ZEN IN THE AGE OF ANXIETY

wisdom for navigating our modern lives

Tim Burkett

EDITED BY

Wanda Isle

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—PORTIA NELSON

WALKING DOWN A DIFFERENT STREET is not about changing what we do or how we do it. It is about changing what and how we think. It requires a new approach to life—and that is what this book offers.

Is this book for you? A glance at the table of contents may tell you.

Part One, Wounding and Splintering, looks at the primary causes of pain and confusion in our culture. The title reflects the fact that our deeply ingrained way of thinking about and responding to frustrations, disappointments, and setbacks wounds not only us but also those around us. We are not isolated beings living isolated lives. When we fall into a hole, we take others with us.

In this first section, author Tim Burkett writes about the split between the heart and mind, and the inevitable splintering of the psyche that follows. Splintering is the source of our deepest pain. One by one, Tim discusses the areas that cause the most splintering: feelings of inadequacy and self-loathing, issues related to sex and to money, and the stigma associated with failure. Often we are so splintered we feel as if we're moving through life alone, in a trance-like state, unaware of the abundance that is fundamental to our interdependent nature.

Part Two, Suturing and Healing, introduces an ancient wisdom that offers a different approach to life. Unlike many wisdom teachers today, Tim doesn't use obscure or ambiguous language of the past, choosing instead images and metaphors drawn from our own popular culture. The last chapter of the book, "Living and Dying in a State of Readiness," delves unflinchingly into our greatest anxiety, revealing how even the fear of death can be bridged.

The first nine chapters each contain a Key, short enough to use as a mantra or to write on a sticky note for your refrigerator. A section called Doing the Work ends each chapter. You will begin to experience life in a different way as you engage these ancient teachings, personally and intimately.

In the epilogue, Tim offers some final thoughts about the common thread connecting the world's major religions and traditions. It's the same thread that can suture and heal our splintered hearts—and that can also heal our world.

An ancient wisdom says if you pull a single thread, a whole world comes into being. May that world be a compassionate one.

—WANDA ISLE
Editor

PART ONE

Wounding and Splintering

The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them.

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

ONE

Being Human

I can't get no satisfaction
'Cause I try and I try and I try and I try
I can't get no, I can't get no
Satisfaction

THE ROLLING STONES'S first big hit in the United States was "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" and is still considered by many the greatest song they ever recorded. It made the charts in 1965. I was in my fourth year at Stanford University, on the supposed fast track to success and happiness. I'd been born into an upper middle class family, I lived in the beautiful and prestigious San Francisco Bay Area, and I never gave more than a moment's thought to the concerns about money and economic status that the previous generation had worried about during the post–World War Two era.

So you may be wondering why the lyrics of that classic Stones song would resonate so deeply with me and my generation. The reason is that, in the sixties, there was more going on than just the restless angst of a privileged generation. Younger Americans were among the first to deeply question the decisions coming out of Washington and the aggressive international path our country had taken. The anguish and actions of college students and

other young people around the country polarized the nation: Peace activists (including me) rallied against the Vietnam War while returning soldiers, with mangled bodies and war-weary eyes, were honored in parades and then forgotten. Angry and often violent polarization was reflected on streets and campuses, in our art, and in our music.

> And that man comes on the radio
> He's tellin' me more and more
> About some useless information
> Supposed to fire my imagination

The idea of the American dream, so fulfilling to my parents and grandparents, no longer nourished the hearts and minds of many in my generation. I tried, and I tried, and I tried, but I got no satisfaction—not as a peace activist, or a student, or at my job. I got a little satisfaction in love, but then we broke up. A little satisfaction from sex, but it didn't last very long.

A year before "Satisfaction" came on my radio, I'd begun a meditation practice with Suzuki Roshi at the San Francisco Zen Center. For a while my heart was calm and peaceful, but when the dissatisfaction returned, it seemed deeper and more impenetrable than ever.

Meditation doesn't save us from life's trials and tragedies. In fact, Zen meditation allows us to enter completely both the joy and darkness that make up this great life. Deep healing often begins in darkness, in times when we feel deep dissatisfaction and little or no vitality.

The place of our deepest fears can be rich soil when it is entered into fully. As our eyes adjust to the dark, clear-seeing becomes possible. Standing firm in the darkness, without withdrawing or lashing out, we discover what motivates us in healthy, wholesome ways and what drives us to exhaustion and depression. We see for ourselves how

fear-based thinking and emotional reactivity influence us individually and collectively. Fear is used by us and against us, and recognizing this truth is the first step toward healing.

This book offers an approach to life that opens us up to a new way of thinking and being in the world. The approach is not new, but too often confusing language, unfamiliar metaphors, and practices that confound and bewilder obscure it. This book is written in the style of an owner's manual, a guide to being human, and begins by focusing on the four most troublesome areas that most of us are intimately familiar with: feelings of unworthiness, and issues surrounding sex, money, and failure. These are the outermost layers of the onion, and they must be penetrated with clear-seeing, generosity, and openness.

> Year after year,
> the monkey's face
> wears a monkey's mask
>
> —BASHO, SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

Basho's poem points to the difficulty of penetrating the onion by seeing through our fear-based thinking. But as I stayed with my meditation practice, I began to see through the layers to realize a direct correlation between the fear-based dramas playing out in my mind and my can't-get-no-satisfaction life. Maybe you can, too.

ONE STEP AT A TIME: THE FOOTPRINT STAGE OF PRACTICE

Every major religion includes contemplative practices that can move us beyond the confusion, disintegration, longing, and weariness associated with fear-based thinking. Often, however, we have to completely exhaust ourselves before

we are ready to embark on this life-altering path.

Here in the United States, we are exhausting ourselves at a younger and younger age. I was twenty when I began my meditation practice. Meditation was an oddity then. But today more and more people are turning to this ancient practice to cope with the mental and emotional stress and weariness that have become hallmarks of American culture.

Maybe you've tried to meditate in the past but have lost your way and quit—perhaps repeatedly. It's not an uncommon experience. Often people read or hear something inspiring and begin a regular practice. They've caught a glimpse of something meaningful, like rabbit tracks on the surface of new-fallen snow. But then the deeper teachings that support the practice become remote and incomprehensible, and the footprints fade away like tracks vanishing in falling snow.

This is what I call the footprint stage of practice. When the tracks disappear, people become overwhelmed or discouraged and withdraw back into their frenzied life of dissatisfaction. Later, the tracks reappear, and for a time, the path is clearly marked. Repeatedly the footprints seem to disappear and reappear.

Eventually, you'll come to realize that the tracks are everywhere—but always, the snow keeps falling and covering them up. Life is continuously unfolding in unlikely and unpredictable ways. Repeatedly, we seem to drift back into the dramas, anxieties, and worries of a fear-driven life. But this, too, may be the path. Each time we return, we are a little wiser and a little more sure-footed as we realize that the path is right where we are, even when the footprints fade from view. When the footprints are visible, we feel secure; when they vanish, we learn to trust. Even though the path is always here, the way we walk it is uniquely our own.

In 2015, forty-five years after I moved away from the Bay Area, I went back to promote my first book, *Nothing Holy about It*. One afternoon, I walked to Bush Street where the San Francisco Zen Center had been. It was now a senior center.

As I stood on the corner of Bush and Laguna, my mind was flooded with memories. I had practiced at the center for five years, from 1964 to 1969, with Suzuki Roshi, who became one of the most famous Zen teachers in the world. Five years may not seem like a long time to absorb Suzki's teachings, but in the days before he was famous he had only a handful of devoted students, so I saw him frequently.

Thinking back to those days, I looked through a window into the room where the auditorium used to be, where on Saturday evenings Suzuki watched imported movies with his Japanese congregation. Then on Sunday mornings he would give dharma talks for his small group of American students. The Japanese congregation didn't meditate or go to his dharma talks. In Japan, only the monks living in monasteries meditated and studied the teachings.

Each day as I entered the building for morning meditation, I passed a giant poster advertising the upcoming movie. A typical poster featured swords dripping with blood, decapitated limbs, and geishas in distress. These looked like pretty lousy movies by my standards. When I wanted some entertainment, I went to North Beach, where they showed artistic movies that had some depth and were emotionally moving. I felt bad that my teacher had to watch those B-rated imports.

One Sunday morning Suzuki looked tired.

"Do you have to watch movies every Saturday night?" I asked.

"Oh, yes," he said, cheerfully. "We watch movies

together on Saturday nights."

"I'm sorry you have to watch those movies. Do you like *any* of them?" I asked.

"I like them all," he said.

He liked them all? Apparently my teacher was pretty unsophisticated when it came to movies.

This was during a time when my Zen practice had become very difficult. It was my can't-get-no-satisfaction phase, and all sorts of memories and fears were coming up in my meditation. Over and over, I relived past dramas and projected them into the future, rehearsing how I wanted to be different. The stillness and joy I'd experienced my first few months of Zen practice had vanished. I seemed to have no control over the images that cycled through my mind, on and off the cushion.

"I like them all," was a teaching that I didn't recognize until much later. Even though I didn't understand the significance of those four words at the time, they stayed with me. Suzuki wasn't judging the movies he saw. He wasn't comparing them to the artsy films playing at North Beach. He was simply present, attentive, and engaged. This was his way.

Today, people say that Suzuki Roshi was a great enlightened being, but I don't know about that. He lived lightly, joyfully. That is what I remember most about him. It's what drew me to him and continues to draw me to him, though now he lives only in my heart.

"I like them all" was a footprint along my path, one that disappeared and reappeared, over and over, until I finally got it. I realized that I could be present and attentive to the movies inside my head without getting caught up in which ones were good and which were bad.

I think this is a challenge that most of us face. We create movies in our heads to try to make sense of the world and of what's happening around us. But these movies are based

on our memories of past experiences, and if they're so dense we can't see beyond them, they tether us continually to the past.

We can learn something about ourselves if we look closely at these movies and recognize their genres and themes. When we're fearful, our movies may be tension-filled dramas. When moody or anxious, gloomy melodramas. For many people, ghost stories are a favorite genre. Here's one of mine:

In the mid-sixties, there weren't many of us meditators, so I got to hang out with Suzuki as much as I wanted. Then we purchased Tassajara Zen Mountain Monastery, and more and more people came to practice with him. Things began to change.

I had a friend whom I'll call Louise. She was a serious Zen student, and I appreciated her sincerity. But after a while it seemed that she was dominating Suzuki's time and I began to appreciate her less and less. Whenever I saw her, I was overwhelmed with jealousy and confusion.

Finally, I realized what was going on. In this situation Louise was like my sister, and I was jealous of my sister my whole life because my dad seemed to give her more time and attention than me. I became aware that the movie I'd created so many years ago was now playing out even here in this calm, monastic setting, dedicated to the cultivation of stillness, compassion, and deep inner joy. I was trying my best to live in today—but memory ghosts swirled around me, separating me from what was actually going on. I felt isolated even while surrounded by kind and caring people.

This is the human situation: We often see others through our prior experiences and expectations. We are so mesmerized by these ghostly images that we don't really encounter each other. Memory ghosts can be so dense and murky that we can't see through them, forming a protective shell that makes us feel disconnected from life.

Memory ghosts sometimes signal a deep hurt or disappointment that needs to be attended to and released. So we have to pay attention to the types of movies that cycle through our minds. If we learn to see them clearly without judgment or criticism and without getting caught up in them, they can serve a deeper purpose, becoming an inner resource that nourishes our aspiration and offers insight and emotional release.

Throughout this book, I'll offer hints and techniques to guide you along, but in the end we learn how to do this deep inner work by doing it. If you stay with it, at some point you will begin to disidentify with your movies and experience an inner openness that allows you to remain receptive to life. Eventually, you'll learn to recognize responses that sustain this openness. But first, you'll have to see clearly those responses that close you down.

CAUGHT IN A SELF-CENTERED DREAM

> We know so many things but we don't know ourselves.
>
> —MEISTER ECKHART

I'd like to share a story about a woman I'll call Alice. Alice had a beautiful daughter that she was proud of. She was very involved in her daughter's life, and she considered herself to be a good mother, but when her daughter went to college and had a psychotic break, everything changed. Alice felt responsible. This was the early seventies, a time when many people believed that mental illness was inherited from the mother. So now, in Alice's mind, she was a bad mother. To escape her guilt, she began to drink heavily.

She went into therapy that lasted for several years, during which time she learned that her daughter's schizophrenia had nothing to do with her. Alice became a

mental health advocate, because she now felt that she was a good person with something meaningful to contribute.

Then Alice's youngest son got kicked out of college for using drugs, and her husband left her for her best friend. Now Alice felt that she was a terrible mother, a terrible wife, and even a terrible human being.

Soon thereafter, her daughter with schizophrenia gave birth to an adorable baby that they parented together, and Alice became a happy, fulfilled mother and grandmother. A few years later, however, her daughter went off her meds, had paranoid delusions, and ran off with the child. Who did Alice think she was then?

Like Alice, many people wander through life experiencing a series of changing roles, like actors in a succession of movies. Who are we in the midst of all these roles? Are we our ideas? Are we our thoughts, our concerns, our movies? Or are we the extended feelings, the moods, the instinctual urges that underlie the movie-making world that we live in?

Meditation is about seeing the multiplicity of roles we identify with, and the way these roles continuously arise and vanish. If we hold them lightly, the roles remain transparent, allowing us to see and appreciate their ever-changing nature.

As Alice's story shows, we identify with certain components of our experience, tie these components together, and call this string of events our *self*. This seems to be the nature of our movie-making mind. These mental movies have the capacity to either diminish or enrich our lives.

Buddha taught that what we experience as continuity arises from a continuous flow of activity, rather than a solid, unchanging self. Alice's story points to the key to understanding the wisdom of this chapter.

> KEY #1: Recognizing the self as a process frees us from a self-centered dream.

We begin to experience freedom from our habituated way of experiencing the world as we learn to see the self as a process rather than a solid being moving through time. For most of us, however, freedom from our fear-based way of thinking does not come easily.

> In the thick of the forest is where you will find your freedom.
>
> —BUDDHA

We never know when we're going to find ourselves in the thick of the forest. For my friend Sydney, a long-time meditator, the discovery of freedom came through a major stroke that left her unable to speak. When I went to see her, she used a writing pad to communicate. Her hand shook uncontrollably as she wrote, "I'm okay. Learned not this face. Learned not this body." When I looked at her, her eyes were suffused with loving acceptance.

Sydney found peace, even tranquility, after her stroke because she had sustained a regular meditation practice for many years. Even a practice of only twenty minutes a day can help you hold your movie-making response lightly.

To really penetrate the movies and follow them all the way in so as to see the patterns that produce them, however, requires more. That's why we have Zen retreats that last from three days to a week or even longer.

A few years ago, during a long retreat, a student came to see me for a private meeting. She said, "I think it's going well because my mind has gotten very quiet. But it's kind of scary. Who will I be if I lose myself? How will I function in the world?" As she spoke she churned up more and

more doubt until finally she exclaimed, “I think I should go home now.”

This frequently happens in Zen retreats. When you finally experience some stillness, these questions become relevant. How do you identify with non-being? There’s nothing there to identify with. It can be disconcerting at first. But it’s right here, in the thick of the forest, that we discover a wonderful freedom that our movie-making mind cannot touch.

I encouraged the retreat participant to stay with her anxiety and ride it out. She agreed to give it try. When she came to see me a couple of days later, her mood was quite different. She spoke of the stillness and peacefulness she was experiencing. “When the bell rang to end a meditation session, my body rose on its own. My body knows what to do.”

Whatever you experience in meditation becomes your teacher if you just stay with it. Even asthma can be your teacher, as my friend Eleanor discovered. Eleanor was planning a long retreat with Katagiri Roshi, then the guiding teacher of Minnesota Zen Meditation Center. She was worried about doing the retreat because she had to use an inhaler frequently. That meant she would have to use it during meditation, but she was clinging to her idea that she should not move during meditation.

Katagiri Roshi encouraged her to do the retreat. He counseled her to be with the stress in her throat if she could and to use her inhaler whenever she needed to. “Use the stress in your throat as the object of your meditation,” he said.

Eleanor began the retreat knowing that she could use her inhaler any time. But as the retreat went on, she was able to relax into the stress in her throat more and more. She stayed for the entire seven-day retreat. By the end, she noticed that her throat muscles had relaxed and her breath was not so shallow.

By being with it rather than trying to avoid or escape it, asthma became Eleanor's thick of the forest. It became a place of freedom where before there was only limitation.

Being human can feel like being trapped—trapped in a body that demands and bullies, a mind that ridicules and spins out over every little thing, a dangerous and confounding world. But is it really that way? The next three chapters will take you into the darkest forest, to the very places where we feel most lost and most vulnerable. But you'll have a guide and a flashlight. All you need to bring is an open mind and a willing heart. The last section of each chapter, Doing the Work, is where your eyes begin to adjust to the dark, and your own insight becomes your guide.

CORE MEDITATION PRACTICE FOR CALMING AND CENTERING

If you're meditating at home, it's important to designate a certain place for your practice. It can also help to create a bit of ritual that signals to your brain your intention to meditate. You might begin by closing the blinds or curtains, dimming the lights, lighting a candle, or perhaps burning a bit of incense. Take each step with your full attention. Feel the floor against your feet and the feel of the match or lighter as you light the candle; notice how the flame flares up and the smoke curls and spirals. When these tasks are performed with attentiveness, always in the same order, and with one-pointed focus, they become a calming and centering ritual. Your mind will start to settle down before you even begin the meditation.

During meditation, when your mind becomes distracted from your breath (and it will, over and over), try to notice the distraction and then return without comment or reactivity. When some emotional reactivity does bubble up, say frustration or irritation, focus on the bodily

sensations of frustration or irritation rather than your thoughts. Stay with the sensations until they dissolve and then return to the object of focus. Don't try to suppress your thoughts. The point is to become aware of your thought patterns by noticing the arising of a pattern without getting caught up in it. That's why we stay focused on the breath, using it as an anchor so we can see our patterns without reinforcing them.

Start by taking a few deep breaths and notice where in your body you feel your breath most prominently. It may be in your nostrils, or as your breath moves down your throat, or in the rise and fall of your chest or belly. Just rest your focus in that area and then allow your breath to return to its natural rhythm, without trying to control it. If your breath is shallow and quick, let it be shallow and quick; if it's slow and deep, let it be slow and deep. Feel the openness that allows the breath to come and go on its own, without hindrance. Bring that same non-attached openness to whatever arises in your mind.

Allowing your breath, thoughts, emotions, and sensations to arise and then dissolve on their own is one of the most difficult things for a human being to do. The specific nature of the difficulty reveals something about our own patterns of reactivity. Is it difficult to let your breath be, without controlling or judging? Do you get agitated or angry when you catch your mind wandering off? You can start to free yourself from your inner control freak by simply observing the rhythm of your own breath without interfering and then extending that gentle attentiveness to your thoughts and emotions as they arise.

As we follow the natural rhythm of our breath, we begin to discover in an experiential way that our thoughts, sensations, and emotions come and go as naturally as the breath if we do not cling to them or try to avoid them. Of course emotions are more viscous and slow-moving than breath, but they come and go nevertheless, because this is

the natural rhythm of life. It is only our fear that we'll be overwhelmed by our emotions or do something stupid that makes us feel out of balance or out of sync with reality. Meditation gives us the opportunity to get to know our emotions in an intimate way so we're comfortable with them. Even the strong emotions that we try so hard to avoid become fresh new avenues of insight and deepen our capacity for compassion.

DOING THE WORK

1. Think for a moment about a personal narrative—a mental movie—that you play over and over in your mind. As an antidote, imagine the unfolding of an opposite story. See if you can find a memory that affirms this new story line. Or you may bring to mind a memory that supports the old story line—and open yourself up to a new interpretation.

2. Recall a time when you found yourself in the thick of the forest. What did this experience teach you about yourself?

TWO

The Trance of Unworthiness

Once the Dalai Lama was asked by an American about how to deal with self-hatred. The question startled him. He turned to his interpreter for an explanation, but the more his interpreter tried to explain the phenomenon of self-hatred, the more confused the Dalai Lama became. Finally, he turned back to the questioner and said, "Self-hatred. What is that?"

In the ensuing discussion, the Dalai Lama asked for a show of hands of those who had experienced self-hatred. Viewing all the raised hands, he concluded, "I thought I had a very good acquaintance with the mind, but now I feel quite ignorant. I find this very, very strange."

For many in the United States and possibly most Western cultures, feelings of unworthiness like those that puzzled the Dalai Lama are pervasive. In chapter one, we discussed how we are enticed into a self-centered dream, hypnotized by the movies we make. In this chapter, we'll look at the trance-like state we get caught in when our original nature is veiled by feelings of guilt, shame, remorse, anguish, and resentment. We may even feel as if we're sleepwalking through life.

Healing happens naturally as we penetrate these trance-inducing veils with mindful attention. We start by seeing clearly the thought patterns that cause us so much pain. We have to see how these patterns are triggered, how they arise, and how they dissolve. In this chapter, we'll begin to understand how so many of our habituated responses are based on cognitive misperceptions, conditioned emotional reactivity, and coping mechanisms that have outlived their usefulness.

The primary trance-inducing veil is fear. When we're stuck in fear-based thinking, we are driven by a need to protect ourselves and may act out in inappropriate and destructive ways. The more we do this, the deeper our trance of unworthiness becomes.

When we use objects like food or intoxicants, or engage in activities like shopping or gambling or even worshipping to avoid feeling the sensation of fear, fear acts like a veil. We may even use spiritual objects like altars. Maybe you have an altar in every corner of your house. Well, that's fine if they are meant to remind you that everyday life is the place of enlightenment. But if you're thinking that the spiritual is different from the mundane, that the calmness of a spiritual life is different from the unruly surf of this great oceanic life, and if you cling to the presence of your altars as a way to escape the fear-inducing realities of the world, then you are caught in a movie about living a spiritual life. In real life, it is the nature of the ocean to create surf. Being afraid of the surf helps to induce a trance that can trap us.

A second trance-inducing veil is anger. Anger is a big wave. We often get bowled over by anger arising from insecurity and from the need to succeed, to dominate, and to feel loved and valued. A historical example of the destructive power of anger is Adolf Hitler. He was charismatic and smart, but the primary emotion he tapped into was anger.

It's important to recognize the power of our emotions. Emotions tend to drive our lives. The word *drive* in this context might sound negative, but it can also be positive. Look at Barack Obama. He is charismatic and smart. He can run different narratives simultaneously: philosophical ones, psychological ones, political ones—but it's the depth of his hope, courage, joy, and love that sustains him. Emotions drive Obama's life in a positive way.

Another example of someone who understood the power of emotions was Suzuki Roshi. I often hear people say that Suzuki was deeply enlightened. But Suzuki himself said, "There are no enlightened people, only enlightened activity." He manifested enlightenment in the way he lived his life. He radiated love, but he never talked about love. He was in the United States for only twelve years before he died. But look at what he accomplished for the dharma in those twelve years. He rooted Soto Zen Buddhism in America—an amazing feat.

A third trance-inducing veil is anxiety. When I began my Zen practice, my father was concerned about what I was doing with my life. He said, "Tim, I just want you to know that I think what you are pursuing is not possible. A lot of people are into this religious stuff because they think they can get some enduring peace of mind. But I've been around for a long time, and there's no such thing. I hope you don't waste your life!"

At a young age, I recognized how much my father suffered from anxiety about social acceptance and money, even though he was quite successful. He suffered from deeply ingrained feelings of insecurity. Achievement became his avoidance strategy. In the United States, avoidance is a common coping mechanism. But no matter how much my father achieved, the underlying fear that he was not good enough remained and his coping mechanism drove him to seek more and more success. Avoidance didn't bring him the freedom from anxiety that he sought.

The suffering I saw in my dad was one of the reasons I was drawn to the counterculture. While my father sought solace within the mainstream social and economic system —what we young rebels called "the establishment"—I *blamed* the establishment. Blaming the establishment became *my* avoidance strategy. It was a coping mechanism I would have to rethink after I finished college and became a social worker, a vocation that is funded and maintained by the establishment.

So far, I've discussed three trance-inducing veils. Now we'll delve more deeply into each of these common afflictions. Then we'll focus on three qualities that allow us to live more skillfully, without withdrawing from or indulging in the turbulent energies of fear, anger, and anxiety.

SUSTAINING THE TRANCE THROUGH FEAR, ANGER, AND ANXIETY

Fear. First, it's important to recognize that fear-based thinking is evolutionary. It is called the "negativity bias," and scientists believe it originated as an adaptive mechanism to help human beings survive. Imagine that one of our early ancestors saw rustling in tall grasses. If his instincts consistently told him it was a tiger, rather than a rabbit, his risk of extinction decreased. In these circumstances, fear saved lives.

Today in the developed countries of the world we generally do not live in life-threatening situations, but the fear response still gets activated. And when our thoughts are fear-based, we tend to be either overtly or passively aggressive, conflict-avoidant, or frozen by indecision.

We like going to movies that keep us on the edge of our seats. All we have to do is suspend our disbelief and go for a thrilling ride. Along the way, we experience happiness,

sadness, anger, fear, anxiety, bewilderment, agitation; emotions and mental states pass through our body like waves through the ocean.

Poet and philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who coined the phrase "suspension of disbelief" in 1817, said that if a writer could infuse a story with a "human interest and a semblance of truth," readers would make a semiconscious decision to put aside their disbelief and accept the premise for the duration of the story. This can be a way of deepening our aesthetic response to a work of art. Unfortunately, we often make the same semiconscious decision to suspend our disbelief when watching the movies we create in our mind—despite the fact that these personal movies are mostly divorced from reality.

The inner movies I hear about the most as a Zen teacher have some common themes: "I'm not good enough to calm my mind. I'm not disciplined enough. My mind is too chaotic and my emotions are too sticky."

What is going on when people think they can't meditate?

During meditation, while our awareness is focused on the breath, our fear-based patterns begin to reveal themselves. When discomfort arises in the form of physical or emotional pain, we usually respond in one of three ways: we fight it, becoming agitated and irritable; we try to escape the discomfort through fantasy and then feel guilty or ashamed that we are wasting our time in meditation; or we freeze up like a stone, holding our mind in a state of rigid, unfeeling blankness.

Here in Minnesota, where I now live and teach, we tend to emphasize the first and third reactions—flight or freeze—when it comes to our relationships with others. "Minnesota nice" can be a superficial way of dealing with people that hides emotions and fosters mistrust. In other parts of the country, New York City for instance, people tend toward the fight response: social encounters may quickly devolve into verbal skirmishes.

It is possible to respond skillfully to fear-based thinking, to meet it with both honesty and kindness. Without honesty, kindness may devolve into sentimentality or complacency. Without kindness, honesty may devolve into self-loathing or righteous condemnation of others. The combination of honesty and kindness characterizes the kind of enlightened activity that I witnessed in Suzuki Roshi.

When you're caught in a scary movie, being honest and kind isn't usually your first thought. Even if you're not caught in a movie—even if you're experiencing life directly—when you're all churned up inside being honest and kind is not easy. It takes courage, commitment, and the willingness to experience the sensations associated with negative emotions. With practice, enlightened activity can become your default response, even in the presence of fear.

Anger. Anger is addictive because it has so much power. People around us pay attention when we become angry. But often we don't realize how dominating anger is. It can control our lives.

On September 11, 2001, planes crashed into the World Trade Center in New York City. We Americans were angry. The leaders of our government were angry, especially the trio of President George W. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. It's natural to be angry when you've been attacked. But what did they do with it? Did they deny their anger? Did they repress their anger? What did they do with their anger?

They magnified and generalized. They revved up their anger, and they revved up the anger of the country. Then they aimed it at several countries and at millions of people in the Middle East. The results were destructive and irrational. Years later we are still asking ourselves, why did we invade and occupy Iraq, a country that had nothing to do with the bombing of the World Trade Center?

One reason anger is so powerful is that it is a mechanism

of survival. We need it. But how do we work with it so it doesn't become a weapon of destruction?

First of all, we have to believe that anger can be purified of its toxic content and channeled in wholesome and creative ways. Anger provides information. We know that physical pain should not be ignored; it is informing us of a problem that needs our attention. Likewise, anger informs you that your mind and heart are in pain. So anger is not a problem—it is a messenger.

The key is to bring our strong emotions like anger into view without fueling them with our stories. In meditation, we learn to observe the arising of a strong emotion, to feel its intensity and notice where in our body it is held, and to begin to see the reactive patterns that occur. We see how we magnify and generalize by making stories out of our feelings. We weave a web around the emotion and then get caught in it, often catching others as well.

However, we can learn to work with the energy of anger and let go of the content. In my first book, *Nothing Holy about It,* I described my brother's suicide and the anger I had to cope with. Eventually I was able to channel its energy into creating programs that help people who suffer from depression, as my brother had.

We have the capacity to work with our anger skillfully, without generalizing or magnifying. It's all about letting go of the content, and we learn how to let go by doing it over and over in meditation. As you work with anger in this way, you develop the capacity to tolerate, and even appreciate, its chaotic energy.

Anger arises for a reason from your karmic past. You can cultivate a compassionate relationship with it that deepens your understanding of the human condition and deepens your capacity for intimacy with others.

Anxiety. The seeds of anxiety that I inherited from my father and from my own karmic past will always be with

me, waiting to be watered.

A few years ago, I injured my back. I was in a lot of pain, especially at night. I was in my mid-sixties and had never previously experienced much bodily pain. But now a pattern developed in which I woke up throughout the night in pain.

After a while, I became anxious about going to bed. What were my choices? I could watch TV instead of lying down. Or I could take a pain pill. But I wasn't in pain yet; I was just anxious about the possibility of pain. Of course, I could take the pill anyway in anticipation of the pain to come.

Neither of my two choices aligned with the path to freedom. If I clung to my anxiety about the pain and stayed up until three in the morning watching TV in order to avoid going to bed, then I would *have* to take a pain pill anyway, so I could allow myself to fall asleep. Often our coping mechanisms create even bigger problems for us.

Thankfully, I had a third option: to lie down, breathe, and pay attention to the ebb and flow of sensations in my body. The Zen path is to learn to tolerate our aches and pains without suffering so much from them. We learn it by doing it, by allowing our kind awareness to flow *with* the pain rather than rebelling against it or trying to escape it. When we can do this, we don't make big things out of small things. Moreover, if we can manage our physical pain in this way, we can do the same with our emotional pain as well.

Another way we make big things out of little things is by layering other reactive emotions on top of anxiety and fear —for example, when we experience shame and embarrassment about having anxiety and fear.

I'm the guiding teacher at Minnesota Zen Meditation Center. What will people think if they know I have anxiety about going to sleep at night? Am I worthy of being a Zen

teacher? Projecting our anxiety inward and making up stories about it is a behavior pattern that increases and sustains our feelings of unworthiness.

We also project our feelings of unworthiness outward. I met a man recently who had moved to Minnesota from another state. He said he had been going to a Zen center there but he quit because the teacher didn't like him. I asked whether he'd discussed the problem with the teacher.

"Oh no," he said. "I didn't want to do that."

"How do you know he didn't like you?" I asked.

"Because he was always frowning when he looked at me."

"Was he frowning or just being serious?"

"Well, it seemed like he was frowning. I felt like there was no room for me there."

But he didn't check it out. He was just projecting, and his projections became his reality. We do that all the time, and it causes so much pain and confusion.

Anxiety in itself isn't necessarily destructive. Like anger, anxiety has an important function in our life. It tells us something about our environment and ourselves. My anxiety helps me to see and understand my patterns and fears. I can see how I often respond to discomfort, embarrassment, or shame by closing down to unpleasant sensations, instead of allowing the sensations to come and go like waves in the ocean.

LIVING SKILLFULLY THROUGH OPENNESS, NONJUDGMENTAL AWARENESS, AND KINDNESS

> All that we are is based on our thoughts. If you act on a wise thought, happiness follows you like a shadow that never leaves you. If you act on an unwise thought, unhappiness follows you like a shadow that never leaves

you.

—BUDDHA

Fear-based thinking is instinctual, but human beings are not limited to instinct. Our thoughts emanate from our beliefs and concepts about the world. Meditation expands our awareness; a spaciousness opens up that often defies our small egoic ideas about how things are. When our heart and mind are open, we begin to experience what interconnectedness and interdependence are all about. Our skin doesn't just divide us; it also connects us to all beings. Here in Minnesota, our northern boundary joins us to Canada. As human beings, our skin joins us to our surroundings in a manner that can be deeply satisfying. With a little thought it becomes obvious that we feel the heat of the sun through our skin, or the cold of a snowflake, or the touch of another person. Zen is about compelling people to think deeply.

While an intellectual understanding of interconnectedness is a good place to begin, it is not enough to be transformative. We have to get it inside us, in our body, all the way down to the marrow. We have to know it in a visceral way. Otherwise, it's just another mental construct, a movie where the hero is a wise sage.

So how do we go from a mental understanding to an embodied understanding? Embodiment is not about changing who we are—but that doesn't mean it doesn't involve change.

When I was living at Tassajara Zen Mountain Monastery, certain days were designated as free days, on which we could do whatever we wanted. On one of these free days, I met with Suzuki to grumble about the way things were going. For one thing, we had to wear robes even though we weren't ordained, and robes were difficult for me. Mine were always higgledy-piggledy, and I stepped

on them whenever I stood up from the cushion.

Another problem was the introduction of a ritualized meal service called *oryoki*. It involved nested bowls wrapped and tied in several layers of linen and a series of meal chants to memorize. The meal unfolded in orchestrated stages. It was quite beautiful, but I wasn't good at ritual, so I was pissing and moaning because I felt awkward and clumsy.

Suzuki responding by saying, "You are perfect just as you are."

Perfect just as I am? What a relief! I didn't have to worry about my robes or mastering the traditional monastic meal service because I was perfect as I was. So I spent the rest of my free day hiking along the streams and hills above Tassajara.

Suzuki recognized that I was becoming fixated on ideas about how I should be and how my practice should be. Through his kindness, I was able to relax into what was happening in my practice, and I experienced some openness. When we're open, we're resilient. Only then can practice continue.

However, Suzuki's lesson for me that day was not finished. When I came back to my little cabin that afternoon, he motioned me over. I immediately started telling him about my day, how wonderful it was.

He listened patiently. Then he said, "But Tim, you could use a little improvement in the way you take care of things."

"You are perfect as you are, but you can use a little improvement," has become one of Suzuki Roshi's best-known quotations. It exemplifies his skillfulness as a teacher. If you just go with the first part—*you're perfect as you are*—you're probably flaking out on your commitments. If you just go with the second part—*you could use a little improvement*—you're probably beating

yourself up around some idea of who you should be. You need both.

The openness, nonjudgmental awareness, and kindness that Suzuki embodied are aspects of our original nature. These qualities arise naturally when the mind becomes still through regular meditation. Here, then, is the key for dissolving the trance of unworthiness.

> KEY #2: Meditation is the antidote for feelings of unworthiness.

In the heat of the moment, however, openness, nonjudgmental awareness, and kindness can be difficult to open up to.

My wife, Linda, and I have two cats that are pretty old. Once, when Linda was out of town, one of the cats started peeing on everything. She peed on the floor, on the bath mat, on our Oriental rug. I put my pajamas on the floor just for a few minutes, and she peed on them. I felt like throwing her outside.

For a moment, I couldn't imagine how to deal with my anger. But all I had to do was pet her and feel the connectedness between my hand and her fur, and I was able to see and appreciate her just as she was, rather than comparing her to the cat she used to be. My anger dissolved, my body relaxed, and a deep appreciation for this continuously unfolding life returned.

SURFING THE GREAT OCEAN OF LIFE

When I was a teenager in Northern California, my friend Jerry and I would go to Santa Cruz after school to surf. Surfing was pretty big in Southern California where the water was warm, but had not yet become popular in Santa

Cruz. Jerry and I were usually the only ones there, surfing the cold water with no wet suits. Jerry had a surfboard and I bodysurfed. When the really big waves came, they often knocked me over and took me under.

The ocean is a good metaphor for our interconnected life. With a regular meditation practice, we can learn to surf life's waves, but chances are good that we will sometimes be overpowered by them for a while.

A technique like following your breath is a great surfboard for riding these waves. But when the surf is up and you're being submerged in wave after wave of fear, anger, and anxiety, you may need a more specialized surfboard, possibly adding counting your breath, repeating a mantra or phrase that is meaningful to you, or doing walking meditation rather than simply sitting still.

Sometimes Jerry and I felt as if we were wasting our time trying to surf—we were just getting knocked over by one wave after another. Days and sometimes even weeks went by when we weren't making any progress at all—very discouraging. Life can be like that, but with a regular meditation practice, you learn to experience each wave not as an obstacle to your real life but *as* your real life. Eventually you may learn to enjoy the surf directly, with no board at all, experiencing the joy of being fully immersed in the water, regardless of its turbulent energies.

Each wave has its own unique nature. It also has the nature of the entire ocean, because a wave is not separate from the ocean. You learn to be patient when you're riding the energy of the entire ocean. Jerry and I surfed on calm days and on stormy days. Surfing on stormy days isn't easy, but the storm is never separate from the calmness down below.

Even so, for every thrilling swell that lifts you upward toward the sky, there is a trough that can send you reeling into the darkest depths. Troughs are part of the ocean, too. When you're in a deep trough, you can't go forward and

you can't retreat. Nor can you predict what will come next, because you can't see beyond the trough. In the troughs, you learn to trust, to have courage, and to be patient—qualities that come naturally if you're committed to surfing the entire ocean.

Another quality that comes naturally as you learn to surf is renunciation. Jerry and I had to practice renunciation every day. Because we wanted to surf in the afternoons, we renounced driving our souped-up cars up and down the street in front of Palo Alto High after school where everyone could see us. Jerry renounced smoking so he could keep his lungs in good shape to handle the strong currents and mammoth waves. We even had to renounce hanging out with girls in the afternoons. It wasn't easy to give up these things that we liked, but we had fallen in love with surfing, so we did it.

Renunciation is a matter of putting aside our immediate desires just a little bit so we can stay focused on something bigger. As Jerry and I waited in the water, watching the horizon for a wave big enough to carry us all the way in to shore, we were often tempted to take whatever wave came along. Resisting that temptation was another form of renunciation. Training in renunciation involves seeing our immediate desires as they arise without indulging them.

If you indulge a desire, what happens next? Another desire arises. And another and another. The faster you indulge your desires, the faster they come. You'll never learn to surf if you are distracted by the small waves that constantly lap at your surfboard.

After a while, the small steady waves of desire no longer distract you. Eventually, even the surfboard begins to dissolve because you no longer need it. Suddenly, you realize that you are right there in the surf with no gap, no separation between you and the waves, completely immersed in the ocean.

Wave by wave is how we stay engaged with life. It is the

only way to experience the immediacy and vigor that real life offers. Sure, it's raw. But we don't need to protect ourselves from the moods and nuances of life's great ocean. We can stay right with it, in placid times and in turbulent times. Life is always offering us the energy and vitality we need—just let the salt water seep into your pores.

I'll end this chapter with an untitled poem written in the thirteenth century by Zen master Dogen, which I've adapted slightly. To understand this poem, it's important to know that the moon is a metaphor for wisdom and that birds are a metaphor for thoughts. Dogen writes about being entranced by thoughts of judgment and ridicule: this is worthy; that is not. Then, a great insight arises.

All my life
True and false,
Right and wrong
Are entangled.
Playing with the moon
Ridiculing the wind
Listening to the birds
Many years wasted.
Seeing the ocean
White with surf,
This year
I suddenly realized
Surf makes the ocean.

Can you learn to surf the chaos and uncertainty that real life includes without falling into a trance of unworthiness? You can. A surfer is powerless to change the towering wave rushing toward her. But she doesn't want to change it. She wants to surf it and she learns to feel safe in the immense ocean of being even when she falls. She confidently gets

right back up to meet the next wave.

A MEDITATION FOR DISSOLVING FEELINGS OF UNWORTHINESS

The following meditation will help you develop the capacity to be nonjudgmental and kind toward yourself and others. We can all develop the ability to discover and transmit pure, unconditioned love, the natural manifestation of each wave's undividedness from the huge ocean.

We begin with ourselves. Then we extend kindness to our loved ones, our friends and acquaintances, and then to those with whom we have difficulty. There may be certain people you are not ready to extend kindness toward. Don't push yourself. At some point, you may be surprised to experience an expansive awareness that easily includes everyone.

Begin with the core meditation for calming and centering (pages 14–16). When you're ready, repeat the phrases below slowly. Pause after each line to arouse and nurture the felt-sense associated with the words so your entire being is fully engaged and participating.

May I feel safe and protected.
May I feel free of mental suffering and distress.
May I feel healthy and strong.
May I live in this world happily, peacefully, joyfully, and with ease.

Repeat the phrase until you feel a sense of warmth throughout your body. When you're ready, think of a person who is close to you, for whom it takes no effort to feel warmth and kindness toward. Repeat the phrases for this person: "May she or he feel safe and protected…"

After you have steeped yourself in feelings of tenderness for this person, move on to someone who is more neutral in your life, a friend or colleague. Continue to steep yourself in tender and caring feelings.

Now turn to someone for whom you harbor hostile feelings and resentments. Repeat the phrases for this person. If you have difficulty doing this, you can say, "To the best of my ability, I wish that you feel safe and protected..." If you begin to feel ill will toward this person, return to a loved one and allow the tenderness to arise again. Then return to this person.

Rather than attempting to dissolve hostile feelings, surround them with tenderness. These hostile feelings point out your own suffering. Offer your compassion as you would to any other being who is suffering. Allow compassion to penetrate the isolated feelings of hostility. Hold both at the same time and notice what happens.

When you're ready, use the phrases to extend the feelings of tenderness to everyone around the world. No one is excluded. This expanded consciousness absorbs and transforms our feelings of unworthiness. Self-hatred cannot exist here. Healing arises when we create the conditions for healing to arise. This is Buddha's most fundamental teaching. You can trust it.

You may end this session by returning for five or ten minutes to the core meditation for calming and centering (pages 14–16).

DOING THE WORK

The point of this chapter has been to demystify our emotional reactivity so we can live with buoyancy and skillfulness, even during emotional storms. The following exercises are designed to help you see your emotional patterns and practice staying with them without acting

them out until they dissolve on their own.

1. For the next week, notice what category of thought and/or behavior you most frequently engage in when afraid or anxious: fight, flight, or freeze. After identifying your predominant pattern, when it next arises, pause and breathe deeply for two or three minutes into and around the desire to fight, flee, or freeze. Notice what happens each time.

2. Notice one opinion or belief that you hold strongly. Consciously interact with someone who has a radically different belief than yours, listening to them very carefully and empathetically so you can get a sense of why that belief is so important to them. Look into your own thought patterns to discover why your belief is so important to you.

3. Notice each time you start putting yourself down. Take three deep breaths and then find the kindness within yourself that you might extend to a sick child. Consciously expand it until it suffuses your entire body and mind. Steep yourself in this kindness for as long as you can. When it fades, notice whether you feel lighter and more at peace with yourself. Consider the possibility that this tenderness is more authentic than the harshness you experience when you engage in thoughts of unworthiness.

THREE

Sex

LOOKING AROUND TODAY, it's hard to believe that American culture has a puritanical heritage. In the 1940s and 50s, we were a shut-down and repressed society. Young boys never saw a female breast. Even infants never saw their mother's breast, because Americans believed research showed that bottle-fed babies were healthier than breast-fed babies. But this research was driven by corporate America, by male-dominated science, and perhaps by the underlying idea that female breasts were indecent.

Now look at what's going on. We reacted to the puritanism of the fifties by going to the other extreme. America has become a hyper-sexualized society. It's easy to see why: we are a consumer culture, after all, and sex sells. But the pendulum has swung so far that even corporate America is feeling the heat: employees watching porn at work have become a major problem.

So how do we respond to our human tendency to bounce back and forth between puritanism and self-indulgence? First, it's important to realize that the bounce is fear-based. It is driven by insecurity. We want something we can count on, so what do we do? We make rules about