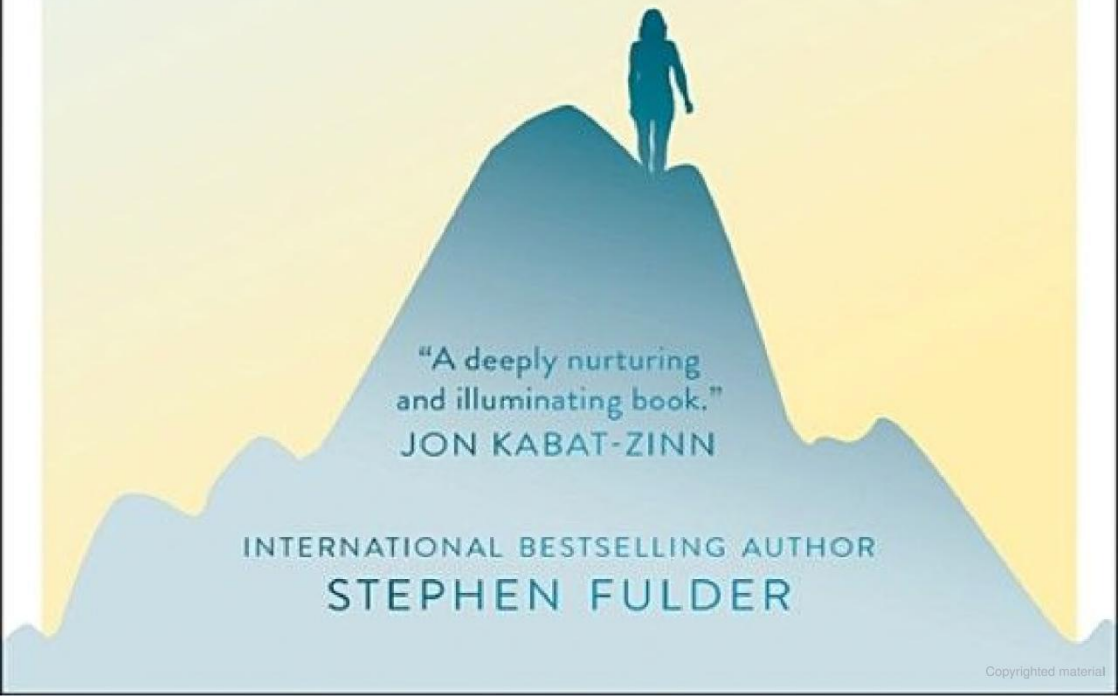
WAKING
UP TO THIS
PRECIOUS
LIFE

WHAT'S BEYOND MINDFULNESS?



"A deeply nurturing
and illuminating book."
JON KABAT-ZINN

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
STEPHEN FULDER

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

When I was a kid, I remember sensing that life was one big mystery. I read a lot of fantasy books, my imagination wove vast worlds and I saw magic in everything and every place; the way apples grew on trees, the way both myself and the butterflies enjoyed the spreading aromas of a lilac bush, and the way people walked in the streets of London. I had one serious problem – that I knew that one day I would have to be an adult and all that magic would disappear. It was a terrifying thought. Adults, it seemed to me, spent most of their lives worrying and stressed, were never satisfied with what they had (especially money), were busy all day, or just worn out from the busyness. They seemed largely nervous or defensive, living their lives on automatic pilot. Moreover they were continually complaining that they were unhealthy and unhappy, and seemed to rely on medication, doctors or psychologists just to keep going. Now, I am an adult.

We all wish we could put down the loads we are carrying through life. There are internal loads such as anxiety, lack of joy, restlessness or a judgemental mind. Or external loads such as not getting what we want or relationship issues or our bodies that seem to betray us. But it is actually our minds that are loaded. For life is constantly changing and not in our control, but how we face change is entirely on our shoulders and mostly feels like an endless struggle. The loads seem quite stuck onto us, as if they have become part of us. This is

because they don't get dropped by wishing to be light and free, nor by thinking about them, nor by imagining them to have dropped, nor by avoiding them. The stress is so integral to our life that trying to clean it we find we are always washing ourselves with dirty water. We need something different. As Einstein once said: "You can't solve problems with the same mind that created them."

This is where wakefulness, mindfulness, and spiritual practices are important. They can make a shift at the deepest level, in the way we are with ourselves, with our experiences and with the world, moment by moment. And gradually something extraordinary happens. We discover that our very nature is peaceful, joyful and connected, but we could not see it because it was obscured by beliefs, stories, memories, narratives and habits that filled our consciousness with clouds and burdens. Once the clouds are seen as unreal and not solid, we realize the sun is still there and it will shine out again. And in its light our view of reality expands way beyond the boundaries that we thought were the world. We are changed and life is lived differently.

In the same way, we discover that the magic that we experienced as a child can actually never disappear. I needn't have worried as a kid. Magic is the way of nature. Though it appears to be covered with layers of mental structures, we do not have to dig too deep to find underlying joy, peace and kindness. We can look reality in the eyes and welcome everything it brings. We can find endless intimacy and great warmth in our relationship with ourselves and with others whether they are close to us or not. We can live a wise inner life of reflection, creativity and inspiration, a life with wide

horizons. Does that sound too idyllic? Well, it is not. It all depends on how we see ourselves and our lives – a clarity can be learned and a transformation developed, which is the subject of this book.

The book is grounded in Buddhist teachings, and how they can be applied meaningfully to our outer and inner life. But this is not a Buddhist book. The Buddhist character of the text is inherent, invisible and lifting us up from underneath not pulling us from above. Paradoxically, that is exactly the way the Buddha himself appeared to have taught and asked his monks to teach. The Buddha wasn't a Buddhist. But the vast teachings of Buddhism are an absolutely vital resource, a practical treasure trove; simple, direct, non-mystical and non-religious in essence, which has reached us today intact and not covered over by layers of religious obscurations. Besides, after 40 years of practice and 20 years of intensive teaching, this is also the ocean in which I swim.

We are in a new phase of an acceptance and an interest in Buddhist-inspired teachings in the modern world and the West. In particular, mindfulness, a key Buddhist practice, is extremely well known and has been written about intensively. It is having a major impact in Western culture. For example, it has changed the face of psychology with the rise of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), and impacted health care, education, business practices and even politics (apparently a quarter of UK parliamentarians have practised mindfulness[1]). However, mindfulness is embedded in an extremely rich teaching. This book recruits the whole teaching and is way beyond just mindfulness. Though there are currently a large number of books on Buddhist teachings

and mindfulness, this book may reflect the next generation of such literature. It is not about bringing new and Eastern teachings into the modern world, it is not even about the teachings. It is about embodying them. It does not describe a horse and explain horse riding. It shows that you are already riding it.

There are 43 chapters in this book, all of which offer a fresh look at many aspects of our daily lives and show us what our life might look like from a place of awakening. They are like exploratory conversations. They are not academic or philosophical, nor obviously Buddhist, nor are they poetry, but rather are written out of a mindset and attitude, centred on insight. They are more like navigation aids that point us to some radical changes that can be made in the way we see and perceive our life, and in the end point us to where we already are. These are words that can lead to liberation, that emerge from the contemplative and lead us back to it. Each chapter is independent and deals with a specific topic, idea or question relating to our lives. You can read them in any order. I invite you to choose a topic that fits the moment.

The book is divided into three sections, which are titled according to the basic triangle of the Buddhist teachings. The first, entitled *sila* in the Pali language (ethics, action, how we live), is about how we act and function wisely and harmoniously in life. The chapters in this section look at a variety of life circumstances, such as sickness, work, moral sensitivity, energy, speech, simplicity, money. The second part, entitled *samadhi* in Sanskrit (practice, serenity, meditation), deals with sources, methods and directions for our journey. What are the paths up the mountain and what

should we take with us? These chapters include working with difficult emotions, conflict, mindfulness, body awareness, memory, conditioning, unconscious potentials. The third part, entitled *pannya* in the Pali language (wisdom, realization, awareness), is the view: how things look from up there. Here I deal with presence, sacredness and the divine, autonomy, self and non-self, wise social action, duality and non-duality, equanimity, liberation, karma. Here we may discover that the mountain may be just a mound, that climbing may be just being, and the view is actually us. Though the three parts advance on each other, all are needed all the time. If we strive spiritually without a base of beneficial and ethical action in life, it will be like rowing the boat while it is still tied to the shore, and if we just deal with the quality of our actions and not our inner life, we will be just circling the mountain trying to get things right all the time, and never glimpse the peak.

This is not an inward journey that demands a withdrawal from the world, nor a way that will prevent us from manifesting ourselves. Exactly the opposite. It is a journey of self-realization within the heart of the challenging world in which we live. Our 24-hour daily life is the field in which we ramble, explore, fall over, get up, and in the end dance with beauty and wild freedom. There can be no other field. It reminds us of the Zen story of a young monk who asked the head of the monastery, what is the highest form of practice. The abbot answered, "Meditation, of course." "But I never see you sitting in meditation," said the student. "You are doing the monastic accounts, cleaning, receiving visitors, tending the garden, busy all day. I never once see you sitting in

meditation." "It's true," answered the abbot, "I am doing the accounts, receiving visitors, cleaning, tending the gardens, teaching and occupied all day. But I never once stop meditating." Here are a couple of examples of this from my own life. While in Varanasi, India, in 1976, I spent a lot of time with the sadhus, mystics and yogis on the banks of the Ganges, and then the more austere Buddhists who were my first introduction to meditation practice. Yet at the same time I was teaching biochemistry at Banaras Hindu University. The two worlds were in conversation not conflict. Today, I teach Buddhist spiritual teachings and practices all year and I have thousands of students and yet together with Rachel, my wife, we still grow our food and medicines, and I am a playful present-moment grandfather to my many grandchildren. We may need periods of withdrawal to reset the system, and touch more subtle places inside, but in the end, inner and outer have to be one, and spiritual life and daily life have to be seamlessly connected.

The pieces that make up this book are meant to be like lamps that are just bright enough and steady enough to dispel the total darkness of the night sky and light up the road. They are not the dazzling headlights of passing cars. They are landmarks or maps directing us toward the forgotten places in ourselves that we long to visit. We have all experienced whispers from the beyond, beyond our life struggles and thinking habits. They may arrive while walking in the hills, when gazing up into the space of the heavens, in moments of love that thrill us, in a touch of unexpected sanctity that lifts us, or in the mysterious unconscious sense that "this is limitless". These are all reminders of our innate freedom that

the book offers. They remind us of the possibilities of understanding our true potential and our true nature as human beings.

Acknowledgements

Concerning the original version of this book, I would firstly like to acknowledge the great help I have received from Muli Glazer, who contributed his skill in putting the dharma into language, which is no easy task, as well as the many students and colleagues who helped with individual pieces.

I would like to acknowledge the help of Dr Carmel Shalev, Jonathan Harrison, Ilan Luttenberg, Chanan Kubitsky, Dr Assaf Federman, Rabbi James Jacobsen-Maisels and Harriet Lewis, for the translation of articles from Hebrew to English.

I wish to express my great appreciation to my wife Rachel, for her deep understanding, support and encouragement all along the way.

PART ONE

HOW TO LIVE

(*SILA*)

CHAPTER 1

HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN?

Have you forgotten
How to do nothing
And watch nature not doing too?
The edges of leaves, the soft fur of cats
Myths in the shapes of clouds
The stillness of the moon, tones in the wind
Your own soft breath
Dissolving the boundary between you and the world.
Have you forgotten
That your troubled mind still loves stars,
And can see the pain behind another's eyes?
Can you allow yourself to love yourself
Just the way you are
And do the same
With every stranger on the road?
Come close, get comfortable, and let me remind you ...

CHAPTER 2

MORAL SENSITIVITY AND INNER DEVELOPMENT

We tend to think of our personal growth and development as an inner path with the development of awareness as its heart. Millions of people practise hatha yoga, forgetting that *yam/niyam*, ethical behaviour and sensitivity, are the first steps in the eight limbs of yoga, before hatha yoga. At the beginning of vipassana workshops we hear about the five principles of moral behaviour, but soon we are instructed to focus on the "serious" issue of meditation practice and see this as the true spiritual work. We rightly assume that continuous practice of meditation will make us better human beings, and transform our behaviour in everyday life as a result, but forget that we also need to transform our behaviour beforehand.

Once, when I was in a Buddhist monastery for a short stay, I had a deep and subtle conversation with the abbot about consciousness. But at the end of the meeting, he looked directly into my eyes and said: "Never forget the importance of conduct." There is a pithy Arab maxim that says it well: "Believe in God, but don't forget to tie your camel!"

This is central: the essential basis of our development is the ongoing conversation between our insights, the choices

we make every moment in our lives and their results. Our inner world and outer action mutually, continuously and seamlessly influence each other. Action shapes consciousness and consciousness directs action. Moral behaviour is therefore an inherent and necessary part of the spiritual path. Without awareness and constant sensitivity to the quality of our actions we will not be able to climb the mountain. Creating damage and distress with harmful words or deeds to ourselves or others is like a cable that ties a boat to the pier – even if we strenuously row the boat of spiritual practice, it will not budge.

In the words of the spiritual teacher Jiddu Krishnamurti: "First of all put your house in order." This means inner sweeping and cleaning, striving for a life of wholeness and harmony (Pali: *kusala*) that does not cause damage, and that is free of guilt, regret or jealousy. This housekeeping is the basis and the ground for every spiritual practice.

There are five moral guidelines or precepts in the Buddhist world that are regarded as basic and fundamental. But unlike the Ten Commandments, which are sometimes seen as a Judeo-Christian equivalent, they include "do" not only "do not". More importantly, they are regarded as a practice rather than a fixed set of rules that we have to take on board and by which we judge ourselves or others. The practice is the constant development and refinement of what feels right, harmonious and beneficial. We can outline the five precepts here as fundamental commitments to develop awareness of how we relate to the world. They are expressed below as personal intentions:

1. I will try to be more sensitive to the suffering caused by harming myself and others and I will cultivate compassion and learn ways to protect living beings. I will endeavour not to do harm, nor to condone acts of harming, in my thinking, and in my way of life.
2. I will try to be more sensitive to the suffering caused by exploitation, injustice, stealing and oppression, and I will endeavour to work for the well-being of living beings by sharing my time, energy and resources with others. I will endeavour to live modestly and not to take what is not freely given.
3. I will try to be more sensitive to the suffering caused by exploitative or abusive sexual energy and behaviour and I will endeavour to manage my sexual energy with care, awareness and harmony in relation to myself and others.
4. I will try to be more sensitive to the suffering caused by unmindful and hurtful speech and the inability to listen to others. I will endeavour to cultivate kind, truthful speech and deep listening in order to bring joy to others, and reduce conflict and discord.
5. I will try to be more sensitive to the suffering caused by unmindful eating, drinking and consuming. I will endeavour not to ingest intoxicants or toxins that damage the body and dull the mind, and to care for the health and well-being of body and mind.

If we can live in the light of these five guidelines, our lives and the life of our environment will change beyond recognition. But it is not easy. If we take this seriously, we will need to be constantly mindful of how we are in the world.

Are we killing ants as we walk? Are we responding with sensitivity and care to the call of other sentient beings? We will find ourselves in constant deliberation. For example, at an international conference of vipassana teachers in which I participated, the question arose: "Is there such a thing as a just war?" The answers were varied and complex, reflecting the magnitude of the dilemma. Another example concerns lying. At the end of the 1980s, my youngest daughter didn't like her school and kept wanting to stay at home. At first, I was happy to write a note saying "She is sick today" when in fact she was happy as a skylark, playing in the garden. But as I continued to practise dharma, lying became painfully crude and unethical. So I wrote notes that didn't actually lie, but were not entirely true and authentic either: "She is unable to get to school today." Then as I continued my spiritual journey even that became impossible and I just wrote the truth: "She doesn't want to go to school today." I was ready to pay the price but I could not lie.

A historical dilemma concerns vegetarianism, and currently veganism as well. Many ask: "Was the Buddha a vegetarian? What did he say about vegetarianism? Were the Buddha alive today, what would he recommend? And what about eggs and dairy products?"

In his lifetime, the Buddha forbade monks to eat meat if someone killed an animal for them. The monks only received leftovers from the families in the villages, whatever they were, but if someone invited them to a meal and wanted to slaughter a chicken for them, they were not allowed to respond. It was more important to let go of need and greed, preference and self-interests, than to be choosy about what

leftovers they ate, meat or not. But nowadays the situation is different. We are not monks. Meat, eggs and dairy are the products of a huge food industry which causes enormous physical and psychological suffering to animals and people working in it, as well as severe environmental damage. If the Buddha were alive today my guess is that he would advise us all to have nothing to do with such products. At the same time, if we choose vegan food, we have to be careful not to fall into other traps of the ego – of being self-righteous, fundamentalist, orthodox and judgemental of those that don't keep our own ethical principles. This is harmful and hurtful and morally insensitive at another level and forgets the life teaching of non-preference and bringing harmony and goodness into the world. Is the Dalai Lama an unethical person because he eats meat?

These are not simple questions, and sometimes the aspiration for a moral life leads us along a bumpy road. For example, we often need great courage and energy to speak out or act with moral sensitivity, where the consensus social view is brainwashed and xenophobic. We can easily get branded as traitors. Are we silent in situations that demand us to cry out? Are we afraid to intervene? Are we concerned only for the poor that we know, and indifferent to the oppressed who are far from us? A painful recent example is the treatment of the Rohingya in Myanmar. Their villages burnt, attacked by the army, they fled into Bangladesh in the hundreds of thousands in what the UN described as a major act of ethnic cleansing. By Buddhists. Clearly being born a Buddhist gives you no automatic access to goodness. The five precepts, like the Ten Commandments, have to be practised

deeply otherwise ethics can fly out of the window at any time.

To understand how to act we need wisdom and attention. We must carefully examine what we do and say and the results of our actions. Do we contribute to an increase or reduction of suffering in the world? In the Biblical myth of Noah, he is picked out as a unique example of ethical behaviour at a time when the rest of humanity was corrupted. He was asked by God to save the animals from the coming flood by building an ark for them. The Talmud asks what was special about him. The answer was that he knew what every animal needed and could take care of each of them. His ethics was based on a great awareness and big heart. Let us be like Noah, lift the curtain and create an empathic connection between us and all other creatures. When people ask me if I eat the chickens that I keep, I answer; "Would you eat your friends?" We need to see all life as a community and then we will take care of other beings. If we see how all other beings suffer like us, we will not cause more pain. The joy of others makes us joyful too.

The accepted way of life in the West revolves around the desire for comfort and pampering and for endless consumption. We are generally not interested in the harm it brings to others and the planet. We don't think about the working conditions of children in Vietnam or Bangladesh who are sewing our clothes. To put my benefit over the well-being of others creates an ethical minefield.

The Buddha was asked a fundamental question: "How does it help me to keep the five principles of morality?" The Buddha replied that a person who commits to stop harming gives all beings in the world more freedom from fear,

freedom from danger, freedom from anger and freedom from oppression. Because he too is one of the creatures in the world, he gets back the gift of freedom from fear, misery, anger and oppression. This is a circle of transmission and reception – those who transmit ease also receive it, freedom returns to them like a boomerang. This boomerang supports us during our spiritual life because it helps us to climb the mountain without the weight of regret, fear or oppression.

This view is based on an understanding of karma. This is the knowledge that every action we take, every word we say, every thought we think, sows a seed. The seeds do not disappear – they produce fruit. All beings in the world are connected in a network of interactions. Everything we do creates a message of a certain kind, and it resonates within and without. We broadcast and receive constantly. There are four types of karma, divided by the actions that create them:

- **An act full of light** brings light to the world. An action full of light is one that is consistent with the five precepts.
- **A murky act** that is harmful results in a muddied outcome.
- **A mixed action** is what characterizes us in most cases, and is created, for example, when we lead a fairly pure life, but are occasionally a bit aggressive, or drink alcohol or watch a stupid television programme.
- **The ideal action** is peaceful and creates no karma at all. It is an action that seems to happen by itself, and takes place when life flows through us. It happens when essentially there is no "I" separate from and ceaselessly trying to control the world. This is liberation.

But until we get to this high place, we should appreciate that our actions are heavily influenced by our patterns, tendencies and habits, called *sankharas* in Pali. And they create further *sankharas*. What kind of person creates this action, that word, that thought? And what kind of person do we build from them? We recreate ourselves every moment. If we look at it this way it is easy to see how pure action fosters joy, calmness and harmony in our psyche, while a murky act has the opposite effect.

We die and are reborn constantly, recreating ourselves every moment, with every thought and action. This is the early Buddhist teaching on rebirth, which is something that happens in the present. The moment called "death" is only one death among many, the death of the body. From this point of view, the power of action becomes clear: we are not born again, but our actions are. Or in the words of Chögyam Trungpa: "The only things that are born again are our bad habits." Therefore, we must be careful and pay attention to every action, word or thought. As it says in the *Dhammapada*: "Even small negative actions can cause great suffering in the world, similar to a poison that even a small dose can harm, yet positive actions, even the smallest ones, bring joy to our next and subsequent lives, just like a small seed can give rise to an abundance of crops."[1]

How can we balance both right action in the world along with spiritual practice? Each stage in the development of consciousness requires a step up in our sensitivity to our actions. This is especially true for great teachers, who have to be very careful. There are many examples of teachers with a high-powered consciousness who do not understand this, and

allow themselves to get contaminated by desire for money or sex, for example. They maintain ethics 90% of the time and not 100%; their students can get badly wounded, karma takes it further, and then everything collapses.

CHAPTER 3

SIMPLY RIGHT

During 40 years of work as a consultant and writer in the area of herbal and complementary medicine, one of my frequent assignments was to go to health product trade fairs, and give talks there. They are bizarre and enormous, with thousands of manufacturers pushing health products for all their worth. I used to go regularly to Expo West, in Anaheim, California, a mammoth jamboree of around 10,000 stands, all pushing, explaining or giving tastes of their products. I used to spend days wandering around, grazing like a cow; tasting organic delicacies from all over the world, sipping juices from exotic fruit, snacking on "forbidden" foods that are actually all made up of soya beans, and, when quite exhausted, getting doses of herbal pick-me-ups. The inventiveness is extraordinary. There are lots of dedicated people who really believe in what they are doing. And lots of others who are only interested in the bottom line. There are good products, and useless ones. But it does raise a question: is our own health and well-being, and that of the planet, dependent on what we buy? Or rather on what we do not buy? There is surely no problem in choosing more wisely what we decide to eat, and what we bring into our home. It is indeed helpful to our health and the environment to choose less processed, organic and healthy food, to be vegetarian, and to have a preference for safe natural medicines rather than toxic drugs

where possible. But there needs to be a more careful examination of what and how much we consume, and more generally, what really matters, what is important.

Our instinct to fill our lives with more and more, feels like an escape from our basic existential dissatisfaction. It leads to shopping as an automatic response, encouraged by the whole of the social discourse. We are usually quite unable to see it as a problem. We are convinced that if we had this new car/flat/holiday/computer/dress/shoes etc we would be happy. And it can make us happy, but only briefly, because happiness is to be found in being, not in having. We are *human beings* not *human havings*. And too often, when the having loses its magic, we are left with depression. There was, apparently, a study carried out in the US that surveyed how long lasting was the happiness resulting from the purchase of a new car. It was on average four days.

It is helpful (though not essential) on the road to real happiness, to be more simple. Not to be overwhelmed, drowned, in things that we accumulate. These can be physical possessions that pile up and we find ourselves constantly busy with them, or they can be mental possessions – ideas, attachments, views and a great deal of mental clutter. It drowns us. We need to let go a bit, not to hold onto things in order to feel fully alive. As one Zen master said: "Why should I let go? Because it all piles up!" It is basically letting go of expectations that the world is our provider, letting go of the need to control everything, and to keep having more. A traditional Christian sect, the Shakers, created a song called "Simple Gifts" that expresses this:

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free
'Tis the gift to come down to where we ought to be
And when we find ourselves in the place just right
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.

As Western culture is so deeply bound into a culture of buying, we may need to go against the stream. There is a phrase going round – "only dead fish go with the flow". Are we going to turn round and swim against the current? How?

One of the most well-thought-out alternative ways to live was that of Mahatma Gandhi. He taught a community life that was fundamentally ecological, joyful and dignified. Symbolized by the hand-operated spinning wheel which he took everywhere, he taught that joy comes when you restore your connection with the most basic things in your life, by doing them or making them yourself. That does not necessarily mean that you need to spin your own cotton thread as in village India. But at least you can consistently cook your own food from simple raw materials of grains and vegetables. You can bake your own bread. You can grow your own food given the smallest plot of land, or window boxes, and you can learn how to treat yourself with medicinal plants and grow them in your own garden or in pots in your house. We find that as we do these things we establish a real contact with those crucial and forgotten life essentials. We bring more joy and ease into our life, and we notice that stress just vanishes in the renewed intimacy with our lives. For around 15 years, I grew wheat in a small plot of land, enough for the family for the year, and I used to bake bread in the early mornings for many years, and it was one of the most joyful

experiences of the day – the movement of the body, the aromas of the wheat, the concert of birds outside against the background quietness of the morning. I also used to grow some of the herbal medicines we all needed: again the simplicity of growing and preparing your own medicine chest as people have been doing for thousands of years. What a joy.

But there is also a deeper letting go that is a major help in our spiritual journey. Too often, our spiritual quest can translate into a restless mindset of shopping, having and gaining – another weekend, another course, another teacher, another book, another practice ... none providing the deeper peace and joy of simply being and being simple. We need to let go of the need to experience certain things we have heard about, of expectations that the path or teacher should provide us with certain results, of the need to control outcomes, of the habits of judgement and criticism. As we let go on this deeper level, we may experience a great relief – that much of the accumulated spiritual "possessions" were not needed in the first place. Though there is no doubt that realizations, inner freedoms and wisdom are precious, but there may be a place where the gifts turn into baggage. Sometimes our longings are the neediness of a demanding "adolescent" self. As we let go those voices in us demanding control and outcomes, we may find that a much deeper joy creeps up on us when we are not looking. A real contentment that previously escaped us. Ramana Maharshi once said that a passenger on a train does not need to keep carrying his baggage. He can put it down and allow the train to take him and his baggage. Let life take us and our baggage. The journey will lead us naturally through the "valley of love and delight",

as the Shaker song put it. Wisdom travels light.

CHAPTER 4

LIVING TO WORK OR LOVING TO WORK?

Rabbi Harold Kushner once remarked: "No-one ever said on their deathbed 'I wish I'd spent more time at the office'." Some of us really seem to enjoy our work and find it meaningful and fulfilling. Others find their work draining and meaningless and they only work because they need to survive. Nonetheless there is a fundamental challenge about working life – and that is its control over most of our life. How are we to make sense of this primary difficulty that we all face – the fact that our work occupies most of our lives, yet often seems the opposite of a liberating experience.

How can we shift from living for work, to working for life, from living to work, to loving to work?

The great wisdom of the dharma teachings offer some illuminating insights into the problem. First, to clear the ground, we should do a basic screening of the moral implications of our work. This is a kind of fundamental housekeeping, in that if there are questionable moral issues around our work, it may be hard to find it fulfilling, since the impure karma, or seeds sown every day by our actions and intentions, may bear uncomfortable fruit. There are boomerangs, which seem quite invisible but can steal our

fulfilment. A pure mind and heart is the best guarantee of a joyful day's work.

The moral issues, as defined in the traditional teachings, are centred on not harming others. We should not be involved in the making and selling of weapons or intoxicants, the harming or selling of animals or people. We should not be involved in deceit or tricks or violence, or in gaining wealth through untrue promises, including spiritual promises.

All of this seems at first straightforward – your initial reaction may be that you don't do any of these things, but it's important to look closely at the ramifications of what we do, and be brave enough to ask some questions.

What promises am I, or those for whom I work, making? What values are we encouraging? Could the substances or materials or services we are supporting or selling create any harm or addiction? Is there discrimination, oppression or harassment in the culture of my workplace? Are we condoning suffering, abuse or exploitation that is not so visible, maybe in the chain of production and resourcing that source a certain product that we may be selling or using?

We may not always be able to change our work situation, and the way things are done. We may not have the courage to speak up, or there may be no-one there to listen. But the inquiry is itself a practice, bringing to our work moral energy and sensitivity, making us feel more in touch with values.

I knew an American meditation teacher who earned his living mending computers. What he really liked about this work was coming into houses, often of lonely, needy people, and bringing friendliness, warmth and light into those homes.

Can we crawl out from under the bottom-line mentality, from what is in it for me, what is in my pay packet, to what can I bring, what can I contribute? Helping others can bring meaning and joy to our work. As the Dalai Lama once said: "It is so much more joyful to give to others than to give to oneself, because there are more of them."

When considering what kind of work to choose, many people on the spiritual journey are choosing the caring professions because it brings meaning and arouses compassion. There may be less money in it, but the open heart is a sweetness that is with us night and day, and is worth much more than gold.

We need to appreciate that as we spend so much time and thought and energy on our work, it deeply conditions us. For this reason "right livelihood" is one of the basic practices of the eightfold path, (the way of life according to the Buddhist dharma), and on the same level of importance as meditation. So we need to ask what is it doing to us, what have we accumulated at the end of a day, a month, a lifetime of work? We may find ourselves committed and enthusiastic for our work, but it exhausts and drains us. We may find that we want to work in a certain career, but that the atmosphere in the workplace is full of criticism, cynicism and judgement. Or we may experience disconnection, alienation or a hierarchical structure that generates fear. Or, again, we may find ourselves strung out by moral dilemmas. Do such psychological and emotional conditions take up residence in our mind and heart? Do we find ourselves talking in the same language, or holding the same views, consciously or unconsciously? Do we take the same atmosphere and bring it

home to our family and our bed?

In such cases, as time goes by, we will feel contracted or even depressed; work becomes a kind of jail which we suffer for the sake of the money. It will need sensitivity and mindfulness to catch the problems as early as possible. And then what?

Well, we may indeed have to give up or change our work to save our inner life.

This is sometimes inevitable. However, there is also another way. To change the atmosphere – to make a difference, to find rewards in bringing something human into a place starved of the heart. Here is where meditative inner work is invaluable.

A commitment to and practice of *deep listening* can dramatically heal an environment of alienation and distance. Insightful awareness can perhaps show us that if we are exhausting ourselves it may be because of some kind of resistance or friction or restlessness constructed from patterns, wounds and anxieties.

The Buddhist practice of *metta,* the broadcasting of loving kindness, can bring warm sun to a frosty climate of criticism. We may be able to initiate a new dialogue that includes honest sharing of feelings and experiences, or group yoga in the mornings. Intention to change conditions can integrate outer work and inner work. For some years I used to go one day a week to a large and quite polluting fertilizer factory, and work there as a consultant to an herbal extract company that was located on the site. I got to know the CEO quite well, and would constantly and subtly try and move him toward more environmental sensitivity and awareness. And every

time I was there I would barge into another office or shed and strike up a conversation with the workers there, listening to them, bringing friendliness and interest, breaking barriers.

Many times I have been asked by people in the armed forces if it is against the Buddhist teachings to serve. At first sight, one would think that it would be completely unspiritual to be a soldier. This is not so – if to be a soldier meant, for example, to stop other soldiers from harming or abusing people, or to bring more respect, communication and humanness into a soldier's life.

One would think that it would be unbearable to work in the slums of Calcutta. It was not so for Mother Teresa. When things are difficult, we do need to ask ourselves – are we able to make a difference? Do we have the inner strength, steadiness and inner peace to make change? Are we radiating kindness in a hard world? As Mother Teresa said: "We can do little things with a great heart!"

If we look at things this way, at higher resolution, with care, and awareness of what is really happening moment by moment, it seems that it matters less what we do, but rather *how* we act, how we work – what are the qualities that we are manifesting? In the moment by moment experience, with mind and heart engaged, there is no such thing any more as work, only actions. The concept of work dissolves into life. To quote Psalm 90: "Let the grace of God be in our work and let the outcome of our work be right."

CHAPTER 5

MONEY: THE SHINE OF GOLD?

Just imagine for a moment, an observer from outer space, examining living beings on this planet including the human species. She may assume that human beings are rushing about all their life after food and essentials, in a similar fashion to mice. She might ask:

"So they are running about after food and shelter?"

"Not exactly. It is after a substance that they call money."

"That's really surprising. Where do they get it from?"

"From others who have it."

"What do they do with it?"

"They pass it on to others to obtain necessary things."

"So when they have those necessary things, do they stop rushing about?"

"No, They can't stop so they continue rushing to get more."

"What do they do with it then?"

"They store it."

"So those that have stored a lot of it, do they stop running about after it?"

"No. They are often even busier running after it than those who have less."

"And do those who have it stored feel happier than those who don't?"

"No, generally they are not so happy."

"And those who have a lot stored, what do they do with it in the end?"

"They die and leave it all behind."

Money is a medium of exchange and passes between people freely, just like water. In the process it is used to do things, like water is used to drive a water wheel. Since it is associated deeply with getting what we want, it has taken on a hugely important status. Since it seems to make available necessary goods and pleasures, it symbolizes all goods and pleasures. But then, as a symbol, it loses its connection with necessary things and becomes the necessary thing itself. As a result we become poorer not richer, because we lose the direct appreciation of those sensory things and just measure them against their monetary value. I remember collecting stamps when I was a boy, and I loved every stamp – the pictures, the series, the fantasies about what each country must be like, based on their stamps. I would sit for hours sticking them in albums and found great delight in swapping them with my friends. Until I discovered that any stamp in the world could just be bought with money. A rich boy could just have it all in an instant. The magic left. From that moment I never collected another stamp.

People have one single precious life, yet they devote almost all of it to money, despite the fact that life passes by. There is an Indian story about a king who was wandering in the desert. He ran out of water and prayed to the gods: "Gods, I will give you half of my kingdom if you provide me with

water." "Fine," said the gods, and he found a pool in front of him. Next day he found he could not urinate and was in great distress. "Gods," he said, "I will give you the other half of my kingdom if you will just unblock my channel and let me urinate." "Fine," said the gods. "We will do it, but you should know that you have given your entire kingdom away for something that just passes in and out." So it is with money.

It is an icon. It is worshipped, thought about, dreamed about, and the main topic of conversation of all people around the world. The reason is its intimate relationship with human insecurity. The more insecure we are, the more we need to feel constant access to those goods and pleasures. We are nervous, not at ease, under stress, and as most of society behaves that way it is legitimized by the community and becomes a kind of suffering norm. So how can we be free? Can we really be free and poor? Can we really be free and rich?

The main shift that is needed is to take the special status away from money. Make it less and less interesting, less of an issue. We need to see it as a necessary medium of exchange and no more than that. This will work if it is accompanied by a deep inner journey, a look in the mirror, to uncover and take care of the insecurities themselves which are projected onto money. Or to uncover and take care of the greed that is similarly projected. In that journey to freedom, as our obsessions, fears and worries dissolve away, it will automatically make us more balanced in relation to money.

We also need to begin to ignore the social pressure to regard everything as purchasable. It is the dominant view that if we had more money we could do more, enjoy more, live more. Actually the opposite is true. Our real joy of life,

our real contact with life, is in the vast territory of *being*, not in the small space of *having*. As our contact with life deepens, we begin to realize that money is less and less relevant to the important aspects of life: our values, our spiritual journey, the meaning invested in our moment-by-moment experiences. Yes, we will need to buy things now and then, spend money now and then, give money now and then. But the essential things are beyond the consumer marketplace. They cannot be bought and sold. This is well expressed by the story in the Gospels concerning Jesus who answered followers who were concerned about the taxes that they needed to give to the Romans. Jesus pointed out that on the coin was the head of Caesar, and wisely said: "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's." The implication is that the coin is his, but the rest of life is yours.

All of us have the potential for expansive, spiritual and non-materialistic lives, and in principle it doesn't matter whether you are rich or poor. Though it must be said that it is often a little harder for the rich to be free as they have more encouragement to be busy with money than others. But whether we are blessed with more money or less, what matters is the holding on and attachment. If we are blessed with money, one of the best ways to abandon holding is to give it away. It is joyful to give, it brings ease to oneself and happiness to others. It is also a primary value or ethic, part of a process of inner purification. If we have no money, we can free ourselves by not constantly wishing for it.

But on a deeper level money is just another form of exchange, of giving and taking, in which all beings participate. In the teachings of the Buddha, this exchange and

giving (*dana*) is clearly experienced as an operating principle of the universe itself. The sun gives to the tree, the tree gives its leaves to the earth, the earth gives its nutrients to the tree. The whole of existence is one great ecology in which all things give to all other things, and take from all other things, in which everything, all life, is a web of interrelationships. Nothing is held back. We cannot imagine the tree saying to itself, I want to hold on to my leaves and not let them drop to the earth, I want to store them. We consume and in the end are consumed. Money is an example of this. Its nature is circulation, exchange, flow. It passes from one to another making things happen on the way. But in the end no-one can take it with them and it must be given away whether you like it or not. The *dana* principle is a life perspective rather than a self-perspective. The insecure human self often does not see this flow of giving and is under the painful illusion that he can hold on, grasp at things, and accumulate possessions. This is a stopping of the flow of life, a kind of death. The Greek myth of King Midas illustrates this. King Midas was obsessed by gold. He prayed to the gods that all things that he touched should turn to gold. The gods granted his wish, but of course everything he touched became dead gold, including his own daughter.

CHAPTER 6

"I JUST CAN'T DECIDE"

Sometimes it's agonizing. Usually it's stressful. We just cannot decide about something. It may be as trivial as which restaurant to go to tonight. Or as important as whether or not to get married. It seems particularly acute when we are younger; choices such as which subject to study at university can create sleepless nights and obsess us for weeks or months on end. I remember the gut-wrenching nights when I was just 15 and the school required that I choose the humanities or science.

Faced with the endless possibilities of what may happen in the future, the mind spins scenario after scenario, trying to predict the best outcome. This is what causes the stress. The reason that the mind does this is that it is driven by a "me", a "self" which has as its job description the search for the safest and most comfortable outcomes for itself in an unpredictable world. Essentially, it cannot be done. The future is unknown. The best we can do is to write possible future scripts based on our experience of the past, or of who we know ourselves to be. For example, "I will buy this white shirt not the blue one as in the past people told me I look good in white." Both reference to the past and current taste are unreliable as guides to the future. The past is gone along with the situations we found ourselves in. And we ourselves are changing constantly and may not be sure exactly who we are

and what fits us at any point in time.

What we forget is that much of what happens to us is not our choice. Can we choose to be happy or miserable, in love or angry? We find ourselves at a fork in the road struggling to choose left or right, and meanwhile we forget all the non-chosen events that brought us there. We try to decide whether to take an umbrella, but we did not choose the experience of cloud-covered sky which created that question in the first place. Much of what occurs to us happens anyway. We just imagine we are choosing everything, with a rather inflated view of our own power. Or, to be more precise, the "self" that sits in consciousness like a big boss or overseer has an inflated view of its own powers.

Let's do a small exercise. Try and remember the last time you "chose" to go to a coffee house, and "chose" something from the menu. Notice how you paid attention to just those many tasty offerings on the menu, not to the sequence of hundreds of small or big influences that resulted in you finding yourself there – you were already in the area, you were attracted by the décor, you were hungry or deprived of caffeine, you had a positive memory of that place. Even the item you "chose" on the menu – did you really choose it or is it simply likes and dislikes that were conditioned by past experiences, such as the kind of food your parents used to give to you when you were small, or the great coffee you once had somewhere. We swim through a sea of influences and so we have less freedom than we think. This helps us to reduce the pressure that we have to decide all the time, we can just relax and go along with what arises because it is happening anyway.

But the opposite is also true. Paradoxically we also actually have more freedom than we think. Our life is often lived on automatic pilot. We are run by our own habits, and the biggest habit of all is forgetting. If we notice how we keep following the same tracks of thinking and acting, if we remember to be there fully with every moment of our lives, we see how playful and open it all is and how much more power we have to change things and make new choices, to do the unexpected, and to be original and independent. A classical example of this is the conditioning we absorb daily from the media, advertising and our peers. As soon as we realize how all this stuff shapes the mind and reduces our power of independent thinking, a whole new world of choices opens up.

Choices in life are therefore made radically easier if we wake up a bit, and live according to three main insights:

1. **Events condition and create us from moment to moment. We do not choose events – they choose us.** This takes away a great deal of pressure from us to continually decide or to try and design our future. We can watch the present continually unfolding and offering us its surprises, without the need to decide. We can be much more child-like and fresh, appreciating what comes instead of manipulating outcomes. When we do have to decide, between the blue shirt and the white one, between this course and another one at university, we do so with much less stress, because we don't feel in charge of everything. We just go in the direction that seems most fitting.

2. **If we live mindfully, and not on automatic pilot, a world of greater freedom and spontaneity opens up.** We do not want to be entirely passive bystanders in our life, carried along by events as in the story of the man who went into the bedroom to change his shirt for an evening dinner, but then assumed it was bedtime, undressed, and went to sleep, much to the consternation of his guests. If we wake up to the original nature of each spontaneous moment, we live with much more potential and possibility. More choices open up.
3. **All choices are actually made spontaneously in the moment.** If we look carefully, most of the intensive calculation, speculation and hardship that goes along with choosing, is actually like treading water. It doesn't go anywhere. When the choice is eventually made, it is always in a moment, often when we have given up from exhaustion after a great amount of fruitless speculation. If we wake up to this, if we live with more awareness, we can shortcut our decisions drastically, learn to make spontaneous, intuitive and instant decisions, and cut through all the useless churning in the mind.

These awakenings are not complicated. They are part and parcel of a more spiritual and aware life. In this kind of life, pressure to choose is replaced by something else. This is intention or direction; a real sense of what is good for us, what helps us, and a wholesome and steady direction to our life. A long-term vegetarian when offered a ham sandwich does not need to choose whether or not to eat it. This is the big picture which makes all the choices less critical. After all,

most choices are on the level of what I want or what I don't want. If our wants and needs are less holy, choices are no big deal. There is a background sense of rightness, harmony or what is fitting to us and the world and from that place we will know what to do.

CHAPTER 7

DANA: THE ECONOMY OF THE HEART

Dana, in the Pali language of ancient Buddhism, means generosity or giving. It is a crucial human quality that is of great significance and importance in Buddhist spiritual practice and the world view that goes with it. It has been a cornerstone of religious culture in Buddhist societies and countries for thousands of years. In Thai villages the giving of food, gifts and possessions is often the way Thais would define themselves as Buddhists. When young Thais or Burmese first enter monasteries to become monks, they are generally not started off with meditation instructions. Instead they usually spend much time in serving and giving to others. It is seen as an essential purification of the inner landscape, a reduction in self-importance, and so a powerful force for success in subsequent practice of devotion, meditation and so on.

Let's leave aside its Buddhist roots and context, for the moment, and consider *dana* both as a personal quality, a deep truth about the nature of things, and as a source of action and meaning in our life. We understand that it is much more than simple generosity. It is not just about money. It is the process of giving self to others. It is about opening the heart to listen

to and feel what the other needs, and giving accordingly. It may be money, but it may be food or teachings, it may be giving attention or respect, often gifts worth far more than money. It may be the gift of giving your time to another, whether a mother who devotes herself completely to her child, night and day, when it is convenient or when it is not, or a carer helping a patient. It can be quite subtle. For example, we have a tendency to put those close to us under pressure, criticize them or put them down. *Dana* may be the gift of space and freedom to others to be themselves, the gift of our friendliness and sympathy instead of our negativity.

A good example of *dana* is breastfeeding. The mother does not give milk only if she gets some credit or reward. She does not try to hang onto as much of it as possible and not let go of her milk. That would be painful. She does not measure the milk according to how many smiles she gets back. She and the baby are one, united in a flow of giving and receiving.

Some of us find it difficult to let go and give things away, others find it easier to give to others but not so easy to receive from others. In the end, *dana* is about both. The giving is not in one direction – it is in all directions, including to oneself. That means it includes receiving as well. "The gift" is a basic form of communication in which the giver and receiver are joined and connected by a primal and universal action.

There is a lot more to giving and receiving than being nice, or a moral imperative. *Dana* is a movement in the soul, in the atmosphere and in the community that is felt as ease, sweetness and lack of pressure. It is emphasized again and again that *dana* is an aid to seeing the world in terms of *being*

rather than *having*. And as this movement is the basis of spiritual realization, *dana* is a direct aid to awakening. It creates joy and release while the constant tendency to want more, to be unsatisfied with what we have, creates suffering.

For these reasons, *dana* has now become the operating principle in most vipassana retreats. As a teacher, for 20 years I have not asked for a fixed sum from anybody, but just have a box there for those I teach to express their support and appreciation in a real and practical way. It pays the bills. Sometimes I teach for organizations that do have a fixed payment schedule, and I just go along with whatever they usually do. Just as a meditation course gave *dana* in terms of teachings, accommodation, care and support, so the participants give *dana* back. Giving and receiving. In Israel, where I mostly teach, the organization I founded (the Israel Insight Society – Tovana) also works on a *dana* basis. That means that no-one is asked beforehand to pay for their residential course, the food or accommodation, the overheads to run the organization. They give *dana* at the end of the retreats. The trust and ease this generates in the retreats is deep and palpable. It is described as an alternative economy, the economy of the heart, in which everyone gives according to their means and their heart, rather than according to a fixed price. It has had the surprising result that many young people, students, or those in the army, now join the retreats, and the average age of participants is going down, whereas in other places where there is a fixed charge for residential accommodation, the average age goes up, as only those established financially can afford it. Does it work? It just about works. The courses more or less cover themselves. The

problem is often one of educating people to this different economy. Coming from a life in which everyone is busy trying to get the most out of each other, some people are confused: it is strange, almost too good to be true: "There must be a catch!" There is no catch. It is *dana*.

This is also a traditional way of doing things. You can go to a monastery or meditation centre in Burma, stay for a year, and no-one will ask you for money. The local people maintain the monks with *dana* of food, one of the main practices in traditional Buddhist communities. The monks give in turn the *dana* of teachings, healing and pastoral care. Behind this is the principle that spiritual teachings are the birthright of all of us. They cannot be bought and sold. Their value is beyond money. No-one should make a profit out of your spiritual thirst. This is unfortunately not always the case in the world of spiritual teachings, which are not always so clean around the issue of money. Spiritual teachers that drain their students of money should learn the principle of *dana*.

But *dana* goes deeper. The *dana* principle is a life perspective rather than a self-perspective. Our actions can be guided by the insight that all of life is a dynamic flow and exchange. Everything, including our own bodies, is received and given away. The insecure human self often does not see the flow of giving and is under the painful illusion that he can hold on, grasp at things, and accumulate things. This is a stopping of the flow of life, a kind of death. Practising *dana*, therefore, is not just the practice of giving. It is the uncovering and realizing with total clarity and conviction an essential truth of life. As we know it in our being we live it. And living in the flow of *dana* is a joyful awakening.

CHAPTER 8

SICKNESS: CRISIS OR OPPORTUNITY?

We all dread the moment when we are diagnosed with some serious disease. It can strike any of us at any time. It feels as if we are skipping along living our life and we get stopped dead in our tracks. A life-threatening health problem, such as cancer, is one of the most severe challenges we can face. The mind is besieged by fears, worries about what will happen, concerns for our children or family, plans and strategies for fighting the disease, and intense questions about causes. We also build lots of narratives and scenarios, for example we may blame ourselves for the problem, or we may be angry at life or at others around us (such as the medical system) and jealous of those who are healthy. All of this creates emotional turmoil, confusion and despair, and makes the struggle for health seem sometimes impossible.

And then, if someone (or a book) comes along and tells us that a disease can be an opportunity, a turning point in our lives, and it is not all as bad as it seems, it may sound absurd, unreal and even infuriating: "How on earth can you say that, you don't know what it is like to be where I am." Yet there is a profound truth in it, which often cannot get through to us because it is presented as words, and not experiences, and

because we are so overwhelmed by our suffering that we put up a stiff resistance – there is no room to listen.

So first we need to give ourselves a little space, some room to look directly at our situation and not at all the projections around it. Then, with a little wise reflection, an open heart and some persistence, we can open new channels in us to messages that actually we long to hear, and that will transform the situation.

To illustrate this I would like to discuss an intensive weekend, which I taught with two other teachers for those with major health problems. There were 50 participants, most of whom suffered from cancer, fibromyalgia, and other diseases, some severe.

At the beginning, the despair and confusion was palpable. The room was heavy with the personal stories that each person carried, and shared, the tears flowed and it seemed impossible to lighten the load. Yet something miraculous happened during our time together and at the end of the short weekend there was laughter, and lightness, there was hope and hugs, there was deep gratitude, and most of all, the participants felt truly alive, in some cases for the first time in a long time. I would like to describe here the methods we used and how they worked.

There were some underlying values that helped to clear the emotional ground. First, there were no professional agendas. There were no promises that "professional others" would fix, cure, treat or lessen the disease. Second, as teachers we did not come over with a system, a belief, or even a special status. In some way we tried to show that we are all the same, the situation of human suffering is universal, that

there were not sick and healthy people there, but just people, all with different issues. Third, we made sure the weekend was inexpensive and not-for-profit, to create an atmosphere of trust, and of giving rather than getting or exploiting.

A basic tool was mindfulness meditation, using breath and body as the main focus. We taught this in several sessions throughout the three days with plenty of real-time guidance and imagery. One of the main images that went along with the meditation was that of coming home, of finding a genuine refuge within us rather than expecting it to come from the changing and often distressing conditions of our lives. Steadily, moment by moment, all of us worked together to develop the sense that there is a deep home inside us that nothing can steal from us.

Mindfulness meditation not only expands our awareness but also brings it back to the immediate lived experience, creating a sense of wholeness and intimacy with our life, which is quite beyond the disease. Being in touch with the feelings, sensations and activities of our mind-body helps us to see that all our projections, fears for the future, scenarios, memories and worries are in the end just chains of repeating thoughts, however loaded they seem. Experienced for even short moments, this kind of mindfulness takes some of the weight off.

Resting in the experience of the natural flow of breath and sensations in the body is not only a safe place but also a place in which we discover that there are messages within us of healthy lived experience. The disease is shouting so loud we cannot usually hear other quieter voices within us. For example, we usually don't know we have a head unless we

have a headache. We don't know that our hands are perfectly fine and enjoying their life, and telling us so, with messages of "okness", if we are only focused on the pain in our back.

Taking the disease down off centre stage and replacing it with our lived experience creates a profound shift in attitude. Our situation lightens, we can become a participator in our fate and not its victim. There is a profound and yet subtle power of intimacy with present-moment experience to take us to a place beyond disease. This is beautifully and poignantly illustrated by this quote from Treya Wilbur, from the book about her life and death by her husband Ken Wilbur, *Grace and Grit*.[1] She was dying from cancer at the time:

> If I do become well for long periods of time, will I lose this deliciously keen knife-edge of awareness I now have?... new creativity pours forth under pressure of this illness, I would hate to lose that ... there are moments when I feel practically ecstatic just sitting on the veranda and looking at the view at the back of the house, and watching the puppies play. I feel so blessed in this moment. Each breath is so incredible, so joyful, so dear. What am I missing? What could be wrong?

Learning to reconnect with the present moment of breath and body is a great help in coping with stressful and painful situations such as hospitals and treatments. One or two conscious-aware breaths and the anxiety fades and we are in a different place. In addition, as is well known, meditation is a tool that can be used to help support our healing and the life force in us.

Another important element of that weekend was sharing and discussion in groups. Here there was a chance to air fears and experiences, including issues of death and dying. It was a chance to listen to others and feel the support. The groups on the first morning were indeed full of tears and the most difficult stories, but as the retreat progressed, the dialogue shifted – toward inquiry into the meaning of being ill, toward illness as a personal journey. Several times participants raised the issue of control. Do we have control? Is it better to fight even though that may bring expectations and anxiety, or is it more helpful to surrender? The groups helped to cut the "demons" down to size, reducing the denial and avoidance which generally increase the suffering. On the second day the groups were actually like alchemical vessels in which change happened because of the intensity. New insights emerged into how life could be lived, new directions were realized, joys were shared, and there was laughter at the absurdities of hospitals and the discomfort of acquaintances. I insisted that one of the group sessions be devoted to our relationship to death and dying, even though some felt it was too risky and even explosive. But it turned out that the groups dealing with death and dying were those in which the laughter rang out – it was as if the valve of the pressure cooker opened and let off steam. The holding, denying and suppressing was much more painful than bringing fears and concerns out into the light.

A further exercise that we used was to open the heart to ourselves and to others, by means of several guided visualizations. We cannot easily "befriend our cancer", especially if we are told to do so by well-meaning but

annoying givers of unwanted advice. But we can be friends to ourselves. We can bathe in soft appreciation. We can feel gratitude for those ordinary moments, which are in fact quite miraculous. We can experience softness in our belly, softness that can hold all the pain. We can feel compassion to ourselves and to all others who suffer. We can feel the preciousness of ourselves and of each other.

Behind the veil of ordinary life were the realizations that were always ready to emerge and surprise us. They often centred on the truth that the experience of the disease is not the disease. The consciousness is freer than we think. We can be bigger than the problem. We need not be drowned in an ocean of despair when we truly discover our vulnerability. Our vulnerability itself can help us to live fully, live on the edge, live with uncertainty, and surrender to the unpredictable nature of life. This can be liberating and freeing. It is the place in which sometimes the sick have an advantage over the healthy.

I have had the privilege of working with several cancer patients over long periods. To illustrate this I would like to describe an extraordinary three-year journey with Liora, who had had cancer for nine years by the time I met her in 2005.[2] We started our monthly meetings in a coffee house with the existential and practical question: What is my real experience and how is it different from the world of fears, projections, struggle and despair? The long struggle with her illness and the constant sense that death was not far away over the horizon created a sense of urgency, a thirst for meaning, a deep curiosity about existence and a commitment to unfold spiritually. Mindfulness meditation practices became a refuge

and also a fascinating new territory. Gradually this territory took shape. Instead of being a victim, she became a courageous and wise explorer into awareness of the moment, the inner landscape, full of its thorns but also its meadow wildflowers. And it was not death that was being explored, of course, but life: moments of grace in the early mornings; the joy involved in writing her thesis; the fun and games with her young daughter; deep peace when finding meditative concentration; the flow of living messages and intimacy with her body (the healthy parts with their healthy messages and the sick parts with theirs); the compassion and sympathy arising spontaneously when meeting other patients or the doctors.

Cancer, for her, became a label, a definition, a concept, that in the flow of experience no longer held power. In the same way, pain, confusion, physical and mental limitations, when unpacked or deconstructed by an inquiring and meditative mind, lost their solidity, their terror. When she needed to take morphine for a long period, she asked me how to find clarity even with morphine. I remember advising her not to be attached to a model of how she wants the mind to be. Instead of clarity, we worked together to convert the dream-like qualities produced by morphine into inner work with changes of consciousness.

In our dialogues we explored the fundamental issue of our human fragility and the transience of our life and all experience. A deep sense of her vulnerability became the cracks in the prison wall that let in the light. There are few that have this blessing. Liora herself more than once thanked her illness for bringing her beyond ordinary life into a place

of depth and meaning. Liora holds an enduring memory for me – and what shines out is her example in converting the struggle for life into a deep and rich awareness of truth.

We do not need education, degrees, money or medicines for this. We only need to have a genuine interest in our experience, and the courage to be authentic rather than go with the herd instincts, which are mostly around anxiety. It is a shift in attitude and when it happens, even slightly, something irreversible occurs. We can never be quite so drowned again. There is always a little voice to remind us that a serious health problem need not be pure crisis. It can be our opportunity.

CHAPTER 9

THE SECRET THAT GLOWS IN THE DARK

I want to share a secret,
About the gentle radiance
Of those last years
So clear, so soft, so good,
That even the doctors
And the visitors who come and go,
Stop to take a breath
And will never forget you.
You are not ill
Illness is our label
Inscribed by our fears.
You know no illness nor wellness
Just there-ness.
No fear of death
No anxieties of what the future may bring,
Or may not bring.
No pain, no blame,
No loss, no regret
No anger at those who abandoned you
No time, no purpose
But the gentle kiss of life itself

The grace that comes when all else goes.
To what do you listen, so intently?
Is it the music of your heartbeat,
Tapping celestial rhythms
On the gates of your soul?
Or is it the humming of bees
On that summer's day?
Or the barking of your dogs,
That only you can quiet,
Or your fingers in their thick fur?
Or dreams of play and play of dreams
The kaleidoscope of past in present
Uninterrupted by our harsh reality.
As I lie next to you,
And feel this life flow through
And watch your face,
No frown, no wrinkles,
Just open presence,
Then, like the moon that shines between passing clouds,
Beams a joyous smile,
That vanishes so fast,
That I do not know if I really saw it
And now, again, you teach me,
About a life without fear, without walls, without end,
Just as you did when I was born
And, like then, share your happiest years.

Poem I wrote about my mother when she was
totally incapacitated by Alzheimer's disease

CHAPTER 10

AGEING WISELY

Ageing is a hard time for us all. I use the word "us" intentionally, as sooner or later, it is all of us. It is hard to watch as one by one our powers weaken and abilities deteriorate, quickly or slowly. We may feel abandoned and side-lined by others who are always busy and whose attention is focused on getting on and achieving in a predominantly youth culture. Frequent health issues keep us endlessly concerned and occupied with medical matters. On top of that, there may be expectations from others, be it family, friends or society, that somehow we are there to look after them – whether babysitting for the grandchildren or giving away presents, money and possessions. And there is a struggle in relation to our role. Too often it is as pensioners who are ignored, dependent and rather useless, and at best do not cause young people too much trouble. Which tends, unfortunately, to be the standard Western model.

But there is another possibility entirely: to arrive in old age skipping not crawling. To be feisty, energetic and full of the spice of life. To enjoy this time as a time of freedom from cares, freedom from ambitions, expectations and concerns. To be delighted that we are not still a slave of the endless race for success and achievement. To live lightly without too much thought of tomorrow. To appreciate all the life wisdom that we have accumulated, donate it freely to others, and usually

receive in return the honour and appreciation due to us. This can be a time to enjoy and share the memories and stories that we live by, and at the same time to be the holders of culture, and preservers of skills, values and ethics. We could radiate steadiness and bring confidence and meaning to younger folk who have lost their way. Why not be the "wise woman" or the "tribal elder"?

If that is our aspiration, we have to start early. Ageing begins at birth. It's just that we don't notice it as such. To age well we have to live well. It takes practice. If we spend our whole lives busy, ambitious, demanding, and full of expectations and needs, it is not easy to switch channels in such a drastic way, so as to let go so completely in older age. We have to practise letting go before that. In a way, since ageing is loss of powers, loss of capacities, and loss of many other things, there is dying in it – dying to what was and to our imagined needs, and to what we think we have and don't want to lose. Practice then means practising to die a bit during our life, to genuinely live with less grasping onto things and to life itself. One meditation teacher described this well after he contracted Alzheimer's disease. He said: "You have got to get your dying done early!"

On the level of the body, preparing for ageing well is about living with simplicity and harmony in relation to the world. If you look at the lifestyles of communities or individuals who tend to live a long time and are healthy and energetic into old age, they generally engage in physical work, are not overweight, eat little and regularly, don't use industrial or processed food, and are not under stress or subject to a great many contagious diseases. Science backs

this up, and confirms that one of the main ways that we can increase our lifespan and general health into old age is to consume less – to reduce the amount of calories and chemicals that our body consumes and then has to get rid of. At the same time if we are active in our life we will be more likely to continue that into old age. It is interesting that science has failed to find any one herb, remedy, pill, vitamin, food supplement or drug that can substantially prolong life, but has confirmed repeatedly in many studies that restricting food intake is the one change that really can prolong life safely.

It happens that my doctorate is on the way cells age, and I have written many scientific papers and a book on the ageing process. What stands out is that there is no one mechanism or a programme that controls the ageing process – it is more the lack of a programme. As we age, more or less everything gets more chaotic, uncontrolled, unregulated. It is as if evolution has designed us to reach maturity and have children, and then after that loses interest – like a car that is designed to go for 300,000 km, but after that everything seems to go wrong. If that is the case, then wise ageing is to get more mileage out of this body by using it carefully, without stress, burnout, over-consumption, toxins and extremes.

However, much of this preparation is of the mind, not the body. And the mind that ages well is a mind that is cheerful, positive, curious, kind and attentive. These are the qualities of mind that we need to sustain in our life, so as to keep them when we are older. This is not the mind of a couch potato. This is not the mind that spends most of its waking hours either working in front of a computer or sinking in front of

This edition first published in the UK and USA 2019 by
Watkins, an imprint of Watkins Media Limited

Unit 11, Shepperton House
89–93 Shepperton Road
London
N1 3DF
enquiries@watkinspublishing.com

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by JCS Publishing Services Ltd

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-78678-198-7

www.watkinspublishing.com