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A L L Y



Sakyong Mipham

TURNING
THE MIND
INTO AN
ALLY



Sakyong Mipham

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To my father and mother,
CHÖGYAM TRUNGPA RINPOCHE
and
LADY KUNCHOK PALDEN

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FOREWORD

I first met Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche years ago in Boulder, Colorado, through his father, my teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. He and the Sakyong's mother, Lady Kunchok Palden, were among the survivors of a refugee group that had narrowly escaped from Tibet to India in 1959. Trungpa Rinpoche, who had been the supreme abbot of the Surmang monasteries, was descended from the warrior king Gesar, a historical figure who is a pivotal source of the Shambhala teachings. Before Sakyong Mipham was born, his father predicted that he would be a very special child, that his early years would be difficult, and that he would emerge as a great teacher. He then requested that Lady Kunchok bless their unborn son by making a pilgrimage to all the sacred Buddhist sites throughout India. When she reached Bodhgaya, the place of the Buddha's enlightenment, the Sakyong apparently decided to arrive. He was born at this holiest of Buddhist sites in December 1962.

During his earliest years, Sakyong Mipham lived with his mother in Tibetan refugee villages in north-west India. His father sent for him to join him in the West at the age of eight. When Sakyong Mipham was a teenager, I became his meditation instructor at Trungpa Rinpoche's request. Looking back, I realize that my teacher was purposely deepening my bond with his son. Every week I would meet with the Sakyong to discuss his meditation. After only a few months, however, I realized that our roles had reversed. The young Sakyong was now instructing me. The relationship that was set in motion back then has only deepened over the years. At the same time, I've watched a somewhat reticent youth grow into a courageous, confident, and wise teacher who is of enormous benefit to hundreds of many students throughout the world.

In 1979 Trungpa Rinpoche privately empowered the Sakyong as his heir and began to guide and instruct him even more closely than before. On a day shortly before this event, Rinpoche said to me, "You aren't going to make my son into a monk, are you? Because I have very different plans for him."

These plans began to come to complete fruition after Trungpa Rinpoche died in 1987, when Sakyong Mipham took over leadership of his father's Shambhala Buddhist community. Later he was recognized by His Holiness Penor Rinpoche as the rebirth of the nineteenth-century meditation master and scholar Mipham Jamyang Gyatso, one of the most renowned teachers in Tibetan Buddhism. At the same time he was enthroned as the Sakyong ("earth protector"), head of the Shambhala lineage.

After years of training with his father as well as undergoing a Western education, the Sakyong now returned to Asia to further deepen his meditation and studies under the tutelage of His Holiness Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche and His Holiness Penor Rinpoche, two of the greatest Tibetan Buddhist masters. It is remarkable to me how natural it was for him to start to speak Tibetan again and to step back into the Tibetan way of thinking. One day I asked him how it was that his grasp of the most profound, often extremely difficult Buddhist teachings came so easily to him. He said, "Well, it seems so familiar, as if I'm just remembering it all." He continues to travel to India every year. He says that he's never happier than when he's doing this study.

Here we have a teacher with a remarkable ability to digest the traditional Tibetan Buddhist teachings thoroughly and completely and then present them in a way that speaks directly to the hearts and needs of Western people. Moreover, his enthusiasm for doing this is contagious. As one who

now completely at home in both the Western and Tibetan mind-sets, he easily and spontaneously serves as a bridge.

In 2001 Sakyong Mipham visited Tibet for the first time, where he was greeted by thousands of people, not only as the current Sakyong and the rebirth of Mipham, but also as living proof of the vitality of Buddhism, returning to the place that his father had left. Huge audiences gathered to hear his teachings.

This book is the ideal next step in Sakyong Mipham's journey, as it introduces him to a world sorely in need of the traditional mind-training practices he presents. The beauty of his approach is that it joins two streams of teachings: Buddhism and Shambhala, a spiritual warriorship grounded in the realization of basic goodness. Here Sakyong Mipham offers detailed instructions for building a courageous mind through the practice of sitting meditation, the natural seat of the warrior bodhisattva. A skilled equestrian, he compares the whole process to taming a wild horse. He generously includes descriptions of the obstacles we might encounter in such rigorous work, along with the antidotes traditionally prescribed by the lineage of Tibetan and Indian meditators.

In addition, Sakyong Mipham instructs the reader in contemplative meditation, which sharpens our insight and develops our wisdom. Contemplation provides the conditions for joy to expand as we realize the nature of reality. He places particular emphasis on the practice of rousing *bodhichitta*—an awakened heart—an enlightened strategy through which we begin to experience our great warrior spirit.

It is difficult to believe that the boy I met so many years ago is the exuberant and powerful teacher I study with today. Yet there is one thing that remains the same—his radiant, somewhat mischievous smile. When that young man smiled at me, I instantly felt love and a profound bond with him—a love and connection that I have felt ever since. That his teachings are finally available to a wider audience is wonderful. That they will benefit all who read them, I have no doubt. I am delighted that this book makes so available the clear and precise wisdom of my heart-friend and precious teacher, Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche.

—Pema Chödrön

PREFACE

Many of the people that I meet as I teach throughout the world are questioning what it means to be content and happy. So many feel that we've somehow wandered from our roots, from something very basic to our hearts and minds. The ramifications of this wandering are far-reaching, manifesting as psychological pain, acts of aggression, and consistent confusion about the nature of reality. For many of us, life is not leading toward awakening. In the Shambhala Buddhist tradition, we call this situation "the dark age."

It is in such times that we turn to spiritual teachings. We try to find something that can help us. But taking a spiritual path isn't meant to be just a way to deal with hard times. Following a spiritual path is how we awaken to our unique and precious power as humans. It can be a natural way of life in all situations, not just a way to feel better. We all have seeds inside us that we would like to nourish, which is why we yearn for deeper meaning in our lives.

When I'm teaching, people often ask me questions in hopes of hearing some esoteric truth. They seem to want me to tell them a secret. But the most fundamental secret I know is rooted in something that we already possess—basic goodness. In spite of the extreme hardship and cruelty we see happening throughout the world, the basis of everything is completely pure and good. Our heart and mind are inherently awake. This basic goodness is a quality of complete wholesomeness. It includes everything. But before we can begin the adventure of transforming ourselves into awakened people—much less the adventure of living our lives with true joy and happiness—we need to discover the secret for ourselves. Then we have the real possibility of cultivating courage, from which we can radiate love and compassion to others.

My father, Chögyam Trungpa—who was also my teacher—was a pioneer in introducing Tibetan Buddhism in the West. He also introduced the teachings of Shambhala, a legendary enlightened society. The first king of Shambhala received teachings directly from the Buddha. The story goes that everyone in the kingdom of Shambhala then began to practice meditation and care for others by generating love and compassion. Shambhala became a peaceful, prosperous place where rulers and subjects alike were wise and kind.

No one really knows whether the kingdom of Shambhala still exists. But if we think of it as the realm of wakefulness and brilliant sanity that lives within each of us, it still has the possibility to uplift us both personally and as a society. The way we reach this kingdom is by discovering basic goodness for ourselves. Then we can cultivate love and compassion. The first step is to train our minds through meditation. For dealing with the rigors of life, the mind of meditation is a wonderful ally.

One



WHY MEDITATE?

The Rock and the Flower

Many of us are slaves to our minds. Our own mind is our worst enemy. We try to focus, and our mind wanders off. We try to keep stress at bay, but anxiety keeps us awake at night. We try to be good to the people we love, but then we forget and put ourselves first. And when we want to change our life, we dive into spiritual practice and expect to see quick results, only to lose focus after the honeymoon has worn off. We return to our state of bewilderment. We're left feeling helpless and discouraged.

It seems we all agree that training the body through exercise, diet, and relaxation is a good idea, but why don't we think about training our mind? Working with our mind and emotional states can help us in any activity in which we engage, whether it's sports or business or study—or a religious path. I've been riding most of my life, for example, and I love horses. When riding a horse, you have to be awake and aware of what you are doing each moment. The horse is alive and expecting communication, and you have to be sensitive to its mood. To space out could be dangerous.

Once when I was staying with friends in Colorado, I took one of my favorite horses, Rocky, on a trail ride through some back country. I had ridden Rocky before, mostly in the arena. He was very intelligent, but he didn't know how to walk a trail. This was a new situation. I was leading the group and that also made him a little nervous. I coaxed him over certain rocks and shifted my weight to indicate to him to go around certain others, but he kept stumbling.

We came to a narrow place in the trail. On one side was a steep shale cliff and on the other, a long drop into a river. Rocky stopped and waited for my direction. We both knew that one wrong move would plummet us into the river below. I guided him toward the gorge, subtly shifting my weight toward the high wall of shale. I thought that if he slipped, I could jump off and save myself.

The moment I shifted, Rocky stopped cold and craned his head around to look at me. He knew exactly what I was doing. I could tell that he was shocked and hurt that I was planning to abandon him. The look in his eye said, "You and me together, right?" Seeing how terrified he was, I shifted my weight back. He swung his head forward in relief and we negotiated the trail together with no problems.

On that ride, Rocky and I created a synergistic bond, a wordless rapport. It's that kind of connection that I think we can all have with our own minds. In *shamatha* meditation—"peaceful abiding"—we train our minds in stability, clarity, and strength. Through this most basic form of sitting meditation, we discover that we can abide peacefully. Knowing our natural peace is the basis for any spiritual path—the beginning and the ground for anyone courageous enough to seek true happiness. It is the first step to becoming a buddha, which literally means "awakened one." We all have the potential to awaken from the sleep of ignorance to the truth of reality.

Training our mind through peaceful abiding, we can create an alliance that allows us to actually use our mind, rather than be used by it. This is a practice that anyone can do. Although it has its roots

Buddhism, it is a complement to any spiritual tradition. If we want to undo our own bewilderment and suffering and be of benefit to others and the planet, we're going to have to be responsible for learning what our own mind is and how it works, no matter what beliefs we hold. Once we see how our mind works, we see how our life works, too. That changes us.

That's the point of talking about mind and meditation. The more we understand about ourselves and how our mind works, the more the mind *can* work. The Tibetan *lesu rungwa* means that the mind is functional. My father used to sometimes translate this as "workable." It means that we can train the mind to work in order to use it to do something particular. For example, if we want to generate compassion and love, that's work.

There is an old saying that bringing Buddhism to a new culture is like bringing a flower and a rock together. The flower represents the potential for compassion and wisdom, clarity and joy to blossom in our life. The rock represents the solidity of a bewildered mind. If we want the flower to take root and grow, we have to work to create the right conditions. The way to do this—both as individuals and as people in a culture in which the attainment of personal comfort sometimes seems to be the highest standard—is to soften up our hearts, our minds, our lives. True happiness is always available to us, but first we have to create the environment for it to flourish.

We might have a deep aspiration to slow down, to be more compassionate, to be fearless, to live with confidence and dignity, but we're often not able to accomplish these things because we're so stuck in our ways. Our minds seem so inflexible. We've been touched by the softness of the flower, but we haven't figured out how to make a place for it. We may feel that our ability to love or feel compassion is limited, and that that's just the way things are.

The problem for most of us is that we're trying to grow a flower on a rock. The garden hasn't been tilled properly. We haven't trained our minds. It doesn't work to just throw some seeds on top of the hard ground and then hope for the flowers to grow. We have to prepare the ground, which requires effort. First we have to move the rocks and hoe the weeds. Then we have to soften up the earth and create nice topsoil. This is what we're doing by learning to peacefully abide in sitting meditation—creating the space for our garden to grow. Then we can cultivate qualities that will allow us to live our lives in full bloom.

A society of hard and inflexible minds is a society that is incapable of nurturing the flowers of love and compassion. This is the source of the dark age. We tend to question our goodness and our wisdom. When we question these things, we begin to use seemingly more convenient ways to deal with our problems. We are less ready to use love and compassion, more ready to use aggression. So we have to continuously remind ourselves of basic goodness. If we want to help alleviate suffering on our planet, those of us who can make our minds pliable must plant a flower on the rock. This is how we can create a society based on the energy we get from experiencing our own basic goodness. In Tibet we call this energy *lungta*, "windhorse."

It is important to look at what actually works, what inspires people to meditate, to study, and to put the teachings into effect. As a lifelong student of meditation, I have a deep respect for its profundity as a spiritual path. I am interested in what people can really use in their life, and how to prepare people to truly hear the potency and depth of what an enlightened being like the Buddha has to say. I am grateful to my teachers for passing these teachings on to me, and grateful for the chance to share them with you.

The teachings are always available, like a radio signal in the air. But a student needs to learn how to tune in to that signal, and how to stay tuned in. We can begin the process of personal development now by including short periods of meditation as part of our everyday lives. Tilling the ground of our own minds through meditation is how we begin to create a community garden. In doing so we are helping to create a new culture, a culture that can thrive in the modern world and can at the same time support our human journey in an uplifted and joyous way. Such a culture is called enlightened society. Enlightened society is where the flower and the rock will meet.

Bewilderment and Suffering

My father and mother were born in Tibet, but I was born in India and didn't visit my parents' native land until 2001. When I was in Tibet, I traveled through some of the most vast, spacious, and beautiful land in the world. Our caravan of land-cruisers drove through remote valleys surrounded by endless mountain ranges. For mile after mile we would pass no sign of civilization. There were, of course, no bathrooms, so we would stop to relieve ourselves along the side of the road. No matter how isolated we thought we were, someone would always come walking around the bend. Then another person would come close to check out this strange group of travelers in his valley. By the time we stood there for more than a minute, the equivalent of a whole village would have gathered, laughing and smiling and staring into our vehicles. I wondered where they were coming from and where they were going. I would think, "Are they born from the earth?" Probably they were just heading for another herd of yaks or a distant monastery, or simply moving to a warmer place. They each had a destination.

The simplicity of that environment made it so clear that this is what most of us are doing: traveling from one place to another, searching for a lasting happiness. There's an element of emptiness that we keep trying to assuage. We want to find something that feels good and makes sense, something solid that we can use as a permanent reference point. Wisdom might tell us that we're seeking something we won't ever find, yet part of the reason we keep looking is that we've never quite been satisfied. Even when we feel great happiness, there's a quality of intangibility, as if we're squeezing a watermelon seed. Yet day in and day out, year after year, and, according to traditional Buddhism, lifetime after lifetime, we don't think beyond accomplishing the immediate desire to find the missing piece, the one that will bring us real happiness.

Since I'm a Buddhist, the Buddha is my role model for an enlightened being. He was a strong person with a healthy sense of self—a caring, clear-minded individual in harmony with himself and his environment. He saw how much suffering was present in the world, and he wanted to help. After following many different spiritual paths, he developed the strength, confidence, and motivation that he needed to meditate and rest in wisdom. This is how he awoke to the deepest meaning of reality and was able endlessly to help others do the same. He was a bodhisattva warrior—one who cultivated compassion and wisdom, who has the courage to live from the open heart. His journey shows us that we too can arouse our open hearts as a way to realize the meaning of being fully human.

The Buddha was born a prince. Because he seemed to have a spiritual bent, his father decided early on that it would be better for him not to get too curious about the world outside the walls of the palace. He didn't want his only son going out to seek his spiritual fortune, which was a popular thing to do in India back then. So the king kept the world within the royal walls humming with all kinds of entertainment, activities, and sensual delights. The Buddha grew up with everything he needed, and within the walls of his own private world. When he was older, there were dancing girls and later a wife and baby. For a long time, he didn't get to know the world beyond the walls. But then one day he rode

out with a servant and saw sick people, old people, dead people, and a wandering ascetic. This completely changed his view. No longer could he live to simply take delight in the entertainments of the royal world, where his father had managed to keep from him the facts of life. His father's worst fears came true, and the Buddha left the kingdom immediately. Dissatisfied with maintaining an illusion, he wanted to understand his life—and life itself. Just like the Buddha, most of us also would like to learn some basic truth about our lives and get a bigger perspective about what's going on. The path of meditation offers us this possibility.

What the Buddha saw is that life is marked by four qualities: impermanence, suffering, selflessness, and peace. He saw that we keep butting our heads against this basic reality and it hurts. We suffer because we want life to be different from what it is. We suffer because we try to make pleasurable what is painful, to make solid what is fluid, to make permanent what is always changing. The Buddha saw that we try to make ourselves into something real and unchanging when our fundamental state of being is unconditionally open and ungraspable—selfless. We discover this notion of selflessness in meditation, where we learn to zoom away from our thoughts and emotions and become familiar with these basic facts of life. Accepting the impermanence and selflessness of our existence, we will stop suffering and realize peace. That, in a nutshell, is what the Buddha taught. It sounds simple. Yet instead of relaxing into this elemental truth, we keep searching around the next corner and never getting quite what we want. In Buddhist language, that is known as *samsara*. In Tibetan, the word *khorwa*, which means “circular.”

Samsara is a circle of suffering, like a wheel that endlessly goes around and around. We are spinning our wheels. We keep looking for something to be different. Next time we will be happy. The relationship didn't work out—but the next one will. This restaurant isn't that good—but the next item on the menu might really do it for me. My last meditation session wasn't great, and the one before that wasn't great either—but this one's really going to be different. One thing keeps leading to another and instead of the simplicity and happiness we desire, we only feel more burdened by our lives. Instead of relaxing into the basic goodness that connects us with every other living being, we suffer from the illness of separation, which is just a trick of our minds.

The Buddha said, “True suffering is the nature of samsara.” We may not even see the suffering in our life, partly because we've become so accustomed to it. But if we look beneath the surface, we see that suffering is percolating through like an underground river. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we sense that it's there and maintain a mental vigilance to keep ourselves occupied in an attempt to avoid it. Over and over again we come up with schemes to outsmart samsara. Even though we know that nothing changes the basic character of samsara, we keep trying to make it work out. This is high-maintenance pleasure. It's what keeps us on the wheel. It's how we keep trying to make samsara work. We think, “I know it's endless. I know it's painful. I know what you're saying. I believe you. But I've got just one more thing, just one little thing.” We can go to the grave saying this. That is samsara. “Just one more” is the binding factor of the cycle of suffering.

The Buddha was an astronaut who traveled into space and saw that suffering is a circle. We say “just one more” because we don't see it the way Buddha did. We're under the illusion that we're moving in a straight line. Yet just as the Earth seems flat as long as we're on it, we think we're walking in a straight line when actually we're stuck in a circle of suffering.

And though it certainly feels like an objective reality, this circle of suffering is just a state of mind. For example, we might think of a violent part of a big city as “samsaric.” If the Buddha were in the

place, however, he wouldn't experience it that way at all. He would experience it just as it is, without the filter of judgment or opinion. It's our mind that's samsaric. Suffering is the state of mind that regards itself as real. We can spend our whole life trying to create a solid, lasting self. We can spend our whole life looking outside ourselves for something to reflect this delusion of solidity, to be as real and lasting as we wish ourselves to be. Search though we will, it's impossible to find what doesn't exist, and the perpetual search causes suffering. The Buddha saw the reality that we're bewildered and suffering because we take ourselves so seriously. We haven't seen the open radiance of basic goodness, our natural state.

The fact is that what appears to us as a solid reality is actually in a state of continuous flux. The world is a continuous state of flux. The house that we grew up in is not the same house anymore. The mother and father that we knew when we were children are physically different now. Where is our first bicycle? At one time, it seemed so real. Everything is always coming together and falling apart, and it doesn't seem to pose a problem for anyone but us. Spring knows how to be summer and autumn leaves know how to fall down. Coming together and falling apart is the movement of time, the movement of life. This is as obvious as our own face, and yet we imagine ourself as solid and unchanging. We stick up for it; we protect it. We feel angry when someone challenges the opinions we hold dear. If something doesn't go our way, we feel insulted. When something interrupts our routine, we feel a sense of loss. We try to ward off signs of aging.

The Buddha said, "I'm not going to tell you one way or another; but if you are real, then where are you? And if the world is real, then where is it?" In Buddhism we talk about emptiness because when we start to investigate that self, we can't find anything solid or substantial. There's a *sense* of self—no shadow. We have eyes and visual consciousness—that is a sense of "me." We have touch and feeling—that is a sense of "me." We have memories, thoughts, actions, and speech, all adding up to a sense of "me." We have a body and the pleasure and pain that come with that, and those things are "me" too. This sense of self is mentally fabricated, defined by outer conditions. We say, "I don't feel like myself today." But when we look for this self that we want to feel like—where is it? The same is true for the world around us. We feel that everything is just as it appears. Yet if we look beneath the surface, we find that our universe is not quite as stable as it seems. The things "out there" change just as much as we do.

With this kind of practice and inquisitiveness, an enlightened being like the Buddha learns to look at the landscape of life in a clear, unbiased way. When he began to teach, the Buddha was just reporting his observations: "This is what I see about how things are." He wasn't presenting any particular viewpoint. He wasn't preaching dogma; he was pointing out reality. Saying that impermanence is a Buddhist belief is like saying that Buddhists believe water is wet. The Buddha didn't create impermanence or selflessness, suffering or peace; the Buddha just saw reality, noticed how it works, and acknowledged it for the rest of us. We can spend our entire life trying to create a solid self, but we won't be able to make it stick. Once we relax into this simple truth, we can go beyond bewilderment and suffering.

I recently had an amusing experience with a Tibetan lama friend. He had just arrived in the West for the first time, and I was having fun showing him different aspects of our culture. He's a learned man, but when it came to his adventure in discovering the ways of the West, he was very innocent. I took him to see the film *The Grinch*, thinking that although he couldn't understand all the dialogue, at least it would be colorful and entertaining for him, and he would enjoy the special effects.

We watched the movie and he seemed to like it. Afterward, I asked him if he understood it. He said, “Just one question: What is Christmas?” I answered that it’s the holiday celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ. Then he said in a very respectful tone of voice, “So, that green monkey in the movie was Jesus Christ?”

I had a good laugh over that, especially because he was being so respectful. I realized that as bizarre as his question sounded, it was genuine. I asked, “Why do you think that?”

“Well, he lived in a cave in the mountains and he had a rough time in the beginning, and then things got better, and in the end it all seemed good.”

In Tibet, many of the historical and mythical holy people live in caves and are eccentric. There is a famous saintlike yogi named Milarepa who lived in a cave in the mountains. He had all kinds of adventures and overcame incredible obstacles through meditation. During his years in the cave, he lived on nettle soup much of the time, and it is said that his skin turned green. In addition, Tibetan mythology has it that humans are partly descended from monkeys.

My friend was pulling together different ideas from his experience to draw his strange conclusion. He was making a leap from his culture into ours. And of course, it seems absurd to us that anyone would think that the Grinch was Jesus Christ. It’s just as absurd to think we have a self. Yet we spend our lives clinging to an imaginary identity cobbled together from different thoughts and concepts, trying to keep it happy, and that is why we suffer. This isn’t a sin, it’s an ancient habit perpetuated by our bewildered minds.

The bewildered mind is like a wild horse. It runs away when we try to find it, shies when we try to approach it. If we find a way to ride it, it takes off with the bit in its teeth and finally throws us right into the mud. We think that the only way to steady it is to give it what it wants. We spend so much of our energy trying to satisfy and entertain this wild horse of a mind.

The bewildered mind is weak because it is continually distracted. It’s distracted by the overriding need to maintain the comfort of “me.” It is meditating on discursiveness and self-absorption and that leads to suffering, because the bewildered mind can’t go beyond itself. When difficulty arises, it is unable to cope. When the unexpected occurs, it reacts from the limited perspective of wanting to stay happy in a small place. So if we’re threatened, we strike out with anger. If somebody has something we want, automatically we feel jealous. If we see something we like, we feel desire. We might not question these responses—not even ask, “Is it worth getting angry about?” What makes us happy and what makes us sad come down to volatile outer conditions, circumstances that are constantly changing. This adds up to bewilderment and suffering for us.

With an untrained mind, we’ll live most days of our lives at the mercy of our moods. Waking up in the morning is like gambling: “What mind did I end up with today? Is it the irritated mind, the happy mind, the anxious mind, the angry mind, the compassionate mind, or the loving mind?” Most of the time we believe that the mind-set we have is who we are and we live our day from it. We meditate on it. We don’t question it. Whether we wake up feeling dread or excitement or just feeling sleepy, the

propelling motivation is simply wanting things to go well for “me.”

There’s a place between Earth and Mars that scientists call the Goldilocks zone. It’s a place that’s not too hot, not too cold, but *just right*—a place where life could conceivably be supported. Many of us live from the motivation to keep ourselves in such a zone. We spend our lives constructing our personal Goldilocks zone where our solid sense of self feels comfortable and protected. Everything is just how we like it, and we work to keep it that way.

Perpetuating this zone involves worrying. Many different aspects of our life must align in order for us to be happy. If they don’t come together, we’re going to suffer. Our mind chews on hope and fear because it’s unable to relax. We’re afraid of what will happen if we loosen our grip on ourselves. So we continually spin a web of concepts, beliefs, opinions, and moods that we identify as “me.” It’s like a closed-circuit TV. We’re always sure of where we are; there’s not much else to be known; nothing will ever really touch us. We work to draw in what will make us happy, fend off whatever causes pain, and pretty much ignore the rest. This is what most of us consider pleasure. We create a comfort zone based on the motivation “I just want to get by.” I call this the “have a nice day” approach.

As a motivation for living our lives, “have a nice day” is very confining. It keeps us trapped in dissatisfaction, self-involvement, and fear. We feel defensive and claustrophobic. We are running on speed, need, and greed. And we are often moving so quickly that we don’t even notice that we *have* no motivation. That sense of oppression is maintained by our bewildered, untrained mind. It’s all pervasive, deep, as if we’re dreaming. This is suffering.

There is a different approach to our lives. We can wake up to our enlightened qualities: unconditional love and compassion; uninhibited, total ease with ourselves; a clear and sharp mind. In order to open our courageous warrior heart, however, we first have to understand the nature of our bewilderment. What’s going on in samsara, this cyclical existence that entraps us? From the Buddhist point of view, we’ve created our own situation. We’re operating out of a basic and habitual misunderstanding. Even though we’re dreaming, we think we’re real. No matter what we do to hold ourselves together, the truth is that we are always falling apart. As soon as we wash our car, it rains. So what are we going to do about it? The Buddha suggests that rather than resist samsara, complain about it, or keep trying to outsmart it, we take a good long look and say, “Let’s figure out what’s happening here.”

We have to understand the suffering of our bewildered mind and decide that we’ve had enough of it. We’re not fleeing from the world. Rather, we’re recognizing the dreamlike quality of existence and not buying into it—or ourselves—as hard and real. Once we understand the play of impermanence and selflessness, we can take ourselves less seriously and enjoy life much more. If, like the Buddha, we were able to see the empty and luminous nature of reality, we’d wake up from our dream in a snap. True liberation is life without the illusion of “me”—or “you.”

Just like the Buddha, however, we have to go on a journey before we can see reality so clearly. The journey begins with understanding why we suffer. We have to recognize the basic landscape we’re living in. If our goal in life is to give “me” a good time, it won’t work out. Why? Because the landscape of the land is birth, aging, sickness, and death. That’s the game plan for “me.” And within that, we have pleasure that keeps changing into pain. There’s no permanence or stability here, nor is there a solid self. Death comes, often without warning. We suffer when we spend our lives denying the basic truth of our existence.

Our human lives are exceedingly precious because they offer us the possibility of discovering our inherent awakeness. Like pictures we see of the Buddha, “awake” is shimmering, radiant, fluid, and primordially pure. It’s what we’re made of, and it connects us all. What lies between us and the joy of this basic goodness is the trick our bewildered minds keep playing. Meditation is how we unravel the illusion.

It’s fine to take pleasure, to enjoy good food, and to listen to beautiful music. Becoming curious about how we suffer doesn’t mean that we can no longer enjoy eating ice cream. But once we begin to understand the bewilderment of our untrained mind, we won’t look to the ice cream and say, “That’s happiness.” We’ll realize that the mind can be happy devoid of ice cream. We’ll realize that the mind is content and happy by nature.

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