

The Essential Guide to **Wisdom for Difficult Times**



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THE TRUTH OF THE PRESENT MOMENT can be painful. When we examine what's here *right now*, as Buddhism asks us to do, it's easy to find a mountain of problems. When we do find that needle of good in what feels like a haystack of horror, something swiftly comes along and takes it away. We wake up with a hopeful intention for the day ahead, grateful that the sun is shining, but when we turn on the morning news, things quickly change. Our heart aches, our stomach tightens, and our thoughts race as stories of suffering flash across the screen. Having seen the reality of the world, we are suddenly hopeless.

And yes, there are many Buddhist teachings that tell us not to hope. The *lojong* teachings instruct us to “abandon all hope of fruition.” When we hope, we are inevitably disappointed. But, if we become apathetic and simply give up, how can we expect anything to change?

As Roshi Joan Halifax writes, we don't have to give up in the face of suffering. Abandoning hope does not mean being hopeless. We don't have to be apathetic, paralyzed by fear. We can instead walk through the world with “wise hope.”

“Wise hope,” writes Halifax, “is not seeing things unrealistically but rather seeing things as they are, including the truth of suffering – both its existence and our capacity to transform it.”

The articles that follow look at hope and hopelessness. They each show us that we can give up our attachment to specific outcomes and simply make our best effort in each moment to do

what feels right. We can be loving, good, and kind for the sake of being loving, good, and kind. We can practice for the sake of practice—not because we think it’s going to get us to a certain place. Step-by-step, and with a little wise hope, we can make change. There’s no need to know or control how it will all turn out. We can simply set the intention that it be for the benefit of all.

—Lilly Greenblatt | Editor, lionsroar.com



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How Not to Freak Out

You're not alone if you despair about the present and fear for the future. If you find all the bad news overwhelming, Buddhist teacher **Judy Lief** has some meditations to help you relieve your anxiety.

IT'S NOT AS IF TIMES OF FEAR and despair are anything new. People have fought wars, struggled to survive, faced injustice, experienced loss, dealt with violence and greed, and been caught up in historical movements beyond their control pretty much forever.

Life has never been that easy.

In Buddhist practice, you learn never to shy away from facing the pain of the human condition. At the same time, you also learn not to shy away from the beauty and value of life in all its forms.

By clearly seeing the extremes of experience, you learn to scout a middle way.

It is easy to become so consumed by your fears for this world that you lose your balance. It is hard to think about the challenges facing our planet and not feel overwhelmed.

It seems as if we humans never learn. Instead, we keep perpetuating the same dysfunctional behavior in every generation. Only now, we have the capacity to create havoc on a global scale, to the extent of threatening the continuation of life on this planet. We not only continue to rely on age-old habits of violence, greed, and deception, but we have put these habits on steroids.

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To the extent that our world is dominated by hatred, greed, and ignorance, known in Buddhism as the three poisons, it is because we have collectively made it so.

On an individual level, we can't seem to stretch beyond the narrow bounds of self-interest and looking out for number one. This focus on ourselves feeds our fear and makes us susceptible to manipulation. It feels as if the worse things get, the more frantically we apply approaches that have never worked.

Because these times happen to be our times, for us they seem uniquely difficult. But it is hard to imagine any time that has not seemed troubled to the people who were experiencing it.

The Buddhist notion of samsara implies that all times are troubled. Not only that, but the troubles we complain about are the very troubles we ourselves create and perpetuate. So to the extent that our world is dominated by hatred, greed, and ignorance, known in Buddhism as the three poisons, it is because we have collectively made it so.

The idea of samsara could be taken as an extremely pessimistic view of things. But it could also be a quite liberating message.

It is liberating to drop the fantasy of there being a more perfect world, somehow, somewhere, and instead accept that we need to engage with the world as it is. It is our world, it is messy, but it is fertile ground for awakening. It is the same world, after all, that gave birth to the Buddha.

It is easy to be overwhelmed by all the problems in this world. You may already be overwhelmed by the problems in your own life. On top of that, you are continually bombarded with news about political, humanitarian, and environmental problems.

There seems to be no end of problems. While you are worrying about human trafficking, you get an email about starving giraffes in Indonesia. When you are distressed about racial hatred, you hear about the latest famine. While you are learning about nuclear proliferation, a politician says something outrageous. It never lets up and it is hard to catch your breath. The continual bombardment of bad news can infiltrate so deeply that it subtly infuses everything you do.

Ironically, it is only this disappointment with the world—with human beings and their stupidity, and with ourselves—that provides a powerful enough motivation to change. Traditionally, reaching the point where you see through the futility of samsara is considered an essential breakthrough on the spiritual path.

For many people, it is the experience of disappointment in its many forms that leads them to the dharma and to the practice of meditation.

Disappointment is a great instigator. From it, positive seeds of change can emerge. When we feel genuine remorse about our own contribution to the samsara project, it strengthens our longing for an alternative and our determination to find a better way to live.

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When you get news of something disturbing, it is good to pay attention to the shape of your reaction. If you hear about a suicide bombing in Lahore, for instance, what is your immediate response?

You could go on for years, drifting along in your complacency, not wanting to let the world's pain touch you. But when it does, you are primed for transformation. Your willingness to feel the suffering of samsara begins to draw out from you a bright stream of compassion for all beings.

You could pretend none of this is happening, that it has nothing to do with you. But because you are human, like it or not, you cannot help but care about such things.

You need to recognize your ability to care and appreciate it for the gift it is. You can actually care about something beyond yourself! You can care about others, you can care about our Mother Earth, you can care about structures of oppression. How amazing that you have not shut down, that you have not given up!

What about when you feel that the intensity of this world is just too much? When you're caught between freaking out and shutting down?

This is the moment when you need to step back and get some perspective. When you feel your mind/heart filled to the point of claustrophobia with thoughts of disaster, fear, and despair, it is good to bring to mind the many counter examples of human kindness and sanity, which are so easily overlooked.

If you think about it, the degree in which our world is stitched together with loving-kindness is extraordinary. To a surprising extent, accomplishing the simplest daily tasks requires that most people we encounter will be relatively decent, even kind. This network of decency is so close at hand, so mundane and ordinary, that it is mostly invisible to us. Even in the midst of the most dire conditions, there are countless examples of people who still manage to love, share, help one another, smile, and laugh.

When you get news of something disturbing, it is good to pay attention to the shape of your reaction. If you hear about a suicide bombing in Lahore, for instance, what is your immediate response?

Most likely it is one of empathy. You imagine how horrible it must be to witness such a thing. You think about how painful it must be to be killed or injured or to lose a loved one so suddenly and violently. You imagine how it must feel to be stuck in a country at war with no means to get out.

That natural response of human empathy and kindness is tender and raw, and at the same time, it is uplifted and beautiful.

If possible, notice and stay with your empathetic response and get to know it. It is simple and immediate, but it also tends to be fleeting and subtle. It is good to keep coming back to that natural compassionate response to suffering, for it is easily lost in the complexities that follow.

The plot thickens as our innocent and natural response to suffering is captured by ego's defense mechanisms. That tender response, with its rawness and vulnerability, gets taken over by our emotional habits and fixed views. We are fearful and we want the world to make sense. We are angry and we want revenge. We don't want to feel the pain of caring, so we feed our negativity as a way to deflect it outward.

This also unleashes our urge to fix things. We don't want to keep feeling this way. We want to act! "There's got to be something I can do to about this right now!" The problem is that often we are in no position to really help.

In response, you could let helplessness overwhelm you, but you don't have to do so.

You need to accept the fact that you can't fix everything, much as you would like to.

The world needs help, but our ability to contribute seems so miniscule compared to the many problems facing the planet. The challenges are so overwhelming that we see no way out. What do we do with that frustration?



You do not need to let your thoughts and reactions run wild. You can interrupt the pattern.

If you stay with the energy of the impulse to act, you can see that it is a positive irritant. We need a little provocation or creative restlessness in order to connect with what underlies our impulse to act and open up to its message.

So you can take your urge to help as a good sign. But you need to take a clear look at what you really have to offer. You need to start with a self-assessment and a bit of humility.

The great Buddhist teacher Shantideva made the point that if you can do something about an issue, then go ahead and do it. But if you can't do anything, then acknowledge that and let it go. It doesn't help to dwell on everything that is going wrong or obsess about wishing you could do more.

It is better to do one small thing that you can actually pull off than to fantasize about all the great things you would like to be able to do but can't.

Captured by powerful emotions and flurries of speculative thought, we can work ourselves into a frenzy by obsessing about events we have no direct connection with or control over. This is an important pattern to notice. We can see that we are mostly responding to what is in our own head, to our mental chorus of what-if's. How easily our tender little pebbles of empathy can get buried under a mountain of thoughts.

It is one thing to engage in analysis or try to read the handwriting on the wall so you can respond appropriately to developments in the world. But it is quite another to engage in mental cud chewing, which warps your initial tender response and makes it about yourself.

Notice how obsessive, what-if thinking can take you over, then bring yourself back to the here and now.

It may not seem like it, but when you are stuck in fearful and despairing thoughts, you do have a choice. You do not need to let your thoughts and reactions run wild. You can interrupt the

pattern. You can slow down enough to investigate the cascade of thoughts, speculations, opinions, and emotions aroused by hearing about all the troubles in the world.

You can understand more clearly your own particular default patterns, with all their complexities, and bring yourself back to the simple natural arising of care and empathy.

It is possible to walk a path between the extremes of pessimism and optimism.

In order to respond with skill and compassion, you do not need to come to a solid conclusion about the nature of the world. You do not need either to cling to your view of how bad things are, or to close yourself off from whatever disturbs your rosy view of things.

If you look at your own experience from day to day, you can see the shifty quality of such judgments. “I had a good day. It was warm and sunny and I felt great. But yesterday I had a crummy day. It was rainy, I got the flu, and I fell behind in my work.”

In any individual life, there are easier and harder times. Circumstances are always changing. They change slowly and inexorably, and they change suddenly and unexpectedly. Often we see our own hand in the circumstances we experience, and sometimes we are blindsided by situations beyond our control.

When things are going relatively smoothly, it is easy to become complacent and assume that our good fortune will automatically continue. When things are not going well, we also assume that nothing will ever change, and we succumb to

defeatism. In both cases we take whatever we are experiencing currently and project it into the future, selectively recalling past experiences that reinforce our view of the way things are.

Our struggle to pin down our living on-the-spot experience of life is futile. We may attempt to get a grasp on life, to pin it down or make it manageable in some way, but it is hard to see beyond the circumstances and mood of the moment.

There seem to be only two alternatives: the glass is half full or the glass is half empty. But a glass with water up to the midpoint is not making a statement either way. It is neither half full nor half empty. Neither is it both half full and half empty. Such a water glass is not elated by being half full, nor discouraged by being half empty. It just is: a glass with water in it.

The world just is. It is not a this-versus-that, good-versus-bad world. It is an interdependent world.

This interdependent world is the dancing ground of bodhisattvas, who thrive in the dynamism of life. By recognizing that every sorrow invites a fresh compassionate response, the bodhisattva path gives us a much broader perspective on our situation. Bodhisattvas are the ones who see the depth and breadth of suffering and confusion most clearly, yet they place themselves right in the midst of it.

I have often wondered: how can bodhisattvas sit there so elegantly and smile? It may be because they have learned that no matter how bad things become, it is possible to change one's attitude on the spot. The flow of compassion cannot be interrupted. In fact, with each new crisis, its flow is increased.

At any moment, as my teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche once told me, “You could just cheer up!” ❁



How Meditation Helps in Difficult Times

Pema Chödrön on four ways that meditation helps us deal with difficulty.

MEDITATION TAKES US just as we are, with our confusion and our sanity. This complete acceptance of ourselves as we are is a simple, direct relationship with our being. We call this *maitri*, loving-kindness toward ourselves and others. There are four qualities of *maitri* that are cultivated when we meditate:

1. *Steadfastness.* When we practice meditation we are strengthening our ability to be steadfast with ourselves, in body as well as mind.
2. *Clear seeing.* This is another way of saying that we have less self-deception. Through the process of practicing the technique day in and day out, year after year, we begin to be very honest with ourselves.
3. *Experiencing our emotional distress.* We practice dropping whatever story we are telling ourselves and leaning into the emotions and the fear. We stay with the emotion, experience it, and leave it as it is, without proliferating. Thus we train in opening the fearful heart to the restlessness of our own energy. We learn to abide with the experience of our emotions.

4. *Attention to the present moment.* We make the choice, moment by moment, to be fully here. Attending to our present-moment mind and body is a way of being tender toward self, toward others, and toward the world. This quality of attention is inherent in our ability to love. These four factors not only apply to sitting meditation, but are essential to all the *bodhichitta* (awakened heart) practices and for relating with difficult situations in our daily lives. By cultivating them we discover for ourselves that it is bodhichitta, not confusion, that is basic. ✨

From *Comfortable With Uncertainty: 108 Teachings on Cultivating Fearlessness and Compassion*, by Pema Chödrön. Reprinted with the permission of Shambhala Publications.



True Practice Is Never Disengaged

If we feel like our practice is here, and the world is over there, says **Karen Maezen Miller**, then we're missing the point of practice.

NOWADAYS I WAKE UP even earlier than usual to check the news. It's an obsession but it feels like a duty; I'm a sentry in a war zone, scanning the horizon for smoke and fire. Threats multiply every day. Environmentally, socially, politically, and technologically, the world seems locked in a death spiral. I feel overwhelmed and, to be honest, complicit. What have I done to alter the course of human ignorance, greed, and hatred? Clearly not enough.

Then I go sit.

As Buddhist practitioners, indeed, as citizens of planet Earth, we might wonder if there's a better use of our time than sitting still in silence. Shouldn't we be raising our voices, righting wrongs and fighting the good fight? There are people to help and causes to champion, protests to organize and injustices to correct. Turning our backs and facing a wall sure looks like escaping reality and avoiding responsibility.

Formal practice—in a meditation hall, surrounded by a sangha—has long been criticized as socially disengaged, morally indifferent, and even selfish. Besides, as far as meditation goes, there are apps for that.

Whenever we're confused about the point of our practice, it's time to question our judgments and beliefs. We are taught to take refuge in buddha, dharma, and sangha, and many of us make vows to do so. But is there true refuge in our refuge, or are we just reciting words? Is practice our living reality or just an intellectual pastime? We must continually answer these questions for ourselves, or the buddhadharma dies.

Do I really believe in buddha, the awakened mind that frees sentient beings from the suffering of samsara?

Do I really believe in dharma, the path of practice that leads us out of egocentric delusion and into lives of clarity and compassion?

Do I really believe in sangha, the harmony of oneness that underlies all things?

As taught in the eightfold path, the right view changes everything, because when we know that our actions and beliefs have infinite consequences, we live differently. Practice is the place where we can begin to see the truth of this, and each glimpse subtly transforms our lives and the world.

Changing the world is not likely to be our first intention in coming to a practice center. We might want to change a niggling little aspect of ourselves—be more productive, less distracted, less angry, or less anxious, for example. But a funny thing happens while we sit silently struggling with our runaway thoughts and emotions. What keeps us in place is the person sitting next to us. We don't move because they don't move. If we weren't sitting in a

group, we would probably walk out. The same is true for everyone else. We sustain each other. We uphold each other. We are not separate, but rather sitting, breathing, and living as one.

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What starts as a self-help project thus becomes the work of a bodhisattva: taking on the suffering of the world. That means we respond to the needs that appear in front of us. It doesn't matter if our actions seem big or small, enough or not enough.

And it doesn't stop there. When we chant, we broadcast the benefits of our practice throughout the universe. We know it works, because our actions and beliefs have infinite consequences. Little by little, our view widens beyond our own desires. What starts as a self-help project thus becomes the work of a bodhisattva: taking on the suffering of the world. That means we respond to the needs that appear in front of us. It doesn't matter if our actions seem big or small, enough or not enough. We shouldn't be fooled by what we think.

Practice is a marvelous vehicle—it goes everywhere and includes everything. It donates clothing and food, signs petitions, and joins marches. It visits the lonely and sits with the dying; it listens, smiles, laughs, and cries. It gives money and time. It votes. Far from disengaged, a living practice is intimately engaged because it is you.

The never-ending greed and hate of samsara make the need for practice clear. Without you there is no sangha, no dharma, and no buddha. As the late Zen teacher Kobun Chino Roshi said, our personal responsibility is so great that “naturally we sit down for a while.” 🌸



Life Is Tough. Here Are Six Ways to Deal With It

An ancient set of Buddhist slogans offers us six powerful techniques to transform life's difficulties into awakening and benefit. Zen teacher **Norman Fischer** guides us through them.

THERE'S AN OLD ZEN SAYING: the whole world's upside down. In other words, the way the world looks from the ordinary or conventional point of view is pretty much the opposite of the way the world actually is. There's a story that illustrates this.

Once there was a Zen master who was called Bird's Nest Roshi because he meditated in an eagle's nest at the top of a tree. He became quite famous for this precarious practice. The Song Dynasty poet Su Shih (who was also a government official) once came to visit him and, standing on the ground far below the meditating master, asked what possessed him to live in such a dangerous manner. The roshi answered, "You call this dangerous? What you are doing is far more dangerous!" Living normally in the world, ignoring death, impermanence, and loss and suffering, as we all routinely do, as if this were a normal and a safe way to live, is actually much more dangerous than going out on a limb to meditate.

While trying to avoid difficulty may be natural and understandable, it actually doesn't work. We think it makes sense to protect ourselves from pain, but our self-protection ends up causing us deeper pain. We think we have to hold on to what we have, but our very holding on causes us to lose what we have. We're attached to what we like and try to avoid what we don't like, but we can't keep the attractive object and we can't avoid the unwanted object. So, counterintuitive though it may be, avoiding life's difficulties is actually not the path of least resistance; it is a dangerous way to live. If you want to have a full and happy life, in good times and bad, you have to get used to the idea that facing misfortune squarely is better than trying to escape from it.

This is not a matter of grimly focusing on life's difficulties. It is simply the smoothest possible approach to happiness. Of course, when we can prevent difficulty, we do it. The world may be upside down, but we still have to live in this upside-down world, and we have to be practical on its terms. The teaching on transforming bad circumstances into the path doesn't deny that. What it addresses is the underlying attitude of anxiety, fear, and narrow-mindedness that makes our lives unhappy, fearful, and small.

Transforming bad circumstances into the path is associated with the practice of patience. There are six mind-training (lojong) slogans connected with this:

1. Turn all mishaps into the path.
2. Drive all blames into one.

3. Be grateful to everyone.
4. See confusion as buddha and practice emptiness.
5. Do good, avoid evil, appreciate your lunacy, pray for help.
6. Whatever you meet is the path.

1. Turn All Mishaps into the Path

The first slogan, *Turn all mishaps into the path*, sounds at first blush completely impossible. How would you do that? When things go alright we are cheerful—we feel good and have positive spiritual feelings—but as soon as bad things start happening, we get depressed, we fall apart, or, at the very best, we hang on and cope. We certainly do not transform our mishaps into the path. And why would we want to? We don't want the mishaps to be there; we want them gone as soon as possible.



We are not talking about miracles. We are talking about training the mind.

Yet, the slogan tells us, we can turn all of this into the path. We do that by practicing patience, my all-time favorite spiritual quality. Patience is the capacity to welcome difficulty when it comes, with a spirit of strength, endurance, forbearance, and dignity rather than fear, anxiety, and avoidance. None of us likes to be oppressed or defeated, yet if we can endure oppression and defeat with strength, without whining, we are ennobled by it. Patience

makes this possible. In our culture, we think of patience as passive and unglamorous; other qualities like love or compassion or insight are much more popular. But when tough times cause our love to fray into annoyance, our compassion to be overwhelmed by our fear, and our insight to evaporate, then patience begins to make sense. To me it is the most substantial, most serviceable, and most reliable of all spiritual qualities. Without it, all other qualities are shaky.

The practice of patience is simple enough. When difficulty arises, notice the obvious and not so obvious ways we try to avoid it—the things we say and do, the subtle ways in which our very bodies recoil and clench when someone says or does something to us that we don't like.

To practice patience is to notice these things and be fiercely present with them (taking a breath helps; returning to mindfulness of the body helps) rather than reacting to them. We catch ourselves running away and we reverse course, turning toward our afflictive emotions, understanding that they are natural in these circumstances—and that avoiding them won't work. We forestall our flailing around with these emotions and instead allow them to be present with dignity. We forgive ourselves for having them, we forgive (at least provisionally) whoever we might be blaming for our difficulties, and with that spontaneous forgiveness comes a feeling of relief and even gratitude.

This may strike you as a bit far-fetched, but it is not. Yet it does take training. We are not, after all, talking about miracles; we are not talking about affirmations or wishful thinking. We are talking about training the mind. If you were to meditate daily, bringing up this slogan, *Turn all mishaps into the path*, in your sitting, writing it down, repeating it many times a day, then you could see that a change of heart and mind can take place in just the way I am describing. The way you spontaneously react in times of trouble is not fixed.

Your mind, your heart, can be trained. Once you have a single experience of reacting differently, you will be encouraged, and next time it is more likely that you will take yourself in hand. When something difficult happens, you will train yourself to stop saying, “Damn! Why did this have to happen?” and begin saying, “Yes, of course, this is how it is. Let me turn toward it, let me practice with it, let me go beyond entanglement to gratitude.”

Because you will have realized that because you are alive and not dead, because you have a human body and not some other kind of a body, because the world is a physical world and not an ethereal world, and because all of us together as people are the way we are, bad things are going to happen. It’s the most natural, the most normal, the most inevitable thing in the world. It is not a mistake, and it isn’t anyone’s fault. And we can make use of it to drive our gratitude and our compassion deeper.

2. Drive All Blames into One

The second slogan on transforming difficult circumstances is famous: *Drive all blames into one*. It, too, is quite counterintuitive, quite upside down. What it is saying is: whatever happens, don't ever blame anyone or anything else; always blame only yourself.

This is tricky, because it is not exactly blaming ourselves in the ordinary sense. We know perfectly well how to blame ourselves. We've been doing it all of our lives. We don't need Buddhist slogans to tell us to do this. But clearly this is not what is meant.

Drive all blames into one means that you can't blame anyone for what happens. Even if it's actually some- one's fault, you really can't blame them. Something happened, and since it did, there is nothing else to be done but to make use of it.

Everything that happens, disastrous as it may be and no matter whose fault it is, has a potential benefit, and it's your job to find it. *Drive all blames into one* means that you take full responsibility for everything that arises in your life.

This is very bad, this is not what I wanted, this brings many attendant problems. But what am I going to do with it? What can I learn from it? How can I make use of it for the path? These are the questions to ask, and answering them is entirely up to you. Furthermore, you can answer them; you do have the strength and the capacity. *Drive all blames into one* is a tremendous practice of cutting through the long human habit of complaining and whining, and finding on the other side of it the strength to turn every

situation into the path. Here you are. This is it. There is no place else to go but forward into the next moment. Repeat the slogan as many times as you have to.

3. Be Grateful to Everyone

Be grateful to everyone: this is very simple but very profound.

My wife and I have a grandson. We went to visit him when he was about six weeks old. He couldn't do anything, not even hold up his head, much less feed himself. If he was in trouble, he couldn't ask for help. Unable to do anything on his own, he was completely dependent on his mother's care and constant attention. She fed him, cuddled him, tried to understand and anticipate his needs, and took care of everything, including his peeing and pooping.

We were all at one time precisely in this situation, and someone or other must have cared for us in this same comprehensive way. Without one hundred percent total care from someone else, or maybe several others, we would not be here. This is certainly grounds for gratitude to others.

But our dependence on others did not end there. We didn't grow up and become independent. Now we can hold up our heads, fix our dinner, wipe our butts, and we seem not to need our mother or father to take care us—so we think we are autonomous.

But consider this for a moment. Did you grow the food that sustains you every day? Did you make the car or train that takes you to work? Sew your clothing? Build your own house with lumber you milled?

You need others every single day, every single moment of your life. It's thanks to others and their presence and effort that you have the things you need to continue, and that you have friendship and love and meaning in your life. Without others, you have nothing.



There could not be what we call a person without other people.

Our dependence on others runs even deeper than this. Where does the person we take ourselves to be come from in the first place? Apart from our parents' genes and their support and care, and society and all it produces for us, there's the whole network of conditions and circumstances that intimately makes us what we are. How about our thoughts and feelings? Where do they come from? Without words to think in, we don't think, we don't have anything like a sense of self as we understand it, and we don't have the emotions and feelings that are shaped and defined by our words. Without the myriad circumstances that provided us the opportunities for education, for speech, for knowledge, for work, we wouldn't be here as we are.

So it is literally the case that there could not be what we call a person without other people. We can say “person” as if there could be such an autonomous thing, but in fact there is no such thing. There is no such thing as a person—there are only persons who have co-created one another over the long history of our species. The idea of an independent, isolated, atomized person is impossible. And here we are not only speaking of our needing others practically. We are talking about our inmost sense of identity. Our consciousness of ourselves is never independent of others.

This is what nonself or emptiness means in Buddhist teaching: that there is no such thing as an isolated individual. Though we can say there is, and though we might think there is, and though many of our thoughts and motivations seem to be based on this idea, in fact it is an erroneous idea. Literally every thought in our minds, every emotion that we feel, every word that comes out of our mouth, every material sustenance that we need to get through the day, comes through the kindness of and the interaction with others. And not only other people but nonhumans too, literally the whole of the earth, the soil, the sky, the trees, the air we breathe, the water we drink. We don’t just depend on all of this; we are all of it and it is us. This is no theory, no poetic religious teaching. It is simply the bald fact of the matter.

So to practice *Be grateful to everyone* is to train in this profound understanding. It is to cultivate every day this sense of gratitude, the happiest of all attitudes. Unhappiness and gratitude simply cannot exist in the same moment. If you feel grateful, you

are a happy person. If you feel grateful for what is possible for you in this moment, no matter what your challenges are, if you feel grateful that you are alive at all, that you can think, that you can feel, that you can stand, sit, walk, talk—if you feel grateful, you are happy and you maximize your chances for well-being and for sharing happiness with others.

4. See Confusion as Buddha and Practice Emptiness

The fourth slogan, *See confusion as buddha and practice emptiness*, requires a bit of explanation. This goes beyond our conventional or relative understanding to a deeper sense of what we are. Though conventionally I am me and you are you, from an absolute perspective, a God's-eye view, if you will, there is no self and other. There's only being, and there's only love, which is being sharing itself with itself without impediment and with warmth. It just happens to look like you and me to us, because this is how our minds and sensory apparatus works. This love without boundary is emptiness practice.

See confusion as buddha and practice emptiness means that we situate ourselves differently with respect to our ordinary human confusion, our resistance, our pain, our fear, our grief, and so on. Rather than hoping these emotions and reactions will eventually go away and we will be free of them, we take them to a deeper level. We look at their underlying reality.

What is actually going on when we are upset or angry? If we could unhook ourselves for a moment from the blaming and the wishing and the self-pitying and look instead at the actual basis of what is in fact going on, what would we see? We would see time passing. We would see things changing. We would see life arising and passing away, coming from nowhere and going nowhere. Moment by moment, time slips away and things transform. The present becomes the past—or does it become the future? And yet right now there is no past or future. As soon as we examine “now,” it is gone. And we cannot know how or where it goes.

This may sound like philosophy, but it doesn't feel like philosophy when you or someone close to you is giving birth. If at that moment you are standing in the delivery room or are yourself, in pain and joy, giving birth—in that first bursting-forth moment, you are amazed. This small life you think you have been living, with its various issues and problems, completely disappears in the face of the miracle of visceral life springing forth in front of your eyes. Or if you are present when someone leaves this world and enters death (if there is such a place to enter), you know then that this emptiness is not just philosophy. You may not know what it is, but you will know that it is real. You know that this reality is powerful and makes you see your life, and the whole of life, quite differently. A new context emerges that is more than thought, more than concept. When you view your daily human problems in the light of actual birth and actual death, you are practicing with this

slogan. Every moment of your life, even (and maybe especially) your moments of pain or despair or confusion, is a moment of buddha.

So do attend births and deaths whenever you can and accept these moments as gifts, as opportunities for deep spiritual practice. But even when you aren't participating in these peak moments, you can repeat and review this slogan, and you can meditate on it. And when your mind is confused and entangled, you can take a breath and try to slip below the level of your desire and confusion. You can notice that in this very moment time is passing, things are transforming, and this impossible fact is profound, beautiful, and joyful, even as you continue with your misery.

5. Do Good, Avoid Evil, Appreciate Your Lunacy, Pray for Help

Now the slogans bring us back down to earth. If spiritual teachings are to really transform our lives, they need to oscillate (as the slogans do) between two levels, the profound and the mundane. If practice is too profound, it's no good. We are full of wonderful, lofty insights, but lack the ability to get through the day with any gracefulness or to relate to the issues and people in ordinary life. We may be soaringly metaphysical, movingly compassionate, and yet unable to relate to a normal human or a worldly problem. This is the moment when the Zen master whacks us with her stick and says, "Wash your bowls! Kill the Buddha!"

On the other hand, if practice is too mundane, if we become too interested in the details of how we and others feel and what we or they need or want, then the natural loftiness of our hearts will not be accessible to us, and we will sink under the weight of obligations, details, and daily-life concerns. This is when the master says, “If you have a staff, I will give you a staff; if you need a staff, I will take it away.” We need both profound religious philosophy and practical tools for daily living. This double need, according to circumstances, seems to go with the territory of being human. We have just been contemplating reality as buddha and practicing emptiness. That was important. Now it’s time to get back down to earth.

First, *do good*. Do positive things. Say hello to people, smile at them, tell them happy birthday, I am sorry for your loss, is there something I can do to help? These things are normal social graces, and people say them all the time. But to practice them intentionally is to work a bit harder at actually meaning them. We genuinely try to be helpful and kind and thoughtful in as many small and large ways as we can every day.

Second, *avoid evil*. This means to pay close attention to our actions of body, speech, and mind, noticing when we do, say, or think things that are harmful or unkind. Having come this far with our mind training, we can’t help but notice our shoddy or mean-spirited moments. And when we notice them, we feel bad. In the past we might have said to ourselves, “I only said that because she really needs straightening out. If she hadn’t done

that to me, I wouldn't have said that to her. It really was her fault.” Now we see that this was a way of protecting ourselves (after all, we have just been practicing Drive all blames into one) and are willing to accept responsibility for what we have done. So we pay attention to what we say, think, and do—not obsessively, not with a perfectionist flair, but just as a matter of course and with generosity and understanding—and finally we purify ourselves of most of our ungenerous thoughts and words.

The last two practices in this slogan, which I have interpreted as *Appreciate your lunacy* and Pray for help, traditionally have to do with making offerings to two kinds of creatures: demons (beings who are preventing you from keeping determined with your practice) and dharma protectors (beings who are helping you to remain true to your practice). But for our purposes now it is better to see these practices more broadly.

We can understand making offerings to demons as “appreciate your lunacy.” Bow to your own weakness, your own craziness, your own resistance. Congratulate yourself for them, appreciate them. Truly it is a marvel, the extent to which we are selfish, confused, lazy, resentful, and so on. We come by these things honestly. We have been well trained to manifest them at every turn. This is the prodigy of human life bursting forth at its seams, it is the effect of our upbringing, our society, which we appreciate even as we are trying to tame it and bring it gently round to the good. So we

make offerings to the demons inside us and we develop a sense of humorous appreciation for our own stupidity. We are in good company! We can laugh at ourselves and everyone else.

In making offerings to dharma protectors, we pray to whatever forces we believe or don't believe in for help. Whether we imagine a deity or a God or not, we can reach out beyond ourselves and beyond anything we can objectively depict and ask for assistance and strength for our spiritual work. We can do this in meditation, with silent words, or out loud, vocalizing our hopes and wishes.

Prayer is a powerful practice. It is not a matter of abrogating our own responsibility. We are not asking to be absolved of the need to act. We are asking for help and for strength to do what we know we must do, with the understanding that though we must do our best, whatever goodness comes our way is not our accomplishment, our personal production. It comes from a wider sphere than we can control. In fact, it is counter-productive to conceive of spiritual practice as a task that we are going to accomplish on our own. After all, haven't we already practiced Be grateful to everyone? Haven't we learned that there is no way to do anything alone? We are training, after all, in spiritual practice, not personal self-help (though we hope it helps us, and probably it does). So not only does it make sense to pray for help, not only does it feel powerfully right and good to do so, it is also important to do this so that we remember we are not alone and we can't do it by ourselves.

It would be natural for us to forget this point, to fall into our habit of imagining an illusory self-reliance. People often say that Buddhists don't pray because Buddhism is an atheistic or non-theistic tradition that doesn't recognize God or a Supreme Being. This may be technically so, but the truth is that Buddhists pray and have always prayed. They pray to a whole panoply of buddhas and bodhisattvas. Even Zen Buddhists pray. Praying does not require a belief in God or gods.

6. Whatever You Meet Is the Path

This slogan sums up the other five: whatever happens, good or bad, make it part of your spiritual practice.

In spiritual practice, which is our life, there are no breaks and no mistakes. We human beings are always doing spiritual practice, whether we know it or not. You may think that you have lost the thread of your practice, that you were going along quite well and then life got busy and complicated and you lost track of what you were doing. You may feel bad about this, and that feeling feeds on itself, and it becomes harder and harder to get back on track.

But this is just what you think; it's not what's going on. Once you begin practice, you always keep going, because everything is practice, even the days or the weeks or entire lifetimes when you forgot to meditate. Even then you're still practicing, because it's impossible to be lost. You are constantly being found, whether you know it or not. To practice this slogan is to know that no matter what is going on—no matter how distracted you think you are,

no matter how much you feel like a terribly lazy individual who has completely lost track of her good intentions and is now hopelessly astray—even then you have the responsibility and the ability to take all negativity, bad circumstance, and difficulty and turn it into the path. ✨

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How to Welcome the End of the World

What is the best response to difficult and uncertain times? *Welcome*. **John Tarrant** offers 10 Zen pointers on the practice of welcoming.

*Old pirates, yes, they rob I;
Sold I to the merchant ships,
Minutes after they took I
From the bottomless pit.
—Bob Marley*

BOB MARLEY'S VERSION of a rough patch is that pirates snatch you from the slave pit, and then they rob you and sell you to a merchant ship. "It's always something," as Gilda Radner said when she got her cancer diagnosis.

How to meet the times we are in is a real question, and everybody feels the force of it. It is an ancient question. It comes with being human.

Here is an ancient koan suitable for our time:

A student asked, "When times of great difficulty visit us, how should we meet them?"

The teacher said, "Welcome."

In hard times, we long to touch and feel the vastness and blessing of life. Welcome might open some blue sky in the heart.

How did you feel about losing the Twin Towers? How do you feel about losing the library of Alexandria, or Baghdad, or Chang An, the City of Perpetual Peace invaded during the An Lu Shan rebellion when two-thirds of the population of China died? And how do you feel about losing your parents, and about losing your dog?

In the U.S., even though our country is based on forgetting the dark karma of the old continents, and in some sense we disapprove of history as a jumble sale of old wrongs, we too are accumulating and being deepened by history. We suffer from wrongs done to our ancestors and done by our ancestors. Simultaneously, our efforts consciously and inadvertently repeat the past. So like other countries, we are going through a rough patch.

There are different kinds of hard times; sometimes we're poor and don't eat and get shot by the police. Sometimes gunmen burst into a church, or a movie theater, or a parade, and shoot us or the police. And beyond the violence coming to a city near you, the whole world is unavoidably connected to us. There's the gap between rich and poor, refugees throwing their children into boats, certainly a desperate measure, and did I mention Zika and climate change?

In difficult times, we disagree about reality. So we are drenched in false descriptions, verdicts, reasons that make no sense—we need to build a wall against Mexicans because, well, ISIS. Yes, that’s what delusion is like.

If I’m outlining the obvious here, it’s because I’m about to say that the inner life counts, and is the beginning of addressing our condition. The inner life is objective, and for that matter, more objective than the outer life. I say this with full awareness of all the aforementioned bad news.

So the first task of the inner life is not to amplify the delusions, not to add hatred to hatred but to head in a different direction, to be openhearted without being gullible.

The little story about welcoming the times we are in offers a path when we don’t know what to do. It’s not about drawing conclusions as a way to freedom. Instead, this koan is an environment. You can repeat it to yourself or just live in it and find out how you and the world change.

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The first task of the inner life is not to amplify the delusions, not to add hatred to hatred but to head in a different direction, to be openhearted without being gullible.

Our lives are full of loss, and also songs. Marley wrote the lyrics above while in pain from his cancer. Paying attention to the inner life is a practice that naturally rises to meet our actual world, the life we have now. I will die, those I love will die, bad people will get elected, diet plans will fail, I might be kidnapped or shot, strangers will certainly be kind, I will get a blessing from unexpected places, an apricot tree will be my friend.

Here's Bob Marley again:

*Won't you help to sing
These songs of freedom?
Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery;
None but ourselves can free our minds.*

It's worth noting that the lines about emancipation from mental slavery are quotes from Marcus Garvey, another Jamaican passionate about freedom.

What is a practice of welcoming? Here is a list of pointers:

1. Emptiness Is Real

All the ways *welcome* appears are manifestations of the famous Zen idea of emptiness. This means that if you look, you'll find that welcome doesn't come from somewhere. It doesn't come from good intentions or desire. It doesn't come from impressing anyone. Welcome just appears, which makes it seem like a gift or a guest. But if you look inside, you'll find it's always been there.

We are inside the mysterious light of emptiness, which can't be described but is painting the world into being. We are never apart from that light. There's a tremendous peace in feeling that. Even if we're not okay, we'll be okay. We'll know what to do.

2. The Bodhisattva Path

In Buddhism, the shape emptiness takes is sometimes called the bodhisattva path. This means, basically, we're in it together. We're concerned about others and, as far as we have a motive, it's to awaken alongside all beings. The effect is to make us helpful without having to feel virtuous or worthy, which are subtle ways to close things down.

We are often advised to be more armored, more paranoid, to take advantage of others. But finding openness in our own hearts—that changes most things about life. It's an exhilarating step into the unknown.

3. Empathy

Moment by moment, the imagination, dreams, and hopes of others press on us. By others I mean people, animals, and even trees and rivers. When people are suffering, we feel it. We may not know it, but we do. We may try to explain it away or even blame them, but it's just that we feel their suffering as our own.

Empathy is the most spectacular manifestation of the mysterious light in everything. The welcome practice is not to be mindful and attentive, though that could be a nice side effect.

Welcome is to see, to feel, to know the flavor of connection. To sing with others, your voice coming out of my mouth. It is the experience that we are already in love with others, and that we perceive others as ourselves. A loving quality appears by itself and is fundamental to being human.

4. Being Companions to Each Other

Part of understanding that we are not living the wrong life is seeing that we are not living in the wrong time. Many things can't be changed; what we can do is accompany each other. That's the bodhisattva path again.

During the terrible ordeal of the Russian people during the twentieth century, poet Anna Akhmatova wrote of her decision to stay:

*No, not under the vault of alien skies,
And not under the shelter of alien wings—
I was with my people then,
There, where my people, unfortunately, were.*

A woman drives her SUV off the icy road, and her carefully buckled-in children drown in the river. On that day, what you can do is make sandwiches and coffee for the stricken people. It's important not to abandon those who have been hurt as somehow too damaged. Then we don't abandon ourselves either.

5. We Don't Need to Know How It's Going to Come Out

Not knowing is what emptiness tastes like. It's also what welcome tastes like.

We never know what will arrive next. Dreadful events can lead to wonderful events, and the other way around. It's always too early to despair. Welcome means not reaching a verdict on our lives.

It is intimate and beautiful not to know, to be vulnerable, not to be stronger than our situation. We can feel our way, we can grope along in the velvety dark, and each step will be true and ours.

6. A Little Note about Delusion

Everyone knows how to believe something. But as soon as you believe something, you have to defend it. When I look, though, I can never completely agree even with my own views.

Beliefs depend on being unexamined. I could just put them behind a no-trespassing sign, but when I do that, I live by them without finding out what is real. The discovery of emptiness implies skepticism about the use of my own views, an inkling that they are a prison rather than a shelter.

When I was a child working with men, they would play tricks on the very young apprentices. They would send them to the store for striped paint or a yard of milk. It wasn't meant to humiliate—it was a moment of complicity in which we were comrades

facing the incomprehensibility of the world. My thoughts are like that—a yard of sorrow, a few inches of indignation, and where did they come from? When I have as much as I want, I can just cut off a strip with long scissors.

7. Who Am I, Anyway?

The mind forms thoughts and feelings without consulting me. Old songs appear in the middle of the night, grief and memories of childhood pop up like clothing stores, but what does that have to do with me? It doesn't seem to be who I am. I do notice that welcome is destructive of my prejudices, and then a spaciousness opens. Then even sorrow has welcome inside it. I don't have to know who I am to take a step.

8. Trust and Welcome

If we just hang out with welcome, the world will carry us along. Welcome is not something to deserve, and who knows who we will be when it has changed us?

Welcome might start as a practice, but it's not a gadget. It transforms and becomes something I notice about reality. Then I'm not opposed to my own life, and I'm amazed how much nicer other people have become.

9. The Apocalypse Also Needs Friends

So what's the worst case for us? Sometimes I walk outside into a sudden silence. No one is chatting anyone up on their phone, or carrying a ladder, or wondering if they look hot in their Dolce & Gabbana sandals with the little photo prints of rock stars on them, and no car stirs on its swishing tires.

The thought appears: "Oh, did something happen? Did everything happen? Did I blink and years have passed?" Then I hear a train's lonely whistle, and an owl, and an engine starts, and someone is yelling with clumsy good nature across the road. I have no idea if the world changed, but in any event it's here now. All is well.

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But what if it really were the end of the world? If it really were the end of the world, I wouldn't think of it as difficult. I'd be full of wonder and possibly laughter. I'd think of it as my today.

But what if it really were the end of the world? If it really were the end of the world, I wouldn't think of it as difficult. I'd be full of wonder and possibly laughter. I'd think of it as my today. I'd think the end of the world is always happening while hummingbirds zoom past my nose and the plain brown birds scratch in the leaf litter and cars go by much faster than the posted speed limit.

“So this is what the end of the world is like,” I’d think, feeling awe and probably happiness. I could stop bargaining, say, “Welcome,” and listen to the vast pulse of the changes. Nothing is ever truly lost.

10. The End of the World Is Here 🌿



Finding Hope in Hopelessness

If I have no belief that my vision can become real, asks **Margaret Wheatley**, where will I find the strength to persevere?

AS THE WORLD grows ever darker, I've been forcing myself to think about hope. I watch as the world and the people near me experience increased grief and suffering, as aggression and violence move into all relationships, personal and global, and as decisions are made from insecurity and fear. How is it possible to feel hopeful, to look forward to a more positive future? The biblical psalmist wrote, "Without vision, the people perish." Am I perishing?

I don't ask this question calmly. I am struggling to understand how I might contribute to reversing this descent into fear and sorrow, what I might do to help restore hope to the future. In the past it was easier to believe in my own effectiveness: if I worked hard, with good colleagues and good ideas, we could make a difference. But now I doubt that. Yet without hope that my labor will produce results, how can I keep going? If I have no belief that my vision can become real, where will I find the strength to persevere?

To answer these questions, I've consulted some who have endured dark times. They have led me on a journey into new questions, one that has taken me from hope to hopelessness.

My journey began with a little booklet entitled, “The Web of Hope.” It lists the signs of despair and hope for Earth’s most pressing problems. Foremost among these is the ecological destruction humans have created. Yet the only thing the booklet lists as hopeful is that the earth works to create and maintain the conditions that support life. Humans will be annihilated if we don’t soon change our ways. E.O. Wilson, the well-known biologist, comments that humans are the only major species from whose destruction every other species would benefit (except pets and houseplants). The Dalai Lama has been saying the same thing in many recent teachings.

This didn’t make me feel hopeful.

But in the same booklet, I read a quote from Rudolf Bahro that did help: “When the forms of an old culture are dying, the new culture is created by a few people who are not afraid to be insecure.” Could insecurity—self-doubt—be a good trait? I find it hard to imagine how I could work for the future without feeling grounded in the belief that my actions will make a difference. But Bahro offers a new prospect—that feeling insecure, even groundless, might actually increase my ability to stay in the work. I’ve read about groundlessness—especially in Buddhism—and have experienced it quite a bit recently. I haven’t liked it at all. But as my culture dies, could I give up seeking ground on which to stand?

Vaclav Havel helped me become further attracted to insecurity and not knowing. “Hope,” he states, “is a dimension of the soul, an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart. It transcends the world that is immediately experienced and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizon. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense regardless of how it turns out.”

Havel seems to be describing not hope, but hopelessness: being liberated from results, giving up outcomes, doing what feels right rather than effective. Havel helps me recall the Buddhist teaching that hopelessness is not the opposite of hope. Fear is. Hope and fear are inescapable partners. Anytime we hope for a certain outcome, and work hard to make it happen, then we also introduce fear—fear of failing, fear of loss. Hopelessness is free of fear and thus can feel quite liberating. I’ve listened to others describe this state. Unburdened of strong emotions, they describe the miraculous appearance of clarity and energy.

Thomas Merton, the late Catholic mystic, clarified further the journey into hopelessness. In a letter to a friend, he advised: “Do not depend on the hope of results. You may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the

work itself. You gradually struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people. In the end, it is the reality of personal relationship that saves everything.”

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Hopelessness is not the opposite of hope. Fear is. Hope and fear are inescapable partners. Hopelessness is free of fear and thus can feel quite liberating.

I know this to be true. I’ve been working with colleagues in Zimbabwe as their country descends into violence and starvation through the actions of a mad dictator. Yet as my colleagues and I exchange emails and occasional visits, we’re learning that joy is still available, not from the circumstances, but from our relationships. As long as we’re together, as long as we feel others supporting us, we persevere.

Some of my best teachers on this have been young leaders. One in her twenties said: “How we’re going is important, not where. I want to go together and with faith.” Another young Danish woman said, “I feel like we’re holding hands as we walk into a deep, dark woods.” A Zimbabwean, in her darkest moment, wrote: “In my grief I saw myself being held, all of us holding one another in this incredible web of loving-kindness. Grief and love in the same place. I felt as if my heart would burst with holding it all.”

Thomas Merton was right: we are consoled and strengthened by being hopeless together. We don't need specific outcomes. We need each other.

Hopelessness has surprised me with patience. As I abandon the pursuit of effectiveness and watch my anxiety fade, patience appears. Two visionary leaders, Moses and Abraham, both carried promises given to them by their God, but they had to abandon hope that they would see these promises come to fruition in their lifetime. They led from faith, not hope, from a relationship with something beyond their comprehension. T.S. Eliot describes this better than anyone. In the Four Quartets he writes:

*I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
for hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love,
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.*

This is how I want to journey through this time of increasing uncertainty. Groundless, hopeless, insecure, patient, clear and together. ✿



How to Work with Fear and Pain in a Moment of Crisis

Even when it feels like you're lost in the universe, **Emily Horn** explains, you can face the unknown with a still and calm heart-mind.

AS I WATCHED THE SNOW FALL on the mountains outside my hospital room, where I was undergoing treatment for an illness that had progressively worsened over the previous months, I was reminded once again that this life moves and changes with each breath — we cannot know what will happen in the future.

But we're not powerless. Our power rests in our ability to train our hearts and minds. Here I was in pain, sick, and unable to use my left hand or arm. Still, I was still in love with my life.

Before I'd been admitted to the hospital, I underwent a painful spinal tap. As my body lay upon the doctor's table, I used the technique of out-loud counting to calm my mind. With the steadiness of the counting, my fear gradually evaporated.

Pain can easily become laden with fear and stories, which only adds to our suffering. Through practice, we can recognize that we always have access to spacious loving, which can empower us to face fear with a calm heart-mind. Mindfulness supports the understanding that some of our storylines are needless, letting them arise and pass without believing them.

Here are a few suggestions to help come back to your center during experiences of fear or pain.

A Short Practice for Working with Fear and Pain

1. Find a focal point in the room or outside (a point in on the wall, a tree, a chair). Set the intention to return to this point if and when experience becomes disorienting. Allow your attention to gently rest with this point of seeing. Know that you are seeing.
2. Count to ten, starting with one and returning to one after you reach ten. You don't have to find your breathing at this point. Just allow the counting to ease you a little more into the moment. If you feel comfortable, say the numbers out loud. Allowing your attention to rest with the sound of your voice.
3. Notice your body in the room and the space it takes up. You don't have to zoom in on the pain or the fearful sensations yet. Allow your body to be your anchor as your weight drops more into the space. From here you can decide what you need to do next, whether starting again or moving on to whatever is needed next. ✿



These Flames are Cool and Refreshing

What do a 16th-century Zen master and a cartoon dog have in common? Both of them maintained equanimity as their worlds burned, says **Cristina Moon**. And this is why we train as Buddhists.

ON APRIL 3, 1582, feudal lord Oda Nobunaga imprisoned Zen master Kwaisen and his monks in a tower at Yerin-ji Monastery in Japan. Then, he set it on fire. Historical accounts say that not a single monk screamed as they burned to death inside.

Before Kwaisen perished with his monks, he gave a final dharma talk. He began by asking the monks how they'd use "this most critical moment" to turn the Wheel of Dharma. After each had responded, Kwaisen concluded: "When thoughts are quieted down, even flames are cool and refreshing."

Even for the most disciplined Buddhists, it can be hard to imagine such a scene. Instead, when we think of sitting in a burning building, we may remember a now familiar cartoon dog. You

know the one—he’s wearing a bowler hat and a saccharine smile, a mug of coffee next to him on the table, his house in flames. Next to his glassy eyes, a speech bubble reads, “This is fine.”

For many, this cartoon dog is a symbol of our current political dystopia. He is our friend or family member who goes about life caught up in petty humdrum, paying no mind while Russia hacks American democracy, children die in school shootings, and nations inch closer to nuclear war.

The dog is also a reflection of the exhausted activist, trying to hang onto some semblance of sanity while the rug gets pulled out from under us again and again.

But what if the dog is also Kwaisen?

Can we imagine that the dog is not pretending that everything is fine because he’s blind to the flames? Maybe he understands completely. Perhaps he sees what he cannot change — a house in flames — and what he can — his internal state. Instead of reacting to the heat and destruction around him, he uses this critical moment to turn the Wheel of Dharma in the cleanest, most decisive way he can.

For me, a Buddhist practitioner who now lives in a Zen martial arts dojo, I’m trying to learn to be fine even when there’s a literal sword pointed at my throat. Before I arrived at the dojo, I felt that my ability to be the person I wanted to be depended on an optimal mix of external conditions, like sleep, food, stress, exercise,

environment, and people. I spent a lot of energy managing those external conditions and blaming them when things didn't work out.

Today, my time is focused on what needs to change inside of me. The most straightforward place to start, I've learned, is in how I inhabit and use my body. Knowing it is subject to death, I cultivate a present moment awareness tinted with mortal urgency. In that mode, there is no time to lose or energy to spare. Waste a single breath — whether in tea ceremony or kendo (Japanese fencing) — and the opportunity in that moment to realize my true self evaporates.

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We can engage Buddhism as deep spiritual training in accepting what we cannot change so we can focus with all of our might on what we can.

I'm learning to let go and not waste energy on my attachment to dukkha—which is often translated as “suffering”, but can also be interpreted as “dissatisfaction” or “this is not how things are supposed to be.” As more and more attachments are shed, including the attachment to putting attention on what's wrong, it's easier to give all of myself to whatever is critical to do right now.

When it feels like our real world is burning, we can choose to burn precious energy pointing out just how f*cked everything is. Or, we can engage Buddhism as deep spiritual training in accepting what we cannot change so we can focus with all of our might on what we can — and go for it.

The historical Kwaisen spoke poetically. Our cartoon dog speaks plainly, more in line with the language of our time. I want to take the dog's frank words literally. Rather than identifying with a dog engulfed by delusion, I engage a canine who has dispensed with any fruitless expense of energy. He's sitting in a burning house, perhaps about to meet death. And, this is fine. ✨



In the Fire: A Profile of Meditation Teacher Allan Lokos

Death can come at any time, so the Buddha warned us to get ready now. Knowing that helped Buddhist teacher Allan Lokos after a terrible plane crash. **Rod Meade Sperry** has his story.

DID MEDITATION save Allan Lokos's life?

Well, there was this one time. The short of it: an indigestion-type feeling hit one evening, was noted but not much worried about. Next thing Lokos knew, he was on the floor of his bathroom at 5 a.m. He was rushed to the ER, where it was guessed that he was in atrial fibrillation, putting him at risk of a stroke.

As he was waiting to be seen, it occurred to him: "What could be a better place for meditation?" So he set to it. Finally, when he was examined, it seemed that Lokos had, thanks to the practice, brought his heart back to normal function. He was given tests and prescriptions but, sure enough, was declared recovered in a few weeks.

It's a great story, nice and neat. Did meditation help? It seems reasonable to think so.

But then, there was this other time, in Burma, on Christmas Day, 2012. Lokos laughingly encapsulates it this way: “It was a trip I wanted to go on, and I loved it. Except for one little thing!”

It’s Marathon Sunday morning on New York’s Upper West Side. A cool hush is in the autumn air. The neighborhood is extra quiet, ground transport having been snarled up in much of the city. I arrive at the Community Meditation Center (CMC) no problem and am greeted by Susanna Weiss, Allan Lokos’s spouse and, as he’s put it, “perfect partner.” She’s natural and charming, and maybe even a bit familiar, to a film fan at least: the actress Laura Dern is a dead ringer for her.

Because of the traffic, Weiss tells me, some die-hard seniors and other regulars may not be able to make it to CMC this morning, so attendance could be way down; it tops out at about two hundred sometimes. She warmly invites me to meet Lokos.

Automatically, I thrust out my hand and shake his, but my sense of touch quickly sends a message to my brain: *This is not the time for a firm handshake.* Both of Lokos’s hands are in bandage-like glove contraptions. I hope I haven’t hurt him.

I leave him to a moment with himself before he gives today’s teaching at 11:30. The room seems to be filling up nicely. Halloween decorations are still up—a green witch will stir a cauldron behind Lokos as he talks—and people are festive, talky, upbeat. By 11:28, fifty have arrived, including some of the die-hard seniors, who are joined by visitors of all ages from their twenties on up.

“Let me catch my breath,” the seventy-three-year-old teacher quips, having just taken his seat. “That marathon’s quite a race.” Then he begins his guided meditation, which includes references to gratitude for the body. “Isn’t it amazing that breathing just happens on its own?” he says. “How wonderful to have this body that supports this practice of mindfulness.”

Coming from him, it means a lot.

Which brings us to that trip to Burma and the “one little thing” that went wrong.

Lokos, Weiss, and sixty-nine others were taking a short in-country flight on a Fokker 100, a small plane but not quite a puddle jumper; the numeral denotes its number of seats. There seemed to be nothing unusual with this flight. Then, with essentially no warning, the plane crashed.

One of the passengers, a woman from California, later recalled looking out and seeing a blue flash, which was likely the plane shearing through electrical wires with its wings. And since the fuel was stored in the wings, they immediately burst into flames. But Lokos didn’t see any of that, so when Weiss first told him they’d crashed, he thought she was overreacting. There had not even been a “Fasten your seatbelts” sign.

Lokos turned to Weiss, and by the time he turned back—it was *that* fast—heavy noxious smoke was pouring in and chaos was overtaking the cabin.

There was an emergency exit, but it was on the other side of all that smoke, and Weiss was already feeling the poisonous effects. She didn't think she could make the jump to safety. "You're going to go right through it," Lokos told her. "You'll be okay."

Lokos gave Weiss a push and intended to follow right after her, but his foot caught on something. "From that moment to when I landed on the ground outside the plane," he says, "all of it is blocked out of my memory, which my trainer, Nancy, ascribes to 'the benevolent brain.' But, clearly, I was on fire in that time."

The plane had crashed in an abandoned rice field. More than half of the passengers were spared serious injury. Two died. And then there was Lokos. A pair of teenaged boys tried to help him after he'd escaped the plane, but he was too big for them to handle. Two men—one of them the husband of the Californian woman—stepped in. "They had to drag me because I couldn't walk," Lokos says. "As I looked up, I saw the faces of all these spectators. They looked horrified."

Then he looked down and saw why. "There were large sheets of skin hanging off of me. But I have no memory of being scared by any of it; I was probably well into shock at that point."

It was then that Lokos turned to the man from California. "Those people look really scared," he said. "I must look awful." "Oh, no," the man replied. "It's really just like a bad sunburn. You're fine."

It was a kind, comforting thing to say. But it was, of course, not true. Lokos was in grave danger. His legs were seriously burned, especially the ankles, which had been burned right to the

bone. “Exactly how my hands got so damaged, I don’t know,” he says. “I never knew that I was close to dying. I never even thought I was injured, never thought about it. Now, as my trauma therapist says, my *body* knew. *I was on fire!*”

Lokos also suffered burns on his head and neck, and part of one ear was lost. “It now looks like I have a deep eye socket,” he says. “See that line of red? That’s how close the flames came to that eye, right to the socket. Two weeks ago Susanna asked me if I wanted to see the clothes that I was wearing at the time. They were just shreds.”

Immediately after the accident, a doctor on the scene assessed things this way: “There’s nothing we can do for him.” When Lokos was moved from Burma to a hospital in Bangkok, doctors there concurred. Then the same happened in Singapore, and once more back in New York. All told, six doctors would tell Weiss, who’d suffered seven broken vertebrae in the crash herself, that Lokos’s prognosis was hopeless. When one flatly told her, “This man won’t live,” she replied, “You don’t know this man.”

Finally, two doctors—a Dr. Tan in Singapore and a brilliant New York surgeon named Dr. Yurt—saw not only the Lokos that Weiss knew but also the potential for turning things around.

Lokos counts Sharon Salzberg, Joseph Goldstein, Thich Nhat Hanh, Mingyur Rinpoche, and others among his teachers, but the path was not always so clearly delineated for him; in fact, he didn’t come to Buddhism until late in life. As a native New Yorker growing up in Brooklyn, he was raised in a family that was, as he puts

it, “once-a-year Jewish,” though his mother’s side was both very religious and wonderful. “That’s where the joy was in my early childhood,” he says. “But—and I think this really plays into where I ended up—my mother died when I was sixteen and my father was mentally ill, bipolar.”

His father was arrested repeatedly, and Lokos and his brother were eventually called to his apartment to intervene; he had pinned a woman down and was over her with an axe. He was arrested one last time and died in the forensic ward nine days later.

Whether despite or because of such difficulty, the young Lokos found himself drawn to beauty. He began exploring the arts, in particular singing. (This can be no surprise to anyone who’s heard his sonorous voice and impeccable diction.) “I studied with Madeline Marshall, who was teaching at Julliard and was the great English language teacher at the Met,” Lokos says. “She literally wrote the book on how to sing in English. I used to cut all my classes at Brooklyn College so I could go to rehearsals. This teacher said, ‘Why don’t you go to a school where your classes are rehearsals?’”

A career was born, with Lokos performing on Broadway and loving it, as well as the lifestyle that came with it. It wasn’t lucrative, he says, but “I did lots and lots of raucous carrying on and having fun.” Later, wanting more, he and Weiss decided to pursue careers as ministers fostering harmony in post-9/11 New York. The interfaith group they founded wouldn’t last, yet the ministry

experience would eventually lead to CMC's birth in 2007, and training for it was what ultimately put Lokos onto the Buddhist path.

It's often said that people come to the dharma because of suffering, but that wasn't quite it for Lokos. "I was suffering as much as anybody else," he claims, "but even in seminary, I never understood why the word was used so much."

Instead, Lokos says he felt the pull of a more positive allure: "Part of the study program to be a minister was that a practitioner from each of the world's religions would come and chat with us. And when this Buddhist fellow came in and began to speak, he brought this sense of calm and joy I really hadn't seen before! That was in 1998, and I was about fifty-seven. He asked me, 'My teacher is coming to the United States. Why don't you come on retreat with us?' So I did." That teacher, Lokos's first, was Thich Nhat Hanh.

Today, the connection to calm and joy remains. He says, "I'm often asked what about this path appealed to me so much. It's just, life works better. It's easier. It's more fun."

After the crash, Lokos endured surgery after surgery, graft after graft, with fantastic results. He seems awed, still, by all that's happened, and without self-pity. But more than that, he seems appreciative.

"The body is unbelievable," he tells me, smiling. "It's incredible—this is all healing. When I came home, I could not turn on my electric toothbrush. The first time I did, we celebrated! The

nerves are regenerating right now, which is painful, but also sort of miraculous because if they aren't regenerating, then the hands are dead. So I try to rejoice in the fact that I'm getting a lot of pain in my hands. I could stop working on my legs right now, because I can walk—I could probably dance if I had to—but we're continuing with these pressure garments that I'm wearing." (They're like the zippered, tiptless gloves he wears, only covering his legs.)

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Suffering is no longer theory and philosophy. And I'm not through the flames yet. I'm still sitting in them.”

“As difficult as things were for us, I think a lot of positive is coming out of it... *will* come out of it,” Lokos says. “The big thing that dominates all of my thinking right now is that there is this opportunity. In no way was I looking for it—certainly, not in the way I got it!—but there is now this opportunity to be able to reach people like I never could before. Quite frankly, if I had been in an automobile crash and injured exactly the same way, nobody would be interested. Practically everyone's been in an auto crash. But 'airplane crash' grabs everybody's attention. We had a group of attorneys come here, and when we were all finished, one of them said to me, tearfully, 'This has been fantastic to meet with you. Usually we only get to meet with the families.'”

And word gets around. Now when Lokos meets new people, they often tell him, “Oh, I’ve heard about you.” “So there is an opportunity here,” he says, “and I just hope I can be equal to it. I’m in uncharted waters.

“The twist,” Lokos adds, “is that I will no longer only be teaching someone else’s teachings. Great teacher though I do follow—the Buddha—I have now been ‘in the fire’ for real, and have been among people who have been suffering in a real sense. Susanna reached a point—and she has spoken about this openly—of saying, ‘I now know that there can be something worse than death; we would’ve been better off if we had been killed.’ So suffering is no longer theory and philosophy. And I’m not through the flames yet. I’m still sitting in them.

So, did meditation save Allan Lokos’s life a second time?

In a word: No. Lokos recalls that soon after the accident, his dear friend and mentor Sharon Salzberg advised him, “You shouldn’t be meditating.” It was as simple as that, Lokos explains. “I had no concentration whatsoever, and it wouldn’t have been wise to introduce an additional struggle at that time.”

But is it possible that meditation practice helped him in his recovery?

“That’s the first thing people usually ask,” he concedes. “Maybe that’s where I had one leg up—that, due to practice, I’m not under as much stress as a nonpractitioner might be. I think the way the

research about these things puts it is that there is no illness or condition that is not made worse by stress. None! So if we're dealing with less stress, we have a better chance."

Wrapping up my visit with Lokos and Weiss, I ask about that comment she'd made to the doctor who'd said Lokos wouldn't make it: "You don't know this man." What did Weiss know that the doctor didn't?

"I don't tend to quit," Lokos offers. "Rather, I become more intrigued. I've discussed this with my trauma therapist—that I don't really think that you can actually *quit*. And she said, 'But you can turn bitter.' And that's what happens—a part of you quits. That doesn't interest me.

"I don't think I was in a plane crash for any reason other than I happened to be sitting on that plane. I'm very much a believer in 'things arise out of causes and conditions.' It was all my choice to be there; I don't regret that choice—I was doing exactly what I wanted to do."

Lokos and Weiss even flew again, on the one-year anniversary of the crash, to see family. "I think it's good to do those things, you know," he says.

"But it was not remarkable. Flying into Cleveland is not usually remarkable. Even the anniversary couldn't change that." ❁



In Times of Crisis, Draw on the Strength of Peace

When we are called upon to help in a crisis, says **Kaira Jewel Lingo**, it's not a question of whether or not to respond — we must respond. But the way we do is crucial.

AT MANY TEMPLES IN ASIA, one encounters statues and paintings of Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of compassion. Avalokitesvara is sometimes portrayed as female, sometimes male, so we could say they are transgender—and also transcending gender. In some depictions, Avalokitesvara has a thousand arms, symbolizing all the skillful means they have of responding to suffering, and on each of these arms is an eye in the palm of the hand, the eye of wisdom.

We need the eye of wisdom in our palms. If we see deeply into a given situation, then our action will be appropriate action. But if we are caught up in our own story, not seeing the situation in its depth, in its complexity, then our action may actually cause more harm than good. We need to act, but it is also vital that we see clearly.

When 9/11 happened, I was on a bus with monastics accompanying my teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh (known to his students as Thay) to Berkeley, where he was going to be giving a talk. We

were all deeply shaken by the news and wanted to respond immediately. We knew there would be a lot of people looking to Thay and the community for guidance. A group of us were brainstorming and discussing what we could do, how we could help, and we came up with a plan to go into town the next day to get resources from our archive at Parallax Press and create a press release so we could respond right away.

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If we are to help bring about peace and relieve this suffering, we must act and live in ways that create peace now.

That night, when we arrived at Kim Son Monastery near Santa Cruz, we went to Thay and rather urgently shared our plan. Thay took some breaths and said, “No, I don’t want you to do that tomorrow. Tomorrow we’re all going to the beach.”

We were taken aback. The beach? There had just been a terrorist attack and we needed to respond—to act! We didn’t understand. But since he is our teacher, the next day we all went to the beach. Rather than speeding up, we slowed down and were deeply nourished. We played and ate together and swam in the ocean. It ended up being a really important time to connect with each other and feel safe. We can’t create safety for others if we don’t feel safe ourselves. The following day we did all the things we were planning to do, but those actions came out of a different place than they would have if we had gone into action right away.

I learned a lot from that. Thay probably felt quite a bit of pressure from us, his very sincere students, yet he was able to say, “No, I won’t be pushed”—not only by all the urgency in society, the collective sense of anxiety, but even these young students he was close to. It takes a great deal of strength to be able to see clearly in a situation like that. Of course, Thay spent the next many months and years responding to the 9/11 tragedy. His whole life has been a response to the tragic and profound events of suffering continuously occurring in the world.

Whether or not we respond is not the question. We must respond. But how? And where does that response come from? The way we respond is crucial.

During the war in Vietnam, Thay set up the School of Youth for Social Service (SYSS). Thousands of young people were sent out into the countryside to rebuild villages, schools, and roads to improve people’s lives. This was important work. Yet every week they would take a day of mindfulness for themselves, to refresh and come together to practice, listen to each other, share, and heal. They didn’t say, “No, this work is too urgent, we have to work seven days a week.”

This is true for all of us. In order to sustain ourselves, we have to take regular pauses.

The late American clergyman and political activist A. J. Muste said, “There is no way to peace, peace is the way.” The social workers in the SYSS in Vietnam were practicing peace, not working toward peace in frenetic ways. We don’t create peace like that.

In every step we have to manifest what we want, rather than run toward something we hope will happen in the future. The future is made up of this moment.

The young people in the SYSS would rebuild bombed villages, sometimes many times over. They didn't say, "This isn't worth it; let's just give up." They weren't rebuilding a village because they wanted a particular outcome. They weren't dependent on a particular result. They rebuilt the village time and time again because that's what they needed to do, not because there was any guarantee that their action was going to work and succeed and they would finally win the day.

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An action done out of pure intent to bring joy or relieve suffering is never lost.

This is an example of "There is no way to peace, peace is the way." We're not doing something with the expectation of a particular outcome. If we do that, we'll burn out very soon. If we only take action when we know for sure we'll get the result we want, then we may not do things that we don't think will succeed, even if those actions are what's needed. And if we do decide to take action and it doesn't go the way we planned, we lose all of our energy and fall into despair.

It's like conditional love and unconditional love. It's hard to practice unconditional love, just like it's hard to work for change without wanting it to go the way we expect. Yet if we want to

survive with our energy, our hope, our love, and our enthusiasm intact, we have to look with this eye in our hand, which sees that no action goes unrecorded. An action done out of pure intent to bring joy or to relieve suffering is never lost, even if the immediate outcome is not what we want, and even if it's the opposite. That eye in the hand of our action is the eye that sees that all we can do is what we deeply feel needs to be done. The only way we can be truly free and powerful in any action is if we do it because we know it needs to be done.

Joanna Macy and Chris Johnston speak about “active hope” as a motivating force that is not dependent on external guarantees. Active hope is rather risky—it takes courage and being okay with not-knowing. It's alive and responsive. You take a step and then see; you make a plan, but you remain ready to adjust based on what's going on. Active hope isn't about having the whole plan mapped out and taking action only when you know it's safe. Rather, it's an attitude of “This is what feels right, so let me try it out and then be willing to respond to the feedback.” It's a very attentive kind of practice.

Rubin Alvez, a Brazilian theologian, speaking about the source of discipline, said, “We must live by the love of what we will never see.” To do what we are called to do, we need this vast trust.

When I was a nun in the Plum Village community, I went through a period of real existential crisis about what I should be doing with my life. I was considering whether to leave the

monastery, which was a huge question to be holding. I had spent my whole adult life in the monastic community, from age twenty-four to nearly forty.

At the time, I was at our center in Germany, where we were about to host two large retreats of about a thousand people each. I had been quite involved and engaged in those retreats for years, but I felt I couldn't stay this time because of how I was feeling. So I asked the sisters if I could go to Plum Village in France instead. They were not very pleased and said I needed to ask Thay.

I went to Thay and said, "I have no space inside, and I cannot see myself staying here for these retreats. It's too much for me." He heard me out quietly, which he would always do, and then said, "Yes, I hear all that you are saying, and you *can* stay here." In other words, you are capable of staying.

I pressed on, saying, "But it's so tight inside. I am totally up against a wall inside." He replied, "This is exactly the time when you take refuge in the basic practices of mindful sitting, breathing, and being aware of each step. Anytime you walk, you are aware you are taking this step; when you take a breath, you are aware you are taking this breath."

As I listened to him speak, something in me relaxed and I realized he was right. He was seeing a capacity in me that I couldn't see in myself. Something quickly shifted in me, and I realized that I could stay. He made it clear that I didn't need to be on the front

lines, facilitating a group, making announcements, and so on, but that I could just stay and be there with the sangha. I was willing to try.

After that, things suddenly seemed workable. They had given me a great gift with that teaching; my experience of both retreats was affirming, nourishing, and empowering. I did not have major responsibilities in the first retreat, but I was nourished by the energy of the sangha and participated in all the activities. By the second retreat I was ready to facilitate a group. I was once again in touch with how joyful and beautiful it is to be part of a large body of people practicing mindfulness; I realized I had the capacity to persevere and find my center in the very midst of crisis and confusion.

In those moments when it feels like there's no way to keep going, that whatever is happening is too much, how do we touch into that sense of space? If we can breathe in and out, putting our mind on our breathing, we create space. We slow things down and let our nervous systems recalibrate and center. The external situation may not change, but we have changed in relationship to our external situation. And—this may sound weird—we can also create more time. This feeling of pressure, of stress, of not having enough time—it's partly mind-made. It's our way of looking, our way of being, that creates this. We get in a rush, we feel pressured, and by simply stopping or pausing we can create some spaciousness. Time becomes fuller. When we meditate, focusing

on the present moment, we touch into a place that's only accessible in the present moment, which is not constrained by our ideas of time.

We can shift our experience of things by this basic practice of being with what is here and now. So much of the stress and the feeling of being overwhelmed comes from all that we are projecting onto the future, all the fear. But in this moment, right here, there is the ability to recognize fear, to be with fear, and to not be swallowed by it. There is non-fear, and we can touch that. But if we're running, then it's fear that's running the show. If we can stop, we have the chance to touch into something deeper than being overwhelmed.

In addition to centering ourselves in the present moment, another way to change our relationship to our external situation is to be in touch with joy. That's insight that we should go to the beach after 9/11 was about nourishing joy. What energizes us to keep going is our sense of joy, our freshness.

Author and gift economy advocate Charles Eisenstein tells a beautiful story about the power of joy in *The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know is Possible*. He describes a group of activists in Portugal who were becoming very burnt out. They were trying to address the most urgent issue, and one person suggested they would like to organize a sharing cooperative, like a time bank. This person was highly motivated and passionate about it. But the group squashed the idea because it was not the most urgent

thing, so this person's freshness was suppressed. Over time, the energy of the group began to decrease; they lost motivation, they lost hope, and they began to have more conflict with each other.

But they were intelligent and decided to pause and take a look at what was going on in their group dynamic. They reflected on how they were approaching their work for change and realized they needed to prioritize each other, their relationships, and take good care of each other. And they also needed to be doing what they loved.

So the group decided that anytime someone was not doing okay, they would stop and see how to take care of that person and keep them strong. They also decided they would no longer make the most urgent thing their priority. They returned to the ideas that people had shared that had gotten squashed, and they decided to support them. Then, interestingly, they began to get a lot more done. They were much more productive, much more successful in their work, and also much happier.

It's important to ask, how are we taking care of each other? This too is the practice of "There is no way to peace, peace is the way." Before every meeting, we can take a few mindful breaths. There are many companies, organizations, and schools that begin their meetings or classes with a bell so that everyone can take some mindful breaths and re-center themselves. It is beautiful to nourish this connection to each other by stopping in this way. It allows us to be a full human being, not looking at our phones all the time, feeling this constant, chronic internal pressure—the

sense of “I can’t actually be here because I need to be there.” That’s not being a full human being. In every interaction, can we stop and nourish ourselves? Can we look clearly, slow down enough to see each other, to see this person needs support, this person is about to burn out? Can we bring in elements of play, joy, humor, surprise, and appreciation?

As we work, it is also important to celebrate our successes and accomplishments throughout the process, not just when our project is complete. This keeps the freshness alive and keeps us connected to the goodness of our work rather than simply focused on some distant outcome at the end. It’s also true that there is no way to celebration, celebration is the way!

There is so much that needs to be done, so much suffering to respond to as humanity heads ever faster toward peril and destruction. If we are to help bring about peace and relieve this suffering, we must act and live in ways that create peace now, in each moment. Seeing with the eye of wisdom in our palm, we can act without expectation while nourishing our connection and joy. We must not forget to take care of ourselves and each other so that we don’t burn out. Sometimes, rather than letting urgency rule the day, that may mean pausing to go to the beach. We can deeply attend to our breath and our steps, knowing this will only strengthen us for the significant work ahead. ✨



A Guided Reflection on Bringing RAIN to Difficulty

Tara Brach discusses RAIN, a technique she frequently teaches to her students and also uses in her own life.

DEVELOPED BY Vipassana teacher Michele McDonald, RAIN stands for:

- Recognize what is happening
- Allow life to be just as it is;
- Investigate inner experience with kindness
- Non-identification.

Here's a guided reflection for applying RAIN in your own life.

Guided Reflection: Bringing RAIN to Difficulty

Sitting quietly, close your eyes and take a few full breaths. Bring to mind a current situation in which you feel stuck; one that elicits a difficult reaction such as anger or fear, shame or hopelessness. It may be a conflict with a family member, a chronic sickness, a failure at work, the pain of an addiction, a conversation you now regret. Take some moments to enter the experience—visualizing the scene or situation, remembering the words spoken, sensing the most distressing moments. Contacting the charged essence of the story is the starting place for exploring the healing presence of RAIN.

R: Recognize What Is Happening

As you reflect on this situation, ask yourself, “What is happening inside me right now?” What sensations are you most aware of? What emotions? Is your mind filled with churning thoughts? Take a moment to become aware of your “felt sense” of the situation as a whole. Can you feel how the experience is living in your heart and body, as well as in your mind?

A: Allow Life to Be Just as It Is

Send a message to your heart to “let be” this entire experience. Find in yourself the willingness to pause and accept that in these moments, “what is . . . is.” You can experiment with mentally whispering words like “yes,” “I consent,” or “let be.” You might find yourself saying yes to a huge inner no, to a body and mind painfully contracted in resistance. You might be saying yes to the part of you that is saying “I hate this!” That’s a natural part of the process. At this point in RAIN, you are simply noticing what is true, and intending not to judge, push away, or control anything you find.

I: Investigate with an Intimate Attention

Now begin to explore what you are experiencing more closely, calling on your natural interest and curiosity about your inner life. You might ask yourself, “What about this most wants my attention?” or, “What most wants my acceptance?” Pose your questions gently, with your inner voice kind and inviting.

Notice where you feel the experience most distinctly in your body. Are you aware of heat, tightness, pressure, aches, squeezing? When you have found the most intense part of your physical experience, bring it into your face, letting your expression mirror, and even exaggerate, what you are feeling in your body. What emotions are you aware of as you do this? Fear? Anger? Grief? Shame?

As you continue to investigate, you might find it helpful to ask, “What am I believing?” If this leads to a lot of thinking, drop it. But you might find that a very distinct belief emerges almost as soon as you ask. Do you believe that you are failing in some way? That someone will reject you? That you will not be able to handle whatever is around the corner? That you really are flawed? That you will never be happy? How does this belief live in your body? What are the sensations? Tightness? Soreness? Burning? Hollowness?

As before, send the message of “yes,” “I consent,” or “let be,” allowing yourself to feel the fullness or intensity of the difficult experience. As you contact and allow what is happening, what do you notice? Is there any softening in your body and heart? Can you sense more openness or space? Or does the intention to allow bring up more tension, judgment, and fear? Does it intensify or change what you are feeling?

Now ask the place of most difficulty, “What do you want from me?” or “What do you need from me?” Does this suffering part of you want recognition? Acceptance? Forgiveness? Love? As you sense what is needed, what is your natural response? You might

offer yourself a wise message, or an energetic, tender embrace. You might gently place your hand on your heart. Feel free to experiment with ways of befriending your inner life—whether through words or touch, images or energy. Discover how your attention might become more intimate and loving.

N: Non-identification: Rest in Natural Awareness

As you offer this unconditional, kind presence to your inner life, sense the possibility of relaxing back and being that awareness. Like an ocean with waves on the surface, feel yourself as the tender, wakeful openness that includes arising and passing sensations, emotions, thoughts. Can you sense how who you are is not identified by or hitched to any particular wave of fear or anger or hurt? Can you sense how the waves on the surface belong to your experience, but cannot injure or alter the measureless depth and vastness of your being? Take some moments, as long as you'd like, to simply rest in this spacious and kind awareness, allowing whatever arises in your body or mind to freely come and go. Know this natural awareness as the innermost truth of what you are. ✨

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Here at the End of the World

Grief, says **Joan Sutherland**, is a buddha—it's how we love in the face of loss.

THE UNITED NATIONS says that a million species could go extinct in the coming decades. What will that look like coming across our news feed? Imagine that the extinctions are announced one by one as they occur: How many alerts per day will that be?

We're entering a time of unimaginable losses, including the possible end of human life on Earth. If we hope to change this, we have to reckon with the fact that whatever we're doing now isn't working, since we're still headed for the cliff, and something is preventing most people from engaging with the emergency, despite all the warnings. It's possible that an important part of that something is a fear, conscious or unconscious, of the sorrow to come. How will we bear this grief? And won't grieving make it harder for us to act? But I'm wondering if it is not grief that weakens us, but all we do to avoid it. Perhaps we need, instead, to include it. Grieving won't keep us from acting, but it will change how we do so, in ways that make a great difference.

Grief has strengths that are different from anger's, as water is different from fire. Many contemporary cultures tend to valorize what some consider masculine traits over what some consider feminine ones, which means fiery virtues over watery: outrage over sorrow, assertiveness over receptivity. Is grief seen as

feminine? Does it feminize us to feel it, and is that one of the reasons some are afraid of it? Anger tends to *feel for* (I don't like what is happening to you and I want to change it), while sorrow tends to *feel with* (Your pain is my pain, and I care about it). Feeling for and feeling with complement each other. If we valued both, we'd be able to employ fire or water according to need. They could temper each other and combine in as-yet-unimagined and powerful ways. Each of us would be able to draw on more of ourselves in response to the crisis; each of us would have more with which to strengthen and console ourselves. We see the results of fiery action all around us, for good and for ill. I'm wondering if at least some of the burning rage so characteristic of our time is actually a defense against grief. I'm wondering if free-floating, unacknowledged sorrow is a larger influence in our communal life than we give it credit for. If that's true, perhaps we should spend some time with sorrow and grief and mourning, here at the end of the world.



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Grief is a buddha. Not something to learn lessons from but the way it is sometimes, the spirit and body of a season in the world, a season of the heart-mind. Grief is a buddha, joy is a buddha, anger is a buddha, peace is a buddha. In the koans, we're meant to become intimate with all the buddhas—to climb into them, let them climb into us, burn them for warmth, make love with them,

kill them, find one sitting in the center of the house. You're not meant to cure the grief buddha, nor it you. You're meant to find out what it is to be part of a season of your heart–mind, a season in the world, that has been stained and dyed by grief, made holy by grief.

A long time ago, a young woman is lost in mourning after the death of her husband. She leaves everything behind and goes to a monastery to ask for help. “What is Zen?” A teacher replies that the heart of the one who asks is Zen: her broken heart is the buddha of that time and place. She decides to stay and find out what that means. Sitting in the dark, the woman runs her fingers over the face of the buddha of grief, learning its contours. Over time, she discovers a kind of grace in that dark, with grief as her companion: a deep humility, a deep stillness, a deep listening.

In its Latin roots, grieving is related to being pregnant.

One day the woman hears the cry of a deer from a nearby stream. “Where is the deer?” the teacher asks. She listens, concentrated, ripe with something. “Who is listening?” The ripe thing bursts in her; the deer’s cry echoes through the trees and rises simultaneously from her own scarred heart. She is there, cloven hooves wet, and she is here, wondering—and everything is listening to everything.

Later she is at the stream with a lacquer bucket meant for flowers, only she fills it with water. She sees the moon’s reflection in the water: her grief radiant. Later still, she says, the bottom falls

out of her bucket: water and light soaking into the earth. All that wet: the stream, the watery moon in a bucket, the deer's moist eye, the woman weeping.

Her tears become a solvent for what is unyielding within, the defenses we erect to keep from feeling the pain of life all the way through—which also keep us from feeling its beauty all the way through. The tears soften, unstick, breach, topple, and fill. They run like water under the ice, and suddenly the frozen is flowing again.

Some people fear this kind of dissolving. *Will I still be me? Will I disappear or go mad? Will I be able to fight climate change?* If we begin this weeping, if we open ourselves to the pain and the poignancy and the terrible, wounded beauty of life on this Earth, perhaps we won't be able to stop, and we will drown.

We do not disappear, nor do we drown. Neither do we cry forever. But if from time to time these tears are called from us, they're no longer frightening; they are a small ceremony keeping us close to the world. They make us less brittle, more resilient. We weep because something is pouring in and we're overflowing, because it is impossible to say anything in some moments and it is equally impossible not to offer something back. The salt tears are remnants of our oceanic beginnings, and they are also the residue of the difficult sea we cross in this life. We contain both, the timeless depths and the waves washing over the fragile raft that carries us from birth to death.

The woman in the story, whose name is Mujaku, went on to accomplish great things, helping other women meet their own hearts. Generations of nuns wrote poems about her; one said that the water from her bucket filled many puddles. She was able to do this not because she found a way around her grief but because she went quiet inside and listened for what grief was asking of her. Her cry for help, the cry of the deer, moonlight pouring from a broken bucket—her grief spread further than the edges of her skin, belonged to more than her particular heart. And so did her awakening. As she was held, so could she hold. That is what awakening is.

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Grief is a form of love, how we go on loving in the absence of the beloved. It is the transformation of love through loss, and how we are initiated into a new world. Like all initiations, it begins with a purification. In the case of grief this can be particularly intense, because the loss of what we love is so intense: shock, memory, sorrow, rage, regret, tenderness, depression, gratitude, guilt, fear, numbness, longing, disappointment, betrayal, relief. We are scoured by gales, the old life stripped away. The grief of our time is a strange one, because in some part we're mourning what will disappear in the future. The loss won't be sudden and unexpected,

like a plane crash. We have predicted it, it will go on for a very long time, and, even as we mourn, we'll try to salvage as much as we can.

Eventually we might find our way into the eye of the storm, as Mujaku did. There's a difference, though. In Mujaku's time it was possible to love the natural world innocently; her awakening is entwined, in an ancient and uncomplicated way, with deer, stream, and moon through the trees. She could take something for granted we can't anymore, that the natural world will, eternally and self-sufficiently, be here to heal and open us. We can no longer love the Earth innocently like that, ignoring the effects of the way we treat it. How do we love now, past innocence? How do we stay with that love even when it near kills us with hurt?

Perhaps letting loss stain our love will help, because it will keep us closer to what's actually happening. Perhaps letting remorse stain our love will help us do what a genuine love must do now: acknowledge our debt.

Peter Hershock once said that in the Chinese koan tradition, remorse is the foundation of morality. He didn't elaborate, so I've carried his thought around with me since. As best I understand, remorse begins with listening without interrupting, and then feeling with, experiencing the pain I've caused as my own. The natural result is a desire not to do whatever it was again. And so remorse becomes inquiry: *How did this happen? How can I keep from repeating it? How can I make amends?*

This too is the activity of love. Grief is how we love in the face of loss, remorse is how we love when we've caused harm. How could they not be part of the work of this time? Right now it is difficult to imagine loving the future we believe is coming, but someday soon we will have to. How can we if we're still drenched in unacknowledged grief, if instead of attending to remorse, we're lost in guilt and denial?

We don't cry forever. Grief changes, growing from its wild beginnings into a kind of dignity. Remorse becomes a noble companion. They fit the season—as unexamined innocence no longer does, as outrage only partially can. We can't know from here what our love of what's coming will look like, but we can decide how we'll walk out to meet it. Right now we are so pregnant with the future, pregnant without entirely knowing what's about to be born. We're entering a great mystery together. We bring to this invisible ceremony our warrior skills, our hungers and our strivings, the genius of our minds—all the things that got us here—hoping we'll do something different with them this time. Perhaps we could also bring washed hearts humbled by what we have done, and a willingness to follow love wherever it takes us, as we step into the great ceremony of the rest of our lives. ✨