The WISE HEART

A Guide *to the* Universal Teachings *of* Buddhist Psychology

JACK KORNFIELD

Author of *A Path with Heart* and *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*

Copyrighted material

THE WISE HEART

A Guide to the Universal Teachings of Buddhist Psychology

JACK KORNFIELD

BANTAM BOOKS

Copyrighted material

THE WISE HEART
A Bantam Book / May 2008

Published by Bantam Dell
A Division of Random House, Inc.
New York, New York

All rights reserved.
Copyright © 2008 by Jack Kornfield

Book design by Carol Malcolm Russo

Bantam Books is a registered trademark of Random House, Inc.,
and the colophon is a trademark of Random House, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Kornfield, Jack, 1945–
The wise heart : a guide to the universal teachings of Buddhist psychology / Jack Kornfield.
p. cm.
Includes index.
ISBN 978-0-553-80347-1 (hardcover)
1. Buddhism—Psychology. I. Title.
BQ4570.P76K67 2008
294.3'422—dc22
2008005916

Printed in the United States of America
Published simultaneously in Canada

www.bantamdell.com

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
BVG

Copyrighted material

Contents

Copyrighted material

Copyrighted material

Buddhist teachings are not a religion,
they are a science of mind.

—The Dalai Lama

Copyrighted material

Copyrighted material

THE WISE HEART

Copyrighted material

Copyrighted material

INTRODUCTION

Last year I joined with Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh to co-lead a conference on mindfulness and psychotherapy at UCLA. As I stood at the podium looking over a crowd of almost two thousand people, I wondered what had drawn so many to this three-day gathering. Was it the need to take a deep breath and find a wiser way to cope with the conflict, stress, fears, and exhaustion so common in modern life? Was it the longing for a psychology that included the spiritual dimension and the highest human potential in its vision of healing? Was it a hope to find simple ways to quiet the mind and open the heart?

I found that I had to speak personally and practically, as I do in this book. These conference participants wanted the same inspiration and support as the students who come to Spirit Rock Meditation Center near San Francisco. Those who enter our light-filled meditation hall are not running away from life, but seeking a wise path through it. They each bring their personal problems and their genuine search for happiness. Often they carry a burden of concern for the world, with its continuing warfare and ever-deepening environmental problems. They wonder what will be left

Copyrighted material

for their children's generation. They have heard about meditation and hope to find the joy and inner freedom that Buddhist teachings promise, along with a wiser way to care for the world.

Forty years ago, I arrived at a forest monastery in Thailand in search of my own happiness. A confused, lonely young man with a painful family history, I had graduated from Dartmouth College in Asian studies and asked the Peace Corps to send me to a Buddhist country. Looking back, I can see that I was trying to escape not only my family pain but also the materialism and suffering—so evident in the Vietnam War—of our culture at large. Working on rural health and medical teams in the provinces along the Mekong River, I heard about a meditation master, Ajahn Chah, who welcomed Western students. I was full of ideas and hopes that Buddhist teachings would help me, maybe even lead me to become enlightened. After months of visits to Ajahn Chah's monastery, I took monk's vows. Over the next three years I was introduced to the practices of mindfulness, generosity, loving-kindness, and integrity, which are at the heart of Buddhist training. That was the beginning of a lifetime journey with Buddhist teachings.

Like Spirit Rock today, the forest monastery received a stream of visitors. Every day, Ajahn Chah would sit on a wooden bench at the edge of a clearing and greet them all: local rice farmers and devout pilgrims, seekers and soldiers, young people, government ministers from the capital, and Western students. All brought their spiritual questions and conflicts, their sorrows, fears, and aspirations. At one moment Ajahn Chah would be gently holding the head of a man whose young son had just died, at another laughing with a disillusioned shopkeeper at the arrogance of humanity. In the morning he might be teaching ethics to a semi-corrupt government official, in the afternoon offering a meditation on the nature of undying consciousness to a devout old nun.

Even among these total strangers, there was a remarkable atmosphere of safety and trust. All were held by the compassion of the master and the teachings that guided us together in the human journey of birth and death, joy and sorrow. We sat together as one human family.

Copyrighted material

Ajahn Chah and other Buddhist masters like him are practitioners of a living psychology: one of the oldest and most well-developed systems of healing and understanding on the face of the earth. This psychology makes no distinction between worldly and spiritual problems. To Ajahn Chah, anxiety, trauma, financial problems, physical difficulties, struggles with meditation, ethical dilemmas, and community conflict were all forms of suffering to be treated with the medicine of Buddhist teaching. He was able to respond to the wide range of human troubles and possibilities from his own deep meditation, and also from the vast array of skillful means passed down by his teachers. Sophisticated meditative disciplines, healing practices, cognitive and emotional trainings, conflict resolution techniques—he used them all to awaken his visitors to their own qualities of integrity, equanimity, gratitude, and forgiveness.

The wisdom Ajahn Chah embodied as a healer also exists as an ancient written tradition, first set down as a record of the Buddha's teachings and then expanded by more than a hundred generations of study, commentary, and practice. This written tradition is a great storehouse of wisdom, a profound exploration of the human mind, but it is not easily accessible to Westerners.

At this moment, a winter rainstorm is drenching my simple writer's cabin in the woods above Spirit Rock. On my desk are classic texts from many of the major historic schools of Buddhism: the Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma, the eight-thousand-verse "large version" of the Heart Sutra, with its teachings on form and emptiness, and a Tibetan text on consciousness by Longchenpa. Over time, I have learned to treasure these texts and know that they are filled with jewels of wisdom. Yet the Abhidhamma (or Abhidharma in Sanskrit), considered the masterwork of the early Theravada tradition and the ultimate compendium of Buddhist psychology, is also one of the most impenetrable books ever written. What are we to make of passages such as, "The inseparable material phenomena constitute the pure octad; leading to the dodecad of bodily intimation and the lightness triad; all as material groups originating from consciousness"? And the Heart Sutra, revered as

Copyrighted material

a sacred text of Mahayana Buddhism in India, China, and Japan, can sound like a mixture of fantastical mythology and nearly indecipherable Zen puzzles. In the same way, for most readers, analyzing the biochemistry of a lifesaving drug might be as easy as deciphering some of Longchenpa's teachings on self-existent empty primal cognition.

What we are all seeking is the experience that underlies these texts, which is rich and deep and joyfully free. When Laura arrives at Spirit Rock with her cancer diagnosis, or Sharon, the judge, comes to learn about forgiveness, each wants the pith, the heart understanding that illuminates these words. But how to find it?

Like my teacher Ajahn Chah, I've tried to convey the essence of these texts as a living, immediate, and practical psychology. I have become part of a generation of Buddhist elders that includes Pema Chödrön, Sharon Salzberg, Joseph Goldstein, Thich Nhat Hanh, and others who have helped to introduce Buddhist teachings widely in the West. To do this while remaining true to our own roots, we have primarily focused on the core teachings, the essence of Buddhist wisdom that spans all traditions. Though this is a role different from that of more orthodox and scholarly Buddhists, it is central to bringing Buddhist teachings to a new culture. It has been a way of forging a non-sectarian and accessible approach to these remarkable teachings. This is what another of my teachers, Ajahn Buddhadasa, encouraged: not dividing the teachings into the schools of Theravada, Mahayana, or Vajrayana, but offering Buddhayana, the core living principles of awakening.

As a parallel to these essential Buddhist teachings, I also bring in important insights from our Western psychological tradition. My interest in Western psychology began after I returned from Asia and encountered problems that had not come up in the monastery. I had difficulties with my girlfriend, with my family, with money and livelihood, with making my way as a young man in the world. I discovered that I could not use silent meditation alone to transform my problems. There was no shortcut, no spiritual bypass that could spare me from the work of integration and day-to-day embodiment of the principles I had learned in meditation.

To complement my Buddhist practice, I entered graduate

Copyrighted material

school in psychology and sought out practice and training in a variety of therapeutic approaches: Reichian, analytic, Gestalt, psychodrama, Jungian. I became part of a growing dialogue between Eastern and Western psychology as I worked with innovative colleagues in the early years of Naropa Buddhist University and Esalen Institute and at meditation centers and professional conferences around the world. Gradually, this dialogue has become more fertile, more nuanced, more open-minded. Today there is widespread interest from clinicians of every school in a more positive, spiritual, and visionary approach to mental health. Many who work within the constraints of our insurance and medical system struggle with the limitations of our medical clinical approach. There is a palpable relief when I teach the perspective of nobility, of training in compassion, of non-religious ways to transform suffering and nurture our sacred connection to life.

The recent explosion of knowledge in neuropsychology has opened this dialogue still further. We can now peer into the brain to study the same central questions explored by the Buddha so many centuries ago. Neuroscientists are reporting remarkable data when studying meditation adepts, studies that corroborate the refined analysis of human potential described by Buddhist psychology. Because they are based on millennia of experimentation and observation, Buddhist principles and teachings are a good fit for the psychological science of the West. They are already contributing to our understanding of perception, stress, healing, emotion, psychotherapy, human potential, and consciousness itself.

I've learned through my own experience that the actual practice of psychology—both Eastern and Western—makes me more open, free, and strangely vulnerable to life. Instead of using the technical terms of the West, such as *countertransference* and *cathexis,* or the Eastern terms *adverting consciousness* and *mutable intimating phenomenon,* I find it helpful to speak of *longing, hurt, anger, loving, hope, rejection, letting go, feeling close, self-acceptance, independence,* and *inner freedom.* In place of the word *enlightenment,* which is laden with so many ideas and misunderstandings, I have used the terms *inner freedom* and *liberation* to clearly express the full range of awakenings available to us through Buddhist practice. I want the stories and

Copyrighted material

awakenings of students and practitioners to help us trust our own profound capacity for kindness and wisdom. I want us to discover the power of the heart to hold all things—sorrow, loneliness, shame, desire, regret, frustration, happiness, and peace—and to find a deep trust that wherever we are and whatever we face, we can be free in their midst.

As a Western Buddhist teacher, I don't sit outside on a bench like Ajahn Chah, but I do meet with students and seekers often. I usually work with those who are attending classes or on residential retreats, where students come to meditate for periods of three days up to three months. These retreats offer daily teachings and meditation instruction, a schedule of group practice periods, and long hours of silence. Every other day, students meet individually with a teacher. These individual sessions, or interviews, are short—fifteen or twenty minutes.

When a student comes for an interview, we sit together quietly for a few moments. Then I ask them about their experience at the retreat and how they are working with it. From this, a deep conversation can unfold. Sometimes I simply try to witness their practice with compassion; at other times I offer advice. Often we enter into a present-time investigation of the student's own body and mind, as the Buddha regularly did with those who came to see him. In the course of these pages you will see more fully how I and other teachers do this work. And you will get a feeling for how we can actually apply this vast and compassionate psychology in our lives today.

If you are a clinician or mental health professional, Buddhist psychology will present you with provocative new understandings and possibilities. It may inform or transform the way you work. If you are new to Buddhist teachings and meditation has seemed foreign to you, you will learn that meditation is quite natural. Simply directing your attention in a careful, considered way is the beginning. You are doing a form of meditative contemplation as you read and consider this book. If you are someone more experienced in Buddhist practice, I hope to challenge you with entirely new ways of envisioning and practicing the path of awakening.

In approaching this dialogue, I'd like to underscore a point the

Copyrighted material

Dalai Lama has made repeatedly: "Buddhist teachings are not a religion, they are a science of mind." This does not deny the fact that for many people around the world Buddhism has also come to function as a religion. Like most religions, it offers its followers a rich tradition of devotional practices, communal rituals, and sacred stories. But this is not the origin of Buddhism or its core. The Buddha was a human being, not a god, and what he offered his followers were experiential teachings and practices, a revolutionary way to understand and release suffering. From his own inner experiments, he discovered a systematic and remarkable set of trainings to bring about happiness and fulfill the highest levels of human development. Today, it is this path of practice and liberation that draws most Western students to Buddhism.

The teachings in this book are a compelling challenge to much of Western psychology and to the materialism, cynicism, and despair found in Western culture as well. From the first pages they outline a radical and positive approach to psychology and to human life. Starting with nobility and compassion, Part I explains the Buddhist vision of mental health and consciousness. Part II details healing and awakening through the practices of mindfulness. Part III is devoted to the transformation of unhealthy emotions. Part IV outlines a broad range of Buddhist psychological tools, from the power of concentration and visualization to sophisticated cognitive trainings and transformative social practices. Part V explores the highest possibilities of development, extreme mental well-being, and liberation.

At the end of most chapters, I have suggested specific Buddhist practices for you to try. Think of these as experiments to explore with an open mind. If you don't have time to undertake all of them, trust your intuition and begin with the practices that you feel will best serve your heart. If you give yourself to them for a period of time, you will find that they transform your perspective and your way of being in the world.

It is an urgent task for the psychology of our time to understand and foster the highest possibilities of human development. The suffering and happiness in our world, both individual and col-

Copyrighted material

lective, depend on our consciousness. We have to find a wiser way to live. The good news is that it is eminently possible to do so. In this book I offer the visionary and universal perspectives of Buddhism for the healing of our hearts, the freeing of our minds, and the benefit of all beings.

Copyrighted material

I

WHO ARE YOU REALLY?

Copyrighted material

Copyrighted material

1

NOBILITY

OUR ORIGINAL GOODNESS

O Nobly Born, O you of glorious origins, remember your radiant true nature, the essence of mind. Trust it. Return to it. It is home.
—Tibetan Book of the Dead

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in the eyes of the Divine. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed. . . . I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other.
—Thomas Merton

In a large temple north of Thailand's ancient capital, Sukotai, there once stood an enormous and ancient clay Buddha. Though not the most handsome or refined work of Thai Buddhist art, it had been cared for over a period of five hundred years and become revered for its sheer longevity. Violent storms, changes of government, and invading armies had come and gone, but the Buddha endured.

At one point, however, the monks who tended the temple noticed that the statue had begun to crack and would soon be in need

Copyrighted material

of repair and repainting. After a stretch of particularly hot, dry weather, one of the cracks became so wide that a curious monk took his flashlight and peered inside. What shone back at him was a flash of brilliant gold! Inside this plain old statue, the temple residents discovered one of the largest and most luminous gold images of Buddha ever created in Southeast Asia. Now uncovered, the golden Buddha draws throngs of devoted pilgrims from all over Thailand.

The monks believe that this shining work of art had been covered in plaster and clay to protect it during times of conflict and unrest. In much the same way, each of us has encountered threatening situations that lead us to cover our innate nobility. Just as the people of Sukotai had forgotten about the golden Buddha, we too have forgotten our essential nature. Much of the time we operate from the protective layer. The primary aim of Buddhist psychology is to help us see beneath this armoring and bring out our original goodness, called our Buddha nature.

This is a first principle of Buddhist psychology:

---

1 See the inner nobility and beauty of all human beings.

Robert Johnson, the noted Jungian analyst, acknowledges how difficult it is for many of us to believe in our goodness. We more easily take our worst fears and thoughts to be who we are, the unacknowledged traits called our "shadow" by Jung. "Curiously," writes Johnson, "people resist the noble aspects of their shadow more strenuously than they hide the dark sides. . . . It is more disrupting to find that you have a profound nobility of character than to find out you are a bum."

Our belief in a limited and impoverished identity is such a strong habit that without it we are afraid we wouldn't know how to be. If we fully acknowledged our dignity, it could lead to radical life changes. It could ask something huge of us. And yet some part

Copyrighted material

of us knows that the frightened and damaged self is not who we are. Each of us needs to find our way to be whole and free.

In my family, it was not easy to see my own goodness. My earliest memories are of a paranoid and unpredictably violent father, a bruised and frightened mother, and four boys who each wondered, "How did we get here?" We would all hold our breath when our father pulled the car into the driveway. On good days he could be attentive and humorous and we would feel relieved, but more often we had to hide or cower to avoid his hair-trigger anger and tirades. On family trips the pressure might lead him to smash my mother's head into the windshield or to punish his children for the erratic behavior of other drivers. I remember my father's grandmother pleading with my mother not to divorce him. "At least he can sometimes hold a job. He's not so crazy as those ones in the mental hospitals."

Yet I knew this unhappiness was not all there was to existence. I can remember running out of the house on painful days, at age six or seven, while my parents fought. Something in me felt I didn't belong in that house, as if I had been born into the wrong family. At times I imagined, as children do, that one day there would come a knock at the door and an elegant gentleman would ask for me by name. He would then announce that Jack and his brothers had been secretly placed in this home, but that now his real parents, the king and queen, wanted him to return to his rightful family. These childhood fantasies gave rise to one of the strongest currents of my life, a longing to be part of something worthy and true. I was seeking my real family of noble birth.

In these often cynical times, we might think of original goodness as merely an uplifting phrase, but through its lens we discover a radically different way of seeing and being: one whose aim is to transform our world. This does not mean that we ignore the enormousness of people's sorrows or that we make ourselves foolishly vulnerable to unstable and perhaps violent individuals. Indeed, to find the dignity in others, their suffering has to be acknowledged. Among the most central of all Buddhist psychological principles are the Four Noble Truths, which begin by acknowledging the

Copyrighted material

inevitable suffering in human life. This truth, too, is hard to talk about in modern culture, where people are taught to avoid discomfort at any cost, where "the pursuit of happiness" has become "the right to happiness." And yet when we are suffering it is so refreshing and helpful to have the truth of suffering acknowledged.

Buddhist teachings help us to face our individual suffering, from shame and depression to anxiety and grief. They address the collective suffering of the world and help us to work with the source of this sorrow: the forces of greed, hatred, and delusion in the human psyche. While tending to our suffering is critical, this does not eclipse our fundamental nobility.

The word *nobility* does not refer to medieval knights and courts. It derives from the Greek *gno* (as in *gnosis*), meaning "wisdom" or "inner illumination." In English, nobility is defined as human excellence, as that which is illustrious, admirable, lofty, and distinguished, in values, conduct, and bearing. How might we intuitively connect with this quality in those around us? Just as no one can tell us how to feel love, each of us can find our own way to sense the underlying goodness in others. One way is to shift the frame of time, imagining the person before us as a small child, still young and innocent. Once after a particularly difficult day with my teenage daughter, I found myself sitting beside her as she slept. Just hours before, we had been struggling over her plans for the evening; now she lay sleeping with the innocence and beauty of her childhood. Such innocence is there in all people, if we are willing to see it.

Or, instead of moving back in time, we can move forward. We can visualize the person at the end of his life, lying on his deathbed, vulnerable, open, with nothing to hide. Or we can simply see him as a fellow wayfarer, struggling with his burdens, wanting happiness and dignity. Beneath the fears and needs, the aggression and pain, whoever we encounter is a being who, like us, has the tremendous potential for understanding and compassion, whose goodness is there to be touched.

We can perhaps most easily admire the human spirit when it shines in the world's great moral leaders. We see an unshakable compassion in the Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi,

Copyrighted material

who remains steadfast and loving in spite of long years of house arrest in Burma. We remember how South African president Nelson Mandela walked out of prison with a gracious spirit of courage and dignity that was unbent by twenty-seven years of torture and hardship. But the same spirit also beams from healthy children everywhere. Their joy and natural beauty can reawaken us to our Buddha nature. They remind us that we are born with this shining spirit.

So why, in Western psychology, have we been so focused on the dark side of human nature? Even before Freud, Western psychology was based on a medical model, and it still focuses primarily on pathology. The psychiatric profession's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders,* which orients the work of most therapists, clinics, and health care providers, is a comprehensive listing of hundreds of psychological problems and diseases. Categorizing problems helps us study them and then, it is hoped, cure them in the most scientific and economically efficient way. But often we give so much attention to our protective layers of fear, depression, confusion, and aggression that we forget who we really are.

As a teacher, I see this all the time. When a middle-aged man named Marty came to see me after a year of painful separation and divorce, he was caught in the repetitive cycles of unworthiness and shame that he had carried since childhood. He believed there was something terribly wrong with him. He had forgotten his original goodness. When a young woman, Jan, came to Buddhist practice after a long struggle with anxiety and depression, she had a hard time letting go of her self-image as a broken and damaged person. For years she had seen herself only through her diagnosis and the various medications that had failed to control it.

As psychology becomes more pharmacologically oriented, this medical model is reinforced. Today, most of the millions of adults seeking mental health support are quickly put on medication. Even more troubling, hundreds of thousands of children are being prescribed powerful psychiatric drugs for conditions ranging from ADHD to the newly popular diagnosis of childhood bipolar disorder. While these medications may be appropriate, even lifesaving,

Copyrighted material

in some cases, laypeople and professionals increasingly look for a pill as the answer to human confusion and suffering. It need not be so.

INNER FREEDOM: LIBERATION OF THE HEART

If we do not focus on human limits and pathology, what is the alternative? It is the belief that human freedom is possible under any circumstances. Buddhist teachings put it this way: "Just as the great oceans have but one taste, the taste of salt, so do all of the teachings of Buddha have but one taste, the taste of liberation."

Psychologist Viktor Frankl was the sole member of his family to survive the Nazi death camps. Nevertheless, in spite of this suffering, he found a path to healing. Frankl wrote, "We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

When we are lost in our worst crises and conflicts, in the deepest states of fear and confusion, our pain can seem endless. We can feel as if there is no exit, no hope. Yet some hidden wisdom longs for freedom. "If it were not possible to free the heart from entanglement in unhealthy states," says the Buddha, "I would not teach you to do so. But just because it is possible to free the heart from entanglement in unhealthy states do I offer these teachings."

Awakening this inner freedom of spirit is the purpose of the hundreds of Buddhist practices and trainings. Each of these practices helps us to recognize and let go of unhealthy patterns that create suffering and develop healthy patterns in their place. What is important about the Buddhist psychological approach is the emphasis on training and practice, as well as understanding. Instead of going into therapy to discuss your problems and be listened to once a week, there is a regimen of daily and ongoing trainings and disciplines to help you learn and practice healthy ways of being. These

Copyrighted material

practices return us to our innate wisdom and compassion, and they direct us toward freedom.

SACRED PERCEPTION

The saints are what they are, not because their sanctity makes them admirable to others, but because the gift of sainthood makes it possible for them to admire everybody else.
—Thomas Merton

Each time we meet another human being and honor their dignity, we help those around us. Their hearts resonate with ours in exactly the same way the strings of an unplucked violin vibrate with the sounds of a violin played nearby. Western psychology has documented this phenomenon of "mood contagion" or limbic resonance. If a person filled with panic or hatred walks into a room, we feel it immediately, and unless we are very mindful, that person's negative state will begin to overtake our own. When a joyfully expressive person walks into a room, we can feel that state as well. And when we see the goodness of those before us, the dignity in them resonates with our admiration and respect.

This resonance can begin very simply. In India, when people greet one another they put their palms together and bow, saying *namaste,* "I honor the divine within you." It is a way of acknowledging your Buddha nature, who you really are. Some believe that the Western handshake evolved to demonstrate friendliness and safety, to show that we are not holding any weapon. But the greeting *namaste* goes a step further, from "I will not harm you" to "I see that which is holy in you." It creates the basis for sacred relationship.

When I began my training as a Buddhist monk, I found a taste of this sacred relationship. Around Ajahn Chah was an aura of straightforwardness, graciousness, and trust. It was the opposite of my early family life, and though it initially felt strange and unfamiliar, something in me loved it. Instead of a field of judgment, criticism, and unpredictable violence, here was a community dedicated to treating each person with respect and dignity. It was beautiful.

Copyrighted material

In the monastery, the walking paths were swept daily, the robes and bowls of the monks were tended with care. Our vows required us to cherish life in every form. We carefully avoided stepping on ants; we valued birds and insects, snakes and mammals. We learned to value ourselves and others equally. When conflict arose, we called on practices of patience, and in seeking forgiveness we were guided by councils of elders who demonstrated how to approach our failings with mindful respect.

Whether practiced in a forest monastery or in the West, Buddhist psychology begins by deliberately cultivating respect, starting with ourselves. When we learn to rest in our own goodness, we can see the goodness more clearly in others. As our sense of respect and care is developed, it serves us well under most ordinary circumstances. It becomes invaluable in extremity.

One Buddhist practitioner tells of being part of a group taken hostage in a bank in St. Louis. She describes the initial confusion and fear that spread through the hostages. She remembers trying to quiet her own racing heart. And then she tells how she made a decision not to panic. She used her meditation and her breath to quiet her mind. Over the hours, even as she helped others in her group, she addressed her captors respectfully and expressed a genuine concern for them. She saw their desperation and their underlying needs. When she and the other hostages were later released unharmed, she gratefully believed that the care and respect they showed to their captors had made their release possible.

When we bring respect and honor to those around us, we open a channel to their own goodness. I have seen this truth in working with prisoners and gang members. When they experience someone who respects and values them, it gives them the ability to admire themselves, to accept and acknowledge the good inside. When we see what is holy in another, whether we meet them in our family or our community, at a business meeting or in a therapy session, we transform their hearts.

The Dalai Lama embodies this sacred perception as he moves through the world, and it is one of the reasons so many people seek to be around him. Several years ago His Holiness visited San

Copyrighted material

Francisco and we invited him to offer teachings at Spirit Rock Meditation Center. The Dalai Lama is the head of the Tibetan government in exile, and the State Department had assigned dozens of Secret Service agents to protect him and his entourage. Accustomed to guarding foreign leaders, princes, and kings, the Secret Service agents were surprisingly moved by the Dalai Lama's respectful attitude and friendly heart. At the end, they asked for his blessing. Then they all wanted to have a photo taken with him. Several said, "We have had the privilege of protecting political leaders, princes, and prime ministers, yet there is something different about the Dalai Lama. He treats us as if we are special."

Later, during a series of public teachings, he stayed at a San Francisco hotel famous for hosting dignitaries. Just before he departed, the Dalai Lama told the hotel management that he would like to thank the staff in person, as many as wished to meet him. So on the last morning a long line of maids and dishwashers, cooks and maintenance men, secretaries and managers made their way to the circular driveway at the hotel entrance. And before the Dalai Lama's motorcade left, he walked down the line of employees, lovingly touching each hand, vibrating the strings of each heart.

Some years ago, I heard the story of a high school history teacher who knew this same secret. On one particularly fidgety and distracted afternoon she told her class to stop all their academic work. She let her students rest while she wrote on the blackboard a list of the names of everyone in the class. Then she asked them to copy the list. She instructed them to use the rest of the period to write beside each name one thing they liked or admired about that student. At the end of class she collected the papers.

Weeks later, on another difficult day just before winter break, the teacher again stopped the class. She handed each student a sheet with his or her name on top. On it she had pasted all twenty-six good things the other students had written about that person. They smiled and gasped in pleasure that so many beautiful qualities were noticed about them.

Three years later this teacher received a call from the mother of one of her former students. Robert had been a cut-up, but also

Copyrighted material

one of her favorites. His mother sadly passed on the terrible news that Robert had been killed in the Gulf War. The teacher attended the funeral, where many of Robert's former friends and high school classmates spoke. Just as the service was ending, Robert's mother approached her. She took out a worn piece of paper, obviously folded and refolded many times, and said, "This was one of the few things in Robert's pocket when the military retrieved his body." It was the paper on which the teacher had so carefully pasted the twenty-six things his classmates had admired.

Seeing this, Robert's teacher's eyes filled with tears. As she dried her wet cheeks, another former student standing nearby opened her purse, pulled out her own carefully folded page, and confessed that she always kept it with her. A third ex-student said that his page was framed and hanging in his kitchen; another told how the page had become part of her wedding vows. The perception of goodness invited by this teacher had transformed the hearts of her students in ways she might only have dreamed about.

We can each remember a moment when someone saw this goodness in us and blessed us. On retreat, a middle-aged woman remembers the one person, a nun, who was kind to her when, as a frightened and lonely teenager, she gave birth out of wedlock. She's carried her name all these years. A young man I worked with in juvenile hall remembers the old gardener next door who loved and valued him. The gardener's respect stuck with him through all his troubles. This possibility is voiced by the Nobel laureate Nelson Mandela: "It never hurts to think too highly of a person; often they become ennobled and act better because of it."

To see with sacred perception does not mean we ignore the need for development and change in an individual. Sacred perception is one half of a paradox. Zen master Shunryu Suzuki remarked to a disciple, "You are perfect just the way you are. And . . . there is still room for improvement!" Buddhist psychology offers meditations, cognitive strategies, ethical trainings, a powerful set of practices that foster inner transformation. But it starts with a most radical vision, one that transforms everyone it touches: a recognition of the innate nobility and the freedom of heart that are available wherever we are.

Copyrighted material

PRACTICE: SEEING THE SECRET GOODNESS

Wait for a day when you awaken in a fine mood, when your heart is open to the world. If such days are rare, choose the best you have. Before you start for work, set the clear intention that during the morning you will look for the inner nobility of three people. Carry that intention in your heart as you speak or work with them. Notice how this perception affects your interaction with them, how it affects your own heart, how it affects your work. Then choose five more days of your best moods, and do this practice on each of these days.

After looking at three people a day in this way five times, set the clear intention to practice seeing the secret goodness for a whole day with as many people as you can. Of course, you will find certain people difficult. Save them for later, and practice first with those whose nobility and beauty is seen most easily. When you have done this as best you can for a day, choose one day a week to continue this practice for a month or two.

Finally, as you become more naturally able to see the secret goodness, expand your practice. Add more days. Try practicing on days that are more stressful. Gradually include strangers and difficult people, until your heart learns to silently acknowledge and bless all whom you meet. Aim to see as many beings as you can with a silent, loving respect. Go through the day as if you were the Dalai Lama undercover.

Copyrighted material

2

HOLDING THE WORLD IN KINDNESS

A PSYCHOLOGY OF COMPASSION

O Nobly Born, now there is born in you exceeding compassion for all those living creatures who have forgotten their true nature.
—Mahamudra text of Tibetan yogi Longchenpa

Overcome any bitterness because you were not up to the magnitude of the pain entrusted to you. . . . Like the mother of the world who carries the pain of the world in her heart, you are sharing in the totality of this pain and are called upon to meet it in compassion and joy instead of self-pity.
—Sufi master Pir Vilayat Khan

Alan Wallace, a leading Western teacher of Tibetan Buddhism, puts it like this: "Imagine walking along a sidewalk with your arms full of groceries, and someone roughly bumps into you so that you fall and your groceries are strewn over the ground. As you rise up from the puddle of broken eggs and tomato juice, you are ready to shout out, 'You idiot! What's wrong with you? Are you blind?' But just before you can catch your breath to speak, you see that the person who bumped into you is actually blind. He, too, is sprawled in the spilled groceries, and your anger vanishes in an instant, to be

Copyrighted material

replaced by sympathetic concern: 'Are you hurt? Can I help you up?' Our situation is like that. When we clearly realize that the source of disharmony and misery in the world is ignorance, we can open the door of wisdom and compassion."

Each person who comes for spiritual teachings or psychotherapy carries his or her measure of confusion and sorrow. Buddhism teaches that we suffer not because we have sinned but because we are blind. Compassion is the natural response to this blindness; it arises whenever we see our human situation clearly. Buddhist texts describe compassion as the quivering of the heart in the face of pain, as the capacity to see our struggles with "kindly eyes." We need compassion, not anger, to help us be tender with our difficulties and not close off to them in fear. This is how healing takes place.

This is a second principle of Buddhist psychology:

---

2 Compassion is our deepest nature. It arises from our interconnection with all things.

When I first came to Buddhist practice as a monk, I wasn't conscious of how much pain I carried. I had managed to shut down the childhood memories of violence, the self-doubt and feelings of unworthiness, the struggle to be loved. In meditation and the monastery life they all came up: the stored history, the judgments and buried pains. At first, the demanding schedule and practices increased my sense of struggle and unworthiness. I tried to force myself to be disciplined, to be better. Eventually I discovered that unworthiness is not helped by striving. I learned that for real healing I needed compassion.

On one occasion I was sick with what was probably malaria, lying in my hut, feverish and wretched. I had received medicine from a monastery elder, but it was slow in taking effect. Ajahn Chah came to visit me. "Sick and feverish, huh?" he asked. "Yes," I replied weakly. "It's painful all over, isn't it?" I nodded. "Makes you feel sorry for yourself, doesn't it?" I smiled a bit. "Makes you want to

Copyrighted material

go home to see your mother." He smiled, and then nodded. "Yes, it's suffering, alright. Almost all the forest monks have had it. At least now we have good medicine." He paused. "Here. This is where we have to practice. Not just sitting in the meditation hall. It's hard. All the body torment and mind states. You learn a lot." He waited for a while, then he looked at me with the warmth of a kind grandfather. "You can bear it, you know. You can do it." And I felt that he was fully there with me, that he knew my pain from his own hard struggles. It took another day for the medicine to kick in, but his simple kindness made the situation bearable. His compassion gave me courage and helped me find my own freedom in the midst of hardship.

Beneath the sophistication of Buddhist psychology lies the simplicity of compassion. We can touch into this compassion whenever the mind is quiet, whenever we allow the heart to open. Unfortunately, like the clay covering the golden Buddha, thick layers of ignorance and trauma can obscure our compassion. On the global scale, ignorance manifests as injustice, racism, exploitation, and violence. On a personal scale, we see our own states of envy, anxiety, addiction, and aggression. When we take this blindness to be the end of the story, we limit the possibility of human development. Consider Freud, whose revolutionary work brought so much understanding of the psyche. But in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, he comes to a deeply pessimistic conclusion about the human heart. He states, "Civilization has to use its utmost efforts in order to set limits to man's aggressive instincts . . . the ideal's commandment to love one's neighbour as yourself . . . is really justified by the fact that nothing else runs so strongly counter to original human nature as this." Yes, we must recognize this aggressive aspect of our human nature. But in this essay, Freud stops there, completely missing the opposite and more powerful fact that our individual lives and our whole society are built upon innumerable acts of kindness.

Copyrighted material

It took me almost fifty years to heal the damage from all her ugly remarks.

Then she relates a childhood ritual that helped her survive.

From the age of five or six until I was well into my teens, whenever I had trouble sleeping, I would slip out from under my covers and steal into the kitchen for a bit of bread or cheese, which I would carry back to bed with me. There, I'd pretend my hands belonged to someone else, a comforting, reassuring being without a name—an angel, perhaps. The right hand would feed me little bites of cheese or bread as the left hand stroked my cheeks and hair. My eyes closed, I would whisper softly to myself, "There, there. Go to sleep. You're safe now. Everything will be all right. I love you."

Describing the life-denying landscape of her childhood, Barnett shows how caring floods through us like an inner angel of mercy, like green shoots forcing their way through cracks in the sidewalk. We can see the natural hand of compassion in all the ways we try to keep ourselves from harm, in a thousand daily gestures of self-protection.

THE PROBLEM OF SELF-HATRED

In 1989, at one of the first international Buddhist teacher meetings, we Western teachers brought up the enormous problem of unworthiness and self-criticism, shame and self-hatred, and how frequently they arose in Western students' practice. The Dalai Lama and other Asian teachers were shocked. They could not quite comprehend the word *self-hatred.* It took the Dalai Lama ten minutes of conferring with Geshe Thupten Jinpa, his translator, even to understand it. Then he turned and asked how many of us experienced this problem in ourselves and our students. He saw us all nod affirmatively. He seemed genuinely surprised. "But that's a mistake," he said. "Every being is precious!"

Nevertheless, self-judgment and shame were there in many of those who came to Buddhist practice. I certainly knew it in myself.

Copyrighted material

In order to survive the periods of extreme conflict within my family, I covered over my pain. I became a peacemaker and a good boy. When my parents were battling I tried to calm them down—without much success. When I went to school, I tried to stay safe by pleasing the teachers. Secretly I envied the "bad boys"—the ones who skipped class, smoked behind the school, and got into fights. It looked like they were having more fun. Today, of course, I know that many of them were struggling too, acting cool to deal with their own fears.

While trying to be good, underneath I had a feeling of being unloved, of forever seeking acceptance. In meditation and body-oriented therapy, I got to know these feelings more fully, they came so often. I learned to put my hands on my belly and heart to hold the pain and emptiness. At times it felt like an insatiable hunger, and at times it left me feeling very young. I was a tiny infant whose parents were already fighting horribly, my mother tells me, while I cried and cried. My twin brother and I, and my next brother, born a year later, were all allies in survival for most of our childhood, while my parents were triply overwhelmed. For me, the bottle I got on a schedule, it seems, was not enough. So inside I felt the hole in my belly and heart and the sense of being unlovable. I would curl up in a ball, and in the image that came, I felt like a starving Ethiopian child I had seen on television. I named this boy Ethie. Yes, he wanted food, but most of all he wanted love. This was the food he was starved for, and through years of practice, I gradually learned to provide it. My sympathy for Ethie has strongly inspired me to support organizations that feed hungry children.

Each of us has our own measure of pain. Sometimes the pain we suffer is great and obvious; sometimes it is subtle. Our pain can reflect the coldness of our families, the trauma of our parents, the stultifying influence of much modern education and media, the difficulties of being a man or a woman. As a result, we often feel that we have been cast out. To survive we have to cover our heart, build up a layer of clay, and defend ourselves.

We lose the belief that we are worthy of love. The mystic Simone Weil tells us, "The danger is not that the soul should doubt whether there is any bread, but that, by a lie, it should persuade it-

Copyrighted material

self that it is not hungry." Compassion reminds us that we do belong, as surely as we have been lost. As you read this book, at times Buddhist psychology may appear dry, full of lists and practices. Always remember to put your trust in compassion. The experiences of practitioners whose stories are told here continually describe the reclaiming of compassion and self-love. From this comes a shift of identity, a release from the covering of clay, a return to our original goodness.

A divorced veteran of the first Gulf War, Andrew came to meditation to find relief. He had lost his heart in the desert. His patrol came upon a bunker with Iraqi soldiers. They shot and then threw in grenades. Afterward, they found it filled with the bodies of very young men, holding a white flag, unable to signal their surrender. Andrew carried the soul-numbing demand of having to kill at twenty years of age. He also carried the sorrow of his military friends who were still caught in the aftereffects of the war. Coming to retreat, Andrew didn't know what he wanted, but I felt in him an unexpressed longing for forgiveness, healing, and a reconnection with the world. In the simplest terms, he needed the healing waters of compassion.

In the beginning, much of Andrew's training was simply to breathe gently and make room for the waves of his grief. He had feared this opening because he believed that he would be overwhelmed by the tragic memories and the guilt. On retreat, with the support of the meditators around him, he slowly learned to hold his battered body with kindness. Gradually he extended his heart to the suffering of both the Iraqi people and the American people. When the painful images and guilt arose, he began to experience his innate compassion, the soul force he had felt was lost. This was the start of his return to life.

When we lose connection with this tenderness, we may not realize that it can be reawakened so simply and directly. Compassion is only a few breaths away. Rose, a Buddhist practitioner, came to a small group meeting with me on retreat. When it was her turn to talk she just wanted to sit quietly, settle into herself, be silent. She was naturally shy. "It is so much more difficult when I relate to people," Rose said. "I know part of this is just my nature, but part of it

Copyrighted material

is the pain of my family history. I can't stand to have anyone's eyes on me." As we talked, she closed her eyes so she would feel safe. Speaking in the group was terrifying. When I inquired into how long she had been this way, it was as early as she could remember. "My parents were always watching me, annoyed, scowling, angry, filled with judgment. I have no memories of it ever being another way."

As Rose continued to be attentive to her experience, she wept. I asked if she could find any safe place in her body. There was none, she said. Could she remember from her childhood a single instant of well-being? It took her a while. Finally Rose opened her eyes, rubbed the palm of her right hand, and said, "Crayons." She smiled. She could remember being five years old and joyfully holding a box of crayons. I suggested that then she could draw with them. "No, no!" she answered. "Anything I draw, they'll criticize me. I'm only safe when I hold them."

The Buddha taught that we can develop loving-kindness by visualizing how a caring mother holds her beloved child. I had Rose close her eyes and imagine holding this little girl with the box of crayons. Then I asked, "If no one was looking, what would happen next?" With her eyes still closed, her face lit up, she threw out her arms, and she said, "I'd hold them and dance. Like a fairy princess. That's what I always wanted to be."

When the group was over, I went to the market and bought her a box of crayons. That day Rose went out into the woods and danced. Then she colored a picture, the first she had drawn since childhood. She showed it to me. When she went back to meditate her heart was filled with joy, her mind was open, well-being filled her sixty-four-year-old body.

Compassion for our own fear and shame opens us to others. After Rose had learned to color pictures and to practice compassion for herself, she began to include all the suffering girls like herself, near and far, who have been betrayed, lost, isolated. She could feel them as her sisters, and she knew that she was not alone. Now it was not just Rose's pain. She held the sorrows of the women of the world in her heart.

Copyrighted material

COMPASSION IS COURAGE

As children, many of us were taught courage in the form of the warrior or the explorer, bravely facing danger. In the Buddhist understanding, however, great courage is not demonstrated by aggression or ambition. Aggression and ambition are more often expressions of fear and delusion. The courageous heart is the one that is unafraid to open to the world. With compassion we come to trust our capacity to open to life without armoring. As the poet Rilke reminds us, "Ultimately it is on our vulnerability that we depend." This is not a poetic ideal but a living reality, demonstrated by our most beloved sages. Mahatma Gandhi had the courage to be jailed and beaten, to persevere through difficulties without giving in to bitterness and despair. His vulnerability became his strength.

We need this same courage to pass through a difficult divorce without lashing out and increasing the pain and anguish. We need it when our children are in trouble, when things go wrong at work. In all these situations we are vulnerable and everyone involved needs compassion.

Buddhist teachings often speak of compassion for all beings. But for most of us, compassion is developed one person and one difficult situation at a time. Novelist Ann Patchett, writing during the first Gulf War, put it this way: "When it gets down to one life, the mind achieves a vivid understanding. If I take the deaths in one at a time, I notice that marine lance corporal Michael E. Linderman, Jr., of Douglas, Oregon, was only 19, and I know what it was like to be 19. And I notice that there wasn't a standard military portrait taken of marine private, first class, Dion J. Stephenson of Bountiful, Utah, and so they used his prom picture and you can see the hook on the strap of his bow tie. . . . After you look at these pictures, the war becomes difficult to follow, because to be decent, you have to stop and love them and mourn their passing, and there are getting to be so many of them it's impossible not to fall behind."

Martin Luther King Jr. exhorted us, "Never succumb to the temptation of becoming bitter. As you press for justice, be sure to move with dignity and discipline, using only the instruments of

Copyrighted material

of their measure of sorrows, their suffering in life. Feel how your heart opens to wish them well, to extend comfort, to share in their pain and meet it with compassion. This is the natural response of the heart. Inwardly recite these phrases:

May you be held in compassion.
May your pain and sorrow be eased.
May you be at peace.

Continue reciting all the while you are holding that person in your heart. You can modify these phrases in any way that makes them true to your heart's intention.

After a few minutes, turn your compassion toward yourself and the measure of sorrows you carry. Recite the same phrases:

May I be held in compassion.
May my pain and sorrow be eased.
May I be at peace.

After a time, begin to extend compassion to others you know. Picture loved ones, one after another. Hold the image of each in your heart, be aware of that person's difficulties, and wish him or her well with the same phrases.

Then you can open your compassion further, a step at a time, to the suffering of your friends, to your neighbors, to your community, to all who suffer, to difficult people, to your enemies, and finally to the brotherhood and sisterhood of all beings. Sense your tenderhearted connection with all life and its creatures.

Work with compassion practice intuitively. At times it may feel difficult, as though you might be overwhelmed by the pain. Remember, you are not trying to "fix" the pain of the world, only to hold it with a compassionate heart. As you practice again and again, relax and be gentle. Breathe. Let your breath and heart rest naturally, as a center of compassion in the midst of the world.

Copyrighted material

3

WHO LOOKS IN THE MIRROR?

THE NATURE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

In its true state consciousness is naked, immaculate, clear, vacuous, transparent, timeless, beyond all conditions. O Nobly Born, remember the pure open sky of your own true nature.
—Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation

Luminous is consciousness, brightly shining is its nature, but it becomes clouded by the attachments that visit it.
—Anguttara Nikaya

Dr. Rachel Remen, who trains physicians to attend to the heart and mind as well as the body, tells this story:

> *For the last ten years of his life, Tim's father had Alzheimer's disease. Despite the devoted care of Tim's mother, he had slowly deteriorated until he had become a sort of walking vegetable. He was unable to speak and was fed, clothed, and cared for as if he were a very young child. . . . One Sunday, while [Tim's mother] was out doing the shopping, [Tim and his brother], then fifteen and*

Copyrighted material

seventeen, watched football as their father sat nearby in a chair. Suddenly, he slumped forward and fell to the floor. Both sons realized immediately that something was terribly wrong. His color was gray and his breath uneven and rasping. Frightened, Tim's older brother told him to call 911. Before he could respond, a voice he had not heard in ten years, a voice he could barely remember, interrupted. "Don't call 911, son. Tell your mother that I love her. Tell her that I am all right." And Tim's father died. . . .

Tim, now a cardiologist, goes on: "Because he died unexpectedly at home, the law required that we have an autopsy. My father's brain was almost entirely destroyed by his disease. For many years, I have asked myself, 'Who spoke? Who are we really?' I have never found the slightest help from any medical knowledge. Much of life cannot be explained, it can only be witnessed."

As a physician and scientist, Tim was confronted with the mystery of consciousness beyond the brain, beyond the body. Western science is just beginning to open to questions about the nature and origin of consciousness, even though Western philosophers have been concerned with such questions for centuries. Recent scientific studies of near-death and out-of-body experiences, along with experiments in remote viewing, allow us to glimpse other dimensions of consciousness. But what are we to make of them?

Buddhist psychology sends us directly into this mystery, to see for ourselves how consciousness works, independent of any object or content. It first describes consciousness as "that which knows," that which experiences. To understand this, we can deliberately turn our attention to examine consciousness.

We can start very simply by looking in the mirror. When we do so we are often startled to notice that our body looks older, even though we don't feel older. This is because the body exists in time, but the consciousness that perceives it is outside of time, never aging. We intuitively sense this. Instead of being caught up in the spilled groceries, it's as if we step back and see our experience with a timeless understanding.

Ordinarily we take consciousness for granted, ignoring it as a

Copyrighted material

fish ignores water. And so we focus endlessly on the contents of experience: what is happening in our body, feelings, and thoughts. Yet each time we move, listen, think, or perceive, consciousness receives all that occurs. Unless we grasp the nature and function of consciousness, it is impossible to live wisely.

This is a third principle of Buddhist psychology:

---

3 When we shift attention from experience to the spacious consciousness that knows, wisdom arises.

The capacity to be mindful, to observe without being caught in our experience, is both remarkable and liberating. "Mindfulness is all helpful," taught the Buddha. As we shall see, the transforming power of mindfulness underlies all of Buddhist psychology. To those who seek self-understanding, the Buddha teaches, "With the mind, to observe the mind." The central tool for investigating consciousness is our own observation. With mindfulness, we can direct our attention to notice what is going on inside us, and study how our mind and experience operate.

What we ordinarily call the mind usually refers to the "thinking mind," the ceaseless fountain of ideas, images, creativity, evaluation, and problem solving that spontaneously streams through our mind. But when we look closely, we discover that the mind is not just its thoughts, not just the ever-changing stream of ideas and images. It also includes a wide range of mind states or qualities around and below the thought process: feelings, moods, intuition, instincts. Even more important, though usually unnoticed, is the sheer fact of conscious awareness. This central capacity to be conscious is the essence of mind.

Physicists since the time of Isaac Newton have studied the mysterious operation of gravity. They have described its laws and characteristics. Consciousness is like gravity, a central part of existence that can also be described, whose laws can be known, whose power, range, and function can be studied. But unfortunately, Western

Copyrighted material

regretful states and loving ones. These states come with stories, feelings, perceptions, with beliefs and intentions. Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh describes it this way: "The mind is like a television set with hundreds of channels. Which channel will you turn on?" Usually we are so focused on the dramatic story being told that we don't notice that there is always consciousness that receives it.

Through mindfulness, we can learn to acknowledge which channel is playing. We can learn to change the channels, the stories and states, by recognizing that all states are simply appearances in consciousness. Most importantly, we can begin to understand the underlying nature of consciousness itself.

Here is a description of the two fundamental aspects of consciousness:

CONSCIOUSNESS IN ITS SKY-LIKE NATURE	*CONSCIOUSNESS IN ITS PARTICLE-LIKE NATURE*
Open	*Momentary*
Transparent	*Impersonal*
Timeless	*Registering a sense experience*
Cognizant	*Flavored by mental states*
Pure	*Conditioned*
Wave-like, unbounded	*Rapid*
Unborn, undying	*Ephemeral*

AWAKENING TO PURE CONSCIOUSNESS: THE SKY

Develop a mind that is vast like space, where experiences both pleasant and unpleasant can appear and disappear without conflict, struggle, or harm.
—Majjhima Nikaya

While studying Buddhism in college, I tried a little meditation on my own. But I was unsuccessful because I didn't know what I was doing. It wasn't that I was afraid of silence or of some terrible darkness that I would find inside, though these are common mis-

Copyrighted material

understandings of meditation. It was that my body would get uncomfortable and my mind would spin out in a million directions. When I heard Ajahn Chah's teaching, the practice became gradually clearer. He taught me to relax and feel my breath carefully, which helped focus and quiet my mind. Then he taught me just to mindfully notice the stream of thoughts and sensations without reacting to them as a problem. This took some practice.

Finally he taught the most important lesson, to rest in consciousness itself. As his own teacher Ajahn Mun explains, "We can notice the distinction between consciousness and all the transient states and experiences that arise and pass away within it. When we do not understand this point, we take each of the passing states to be real. But when changing conditions such as happiness and unhappiness are seen for what they are, we find the way to peace. If you can rest in the knowing, the pure consciousness, there's not much more to do."

Does resting in consciousness mean we are simply checking out of the world or withdrawing into navel gazing? Not at all. Resting in the knowing is not the same as detachment. When I look back at my own life I can see my own struggles to discover this truth. Because of the conflict and unpredictable violence in my family, there were many times I wanted to run away but couldn't. To cope with the trauma, at times I became depressed, angry, or cynical. But as a primary protection, I developed the capacity to detach myself from what was happening. Detachment came naturally to me. I used it to become peaceful within myself and to try to calm those around me. Of course, these patterns persist, and now I do it for a living.

So when I first tried to meditate, I confused it with my familiar strategy of detachment. Gradually I discovered how wrong I was. My detachment had been a withdrawal from the pain and conflict into a protective shell. It was more like indifference. In Buddhist psychology indifference is called the "near enemy" of true openness and equanimity, a misguided imitation. To rest in consciousness, I had to unlearn this defensive detachment and learn to feel everything. I had to allow myself to recognize and experience

Copyrighted material

lying on the floor of the prison and he was being kicked by a particularly cruel guard. Blood poured out of his mouth, and as the police report later stated, the authorities believed he had died.

He remembers the pain of being beaten. Then, as is often reported by accident and torture victims, he felt his consciousness leave his body and float up to the ceiling. At first it was peaceful and still, like in a silent movie, as he watched his own body lying below being kicked. It was so peaceful he didn't know what all the fuss was about. And then Salam described how, in a remarkable way, his consciousness expanded further. He knew it was his body lying below, but now he felt he was also the boot kicking the body. He was also the peeling green paint on the prison walls, the goat whose bleat could be heard outside, the dirt under the guard's fingernails—he was life, all of it and the eternal consciousness of it all, with no separation. Being everything, he could never die. All his fears vanished. He realized that death was an illusion. A well-being and joy beyond description opened in him. And then a spontaneous compassion arose for the astonishing folly of humans, believing we are separate, clinging to nations and making war.

Two days later, as Salam describes it, he came back to consciousness in a bruised and beaten body on the floor of a cell, without fear or remorse, just amazement. His experience changed his whole sense of life and death. He refused to continue to participate in any form of conflict. When he was released, he married a Jewish woman and had Palestinian-Jewish children. That, he said, was his answer to the misguided madness of the world.

TURNING TOWARD OUR ESSENCE

"Who are we, really?" the Zen koans demand. "Who is dragging this body around?" or "What was your original face before your parents were born?" These questions force us to look directly at the consciousness that inhabits our body. Ajahn Chah asked us to "be the Knowing." Tibetan teachers instruct their students to direct their gaze inside to see who or what is doing the looking. Ajahn Jumnian,

Copyrighted material

roles and we had to play them well and behind it, it was all spacious, all OK."

When we learn to rest in awareness, there's both caring and silence. There is listening for what's the next thing to do and awareness of all that's happening, a big space and a connected feeling of love. When there is enough space, our whole being can both apprehend the situation and be at ease. We see the dance of life, we dance beautifully, yet we're not caught in it. In any situation, we can open up, relax, and return to the sky-like nature of consciousness.

PRACTICE: THE RIVER OF SOUND

Sit comfortably and at ease. Close your eyes. Let your body be at rest and your breathing be natural. Begin to listen to the play of sounds around you. Notice those that are loud or soft, far and near. Notice how sounds arise and vanish on their own, leaving no trace. After you have listened for a few minutes, let yourself sense, feel, or imagine that your mind is not limited to your head. Sense that your mind is expanding to be open like the sky—clear, vast like space. Feel that your mind extends outward beyond the most distant sounds. Imagine there are no boundaries to your mind, no inside or outside. Let the awareness of your mind extend in every direction like the open sky.

Relax in this openness and just listen. Now every sound you hear—people, cars, wind, soft sounds—will arise and pass away like a cloud in the open space of your own mind. Let the sounds come and go, whether loud or soft, far or near, let them be clouds in the vast sky of your own awareness, appearing and disappearing without resistance. As you rest in this open awareness for a time, notice how thoughts and feelings also arise and vanish like sounds in the open space of mind. Let the thoughts and feelings come and go without struggle or resistance. Pleasant and unpleasant thoughts, pictures, words, joys, and sorrows—let them all come and go like clouds in the clear sky of mind.

Then, in this spacious awareness also notice how you experi-

Copyrighted material

vorced monk from Bangkok he chided, "Is there sadness? Anger? Self-pity? Hey, these are natural. Look at them all." And to a confused English monk he laughed, "Can you see what is happening? There is distraction, confusion, being in a muddle. They're only mind states, you know. Come on. Do you believe your mind states? Are you trapped by them? You'll suffer for sure."

Once we became more skilled at noticing, he would up the ante. He would deliberately make things difficult and watch what happened. In the hottest season, he would send us out barefoot to collect alms food on a ten-mile round trip, and smile at us when we came back to see if we were frustrated or discouraged. He'd have us sit up all night long for endless teachings, without any break, and check in on us cheerfully at four in the morning. When we got annoyed, he'd ask, "Are you angry? Whose fault is that?"

In popular Western culture we are taught that the way to achieve happiness is to change our external environment to fit our wishes. But this strategy doesn't work. In every life, pleasure and pain, gain and loss, praise and blame keep showing up, no matter how hard we struggle to have only pleasure, gain, and praise. Buddhist psychology offers a different approach to happiness, teaching that states of consciousness are far more crucial than outer circumstances.

More than anything else, the way we experience life is created by the particular states of mind with which we meet it. If you are watching a high school soccer playoff and your daughter is the nervous goalie, your consciousness will be filled with worry, sympathy, and excitement at each turn of the game. If you are a hired driver waiting to pick up someone's kid, you will see the same sights, the players and ball, in a bored, disinterested way. If you are the referee, you will perceive the sights and sounds in yet another mode. It is the same way with hearing Beethoven, pulling weeds, watching a Woody Allen movie, or visiting Mexico City. Pure awareness becomes colored by our thoughts, emotions, and expectations.

"Just as when a lute is played upon," the Buddha says, "the sound arises due to the qualities of the wooden instrument, the strings,

Copyrighted material

the 1960s, loved the lists. Alas, for many of us they bring up a sinking feeling, like memories of badly taught arithmetic or an old obsessive uncle. It's not our way to learn.

Nevertheless, these lists served a critical function. Buddhist psychology was originally an oral tradition, recited for five hundred years before ever being written down. Numbered lists are a traditional mnemonic device, a way to remember the teachings in detail and depth without losing critical information. They were part of the science of the times, ordered and repeated, used in inner experiments of exquisite accuracy for centuries. Even though they now exist as written texts, these lists are still recited from memory and regarded as a precious legacy. Indeed, this form of systematized knowledge was respected not just in India, but throughout the educated cultures of the ancient world. It is recorded that Abdul Kassem Ismael, grand vizier of Persia in the tenth century, couldn't bear to part with his 117,000-volume library. When he traveled, these books were carried by a caravan of four hundred camels, trained to walk in a way that preserved the library's alphabetical order.

To help us understand the momentary colorings of consciousness, Buddhist psychology places them in a three-part system. Described as "the all," this system encompasses the whole of our human experience. Part one includes all the impressions received through our sense doors. This list is short because our sense experience comprises only six things: sights, sounds, tastes, smells, touch/bodily perceptions, and thoughts/feelings. It's worth noticing that in the Buddhist system, the mind is considered to be the sixth sense door, receiving thoughts and feelings and intuitions just the way the eye receives sights and the ear receives sounds.

Part two is comprised of the discrete moments of consciousness that receive each sense experience. A fresh corpse also receives sense input, sunlight or breeze on the skin, but there is no consciousness to register it. For us to experience something, there must arise a moment of consciousness at the sense door. These six basic particles of consciousness are individual moments of knowing called, respectively, eye, ear, tongue, nose, body, and mind consciousness.

Copyrighted material

With the six senses and their individual consciousnesses we construct our reality, just as an artist can paint the whole world using any combination of the colors red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple. The Buddha explains, "Monks, have you seen a masterwork of painting? That masterwork is designed by the mind together with the senses. Indeed, monks, the mind is more artistic and creative than any created masterpiece; it is the source of all human creativity."

Initially I thought these lists were archaic and at times arbitrary, but my teachers insisted they could help me understand my direct experience more insightfully. When I received meditation instruction from the Burmese master Mahasi Sayadaw, I was taught to slow down and note the arising and passing of each moment in precise detail. In the monastery dining hall, every second brought new sights, sounds, smells, and thoughts. When I sat down to eat rice and fish curry, I could feel the tug of my robes, hear the changing play of voices from the visitors, and feel and smell the sweat on my body; as I mindfully moved my arm to lift a mango and chew, I became aware of a background commentary of thoughts and feelings. At first these all blended together, but after months of training in mindfulness, my perception became microscopic. A few minutes contained thousands of moments of sound and ear consciousness, sight and eye consciousness, taste and tongue consciousness, all blended together like the spots of color in an impressionist painting or the dots of light on a television screen to create my experience of lunch.

Even now as you read, you can notice these six sense impressions and the six consciousnesses, rapidly arising and passing like frames of a movie, one after another. Take a moment, look up from the page, and notice how the book and the ideas it carries disappear from consciousness, replaced by the sights in front of you. Return to this page, and again, after you read this sentence, shift your attention to your bodily sensations: contact with the seat and floor, warmth and cool, tingling, tensions, vibrations. Notice how the book and its contents recede in consciousness as you do. Sense impressions and sense consciousnesses are the first two steps in constructing our world.

Copyrighted material

HEALTHY AND UNHEALTHY MENTAL STATES

To complete this picture of our world, let's go back to the woman watching her daughter play soccer. She sees the game and hears the sounds, each received by eye and ear consciousness. She is also excited, worried, proud, sympathetic. Her sense experiences are colored by many states of mind. These states of mind constitute the third aspect of human experience. These qualities of mind, called mental states, color consciousness. One common list has 52 qualities, while other lists have up to 121. Apparently, between the monasteries, the monks could never fully decide.

With every sense impression and the consciousness that receives it, there arise qualities of mind such as worry, pride, and excitement. They arise between the senses and consciousness, and add their color to experience. These mental qualities and what they bring to each experience are critical for our happiness.

A friend sent Dennis, a real estate broker, to practice at a Spirit Rock meditation class. An attractive man in his late thirties, Dennis had lists of his own, having just broken up with his seventeenth girlfriend. He was sad because none of them had been quite right. He'd gone through a number of spiritual teachers too. I was sure I was going to be the next disappointment on his list.

Initially Dennis hated meditation. "Can't I just find another girl?" he asked. I told him to forget the girl and to be mindful of his breath and body. During the following weeks I asked him to pay attention and mindfully notice not his external experiences but his mind states, the mental qualities that filled his day. Dennis was not prepared for what he saw. He thought of himself as a happy guy, but he discovered more moments of dissatisfaction than he could have imagined. Along with them were mind states of aversion, boredom, judgment, and anxiety. There were many moments of pleasure too, but he was surprised by the frequency of dissatisfaction and anxiety. Immediately Dennis began to judge himself: "What's the matter with me? Why can't I be more serene?" Now he was dissatisfied with his own mind. When he told me, I laughed and pointed out that he was simply caught in the mind state of being dissatisfied, and suffering from it, instead of noticing it as simply a thought.

Copyrighted material