

“A rare and remarkable achievement. It fuses deep scholarship with deep tenderness. . . . This is a wise and important book.”  
—Siddhartha Mukherjee, author of *The Emperor of All Maladies*

# The Trauma of Everyday Life



MARK EPSTEIN, MD

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## Praise for *The Trauma of Everyday Life* by Mark Epstein

“Mark Epstein’s book is a rare and remarkable achievement. It fuses deep scholarship with deep tenderness—in the spirit of the greatest Buddhist teachers—to investigate the nature and psychic repercussions of trauma. The fact that Epstein can effortlessly transit between the ancient truths of Buddhism and the most contemporary understanding of trauma is a testament to his agility as a thinker. This is a wise and important book.”

—Siddhartha Mukherjee, author of *The Emperor of All Maladies*

“This daring psychobiography of the Buddha divines in tales of his life the sources of his early emotional pain and finds in the Buddha’s methods a balm for the human psyche. In a breathtaking display of the therapeutic art, Epstein does ingenious psychodynamic detective work, deducing what ailed the Buddha, and why his remedies work so well. *The Trauma of Everyday Life* reads like a gripping mystery—one told by your warm and reassuring, but utterly candid, analyst. What’s true for the Buddha, Epstein explains, applies to us all.”

—Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*

“Written with authentic originality, from the author’s own inward struggles and achievements, it is the most loving, gentle, brave, insightful, and exquisite presentation of the all too fully human process of enlightenment I have seen. Reading it engages us to look deep within to the heart as we expand our mind to appreciate the Buddha’s example in the only real way—with the joy of natural relational knowing. Buddha would have loved it—I love it! I recommend it—a transforming pleasure!”

—Robert A. F. Thurman, Jey Tsong Khapa Professor of Buddhist Studies, Columbia University, and author of *Essential Tibetan Buddhism*

“Mark Epstein is one of the very few writers who has been able to make the connections between psychoanalysis and Buddhism seem not merely interesting but somehow riveting and useful. Written with Epstein’s characteristic lucidity and passion, this inspired and illuminating book clarifies a lot of our presuppositions about trauma and, indeed, about everyday life. It should be of considerable interest to a great many people.”

—Adam Phillips, author of *Missing Out and Winnicott*

“Mark Epstein has managed to bring to life a sensitive and subtle understanding of human suffering and how traumatic the human condition is, and how transcendent and liberative it can be. His exploration of the subject draws beautifully and candidly on his own life, his own meditation practice, and his love for the Buddha’s life story and embodied wisdom teachings. He weaves these threads and

themes together with his love of Winnicott and psychotherapy in the most magical of ways. It is a remarkable and poetic achievement and goes to the heart of the relational nature of human awareness reflected, as he shows, in our own implicit memory.”

—Jon Kabat-Zinn, author of *Full Catastrophe Living* and *Mindfulness for Beginners*

“In this intriguing and deeply moving meditation on the human condition, Mark Epstein offers a psychoanalytic reading of the Buddha’s life that illuminates the same tragedies and joys that are just as much part of our life today.”

—Stephen Batchelor, author of *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist*

“As always, Mark Epstein meditates on experience—his own and that of others—with exemplary intelligence, sensitivity, and tact. It is hard to imagine a book this year with more lucid and bracing wisdom.”

—Pankaj Mishra, author of *An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World*

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THE TRAUMA OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Mark Epstein, MD, is a psychiatrist in private practice in New York City and the author of a number of books about the interface of Buddhism and psychotherapy, including *Thoughts Without a Thinker* and *Psychotherapy Without the Self*. He received his undergraduate and medical degrees from Harvard University.

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ALSO BY MARK EPSTEIN:

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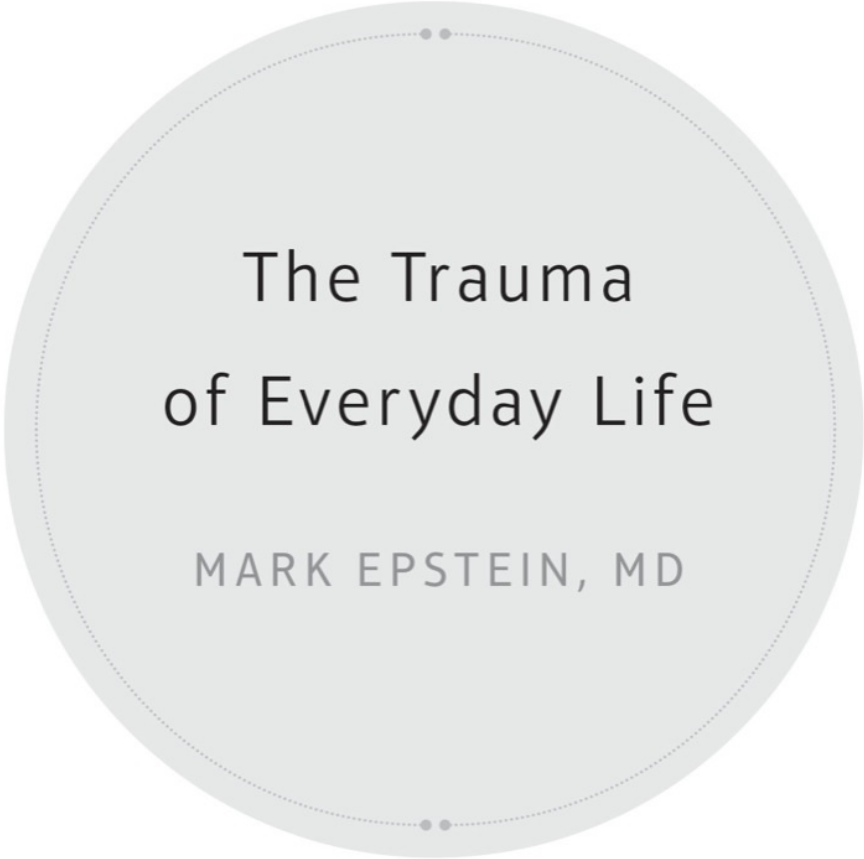
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of Everyday Life

MARK EPSTEIN, MD



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#### AUTHOR'S NOTE

Except in the case of well-known figures introduced by first and last names, I have changed names and other identifying details or constructed composites in order to protect privacy.



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To Arlene

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Only one step, and my deep misery would be beatitude.

—RAINER MARIA RILKE,  
*The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*

# The Way Out Is Through

For the first ten years of my work as a psychiatrist, I did not think much about trauma. I was in my thirties, and many of the people I worked with were not much older than I was. In the first flush of my marriage, most of my efforts were directed toward helping my patients find and achieve the kind of love and intimacy they wanted and deserved. In retrospect, I should have been alerted to the ubiquity of trauma by the fact that three of the first patients I ever cared for were young women on an inpatient psychiatric ward who each attempted suicide after breaking up with their boyfriends. Their experiences were all similar. The stability and security they were counting on suddenly vanished. The earth moved and their worlds collapsed. While I helped them to recover, it took me many more years to understand that their reactions were far from unique. They were impulsive, young, vulnerable, and full of unrealistic expectations, but they were being forced to deal with an uncomfortable truth that we all have to face in one form or another. Trauma is an indivisible part of human existence. It takes many forms but spares no one.

Ten years into my therapy practice, three women in their early thirties came to see me within three months of one another. Each of their husbands had dropped dead. One left in the morning to ride his mountain bike and had a heart attack, one lay stricken on the tennis court, and one did not wake up in the morning. Each of these women's losses challenged my therapeutic approach. They had already found the love and intimacy I was endeavoring to help my patients achieve. They needed something else from me.

Around this same time, one of my long-term patients, a man about my own age, received a frightening diagnosis. He had a condition that threatened his life but that was known to have a highly variable course, discovered in a routine blood test. He might be severely sick soon, with a bone marrow cancer called multiple myeloma, or he might be fine for a long while. Only time, and careful monitoring, would tell. When he first told me, I reacted with genuine concern and barely disguised horror. He responded to my concern with alarm.

"I don't need sympathy from you," he said. "I can get that from other people. I need something different from you. This diagnosis is a fact, is it not? I can't treat it like a tragedy. That's why I'm coming to you. I know you understand that."

My patient's comment brought me up short. I knew he was right. His condition was mirroring the breakups, losses, and deaths that had been knocking at my door. His query, "This illness is a fact, is it not?" rang in my ears. What could I offer him? Already deeply influenced by the philosophy and

psychology of Buddhism, I turned to it again for help. What I found did not really surprise me—in some sense I knew it already—but it helped me, and my patient, a great deal. In its most succinct form, it was what the Buddha called Realistic View. In the prescription for the end of suffering that he outlined in his Four Noble Truths, Realistic View held an important place. A critical component of what became known as the Noble Eightfold Path, Realistic View counseled that trauma, in any of its forms, is not a failure or a mistake. It is not something to be ashamed of, not a sign of weakness, and not a reflection of inner failing. It is simply a fact of life.

This attitude toward trauma is at the heart of the Buddha's teaching, although it is often overlooked in the rush to embrace the inner peace that his teachings also promised. But inner peace is actually predicated upon a realistic approach to the uncertainties and fears that pervade our lives. Western psychology often teaches that if we understand the cause of a given trauma we can move past it, returning to the steady state we imagine is normal. Many who are drawn to Eastern practices hope that they can achieve their own steady state. They use religious techniques to quiet their minds in the hope of rising above the intolerable feelings that life evokes. Both strategies, at their core, seek to escape from trauma, once and for all. But trauma is all pervasive. It does not go away. It continues to reassert itself as life unfolds. The Buddha taught that a realistic view makes all the difference. If one can treat trauma as a fact and not as a failing, one has the chance to learn from the inevitable slings and arrows that come one's way. Meditation makes profound use of this philosophy, but its utility is not limited to meditation. As my patient realized when grappling with his diagnosis, the traumas of everyday life, if they do not destroy us, become bearable, even illuminating, when we learn to relate to them differently.

When I first came upon the Buddha's teachings, I was young and not really thinking about illness or death. No one I knew had died, and I was struggling with my own issues of adolescence and young adulthood. Trauma, in the sense of confronting an actual or threatened death or serious injury (as the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* defines "trauma"), was not something I had to face directly. But there was another kind of trauma, developmental trauma, percolating under the surface of my experience. Developmental trauma occurs when "emotional pain cannot find a relational home in which it can be held."<sup>1</sup> In retrospect, I can see that this was the case for me. In my first encounters with Buddhism, I was trying to escape from emotional pain I did not really understand. But in order to practice the Buddha's teachings, I needed a realistic view. This meant accepting there was no escape. The most important spiritual experiences of my early exploration of Buddhism gave me such a view, although I have had to be reminded of it time and again as circumstances have evolved. This is what I remembered in response to my patient's plea, however. What I learned in grappling with my own trauma was relevant in his struggle, too.

I could tell, when I first came upon Buddhism, that there was going to be a problem getting it right. There were too many paradoxes for there not to be. Self appears but does not truly exist, taught the Buddha. Change your thoughts but remain as you are, said the Dalai Lama. The mind that does not understand is the Buddha; there is no other, wrote the Zen philosopher D. T. Suzuki. I was excited by these teachings—they rang true in some ill-defined way—but it was not easy to make the transition from conceptual appreciation to experiential understanding. Nor could I even say with confidence that I truly understood things conceptually. At the time of my introduction to Buddhism, I was still a college student and I was good at only one thing: studying. I knew how to write a paper, prepare for a test, gather information, and analyze it a little bit. I had figured out how to be reasonably comfortable in an academic environment, but I was after something more, although I found it difficult to put my finger on just what that might be.

Whenever I tried to put it into words it sounded banal. While comfortable in my academic world, I was uncomfortable with myself. Deep down, I felt unsure. Not of my intellectual skills but of something more amorphous. I could frame it in terms of existential anxiety or even adolescent ennui, but it felt more personal than that. I worried there was something wrong with me, and I longed to feel more at ease. I had the sense that I was living on the surface of myself, that I was keeping myself more two-dimensional than I really was, that I was inhibited, or was inhibiting myself, in some ill-defined way. I felt boring, although I framed it in terms of feeling empty. To admit that I felt boring would have made me feel too ashamed.

Buddhism appealed to me because, while it hinged on paradox, it also seemed very logical. It spoke directly to my feelings of anxiety and even promised that there was something concrete to do about them. The Buddha, in his First Noble Truth, affirmed my experience by invoking *dukkha*, or suffering, as a basic fact of life. He spoke about it very psychologically; he even specified that there was something uncomfortable about the self in particular, some way that it could not help but disappoint. This made me feel relieved, as if to suggest that I was not making it up. If the Buddha had noticed it all those years ago, maybe it was not just *my* problem; maybe there was even something to do about it.

The first words of the Buddha that I ever read, preserved in a collection called the *Dhammapada*, reinforced my feeling of hopefulness by speaking directly to my helplessness. He seemed to be describing my own mind.

Flapping like a fish thrown on dry ground, it trembles all day, struggling.

I liked the image of the fish on dry ground. It spoke of my discomfort, of what I would now call a feeling of estrangement, a sense of not being at peace, or at one, with myself. And it caught the feeling of my anxiety perfectly. But there was more than just a diagnosis of the problem in the Buddha's approach. There was a science to it that I found reassuring, an inner science.

Like an archer an arrow,  
the wise man steadies his trembling mind,  
a fickle and restless weapon.

The Buddha had a solution, something to do for the problem, a way of working directly with the mind that appealed to the budding therapist in me. There was a path with a goal and a concrete method that one could practice in order to feel better.

The mind is restless.  
To control it is good.  
A disciplined mind is the road to Nirvana.<sup>2</sup>

I was excited by the promise of the Buddha's psychology, drawn to it before ever learning much about Western therapy. I could see that my mind needed work, and the Buddha's prescription of self-investigation and mental discipline, what he called "mindfulness and clear comprehension," made intuitive sense to me. Yet the more I learned about meditation the clearer it became that there was a

limit to how far I could think, or reason, or even practice my way in. I wanted to understand and master it, but it frustrated me when I approached it. ~~Whenever I sat down to meditate, my own insecurities rose to the surface. I was never sure if I was doing it *right*.~~

I have written of how my first understanding of meditation came from learning to juggle. I was at a Buddhist summer institute in Colorado in the summer after my junior year in college. The faculty was full of Buddhist teachers: university professors, Tibetan lamas, Zen *roshis*, American Peace Corps veterans in the process of becoming meditation teachers. I took classes from all of them, but my roommates, randomly assigned to me for the summer months, stopped going to class after a week or two, turned off by the pretension of many of the most popular instructors. They watched me laboring at meditation and after some time took pity on me. One day, they offered to teach me to juggle.

I was up for the challenge and worked at it assiduously. After several days of practice, I succeeded at keeping three balls in the air. My mind relaxed and I momentarily stopped worrying about keeping everything together. A new kind of space opened up in which everything flowed in its own way and I settled into it. I was present but not in the way, attentive and physically active but not interfering, detached but not disinterested, watching but at the same time completely involved. My familiar and troubled self did not disappear; it became one more thing to be aware of, one of the balls I was juggling. Instead of secretly fighting with it in the back of my mind, I became more accepting of my troubling inner feelings. I sensed a shift in my basic orientation to life, an easing of my self-centeredness, more of an ability to take myself lightly.

I also found that it was possible to maintain this new frame of mind, both when I was juggling and sometimes, when I was not. If I kept a light and steady touch on my mind, something of the juggling remained with me. If I tried too hard, thought about it too much, or, conversely, relaxed altogether, the balls fell out of the air. But if I dropped all that and just juggled, it seemed to take care of itself. Juggling and, by implication, meditation required that I suspend my usual orientation and enter some new territory, an intermediate zone that seemed to create something new or evoke something old. My hands were not only juggling the balls; they were juggling my mind. Or maybe my mind was doing the juggling, not my hands. And where was “I,” the troubled and anxious “me,” the one who was worried about being good enough, in this process? I really could not say. Intrigued and, for the moment, relieved, I returned to my meditation classes. I had a new way to approach meditation now, and a new orientation to myself.

I began to appreciate that Buddhism demanded something more of me than studying and also something more than just rote practice. Not that it did not engage my intellect—it did. And not that it did not encourage conceptual rigor and rigorous effort—these were things I appreciated about it. But it demanded something in addition. I knew nothing of art at this time, but I can see now that Buddhism is as much inner art as it is inner science. It is a formless art, to be sure—the only product is the self, and even *that* comes quickly into continuous question—but it is an art nonetheless, one that demands its own touch, one I could only understand to the extent that I could give myself over to it completely. This emphasis on surrender and process was not one that I knew before I came upon Buddhism—perhaps if I had been a musician or an actor or a painter or a poet, it would not have seemed like such a revelation—but for me it was like stumbling into a new reality, one in which I was suddenly being asked to give of myself in a new way. In Zen, the image of falling backward into a well is used to describe what it is like. For me it was like feeling my way into myself while blindfolded, never quite sure what I would find.

Feeling my way into myself. That was definitely what it was like. Feeling my way into all of the doubts and anxieties and insecurities and dis-ease that I would have been all too happy to get rid of,



that I had initially hoped meditation would destroy. Feeling my way into them, in my body as well as in my mind, and feeling my way through them. Something changed as I embraced the art of meditation. Instead of approaching myself with dread, with the secret hope that I could rise above my personal struggles, I began to explore the texture of my own suffering. No one had ever told me such a thing was possible. Even as I practiced under the tutelage of a new generation of Buddhist teachers, I had trouble reconciling my experience with what I was learning from my Buddhist books. The fundamental psychological teaching of the Buddha was called *anatman* (in Sanskrit) or *anatta* (in Pali, the language of the Buddhist scriptures, a Sanskrit-related tongue closer to what the Buddha must have spoken), meaning no-soul or no-self. My Buddhist teachers stressed this at every opportunity. Part of my initial attraction to Buddhism lay in this central concept. I liked that there was an alternative to the Western preoccupation with self, to the psychoanalytic effort to build up the ego. “Where *id* was, the *ego* shall be,” pronounced Freud in a famous maxim that I had already unconsciously subscribed to. Not quite ready to relinquish my *id* (still in the process of finding it, in fact), I liked the counterintuitive implications of no-self, the allure of egolessness. I liked the very sound of it. It took away some kind of pressure I had been feeling to make myself into someone I could put my finger on, something I could explain. It let me off the hook a little, relaxed me, gave me a sense of relief. No self. It had a nice ring. While most other people were busy making themselves bigger, better, and stronger, I could head in a different direction. Go to zero. Less is more, wasn’t that what people were saying? Maybe I could leave my *id* alone after all.

But my understanding of no-self was limited at this point. I took it to mean that my inner anxiety, my “self,” was unreal and would drop away once I woke up. It was confusing to find that meditation—rather than dropping me into a void of no-self—backed me into myself. It tricked me, so to speak. The paradox that lured me to Buddhism in the beginning did not resolve as I became more familiar with the Buddha’s words; it deepened. While meditation was teaching me to hold myself with a light touch, it was also helping me to emerge, to emerge *through* my suffering, not in spite of it. I continued to study Buddhist theory, of course, and I understood, theoretically, that there was no self to be found, that what we took for a self was only a conglomeration of parts, just as a car is made up of wheels, axles, motors, chassis, and so forth. In the Buddhist sutras, the Buddha called the parts that are construed in their interaction as a self the five *skandhas*, the five “heaps” or “aggregates.” Form, feelings, perceptions, mental processes, and consciousness were the five *skandhas*; I knew that. There was no self; there were only the aggregates. That was one of the fundamental principles of the Buddhist path, repeated at the outset of every teaching. Yet the more experience I had with meditation, the more connected I felt with myself. Where before I had been living on the surface, secretly afraid that I was missing something or that there was something off about me, I now felt—how else can I phrase it?—more at home. Instead of dropping away permanently, as I, newly schooled in Buddhist metaphysics, hoped and expected it would do, my self seemed to be broadening its horizons.

Affirmation that I might not be completely off base came to me from the Buddhist sutras themselves. In one, there is a story about a conversation between the Buddha and the king of Kosala, one of the kingdoms where the Buddha roamed. Why is it that your followers seem so different from those of other teachers and sects? this king wanted to know. You emphasize the inescapability of *dukkha*, the truth of suffering, and yet your monks look so full of life. The followers of other religions look “haggard, coarse, pale, emaciated, and unprepossessing,” the king went on, while your disciples are “joyful, elated, jubilant, and exultant.” They even seem “light-hearted,” the king continued, as if they have “a gazelle’s mind.”<sup>3</sup> This was indeed a strange religion. How was it that a willingness to embrace suffering yielded such a sense of vitality?

The king was seeing what I was feeling. The fruits of meditation—balance, ease, joyfulness, and humor—seemed to emerge in conjunction with an acknowledgment of suffering. This was strange, I thought. But I could not ignore the shift that was taking place inside of me. While Buddhism taught about no-self, my own experience was to feel more connected, more alive, less at odds with or afraid of myself, and more able to rest in my own consciousness. I was less fraught, less worried about the state of myself, less preoccupied with what was wrong with me and more able to just be. The feelings of being like a fish out of water were beginning to diminish.

I have come to realize that this paradoxical strategy was one of the Buddha's greatest discoveries. Trauma happens to everyone. The potential for it is part of the precariousness of human existence. Some traumas—loss, death, accidents, disease, and abuse—are explicit; others—like the emotional deprivation of an unloved child—are more subtle; and some, like my own feelings of estrangement, seem to come from nowhere. But it is hard to imagine the scope of an individual life without envisioning some kind of trauma, and it is hard for most people to know what to do about it. I remember talking to my father just before he died from a malignant brain tumor a couple of years ago. He was eighty-four years old, an accomplished physician who had lived a long and productive life and had worked steadily until his tumor was discovered a month or so earlier, too late for treatment.

“Have you made your peace with what is happening?” I asked him somewhat awkwardly in one of our final conversations, tiptoeing around the dreaded word “death.”

“I could say that I'm trying,” he said, his words coming slowly and haltingly now. “But I feel like I'm finally up against something I can't do anything about.”

It is rare for someone to get through life without facing trauma. I know my father had his share—at fifteen he injected his own father with morphine as he lay dying of mesothelioma, an asbestos-caused lung cancer he came down with after insulating his own attic—but I think he did his best to keep it out of his consciousness for as long as he could. The Buddha counseled another way. He saw the mind and the heart as one and he used a rather strange phrase to talk about how a realistic view of trauma helps people. It “gladdens their hearts,” he said on many occasions. The king of Kosala noticed it in his time and I noticed it in mine but it was not the conventional approach in his era and it is certainly not the standard in ours.

The Buddha was not a physician, although he was often described as one, at least partly because he gave his first set of teachings, on the Four Noble Truths, in the form traditionally used by doctors of his time to present their cases.<sup>4</sup> Like them, he described the illness, gave its cause, declared that a cure was available, and laid out the components of the treatment. In so doing, he pushed against the constraints of his culture. An ancient Sanskrit proverb declares, “One should not speak unless what one says is both true and pleasant.”<sup>5</sup> Buddha rejected this view. There was nothing pleasant about his First Noble Truth, spoken by him in the form of a one-word exclamation: “*Dukkha!*” The word, generally translated as “suffering” but carrying the literal meaning of “hard to face,” was the Buddha's emphatic summary of the entire human predicament. When forced to elaborate on what he meant, the Buddha let loose with a torrent of explanation. Birth, aging, sickness, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are inescapable; being close to those who are disagreeable, being separated from those who are loved, and not getting what one wants are all unpleasant facts of life; indeed, just being a person in this world brings suffering because of how insignificant we feel and how impermanent we are. Even pleasant experiences carry a whiff of dissatisfaction because of their inability to provide ultimate comfort. No matter how fulfilling, they eventually run their course.

But there was another quality to the *dukkha* the Buddha described, a more subtle description of the unsatisfactory nature of the human predicament. The word itself is a compound with an interesting

derivation. The prefix “duh” means badness or difficulty, while the suffix “kha” can refer to the hole at the center of a wheel into which an axle fits. The word thus connotes a bad fit making for a bumpy ride.<sup>6</sup> For me this image of a poorly fitting axle was another way of describing the sense of not fitting in, of not quite belonging, of being slightly at odds with oneself, that had afflicted me for as long as I could remember. It was probably no accident, given the derivation of the word, that the Buddha’s teaching of the Four Noble Truths was entitled “Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dharma.” His listeners would have been aware of the connotations of the word *dukkha* and would have appreciated the imagery of the Buddha turning a wheel smoothly.

Questioned some years after his enlightenment by a local prince about his penchant for delivering bad news, Buddha said that he could no longer abide by the traditional Sanskrit principle of saying only what was true and pleasant. He marched to a different drum, he maintained, and would speak of what was “true and beneficial even if it was disagreeable.” To illustrate his point, he pointed to a baby on the prince’s lap. What if the infant put a stick or a pebble in his mouth? Wouldn’t the prince pull it out even if doing so were likely to cause the baby some distress? Wasn’t that what a doctor sometimes had to do? Not to mention a mother? But he added one caveat. He would speak the beneficial, if disagreeable, truth only if he “knew the time to say it.”<sup>7</sup> As is the case with good therapists today, tact was a major concern of the Buddha. If someone was not ready to acknowledge his or her trauma, he would not force the issue. Each individual had to liberate him- or herself, after all. The best a teacher, even a Buddha, can do is to show them how.

“This generation is entangled in a tangle,” began one of the earliest commentaries on the Buddha’s teachings, written many generations ago in Sri Lanka, somewhere around the fifth century of the common era. The “tangle” refers to the way we only want to hear what is “true and pleasant,” the way we refuse what is “disagreeable.” In the Buddha’s time as well as in our own, there was a rush toward some imagined version of normal, an intolerance of the precarious foundation upon which we are perched. It was true thousands of years ago and it remains true to this day. The novelist William Styron once expressed this perfectly. Overheard when he was a young man in Paris drunkenly falling into his oysters and pleading to his friends for relief, Styron gave voice to what for most people remains an unacknowledged whisper in the back of their minds. “Ah ain’ got no mo ree-sistance to change than a *snow-flake*,” Styron moaned. “Ah’m goin’ home to the James Rivuh and grow *pee-nuts*.”<sup>8</sup> Styron’s willingness to acknowledge his trauma is unusual—most of us refuse to admit it, even to ourselves, but live in a state of entanglement with it nonetheless.

A patient of mine recently gave voice to a similar sentiment in the midst of her therapy with me. She was sober, and she had a different image for her suffering, but she was pleading in much the same way as William Styron: “I feel like a person alone in a sailboat in the middle of the ocean clinging for dear life to the mast,” Monica confided as she began to well up, the silence of her therapy session cushioning her tears. “It’s too much; I can’t hang on any longer; I don’t know what else to do.” An accomplished and beloved professor in her midfifties, Monica was astute enough to be able to give language to her trauma, one that many people feel but shy away from. She, too, was like a fish out of water. There was an urgency to her communication, I remember, a desperation, but also an honesty. I think it came in the context of talking about her mother’s declining health, but I recognized the feeling and did not think it was only about her mother’s impending demise. I was too familiar with what she was talking about to attribute it solely to the approaching loss of her mom.

Life’s difficulties often reduce us to the feeling Monica was talking about, I thought. What with war and earthquakes and rape and disease, it’s a wonder life is not more difficult more of the time. But even if we push natural or man-made disasters to one side and try to stick to normal everyday life,

things are still a struggle. Life is beautiful sometimes, for sure; in fact, it's totally amazing, every day a good day; but that doesn't stop things from being fragile and precarious, nor does it stop us from feeling all too alone. Of course, the line between normal everyday life and calamity seems extraordinarily thin sometimes, but regular life, even in its glory, is difficult. Things don't always go the way they should. Our friends and loved ones struggle. The specter of loss is always hovering. And we often feel adrift, unmoored, fearful, and out of our depth.

Luckily, I did not relay any of these thoughts to Monica. Something more vital popped out of my mouth.

"But you're the ocean, as well," I replied.

Several years later, after her mother had passed away, Monica reminded me of my comment. It had had a tremendous impact, she said. I was surprised—I could have just as easily made a case for her *not* being the ocean—but I was glad I had been able to say something that mattered, something she remembered, something that made her think. So much of therapy happens in the moment and passes right out of memory. There was a Buddhist slant to my retort, I reflected. It hit on something I had learned from my own experience. Trauma is the way into the self, and the way out. To be free, to come to terms with our lives, we have to have a direct experience of ourselves as we really are, warts and all. To understand selflessness—the central and liberating concept I was reaching for when I reminded Monica of her oceanic nature—we have to first find the self that we take to be so real, the one that is pushing us around in life, the one that feels traumatized, entangled in a tangle. The freedom the Buddha envisioned does not come from jettisoning imprisoning thoughts and feelings or from abandoning the suffering self; it comes from learning how to hold it all differently, juggling them rather than cleaving to their ultimate realities.

Monica was at a pivotal point in therapy, a pivotal point in her life. Some might say she was regressed, but there is an inherent prejudice in this word that connotes an almost universal fear of the emergence of such strong feelings of dread. Monica was in touch with herself on a primitive level, and this was a real accomplishment. She really did feel alone, adrift, and afraid. However much I might have wanted to comfort her, to show her how her current feelings were conditioned by early childhood experiences of deprivation and were therefore presently unreal, I restrained myself. From my perspective, her willingness to expose her true feelings was a great opportunity. On one level, Monica was in touch with her reality. There she was, clutching the mast of her identity. On another level, she was poised for a breakthrough. All around her, just outside her apprehension, was the liberating ocean of her mind.

I was reaching for this when I was speaking with Monica. I was not thinking of Freud's oceanic feeling, of the way Freud reduced spiritual experience to a resurrection of infantile oneness with the mother at the breast. I was not trying to tell her that she and her mom were one despite her mother's impending death, and I was not trying to show her the childhood or infantile origins of her painful feelings: I was indicating to her that she was actually one step away from understanding her true nature. Her conviction about her predicament was inadvertently summoning an image of its release. Convinced that she was clinging to the mast of her ship, she was nonetheless painting a picture of the sea. And somewhere inside, when I pointed out the huge part of her internal landscape she was ignoring, Monica let go, just a little.

This rhythm, of trauma and its release, is one that runs through Buddhism like a great underground river. I say underground because, even within Buddhist culture, it is not always clearly acknowledged. There is a hidden trauma at the heart of the Buddha's own story, for example, one that is known but not often spoken of, one that I have found full of meaning despite the lack of attention it has garnered.

over the years. The Buddha's mother died seven days after giving birth to him. Overtly, in the myths and legends that have grown up around the life of the Buddha, very little is made of this fact. But scratch the surface of the Buddha's biography and you can see a metaphor churning away, lying in wait, one might say, for the psychologically minded times we are now living in. Something was nagging at the Buddha's heart, something he had no memory of, a taste of suffering so early in his life that, for all intents and purposes, it should not have mattered. Raised by loving parents—his mother's sister stepped in and took care of him like her own—and surrounded by all the joy and wealth and caring attention his parents could muster, the young man who was to become the Buddha nevertheless felt that something was wrong. Whether this feeling stemmed from the loss of his biological mother or from a later confrontation with the realities of old age, sickness, and death we do not know, but the presence of this early loss in his psyche creates a motif that anyone who struggles with inexplicable feelings of estrangement or alienation can relate to. The traumas of everyday life can easily make us feel like a motherless child.

In responding to Monica, I was making a critical point. It is not as important to find the *cause* of our traumatized feelings as it is to learn how to relate to them. Because everyday life is so challenging, there is a great need to pretend. Our most intimate feelings get shunted to the side, relegated to our dreams. We all want to be normal. Life, even normal life, is arduous, demanding, and ultimately threatening. We all have to deal with it, and none of us really knows how. We are all traumatized by life, by its unpredictability, its randomness, its lack of regard for our feelings and the losses it brings. Each in our own way, we suffer. Even if nothing else goes wrong (and it is rare that this is the case), old age, illness, and death loom just over the horizon, like the monsters our children need us to protect them from in the night.

The story of the Buddha's enlightenment shows him confronting his own trauma and using it to broaden the horizons of his mind. A Buddhist teacher of mine, whom I met years ago in Boulder in my initial explorations of Buddhism, has a pithy way of describing how the Buddha accomplished this. When dealing with painful emotions, Joseph Goldstein (now a respected American Buddhist and the cofounder of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts) suggests, *the way out is through*. Emotional pain is as fruitful an object of awareness as anything else; it may even have qualities, like intensity, that make it particularly useful as a means of training the mind. In exploring the Buddha's life story, we can see him doing just this. He may not have known where his feelings of trauma came from, but he was able to create for himself the inner environment of attunement and responsiveness that he needed. His success is a model for the rest of us. Confronted with unpleasant feelings that we often are at a loss to explain, we can learn to use those feelings to show us the oceans of our minds.

In a famous statement, the Buddha is reported to have said, "I teach one thing and one thing only: suffering and the end of suffering." As has often been pointed out, to most ears this sounds like two things.<sup>9</sup> But the Buddha was choosing his words carefully. The clear-eyed comprehension of suffering permits its release. The Buddha, in his role as therapist, showed how this was possible. The great promise of his teachings was that suffering is only the First Truth and that acknowledging it opens up the others. By the time the Buddha, turning the wheel of the dharma, got to the Third Truth and the Fourth Truth (the End of Suffering and the Eightfold Path to its Relief), he had filled his listeners with new hope. Trauma, he was saying, while an indisputable fact of life, did not have to be the last word.



## Primitive Agony

It took the Buddha six years of self-imposed exile to find his way out of suffering and some extra time after his awakening to organize his insights into the Four Noble Truths. At first, postenlightenment, he was a bit tongue-tied. It is said that in the immediate aftermath of his nirvana, he was convinced that no one would be able to understand him. “This world is anguished,” he affirmed to himself, “and even that which we call self is ill. No one will ever see what goes against the stream, is subtle, abstruse, deep and hard to see.”<sup>1</sup> People were too entangled in their tangles to open in the way he now knew was possible. Trying to articulate his expansive vision in the face of their disbelief would be tiresome, he thought to himself; it would be wearying and troublesome. “I saw vexation in the telling,”<sup>2</sup> the Buddha reminisced later, and he relented, it is said, only after the pleading of Brahma, highest of the gods, who implored him that there were a handful of people “with little dust on their eyes” who would be grateful for the chance to hear his teachings.

Still, the Buddha was not immediately successful in articulating himself. He scoured the universe with his divine eye after Brahma’s intervention, searching for the two major teachers of his preawakening years. They had shown him how to control his mind, although they had not been able to free him completely from his pain. They were wise, learned, and discerning, the Buddha thought. They had little dust on their eyes. They would be ones who could soon understand him. But, as if to accentuate the unpredictable nature of reality, the Buddha saw that both men had recently died. One had passed away the week before and one the previous evening. At a loss, the Buddha set out to find five old friends he had recently spent time with in the forest doing self-punishing spiritual practice. On the way, the first person he encountered was another acquaintance from his days as a forest ascetic—a wandering Ajivaka named Upaka. Upaka was immediately impressed with the Buddha’s radiant complexion but was suspicious of his claims of enlightenment.

“Your faculties are serene, friend; the color of your skin is clear and bright! Who is your teacher?” the friend exclaimed. The Buddha responded with a long description of his accomplishments, proclaiming that he had no teacher, had freed himself by virtue of his own wisdom, and had peered deeply into the blissful nature of reality. He challenged Upaka’s ascetic worldview right from the start by affirming that nirvana was present in the here and now and not dependent on self-mortification.

“I am an All-transcender, an All-knower,” he explained. “In a blindfold world I go to beat the Deathless Drum.”<sup>3</sup>

Upaka would have none of it and shrugged the Buddha off, unimpressed with his poetry. Deeply

immersed in the prevailing ideology of his time, Upaka believed that painful experiences needed to be accentuated in order to yield their purifying effects. Everyday life was not nearly traumatic enough for him; he was out for something much more punishing. He had known the Buddha when both of them were engaged in torturing themselves as a spiritual pursuit. By subjecting themselves to extremes of hunger, thirst, pain, and physical discomfort, ascetics of their time hoped to liberate their spirits from the prisons of their flesh. To see the Buddha looking so healthy was one big shock—to hear him describing the blissful nature of reality while proclaiming himself fully liberated was more than Upaka could bear. Concluding that the fresh-faced Buddha's realization was only skin deep, he walked on by.

Upaka's rejection of the newly liberated Buddha was instructive. It helped the Buddha to frame his teachings in the manner that we now associate with him. There was no point describing his liberating vision off the bat; it was better to begin with suffering. From that point on, this was the Buddha's tactic. There is enough trauma in daily life to awaken the desire to be free, the Buddha taught. It is right here, already a part of us, already an underlying feeling in our lives. Painful experiences do not have to be cultivated specially—they do not have to be sought after or induced—there is already more than enough to go around. A willingness to face the feelings we already have is much more valuable than trying to escape from them (as the yoga practitioners of his time intended), exaggerate them (as the ascetics attempted), or minimize them altogether (as the materialists and laypeople tended to).

The Buddha applied this logic to both pleasure and pain. It is as silly to reject pleasurable feelings as it is to cultivate painful ones, he taught, but equally foolish to mindlessly pursue unstable pleasure in an attempt to blot out the anguish inherent to life. In later years, in the Buddhist cultures that grew up in India and then in Tibet, the word that was used to describe the world we inhabit translated as “tolerable,” in the sense of being barely tolerable. The Buddha believed that this quality of “barely tolerable” was perfect for spiritual and psychological growth. The fragility of things is apparent to those who look, but if the mind can be taught to hold the instability with some measure of equanimity, a new kind of happiness reveals itself.

Because of his unvarying emphasis on *dukkha*, the Buddha's teachings were often taken to be pessimistic, as if he were still a practicing ascetic. But he was not. As Upaka recognized but could not embrace, Buddha rejected the cultivation of painful states. But he always claimed that, like a doctor, he had to be realistic. One can of course deceive with false consolation, denying the illness; or one may exaggerate the malady and give up hope completely.<sup>4</sup> But such a physician would be of little use. Buddha rejected these two extremes and continually applied the therapeutic middle. In a famous sutra he compared himself to a surgeon pulling a poisonous arrow from a patient's flesh.<sup>5</sup> The tools he offered were powerful, but he admonished his listeners that even if the arrow were removed the patient could still die if he did not tend to the lesion himself. Even the best physician needs the cooperation of the patient, the Buddha affirmed. And every patient has to deal with his or her own wounds.

In today's world there are still contemporary versions of the ancient ascetics, with world views that are remarkably similar. Some of them remain in the wilds of India, living much as they did thousands of years ago, cultivating hardship in order to release themselves from the prisons of their attachments. But others are right here in our own culture. Today's examples include those who suffer from anorexia and starve themselves into an emaciated kind of invulnerability or those who hurt themselves, even cut themselves, to express and/or transcend inner wounds they are not entirely reconciled to. But there are many much less extreme but equally debilitating examples. People who are convinced of their own unworthiness, who cling, like my patient Monica, to the masts of their own

insecurities, who are caught in one way or another by their negative feelings, bear close resemblance to the ascetics of the Buddha's time. Like his old friend Upaka, they have a very hard time seeing past their ingrained versions of reality, driven as they are by self-condemnation. As the comedian Louis C.K. has put it, in a contemporary twist on the Buddha's teachings, "Everything's amazing, and nobody's happy."

Therapists today, building on detailed observations of the infant-parent relationship, now have a way to explain this ascetic strain in the contemporary psyche. Their model, of "developmental trauma," is based on the realization that "there is no such thing as an infant"<sup>6</sup>; there is only a mother-child relationship. Infants are too dependent to be called persons in their own right—they survive only because their parents give themselves over to their care. This "relational" paradigm sees unbearable emotion as the determining factor in trauma. Intense feelings are present in a baby from birth. They take many forms—an infant's ruthless mix of appetite, need, and distress is well-known to any parent—and it is the parent's gut response to engage these rudimentary emotions and try to make them bearable, or barely tolerable, for their child. When this does not happen adequately, when the painful emotions or unpleasant feelings are not picked up and handled by the parents, the infant, or child, is left with overwhelming feelings he or she is not equipped to deal with, feelings that often get turned into self-hate.

My favorite example of this kind of parent-child attunement comes from a children's book one of my patients gave me after hearing me talk about this. The book is called *What's Wrong, Little Pookie?*<sup>7</sup> and in it a mother can be heard questioning her child about what is bothering him. She goes through a series of hypothetical questions (Are you hungry? Are you tired?) that become increasingly absurd (Did a very large hippo try to borrow your shoes?) until Little Pookie has completely forgotten why he was so upset in the first place. It is a humorous example of something parents do for their children all the time. They sense the emotional flavor of their child's mind and endeavor to help the child make sense of it, lightening the child's emotional load in the process.

"Painful or frightening affect becomes traumatic when the attunement that the child needs to assist in its tolerance, containment, and integration is profoundly absent,"<sup>8</sup> writes Robert Stolorow, a philosopher, psychologist, and clinical professor of psychiatry at UCLA, in his book about trauma. "One consequence of developmental trauma, relationally conceived, is that affect states take on enduring, crushing meanings. From recurring experiences of malattunement, the child acquires the unconscious conviction that unmet developmental yearnings and reactive painful feeling states are manifestations of a loathsome defect or of an inherent inner badness."

A recent patient of mine described a version of this perfectly. From as far back as she could remember, she had been convinced there was something wrong with her. This manifested in her preadolescent years as a conviction that her body was flawed. Her parents had their own problems, and she hid her feelings from them as best she could. But one consequence of this was that she not only felt that something was wrong with her but also blamed herself for feeling that way. She tried everything to get away from these uncomfortable feelings: ignoring them, rising above them, insulating herself from them, and pretending they were not there. None of these approaches worked too well—or, rather, they all worked a little. My patient grew to become an accomplished woman with a career and a family. But in private she was still troubled by self-negating feelings not entirely different from those she experienced as an adolescent. She could put up a good front now, but under the surface she was less than sanguine. Her body still bothered her. One day, when her college-aged children were home for the holidays, she was driving home feeling how quickly her life was passing her by. One moment her children were little and the next they were adults. Somehow, she let herself



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