

Introduction

The prince born twenty-five hundred years ago who became the historical Buddha [“the awakened one”] was the only founder of a major world religion who claimed to be neither a god nor a messenger of a god. When asked once just what he was, he replied simply, “I am awake.”

— Jean Smith, *Radiant Mind:
Essential Buddhist Teachings and Texts*

BUDDHIST MEDITATION HAS changed my life. It can also change yours. I started on the path of falling in love and raising a family, discovering mathematics and literature, Israel and the Bible. But it became the path of achievement, success, and overreaching, which brought upon me the curse of chronic, incapacitating headaches. When Buddhist meditation enabled me to face the pain, the suffering ceased and the curse became a blessing, blossoming, after years of anger and struggle, into acceptance and peace.

What is your path?

Whatever path you are following, you can learn from mine because my story is a variation on a common theme. Blessed with first-rate Western educations and enjoying successful careers, about wisdom we learn nothing until it is almost too late. Then

we must learn wisdom the hard way, the Buddha's way of suffering and the end of suffering. As I learned, so can you learn.

In order to help you discover your path, this book is a web interwoven with many strands: meditation, Buddhist teachings, spiritual healing, inspiration, self-help, the interpretive power of the Bible. Each strand enriches and supports the others while illuminating a main theme: how Buddhist teachings can give us the wings that will lift us out of the maelstrom of an unaware life in which we focus on ego and suffer. Most of us suffer, whether from physical pain, emotional pain, or the dissatisfaction and sense of lack that, as the Buddha taught, is pervasive in our lives. By sharing Buddhist teachings and insights into pain, suffering, and healing, I hope that you will gain greater awareness into your own suffering, awareness leading to change, leading to peace.

If you suffer from pain and turn onto the path of meditation, then pain will become your best teacher. Here is what it can teach you:

- Pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional. Meditation can help you heal suffering and alleviate pain.
- By quieting the mind, meditation allows the body's natural healing powers to flourish.
- Meditation can help you heal suffering by enabling you to slow down, to be in the moment, and to pay attention, with a light touch and without judgment, to what is pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral.
- Everything in your life is interconnected.

- Accept your pain. Embrace it. It's an integral part of your life. Open yourself up to the wisdom of your pain. That wisdom can be inexhaustible if you let it unfold.
- By accepting and embracing your pain, you may eventually come to love it. Cursing your pain, hating it, pushing it away create duality and more suffering.
- Pain wants to be a verb, not a noun, an energy flow, not a thick, brick wall. Relax. Open up. Observe it changing and flowing, surging and vanishing.
- No matter how bad your pain is, it could always be worse. Gratitude and compassion are two of its fruits.

If you turn onto the path of meditation, then you will discover a new way of being as meditation grows from a practical technique for dealing with pain into an all-encompassing approach to your life. It will change the way you process all your interactions with the world around you and the world within you. I, the permanent, rigid ego, transformed into "I," a permeable and flexible label. Less solidity, more flow. Less grasping, more letting be and letting go.

You wake up in the morning or in the middle of the night when pain makes sleep difficult. Medication has not been helping, so you have turned to meditation. You start by closing your eyes and surveying the landscape. Perhaps the pain disappears — cumulus clouds drifting across a deep, blue sky. Perhaps it does not — an emptiness in the heart, a burning or stabbing in the forehead or pinching pressure in the nose, pain precisely where you want to focus on your breath. Whatever landscape

appears, you breathe through the quiet or through the pain and enter a refuge of awareness, being, and direct experience past all the concepts of good, bad, pain, suffering. The solid chunk of sensation when your eyes are open flows when your eyes are closed, flowing and rolling, waxing and waning, ocean waves lapping the shores of your inner face as you breathe through the waves, swimming, you're swimming, you're meditating. Pain, a frozen Berlin wall guarded by demons, melts into a pulsing or a burning or a throbbing or a breathing. Even when your eyes are open, you learn not to label and not to judge. The rock-hard concept of pain dissolves into an energy flow, here today, gone tomorrow, back the day after. Greetings, honored teacher. What will you teach me today? When the flow threatens to solidify, you verbify it by laughing.

If you have meditated, then perhaps you have had these experiences. They have been my experiences, giving rise to insights that I would like to share in the context of my life. I start with a summer day in my youth, July 27, 1963. While attending Alison Feinberg's sweet sixteen party, I was so captivated by her smile that I immediately fell in love with her. I went on to Harvard, Alison and I got married, we moved to New Jersey, I worked at Bell Labs to escape the Vietnam War draft, and I earned a Ph.D. in mathematics at NYU. I taught at Northwestern University, our daughter Melissa was born, then our son Michael. By this time we had gone back East, where I was teaching at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and was leading the stressed-out life of husband, father, son, teacher, and hyper-achieving, hyper-driven mathematics researcher, always aiming for more and always unsatisfied.

My family could have been enough for me. If at the time I had tried to articulate it, I might have said that I was on a quest

for fulfillment beyond what I thought my family could provide. As the Buddha taught 2,500 years ago and as I would later find out, that quest was doomed from the start. The details of your life are surely different, but perhaps my story resonates with you.

For years I had been searching, my ego butting into me wherever I turned. Since my youth, I looked to mathematics, but the truth wasn't there. Since my youth, I looked to literature, but the truth wasn't there. As an adult, I looked to Israel, but the truth wasn't there. After returning from Israel, I looked to the Hebrew Bible. Perhaps the truth was there, but I could not find it. I also looked to Jewish practice: eating only kosher food, saying the daily prayers, observing the Sabbath. But those activities so disrupted my family that I dropped them.

For me today, the truth is not in mathematics and not in books and not in ego and not in heaven and not beyond the sea. It is not hidden from me, nor is it far off. I learned the truth by facing my headaches, listening to them, and learning from them. As Buddhist meditation would eventually help me understand, the truth is in my pain. The truth is in my face. This book is a record of my trying to penetrate the paradox of these insights, which would lead to my healing. What I had thought for years was the problem is actually the solution.

The blessings continue to blossom. Meditation has opened my eyes to the awareness that the pain is not my deadly enemy, but my life-enhancing teacher. Enriched by this awareness, I have also found in Buddhist teachings a key to synthesize what for years were the disparate elements out of which I have built my intellectual life — mathematics, literature, and the Hebrew Bible. In explaining this synthesis, I will share the spirituality of mathematics and Buddhist truths embedded in the Hebrew

Bible, which a Buddhist reading sensitive to the original language of the Bible reveals.

Franz Kafka's parable, "The Leopards in the Temple," describes the process that my awakening has followed. "Leopards break into the temple and drink to the dregs what is in the sacrificial pitchers; this is repeated over and over again; finally it can be calculated in advance, and it becomes a part of the ceremony."

The headaches erupted in 2000. They were a pack of leopards that broke into my temple and drank to the dregs what I had once worshipped as my ego-accomplishments, demolishing the conceptual lens of achievement and success through which I had interpreted my life. I was fortunate to have found in Buddhist meditation a new way of living that could accommodate to the headache chaos. It finally enabled me to see that what I had once worshipped as my ego-accomplishments were as empty of inherent existence and solid, substantial reality as a rainbow, an echo, a dream, the reflection of the moon in water, the concept of pain, my next breath.

Kafka's parable about the leopards is related to a major theme of this book: the connection between conceptual thinking and paradigms or conceptual lenses. A paradigm is a set of assumptions, values, meanings, and self-images representing a way of interpreting experiences and life. As the cognitive linguist George Lakoff observes, the fundamental role of conceptual lenses in structuring our view of reality is a basic tenet of cognitive science:

We have learned that there are certain mechanisms of thought that structure our reality. What this means is that you don't see reality as it is. That's impossible from the point of view of cognitive science. You are always imposing a structure

on reality; there's no way you could do otherwise given the nature of your brain and body.

Kafka's leopards break into the temple when an event occurs or a discovery is made that cannot be explained by the accepted paradigm. One must adapt either by altering the accepted paradigm or, if the event or discovery is too radical, by adopting a new paradigm. "Finally it can be calculated in advance, and it becomes a part of the ceremony." The paradigm shifts, the event or discovery fits into the new scheme, a different conceptual universe is born, and the leopards break into the temple again.

When you view a rainbow, what do you see? The answer reflects the conceptual lens you are using. The physicist sees an arc of colors that appears in the sky as a result of the dispersion of sunlight in drops of mist or rain. To lovers the rainbow is a symbol of their passion; Orthodox Jews see in it a symbol of God's covenant to Noah after the flood; and movie buffs think of the better place "somewhere over the rainbow" of which Dorothy dreams in *The Wizard of Oz*. The spiritual seeker whispers "Wow," and the complainer is reminded of how rain always ruins his picnics. Who is correct? Everyone and no one.

As with a rainbow, so with all our experiences. Without a conceptual lens, we cannot process the infinite complexity of the universe, which includes the infinite complexity of our lives and minds. The paradox, or perhaps the tragedy of the human condition, is that whatever lens we use — the lens of cognitive science, physics, or religion, the lens of romance or Hollywood entertainment — by necessity it imposes a judgment concerning expected behavior, and it excludes many other lenses. Furthermore, the sharper a lens's focus, the more it excludes. As a result, the always changing, always flowing dance of reality

cannot be captured by any single conceptual lens. Leopards keep breaking into the temple because the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth.

In this book we will explore pain and suffering, healing and happiness, ego and enlightenment through several conceptual lenses. These include the Hebrew Bible in translation, the radically different conceptual lens of the Hebrew Bible in its original language, and Buddhist teachings, which in this context play a fundamental role. They provide the broadest framework for understanding conceptual lenses because they go to the root, showing us how to transcend all conceptual lenses via a systematic path that alleviates suffering, brings inner peace, and awakens the innate wisdom that sleeps within us.

In order to justify this claim about Buddhist teachings, I next summarize the Buddha's insights on conceptual thinking. They will lead us to the Four Noble Truths, the heart of his diagnosis of human suffering and the end of suffering. Together with other Buddhist teachings that I was able to integrate into my life through the practice of meditation, the Four Noble Truths led to my healing. In discussing these teachings in the context of my experiences, I hope to inspire you to explore them and ultimately to benefit from them in the same profound way that I have.

By their very nature, conceptual lenses inevitably lead to limited vision. Buying into a single lens, without the awareness that it is only a lens, is what the Buddha called attachment to views. In his book, *Old Path, White Clouds: Walking in the Footsteps of the Buddha*, Thich Nhat Hanh discusses why "attachment to views is the greatest impediment to the spiritual path. . . . Thinking that we already possess the truth, we will be unable to open our minds to receive the truth, even if truth comes knocking at our door." Attachment to views inevitably causes suffering in

the sense of the Buddha's term *dukkha*, which includes not only suffering from physical pain, mental anguish, and grief but also much more. Christopher W. Gowans explains that suffering is too narrow a translation to convey the broad range of implications that *dukkha* conveys:

For example, it sometimes implies such things as disappointment, frustration, anxiety, discontentment, dissatisfaction, lack of fulfillment, falling short of perfection, and the absence of ease. In addition, the meaning of "*dukkha*" is broad enough that it might be interpreted as encompassing . . . a sense of finitude, melancholy, alienation, and *angst*. . . . *Dukkha* . . . is perhaps most usefully thought of as the failure to fully achieve an ideal of happiness we all implicitly seek. . . .

In the Fire Sermon the Buddha gave one of his strongest images, analogizing the *dukkha* that arises from conceptual thinking to a raging fire (translation by Thanissaro Bhikkhu):

The intellect is aflame. Ideas are aflame. Consciousness at the intellect is aflame. Contact at the intellect is aflame. And whatever there is that arises in dependence on contact at the intellect — experienced as pleasure, pain or neither-pleasure-nor-pain — that too is aflame. Aflame with what? Aflame with the fire of passion, the fire of aversion, the fire of delusion. Aflame, I say, with birth, aging and death, with sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, and despairs.

Through conceptual lenses, the outer eye learns how to see, but seeing without awareness inevitably brings *dukkha*. Meditation helps extinguish the raging fire. The inner eye learns wisdom, we become aware of whatever conceptual lens we are wearing, and ultimately we transcend all lenses, viewing reality as it is. Enlightenment, the Buddha called this. Nirvana. Thich Nhat Hanh elucidates this term in his book, *Understanding Our Mind*:

Nirvana means stability, freedom, and the cessation of the cycle of suffering. Enlightenment does not come from outside; it is not something we are given, even by a Buddha. The seed of enlightenment is already within our consciousness. This is our Buddha nature — the inherent quality of enlightened mind that we all possess, and which needs only to be nurtured.

The Buddha formulated his insights into *dukkha* in the Four Noble Truths. He enunciated them in his first discourse after meditating under the Bodhi tree and attaining enlightenment, and they remained the main focus of his forty-five years of teaching. These in brief are the Four Noble Truths:

1. There is suffering.
2. Suffering originates in attachment: attachment to desire, to craving for sense pleasures, to one's own views, to the belief in I and self.
3. Suffering can end and peace can be experienced.
4. The way that leads to the end of suffering and to experiencing peace is the path of being mindful, of seeing reality as it is, not through the conceptual lens of I and

self. This way is the Noble Eightfold Path comprising right understanding, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The last three qualities are cultivated by practicing meditation.

In our ignorance we seek happiness by attachment to desire, to craving for sense pleasures, to one's own views, to the belief in I and self. But this is doomed because it contradicts the nature of reality. Transient, continually flowing, empty of any solid, inherent existence, reality is governed by the universal law of impermanence and change. Everything is changing on every level all the time, and nothing stays fixed, not only material possessions but also bodies, mental states, relationships, experiences, entire civilizations and cultures. Refusing to accept this universal truth, we grasp at the impermanent, hoping that it will stay fixed, and when it inevitably does not, we suffer. We can overcome suffering and become truly happy not by attachment to what must pass, but by accepting the universal law of impermanence and change as the guiding principle of our lives.

This book examines the Four Noble Truths through the conceptual lenses of chronic pain, meditation, the Hebrew Bible, and mathematics. What are your lenses? Through them, let the truth of the Four Noble Truths permeate your life.

1. I suffered.
2. I suffered because I craved recognition and fame through mathematics and other intellectual pursuits and because I craved to get rid of the pain. Not understanding that pain is a concept, I congealed it into a solid, substantial reality and then suffered from that solidification.

3. I learned that suffering could end and peace could be experienced.
4. Meditation showed me the path by revealing the truth of the pain: the pain is impermanent, continually flowing and changing, empty of any solid, substantial reality. Facing the truth that is in my face, I let go of the pain, let go of the past, let go of the ego, and finally woke up.

A fly caught in a windowless room, we solidify our pain into a windowpane against which we keep smashing our faces. The pain intensifies; the pane grows thicker. Panic. We are trapped. No, we're not. The pane of pain is a mirror in which we see that the door has been open all the time. Look again. The pane of pain is empty space, and we can fly right through.

There is no pain. There is no pane. There is no solidity, certainty, or permanence. There is only change and empty space. Now is all we have.

Listen to the Buddha. When asked why his disciples were so radiant, he gave the following answer, recorded by David Loy in his book, *Lack and Transcendence*:

“They do not repent of the past, nor do they brood over the future. They live in the present. Therefore they are radiant. By brooding over the future and repenting the past, fools dry up like green reeds cut down [in the sun].”

The past and the future are merely conceptual abstractions. Opening to the present is the most precious present we can give ourselves. Meditation teaches us how.

These are the insights I have learned and want to share with you. I did not learn them from books. I learned them through suffering and overcoming suffering. I learned them by opening up to the present and forgiving myself for the past.

In this spirit of forgiveness, I examine some of my lives, lives that I have let go of but that illuminate the roots of the headaches and the healing. Growing up in a Jewish area of Boston; meeting Alison, my wife, lover, and best friend; double-majoring in mathematics and German literature at Harvard; having to abort my post-Harvard plans because of the Vietnam War draft; working on my Ph.D.; surviving the first headache attack of 1980; discovering Israel and my Jewish soul in 1982; publishing my first math book in 1985; not publishing the “great Jewish novel,” on which I labored for fifteen years; publishing a second math book in 1997 that I wrote with Paul Dupuis; experiencing the poetry of Emily Dickinson; teaching courses on the Hebrew Bible and Franz Kafka; publishing articles on the Hebrew Bible, literature, and the Holocaust; almost not surviving the headache earthquake of 2000.

That earthquake was a defining event on my journey of awakening. The injustice of it all, to be zapped by headaches in the prime of my life. “Why me?” I screamed. “Why now?” How I suffered from the pain and how I doubly suffered from my utter inability to figure out the pain and how I triply suffered from the many doctors who pumped me with pills and were deaf to my anguish, each doctor issuing his own diagnosis or no diagnosis but never really listening to me. Have you also suffered in this way?

Then I met Jean Colucci, a clinician who based her therapy on Buddhist principles. Under her guidance I began to meditate daily, and this in turn brought me to a meditation retreat. There,

on August 5, 2003, through no effort of my own, an insight emerged from out of nowhere: the truth is in my pain. It was a manifestation of the innate wisdom that the Buddhists call Buddha nature and that we all possess. My suffering blossomed into healing when I opened myself up to Buddhist teachings and allowed this insight about my pain to guide me. I finally woke up from the deep sleep of duality and illusion in which I was unable to see that the pain is my honored teacher.

In this book I offer the inner experience of that awakening. With a joy of insight unmediated by any conceptual lens, I finally understood that the truth about my pain is in my face. That truth continues to resonate until today. It wrote this book.

Thus some of the lives of Richard S. Ellis, a comforting label that gives the illusion of a fixed, stable identity. These lives are transient, but the wisdom that has nourished them is real. It is the wisdom of Buddhist teachings, made accessible through the headache pain. It is also the wisdom that the Bible reveals when read with a sensitivity to the original Hebrew, to which a gentle introduction will be given. In so reading the Bible, especially the narratives, one experiences a fertile ambiguity, a fluidity of language, theme, and character pregnant with possibilities and unavailable in any translation. As we become aware of the open-endedness, multiple interpretability, and vast reach of the original Hebrew, we are inspired to face our lives with the same awareness of interdependence and infinite possibilities. With practice, we begin to experience life as a flow in which we swim, not as a problem that we must solve. This is one of the Hebrew Bible's great lessons. As we will see when we explore several narratives, it speaks a Buddhist language that goes beyond words and concepts.

Because the Hebrew Bible receives much attention in this book, I would like to explain this and related terms. The Hebrew

Bible has three parts: the Five Books of Moses, the Prophets, and the Writings. The Five Books of Moses, which in Hebrew is called the Torah, comprise Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The Torah is the primary text of Judaism. It is read from a handwritten Torah scroll during Shabbat (Saturday) morning services in the synagogue. In this book the word “Torah” is also used in a second, more general sense. It is a dynamic term referring to all the teachings of Judaism, including the Hebrew Bible, as well as all commentaries and interpretations, including those in chapters 4–6 of this book and those that you contribute. In this more general sense, “Torah” is the closest word in Jewish spirituality to the Sanskrit word “Dharma,” the body of teachings expounded by the Buddha and by all those inspired by the Buddha.

As I will describe in the next chapter, the Hebrew Bible discovered me in Israel. That book is my passion, but not the God who commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, through whom Abraham had been promised that he would be a great and mighty nation. Instead, I embrace the God who played with Adam in the Garden of Eden and who argued with Abraham over the fate of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. That is how we will read the Bible: by playing with the text as God played with Adam, by arguing with the text as Abraham argued with God.

The prosaic details and apparently routine experiences of daily life are the fertile soil in which deep insights about happiness, suffering, and healing germinate. These insights both are nourished by Buddhist teachings and elucidate these teachings when the experiences of daily life are examined with awareness, compassion, and honesty. Similarly, the apparently prosaic, all too familiar text of the Bible is the fertile soil in which deep insights about birth and death, ego and enlightenment, sickness and

health germinate. These insights both are nourished by Buddhist teachings and elucidate these teachings when the Bible is read with a sensitivity to the Hebrew original.

We start with Jacob, whose story is about awareness, transformation, and acceptance. He is the quintessential Jewish hero who prevailed by his wit and his guile. Then he discovered, as I did, a new way of being, based not on achievement and control, but on insight and love. We also examine through a Buddhist lens the stories of creation and the Garden of Eden, which resonate with Buddhist teachings: the genesis of conceptual thinking, the flowering of self-consciousness, the birth of the ego-self, and the possibility of enlightenment. Finally we look at the Book of Job. Of all the books of the Bible it speaks the most eloquently about suffering, the search for justification, and spiritual growth. When pain afflicts us, we often act like Job, demanding explanations for our suffering and trying to rationalize it. But this doesn't bring peace. We will find peace when our inner voice of wisdom — our Buddha nature — reveals the truth, as Job found peace when God spoke to him from the whirlwind.

As a teacher of Biblical texts, I am aware of a great hunger for spiritual nourishment that the Bible, as it is traditionally taught, does not universally provide. The innovative readings of Bible narratives to be presented here can satisfy this hunger by yielding fruitful insights that you, the reader, could apply to change your life.

Headache pain has been my best teacher. Physical and emotional pain can also be your best teacher, becoming a path to verifying the truth of Buddhist teachings. In order to inspire you to reexamine your experiences with suffering and pain, in the next-to-last chapter I weave together personal narratives and teachings that emphasize a basic aspect of the Buddha's work.

He totally avoided metaphysical questions and focused on the practical as he pursued his goal, which was to teach people how to alleviate suffering and to find peace.

The teachings of the Buddha are profound and vast, an intricately interconnected web of insights that illuminate every facet of our experience. The Buddha also provided a path to incorporating these insights into our lives. A key component of this path is mindfulness, which is the calm and direct awareness — without judgments, concepts, or ego — of what is happening in the present moment, in our bodies, in our minds, and in the world around us. Mindfulness is cultivated by meditation. In the appendix I discuss how one might start to walk this path by learning to meditate. Brief instructions for meditation are also given.

Just as Buddhist teachings have changed my life, so they can also change yours, whether you suffer from the *dukkha* of chronic pain, the *dukkha* of emotional pain, or the *dukkha* of the human condition. In the spaciousness of that landscape that is beyond I, beyond separation, conflicts, concepts, constructs, and confusion, your innate Buddha nature will unfold if you allow it to. In his book, *The Healing Power of Mind*, Tulku Thondup describes this process:

Living beings are Buddha in their true nature,
But their nature is obscured by casual or
sudden afflictions.

When the afflictions are cleansed, living
beings themselves are the very Buddha.

Buddhahood, or enlightenment, is “no-self.” It is total, everlasting, universal peace, openness, selflessness, oneness, and joy.

How can we strip away our many conceptual lenses to become aware of our Buddha nature and to experience our lives and all creation with love, gratitude, and wonder? This book is a meditation on that question, which goes to the heart of the Buddha's teachings and to the heart of everyone's awakening. May the meditation on this question also help you discover the path to a more tranquil and fulfilling life, in which your suffering is transformed into peace.