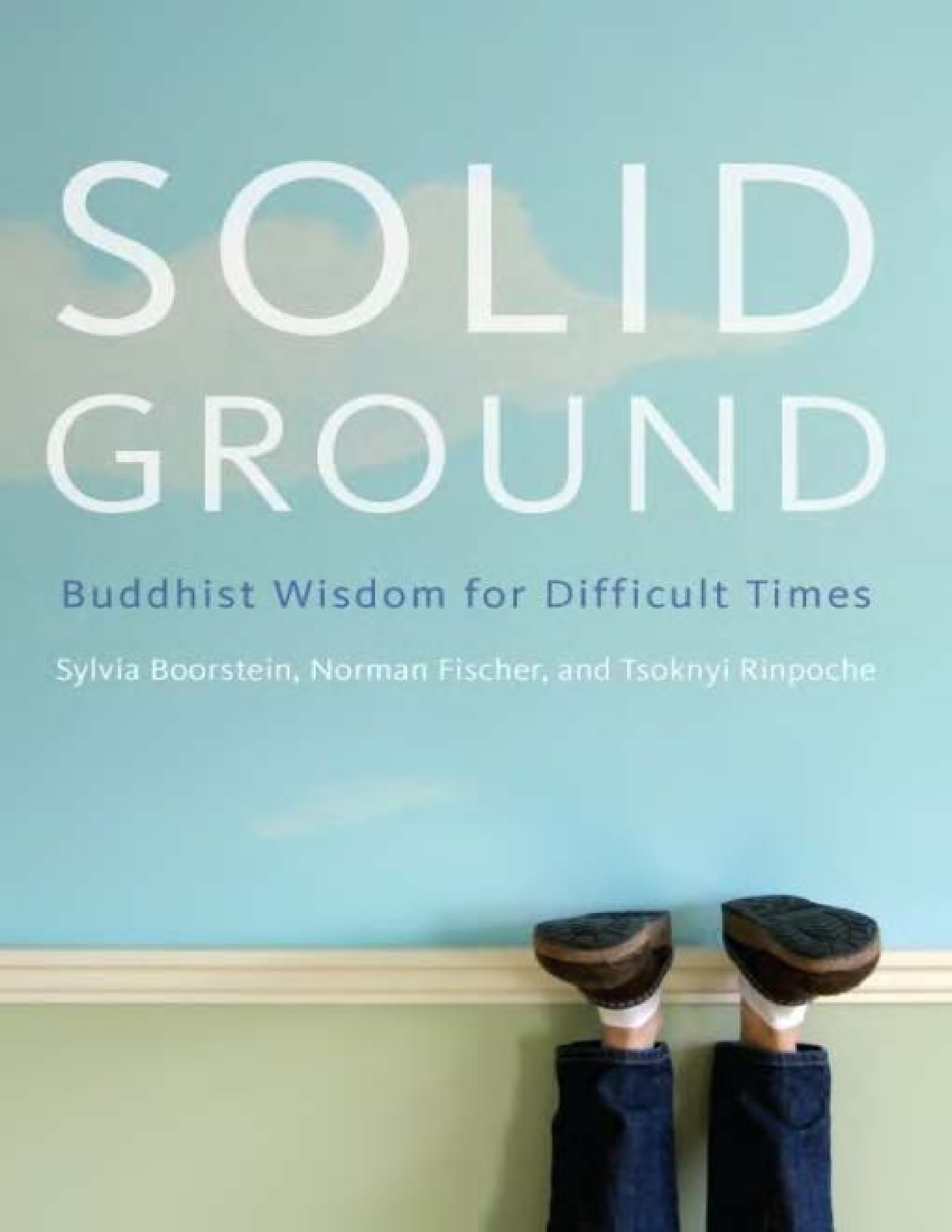
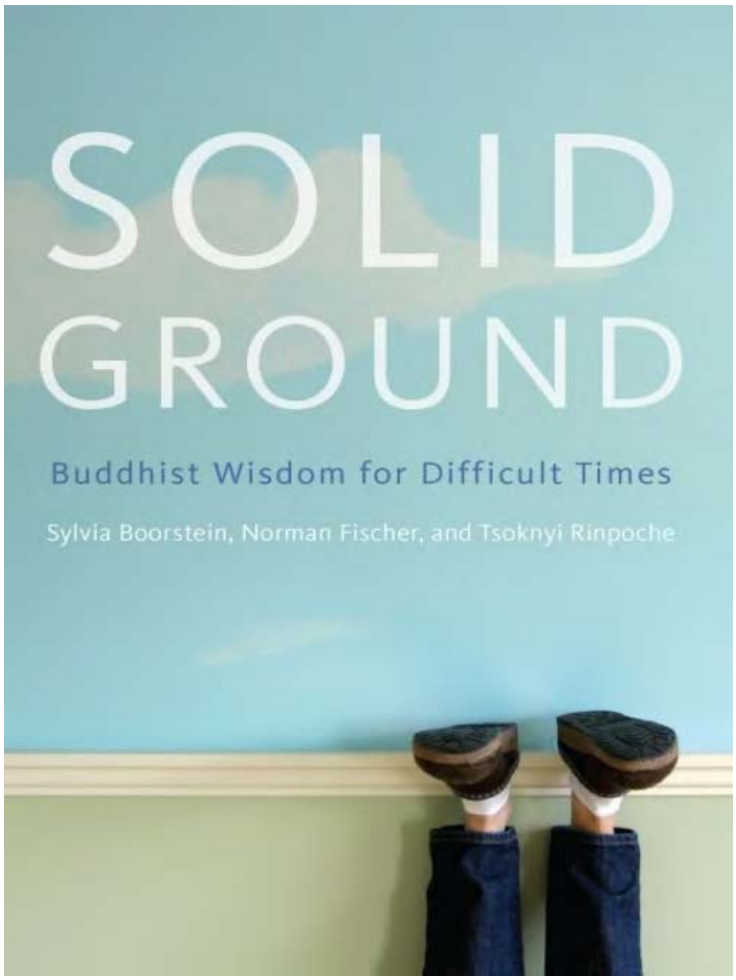
SOLID GROUND

Buddhist Wisdom for Difficult Times

Sylvia Boorstein, Norman Fischer, and Tsoknyi Rinpoche

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SYLVIA BOORSTEIN, NORMAN FISCHER, AND TSOKNYI RINPOCHE

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PARALLAX PRESS

BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA

introduction

MELVIN MCLEOD

Melvin McLeod is the editor-in-chief of *Shambhala Sun* and *Buddhadharma: The Practitioner's Quarterly*. He is also the author of, most recently, *Mindful Politics: A Buddhist Guide to Making the World a Better Place*.

All conditioned phenomena are impermanent. According to Buddhism, that simple, seemingly bland statement defines the human dilemma. When we deny and struggle against its truth, we suffer. When we accept and open ourselves fully to its reality, we discover peace and untold resources of wisdom and compassion within us. This is the essence of Buddhist wisdom for difficult times.

Every life is marked by change and loss. Everything changes, ages, breaks, falls to pieces, and decays. To put it bluntly, everything dies. Every being, inanimate object, idea, philosophy, religion, planet, and universe ever known dies. This includes every person we love, every object we treasure, every credential we earn and success we achieve, every idea we have, every perception or emotion we experience, and every moment we live. Some things last longer than others and give the appearance of permanence, but ultimately there's nothing we can hold on to; it's all changing constantly.

Who can blame us for wanting it to be different? We want to be able to hold on to what we want to hold on to and avoid what we

want to avoid. We want to feel secure about our own reality and to live in a universe that confirms it. But the struggle to build a solid life for ourselves in a world that we can't rely on is ultimately futile. The world doesn't cooperate. The economy rises and falls. Political upheavals happen. People like us and then they don't. Or they don't like us and then they do. We experience success and then we fail. We fall in and out of love. Our children leave to start their own families. Our old friends die. We go from tears of joy to tears of sorrow and back again. Underneath everything is a subtle feeling of anxiety and insecurity that colors every moment of our lives, even the ostensibly happy ones.

In Buddhism the suffering caused by the disconnect between what we want and what reality gives us is called the First Noble Truth. Some people think of Buddhism as negative or pessimistic because of its focus on suffering. But while suffering is Buddhism's starting point—because it is life's—the other three noble truths deliver hopeful news. We can understand why we suffer (the Second Noble Truth), peace and joy are possible in this very life (the Third Noble Truth), and there is a clear path we can follow to get there (the Fourth Noble Truth).

All Buddhist wisdom is wisdom for difficult times. In this small and beautiful book, three leading teachers show us how they have coped with difficulty in their own lives and how Buddhism helped them do it. They offer us insight based on their years of study, meditation, and wise living. And what they tell us goes against every grain of our being.

Normally, we feel our happiness is dependent on the outside world and how it treats us, when really we have little influence over what will happen to us in life (and none at all over the basic nature of reality). There's a *Seinfeld* episode in which George Costanza realizes that if everything he usually does in life is wrong, then the opposite must be right. Buddhism's like that. What these three wise teachers tell us is pretty much the opposite of the way we normally live.

Here are some of the radical truths you will read in this book:

- difficult times are inevitable, but whether we suffer or not depends on how we react to that difficulty
- by facing difficulty with an open heart, we discover insight, love, and courage
- the basic practice is to stop everything we're doing and just look at what's happening
- the best way to be happy ourselves is to put others' happiness first
- the only really solid ground is open ground

In the face of constant change, we seek solid ground. That's fundamental. But there is no solid ground in conditioned phenomena: we won't find security in a slippery and unpredictable world or be able to build a sense of personal identity based on our ever-changing thoughts and emotions. Nonetheless, we cling to that which we think will benefit us, repel that which we label as negative, and are indifferent to whatever does not affect us personally. These basic drives—passion, aggression, and ignorance—are what Buddhism calls the Three Poisons. They're our strategy for trying to control our world, and they only make us hurt ourselves and others.

As an alternative, Buddhism offers the radical act of stopping. What if we just stop and look and fully experience life as it is? In the greatest reversal of all, in doing nothing we discover everything.

Stopping doesn't mean we become indifferent, impractical, or paralyzed. When our child is very sick, we still rush her to the hospital. But we have choices about how we respond inside. We can hope; we can fear; we can alternate between the two. We can blame; we can deny; we can pray. Or we can just be. We can rest openly in our pain and uncertainty, neither minimizing it nor identifying with it.

Only this ground of open, accepting mind is truly solid. A mind dominated by hopes and fears, likes and dislikes, can't ever be happy or secure in this shifting world. It is our very search for security that makes us insecure. It is our very search for happiness that makes us unhappy. This is another of Buddhism's great reversals of conventional thinking. When we rest in the open ground of our being, we discover that we are not ultimately dependent on the ups and downs of this world. We discover resources of wisdom,

love, and strength we didn't know were in us. We discover that this very vale of tears, in which life and death inter-are, is spacious, sacred, and joyous.

By simply opening ourselves to the experience of difficulty, with all its pain and uncertainty, we can experience ourselves fully, perhaps for the first time. Being who we really are is an all or nothing proposition. We can't just hold on to the parts of our experience we enjoy or approve of and hide the rest away. Only when we're willing to experience it all—our sadness, fear, pain, and self-doubt, as well as our happiness, confidence, and virtues—will we discover the full depth and vastness of our being. Only then, through the path of opening ourselves in difficult moments, will we discover who we really are. It is the greatest discovery of all, and it is the fruit of practicing in difficult times.

This isn't easy, particularly in times of extreme difficulty. It takes courage to face life in all its intensity. Norman Fischer is one of the most insightful writers in American Buddhism. He has practiced for decades under the tutelage of great Zen masters. Yet even after years of meditation and study, the unexpected death of his best friend, whom he describes as "closer than a brother," shook him to his core.

You will appreciate the love and honesty with which Norman talks about this difficult event in his life and of how, with all its pain, it changed him for the better. Neither Buddhism nor meditation insulates us from pain. We can't even control the feelings and thoughts that arise within us when life gets painful. But when we're aware of our thoughts, perceptions, and feelings as they arise, we're liberated on the spot from their control over us. We experience their true nature as manifestations of basic awakened mind, beyond suffering and non-suffering. That is the secret of Buddhist meditation.

By taking whatever life gives us and joining it to the mind of awareness, openness, and love, we bring our suffering to the spiritual path. We take the experience of difficulty and transform it into something that benefits ourselves and others. This is the greatest and most virtuous alchemy of all: to take suffering and, through our practice, transform it into wisdom and love. We have this power and, in every moment, the freedom to use it.

This is our birthright as human beings, as the buddhas we inherently are. Yet here we are, suffering, trapped in our projections, and convinced that our happiness is dependent on the pain and pleasure, praise and blame, love and hatred, and success and failure that the world doles out to us. We may see the great potential for awakening within us, but that ideal seems so far away from our lives right now. Well, it's not. That's the conventional way of thinking. In fact, awakened mind is always right here, it's happening all the time. This is another of Buddhism's radical reversals, that enlightened mind and heart aren't far away in space or time. Buddha is right in the palm of your hand, as intimate and natural as your next thought or feeling. The practice is to notice it. Waking up to the fact that we're already awake is Buddhist meditation.

One of the strengths of this book is the series of excellent meditation instructions it offers. In formal meditation, we set time aside and we create a supportive environment for developing (or perhaps more accurately, uncovering) the attitudes of mind and heart we want to bring into our lives.

We start with our own mind—noticing the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions that come up while we're meditating. Whether they are glorious or grotesque, mundane or monumental, positive or negative, we take an open, relaxed, and nonjudgmental attitude toward them. We watch them arise, abide, and dissolve without attaching ourselves to their content or identifying ourselves with them. Looking at the contents of mind with stability and clarity, we find that the open space of awareness includes, yet remains unmoved by, the comings and goings of mind. In that mind of awareness, we discover many good qualities, such as insight, skill, and compassion. Once discovered in meditation, these are all available to us as we go about our everyday lives.

The poet Allen Ginsberg, a serious Buddhist practitioner, was once asked what he thought of the Beatles' declaration that "all you need is love." Ginsberg said, "All you need is awareness. Then love will come naturally." Love is the other great gift of difficult times. It is the other great gift of practice.

There are meditations in this book to awaken the mind and meditations to awaken the heart. We have an almost natural

tendency to keep our suffering and pain private. To be open about our suffering makes us vulnerable and, particularly for men, erodes our facade of strength. Perhaps we are, unfairly, ashamed of our suffering. And the deepest and most damaging form of privacy is to keep our pain private from ourselves. It leads to a kind of deadness of the heart.

To acknowledge our suffering is to experience it. That is painful, but it is also the path to love and human connection. When we are aware of our own mind and heart, we touch the minds and hearts of all beings. If we do not know our own suffering, how can we know the suffering of others?

Sylvia Boorstein—sometimes described as Buddhism's Jewish grandmother—urges us to be open about our own suffering and to hear the sufferings of others. In this book she teaches us the great *metta* (loving kindness) meditation for which Buddhism is renowned. In metta meditation, we express our wish that all beings, including ourselves, experience happiness and do not suffer. The beautiful discovery we make when we understand that beings suffer is that we naturally wish them well. As in all Buddhist meditations, we're not developing this wish so much as discovering that it represents our deepest and most heartfelt aspiration.

That awareness of suffering as the path to love is another of Buddhism's unconventional truths. Here is another and perhaps the most surprising: selflessness is the path to happiness. The Dalai Lama has said, "If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion." As Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche puts it, "If you want to be happy, think of others. If you want to be unhappy, think of yourself." It is not a coincidence that the Dalai Lama and Sakyong Mipham come out of the Tibetan Vajrayana tradition. The central teaching of all the lamas is compassion.

Tsoknyi Rinpoche, a vibrant young teacher in the Dzogchen tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, says, "The purpose of the Dharma is not simply to achieve personal happiness or personal liberation, but to relieve the suffering of all living creatures, to liberate all beings from the pain and suffering of samsara." He could as easily have said that it is the purpose of life.

Dominated by the Three Poisons and by our survival instinct, we take in what is pleasurable and repel what is painful or threatening. That's the way we normally operate. But what happens if we reverse the process? What if we consciously take in the pain and suffering of others, rather than ward it off, and give them our happiness and pleasure, rather than hoard it? Then, according to Buddhism, the painful struggle of self-centeredness is relaxed, and our life becomes one of compassion, joy, and benefit.

If it seems a little daunting to try to live this way right now, we can practice. Tsoknyi Rinpoche teaches us the meditation—a specialty of Tibetan Buddhism—called *tonglen*, in which we visualize that we're taking in the suffering of others and sending them happiness and relief. In conventional, ego-driven thinking, this is perfect insanity. In Buddhism, it is enlightenment itself.

I had the honor of moderating the program in San Francisco at which these teachings were given. It was sponsored by the Shambhala Sun Foundation and the California Institute of Integral Studies. People came in search of Buddhist wisdom to help them with a wide range of difficulties, from illness and bereavement to unemployment and divorce. They came for help with the underlying sense of unease and fear that we all feel, even in the best of times. I'm grateful, as were they, for Norman Fischer, Tsoknyi Rinpoche, and Sylvia Boorstein and the love they showed in sharing their own lives and challenges with us. I would like to thank Parallax Press for making these pithy, deep, and relevant teachings available to all who may benefit from them. May they help us, in the words of the metta meditation, to feel safe, content, and strong, and to live with ease in difficult times.

suffering and possibility

NORMAN FISCHER

Zoketsu Norman Fischer is a teacher and former co-abbot at the San Francisco Zen Center. He is the founding teacher of the Everyday Zen Foundation, a network of groups whose mission is to offer Zen teaching and practice to a wide audience. As a Zen teacher and writer, Norman is involved in projects in the worlds of poetry, business, conflict resolution, law, and technology. He leads retreats around the country. His latest book is a collection of poetry called *Questions / Places / Voices / Seasons*.

On January 12, 2009, my dear friend of forty years, my best friend who was more than a brother to me, Rabbi Alan Lew, died without any warning or any known illness. I won't go on about our long friendship; there's too much to say. Suffice it to say, we were as close as people can be; we were spiritually linked. We knew each other before either of us had started on our religious paths, and then we began practicing Zen at the same time. We studied for many years together at the Zen Center in Berkeley and went to Tassajara Zen Mountain Center where we were monks together. As time went on, we created our own version of Jewish meditation and together we founded Makor Or, a Jewish meditation center in San Francisco. We practiced there together, side by side, for more than a decade.

So when Alan died all of a sudden, it was hard to take. I'm guessing that I will not get over it, that his death probably holds a permanent place of sadness in me. I'm not so sure that I want to get over it. The sadness is okay. It's not so bad.

About a week before he died, we co-led a retreat together. At that retreat he gave me what turned out to be his last teaching, although we didn't know it at the time. Alan was really a great person and a great rabbi, but his teachings were often humorous. He would present very profound things in a silly way. It would take you a while to realize how profound his teaching actually was.

For some years Alan had been collecting fountain pens, which he liked to tell me about. I like fountain pens myself. I didn't think much of it until I went over to his house one day, and he showed me his collection. It was an astonishing thing. There were hundreds and hundreds, maybe five hundred, fountain pens that he kept neatly in special binders that are made for such collections. These were rare antiques that were worth quite a bit of money. Apparently, there's a whole world of fountain pen collectors out there. There are fountain pen conventions and fountain pen websites. There's even a whole kind of stock market of fountain pens; you buy and sell and the prices go up and down. I didn't know this, but it's a huge deal.

A few months before his death, Alan decided he would sell off some of his fountain pens. He brokered the transaction online and sent thousands of dollars worth of pens to some person he found online. While he was waiting for the check to come in the mail, the guy who had purchased the pens from him died suddenly. His widow hired a lawyer to clear the estate, but the lawyer didn't find a convincing paper trail for these fountain pens, so he informed Alan that he was not going to get paid for them.

Alan thought, "Well, I could get a lawyer, and no doubt I would win the case, but by the time I pay the lawyer, it's probably not worth it. So the heck with it." He never pursued it. He said, "You know, I don't mind losing that money, because I learned something that's worth every penny of it." I asked him what he had learned.

"I learned that when you're dead, you can't do anything," he said. "This guy was a very decent person and he would certainly have paid the money, but he was dead, and he couldn't do anything. You'd

think that I would have already known this. And in a way I suppose I did. But I didn't really know it. Now, with the loss of all this money, I really know it. When you're dead, you can't do anything."

This is a really profound teaching. When someone you love is gone, that person can't do anything anymore. This means that you have to do something, or that you have to do something differently. Somehow, you, who are connected to that person, have to do what they can no longer do. You have to ask yourself, "Now that this has happened, what will I do, what will I do in place of my friend?" There is always something to be done. This was Alan's last teaching to me.

Alan was really concerned about others. He would get agitated and upset if the people he loved weren't doing well. If his family members were having troubles, he would tell me about it with anguish in his voice. His death made me want to care more for other people. It's not something that comes naturally to me. When my friends are ill or in need of help, I have to put a real intention into thinking about them, calling them, and doing something, instead of just going about my business. I have far to go, but I think of Alan and I keep working at it.

We think we're trying to get rid of suffering. I want more suffering. I want to feel more suffering of the people who are suffering everywhere. I want to feel that suffering more, care about it more, and do something about it more. That's my commitment to Alan and to myself.

The other thing I learned from Alan's death is that love will naturally rush into the vacuum that loss creates. Alan knew a lot of people, and we knew many people in common. Many people loved him, and when he was gone, I felt so much closer to those people. Even though we had been close before, the vacuum caused by the loss created much much more love. Love creates love. That feeling wasn't something that came and went in a month or two. With loss, difficulty, and the total overturning of the plan for your life you had that is no longer operative comes more love and more depth if you turn your heart in that direction.

Loss, disappointment, and difficulty can be really devastating. They can damage us permanently; they can even destroy our lives. But if we yield to our sadness and turn toward our difficult feelings,

we can remember these lessons that I learned from Alan: there is always something to be done and there is always more love. I don't know if you believe this already, but it is certainly true.

Do We Have to Suffer?

These are tough times, full of objective difficulties and anxieties. But times are always tough, and even when times in general aren't tough, your time might be tough at any given period in your life. Nobody escapes tough times. Nobody escapes suffering.

By suffering, I mean pain, whether physical or mental. I suppose a small minority of us might say, "I like suffering; I want more suffering." But most of us don't. When I'm in the presence of something I really don't want, then I'm suffering. Suffering seems to be the opposite of happiness. If there's happiness, there is no suffering. If there's suffering, there is no happiness.

The most astonishing fact of human life is that most of us think that it's possible to minimize and even eliminate suffering. We actually think this, which is one reason why it's so difficult for us when we're suffering. We think, "This shouldn't be this way," or "I'm going to get rid of this somehow." I think many of us believe that since suffering is so bad and so unpleasant, if we were really good and really smart, it wouldn't arise in the first place. Somehow suffering is our own fault. If it's not our fault, then it's definitely someone else's fault. But when suffering arises, we think we should surely be able to avoid it. We should be able to set it to one side and not dwell on it. We should "move on" as they say, go on to positive things, do a little Buddhism, meditate, get around the suffering, and go forward. We shouldn't allow the suffering to stop us, not allow it to mess us up. We believe that if only we play our cards right, we could have a positive life without much suffering. We constantly come back to that way of thinking.

It's incredible that we would think such a thing. The more we look around us, the more we pay attention to what we're feeling and what others around us are feeling, the more suffering we see. There is

more suffering than we know. Anxiety is suffering, isn't it? There is a lot of anxiety. Not getting what you want is suffering. How many of us don't get what we want? Irritation is suffering. Anger is suffering. Having to put up with things you don't like is suffering. Knowing that you're going to have to die, and you really don't want to—that's suffering. Sickness is suffering. Old age is suffering. Not having enough money is suffering. Losing your job is suffering. Having a bad marriage is suffering. Having no marriage can be suffering if you want to have a marriage. Fear is suffering. Knowing you could lose what you think you have is suffering. Being ashamed is suffering. Feeling disrespected is suffering. Feeling unloved is suffering. Feeling loved, but not loved enough, is suffering. Feeling lonely is suffering. Feeling bewildered is suffering. Being too cold, being too hot, being stuck in traffic, getting in the wrong line and the guy in the front is very, very slow, and the other line that you could have got into is going much faster, and you could have been in the front of that line by now, but if you joined it now, you'd be at the end—all this is suffering. Even without talking about the earthquakes, the wars, the deprivation, the oppression, the illness, and the hunger that is happening all over our world, suffering is really common. It's not a special condition. Suffering is a daily experience.

Even if we try to ignore it, we really don't escape the suffering. It registers in our psyche and becomes a conditioning factor in our lives. We may find that we're living in reaction to the suffering that we're unwilling to see and think about. So the idea that suffering is some sort of mistake and a minor problem that we could overcome with a little bit of meditation and a positive attitude is the towering pinnacle of human self-deception.

Dukkha

Part of the problem might be that "suffering" is such a drastic word; it sounds like a rare thing. The idea of suffering is a central thought in Buddhist practice. The original word in Pali is *dukkha*, which is most often translated as suffering, but is sometimes translated simply as

“unsatisfactoriness” or as “stress.” Dukkha refers to the psychological experience—sometimes conscious, sometimes not conscious—of the profound fact that everything is impermanent, ungraspable, and not really knowable. On some level, we all understand this. All the things we have, we know we don’t really have. All the things we see, we’re not entirely seeing. This is the nature of things, yet we think the opposite. We think that we can know and possess our lives, our loves, our identities, and even our possessions. We can’t. The gap between the reality and the basic human approach to life is dukkha, an experience of basic anxiety or frustration.

Seen in this way, dukkha could actually be another name for human consciousness itself. Dukkha is not a mistake. It is not a correctible situation; it is human consciousness. Dukkha is every moment, every experience of our lives, not just the things that obviously seem to be dukkha, like pain, suffering, and loss. Pain, suffering, and loss are built into every moment of consciousness, even if they don’t appear on the surface to be pain, suffering, and loss.

The great and beautiful secret of meditation practice is this: you can experience dukkha with equanimity. Isn’t equanimity the secret of happiness? If you tried to eliminate dukkha, it would be like trying to eliminate life. But if you can receive dukkha with equanimity, then, in a way, it’s no longer dukkha. Impermanence could be the most devastating fact of life, and often it is. But impermanence could also be incredibly beautiful, if you receive it with equanimity. It could be peace itself.

If we stop, perhaps for a moment we can see the beauty in this impermanence. But then we go back into our lives in the world of activity and desire. We go back to grasping things that aren’t really there and to operating in the world that we want, rather than the world as it is. Beneath our daily consciousness will be this anxiety and fear and this immense longing. Dukkha is this basic fact of our lives. When we are dying, our whole lifetime habit of denying dukkha will end, and dukkha will become inescapable. One way or the other, we’re going to have to grapple with it. So it’s good to get a head start.

Our culture is so focused on consumerism and youth that we don't have a good model for what aging and dying could be like. All we feel is the lack of things: we're not as youthful as we were, we're not as limber as we were, we're not as this, we're not as that. Almost everything that we hear and see in the media is about how to maintain your youth as long as possible. All this focus on stopping aging implies somebody made a big mistake in the universe. It's as if we should be getting younger instead of older.

But we're missing a very important point. There's something beautiful about quiet and peace. There's something beautiful about not trying to do anything, but simply, in some way, your heart joining the whole world. There's a time in life when we should be running around doing things. We should go out dancing; there's a time in life for that. There's a time in life for building something up in this world, a family, an institution, a business, a creative life; there's a time for that. There's also a time for becoming quiet, a time for slow conversations with people that we love, and a time for reflecting on all the things that we've seen in many years of living. When the time for those things comes, it's beautiful. It's not a terrible thing, it's sweet. There's also a time for letting go of our life, not "Damn, somebody's snatching this away from me," but "Yes, it's beautiful to exhale after you inhale." At the right time, when the chest is full, breathe out and let go.

The Six Realms

In Buddhist cosmology, there are six realms: the god realm, the demigod realm, the human realm, the animal realm, the hungry ghost realm, all defined by constant desire, and the hell realm, defined by constant pain and suffering. In the god realm, everything is perfect. There's no pain and no discorporation of the body because there is no body. Everything is sort of ethereal. Sounds nice, right? But this is not the best realm to be born into because in this realm one becomes addicted to pleasure. The best realm is the human realm because in the human realm, there's just enough

suffering that we have the incentive to seek liberation, but not so much suffering that we are consumed by it and cannot focus on a spiritual path.

So suffering, if we can relate to it properly, is an advantage for the spiritual path. If we imagine somehow that our suffering will dissolve if we only do such and such, or if we are crushed by the weight of it, then we don't have the energy or resources to understand it as a tool for greater consciousness. This is an improper response to suffering. The question then is not: Can we ameliorate or eliminate suffering? The question is: How will we receive and make use of the suffering in our lives?

Suffering is not a mistake. It's not a problem. It's not your fault; it's not my fault. It's not the government's fault. You and I and the government may make plenty of mistakes, but the question of suffering is much bigger than that. Suffering is pivotal for human life. It's what gives us the incentive, the vision, and the strength to really take hold of our lives spiritually.

Whether or not you have a spiritual or religious point of view, if you're human and if you have language, you know that life could either be meaningful or meaningless. The difference between these two perspectives matters to all of us. None of us can bear a meaningless life. We all need to find some way for life to have meaning. This is part of being human. If we don't have meaning, we become brittle, brutal, and numb. Suffering can reduce us to meaninglessness. So much of the overt suffering in this world is caused by people who have themselves suffered and been crushed by the weight of that suffering. But suffering can also bring us to the deepest possible sense of meaning for human life. We can all likely recall a story of someone who, due to tremendous suffering, found a beauty and meaning in life that they never would have seen without that experience.

In difficult times, the key thing is to turn toward the suffering instead of trying to figure out how to get rid of it or paper it over with all kinds of positive things. We need to learn how to turn toward suffering, really take it in, find the meaning in it, and let it open a path for us to a new life. There's nothing more beneficial than being able to be present with the breath and with the body to what's happening

when we are suffering, without flailing all around in resistance. That's the beginning of a new path.

Suffering and Possibility

Rabbi Lew wrote a great book called *Be Still and Get Going*. In it he discusses the Garden of Eden story, which is essentially about people who have everything that they could want, but want the one thing they can't have. The result, no surprise, is suffering. He writes, "Is the universe essentially deficient and in need of improvement? Is God flawed? Why was this desire, which would prove to be our undoing, implanted in our souls in the first place? Is God a screwup?"

Rabbi Lew writes in terms of God, but if that's not your way of looking at things, you could rephrase it as, "Is there a screwup in the nature of things? This is a horrible mess—what's going on here?" He continues:

> Or is there something about the process of healing, of working through suffering and death, of mending a broken world, that is both necessary and good? Is there something about the process of extinguishing desire that might in fact leave us better off than if we'd never had desire at all? The fall from Eden cast us out of paradise, but it also thrust us into history. Perhaps there is something necessary, even redemptive about the experience of history. As for the breaking of the vessels, the rabbis of the Talmud say that it is far better to have sinned and repented than never to have sinned at all. And in the Talmudic discussion that followed this assertion, the rabbis observed—with impeccable biological correctness, it should be added—that a bone that has been broken and healed is far stronger than a bone that has never been broken.

> I have a friend who was going through a period of tremendous suffering, a complete breakdown in his life; he couldn't work or do anything. I've known him well over many years, and he was very discouraged and ashamed of himself for his suffering. I said to him, "You know, I guess this is just your way of digesting a new phase in your life. The last time this happened to you, you were about to enter a new phase. Perhaps this is just what you do: you go all to pieces, then you pick yourself up and you go forward." He was going through a big reorganization, which is always painful. But then when he was done, he was able to move ahead in a way he hadn't before.

Rabbi Lew is saying that often suffering is needed for reorganization. We're stronger after we reorganize. This raises more questions. Suffering may very well be inevitable, but can it also be useful in this way? Is the history we were thrust into after our fall from Eden not only inevitable but also something we needed to go through, something that benefited us more than remaining in a static paradise? We're all looking to get rid of suffering. We're looking for a way to be consistently happy. But maybe that's not actually so good.

Rabbi Lew quotes Rebbe Nachman, a famous Hassidic spiritual teacher:

> The strength of a person's desire is brought about by the impediments that happen to him. So when a person needs to do something, a hindrance will arise in his path. And this hindrance is for the sake of the desire. By means of the hindrance, he will have a greater desire to do this thing that he needs to do than if there had been no such obstacle. For whenever a person is prevented from doing something, his or her desire becomes that much stronger. Many of us recognize this feeling, "I can't do it; therefore I really want to do it."
>
> So it is that obstacles are placed in the way of a person who needs to do something so that his desire to do it will be increased. This is especially true in matters of holiness. Because the more important the thing desired, the greater the

> obstacles are that are presented. Consequently, when a person experiences many obstacles to the realization of some holy task, he should realize that this shows the importance of the thing desired. And this is the general rule. Every obstacle is presented only for the sake of increasing desire. So that once a person has a great desire to do something, he will carry it out; the potential will become actual.

We need suffering to strengthen us and get us to the next step. Rabbi Lew comments:

> According to Rebbe Nachman, there is an inevitable relationship between our desire for a thing and the obstacle that stands in our way. If we didn't want a thing, we wouldn't see what was preventing us from obtaining it as an obstacle. ... Desire causes suffering, but suffering also causes desire. If we desire that which we don't have, then suffering in the form of an impediment to what we want will only make us desire it more. So suffering and desire are not inherent defects in the universe, they are divine instruments . . . . Suffering can awaken us to the spiritual path and quicken our resolve to remain on it as well. Indeed, suffering can often be an awakening to the way things really are, a pathway to a clearer vision of our lives.

Accepting suffering as part of our lives doesn't mean we give up hope or stop wanting some things to be different. For example, if someone you love is diagnosed with cancer, of course you will hope and search for a cure. You can accept the fact of the diagnosis at the same time that you do everything possible to ameliorate it. There is no contradiction between acceptance and hope. In fact, acceptance and hope are connected. Acceptance is not resignation. Acceptance is a lively engagement with conditions as they are.

Of course, there is a kind of hope that is really more like desperation: the sense that if something bad happens, you'll be ruined forever, and so you hope desperately that there will be a good outcome. That's the less effective kind of hope because there is only one outcome that is acceptable to you. So you mightily focus on it, shutting out everything else including all fear and all sorrow. Then

there's the kind of hope built on acceptance, with some uplifted spirit, of conditions as they are. Acceptance strengthens this kind of hope. You still do everything you can, including all kinds of objective things such as looking at different treatments and making that person comfortable. You hope and pray for a good outcome. If you do this with the awareness and acceptance of suffering, you strengthen your ability to face with love whatever happens next.

Unnecessary Suffering

There is suffering that is necessary, and there is a lot of suffering that is absolutely unnecessary. All of us cause ourselves unnecessary suffering. A huge percentage of the suffering that we feel on a daily basis is extra. We don't need it. There's plenty of suffering built in to human life; we can just wait for it. We don't need to add more by unintentionally making choices that cause more suffering. We don't need to add more by getting trapped in our mind's attachment to past or future problems and potential pitfalls.

We complicate our lives and we have a lot of desires. In this way we make more suffering than we need to. If I decide I'm going to accomplish fifteen important things today, and I only accomplish thirteen of them, then I am suffering—I am dissatisfied. But I made this up myself! Why not only ten? Or seven? If I have an idea about how my day is supposed to go, or my life, and my day or my life doesn't go that way, I have a reason, it seems, to be unhappy. But I have created that reason myself. There are plenty of reasons to be unhappy without my creating more reasons. Maybe I could just pay attention to the basic and actual suffering that comes, rather than making more suffering than I need. The basic suffering, the actual suffering, is difficult, but it is useful. The extra suffering is usually trivial: it doesn't illuminate my life; it only makes me crabby.

In Zen we have koans to practice with, stories of the old masters that are sometimes hard to fathom. We can suffer over these stories; we can become miserable if we think we don't understand. But we don't need these stories to give us artificial problems. There are

enough real problems to get our attention, like sickness, aging, and death; like loss. When real suffering comes, it gets our attention. We're forced to go beyond crabbiness. If, in the face of suffering, we take up our spiritual practice and use the suffering to strengthen our motivation, then we can find some real benefit in the suffering.

Meditation can help. The more we practice, the more awareness we have. The more awareness we have, the more we can notice when we're creating the needless suffering, and we can decide to do something else. You can see all this quite clearly on your meditation cushion. Let's say a pain comes into your back. There it is—it hurts! And then you begin to squirm, and you begin to complain, maybe about someone else whose fault it is that you are trapped in this body in this moment, or maybe about yourself. Your mind is raging all over the place. And this makes the pain much worse. If you are just willing to sit still and experience the pain, you see that it's not so bad. You can endure it. It can even sometimes disappear. But even if it doesn't, at least it's real. There's a dignity in bearing pain that must be borne. It is much better than squirming and complaining and making matters worse. You actually find that the more you squirm and try to improve things that cannot be improved, the worse it gets. The more you are willing to endure something that cannot be changed, the easier it is.

When we stop creating the unnecessary suffering, we can notice all the real suffering around us. All the fake unnecessary suffering is actually distracting us, protecting us in a way, from the real suffering around us. The real suffering is much more intractable. It's horribly painful. But it connects us to everyone else in the world, and so in that sense, the real suffering is okay. We became numb and isolated because we want to avoid the suffering, but it's the numbness and isolation that feel the worst. When we break through the unnecessary suffering and connect with others, it's hard and it's painful, but it's also better. When we open up to the real pain of caring for others, we do feel better.

Body Practice

Suffering doesn't just affect our thinking; it affects our whole body, where our strong emotions reside. Particularly in Western cultures, we're trained to process and try to fix everything mentally. But if we can notice what's going on in our body, we can say, "Oh, I understood something about my life by observing my breath. I saw something in my breath that taught me something about what I'm feeling now." This is very wise. That's what happens when we trust the body. The mind can be very mixed up. We don't know what's going on. But the body is actually very smart.

Suppose you had to think about all the processes of the body and you had a checklist: "Okay, heart beating, breathing enough, pulse going all over the body, nerves firing neurons. Whoops, I forgot about that." If we had to keep track of everything, we'd be in a mess, you know. But the body does all of this beautifully. The body has an incredible wisdom. And the subtle body, the emotional body, is the repository of all of our pain, all of our wisdom, and all of our transcendence; it's all in there. So the more you pay attention to the breathing and pay attention to the body—not only when you're meditating but all the time—the more you're in touch with your body, with the whole of yourself, the more you get to see, "Oh, my mind is thinking in this very crude way about my situation, and I get stuck in obvious trains of thought, while the body is telling me, 'No, look at it differently, understand it differently.'" Sometimes the suffering causes us to realize that we've just got to let go. And that's what we need to do. Letting go always leads to another moment. And that's how we get to that moment, by letting go.

Dogen, the Zen master who started the Soto Zen school in thirteenth-century Japan, had a beautiful saying: "To accept a body and to give up a body is a tremendous act of generosity." Isn't that a beautiful saying? We don't know we did this, but all of us have accepted this human life. We've said, "Yes," and we're alive here; we're here! And we're all going to have to give up this body. We've all, in one way or another, accepted this incredible assignment. What a generous thing to do, to go through this together. If you know that and if you live that, then life is service. It's the spirit that you have in living.

Of course if we find ourselves in a position at a given time to do something that the world identifies as service, we certainly do that. We each can serve in large ways and in small ways, in institutional ways and in private ways; and if the wheel turns and that way of serving is taken out of our hands, we let it go. We go on and we keep the spirit of service, and something else opens up and we find another way to serve. We don't really need to think it through or figure it out; the body teaches us that. That's the great secret, you know: we're constantly looking for the mind, but our practice is more than that; it's our life, and our life is our body as much as our mind, if not more than our mind. The body is really a more fertile field for development than the mind.

Subtle Body

There are three things that go on with everything that happens to us, but particularly with trauma and hard times. When we experience something new—which is all the time—something changes in the heart, in the body, and in the subtle body. When we practice meditation, we begin to work on the places where the trauma is in the body. Then the way we look at it, the way we receive it, and the behaviors that come out of it are examined. In a way, it's almost like a massage, softening the body and reshaping the body in a good way around the trauma. Every time there's pain, there's the possibility of more love and more wisdom. But when the trauma is twisted in us, that doesn't happen. With practice, with loving kindness, and with support, it begins to happen. When something really bad happens that harms our body in that way, it turns into a treasure once we work with it in our practice.

I think it's good to recognize "This really did happen, it really did do damage, and it's really tough." Recognition is the beginning. But it's not the end; it's not like you're stuck with that pain forever. There's a way of turning that pain into love, compassion, and wisdom. So please never ever give up the effort to make that turn, because it's always possible. Even if the trauma is very old, and you've been

stuck in it for a long time, it is always possible. It happens; it happens all the time.

Anger and strong emotions also reside in our body and tend to get stuck there. In the Zen Buddhist tradition we have a precept about anger: “A disciple of the Buddha does not harbor anger.” Anger happens. It’s not a sin or a problem to be angry, but our commitment is not to harbor and hold on to that anger, not to encourage it and make more of it than is necessary. So when anger arises and you feel, “Oh, this is anger—it’s unpleasant, it’s difficult,” you can say to yourself, “I actually don’t want to continue to make more of it.”

When you feel the anger in yourself, you observe the kinds of behaviors that suddenly spring out of you in relationship to the anger, and you realize the effect of that behavior on the people around you—your partner probably doesn’t react that well when you’re speaking and acting out of anger. The more anger comes back, you can see that whole process unfold, and you begin to understand it. You just keep working steadily with your awareness until you realize that when anger arises, your practice is to feel it and pay attention to it. You don’t need to eliminate it or make it go away. All you have to do is pay attention—and not get caught by your anger, not get hooked by it, not flail around. You create space within yourself so that the anger can be there, but it doesn’t have to be seized and used. It can be your friend, your pet. It doesn’t have to be your mean nasty boss.

It’s a gradual process, but once you get the hang of it, you appreciate your suffering and discomfort, because it’s the suffering and the discomfort that give you the incentive to let go of the anger. At some point you realize, “I can’t go on this way anymore, this is so repetitive, habitual, and unpleasant that I really have to stop doing this.” As I say, this is a process; it takes time. We will make many mistakes, getting angry and losing ourselves many times. “Oops, I did it again—okay, I know I don’t want to do that.” Gently talking to ourselves in this way, little by little, things change for us.

You can say to the person you lashed out at, “I’m sorry. I’m not saying that you were right. All I’m saying is that I don’t want to be angry, and that my angry response is not what I want to do.” Every time you make an apology like that it helps you, so that little by little you won’t need to apologize because you’ll no longer be lashing out

in reaction. You still may feel the anger, but you're not acting on it, so you're not strengthening it and you're not creating more reactivity. Eventually, you get to the place where there's less anger, and then maybe there isn't any anger. The same thing that somebody said to you two years ago that made you angry—that has made you angry all your life—now doesn't make you angry. If it's something that should not be said to you because no one should speak that way to another human being, then you can say without anger, "You know what, you shouldn't talk that way to me. That's a bad way for people to address one another. And I would never address you that way." Without anger you can do that. That would probably be much more effective than lashing out and starting this whole repetitive chain of events in which both hearts are inflamed and uncomfortable.

One way to deal with anger and other strong emotions is to talk to yourself. Somebody in you knows how to practice gently. Take a minute and have a little conversation with yourself; I think it's good if you speak out loud. The part of you that knows can talk to your ego and say, "You don't have to get caught by your anger, do you? Do you really want to act on that anger? Do you really want to be angry?" It's a very powerful practice to have a conversation with yourself out loud. You'll be surprised at what good advice you can give yourself if you would only listen!

The Balm of Meditation

I don't know of anything more effective in helping us be with the truth of suffering than a basic, unadorned meditation practice, just silence. To simply sit in the present moment of being alive here and now; feeling what that feels like in the body, in the breath, in the heart, in the mind; feeling the support that comes from the life force in us, that we are alive, that we are breathing—when we do that, we can experience whatever arises and passes away in the mind, without fear. Just sitting there and being willing to be with the experience of our life clarifies what we're feeling in our heart, without doing anything. Then we can settle. When we settle, we can feel love, and

we will know what to do. Can you be present and alive with the mind, with the heart? Can you allow the healing that will come, simply by means of that experience?

Does It Work?

Many of us first come to meditation when we are experiencing difficult times. We are questioning and often hurting, and we want something that will make the pain go away. We want a quick fix. Is meditation the cure? Will it make our lives less painful and less problematic? Does it work?

Meditation doesn't solve all our problems. But it can help us arrive at a glimmering thought that maybe there is a way to really change our life and make it more heartfelt, compassionate, and deeper. We have to ask what we mean by "work." If you want meditative practice to work in specific ways and believe it should have specific outcomes that prove it is working, then who is the person thinking this? The person who is in a mess is thinking about how it's going to look when this supposed transformation takes place. So that person's idea of "working" might not be so reliable. The paradox is that from a needy, mixed-up state, you project a kind of result that looks good from that perspective. In that desperate state, you might not actually be a good judge of whether something is working or not.

I spent a long time living in monastic and semi-monastic communities. In these communities, we were all living together and all we were doing was the practice. We got up every morning and went to meditate. We had to go. Every evening, we had to go meditate. We had to have retreats, we had to study, and we had to practice all the time.

After many years of doing that, I retired from the monastic community. I thought, "Well, suppose I try and see if people who don't live in monasteries and aren't required to meditate can do this too. The world is crazy and it's very difficult, but let's just see if it's possible." I discovered that meditation almost always works. It's not like it works rarely or only half the time; it almost always works. By

"works," I mean that if you actually give meditation some attention, it transforms your life. Your life may not transform in a spectacular way, but it transforms in a way that is unmistakably real for you. Lots and lots of people have really turned their lives around. They've put in effort, and they're continuing that effort with a lot of delight.

People come to meditation, and keep coming, coming, and coming, because they benefit from it. Ordinary people—within the context of their families, their jobs, and their lives in this world—are transforming their lives through practicing with some degree of intention and commitment. That's not to say they've figured it all out, and now they're perfect and completely enlightened. Nobody says that, even if they've been practicing their whole life. Instead, you might find people who say, "I still have a lot that isn't figured out and a lot of problems, but today I'm okay." Or you might find people who, after meditating for a while, say, "Maybe I don't have to think I'm stuck in this problem forever," or "Maybe there's a way that I could do this instead of that." There may be a moment when instead of doing what we usually do, we notice an opening and we seize it and say, "I'm going to find a way to act with more openness and compassion." If this happens to you, it would be worth everything.

The sad and beautiful fact is that we always have a beautiful life, and we always have something to be worked out. Do we want to get to a place in life where there's nothing more to be worked out? A day when everything is complete, quiet, and absolutely perfect. Well, that day is coming for all of us soon enough. Why rush?

Finding the Time

Perhaps this sounds good, but with all the busyness of our lives and all our suffering, who has time to meditate? Actually you don't have enough time *not* to meditate. If you analyze what goes on in a day, it turns out that partly why the day is so busy is because you're cleaning up messes, inside of you and outside of you, that you wouldn't make if you were meditating. Perhaps you forgot your keys and now you have to go all the way over here to get your keys.

Everything takes a lot longer than you think, because your mind is scattered. Perhaps you made a mess out of a relationship with someone in your life and have to spend a lot of psychic energy cleaning it up. The more aware you are in your living, the more time you have, because you don't have to spend as much time picking up the pieces.

Try to experiment with a week or two of meditation. You're not tricking yourself into thinking you're making a commitment to meditate every day for the rest of your life, but just for a week or two. Simply, when you get up in the morning, before you have a chance to think about how busy you are and that you don't have time, immediately sit. Meditate immediately. Don't think about anything. Don't even get dressed. Sit in your pajamas. Just sit and meditate before you have a chance to do anything else. If you have to get up a little earlier and lose half an hour of sleep, it's worth it.

After a week or two, you may discover that for some mysterious reason time has opened up in your life. There is that half hour to meditate and the day goes a little more smoothly because of it. Try this for two weeks and then stop. See the difference. You might realize that it's much better to meditate. No matter how much time you think you don't have, you have that time.

The single most important thing that you can do to deal with your suffering is to sit every day, in a simple way. That changes everything. Not because it alone changes things, but because it inspires you to practice all day long and extend your awareness into everything in your life. This is really doable. It's not that hard, and in fact it brings more joy and more fullness to your life. Rather than being another thing on your "to do" list—"I've got bills to pay, and I've got a relationship to take care of, my job, and now I have to meditate, too!"—it will be what enables everything else on your list to unfold in an easier and more enjoyable way.

The Importance of Community

Don’t think meditation is something that you have to do, or even could do, by yourself. There is nothing that we really have accomplished all by ourselves. Did you get to work this morning by yourself? Did you make the highway? Did you manufacture the automobile or the bicycle or the train that got you there? Did you grow the food that you had for breakfast? We’re always doing things together.

For my meditation practice, I really depend on my community. It’s a good thing that we need each other, that we go forward together, and that we need reminders. My life is going forward with everybody, constantly practicing and studying together. It’s fun. It’s not easy, and there are times when I wouldn’t do it except that I have other people who keep me on the beam and get me to do it.

Community really does make a difference, because the practice tends to get a little bit circular in one’s own brain. It really helps to rub shoulders with other people who are trying to do the same thing and get to know them so that you’re friends. You hear a bit of what they’re going through and see what their struggles are, and it somehow changes you. You say, “Oh yeah, I didn’t see it that way. But now that I’ve been with so and so, I see something about myself.” All of us can do this as long as we have help.

> Mind like moon so new it’s nothing,
> Then a shining sliver to a cool blast
> Of suggestiveness. In the garden I wander
> Or wonder, for you are elusive and there’s no
> Trust short of nakedness and letting
> Everything go away explicitly, embarrassingly
> I put on these robes long ago, not for the purpose
> Of covering but to uncover
> All these knots not for the purpose of
> Untangling, which would be the end
> But so as to set aflame, cool,
> So that all float down while I watch
> And leap and journey.

A Guided Meditation for Sitting in Difficult Times

This is a twenty-five minute meditation. If you feel jittery or don't think you can sit that long, try doing this meditation lying down. (And of course, if you are lying down, you can ignore the instructions that have to do with sitting up.) If you like, you can read it paragraph by paragraph, taking time between paragraphs to set the book aside and just be quiet, letting what you have just read permeate your mind and heart.

The focus of this meditation is simply to sit in the present moment and actually feel what it feels like to be alive. Of course, we're always alive, so this meditation can be applied at any time. But most of the time, we're too busy with our problems, our issues, our desires, and our needs to even notice that we're alive. We simply take it for granted, as a given. And it is given; it's a gift. It didn't have to be this way; we didn't have to be here at all. And yet, here we are. So we're just taking a step back, setting aside all the tasks, needs, desires, identities, and just experiencing this gift of life. The way we focus the mind to make this possible is that we use the most basic facts of life as our anchor point for the mind. The most basic fact of our life is that we are embodied: we are here in this human body.

Gather your awareness and bring it to the body. Bring your awareness to what it feels like to sit on the cushion, and notice how you're supported—the chair, the cushion, the floor, the building, and the earth are actually supporting you. See if you can feel that support relieving the weight of your body. Give your body weight to the support that you're feeling from below. Take a few moments to feel that support. Notice that you're influenced by gravity. Feel your weight.

If we were only being influenced by gravity, we'd all be lying down on the floor. There's also a life force within us that lifts the human body up. Feel that lifting, arching the small of your back slightly, lifting up the sternum, and lifting up the back part of the head. This is

subtle. You don't have to exaggerate it. Just feel how your upper body is naturally uplifted. Allow the natural opening in your shoulders and chest area. Allow your body to open and lift. That's what it wants to do. Feel what it's like to sit, fully supported from below and lifted from above.

You can feel a beautiful balance occupying this human body that is both connected to the earth and uplifted by the spirit within. As you sit, come back to the feeling of the body, your life energy. When your awareness wanders, just bring it back to the feeling of your body—your feet on the floor, your ears open to the sounds around you. Feel your sense organs—your nose, your ears, your closed eyes, your relaxed tongue, and your open hands. Feel the shoulders, the arms, the top of the head, the coolness of the air on the forehead or cheek, and especially the feeling of the body sitting.

Notice that the body is animated and alive. You can feel that because the body is breathing; you're breathing. That's your life. So now you can bring some focus to the breathing. Start to focus on the belly rising and falling as you breathe in and out. Really be present with every breath, coming in, going out. Follow it at the belly. This is literally your life. You breathe in, you say yes to life; you renew your life. You breathe out, you let go of that moment. With each breath, you make yourself ready to renew again. You can feel that with every breath, coming and going.

Use the feeling of the body sitting and the feeling of the breathing to anchor the mind, illuminate the mind, and deepen the mind so that you are able to feel being alive. Bring awareness to the very simple, very concrete reality of your body and your breath. That's our commitment when we sit down to practice. The commitment is, "I'll keep coming back to the feeling of the body and to the breath—and I'll establish it as strongly as I can in the beginning so that it's there for me throughout the whole period."

Of course other things will arise—a thought, or maybe a sensation of sleepiness, or agitation, a memory, a sound, who knows. A snatch of music goes by your brain, a visual from a movie you saw. And all of that is part of your life too, so don't try to eliminate or excise any of it. As soon as you notice it, you appreciate it: "Oh, that's there," and then gently—no need for complaining or saying, "I did it wrong," or

anything like that—come back to your breath. There's no way to do this wrong. Whatever arises is fine. "Oh, that's there. Now I'm back. Yeah, the body ... hmm, the breath." Always come back to the breath and the body and appreciate whatever is there. It's there for a reason. We come back to being present with the feeling of being alive. It's that simple.

Sometimes the mind is calm. Sometimes it's agitated. Sometimes the mind produces many thoughts, sometimes not so many. It doesn't matter. We just come back.

Maybe after sitting you get bored. I mean there's not much to this after all. Or maybe you don't like it. Then you may think, "I'm sitting here feeling my life, and I'm bored. I'm sitting here feeling my life, and I don't like it. Why? Why would I not like it? And why would I be bored? Ask yourself, if you feel those things, "Where is that coming from, and why?" and just breathe with that question.

Maybe after a while of sitting, the body feels uncomfortable. There is a crick in the neck maybe, or pain in the shoulders. You can notice that there's some thinking associated with that sensation in the body: "Ooh, that hurts, is it going to go away? Maybe I should move. Why am I doing this? I'm not very good at this." Perhaps you recognize these thoughts.

Take these feelings and sensations of discomfort in the body as an advantage. When you feel them, instead of automatically going to the train of thought associated with them, see if you can count five breaths—an inhale and exhale equals one breath—and during those five breaths, investigate closely the sensation itself in the body. It's not going to kill you to sit with this for five breaths. Just feel the sensation and see that there's a difference between the sensation of discomfort and the associated thinking. They're not the same thing. See if you can understand the difference during those five breaths and make your uncomfortable sensations advantageous to you. Make every breath complete so that when you breathe in, you feel the whole breath coming in, "Yes, here is life, again." And when you breathe out, you feel the whole breath going all the way out; it's very peaceful to exhale.

Usually we miss part of the breath. See if you can experience the whole breath. What would it be like if you were having a hard time

and something really bad were going on in your life, but you could take a breath in, and you could take a breath out? What if you could feel the life and the healing in breathing in and breathing out? What would happen if you could do that? How much would it be worth to develop that much faith and trust in your lifebreath so that in times of need it would be there, supporting you? How much would that be worth? And what would that be like? Feel that now as you breathe in and out. Sit silently. Open your eyes.

Guided Meditation Two

Find a sitting posture and bring your awareness to your body, feeling gravity below, and lifting up above. Be with your breathing.

Pay extra close attention to every breath, from the time it starts in, through the swelling of the breath in the chest, to the end of the inhale when the chest is full, to the beginning of the exhale as the breath begins to flow out of the body, through the strong part of the exhale as the exhale becomes less strong, as the breath becomes almost unfindable and then ceases. Notice the moment before the inhalation begins again and swells and fills the lungs. Pay close attention to that whole process. Try to find the exact moment, the precise moment, when the inhale begins and when the exhale ends. It's pretty hard to tell—you can't be sure.

Become aware of whatever thoughts might arise in the mind. See if you can grab hold of a thought and make it stay there. I don't mean that you think it again. I mean, make that thought that arises in the mind stay there and not pass away. It's pretty hard to do that, to hold on to a thought and make it stay. The thought seems to want to go away.

As you experience the breath like this, take a moment to notice that in this moment, you're not suffering. Watch your breath come in and go out, and experience the passing of time, of life, and of thoughts. In this moment, you're not trying to make anything happen.

In this moment, you have some equanimity. Notice the equanimity. Breathe it in. Breathe out. Open your eyes.

upgrading our practice

TSOKNYI RINPOCHE

Tsoknyi Rinpoche is a master in the Dzogchen tradition of Vajrayana Buddhism. For the last thirty years, he has trained in the teachings and practices of both the Kagyu and Nyingma lineages of Tibetan Buddhism and has been teaching worldwide for over fifteen years. He is the son of the late Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, one of the greatest teachers of the twentieth century in the Dzogchen tradition. Tsoknyi Rinpoche oversees more than fifty practice centers, retreat centers, and hermitages that serve over two thousand nuns and nine hundred monks in Nepal and Tibet. In the United States, he has created a fifty-five-acre retreat center in Crestone, Colorado, called Yeshe Rangsal. Rinpoche has also recently established three Dharma centers in Malaysia. He is the author of two books, *Carefree Dignity* and *Fearless Simplicity*; his latest book will be published by Harmony Books in the spring of 2012. To find out more about Tsoknyi Rinpoche, visit the website Pundarika.org.

Everywhere I go lately, people seem more anxious and afraid, preoccupied with disturbing news streaming in from many different areas—political, economic, social, and environmental. Some people I've met are affected very personally by difficulties that seem to have

struck all at once. They've lost their job, lost their home, or been stricken by a health crisis; their family members or close friends have been affected by one or another of these crises. Still others have been dealing with health or financial problems for a long time and are feeling burned out.

In difficult times, it can be hard to imagine that anything can make things better. Quite often, when the coping skills and techniques that people learned as children or that are already established in their own culture no longer seem to help, they look for other options. In some cases they turn to the Dharma—which is a very small word for a very big set of insights and practices introduced to the world twenty-five hundred years ago by the Buddha Shakyamuni, which have been refined and extended since then by sincere practitioners and great masters over much of Asia and, more recently, in the West.

For newcomers to these insights and practices, the main question I encounter is, "Does the Dharma work?" Of course, the question is phrased differently by different people, but I think the essential meaning is the same: Can these insights and practices actually help us achieve an enduring sense of well-being and engender the confidence and courage for us to expand beyond our comfort zone and have a positive impact on the world around us—and if so, how?

On a purely personal level, based on my own experience and on seeing the effects of the Dharma on the lives of individual students around the world, I can say, "Yes, the Dharma works." It provides the causes and conditions for enhancing our personal sense of well-being and gives us relief from many of the difficulties that we face in our daily lives. Through listening to and contemplating the teachings and applying them in our everyday lives, we know how to deal with problems when they arise. We understand that when disaster strikes or a challenge occurs, it is the effect of karma—which may be understood on its simplest level as the consequences of actions we have taken in the past. We understand that samsara—the negative or limiting point of view that we have been trained to accept about life in general and our own life in particular—is conditioned by crises of all different kinds. That understanding can help us to face whatever difficulties we have with a certain degree of calmness and

courage. Through various meditation practices, we can transform difficult emotions, learn to let go of our fixations, and experience a sense of personal happiness and peace.

But although practicing meditation can help us feel happier, practicing for the sake of achieving personal happiness is a little self-centered. Bound up in it is an element of hope that our happiness will last. We believe that even when new challenges arise, we'll be able to handle them and maintain our personal sense of well-being and security. Deep down, we're aware that whatever happiness, whatever well-being or peace we've achieved is temporary; so along with hope we experience the fear that maybe we won't be able to manage the next crisis or that some person or event will disrupt our sense of personal contentment. As long as our focus remains on achieving and maintaining personal happiness, a true, lasting experience of well-being eludes us.

The initial question, of whether the Dharma works to ease our suffering, could be rephrased a little bit: "Are *we* working the Dharma?" The purpose of the Dharma is not simply for us to achieve personal happiness or personal liberation from suffering, but to relieve the suffering of all living creatures, to liberate all beings from the pain and difficulties of samsara.

I had heard this many times as a child, surrounded by family members and other adults who were dedicated practitioners of the Dharma; it was emphasized continuously during my own years of training. But it didn't become real to me until a few years ago when I was in Bodhgaya and realized that while I was pretty comfortable in my own practice, I still wasn't completely comfortable in my own skin. Little things still irritated me; I tired easily; I found myself wrestling between my obligations as a teacher and my desire to spend more time practicing alone or relaxing with my family and friends.

For a few days, I scanned my moods, my emotions, my reactions and compared what I discovered with what I had seen in the great teachers who had influenced my life—including Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, Adeu Rinpoche, and my father, Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche. These teachers were always the same, in every situation. Whether relaxing in their own rooms or teaching large crowds or answering

questions from a handful of students, they maintained the same motivation: the desire to help all beings everywhere, in any way they could, regardless of whatever demands were placed on their time and energy. Their entire lives were motivated by a deep and unwavering compassion that is the core of the Dharma, the very heart of the Buddha's teachings, and the aim of all Buddhist practice.

Upgrading Our Practice

When the Buddhadharma came to the West around fifty years ago, the development of compassion was one of its central teachings. But over the years, some of the emphasis has been lost or diluted. Compassion has become more of a nice idea than an actual effort. We make aspirations for all sentient beings to be happy and to be free from suffering. We sit on our cushion practicing tonglen (a meditation practice during which, as we inhale, we visualize ourselves taking in all the suffering or despair of other sentient beings; and as we exhale, we send out to them all of our own experiences and qualities of well-being, joy, compassion, and courage) for a while and feel very good about ourselves; and yet we completely ignore the fact that the person who was the object of our meditation really needed us to drive them to a doctor's appointment. We extend ourselves only so far as it doesn't intrude upon our own comfort zone.

As long as we continue to practice in that way, we'll still be disturbed by all sorts of political, economic, and social challenges as well as by our own personal crises. To use a modern technological term, we need to "upgrade" our practice. If we want to truly be happy, to truly be free, we have to extend ourselves beyond our comfort zone, to all beings, in all situations, whether we're comfortable doing so or not. We have to move beyond considering Dharma practice to be, as one person described it, a "self-improvement project," and recognize that the essence of the Dharma is improvement of the welfare of all beings. One of the great benefits of upgrading our practice in this way is that we develop greater confidence in facing

situations that might appear scary, uncomfortable, or inconvenient; we develop the guts to deal with whatever challenges life hands us.

A Question of Faith

When you're raised in a culture in which the Dharma is deeply embedded, the question of whether it works or not rarely comes up. There are so many great examples of men and women who have achieved an extraordinary depth of tranquility and extended themselves tirelessly on behalf of others, even in the face of tremendous adversity.

One of my teachers, Adeu Rinpoche, endured fifteen years in a prison camp in Tibet, suffering terrible privations and humiliations; yet he emerged from that experience with his patience, compassion, and generosity intact. Adeu Rinpoche has simply said that his years in prison (where he met many other learned masters) were in fact an extraordinary opportunity to practice. But for those of us who didn't grow up surrounded by the teachings, some faith is necessary.

Faith has two aspects: intelligent faith and blind faith. I think we need both in approaching the Dharma. Intelligent faith is based on hearing, reflecting, and practicing with what we might call a critical or discriminating attitude—engaging in these activities with some view toward discerning whether or not the teachings and practices actually do produce a sense of peace, stability, well-being, and open-heartedness in our own lives.

In the Kalama Sutra the Buddha himself encouraged the people who had come to hear him not to take his or anyone else's word for the effectiveness of principles or practices, but to test them through their own application of them. It's really through such testing that we gain some understanding of the Dharma and begin to taste its benefits and, through personal experience, gain confidence in the teachings. Over time, this confidence builds trust in the principles and practices of the Dharma. This process of testing with an open mind and developing confidence and trust is what I mean by cultivating intelligent faith.

Of course, intelligent faith will only carry us about seventy-five or eighty percent of the way in our decision to commit to practicing the Dharma. The remaining twenty or twenty-five percent requires a leap of what we might call “blind faith.” The same ratio holds in almost all the really important decisions and commitments we make. It’s impossible to be one hundred percent certain about anything before we decide to engage in any sort of process or journey.

Consider, for example, committing to marriage or a long-term relationship with a partner. If we wait until we know one hundred percent about the other person—how the relationship will turn out, and so on—well, we’re likely to spend the rest of our lives alone, because it’s impossible to know everything about the other person or to predict all the events and conditions that will affect the relationship in the future. By the same token, if we’re only ten percent certain about our commitment, or know only a little about our prospective partner, it would probably be wise to wait a bit!

Everything we do involves some degree of blind faith. Driving to work or to a friend’s house is a leap of faith. We’re not entirely certain whether we’ll make it or not, but we’re pretty sure, so we get in our car or whatever and we go; if we waited until we were one hundred percent certain, we might not ever leave the house.

I face this decision quite a lot in traveling around the world. I can never be one hundred percent certain that the airline I’m traveling on is one hundred percent safe. But I’m seventy-five percent sure. So I get on a plane with twenty-five percent blind faith that I’ll arrive safely at my destination. It’s the same with the Dharma. If we try to be too smart, too intelligent—if we approach the Dharma wanting to know everything about it and with a one hundred percent guarantee that it works—we’ll never even begin to explore it, and we’ll never know if it works or not.

We can look at the process of developing faith in terms of what my own teachers described as three levels or degrees of understanding: gross understanding, subtle understanding, and what we call “most subtle” understanding.

Gross understanding is more or less an intellectual exercise of listening to and contemplating the teachings to make sure we comprehend on a very basic level what the teachers and the texts

are saying. Subtle understanding emerges through our own testing of the teachings and practices. The level of most subtle understanding only evolves as a deeper experience once we fully commit to the path. But even before we make that commitment we can still look at examples of people who have fully committed their lives to certain principles or practices. I often ask my students to look at someone like His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Would you mind ending up like him? Would it be so terrible to end up like Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, or the Buddha, or Jesus? Why not go for it?

A Matter of Time

One of the other concerns that comes up for people when they're introduced to the Dharma is the issue of the amount of time one ought to dedicate to meditation practice. Most people these days lead very active lives—holding down a job, taking care of a family, and so on—and adding one more activity to an already busy life is challenging. How much time is enough to see the results of practice? How can people who are already committed in so many directions add one more commitment?

I can't answer for everybody's situation, but in general I would say that people can utilize the organizational skills they've already developed to fit some time into their day for meditation practice—maybe forty-five minutes a day. But maybe that total commitment can be broken up—dedicating half the time in the morning and half in the evening. For some people this may involve making some adjustments to daily life, like watching one less TV show. For others it means taking a look at what they mean by "time."

For instance, I have a student in Nepal who was always complaining to me, "Oh, I don't have time, I don't have time." And I really thought she didn't have time to meditate. So one day I told her, "Please come and we'll talk about it." So she came and I asked her, "Okay, what time do you wake up? How do you meditate? When do you do it? Examine every minute."

It turned out that she was only working for three hours a day—the rest of her "busyness" was just in her own mind. After looking at how much time she actually had in her day, much of it spent worrying about how little time she had, she was shocked. I was shocked too, because she actually had a lot of time. I'm not saying that everyone has the same situation; but if we cut a little bit here and a little bit there out of our everyday schedules, we can probably find forty-five minutes a day to devote to meditation. I think the benefits experienced as a result of devoting that time to practice will outweigh the sacrifices made.

Also, it's good to keep in mind that we don't have to commit very large chunks of time to practice or make a big production out of our practice. My brother, Mingyur Rinpoche, engages in physical exercise every minute he can squeeze it in. Even if he has only two minutes, he exercises. I like to exercise too, but I think I like the *idea* of exercising more. I tend to romanticize the idea of exercising. Not long ago, I went all out making a commitment. I bought a nice bag; I bought sport shoes; I joined a club. But then, I was always being called off to a meeting or getting on a plane to go somewhere, and I didn't have the time for that big, romantic commitment. I didn't exercise at all, and I just kept growing bigger! But every time Mingyur Rinpoche has five minutes, he just walks up and down the monastery staircase ten times—whereas I just sit in my chair. He doesn't make a big deal of it. Each moment he has available he uses for exercise.

So I think if we're really diligent, we can find the time to meditate. Some people find it easier to break up that forty-five minute commitment throughout the day—spending five minutes in the morning, five minutes in the afternoon, five minutes in the evening, five minutes before going to sleep, and so on. That's a useful approach, because the time accumulates. There's an old Tibetan saying, "An old house leaks drop by drop. Overnight your cup will be full." We don't need all the water at once—just the drops from the roof of the house can satisfy our thirst. I often meditate like that: any time I find, I just sit.

Finding Space

Of course, when we do decide to incorporate meditation practice in our lives, we need to rely on a method—some technique of focusing the mind, allowing it to come to rest, opening it to accept certain thoughts, feelings, and sensations—and cultivate compassion. While methods are important, we must be careful not to become so attached to them that we hold on to them as if we are too tightly hugging a little puppy. Methods are subject to the influence of causes and conditions.

Say, for example, we've found through practice that a certain technique like mindfulness of breathing or mindfulness of physical sensations creates an experience of calmness and stability. Then one day, we sit down to practice and we just can't find that peace, that calmness. Maybe a strong thought or emotion or a painful physical sensation keeps intruding on our awareness. Maybe the television or stereo is playing too loudly in the next room, or street noises penetrate even a closed window. It's so easy to become frustrated when such conditions arise—to tell ourselves that the method doesn't work, that meditation doesn't work, that our mind (or our body) just isn't up to the challenge.

Of course, one way to deal with this situation is to switch methods. Instead of mindfulness meditation, for example, maybe we can try tonglen or some other practice. We don't have to stick to a particular method just because it has worked in the past.

The bigger issue, though, is that we've become attached to the results of our practice. We like the peace so much; we like the sense of stability or calmness we've experienced and so we're disappointed when the results we've come to expect don't occur. But if we attend to our reactions, we gradually come to see that our practice has become colored by hope and fear, by pleasure and displeasure, by expectations—and that's not such a bad thing to notice.

The frustration we experience is an opportunity to discover within ourselves a deeper sense of freedom by allowing some space into our practice. Whatever comes up while we practice—whether it's a

thought, a feeling, or a physical sensation—we just let it come up. We don't need to suppress it; but we don't need to follow it, either. We can simply welcome it and observe it as part of the process of being alive, right here and now. We can say, in effect, "Hello! I'm a little bit busy right now, so I can't pay much attention to you, but feel free to hang around. Feel free to come and go as you please."

That space is a form of love. It's a form of appreciation of our basic humanity. I think it's wonderful that we have so many thoughts, so many sensations, and so many emotions. They are all human gifts. Without them, we would be like rocks.

The difficulty most of us face is that we're afraid of our humanity. We don't know how to give our humanity space. We don't know how to give it love. We don't know how to offer our appreciation. We seize upon whenever difficult emotions or painful thoughts arise—in large part because we've been taught from a very young age that life is a serious business. We're taught that we have to accomplish so many things and excel at so many things because we have to compete for a limited amount of resources. We develop such high expectations for ourselves and others, and we develop high expectations of life. Such a competitive, goal-oriented approach to life makes us very speedy inside. We become so tight physically, mentally, and emotionally as we rush through each day, each moment, that many of us forget—often quite literally—to breathe.

When we allow space into our meditation practice, however, something quite wonderful begins to happen. That solidity, that seriousness begins to break down. We begin to relax a bit more and experience some of the fluidity we enjoyed as very young children. We begin to dance with our experience: "Haaa . . . I'm so upset . . . I'm so good . . . I'm happy . . . I'm a human being . . . I might be upset, but I'm alive . . . If I were dead, I might not have emotion . . . but, wow, I'm alive."

We also gradually cut through the habit of identifying with each emotional wave that passes through our awareness. We can be angry, jealous, or scared without having to act on those emotions or let them take over our lives. We can experience joy or love without becoming attached to the object that we think is the cause of our joy.

All too often, the emotions we experience, along with the thoughts and behaviors that accompany them, become part of our internal and social story lines. Anger, anxiety, jealousy, fear, and other emotions become part of who we believe we are, creating what I would call a “greasy” residue, like the oily stuff left on a plate after eating greasy food. If that residue is left on the plate, eventually everything served on that plate starts to taste alike; bits of food start to accumulate too, stuck to layers and layers of greasy residue. All in all, a very unhealthy situation!

Freedom and Respect

When we allow space into our practice, though, we begin to see the impermanent nature of the thoughts and feelings that arise within our experience—as well as of the conditions, over many of which we have no control. That greasy residue doesn’t build up, because there’s no “plate” for it to cling to. Whenever I find myself in a challenging situation—and there have been many over the years—I think of Holi, the Hindu festival during which people throw colored powder into the air. For a few seconds after the powder is thrown, the sky becomes red all around; but then the colored grains fall back to the ground and the sky is once again clear.

In the same way, if we can allow some space within our awareness and rest there, we can respect our troubling thoughts and emotions, allow them to come, and let them go. Our lives may be complicated on the outside, but we remain simple, easy, and open on the inside.

Once we find this free, open space, not caught up by conditions, the basic natural awareness we enjoyed as infants and young children begins to reemerge and, along with it, the warmth and freedom we experienced before we began to identify so closely with the conditions inside and around us. As we taste that warmth and freedom again, we begin to experience a deeper and more enduring sense of contentment and joy. We begin to smile. Our neck relaxes, our chest opens, our mind becomes less cloudy, our whole being

starts to feel good—and that is the best basis for practicing real compassion. Otherwise, there's no way to practice compassion because we're caught up in our own stuff.

We don't need to feel guilty about being free. If we're free, we can free the next person; we can offer joy to the next person; we can help the next person more effectively. With that freedom, all the sublime qualities of our essential nature—kindness, compassion, clarity, and openness—can emerge. As we cease grasping, attaching, and pushing, gradually we begin to see more clearly what the next wise step is and what action we can take that will minimize suffering not only for ourselves but for others.

The ultimate goal of the Dharma is to assist us in seeing the truth that reality is unimaginably free and unimaginably open. Of course, we act out our daily lives in a realm of relative reality that emerges, abides for a while, and dissolves as various causes and conditions temporarily come together. But relative reality and the absolute reality need to complement each other. We cannot hold ourselves as something or somebody defined by this or that characteristic or combination of characteristics or attributes. From time to time, we need to come home to the simple fact that ultimately we can't be defined by our circumstances. We need to remind ourselves "I'm nobody. Really, literally, I'm nobody. I'm just a fellow human being . . . " and just rest there.

Approaching our experience in this way is a bit like staying in a hotel. I don't own a hotel, but I often live in a hotel room for a few days. I really enjoy my stay, but at the same time, I am a respectful guest. I never burn the carpet or steal a towel. In the same way, we must respect the relative reality in which we function. We respect our body, our responsibilities, and those around us. We take from it what we need and give what we can, but we don't really own it.

We really can't own anything. With a free and lucid mind, we recognize, "I'm naked. I came naked, I'm going back naked. I know everything is an illusion. But I am in the world and it has its own laws and rules and regulations. I respect that. I'm enjoying it. But our respect and enjoyment are also illusions." If we approach our lives with that kind of mind, I think life starts to be enjoyable, no matter

what our circumstances. We can deal with adversity in our own lives and assist those in need with greater courage and conviction.

The Dharma can help us to achieve this free and lucid mind, to attain the inner simplicity with which to work with the outer complexity of life's challenges. But in order for the Dharma to work, we have to be willing to work with it. We need to commit the time to work with it. We need to organize our lives, make a list, and delete the not-soimportant things. If we commit to practice, we can appreciate our lives more deeply; we can cultivate a healthy respect for the world we live in; and we can move forward with a sense of gratitude for the opportunities for developing compassion toward ourselves and others that even the most challenging circumstances offer.

Tonglen Guided Meditation

Tonglen is a Tibetan word that may be translated as "sending and taking." It is a meditation practice that involves sending our own happiness and well-being to others and taking into ourselves their pain, adversity, and suffering. In other words, we exchange our own happiness for the suffering of others. The idea of engaging in this sort of practice might sound a little crazy, until we realize that its purpose is to interrupt the habit of clinging to an ego or a separate sense of self. Tonglen practice ultimately cuts through the mental and emotional habits that bind us to the sense of self around which pain and discomfort accumulates like iron filings drawn by a magnet.

The Buddha identified our sense of separation as one of the fundamental causes of the discomfort, uneasiness, anguish, and pain that we call "suffering." Our habit of attachment to our sense of self reinforces the idea of self as something solid, independent, and inherently real. Unless we can let go of this habit, we will never know the possibility of freedom from suffering. We'll always be stuck in a kind of debilitating, self-protective mode of being, consciously or unconsciously reinforcing the idea of "me against the world."

We can engage in many sorts of meditation practices and achieve some sort of inner peace or harmony, but if we don't look deeply at our intentions, we may very well end up strengthening our attachment to pleasant experiences and increasing our fear of unpleasant experiences. Our attachment to having a pleasant individual experience ultimately brings us deeper into confusion, pain, and difficulties. The key point to bear in mind whenever we practice tonglen is that we're doing so in order to benefit others, though we ourselves also experience a greater sense of serenity. The motivation to benefit others and to free others from suffering is the basis of all Buddhist practice.

Tonglen is actually quite easy to practice and it uses a simple combination of visualization and breathing. Most people find it easier to practice by assuming a relaxed but attentive physical posture, with the spine straight and head balanced easily on the neck. If you're sitting on the floor, it's usually best to cross your legs in order to give yourself a stable foundation; if you're sitting in a chair or on a couch, rest both feet firmly on the floor. The hands can be placed on the knees or can rest, one on top of the other, in the lap. Eyes may be open or partly closed.

Breathe in and out, easily and naturally, a few times and let the mind just rest in a state of relaxed attention for a few moments, without necessarily focusing on any particular object. Then gently bring your attention to the thought, "Just as I want to attain happiness and be free of suffering, others have the same wish."

The next step is to focus on your breath as a vehicle for sending positive feelings or circumstances to all sentient beings and for absorbing the suffering of others.

As you exhale, visualize your happiness and positive circumstances flowing out of yourself in the form of clear light. This light reaches out to all beings and dissolves into them, eliminating all forms of suffering they may be experiencing.

As you inhale, visualize beings' pain and suffering as a dark, oily smoke, which is absorbed through your nostrils and dissolves into your heart. As you continue this visualization and breathing practice, imagine that all beings are freed from suffering and filled with bliss and happiness. After practicing in this way for a few moments,

simply allow your mind to rest. Then take up the practice again, alternating between periods of tonglen and resting your mind.

Many people find it a bit difficult in the beginning to visualize all sentient beings; so there is a gradual method of tonglen, which can be quite useful. To do this, begin by visualizing the suffering of one single person, ideally someone toward whom you feel a particularly close bond, such as a parent, a child, a partner, a friend, or a spouse. You perform the same visualization exercise, using only a single object of concentration. I know people who have even done this practice using a beloved pet as the initial object of visualization.

As you develop greater confidence in the practice, you can gradually extend the object of focus to include groups of friends or family members. Eventually, you can extend your focus to include strangers, people you actively dislike, people you find difficult, people (and other beings!) you have only heard or read about—until finally your practice includes all sentient beings, in infinite universes, everywhere. Of course, as the object of focus grows wider, you probably won't be able to imagine specific faces or individuals. However, although the focus is wider, through gradual practice your sense of being able to reach all other sentient beings can become quite specific and strong.

Tonglen practice is especially useful in those times when we are feeling stressed, pained, or troubled. In such moments, we can use the particular difficulty that we are experiencing, whether it is fear, anxiety, grief, or even physical pain, as a very present, immediately recognizable center. We can visualize that as we inhale we're taking in the pain of all sentient beings and allowing it to be absorbed into our own suffering. In this way, our own pain and discomfort become useful or meaningful; they become the basis for making a strong and vivid connection to others who are suffering. Instead of being overwhelmed by our own suffering, we draw on it as an inspiration to connect with and to benefit others. In other words, we use our own suffering instead of being used by it.

You may feel the empowering effects of this practice right away; perhaps it will take a little longer. But if we do this practice regularly, we can experience an increase in confidence and strength in facing our own difficulties and using them as a basis for benefiting others.

greet this moment as a friend

SYLVIA BOORSTEIN

Sylvia Boorstein trained in the Theravada tradition. She studied at the Insight Meditation Center in Barre, Massachusetts, with Joseph Goldstein, Sharon Salzberg, and Jack Kornfield and has been teaching vipassana and metta meditation for over twenty-five years. She is also a founding teacher of Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, California, and leads a regular Wednesday morning class there. Sylvia has a PhD in Psychology and has been a psychotherapist since 1967. She has written five books on Buddhism and meditation. She and her husband have two sons, two daughters, and seven grandchildren.

In the Zen Buddhist tradition, teachers save their pith instructions for their final breath in this life. As they're dying, with their final exhalation, they utter the culmination of their understanding. Many years ago, a friend recounted a story she'd heard from a Zen practitioner whose teacher's final utterance was, "Thank you very much; I have no complaints."

I admire that. I would like to have that as my final utterance. It would be a great statement about wisdom to be able to leave this life saying, "I have no complaints." To complain would be to think that things could have been different. The fundamental wisdom we seek

to connect with is that things are the way they are as a result of myriad causes and conditions—things are what they are, we do what we can, and we work with what we've got. "Thank you very much; I have no complaints."

I sometimes remind students, "Try not to duck. Try to see the truth of your experience right now. Try to be there." When we are in contention with the moment, we push it away and then we don't see it clearly. When we see things clearly, we can usually figure them out. And when we see things cordially, or at least when we allow ourselves to see them this way, then they're not distorted by our liking or not liking. Another way of putting this is, "Let's see the truth of every moment and let's see it without contention."

Dealing with the Unexpected

As human beings, we are always subject to loss, personal and communal. We all experience the loss of our own body as we get older and, in some form, the loss of our friends, our hopes, and our dreams. In a certain way, we are always accommodating loss, from the beginning to the end of our life. I try to cultivate a mind that accommodates in a gracious way so that it has energy left to connect with benevolence. I think this is the key to being able to make it to the end of my life in a way that is warm, lively, energetic, and useful.

So many things are problematic in society and in the world. I heard a local news bulletin saying that engineers are currently working on plans to build dikes all around the inside of San Francisco Bay in preparation for the melting of the ice cap. I heard that while I was driving. And as soon as I heard it, I started to drive a little more tensely. It's not something that's going to happen very soon, but it's an awesome thing to think about. We live in awesome times. But times have always been awesome for whoever was living in any historical period.

I want to tell you a contemporary story of difficult times—of financial insecurity, of economic stress, of so many people losing

their jobs—and of the relevance of understanding, wisdom, and practice in meeting those challenges. A friend of mine, my age, expecting to retire, and a longtime meditation practitioner, had all of her money invested with Bernie Madoff. I learned of this a week or two after the news broke that Bernie Madoff had lost all of his investors' money.

I contacted her and we went out to lunch together. I really wanted to find out how she was and how she was dealing with this. She said, "Well, I'm really frightened because this is my entire life savings. My friends told me it was foolish to put all my eggs in one basket. But every month in my statement I saw how the profits were going up, and Madoff seemed to be a person of great repute who was doing wonderful things. I'd not only invested my life savings from all the work I've done, but I'd also entrusted him with the small inheritance from my parents that I was saving for my children. My partner doesn't earn a lot of money. Here I am at seventy-two. I haven't got a lot of time to work. How am I going to make it?"

I asked, "How did you feel the moment you got the phone call?" She said, "Well, the moment I got it, I didn't understand it. Someone called me and said that this is what had happened, and I couldn't believe it. They had to tell me several times; it just didn't go in. Finally it did go in. I got it, and I got terrified. It's like the whole bottom fell out of my world. I got frightened. I'd get up in the middle of the night and think, 'What am I going to do, and how am I going to take care of myself and my partner for the rest of my life?'"

We talked like that for a while, and then she said, "You know, the only thing I didn't get was angry. I didn't get angry, because I thought, 'It's extra. I have enough problems in my mind and in my life without getting angry; anger is extra.' And who would I get angry at? Am I going to get angry at Bernie Madoff? He's not like a real person—he's something else—I can't get mad at Bernie Madoff. Should I be mad at the Securities and Exchange Commission for not having enough oversight? Should I be mad at everybody who worked for Madoff, who didn't report him earlier? Should I be mad at myself? I am mad at myself when I think about it. My friends told me, 'Don't do this.' But, you know, the profits looked so good on paper, and I really wanted that money and it seemed like a good thing; maybe I should

be mad at myself. The thing is, I just knew all the time that ‘mad’ was the last thing I needed. I’m just barely making it as it is.”

Then she said, “I couldn’t have done this without all the years of practice. I just know that anger is not going to do me a bit of good. I need all my wits about me to figure out how to do the rest of my life. If I’m confused by anger, that isn’t going to be helpful.”

This story is exactly relevant to our times, and it’s exactly relevant to every time. I think our practice is about cultivating the kind of mind that’s able to say, “Whoa, I didn’t foresee this, and it isn’t what I wanted, and it’s what I got, and I’m going to have to figure out what to do next, and I don’t know how. But I need to keep my wits about me so that somehow, so long as I don’t let my mind become clouded with confusing energies, I’ll be able to do it.”

I take a lot of courage from this story, because if she was able to do that in her circumstance, maybe I’ll be able to do it in another circumstance, because we’re each going to have our particular challenge sooner or later, one way or another.

The Buddha’s Last Words

According to the Pali Canon, the earliest compendium of the life and teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni, the Buddha’s last words of his final sermon before he died were: “Transient are all conditioned things. Strive on with diligence.” I like that a lot. It reminds me of impermanence. Things pass. With very difficult times, when the mind or the body may be very much in pain, it helps when we have the awareness that however painful this moment is, it will change.

We’re always dealing with shock. We lose a job, we lose a love relationship, someone we care for dies, something in our own body goes wrong. After a while, even if things aren’t better, we get over the shock. At that point, understanding the transient nature of things can buoy up the mind.

I think about transience in terms of contingency. Things happen and, as a result, other things happen. We need the understanding of impermanence. And we need the understanding of contingency, of

interconnection, that things happen because other things happen. This is the meaning of karma. Finally, we need to have the insight that suffering is the tension in the mind when it is unable to accommodate the truth of our experience of impermanence and contingency.

Recently, my husband and I left home to do an errand in town. While we were gone, a huge branch from an oak tree fell across the road that goes to our house. When we came back, a truck was pulling the branch off the road. The oak tree has probably been there for 150 years. That branch fell down in the half hour that we were gone—but not in the two seconds that we were under it. I thought, "If not for this, then that." Everything is contingent on other things. The fact that I'm here and well in this moment is because I wasn't under the oak tree branch when it fell, and that was because of who I was with and where and when and how long my errands took, and all of the millions of conditions that caused that oak tree branch to fall down exactly when it did.

My friend is without funds at this moment because Bernie Madoff wasn't a well man, and because the Securities and Exchange Commission's oversight was flawed, and because of her own particular yearning to increase her money, and because we live in a culture in which we use money to make more money, and because of a million other things—and also because she'd heard of Bernie Madoff. I hadn't heard of him, but if I had, I might be in her position.

Everything is contingent; when I think about that, it removes blame from everyone. It's not her fault and it's not anyone's fault; it's just what is. Things happen because they do, and I do the best I can.

The second part of the Buddha's last utterance is usually translated as, "Strive on with diligence." My friend Andrew Olendzki, who's a codirector of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, says a better translation is: "Move with confidence into the future." To me this means that what we do makes a difference. We're not individually in charge of the world. We don't run the world. But what each of us does makes a difference. This doesn't contradict contingency. I can feel at the same time that things are out of my hands—I don't need to feel in charge or take responsibility for everything—but I also can't renege on doing my part. I find it

tremendously inspiring and tremendously consoling. I think it's the gist of being mindfully aware, which leads to wisdom.

A Moment of Grace

I once met a person who said to me, "I don't pray, but I wish." It's a normal human response to wish that things go well for people, to wish that they don't suffer, and to wish that they get well from their illnesses, even when we know they are likely to die. We wish that they won't suffer.

Thirty-two years ago in 1977, I went to a two-week mindfulness retreat. Before that, I hadn't practiced at all. At the end of the two weeks, I didn't know if anything substantial had changed in me. The headache that I'd had for the first five days had gone away, and I felt the colors and the leaves were a little clearer and the smells were a little sharper, so I knew my senses were a little bit more alert. Otherwise, I felt normal. However, on the last night of the retreat, when I phoned home to talk to my husband to arrange for him to pick me up the next day, I learned that my father had been diagnosed with cancer and would likely die within two years. I loved my father enormously and it was terrible news to hear. I felt tremendous sadness. In no way did the fact that I'd been practicing and on retreat for two weeks make it okay with me. I felt the pain very sharply. I remembered the feeling that I had experienced at other times in my life when people very dear to me had either been seriously ill or had died. I felt, on those occasions, as if I would fall through the floor. It had been impossible news to hear.

I remember myself standing in that phone booth, listening to that news, and feeling terribly pained. But there was also something in me that stayed steady. The ground didn't feel like it opened, and there was something in my mind that was different. At that moment I certainly didn't say to myself, "Aha, I see this meditation practice is working and this is what I need." But I remember that that moment was different.

I never left the practice once I'd started. Years later, I remembered how I had felt hearing about my father. I think I knew in that moment that there was a way that the mind could be steady enough to hold any experience. By steadiness, I certainly don't mean indifference. I mean that the mind can feel something very deeply and hold it in balance. Sometimes I feel that having gotten the news of my father's illness right then, not three weeks before or three weeks later, was a moment of grace.

Suffering and the Four Noble Truths

I read a novel recently and the pivotal moment—the moment in which things begin to open up and the denouement begins—happens when a professor of emergency medicine is conducting a class for applicants seeking positions as residents in his department. He asks them, "What medication in first-response trauma situations is administered through the ear?" Everyone looks around with a puzzled look until someone raises his hand and correctly says, "Words of consolation."

My friend and my teaching colleague Howie Cohen said the first time he heard the Four Noble Truths, he cried. He said it was such a relief to hear that his experience of life as difficult was not his unique, gloomy perspective, that life is difficult for everyone. In fact, it is difficult for everyone because everything is always changing and requiring constant accommodation. This doesn't mean life is awful or that life doesn't have wonderful moments in it. But life is difficult and subject to change, constant change.

Suffering can be differentiated from pain. There is pain in life, without doubt, but suffering is the extra tension in the mind that is unable to accommodate change and accept the truth of its experience. The first two noble truths are that life is difficult and that suffering is the tension in the mind that insists an experience be different from the way it is. It's the imperative in the mind that this moment be different that causes our suffering.

The third noble truth is that peace is possible. Peace is possible here and now, in the middle of the world, in the middle of a life, in the middle of a body, in the middle of a situation, in the middle of however you are and however the world is. Change may or may not happen in a way that we like. But the mind has the capability of saying, “It’s like this, and I can manage it,” without creating extra difficulty. There is a path to peace. The path is a doable, cultivatable skill of awareness of the mind; that is the fourth noble truth.

It inspires me that the Buddha was a human being. In spite of the folklore that tells of the many lifetimes of the Buddha before his liberation—his many, many lifetimes spent practicing all of the perfections of the heart—in the lifetime of his realization, he was a human being and he understood. Understanding is a possibility for us as the flawed and beautiful humans we are, not as gods.

Seeing What Is True

Sometimes we go along just fine, enjoying our day and all the different aspects of our lives. And, paradoxically, it is also true that often when everything is fine, the mind, out of habit, is unconsciously anticipating trouble.

Sometimes people tell me, “I have nothing but angst. I think about my problem all day long. It’s always completely there.” I tell them to notice any second when it’s not there. Catch yourself enjoying a sip of tea, think to yourself, “Ah, it’s not here! In this moment, that whole story isn’t in my mind. It’s in the world and it’s in my life, but it’s not in my mind right now.”

The mind can enjoy moments of peace and ease. The point is not just to enjoy the moment—although that’s certainly a valuable reason to be present and balanced. But in those moments when we’re present and not in contention with the moment, when we’re able to see clearly what’s happening without refusing to see any part of it or pushing it away—it’s in those moments that we can choose what is a skillful way to go on.

When we can see what's true and what would be a wise next step, when we learn how not to create suffering for ourselves and other people, then we're able to lead the happiest lives that we can. That path is available moment to moment.

Mindfulness and Wise Decisions

Mindfulness is the practice of being present and attentive in each moment to what's happening both outside and inside of ourselves. Mindfulness is not just about being present, although the present is very pleasant. Sometimes people will say something like, "I went to this great opera; it was wonderful. But I lost the whole second act because I was thinking about this and that." Does that ever happen to you? Your body is there but your mind is someplace else. Sometimes you miss an opera. Sometimes you drive across town and you think, "How did I get here?" The body drives but nothing else is there. It's actually amazing that we do so well, given that no one is driving.

But the point of mindfulness in any situation is not just to be comfortable and enjoy the opera or whatever we are experiencing, though certainly we want to drive safely or ski without running into people. The point is really to see, moment after moment, what is true in this life and, from that place of wisdom, make wise decisions.

Mindfulness is not just about the pleasure of presence; it's about the pleasure of wisdom. The main consolation is to be able to see that things are what they are and to be able to see clearly what we want to do about that.

Some years ago I heard one of my teachers, Ajahn Sumedho, the abbot of Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in London, teach about the ability of the mind to let go of an imperative that things be different. He said, "I might be going along and feeling all right and then a certain difficulty that's happening in my community or in my life comes up in my mind and I feel tension start in my mind. Then I realize there's tension in my mind and I realize the discomfort of that

tension. And I say to myself, 'Hmm, it's like this, that's how it is.' Then I feel all right."

It was helpful to me to hear him speak about the tension that arises in the mind when the mind is unable to accept the truth of the situation. You have to look at the truth of the situation. You have to accept it. And you have to say to yourself, "It's like this—what should I do now?"

Wisdom is really the goal of practice. Mindfulness is the tool to arrive at wisdom. It's the clarity of mind that allows for wisdom to arise. The Buddha taught that there are three essential insights that constitute the whole of wisdom: the insight of impermanence; the insight of contingency or interconnection; and the insight of suffering and how it arises or disappears depending upon the ability of the mind to accommodate change, and change, and change.

We practice mindfulness in order to, over and over again, see those same insights. It isn't a one-time deal to understand the insights of impermanence, contingency, the causes of suffering, and the end of suffering. It's not as if you understand them and then you're set for life. I do get them. I say, "Now I really get it, I won't get trapped again. I really have it this time." But then I get trapped again. Then something happens and I get untrapped and I say, "Now I've really got it." But still, it's so easy for the mind to cloud and slip away and not get it. We need the continual practice of mindfulness—being aware of what's happening now, what's going on—to remind us.

How We Meditate

The fundamental instructions for meditation in the Theravada tradition come from the Buddha's sermon called the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. The Four Foundations are attention to breath and body; attention to the feeling tone of each moment of experience, whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral; attention to changing states of mind; and attention to the patterns of mind that emerge as one pays attention, patterns which reflect the insights that the Buddha offered about the causes and the end of suffering.

Beginning meditation instructions often focus on the breath alone. This may be confusing if you've been taught that mindfulness is being aware of everything going on, and not just the breath. But although we focus on the breath, meditation practice isn't about the breath. We focus on the breath to train our attention in small, incremental ways. It's like going to the gym and starting with the small weights. We take something that's immediate, present, and easy to find.

We can be mindful of anything—of sounds, the arising and passing away of sounds—and sometimes there aren't any sounds, sometimes it's profoundly quiet. But the breath is always happening, so it's a good choice. Also, the breath is repetitive, and that repetitive nature has a calming effect on the mind, so long as breathing is a nonconflicted event for us. For someone with asthma, emphysema, or any kind of compromised breathing, it's best to keep your attention on your whole body and leave it there. If you bring it specifically to the breath, it won't calm the mind, but will probably bring a little tension to the mind. For people whose breathing isn't compromised, the breath comes and goes all by itself; we don't have to do anything.

We're not trying to cultivate a certain kind of a breath, as in yoga. The breath is just something that arises and passes away naturally. This is also true of our thoughts; if we pay attention deeply, they arise and pass away. They come and they go. If you think to yourself beforehand, "I really want to connect to the impermanence of things and that's what I'm going to focus on," then you might think, as I did when I began, "Who doesn't know that everything is impermanent? Everybody knows that."

But I'm convinced, from my own experience, that there's a difference between knowing and profoundly knowing. In times of difficulty, I have relied a lot on my growing certainty that things were going to pass. This has really supported me.

Sometimes in meditation our bodies may ache. We wish our bodies felt great all the time. It's all right to rearrange ourselves. If your feet fall asleep, try to find another way to sit. Sometimes when I sit on a zafu, my feet fall asleep, and I don't know why. You can try sitting with your knees under you. Turn the zafu on its side, put it

between your legs, and sit on your knees. But sometimes, no matter what, we're aware of our body's discomfort. The question is: How does the mind respond to that discomfort? The first time my teacher said, "Do you want to have a malleable mind?" I thought that sounded great. A malleable mind is one that can say, "Well, this is unpleasant, but I could hang out here and see what it turns into." Frequently in life when things are unpleasant, our only choice is to hang out with that discomfort.

Sometimes people have the idea that to meditate means that the mind will be a certain way. But people have different temperaments. For example, the third foundation of mindfulness is mindfulness of mind, mindfulness of the contents of mind. In the Sutra on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the Buddha says, "The meditator notices mind full of thoughts, mind empty of thoughts." That was such a blessing for me to see that a "mind full of thoughts" was not a bad thing to have. It's easy to think, "Wow, everybody else is sitting here in deep peacefulness, but my mind has a million thoughts a minute." A million thoughts a minute is not a problem unless you make it a problem. You could say, "Wow, look at this amazing mind! It makes a million thoughts a minute—that's great!" We don't have to make it into a problem unless we imagine that it should be a certain way.

The mind is very restless. The body can also be very restless. Meditating, you might have the feeling that "if this meditation doesn't end in one second, I'm going to explode." I actually thought I was going to be the first practitioner in history to explode on a zafu. It's great when your mind is steady, but it's also important that when it's not steady, you say to yourself, "My mind is not steady. That's the truth. My mind is not steady." Then, poof! It will be entirely different as soon as you tell yourself the truth. "My mind is full of irritability. Boy, am I irritable. What kind of a meditator has irritable thoughts; that's not right. I'm thinking all bad thoughts about this one, that one, and the other one." But then you can say, "Okay, my mind is full of bad thoughts, hmm. Now how does my body feel? Not a bit good. Now let me see if I can put my attention in my body and how it's feeling." You don't have to make it a problem.

The Magic Bell

Once I was at a retreat, sitting on the floor in a very hot retreat center in the middle of summer on a very hot day with other people right next to me. I was trying to meditate “right,” but I really thought I was going to explode if the bell didn’t ring. It was hot, and my knee was in so much pain I thought I’d never walk again. I was thinking, “Ring bell, ring.” Finally, I heard, “ding!” I opened my eyes, and everybody was still sitting. There’d been no bell. I’d wanted it to ring so badly, I’d hallucinated a bell. That was quite startling. So I closed my eyes again and sat. I was sweaty and thinking, “That bell better ring, bell better ring, bell better ring.” Finally, “ding.” But nobody was moving. This had never happened to me before. I thought, “I don’t hallucinate.”

I continued to sit. The knee was still hurting. Again, I heard the “ding.” This time I thought, “I’m not even getting my hopes up. But I’ll just open my eyes.” Lo and behold, people were rubbing their knees, standing up, and getting ready to move. All the while I was sitting and I hadn’t moved my knee yet, I was just looking around. Before I moved, I realized that my knee didn’t hurt nearly as much. It was such a dramatic example of some distress in the knee from sitting too long, but most of the distress was the tension in the mind that was making up stories: “I’m not going to walk again,” “This is the wrong practice for me,” “This is ridiculous,” “I can’t move or someone will see,” “I’m the oldest person in this room—they’re going to think that’s why,” and so on. A million stories and editorials were flaming in my mind.

Mostly, we are distressed by the editorials we tell ourselves that inflame the mind. They’re usually bad opinions about ourselves or frightening stories about the future, what’s going to happen or not happen that we want or don’t want to happen. But it is what it is. I can say to myself, “Wow, my knee is really hurting,” or “My body is really tense. I could probably sit here one minute at a time. If it gets worse, I’ll stand up.” If you give yourself permission to stand up, to end the practice, to move on, then the body becomes much less

restless. It's only restless when it's frightened and feels stuck. But if you say, "I'll stand up, I'll walk back and forth a bit," it all works out.

The other night, I watched a video documentary about a boy four or five years old in the final moments of his life. His mom was holding an oxygen mask on his face. The camera was right there. So I watched. The first image I had when I woke up the next morning was the boy's small, shallow breathing. Throughout the day, I found myself merged with the boy's breathing. I was frightened by the experience. Finally I remembered—and this was hugely emotional—my own fears as a child as I listened from the other room to the sounds of my mother's own labored breathing, a result of her damaged heart and coronary insufficiency. Then I could stay with my own memory, breathing steadily and calmly through it. I didn't force my attention to stay with my breath or with the video image. I could rest in my own sense-memory of fear until it passed. Then my own breathing became steady and comfortable again.

The idea in doing this practice is not to become a steadfast breather or a steadfast namer of mind-states, but to cultivate a steadfast alertness to whatever is touching our hearts right now. Our minds have a proclivity to grasp at what they can't hold or to push away what they can't push away. As a result, we get tense and suffer. But when we stay steady with whatever comes up and learn to sit with it, the insights that the Buddha taught—that things are impermanent, that things are interconnected, that what happens is contingent on other things that have happened—become more and more apparent.

These insights are true for all of us. It's also true that each of us as individuals has a different body, a different path, and a different past. We've all had different psychological experiences that have impacted us in different ways. So as well as those universal spiritual insights arising, insights also arise about our own personal psychological makeup. All of a sudden stories from our own past surface. People will say, "I was sitting there happily breathing away, and all of a sudden a story from thirty-five years ago popped up into my mind." It's not at all surprising.

I think that the psyche waits for a break in the clouds and it says, "Aha, I see you're relaxed there—you have a pretty good mind now

—maybe you'd like to revisit this difficult piece of your past that you never quite worked out. Now might be your chance." I've also heard people say, "I was sitting there very calmly, and all of a sudden the voice of my mother said this, that, or the other, and my mother's been gone for thirty years." Or, "I wasn't asking for it but, boom, there it was, and I suddenly remembered a time in my childhood." We might not *feel* we're asking for recollections, but I think in fact we *are*. That's part of the deal when we sit down and say, "I'm undertaking this spiritual path of awareness." We get the whole awareness, good and bad, everything we've been imprinted with, at least in this lifetime.

Often when people begin to sit in regular meditation practice, they get more in touch with their physical body. That's another level of awareness. I remember one day doing walking meditation, and looking down at the ground as I was walking, I suddenly realized, "My feet are quite close to my eyes; I am a short person." I hadn't noticed it in that way before. On a certain level, I'd noticed it. I've shopped for clothes, so I must have noticed. But one day I looked down and thought, "Hmm ... short person," and it was a different feeling. It's not monumental; I could have lived this whole life without knowing how truly short I was. But there's a way in which I suddenly really got it.

Distraction

When you start to sit in meditation, you probably have the intention, "I'm really going to stay focused and present, in the now, in the breath, in the pleasant and unpleasant, in the climate of the mind, in the coming and going." But then all of a sudden, in your mind, you're in a conversation over here and then over there. It's like a movie has moved in, but really it's more that the movie has arisen from inside.

On Broadway in New York City, there are movie theaters all along either side of the street. Say you're planning to walk fifteen blocks and to go straight to your destination. Then by accident you slip into a movie theater and you say, "I'll just stop in here and watch this

movie—oops, I didn't mean to be in here. Okay, I'm out—now I'm continuing to walk." But two blocks later, oops, you step into another movie theater. "Wait a minute, I didn't mean to go in here, I'm going to go back out and continue walking straight on." Just as on Broadway, there are always movies in your mind that you could step into.

When there's more silence and space and less input, there are fewer movies. For example, when we're staying in the retreat environment, we don't see other people from outside. This is one reason we tell people on retreat: "Don't read; don't write; don't bring books; don't talk to each other," because that makes a lot of input for you to think about. Eventually, no matter how many times you've thought over your last days before you entered the silence, you eventually use up all that material. And then you're left with your mind, ready to really say, "Okay, I see you have a little free space. Okay, thirty-five years ago this or that happened." It's not the mind trying to make you uncomfortable; I think it's the mind looking to actually make you more comfortable by saying, "Here's a piece you couldn't handle ten years ago; handle it now." Or "Here's something that's been on your conscience for twenty-five years, and you didn't even know about it."

That meditation actually makes us both more comfortable and more uncomfortable is not surprising to me anymore. But it was surprising for a long time. I'd think, "Why, of all things, would I have this memory that's so upsetting to me?" And then I'd think, "Never mind how somebody did something bad to me—what about how I did something bad to somebody else? I did this, I did that." It's like a spontaneous moral inventory.

We often think, "I'd like to have a moral inventory." But sometimes in meditation I think, "I've had enough moral inventory, leave me alone; come back tomorrow with more moral inventory." But I've actually come to admire that aspect of the human mind. I think we're so good, really. This is one of the things that causes me to feel that, for the most part, most human beings with sound neurology and reasonable parenting come out goodwilled. And it hurts our feelings when we don't really behave as well as we hope, and as well as we hope other people will behave. And when we sit quietly, our hurt

feelings say, “Think about this and see if you can make a little reparation for it; you’ll feel better.”

I’ve heard people say, “I was sitting; my mind was very relaxed; I felt completely at ease, and all of a sudden I had a clear insight about a particular knot in my psyche that I’ve worked on for years. And I thought, ‘Aha, here is a really important key to working it out.’ Should I stay with the breath and let it float away like a cloud, this important insight that I’ve just had? Or should I stay with the insight and think it through, see what evolves and what comes from it, and maybe finally come to some sort of resolution about it?” It depends on where you are and what the situation is. If it’s the first day of a thirty-day retreat, I might say, “Take a notebook and write it down. Spend five days really trying to consolidate your attention and deep concentration. Then spend a whole day with that insight in that place of deep concentration.” But if one morning you say, “Whoa, I suddenly had this big insight, I’m not going to spend this morning with the breath, let me follow the insight,” that also makes a lot of sense. Yes, A or B; A and B. Sometimes A, sometimes B, sometimes both. It’s a long life, and they both count.

Walking Meditation

In the Theravada tradition, walking meditation means walking back and forth, back and forth, and back and forth. And instead of thinking about what you’re going to do later, think about your feet touching the floor, feel your feet touching the floor, feel your body moving through space. I am always eager to remind students that walking meditation is equally potent as a path to insight as sitting is. Each is a posture in which the practice is to have the attention rest steadily with the experience at hand. In both cases the experience involves simplicity—it is just plain sitting and just plain walking. Both have a repetitive rhythmic quality. Breath in and out. One step, then another. The plainness of both of them calms the mind. The constant predictable changes keep the attention steadily focused. Keen, balanced attention allows the mind to see things in new ways.

Insights about how the mind operates as well as how life operates are both born out of that calm alertness.

At a typical mindfulness retreat, periods of sitting meditation alternate with periods of walking meditation throughout the day. It seems that sitting has the tendency to deepen concentration since there are fewer stimuli for the mind to process. And walking keeps the attention from becoming drowsy because there are more stimuli present—we need to walk with the eyes open and all the body moving.

The special instruction—in addition to the instruction to pay attention to all the sensations of the body, especially in the feet and legs—is to make the walking path simple. Walking back and forth in a defined space keeps the walk simple and focused.

Metta and Goodwill

The best means of protecting the mind against turbulence and fear is feeling that one lives in a blameless world, without enemies.

Sometimes when I'm on a plane going across the country, I get involved in a conversation with someone I don't know. They talk, and you talk, and all of a sudden it just seems to flow and the whole flight goes very easily. Often I learn something. They tell me their story, and I often tell them some of mine. When they get up to leave, I realize that the whole story is now leaving my life at this point. But also the person with whom I didn't talk at all has a whole different universe they're carrying around inside their mind that I didn't even investigate, that I didn't touch into, and now they're getting off with their world. I find it useful to realize that we each have our own story, yet the other stories are not that different from one's own story. Everybody's story has losses and grief, pain and fear, hopes and desires.

When I was young, way before TV, there used to be crime shows on the radio that would always begin with the tagline, "This is a true story; only the names have been changed to protect the innocent." Everything is a true story and the names have been changed. If we

asked everyone, “Are you worried about the physical or mental health and well-being of someone in your family?” everybody would put up their hand. If we asked “Do you have some hope that your worry might never come to pass?” everybody would put up their hand. We share a great deal; just the names have changed in each person’s story.

We are each the center of our own universe. I can intuit that you care as much about your universe as I do about mine. Therefore, we can say, “May your universe and everybody in it be well. May our universes meet and interact harmoniously.”

Life has always been challenging for everyone on the levels of grief, loss, hopelessness, and societal woes. Nevertheless, these are very trying times, particularly trying times. It seems to me that the level of communal fear is much higher now than it was twenty years ago, and people’s tension is higher as well. Going somewhere on an airplane has become a really tense experience, not only being in an airplane but also going through the screening procedures, standing in line, and flights being canceled or delayed. I know from my own experience that maintaining a degree of goodwill in my heart and mind—being able to really connect in a way that’s a blessing, an appreciation, a consolation, with goodwill and compassion for what’s going on around me—keeps me afloat.

Four Pieces of Paper

I always carry four pieces of paper with me. One of them has the Metta Sutta on it, the Buddha’s teaching on impartial goodwill and loving kindness. One of them is a poem by Pablo Neruda called “Keeping Quiet.” It begins,

> Now we will count to twelve
> and we will all keep still.
>
> This one time upon the earth,
> let’s not speak any language,

let's stop for one second,

and not move our arms so much.[1]

The gist of that poem is that if everyone in the whole world would stay still and stop their perpetual moving and look around, everyone would say to each other, "What are we doing? We're killing each other. This isn't right. Look how our hands are hurt, our bodies are hurt, our countries are hurt, and our planet is hurt."

I also carry a poem by Naomi Shihab Nye, a Palestinian American poet, called "Kindness." She writes,

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.[2]

It's heroic. All of you, with whatever bubble of worries and woes and idiosyncratic stories you have in your mind, everybody here got up this morning, put on their socks and shoes, and came here. People are heroic. If we looked around, we'd realize that really in the end what saves us is other people's kindness, and our own kindness, and connecting with our own goodwill. Being connected in goodwill holds us up, and we persevere for another day of going on with our business of being human beings.

For a long time I carried only those three pieces of paper. Now I carry a fourth one as a bit of whimsy. It's a poem by Billy Collins called, "Another Reason Why I Don't Keep a Gun in the House." The poem is about a besieged poet who can't think because the next-door neighbor's dog is barking incessantly. He imagines the dog is sitting in the oboe section of an orchestra playing Beethoven's Ninth and the barking is part of the score. When the dog continues after the symphony is finished, the poet imagines it's the amazing dog solo that follows the final ending, the innovative coda that ensured

Beethoven's place as a creative genius. It's another way to see a situation. When I want to remind myself about the mind's ability to stretch beyond whatever it is that frightens it and realize that there's a bigger way to see the situation, I read that poem.

Taking Refuge

On the morning following September 11, 2001, I had a Wednesday morning class at Spirit Rock Meditation Center. I'm sure wherever you were on that morning, you and everyone around you were shocked, dismayed, and frightened. It's a frightening thing to have such a huge, communal loss. At Spirit Rock, we talked about "who knew someone who was connected to someone in New York." It's not that many degrees of separation. I think many of us felt that sense of alarm. What I found consoling that morning was for us to chant the Three Refuges together.

The Three Refuges are: "I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the Dharma. I take refuge in the Sangha." Traditionally, the formal recitation of the Three Refuges is part of the initiation ceremony for joining a Buddhist community. At Spirit Rock Meditation Center, in order to allow for people with connections to other religious communities to benefit from the inspiration and intent of the refuges, I explain what I mean when I say them.

When I take refuge in the Buddha, I am thinking of the Buddha as representing the human capacity to develop a liberated mind, a mind fully free of hatred, greed, and ignorance. When I take refuge in the Dharma, I mean that I trust there is a truth that can be understood about the cause and the end of suffering and that I can discover this truth on my own with the help of the tools of all my practice traditions. Taking refuge in the Sangha traditionally meant taking refuge in the community of ordained monks and nuns who were disciples of the Buddha. For me, it means taking refuge in all the people who support my practice. In times when my mind feels threatened, taking refuge soothes it.

On that day after the September 11 attacks, when we chanted the Three Refuges, we agreed that what we especially meant was, “We take refuge in the fact that peace is possible—in our hearts, in our communities, in our families, in our world. I take refuge in the Sangha, the community in which I find myself.” We acknowledged that although not all of us personally knew each other, we took comfort in the fact that we shared the belief that peace is possible.

After we chanted the Three Refuges, we chanted the Five Precepts, the ethical guidelines that Buddhist laypeople vow to follow. (The Precepts are ecumenical. Many people who do not identify as Buddhists feel pleased to embrace them as well.) The Five Precepts are: “I undertake the vow to abstain from harming living beings. I undertake the vow to abstain from taking that which is not freely given. I undertake the vow to refrain from expressing my sexuality in ways that are exploitive or abusive. I undertake the vow to abstain from speech that’s exploitive or abusive. I undertake the vow to refrain from intoxicants that cloud my mind and lead to heedlessness.”

Reciting these precepts was a comforting thing to do. It felt as if we were affirming that, in a world where people do terrible things, we were in a community that was able to say, “I vow not to harm living beings.” I think that vow comes from nothing other than our sense of the preciousness of life, our own and that of others.

When we recite the precepts as a regular practice—in contrast to their recitation on horrific days like September 11, 2001—what often arises are specific personal regrets such as, “Oh, yesterday I really should have ...,” or “What I did wasn’t exactly right,” or “I spoke a little bit too hastily to that person; I really should fix that.” The mind is very cooperative. It keeps all those things right there in a little sort of “to do” basket. If I say the precepts and give myself enough time with them, my mind says, “Okay, this is what you meant to do,” “This is what you meant to say.” I like that very much. It means my moral inventory is in good shape. I enjoy that feeling.

Anger

The question that I hear most in teaching is, “I’ve been practicing such and such a meditation for two years, six years, ten years, whatever, and I still get angry,” as though that’s a mistake. But we’re wired that way. When something unpleasant happens we’re like all animals; we’re startled and think, “Eek,” and we look for how to strike back. What’s remarkable about human beings is that we don’t have to react that way. In that little interval after being startled we can think, “What can I do now? Is this going to be helpful or is this going to compound it?”

There are two particular things that I think are important to know. First, everybody’s nervous system is different. There are some people who are really mellow by nature; they very rarely get angry. I come from mild-mannered people. I think that explains a lot. If I’m mild-mannered to any degree, it’s not because I practiced that, but because I was born with it. But there are some people who have different wiring, and they easily react and then feel bad about it, as though they’re somehow not good people or not good at meditation. I really want them to give themselves a lot of space. Everyone is born and grows up with different wiring. Everyone has different challenges.

The second thing about anger is that the anger response makes chemicals in the mind that are immediately released into the bloodstream, so that even if a moment later you think to yourself, “Wait a minute, I’m really mad, and it wouldn’t be so wise to speak about it right now; my anger is just a transient emotion, letting me know things here are not what I want them to be,” the anger doesn’t go away in one second. The brain literally gets swollen, and it takes a little while for the brain to unswell and reconfigure itself so that we’re able to see if we need time and space before we think and act. We can’t say right away, “Give me time to think this over.”

There’s a list in the Vinaya, the Buddha’s code of monastic rules, of what the Buddha said people should think about before they admonish another person. The first is, “In due season will I speak, not out of season.” This means, wait until it’s a good, propitious time and you have reconstituted yourself and are in your right mind, and also that the other person is in the frame of mind to hear you. Then you can speak out of a place on the other side of anger.

Blamelessness

One of the biggest fuels of our anger is blame. The Buddha talks about “the bliss of blamelessness.” This is an expression I increasingly understand. For me, the bliss of blamelessness means not only feeling like I’ve made the amends I can for whatever mistakes I’ve made, but that I’m not blaming other people either. That’s really the bliss of blamelessness, for me to make the whole world blameless. I think a lot of people are doing some really terrible things in the world, but I think that from their point of view they can’t do otherwise. I feel committed to doing whatever I can do to support the social changes I’d like to have happen. But I really am working on not having enemies in this world. I know I will feel better and less fearful if I don’t people the world with enemies.

It was a very big discovery for me that I didn’t have to be pleased in order to be content, and I didn’t have to like somebody to wish them well. I found I could wish them well even if I didn’t like them. If I wish them ill, then I’m doubling my discomfort. If I do that, I’m unhappy with what they’re doing and have also made my mind tight. It makes every bit of sense to me to wish others well. As one of my teachers said, “You don’t have to invite people into your home, just into your heart.” That makes a big difference.

The Buddha didn’t teach how to fix the mechanics of life, how to end an economic recession, and how to address societal ills. He taught how we should make for ourselves hearts that are blameless and cooperative and caring. The phrase many people like more than others in the Buddha’s Sermon on Universal Love, the Metta Sutta, is “Just as a mother would give her life to save her one and only child. ...” It is marvelously evocative of the unlimited potential of the human being for compassion.

Loving Kindness

The offering of blessing, both as a meditation practice and as a way of life, is for me a most direct way of connecting both with my own natural good heart and my awareness of the preciousness of life. When I follow the traditional sequence of blessing, I offer blessings and good wishes to myself, then to those close to me, then to those further out, then further and further out, like orbits circling the sun. I begin with my nearest and dearest kin. Then I think of other relatives and good friends. I think then of the people I work with. Among them are the people I really like, and then those not so much—but still they're there and they're colleagues. Then there's the person who cuts my hair, and the dental hygienist, and the dentist. I like them, but I do not normally think of them outside of their particular roles in my life. Then there are the six billion plus other human beings out there in this world, each of them with a universe of people around them, each of them wanting to go home and lie down in peace and wake up in peace, and live another day, and celebrate a birthday with their family, and have a meal and not be in pain, just like me. I wish them all the feeling of safety, the feeling of contentment, the feeling of strength, and I wish them a life of ease. I try to feel the feelings in myself as I mentally send the blessings outward.

When I am practicing loving kindness as a meditation, I like to sit still with my eyes closed, deliberately focusing on the feeling of each wish. In this way, loving kindness becomes a concentration practice in the same way that awareness of the breath or awareness of the body is a practice. You'll notice, if you try it, that thinking with devoted intention, "May I feel safe," brings up the feeling of safety in your body. It's like calling down a well that echoes the sound back up. You call down a well, "safe," and it says, "safe." The same is true for the words "content" and "happy" and any other words you like. "Strong" makes me always sit up a little straighter.

Sometimes when I begin to teach the particulars of loving kindness practice, I'll see a worried look come on somebody's face, and they'll say, "Wait a minute, surely you're not going to ask me to wish well to ...," and then they'll name some well-known figure on the world stage or in national politics. Or they'll say, "Everybody in the world I wish well, but not so and so who did me ill." I don't want to

make light of what people have suffered when they say this. Forgiving a person doesn't mean that what they did was okay; it doesn't mean you've forgotten about it, and it doesn't mean you have to be friends with them. It just means that your own heart has returned to its natural goodwill state, and that you can be happier.

To feel freer and happier, you have to be able to let everybody into your mind, and think, "May you feel safe, may you feel content, may you feel strong, may you live with ease." That particular rubric is a short version of the direct translation from the Pali, which is, "May I be free from danger, may I have mental happiness, may I have physical happiness, may I have ease of well-being." There are many permutations of this loving kindness meditation, but they are all variations of "May you be well." Consider beginning or ending your day with a period of loving kindness meditation, perhaps for five or ten minutes.

According to the stories, the Buddha taught metta practice to monks he had trained who were going out to live on their own. The story is that he sent monks out to meditate by themselves in the forest. And they were, understandably, frightened to be out by themselves in the dark with all the fearful things that inhabited the world for people in that era: animals, ghosts, and such. The Buddha taught them loving kindness practice as a kind of an amulet, as a blessing practice to keep them safe from malevolent forces. I think it does. It's not that it keeps us safe on the physical level from all the disasters and painful losses that can and do happen. But it's the fundamental refuge against despair and isolation. It could be, for the whole of our lives, a warm connection to our own experience, to other people, and to the whole world.

The technique and practice of loving kindness, in the largest sense, is to wish all beings well as you go about the day, as you meet them on the bus, as you see them on the plane, as you see them in the supermarket, as you encounter them in line. The practice of continual wishing well rescues the mind from falling in on itself in selfconcerns. It pulls you out of a well of despair, disgruntlement, unhappiness, or fearfulness and connects you in a warm way with what's happening out there.

It Could Happen

In the Pali Canon there are wonderful stories of the Buddha after his enlightenment, going from place to place and teaching. The canon is mostly stories, not instructions for meditation. The Buddha taught, very much like Jesus did, going from place to place and telling stories and presenting parables. I'm really inspired when I read the accounts of a time he went to such and such a place and spoke to such and such a number of people. These accounts often end with the words: "And as the blessed one finished speaking, all confusion disappeared from the minds of five hundred people or one thousand people. And their hearts, through not clinging, were liberated from taints," which means they were completely free from then on, forever. I love to read that. So far this kind of liberation hasn't happened to me. But I think to myself that there's a precedent. It doesn't even have to happen in the middle of a personal meditation practice period. You can be listening to someone teaching, and suddenly your heart can be liberated from pain. "

I feel very different than I did a long time ago. When I find myself struggling in one way or another and thinking to myself, "What kind of a spiritual teacher are you? If you were really clear, you wouldn't be doing this"—that kind of thinking no longer makes any sense to me. That is the kind of spiritual teacher I am: sometimes I can really organize myself and see clearly, and sometimes I can't. But I know the difference between these two states.

When something has happened so that I'm upset with someone and I'm thinking, "Well, when I meet that person the next time, I just won't be so nice to them, and I'll behave in a certain way in which I won't say it right out, but they'll know that I'm a little distant from them and they'll wonder what they did and they'll feel bad"—then I think to myself, "What are you doing?" I see my mind actually hatching revenge. But then it doesn't get very far down that road, it just goes a little bit down the road. It catches itself and says, "What are you doing?" More and more my attention catches itself, "What are you thinking? That's a mistake—let's not go there."

It's a wonderful discovery that you can find your attention going down the wrong road and you can say, "Wait a minute, that is not where I meant to go. Now I'll just take it back from there." With awareness, you can take the attention and say, "I don't really mean to go there." I literally say where I mean to go instead. "I mean to go this way: May all beings be peaceful and happy, and may I be peaceful and happy," or something like that. Even when we're struggling, we can remember that it could be otherwise. We can have confidence that we can turn our attention, and thus our own suffering, around.

I can remember sitting at my first retreat and listening to my teachers teach. They were young people then: Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein, and Sharon Salzberg. I knew that they had struggled in their lives in various ways, making their way in the world, getting established, and finding places to live, work to do, and relationships to have. But I knew, apart from that, they had something that I didn't have, and they knew something about that experience of peace in the middle of whatever difficult situations there were for them. Each of us knows that at some point in our lives there have been times—short or long—in which everything was really okay, just the way it was. Peace is possible. That doesn't mean we won't have loss or difficulties. But we can learn to be with them in a different way.

Loving Kindness Meditation

May I feel safe.
May I feel content.
May I feel strong.
May I live with ease.

Make those same blessings for someone you love a lot. Imagine that person in your mind's eye, as if he or she were in your presence.

May you feel safe.
May you feel content.

May you feel strong.
May you live with ease.

Make those same blessings for someone else, someone you like, maybe another family member, a colleague, or a friend.

If you'd like, try to see how it feels with a familiar stranger, the person who delivers your mail, cuts your hair, or your dentist. Make these same blessings:

May you feel safe.
May you feel content.
May you feel strong.
May you live with ease.

There are a vast number of beings who inhabit this world with us—human beings, more than six billion of them. Imagine them all over this globe, waking up and going to sleep, and doing all the things in between, all the people we don't know, but who we wish to feel safe, content, strong, and at ease.

You might especially want to think about all beings in pain—mind pain, body pain—may they feel comforted. You might want to offer a blessing like this one:

May this be a world where people
feel comforted enough and nurtured enough
to take care of each other as if they were kin.
And may the merit of my practice be offered
on behalf of the well-being of all beings.

When you want to, open your eyes.

One Minute Meditation
to Use Throughout the Day

This is a short meditation you do with your eyes open, because we live mostly with our eyes open when we're not sleeping. Look around and feel yourself present in whatever room or space you're in. Then say to yourself silently as you breathe, "May I meet this moment fully. May I meet it as a friend. May I meet this moment fully. May I meet it as a friend." Try this for a moment. Keep your gaze open and relaxed. Breathe. I think this is really a synopsis of the meaning of mindfulness: "May I be open to this moment fully; may I not be in contention with it." I say this to myself a lot as I go about my life. I often say it as I sit down to meditate, as the beginning of my sitting meditation.

You can do this meditation anytime, anywhere, sitting or standing. In this way, the whole of the day becomes an ongoing mindfulness practice. You can decide in each moment to meet that moment fully, as a friend. Do this as you stand in line at the supermarket. Do it on the bus. Do it while driving. I can even do it after being lost in a magazine on the bus. I make a point to look up and look around and look at all the people I don't know, and think, "Somebody here may have just had bad news. Somebody here may have just had a bad diagnosis. Somebody here is worrying about something. Somebody here may be on their way to an exam." I don't know specifically what the matter is with anybody, but everybody has troubles. Look at the people around you and say, "May all these people be peaceful and happy." These are the hidden meditations—wishing people well in line at the supermarket and on the bus—that count as transformative practice.

The Four Foundations of Mindfulness
Guided Meditation (20–30 minutes)

Sit in a way that's comfortable for you, dignified and alert. If you want to, close your eyes. Listen as closely as you can to the silence; bringing attention to the sense door of hearing wakes up all the sense doors. So in the next minute, just by listening, imagine that

your whole body will become more apparent to you, more present to you.

To whatever degree you feel your body, allow your attention to really be with the sense of the body sitting. You can tell it's sitting because there's pressure on your bottom, or on your back if you're in a chair; and even with your eyes closed you can tell if your legs are down on the floor, if your knees are bent, or if your legs are crossed; you can tell if you're holding your hands, or if your hands are on your knees, or on your thighs.

The first foundation of mindfulness is mindfulness of the body. With your eyes closed, really feel your body. Let the idea that "this whole kinesthetic marvel of a body works the way it does" bring a certain amount of pleasure to your mind. If your body feels good, you can be comfortable. If you're comfortable, then your body can relax. With this relaxation, your face may open into a small smile.

With your attention in your whole body, notice that as the breath goes in, your body seems to expand and then it relaxes back down. It gets bigger and goes down again. You can keep your attention on your breath in the widest focus, feeling your whole body expand and relax. Just feel the body moving, the shoulders lifting and lowering, and the rib cage pushing your arms out and down. They're subtle movements but you can feel them. If you'd like to bring your attention very closely to your breath, you can probably feel the breath coming in through your nostrils, feel your chest open, or you might feel your belly push out, and then relax, and your chest relax. Sometimes people can actually feel the breath come out of their nostrils on to their upper lip. Feel your in-breath as it passes the nostrils, the chest, and the belly. Feel your out-breath as it comes back up that path.

If you get sleepy, move your attention from one place of focus to another, or open and close your eyes. Rest in the peace and ease of mind and body. If you discover at some point that your mind is filled with other thoughts, in the moment of that discovery, the other thoughts disappear and you'll find the breath is right there. You can notice whether it's coming in or going out; you might name it "Breath in" or "Breath out," just to let your attention settle back with it.

Continue to use your breath as an anchor for your attention. You might add an awareness of whether each moment is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—that's the second foundation of mindfulness, mindfulness of feelings. It's the same practice, but now you are alert to pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feelings. It's a way of seeing whether the mind is creating tension. Stay with the breath as your anchor.

The third foundation of mindfulness is mindfulness of mind. As you sit, continue to feel the rhythmic breath coming and going, and notice the climate of the mind. Is the mind at ease, restless, sleepy, or alert? Is it filled or empty of thoughts? There isn't any one particularly desirable mind-state. Just notice whatever mind-state arises, perhaps one, then another, and then another.

The fourth foundation of mindfulness is mindfulness of truth, mindfulness of the way things are. Use these last minutes to notice the experience of arising and passing away, whether you notice it in the breath, in the coming and going of mind-states, or the coming and going of different body sensations. Be particularly aware of the coming-and-goingness; see where you experience it.

Think about opening your eyes before you actually open them. It's always a little bit startling to open them after sitting with them closed. It may be quite light and there may be a lot of things to see. Then, when you're ready, open your eyes.

Parallax Press
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PARALLX PRESS
P.O. Box 7355
Berkeley, California 94707
www.parallax.org

Parallax Press is the publishing division
of Unified Buddhist Church, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Boorstein, Sylvia.a.
Solid ground : Buddhist wisdom for difficult times / Sylvia
Boorstein, Norman Fischer, and Tsoknyi Rinpoche.
p. cm.
eISBN : 978-1-935-20982-9
1. Religious life—Buddhism. 2. Suffering—Religious
aspects—Buddhism. I. Fischer, Norman, 1946- II. Tsoknyi
Rinpoche. III. Title. IV. Title: Buddhist wisdom for difficult
times
BQ5410.B65 2011
294.3’444--dc22
2011001678