

Wake Yourself Up

Spiritual Enlightenment
Right Here, Right Now



by Marcus Conte

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Flexible Manikin Books
eBook Edition

First Edition 2012

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*In memory of
the one trillion animals that are
exploited, tortured and killed every year
around the world for food*

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About,

Spiritual enlightenment, or the fully awake state is ones own unfiltered consciousness realized though ones own efforts. It is the end of suffering. One part contemporary how-to guide, the other spiritual memoir, this is a book about how against all odds someone realizes spiritual enlightenment.

This book offers a workable path to spiritual enlightenment and includes detailed descriptions of enlightened thought perception, particle evolution and proper ethics. The path is narrated by a former nationally recognized medium that offers insight into the psychic process calling it a mere stepping-stone to true awakening. There are 100's of books by expert monks and mystics that consider spiritual enlightenment a theory rather than a fact. Many claim ordinary people cannot realize enlightenment at all. Others say it can be done but only after 50 or 100 lifetimes of practice. WAKE YOURSELF UP boldly proves the opposite; that spiritual enlightenment can be realized by anyone, right here, right now.

In the 1990's Marcus Conte went by the pseudonym Marcus Goodwin. His first book, THE PSYCHIC INVESTOR (Adams Media 2000) was hailed as a milestone in business intuition. The Author is not a high-guru from the East. He does not live in a cave or wear a yellow robe. He is an ordinary human being that through his own mishaps and urgency was able to wake himself up. In this book Conte combines everything he knows about conventional Buddhism and mindfulness training. How he coupled it with the latest advancements in diet and exercise: how he mixed it all together and freed himself from what is seen as a cycle of suffering.

So many of us in the West look to the wisdom of the East to solve our problems; many think of enlightened people as monastery monks who must practice secret ritual. Conte makes this once restricted and seemingly unreachable level of consciousness 100% achievable. Despite being an acclaimed mystic, Conte doubted whether he could ever *still* his mind enough to penetrate the truth behind the Buddha's teachings. He was reluctant to take the steps necessary to decompose his ego and realize enlightenment. After years of silence on the issue, Conte finally reveals all.

Marcus Conte is a former advisor to the stars who guided scores of careers throughout the 1990's: included were 100's of ordinary people, corporate executives, hedge fund managers and law enforcement investigators. He is a native New Yorker, TV mystic, distance runner and failed nutrition expert who earned a BS degree in nutrition from Syracuse University. He is an avid examiner of Theravada, Zen and Tibetan schools of Buddhism. He is a graduate of Shambhala & Vipassana meditation training. His commentary has appeared in / on: UPN9 TV, CBS TV & Radio, Playboy, US News & World Report, The New York Post, Harper's Magazine, Money In The Morning, New York Observer, Online Investor, WBIX Business 1060, The National Enquirer, TheStreet [dot] com and Money Magazine.

Chapter 1. When We Become

Man experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separate from the rest – a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison restricting us to our personal desires.” --Albert Einstein

What if you had access to all of the world’s knowledge at once? What if you didn’t need a book, teacher or the Internet to see it? Imagine if no matter where you were in life, you had free unlimited access into the nature of all things. All you needed was to ‘see’ and you would suddenly ‘know.’ And what if instead of a super computer hooked to your brain, you already had this access deep within you; a complete mind-state that witnesses all things expand from one.

As ordinary human beings -- without exception -- we all have the capacity to see the nature of things as they are. Yet from the simplest thoughts in our mind to the most elaborate physical events, instead of appreciating things as they are, all our attention goes to fulfilling our own personal desires. This is a big problem because it causes us to spend our days trapped in the cavern of struggle. This is the striking fact of our dualism, or placing ourselves in constant opposition with the phenomenal world around us. On the other hand, we can choose to move in the direction of least resistance.

Dualism, or our self-centered world of opposites is a world of boundaries and conflicts. For every line we draw in the sand we create the same number of battles. The firmer the boundaries we invent, the more intense will be the fight. The more we embrace pleasure, the greater we will fear pain. The more we pursue heaven, the more obsessed we become with hell. The more we seek success, the more we dread failure. The greater we cling to life, the more horrified we are of death.

To render the human psyche free of desire is what we need, but to achieve it is seen as giving up way too much of the good life than anyone cares to admit. As a result, every human story is littered with a pleasure-seeking narrative. Every human occurrence, from cradle to grave is tainted with the poison of ignorance.

For most of my life I didn’t get it:

The most popular of the 5 New York City boroughs is where I grew up in Brooklyn New York. I went to elementary school there, where the Dodgers played baseball, and the famous three bridges, Brooklyn, Manhattan and Williamsburg connect to the glorious island of Manhattan. My grandparents owned a house on Bay 22nd Street. Out front was a mosaic brick fence with flowers and a tomato crop in the backyard that yielded a pretty good return every year. My mother and I, and my brother lived in the apartment building a short walk down the block on the 4th floor. Everything I remember about childhood was on that block.

At one end of our block was 86th street where you could see the old subway overpass and hear the B train chug by. There was an old-fashion hotdog eatery named High Tulip and a pizzeria named Lenny’s. On the other end of the street is

the public school where I first learned to ride a bicycle in the yard with my grandmother running behind me, and to fly a kite that eventually got let go into the wind. One more block over is the church and the catholic school where I received Sunday instruction about the saviors, saints and sinners.

I remember the days of stickball in the street with kids named "Frankie the Head" and "Fat Sal." There was a girl named Alicia who lived across the street who tried to kiss me once. I think she was a cousin. I can still smell the meatballs my grandmother made on Sunday's, and the barbeques and the water hose-fights in the yard. There was a lady next door who was supposed to be crazy. I saw her and my mother yelling one day and remembered I wasn't supposed to talk to her or her kids anymore. She would give us the dirtiest looks. Maybe she was crazy.

Family life revolved around Grandma's house. On Christmas there was a big decorative tree in the living room with every gift you could imagine under it, and a few that were complete surprises. I still have a picture of me eating a big lollypop sitting on a cool mini-fire truck with pedals. I was a finicky baby. People smoked cigarettes back then and everyone had their favorite brand on the table, and an ashtray next to them. Whenever the family gathered at the table I would start to cry. Maybe it was the smoke that made me cry, or maybe my own discontent.

I remember 1st grade, the day a kid wet his pants and got singled out of class while all the other kids laughed. His face turned beet red. One day per week we would comb our hair and look our Sunday best to say *the pledge of alliance to the flag* and listen to the principle give a speech over the wooden boxed-speaker over the front door. At an early age I had connections. My grandmother was a teacher's aid, which meant she was at school during lunchtime and would bring extra goodies to eat, and enough hugs to go around. She had a silver whistle she would blow and put the other kids in check when they acted up. Being her grandson meant I was above such petty law.

At age 7 my mother pack us up for a move to Las Vegas where she bought a house and worked at one of the hotels on the strip. During the day my brother and I would ride our bikes through the desert sands and jump the dunes pretending to be the dare devil Evil Kenevil. At night we would climb to our bunk beds then wake up and jump in the pool in the yard. Many days I spent in the local schoolyard on the monkey bars doing bar tricks and riding my bike off the ledge into the wind. It was also about that time I started to experience crazy-intuitive visions that still occur today, but I mostly ignore. Other than that, I was a pretty normal kid.

When we moved to Las Vegas, I missed New York, my grandparents, and the tang of the city. I missed the Italian kids from the neighborhood, and the summers on the rides at Coney Island. While away, my grandparents moved from Brooklyn and bought a house over the bridge in Staten Island. Eventually my mother, brother & I moved back to New York to be near them. My mother bought a big house close by where we could see the Verrazano Bridge from our rooftop. My mother owned a candy store down the block and I worked there after school.

I never desired for much as a kid. I was taken care of in the sense of basic needs, attention and freedom to choose. I had what seemed to be about the same or a little more of what other kids had. So for the most part I was ok. But as clear as I can recite these events of my childhood, I can't remember ever being truly happy.

The first time I smoked pot was a summer afternoon at an uncle's softball game. About the third inning I walked off toward the marsh meadow and smoked a joint someone rolled for me. I got high. I remember everything changed. Suddenly the trees were more colorful; the sun was brighter and the wind pulsed in the sky. I could hear a faint Beatles song in my head, *hey bungalow bill...* I was 12 years old, and at that very moment I felt complete. The earth became a big marshmallow and the clouds were erotic smiley faces. Suddenly the only worry I had was maybe confronting an adult because perhaps no words would come out. So I stayed hidden and enjoyed the ride. I began to see things that weren't there before. The lonely-critical voices in my head became friendly and inviting – even sexual. They were like a new set of friends, exciting to be around. It was like a new planet and a new identity. In this fresh-new world of vividness and clarity I discovered life wasn't so meaningless anymore. And for another 18 years I chased that high with every ounce of my being.

As a drug dealer in high school, if you sold drugs at my school and weren't from my neighborhood you got beat up so you wouldn't do it again. Selling pot and steering traffic for the harder drugs, and stealing whatever wasn't nailed down was the nature of my teen years. Violence, crime, and a code of 'mafia' silence were introduced to me very young. But at age 19, I went off in a different direction. I quit running drugs and instead ran the New York City Marathon. I was on an exercise and health food bender that seemed to make sense for a while: until it stopped working. Then it was off to college with all my belongings and the thought that everything would be different this time: a geographical change that I thought was sure to make everything better. But the new kids at this school had a different way about them. They had a lifestyle that was strange to me in so many ways. They had different names, too. They had designer cloths and new cars and I never remember anyone ever worried about paying for all of this.

They had money: big money from the rich families they come from; money from dead relatives that left it behind for them and money from that ATM machine that never seemed to run dry. I had shirts with the sleeves cut off. These kids had collared ones with polo ponies and alligators on theirs. I had rock concert tee shirts, a Staten Island accent and an old car that my head was under the hood fixing it more than it was behind the wheel driving it. They had more of everything, and in a seemingly normal American way I wanted a piece of what they had.

When I first tried cocaine, just like the first time I smoked pot, I knew everything was about to change. It instantly delivered a new sense of freedom and joy. The salesman in my head also realized that cocaine and rich kids had something in common. It's expensive and most of these kids had deep pockets. At the age of 20, there began my career as a campus drug dealer, and there I suddenly began to feel a sense of fitting in. I was now able to get into parties, and the same kids

that wouldn't talk to me before were suddenly waving me over to say hello. The girls took notice too.

Even though it was drug money, paying most of my college tuition in cash was a badge of honor. I didn't have anything like a bank account or credit card so each semester I would walk into the bursar's office and count off whatever the balance was at the bottom of the tuition bill. I was a self-reliant city kid paying my way through college. I was on a power trip, "No problem, I got it."

Then the drugs stopped working, again, and there were the many days and nights spent on the floor thinking people outside were looking in through the window, or from under the door: the audio and visual hallucinations, the 50-hour coke binges that ended in cold sweats and terror: hiding the stash so that if the police busted in they wouldn't find anything. I knew the drugs stopped working many years before this. I had turned a corner where they just made me paranoid, to the point of wanting to kill myself or somebody else. When the police finally cracked down, and the supply dried up, so to dried up my identity as the campus drug lord. In some ways the crackdown was a relief, an opportunity to kick the habit once and for all, and to do something right for a change. The emotional withdrawal from drugs, money and the big shot status I had established was the most devastating I had experienced to date. It felt like I had fallen in a ditch and there was no way out.

After college things changed a bit, and I changed with it. When I moved back to Staten Island, I had a degree in healthcare and worked as a dietitian in a nursing home. I was still experiencing psychosis from heavy substance abuse but was able to hold a job for a while. I lived in my grandmother's basement. I started a rock band that sang poetic songs about dysfunctional sex and reckless drug use, violence and power. Everyone loved the band and we signed with a New Jersey record label and released an album. There were many profound evenings out in the New York underground where I felt like life had meaning again. I felt important: connected to something greater than myself. I was suddenly a man with a microphone looking out over 1000 people looking back at me. Then, like everything else the band started to fall apart and I started back with the drugs, but this time heroin. I slipped further and further to the point of living hand-to-mouth on the streets of the Lower East Side of Manhattan. But somewhere in my mind I thought I had beaten the system. I was free like a bird. No bills to pay, no boss or family nagging me to clean up my act. No band problems, no girlfriend trying to run my life.

My existence became painfully insignificant: go to the methadone clinic, the crack-spot and stand on line for heroin. Steal from the chain store to pay the drug dealer. Hustle the city streets ripping off tourists, jumping the turnstiles, and sleeping in empty houses or on a park bench, or not sleeping at all. There were the jails, the detox units, the rehabilitation centers, food stamps, welfare, and whatever else you could imagine at the bottom of city life. In the end I would stand in front of a restaurant or a storefront and look in at the happy faces inside, and ask myself, "How did I end up out here? What did I do to deserve this?"

Once when I was buying heroin at Sunset Park in Brooklyn I got jumped by drug dealers who mistaken me for someone who tried to rip them off. A few doors down I had already made my drug purchase and had 2 bags of dope tightly in my hand. All of a sudden a giant man tackles me and another hits me in the face with a pipe. I felt the side of my cheek cave in. I was getting kicked and punched by a group of thugs for what seemed like an hour until finally I found a hole in the crowd and ran for my life. With blood pouring down my face and what felt like a few broken ribs I kept running and realized through all the kicking and punching I still had the bags of dope firmly in my hand. At that moment, the drugs were the most important thing in my life.

I use to paint my eyes and fingernails black, and with a stolen box of cheap hair dye and scissors I would style my hair different colors. From a slender 180 pounds I dropped to 150. I could see and feel my ribs protrude; my face and eyes sunk in like caves. The cloths I wore told the story of a young man who was once 30 lbs healthier. Nothing fit anymore, and I would regularly install new holes into the one belt I owned to hold up my pants. My skin took on the pale gray color of death. My breath was corrosive: teeth a funny bright yellow, my gums bleed constantly. I could smell ammonia and taste copper from my own blood. My eyes where half closed most of the time; my mouth frozen into a permanent frown. I would often lose my balance and fall down in the street. My knees would suddenly buckle under my own weight. My joints ached, and I couldn't see clear anymore; the only pair of glasses I owned broke long ago in a heated brawl. Most of the time I felt hungry but couldn't eat. Most of the time I couldn't urinate or defecate without extreme effort. Each day the track marks on my arms grew a little deeper and wider. Each day I shriveled a little more into oblivion. Each day my life hung on by a thread.

Drugs gave me wings then took away the sky. The situations around me became claustrophobic. It seemed everywhere I went the world was caving in. People were pushing me to the perimeter -- out of their way. As a result of stealing, I couldn't enter most stores anymore. As a result of lying I couldn't earn money anymore. As a result of starving, I couldn't eat. As a result of having nothing to offer, I couldn't receive. If you want to know what hell is like, this was it. Living dope-sick and homeless on the New York City streets withdrawing from a combination of heroin, methadone and cocaine is as close to hell as it gets without actually being there.

Life became unbearable. I would try drugs one last time with the intention of getting blissfully high, than end it all with a lethal dose. I had overdosed many times before but always by accident. Once in Central Park I injected a small amount of heroin and woke up at Metropolitan Hospital to a medical staff that informed me I arrived by ambulance without a pulse. I was in a coma for about 12 hours and suddenly snapped out of it with tubes and wires sticking from every part of my body. Once awake, I immediately signed myself out and 30 minutes later was on the street smoking a lone vile of crack buried in my pants pocket that the hospital staff somehow didn't find.

I often thought about ending my life by leaping in front of a subway train but never got around to doing it. But this time I would buy just enough cocaine to get the job done, and a needle to make it happen. I finally loaded the syringe with what I planned to be a final solution: a final send-off from the pain I was in. When I finally injected the shot I could feel the top of my head sizzle, as if it were about to explode. My ears filled with the sound of my own blood racing through them, and the sound of my heart pounding erratically. I dropped to one knee on the pavement in Battery Park, and for about an hour sat on the wet ground in a semi-catatonic state, fully conscious but unable to speak or move. I was frozen, but still alive.

That was August of 1994; the last time I used intoxicants.

The next day I was able to check into a detox unit and eventually got clean. This time around I followed some 12-step suggestions and noticed my condition start to improve: everything got sort of agreeable for a while. I gained weight. Material things came back. I had a girlfriend, a job in a nightclub. I even dabble with the idea of a career on Wall Street. I moved to a little place in Soho where I could tell fortunes by day and for extra money I would hit the nightclubs and read tarot cards for the hipsters. But just like the other times I had gotten clean all that changed was the outside. What was going on in my head didn't change much. In fact the critical voices got louder, more disagreeable, more sinister. The same-old mental tapes played-out the past in an endless loop. The same hopeless dreams of the future flashed like a movie trailer. Absent of drugs I would inevitably make the physical recovery, but within a month or two I would morph right back to the same psychotic beast I was before – just without the drugs.

When I first got a job on Wall Street I was cheerful about the possibilities but knew it wasn't going to last; I was an artist I thought, a powerful mystic that would waste away serving in the halls of a bank or brokerage house. So I kept telling fortunes, but like music, I started writing again. But this time I wanted to write a book. I could tell the story of a drug dealer who became a homeless drifter, but who would read it? I always had a psychic theory about the stock market: I always wanted to give that a try. So a book about my tales as a big shot psychic-gone-stockbroker seemed the way to go.

When my 1st book 'The Psychic Investor' came out I was happy as could be. There I was, my name and my psychic formula in lights. I had made it. Maybe this is what life was all about. Success. Recognition. It took some time, but I finally accomplished something big so happiness should last this time. I was invited to speak and sign books at Barnes & Noble. I visited scores of financial organization that were suddenly interested in what I had to say. I was on radio, TV and in magazines. It seemed I was everywhere all at once.

Years later when the success of the book started to fade, and I was alone again with my thoughts, I was more lost than ever because I knew not the rush of fame, nor drugs, nor anything else could fix the aimless feeling I had inside. But I was smarter now, I thought. I had quit the drug lifestyle, cleaned up my act, had a place to live, friends to talk to, I was a writer, had a college degree. I was famous. I

should have been happy as a pig in a playpen, but nothing could have been further from the truth.

Never in my life did I realize I could examine my own mind and correct what was going on in there. I thought the psychological hand you were dealt was the hand you were stuck with. I dabbled with picture cards and psychic impressions, enough so to make a living telling other people about themselves, but never could I see the dirt in my own backyard, or the reason for my discontent. Happiness is what I wanted but couldn't find it anywhere. I realized everything I worked for didn't last. Everything I pursued ended in the same dull pain, or complete disaster. In my relentless pursuit of happiness, all I ever got was misery.

Aside from the gritty sometimes-brutal truth of blue collar Brooklyn in the 1970's, most of my growing up in the city was pretty normal. I had family who were there for me. Opportunities to advance. I was ok looking enough according to the girls; so I can't say my unhappiness had anything to do with my situation specifically. I now realize I spent my entire life looking for a future solution to my problems in the present. In 2008, I finally hit bottom -- and it wasn't from drugs. What finally brought me to my knees was none other than the stock market. After trading for a bunch of years I finally lost everything. And I finally realized that the tiny bit of peace and security I was holding on to was based solely on exterior factors -- namely money. Without money I was nothing.

And that's when I woke up.

After getting totally wiped out in the 2008 stock market crash, I suffered extreme anxiety about what was now to become of me. Similar to a drug withdrawal, the groundlessness over the loss of money felt the same: except there was no chemical buffer to ease the hurt. Without money I would probably starve to death. I would have to move back to the suburbs with the poor people. I would end up working some meaningless-penniless job, and when I died no one would remember my name. Or maybe I would just get high on drugs again. I heard marijuana was legal. And what difference did it make anyway. I was a failure.

It was a cold November in New York and I spent the next 28 days sitting on the beach in Coney Island. There I would face my demons, and confront my emotional pain head on. Everyday and most of the nights I sat there in the sand thinking about what went wrong. How could I have been so stupid? With all my knowledge and experience, how could this have happened? The psychic chatter in my head hit epic levels. At times it was like the US senate questioning me and if I didn't have the right answer they threatened to throw me in a room and make the room disappear. At this point I knew all about Buddhism and meditation and the benefits of not following a train of thought, but the truth is, at that very moment it all seemed like a bunch of nonsense. There must be another way out.

And then one day I started to notice something different -- the waves. I started to smell the sea, and felt the wind. Even though it was cold, I could feel the warmth of the sun on my head, and the support of the sand under my body. The sound of the

wind whistled in the air. For years I had known intellectually what it meant to have a spiritual awakening, but I never personally felt a thing. I had escaped the wrath of drug addiction many times, but here I was, again, suffering on an epic scale. Once I recognized the nature of this suffering: how it arises and fades away, a gap opened up, and the invisible appeared. I heard my own voice repeat, "We are slaves to desire. If we remove desire we are free."

I spent the next 12 months tittering in a semi-meditative state. I participated in meditations retreats, read books and surfed the web until finally, gradually, sometimes minute-by-minute, I witnessed my inner 'self' crumble. It felt like deleting files from a hard drive. My mind would find the ones that were no longer useful, and with a right click: press & delete. For the first time I started to see my own ego as something separate from the rest: a distraction of sorts. I was finally able to let it go.

Perhaps my story is similar to your own. If you suffered like I did -- forever hopeless and helpless -- this book will show you a way out. This is not a religious book or even a spiritual book, and I am no expert on anything more than my own experiences. After 18 years of having "made it" in Manhattan, I finally came home to Brooklyn. I can see the Verrazano Bridge out my window. I keep things simple. I eat a simple plant-based diet, ride a bicycle, and run. I don't lie, cheat, kill or steal. I don't drink alcohol or take drugs. I don't sleep with anyone as to cause harm. When asked, I show people how to meditation. I am mindful of the facts, fully awake and present.

This book is based largely on my own normal & paranormal experiences, and on my engagement with the philosophical breakthroughs that unfolded in the world around 500 BC. Though the teachings of the Indian sage Siddhattha Gotama, or The Buddha are highly discussed, I should state that I am not a Buddhist, nor a devotee of any specific religion. The Buddha's teachings were written down about 500 years after his death, and their exact origination or authenticity is somewhat in question. But these striking observations of mind & matter remain. The wisdom of some of my favorite writers is also discussed and or their lines appear in quotations giving them credit. Or, it's just me remembering what they said and explaining it some other way.

In this book, use of the words "I" "me" "mine" and "myself" should be considered figures of speech. As you will discover, identification with an "I, me, and myself" is a touchstone of human suffering, but as a means to make a point within the limitations of our written language these words are used throughout. You do not have to become a religious devotee, a marathon runner and or a health food fanatic to benefit from this book. You don't have to join a cult either. Nor must you reinvent the wheel, believe in Santa Claus or wait up for the tooth fairy. But if your eyes are only a little covered with dust, you will realize the truth and WAKE UP.

Lets begin by withdrawing from: Killing, Stealing, Sexual Misconduct, False Speech, and Intoxicating Drinks and Drugs. If you don't like where this leads, your pain will graciously be refunded.

Walking down the street I see a girl, smiling,
Her white dress sways in the wind,
She is very pretty – she has a boy on her arm,
Mind thinks, “Why not Me?”

I pass a restaurant and smell something good
In the window I see cheery people, eating, drinking, chatting,
Mind thinks, “They are happy.”
“Why not Me?”

I see a young man exiting an expensive car,
Wearing expensive cloths,
Talking on an expensive gadget,
He walks into his expensive apartment building,
Greeted by his glamorous lady friend,
Mind thinks, “Why not Me?”

I see a man in rags lying on the sidewalk,
Head slouched sharply to the left,
Dribbling,
A stream of urine runs from his pants to the street,
I step over him,
Mind thinks, “I am better than this man.”

Walking down the city street mind thinks of “Me”
Everywhere, constantly...
Them vs. Me

I suddenly wake from the dream. Me?
Illusion -- hooked, again, by the tricky mind.
There is a body here, surely,
But Me?

Chapter 2. The Great I Am

bliss: a: Brave Luminous Immutable Selfless State

Harmony: unshakable clarity, peace. Freedom, the sum total, the grand finally, finito, convinced. Genuine contentment, joy, generosity, kindness, love; heaven on earth, as good as it gets, beyond words...

We live our lives with an insatiable desire to please ourselves. Yet there are so many of us. The ones who suffer. In this latest wave of humanity, we see ourselves as very important. We worship the idea of success, and are willing to work very hard to achieve it. Then things fall apart and we don't understand why.

We pay homage to a strong body and charismatic mind that collectively we call 'me.' We are taught the goal of this mind-body team is to be crafty and get what it wants: to be better, smarter, stronger, faster. We say to ourselves, "This is what I want, and this is how I will achieve it. This is who I am." Like a smart bomb, we program ourselves towards our next mission. The all-knowing mind/body duo then sets sail on a never-ending quest for pleasure. Then it hits an iceberg and sinks into the sea.

We are not entirely born this way. We learn most of it over time. As we age, we refine our pleasure seeking motives to the point of complete submission to our thoughts and emotions. And why not? My thoughts and emotions come from *me*, so they must be ok. Inseparable and proper the self-serving mind appears: this is the mental dilemma that robs us of our lives. Instead of dismantling our ego as we should, we celebrate it. We embrace it, "Look at *me* doing this. Look at *me* doing that." Everybody and everything we encounter in some profound way gets connected to a false sense of *me*. Day after day, year after year, possibly lifetime after lifetime we train ourselves in the fine art of self-deception. All day long we fan the flames of suffering by focusing on the pros and cons of our life, our place in society, how many toys we own, what makes us happy, what repulses us, what we lust for, what we crave. Then we die and leave it all behind. Back goes our precious body to the earth heap in which it sprang. Alone: with none of its possessions. Draped in an old suit or party dress and a wooden box to heed off the worms. Down we go into the ground. Cold. Dead. Forgotten.

Like being stuck on a merry-go-round at warp speed, we travel this life in a dizzy circle that always leads back to where we started -- *me*. We're always trying to fill the proverbial *me*-void with something to elevate us. But it's never enough. Nothing seems to last very long. The relationships go south. The money runs out. Our friends move on or die. The drink stops working. Our body falls apart. We get old and gray and wish we were young again. And yes, death waits in the wings. Ready to swoop in at any moment.

However dysfunctional or unrealistic our thought patterns and emotions are, they rule our ordinary mind. Rather than train mind & body to be of service to us, we focus all our attention on how to convert everything we encounter into permanent lasting pleasure. We plot, plan and calculate how to make our lives more

abundant. We immerse ourselves in gossip, politics and the latest fashion. We create elaborate plans to secure our future: investment programs, trust funds and the 401k. We get lost in booze, drugs, food, sex and even higher education. We join in on the haphazard pursuit of money, power and fame. Yet rarely do we consider the well being of others, nor the planet. Others you say? What's that? Competitors, employers, sex partners, enemies? Why should I look out for others? What's in it for me?

Driven by an insatiable desire to put ourselves first, we travel head first into disaster. Leaders declare war on leaders, politicians defame politicians, religions mock religions, citizens attack citizens, a mother clashes with a son, a father with a mother, lovers quarrel, friends fight. We fall upon one another with harsh words, fists, and weapons of mass destruction. Animals are exploited, tortured and devoured. This is the untrained human spirit in action. In this modern age, ruled by intense craving, nations invade other nations, soldiers bomb, plunder, and pillage their opponents in the name of the flag. And when caught, the conquered inflict on them various forms of their own punishment, or death. And innocently, a young boy in the Bronx tries crack for the first. This is the misery of craving. This is the heaping up of suffering.

The dilemma of human suffering -- like Galileo's theory of the sun at the center of our galaxy -- is that the dreamlike state that suggests *me* is at the center, and everything revolves around it is patently false. Because when you get down to it, an everlasting *me* doesn't exist. And there is no 'center' to speak of. These are all delicious theories we drum up in our mind that accelerate our suffering. In fact, if an inkling of a reliable ego or 'self' exists, try to throw a hoop around it and say, "Here it is. I found myself!" As Sakyong Mipham puts it, "*We can spend our whole life trying to create a solid lasting self...looking outside ourselves for something to reflect this delusion of solidity...search though we will, it's impossible to find what does not exist.*"

The world is given to stimulation and pleasure, delighted with it, captivated by it. As the saying goes, "If it feels good do it." But there are causes and conditions to everything. Like streets in a sprawling metropolis everything is hooked into everything else in some minute way. Everything that comes together eventually falls apart. Everything that goes up eventually falls down. And everything that is born will certainly die. In the scientific words of Isaac Newton, "*For every action there is an equal but opposite reaction.*" Like the vast universe itself, we humans are caught in a blistering cycle of impermanence. Like intergalactic stars swirling in space, we are always coming together and smashing apart. We search high and low for a cause for all of this, a permanent place to hide, but the only consistent treasure there ever is - is a life free of suffering right in front of us. The fading away of craving, attachment and longing for pleasure is what we really need but have no idea how to achieve it, "I heard it's possible, but how?"

In order for us to change our ways, something must penetrate us so deeply that we realize there is no other way. Emotional suffering must be the great motivator and the driving force that causes us to seek relief. Only when our emotional suffering

and anguish reach epic proportions can change occur in the mind. No degree of logic, academic knowledge or human will power can lessen a bewildered state of mind until it experiences a profound sense of misery. A child will not understand the dangers of fire until it burns him, for example.

To change our habitual patterns requires an acute familiarity with our discontent. When a reliance on ordinary thinking disturbs us deep enough we begin to see there is something wrong in our mind and move towards correcting it. When our inflamed ego creates one devastating event after another, only then do we become willing to let go. As The Dalai Lama puts it, *“Our understanding should be so profound that it shakes our whole being and induces in us a spontaneous wish to gain it.”* But sometimes our habitual patterns kill us or drive us mad before we have a chance to correct them. This is the tragedy of the untrained human condition.

Insanity is defined as doing the same things over and over again and expecting a different result. Drinking and taking drugs to reduce emotional fatigue but only getting deeper stronger fatigue, or death, is one of those insanities. Eating excessive amounts of food to the point of exploding out of our cloths is another. “Thinking” all day about personal achievements that may come to fruition later, but finding no peace whatsoever right now is just as insane. Think of emotional suffering as being trapped inside of a box. You are stuck inside and can’t get out. You know there is a simple way to escape because many people who got trapped there before you got out with ease. At this point, you lack the simple know-how: the simple instruction on how to be free. Now imagine the instructions are clearly printed on the box’s outside label. Everyone outside who escaped before you can see them. All you need is an escapee to read the instructions to you, and puff, you are free.

Things like aging, death, regret, pain and despair are the many forms of suffering we live with via a life ruled by our incorrect use of the mind. Not to get what one wants is also a high form of suffering. All of these forms of attachment are a direct result of a life lead by an intense urge for pleasure. This is our inherent untrained nature. But none of it is actually real on the outside. None of it has any solid or permanent structure whatsoever. It is all neuro-chemical figments of our imagination. Dilgo Khyentse describes two of the most toxic symptoms, hatred and anger like this, *“When you feel hatred toward someone, your hatred and anger are not in any way something inherent either to that person as a whole or to any aspect of him. Your anger only exists in your own mind. When anger erupts, do not pursue it, but instead look at the nature of anger itself.”*

All emotions begin as small thoughts in our mind and gain momentum as they are pursued (thinking). But if we cease to pursue them they stop. Training our mind through meditation sets the clock back to its uncluttered state, and allows us to experience our mind as it actually is: peaceful and calm. Think of a thought in your mind as a snowball rolling down a hill. It starts off small but with a little push, by the time it reaches the bottom of the hill it’s big enough to take down the house. No push, no momentum. Disturbing thoughts and emotions, as well as joyful ones, are just like that.

In a perfect world everything goes our way. When the temperature outside is just right and the sun is shining it's an excellent day. Then it rains and all we see are the clouds. The sun is still there but other phenomena are first in line to receive it. Clouds may block our view, but the fact the sun is still warm and bright does not change. And why is a sunny day better than a rainy one anyway? Rather than appreciate the importance of rain to provide water for all life, we stand in judgment that the sun's real job is to make our holiday a sunny one. We say, "The plants can drink later, but today is my day off." In its most innocent form, this is suffering. This is our attachment to the way we think the world should be instead of accepting it the way it actually is. Why did the police give me a ticket and not someone else? Why did the employer hire him for the job instead of me? Why am I always over here on the wrong side while everyone else is over there on the right side? Because of these judgments, we get upset. Because of this establishment of opposites in our mind we can't see the magnificence in how everything comes together and falls apart. All we see are the problems.

In meditation, when thoughts of 'me' emerge, we are lost in the me-dream. Suddenly we leave the present moment and follow the illusion into the past or the future. We are absent for the moment: out fishing for pleasure. But the result is always an equal but opposite serving of pain. No matter how great our passions may temporarily be they will always fall short in response to the way the world actually is. Only when we are grounded in the moment do we see what's actually going on. The rest is a dream. Suffering is what the ordinary mind signs up for, and ultimately receives. Belief in the perception that this great body of wealth we see in the mirror before us is anything more than a transient compulsion of bones, blood and perishable parts will always lead to the universal tragedy of suffering. That is, craving, greed, anger, envy, jealousy, rage, hate, lust and disease. But we are so attached to this way of engaging the world we can barely fathom letting go.

When we set aside our individuality (ego), and all the baggage that comes with it, what remains is our true being. This is our true nature, or the essential indestructible makeup of all sentient beings. It exists in all of us but gets obstructed by our own moral and mental contamination. While we dwell in afflictive emotions, our true nature is like a treasure of jewels hidden under a poor person's house. It's out of reach. But once we dig it up, this trueness shines through in full radiance.

We can make peace with the painful voices in our head. Once we realize this, we can dissolve the painful voices and create space where there was none. We begin to see a new joy and a newfound happiness. We start to realize that the thinking-voice that says, "You can't do it. Don't even try" emerges to say, "I am of service. I can help others." The same thinking-voice that says, "I am ugly, fat and stupid," now says, "I am human. I am the same as you. Your pain is my pain." We can then develop further in the fine art of being human by cultivating compassion for others, and ourselves. You might say to yourself, "What if I clear my mind of selfish thoughts and toxic emotions, or all thoughts and emotions for that matter. What would be left of me? I would be like the hole in a donut. Nothing left but a Zero. No mind of my own. I would have given away all my precious time on earth doing

everything for others, and getting nothing for myself. While others have all the fun I would have accumulated nothing more than a basket of useless philosophical arguments.

One could also argue that to commit entirely to experiencing our world built on a natural state of clarity -- experiencing things as they truly are -- is a *mystical* form of self-indulgence. Or to experience a world where craving, attachment and longing for pleasure has faded away is to become a zombie; like someone who can't acclimate in real society. To sit quietly and pilot thoughts and emotions away from moshpit thinking to the calm womb of stillness is a mere practice in escapism, like being hooked on drugs. Further, to enrich the body with proper diet and exercise as to elevate our true spirit is mere spiritual snobbery. But the truth is NO OTHER HUMAN OPTION EXISTS. If there is any possibility for a life worth living, we must wake up now – or die suffering.

Chapter 3. 500 BC

"It's the answer that led those who have been told for so long by so many to be cynical, and fearful, and doubtful of what we can achieve, to put their hands on the arc of history and bend it once more toward the hope of a better day... So let us summon a new spirit of patriotism; of service and responsibility where each of us resolves to pitch in and work harder and look after not only ourselves, but each other." --Barack Obama

Between 600 BC and 400 BC was the Great Age of Philosophy. The world, and particularly Athens Greece was made up of small settlements where everyone knew everyone else, but there were no printed books, newspapers or broadcasts to satisfy their curiosities. If people wanted to learn about current events they walked around town and talked to each other, and the central gossip hole was the market place. In public halls or under the colonnades or out in the open air is where legislative bodies met. It was a democratic culture where every grown man was a member. Legal disputes could be argued and any man might be called to the jury or the bench where cases were put to vote.

Groups of friends could gather and talk freely about whatever attracted their mind, and if the subjects were interesting, they discussed them in a house or the parlor or any friendly hall that might be available. The Greeks in particular and citizens from the cities of the Aegean world from Asia minor to the tip of south Italy were most interested in the science of matter and mind, what was the origination of things, what was the sun, the moon and stars, what was man, and where did he come from, and was he bound to earth. Many great thinkers proposed their theories, and the entire world debated them. In time, a number of men appeared called "sophists," or students of philosophy who traveled from city to city professing their chosen subjects. Included were the topics of conduct in private and public life, the right use of words, rhetoric and the art of persuasion. There, logic-method and inductive reasoning was born. And some 4000 miles away in the Gangetic plain of central India the same cultural revolution was emerging, and so came The Buddha, his teachings, and his students.

The Buddha, or Siddhattha Gotama was born to a wealthy family who were the rulers of the Shakya clan. He later became a prince or village chieftain of sorts being given the honorary title Shakyamuni, which means "sage of the Shakya clan." But at age 29 he renounced a life of privilege and became a homeless drifter in order to find a way out of what he recognized was a world of suffering. The ravages of poverty, disease, and even old age were unknown to Siddhartha, who grew up in an extravagant palace surrounded by every comfort.

After a 6-year experiential quest of meditation and philosophical study he finally attained a state of enlightenment under the Bodhi tree at Buddh-Gay. The Buddha continued to sit after his enlightenment, meditating beneath the tree and then standing beside it for a number of weeks. Seven weeks after his enlightenment, he left his seat and decided to teach others what he had learned. He encouraged

people to follow a path he called "The Middle Way," which is one of balance rather than extremism. The Buddha's precise teachings are contained in The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path.

The Buddha famously stated, "I only teach 2 things; suffering and the end of suffering." He was doubtful his insight and state of consciousness could be taught. He had a choice -- content in his own mind he could vanish from society for the rest of his days, or stay and teach others how to achieve enlightenment. Like the sophists of Athens, the Buddha stayed and taught. He spent another 40 or 50 years wandering and teaching, and died at age 80 from food poisoning. The Shakyamuni Buddha as he is often called is neither a god nor a prophet or incarnation of a god, but an exceptional human being who, through his own effort, attained a profound understanding of mind and matter. The Buddha emphasized he was not a god nor the messenger of a god and that enlightenment was not the result of a supernatural process or agency, but rather the result of a close attention to the nature of the human mind which could be discovered by anyone for themselves. He is a savior only in the sense that he showed humans how to save themselves by following his example. For this reason he becomes our principle teacher:

The Three Jewels:

1. The Buddha
2. The Dharma
3. The Sangha

The Buddha,

Jewel one is The Buddha. The Buddha is the professor, the sophist and or the role model for our enlightenment. The Buddha lived and taught in the northeastern Indian subcontinent some time between the 6th and 4th centuries BC. He is recognized as an awakened teacher who shared his insights to help sentient beings end suffering.

The Dharma,

The Buddha is the teacher and the Dharma is what he taught. The Dharma is a dissertation that describes a way to enlightenment, or freeing oneself from suffering based on a clear comprehension of actuality. There is no single text like a Bible, Korean or Torah, but all of The Buddha's instructions are contained in The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. The teachings were handed down in the ancient Pali language, and preserved from monk-to-monk by memory for about 500 years after the Buddha's death. The Four Noble Truths deal with the fundamental facts of life that are attainable through man's own effort. The Dharma offers a realistic system of ethics, an analysis of life, and a very practical method for training the mind.

The Four Noble Truths:

1. The truth of suffering
2. The truth of the origin of suffering
3. The truth of the extinction of suffering

4. The truth of the path that leads to the extinction of suffering

Eight Fold Path:

1. Right Understanding
2. Right Thought
3. Right Speech
4. Right Action
5. Right Livelihood
6. Right Effort
7. Right Mindfulness
8. Right Concentration

The Sangha,

According to oldest memory, 'Sangha' is the community around the Buddha. Historically, it is the order of gentleman known as Bhikkhus or mendicant monks founded by the Buddha himself. It still exists in various forms in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Bangladesh. It is, together with the order of the Jain monks, the oldest monastic order in the world. Here in America Sangha simply means community of practitioners: like the Jewish community in Williamsburg or the community of musicians who started punk rock in New York & London. Most meditators in the West consider all those who practice to be part of the Sangha.

Skillful means,

The Four Noble Truths and The Eight Fold Path are the Dharma in its entirety. They contain the complete tools or 'skillful means' by which the Buddha used to realize enlightenment. It is an experiential approach to knowing the mind that requires a simple yet radical shift of allegiance from "thinking" to "non-thinking" cognition. Hundreds of years after the Buddha passed, revised meanings, new rules and sexy observances cropped up in Sanghas all around the world. With that, elaborate systems of worship evolved along with some of the most stunning religious statue and thangka art the world has ever seen. Through all of these contemporary methodologies and art forms, the Buddha's compelling message of deliverance still shines through.

Other commentary,

What can be said for other books on spiritual enlightenment? Why not stick with the Four Noble Truths and cut out the middleman? Isn't everything the Buddha said in the original script? Yes, but...The Buddha was a man who penned a profound doctrine that revealed the nature of suffering. This event occurred more than 2500 years ago. And although the method to realize enlightenment is well established, the exact description of 'enlightened mind' is hard to place into words - maybe even impossible. Unlike a bronze Buddha statue on a shelf, we are not frozen in time. Instead, we are alive and breathing. We are awake enough to read, write and discuss things in a colloquial manner. Without this communication our experiential analysis of enlightenment might become limited to ourselves. As we progress, it is arguable that less interaction with others becomes the norm, but in the beginning we should stay in the middle of the pack and learn from everyone.

So long as a professor, writer or teacher speaks from a place of personal experience, it can be a good lesson. If, however, a teacher claims the strength of the Buddha's teaching is somehow coming from the all-powerful teacher himself rather than flourishing inside the student, then we have a problem. Or if a teacher claims that everything they say or do is somehow an up-to-the-minute Dharma revision, it may be time to find another teacher.

All 3,

The Buddha and the Dharma are obviously important, but Sangha is equally important because it is the glue that holds the whole thing together. Without Sangha, the teachings might become another lost collection of ancient scribble. The Sangha is what offers us the ongoing support to practice what we learn. There is no quick fix on the road to deliverance. Because you must work with your mind and go through a whole spectrum of thoughts and emotions, the work requires great courage. It takes a solid community of classmates who are heading in the same direction.

We learn about practice by working with practitioners of all levels. If you have been practicing for 1 day, find someone who has been practicing for 1 year. If you have been practicing for 1 year, come find me who has been practicing for 10 years. If you have been practicing for 10 years, find someone who has been practicing for 1 day because people with less practical experience teach us the most. The new practitioner helps us see where we came from. Transversely, if someone is new to practice, your example shows them where they can go. As well, anyone who gives a Dharma talk should be treated with respect. Not more or less respect than other members of the Sangha, but the same respect. Though one day we may wear the hat of 'teacher,' everyday we are humble students of the Buddha.

Everyone will know how great I am
Look at me doing this
Look at me doing that
Look at the way that I am...

If you like me
Then I will be happy
If you don't
Then I will be sad

I will make a product
And tell the world about it -- Fame

It works!
I am famous
Everyone knows my name
Look at me on TV
There I am in a magazine
There I go, off to the party to celebrate:
To hear people tell me how great I am,
To tell people, "You can be great too."
But not really,
Because if you are great too,
Then I must become greater than you.

Hey, you stole my fame!
I will make another product
And sell it to the world
Then they will know how great I am

Chapter 4. Inner Space Travel

We often look UP for answers, but we rarely look IN.

If we travel to outer space, there is no end in sight. Outer space is infinite; a spaceship will keep going infinitely, past the stars and past the universe forever. For those who disagree, if outer space does come to finality where does the end, end? Is the final destination a wall? What does the wall look like? What's on the other side of the wall?

What about inner space? If we travel inward we discover the same string of infinitely smaller particles with infinite possibilities and combinations. If we travel inward to the cells, what is inside those cells? And what's inside of what's inside of those cells? Inner space is less understood because the mind mostly focuses outward and sees, hears, tastes, smells, touches and thinks about external phenomena, and abides there. To understand human behavior, and why we suffer, we must travel inwardly towards inner infinity for answers.

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Infinity is easy to see with numbers. There are infinite negative numbers that get smaller from zero. The same for positive infinity where numbers get higher from zero. Infinity exists on earth in all four basic elements of matter: earth, water, fire and wind. The elements of matter are composed of infinitely smaller particles. All four elements are present in every material object, though in varying degrees of strength. For example, if earth predominates like in the human body the material object is considered a solid though the human body is actually 60% water.

*Inner infinity --> organelles --> cells --> **BODY** --> planet --> universe --> outer infinity*

To better understand the human mind we look inward to the cells for answers. In the above flow chart, notice the energy flow from inner infinity up towards BODY and past it (arrows). As a result of smaller particles moving upward in a positive direction, these reactions release energy.

Thought theory,

Thoughts are charged particles that flow UP from inner infinity to the mind. They are often realized as memory. Thoughts contain stored energy that release organic oomph. With our thoughts we create the world. With the world we create our thoughts. With our thoughts we directly affect outer formations that create our present experiences, and transversely, the things we eat, the air we breathe and the vibrations around our body assist at formulating our thoughts.

We experience the phenomenal world through the 6 human senses of sight, sound, taste, smell, touch and mind objects (thoughts). Thoughts are in fact a separate sense perception. Collectively all 6 create our consciousness, or our *awareness*. Awareness is interchangeable with the word mind. Mind exists at all levels of infinity. Mind sees thoughts. Thoughts occupy mind. Smaller particles are

aware, that give rise to larger particles that are aware, that give rise to even larger particles. The same string of awareness occurs into smaller and smaller particles. But the interesting fact of all this awareness is that “mind” and “awareness” are not physical objects. They are just compilations of smaller ever-changing phenomenal particles.

FACT:

- There is awareness
- There are thoughts
- There is no inherent self

”Form is emptiness -- emptiness is form; emptiness does not differ from form, form does not differ from emptiness; whatever is form, that is emptiness, whatever is emptiness, that is form, the same is true of feelings, perceptions, impulses and consciousness...in emptiness there is no form, nor feeling, nor perception, nor impulse, nor consciousness; No eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind; No forms, sounds, smells, tastes, touchable or objects of mind.” --The Heart Sutra

Emptiness (VOID of Self):

All matter is void of self; empty of an inherent mechanism we refer to as me, I and or myself. Of inherent occurrences, there is awareness, and there may be thoughts but of ‘self’ there is nothing that gets passed on. Self can be perceived, just like thoughts and awareness can, but self is different because rather than a human attribute, self is a learned human condition, a self-styled mental predicament that arises from ordinary willful thinking. We make most of it up. Like the remains of our prehistoric lizard tails, self is also unnecessary for our continued survival. Unlike awareness or thoughts that are useful, self is a dysfunctional intruder. A cancer. It is a manmade disorder without a vital function. Reliance on a perceived sense of self is the cause of our suffering. But if we fail to identify with it we experience a sense of freedom. When my feelings are hurt, for example, my emotional sense of self has been hurt. Without identification with a self, there is no emotional hurt. There are no feelings. Because the self is manmade, any emotional suffering a self encounters must also be considered manmade. Selflessness is not to say if a falling object strikes us we will not experience physical pain. But even under extremely painful situations, without a sense of self there may be pain, but there is no suffering.

Ownership,

Human beings like to own things. Even themselves. But everything we acquire in this life is shared in some way by everything else. There is nothing we can rightfully drag back to our caves and say we own. Everything is communal. We may spend our whole lives accumulating stuff and calling it our own, but these are only temporary situations at best. In the same way, we spend a lifetime investing in the idea of a reliable, everlasting self. But it too is a dream. Like a castle in the sand, a love relationship or the human body, all things come to pass. Like cloud formations that suddenly appear in the sky, and in a few moments they are gone, so to is the illusionary self. By nature, the elements of matter participate in a string of endless formations arising and fading away, and nothing we can call a reliable self ever remains.

Seeing ourselves as separate entities that think and reason: superior entities to everything around us, is our inherent dualistic affliction as humans. Left untreated, it causes us to suffer in ways that appear to be unique to our species. Humans are not the beginning of the evolutionary chain, nor the end, but a mutable speck in the infinite string of inner and outer possibilities of the phenomenal world. We are born, live and die, and are recycled infinitely like all other elements of matter. Here's a flow chart that shows how a thought (ignorance) from inner infinity creates a string of interconnected reactions. The formations are essentially void or without a self, or empty in nature.

Ignorance (grasping at pleasure) --> formation --> consciousness --> mental & physical existence --> sense organs --> sense perception (contact) --> feelings --> craving --> clinging --> becoming --> birth --> decay, dying, sorrow, pain, grief, despair

Ego / self,

Ego is interchangeable with the word self. When the mind is present ego cannot exist. It only springs into action when the mind reflects past or future: of which neither exist. Embracing the idea of a self is a destructive fantasy. We see how such attachments occur all around us, and the suffering it causes. For example, when a person is brought to tears over something even as simple as their favorite sports team losing a game. These are confused phenomenal creatures born and now clinging to a way of life they are deeply invested in. Without ego, or attachment to self, there would be no suffering. Here's a anti-dualistic riddle that might help explain:

The mind is like a camera
It takes a picture of a pretty girl
Is the picture a pretty girl?
No. The picture is ink on paper
Is the ink on paper a pretty girl?
No. The ink and paper are smaller particles of ink and paper
Is there a pretty girl in mind?
No. There is awareness of external phenomena
Is the pretty girl pretty?
No. The mind abides in lust
Pretty girl takes a picture of mind
Is the picture of mind really 'me'?
What does pretty girl see?

Emptiness is not to say there's nothing there. Because there's a whole lot there, just no reliable everlasting self. Emptiness can further be defined as everything we can't see and most of what we can. Take a crystal ball for example that is clear and colorless, but for some reason it has the capacity to reflect all the seven colors. This is the same capacity of emptiness to appear as being connected to everything else. If you have nothing to do one night, and you have a crystal ball lying around, shut the lights off and shine a flashlight into it. Multi-colored light will

project out and appear on the wall before you. Depending on how close you hold the flashlight, the description of emptiness appears.

My pal Rufus,

Rufus manifests as the ego-ic voice in my head. Technically speaking, Rufus and I are the same. He's the guy I call "me." We are a team. All Rufus ever thinks about is food, sex, money and power. When I wake up in the morning, Rufus is already a few moments ahead taking care of business. He lets us know immediately what we need to do to make us happy. He reminds us of the past and how we missed out on opportunities. He informs us how dim our world is right now, and how hard it will be to make things brighter in the future.

Rufus is always there to compare us to others, and to make sure we get in front of them on line. He tells it like it is. Rufus never fails to remind us we are getting old and fat, and becoming less attractive. Rufus never gets lost in the present. He reminds us of the past, and keeps both eyes firmly on the future. Rufus says once we get everything we need in life we will be very happy. But for now, life is a struggle. It seems like Rufus and I are in competition with each other sometimes. So I try to be a good guy and let Rufus have his way. Rufus doesn't like it when we meditate. He says it makes him sick. He can't focus. When we follow the breath for example, all Rufus does is complain. So he makes sure we don't do it. Rather than sit in meditation, Rufus says food, sex, money and power are really what we need.

Rufus is there, but is Rufus really me? If Rufus is not me, but I am aware of Rufus then who is aware that I am aware of Rufus? Is that me? Or if I am aware that I am aware of Rufus, then who is aware that I am aware of me?

Unless ego (Rufus) is addressed in the present moment where we talk to ourselves, human neurosis persists infinitely. Knowing how and where to create space in our mind to slow down unwanted thinking and emotions leads us to the gateway of enlightenment. On the other hand, trying to extinguish these voices before creating sufficient space often leads to the halls of the insane asylum.

Reincarnation / Rebirth,

Nowhere do we find one person with complete and exact remembrance of being someone or something else. With the exception of clones, we do not find 2 exact sets of chromosomes in 2 separate living beings. But we do find within us the residue of previous thoughts & actions. Maybe even previous lives. Rebirth is the recycling of elements to other forms of phenomena whether literally or through previous actions, or both. There is a continuum. Things reincarnate not as a whole but as part of other things that will be born, or things that already exist. The infinite inner matter of our bodies only lasts in that form until it decomposes and returns to something else. Just like autumn leaves fall to the ground, they contain infinite inner possibilities that become included in other forms of rebirth. Ego, complete with memories, emotions and selfish-neurosis dissolves upon death. It is only temporary perceptual phenomena.

In the West we were taught that reincarnation is a complete transfer of 'self' from one form to another. When a person dies, for example, they can "come back" as someone or something else. A bad person may reincarnate into a tree and endure a seemingly painful life of standing in one position, whereas a good person will take-on a higher form of human life, or even a god. Now that you know self is a mere illusion, you realize reincarnation of this nature is also an illusion. Instead, prior to and upon death 3 important things occur:

- Inherentness continues through sperm / egg union
- Awareness finds a host through prior and final actions
- Decomposition: molecules return to earth

Sperm / egg union is the unbroken chain of historic events that can be traced all the way back to the beginning of time. It is rebirth that occurs right before our eyes in the form of offspring. In its most obvious form, this is rebirth. This is reincarnation. Awareness too is an ancient unbroken sequence of dealings, but instead awareness reincarnates through actions. The creation of a school, university or a style of political tyranny can be viewed as rebirth of awareness.

It is what it is,

It's fun to imagine there is something deeper, more mystical going on with rebirth, but there is not. Ever watch a newborn kitten exhibit behavior that it shouldn't really know? Like using a litter box, or purring when it sees something pleasurable, or being lazy. The cat has no memory of previously being a specific cat but as a result of its genetic inheritance it has perfect memory about how to be a feline. Same thing for humans. A newborn baby has no memory of previous lives but has exact inherent memory of how to be a human being. Both creatures have unbroken sperm / egg inheritance. Both 'remember' being their respective creatures.

On the other hand, have you ever seen a human act like an animal or an animal act like a human? When you witness it, you are witnessing the rebirth of awareness from one being to another. Traits from one sentient being are integrated into a receptive host through its thoughts and actions. As you meditate, and as deeper levels of meditative absorption are achieved, awareness will perceive some of these un-seeable traits. Thou not proven by any statistical measure, a respective being may recognize previous life-memories in it's own unbroken inherent chain.

Psychic,

Prior to realizing enlightenment, people often experience psychic impressions. These manifest as perceptual hallucinations as a result of a mediator's new acute sensory attention. Psychic impressions are often thought to contain messages from afar. But usually what is happening is that a person suddenly sees and hears things they previously didn't realize were there. Psychic impressions are a result of heightened discursive thoughts in the mind that begin to look for an outlet: a deep-seeded desire to make sense of the world. As the mind stills even further, or a mediator's one-pointed focus intensifies, psychic impressions may become more intense. But once a meditator reaches the height of this phase of development,

they begin to let go and experience clear insight, or clairvoyance. This latter condition is mostly absent of mental noise.

“SIX PSYCHICAL POWERS: He may enjoy the different magical powers. With the heavenly ear, the purified, the superhuman, he may hear both kinds of sounds, the heavenly and the earthly, the distant and the near. With the mind he may obtain insight into the hearts of other beings, of other persons. He may obtain remembrances of many previous births. With the heavenly eye purified and superhuman, he may see beings vanish and reappear, the base and the noble, the beautiful and the ugly, the happy and the unfortunate; he may perceive how beings are reborn according to their deeds.” – The Buddha

Enlightenment,

Usually after weeks, months, or years of meditation a mediator will gain control over his physical and mental apparatus causing an irrevocable change. By definition, spiritual enlightenment is to be ‘awake,’ or free from the burden of ego. Because we are our own witnesses to this condition, spiritual enlightenment is self-diagnosed. It is a clear understanding of the nature of reality: a blending together of what we once perceived as opposites. It is the end of suffering. ‘Presence’ becomes our predominate mental state. An enlightened person becomes physiologically different from an ordinary person, and restoration to the previously confused state of mind is often considered not possible.

Enlightenment 2.0,

Enlightenment is also described as a permanent return to emptiness. With no reason to continue in any other form, back to void it goes for good. The historic Buddha said that enlightenment is a prerequisite to permanency in some other plain of existence. He alluded to enlightenment as being a permanent “escape” from human suffering by permanently halting the cycle of rebirth. The Buddha concluded that if mutable phenomena exist (earth, water, fire, wind) so must the immutable (flipside).

“The one who sees emptiness the Lord of Death cannot follow.” –The Buddha

God,

Throughout history, the prophets agreed that instead of looking up to the sky for Godly vision we should look deep within ourselves for reliable answers. Jesus told the blind masses 2000 years ago, *“The kingdom of God is within (or among) people.”* In the Islamic tradition, God exists without a place, *“No vision can grasp Him, but His grasp is over all vision...is acquainted with all things.”* The rational that a physical God exists in the sky (and resembles a human) was perceived at a time when people still thought the earth was flat. All along, a neighboring planet, the moon, a perfect circle, was revolving in the sky to show otherwise. Though never suggesting a God figure per se, The Buddha suggested we all have an inherent awake nature (a constant). He also said that all solutions lie within. The fact that all the historical prophets dealt so confidently and uniformly with this metaphysical query of God coming from within -- the gap between their ages in

some cases being thousands of years -- goes to show that the source of their knowledge was the same. They made use of their faculties of mind and heart and realized the truth.

IN A BLINK OF AN EYE

The earth is 4.54 billion years old

5 million years ago humans appear

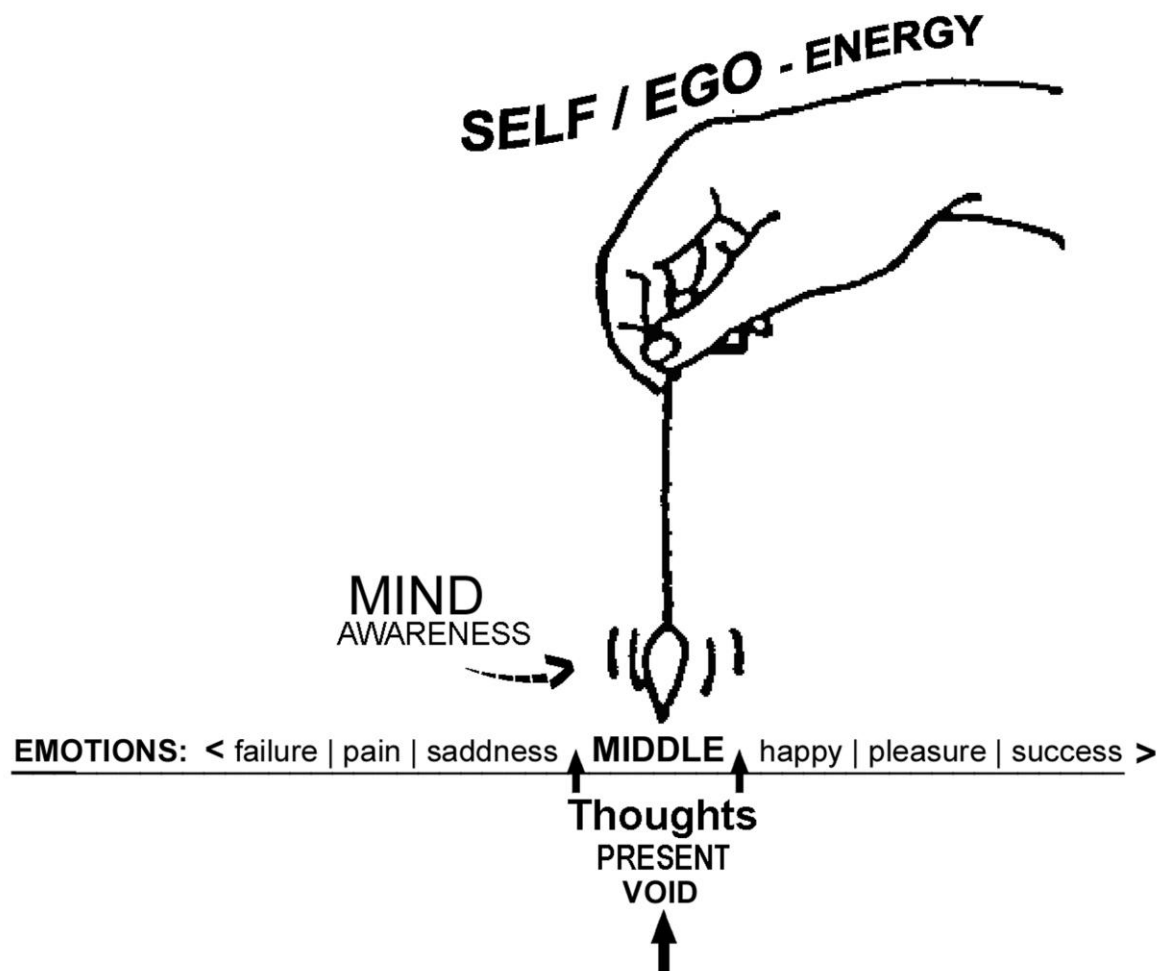
500 BC there are 2 million of us

We are NOW 7 billion

In a blink of an eye

We are none

Chapter 5. Awareness



The Path of Least Resistance:

The mind is like a pendulum that can swing across the full range of human emotions. Let's say at one end of the field are the feelings of happiness, pleasure and success. On the other end are sadness, pain and failure. The MIDDLE represents void or emptiness. Void is absent of emotions, and a place where thoughts flow. Void is without ego. Void is absent of past and future rhetoric. Void is the present moment.

Thoughts are like seeds that spring into existence from inner infinity. They enter the human emotional field and can bond with any one of the emotions. Physical actions like eating, drinking, tasting, touching, hearing, seeing, feeling, smelling shape thoughts, and steer emotions. But once a bond is formed, the emotional-thought takes root and the mind realizes it as a feeling. The source of energy for all this, or the ability for a thought to bond with an emotion is the human ego (the hand in the diagram). Emotional-thoughts are the ones that make us say, "I like this" or "I don't like that." Or, "I'm going to kill you." Emotions are physical-chemical impressions in the mind that draw energy away from the body. Thoughts, or *pure thoughts* as we will call them, require no human exertion to be realized. They are

free of emotions. They move up effortlessly and endlessly from infinite inner possibilities.

The physical phenomenon of emotions forming and bonding takes place in part at the cellular synaptic level: lock & key theory. Energy is drawn from the body for these chemical reactions to occur. These reactions are physically draining, cause dependency, physical symptoms, and disease.

When a thought enters the emotional field, ego can exert itself, and an emotion can be felt. Because ego pushes down, thoughts that come up from void pause there and are subject to bonding with emotions. In absents of ego, emotions are static, or unrealized. Pure thoughts flow and are viewed directly in the mind without emotional resistance. "Mind" is not necessarily the brain, but mind lies in the infinite inner compilation of human body parts, and possibly deeper. Mind perceives a world around it via the six senses. Mind is awareness – awareness is mind.

As ego causes our awareness to swing (pendulum), or our mind follows a juicy thought, it causes emotions to attach to the thought it follows. But once attached, an equal but opposite emotion will eventually be realized. For every 1 visit to ordinary happiness there is a reactionary 1 visit to sadness. 'Happy' and 'Sad' impressions are statistical opposites. Just like heads and tails on a coin.

FACT:

- Pure thoughts can be agreeable, disagreeable
- Pure thoughts can be past, present or future
- Pure thoughts evolve from void
- Pure thoughts are a release of energy
- Pure thoughts are absent of emotion
- Emotions draw human energy to be realized
- Emotions occur ONLY when ego exerts itself
- All emotions have an equal but opposite reaction

"Thoughts" vs. "thinking,"

A thought comes first, and then thinking occurs. Thoughts are what the mind realizes absent of ego. They are pure unfiltered impressions that arise in the mind. A still mind experiences thought, but only when the mind decides to pursue a thought does 'thinking' occur. Then concepts and stories develop. A thought is a spontaneous release of energy that occurs in the moment. Whereas thinking is the pursuit of a thought well into the future. To think or to be 'thinking' requires energy. It is a secondary emotional reaction to thought. Thought is absent of self -- whereas thinking is generally an expression of self. Thinking often begins with memories of the past, or ideas about the future. Sometimes a whole life can be spent thinking about one single thought, like "Will I ever find true love?" Moreover, when we are thinking, or "lost in thought" there is 100% chance we have engaged the emotions.

First thought – insightful thought,

Insight is what occurs when we experience pure thought without the burden of

ordinary thinking: without identification with ego. Insightful thoughts can be realized singularly or in combination with others. Insight is a human attribute rather than a human fabrication. It is thinking without really thinking. It is the source of creative expression. It is an inherent ego-free way to experience our thoughts. The ordinary mind that is always thinking experiences very little of this. It rarely slows down enough to explore it. Instead, the thinking mind regurgitates previous thoughts that become full blown emotional concepts. An example of this would be when we are asked to give a talk in front of a large group. Suddenly we feel nervous. The thinking mind kicks in to tell us a fearful tale of the past, "With so many eyes watching, you might say or do the wrong thing." But once we become aware of our thinking, the emotion-laced story subsides. We can give the talk without past memories and future desires getting in the way. The fear disappears without being repressed. Insight starts to flow.

Most of our thoughts are repeats. Some thoughts have been revisited hundreds of times over in our mind. More times than not thoughts are disagreeable: painful renditions of the past or hopeless estimates of the future that trigger an emotional reaction. Not only do we revisit the same old thoughts with the same old stories attached, but the stories start to change. With each revisit we amend the story a little; add a new twist to it, a new adventure, a new possible outcome. No matter how subtle or brief the visitation is, additions in this way mount in equal proportion. It's like the game of telephone where a story changes as it makes its way through the telephone line of participants. In the same way, the more habitual our thinking patterns are, the more a thought will change as it gets rehashed in the mind.

Stillness,

Without energy applied to a thought, the pendulum (mind, awareness) stops in the middle at void. Ego cannot exist in the present moment. Without movement, the mind does not experience ordinary thinking or the emotions. It only experiences pure thoughts that flow from void. The still mind hangs in the void. Still. Motionless. Present. Suddenly there are no past or future story lines. The ego wants the mind to experience pleasure, so it forces awareness to swing in the direction of future happiness, pleasure and success, but it is statistically impossible for it to stay there due to its impermanent nature. The momentum always causes the mind to swing back to the opposite emotion. Again, wherever there is a single emotion, an equal but opposite emotion is experienced. For every 1 visit to happiness there is a reactionary 1 visit to sadness.

In absents of ego:

- Mind stops in the MIDDLE
- Past and future do not exist
- There is only the present
- There are no emotions
- There is no unwanted thinking
- There are only pure thoughts

Thoughts that are not pursued in the mind fail to become, and begin to lose power. They die, decompose and perhaps try again to pop up later. We cannot extinguish

thought or memory from our mind, nor do we want to, but with training we can prevent unwanted thoughts from gaining ground and becoming unwanted thinking. One way is to avoid certain people, places and things that trigger unwanted thought formation. Another is to train our awareness to ignore certain thoughts completely. Unwanted thoughts then drop back to the inner realm (void) they sprang from and grow weaker, or are forgotten. There is no thinking.

Thought --> thinking --> emotion

All emotions evolve because of the ego's relentless pursuit of pleasure. First there is an agreeable thought, and then thinking about something "delightful" occurs. Ego then forces the pleasure centers of the body to exert itself. Ego pursues the pleasurable experience. We then experience the emotional-thought as a feeling. But if we understand there is no pleasurable item there, but just a habitual thinking pattern, the emotion will dissolve. If we view the world around us, and inside us from a place of non-ownership or as a witness to it instead of a victim, any thought or emotion can ultimately be dissolved when awareness is directed to do so. As you will see in meditation practice, we have a choice. We do not have to follow every thought. Technically speaking, thinking is optional. We do not have to get wrapped up in emotions either. We can let those go completely.

Theory as mind,

The above arguments illustrate where thinking, human mood swings and thoughts come from. It also illustrates how the self-seeking mind (ego) makes a choice to apply energy and chase pleasure. It further illustrates that thoughts start out absent of emotions and are only contaminated when ego kicks in. Like driving a car with your foot on the brake, emotions and ego create resistance in the mind. They contaminate the flow of pure-insightful thoughts from void. They carry physical and emotional side effects. They stand in the way of clarity, wisdom and compassion.

Every time ego exerts a similar impulse the emotional swing becomes more intense, and the pattern more habitual. This is similar to the way a drug addict becomes more and more addicted to drugs, or how lovers fall more and more in love with each other. The longer the mind experiences or clings to a certain emotion, the harder it becomes to break the habit. Ego 'remembers' the place it found pleasure, and tries to revisit over and over again (lock & key theory). In this scenario, individuality and personality get stronger, and the habit harder to break. Desire and craving can reach catastrophic proportions.

With habitual patterns, the flow chart looks something like this:

--> Thought evolves from void --> thought pause in the emotional field --> thinking occurs --> thought bonds with pleasurable emotion --> pleasurable emotion is realized in mind & body --> pleasurable emotion swings to unpleasant emotion (opposite reaction) --> ego exerts greater energy to continue pleasurable emotion - -> pleasurable emotion become a habit

Emotions are just as dysfunctional as is ego. Both are byproducts of a dualistic narrative in the mind that attempts to acquire pleasure in the future. But since the future does not exist, the entry point for such pleasure never comes. It is possible

to experience our thoughts absent of emotions and their physical side effects. It is also possible to experience thoughts without “thinking.” Energy exerted by ego, not our thoughts are the reason we experience emotional sadness, hopelessness and despair. It’s also why even pleasurable emotions become painful later. Ordinary happiness, therefore, is equally responsible for human suffering as is ordinary sadness. The only way to slow the mind down enough to correct any of this is through meditation. Through precise attention to detail we place our mind in the void and witness confusion dissolve.

About VOID,

Voidness or emptiness or stillness is not to say there is nothing there. It says we are a smaller part of a bigger picture and through emptiness we are connected. Emptiness connects us to the greater whole. It is from emptiness that samsara (anguish) and nirvana (pleasure) arise and it is into emptiness that they dissolve. Through our understanding of VOID, an enlightened state of mind can be realized. We can view voidness as a calm deep ocean, and our mind is one with the ocean. The ocean has many exotic fish that live there. Imagine the fish are thoughts. There are good fish, bad fish and indifferent fish. But the mind can see all fish. It can pick and choose the fish it would like to examine, and ultimately befriend.

Samsara,

The untrained mind never rests in the MIDDLE (present) where things are naturally calm and peaceful. It always pursues ego-ic stories and concepts that it believes will produce future pleasure. It is forever thinking. It follows the poisonous chain of mental reactions by placing ‘me’ in the middle. Like the hero in a movie, the stories we tell ourselves are always about ‘me.’ In Samsara, the untrained mind finds pleasure via the six senses of sight, sound, taste, touch, feel and thought. It pursues agreeable objects, and generally avoids the disagreeable. In this scenario ‘happiness’ is connected or *compounded* to agreeable objects. But because circumstances are always changing, the ordinary mind never experiences the lasting happiness it plans for in the future. Because the future doesn’t exist.

FACT: Mind is an object we can train to be still

FACT: Ordinary mind chases pleasure

FACT: Trained mind remains still

The untrained mind is always chasing after the proverbial carrot of pleasure. It tries always to attain pleasure but the momentum consistently returns it to pain. The more intense the happiness, the more intense is the return of sadness. Wittingly, the ordinary mind never intentionally pursues pain. But that’s precisely what it gets on the rebound. No matter how you look at it, the momentum of the emotional swing always creates suffering. It is inescapable. This is called Samsara, or what is commonly referred to as the Cycle of Suffering.

The trained mind,

The mind trained in meditation remains steady in the MIDDLE. Present. It is absent of ego. Absent of emotions. Absent of past and future narratives. It neither swings towards ordinary happiness or sadness, pleasure or pain. It just rests in the

MIDDLE: peaceful, calm, void, empty. It experiences neither the severity of common pleasure or the agony of emotional suffering. It just bears witness to the swing in others but understands the possibility for it to arise in itself. It can experience pure insight without ego. It can experience the unfiltered truth of any situation. It is the foundation of pure creativity and compassion. Through sitting meditation, we train the mind to understand this. Through one-pointed focus and contemplation we pierce it.

Fear,

It is fear of not getting what we want and losing what we have that causes us to retreat from life. Instead of asking ourselves the proverbial question, "What am I afraid of?" We should ask, "What variety of pleasure have I chased to cause this fear?" Say for example as a young man I decide to pursue a career that pays enough money to buy a house, a car and support a family. I even plan to save some money for a rainy day. The pursuit of family, career and savings is a pleasurable story I tell myself. I go on to imagine my grown children enjoying the fruits of my labor, getting sent off to college and having a family of their own. I even see myself retiring on a beach in Florida. As time advances, my career may take off, but so do my dreams. Mind thinks, "Maybe I'll own my own company, have 100 employees and make a billion dollars. I'll have my own jet and an island with servants..." In this scenario we are always living one moment ahead. We imagine someday a time will come where we will be happy.

Needless to say, as we carry these stories around in our heads, we build a steady and ever-changing attachment to a pleasurable outcome. Instead of living in the present, we invest all of our waking moments fearful we may not get there, or fearful we may lose what we have accumulated. Or, we keep upping the ante to unrealistic proportions. We are attached to chasing pleasure, and we receive emotional pain in the form of constant frustration, anxiety and fear. Modern psychoanalysis seeks to analyze and repair this sort of fearful ego, and make it happy. By attempting to recondition the ego, therapists attempt to make fear go away. Instead of viewing compulsive thinking and the ego's constant pursuit of pleasure as the root of the problem, psychology views personality like a garden that needs pruning. The garden or person's ego is infested with weeds of bewilderment. Psychology states, "We will remove these weeds of fear and the ego will be happy."

Enter gardener,

In front of the psychologist lies the polluted garden of a person's yearning personality (ego). There are some happy weeds from the past and sad weeds too. There are fearful weeds about the future and lustful weeds about you-know-who. Just a lot of weeds competing for space in an egotistical garden. The premise of the theory is that once the garden is de-weeded, or a person's ego is somehow corrected, and the person's mind will be reasonably happy. Needless to say internal and external conditions change and the next series of events yield the same ugly weeds.

Working with ego at a 'fix-it' level like this is like trying to hold a gallon of liquid in your bare hands. It just ends up on the floor. We must go one level deeper. If we view the above dilemma from the root cause, we realize that rather than give ego a makeover, we need to uproot it completely and reduce it to ashes. Inflamed ego distracts us from what is happening in the moment. Once removed, the weeds and or their seeds die on their own, wither and dissolve. Then, and only then can we address the emotional setup that occurred: the pursuit of ordinary happiness.

It's the emotions,

The field of psychology does a noble service when it points-out sick behavior to a sick client: like violence, larceny or abuse. Showing them something is wrong in their behavior is a good thing. So we should honor their work. But as is revealed here, the coming together and breaking apart of ordinary happiness and sadness, or the perpetual swing of the emotions never ends unless you render it motionless. Until you expunge ego completely the problem persists indefinitely. In fact, the longer moods are pacified, the greater is the speed of acceleration; we basically get crazier with age. The more we try to 'think' our way out of every situation the further away from the truth we get. The correct way to alleviate this sort of emotional bewilderment is abstinence from the thinking that got us there in the first place. Through meditation we slow the mind down enough to see the movement. If we see egotism getting ready to build, we let go. When we witness the seeds of how a radical thought can potentially produce mood swings, we recognize it but we do not pursue it. And it dissolves.

Daydreaming,

A daydream is what the ordinary mind experiences most of the time. It is technically a state of unconsciousness, just like dreaming at night. In our heads we lock on to a thought that produce pleasant or unpleasant fantasies. We are no longer present in the moment, but off somewhere following a chain reaction of dreams. We abide in whatever story we tell ourselves. For example, if vanity takes over, ego starts painting a picture in our mind how wonderful we are. How everything we said the other day, or a minute ago was just perfect. How the plan we have designed, or the course we have set into action will all work out to our advantage. Or the person we just met, or saw in passing is the perfect mate for us and we will live happily ever after together. It's similar to the way we dream while asleep. It is the same unstable mind chasing after pleasure. But in a daydream our eyes are wide open as it happens. We are off somewhere in a dream-state while our lives pass us by. Needless to say the experience is counterfeit. A dream, whether awake or asleep, is a chemical-fabrication of the mind. When it doesn't prove to be real it causes a rupture of ego, and misery follows. Or, if things do go the way the dream said it will, ultimately circumstances change, become unstable, fade and we are back to suffering again.

*"Wakefulness is the way to life.
The fool sleeps as if he were already dead,
But the master is awake and he lives forever.*

– The Buddha

Night dreaming,

One third of our life is spent asleep (7 or 8 hours per night). As we meditate, exercise, and improve our health our ratio at best only increases to one quarter of our life spent asleep (5 or 6 hours per night). That's a lot of down time. Wouldn't it be nice to meditate while we sleep? Some people do, or at least say they do. A lucid dream, or a dream in which one is aware that one is dreaming, dreamers can allegedly train themselves to maneuver the dream in whatever direction they please. Modern Freudian psychology and the Tibetan dream yogis of yesterday claim there is valuable significance to a dream, and a chance to explore the unknown. The fact is: whether awake or asleep, a dream is a dream is a dream. It's make-believe. Best to disregard all dreams as the tricky mind playing another trick on us. I've tried to steer my own dreamboat a few times and at best I woke myself up. It's very subtle, but if you find yourself dreaming, and you are remotely aware that "this is a dream," whether pleasurable or not, rather than pursue the dream, simply say, "dreaming." And let the wildness dissolve. Don't lose sleep over it. It's just a dream. The more you work with dreams by day, the less they occur at night.

We are human,

Even if we spend the rest of our lives training our mind, now and again we will experience a painful emotion. They are usually triggered by deep seeded memories we are still invested in. We may not even realize they are still there. When a painful emotion does slip through our defenses, like in the example of the death of a family member or lose of a career, we don't beat ourselves up over it but allow ourselves to experience the emotion in its entirety. We welcome it as a chance to understand suffering. We remain mindful in the moment. We don't run from the phenomena or pretend it's not there. We take a full turn into it. We connect with the feeling of anguish, and dissect it. We stay with it. We drop the storyline (dream) and place all of our attention on the emotion. We say, "This is emotional pain. I don't own this pain. This pain is not my pain, or your pain. This is pain. Pain is universal." We allow ourselves to experience it in the moment. We explore the texture of emotional pain. All sentient beings experience pain.

We contemplate the feeling a little longer. We see that all sentient beings suffer in this way. We know it. This is suffering. We feel what pain feels like in our heart. We allow it in. We allow pain to pierce our being. We remain brave. Fearless. We are not afraid of this pain, or ourselves. We are not afraid of our human pain. We are compassionate for others in pain. We understand pain. Then it dissolves...

Whatever thought or emotion we encounter we remain brave like warriors. Not brave in the sense of banging our chests, shooting bullets or pulling swords on each other, but brave to experience our world as it is, not as we dream it to be. Chögyam Trungpa, creator of Shambhala training which I am a graduate of describes human bravery (warriorship) like this; *"Warriorship does not refer to making war on others...warriorship is the tradition of human bravery, or the tradition of fearlessness...not being afraid of yourself. When we are afraid of ourselves and afraid of the seeming threat the world presents, then we become extremely selfish. We want to build our own little nests, our own cocoons, so that*

we can live by ourselves in a secure way.” Through the perpetual swing of all human emotions, and a volcano of thoughts that spring up, whether happy or sad, euphoric or agonizing, they are all the same. Just thoughts. Just emotions. The untrained mind likes to follow every thought to the end of the earth. The mind trained in meditation knows better.

Finally, whether we marinate in ordinary happiness or dwell in sadness, we realize neither is contained in the world around us but resides exclusively in our mind. Dilgo Khyentse a renowned mediator from Tibet makes this point on the emotion of ‘pride’ by saying, *“If you analyze pride carefully, you will find that it is not inherent in whatever you feel proud of, but is produced by the grasping mind. If you always stick to a modest [middle] position and keep your mind humble, pride will vanish like morning mist.”*

I wanna make piles of money
Money is good
Money can buy me things
The more money I have the happier I will be.

And what about the stock market?
Lots of money, prestige,
“Good morning Mr. Rich guy”

I will meditate later, tomorrow, next year,
But right now I will take care of myself
And make lots of money.

Ok, lets go...
The stock went down?
It was supposed to go up!
I lost my money!

I can sleep at night
Can't eat
This is making me sick
How will I pay my way?
I lost MY money!

*“We are what we think.
All that we are arises with our thoughts.
With our thoughts we make the world.” –dhammapada*

The Yogi and the Scholar:

Once there was a man who became a hidden yogi. He found a deserted island where he could be alone to work with a mantra that would bring him to enlightenment. The yogi was on the island for many years doing his work, and as part of his practice he repeated a mantra over and over again. A renowned scholar on the mainland heard of the yogi and decided to visit him to check on his progress. So the scholar hired a boat to take him to the island, and when the scholar arrived, he asked the yogi if he would repeat the mantra for him. So the yogi repeated the mantra and to the yogi’s surprise, the scholar informed him that he had been pronouncing the mantra all wrong. Politely, the scholar repeated the mantra, and the yogi repeated it with him. The yogi was very grateful for the visit and escorted the scholar back to his boat. As the scholar began to paddle away, the yogi ran across the top of the water to the scholar’s boat. Standing on the water, the yogi humbly asked the scholar if he could repeat the correct mantra one more time because he already had forgotten it. So the scholar repeated the mantra and the yogi repeated it with him. The yogi thanked the scholar for his generosity and walked back to the island.

I think you can see the point: there is more than one-way to screw in a light bulb. Waking up is a lot like that. Of the many teachings and the many scholars that teach how to do it, the true genius reveals itself to those who figure it out. What you understand and what I understand may be two different things. But as long as we’re practicing, the result can be the same. Even if the scholar had never corrected the yogi, the yogi would still have achieved his clear state of being, enough so to “walk on water.”

Whether we are following the breath or repeating a mantra like Om mani padme hum (Tibetan for the brilliant jewel in the lotus), we are reminded of our own wakeful nature. That all paths lead to one. When we focus on the breath, or repeat the 6-syllable mantra all carry with it an understanding of our pending enlightenment. Like a big bowl of veggie soup, it’s in there; and we eat it for the good of all sentient beings.

Chapter 6. We Are Responsible

*“All beings are the owners of their deeds,
the heirs of their deeds: Their deeds are the womb
from which they sprang, with their deeds they
Are bound, their deeds are their refuge.
Whatever deeds they do -- good or bad –
of such they will be the heirs.” – The Buddha*

KARMA:

Karma is a fun word because everyone seems to know it. When we think of karma we think of a boomerang, or the saying, “What goes around comes around.” But why do our thoughts and actions have a boomerang effect? It starts with the thoughts we cultivate in our mind, but a step above that is our engagement with the world, or our interdependence. Whether good or bad, our actions come right back at us. We see in our mind how intense craving for pleasure results in inevitable dissatisfaction. In the same way we see how selfish actions result in equally intense reactions. For example, when ignorance takes over we see how an abuse like eating defenseless animals can occur. Selfish thoughts lead to selfish actions. Did you ever wonder why a movie with consenting adults having sex gets restricted from American theaters while another with violence, war and or serial murder gets promoted on prime time? Our mind is the place we start to look for answers. If we are present in our thoughts, our presence will extend outward to our actions. If those actions are sensible, the world around us slowly becomes a sensible place. Karma encapsulates the idea that I am responsible for what I experience not only within my own mind, but what I do outwardly.

“With our thoughts we make the world.
Speak or act with a pure mind and happiness will
follow you as your shadow, unshakable.” --dhammapada

Interdependence:

Man is supposed to be the most intelligent species on the planet. We can walk and talk and tell funny jokes, but the ocean didn't get pollute by itself. We can make sophisticated tools to make our life easier, but the air didn't get polluted for some mysterious reason. We can build high-speed computers with global connectivity, we can fly an aircraft across the planet and beyond, but global warming is not something that just happens. We are responsible.

We exploit the environment out of selfishness. We terrorize and hunt living creatures out of ignorance. If I am selfish within, outwardly it is easy for me to join the selfishness and ignorance around me. If I lack compassion and understanding within, it is easy to be less compassionate outwardly. If my view of the world is bathing in selfish thoughts, those thoughts become selfish actions. We'd all like to think of ourselves as happy-loving people but then we put our selfish desires first and forget everyone. We drive a gas-guzzling car to the corner instead of walking. We allow our municipalities to dump plastics in the ground instead of recycling. We

choose an occupation based on salary enough to way live above our means (pleasure), rather than work at something useable for the greater good.

Ironically, the greatest act of kindness in the world is to work on ones own mind. In order to wish peace for others, or peace for the entire world, we must first understand peace in ourselves. Once understood we can extend it outwardly and save the planet and all the poor souls in it. As Gandhi said, "*Be the change you want to see in the world.*" You might say about the problems, "How can I help? The problems are too big. It's too much." Every Tuesday night my local meditation center has a Dharma gathering. Like a community focus group, it's a Sangha of people who come together to discuss the very topics you are reading in this book. There are teachers and an office with important people answering phones, and pictures on the wall of more important people. But volunteers like myself do the bulk of the work. People who show up and do community service keep the Sangha alive.

I believe that telling people about meditation is a positive thing. So I do service that encourages it. I believe meditation benefits all people who take a moment to understand it. So I show up and do whatever needs to be done to make it happen. A Dharma gathering is a great place to find people who are new to this way of life, and as a volunteer I get a first hand account. All it requires is getting there a little early, setting up some cushions and making some tea so that when people arrive they feel welcome. We are not lifting refrigerators on our backs or swinging sledgehammers in a ditch. We are making tea so that people can relax. It's gentle labor, with a gentle purpose.

I am only one person in the world and can only effect things directly around me. I am not the President of the United States or the CEO of a large energy company. So I ride a bicycle instead. It's not because I'm cheap and I don't want to buy a car or take a taxi. It's because the environment is important to me. So is my own health. By riding a bicycle to get around town, I keep my body in better physical condition so that I am in a healthier frame of mind. My actions also make a statement to others about how to cut down oil consumption. It is these small actions that add up and make a big difference. The seeds we plant become the fruits we sow.

Right View,

Lets talk more about ethics. For our discussion, 'right view' is an all-inclusive term that encapsulates a peaceful style of living as outlined in The Four Noble Truths. Right view is essentially any action that will not harm others or ourselves. No harm can come from actions that harm no one. That's how you know it's right. Lying, cheating, stealing, gossiping, using harsh language, boozing, whoring and killing living creatures are the opposite of right view. Selflessness, service to others and compassion for all beings is right view. Understanding emptiness, interdependence, karma, and the truth of suffering are all right view.

Right view --> meditation --> right action,

Right view encompasses basic decency. To help others, first we must find an unshakable clarity in our mind. Meditation and right view then become one. All the meditation in the world is of no use if our actions drag down the world around us. We must relinquish all hope that our ego will help us think our way through every situation. It's about treating people with basic respect. Don't talk about them behind their back. Don't try to sleep with their girlfriend or boyfriend. Don't speak like a saint on Monday and cursing like a drunkard on Tuesday. Don't kill anyone, or anything. Don't steal. In conversation, listen to the other person speak instead of waiting for your turn to jump in and talk about yourself. Don't lie. Try to pick a job that lifts people up rather than tears them down; like a nuclear physicist who builds power plants rather than one who builds nuclear bombs. And yes, it is a good idea not to drink, smoke and take drugs. All of which are willful ego-ic steps away from awakeness.

Refrain from: lying, cheating, stealing, cursing, killing, gossip, sexual misconduct, arrogance, egomania, vanity

Pull don't push,

Nobody likes to get even something good forced down his or her throat. Rather than promote our cause like hungry car salesmen, we should become the positive ideal we would like to see in world. Then others will follow. When we push our ideals, whether good or bad, we are willfully engaging the ego and may attract a wide range of possibilities. As a remedy, rather than engage the mouth first and say, "You should do this and you should do that," let your actions speak. Let people see your arms, legs and mouth doing positive deeds. And if those deeds are in fact positive, people will join in. We lead by example.

Actions Rule,

Actions speak louder than thoughts. More than just meditating on ways we can help others, actions are the most potent way to put the wheels of kindness into motion. It starts by diffusing toxic thoughts in our mind first, but until we engage the phenomenal world with our arms, legs, mouth or pen nothing will change. A gentle thought about solving the hunger problem is good, but helping hungry people find food is better. A loving thought about saving the planets ecosystem is good, but walking instead of driving actually does something to solve the problem. A kind thought about meditation for others is good, but giving a talk, lifting a chair or making some tea is superior. A wholesome though about the rights of animals is nice, but until we stop eating them, the problem only gets worse. We cannot wish, pray or meditate the problems of the world away. We must take action.

To become a winner, hang around the winners,

We rarely learn from people who point the finger and tell us how to think or behave, but we learn a whole lot by studying their behavior. If for example a highly regarded teacher, politician or model student exclaims from afar, "You must help everyone and be of service." Though the message is right, lets see if he or she actually helps people and is of service. It's easy to be calm and seemingly knowledgeable from an elevated sound stage. It's a controlled setting. But do our words reflect our actions? We see our rockstars for example, the embodiment of

confidence and success go home and put a needle in their arm, or a gun in their mouth. Or a politician that runs for office on a platform of honesty then betrays his constituents by lying and stealing. Or the big Buddhist from afar who claims spiritual perfection but all the while eats meat, drinks alcohol, misappropriates funds and sleeps with everyone but his wife.

“Come early – stay late” is a good way to find the winners. At a voluntary event or public gathering, come early and see who is actually helpful. Everyone likes to volunteer for the high job. They say, “I’ll be in charge.” But what about the less popular job like setting up chairs or filling coffee makers? Or how many hands go up when it’s time to sweep the floor? Stay late and see who cleans up the mess. Feel free to jump in. You’re amongst the winners.

Start small,

Everyone new to meditation loves the word enlightenment. They come aboard and say, “I can’t wait to be enlightened.” For now, think of enlightenment as anything that is absent of aggression. The world is a tough place full of unconscious people who like to push you around. These are not awakened creatures and most of them do not care about your personal undertaking. They care exclusively about themselves. They are suffering. Aggressive people can put us in a tough situation, and the only remedy for this is to stay awake and helpful.

We have all these material things in our world, but does it make it a better place? Does it make people happier? In the United States and other *developed nations* what we consider to be a higher standard of living results in the highest suicide rates anywhere. How can this be? Once we realize that the problems in the world start in the mind there is a chance for redemption. Mindfulness allows us to see on the spot the difference between right and wrong and decide whether or not to follow that flow of thinking. If we are right in our mind, we will be right in our actions. And most of all, rather than crawl up in a ball and hide from challenges, we should rejoice when a tough situation arises. Celebrate it as an opportunity to practice being awake.

As I mentioned before, I ride a bicycle around town. But the town I live in has a few more cars than it does bikes. And even more taxi’s that don’t yield for anyone but themselves. So inevitably one day I got hit by a car and was in a tough situation. Laying flat on my back on the hot pavement, I was suddenly looking up at the guy who ran me over. Being a little dazed from the blow, my first reaction when I got up was to hit him back! This guy just knocked me sailing off my bicycle and could have crushed me. Therefore, my anger is justified. He deserves a punch in his head to teach him to be more careful.

When you think about the above logic it really makes no sense, but this how we react. He accidentally hits me, so I should willfully hit him back. Rather than accept that accidents happen, I was being triggered to get angry, maybe even violent. Since I’ve been at this meditation thing a while I was able to remember that anger is never justified. I was in the emotional field for a second, and was able to let it go. So when my mouth finally opened to speak, instead of saying, “I’m going to kill

you, you idiot.” I said, “Are you ok? Are you hurt?” To his surprise he said, “Me? I’m fine. How are you?”

The bad consequences,

On the other hand, even though I’ve been at this meditation thing for a while I am human and have made all kinds of mistake. The day I got hit by that car was the same day I lied to a girl about my age. She was 20-something, so I said I was 32 (I was well in my 40’s). To win a date, I figured it was just a little white lie, and what is age any, just a number? A few hours later on my way to the post office, bang, I’m laying in the street on 1st Avenue.

Whenever we pursue pleasure it’s always at the expense of something else. Consequences of our actions are not always straightforward either. Like my bicycle incident. Sometimes we chase pleasure over here, and receive pain over there. We cling to pleasure and are selfish, and then we get stepped on or run over. We act selfishly in this way, and suffer in that way. We belittle someone at the checkout counter and fall down at the bar. We steal from Peter, and Paul hits our friend Mary. A king finds pleasure in invading another nation then slips on his own silk robe and is paralyzed. A worker gossips about the boss and is struck by a falling piece of debris. We steal and are stolen from. We fantasize in our head about the exploitation of others: lying for sex, cheating for money and gossiping for power. Then it’s our turn, and we find a stranger in bed with our mate. These are the karmic seeds we plant, and these are the fruits we sow. Like the perpetual swing of the emotions, our actions operate in a similar field of action-reaction. In the Second Noble Truth the Buddha offers a poem on the karmic backlash of wrongdoing. He basically says our actions are inescapable:

Not in the air, nor ocean-midst,
Nor hidden in the mountain clefts,
Nowhere is found a place on earth,
Where man is freed from evil deeds.

Get honest,

The mouth is the gateway of sin. Lying, exaggerating and gossiping always lead to trouble. But sometimes these acts are so absentminded we barely realize we’re doing it. To uncover our true defects of character so that we may rid ourselves of them, it’s a good idea to find at least one honest person we can tell the whole unadulterated truth about ourselves. A therapist, cleric or safe friend will do. Pick someone who is well grounded in the values and ideals you would like to witness in yourself. Don’t be afraid to bare your inner most secrets to this person. Get humble. Be fearless and thorough in your approach. Let it all hang out. Bounce your inner most impressions off this person and see what they say. Be open to whatever happens. The therapeutic value is priceless. Then, when in public, rather than bear your inner most psyche to everyone you meet, when asked, talk about yourself in a general way. But most of all, be honest. Honesty is the foundation of true compassion. Once we get honest and are working on behalf of others, we can return the favor by making ourselves available as listeners. Listen to learn, and learn to listen.

The good consequences,

Yes. Karma can be good too. In the larger scheme, the world has seen many great doers like Mother Theresa who at the time of her death her charities for the poor were operating 610 missions in 123 countries. Or Martin Luther King who used methods of nonviolence based on the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi to change a colorblind society to include all people. And Gandhi himself who lead a political and spiritual quest that freed India and made it self-reliant. By planting good seeds we sow good fruit.

Right livelihood,

This may be my most helpful contribution in the book because a declining 2008 stock market was the catalyst of my waking up. For many years I traded the stock market. I don't anymore. It is an occupation of winners and losers. For every person who makes money, someone will lose money, "Your failure is my success." It sounds like the final word in freedom; quit your day job, swap your stiff suit for some comfy shorts, never have a boss again and spend your days trading stocks with your own money, for your own profit. While self-employed trading may epitomize the economy's free agents they're never going to have a tension-free workday. I never did. When you risk your own money, which often represents years of accumulated savings and attachment, and the odds of winning are stacked heavily against you it's hard to sleep at night. In fact, 90 percent of novices, armed with little more than "hope" and access to a computer, are likely to fail.

When you trade, you are not providing any goods or services per se; you are simply trying to capitalize on the other guy's mistake. I could write a book on the trials and tribulations of trading, how to trade, how not to trade, but that would be an exercise in ego. My takeaway from the experience is that all fields of business are the same: spread your message and make money. Money is a good thing if it's used to sow good seeds. But it's the worst thing in the world when you only operate for your own gain. When you trade the stock market you put yourself in a tricky situation. It is a greed & fear driven environment that will test your ethics. You are trying to outwit the guy on the other end of the trade. You are basically trying to take his money before he takes yours. Your opponent could be a bank or a hedge fund, or a modest guy in Atlanta for all you know. But someone is on the other end of every trade. Seems like a pointless endeavor, all about money, but millions of people do it. And when you get down to it, all economies whether blatant or subtle are based on this idea.

I have been through a few boom & bust cycles in my career. At the time of writing this book I am market-bust and quite satisfied sitting the sidelines. This time around I experienced the pain of having lost everything: the pain of failure, the pain of a crushed ego. But in retrospect, getting killed like this was the best thing that ever happened to me. It allowed me to see who I really was; the false hopes and dreams I was still fostering, and the false sense of security that money provided. More disturbing than a heroin overdose, losing my possessions caused my mind to shift in a way that drug addiction never did. There was no chemical buffer this time to save me. Losing the security of money, I learned how addictive behavior

reinvented itself through trading, and took over my world. Nobody on Wall Street can stop you from killing yourself. There is no school or university that can prepare you to trade. You learn from experience.

I will say that for everyone I met who had a genuine heart; they are humble and meaningful people. Then there are the greed-mongers. We call them pigs and they almost always get slaughtered. The Ivy Leaguer who lasted 2 months. The hip-hop guy who lasted 3 weeks. The 25-year-old preppy kid who confessed to me his chest pains and sleeplessness. The high roller who sat with an enormous brass bull and golf balls on his desk, and lost everything. There are the candle burners, and the guys with 6 screens. The superstitious players who would wear the same clothes 3 days in a row when they're up, and not walk through the same door when they're down. The Christmas parties that look like the lounge scene in Star Wars with assorted aliens, misfits, wives and whores. And myself who carried in his pocket what I told myself were lucky magick coins. There are times when I would wake up in the middle of the night with stock charts racing in my head. How the biggest losses (fear) came the day after the biggest gains (greed). How one minute I would say, "I am brilliant" and the next, "What a fool." The fact that I never used an alarm clock to wake up bares testimony to how restless I would sleep in the first place. Life becomes one big trade.

Pro surfers never jump right into a rough sea. They sit on the beach and watch for a while until the waves make sense. In an ever-changing economy where the trend is supposed to be your friend, it never made sense to jump in at all, but that's precisely what I did. And to all those who call the stock market a casino, why is it ok to speculate \$50,000 per year on college tuition but when a man puts his hard earned capital on the line in the stock market it's gambling?

Expose yourself,

As you can see from the above argument I'm not over it. I try to convince myself it's a safe business. I tell myself I'll be back in there again someday working for the good of all people. As a writer I once put a book in peoples hands called The Psychic Investor. Although it's a good thing to write and tell people how to use a focused mind to focus on picking the right stocks, my views were distorted. My actions were well intended because I was helping people make money, but my view was wrong because it contributed to the breakdown of the economy. Rather than develop a right view first like finding stocks that lift people up rather than tear them down, I directed people to just get in there and make money. There are a variety of publicly traded companies you can invest in that lift the world up. There are solar companies that make innovative tools to harness the power of the sun. Green energy companies that convert wind into electricity. But instead, I told investors it doesn't matter. Just pick the winners and forget the rest. Or *short* the stock when it's going down (not good for the company). The seeds of greed were planted in me, and I planted those seeds in others and perpetuated the cycle of suffering.

By the way, the economy doesn't just collapse one day. We are responsible. To most people's surprise, the U.S. investment banks that were at the forefront of the

economic meltdown in 2008 are not completely to blame, nor are they in business entirely for their own gain. Their job is to make money on behalf of their shareholders. Anyone who has as much as one penny invested in the stock market is just as guilty for the collapse. By definition, Wall Street exists today without a physical place: as an investor, you are that place. You are Wall Street. It's the egoic finger pointing and building up of greed that caused the damn to eventually break. It is the ill-advised karmic seeds we as a people plant, and overindulgence is what we sow. An economy based on right action would be a wonderful place indeed. Maybe we'll get there someday, but it starts by taking responsibility for our own actions.

To give you another idea how this negative karma expressed itself in my thoughts and actions, I was peddling home after a day of losing money and saw a young man on the Brooklyn Bridge ready to jump. There is a wonderful bike path that goes around the island of Manhattan and at the bottom part near Wall Street it goes under the 2 bridges that connect to Brooklyn. I was so wrapped up in my head one day, when I saw the kid on the ledge and the police trying to get him down, all I could think was -- Jump! I even took a picture to show my friends. After a lifetime of experiencing the world in a selfish way, it's hard to change. As a kid I saw the world outside and thought this is my world. This is who I am. Mom owns a candy store and makes lots of money. I am her son. This is our house. Mom has a car and a portfolio of stocks. Someday I'll be just like mom. Maybe I'll even be a movie star or a lawyer. I'll have two houses and two cars and I'll be happy, and mom will be proud. I won't fail. I am going to make it.

We are responsible for the stories of false hope we tell ourselves and teach our children. As a species, this is our collective defect of character. As children we react to our surroundings out of parental discretion, but as full-blooded adults there are no more excuses. As a kid my mantra was, "I have new skates and a pool in the yard. I have a bicycle and you have a fur coat." Today my mantra is, "How can I be of service...how can I help people wake up." At the time of writing this book I drive a bicycle taxi in Central Park. I give guided tours. It's a tricycle that has room for 2 regular size passengers in the back, and myself on the front. There is no motor. It is honest work for honest pay. It allows me to support myself while I write this book. When asked, I also teach people to meditate. But I only do that when asked. I live modestly with a lady friend and a few friendly cats in Brooklyn. I am a vegan, which means I don't eat animals or use products animals suffered for. I don't predict world events anymore, nor think much about the stock market. I could care less if you bought this book and put money in my pocket or borrowed it from a friend who borrowed it from a friend. All I care is that it helps you train your mind and free your heart. For that I am responsible.

I met a beautiful girl
She is so smart
She loves me
And I love her
We are in love.

We go dancing
Arm in arm
Everyone stares at how wonderful we are
We are the envy
Like stars

I am so happy
I am so proud
Life is worth living after all
This is the meaning of life -- Happy

But why are we fighting?
Why can't we talk anymore?
We were so happy
We had a happy life together
Like stars
We were the envy

I will meet another beautiful girl,
Then I will be happy.

“Negative thoughts and actions produce negative results and conditions, *just as positive thoughts and actions produce positive results and conditions...our present happiness or unhappiness is nothing more or less than the result of previous actions.*” –The Dalai Lama

Depending on how you look at it, rats can teach us something:

On the Lower East Side of Manhattan there is a soccer park that has a healthy rat population. Every night I chained my bike to the fence and marveled at how the rats enjoy being rats. Initially I was fearful based on everything I was told about rats. But when I started to observe their behavior, I realized they are just fun loving creatures deserving of space. Just like squirrels that are only a bushy tail away from being rats, the rats were only afraid of me if I was afraid of them. So I started to make friends with these so called demons from Hell by feeding them leftovers I had, or bought stale pastries for them from the bakery across the street. Every night I would come home and they would be waiting for me to say hello, and to grab a bit to eat. I observed how they would get a little closer to me each night. I watched how their fear began to dissolve and turn into trust and friendship. How they respected one another. How they played games with one another like chasing, jumping and tackling. How when they actually got hold of a piece of food, rather than scurry off with the food and eat it themselves, they would demonstrate generosity by holding the food in their mouth while other smaller rats would come by and take a sniff or a bite. These were not the scary rats of my childhood. They were not the venomous monsters that were supposed to tear my face off. They were just fun loving creatures deserving of life. One morning I saw the park department lady spreading rat poison on the spot they play, and I wept.

The things that scare us the most are usually the things others tell us to be scared of. Or, they are the things in our mind we set ourselves up to be scared of: like rats in a rodent-phobic world. Rather than experiencing events for ourselves, we buy into the fears, doubts or even joys of others. Rather than experiencing reality based on what we see, we exercise fear based on what we heard. By allowing the ordinary mind to follow small negative thoughts that morph into powerful storied emotions, we miss out on what is real. We can be more fearless than that.

By the sea,
The ocean waves echo, mist
And the wind blows
The sand holds up my body
My heat resembles the sun

There is a body here:
Like the ocean, fluid – Water
Like the wind, breath – Air
Like in the sand, bones & skin – Earth
Like the sun, cells – Fire
We are the same.

A slender girl walks into view
Mind thinks,
“Talking would be nice right now,
Wow is she hot!”

A daydream, I return,
Aware the tricky mind, is like fiction
I take a breath
Mind stills
Clear,
Breath...

Chapter 7. Sitting Meditation

SIT:

The following chapter contains meditation instructions for sitting meditation as taught in the Shambhala (Tibetan-American) Buddhist tradition. With few exceptions, the technique described below is how I got started. This explanation for shamatha (sitting meditation) is neither original nor hard to follow. It develops one-pointed focus using the breath: it is a simple technique that predates Buddhism and all of the world religions. It is a precise form of meditation that has lasted through the centuries because it is direct, potent, and effective.

Thus far we have discovered the unruly way the ordinary mind works. We now realize our untrained thinking is our biggest enemy. We have identified the problem. Now we can work in the solution. Not to be able to slow down our thinking is a dreadful affliction, a disease of sorts. But we tend not to view it that way because everyone around us is caught up in it. Although there are other ways to tame the mind, the best place to start is sitting meditation. If you want to understand your mind you need to sit down and observe it. When you first try meditation you'll probably note to yourself, "I can't do this. My mind won't focus. It keeps drifting." This is normal. But realize you can do it. You can concentrate. It's just that you've spent your entire life focusing on the wrong object. Our uncontrolled thinking becomes so comfortable it's hard to break the habit. But it can be done. As you'll see, the instruction is beyond simple.

Background,

There are only 2 ways to experience the mind: scattered or clear. The word for meditation in Sanskrit is "shamatha." By definition, shamatha is a description of the mind in its natural clear state of being. It basically means, 'peacefully abiding.' This is not the shape the mind use to be in, or the condition it might be in after you have been meditating for 10 years. But the way the mind actually is right now. Like a lake that suddenly goes motionless when the wind stops blowing, the human mind is very calm and peaceful in that un-winded sense. The thing that causes the storm is a downpour of distorted thoughts and emotions and not knowing what to do with them. Shamatha reveals -- and removes -- the distortion.

It is important to know that in shamatha meditation we are not creating a peaceful state. We are simply allowing our mind to exist as it is to begin with: allowing our mind to rest in the void. What we're doing is observing our mind, understanding that it is genuinely calm, cool and collected; and then experiencing the world around us from that perspective. We all have the ability to realize a peaceful mind. Once realized, we can focus on anything we want with remarkable clarity. Soon our mind will no longer drift; our thinking about a million things will stop. We see a bird sitting in a tree or we hear music, and suddenly we see and hear both completely. Our mind is suddenly present and available. Before, we were so busy wrestling with our thoughts we didn't notice the interesting bird or the soulful music. But now we see and hear them, awake, and it's vivid like never before.

To do this practice requires slowing down the mind and observing its natural calm state. We then begin to see how our mind works. We see that whatever the mind focuses on – anger, lust, jealousy, or peace – that is our state of mind. We also begin to see, maybe for the first time, that we have a choice in the matter: we do not have to follow every thought. Working with the untrained mind is like trying to round-up ally cats. No matter what direction you steer them, they lazily drift off in all directions. Instead, the mind that is peacefully abiding resembles the family dog. You can take a dog out for a walk and communicate which way you would like to go. A dog will follow your lead.

Walking the dog,

The instructions are clear and simple. The focal point of our concentration is our own breath. The breath is the one place we return to again and again when the mind runs off somewhere. Think of the mind as a muscle. The untrained mind is weak and involuntary. It lives in the pleasure zone. When challenged, it cramps up and gets increasingly stiff. In contrast, the trained mind is strong and reflexive, and can reach beyond its own limits. Like a zoom lens on a camera, it is focusable. The trained mind can engage a challenge where as the untrained mind runs the other way.

Shamatha meditation is synonymous with the phrase: “not too tight, not too loose.” A good example of this is playing guitar. When I first started playing guitar I could not imagine ever getting music out of the thing. I could pluck a string and make some noise, but to actually make the noise sound musical seemed impossible. Then one day someone showed me a few chords and my situation got worst. Now, not only did I have to hold my fingers a certain way, I had to get my fingers to move from one chord to the other. It took me about 6 months to finally say, “It sounds like music!” When you play guitar, you have to be very aware how tight or how loose your grip is. If it’s too tight you’ll push the strings out of tune. If it’s too loose, you’ll cause the strings to go mute. If it doesn’t sound right, you might even end up putting the guitar back in the case and quitting. It took months of practice to understand “not too tight, not too loose,” or to get my hands to move freely around the instrument. It took even longer before it became an effortless joy. When I finally realized that I was playing without looking down at my fingers, I was amazed. Meditation is a lot like that. It takes practice. “Not too tight, not too loose” holds true in every aspect of sitting practice. We must,

- Make time to meditate
- Find the right environment
- Prepare both body and mind
- Hold the posture
- Notice thoughts and emotions
- Bring our mind back to the breath

Environment,

Find a place that is safe & quiet. A space that feels uplifting and spacious will do. If you don’t have one of those, you can sit anywhere. You can sit on the beach, or

under a tree, or in the mountains. Even on the subway (earplugs). Wherever you feel comfortable will do. The key is consistent practice.

Timing,

Decide on a regular time to practice each day and try to stick with it. A ten-minute period in the morning is a good place to begin. The more consistent you can be, the better. It's better to practice everyday for 10 or 20 minutes than to practice once per week for 1 or 2 hours.

Preparation,

Prepare yourself for when you will meditate. Think of it like warming up before the big game. If you can do a little yoga, run, swim, stretch, or even a short walk, it will help you relax for meditation. This gives you a way to soften your body and mind before you begin. If the body is calm and relaxed it's easier for the mind to settle. If you plop down on your seat after a challenging few moments, you may spend the whole session trying to slow down enough even to remember that you're meditating. If you're drowsy, a cool shower might help. It can be inspiring to read a little about meditation as a reminder of why we do this.

Take your seat,

Half the challenge of meditation is simply getting to your seat. At the beginning of a session you may realize you have more important things to do – computer stuff, phone calls, text messages. This is the lazy mind kicking in. But since you have prepared yourself in advance you are one step closer to training your mind. The more regularly you practice the better you'll get at working with strategies that the untrained mind drums up to keep you from making it to your seat.

Technique,

For our meditation, we will:

- Take an upright posture
- Place our mind on the breath, and keep it there

The breath represents being alive in the moment. Our mind will usually jump wildly from thought to thought as we focus on the breath. It replays the past; it fantasizes about the future. In Shamatha meditation we don't follow it. Thinking is ok; it's what a mind likes to do, but right now we're practicing a high form of meditation. We will think later. Gently we bring your focus back to the breath.

When we sit down, we take a balanced posture,

If you're on a cushion, sit with your legs loosely crossed. It's a good idea to have your hips higher than your knees so that you feel a sense of balance. If your hips and knees are at the same level, or your knees are higher, you may feel like you're falling backward. Work with the height of your hips by propping your buttocks up with cushions or pillows. If you're in a chair, keep your legs uncrossed if you can and your feet flat on the floor. For longer sits, try a thin pillow under your feet so you are not distracted by the hardness of the floor.

Now, imagine that a string attached to the top of your head is pulling you upright. Allow your body to settle around your erect spine. Place your hands on your thighs in a place not so far forward that it begins to pull your shoulders down, nor so far back that the shoulders contract and pinch the spine. The fingers are closed and relaxed – not spread out or holding on to anything. Tuck your chin in and relax your jaw. The tongue is also relaxed, resting against your upper teeth. Your mouth is ever so slightly open. Your gaze is downward about 5 feet out in front of you, with the eyelids almost half shut. The eyes aren't looking; the eyes just see. It is the same with sound – the ears aren't listening, but we do hear. We're not focusing with our senses: we're just letting them be.

We begin to notice the breath,

Breath is something that is with us all the time. We are alive and breathing. We begin to notice our ordinary breathing; nothing is exaggerated. We don't force the breath or try to control it. We just witness it in its natural state. Sometimes we take a short breath. We observe it. Sometimes there is a long breath. We observe it. It's just breathing. We are breathing and witnessing the arising and fading away of every breath. We use the breath as the object of meditation because it is always available to us, and calms the busy mind. The breath brings us back to the moment, back to the present situation.

In the beginning you may find it hard to focus. Your mind will keep drifting off here and there. One simple technique is to count the in-and-out cycles of breathing from 1 to 21. Place your mind on the breath and count each cycle. We breathe in, and then out – one. We breathe in, and then out – two. You can drop the counting when your mind is settled. When you find yourself thinking, you can also check your posture. Bring yourself back to the upright position. Imagine the string is pulling your spine up straight, and relax your body around it. Slouching impairs your breathing, which directly affects the mind. If you slump, you'll be struggling with your body at the same time that you're trying to train your mind. What you want to be doing is the opposite: synchronizing your body and mind. If your feet fall asleep, or your back starts to ache, recognize it. It is ok to move a little. This is not an endurance test. If you feel sleepy that's ok too. You can raise your gaze, or try a few deeper breaths.

As you focus on the breath, you'll notice that various thoughts and emotions arise. When this happens, acknowledge that you are thinking and return your focus to the breath. In focusing on the breath you are bringing yourself back to the present. You are essentially *waking up* from a daydream. You are centering yourself in your mind and placing your mind on the breath. When you first begin to meditate, the movement of thoughts may feel like an earthquake. But as you continue to apply the technique, the torrent slows down to a rumble, even a purr. Eventually the mind slows enough where it will register the slightest activity.

Mindfulness,

Another term for this is "mindfulness." But with mindfulness, instead of placing all of our attention on the breath, we partially allow ourselves to experience the six sense perceptions of sight, sound, taste, smell, touch and thought. Whatever

arises we play witness to. After a few minutes of sitting with the breath, we can allow ourselves to notice external phenomena. We leave a part of our attention on the breath and allow the balance of our mind to see, hear, smell and feel. We 'see' our thoughts too. Quite simply, mindfulness is complete attention to detail. We are completely absorbed in the fabric of life, the fabric of the moment. We realize that our life is made up of these moments and that we can only deal with one object at a time. Even though we have memories of the past and ideas about the future, it is the present moment we are experiencing.

The practice of mindfulness is the practice of being alive. When we talk about the techniques of meditation, these are also the techniques of life. Meditation is not about something separate from us. We are not trying to get into some kind of mystical state of mind. The present situation is completely available, spontaneous and real. Through the practice of mindfulness, we can view life that way. When we begin to meditate, the first things we realize is how wild things are: how wild our mind is, and how wild our lives are. But once we begin to tame the mind, once we can sit with ourselves, we realize there are vast possibilities that lie in front of us. We also realize that there is something else going on. There is 'life' itself, and then there are these thoughts we have that are mostly connected to our 'life situation;' work, school, money, health, past, future. Meditation is looking at life: looking at what is actually going on right now, and discovering what already exists.

Rediscovering the mind is a moment-to-moment process, and as we continue to practice, our awareness becomes more familiar. Mindfulness encapsulates our whole life. It is the only real way to appreciate our world and to see the uniqueness of everything. We add mindfulness, and all of a sudden we enter a different dimension. This practice soaks into everything we do; there's nothing left out. Mindfulness becomes our complete experience. It took a lifetime of distorted thinking to whip our minds into a bewildered state: maybe even several lifetimes. In order for the movement of our mind to now slow down takes consistent practice. A good practice is one we keep doing 20 or so minutes a day, year after year. Through ups and downs, highs and lows, slowly we become familiar with the natural stability, strength, and clarity of the mind. It becomes natural to return to that place. We let go of our conceptual ideas about it. We relax there and enjoy the stillness. We begin to let this natural state infuse our entire life. Having a mind that is at peace with itself, a mind that is clear and not intrusive is the foundation of enlightened being.

When my grandmother would ask me to do something and I told her "Ok, I'll do it later" she would repeat after me, "Now? Wait later." There is a lot of wisdom in that statement. She was calling me on my laziness. There is no better time to start a meditation practice than now. Start from where you are. Now that you know the practice, it's up to you to do it.

“To live fully is to let go and die with each passing moment, And to be reborn in each new one.” --Jack Kornfield

Use it or lose it,

Meditation is a skill. You learn it over time. The more consistently you practice, the more skillful you become. The less you practice the less skillful you are. Or, if you practiced a long time ago and haven't practiced for months or years, you're out of practice. Just like a world-class runner who stops running. He had world-class speed and endurance, but not anymore. After years of laziness he tries to run and he is out of breath. Although he'll know from memory how to get back in shape, he has a lot of work to do. Basically, you can't bank today on yesterday's meditation practice. To cross the threshold, a daily reprieve is required. I have had periods of steady practice for years, and then no practice for months. When I start up again, my mind eventually comes back, but it still requires extra effort. Might as well keep practicing.

A good sitting routine for me is 25 minutes every morning, with extended 1 to 2 hour sits on the weekend. I'll also do a full day of sitting meditation twice per month. In addition, every morning when I wake up as my eyes open I place awareness on my breath for about 5 minutes, and then extend out into the room. I notice for those 5 minutes my state of mind. I set my mind in mindfulness. I'll usually practice daily in the morning after I've eaten. Sometimes I practice in the middle of the day too. Sometimes at night: and almost always after exercise. As you get on with the practice, you find other less obvious places to sit. Like a park bench or on the subway.

Sometimes in the summer I take my seat down by the East River. A dark pair of sunglasses is a good way to hide my eyes so people who pass don't think I'm on drugs just spacing out. I'll let my posture relax a bit in public so I look less like an upright soldier and more like a guy just sitting there thinking. A subway train is great too because the amount of time city people like myself spend on the train is usually wasted. The sound of the train for me is somewhat hypnotizing. The rumble of the tracks occupies my critical ear and allows me to let go of thoughts. Sometimes I'll use earplugs and embrace the quiet rumble.

Probably my favorite place on earth to engage sitting practice is on the beach at about 6:00 pm -- when the sun starts to break. At the beach I'll usually have put in half a day, or a full day of sitting meditation. But by 6:00 pm there is that unusually crisp ocean breeze, and most of the sunbathers are gone. I get to make a custom seat out of sand that's just the right height for me, and gaze out towards the sea. I can see and hear the waves break, and smell the fresh air coming on shore. I become mindful of these phenomenal surroundings. I can contemplate emptiness and interdependence based on the elements before me (earth, water, air, fire). I can relax and watch the sky as it turns orange and the sun begins to set. Symbolic for me are the rising and setting suns. In the evening, the sun as it sets reminds me of the past and how it fades, how events of the past become fainter. How everything that arises eventually fades. How everything that is born dies. The sun

as it releases its grip on the sky and falls off the horizon are my poisonous thoughts about yesterday and tomorrow. And when the sun rises again: so to come fresh thoughts bubbling to be born.

The weekend retreat,

Occasional extended periods of entire weekends, 10 days or 1 month of meditation are a brave idea. But the longer sessions is where your practice is tested. For someone like myself who lives in the city it is the weekend retreat that makes the difference. Practicing with other likeminded people is a great way to stay grounded in the practice. Until you have sat on the cushion and meditated for an entire weekend or 10-day retreat, you have no idea the true meaning of boredom. It's something you would like to say you did, but not actually have to do. Or something cool to tell your friends about, "Hey I'm going on retreat this weekend, see you Monday." For the first few hours it is pretty cool. You feel like you are working on yourself and progressing with your practice, "This is something important to me, and now I'm here doing it." Leading up to the event I like to read some Dharma to set my mind there, maybe a good book on meditation. I'll pick out some loose fitting cloths, get a good night sleep and I'm ready to go. Then the retreat begins. My mind is clear and responsive. I can take my seat with ease. When I notice I'm thinking, snap, I place my mind back on the breath. Easy.

But as the hours press on, you start to go deeper and deeper into your mind, and the novelty wears off. All kinds of thoughts and emotion begin to surface. Memories you didn't know were still there; unpleasant or even euphoric thoughts start to pop up about life, love, and all that comes with it. As well, all kinds of things start to happen in the shrine room with other practitioners like fidget fits, coughing, heavy breathing, crying and people upping and leaving. So your practice begins to be tested. At times you even consider quitting yourself, "I don't see any locks on the shrine room door, maybe I should go now..."

There are ups and downs. There are "good" sessions and "bad." And in the beginning, everyone in the shrine room is dealing with the same thing. Boredom. There are no TVs or books hanging around. No ocean to go jump in. No pizzeria to eat. No CD to pop in. No computer. Talking during practice is only allowed if you need to inform everyone the building is on fire (functional). You can use the bathroom during the walking portion. For the most part, you are alone in your own world. Not lonely, but alone. You see your own mind for what it is. You came into the world like this, and suddenly you are back. There are people around you, and you can see them. But nobody is interacting or chatting. You are alone: just you and your own mind.

There are opening comments and welcoming words, but for the most part everyone is silent and peacefully abiding (or thinking about something). The timekeeper rings the gong, and for 20 minutes you practice. The gong rings again, and you practice some walking meditation. 10 minutes later the timekeeper marks the end of walking by striking the mountain clappers, and everyone is brought back to mindfulness. Another strike of the gong, and another 20 minutes of sitting

practice will follow. This goes on for hours. Then, finally a deviation: a Dharma talk from the floor, a discussion, some food, yoga, then back to your seat.

In the beginning, the things you start to notice the most is the physical aspects of sitting upright on a cushion without a backrest. Back fatigue, fidgeting with your hands and legs and battling to keep your feet from falling asleep are a few of the ways you entertain yourself. Or, you can have fun by switching cushions; switching from a red one to a blue one, switching from a cushion to a chair, maybe go to the bathroom even though you don't have to go. You start reaching for distractions.

There are the "soft-thoughts" that pop up: ...Its hot in here...it's too cold...look at me I'm meditating...I'm hungry...my pants are too tight...I need coffee...something smells funny...that person is sexy...I'm sleepy...I wonder if my shoes are still by the door...maybe on the next walking session I'll look out the window...

Then the "sharp edges" kick in: thoughts of the past, thoughts of the future. Deep emotional thoughts. As you start to get tired, your guard starts to drop. Your mindfulness gets tested. You are open. You start to get derailed a little harder. Your thoughts get harder and harder to put at bay. You'll find yourself caught in the grip of a heavy emotion, and you think, "Ok – it's time to go home." Then a breakthrough: you are peacefully abiding with ease, mindful of your surroundings. Maybe I was holding on too tight, let me try loosening my grip. Followed by another torrent of thoughts and emotions. Followed by another symphony of, "My back hurts. My pants are too tight." Sometimes all you can do is sit there and hang on, and wait for that gong to ring. Once I actually said to myself, "Hey this painful stuff wasn't in the colorful brochure. Maybe I can get a refund." In the West we call this boredom.

Unlike our enjoyable 20-minute meditation we do at home, when everything ends after 20-minutes, extended meditation is like the marathon. It is not designed to be commercially entertaining, like a dance class or golf. This is the serious practice of sitting meditation that can be traced all the way back to the Buddha, and beyond. And it is our greatest gift to be alive to practice it. It's purported that The Buddha himself spent about 6 or 7 years studying and meditating. So hang in there.

As time goes on, the extended sessions do get easier: Maybe not easier but definitely more understandable. You start to understand the many facets of the mind and how rich the activity is in there. You also start to realize how deep ego can run. All these things were going on at once but you never noticed them before. Over time you realize you can hold your attention on the breath, you can absorb into the moment, and most of all you can sit with yourself. It starts to become entertaining in its own right; like watching a movie about someone's mind.

Through extended sitting practice, we see the real workings of the mind under reverse pressure. We see boredom in all its brilliant color. We see how fatigue arises in the physical body. We see how our mind wanders to the point of even forgetting that we're meditating at all, or thinks about giving up our seat completely. We realize that any stability of mind we may have had is impermanent under these

new extended conditions. So we hold on. We realize that to give up our seat is to have our suffering graciously refunded.

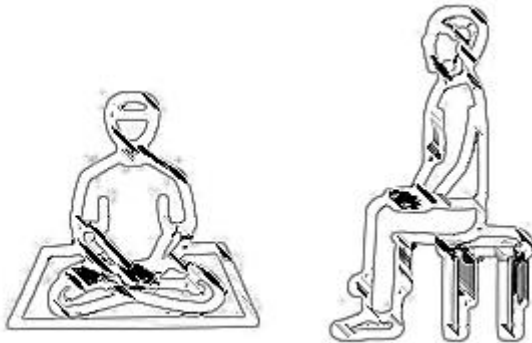
Rites & Ritual,

When I first started with meditation, paranormal phenomena and Buddhism, I went over board with the gimmicks. My living space was a self-styled esoteric shrine of sorts. I had two or three candles burning, incenses smoking, picture cards flipping, Buddha statues focusing, a gong and a crystal ball. You name it, I had it. Then I visited other venues and started to mimic their symbolism: imagines of dragons, colorful thangka art, gurus on the wall and mystical Feng Shui arrangements. It's nice to take this serious, but all of these are ornaments that eventually you will let go of. Books are important; especially the ones that stay on-message, but you can't read them while you are meditating. Besides books, the rest of it I let go one piece at a time. And as I outgrow a book I let those go too.

Initially, I used a very cool brand of incense that burned for exactly 30 minutes. That replaced my meditation timer. Instead of looking at the clock, I could simply look up and see if the incenses were about to burn out. Then I knew I had sat for a full 30-minutes. Sometimes a candle at or around my visual gaze helps bring me back to the room when my mind drifts. But after a while the breath becomes your single home base. And I let the candles go too. Picture cards and books and crystals and gongs all ground you in the moment. But in the end it is your own mindfulness and your own breath that carries you. The rest you let go.

Chair vs. Cushion,

When you visit a meditation center you notice everyone takes a seat on the floor, usually with some sort of cushion for support. There are a few people sitting in chairs in the back, but all the cool people are sitting on the floor; even the teacher. So you join in. You pull up a cushion, cross your legs and take a seat.



But what you realize over time is that the cushion, though very exotic, is really not superior over the chair. In fact, the chair has distinct advantages. The most important thing about sitting posture is arguably a straight back. Both are achieved via chair or cushion. But only the chair will eliminate your feet from falling asleep. When you cross your legs in sitting position, your feet will eventually fall asleep. Maybe not right away, but eventually they will go numb and you'll have to move them.

Regarding back pain: everyone deals with it. But over time you begin to understand physical balance. It actually takes very little effort to sit up straight. There is a center of gravity that you eventually find. But ultimately you are meditating to train your mind, not develop super human feet that refuse to fall asleep, or an iron back. But the less you wrestle with minor physical fatigue like sleepy feet, painful ankles-knees and joints the better off you are. The solution for me is if I attend a brief talk with only a short sitting practice, I'll pull up a cushion and sit on the floor with the cool people. But if I plan to meditate longer than one hour, I'll start off on a cushion than move to a chair. At home I almost always use a chair.

It would be nice to find something
To calm my restless mind
Then I will be happy

A fermented beverage,
Cool, refreshing...
Hey – this is great,
Mind is still,
Brilliant thoughts are flowing
Powerful, bubbly
It seems I can do anything

A white powder,
Wow – this is good...
Mind is focused,
Powerful, euphoric
May I have another?

I am free,
I am powerful,
I am smart, good looking too!
May I have another?

Why isn't it working anymore?
Ouch...like a roller coaster.
Thinking about Me again.
Thinking about how much less
I-am-than-you

Chapter 8. Insight Meditation

*There is no other path to purity of insight.
If you follow this path you will put an end to suffering.
But each one has to struggle for himself,
the perfect ones have only pointed out the way.”
– The Buddha*

Contemplation & Insight:

Inherently, we suffer from a fear of losing what we have and not getting what we want; and the imaginary projections we call ‘losing’ and ‘getting’ do not actually exist. They are not worthy of the present moment. Our fears, along with our hopes and dreams are disingenuous mind objects that lead us to a future entry point that never comes. We discover that,

- Hope is for the hopeless
- Fear is for the fearful

Both hope and fear conceal the peace in what we are doing right now. They allow time to bury the present moment. Life then becomes a struggle rather than a release. Contemplating in our mind the truth about inherent distracts like hope and fear allow us to return home to the present. Our intense desire to control the future, and our relentless review of the past then loses its grip. Eventually ‘presence’ becomes our regular state.

Proper insight is born of proper contemplation,

At some point in our meditation careers rather than just drop a thought when it enters the mind stream, we will pause there and have a look. In this way we pierce the nature of a thought. For example, if you are in sitting meditation and realize the same persistent thought resurfaces over and over again you may want to have a look at it. The sitting instruction thus far has been if you realize you are thinking drop the story and return to the breath. But here we become brave enough to contemplate the composition of a thought. We look directly at it. We give the thought our full attention. We don’t feed the story line (thinking) but we may investigate the story. We become a witness to it.

As you will see, our mindfulness training is the basis for our insight. By its virtue we begin to see the interconnected nature of all things, including our thoughts. When we hear the word “insight” we may also see it resembles what the psychic community discovered time-eternal ago. Or what the latter day Buddhist community sometimes calls ‘ordinary magic.’ Whether we focus on picture cards imprinted with thoughts and feelings, a thangka or tealeaves we develop a similar one-pointed focus of mind. Choosing the proper objects of contemplation, however, is something to consider.

In the course of our awakening, we will encounter what is commonly referred to as ‘the psychic powers,’ or deep insight into the nature of certain people, places or things. In extreme moments you may experience this as a paranormal thought and

vision. These are normal prerequisites on the road to full awakening. Some of them can be quite detailed and explicit, agreeable or disagreeable. Explore them as they arise, but don't invest in them. Ultimately these too will be treated and released like any other thought or emotion. They are not special. From my personal experience as a psychic reader of over 20 years I can tell you wrong use of insight, or insight born of rigged contemplations will hurt rather than help. If you get caught thinking you are some sort of spiritual master of the universe, or start advising people in a way that this is "big me" guiding "little you," the backlash gets ugly. Ego has a funny way of sticking its foot into situations like these. As a medium that went on to teach other mediums how to read for people, although I could see what was going on with other people, I learned that if I took a higher-than-thou seat I would do more harm than good.

For example, for years I read tarot cards in a nightclub. Sounds like a fun job, and it was for a while, but at times I wasn't too spiritual. By not spiritual I mean I was conducting business for profit by delving into the psyche of people and telling them about themselves. That itself may not be a bad thing, but then I would read for a pretty girl in distress and use my *skills* to get her home in bed that night. Rather than point the pretty girl in the direction of clarity, I used insight to point her in the direction of my bedroom for whoopee. As a result, I had nothing but unsatisfying relationships. Or when I used contemplation to see the outcome of stock market activity for my own gain I ended up broke. You can develop very powerful insight into all sorts of things. Like playing guitar or a sport that requires practice and discipline, meditation is the same. It's a skill. You learn it over time. It's what you do with this skill that allows you to either free yourself and others from suffering, or have it spoil you -- and end up miserable.

When you do these techniques realize that you will begin to see things about people they can't or won't see in themselves. Why? Because we are not that different. A practitioner schooled in his own thoughts and actions sees in a general way what goes on in the minds of others. The Buddha, amongst others, taught that evidence of our motives and demeanor lies not only in our own mind but also in the minds of others and their actions; body language, the cloths they wear, the jobs they go to, and the people they associate with. Their level of greed, lust and trust. Or their lack of greed, lust and trust. Their friendliness or bitterness. The look on their faces, or the pain and joy in their eyes. These are the things you begin to notice about others, because you already notice them about yourself. These are the insights you begin to access.

I use to practice insight by sitting in a coffee shop or on the bus and in my mind I would contemplate people randomly. I would place my focus on someone, and read. After a few minutes I knew plenty about them: about their love life, their finances, their physical and mental health. I could sometimes see specific things about their present situation and draw conclusions, thou not always accurate, about their statistical future. I would do the same in the nightclubs, but I got to confirm my insight because the person was sitting across from me. If my insights were correct, the person me would usually go silent. They would perk up and listen. They would be somewhat shocked that a perfect stranger could know all of

these secrets about them. If I was off in my insight and person was still babbling, I could deepen my focus until the proper themes emerged.

My job as a psychic reader was to access the present situation, talk about it, and propose a happy-fluffy ending. If you are this far into this book you now realize the past and future do not exist. They are imaginary places in the mind. The only reality is the present. But if we can see accurately what someone's present state of mind is, you basically know where they came from, and if nothing changes where they are likely headed. Thoughts and actions are a continuum that sprout from the present. By accessing the present, you can steer someone in whatever direction you please; because when you tell a perfect stranger details about themselves they think you couldn't possibly know, their defenses drop and they hang on your every word. It has nothing to do with tarot cards, astrology or a crystal ball, but everything to do with the mind of the human being sitting across from you, and the nature of your own mind as a mirror.

Now that you know the secret behind a one-on-one psychic reading, you can see there is nothing esoteric about it. It's a deep science of the mind. The mind reader simply creates the illusion that the information is somehow coming from some magical place: cards or stars or whatever, but the magical place is really the mind, however powerful.

Don't do it,

Having said all this, we are not practicing here to become nightclub entertainers or stage mentalists. We are practicing so that we may free ourselves from the bondage of self. We are engaged in simple contemplative techniques designed to set our mind in the moment, and free ourselves from suffering. I only pointed out these similarities in other contemplation practices to make a point that meditation can be used and abused in all sorts of ways. As a core practice, don't contemplate other people. The best way to navigate the future is to contemplate the truth in the present, that is: emptiness, the truth of suffering, karma and cultivate compassion if you can. Contemplating the situations of other with a view towards telling them specific insights about themselves really doesn't help. In fact: you are only stroking the other person's ego and perpetuating their suffering, and your own.

Deeper,

With peaceful abiding as the basis of our meditation practice we enter various stages of *absorption* or acute awareness to facts and immediate phenomena. We are waking up to the present moment and seeing things as they are. Through proper training we are placing our mind in the void, and accessing reality. To fully engage insight meditation, you don't have to live in a cave for years like the hidden yogis of yesterday. In fact, mingling in human society is the best way to go. You get to see humans in their natural habitat. You get to engage the world and see how it responds. You get to see how your own mind works when it mingles amongst its peers. You can see how polluted or clear or scattered or un-scattered your own mind really is by taking a simple walk around the block, or strolling through the grocery store. And no matter how far you travel, or how much money

you spend on retreats, classes and meditation getaways, you ultimately take yourself with you. So you might as well get busy where you are.

To practice shamatha, contemplate specific mind objects or retrieve insight requires a certain leap of faith. If you 'jump' the net will appear. But you have to jump first. By allowing the mind to rest peacefully in a void state, and disregarding the constant reference points that ego creates, we jump and the net appears. As our level of absorption deepens, and our contemplations become more focused, so do our insights. What we also realize is the only insight we really care to access is a way to end suffering. The rest is a distraction. Long slow training in one-pointed mindfulness is the way we get there. There are no shortcuts. When we peacefully abide for a while we begin to experience very clear and stable mind. It will focus on whatever we tell it to. It sits waiting for awareness to lead it. People develop at different rates: sometimes quickly – sometimes slowly. If you have a daily practice it will emerge.

One day you'll begin to experience the first level of absorption. You'll know it when it happens. It will kind-of-sort-of shake you up and maybe even scare you. You suddenly realize that in absent of ego, or getting your mind-chatter out of the way, your surroundings become clear, bright and real. The gaps in thinking widen, and ultimately dissolve. There is space where before there was none. Before this, it was a flood of scattered thoughts about me, me, me and trying not to pay attention to them, or constantly labeling it "thinking" and returning to the breath. But for some odd reason we are now able to pause there and have a look.

Proper insight is born of right understanding of the path and one-pointed focus of mind. It emerges naturally. To get there, The Buddha described four levels of absorption that unfold in the process. The end game is to experience mindfulness in all our affairs. I'll include the four absorptions as a basic guideline for development. They describe how we "wake up" in stages. As you move through the absorptions you'll notice that unwanted mind objects are freed up rather added. It's like the old analogy of a garbage pail. You have to empty the pail first before you can reuse it. If you make space by just putting your foot in the pail and pushing down, you're stuck with the same old garbage.

The First absorption (born of detachment from ego)

- Mind free of: lust, hostility, laziness, impatience, anxiety, doubt
- Mind full of: concentration, thought conception, discursive thinking (loosely defined as a river of scattered or rambling or abstract thoughts & ideas)

The Second absorption (born of concentration)

- Mind free of: concentration, thought conception, discursive thinking
- Mind full of: inner tranquility and oneness of mind. (There is a false sense of happiness and joy (with the path itself) that may emerge at levels 1 & 2. Don't cling to it. It's just a thought).

The Third absorption

- Mind full of: calmness, mindfulness, clear awareness, calm-happiness, focused-concentration, equanimity*, “Happy lives he who is equanimous and mindful...”

The Forth absorption

- Mind full of: equanimity, calmness and mindfulness, complete understanding, bliss. (The Third and Forth absorptions are commonly referred to as an enlightened state of being).

***Equanimity:**

Neither a thought nor an emotion, it is the steady conscious realization of reality's transience. It is the foundation of wisdom and insight. Mature equanimity produces radiance and warmth of being. Bliss. The Buddha described a mind filled with equanimity as: abundant, exalted, immeasurable and without hostility or doubt.

Contemplation Practice:

There are 2 interchangeable ways to contemplate:

1. Place an object in the mind-stream to examine it
2. Examine an object that is already in the mind-stream

Once we know the truth about human suffering, how it arises and fades, how it is interconnected with the world around us, we progress further. Sharp and aware in it's approach, mindfulness sees phenomena for what it is. Days become minutes become seconds. Time: an illusion. One moment – and it passes. Another moment arises, and it passes. No past or future, only this very moment. At this moment – mind is aware. Whether sitting, standing, walking or lying down, it is a new moment, similar to no other. Thoughts of past & future arise, and then they fade. Thoughts of yesterday & tomorrow -- fade. Always rising, always fading.

We will contemplate:

- Right View
- The Truth of Suffering
- Impermanence
- Emptiness
- Karma
- Interdependence

We will cultivate:

- Compassion (loving kindness, curiosity, equanimity)

We are composed of the four elements of matter. Ever changing they are, by contemplating them we realize how ever-changing we are too. Born of this contemplation is powerful insight into the nature of emptiness and the end of suffering.

The Four Elements of Matter, (earth water air fire)

Everything on earth can be explained in terms of 4 states (phases) of matter. Matter is anything that has both mass and volume (occupies space). Made up of atoms and molecules held to have chemical and electrical properties, infinitely

smaller parts, wholly characterless, limitless. Empty and or void of self.

Earth, (solid, human body)

A substance in a solid phase is relatively rigid, has a definite volume and shape. The atoms or molecules that comprise a solid are packed close together and are not compressible. Because all solids have some thermal energy, its atoms vibrate. However, this movement is very small and very rapid, and cannot be observed with the ordinary eye.

Water, (ocean, fluid, blood)

Liquids have a definite volume, but are able to change their shape by flowing. Liquids are similar to solids in that the particles touch. However, the particles are able to move around. Since particles are able to touch, the densities of liquid will be close to that of a solid. Since the liquid molecules can move they will take the shape of their container.

Air, (sky, open space, breath)

Gases have no definite volume or shape. If unconstrained, gases will spread out indefinitely. If confined they will take the shape of their container. This is because gas particle have enough energy to overcome attractive forces. Each of the particles is well separated resulting in very low density.

Fire, (sun, heating element, cellular digestion)

Plasma (fire) occurs naturally and makes up our sun, the core of stars and occurs in quasars, x-ray beams, and supernovas. On earth, plasma is naturally occurring in flames, lightning and the auroras. Plasma is an ionized gas, a gas into which sufficient energy is provided to free electrons from atoms or molecules and to allow both ions and electrons to coexist. A plasma is a cloud of protons, neutrons and electrons where all the electrons have come loose from their respective molecules and atoms, giving the plasma (fire) the ability to act as a whole rather than as a bunch of atoms. Plasmas are the most common state of matter in the universe comprising more than 99% of our visible universe and most of what is not visible.

The Six Human Sense Perceptions:

1. Eye = seeing, sight
2. Ear = hearing, sound
3. Nose = smell
4. Tongue = taste
5. Body = touch, feel
6. Mind = mind objects, thoughts

Interdependence, The endless series of births, deaths, and rebirths to which all phenomena are subject...

On ignorance depends karma formation

On karma formation depends consciousness

On consciousness depends mental & physical existence

On mental & physical existence depends sense organs

On sense organs depends sense perception
On sense perception depends feelings
On feelings depend craving
On craving depends clinging
On clinging depends becoming
On becoming depends birth
On birth depends decay and dying, sorrow, pain, grief, despair,
In consequence, the whole mass of suffering occurs...

Negative formations:

Lying, cheating, stealing, killing, gossip, intoxicants, use of harsh language, sexual misconduct, physically assaulting people, animals or the environment.

Thoughts / Emotions:

It's a good idea to relearn the definitions of the objects that follow. These are mental formations (thoughts, emotions, stories) that pop up under normal circumstances. Unless we understand their separate meanings they tend to get clumped together under one umbrella – pain and suffering. Instead, we should contemplate them individually as they pop up in the mind stream, acknowledge them, and work through them. Awareness to detail is the basis of mindfulness: to be constantly aware how the mind tosses up random thoughts on a moment-to-moment basis. For example, if you are walking down the street and think someone is more successful or has better looks than you, you can stop for a second and contemplate jealousy or envy. You don't run from the thought. You take a full turn into it. You welcome it as an opportunity to understand the impression, "This is jealousy. I am experiencing jealousy." You can even have fun with the impression and say, "Hello Jealousy." And allow it to lose its grip.

Pain: Mental or emotional suffering or torment, suffering or distress due to injury or illness, a distressing sensation in a particular part of the body

Lust: Intense sexual desire or appetite, uncontrolled or illicit sexual desire, a passionate or overmastering desire or craving

Hate: To dislike intensely or passionately, feel extreme aversion for or extreme hostility toward, detest, unwillingness, dislike

Greed: Excessive or rapacious desire for gain, wealth or possessions

Anger: A strong feeling of displeasure and belligerence aroused by a wrong

Rage: Angry fury, violent anger, a fit of violent anger

Worry: To torment oneself with or suffer from disturbing thoughts, fret, uneasiness or anxiety

Doubt: To be uncertain about; consider questionable or unlikely; hesitate to believe, to distrust, a feeling of uncertainty about the truth, reality, or nature of something

Vanity: Excessive pride in one's appearance, qualities, abilities, achievements, character or quality of being vain, conceit

Envy: A feeling of discontent or covetousness with regard to another's advantages, success, possessions

Jealousy: Resentment against a rival or person enjoying success or advantage, or against another's success or advantage itself, mental uneasiness from suspicion or fear of rivalry, unfaithfulness, vigilance in maintaining or guarding something.

Fear: A distressing emotion aroused by impending danger, evil, pain, whether the threat is real or imagined, the feeling or condition of being afraid

Sorrow: Distress caused by loss, affliction, disappointment, grief, sadness, or regret

Grief: acute mental suffering or distress over affliction or loss; sharp sorrow; painful regret.

Despair: to lose, give up

Pride: a high or inordinate opinion of one's own dignity, importance, merit, or superiority, whether as cherished in the mind or as displayed in bearing, conduct

Attachment: A feeling that binds one to a person, thing, cause, ideal, or the like; devotion; a profound attachment to a cause

OPPOSITES:

Happiness: The quality or state of being happy, delighted, pleased, or glad, as over a particular thing, good fortune; pleasure; a happy mood; a happy frame of mind, results from the possession or attainment of what one considers good

Contentment: Satisfaction; ease of mind. Something that is contained: the contents of a box, power of containing; holding capacity

Hope: The feeling that what is wanted can be had or that events will turn out for the best

Joy: The emotion of great delight or happiness caused by something exceptionally good or satisfying; keen pleasure; elation: a source or cause of keen pleasure or delight; something or someone greatly valued or appreciated: expression or display of glad feeling; festive gaiety.

Peace: Freedom of the mind from annoyance, distraction, anxiety, and obsession. Tranquility; serenity: silence; stillness. Absents of: Pain, Lust, Hate, Greed, Anger, Rage, Worry, Doubt, Vanity, Envy, Jealousy, Fear, Sorrow, Grief, Pride, Despair, Attachment...

Generosity: readiness or liberality in giving, freedom from meanness or smallness of mind or character

Love: A profoundly tender, passionate affection for another person, a feeling of warm personal attachment or deep affection for all beings.

Kindness: The state or quality of being kind: kind behavior, kindness to animals, friendly feeling; liking and likable

BLISS: a: Brave Luminous Immutable Selfless State

Harmony: unshakable clarity, peace. Freedom, the sum total, the grand finally, *finito*, convinced. Genuine contentment, joy, generosity, kindness, love; heaven on earth, as good as it gets, beyond words...

*“If you want others to be happy, practice compassion.
If you want to be happy, practice compassion.” – The Dalai Lama*

Contemplation:

We now enter the process of placing objects into the mind stream for contemplation. What we contemplate are the truths of our existence already discussed in other chapters. When we contemplate the truth, insight swells from there. Insights are received, not requested. They are unfiltered thoughts and impressions that emerge effortlessly and endlessly from void.

The approach that follows is one I used at various stages of development. The wordings after each of the topics are my own discursive thoughts that occurred on a cold November beach in Coney Island. After placing an object in the mind stream, I wrote down what I realized. This is only one mediator’s mind trying to understand certain phenomena. Once you penetrate the broader truth for yourself, you stop trying to find answers to everything, or reasons why everything is. A lot of what you discover is beyond words. I covered the important contemplations, namely, the 4 elements of matter, body and mind. When you are ready, place 1 object at a time in your mind and let your mind naturally switch to autopilot. Feel free to use my blurbs for guidance. Hold each object up for inspection. Slowly and independently, become present, and say, “I place _____ in the mind stream:

The Four Elements of Matter (earth water air fire),

Aware: I sit on the beach and feel the sand beneath me. There is a solid form under me. The ground. Earth. Firm. With trees and life springing up. I see the ocean. Mass of liquid, waves, unsettled and ever-changing. Fluid. Mutable. I see the waves come together and fall apart. Mist. Touching the water’s surface I see air. Open space: a massive gap with clouds and gas particles, and light coming through. Massive in it’s reach, all the way around. Sometimes hot, sometimes cold. It moves the water, wind, and ripples, choppy. I can feel the air blow. I can smell it. It extends all the way up as far as I can see. Above is the sun, the heating element, the heater, the power engine. Fuels us with its strength and mass. The earth, the water, the air, the sun; I can see them and feel them. They are here. I am here – and I appear as them. I am comprised of them, dependent on them, and they are comprised of me. Dependent on me.

Body, (body scan):

Aware: There is a body seated here. Not my body, but a body is here. It may last 50 or 100 years, but falls apart like the ocean waves dissolve before me. Composed of the same elements of matter. It comes together, is born, and falls apart. It grows -- then decays. Like the sea creatures I see washed up on the shore. Dead. Returning. My body: there is a head, hair, eyes, ears, nose, mouth, tongue, skin, flesh, arms, legs, bones, heart, stomach, intestine, liver, kidneys: A formation of parts. [With awareness I scans these parts]. Independent parts connected, solid like the earth: touchable -- seeable. Like the air: lungs that pump air in-out out-in, a heart that pumps fluid, blood, from heart to head: from toe and back again. Cells that burn foodstuff. Like the sun -- little engines -- little power packs. Batteries. Body is solid. Body is water. Body is air. Body is sun. “Body” is

the same as the elements: interconnected particles coming together and falling apart. Dependent on one another: small particles interacting. Everything I am is everything they are. I can see no difference.

Mind,

Aware mind is cramped or scattered. Aware mind is not cramped or not scattered. There is no 'self' here, only parts and particles of matter, free of ego. This is not 'me.' This is a formation of infinitely smaller particles creating form. A puppet show of sorts. Thoughts are only moment-to-moment; they rise and fade. Like breath, a thought arises and fades. There are positive thoughts, negative thoughts and indifferent thoughts always bubbling to be born. There are feelings, always bubbling to be born. Thoughts and feelings are present, bubbling over.

With the senses I can see, hear, taste, touch, feel and perceive mind objects. I perceive the phenomenal world; I am aware in the moment. There is no guarantee another moment will arise but I am awake in this moment. My thoughts are just thoughts. I don't own them: there is nothing to own, and no owner. There are positive feelings and negative feelings and indifferent feelings; just feelings -- an infinite string.

[Awareness scans the mind for, if any]: lust, greed, anger, hatred, worry, fear, doubt, envy, vanity, happy, sad. A disease: unwanted thoughts and feelings. Distractions they are. They are not my feelings. They are communal feelings. They are just human thoughts and feelings. They are not in the world -- they are in the mind. One moment happy, and it fades. One moment sad, and it fades. One moment -- one thought -- one feeling at a time.

Dis – ease,

I abide in lust. A disease.
I abide in hate. A disease.
I abide in greed. A disease.
I abide in anger. A disease.
I abide in worry. A disease.
I abide in doubt. A disease.
I abide in rage. A disease.
I abide in vanity. A disease.
I abide in envy. A disease.
I abide in fear. A disease.
I abide in joy. A disease.
I abide in euphoria. A disease.

Mindfulness sees disease wanting to be born in the mind. It knows disease. Greedy is its nature. Clinging. Selfish in it's motive. Craving to be born. Like seedlings in a pot reaching for the sun. Desperate: craving to be born. The source of all suffering: one disease, one moment at a time. And it fades. Awareness recognizes disease: sees how it arises, takes root, becomes in the mind, grows outwardly into action, decays, dies, and gives rise to suffering. A never-ending

cycle: like a wheel. True unshakeable clarity is there in the moment. It always has been. But these objects bury it.

3x,

The greatest act of compassion is working with our own mind.

The greatest act of compassion is working with our own mind.

The greatest act of compassion is working with our own mind.

Compassion,

Keep the phrases simple. Repetition is the mother skill. Play with the following 4 phrases and after some experimentation write your own lines. Three or four phrase is all you need. Start by gathering your awareness behind one phrase...

- May I see the world with clarity, and live in peace...
- May my friends see the world with clarity, and live in peace...
- May my enemies see the world with clarity, and live in peace...
- May all beings see the world with clarity, and live in peace...

Silently, I say...

May all beings be free of suffering

May all beings be free of self

May all beings be free of lust

May all beings be free of pain

May all beings be free of violence

May all beings be free of hate

May all beings be free of anger

May all beings be free of vanity

May all beings be free of envy

May all beings be free of jealousy

May all beings be free of rage

May all beings be free of worry

May all beings be free of suffering...

In action,

We must guard our thoughts at all times. When walking in the town square, around others, or alone, we remain awake. Content in our mind with the way things are: always mindful of ego wanting to be born, always mindful of ego wanting to spring into action. We witness diseased thoughts in the unconscious humans bubbling around us. If they are intrusive – we remain kind. If they speak poorly of us – we remain patient. With a smile on our face, always pleasant, always calm, peaceful and patient. Where we see greed and selfishness – we remain indiscriminate. Mind sees disease in action, everywhere. We recognize selfishness because we recognize the potential for it to arise in our own mind.

When we encounter kindness we honor it. We embrace kindness and the people who are kind and gentle. We attract kindness and celebrate it. We are always kind no matter what we receive. We are kind to all people: not just to pleasant people or angry people. We do not steal even if we are stolen from. We hold no secrets. We are honest. We are not vain though we see vanity everywhere. We do not talk

about others in a harmful way as to tear them down and lift us up. We speak the truth. We do not harm living things. We do not eat animals though we see others eating them. We do not indulge in intoxicating substances though we see others intoxicated. We do not judge or point out faults in others. We only strive to lift up everyone and everything that suffers. We are not afraid.

In the course of the day you can contemplate one thing at a time like emptiness. You can place the word "emptiness" in your mind and look for evidence of it in the phenomenal world. To remember to do this, wear something on your body like a set of beads or a rubber band on your wrist. When you see the beads or the rubber band you are reminded of emptiness.

We see luxuries and objects of material value, expensive cars, homes, jewelry and we abide detached from desire, envy or jealousy. We seek only to eliminate suffering in those who are attached to such objects. We see fit bodies, and half bare bodies and well decorated bodies adorned in fancy cloths, fancy gadgets and fancy style. We are content in our mind that attachment to such articles leads to suffering. We seek only to eliminate the suffering in those who are attached to such appearances and material adornments. We see a fit body, then an unfit body. We see a strong body and weak body. An old body and a young body. A pleasing body and a non-pleasing body. An indifferent body. We abide void of opinion. They are all the same. Just bodies. We see a body with a certain color, shape or size: then another body with a different color, shape or size. Just human bodies. We abide indifferent in opinion of their appearance: free of lust or repulsion. We encounter people of high position and people of no position: bosses, workers, street sweepers, lawyers, rulers, drug addicted. They are equal in ego-ic magnitude. The same regarding ordinary desire. We abide detached from opinion of such. We seek only to eliminate the suffering in all sentient beings that are attached to such status, if any.

To be of service to those who suffer, we protect our own mind. We stay mindful in the moment. We smile, and are always pleasant and helpful. Though we may see suffering we reflect kindness. We see how humanity is caught in the perpetual cycle of pleasure seeking. We know it because we are the same: no 'I' or 'other.' This moment I work for the good of all beings so they may find peace, calmness and realize unshakable happiness. I know a mind void of troubling thoughts and emotions. Aware: in the town square amongst others, or alone, we guard our senses. Every moment, a new moment, and every new moment bares the potential for disease to spring into existence. We are not above disease, or below disease. Aware: I return from the town square.

“Try to be mindful and let things take their natural course. Then your mind will become still in any surroundings, like a clear forest pool. All kinds of wonderful, rare animals will come to drink at the pool, and you will clearly see the nature of all things. You will see many strange and wonderful things come and go, but you will be still. This is the happiness of the Buddha.” -- Ajahn Chah

Absolute commitment (?),

To realize enlightenment the Buddha described an absolute commitment to practice. He instructed his students to go to the woods for an indefinite amount of time, sit quietly with legs crossed and place mindfulness before them: eat once per day, only accept what is offered, remain mostly silent and study the nature of things. But is this approach practical or even possible in today's world? Or does it need modification? If you tried the eating part of this instruction in New York City for example, and sat on 14th street with a food bowl in front of you, you'd likely starve to death; or in the winter months, freeze.

Literally this doesn't work, but figuratively, YES. It works. Once we realize the true nature of things, and realize how the practice is a microcosm of existence itself, absolute commitment becomes possible. Daily meditation gives birth to daily understanding of how the mind works. Daily attention to diet and exercise synchronizes body and mind to create inner biological peace. Studying the Dharma and working with others allows us to both increase our knowledge base and witness the transformation inside and out. All are contingent on personal discipline, but the exact mix is up to you.

Hint: There is a tipping point at which you will realize you are awake more than you are dreaming. It is a smooth sail from there.

Hierarchy,

In your spiritual travels, you might encounter certain 'pecking orders.' Despite an emphasis on critical thinking and open exploration, some classic meditation schools tend to be dictatorial and oriented toward the establishment of hierarchy and proper behavior in relation to their hierarchy. The good news is you don't have to go there. Hierarchy is more a cultural nuisance passed down from Eastern blocks where the practice of mindfulness was fostered for many years. Foreign educationalist' attempt to establish hierarchy to drive their point across, and retain their customers. When in the present of such ritualized old-scholars, remain grateful for the inspired teaching they may offer, but be compassionate for a greater-than-thou defilement they may display. If you must, contemplate the US Constitution and the values of democracy that give everyone an opportunity to be heard: a place where individuals may say and think as they please without social barriers or risk of persecution. Or, remember what the Buddha himself said, that students should verify everything for themselves based on direct personal experience. Like the Buddha who once accepted a bowl of rice from a young girl, he realized that the teachings of his time on physical austerities were not working for him. So he changed his mind and ate something.

Is time-in really important? What I mean is, is the person who has been practicing the longest the most practiced? Yes and no. At any given moment the most consistent person in the hall is usually the most realized. If someone has been practicing on-and-off for 30 years and is still bewildered or complaining of the same restless mind, and next to him is someone practicing consistently for 1 or 2 years and seems at peace, the peaceful practitioner is the most realized. As mentioned earlier, if you are persistent in the moment you will experience a state of mind that requires very little if any effort to remain present.

Mind-speed,

Time and speed are illusion. Whatever occurs in the moment, seemingly fast or slow, internal or external, the mind can handle it. It's often thought that people who meditate become mentally slower, and in many respects boring. Though we may slow our thoughts to examine the mind's richness, the degree to which we register activity actually increases. A still mind does not equal a slow mind, nor does a still mind require objects to move slowly to remain still. In the beginning we may want things to go slower so our mindfulness is not disturbed, but even as challenges arise like confrontational humans that pop-up before us or when intense memories resurface, neither can derail a stable mind. There are no excuses, or internal or external causes for distraction. When I studied swing and ballroom dance, in the beginning it was hard to get my legs and feet to do even a basic dance step. So I favored the slow music because it was easier to work with. But as I progressed I could dance any step at any tempo. I actually started to enjoy the faster rhythm. Whether meditating at a quiet shrine in the south of Thailand or walking mindfully through loud-speedy Time Square, to the seasoned practitioner there is no difference.

Chemical enlightenment,

It's been said that awake-mind sometimes resembles an LSD trip. Colors appear brighter, sounds more acute and many insights generated are strikingly similar. But the problem is: you can't keep the drug trip. Like a roller coaster ride, drugs always end with an equal but opposite crash. There are many subtle nuisances to substance-induced stillness that may resemble meditative awareness, but consuming drugs and alcohol, and then calling it enlightenment is invalid. Drug induced awareness is not genuine awareness at all. It is an emotionalism of a synthetic nature that lasts as long as the synthetic. When the drug runs out so does the so-called awareness. And the flood of misery returns. Though people have searched high and low for a chemical to induce and or enhance their spiritual condition, they cannot find what does not exist. The two are biochemical opposites.

Religion,

Religion gets a bad rap these days; but just for the record, the Buddha didn't teach a religion called Buddhism; he taught a scientific discover. The religious "ism" came years later. The Buddha was not a religious man. Instead he moved away from the religions of his time suggesting that people should find their own salvation. When we see a statue or picture of the Buddha we should really see ourselves. After 29 years of ordinary living the Buddha began his quest, and after 49 days of

meditation at the age of 35 he woke up. There are, however, self-styled religious systems you may encounter that discount the life-experience approach and use dictatorial selection instead. In certain nations male children 5, 6 & 7 years old are molded into meditation whiz kids of sorts. The toddlers are often rescued from poverty and go on to have lifelong careers as teachers who spread their political & religious ideas. Though exotic this approach to enlightenment may be, it's a good idea to stick with the initial teaching: live the life you were born into and when you realize suffering, embrace the instruction.

We have a lot more advantages today to realize enlightenment than those who tried in the past. We don't have to climb mountains for information or pay outrageous sums to institutes of higher learning, or pledge allegiance to any secret society. We have a free press and a free Internet. We can Goggle and Youtube anything. We can read or listen to teachings from all over the world, and from every perspective. We can pick and choose the commentary that works for us and leave the rest behind. Anyone in America who discovers enlightenment has just as interesting a story to tell as the monastery meditator from afar; and on the recommendation of the Buddha, nobody on the path should be worshiped -- including the Buddha himself.

With simple daily commitment a state of enlightenment can be achieved by anyone. Once over the hurdle, the hardest lessons are complete. The information on reality is not rocket science, but based on basic earth science we learn in the 7th grade: the body, the 4 elements of matter, sight, sound, taste, touch, odor and thought. Or personal conduct described in the Eight Fold Path is based on reciprocal decency. All the facts we need are on the table before us. With a few modern advancements like eating right and exercising we can free ourselves at a fluid rate. Eat right, exercise, get honest, meditate and remain involved and teachable. One day at a time gives rise to a lifetime of liberation. To wake up, you don't have to quit your day job, wear a yellow robe or go door-to-door begging for food. And you do not have to be born into it. Wear your own cloths. Cook your own meals. Earn a humble living. Practice constantly. Blaze your own trail. Work with others doing the same. Share your ideas. Speak your mind. Become a shining example of how these ancient discoveries can work today for everyone.

Personal fashion,

Since fashion is in constant flux, what we wear should to be amended from time to time. Representing ourselves in a decent, self-respecting manner is a good idea. But beware: what is decent or self-respecting for some may seem trite or flamboyant to others, and vice versa. So it's up to you. A shirt and tie for men may seem distinguished and proper for some, but for others it may give the impression of a money-grabber or snake-oil salesman. And what about a shirt and tie for women? Are ties for men only? What about a man in a dress?

Once upon a time in the late 1980's my suburban girlfriend and I were walking down St. Marks place in the East Village. It's a melting pot of people trying to say all kinds of things with their attire. There are punk rock kids, drag queens, hipsters and locals. Even a group of Hare Krishna's in robes could come by banging a drum

and singing a song. That day, a small group of tattooed-and-purple-hair-kids walked by and my girlfriend said, "Look at them, they just want attention." And she was right. They do want attention. So do the rest of us. That's why we dress a certain way. Perhaps on that day her and I picked our clothes in a conservative manor, but those kids threw convention to the wind and said, "This is who we are." While the rest of us put on someone else's uniform, or even a robe, I suspect the ones who create their own sense of style are the true poets.

Unless you are a caveman, perhaps the poorest fashion statement anyone can make is fur, leather or skin. Obvious acts of cruelty and violence go into making these materials, and there are plenty of less vicious alternatives. Cotton and polyester for example, instead of wool, silk or feather. Synthetic sneakers and non-leather shoes, belts and accessories instead of cow hide. How bout a grass skirt? As long as people continue to wear the remains of innocent creatures on their bodies they remain by definition savages. Our task as awake-beings must be to widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature.

It's ok to laugh,

In absents of our old ego that laughs at someone else's misfortune, like if someone trips walking up a flight of steps or says something to embarrass themselves, we can have a sense of humor at the good life too. The trick is to keep the focus on yourself. If you're laughing, make sure you're the butt end of the joke. Then it's funny for all parties. Through humor, we can soften some of the most challenging blows life delivers. Or as Woody Allen famously said, "Tragedy plus time equals humor."

But if our ego is the monster we think it is, then why is everything all of a sudden so funny? Because we have worked out the self-serving kinks in our mind and placed ego aside. Through meditation we have not erased our minds completely, but removed the destructive egoism that lacked focus and compassion. We have stabilized the destructive thoughts and emotions that sabotaged our basic humor. In absents of 'self,' things are funnier than ever. We see the meaninglessness to the things we use to hold so sacred, and laugh at how serious we took ourselves. Ordinary life then becomes a joke divided into two categories: painful and miserable. What could be funnier than that?

I am not,

I haven't owned a TV set in 25 years, mostly because I would get so distracted that hours would click by and I wouldn't get anything done. I watch sports once in a while and news sometimes, but regular programming I haven't seen for years. On the other hand, when I was a kid I could tell time by what show was on at my grandparent's house. There was a TV set in every room so I knew it was 4:30 because I Love Lucy was on. At 5 o'clock it was The Flintstones. Or at night we'd be sitting around watching All In The Family, Bowling for Dollars, or Sanford & Son.

In America we in-part learn our habitual behavior from TV. Our ideals and memories are shaped around our TV set, our favorite actors, glamorous movie

stars; talented sports figures that spit chewing tobacco on home plate, rock stars with outrageous hair and stories of promiscuity. We don't have a royal family in the US but we worship our celebrities. You could say that by 15 years old, Americans *become* their favorite TV idol. Everything we eat, buy or want in life is somehow connected to the TV set.

When I was a kid I talked to myself a lot. I could stand in the bathroom for an hour in front of the mirror pretending I was Mick Jagger singing a Stones song to a million people. Or I was John Travolta in Saturday Night Fever swinging a can of house paint on 86th street with the Bee Gees playing in the background. I would pretend I was on a date with a girl and practice saying all the right things to win her heart, and she would fall over backwards for me. Later in a more subtle way I could walk around thinking about something and all of a sudden I'm having a full-blown conversation with myself. Maybe it's about something important, or nothing at all. I could fantasize in my mind about a mistake I made, and a minute later be acting out loud the way it should have went instead. Or a vain thought of me being handed an Oscar for the brilliant roll I played in the movie I was never in.

These are active daydreams that set us up for heartache. In my case it's talking and acting out loud but most of us do this anyway in our head. If the pressure of a job interview leans on us, a meeting with the boss, a hot date with someone we just met, instead of acting from a place of mindfulness on the spot, we play it out in our heads way ahead of time. Then, when the live event actually occurs it doesn't measure up to our fantasy. And we have a sense of discontent.

Home sweet home,

I love America in all its brilliant color. We are a great nation of spirited people, poets, and in many ways the envy of the world in prosperity, creativity and respect. But we have our problems. There are so many things that lift our nation up, yet so many more that drag it down. We have a melting pot of people, religions, political opinions, and foreign ideas flooding in: all kinds of ideas making for a magnificent one-of-a-kind location at a one-of-a-kind time in history. But like all of humanity we share a common hollowness; a certain sense that something is missing in our lives. We walk around pretending, instead of living. We have one foot in yesterday and one foot in tomorrow, and we step over today. We walk past things and don't even notice them. We treat people as competitors instead of our fellow Americans. We see people, but all we really see is how they measure against our own possessions. We grow up watching programmed violence, fantasy and war and wonder why our communities are falling apart. Money, power, romance and the like are what we grow up pursuing, and this is how we expect our lives to turn out. Then things turn out differently and we are bewildered.

Something is wrong and we all know it, but until now we had no idea how to fix it. As a nation, we run from one dream to another, then something else pops up on TV or the Internet, and there we go, chasing it. We have no system of mind training in place and no historical perspective on how to transform the human condition. Meditation slows our thoughts down enough to experience the natural speed of our lives instead of watching from a distance as life speeds away. But we never

learned this in school. I imagine you could benefit from meditation alone, but the teaching presenting in this book moves the discussion in the direction of individual and community responsibility, because without it, meditation is just another yoga class or dance lesson, or a day out with our friends playing softball.

All the problems in my life, and in the world are really in my head. If we buy into a world of violence, greed and fear we manifest it in our actions. If we stop feeding this proverbial monster, everything around us becomes less selfish. Suddenly its not a reality TV show anymore, but reality itself. We are present for our lives. We suddenly forget about yesterday and tomorrow and wake up for today. It's a stunning event when it happens personally. When you are suddenly in a public place and realize you're not afraid anymore. You're not worried that someone is looking at you funny. You suddenly realize that people are not scary. They are scared.

When you are clear and mindful of the facts, you're not constantly thinking of yourself. The mental voices fade. Suddenly you are absorbed in the moment and can engage yourself in a way you never knew possible. Fearless is the best way to describe it. When I was a kid I use to think I was shy or introverted. So staying to myself was natural. I realize now that I was terrified by years of poor conditioning. I thought for every moment of my life I didn't measure up in some way. That I wasn't smart enough, good looking enough, I was to young, then to old, to skinny or to fat. Whatever I thought I was, I was supposed to be something else.

In describing the above personal events, I could be talking about a different person. The person in the story (me) doesn't exist anymore. Today I see things for what they are. I know what I am. I know what you are too. I know what is considered pleasant and painful, and where it all comes from. I know I have a choice in life on how to engage the world, and a choice in how I think. And for that realization, I am grateful.

Hockey and meditation have something in common?

In high school I played hockey. Although most people view hockey as a violent game full of toothless men trying to beat each other up, it is actually a game of finesse that requires a high degree of physical fitness and skill. It can also teach us something about meditation practice.

Moving the puck across the ice and trying to put it in the other team's net while the other team tries to stop you is a challenge. It requires that you skate well, handle the puck well, all while the other team tries to knock you off your game. Checking, or trying to take someone *off* the puck is part of the game. You can use your body to do it, but not your hands or the stick. There are very clear rules to the game of Hockey and every player knows them. The object is to work within the rules, and defeat your opponent.

Sometimes when I meditate, if I'm lost out in the woodlands of thought, I recall the game of hockey. I think of the rules. I view the stories in my head as the other team trying to sabotage my game. They are trying to take me off the puck. Although I am trying to carry the puck *this way*, the other team is banging into me trying to get me to go *that way*. When I meditate, sometimes my sharp thoughts are just like that.

My mind plays by the only rules it understands. Its natural state is calm and peaceful, but its untrained condition is like a hockey arena. And like the game of hockey, the more conditioned I am, the more able I am to enjoy the game. If I put my guard down, and allow my physical training to falter, the other team advances. If I deviate from a healthy diet, my body slows, and I suffer. If I fail to meditate regularly, ego returns stronger than ever. But what if there were no other players on the ice. I could go straight for that net and put the puck away every time. But what fun would that be? Be grateful to everyone. Even the other team.

Holed up and hollow,
Why did I listen to you?
I should have taken a chance
You told me I couldn't do it
And I listened

Inertia build-up
Like a stale green lake
Full of microbes, the body,
You said, "lets take a nap"
Instead of, "lets exercise"
And I listened

Stomach cramping and gassy
Teeth hurt, what's left of them
And on the bowl
You said eat it. You'll love it.
And I listened

"I am your ego"
Just you and me
No, no, no... don't meditate,
We're having so much fun.
Stay here with me (and suffer)

Chapter 9. A Nonviolent Diet

“Don’t think -- feel. Use your instincts, and may the force be with you.” --Qui-Gon Jinn, Star Wars

Diet Guru,

In 1981 I met a man who became my *diet guru*. Bill was well in his 60’s at the time and I was 17 years old. Bill was a retired New York City police officer who lived in the apartment building around the corner from our house on Steuben Street in Staten Island. He was a friend of my mother, but later became my friend too. Every night I would see Bill walk up the block on his way home, and sometimes we would sit on the porch and talk for hours about politics, the state of the economy, or whatever else you could think of. But mostly we talked about food. Not in the sense we were hungry, but about the nature of food and how it could promote health.

At first I thought Bill was a dreamer, an old drifter with nothing to do but walk up and down the block mingling with the middle aged women watering their lawns. Well in his 60’s, maybe even 70, Bill had a glow of someone much younger. He had a spring in his walk, and we connected in a way that a 70-year-old man and a 17-year-old kid rarely do. He had wisdom. I was only 17, still in high school, and in the process of realizing there must be more to life than hanging out in the park with kids who get in trouble. I was thinking about college. Bill use to say, “You have your whole life in front of you. If you eat right nothing can stop you.” And I started to believe him.

Bill use to say that if you eat right you’ll feel better. Sounds overly simple, but that’s what he would say. I went to Bill’s house one day and saw an array of different vitamin and mineral supplements on his counter. He knew all about the supplements, what this one was for and how that one could help you. His counter seemed like a drug store at first glance until I realized this was just concentrated foodstuff that we eat anyway. He had Vitamin A through Z, all the minerals, and some concentrated items like dried liver, figs and seaweed. Then there was the actual food. I popped open his refrigerator and there was nothing in there but fruits and vegetables, and items from the health food store. I thought to myself, this guy really believes in this stuff. Maybe he’s not crazy after all.

In 1980, America was waking up to diet and exercise in a way similar to the way people in the 60’s use drugs for the same. Everyone seemed to know at the same time bad food choices and a lack of exercise was slowing us down and making us sick. America is a society of junk food eaters. We pick our foods based on the pretty packages in the store, what taste good, how convenient it is to make, or what container has the coolest marketing angle; like a tiger on the box or an athlete running the mile. Something was wrong with this picture and everyone knew it.

After a year of eating right and regular jogging my life took a turn for the better. I realized for myself that I felt a lot better this way. I wasn’t tired all the time or full of anxiety so much. I was alert. And it felt great. In the back of my head I still missed

the goodies like ice cream and chocolate cake, but eating fresh fruits and vegetables and lightly cooked proteins instead had a profound effect on my mental and physical state. It was all fiction until I actually tried it. I started to take a few supplements too. I would hang out in the grocery store and notice 80% of what was in there was bad for you. In fact, everything in the middle of the store was bad, but if you walked around the edges, you found the healthy stuff like fresh fruits and vegetables and meat. Yes, at the time I ate meat.

I would marvel at how people shopped. How the people who were twice the size of me in circumference had a shopping cart full of goodies, and how the slim folks bought the right stuff. But what I realize most was that this wasn't complicated bits and pieces we were talking about. In fact once you got your arm around the idea it was more about what you didn't eat than what you did -- it was easy.

Mr. Marcus, Dietitian,

In 1987 I took my first job as a clinical nutritionist. Out of those conversations with Bill I went on to study nutrition at Syracuse University where I received a bachelors degree with a view towards a career as a nutritionist. While at school I got distracted and lost my way, but I still remember those investigations with Bill, and realize through all the books I studied and all the intricate biology and chemistry classes I took at college, nothing had a better effect on my health than the simple practice of picking good foods and leaving the rest alone. Even through my 3 or 4 jobs as a clinical dietitian I couldn't find a better solution than this. Less was indeed more.

Our bodies are equipped with informants that notify us when there is a problem. They are called symptoms. Treating symptoms does not address the cause of a disease and often complicates it. Most medications including the ones we prescribe to ourselves are designed to destroy symptoms and silence the messenger. But if we silence the messenger, we become mute to the destructive path a disease will take. That's why people all around us die of 100% curable diseases like diabetes and heart disease. Pharmaceutical and food companies spend more money on advertising than they do on researching their own product line. But this is whom we look to for solutions to our health problems.

Everything we need for optimum dietary health is at our disposal. It's right in the grocery store on the corner. So is everything we need to make ourselves very sick. Our worst mental enemies are fear, guilt, shame and a lack understanding. But bad food choices wear us down and prevent us from living free as well. Salt is not the enemy; sugar and overly processed foods are. Cholesterol, as found in eggs and butter is not the devil: super hydrogenated oils and non-food goodies are. Before converting to a mostly plant-based diet I use to eat up to 6 eggs a day (in a blender with fruit). Every time I checked, my cholesterol was about 155 mg/dl: approximately 75 points below the norm. How do you figure? Shouldn't I have had a ridiculously high number? There is really no evidence to suggest that reducing salt in your diet is effective at eradicating high blood pressure. There is no evidence to suggest that a low intake of dietary cholesterol will reduce your risk for heart disease (the body produces it's own cholesterol). And there is no evidence to

suggest that drinking alcoholic beverages on a daily basis will create anything more in your life than chronic alcoholism. These are all myths perpetuated by a sick society and its collective need to sell new products and ideas.

“If this country is to survive, the best-fed-nation myth had better be recognized for what it is: propaganda designed to produce wealth but not health” –Adelle Davis

Food is simple -- people are complicated. There are a lot of good people in the field of nutrition who said a lot of good things about optimum health in the past. My personal favorites are the writings of Adelle Davis, Nathan Pritikin, Dr. Atkins and Gary Null. Although there are many contradictions amongst these and other experts as to what the “perfect diet” is, you can certainly draw parallels as to what is good and or bad for you. Experts almost all agree that removing certain foods is more important than adding them. That eating less is better than eating more.

In my view no single dietary combination is perfect for everyone, and we must all discover for ourselves which food mixtures work best. I like to let *the feeling of wellness* guide me in my food choices. It is also my belief that like everything else in life diet is impermanent. As we change as people, so do our dietary requirements change. So do the actual foods we are eating change. Sometimes we can eat something for a while and it feels like a good food choice, then it takes on a different character. That’s because our body chemistry, or the food itself is always changing. It is therefore necessary to keep altering our diets to meet our changing lives.

A diet consisting of 50% carbohydrates, 30% protein, and 20% fat is about right. But trying to calculate a diet based on this ratio, or measuring sodium or cholesterol intake, fat consumption, or calorie counting is a distraction. Eating good foods until we are satiated -- not stuffed – is a good way to look at it. Eat less not more. Most cultures that eat less tend to live longer, and suffer way less food related ailments. Most countries we consider in the West to be *third world* or lower, actual have superior diets. Their diets are simple, free of additives, preservatives, or added sugars. And people don’t over eat.

You do not need a team of professionals to put a basic nutrition plan into your life. I was trained as a clinical dietitian but knew more about basic wellness and nutrition before entering diet school. It’s all about balance and elimination. Balance is the feeling you get when you eat a combination of good foods, and elimination is simply avoiding ALL things known to be bad. It is likely that our current food supply is deficient in certain nutrients. Dietary supplements like vitamins and minerals can help. I like to take a multi-vitamin and mineral supplement for a while and see how I feel. But that’s it. I don’t get carried away. You can spend a lot of time and money buying every supplement in the store: but what you’ll receive for your effort is diminished returns. Allowing the felling of wellness while taking a multi-supplement is all you need.

It's counterproductive to analyze specific fruits and vegetables to discover which of them contain which vitamins and minerals, and what the specific function of each substance is, or which food group a food falls into. The fact is, by simply eating a variety of good foods and eliminating the bad ones, you are practicing a very high form of enlightened nutrition. You won't find the answers to dietary health in a scientist's laboratory. It is not the mysterious steamy brew of a Bunsen burner, nor the frozen potpourri of a cultivation dish that makes the difference. It is your own feeling of wellness that is the single greatest guide. The over-intellectualism of biology and nutrition microscopically is fun to discuss, but listening to the messages our bodies send to us -- before, during, and after -- the consumption of a specific foodstuff is really all you need. The rest is fluff.

All foods have the basic elements of matter in them to varying degrees. They are interconnected in many ways. They all have protein, carbohydrates and fat. So you can get protein from green vegetables just as easy as getting carbohydrates from beans. Regarding eating a variety of fruits and vegetables, think of them as colorful candy. Fruits and vegetables all have bright colors and interesting flavors to them. Try to indulge in all of them: even the ones' that look and smell funny.



Please don't eat me -- I love you,

The greatness of a civilization and its moral progress can be measured by the way it treats its weakest members, namely animals. This fact alone should convert most meat-eating humans to a plant based diet, but not so. It has long been understood by health organizations, historians, and nutritionists that the best diets contain very little or no animal products. Yet for most humans the only remaining justification for eating meat is it taste good. This morally vacant excuse shouldn't outweigh the fact that animals are exploited, tortured and killed by the trillions for no other reason than a tasty meal. A chicken, perhaps the most tortured creature on the planet has been dealt a double whammy. Not only does a chicken's flesh taste good, but you can stuff 5 or 6 hens into a small cage and eat its premature offspring (egg). Cows too. Not only can you grind up a few cows and get hundreds of hamburgers, but you can keep the females perpetually pregnant and force them to give up their milk intended for their own offspring.

How did humans become so cruel? If a human child falls down in a park and breaks an arm or leg for example, a parent will grieve and rush the injured child to the nearest hospital. The child's suffering saddens everyone. But when an adolescent pig, cow or chicken is confined, tortured, executed, disemboweled, and or cooked in a rotisserie and eaten, this is considered acceptable human behavior.

It is impossible to neglect the suffering and exploitation of animals while we extend our sense of compassion to end the suffering and exploitation of humans.

*"For as long as men massacre animals,
they will kill each other.
Indeed, he who sows the seed of
murder and pain cannot
reap joy and love." --Pythagoras*

Moreover, there is no humane or compassionate way to kill anything. The act of killing is the act of killing. No matter how you dissect it, even if you execute an animal covertly where you cover it's eyes and say a mystical prayer before you shot it, it's still killing. Whether you kill a chicken by violently crushing its skull with your boot, or thank the chicken politely for the sacrificial flesh it's about to give you, it's murder. Whether we kill a cow, duck, fish or man – it's all the same. There is no difference between what is being killed. The idea of difference is only a human concept for man's own advantage. It is likely we will see a time in our history where the current putting to death of non-human animals is viewed the same as the killing of humans. A time where future generations will hold our era wholly accountable for the extinction of thousands of the earth's species; when the full impact of this senseless raising, terrorizing and eating countless trillions of beings is fully comprehended.

*"The love for all living creatures is the most
noble attribute of man." –Charles Darwin*

At the root of the problem is 1 of the 6 human sense perceptions. Namely, human taste. There is no solid evidence to suggest meat consumption is bad for your physical health, or that humans must eat meat to survive. Neither is entirely true. The decision to eat meat is all a matter of *taste*. We are omnivores by nature, which means inherently we can digest plants or animals. You might even say most unconscious humans are scavengers because they will eat anything that doesn't eat them first, including bugs. But if we put all the chickens, cows, pigs and fish we have eaten in our lives in one room, think of all the lives we have taken; all the hellish suffering we have created; all the misery we have consumed.

Make no mistake about it; when shopping for meat at the grocery store, although we may not personally kill the animal, that neatly packaged product in the cooler is the remains of an animal that was killed for your consumption. The residue of pain and death are in the flavor. Although vegetarianism is for the conventional Buddhist an ideal rather than a mandate, in this modern age we must apply our intelligence and stop the killing. Some of the most important work of creating a just and healthy society must start by converting meat-eating humans to a plant based diet.

*"In the strict scientific sense we all feed on death,
even vegetarians." –Spock*

Plants v. Animals,

You might say, "Fruits and vegetables are life too. Please don't eat plants because they love you too!" Creative argument, but ask yourself these questions: do fruits and vegetables scream in terror when you cut them, or do they lose control of their bowels when you hang their bodies up side down and beat them to death? The best we can do is measure similarities between animals and various plant forms to determine likeness. Plants in fact lack a central nervous system and appear to have no episodic memory. So not only can a plant not feel pain (as we know it) they wouldn't be able to remember it even if they did. So it's safe to say that "pain" in the plant kingdom is essentially non-existent.

Regarding intelligence: lets compare a representative from each kingdom. From the animal kingdom let's consider a well-fed pig: and from the plant kingdom, a fresh head of lettuce. Pigs are highly gifted social creatures with an IQ roughly comparable with that of a 3-year old human. On the other hand, a head of lettuce has an IQ of zero. At early stages of development a pig is far more intelligent in comparison to a 1-year old human who cannot even feed itself. Pigs are noticeably smarter than the common house cat and about 2x smarter than most dogs. In contrast, a head of lettuce has no brain. So which one is smarter? Which species closer resembles our own in its ability to experience pain and suffering?

It's not even a matter of can animals speak or reason, or are they smarter than humans or plants. Or can they fetch a ball. The issue is do they suffer. Watch and listen to a young pig cry out in hysteria as the pig before him on the slaughter line has his throat violently cut open and is hung upside down to die. Moreover, the case for behaving decently to animals rests on the fact we are the species more capable of rationality and moral choice. That is precisely why we are under an obligation to recognize and respect the lives of animals.

"Nothing will benefit human health and increase chances for survival of life on earth as much as the evolution to a vegetarian diet." –Albert Einstein

To consume meat, fish, fowl, milk or eggs is to participate directly in acts of cruelty, betrayal and violence against all beings, and contributes to a mentality of violence so explicit that one cannot eat meat and rightfully declare his life a peaceful one. If meat-eaters go on to raise children as meat-eaters, as well, everyday these children are taught an ethic of violence. In fact, so long as slaughterhouses exist, so will battlefields. We do not stop eating meat for our physical health, or to lower our cholesterol. We do it out of compassion for others. A vegetarian (vegan) manner of living benefits mankind by its pure physical effect on the human temperament.

Let's say that it is 24 hours before you will be born, and a magic guru appears and says, "You are hereby empowered to set the rules of a society into which you will be born. You can set the economic, social and ethnical rules, and even the order of beings, but whatever rules you set will apply during your lifetime and your

children's lifetimes." And you'll say, "Well, that's great, but what's the catch?" And the guru says, "You don't know if you're going to be born a human or a non-human animal." With a 50% chance you and your children will end up confined, torture and cut into pieces for human food, how many people in the above scenario do you think would set up a world where humans exploit animals?

*"To my mind, the life of a lamb is no less
precious than that of a human being."
--Mahatma Gandhi*

The lists below are basic dietary guidelines. You can pick out things from the "offered" side that work for you over time. Then when they stop working, you can mix it up. Like animals that only have access to certain foods at certain times of the year, we have to view diet the same way. We become seasonal grazers. But most of all, it is the things that we eliminate (not offered) from our diet that benefit us the most. I have listed them in two groups:

Offered

Any soy (tofu, soy-milk)

Any fresh fruit or vegetable

Any whole grain, rice, potato, corn...

Any bean, nut, seed

Any herb (including salt)

Any cold pressed vegetable oil

Any water, fruit or vegetable juice, tea (caffeine free)

Not Offered

No highly processed or deep fried food

No meat, poultry, fish, eggs, butter, milk, animal by-products

No canned fruits and vegetables (frozen ok)

No processed hydrogenated oils, margarine, artificial colors and flavors

No sugar: sucrose, fructose, maltose, corn syrup...

No alcohol, nicotine, caffeine, food additive or preservative

No drugs: prescribed or otherwise

“Twelve voices were shouting in anger, and they were all alike. No question, now, what had happened to the faces of the pigs. The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which.” —George Orwell, *Animal Farm*

Soft drugs:

It is equally important to eat quality foods that promote health, as it is to eliminate poor quality foods and toxins, or *soft drugs* that are counterproductive. Toxins are any indigestible nonfood substances that wear the body down mentally and physically over time; despite immediate gratification (pleasure), all soft drugs will hinder progress of mindfulness development by exaggerating addictive behavior and neurosis. They will cause a litany of physical symptoms, diseases and dependency. The most widely used and abused soft drugs are alcohol, nicotine, caffeine, and sugar. We'll take a look at these together. You can also add to the no-no list all recreational mind altering substances: marijuana, LSD, cocaine, MDMA, heroin, opium and or their prescribed derivatives such as psychotropic anti-depressants like Phenobarbital – all of which temporarily relieve human symptoms such as anxiety and insomnia, but all have a boomeranged effect. Alcohol is the first soft drug on our hit list:

Alcohol,

No matter how you *pour* it, alcohol consumption is bad for you. The more alcohol you consume the more un-awake you will become. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 15 million U.S. adults met the standard diagnostic criteria for alcohol dependency. Alcoholism is a chronic, progressive disease with symptoms that include a strong need to drink despite negative consequences such as chronic liver disease. Like many other diseases, alcoholism has a generally predictable course, has recognized symptoms, and is influenced by genetic and environmental factors that are well established. Terminal alcoholic behavior and liver cirrhosis is often the final blow.

You may say to yourself, “What are you talking about? Drinking isn't a problem for me.” The truth is, most people consume alcohol against their will, and most will ultimately abuse it. For instance, remember the first time you tried alcohol and it tasted like poison. But for some societal reason, you struggled to “acquire a taste.” Then over time you started to like how it feels, and drank it for the effect of numbness or euphoria. Years later, and with alcohol still in hand, we toasted to the best of times, and drank over bad ones. We downed a few when it was cold and snowy outside, and downed a few more when it's warm. We drank on the weekends to loosen up around people, and we drank when we were alone. We drank with our friends, acquaintances, strangers, and drank some more to get in the mood for sex.

There are several nonsensical studies that report moderate drinkers, those who have one or two drinks per day, are less likely to develop heart disease than people who do not drink alcohol at all. The study suggests that small amounts of alcohol may help protect against coronary heart disease by reducing the risk of blood clots in the coronary arteries. Alcohol actually does the opposite. It causes platelets to

stick together, and sludges the red blood cells. It reduces the cells oxygen-carrying capacity reducing blood supply to the heart. Alcohol also depresses the immune system by inhibiting mobilization of lymphocytes from lymph into the blood when they're needed elsewhere to fight infection. This all makes us more susceptible to infection, and ultimately, disease. Alcohol also tends to load up the liver with triglycerides and other fats, forcing a rise in those levels. This is a leading cause of heart disease and cardiac arrest.

There are more than 100 commonly prescribed medications on the market that interact with alcohol and lead to an escalated risk of illness, injury, and in some cases, death. The effects of alcohol are increased by medications that slow down the central nervous system, such as sleeping pills, antihistamines, antidepressants, anti-anxiety drugs, and some painkillers. In addition, medicines for certain disorders including diabetes and heart disease are dangerous if used with alcohol.

To prevent alcoholism certain drugs have been developed that can allegedly fix the problem. One such example is a medication alleged to lessen the craving for alcohol thereby preventing a return to heavy drinking. Another is a pill that discourages drinking by causing nausea, vomiting, and other unpleasant physical reactions when used with alcohol. Search though you will, you cannot find what does not exist. The only solution to the alcohol problem is complete abstinence.

At this point, I'm tempted to launch a discussion about why all drugs, like alcohol, should be decriminalize, or better, legalized. Addiction is an illness. Yet punishing the sick and suffering in our society is nothing new, treating people like criminals is not the solution. Even if you built a 90-foot wall around the United States to keep drugs out, somebody somewhere will succeed at tossing an ample supply over it (or dig a hole under it). If you find that you can't stop drinking or taking drugs, reach out to a good support group in your area. Work with other people who are trying to achieve the same goal of abstinence. When I stopped drinking I wrote this poem to say goodbye to alcohol:

Alcohol, Alcohol, Tasty And Bright
Alcohol, Alcohol, Full Of Might
I Indulge In Your Bubbly
And Change How I Feel, And With Each Passing Meal
I Consume You,
To Make The Outcome Right

But You Let Me Down, Time-And-Time Again,
You Make Me ill, Yet Say You're My Friend.
And In The End,
You Clog My Arteries,
And My Mind, You Never Mend

And So Far As I Can Tell,
You Were Indeed A Friend

But For The Rest Of My Days,
Our Friendship Must End
I Dismiss You Of Your Duty
Here And Now
And A Hardy Farewell To You, I Send

Nicotine,

As of 2010, an estimated 45.3 million people in the United States smoked cigarettes; an estimated 21.5 % are men and 17.3 % are women. Health experts estimate tobacco use causes about 443,000 deaths in the United States every year. Nurture may have something to do with it. For instance, the state of Kentucky, a major tobacco-producing state, leads the *pack* when it comes to smoking. The CDC found nearly one in three adults there lit up in 1997. Religious conviction is probably a strong factor when it comes to people not smoking. This is most apparent in a state like Utah where religion runs high, and cigarette smoking low. Utah has the lowest adult smoking rate in America, 13.7 percent (one in seven).

The point is -- smoking can nullify virtually all benefits of a good diet, exercise and meditation program. Carbon Monoxide (CO) is a poison, and it is the most destructive component of cigarette smoke. Blood cells are magnetically drawn to CO. They are two hundred times more drawn to this toxin than to pure oxygen. When CO and a red blood's cell hemoglobin bind together, they form a stable compound, carboxyhemoglobin, which ties up the red blood cells oxygen-carrying capacity for up to twelve hours. The net result is oxygen starvation. Oxygen starvation in the body causes the cells lining the inside surface of the arteries to open. This permits betalipoprotein to invade the cell layers, and causes artery inflammation that allows this deadly irritant to grow. This is a leading cause of heart disease. The good news is that experts believe that after a decade of nonsmoking, a former smoker's risk equals that of a lifelong nonsmoker in many areas of risk. So, if you smoke -- quit now.

Caffeine,

Caffeine is a drug known to produce: peculiar and rapid heartbeats, insomnia, high fatty-acid levels in the blood, high blood glucose levels in diabetics, increased gastric acid secretion, irritability, nervousness, insomnia, ventricular tachycardia, acute myocardial infarction (heart attack) and high blood pressure. The raising of blood lipids is suspected to be a major factor in atherosclerosis. So, why do so many people choose to consume caffeine? The answer is simple – like all other drugs, it's pleasurable.

Kids get a huge quantity of caffeine that creates an addiction that begins in childhood. A seven-year-old boy who drinks three soft drinks per day, and only weighs 60 pounds, is drinking the equivalent of 8 cups of coffee that a 175-pound man would drink. Like alcohol and nicotine, caffeine serves only to upset our internal balance. It has a nutritional value of zero.

Sugar,

Refined sugar is an empty caloric food that does more harm to our health than good. Sugar is a leading cause of obesity, elevated blood triglycerides, and stresses the insulin-producing organ of the body known as the pancreas. This effect can cause hypoglycemia (low blood sugar) and its high blood sugar counterpart hyperglycemia (more commonly known as diabetes).

Hypoglycemia, or mild sugar withdrawal creates symptoms such as lightheadedness, fatigue, and weakness. Most of us have experienced it at one time or another. Yet, prolonged sugar abuse causes a more permanent reoccurring side effect. Sugar is a soft drug, with strong addictive properties, and clear-cut withdrawal symptoms. Best thing to do is avoid it. Sugar is abundant in our food supply so you have to be careful and read labels. The supermarket is a minefield of sugar-containing products: you need to look for “hidden sugars” at every turn. Heart disease, obesity, and diabetes are among the most prevalent and persistent American health problems. Heart disease and diabetes rank first and fifth, respectively, as causes of death. And obesity may affect more than 30 percent of our population. Sugar consumption is a leading contributor to these conditions.

King of Compassion,

There is a park in Chinatown that sits between Forsyth & Chrystie at the corner of Stanton Street. That's where I found this guy. He was a black male cat in distress and was trying to hide himself behind a razor thin traffic sign on the bike path. Not doing a good job at hiding, I spotted him and got a closer look. I wasn't sure if this was a stray outdoor cat that had a fight and needed some time to rest, or maybe he was a cat too sick to move. Or maybe it was my worst impression: someone's house pet that got dumped out in the park and never saw the outdoors before, and was terrified. So I built him a little cardboard house that he crawled into, and left him with some food and water. I thought that was the end of it. But the next day I swung by, and there he was -- still in the box -- morose. So I took him home.

Indeed this was someone's house or garage pet: maybe a storeowner who employed him as a rat catcher, or a tenant who got evicted from his or her home and left him behind. I thought he was 5 or 6 years old when I found him, but a veterinarian later informed me he was only about 2 years old. Once home, and after an hour of petting & brushing and feeding him, and winning his trust, he was warm and friendly. His hair was matted and dirty and felt rough like a Brillo pad. You could feel the bones in his side, his rib cage, and his nails were brittle and scaly. His gaze was depressing. He ate a whole can of food in one sitting, licking the bowl clean, and drank some water. I picked him up and he sat comfortably in my lap. He even used the litter box that was set for him. He purred and rubbed up against my leg to say thanks.

The cat didn't seem too disoriented, but I suspect he spent a many hard days and nights alone before being found. At first his eyes wouldn't make contact with anything. I thought he could be slightly blind. My heart went out to this guy for hanging in there. Since I already had a cat that was acutely aware another cat was now living in the bathroom, I thought I couldn't keep him. A city shelter was out of the question since most will just kill him 48 hours after entry. So it was up to me to give him a new name, and a home. His name is Batman -- dark warrior, king of compassion. Today my other cat is friendly with him. They chase each other around and enjoy the same toys. He has a shiny black mink-like fur coat, broad shoulders and a fat belly. He knows his name. He looks straight in my eyes. He's lying next to me as I write this, at peace.

Chapter 10. RUN And Become

"I always loved running...it was something you could do by yourself, and under your own power. You could go in any direction, fast or slow as you wanted, fighting the wind if you felt like it, seeking out new sights just on the strength of your feet and the courage of your lungs." --Jesse Owens

Besides eating the right stuff and eliminating what is wrong in our diet, exercise is important too. The Buddha is purported to have used some sort of yoga for exercise, but for the sake of this book, we will use running. Though exercise is vital to human health, try not to get carried away with it. A little exercise goes a long way. In or around 400 BC, the Greek philosopher Hippocrates famously mentioned about diet and exercise, *"If we could give every individual the right amount of nourishment and exercise, not too little and not too much, we would have found the safest way to health."*

On Running,

A sedentary body is like a still green lake. Though still waters run deep, the rocks below, and air above can't do their job of cleansing. Without proper aeration and movement our lake gets contaminated and mucky. Microbes, protozoa and all kinds of green stuff take over. The biggest component of our lake is water, but you wouldn't want to swim in it. When we're out in the field running, our bodies convert to swift streams of pure running water. Every inch of the way we cleanse-out the green stuff. Not only can we swim in our lake now, but we can drink from it. I started running for fun when I was 17 years old, then for my health. Through the best and worst of times, I've always been a runner.

Thousands of years ago Egyptian pharaohs would have their loyal soldiers exercise for them. They would have a few hundred troops out in the field doing jumping jacks and pushups. In the same way, sometimes when I go to the gym I watch other people swim back and forth in the pool. I'm not much of a swimmer (thin frame, sink), but I remember the story of the pharaohs and think to myself those people in the pool are swimming on my behalf. Unfortunately exercise doesn't work that way. You have to do it. We have a physical body that is built for movement. Although we may die tomorrow, we must work with mind and body today. If we allow the body to get lazy, mind will follow. Exercise can be traced all the way back to the caveman days, and probably the first people to workout didn't know they were doing it. They were just running for their lives from giant land creatures looking to eat them.

It's fun to run with a pack of people because you forget its exercise and join in on the conversation and jokes. The rhythm carries you. There's a running Sangha in America that meets almost everywhere there is open space. In Manhattan it's Central Park. But the meditative work starts when you're out in the brush alone, just you and the pavement, and your thoughts. There is a whole scientific explanation why exercise is good for you, and we've all heard it before. The main psychological reason to run for those of us who meditate is to strengthen the mind

while the body is in heated motion. The cumulative benefits as you will see are outstanding.

With running, you only have one real piece of equipment to consider – shoes. You can drape your arms and legs with whatever you like, but you need to get the right sneakers designed specifically for running. Running shoes have a certain bounce to them. Don't go running in basketball or tennis sneakers. You will hurt yourself. There are 100s of running shoes on the market, and the best way to find which ones are good for you is NOT to pick the ones that look pretty, but to try a few of them on and run around the store for a while. Sounds funny but that's how you do it. In Manhattan there's a few shops that have a treadmill in the store where you can take your potential new shoes out for a run. You can try before you buy.

With running, age is irrelevant. You're never too old or too young to run. In 1982 I ran the first 2 miles of the 26.2-mile New York City Marathon with an 86-year old man named Joel Johnson. Next to him was my training partner Mike (64), to Mike's right was my aunt Angela (43) and our friend Michael (14). We all finished the race at different times, but we all started together. 64-year-old Mike and I were training buddies at the time and we were out to beat each other that day. He ran 3 hours 56 minutes; I beat him with a time of 3:44. I was 19 years old. Our friend Mr. Johnson running in his 10th marathon finished just under 6 hours. 20 years before that, Mr. Johnson was on his deathbed in a nursing home.

If you are in fairly good condition, and you don't smoke, this should be easy. If you smoke or are over weight you need to proceed with caution. Weight is the biggest deterrent to consider, because if you're carrying extra pounds your body is under excess stress and prone to injury. Ideal body weight (IBW) can be calculated in a general way from your height:

- 106 lbs for the first 5 feet plus 6 lbs for each inch (medium frame)
- Small frame (- 10%), Large frame (+ 10%)
 - So if you are 6 feet: your IBW is about 178 lbs.
 - Most people are medium frame.

Running meditation,

Running is a very advanced exercise. When you run you learn about your body, and your mind's willingness to put up with pain. 90% of keeping the body moving is in the mind. You see how lazy mind and body can become, how it wants to quit, or slowdown, or not show up at all. It's not a contact sport, and when you run you're not in competition with anyone. So it's very good for mediation. As you get on with it, especially on a dedicated track for running, you can lower your gaze the same way you do in sitting practice. Don't try this on the street near traffic, or where the ground suddenly changes like with potholes, curbs or things you need to jump over. The speed at which you run is not important, it's the time and or distance that counts. If you've never done this before a half-mile is a good place to start, day after day. Like sitting mediation practice, with running, "not too tight – not too loose" is the theme.

Fifty percent of running is getting your sneakers on. Sounds easy, but I've actually put my shoes on and got ready for a run, then went to the computer for a minute and took my shoes off. Once your shoes are on, you still have to make it out the door and do it. Make sure your laces are not too tight as to cause your feet to go numb and not too loose where your feet swish around inside the shoe and cause blisters or other foot injuries. Give your laces a double tie so the laces themselves don't come loose after you start running. If they do you'll either have to stop and tie them or you'll already have tripped over them and be waiting for an ambulance.

Make sure you stretch first. This is a gray area because some people stretch and others don't. I usually ride a bicycle to the track where I run, so I'm pretty warmed up by the time I get there. It's best to stretch a warm muscle than it is to stretch a cold one. Don't go crazy with this. A few minutes of bending here and there should wake everything up. Or a few minutes of yoga is pretty good too. You are going to start out running slow so your body will warm up naturally to the run.

Picking the terrain, track or course you're going to run on takes some consideration. In the beginning, a flat round track where you know the distance is best. You know for example that every loop is a quarter mile. So there's no problem figuring out how far you went. On the other hand, if I'm out on a three-mile run (12 loops around the track), half the time I forget what loop I'm on. When this happens I teach myself a lesson and round down rather than round up. So if I lose count on what I think is lap 9, I'm only on 8. Makes me pay closer attention.

Out-and-back courses or longer loops around the neighborhood or on the beach are fine too. A good idea is to measure the distance before you run; drive a car over the course and check the odometer to see how far you went. There are a few gadgets on the market you can wear on your body that measure distance, but I've never found them to be accurate. I did find an odometer for my bicycle once that gave a pretty close measurement. If you can't calculate distance, a healthy second is to run by time. Run when you can. Time of day is up to you. But pick a time that you can stick to. Also consider in the hot summer months while you're out pounding the pavement the sun is out pounding on your head. Early in the morning or early evening is a good remedy for this. Dress accordingly -- wear sunglasses.

The number of runs per week is something to think about too. You shouldn't be out running everyday. The body needs rest, but I find that 2 and 3 in a row days works pretty good, with a day off in between. So if you run 4 times a week at 3 miles per day, you are running 12 miles per week. When I ran a marathon, I would run about 40 miles per week. Then there are the times I don't run at all and regret it because I feel physically weaker. I recall a period in my life when I wasn't running at all and a friend asked me, "Hey Marcus, are you still running?" and I said, "Yes, but only when chased." (Joke).

Don't wait till you get thirsty. Drink a little water before you start: especially if it's hot outside. Even if it's cold -- drink. Not colorful sporty drinks, but water. You don't need a water bottle either to carry with you. Drinking liquid while you're on a shorter than 5 mile run doesn't serve any purpose other than occupy your arms,

hands and mouth. It's a distraction. Drink before you run, and when you are done – drink again. The other distraction is music. Don't do this. Leave the iPod home. You want to get yourself in a place where running becomes meditative, and you tune in to body and mind – and ultimately your surroundings. If you have music blasting in your ears, you can't hear the natural rhythm of the breath or experience the landscape of which you are running through. It's a distraction.

Long slow distance (LSD) is how we build a base. A base is what's underneath, or the foundation of our running condition. By running long slow distance at a comfortable pace, month after month, we allow the body to build strength naturally, and when it's time to go faster our body will tell us so.

*"Keep varying the program.
Your body will tell you what to do."*
-- Joan Benoit, Marathon Runner

Preventing injury is all about attention to form. Things like shin splints where you get a sharp pain in the front of your legs, or an icy painful feeling in your knees, or a pain in the middle of your foot: all can be remedied by adjusting your stride. Instead of leaning into the stride you can sit back a bit, or bounce, or both. If you notice your strides are too long or extended try a lap with shorter choppy ones. By changing the mechanics of the body, you allow the body to rest in certain areas that were previously being over worked, and you work other areas that were previously being under worked. Drop your arms when you feel like they are too heavy and need a rest. Hold your stride but let your arms and hands swing free for a minute, then, resume your posture. If there is one area that weight training might help its here: working the upper body with weights will help your running a great deal. An upper body workout can be done with pushups or low impact yoga as well.

Don't compete with the guy or girl running in the lane next to you, just run your own pace. Let it be a practice in humility. Sometimes when I'm on the track and someone older than me passes by, ego pops up to say, "Pick up the pace. Are you going to let that old guy beat you?" Or if an attractive female should strut by, 'lust' taps me on my shoulder and says, "Be a real man and show her how strong you are." These are the silly games the stressed mind plays. You are out running to bring mind and body into the moment, not give ego and lust a workout.

Once while out on the track at 8 am I got hit in the head with a soccer ball. There was a soccer match going on and lots of enthusiastic fans standing on the track around the field. In addition to watching the soccer match, a few guys were kicking a ball around and along came me to get knocked in the head by it. It was a hard shot too. I was more than half way through my workout, so I was cruising along in a meditative state, and when the ball hit me, my head snapped back and my gum fell out of my mouth. Whoever kicked the ball apologized, but now I had a resentment to deal with. For the next few laps I had to struggle with the thought that if I get hit in the head again by that ball, I'm going to take the ball and throw it in the river. So on a beautiful fall morning, a stray kickball and the kids who kicked

it, became the object of my resentment. I guess it's similar to sitting practice where the person next to you has an episode of the fidgets or a cough attack and "disturbs" your practice. Mindfully we place awareness back on the task at hand.

Focus on the breath. Depending on how well your condition is, the breath here is heavier than in sitting meditation. You'll feel the in-out breath as a deeper pull and push sensation. This is not exaggerated breathing, or forced in any way. It's heavier and sloppier in many respects, but it's just breathing. The good thing about running meditation is that unlike sitting meditation you can't fall asleep. Or maybe you can?

Let your strength build naturally. As you get out and run more you'll suddenly feel like you want to go faster. We tend to grow in spurts. You'll be chugging along at the same pace and then one day it feels easy. So you pick it up a bit. With running you don't push, you release. As you grow in strength you can also have fun running hills, or steps, or interval training. Intervals are where you run a fast lap followed by a slow lap followed by a fast lap and another slow until you're done. Or pick a hilly course or a course with steps in it like the scene in the movie Rocky when he runs up the steps of the Museum of Art in Philadelphia.

Run a race too. In most towns in America, every Saturday or Sunday morning there will be a 5k or 10k race going on. Races are fun and a great way to check your progress, and your ego. Because when the gun goes off and your excitement builds, you're going to want to run faster than usual. Then you get to the first mile and you realize you can't breathe. Remember, we are not competing against anyone but ourselves, even in a race. Let the speed demons and running freaks run their own race, just kick back and hold your normal stride and see how long it takes to cross the finish line. Write down your finishing time and in a few months run another one at your regular pace and you'll see a natural progression. Maybe a minute faster: maybe five: or maybe slower.

Stretch after you're done. This is also a good time to do any upper bodywork. The body is alive and receptive to additional exercise at this point; so take advantage. And now that you are done, try some sitting meditation and you'll be amazed how relaxed you are. Mind and body are wide-awake, and responsive. When it's windy, I like to fly two-line stunt kites. They are amazing toys on a breezy day, and I have a pretty good collection of them. There is a spot at the edge of the wind spectrum that when you hold the kite in there it just stops in the air. Perfectly still. Your meditation will feel like that after a run.

Most importantly, don't over do it. Running stimulates the body to produce various endorphins that have a relaxing effect on the body. It's a biochemical reaction and can become habit forming and cause you go over board. You don't need to run marathons either. You want to make running something you do forever. So easy does it. Running will benefit all aspects of your life especially sleeping. When I don't run I tend to have a harder time staying asleep. And yes, a healthier body equals a healthier love life. All your parts will be working better. Now that you're running more and eating less, and only eating the good stuff, and not killing

yourself with self-medications, weight problems will fade. So do 90% of common medical ailments. If you were fat, you are not fat anymore.

The “S” word,

Just like running, **sex** produces pleasure. Similar to an adrenaline rush to the brain, an orgasm creates an intense rush: and then fades. Yet as with all emotions, strongly charged byproducts are left behind; sex has a flip side -- or *crash*. When we step on the sex pedal, and romance the body, we also romance the emotional mind. Fantasy, lust and passion kick in. Craving, hope or attachment to another session may occur. Attachment to another person may intensify. Fear may be born of co-dependency. The Buddha didn't denounce sexual activity. He said it's ok as long as it didn't fall into the category of "misconduct," but we should proceed with caution.

One of the most important lessons the Buddha taught is that all desire carries with it the seeds of suffering. Latter day forms of Buddhism and Hinduism may disagree. Sexual desire, they say can have three separate and distinct purposes: procreation, pleasure and spiritual liberation. Those who use ritualized sex to seek liberation from desire purportedly abstain from reaching an orgasm in favor of higher realms of awareness. Some will start out trying to dispel desire by visualizing themselves as a female in her sexual prime (age 16), and then attempt to visually join her sexual energy with some other form of energy. Some feel the best way to work towards enlightenment may be to experience desire fully in this manner and thereby drain it of its mystery.

The best way to dissolve a habitual pattern is to abstain completely from the thought or behavior. Sometimes when my guard is down and I see a group of attractive females at a table, or I am face to face with obvious beauty, it's hard to not be distracted. It is something I must guard against all the time. By allowing my thoughts to run off to the bedroom without me I set myself up for emotional discomfort. Lust is tricky like that. If you are aware lust is an obstacle for you, best to let go of the thought for a while. If you stop acting on lust and sex, your thoughts of lust and sex eventually stop. Running is a pleasurable event. So is meditation once you get the hang of it. Proper diet and absents of mind altering substances is a lifter too. Like sex, all appear to be ordinary occurrences. "Not to tight -- not to loose" is the way to go. Stay mindful and be respectful of others.

True happiness,

Before you read this book, happiness was defined as, you buy a winning lottery ticket and you're happy. Or someone you ask out on a date says yes, and you're full of joy. Or the boss gives you a pat on the back and you're all smiles. But as we have seen, this sort of cursory happiness comes back to haunt us. It's really just pleasure-seeking in disguise. These are not tragic events. They are forms of impermanent or compounded happiness that is always connected to some person, place or thing we find agreeable. But if we remove the person, place or thing we remove the happiness. Then we're sad. You could argue that diet and exercise are compounded forms as well. And they are. But we have to eat or we'll die. We also have to move around, or we'll die. We also have to procreate or as a species we

may cease to exist. Unshakable happiness, or enlightenment is compounded to only one set of proper tools -- right view, meditation, diet, and exercise. The term for this is called "right effort." A healthy body and mind operating this way transcends ordinary happiness and yields a profoundly new kind of joy. In many respects its closer to curiosity. It occurs at a statistical tipping point where meditation 'presence' becomes the predominant state. But no matter how long we study, meditate, eat right or run, if we stop applying right effort our misery slowly creeps back in.

"All compounded things are short-lived; work diligently on your salvation." --The Buddha's last words

If you watch the nature channel on TV you see wild animals eating each other. If you observe a pack of gazelles for example, to prevent getting eaten you'll notice they stick together in a tight pack. Around them somewhere are the lions looking for a meal. The lions are coy in their approach and try to stay calm and peaceful to win the trust of the gazelles. The gazelles know what the lions are up to because they have seen the performance before. The lions move closer and closer to the pack but don't try any sudden moves: until one of the braver egotistical gazelles forgets the rules and strays from the pack. Then it's dinnertime for the cats. The lions move in as a team and isolate the prey from the support group. Then eat it. When we stray from practice, we are like the stray gazelle: potential cat food.

Chapter 11. OUR FRIEND DEATH

“To fear death, my friends, is only to think ourselves wise, without being wise: for it is to think that we know what we do not know. For anything that men can tell, death may be the greatest good that can happen to them: but they fear it as if they knew quite well that it was the greatest of evils. And what is this but that shameful ignorance of thinking that we know what we do not know?”

--Socrates (BC 469-BC 399)

Death is real. 100 years from now, we'll all be dead.

My first string of jobs out of college included working as a dietitian in a nursing home in Staten Island. A nursing home, for better or worse, is where most of us in America will end up when we are old and gray, and it's time to die. On any given day there are 400 or 500 people in a nursing home in the same situation: nowhere to go and waiting to die. In my short career, I saw a lot of death. I would mingle around the facility in the daytime making small talk with residents. I would find out what they liked and didn't like to eat; find out where they came from, and sadly, how they ended up here. And the next morning, or a week from now, or one month later, I would come to work and see their dietary card pulled from the meal assembly line sitting on my desk. That meant that the person wouldn't be needing of a meal anymore because they had "expired."

I remember reading an article once about a nursing home that had a cat that knew when people were about to die. The cat had free run of the facility; he wasn't anyone's cat in particular, but whenever someone was in the final stages of life, the cat would pop up and sit by the dying person. The nursing staff started to use the cat as an indication that their analysis was right and the patient was in the final stages of their life, and death was imminent. Having lived with a few cats in my home for most of my life, and knowing something about selfish cat behavior, I figure the cat was only there because it saw something to benefit itself: maybe a free bed to sleep on, or an extra meal that no one would be eating. Nonetheless, the cat was there to witness death over and over again. Maybe for the cat it was about a comfy bed or a free meal, or perhaps it was the smell of imminent death that drew the cat to the bedside. Or maybe these are only human interpretations of the cat's instincts, and animals know more about death than we think.

Experiencing a lot of death at the nursing home was a memorable experience. I was a dietitian responsible for making sure people had 3 hot meals a day and someone to complain to if they got the wrong dish. But experiencing death of a loved one, or our own pending death for that matter is another story entirely. While I was at work one day, I got the call from my mother that my grandfather had died. I lived with my grandparents at the time so the impact of death hit real close to home. I didn't cry right away because I was kind of used to seeing people die a lot, but I remember my mind went blank. Like a part of my brain that held memories of my grandfather had suddenly been erased. I barely remember the drive home, and then to see my grandmother weeping, and her intense sense of loss brought me to tears.

In his prime, my grandfather was a robust Italian-American shoemaker. He was born in America like the rest of us, but still identified with the old country where his father was from. The last few years for him were very painful. He dropped to about half his normal body weight and developed almost every ailment, symptom and disease in the book: he had heart disease, kidney failure that required dialysis, emphysema from smoking 3 packs of Lucky Strikes a day; he had colon cancer, skin cancer, even developed pneumonia a few times. At this point he knew he was dying and threw in the towel. He rarely got out of bed and my grandmother and I, mostly my grandmother, helped him with his basic needs. At age 60 he finally died.

A day or two before his death, I was at his bedside in the hospital and remember the look on his face. Like the rest of us, he had no idea what to expect. My mother told me he pulled her over to say goodbye, but he was clearly inundated with fear about the unknown. After he died I went to the hospital as a formality and identified his lifeless body. It was almost a relief to see him that way after the way he had suffered. He was out of pain.

We all know death, sort of. For me it was also the deaths of my rough & tumble friends who died when I was off at college. The buddy who got shot in the chest and bled to death internally, the overdosers that took one drug to many, the kid who was stabbed to death in a rage of violence, and the most heartbreaking death of all was a friend who found himself in the grip of drug addiction and took his own life by gun-in-mouth. On three separate occasions in my 20's I was hospitalized for accidental drug overdoses. Many times I saw my own death approaching, but was too numb to care. Or maybe I thought death had nothing to do with me. It was something everyone else would experience -- and I was invincible.

Most of us in America have no firm idea what death is. We think it's a natural thing that just happens. We see people, our pets, bugs and creatures all around us die but take it lightly until we are dieing ourselves. Then it's a different story. Usually one of extreme pain and lose. Only when we are faced with our own death do we try to make real sense of it. Only then do we search for meaning and start to prepare psychologically for death. But by then it's too late. The lasting effects of denial of death or lack of preparation for death go far beyond ourselves. There is a continuum that we didn't learn about in college. Instead, we were taught this life is the final frontier; that once this precious body disintegrates time itself stops. With no long-term vision like this, there is no restraint from destroying the planet for our own gain and or living our lives in a selfish way. We deplete natural resources, kill living creatures, pollute the waters and contribute to burning a hole in the atmosphere or spilling oil in the sea. And most of all, we sit on our deathbed terrified.

Death of a rock star,

There are many types of death to observe while people are still breathing. If you watch a very attractive person in action, for example, one who is not humble about their attractiveness, you see the painful setup approaching. An attractive person that mingles in a pool of less attractive people has a certain power over them.

Since most people are drawn to their beauty, they are masters of the physical realm: full of structural magnetism and sexual potency. They can move around their environment with ease as others fall over themselves trying to get closer. Out in the bar, or at the market, or in the work place, an attractive person has an easier time obtaining pleasure than a less attractive person. A young male or female where the decay of aging hasn't set in yet draws people to them like a magnet draws nails. Until their appearance slips, and they get old, gray and a few teeth fall out it never sinks in. They imagined their beauty would last forever. But when their attractiveness dies so does their power over others. The same circle of people who once fawned over them or moved in for a kiss now barely toss well-wishes from afar. Nothing can shelter them now from the suffering of this sort of unprepared death. Without preparation, physical death is the same. The apple of everyone's eye, and our own, is left to die alone with his or her own misery. We must prepare.

"We choose our next world through what we learn in this one. Learn nothing, and the next world is the same as this one, all the same limitations and lead weights to overcome."—Richard Bach

Now that you have gotten this far in this book, you may realize that like all thoughts, death is a thought just like the rest. It is the attachment to "self" that causes the inevitable pain of lose. It is to think that we know what we do not know about death; to think death is the worst possible outcome. If we are diligent and live the remainder of our days mindful and awake, we are prepared to meet our friend death when she knocks. Rather than worry ourselves that death is something to dread, if we are prepared for it there can be tremendous relief at the time of our death. Instead of holding on for dear life, we can release ourselves freely and spontaneously into the unknown. There is an astounding and boundless freedom upon this realization. For someone who has prepared and practiced for life itself, death comes not as defeat but as a possible victory, a moment of superb existence. It is ours to work for in life, and to choose the state of mind in which we die.

The human animal is original in perhaps only one respect. If you tell a cow, bird or fish that tomorrow he or she will die, that animal, as far as we know can't really process the information. But if you tell a human that tomorrow it's time to go, it's a different story. But this is the hand we have been dealt. What accompanies our inherent intelligence is awareness of our eventual death. The Buddha left behind an interesting meditation called the Cemetery Meditation. It sums up the physical body, what it is, and what it looks like when we're done with it. It describes in crude terms how it is composed of mere parts, and empty of anything we can call a self: temporary phenomena losing its form. After reading it, attachment to body and ego becomes the same as attachment to coins in our pocket. Vain. But most of all, this meditation is not a joke. If you read it like it's a horror story, or something disgusting and or silly, you are eating the poison.

CEMETERY MEDITATION (By The Buddha)

- 1.** Just as if the student were looking at a corpse thrown on a burial ground, one, two, or three days dead, swollen up, blue-black in color, full of chaos -- so he regards his own body: "This body of mine also has this nature, has this destiny, and cannot escape it."
 - 2.** Just as if the student were looking at a corpse thrown on a burial ground, eaten by crows, hawks or vultures, by dogs or rats, or devoured by all kinds of worms -- so he regards his own body; "This body of mine also has this nature, has this destiny, and cannot escape it."
 - 3.** Just as if the student were looking at a corpse thrown on a burial ground, a framework of bones, flesh hanging from it, fixed with blood, held together by tendons, muscles, ligaments...
 - 4.** A framework of bone, stripped of flesh, fixed with blood, held together by tendons
 - 5.** A framework of bone, without flesh and blood, but still held together by tendon
 - 6.** Bones, disconnected and scattered in all directions, here a bone of the hand, there a bone of the foot, there a shin bone, there a thigh bone, there a pelvis, there the spine, there the skull -- so he regards his own body: "This body of mine also has this nature, has this destiny, and cannot escape it."
 - 7.** And further, just as if the student were looking at bones lying in the burial ground, bleached and resembling shells
 - 8.** Bones heaped together, after the lapse of years
 - 9.** Bones weathered and crumbled to dust -- so he regards his own body: "This body of mine also has this nature, has this destiny, and cannot escape it."
- Thus he dwells in contemplation of the body, either with regard to his own person, or to other persons, or to both. He beholds how the body arises; beholds how it passes away; beholds the arising and passing away of the body. "A body is there:" this clear awareness is present in him, to the extent necessary for knowledge and mindfulness; and he lives independent, unattached to anything in the world. Thus does the student dwell in contemplation of the body

Chapter 12. Enlightenment

The religion of the future will be a cosmic religion. It should transcend a personal God and avoid dogma and theology. Covering both the natural and the spiritual, it should be based on a religious sense arising from the experience of all things natural and spiritual as a meaningful unity. Buddhism answers this description. If there is any religion that could cope with modern scientific needs it would be Buddhism. --Albert Einstein

Awake,

Coming out the other side, we have paid our dues and are on the highway of bliss. Indeed, what a different feel it has. Smooth, enduring, fascinating beyond words. We live free without seeking the approval of others, or our former selves. The dualistic narrative in our mind has vanished. We have learned from everyone and everything, and have placed it all aside. At last we can see what ordinary life has distracted us from. We are awake.

Through our own resolve we were able to change the operating system in which our lives were based. Even some of our hardware is noticeably different. Our face has changed. Our eyes appear less fixed. We have reconfigured both our inherent and learned makeup, and we realize we no longer suffer from the human dilemma of ordinary thinking. Perhaps we are a different kind of human altogether. Perhaps we have evolved to a different species. The past and future were both moving in directions that did not really exist yet we were deeply invested in both. Now, instead of planning life's next big mission, we abide in the present without ambition. We have nothing to gain or loss. No power or prestige to accumulate. Nothing to hide. Our whole consciousness, our whole being is involved in the reality of the here and now.

We see clearly how 'self' had a stranglehold on us; the small box it placed us in. It was our own thinking that gave ego permission to exist in the first place, and the high price we paid for our identification with it. But all was not lost. Without knowing our dysfunctional selves, without having experienced ego's wrath in its entirety, we would not have found peace. We were raised into human society with a standard notion that 'self' is something we are born with and must perfect. But then we discovered the opposite; that self is a programmed illness that must be removed.

We worked and practice for a long time but nothing seemed to change. We still got distracted when we meditated. We had our doubts whether it would work or not. We still reacted to situations unpredictably. We heard about extraordinary enlightened experiences, non-self, clarity, bliss, but for a long time we just seemed stuck in ordinary life. We begin to wonder what the point of it all was. Have we been deceived? While we may not have noticed any change, the clouds began to clear. We started to notice that situations and interactions that use to be problems for us were no longer problems. But we were not quite sure when they stopped being problems. There were long periods of barely discernible change, and then for no apparent reason a profound shift. We began to see the suffering and the end

of suffering so clearly in ourselves that we began to know how others felt, and our hearts opened to them.

Somewhere along the line we stopped looking for something different. At times we bought into the notion that enlightenment would offer us a new set of sensations. We imagined it to be euphoric, electrifying or even orgasmic. But instead, inner peace and understanding we found are not that way at all. They do not appear special in any way, and yet they are. We place much less attention on searching for unique experiences, and find it more peaceful to just be here in ordinary situations.

Until now we lived our lives as if we had a choice. But what choice did we really have to be born into a life we didn't sign up for? Unexplainable causes and conditions hurled us into this world and one day we realized we were here. We now see that our daily choices like having coffee or tea in the morning do not compare to the greater choice that was made for us: to be born into a world where everything ends in sickness, chaos and death. There is no other choice here but to die. And no other choice while here but to end the deep suffering that stems from this refusal to accept we have no choice. We own nothing. In death we take nothing with us. The universe does not see a problem with our lack of ownership, or our pending death, nor the coming together and falling apart of other objects. So we align ourselves with this reality and let go.

When we enter our meditation now and notice something, our awareness remains stable, hypnotic and unwavering. No matter how low or high our gaze, no matter how light or close a touch we give it, no matter where we are: sitting, standing, walking, or lying down, we are present for all things. While doing these simple things, we explore humanity and all of creation as if we were a mirror that reflects what it sees. We are wise and sensitive to the nature of things by simply knowing ourselves. We have become experts on our own inherent behavior, as well as on our own clarity and insight. We see the arising and fading away of each moment. Our meditation is so precise now that abandoning unwise thoughts and emotions are no longer a challenge. Like snow flakes falling to a heated inferno, they vanish.

Once upon a time we viewed meditation in terms of good and bad. We said to ourselves, "Wow, that was a great meditation session. I was in the zone." Or, "That was a waste of time. I couldn't focus." We know now that there are no good or bad meditation sessions, but only meditation. We place our conceptual ideas about it aside. We arrived at a place where there is no distinction between meditation and non-meditation. There is only the awake state. We no longer get lost in mental reflection: hopes, dreams, psychic impressions or attempts to conjure a more perfect existence. We let go of mental distractions in favor of the stillness we discover beneath it. Our advice to others, if any, is minimal and direct. Void of ego. Helpful. And though we may never use the word God, we are no longer perplexed or offended by it. We neither accept nor reject the idea.

A mind that once resembled a riptide of erratic thoughts and emotions now resembles a still pool of water. The Buddha once told a story how a teaspoon of

salt could make a small glass of water very salty. But if you drop the same amount of salt into a sizeable pool, the salt goes unnoticed to the taste. Through meditation our mind has become vast like the pool. We have expanded our capacity to absorb whatever enters into it including perceived mishaps, toxic thoughts and or disturbing emotions. Our allegiance has firmly shifted from thinking to non-thinking cognition. Our attention is no longer fixated on our worrisome "life situation" but on the mystery of "life" itself. As a result, our focus is crisp and transparent. Our body is healthy and in favorable sync. We have the ability now to slow our mind at will and witness thoughts as they arise, or rest in the mind-space without thought. There is space now where previously there was none. Calm tranquility has replaced the grasping chatter that once defined our monkey mind. So much of how we now view the world is beyond words, indescribable. We stopped trying to figure everything out or explain everything. We are content with knowing and saying less.

Thoughts exist emotionless and pure now. We can discern the different textures from one thought to another: the tang of emotion in absence of a story. We sit quietly and like a bubble rising to the surface, we recognize insightfulness as it unfolds. Unabridged like this we can see, and understand. Equanimity and enlightened mind are no longer speculation. We are living it. Throughout our journey, and in the back of our mind, we wished for this for all beings. But what we had worked for in others, we have realized for ourselves alone. We have discovered that attachment, fear and ignorance are the reasons why life is so confusing, and with those burdens gone from our mind, we live with a cool blissful breeze at our back. We handpicked this reality based on the powerful lessons we learned prior to it. We have taken a quantum leap forward.

The memory of our old life is starting to fade. We had learned much, but the details are hazy now -- something about competing with others for material gain and recognition, being told where to sit and when to stand, and how to think. We have come to terms with troublesome memories from a time when we joined in on the selfishness all around us. We ate animals, exploited others and the environment, lied, stole, cheated, drank, drugged and slept around. But those memories have lost their grip. The killing streets of our youth and the killing chambers of the slaughterhouses will forever remain, but our personal debt to them has been repaid. Formally, we were confused as to what the meaning of life was, but now we understand completely. We see a new freedom within us, and harbor a newfound joy. There could be no turning back.

We set out with a destination in mind. We were trying to get somewhere other than the place we were at. We wanted something to replace our restlessness, a spiritual makeover of sorts. Maybe we would get a better job, bigger house or more attention. Maybe we would break a bad habit, or even find true love. But what we came to understand is that no such destinations exist. Nor could the security and happiness we were after be purchased with gold coins. We searched relentlessly for an ideal situation outside of ourselves but came to understand it was within us the whole time.

At some point we stopped caring about eternity. Much of our time until now was spent engaging discursive thoughts about finding some indestructible or everlasting truth. But this sort of logic did little or nothing to trim down our suffering. In fact it made it worse. If there is a solid-something beyond the laws of our universe, then so be it. For us, this indestructible or eternal has become change itself. Change is our master. Because for every solid solution we grasped at there were as many equal but opposite dilemmas. Though we may experience “awareness” as something that does not change, whether it is temporary or continuous, independent or compounded, does not matter. Even if we suddenly discovered the chicken indeed came before the egg it would make no difference. All we know is that a short time ago our inner world was a burning hell. And right now it is free beyond words.

The Buddha spoke to us in very simple terms. He taught that there is suffering, there is a reason for the suffering, and there is a way to escape the suffering. He explained that true inner freedom is the very nature of our being, that whatever stands against that freedom must be set aside, be it thought perception or ritual or limitations in any form. Not seeing ourselves as trapped by limited thinking, we can go any place and at any time we wish. We are mindful that people who ridicule this freedom for the sake of false security go nowhere, slowly. And those who put aside their false security for the sake of freedom go everywhere, instantly.

We live convinced in our mind we have the tools we need to remain awake. There is nothing more to add. Whether we live on Park Avenue or on a Park bench, both are acceptable. Whether we perform brain surgery for a living or rack leaves in the field, either is sufficient. We do not eat animals anymore. We regard food only as medicine we swallow to stay alive. What we read has changed too. Our old libraries are obsolete. So is ordinary television. We no longer grasp at external information or everyday knowledge. Instead we go straight to the mind-stream for answers. We have become silent investigators uninterested in chitchat, gossip and excessive interaction. We conserve our words for purposeful speaking, and to investigate phenomena if need be. We leave a small physical footprint.

In a moment of euphoric recall, we reminisce of a time better spent in our old life where we harvested the material world. Or we envision a better life we would have if it weren't for all this awake-ness. In our mind we follow the toxic illusion and recall the dreams we had, the money we made, the pretty people we called friends. Then soberly we recall the truth: how we would once again return as the user and taker of people. The pompous no-it-all. With ego as our master we would again dressed ourselves fancily to convince others of our worth. We would again gravitate to those whom we perceived to have something to gain from, and ignore those in need. But soon the game will end, and we will give it all back. We will find ourselves once again exposed to the powerful rays of selfishness. Not the raucous laughter nor self-assured grins could deafen the more thunderous voices inside our mind. Not the sexy cloths, nor sexy mates, nor exotic destinations can offer relief from this sort of confusion.

Everything that limits us now we have placed aside. Each of us releases his own true nature, an unlimited expression of freedom. We came from a place where people cannot see past their own noses. A place where people cling to social norms and leave claw marks on the back of ritual and petty comfort; a place where people are addicted to immediate gratification and live their lives in agonizing fear. We realize the only thing that prevents our fellow man from killing each other is not any immense decency they possess, but the sheer threat of persecution by law enforcement. Without grave consequences of their actions men would surely go back to eating each other.

We'll often wonder if others back in our old life still struggle to break free of their limits, to see the meaning of life beyond a way of just overindulging themselves. And for the good of all sentient beings, we must go back and show them a way out. But how or why should we go back and care for people full of anger, greed and fear? The place we came from is bubbling over with scared people arguing and fighting amongst themselves. We are light-years away from that now. Why should we help them when they stoned us? The truth is: the only way to keep this freedom is by giving it away. If we cling to it, all will be lost. If we become selfish again, the cycle of suffering begins again. Even 'presence' is impermanent, and surely there are higher grounds to see than this. By continuing a moment-to-moment vigil within our own mind how we got here, we continue to expand on behalf of all sentient beings.

But even more entertaining is how our former rivals now become our greatest friends. The disgruntled ones somehow teach us the most. Their narrowness allows us to expand. And our expansiveness allows them to breath. They remind us of the painful ways of the past, and that if we should forget them we are doomed to repeat them. So we keep our rivals close. We even begin to enjoy the hatred and selfishness we see in the world. We suddenly see natural brilliance everywhere, and in everyone.

When our selfish desires had not yet disappeared, working for the benefit of others was a trading post for favors. We wouldn't extend our hand to anyone unless there was something in it for us. But fortified now with clear vision into the nature of things -- time, space, objects and people -- we are able to help. We lead by example. We see in people where we have come from, and teach them where they can go. When they look at us funny, and say, "*How do you expect me to live like that -- surely you were born with some super gift,*" but you'll know different. The only difference, the very only difference is that you understand what you really are and have practiced it.

We once thought to realize enlightenment was to become a renunciate and practice some sort of stiff asceticism. But renunciation we discovered is inconsistent with our experience. What have we given up? Our ego? If we had a cancerous tumor growing from the side of our body and a surgeon removes it, did we renounce cancer? We came to realize that by constantly feeding our ego we kept this killer alive and only accepted an opportunity to dispose of it. We gave up unwanted emotional suffering and anguish. That's it.

At times we walked the road of confusion and it caused our mind to shift. Without these tests we would not have found this place of unexplainable peace. We took the time to discard our psychological baggage, and in the void we discovered a state of tuneful harmony. Lets spread the word that it works. Let each of us live an expansive life where there is room for everyone. Let us include both the rights of humans and animals alike: teach by example the principles of nonviolent food choices and have no involvement with intoxicants or the reckless passions. Let us meditate constantly, and exercise and nurture the body. Let us radiate the stark magnificence of spiritual enlightenment.

The road ahead won't be easy. Some will call us home-wreckers, false prophets, devils or saints. They'll twist our words and label us religious kooks, liars; refer to our awakensness as "the opium of the people." Most brutal will be the spiritual-profiteers who prey on the hopeless. To protect their profits, they'll point the finger and say we are traders. They'll say we are not seasoned enough. Or the opposite, our approach is too antiquated and may be harmful. They'll fawn over us in one breath and stab us in the heart the next. Or, they'll ignore us completely.

Through all the books we have read, through all the enlightened friends we have encountered and through all the countless hours of meditation we have accrued, the highest bit of wisdom we can pass on is this: when we find ourselves lost in a sea of dreams, return to the present where confusion dissolves.

But don't take my word for it. Try it for yourself.



Dedication of Merit*

By this merit may all attain omniscience
May it defeat the enemy, wrongdoing
From the stormy waves of birth,
Old age, sickness and death,
From the ocean of samsara, may I free all beings
May the dark ignorance of sentient beings be dispelled
May all beings enjoy profound brilliant glory

*Dedication of Merit by Chogyam Trungpa, Dorje Dradul of Mukpo.

Appendix

Atisha (11th century Tibetan Buddhist),

The greatest achievement is selflessness

The greatest worth is self-mastery

The greatest quality is seeking to serve others

The greatest precept is continual awareness

The greatest medicine is the emptiness of everything

The greatest action is not conforming

The greatest magic is transforming the passions

The greatest generosity is non-attachment

The greatest goodness is a peaceful mind

The greatest patience is humility

The greatest effort is not concerned with results

The greatest meditation is a mind that lets go

The greatest wisdom is seeing through form

Appendix 2

Physiological Changes:

Bigger Brain,

Meditation practice promotes cortical plasticity in areas important for cognitive and emotional processing and well being. On the brain's outer cerebral cortex layer (gray matter), the thickening is more pronounced in older people who meditate than in younger people who do not. Those sections of the human cortex, or thinking cap, normally get thinner as we age. But with meditation, they tend to grow.

Larger Heart,

The condition of a runner's larger-than-normal heart muscle can be found with a routine echocardiogram (EKG). From training, a fit runner has a naturally stronger enlarged heart, lower blood pressure and slower resting pulse. Also detected will be increased muscle and lung capacity.

Better Body,

Anyone who eats less will weigh less. Anyone who eats the right foods, and eliminates the bad ones will show naturally improved health and increased energy. The enlightened dieter experiences less: emotional disorder, heart disease, blood cholesterol irregularities and exhaustion of the adrenal system. Hypoglycemia, certain kinds of diabetes, digestion problems and low sex drive also fade away.

Sleeping Beauty,

Lack of quality sleep, or getting too much sleep makes us feel foggy and unable to concentrate, or a lesser version of our normal self. Meditation, physical exercise and proper diet improve the body's physical and emotional state. The practitioner schooled in all-of-the-above will experience better quality sleep, and requires less of it.

Thank you for your presence,
--Marcus