



The
Tao of
Bipolar

Using Meditation & Mindfulness
to Find Balance & Peace

C. Alexander Simpkins, PhD
Annellen M. Simpkins, PhD

“Annellen and Alex Simpkins have produced another great book that represents their lifelong commitment to helping people using unique resources. . . . This step-by-step guide of systematic meditation techniques is designed for people diagnosed with bipolar disorder. The reader learns to enter into a different mental state that permits both relaxation and alertness, where once there was only mania or despair.”

—**Michele Ritterman, PhD**, *world lecturer on “The Three-Minute Trance,” and author of The Tao of a Woman and Using Hypnosis in Family Therapy*

“The Simpkins have written a wonderful book. It begins with a solid foundation of ancient Eastern philosophy integrated with modern Western science and a clear description of bipolar disorder. The benefits of a variety of meditations are described and clear guidelines are offered to match these with the individual symptoms that different people experience. Simple, easy-to-follow exercises are offered throughout the book so each reader can experience their own process, leading to sustained improvements. This is a wonderful book and will be appreciated by many people suffering from bipolar disorder. I recommend it enthusiastically.”

—**Robert McNeilly, MBBS**, *an international teacher of Ericksonian approaches to psychotherapy and hypnosis*

“A wonderfully well-written book integrating ancient philosophy of Tao and modern neuroscience for self-help with bipolar disorder.”

—**Kathryn and Ernest Rossi**, *authors of the video e-book Creating New Consciousness in Everyday Life*

“*The Tao of Bipolar* is a how-to guide to clearing your mind, easing your moods, and developing your talents. I’m pleased to have this powerful resource to offer to my patients. The Simpkins offer you the tools you need to gain a high level of awareness and control over your bipolar symptoms. Their easy explanations and practical meditation exercises will help you develop powerful, life-changing habits.”

—**Ashley Davis Bush, LCSW**, *author of Shortcuts to Inner Peace and Transcending Loss*

“Even though the book is mainly directed to persons with bipolar disorders, it is also helpful for any therapist. The book nurtures the mind, body, and spirit of every reader; satisfies the need for sound knowledge; and gives the pleasure of reading a well-written book enriched by metaphors and cases that enhance the passionate hope that the meditations proposed in the book really work. . . . The deep message the book conveys is: Nurture your potential by committing yourself to doing the meditations. Find healthy daily routines of waking and sleeping, balance your moods to harmonize your relationships, and become what you want to become, trusting in the power of both Tao and nature.”

—**Consuelo Casula**, *psychologist,
psychotherapist, and the president-elect of the
European Society of Hypnosis*

“Throughout this helpful, holistic, clear, and cogent book the experienced authors skillfully depict both the bipolar condition and the many therapeutic ways its symptoms may be alleviated. Compassionately reassuring the sufferer, they encourage an attitude of non-judgmental awareness accomplished by meditation and breathing exercises to follow each day. . . . This book will be of great help to any who reads it and applies it to their lives.”

—**Tasha Halpert**, *meditation teacher, columnist,
blogger, and author of Heartwings: Love Notes for a
Joyous Life*

“A true self-help book. The authors expertly guide the reader through a description of bipolar disorder and teach, step-by-step, how to meditate to increase the ability to manage the mood swings that go with bipolar disorder. A great introduction for anyone considering treatment, and a thoughtful addition to talk and medication therapies.”

—**Tanya H. Hess, PhD**, *director of training at
Coaching into Care, Philadelphia VA Medical
Center*

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To our parents, children, grandchildren, and extended family.

And to all those who have suffered from bipolar disorder.
We recognize your talent and great potential. May you
find meditation to be a valuable tool for opening your
heart and mind to positive change—and transcend.

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Introduction

Your bipolar disorder need not hold you back from accomplishing your goals and doing what you care about. Throughout the ages and into the present, many have suffered from bipolar disorder. And yet, a percentage of those who receive this diagnosis manage to accomplish great things and lead productive, happy lives. So can you!

Typically, people have a pessimistic view of bipolar disorder. You may have been told that bipolar disorder is a lifelong medical problem with a strong effect on the brain. As a result, you might be thinking there's not much you can do. But we invite you to join those who are successfully managing their bipolar disorder, by opening yourself to the idea that you *can* help yourself. If you catch a cold, you might believe that all you can do is endure it. But going out in the rain, missing sleep, or exposing yourself to other illnesses will certainly make things worse, whereas getting plenty of rest and drinking liquids will probably help. Most medical conditions, including bipolar disorder, can be improved when the patient takes an active role.

If you view a house only from the outside, you will never know what's inside. But after you enter the building, you can walk to all the different rooms within. Similarly, you may be thinking about bipolarity from an external perspective, based on the negative things people have told you. These pessimistic perspectives might keep you from trying to do anything to alter your condition. Meditation lights the lamp of your inner experience, thereby allowing you to guide your actions from an illuminated source within, whereby you will discover new potential and options for improving your life.

This book offers you an optimistic view of bipolar disorder drawn from the ancient wisdom of the East and combined with the latest findings on bipolar disorder from neuroscience, psychology, and Western medicine. You will look at your mood problems through a different lens. *Taoism* is an ancient philosophical tradition that focuses on the principle of harmony and balance known as the *Tao*, which can be found through meditation. By viewing your mood problems through the lens of the Tao, you add another perspective and many practical methods for improving your bipolar disorder. This time-honored perspective, with its meditation techniques, will bring you feelings of well-being, balance, and happiness. Your life will be enhanced as you live with greater awareness, and this book shows you how to do it.

What Are Moods?

Without your feelings and experiences, who are you? Emotions are like music, lending harmony or discord to experience. You can find examples all around you: When a good friend you rarely get to see visits, you spontaneously feel happy, even elated! Then, having shared some wonderful time together, you feel sad when that person has to leave. Eating your favorite food, you feel enjoyment, whereas when you take a sip of sour milk, you feel disgust. Each of these emotions occurs naturally in relation to what you are doing and experiencing, and all of them elicit your sense of meaning about the events in your life. Whether your feelings are positive or negative, they add information that deepens your understanding of yourself and the world. The emotional center of the brain, known as the *limbic system*, is highly interconnected with many different regions all around the nervous system. These extensive links help to explain why your feelings are so much a part of what you think and do.

When an emotion endures, it becomes a *mood*. Moods are also a way of knowing what's happening. For example, when people find themselves continually feeling irritable, it often reflects a problem in their lives. Then when the problem is solved, the irritable mood goes away. Emotions and moods are normal, built-in reactions of the mind-brain-body system. They come into being and then leave again as an integral part of everyday life. Through this process of experiencing continually changing emotions, we weave the cloth of our lives.

But when you have bipolar disorder, your emotions and moods don't always accurately reflect what's happening in your life. In fact, your moods may mislead you, creating problems for you. Your moods can be extreme, leading you into tangled knots in the fabric of your life experience and, at other times, tearing the fabric apart. If you suffer from the chronic moodiness found in bipolar disorder, your mood can take you on a roller-coaster ride from low to high and back again. You may become engulfed in a vortex of emotions that push and pull you away from any sense of calm and stability. As you work through this book, you will learn how to get off the roller coaster and return to more balanced emotions that can become a resource for you rather than a problem.

Bipolar Disorder, the Brain, and Meditation

Modern neuroscience has found that the brain continues to develop and change throughout adulthood, and that we can influence this development with our actions. Bipolar disorder has a strong brain component associated with mood swings. Research reveals that people with bipolar disorder have structural abnormalities in neural pathways that are involved in regulating moods (Strakowski et al. 1999). The mental training that comes from practicing meditation increases activation in the parts of the brain that manage emotions and moods. Regular meditation can make these important structures and connections even denser (Tang et al. 2009). These exciting findings and others that we will discuss in this book offer compelling evidence that meditation can change your brain and stabilize your moods.

Meditation also has many general benefits. You know that the symptoms of bipolar disorder can be extremely stressful for you and your family. Many different studies have found that meditators feel less stressed and anxious (Kabat-Zinn 2003), so you will be able to address your problems with more calm and comfort. Meditating also balances your autonomic nervous system (Grossman et al. 2004), which can lessen your tendency to swing from high to low and back again. And meditation is well known for inducing an overall experience of well-being (Lutz et al. 2009).

We encourage you to use meditation along with your drug therapy. The two treatments enhance each other. With all of these positive effects on your brain, mind, and body, you can find happiness and discover your own unique stability.

What This Book Offers

This book offers hope. It helps you to restore your faith in yourself. It gives you a clear path to follow. And it helps you develop your talents and express them realistically and effectively in the world. Using meditation allows your experience to become your teacher. You will be able to notice what's really going on. Through this awareness, you can learn more about what you need to do to live the life you want to live. You will develop tools for either activating or calming your mind, brain, and body to restore balance. When you are attuned to the moment, alert, aware, and at ease with yourself, you can express your best potential for living fully.

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 presents a new perspective for understanding bipolarity, based on the Tao's ever-changing movement of flowing energy. From this perspective, you can use a set of meditative tools to alter this flow in order to bring about real mind-brain changes. You will learn the latest scientific knowledge about bipolar disorder and how meditation changes your brain. Part 2 teaches three forms of meditation step-by-step. *Focus meditations* train you to keep your attention deliberately focused on something, such as breathing, which helps you gain some control over your thought processes. *Open-focus meditations*, such as mindfulness, have an ever-changing object of focus that teaches you how to keep your attention flexible and aware. And *no-focus meditations* free your mind so that you can have clear, aware consciousness. Part 3 guides you in applying these skills to reduce your stress, manage your moods, improve your interpersonal relationships, and develop your talents and abilities. We often tell our clients that their problems are the seeds of their potential, and this part of the book helps you transform troubling symptoms into creative capabilities. We draw on well-researched methods and include stories of clients who used these techniques successfully.

What Is Meditation?

Meditation began long ago and has its roots in the ancient traditions from the East: yoga, Buddhism, Taoism, and Zen. Thousands of intelligent people from all around the world have contributed to the evolution of meditation through time. Today we have the fruits of more than two thousand years of sincere exploration, study, writings, and analysis in a rich and varied set of meditation practices.

Meditation is a time for sitting quietly, seemingly doing nothing. In the empty moment, you can discover meditation. You might think that sitting quietly and doing nothing is a waste of time. How can anything significant be accomplished by doing nothing? The answer requires a shift in how you look at things. Then, what at first seemed to be a non-activity is its own kind of action.

To understand what meditation is in general, you can get to know it better in terms of opposites. Meditation empties the mind of thoughts or fills it with chosen thoughts. Some meditations direct attention deliberately to an inner or outer object of focus, while others are indirect, objectless, and open ended. Meditation can withdraw attention from the outer world and focus it inwardly, or it can direct attention outward for alertness and awareness in every moment. This book guides you through the process.

Whom This Book Is For

This book is for anyone who is dealing with bipolar disorder or mood problems. You can use it as a self-help adjunct if you are in treatment and on medication. If you have not sought medical care but simply feel bothered by moodiness, you will also find this book helpful. Many of the meditations in this book will also assist you with the stress and disturbance that you may be feeling. You may want to share things you learn in this book with your parents, siblings, or spouse. Their support and positive attitude can help you to help yourself. With everyone working together, new potential opens up for all involved.

The meditation methods presented in this book offer powerful tools for change. As you gain mental skills and become mindful of what you are experiencing, you will be better able to take an active part in your

own treatment. So these methods can work well with medical and psychological care.

We encourage you to seek a doctor or therapist and to use these methods in conjunction with medication when needed, along with a good diet, regular exercise, and adequate sleep. If you are having trouble maintaining these healthy habits, this book may help you to discover how to be healthy and in balance. And although meditation is something everyone usually can do, we recommend consulting a psychotherapist or physician who is familiar with this kind of approach before you begin, to ensure that you have no psychological or physical conditions that might preclude meditating. If you do have a history of severe anxiety, depression, or trauma, always use these methods under the guidance of a well-trained professional. When you work in conjunction with an expert, a better and happier life will open up for you!

How to Use This Book

This book offers things to read and think about, as well as exercises to practice. We encourage you to actually do the exercises. Although there are concepts, theories, and research findings, change takes place through your experience. By doing the exercises, you give yourself the opportunity to feel something new. Through the process of actively engaging in the exercises, change happens. You can skip around, especially in part 3, working with the sections that seem most relevant to your situation and needs.

When you do an exercise, read it through a few times. Then, set the book down and try the exercise. Begin with a short amount of time and gradually increase it. Even devoting a minute or two to meditation will help you feel better and start a change process. And as you become more skilled at meditating, you will be able to increase the amount of time you devote to it. Start where you are, with what's comfortable for you to do. Accept whatever you do without judging it as good or bad. Learning to accept things as they are is a primary quality of meditation. You will discover ways to stop being so hard on yourself as you engage in the meditative experience.

We have been writing about meditation for decades and have written numerous books on these rich and beautiful practices. We also teach

meditation to the public and to other professionals to help them integrate this useful tool into their work. Over the years, we have come to respect the unique talents and creativity in our clients who have suffered from bipolar disorder. We have developed meditative treatments to help them stop dissipating their energy so that they can focus it on developing their potential. It is our sincere hope that you will cultivate your best qualities as you work with this book.

Part 1

**Fundamental Principles
and Facts**

Chapter 1

Looking through the Lens of the Tao

This chapter introduces fundamental principles from Eastern healing that can help you begin the process of overcoming the problems from your bipolar disorder. The exercises that accompany each principle help you to experience the ideas personally. You will gain a better understanding of the nature of bipolar according to the Tao, which opens up a new way of working with your bipolar disorder.

What Is the Tao?

Tao means “way,” a path or method to follow. And that path is the way things are, their essential nature. Each thing has its own Tao, its way. When you attune to the way things are, you gain understanding and access. Then, everything you do flows more easily. Often when people have a problem, they think the best way to overcome it is to set it at a distance and fight against it. And of course, it makes sense to try to overcome your problems with bipolar disorder. But how to do so successfully may not be what you expect.

Taoism teaches that the way to overcome problems is to first get to know them. Begin by moving closer, aligning with the underlying forces instead of fighting against them. Use your awareness to help you redirect the flow of energy and bring about change. Thus, the first step is to get to know what you are working with, your personal Tao, or way, and the

Tao of your bipolar disorder. You do this by tuning in meditatively, and this book will show you how. This ancient wisdom can help you to cope better with your bipolar disorder.

According to the ancient Taoist classic, the Tao Te Ching, before the beginning of the world as we know it today, there was the Tao, an undifferentiated, endless emptiness with no beginning and no end. But with the beginning of the world, this emptiness began to take form. The emergence of the Tao in the world is often pictured as an empty circle with a dotted outline, shown barely emerging from the background. The Tao in its undifferentiated form is the foundation that sets everything in motion. From its unformed beginnings, the Tao evolved into the complex patterns that form our world.

The Tao, as an empty void, is the wellspring, so emptiness is not simply “nothing.” In emptiness, we find openness filled with potential. Life springs from the Tao. We see the importance of emptiness everywhere around us. For example, a cup would not be what it is without the empty space inside it. Once you fill a cup—perhaps you decide to fill it with soil, to make a planter—it loses its capacity as a cup. Emptiness is essential for a cup to serve its function as a vessel to be filled.

When you learn how to meditate, you return to emptiness, the undifferentiated Tao, where you can find your path to follow. The Tao Te Ching states, “Take emptiness to the limit; maintain tranquility in the center” (Lao-tzu 1989, 68). In those moments of silence, you open a space for the Tao to appear. Emptiness may seem like a vague foundation, but as you discover your own open moments through meditation, you will learn that the pushes and pulls that have ruled your life fade away, leaving an empty space for new possibilities to take form.

Exercise 1.1 Discover an Empty Moment

Set a timer on your watch or clock for one minute. Find a comfortable place to sit down. Just sit quietly. Do nothing except sit quietly. Let your breathing be relaxed and comfortable. If you find yourself feeling as if you should be doing something, gently remind yourself that you are just sitting quietly, and return to sitting and doing nothing. In this silent, empty moment, with nothing that needs to be done, you open a space for something new to happen.

Attuning to Your Personal Tao

You have your own Tao, your personal way. Your personality; your likes and dislikes; your thoughts, behaviors, and feelings emerge spontaneously as an expression of your deeper nature, your Tao. You spontaneously expressed your Tao as a child, when you found yourself drawn to some activities and not others. For example, our love of writing began early, when we were children: Annellen created “Things to Do” books for family and friends, and Alex designed, wrote, and produced his own newspaper. As we mention our early interests, you will probably think of yours. Perhaps you liked to play sports or video games, or maybe you were happiest with a box of crayons and a pad of paper. Children express their Tao naturally, and sometimes these early interests give you clues about your deeper nature.

Exercise 1.2 Uncover Your Personal Tao

Think about your interests throughout your life. What did you like to do when you were a child? What was your favorite subject in school? What did you do best? Were you athletic, artistic, or perhaps social? Now consider what you like to do as an adult. What do you choose to do when there’s nothing that you have to do? What are your hobbies? Whether or not you pursue these interests seriously, consider what they are. As you think about these things, you can begin to recognize that you are much more than your bipolar disorder. True, it pushes and pulls you strongly, but you also have many interests, tendencies, and talents that comprise your fuller nature, your Tao. Your Tao is a constant center that guides the journey of your life. And by taking the time to become aware of yourself in this way, you will gain tangible skills that will prove helpful in overcoming your problems from bipolar disorder.

Attuning to the Tao of Bipolar

As you might expect, bipolar disorder has its own Tao, its way. In the West we typically define disorders by their symptoms, and bipolar disorder is typically depicted as swings in moods, work disturbances, and loss of sleep. These are the outer manifestations of the disorder. But the Eastern way looks for the source, the deeper nature that drives the symptoms. So, you might be wondering, what is the essence of bipolar disorder, its Tao?

The Tao of bipolar disorder affects energy. At its core, bipolar disorder involves a cyclical change of energy. The original name, *manic depression*, was replaced with the term *bipolar disorder*. Experts recognized that the problem was better understood as an energy or mood change along a continuum (see chapter 2). Therefore, learning about the nature of change itself (described in the next section) will give you deeper insight into your mood shifts. To truly know the Tao of bipolar disorder means to become aware of your energy as it undergoes change. Then you will be able to move your energy toward a natural balance that flows smoothly through time.

You can work with your bipolar disorder by attuning to yourself in real time as you undergo changes in energy. Through the practice of meditation, you gain skills that will help you become aware of your shifts in energy. You will learn how to notice changes in your energy as they happen, moment by moment. You will be able to sustain your awareness to notice the flow of energy, because it is ongoing. And by becoming mindfully aware of these subtle, underlying forces that drive your mood swings, you will be able to recognize the source and work from it in order to lessen your troubling symptoms.

Following the Way of Nonaction

Then how do you implement this real-time attuning to the Tao of your bipolar disorder? One of the key teachings in the Tao Te Ching is the way of nonaction: *wu wei*. Take no action, and then nothing will remain undone. You might wonder, *How can I make a significant change in my problems without doing something to make it happen?* Penetrating deeper

into the meaning of nonaction offers creative alternatives to typical ways of trying to make things happen.

The Tao Te Ching states that the first step on the way to the Tao is to be in harmony with, not in rebellion against, the fundamental laws of the universe (Waley 1958). Thus, the first step in overcoming the symptoms of bipolar disorder is to become aware of yourself along with your levels of energy and corresponding thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Although your intention is to change, you begin by noticing yourself just as you are. With this awareness, you will gain a certain amount of control. So, even though your symptoms, at times, may feel all encompassing and completely out of your control, your awareness inserts a new variable, and with it comes the potential for change.

Now you can probably see that nonaction doesn't mean that you literally should do nothing at all to try to help yourself. Instead, it means that you don't take any action that is contrary to the deeper nature of the situation. You might typically think of taking action to improve your mood as forcing yourself to feel a different way. Or maybe your mood is just a reaction to how you are feeling, and you can't quite help it. The Taoist way involves neither trying to take action nor just reacting. The action you take should be in accord with the forces at play. You don't have to try to oppose your mood, nor do you have to just resign yourself to feeling discomfort. Instead, you learn to follow your mood and use its force to redirect it in a better direction. This means starting with awareness. Notice the forces and sense their direction. Then, like an experienced logger who can guide logs downstream with the current, you will be able to channel your energy to help you accomplish your goals.

Learning to take a path of nonaction with problems is more effective than avoiding them or fighting against them. Phobias are a good example of the power of nonaction. People often try to manage the fear by running away from it. But the more they do things to avoid their fear, the worse it gets. And as a result, they lose touch with the real situation. From the perspective of nonaction, they have lost their attunement to the feared situation's true nature. An effective form of treatment for phobias, known as *exposure therapy*, involves staying with the fear. Being calmly immersed in the situation without trying to escape—in other words, practicing nonaction—makes the fear go away. For example, a cure for a fear of elevators is to ride on an elevator, carefully guided into calmness with the support of a therapist. The phobic person may feel intense anxiety at

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