved into a space of helplessness and emotional shutdown. "I just don't care," he said. "I feel flat and gray inside." Worst of all, he had begun to resent his clients, and he knew this meant he needed to get out of his profession.

His story exemplifies the negative outcomes of a combination of all the Edge States: what happens when altruism goes toxic, empathy leads to empathic distress, respect collapses under the weight of sensitivity and futility and turns to disrespect with a loss of integrity, and when engagement leads to burnout. Suffering had crept up on the psychologist, and he began to die inside. He could no longer absorb and transform pain to find meaning in his work and his world.

My friend is far from alone in his suffering. Many caregivers, parents, and teachers have confided similar feelings to me. Part of my work has been to address the devastating epidemic of futility, which leads to a deficit of compassion in people who are expected to care.

I have another friend, a young Nepali woman who bucked the odds and turned adversity into strength. Pasang Lhamu Sherpa Akita, one of the country's greatest woman mountain climbers, was an hour's walk from Everest Base Camp in April 2015 when the 7.8 earthquake hit. She heard the thundering avalanche that killed many at Base Camp. She immediately set off to help but was forced to turn back when an aftershock hit.

Pasang's home in Kathmandu had been destroyed by the quake—but she and her husband, Tora Akita, realized that they had to respond to the loss of life, home, and livelihood that many in Nepal were facing. "I could have been killed at Everest Base Camp," Pasang said. "But I was safe. I survived. There had to be some reason why I survived. I told my husband, 'We have to do something for the people who are in trouble.' "

In Kathmandu, Pasang and Tora began to organize young people, and hired trucks to bring rice, lentils, oil, salt, and tarps to people in Sindhupal-

chowk, the region of the quake's epicenter. She returned week after week to the Gorkha area with roof tin, tents, medicine, and more tarps for the survivors in a number of villages. She hired local people to make new trails across and over landslides that had destroyed existing pathways. She employed hundreds of villagers to bring food and supplies to people who were completely isolated by the effects of the quake and facing the monsoon season without food or shelter.

Pasang was acting from altruism, an Edge State that can easily enough tip toward harm. But in speaking with Pasang during her months of intensive service following the earthquake, I never detected anything in her voice but unlimited goodwill, energy, and dedication. She also expressed a tremendous sense of relief that she and her husband were able to help.

My psychologist friend went over the edge and never found his way back. My Nepali friend stood on the best edge of her humanity. How is it that some people don't get beaten down by the world but are animated by the deep desire to serve?

I think compassion is the key. The psychologist had lost his connection to his compassionate heart; burnout had deadened his feelings. Cynicism had sent down a deep root. Pasang, though, was able to remain grounded in compassion and let those feelings guide her actions. I have come to view compassion as the way to stand grounded and firm on the precipice and not fall over the edge. And when we do fall over the edge, compassion can be our way out of the swamp.

When we learn to recognize the Edge States in our lives, we can stand on the threshold of change and see a landscape abundant with wisdom, tenderness, and basic human kindness. At the same time, we can see a desolate terrain of violence, failure, and futility. Having the strength to stand at the edge, we can draw lessons from places of utter devastation—the charnel grounds—of refugee camps, earthquake-destroyed areas, prisons, cancer wards, homeless encampments, and war zones, and at the same time be resourced by our basic goodness and the basic goodness of others. This is the

very premise of coming to know intimately the Edge States: How we develop the strength to stand at the edge and have a wider view, a view that includes all sides of the equation of life. How we find life-giving balance between oppositional forces. How we find freedom at the edge. And how we discover that the alchemy of suffering and compassion brings forth the gold of our character, the gold of our hearts.

# 1. ALTRUISM

*May I do a great deal of good without ever knowing it.*
*—Wilbur Wilson Thoburn*

*In the early seventies, my passion for biology and the sea led me to serve as a volunteer at Lerner Marine Laboratory in the Bahamas. I assisted a biologist from Brandeis who was researching the ever-so-brief life cycle of the intelligent and wondrous Octopus vulgaris, which we know as the common octopus.*

*My work afforded me the rare chance to witness a captive female octopus spawn her eggs after she was fertilized. Hundreds of thousands of translucent, teardrop-shaped eggs, each the size of a grain of rice, were spun out of her mantle into long, lacy strands that hung in the water of the aquarium where she was captive. As the weeks passed, she floated like a cloud above them, not hunting or eating, just gently moving the water around the knotted thread of eggs that were slowly maturing. Hovering over her eggs, keeping them aerated, she hardly budged, and her body slowly began to disintegrate, becoming food for her brood as they hatched. The mother octopus died to feed her offspring, her flesh the communion meal for her hatchlings.*

*I was puzzled and moved by the strange sight of this beautiful creature dissolving before my eyes. Although her sacrifice was not altruism per se, but part of the natural life cycle of her species, this octopus mother brought up a lot of questions for me about human behavior—questions about*

*altruism, self-sacrifice, and harm. When is human altruism healthy? When do we give so much to others that we can harm ourselves in the process? How do we recognize when our altruism might be self-centered and unhealthy? How do we nurture the seeds of healthy altruism in a world where being hurried and uncaring is so often the order of the day? How does altruism go off the rails, over the edge?*

*In my later work with dying and incarcerated people, and as I listened to the stories of parents, teachers, lawyers, and caregivers in my capacity as a Buddhist teacher, I began to understand altruism as an Edge State. It is the narrow edge of a high cliff, one that allows us a vast view but also one that can erode under our feet.*

*To act altruistically is to take unselfish actions that enhance the welfare of others, usually at some cost or risk to our own well-being. When we are able to stand firm in altruism, we encounter each other without the shadow of expectation and need lurking between us. The recipient of our kindness may discover trust in human goodness, and we are ourselves enriched by the goodness of giving.*

*However, when our physical and emotional safety is at risk, it can be challenging to keep our feet planted on solid ground; it's all too easy to lose our footing and free-fall into harmful forms of serving. We might help in a way that undermines our own needs. We might inadvertently hurt the one we're trying to help by disempowering them and taking away their agency. And we might "appear" altruistic, but our motivation is not well grounded. These are forms of pathological altruism, as we'll explore.*

*Standing at the edge of altruism, we gain a view of the vast horizon of human kindness and wisdom—so long as we avoid falling into the swamp of egoism and need. And if we do find ourselves stuck in the swamp, our struggle doesn't have to be in vain. If we can work with our difficulties, we might be compelled to figure out how we got there and how we can avoid falling off the edge again. We might also get a good lesson in humility. This is hard work—but it's good work that builds character and helps us become wiser, humbler, and more resilient.*

# I. AT THE HIGH EDGE OF ALTRUISM

THE WORD *ALTRUISM* WAS COINED in 1830 by French philosopher Auguste Comte, who derived it from *vivre pour autrui*, or "live for others." An antidote to the selfishness of living for ourselves, altruism became a new social doctrine based on humanism rather than religion. Altruism was an ethical code for nonbelievers, one detached from dogma.

Those who act from the purest form of altruism are not looking for social approval or recognition, and they are not looking to feel better about themselves. A woman sees a child she doesn't know wandering into the path of a car. She doesn't think, *Saving this child would make me a good person*—she just rushes into the road and grabs the child, putting her own life at risk. Afterwards, she probably doesn't praise herself too much. She thinks, *I did what I had to do. Anyone else would have done the same.* She feels relieved because the child is alive and well. As this example illustrates, altruism is a step beyond ordinary generosity; it entails self-sacrifice or physical risk.

In 2007, Wesley Autrey (not far from *autrui*), a construction worker, jumped onto the Manhattan subway tracks to save Cameron Hollopeter, a film student who was having a seizure and had fallen from the platform onto the tracks. Autrey saw the oncoming train and leapt down to haul Hollopeter out of the way. But the train was coming too fast, so Autrey threw himself over Hollopeter in the foot-deep drainage trench between the tracks. As he held down the seizing man, the train passed over them both, grazing the

top of Autrey's knit cap. No thought to self, just an unmediated impulse to save a fellow human's life.

Later, Autrey seemed bewildered by all the attention and praise he received. He told *The New York Times*, "I don't feel like I did something spectacular; I just saw someone who needed help. I did what I felt was right."

I see Autrey's story as an example of pure altruism. We all have altruistic impulses, but we don't all act on them at all times. Other people on that subway platform no doubt saw Hollopeter seizing and recognized the need to help—but they also understood that they could get killed in the process. Altruism happens when our impulse to serve others overrides our fear and our instincts of self-preservation. Thankfully, Autrey was resourceful enough to save a life and to survive as well.

All over the planet, every day, people are acting from unmediated altruism to serve one another. Like the unidentified Chinese protester who stood resolutely in the pathway of the tanks heading toward Tiananmen Square. Like the doctors in Africa who so courageously treated Ebola patients. Like the Parisians who opened their homes to those escaping the 2015 terrorist attacks. Like the three thousand courageous Syrian volunteers who serve as first responders rescuing survivors after the bombs fall on civilian neighborhoods. Like Adel Termos, who tackled one of the suicide bombers heading toward a crowded mosque in Beirut the day before the Paris attacks in 2015. When Termos caused the bomb to detonate away from the crowd, he lost his own life—but he saved the lives of countless others. Like Ricky John Best, Taliesin Myrddin Namkai-Meche, and Micah David-Cole Fletcher, who fearlessly intervened in a racial attack on two teenage girls riding the MAX Light Rail train in Portland in May 2017. Ricky and Taliesin lost their lives; Micah survived. As Taliesin was bleeding out, he offered these words: "Tell everyone on this train I love them." In our fraught world, I feel that it is important to hear stories like these to keep our faith in the beauty and power of the human heart and to remember how natural altruism is.

## Self, Selfish, or Selfless?

Let's return for a moment to the woman who pulls the child out of traffic. If she later thinks, *I'm a good person for doing that,* does this self-congratulatory thought negate the altruism of her action? The strictest definitions of *altruism* do not allow for ego involvement, either before or after the action. Altruism is characterized as an act of selflessness that is about benefiting others, free of expectation of an external reward (such as gratitude or a quid pro quo), and free of internal rewards like higher self-esteem or even better emotional health. Pure altruists have "no gaining idea," to quote Zen master Shunryū Suzuki-rōshi—they gain nothing from their beneficial actions. They are fundamentally unselfish.

Great contemplative practitioners and some naturally compassionate human beings have the kind of boundless heart that is open to serve in all circumstances. No self, no other; just unbiased goodness toward all. But most of us are merely human, and it's very human for us to feel some sense of fulfillment from serving others.

Whether pure altruism even exists is a subject of debate among psychologists and philosophers. According to the theory of *psychological egoism*, no act of service or sacrifice is purely altruistic, because we are often motivated by at least some small feeling of personal gratification, or we feel a little ego enhancement after helping others. This theory might hold that in the real world of human psychology and behavior, there is no such thing as pure altruism.

Buddhism takes a more radical position; it says that altruism and its sister, compassion, can be totally free of the ego, the small self. Altruism can arise spontaneously and unconditionally in response to the suffering of others, as it did for Autrey. Buddhism also suggests that selfless concern for the welfare of others is part of our true nature. Through contemplative practice and ethical living, we can resist the pull of selfishness and come home to the place inside us that loves all beings and holds them in equal regard; the place that fearlessly aspires to end their suffering and is free of biases.

Thích Nhất Hạnh writes, "When the left hand is injured, the right hand

takes care of it right away. It doesn't stop to say, 'I am taking care of you. You are benefiting from my compassion.' The right hand knows very well that the left hand is also the right hand. There is no distinction between them." This is the kind of altruism that is *non-referential*, meaning that it is not biased toward family members, friends, or other in-group affiliations.

A poem by Joseph Bruchac conveys this deep and humble sensibility to care for all beings equally:

*Birdfoot's Grampa*
The old man
must have stopped our car
two dozen times to climb out
and gather into his hands
the small toads blinded
by our lights and leaping,
live drops of rain.
********
The rain was falling
a mist about his white hair
and I kept saying
you can't save them all
accept it, get back in
we've got places to go.
But the leathery hands full
of wet brown life
knee deep in the summer
roadside grass
he just smiled and said
they have places to go
too.

Here, the grampa is a good example of a living *bodhisattva*, in Buddhism, someone who freely saves all beings from suffering. Grampa keeps stopping

to rescue those toads, though it means scrambling along the rainy, dark road. Smiling, he seems to be experiencing what Buddhists call "altruistic joy," joy in the good fortune of others.

Altruistic joy is considered to be a truly nourishing quality of mind. In this way, Buddhism agrees with Western psychology that feeling joy about the good fortune of others is good for us. I know I feel better mentally and physically when I am doing good things for others, although feeling better isn't what motivates me. Recent studies in social psychology suggest that being less self-centered and more generous is a source of happiness and contentment for the giver. One study showed that very young children, even those under two years old, tend to experience a greater sense of well-being when they give treats than when they receive them. Another found that adult participants who spent money on others experienced greater satisfaction than those who spent money on themselves. And the neuroscientist Tania Singer has discovered that compassion (a close companion of altruism) triggers the brain's reward centers and pleasure networks. She believes that humans are wired for kindness. When we act from kindness, we feel aligned with our deepest human values. We take joy in our actions, and life feels more meaningful.

Conversely, when our actions harm others, we don't feel well; we often lose sleep, become irritable, and worse. With more and more research documenting the positive health outcomes for people who help others (e.g., enhanced immune response and increased longevity), we might soon face a wave of pseudo-altruists who help others just to live a longer and healthier life. Of course, this might not be a bad problem to have.

## Forgetting the Self

For me, one of the most moving examples of altruism is the story of the late Englishman Nicholas Winton. In 1938, as the Nazis were in the process of occupying Czechoslovakia, Winton organized the transport of 669 children, most of them Jewish, from Czechoslovakia to Britain. He ensured their safe

passage through Europe by train and found a home in Britain for each and every refugee. This was an incredibly risky, selfless act. He didn't even tell his wife for fifty years. He wasn't interested in fame, though in the end he did become famous when his wife told the BBC about this extraordinary endeavor, after she discovered his scrapbooks when cleaning their attic in 1988.

That year, the BBC invited Winton to the airing of a show called *That's Life*. Unbeknownst to him, people whom he had saved, now in their fifties and sixties, had also been invited. The presenter said, "Is there anyone in our audience tonight who owes their life to Nicholas Winton? If so, could you stand up, please?" Everyone in the studio audience stood up. Winton hugged the woman next to him and wiped away tears.

We can ask if we can really know Winton's precise motivations, and whether his actions may have reified his sense of self in some way. In 2001, when a *New York Times* reporter asked why Winton did what he did, Winton modestly replied, "One saw the problem there, that a lot of these children were in danger, and you had to get them to what was called a safe haven, and there was no organization to do that. Why did I do it? Why do people do different things? Some people revel in taking risks, and some go through life taking no risks at all." An interesting personal assessment of his extraordinary courage.

Winton saw the need, saw that he could serve, and had an appetite for positive risk. If he felt any "fulfillment" from his actions, would that change the way we regard him? I think not. Saving the lives of 669 children earns our profound appreciation. His actions had such a powerful long-range effect, through generations, that we simply rest in the wonder that this happened, and that so many people benefited. Winton lived a long life, passing away in 2015 at age 106.

As Auschwitz survivor and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl said, "Being human always points, and is directed, to something or someone, other than oneself. . . . The more one forgets himself—by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love—the more human he is."

# II. FALLING OVER THE EDGE OF ALTRUISM: PATHOLOGICAL ALTRUISM

It's sometimes challenging to keep altruism healthy; as we stand at this cliff's edge, we can be vulnerable to falling into harm. When we help excessively and ignore our own needs, we can begin to resent the person we are helping and the situation in general. I knew a woman who cared around the clock for her cancer-ridden mother. Worn out, frustrated that she couldn't do more to alleviate her parent's pain, and feeling guilty for being so frustrated, she ended up turning anger toward her mother, and then later toward herself. She felt she had lost heart and failed both her mother and herself.

When our altruism shifts out of selfless goodness into obligation, duty, or fear . . . or we simply feel burned out from giving, we may start to churn with negative emotions. I remember listening to a schoolteacher who was angry at himself for spending "too much time" helping a needy student. And a nurse who came to resent her patients, then felt ashamed for feeling so negative toward those whom she had once enjoyed serving.

We may also believe that helping a patient, student, or relative gives us permission to offer unsolicited advice or to control their actions. Once, when I was in the hospital very sick with sepsis, I became the recipient of so much kindness that I was almost done in. Finally, one of Upaya's chaplains wisely advised me to have a sign put on my door: "No visitors." Struggling through fever and chills, I was hosting an overwhelming number of visitors who were giving me copious counsel on how to recover my health. These kind people

had taken time out of their day to visit me and were trying to be helpful—but clearly, I needed my own energy to heal, and not theirs. I couldn't even mentally track what they were saying, my fever was so high. Their need to help seemed to overwhelm their capacity to feel into my situation and to realize that I could not be receptive. Altruism's edge in these situations can easily crumble when our anxiousness or need to fix take the lead.

If we can learn to view altruism as an edge, we will become more aware of the risk and peril of this geography, and can realize what's at stake: harming others, ourselves, and even the institutions in which we serve. If we find ourselves on shaky ground, we can learn to sense when our actions are likely to send us over the edge. In the best of circumstances, we can pull ourselves out of precarious situations and move back to solid ground.

## Help That Harms

When altruism goes over the edge and into the abyss, it becomes *pathological altruism*, a term used in social psychology. Altruism that is sourced in fear, the unconscious need for social approval, the compulsion to fix other people, or unhealthy power dynamics easily crosses the line into harm. And there can be tough consequences, from personal burnout to the disempowerment of entire countries. It is important to unmask situations where we see pathological altruism operating, whether in the lives of parents, spouses, clinicians, educators, politicians, aid workers, or one's self. Recognizing and naming this phenomenon has opened the eyes of many who have found themselves slipping down the precarious slope of good intentions gone awry.

In their book *Pathological Altruism*, Dr. Barbara Oakley and her colleagues explore help that harms. They define *pathological altruism* as "behavior in which attempts to promote the welfare of another, or others, results instead in harm that an external observer would conclude was reasonably foreseeable."

A familiar example of pathological altruism is codependency, in which we focus on the needs of others to the detriment of our own, often enabling

addictive behavior in the process. I knew a married couple who let their twenty-five-year-old son, alcoholic and unemployed, live in their basement for a while. They didn't want to kick him out onto the street with no job or home—but his presence strained their finances and, as their resentment grew, tested their marriage. They tried to make him go to AA and to inpatient rehab, and they found temporary jobs for him, but their attempts to control his behavior and modulate his addiction always backfired. For their son, having a free place to stay wasn't a good thing either, because he had no incentive to change his situation.

Alongside codependency, Dr. Oakley cites other manifestations of pathological altruism, including animal hoarding and "helicopter" parenting. We all know the cat lady who can't say no to taking in one more stray, and the father who makes a federal case to school administrators about his son's well-deserved C in chemistry class as a way to "help" his son.

In my own work, I have observed many people who are caught in the grip of pathological altruism: a nurse who worked too long without food or sleep in order to care for her dying patient; a social activist who camped out in her office so she could be on call 24-7; the CEO of a social relief organization who was chronically jet-lagged from flying all over the world; a volunteer helping refugees in Greece who experienced empathic distress from all the suffering she was witnessing.

Parents, teachers, health care professionals, employees within the justice system, and activists working in crisis situations are especially at risk of pathological altruism from exposure to others' suffering. The consequences can manifest as resentment, shame, and guilt, and also as the toxic sides of the other Edge States: empathic distress, moral suffering, disrespect, and burnout.

Also, viewing ourselves as "saving," "fixing," and "helping" others can feed our latent tendencies toward power, self-importance, narcissism, and even deception of ourselves and others. A particularly troubling story of pathological altruism involves an organization which claimed to be doing health and humanitarian relief work in Asia and Africa. The organization not only misrepresented itself to its funders about the scope of its work—it also failed

to pay their local staff in various countries. Ethical violations like this are sourced in self-delusion. My hunch is that in the beginning of their work, they probably wanted to be of service, but they eventually got caught in the need to represent the organization as doing good in order to raise money. Of course, the funder finally realized what was going on and the funding stream stopped, but in the meantime, there was harm all around.

Pathological altruism on a systemic level occurs when helping actually harms the organizations or peoples who are supposed to be served, such as in situations of foreign aid gone wrong. There are abundant examples of this—from my experience, they include clinicians doing medical service in refugee camps where there is no incentivizing or training of local people to offer follow-up care, so refugees become dependent on outside sources for medical help; NGOs that bring in Western products or services rather than giving grants and training to local entrepreneurs who could meet the demand; and "toxic charities" that give money without providing opportunities for skill development, creating more dependency on outside sources for support.

When we Westerners think we can save the world, we might do so not only from a place of goodwill but from hubris. Writer Courtney Martin notes that from afar, other people's problems seem exotic and easily solved. She says that while this tendency is not usually malicious, "it can be reckless. There is real fallout when well-intentioned people attempt to solve problems without acknowledging the underlying complexity."

Martin urges us instead to "fall in love with the longer-term prospect of staying home and facing systemic complexity head on. Or go if you must, but stay long enough, listen hard enough so that 'other people' become real people. But, be warned, they may not seem so easy to 'save.' " Bearing witness to the problems of another culture, and really listening, may be the only way to stay on the healthy side of altruism.

Some people become so obsessed with helping others that their own well-being is compromised. In her book *Strangers Drowning*, Larissa MacFarquhar profiles American "do-gooders" who make helping strangers their life's mission. Her subjects forgo everyday luxuries such as restaurant meals and

concert tickets so they can send the money to families in developing countries, tallying up how many lives they are saving through their frugality. MacFarquhar examines this phenomenon without judging it; she documents uplifting moments of generosity and disturbing moments of pride and guilt. Some of her subjects are part of the effective altruism (EA) movement, which uses data analytics to predict where donations will have the greatest impact on people in need. EA urges its followers to divorce their giving from emotion, arguing that "sentimentality" gets in the way of financial efficiency.

In *Pathological Altruism*, Dr. Oakley also cautions about getting our emotions mixed up in giving. "The bottom line is that the heartfelt, emotional basis of our good intentions can mislead us about what is truly helpful for others," she writes. Oakley implies that "tough love" approaches, like the parents who kick out their basement-dwelling son, can be more truly altruistic.

I think it depends on the situation. From a Buddhist perspective, caring, love, kindness, compassion, and altruistic joy are highly valued qualities. And yet, sometimes help harms. And here, wisdom is essential. Buddhists do not separate wisdom from compassion. These qualities are two sides of the same coin of our basic humanity.

## Healthy or Not?

In Buddhism, the Jataka tale of the hungry tigress is usually considered to be a meme of selflessness as an expression of generosity, altruism, and compassion. In another interpretation, however, it could be a story of pathological altruism.

In a dense forest, a bodhisattva (who will one day incarnate into Gautama Buddha) and his two brothers encounter a starving tigress who is preparing to feed on her own cubs. The brothers go off looking for food for the tigress, but the bodhisattva, in an act of pure and unconditional altruism, lies down before the weak mother cat. He pierces his own neck with a bamboo splinter so that she and her cubs can more easily feed on his body.

We can view this story as inspiration for us to engage in radical acts of

kindness; as a legend, it isn't supposed to be taken literally. But looked at another way, it could serve as a rationale for actions that violate the First Precept of Buddhism, which says that we should not harm living beings, including ourselves. This story also might encourage martyrdom. The bodhisattva in this tale gives his life, if taken literally, and seems to cross a dangerous line.

The Buddhist canon contains many stories of martyrdom. Records from as early as the fifth or sixth centuries C.E. tell of respected Chinese monks and nuns immolating themselves as protest and offering. Even as I write this, in Tibet, young men and women are immolating themselves in resistance against Chinese oppression. Once, I attended a large service in Dharamsala led by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. His Holiness's eyes were filled with tears as he conducted the service for those who had martyred themselves. His young colleague, His Holiness the Gyalwang Karmapa, has urged Tibetans to stop this extreme and deadly practice. I have asked myself again and again what immolation has to do with Buddhism, which exemplifies nonviolence and non-harming. But then I remember Thích Quảng Đức.

## Fire Lotus

In 1963, several years into the Vietnam War, I saw a newspaper photograph that burned itself into my psyche. It was an image of the Vietnamese monk Thích Quảng Đức, who, in protest against the persecution of Buddhist monastics by the government of South Vietnam, had turned himself into a human torch on a busy intersection in Saigon. On a cushion right on the street, in lotus position and in utter stillness, gas can behind him, this stoic monk sat still and silent as raging flames consumed his body.

I was stunned and horrified. I wondered, what had motivated this monk to set himself on fire? How had he developed the quality of character and mind that allowed him to stay upright as flames consumed his body? I remember thinking, *This war must stop.* It was because of this image that I was moved to speak out against the war, and it has been a psychic trigger for

me ever since as I continue to uphold nonviolence as the only path to peace. The irony is that the trigger—no, the inspiration—for my work as a peacemaker was an act of extreme self-violence.

The photograph of Thích Quảng Đức in flames, for which the API photojournalist Malcolm Browne won a Pulitzer, became one of the most iconic images of the Vietnam War. It is an image that epitomizes suffering and transcendence; it also exemplifies, for many, an ultimate act of altruism. In the months and years that followed, other Buddhist monastics followed Quảng Đức's example, including Sister Nhất Chi Mai, a student of my teacher Thích Nhất Hạnh. Thích Nhất Hạnh spoke of Sister Nhất Chi Mai often and repeated her words: "I offer my body as a torch to dissipate the dark."

Several years after Thích Quảng Đức's immolation, I met the young journalist David Halberstam, who was one of the few reporters present when Thích Quảng Đức set himself on fire. As Halberstam recounted to us the details of what he had witnessed, I could see that he was deeply disturbed by almost every aspect of the event. I don't remember his precise words that evening, but I do remember his hollow, tired eyes. He seemed shut down and numbed by all he had seen. Later, he wrote:

> *I was to see that sight again, but once was enough. Flames were coming from a human being; his body was slowly withering and shriveling up, his head blackening and charring. In the air was the smell of burning human flesh; human beings burn surprisingly quickly. Behind me I could hear the sobbing of the Vietnamese who were now gathering. I was too shocked to cry, too confused to take notes or ask questions, too bewildered to even think. . . . As he burned he never moved a muscle, never uttered a sound, his outward composure in sharp contrast to the wailing people around him.*

Thích Quảng Đức's self-immolation spurred much controversy among Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike about the ethics of taking one's life to benefit others. Sister Mai's martyrdom raised the same questions, such as, where is the line that separates benefit from harm? Who draws that line?

Does the great harm that came to their bodies negate the good they did in bringing international attention to the war? What motivated their actions—was it the conviction that this act would ultimately save the lives of others? Or was it extreme intolerance of the experience of the suffering of others? Is martyrdom of value to social transformation—or is it deluded and harmful?

Buddhism explores the connection between self and other. I have a sense that Thích Quảng Đức and Sister Mai acted from the space where there was no self and there was no other. They perceived injustice and suffering, felt they had the power to change it, and took action—self-sacrificing action. In that space, there are no boundaries between what we do for others and what we do for ourselves.

In my opinion, the actions of Sister Mai and Thích Quảng Đức in one way transcend categories of help and harm. They galvanized protests around an unjust war, likely saving many lives; yet two people died in a shocking and excruciating way. After nearly fifty years of thinking deeply about their immolations, I now feel that when viewing their ultimate sacrifice, we must recognize the heroism and the harm, the benefit and the costs. I have come to understand the profound value of altruism as an act of selflessness, and I have also gained some insight into its shadow. Holding both of these perspectives prompted me to see altruism as an Edge State. And it occurs to me that not only the intention but also the outcome affects whether we judge an action as pathological or not. If Wesley Autrey had died trying to save Cameron Hollopeter from the subway car, we might call his action pathological or foolish.

The real work we must do is to hold both perspectives, so we can have true depth of field—because often, we are not able to make out the whole picture at any given moment. Our view really depends on where we are standing. This is why turning toward any act of seeming altruism entails a practice of deep inquiry and openness. In the best of worlds, altruism and our perception of it is grounded in the ability to rise above self-interest, to be context-sensitive, and to be comfortable with ambiguity and radical uncertainty.

## Altruism Bias

As the actions of Thích Quảng Đức and Sister Mai reveal, martyrdom could be considered an extreme form of altruism; some would call it pathological. The more common forms of pathological altruism—the ones we know from our everyday lives—are less complicated, but they can also be treacherous.

When we do good for others, we must take care that it's not about our own emotional gain. Religions warn against this motivation. In the Sermon on the Mount, which was a source of inspiration for me as a young woman, Jesus condemns doing good works for the purposes of recognition. In Buddhist terms, when we serve others to gain social approval, it can reify our sense of self and foster attachment to an identity as a "good person."

I remember my first Zen teacher, Zen master Seung Sahn casually asking me how I had been spending my time. I listed all my recent "good" deeds. He paused after my recitation and growled, "You are a bad bodhisattva!" I felt like I had been struck by lightning. With not a little bit of shame, I saw that by working to exhaustion for causes related to social justice, I was burning myself out and disempowering others by taking away their agency. Moreover, I was probably trying to gain approval from my teacher and from others. I felt chagrined but also grateful for the tough lesson he had given me.

On the other hand, is it really bad to feel good about helping people? Maybe feeling joy about serving others is important. So much depends on our values, motivations, and intentions. If our motivation is to feel good about ourselves, or to accrue the admiration or respect of others, our actions will be compromised by ego needs. Instead of asking, "Will this action prove I'm a good person?" or "Will doing this make me feel good?" we need to ask, "How will this serve?"

The late Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche coined the term *spiritual materialism*, in which seekers try to amass "spiritual" credentials through various means, including appearing "altruistic" in order to enhance one's spiritual identity. Aspiring to benefit others is an important

aspect of the spiritual life—it helps align priorities and can deepen practice. And yet, if we start using altruism as a way to boost our sense of self, this becomes a trap. A little reality-based humility can be useful in tempering the need for approval and appreciation.

Some aspects of pathological altruism correlate with gender. When I was growing up, my mother was a Gray Lady, volunteering with the Red Cross in a military hospital in Miami. The day she died, she was a Pink Lady, delivering magazines and books to hospitalized seniors in North Carolina. All her life she served others. She was an altruist. At the same time, her altruism was mediated by a subtle need for social recognition that she was a good person. I believe it was her identity as a woman that put this small warp into her motivation. I learned from my first Zen teacher, through his tough lesson, that I had that warp too.

Women have often gained purchase and power in society by being altruistic—whether in their role as wives and mothers or as caregivers. Many women also have family, social, and cultural histories of oppression, or are subject to religious values that encourage self-sacrifice. And listening to women clinicians, social workers, teachers, lawyers, and executives speak about the challenges of their professions, I have come to understand the role gender identity can play in how altruism is lived and how it can harm through overdoing. Granted, many men share the same issue of needing to gain social approval through what I call "service martyrdom," but I've observed that women often carry an extra burden that results in harm to self and others.

Oakley has a term for this: *altruism bias.* This is the social, cultural, and spiritual expectation to be empathetic and caring. Many of us are biased toward acting altruistically even when it might not be appropriate to the situation. We may ignore signs that our help isn't serving and bail our addicted spouse out of jail again, because we believe it is our role to help our loved ones conquer addiction. Or we might become caught in self-righteousness or the role of rescuer in which we unconsciously seek social approval for our attempts to care.

And yet, altruism bias is hardly a bad thing. Saving a seizing young man

from being killed by a subway train, or bringing medical services to vulnerable villagers in the Himalayas, or defending girls against a racist attack, or reaching out to a neighbor who is dying, or saving children from Nazi death camps may be what is called for, even though risky and hard. Experience tells us that altruism bias is a necessity. If our parents didn't lean toward some degree of altruism, we wouldn't have survived our infancy. And without altruism bias, we each are less of who we really are.

Yet there are other interesting considerations to altruism bias. Ethical systems, like those we find in spiritual and religious traditions—as well as the humanistic concept of altruism itself—reinforce altruism bias. These cognitive and cultural systems, coupled with our personal values and histories, can create unconscious tendencies that may blind us to what will truly serve. Due to the influence of these systems, we can be fooled into discounting alarm signals sounded by our intuition, our conscience, our body, and our mind. Even if we get feedback from observers such as friends or colleagues, we may still push ahead with selfishly based altruism at a great cost to all. In the aftermath, these unconscious biases and processes of self-deception can also help us to rationalize actions that go sidewise. "I thought it was the right thing to do," or "It made me feel like a good person," we might say in retrospect.

I learned from working in Nepal, Tibet, Mexico, and Africa that altruism bias can negatively affect not only individuals but also systems, playing into institutional and systemic violence. International aid organizations often fail to conduct adequate studies on the impact of their programs and therefore may not understand the complexity of suffering in the situations they are trying to serve and heal.

At Upaya Zen Center, we were determined to take a different approach when we responded to the catastrophic earthquake in Nepal in the spring of 2015. We knew from our years of work in health care projects in Nepal that smart and motivated young Nepalis were already on the ground and ready to serve earthquake survivors. They knew the territory, could communicate with each other and with us through social media, and had the energy and inspiration to serve. We also suspected that the usual pathways of aid to Nepal through large, international NGOs would be less effective in getting