

The Essential  
Guide to  
**Working  
with Difficult  
Emotions**



LION'S ROAR



# LION'S ROAR

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**THEY CAN BRING US JOY** and make us suffer. They can empower or control us. They create confusion but their essence is wisdom. So much of our happiness depends on how we work with our emotions.

Buddhist practice helps us understand the energy of strong emotions, free ourselves from negative emotional patterns, and discover the wisdom in even the most difficult emotions. In this guide, Buddhist teachers offer insights and techniques to help us work with difficult emotions.



# CONTENTS

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## **The 4 Noble Truths of Emotional Suffering**

Anyen Rinpoche

## **You Can't Get Rid of Your Anger—and That's OK**

Josh Korda

## **How Does a Meditator Deal with Episodes of Major Depression?**

Narayan Helen Liebenson

## **Talk to Your Depression**

Josh Bartok

## **I Want to Tell You About Coming Apart and Struggling Through Depression**

Susan Moon

## **How to Work with Anxiety on the Path of Liberation**

Bruce Tift

## CONTENTS (CONTINUED)

---

### **The Wisdom in Dark Emotions**

Miriam Greenspan

### **How Do I Deal With Painful Thoughts of Revenge?**

Lewis Richmond

### **The Wisdom of Anger**

Melvin McLeod

### **Calling on Jizo: A Zen Response to Grief**

Dojin Sarah Emerson

### **The Nature of Fear**

Joseph Goldstein

### **Six Kinds of Loneliness**

Pema Chödrön

### **How Do I Put My Mind at Rest?**

Karen Maezen Miller



## The 4 Noble Truths of Emotional Suffering

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The Buddha laid out a four-step path to freedom from difficult emotions. The secret, says **Anyen Rinpoche**, is understanding why our emotions cause us so much suffering. Once we know that, the path to freedom becomes clear.

MOST OF US START to practice Buddhism because we feel dissatisfied and disillusioned with life, in a general way or for some specific reason. Indeed, it is rare to meet someone who has turned to the dharma simply out of curiosity and not because of a real need to alleviate some discomfort or a painful situation.

What else do we dharma practitioners have in common? The fact is that most of us have done everything we can to alleviate our unhappiness, but we have been unsuccessful at finding the happiness we thought possible. One reason is that we are often mistaken about the true cause of our unhappiness.

For example, we may think that our unhappiness stems from having to face a barrage of unwanted situations, even though we are making every effort to have the kind of life we want. Most of us know that at some level we can't control the people around us or the unfolding of events in our lives. But even when armed with this knowledge, we still experience a lot of pain and unhappiness.

## The Four Noble Truths of Emotions

In Buddhism we call this the first noble truth: *the truth of suffering*. I have met some Buddhists who want to avoid talking about the truth of suffering. They say it will discourage people from wanting to practice the dharma because it sounds depressing. They want to find some more uplifting way to describe the human experience.

But let's call a spade a spade. All of us are suffering every day in a multitude of ways—physically, mentally, and emotionally. And while we may feel happy about something in the moment, we never know how long it will last. Next year, next month, next week, tomorrow, or even five minutes from now, the very same situation might bring us sadness, anger, jealousy, or resentment. Our emotions change from moment to moment and bring with them a cascade of moods, feelings, and thought patterns—many of which increase our unhappiness and can be self-destructive.

Our emotions can really be a lot to handle. Many of us recognize that our emotions are out of control—or in control of us. We long for close, intimate relationships with others, but our feelings are often so overpowering that we can't find the way to open up to others and relate to their experience.

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Our emotions change from moment to moment and bring with them a cascade of moods, feelings, and thought patterns—many of which increase our unhappiness and can be self-destructive.

Because we are so focused on how we feel, we may become self-protective and defensive, constantly worried that others will hurt or take advantage of us. These feelings of self-protection can be part of an ongoing emotional cycle, feeding even stronger emotional reactions that cause chaos in our minds and in our interpersonal relationships.

In the Buddhist teachings, we call strong emotions like anger, attachment, jealousy, and arrogance “poisons.” They poison not just our own happiness but also our connections with loved ones, friends, coworkers, and our local community. Sound familiar? That's because we are human beings, and the truth of suffering cannot be avoided.



When we actually take a look at all of the problems our emotions cause us, we might be surprised. We usually put the blame for our unhappiness on things outside of ourselves, such as when we are treated or spoken to in a way we don't like. In that situation, our ordinary reaction is to resent the person we feel has wronged us.

But we should take some time to examine the truth of the matter. No matter how another person treats us, how difficult a situation might be, or which of our personal needs we feel wasn't met, we actually have the power to transform our own state of mind from resentment to peace and contentment.

When we reflect in this way, we see that it is actually our own emotions that are the problem. They are what is causing us so much pain. This is the second noble truth: *the origin of suffering*. We suffer because we do not know how to deal with our emotions and emotional reactions. We don't realize that blaming others for our own unhappiness can never bring us happiness, so we continue to deal with our problems in the same way we always have, which only brings more suffering.

We suffer because we continually choose to identify with and focus on how we feel. But identifying with our emotions is like throwing fuel on a fire. If we choose to identify with our anger, it will burn even hotter and take longer to die down. The same is true of the other poisons, such as attachment, jealousy, or arrogance. Identifying with our emotions is a sure recipe for even more unhappiness.

The truth of the origin of suffering can be freeing. We realize that at each and every moment, happiness is available to us if we choose to let go of our strong emotions and relax. This is the third noble truth: *the truth of cessation*. If we come to accept that our own emotions are the cause of our suffering, we can eradicate the attachment to and identification with them that causes us so much suffering.

Then we will be motivated to practice the dharma authentically and enthusiastically. This is the fourth noble truth: *the truth of the path*. All the masters of old tamed their emotions using the tools and techniques presented by the path of dharma. If we practice the path in the same manner they did, we can be sure that positive changes will come. And we can share those positive changes with the people in our lives.

## You Are What You Feel: A Formula for Unhappiness

Our suffering may look different from the sufferings of others, but all human beings experience painful emotions and unwanted situations. We all face separation from loved ones, falling out with friends, and the death of family members.

This may raise the question, “Is everyone all over the world full of emotional turmoil?” Actually, based just on my upbringing in Tibet, I would answer this question in the negative. Of course, we Tibetans have emotions just like every other human being, but

there are aspects of Tibetan culture that help Tibetan people handle their emotions in a way that makes them less dominating and demanding.

As a boy, whenever I was interacting with my family, my village, and my sangha, we always put our focus on others. The most important thing was not how each person felt individually, but how the group felt together. In Tibet, as well as many other Asian Buddhist cultures, there is much value placed on putting the happiness and well-being of the group above our own personal feelings. In that kind of cultural environment, it spoils the mood and the energy of the group whenever anyone focuses on themselves too much.

Many Americans comment on the joyful disposition of Tibetan people, especially when they travel to my home country. I believe this happy disposition comes from how we Tibetans enjoy our family and community connections and do not spend too much time focusing on our own personal emotions.

I did not realize that this was a unique aspect of Tibetan culture until I left Tibet. When I came to America more than ten years ago, I noticed the strong relationship Americans have with their emotions. People here focus on their emotions much more than we Tibetans do, and they are encouraged to do so. As a result of this, I have noticed that the way people do things here is quite the opposite of how we do things in Tibet. This culture places value on focusing on our own feelings more than the mood and energy of the people and situations happening around us.

What is the consequence of this way of relating to our emotions? First, it can cause us to be extremely sensitive. We react emotionally to almost everything and everyone around us. Emotions have become the core of American identity—almost literally, you are what you feel. Even the English language expresses this idea. We identify directly with the emotions, saying, “I am angry” rather than “I have anger,” as they do in other languages like Spanish. In the Tibetan language, we actually say, “Anger is present” and do not connect the emotion with “I” at all.

“Emotions have become the core of American identity—almost literally, you are what you feel... In the Tibetan language, we actually say, “Anger is present” and do not connect the emotion with “I” at all.

What is the problem with connecting our identity or ego—our very sense of self—with our emotional state of mind? In addition to all of the pain and suffering our emotions cause us when we focus on them, rehash them, and obsess about them, we also lose our ability to connect with others. We lose our compassion for others and have trouble understanding how they feel. We may express things that hurt the people we love without realizing our words are hurtful.

Our personal identity takes up a lot of space. We may have trouble relating to communities because of the demand to compromise our needs for the needs of others. Or we withdraw because we need to feel we have enough space to breathe and do not want to be influenced by the ideas, words, actions, and energy of others. Many people feel isolated, misunderstood, and lonely as a result.

In the end, we have done just the opposite of what we set out to do. We thought that protecting ourselves and paying attention to our feelings would make us happier, but actually, our unhappiness increased. In the dharma we have a saying, “All people desire happiness, but instead they chase after suffering.” When we reflect on our relationship with our emotions, we can see just how true this is.

The Buddhist path has tools that help us train our mind so we don't put so much energy into our emotional responses. By gradually reducing the focus we ordinarily place on our emotions, we begin to identify with them less. As we identify with our emotions less, we become more willing to let small situations go, and we begin to feel more relaxed. This starts a different kind of emotional cycle. As we start to see that letting small situations go actually brings us peace of mind and happiness, we become willing to let other situations go too. When we relax and let go, we identify with our emotions even less. When we identify with our emotions less, we are less self-protective, less emotionally reactive, and we feel happier.

## Meditation Practice: Changing Your Relationship with Difficult Emotions

How do you transform the relationship you have with your emotions? I suggest a few different techniques, all of which fall into the category of *lojong*, or *mind training*.

First, I suggest working diligently to develop mindfulness toward your emotional reactions. I am not suggesting that you identify with your emotional reactions, but simply try to notice how changeable your moods and feelings are.

One way you can do this is to contemplate the impermanent nature of life. By cultivating mindfulness, you notice the energy of your mind changing from moment to moment. In one moment you feel calm and relaxed, in the next agitated or afraid. You might feel comfortable sitting outside in the sunshine, only to notice five minutes later that the same sunshine is now burning us.

Our minds might jump from the past to the future, from here to somewhere across the planet, all in a matter of moments. Our emotions are unpredictable, momentary, and fickle. You should ask yourself: why am I so willing to believe that every feeling I have is true?

After you watch your mind for some time, you start to notice that sometimes your emotions arise as a reaction to a certain situation, and other times they arise for no apparent reason at all. You might be sitting on a cushion in a quiet room, with no one around, and suddenly feel angry or sad.

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Rather than looking for a cause or someone to blame for how you feel, notice instead how prone you are to certain types of emotional reactions.

One way we ordinarily react to this kind of emotional energy is to look for its cause—or for something to blame. However, as part of your lojong training, you can start to break the habit of linking your emotional feelings and reactions to outside causes. Rather than looking for a cause or someone to blame for how you feel, notice instead how prone you are to certain types of emotional reactions and how deep your emotional habits are. After all, you can have intense emotional feelings even when there is nothing present to trigger them.

As you begin to notice that you have certain dominant emotional habits and are prone to certain kinds of feelings, you begin to identify less with them. You can relax more and find more contentment in the moment.

All the masters of our Buddhist tradition have shown us that true happiness comes from pacifying our emotions and accepting the people and circumstances around us. When we feel relaxed, comfortable, and confident in ourselves, we no longer need to interpret unwanted circumstances as attacks on us. We can simply see the interplay of events, people, and circumstances around us and feel free to make the choices that suit us best. This is a step on the path to freedom. 🌸





## You Can't Get Rid of Your Anger— and That's OK

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Denying anger or giving in to it only makes things worse. The middle way, says **Josh Korda**, is to live with your difficult emotions skillfully so you don't harm yourself and others.

I'VE FOUND IT DIFFICULT to make any headway on the Buddhist path without encountering and working with difficult, agitating emotions—sadness, disgust, fear, and especially anger.

Anger is an agitated state of mind that can easily lead to hatred and violence if unchecked. Yet I don't believe it's possible to *get rid of anger*; it is a universal emotion deeply rooted in ingrained survival reactions. My goal is to *live with anger*—as well as other difficult emotions—in a skillful way so it doesn't cause harm.

How do I practice with anger in order to achieve that?

There are many types of anger. For example, there's the anger I feel after watching or reading about social injustice. The energy of this type of anger can be helpful. Taking action requires experiencing enough outrage that I'm compelled to volunteer, protest, or support the causes that address social injustice—without allowing my indignation to erupt into violence.

Another type of anger is made up of grudges that camouflage grief. I mentor many people who carry around unending resentments at those who've abandoned them, whether lovers, spouses, partners, parents, or family members. What I find is that harboring such resentment creates the illusion that we can protect ourselves from ever being abandoned again.

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As the son of an alcoholic father, I lived with my share of bitterness, which only blocked me from processing the deeper emotions of grief and sadness that needed care and attention.

Our underlying belief is that if we replay the events often enough in our minds, we'll be safe. But believe me, it's very possible to be wounded by others while being filled with resentments—that was the gist of my twenty years of alcohol dependence. As the son of an alcoholic father, I lived with my share of bitterness, which only blocked me from processing the deeper emotions of grief and sadness that needed care and attention. Fortunately I learned to work past the “unfairness of it all” through Buddhist therapy and Insight Meditation practice, in which I practiced recognizing the deeper, more painful, emotions.

Then there is the type of anger that erupts when we experience small indignities in daily life. Here are two examples of situations like that in which I failed, at first, to process anger in a skillful way.

A little while ago, I was riding my bike over the Williamsburg Bridge. There was only one person ahead of me on the Brooklyn-bound bike lane, and he was a good distance ahead. At one point I looked away from the path, and in the time it took for me to do so, he had gotten off his bike and put it down in a way that completely blocked the path.

He was now less than ten feet away from me. I screeched to a stop and inadvertently yelled, “Damn!” (which in Brooklynese is like saying a friendly hello). Maybe I gave him a quizzical look as I pedaled past, but nothing more. A moment later he yelled out in my direction, in the most sarcastic voice you can imagine, “I’m sorry if I ruined your night... *asshole!*”

I continued over the bridge in an agitated state—my shoulders almost touching my ears, my jaw locked, my thoughts caught in a self-righteous spiral. You see, when I experience some form of poor treatment, my mind provides, free of charge, an inner lawyer who delivers long speeches about how horrible the world is today, everything’s only getting worse, *blah blah blah*.

“ Anger and other emotions like fear are core survival impulses, and they will never be displaced by logic or reason or being told to just ‘go away.’

Then the revenge fantasies started up, with the creation of a series of perfect retorts that I visualized myself riding back and yelling at my night-ruiner. Then I heard yet another inner lawyer—this time apparently a Buddhist—argue back: “You should be above all this. You just taught a meditation class! Clearly, you’re doing your practice all wrong...” So my mind ping-ponged back and forth between “I’m going to tell that guy what’s what” and “I shouldn’t be feeling this angry.”

Anger, though, doesn’t pay attention to any such *shoulds*. Anger and other emotions like fear are core survival impulses, and they will never be displaced by logic or reason or being told to just “go away.” Such inner speeches are decoys, false refuges that keep us from feeling the actual, physical sensations of our emotions.

The experience of anger is difficult to sit with, and it can feel easier and safer to retreat into our heads and listen as our thoughts prattle on about the unfairness of life. But as I can attest, our resentments don’t alleviate our anger. After spending my childhood with a drunk, violent father, I carried outraged victimization stories around for years. All they did was continually reactivate my rage rather than relieve it.

Let's look at another example of poor emotion regulation. A few years back, I got a call from my bank: "Hello, Mr. Korda. We recently had a teller who revealed customers' PIN numbers to a known felon. Funds were subsequently emptied out of some accounts, and yours was involved. We're going to send you a form that you should fill out, and then wait to get your money back. And, we recommend that you purchase our identity-fraud protection plan."

I became furious and laid into this poor bank employee. But in addition to being unpleasant, my reaction was a complete waste of time and energy. All I needed to do was ask to speak to a supervisor. I eventually did and got everything sorted. My temper tantrum hadn't relieved any stress. Instead, I'd walked around furious for days afterward, feeling mistreated. And the decision to call and offer the identify-fraud program hadn't been the bank employee's choice—she was simply following protocol. All my venting provided was an illusion that I could externalize and thereby relieve my anger.

But it doesn't work that way. As the psychologist Jeffrey Lohr recently concluded after a meta-analysis of a wide variety of clinical studies, "Expressing anger does not reduce aggressive tendencies and likely makes it worse." In other words, when I'm venting I'm trying to externalize—to push outside of myself and onto someone else—feelings that are meant to be felt in my body.

Over the last decade of mentoring, not to mention my years in Buddhist therapy, I've learned that emotions are alleviated in only a couple of ways:

By *being felt*. Emotions seek our attention by creating physical sensations—the tight abdomen or chest, the pounding heartbeat, the contraction of throat muscles, facial expressions, shaking limbs, etc.—for us to feel. Emotions speak via the body, while thoughts speak in words.

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When someone mirrors our emotional state back to us—through words, a knowing smile, or other nonverbal indication—we feel relief.

Emotions are impulses from the unconscious, telling us that an event that affects our survival, or reminds us of an earlier threat or interpersonal disappointment, has occurred. These emotions/impulses also let us know that our subconscious minds have decided that something important has happened, and that we should pay attention to it.

And by being communicated. Human beings are social beings. Knowing that others understand what we're experiencing makes us feel less vulnerable.

It's possible to achieve some relief by expressing strong emotions in art, music, dance, writing, and so on, but nothing replaces direct communication: *You're feeling really hurt, wounded, lonely, sad, depressed. I get it. I'm here.* When someone mirrors our

emotional state back to us—through words, a knowing smile, or other nonverbal indication—we feel relief. Connection soothes our unconscious survival regions, telling us *You're okay, you're safe, others care about you.* (For more on this, see psychologist Matthew Lieberman's wonderful book, *Social.*)

For many years I relied on alcohol to freeze or get rid of my anger and other feelings. Drinking inhibits awareness of the emotional body, where the feelings of anger reside. Others seek out food, shopping, pornography, or other behaviors to distract themselves from the feeling of anger in the body

Eventually, though, the unacknowledged emotions build and force their way to the surface, and we vent them with even greater force. Have you ever met romantic partners who say they never argue, but then suddenly split apart? When we fail to acknowledge our disappointments and continually bury conflict, eventually huge battles and breakups ensue over minutia like whose turn it was to purchase toilet paper or clean the dishes. Unexpressed and unfelt emotions don't go away; they erupt or eat away at us.

In many of the Buddha's core teachings, he instructed practitioners to do anything they could to replace anger that leads to harmful behavior with skillful alternatives. "Hatred is never allayed by hatred; but only through non-hatred, which is the everlasting way," it says in the *Dhammapada*. Or, "Overcome your anger with the opposite of anger, as you overcome evil with goodness."

This is excellent advice when you might explosively discharge rage or aggression on another being. I find it helps relieve aggressive impulses if I extend my exhalations until they're twice as long as my in-breaths, while also mentally repeating a *metta* phrase to calm my mind, such as "May I feel loved, safe, and at ease." I may also visualize a place where I feel safe, such as a favorite park by the East River.



To properly process anger, we have to really face it.

But if I rely on self-soothing techniques for too long, they can turn into what psychologist John Welwood called a "spiritual bypass." That's when I'm using my spiritual practice to suppress my emotions like anger and avoid really addressing them. So I only employ breath, *metta*, or forgiveness practices to subdue immediate impulses that could lead to harm.

To properly process anger, we have to really face it. It's essential to feel and constructively express the feelings that come with difficult emotions. Look at the Buddha's story of "King Sakka's Demon." This demon fed on people's resistance and anger. One day the demon climbed onto the king's throne while he was away. Sakka's guards saw the little demon and yelled at it, "How dare you sit on the throne? This is an outrage!" As they yelled, the demon became a ferocious beast, breathing fire and terrifying the guards, who fled.



When King Sakka returned, he tried a different approach. He greeted the demon with kindness. “How can I make you feel comfortable?” he asked. “Can I offer you something to eat? Do you want to put your claws up on the table?” With each nicety, the demon shrank in size. It became smaller and smaller until eventually the king could easily remove it from the throne.

This story is, of course, a metaphor for the way to relate to our anger and other challenging emotions. If we try to get rid, repress, or *should* them, they only get stronger. The real practice is to do what Sakka did: turn toward the anger, make it comfortable, and create a safe place in the body where it can be felt.

When the time comes for communicating anger—which we do in the group practices I lead—I find there’s no real virtue in a blow-by-blow recollection of past grievances. Little soothing or alleviation occurs when we simply repeat the stories of our woundings, rather than express how we feel about them.

So the most I might say is something like, “A teller called me up; she informed me that thousands of dollars disappeared from my bank account; I yelled at her and now I don’t feel too good about that. I still feel angry.” Usually, the others will listen with empathy, compassion, and tolerance.

Finally, I’d like to add that all the emotion regulation in the world won’t help if we don’t develop and stick to adult boundaries or are in situations wherein harm is continually happening. We should never use spiritual practice as a way to avoid establishing and sticking to rules of conduct in our interpersonal lives.

My father and I spent a decade in family therapy working to develop a new relationship. He managed to change a great deal, but he never became capable of helping create a safe environment in which I could discuss certain topics, such as my work, without becoming harsh and judgmental. So I had to establish clear boundaries, not only with him, but also with myself: *I'm not going to discuss what I'm doing for a living with him, because it's not safe.*

### **Meditation Practice: Insight into Anger**

1. Bring to mind a frustrating interpersonal event. It can be anything that you found irritating, such as a small interaction or hearing unpleasant news. It should be something that, when you think about it, fills your mind with thoughts of how unfair or difficult life can be or how unhelpful others can be.
2. Instead of retelling the entire story in your mind, just hold a single image that best evokes the irritating nature of this experience. What you are doing here is inviting the emotion of frustration or disappointment to arise. At the same time, keep yourself comfortable, with your arms and legs relaxed.
3. Hold the provocative image in your mind and patiently activate your feelings of irritation, frustration, or disappointment until you can feel them stirring somewhere in the front of your body—in the belly, chest, throat, or face.

Try to create a welcoming environment for these feelings. Resistance only makes the anger stronger and more painful, and it will stimulate the “unfairness of it all” thought that get us nowhere. Create a space where the emotion can play out, without trying to get rid of anything.

4. Every time your mind tries to intervene and retell the story, or launches into criticisms or ideas about the way the world should be, bring it back again to the body. If you can locate feelings of frustration or disappointment in the body, you can send soothing, nurturing messages from the mind to the feeling itself: “It’s okay. You’re allowed to feel that way. You’re safe now.” Connect with the anger the way you would talk to a child you love and who is upset. It’s not the words that matter here. It’s the caring voice and calming awareness with which you greet your feeling that matters. 🌸



## How does a meditator deal with episodes of major depression?

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**Narayan Helen Liebenson:** Major depression is one of the more difficult situations one can encounter. My experience is that meditation can be beneficial, if practiced under the supervision of a skilled therapist or teacher.

I recommend *The Mindful Way through Depression* by Mark Williams, John Teasdale, Zindel Segal, and Jon Kabat-Zinn. Based on outcome research, this book is easy to read and useful, with sound guidance for how the tool of mindfulness can help one work with the thoughts and feelings that can fuel depression. Its limitation is that one has to be self-motivated, which is usually a problem when one is depressed. However, if the ideas, concepts, and practices can be worked with at times when one is not depressed, then perhaps they can be practiced during a depressive episode as well.

It may also be helpful to work with a teacher who knows this terrain personally, someone who has worked with it in their own experience. There is a Burmese teacher named U Tejaniya who talks about his own history of depression quite candidly and who used the practice of mindfulness to alleviate his suffering. He knows what a terrible mental and physical state depression can be, and he also knows that freedom from depression is possible.

I feel it is crucial to be open to anti-depression medication. Although times have changed and meditators these days do seem more open to taking medication when needed, it can still be a sticking point for some who think they should be able to free themselves without medication or think of themselves as “less than” for having to medicate, believing they should be able to rely solely on Buddhist practice.

This is not a wise and openhearted attitude. Antidepressants can be an enormously useful sacred medicine meant to balance that which is unbalanced. Taking them can be compassionate action, enabling someone who is incapacitated from this kind of suffering to meditate in a fruitful way. It is true that the issue of medication is complex and controversial, and that while antidepressants seemed some years ago to be a miracle of sorts, this is not always so. But for many, they are clearly helpful. ✿



## Talk to Your Depression

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**Josh Bartok** offers us an inner-dialogue practice for accessing more patience, courage, and acceptance in the face of depression.

CONNECTING TO THE REALITY of impermanence can be tremendously helpful in times of depression. When I am experiencing depression, one way I have of connecting to this is with the following inner dialogue, which I have come to think of as a kind of catechism of impermanence:

How do I feel? *I'm in a black pit of depression. Everything is terrible. I'll never recover.*

Is this the first time I have felt this way? No.

Was it permanent the last time I felt this way? No, *but this time it definitely feels permanent, so it's surely different.*

Is the first time I have been sure that this time is different? No.

Was it permanent when I felt that way before? No, *but this depression may be The Big One, the permanent one.*

Is this the first time I have thought that? No.

Was I right about that before? No.

Using this dialogue practice allows me to access more patience and courage. In short, it helps me develop deep acceptance.

But here's the tricky part: although there is absolutely no precedent whatsoever in my experience (or, indeed, in the history of the universe) that any kind of suffering is ever permanent, deep acceptance even includes accepting that this particular instance of suffering might actually be The Big One, the one that is, in fact, permanent. Of course, accepting that possibility is difficult and scary, but this catechism lets me be more patiently and calmly present with the particular pain and fear that's here now.

Working with my mind in this way allows me to call myself to this moment—to notice my stories of delusive certainty, to notice my predictions of a certain and permanent future, to notice my stories simply as stories. And noticing this, in turn, makes it more possible for me to do what needs doing. For me, this is an essential part of the practice of waking up, of not being taken in by Mara the Deceiver, especially when Mara arises inside my own head in the form of depression. 🌱



## I Want to Tell You About Coming Apart and Struggling Through Depression

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A moving account by **Susan Moon** of her journey back from depression, and how her Buddhist practice both helped and hindered her.

ALTHOUGH I SUFFERED from severe depression, I didn't call it that for most of the several years I was in and out of it. I thought depression was for lethargic people who stayed in bed all day. But my pain was as sharp as an ice pick. Restless in the extreme, I paced and paced, looking for a way out. The visible cause was the drawn-out and difficult end of a relationship with a lover. The invisible causes were old griefs and fears and other conditions unknown to me.

It's taboo to be depressed. When I was feeling really bad, I still went to work, though I was barely functional. If I had had the flu and felt a fraction of the pain I was in, I would have called in sick. But I couldn't call in "depressed." One day I threw a whole issue of the magazine I edit into the computer's trash can, thinking I was saving it. Then I emptied the trash. I had to hire a consultant to look for it in the virtual garbage, and eventually I got most of it back. But it was myself I wanted to throw in the trash.



Physical pain is hard to describe; psychic pain is even harder. I was in intense, moment-by-moment pain, and all I wanted was to get away from it. The pain was in the thoughts, which I didn't (and couldn't) recognize as just my thoughts. (As Buddha said, "When, for you, in the thought is just the thought, then you shall be free...") A voice in my head repeated what I took to be The Truth: I was completely alone, I would never again love or be loved by another person, I was nothing.

I spent hours every day on the phone. Once, during the 45-minute drive from my lover's home back to Berkeley, I had to stop and call a friend from a pay phone by the side of the road, so that I could drive the rest of the way, even though it was only fifteen minutes. Luckily she was home. "I just got off the Richmond Bridge," I sobbed. "I'm afraid I don't exist. My body's here, but there's nobody in it."

"You exist," she said. "How could I love you if you didn't exist? Come over right now and we'll take a walk on the Berkeley pier."

I've gained some understanding of what it must be like to have an invisible illness, like lupus or chronic fatigue syndrome. I wanted to wear a sign around my neck—I *might look okay, but I'm sick!*—so people wouldn't expect me to be functional.

I couldn't eat, a common symptom of depression. It wasn't just loss of appetite. Chewing itself was unbearable. A blob of bread was scary because it got in the way of breathing, and breathing was already hard enough to do. Liquids were more manageable. It occurs to me now that I'd regressed to the stage before I had

teeth, when the only kind of eating I could do was sucking. So I drank hot milk with honey, and Earl Grey tea. I lost a lot of weight, something I'm always trying to do when I feel "normal," but I was too downhearted to take any pleasure from it.

Like many other depressed people, I didn't sleep well. I clutched my pillow and called out to the flapping curtains for help. I took sleeping pills—sometimes they worked, sometimes they didn't. I couldn't read in the night (or during the day, for that matter) because I couldn't get past the fear to concentrate on anything.

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One of the worst things about being so depressed is that one becomes totally self-absorbed.

Waking in the morning was the worst of all. The moment consciousness returned, the pain came with it. *Oh no! I have to breathe my way through another day.*

I didn't like getting into the shower because I didn't want to be alone with my skin. To feel my own skin and imagine that nobody would ever touch it again was unbearable. Better to swaddle myself in layers, no matter what the weather, so the skin didn't have to notice it was alone. I remembered a pale young woman who had lived next door to me years earlier, who began to wear more and more layers of clothing—a skirt over her pants, a dress

over her skirt, a long shirt over her dress, then a sweater, a long coat, a cape, a hat—in Berkeley summer weather. Finally her father came and took her away to a mental hospital.

One of the worst things about being so depressed is that one becomes totally self-absorbed. I could hear other people only when they were talking about *me*: recommending homeopathic remedies for me, interpreting my dreams to me, telling me they loved me. During my depression, one of my adult sons had a serious bicycle accident, and my fear for his well-being snapped me out of my self-absorption for the five days he was in the hospital. I sat all night in a chair beside his hospital bed, hypervigilant, watching him sleep. I put a cool cloth on his forehead, I prayed to whoever might be listening, and I made a promise I couldn't keep: not to be depressed if only he would be all right.

He came home to my house from the hospital, with one leg in a full cast. It was summer. He sat on the back porch of the house he'd grown up in and I washed his back. One day I walked into the living room where he was reading on the couch, and he said, "My god, what's the matter? You look like a ghost!"

Dry-mouthed with panic, I told him I had to go see my lover; we had to decide *right then* whether to break up. "Do you think I should stay with him?" I asked.

My son looked at me with an expression I'll never forget—a mixture of despair and love. "I don't know how to help you any more," he said. "I don't think you should be driving in the state you're in. Why don't you just stay here and be my mother?"

But I couldn't. I drove out to see the man, compelled by an irrational sense of urgency, with my son's stricken face burning in my mind.

I had then been a Zen Buddhist practitioner for more than twenty years. I assumed that my meditation practice would steady me. What could be more comforting than forty minutes in the peaceful, familiar zendo, with the sweet smell of tatami straw matting? But it didn't help. This is something I want to say: at times it made things worse. The demons in my mind took advantage of the silence. They weren't real demons, but they didn't care; they tormented me anyway.

My Buddhist teachers urged me to keep on sitting zazen. "Don't turn away from your suffering," they said. "Just watch the painful thoughts arise and watch them pass away again."

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Bring your attention back to your breathing," my teachers had advised me. This was like telling a person on the rack, whose arms are being pulled out of her shoulder sockets, to count her exhalations.

When I sat down on a zafu, the painful thoughts arose all right, but if they passed away, it was only to make room for even more painful thoughts. *I'll die alone.* And, adding insult to injury: *After twenty years, I'm the worst Zen student that ever was.*

When I told my teachers I was disappointed that zazen didn't make me feel better, they scolded me. "You don't sit zazen to get something. You sit zazen in order to sit zazen. If you want zazen to make you feel better, it won't work." But didn't Buddha invent Buddhism in the first place to alleviate suffering? Did all those other people in the zendo *really* get up out of bed at five a.m. for no particular reason?

Still, I kept going back, hoping that if I meditated hard enough I'd have some sort of breakthrough. In the past, sitting in the zendo, I too had had the experience of watching my worries turn to dry powder and blow away. So now I signed up to sit *Rohatsu* sesshin, the week-long meditation retreat in early December that commemorates the Buddha's enlightenment. He sat down under the Bodhi tree and vowed not to get up until he saw the truth. It took him a week. I had sat many sesshins before, but maybe this would be my week.

The first day was bad. I cried quietly, not wanting to disturb the others. The second day was worse. Tears and snot dripped off my chin on to my breast. I hated myself. *Nobody else will ever love me!*

"Bring your attention back to your breathing," my teachers had advised me. This was like telling a person on the rack, whose arms are being pulled out of her shoulder sockets, to count her exhalations.

But I wasn't on the rack. I was in the zendo. Around me sat my dharma brothers and sisters, hands in their pretty mudras. As for my mudra, I dug the nails of my left hand deep into the palm of my right hand, feeling relief at the physical pain and the momentary proof of my existence. On the third day, during a break, I snuck away to a pay phone down the street and called my sister in Philadelphia. Choking on my own words, I told her I didn't know who I was. I wasn't exactly convinced by her reassurances, but just hearing her voice was some comfort.

The fourth day was worse yet. The distance between me and the people on either side of me was infinite, though their half-lotus knees were only six inches away from mine. I thought of the lover who wasn't going to be taking care of me after all. *I'm nobody*, I thought. *There's nobody here at all*. This feeling of no-self was supposedly the point of meditation, and yet I had somehow gotten on to the wrong path. While a nameless pressure mounted inside me, the people around me just kept sitting zazen. I couldn't stay another second. I left without getting permission from the sesshin director.

Driving away from the zendo in the privacy of my car, I shouted: "This is the worst day of my life!" (There would be other days after that when I would say it again: "No, *this* day is worse.") I drove into Tilden Park and walked into the woods, where no one could see me. I screamed and pulled my hair. I lay down on the ground and rolled down the hill, letting the underbrush scratch and poke me. I liked having leaves get stuck in my hair and

clothing. It made me feel real. I picked up a fallen branch from a redwood tree and began flailing myself on the back. The bodily pain was easier to bear than the mental pain it pushed aside.

But I scared myself. How could I be spending my sesshin afternoon beating myself with sticks in the woods? How had it come to this? I picked the leaves out of my hair and went home. The next morning, the fifth day, I called the Zen Center and said I wasn't feeling well—an understatement if ever there was one—and wouldn't be sitting the rest of the sesshin. I didn't sit zazen for some months after that.

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You'd think that it would be painless to have no self, because without a self, who was there to be in pain? And yet there was unbearable pain.

I thought I had failed in my practice—twenty years of it!—and I was bitterly disappointed in myself. Only after the depression subsided did I see what growth that represented: choosing not to sit was choosing not to be ruled by dogma, to be compassionate with myself, to take my spiritual practice into my own hands.

Buddhism teaches that we have “no fixed self.” There is nothing permanent about us. During the depression, I wasn't my “self,” as we say. I didn't seem to have a self at all, in a way that cruelly mimicked this central point in Buddhist teaching. You'd think that it would be painless to have no self, because without a self, who was there to be in pain? And yet there was unbearable pain. Like

a wind-up doll, I went stiffly through the motions of being Sue Moon, but there was no person present, no aliveness—only a battery that was running down.

I felt angry at Buddhism, as if to say: *You told me there's no fixed self, and I believed you, and look where it got me!* I knew the yang of it but not the yin—the balancing truth that there was no separation.

I couldn't have gone on like this indefinitely. I was tearing up the fabric of my life. As I was weeping to my friend Melody on the phone one afternoon, speaking my familiar litany, she suddenly shouted at me: “Stop it! You've got to save your own life! You've got to do it! Nobody else but you can save yourself, and you can do it! You just have to be brave. That's all there is to it.” This was an important phone call: she startled me into finding a stick of courage, and I held on to it by reminding myself of her words.

Still, the misery continued, and I finally decided to try medication. I consulted a psychiatrist, who prescribed Prozac. I took it for about a week and felt much worse, though I wouldn't have thought it possible to feel worse. The psychiatrist had me stop the Prozac and try Zoloft. I felt it kick in after a couple of days. I didn't feel drugged; I felt, rather, as though a deadly fog were lifting.



Zoloft is supposed to be good for people who have trouble with obsessional thinking, and I seem to be one of those. Zoloft did what zazen didn't do—it quieted the voices in my head: *I hate him. I hate myself.* It didn't shut them up entirely, but they weren't as loud and I was sometimes able to turn away from them.

I had a lot of resistance to taking medication. I thought my unhappiness had two parts: negative circumstances in the outside world, which Zoloft obviously couldn't fix, and negative attitudes inside my head, which I thought my Buddhist practice should take care of. Besides, an orthodox Zen voice whispered in my mind that the monks of old got along without Zoloft. But some of those monks probably obsessed their lives away in misery; others may have left the monastery because they couldn't concentrate. Buddhist history doesn't tell us about the ones who tried and failed, the ones with attention deficit disorder or clinical depression.

“ Taking Zoloft and stopping sitting were both acts of faith in myself.

I was learning to trust myself. Taking Zoloft and stopping sitting were both acts of faith in myself. So, too, I learned to construct my own spiritual practice. Every morning, as soon as I got out of bed, I lit a candle on my little altar and offered a stick of incense. I made three full bows, then stood before the altar, my palms pressed together, and recited out loud my morning prayers, starting with a child's prayer a Catholic friend had taught me:

*Angel of God, my guardian dear,  
To whom God's love commits me here,  
Ever this day be at my side  
To watch and guard, to rule and guide.*

It was comforting to ask somebody else, somebody who wasn't me, to help me. Prayer was something I missed in Zen practice as I knew it, so I imported it from Christianity and other Buddhist traditions. I prayed to Tara, Tibetan goddess of compassion, to fly down from the sky, all green and shining, into my heart. I prayed to Prajnaparamita, the mother of all Buddhas, who "brings light so that all fear and distress may be forsaken, and disperses the gloom and darkness of delusion." Then I took refuge in Buddha, dharma and sangha, saying the words out loud, whether I felt anything or not.

That I had shaped this practice for myself gave me confidence. And the early morning incense smoke, though it was thin and drifting, provided a hint of continuity for my days. They seemed, after all, to be days in the same life. One person's life—mine.

Now I can say this: there are times in life when nothing helps, when you just have to feel terrible for a while. All you can do is go through the agony and come out the other end of it. It's a gift, in a way, to hit the bottom (though it doesn't feel that way at the time). If you lie on the grass, you can't fall down.

There's a saying in Zen that "inquiry and response come up together." Perhaps that's what prayer is. To make an inquiry is already to get a response, because asking implies that there's something else there. And there's not even a time lag. The moment you're asking for help, you're already getting it, though it may not be the help you thought you wanted. Once, when I called Zen teacher Reb Anderson in despair, he came to Berkeley to see me. We sat on a park bench in a playground, and he told me, "The universe is already taking care of you." I said this mantra to myself over and over: "The universe is already taking care of me."

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I wasn't afraid to be alone with my skin because I wasn't alone; there was nothing, not the width of a cell, between me and the rest of the universe.

One late afternoon at the end of a hard summer, while I was visiting friends on Cape Cod, I walked barefoot and alone down the beach and into the salty water. There were no people about, so I took off my bathing suit in the water and flung it up on the sand. I swam and swam and felt the water touching every part of me. I was *in* it—no dry place left. I wasn't afraid to be alone with my skin because I wasn't alone; there was nothing, not the width

of a cell, between me and the rest of the universe. I did a somersault under the water and looked up at the shiny membrane above me. My head hatched into the light, and I breathed the air and knew that I would be all right. No, not *would* be, but *was already*. I was back in my life.

I'm more than two years out of the desolation, and I still don't know why I suffered so much, or why I stopped. I can neither blame myself for the suffering nor take credit for its cessation. I sit again—I mean on a zafu—but not as much as I used to. I also bow and chant and pray. I've stopped taking Zoloft, though I'd return to it without shame if I thought it would be useful.

I practice curiosity. What is it to be born a human being? What does it mean to be embodied in your separate skin? There are many other (and more reliable) paths out of the delusion of separation besides having a boyfriend—things like writing and swimming, for example. And most of all, there's studying this human life. You could call it buddhadharma, or you could call it something else. It doesn't matter.

I now admit that I sit zazen for a reason: I want to understand who I am (if anybody), and how I'm connected to the rest of it. And yes, I want to stop suffering and I want to help others stop

suffering. When I was in despair, time passed slowly, so slowly. Now it sweeps by faster and faster, gathering momentum. The shortness of life stuns me. ❁

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*Please note that clinical depression is a medical condition. This article is not intended to provide or replace treatment options for those who may suffer from clinical depression or other forms of mental illness.*

*If you are in need of help, you can call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255) to access free, 24/7 confidential service for people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress, or those around them. The Lifeline provides support, information, and local resources. You can also text the Crisis Text Line at 741-741 for free 24/7 support with a trained crisis counselor right away.*



## How to Work with Anxiety on the Path of Liberation

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Anxiety is actually a necessary part of our path. Psychotherapist **Bruce Tift** gives an instruction in how to relate to it constructively.

WHEN WE INVESTIGATE the experience of anxiety, the Western approach takes the experience itself as its starting point. What triggered the anxiety? How can we work with it? How can we make it go away?

We can never solve our lives. Life is not a thing that can be broken and then fixed. Life is a process, and we can never solve a process. We can only participate in this process, either consciously or unconsciously. We aren't going to find the perfect formula and then coast our way through life. We can't make pain go away, although we can reduce unnecessary suffering significantly. The more deeply we investigate, the less we can grasp or even know this apparent self that Western psychology takes as its foundation. From the Buddhist perspective, the nature of life—and of our own mind—is basically open. There is no foundation; no ground to stand on. We can consciously participate in this open nature, but we can't know it.

“We really might want to consider committing to the experience of anxiety, because it’s not going anywhere.

From this point of view, we can see that anxiety is actually a necessary part of our path. As we move in the direction of waking up, increasing our tolerance of more and more awareness or open mind, we will inevitably experience anxiety. At some point or another, anybody committed to a spiritual path may find it important to commit to the experience of anxiety as an approximation of an open state of mind.

When I say “committing to our anxiety,” I mean doing the difficult work—difficult because it goes against both our biology and our cultural conditioning—of training ourselves *not* to try to escape our anxious feelings. It even means to learn to appreciate them, explore them, feel them, and see for ourselves whether they are as much of a problem as we think they will be. If anxiety is *not* a problem and if we understand that it’s actually an essential part of our path of waking up, then we might want to practice this attitude of commitment. “I am ready to feel anxious at any second,” we might say to ourselves, “and to work with the energy of anxiety for the rest of my life. I give up my fantasy of a life free of anxiety.”

If anxiety is our egoic response to the truth of not knowing—or of openness, as I like to think of it—then we really might want to consider committing to the experience of anxiety, because it's not going anywhere.

## Giving yourself permission to feel your anxiety

If you would like to try this practice, decide which feeling you're going to work with. Ideally you will choose an underlying issue that you really don't like to feel—something like abandonment, shame, low self-worth, dependency, guilt, or anxiety.

Once you've decided on your issue, take a moment to settle in. If you're sitting down, feel the weight of your body in the chair. Then begin to pay attention to your breath, feeling both the inhale and the exhale. Once you're present, start dialoguing with yourself.

Say out loud, "I give myself permission to feel [this feeling that you really don't like to feel] off and on for the rest of my life." Accept this feeling as if it were already a legitimate part of who you are. As you invite this feeling, try to bring your attention out of any interpretation into whatever raw sensation is happening. For example, many people find that the torso is the location where they feel emotional intensity. Check it out and see if there's any agitation there. Perhaps you feel numb from the neck down; perhaps there is some sense of tingling in your hands, or aching or fullness or lightness somewhere in your body. Perhaps the experience permeates your whole body. Or maybe you don't have any



awareness of sensations except behind your eyes. It doesn't really matter what you discover. The point is to be willing to direct your attention toward your experience at the level of sensation.

Next, ask yourself whether this sensation you're feeling is actually a threat in any way. Are you going to die from feeling a ball of pressure in your stomach or a hollowed-out chest or a heavy heart? Is the burning sensation in your solar plexus actually dangerous? Will the tension in your belly or your throat actually constrict you enough to kill you?

If you find that experiencing these sensations is not harmful, even if they are disturbing, then experiment with a commitment to having a relationship with these sensations, perhaps for the rest of your life. What feelings arise when you think of this? What sensations?

The point of this exercise is to see for yourself whether it is, in fact, a problem to feel the sensations you've organized your life around not feeling. ✨

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From *Already Free: Buddhism Meets Western Psychotherapy on the Path of Liberation* by Bruce Tift, published by Sounds True.



## The Wisdom of Dark Emotions

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Grief, fear and despair are part of the human condition. Each of these emotions is useful, says psychotherapist **Miriam Greenspan**, if we know how to listen to them.

I WAS BROUGHT TO THE PRACTICE of mindfulness more than two decades ago by the death of my first child. Aaron died two months after he was born, never having left the hospital. Shortly after that, a friend introduced me to a teacher from whom I learned the basics of Vipassana meditation: how to breathe mindfully and meditate with “choiceless” awareness. I remember attending a dharma talk in a room full of fifty meditators. The teacher spoke about the Four Noble Truths. Life is inherently unsatisfactory, he said. The ego’s restless desires are no sooner fulfilled than they find new objects. Craving and aversion breed suffering. One of his examples was waiting in line for a movie and then not getting in.

I asked: “But what if you’re not suffering because of some trivial attachment? What if it’s about something significant, like death? What if you’re grieving because your baby was born with brain damage and died before he had a chance to live?” I wept openly, expecting that there, of all places, my tears would be accepted.

The teacher asked, “How long has your son been dead?” When I told him it had been two months, his response was swift: “Well then, that’s in the past now, isn’t it? It’s time to let go of the past and live in the present moment.”

I felt reprimanded for feeling sad about my son’s death. The teacher’s response baffled me. Live in the present? My present was suffused with a wrenching sorrow—a hole in my heart that bled daily. But the present moment, as he conceived of it, could be cleanly sliced away from and inured against this messy pain. Divested of grief, an emotionally sanitized “present moment” was served up as an antidote for my tears. However well meaning, the message was clear: Stop grieving. Get over it. Move on.

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I felt reprimanded for feeling sad about my son’s death. The teacher’s response baffled me. Live in the present? My present was suffused with a wrenching sorrow.

This is a familiar message. Its unintended emotional intolerance often greets those who grieve, especially if they do so openly. I call this kind of intolerance “emotion-phobia”: a pervasive fear and reflexive avoidance of difficult emotions in oneself and/or others. This is accompanied by a set of unquestioned normative beliefs about the “negativity” of painful feelings.

Emotion-phobia is endemic to our culture and perhaps to patriarchal culture in general. You'll find it in sub-cultures as different as spiritual retreats, popular self-help books and psychiatric manuals. In fact, my teacher's supposedly Buddhist response was very much in line with the prevailing psychiatric view of grief. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual IV (the "bible" of psychiatry), the patient who is grieving a death is allotted two months for "symptoms" such as sadness, insomnia and loss of appetite before being diagnosable with a "Major Depressive Disorder." Grief, perhaps the most inevitable of all human emotions, given the unalterable fact of mortality, is seen as an illness if it goes on too long. But how much is too long? My mother, a Holocaust survivor, grieved actively for the first decade of my life. Was this too long a grief for genocide? Time frames for our emotions are nothing if not arbitrary, but appearing in a diagnostic and statistical manual, they attain the ring of truth. The two month limit is one of many examples of institutional psychiatry's emotion-phobia.

Emotions like grief, fear and despair are as much a part of the human condition as love, awe and joy. They are our natural and inevitable responses to existence, so long as loss, vulnerability and violence come with the territory of being human. These are the dark emotions, but by dark, I don't mean that they are bad, unwholesome or pathological. I mean that as a culture we have kept these emotions in the dark—shameful, secret and unseen.

Emotion-phobia dissociates us from the energies of these emotions and tells us they are untrustworthy, dangerous and destructive. Like other traits our culture distrusts and devalues—vulnerability, for instance, and dependence—emotionality is associated with weakness, women and children. We tend to regard these painful emotions as signs of psychological fragility, mental disorder or spiritual defect. We suppress, intellectualize, judge or deny them. We may use our spiritual beliefs or practices to bypass their reality.

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Few of us learn how to experience the dark emotions fully—in the body, with awareness—so we end up experiencing their energies in displaced, neurotic or dangerous forms.

Few of us learn how to experience the dark emotions fully—in the body, with awareness—so we end up experiencing their energies in displaced, neurotic or dangerous forms. We act out impulsively. We become addicted to a variety of substances and/or activities. We become depressed, anxious or emotionally numb, and aborted dark emotions are at the root of these characteristic psychological disorders of our time. But it's not the emotions themselves that are the problem; it's our inability to bear them mindfully.

Every dark emotion has a value and purpose. There are no negative emotions; there are only negative attitudes towards emotions we don't like and can't tolerate, and the negative consequences of denying them. The emotions we call "negative" are energies that get our attention, ask for expression, transmit information and impel action. Grief tells us that we are all interconnected in the web of life, and that what connects us also breaks our hearts. Fear alerts us to protect and sustain life. Despair asks us to grieve our losses, to examine and transform the meaning of our lives, to repair our broken souls. Each of these emotions is purposeful and useful—if we know how to listen to them.

But if grief is barely tolerated in our culture, even less are fear and despair. The fact is we are all afraid and act as if we're not. We fear the sheer vulnerability of existence; we fear its unpredictability. When we are unable to feel our fear mindfully, we turn it into anger, psychosomatic ailments or a host of "anxiety disorders"—displacements of fears we can't feel or name.

According to experts, some 50 million people in this country suffer from phobias at some point in their lives, and millions more are diagnosed with other anxiety disorders. One reason is that we've lost touch with the actual experience of primal, natural fear. When fear is numbed, we learn little about what it's for—its inherent usefulness as an alarm system that we ignore at our peril. Benumbed fear is especially dangerous when it becomes an

unconscious source of vengeance, violence and other destructive acts. We see this acted out on the world stage as much as in the individual psyche.

As for despair, how many among us have not experienced periods of feeling empty, desolate, hopeless, brooding over the darkness in our world? This is the landscape of despair. Judging from my thirty years of experience as a psychotherapist, I would say that despair is common, yet we don't speak of despair anymore. We speak of clinical depression, serotonin-deficiency, biochemical disorder and the new selective serotonin-reuptake inhibitors. We treat the "illness" with a host of new medications. In my view, "depression" is the word we use in our highly medicalized culture for a condition of chronic despair—despair that is stuck in the body and toxified by our inability to bear it mindfully. When we think of all despair as a mental disorder or a biochemical illness, we miss the spiritual metamorphosis to which it calls us.



Dark emotions are profound but challenging spiritual teachers.

In retrospect, a more helpful answer from my meditation teacher (and one more in line with the Buddha's teachings) might have been, If you are grieving, do so mindfully. Pay attention to your grief. Stop and listen to it. Befriend it and let it be. The dark emotions are profound but challenging spiritual teachers, like the Zen master who whacks you until you develop patience and

spiritual discipline. When grief shattered my heart after Aaron's death, that brought with it an expansion, the beginning of my experience of a Self larger than my broken ego. Grieving mindfully—without recourse to suppression, intellectualization or religious dogmatism—made me a happier person than I'd ever been.

What I learned by listening closely to grief was a transformational process I call “the alchemy of the dark emotions.” Many years after Aaron's death, after a second radiantly healthy child and a third who was born with a mysterious neuromotor disorder, I began to write about these alchemies—from grief to gratitude, fear to joy, and despair to faith—that I had experienced in my own life and witnessed countless times in my work as a psychotherapist.

The alchemy of the dark emotions is a process that cannot be forced, but it can be encouraged by cultivating certain basic emotional skills. The three basic skills are attending to, befriending and surrendering to emotions that make us uncomfortable. Attending to our dark emotions is not just noticing a feeling and then distancing ourselves from it. It's about being mindful of emotions as bodily sensations and experiencing them fully. Befriending emotion is how we extend our emotional attention spans. Once again, this is a body-friendly process—getting into the body, not away from it into our thoughts. At the least, it's a process of becoming aware of how our thoughts both trigger emotions and take us away from them. Similarly, surrender is not about letting



go but about letting be. When you are open to your heart's pain and to your body's experience of it, emotions flow in the direction of greater healing, balance and harmony.

“When you are open to your heart's pain and to your body's experience of it, emotions flow in the direction of greater healing.

Attending to, befriending and surrendering to grief, we are surprised to discover a profound gratitude for life. Attending to, befriending and surrendering to fear, we find the courage to open to our vulnerability and we are released into the joy of knowing that we can live with and use our fear wisely. Attending to, befriending and surrendering to despair, we discover that we can look into the heart of darkness in ourselves and our world, and emerge with a more resilient faith in life.

Because we are all pretty much novices at this process, we need to discipline ourselves to be mindful and tolerant of the dark emotions. This is a chaotic, non-linear process, but I have broken it down to seven basic steps: 1) intention, 2) affirmation, 3) sensation, 4) contextualization, 5) the way of non-action, 6) the way of action and 7) the way of surrender.

### **1. Intention**

Intention is the means by which the mind, heart and spirit are engaged and focused. Transforming the dark emotions begins when we set our intention on using our grief, fear and despair for the purpose of healing. It is helpful to ask yourself: What is my best intention with regard to the grief, fear and despair in my life? What would I want to learn or gain from this suffering?

### **2. Affirmation**

The second step in using the dark emotions for growth is affirming their wisdom. This means changing the way we think about how we feel, and developing and cultivating a positive attitude toward challenging feelings.

### **3. Sensation**

Emotional intelligence is a bodily intelligence, so you have to know how to listen to your body. The step I call “sensation” includes knowing how to sense and name emotions as we experience them in the body. We need to become more familiar and friendly with the actual physical sensations of emotional energy. Meditation, T'ai chi, yoga and other physical practices that cultivate mindfulness are particularly useful. How does your body feel when you are sad, fearful or despairing? What kinds of stories

does your mind spin about these emotions? What happens when you simply observe these sensations and stories, without trying to understand, analyze or change anything?

#### **4. Contextualization**

In step four, contextualization, you acquaint yourself with the stories you usually tell yourself about your emotional suffering, and then place them in a broader social, cultural, global or cosmic context. In enlarging your personal story, you connect it to a larger story of grief, fear or despair in the world. This gets us out of the isolation and narcissism of our personal history, and opens us to transforming our suffering into compassion.

#### **5. The way of non-action**

Step five, the way of non-action, is the skill that psychologists call “affect tolerance.” This step extends our ability to befriend the pain of the dark emotions in the body. When you can tolerate the pain of grief, fear and despair without acting prematurely to escape it, you are practicing the way of non-action. Again, it is helpful to meditate on your emotions with the intention of really listening to them. What does your grief, fear or despair ask of you? In meditation, listen to the answers that come from your heart, rather than from your analytic mind.

## 6. The way of action

The dark emotions ask us to act in some way. While the way of non-action builds our tolerance for dark emotional energy, step six is about finding an action or set of actions that puts this energy to good use. In the way of action, we act not in order to distract ourselves from emotion but in order to use its energy with the intention of transformation. The dark emotions call us to find the right action, to act with awareness and to observe the transformations that ensue, however subtle. Action can be strong medicine in times of trouble. If you are afraid, help someone who lives in fear. For example, volunteer at a battered women's shelter. If you're sad and lonely, work for the homeless. If you're struggling with despair, volunteer at a hospice. Get your hands dirty with the emotion that scares you. This is one of the best ways to find hope in despair, to find connection in a shared grief and to discover the joy of working to create a less broken world.

## 7. The way of surrender

Finally, step seven, the way of surrender, is the art of conscious emotional flow. Emotional flow is something that happens automatically when you know how to attend to and befriend your emotions. When we are in flow with emotion, the energy becomes transformative, opening us to unexpected vistas.

When we look deeply into the dark emotions in our lives, we find both the universality of suffering and how much suffering is unnecessary, the result of social inequities, oppression, large scale violence and trauma. Our awareness both of the universality of suffering and of its socially created

manifestations is critical to the healing journey. Knowing how our grief, fear and despair may be connected to larger emotional currents and social conditions de-pathologizes these emotions, allowing us to accept and tolerate them more fruitfully, and with more compassion for ourselves and others. We begin to see the dark emotions as messengers, information-bearers and teachers, rather than “negative” energies we must subdue, tame or deny. We tend to think of our “negative” emotions as signs that there’s something wrong with us. But the deepest significance of the feelings is simply our shared human vulnerability. When we know this deeply, we begin to heal in a way that connects rather than separates us from the world. 🌱



## How Do I Deal with Painful Thoughts of Revenge?

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You needn't give harbor to thoughts of ill will, says **Lewis Richmond**, no matter how justified they seem to be.

**Question:** Someone did a real wrong to me recently and now I'm haunted by thoughts of revenge. Although I think they deserve it, I know I shouldn't try to hurt them back. How do I deal with these painful thoughts of revenge while still recognizing the harm that was done to me?

**Answer:** This situation is quite human. Revenge seems to offer relief, and we are tempted to believe it will help us. As Thrangu Rinpoche, a contemporary Mahamudra master, says, "We think we *deserve* this anger, we think we have a *right* to this anger."

You have already realized that this attitude is not wholesome. In this way you are honoring the Buddhist precept not to "harbor ill will." But deep ego (the unconscious) keeps bringing ill will up. It knows that it has been wounded and legitimately wants to be healed.

Loving-kindness can help, particularly when directed to yourself: “May I be filled with loving-kindness; may I be free from this suffering.” That can be your prayer—you can say it and think it. Deep ego, like a distressed child, appreciates this comfort.

The lasting way to liberate an instance of ill will is to see directly into its empty nature. My teacher, Suzuki Roshi, taught that when we breathe out, we can let go of affliction; with the next inhale we can start over with a clear, pure mind. For one breath, anyway, revenge disappears. And each time it arises, it can disappear again. Over time it may disappear altogether.

Suzuki Roshi called this practice “beginner’s mind,” and said it was the secret of all Zen practice. Seeing the empty nature of phenomena is the touchstone of all Buddhism, but for it to really heal our afflictions it has to be more than a doctrine or idea. We have to practice it, in meditation and in life. In that way even revenge can be our teacher. 🌸



## The Wisdom of Anger

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If you know how to use it, says **Melvin McLeod**, the energy of anger becomes fierce and compassionate wisdom. Because even the buddhas get angry about suffering and injustice.

IS ANGER AN EMPOWERING and appropriate response to suffering and injustice, or does it only cause more conflict? Is it skillful or unskillful? Does it help or hurt?

With so many bad things happening in the world these days, there's a lot of debate about the proper role of anger. The answer may lie in the fundamental distinction Buddhism makes between anger and aggression.

According to Buddhism, aggression is one of the “three poisons” that drive our suffering. Even a brief moment of reflection on our own lives, our society, and human history will confirm that aggression is the greatest cause of destruction and suffering.

As with the other two poisons—ignorance and passion—what defines aggression is ego. Aggression is the energy of anger in the service of all we define as “self,” ready to attack anyone and anything we deem a threat. But when anger is released from its service to ego, it ceases to be aggression and simply becomes energy. The pure energy of anger has wisdom and power. It can even be enlightened.



## The Buddhas Are Angry

The buddhas are not just the love-and-light people we like to think they are. Of course, their enlightened mind is grounded in total peace, but in that open space compassion spontaneously arises. It has many manifestations. One is the pure energy of anger.

Anger is the power to say no. This is our natural reaction whenever we see someone suffer—we want to stop it. The buddhas say no to the three poisons that drive injustice. They are angry about our suffering and they will happily destroy its causes. They aren't angry *at* us. They're angry *for* us.

Traditionally, it is said that the buddhas' compassion expresses itself through four types of energy. These are called skillful means, the different ways wisdom and compassion go into action to relieve suffering.

First, the buddhas can *pacify*, helping suffering beings quench the flames of aggression, passion, and ignorance. The calm and pacifying buddha is the one we're most familiar with, whose image brings a feeling of peace to millions around the world.

But sometimes more is needed. So the buddhas can *enrich* us, pointing out the wealth of resources we possess as human beings and healing our inner sense of impoverishment. Then, if need be, they can *magnetize* us, seducing us away from the suffering of ego to the joy of our inherent enlightened nature.



In its pure, awakened form, when it is not driven by ego, anger brings good to the world.

Finally, there are times when the compassionate thing is to *destroy*. To say “Stop!” to suffering. To say “Wake up!” to the ways people deceive themselves. To use the energy of anger to say “No!” to all that is selfish, exploitive, and unjust.

In its pure, awakened form, when it is not driven by ego, anger brings good to the world. In our personal lives, it helps us be honest about our own foibles and have the courage to help others see how they are damaging themselves. On a bigger scale, anger is the energy that inspires great movements for freedom and social justice, which we need so badly now. It is a vital part of every spiritual path, for before we can say yes to enlightenment, we must say no to the three poisons.

The energy of anger is an inherent part of our nature—we can no more have *yes* without *no* than light without dark. So we need a way to work with the energy of anger so it doesn’t manifest as aggression, as well as methods to tap its inherent wisdom. We need a profound understanding of where aggression comes from, how it differs from anger, and a practical path to work with it. That path begins where all healing begins.

## First, Do No Harm

Most of us aren't physically violent, but almost all of us hurt other people with aggressive words and harsh emotions. The sad part is that it's usually the people we love most whom we hurt. We can also acquiesce in or implicitly support social evils and injustice through our silence, investments, or consumption habits.

Buddhism, like all religions, offers guidelines to help us restrain ourselves. We may not like rules and limitations, but the morals, ethics, and decorum taught directly by the Buddha are guides to doing no harm.

The principle of right conduct applies to acts of body, speech, and mind. Guided by the inner attitudes of gentleness and awareness, we monitor what arises in the mind moment by moment and choose the wholesome, like peace, over the unwholesome, like aggression.

Buddhism teaches helpful meditation techniques so we are not swept away by the force of conflicting emotions like aggression. These techniques allow us to take advantage of the brief gap in the mind between impulse and action. Through the practice of mindfulness, we become aware of impulses arising and allow a space in which we can consider whether and how we want to act. We, not our emotions, are in control.

## I'm in Pain, You're in Pain

Without excusing or ignoring anything, it's helpful to recognize that aggression is usually someone's maladapted response to their own suffering. That includes us and our aggression. So caring for ourselves and cultivating compassion for others are two of the best ways to short-circuit aggression.

We are suffering beings, and we don't handle it well. We try to ease our pain and only make it worse. The practices of mindfulness and self-care give us the strength and space to experience our suffering without losing our stability and lashing out. And when we are targets of aggression ourselves, knowing it may come out of the other person's pain helps us respond skillfully.

## Without Suppressing or Acting Out

Fear and shame distort the basic energy of anger and create suffering. We fear that intense emotions like anger will overwhelm us and make us lose control. We're ashamed that such "negative" emotions are part of our makeup at all. So we protect ourselves against the energy of anger by either suppressing it or acting it out. Both are ways to avoid experiencing the full intensity of emotion. Both are harmful to ourselves and others.

What we need is the courage to rest in the full intensity of the energy inside us without suppressing or releasing it. This the key to the Buddhist approach to working with anger. When we

have the courage to remain present with our anger, we can look directly at it. We can feel its texture and understand its qualities. We can investigate and understand it.

What we discover is that we are not actually threatened by this energy. We can separate the anger from our ego and storyline. We realize that anger's basic energy is useful, even enlightened. For in its essence, our anger is the same as the buddhas'.

## Discovering the Wisdom of Anger

We have the same power to say no that the buddhas do. Traditionally, it is said that the enlightened energy of anger is the wisdom of clarity. It is sharp, accurate, and penetrating insight. It sees what is wholesome and unwholesome, what is just and unjust, what is enlightenment and what is ignorance. Seeing clearly, we lay the ground for action.



In our basic nature, we are enlightened and our anger is really wisdom.

We all experience the wisdom of anger when we see how society mistreats people. When we have an honest insight into our own neuroses and vow to change. When we are inspired to say no to injustice and fight for something better. This wisdom is a source of strength, fearlessness, and solidarity. It can drive positive change.

If Buddhism offers us one piece of good news it is this: in our basic nature, we are enlightened and our anger is really wisdom. The confused and misdirected aggression that causes such suffering is just temporary and insubstantial.

When the energy of anger serves ego, it is aggression. When it serves to ease others' suffering and make the world a better place, it is wisdom. We have the freedom to choose which. We have the power to transform aggression into the wisdom of anger. There is no greater victory, for us and for the world. 🌱



## Calling on Jizo: A Zen Response to Grief

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In Japan, Jizo Bodhisattva is the “guardian of children who have died.” Zen priest and grief counselor **Dojin Sarah Emerson** recalls how the Jizo Ceremony helped after the death of her daughter.

*“Homage to Jizo Bodhisattva, protector of those crossing over, guardian of children who have died, comforter of loved ones struggling on the path of crossing over from this life and those who grieve their deaths; homage to your great vow and to the fearlessness you illuminate and inspire in those who grieve; and deep gratitude for the balm and healing your fierce love illuminates in this world of striving and love and suffering.”*

There is a ritual that, over the years, I have come to participate in often. I know it as the Jizo ceremony, or the “Ceremony for Children Who Have Died”; in Japan, it’s called Mizuko Kuyo. When I join in this ritual, my ways of perceiving and engaging are shaped by three of my identities: that of a Soto Zen priest, that of a grief counselor, and that of a mother of a child who has died.

I lived and trained in the San Francisco Zen Center community for about nine years before formally ordaining as a priest. Our first child, a daughter, was born at Tassajara. Right around the time

I ordained four years later, I became pregnant with our second child. This daughter, Sati, was with me from the beginning of my life as a priest in every respect, as she continues to be today. Sati was born a few weeks premature, and despite everyone's hopes and much skillful high-tech medical intervention, she died the day after she was born, a Moon-face Buddha. In loving response to our daughter's death, many a Jizo flowed into our home, sent by friends. To this day, a small legion of them occupies our altar, and they travel with me to Jizo ceremonies in the wider community.

In the days following our daughter's death, I was driven by the natural instinct to clothe, nourish, and nurture my child—to somehow infuse her with our love and protection. I sewed a set of rakusus, or small robes—one small one to go with her body as it crossed over into ashes, and another one to stay in this realm, with us, on the Jizo on our altar. The satisfaction I drew from that work is hard to describe. Every ounce of what I expected to be a lifetime of embodied devotion was distilled into these small garments, this one gesture. Making something for her, full of my instinct and need to care for her, was an anchor for me in those first days of grief and shock. And entrusting one to the Jizo on our altar, making this offering even before I really knew any formal practices around Jizo, was the beginning of my grieving and eventual healing.

Jizo Bodhisattva is most always depicted as a humbly dressed monk, with a shaved head, simple robes, monk's staff, and a gentle face. Even the very simple line drawings that so often depict



this bodhisattva convey Jizo’s paradoxical qualities: a kind of sweet innocence together with a fierce protective stability and resolve. (Historically, Jizo Bodhisattva is usually depicted as a male monk, but to honor the feminine and masculine aspects of this being, I respectfully will use both male and female pronouns.) It is said that long ago, upon witnessing the suffering of beings in hell realms, Jizo made a great vow to help every being, in every realm, cross over from suffering. So great is her resolve that Jizo is unhindered by the delineation of the six realms—she fearlessly steps across these boundaries to wherever her intercession is needed.

“The archetypal qualities that Jizo embodies — fearlessness, protection, and fierce love — are the very same qualities we call forth in ourselves whenever we turn fully toward the complexity of our grief.

The lore of Jizo originates in India as the Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha, or “Earth Womb” Bodhisattva. In China he became Ti Tsang, and in Japan, Jizo, both also meaning “Earth Womb” or “Earth Storehouse.” In Japan, Jizo took on a multitude of manifestations to address particular forms of suffering. One that has become prevalent in modern times is the “Water-Baby Jizo,” or

Mizuko Jizo, who protects children in general but especially those who die before or soon after they are born, babies who live most of their embodiment in the watery realm of their mother's womb.

The Ceremony for Children Who Have Died, as it has come to be practiced in North America, is pretty simple. People gather quietly, sometimes lighting a candle for whomever they are holding in their hearts. The officiant gives a brief description of Jizo, the ceremony, and what it means to call on Jizo's intercession: how Jizo's great fearlessness allows her to step with ease across divides we can feel are insurmountable, like the perceived distance between the living and the dead, and how whenever we call on her fearlessness, we necessarily call forth our own. An explanation then follows about making the offerings: traditionally caps or capes, but also small bundles, something sweet for the child or loved one, something made while holding them in our hearts and minds. Materials are provided and might include scraps of cloth, needle and thread, paper, markers, glue, string, and yarn, sometimes even glitter and stickers. There might also be fresh flowers: forget-me-nots, or rosemary for remembrance. There's a reminder that this work will mostly be done in silence. Often someone present has some hesitation about "not being crafty." I used to worry about this. But I have witnessed this ceremony many times now, and I've seen how people find their way in. Sometimes they dive, and sometimes it takes a while, but I have never seen anyone not find

a way to make the offering they need to make. For many people there is something innate that longs to express the depth of their emotions through the work of their hands.

Once the items are made, everyone gathers around the altar, which may hold one Jizo or several. An invocation is made, calling on Jizo and all beings of wisdom and compassion to be present for our offerings, and dharma words are spoken, and then people come forward, one at a time or as a family. They say some words to their child or loved one, either silently or out loud, then offer what they have made to one of the figures on the altar (or later in a Jizo garden outside). They bow and come back into the circle, making room for the next person. This might be followed by chanting: the Jizo Mantra, or *Heart Sutra*, or something else. After a dedication is made, people are invited to either take their offerings home or leave them behind.

“The Jizo ceremony is, among other things, simply time carved out in busy lives to spend with grief.

In my understanding and training, all ceremonies in Zen are held in the context of nonduality. Zazen, for example, the fundamental ceremony of Zen practice, is both the sitting meditation of an individual person and an enactment of Buddha's awakening. In its fullness, it is not just one or the other or both, but the nondual intersection of all of this. The Jizo ceremony, too, when offered in a Zen setting, is grounded in the nonduality of the people

attending the ceremony and Jizo herself. The archetypal qualities that Jizo embodies—fearlessness, protection, and fierce love—are the qualities we call on when invoking Jizo in the ceremony; they are also the very same qualities we call forth in ourselves whenever we turn fully toward the complexity of our grief. The Jizo ceremony is, among other things, simply time carved out in busy lives to spend with grief. In the face of loss, just showing up for the ceremony requires a kind of fearlessness that is challenging in our predominantly death-denying culture. To do this in a room of people who have also made this choice forms a kind of collective courage, mirrored, infused, and bolstered by Jizo's presence and fearlessness.

In the days and weeks and months following our daughter's death, and still now every anniversary, the Jizo wearing her twin rakusu has stood patiently on our home altar, receiving our chanting, incense offerings, and prayers of protection in her name. It soothes my heart to still be able to do something for her benefit, and also to satisfy the need I still have to care for her, even if only this.

Many cultures in the US do not practice collective rituals of grief. There are funerals, which are the marking of a person's death, and memorials to celebrate their life, but they tend to center around the person who died, not around the experience of those who mourn. A ritualized turning toward and processing of grief, done in a collective way, is often hard to find.

Because the Jizo ceremony is mostly silent, the specifics of people's losses are not shared. But sometimes, from previous conversations, I know who is sitting in the room: a couple whose child died in labor three weeks ago, the mother's belly still soft and postpartum; a woman whose child died fifty years ago; a family who lost an adult child to suicide or accidental overdose; a couple wanting to honor an elected abortion; the family grieving a six-year-old who died from cancer. Some who attend are Buddhist practitioners, but others are not. Each loss is distinct, but I have seen this ceremony resonate and be a place of healing for people experiencing these losses and others as well. The Jizo ceremony provides, for all of them, an expression and an experience of communally witnessed grief.

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Many of our experiences while grieving are difficult to put into words, and even when we can, words are often reductive and belie the complexities of all that is unspoken.

This ceremony is also a space for a nonverbal processing of grief, which is often undervalued and hard to come by. Many of our experiences while grieving are difficult to put into words, and even when we can, words are often reductive and belie the complexities and presence of all that is unspoken. Emotions in grief are wide ranging. Often there is sorrow, which is widely

acknowledged and accommodated (as long as it doesn't get too loud or go on for too long). But there are so many other emotions that can and do arise in mourning: confusion, rage, guilt, frustration, fear, and even joy, elation, relief, excitement, feelings of humor, feelings of love. It's hard to reckon with the gamut of emotions that show up even in the privacy of our own hearts, let alone express them for others to possibly judge and misconstrue. Also, these feelings don't just come around for a few months and then go away. For the major losses in our lives, this expansive emotional range of experience is with us, in a kind of ebb and flow, for the rest of our lives. This ceremony makes room for all of this complexity to be expressed, infused, and bundled into the offerings we make, offerings that can be witnessed and collectively held, even while the particulars can still be held privately. And there is the enactment of the offering itself, which allows these bundles of complexity to be acknowledged in this world but then handed over, entrusted to Jizo, and released. Jizo, in his immense capacity, a heart-storehouse as wide as the womb of the earth, is vast enough to hold the immensity of our grief.

When I first became involved with the ceremony, I often had the experience of my own grief being awakened by the grief of those around me, and it was heavy. I would be wiped out afterward—my limbs would feel weighted down, my mind foggy. But over time I came to see how fully the form and container of ceremony could hold grief, and I began to trust in that. I didn't have to hold it all myself. I still feel a real gravity when engaging with

these ceremonies. But I also feel a kind of joy and a wholeness that's subtle but deep. In my experience across many realms—social, religious, psychological, even in communities of hospice workers—child-loss makes people squirm. There are not many shared places where a relationship with a child, or a loved one of any age who has died, can be acknowledged, let alone honored and made central. But in this ceremony there is a relief in getting to hold the whole truth of our lives. For me the truth is that I have a middle child, a daughter, and I love and cherish her. She has a place in my life. I get to make something for her, on this material plane where I live. With my hands and heart, I can offer it up to be transmuted through my love and Jizo's conveyance to be a gift for her, to be of benefit for her wherever and however she is.

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There are not many shared places where a relationship with a child, or a loved one of any age who has died, can be acknowledged, let alone honored and made central.

Over the years, I have been asked several times as a priest to adapt this ceremony to respond to other traumatic deaths, including death by suicide. In doing so, I have found certain principles of this ceremony, whether we are meeting the death of a child or a different loss, to be true: that participants call forth, and call upon, Jizo's qualities; that the container of the ceremony is

wide enough to hold the vastness and complexity of loss; and that expressing our grief through the making of something, and then offering it up, entrusting and releasing it as an enacted and witnessed expression, is part of a path of healing.

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Grief, when it can be held, honored, and expressed, is a path of healing.

The Jizo ceremony as I practice it is an adaptation of a ritual with its own cultural background and history, and I know that carries its own complexity. I am a priest in a religious tradition that comes, originally, from another country, from another culture. It is easy, and in some ways accurate, to say that this is what Buddhism has historically done: moved through countries and cultures and been picked up by the people there, and then been changed and shaped by their cultural histories and influences. But this does not excuse me from taking up and being intimate, every day, with the questions of what my particular engagement means given the privileges, statuses, and particularities I carry, in the cultures where I live and practice. Is it okay for me to be offering this ceremony? Is it okay to adapt and change the form to respond to the needs of those around me? I do not feel *entitled* to offer this ceremony, or even to help make it available to others. But at the same time, witnessing its transformative potential over and over in the face of the immense suffering of loss, I do feel a kind of



humbled obligation to find my way into offering it, into honoring this form and ritual that can help heal parts of our suffering that are so rarely addressed.

Grief, when it can be held, honored, and expressed, is a path of healing. We need to make spaces in the community for grief and loss of all kinds to be experienced and shared. So I hold all this with curiosity. I wonder about the intersections of my life converging in this ceremony, right down to my daughter's conception aligning with my ordination, which in some ways means nothing and in other ways deeply shapes my life as it is, including my life as a priest. I feel supported by Jizo Bodhisattva, in her example of fearlessly turning toward what is difficult and painful, to staying open, to holding the complexity of it all. ❀



## The Nature of Fear

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**Joseph Goldstein** explains how to sit with fear and hold it within your practice.

IMAGINE YOURSELF a great lover of music, about to hear the world's greatest musician perform an unknown composition. Imagine yourself listening to that performance. How would the mind be? How would the attention be as the music unfolded? There would, I think, be a sense, of no anticipation and no dwelling on a particularly nice phrase, because always in each moment there would be the next unknown note, the next unknown development of the music. There would be a quality of presence of mind, of openness of mind, without anticipation, without attachment, without resistance.

It is possible for us to live our lives like that, to see that actually in each moment there is a gift of experience. Can we be with it in such a way that there's no anticipation of what's to come, no anxiety, no worry, no clinging to what is actually there in the moment? Can we be without attachment to what's already past?

There's a possibility of wonderful spontaneity if somehow we can settle back into the moment and allow the natural unfolding of our lives. The words sound so simple— What prevents that? As we practice, we see that the tendency of mind is to hold on, anticipating, resisting. What's underneath that attachment and resistance, that conditioning which prevents the spontaneous opening to each moment?

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We have an underlying panic about our experiences because we don't understand the nature of fear.

If we can investigate in a careful way what is beneath attachment, beneath resistance, often we find that there's some basic fear working. Underneath attachment is the fear that we're going to lose something. So we hold on, we try to preserve it. Underneath resistance is the fear of experiencing something we don't want, so we create a barrier.

How can we work with such a deeply conditioned force that influences and conditions us in so many ways? For the most part we have avoided exploring the nature of fear, taking a direct look, and so in an unconscious way, it drives us. Chuang Tsu, the Taoist sage of ancient China, said, “Little fears cause anxiety, and big fears cause panic.” We can see how those qualities operate in our lives. We have an underlying panic about our experiences because we don't understand the nature of fear, we haven't looked at it carefully.

Part of the great beauty and power of dharma practice is the growing appreciation that the dharma is part of the totality of our lives. It's not something that we do separate from the rest of our lives. "Dharma" means "reality," it means truth," how things are. When we understand dharma practice in this way, fear, along with every other aspect of experience becomes eminently workable. It is not something apart, which we have to avoid. Rather, it is simply another facet of our experience, of how we relate to ourselves and to the world.

What are we afraid of? What are the basic fears that most of us share? One is the fear of pain. We're afraid of feeling pain, and so we construct our lives in such a way that we try to avoid it. Yet, pain is a very interesting part of our experience.

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Some pain is a danger signal, and we must pay attention to that and respond to it.

The Buddhist cosmology includes different realms of existence: the lower worlds of suffering; the human realm; and the higher realms—the heavenly planes. The human realm is in some ways the most interesting, because it is a combination of pain and pleasure. If we live our lives always afraid of pain, then we cut ourselves off from a major part of life's experience. When we try to create an exclusively safe, secure, painless, comfortable place, a great part of the vitality of being a human being is lost. This is not to suggest that we take a simple-minded attitude toward all pain;

that is, when you put your hand in fire, you don't necessarily say, "paining, painning, painning," as it begins to burn up. Obviously some pain is a danger signal, and we must pay attention to that and respond to it.

The kind of pain that's very interesting to work with in sitting practice, is the pain or tension that we've accumulated through past actions of clinging, grasping and feeling aversion. Each of those reactions has stored a tension or kind of knot in our energy system; so as we sit and pay attention, we begin to discover that our mind-body system seems to be a collection of energy knots, of blockages, of tensions. If we can see our fear of that kind of discomfort and still allow the mind to become soft, open and relaxed, we begin to understand that it is possible to begin releasing that kind of knot, that kind of tension.

Generally, fear is of something in the future. Say you're sitting, and perhaps there are places in your body that are hurting. The pain itself, the sensation itself, is not the problem, and you respond to it with acceptance. But then comes the anticipation: "If I keep on sitting, something awful is going to happen." Fear arises from that future anticipation. Very rarely does fear arise in response to an experience in the moment. There may be intense sensations or feelings—surprise or shock—in response to the moment, but those are not fear.

We can learn so much about the nature of aversion, the nature of judgement, and the nature of opening, through a willingness to be uncomfortable. We can see how we try to protect ourselves

from discomfort constantly, not only while sitting. One of the things I like very much about the winters in New England is that they're so intense. You know, the cold is so cold. Sometimes you go out in the end of December or in January, and even your breath is like ice. It's easy to observe the mind's conditioned reaction to that—which is to contract everything. The mind contracts; the body contracts. It's a wonderful opportunity, going out into that cold, into the severity of it, to see if it's possible simply to open, to say "Okay, what's this experience like?" And there's a wonderful sense of strength and vitality in such an ability to open. It requires paying attention to the conditioning of fear, how it closes us, and then seeing that we don't have to follow that habitual pattern of mind.

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Fear arises from future anticipation. Very rarely does fear arise in response to an experience in the moment.

There's another kind of fear which, in some ways, is even more difficult and subtle to work with: psychological fear, fear of being insecure, fear of being vulnerable, fear of being exposed. What would happen if I were totally open and exposed? People wouldn't like me. If they saw me as I know myself, they would not like me, respect me, be friends with me, love me. They would judge me harshly. All those fears of being vulnerable, being open, being exposed cause us to construct a self-image which we present.

“Joseph is a nice guy.” We put that image out there in front, while really all this dark, murky stuff is lurking behind it. Then we think that we’re fooling people. But the mask is transparent, because everybody sees everything anyway.

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Imagine someone sitting in front of you who has the power to look into your mind. If they could see your mind totally, what would you try to hide?

When we investigate that fear of being judged, of not being loved, of not being accepted, we see that it really has nothing to do with other people. Instead, it has to do with the fear of experiencing certain of our own feelings and emotions. It is we who are judging ourselves, not accepting ourselves, not loving ourselves. What is it that we’re afraid to see, to be with, and to open to? You might imagine someone sitting in front of you who has the power to look into your mind. If they could see your mind totally, what would you try to hide? What part would you like to cover up and protect? That is the place to investigate—and to open up to, to begin to love and to accept.

If we can do that, if we can be totally ourselves, without any pretense, if we can allow ourselves to feel vulnerable and insecure, then there is a wonderful sense of freedom. We don’t have to protect anything. Being vulnerable and exposed, even though we’ve been conditioned to be afraid of that, can actually be wonderful because it is a moment when the armor loosens.

Another kind of fear deeply conditioned in us, and very much a part of our culture, is the fear of death. We don't look at death very much in Western cultures. We don't look at the process of decay and aging, and don't relate much to dead bodies. We pretend that doesn't happen. Underneath all that pretense is a real fear of dying. What is the fear of death about? It's a very strong conditioning, especially when we don't clearly understand the nature of our mind and body. We think that this mind-body is something solid and secure—self, me, I. Naturally, when we have that viewpoint the possibility of the death of “I” is frightening.

To begin penetrating the nature of this mind-body process we must see that it is literally—not metaphorically, but literally—being born and dying in every moment. We see that there is nothing solid, nothing static, nothing steady which goes from one year to the next, one month to the next, one moment to the next. This mind-body is a flux of constant creation and dissolution. When we can experience that, feel it in a very immediate way, then the fear of death dissolves, because we see that there is nothing there to hold onto.

Now think for a moment of what your experience actually is from moment to moment. It's a sound, a sight, a thought, a sensation, an emotion, a smell, a taste. Moment to moment, they are arising and vanishing, being born and dying. Then what is the fear? The fear comes from attachment, that we try to hold on. But, of course, as we can see so clearly if we are attentive, whether we want to hold onto it or not, the very nature of the process is



constant, immediate, and continuous change. There is no possibility of holding on. In meditation practice, by developing a careful attention to the moment, this process of flux becomes so clear. In that awareness of the insubstantiality and impermanence of all this, the mind is de-conditioned from its grasping and clinging. We begin to become one with birth and death, and see them happening every moment of our lives.

Life actually is so fragile: the heart will stop beating one day; the lungs will stop going. Being aware of this, one gets a sense of what this mind-body process is actually about, and can work with the fear that comes up. seeing that the fear is not related to the present experience, but to some future anticipation.

The fear of pain, fear of certain emotions or feelings, fear of loneliness, fear of anxiety, fear of sadness, fear of anger, fear of being vulnerable, fear of death—how can we make them an intrinsic part of what we're doing here? The first attitude is not to take the fears lightly, not to dismiss them with a mere intellectual understanding, but rather to have respect for them, because they go very deep. Then we could see that we don't have to be afraid of the feeling of fear. Mostly we never get behind the fear itself. When fear arises the body gets anxious, there's vibration and anxiety, but we could see that it's okay to feel that way, we don't have to run from it. If we keep running from the feeling of fear, then we have to build barriers and defenses, close ourselves off in a narrow, tight little way of living. And, of course, the fear is still there.

The resistance at times gets very subtle; our minds get very tricky. When fear arises in any set of circumstances, whether it's fear of pain or fear of death, the first step is to see that it's just another feeling, like sadness, or happiness, or anger, and to become friends with it. From that foundation of acceptance, then we can really begin to work with our fears with some degree of discriminating wisdom.

“When fear arises the body gets anxious, there's vibration and anxiety, but we could see that it's okay to feel that way, we don't have to run from it.

This doesn't mean being reckless, but it does mean being willing to take risks—just jumping into whatever it is. If you're afraid of the dark, go out into the woods. Just to see how it is.

We don't have to go through and act on every fear that we have, because that could become another fixation of the mind. Rather, the aim is to learn from some experimentation that we don't have to be afraid of fear. Once we learn that, then fear doesn't matter. Then we just live our lives, and when fear comes up, we can act anyway. Practice is really challenging in that way—coming right out to the edge of what you're willing to be with, what you're willing to do.

It's also important to keep a sense of humor. One of the occupational hazards of meditation is that for some reason people often become very grim in their outlook, as if grimness were

mindfulness. Grimness is just grimness; it has nothing to do with awareness. Don't think that it's a necessary component to practice.

Another way of working with fear is by developing loving thoughts. When loving feelings are strong in the heart, then there's a sense of communication and contact with oneself, the environment, and with other beings. But you can't pretend. I had a funny experience while I was visiting in Western Massachusetts. I was walking down a road, just a dirt road, and passed a house. A dog there started to bark, really angry, barking quite ferociously. I was standing there thinking, "Be happy, be happy, be happy!" and as I was saying that to myself the dog ran over and bit me! I saw how you can't use love to manipulate, because then it's not really love. When you're putting it out as, "Be happy, be happy—but stay over there," that has zero to do with love.

When fear arises, it means that we are at some edge of what we're willing to be with, what we're willing to accept. Right there is precisely the most interesting place of practice, because that is where we have set a limitation, a boundary for ourselves. If we can see that and recognize it, then that is the place to work, to look, to explore. That is the place to open. ✨



## Six Kinds of Loneliness

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To be without a reference point is the ultimate loneliness, explains **Pema Chödrön**. It is also called enlightenment.

IN THE MIDDLE WAY, there is no reference point. The mind with no reference point does not resolve itself, does not fixate or grasp. How could we possibly have no reference point? To have no reference point would be to change a deep-seated habitual response to the world: wanting to make it work out one way or the other. If I can't go left or right, I will die! When we don't go left or right, we feel like we are in a detox center. We're alone, cold turkey with all the edginess that we've been trying to avoid by going left or right. That edginess can feel pretty heavy.

However, years and years of going to the left or right, going to yes or no, going to right or wrong has never really changed anything. Scrambling for security has never brought anything but momentary joy. It's like changing the position of our legs in meditation. Our legs hurt from sitting cross-legged, so we move them. And then we feel, "Phew! What a relief!" But two and a half minutes later, we want to move them again. We keep moving around seeking pleasure, seeking comfort, and the satisfaction that we get is very short-lived.

“ The process of becoming unstuck requires tremendous bravery, because basically we are completely changing our way of perceiving reality, like changing our DNA.

We hear a lot about the pain of *samsara*, and we also hear about liberation. But we don't hear much about how painful it is to go from being completely stuck to becoming unstuck. The process of becoming unstuck requires tremendous bravery, because basically we are completely changing our way of perceiving reality, like changing our DNA. We are undoing a pattern that is not just our pattern. It's the human pattern: we project onto the world a zillion possibilities of attaining resolution. We can have whiter teeth, a weed-free lawn, a strife-free life, a world without embarrassment. We can live happily ever after. This pattern keeps us dissatisfied and causes us a lot of suffering.

### Our Birthright: The Middle Way

As human beings, not only do we seek resolution, but we also feel that we deserve resolution. However, not only do we not deserve resolution, we suffer from resolution. We don't deserve resolution; we deserve something better than that. We deserve our birthright, which is the middle way, an open state of mind that can relax with paradox and ambiguity. To the degree that we've been avoiding

uncertainty, we're naturally going to have withdrawal symptoms—withdrawal from always thinking that there's a problem and that someone, somewhere, needs to fix it.

The middle way is wide open, but it's tough going, because it goes against the grain of an ancient neurotic pattern that we all share. When we feel lonely, when we feel hopeless, what we want to do is move to the right or the left. We don't want to sit and feel what we feel. We don't want to go through the detox. Yet the middle way encourages us to do just that. It encourages us to awaken the bravery that exists in everyone without exception, including you and me.

“ The middle way encourages us to awaken the bravery that exists in everyone without exception, including you and me.

Meditation provides a way for us to train in the middle way—in staying right on the spot. We are encouraged not to judge whatever arises in our mind. In fact, we are encouraged not to even grasp whatever arises in our mind. What we usually call good or bad we simply acknowledge as thinking, without all the usual drama that goes along with right and wrong. We are instructed to let the thoughts come and go as if touching a bubble with a feather. This straightforward discipline prepares us to stop struggling and discover a fresh, unbiased state of being.

The experience of certain feelings can seem particularly pregnant with desire for resolution: loneliness, boredom, anxiety. Unless we can relax with these feelings, it's very hard to stay in the middle when we experience them. We want victory or defeat, praise or blame. For example, if somebody abandons us, we don't want to be with that raw discomfort. Instead, we conjure up a familiar identity of ourselves as a hapless victim. Or maybe we avoid the rawness by acting out and righteously telling the person how messed up he or she is. We automatically want to cover over the pain in one way or another, identifying with victory or victimhood.

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When we can rest in the middle, we begin to have a nonthreatening relationship with loneliness, a relaxing and cooling loneliness that completely turns our usual fearful patterns upside down.

Usually we regard loneliness as an enemy. Heartache is not something we choose to invite in. It's restless and pregnant and hot with the desire to escape and find something or someone to keep us company. When we can rest in the middle, we begin to have a nonthreatening relationship with loneliness, a relaxing and cooling loneliness that completely turns our usual fearful patterns upside down.

There are six ways of describing this kind of cool loneliness. They are: less desire, contentment, avoiding unnecessary activity, complete discipline, not wandering in the world of desire, and not seeking security from one's discursive thoughts.

## Less Desire

Less desire is the willingness to be lonely without resolution when everything in us yearns for something to cheer us up and change our mood. Practicing this kind of loneliness is a way of sowing seeds so that fundamental restlessness decreases. In meditation, for example, every time we label “thinking” instead of getting endlessly run around by our thoughts, we are training in just being here without dissociation. We can't do that now to the degree that we weren't willing to do it yesterday or the day before or last week or last year. After we practice less desire wholeheartedly and consistently, something shifts. We feel less desire in the sense of being less solidly seduced by our Very Important Story Lines. So even if the hot loneliness is there, and for 1.6 seconds we sit with that restlessness when yesterday we couldn't sit for even one, that's the journey of the warrior. That's the path of bravery. The less we spin off and go crazy, the more we taste the satisfaction of cool loneliness. As the Zen master Katagiri Roshi often said, “One can be lonely and not be tossed away by it.”



## Contentment

The second kind of loneliness is contentment. When we have nothing, we have nothing to lose. We don't have anything to lose but being programmed in our guts to feel we have a lot to lose. Our feeling that we have a lot to lose is rooted in fear—of loneliness, of change, of anything that can't be resolved, of nonexistence. The hope that we can avoid this feeling and the fear that we can't become our reference point.

When we draw a line down the center of a page, we know who we are if we're on the right side and who we are if we're on the left side. But we don't know who we are when we don't put ourselves on either side. Then we just don't know what to do. We just don't know. We have no reference point, no hand to hold. At that point we can either freak out or settle in. Contentment is a synonym for loneliness, cool loneliness, settling down with cool loneliness. We give up believing that being able to escape our loneliness is going to bring any lasting happiness or joy or sense of well-being or courage or strength. Usually we have to give up this belief about a billion times, again and again making friends with our jumpiness and dread, doing the same old thing a billion times with awareness. Then without our even noticing, something begins to shift. We can just be lonely with no alternatives, content to be right here with the mood and texture of what's happening.

## Avoiding Unnecessary Activities

The third kind of loneliness is avoiding unnecessary activities. When we're lonely in a "hot" way, we look for something to save us; we look for a way out. We get this queasy feeling that we call loneliness, and our minds just go wild trying to come up with companions to save us from despair. That's called unnecessary activity. It's a way of keeping ourselves busy so we don't have to feel any pain. It could take the form of obsessively daydreaming of true romance, or turning a tidbit of gossip into the six o'clock news, or even going off by ourselves into the wilderness.

The point is that in all these activities, we are seeking companionship in our usual, habitual way, using our same old repetitive ways of distancing ourselves from the demon loneliness. Could we just settle down and have some compassion and respect for ourselves? Could we stop trying to escape from being alone with ourselves? What about practicing not jumping and grabbing when we begin to panic? Relaxing with loneliness is a worthy occupation. As the Japanese poet Ryokan says, "If you want to find the meaning, stop chasing after so many things."

## Complete Discipline

Complete discipline is another component of cool loneliness. Complete discipline means that at every opportunity, we're willing to come back, just gently come back to the present moment. This is loneliness as complete discipline. We're willing to sit still, just be there, alone. We don't particularly have to cultivate this

kind of loneliness; we could just sit still long enough to realize it's how things really are. We are fundamentally alone, and there is nothing anywhere to hold on to. Moreover, this is not a problem. In fact, it allows us to finally discover a completely unfabricated state of being. Our habitual assumptions—all our ideas about how things are—keep us from seeing anything in a fresh, open way. We say, “Oh yes, I know.” But we don't know. We don't ultimately know anything. There's no certainty about anything. This basic truth hurts, and we want to run away from it. But coming back and relaxing with something as familiar as loneliness is good discipline for realizing the profundity of the unresolved moments of our lives. We are cheating ourselves when we run away from the ambiguity of loneliness.

## Not Wandering in the World of Desire

Not wandering in the world of desire is another way of describing cool loneliness. Wandering in the world of desire involves looking for alternatives, seeking something to comfort us—food, drink, people. The word desire encompasses that addiction quality, the way we grab for something because we want to find a way to make things okay. That quality comes from never having grown up. We still want to go home and be able to open the refrigerator and find it full of our favorite goodies; when the going gets tough, we want to yell “Mom!” But what we're doing as we progress along the path is leaving home and becoming homeless. Not wandering in

the world of desire is about relating directly with how things are. Loneliness is not a problem. Loneliness is nothing to be solved. The same is true for any other experience we might have.

## Not Seeking Security from One's Discursive Thoughts

Another aspect of cool loneliness is not seeking security from one's discursive thoughts. The rug's been pulled; the jig is up; there is no way to get out of this one! We don't even seek the companionship of our own constant conversation with ourselves about how it is and how it isn't, whether it is or whether it isn't, whether it should or whether it shouldn't, whether it can or whether it can't. With cool loneliness we do not expect security from our own internal chatter. That's why we are instructed in meditation to label it "thinking." It has no objective reality. It is transparent and ungraspable. We're encouraged to just touch that chatter and let it go, not make much ado about nothing.

Cool loneliness allows us to look honestly and without aggression at our own minds. We can gradually drop our ideals of who we think we ought to be, or who we think we want to be, or who we think other people think we want to be or ought to be. We give it up and just look directly with compassion and humor at who we are. Then loneliness is no threat and heartache, no punishment.



Cool loneliness doesn't provide any resolution or give us ground under our feet. It challenges us to step into a world of no reference point.

Cool loneliness doesn't provide any resolution or give us ground under our feet. It challenges us to step into a world of no reference point without polarizing or solidifying. This is called the middle way, or the sacred path of the warrior.

When you wake up in the morning and out of nowhere comes the heartache of alienation and loneliness, could you use that as a golden opportunity? Rather than persecuting yourself or feeling that something terribly wrong is happening, right there in the moment of sadness and longing, could you relax and touch the limitless space of the human heart? The next time you get a chance, experiment with this. ❁



## How Do I Put My Mind at Rest?

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Like the student in this famous koan, we constantly face the challenge of emotional turmoil and restless mind. You don't have to cut off your arm like he did, says **Karen Maezen Miller**, but you do have to cut off your conflicting emotions at their root.

“WOULD YOU LIKE TO LEARN to meditate now?” I asked this of a student as we neared the end of the meditation class. I was losing my patience. All morning long, she had raised philosophical questions and objections. She wanted to debate Buddhism and not practice it. Time was running out, and we'd barely begun.

I kept trying to get back to the point, but it wasn't working. She had her own ideas and they were different. When we began to meditate together as a group, she ignored the advice. When I demonstrated the postures for sitting comfortably on a zafu, a bench, or a chair, she wouldn't try them. Sitting cross-legged on a cushion, back bent, her knees floating several inches above the floor, it was a good bet she was in agony.

Perhaps she was disappointed, angry, or bored. When we met, she said she had taken several meditation and mindfulness courses already, naming the famous teachers and thinkers she admired. I wondered what she was still looking for.

“Can I ask one more thing?” It would be her last question of the day. “Have you found the secret to happiness?”

“No,” I replied. “But I’ve found the secret to suffering.”

*Bodhidharma sat facing the wall. The Second Ancestor stood outside in the snow. He cut off his arm and said, “My mind is not yet at peace. Please, Master, put my mind to rest.”*

*Bodhidharma said, “Bring me your mind, and I will put it to rest.”*

*The Second Ancestor said, “I have searched for my mind, but I cannot find it.”*

*Bodhidharma said, “There, I have put your mind to rest.”*

This is a koan that Zen students might encounter several times over the course of their formal training. But even if you’re not a Zen student, it’s a koan that you encounter many times throughout your life. It could be when you are depressed or enraged. When you are anxious, afraid, helplessly confused, or in despair. The kitchen sink is stopped up and the car has a flat. The roof is leaking. The taxes are due. You can’t take it anymore, and you want out. Can someone tell you the secret to happiness?

Koans are stories of historical encounters between Zen teachers and students, and this one recounts a student’s climactic meeting with Bodhidharma, the meditation master who brought the Buddha’s teaching from India to northern China in the form of Chan, the predecessor to Japanese Zen.

The details of his life are a little sketchy. Some say Bodhidharma came by water, some say by ground, sometime around the fifth century. His ocean passage was tossed by storms, his overland journey besieged by bandits. Like anyone traveling the perilous byways of life, his was not an easy route. He got sick; he got sore. There were setbacks and deprivations. Eventually he arrived at a place he could settle. He founded a sanctuary, sat down, made his mind as steady as a mountain wall—originating the practice called *wall gazing*—and entered the state of *samadhi*, non-distracted awareness. This story presents the essence of Bodhidharma's Zen, which he described as this:

*A special transmission outside the scriptures;  
No dependence upon words and letters;  
Direct pointing to the mind:  
Seeing into one's own nature and attaining buddhahood.*

Bodhidharma waited a long time for a student to show up—by some accounts, nine solitary years spent facing the wall. Maybe even longer. At any rate, he sat there for more time than you can fathom. Now, someone approaches.

Alone in his misery, fraught with pain, a stranger emerges from a blinding blizzard to confront the old master. This fellow is serious, and from the looks of it, half out of his mind. We know a little bit of the backstory. He's not exactly a newbie. He's read



the ancient texts, pored over books and magazines, and taken the courses. He knows a lot already, and yet there is still something missing. His mind is not at ease.

Hearing that there is a new teacher in town, he goes to see him. In fact, he goes to see him nearly every day—and every day, the teacher turns him away. He can't seem to get past the front door! His panic grows. In desperation, he starts to cut himself to shreds, as if that would prove him worthy.

Zen teachings aren't always as cozy as you might expect. They point directly to the savagery of human suffering.

Curiously, the student in this story isn't named, although we know him well. Who is this so-called Second Ancestor, the heir to Bodhidharma's wisdom, the earnest seeker of peace and ease?

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Zen teachings aren't always as cozy as you might expect. They point directly to the savagery of human suffering.

To pass this koan, you have to find out who this character is. If you go up into your head looking for an answer, separating yourself from your present reality, you won't see it. If you are lost in rumination or intellectual analysis, you are a million miles away. Fifteen centuries after Bodhidharma mouthed his words, whose mind is bringing this story to life right now? Who is seeing it, reading it, and living it?

It can't be anyone but you. You are the only one here. You are the student, come to calm your weary mind. Now we're getting to the point.

*Become one with the koan.*

When you work with a koan master, you're likely to get the same instruction whenever you ask for help: *Become one with the koan*. At first, this can sound as bewildering as when a yoga instructor tells you to breathe through your coccyx. You can't quite wrap your head around it.

*Become one with the koan? You mean cut off my arm?*

Cut off what you're holding on to: the attachment to your thoughts, beliefs, and feelings, the residue of your discriminating, egocentric consciousness. As Yasutani Roshi said, "Most people place a high value on abstract thought, but Buddhism has clearly demonstrated that discriminative thinking lies at the root of delusion."

Thoughts—and feelings triggered by thoughts—are mutable and impermanent, and yet because we humans incorrectly identify our *being* with our *thinking*, we construct a false notion of ourselves out of ideas and memories that have no actual substance. No wonder the ego is called "the false self." The false self—the thinking mind—is continuously talking to itself, disturbing itself, even lying to itself. Reimagining the past or fantasizing about the future. Setting up expectations that aren't met, then casting judgment and blame. Struggling every step of the way to stop struggling. Naturally, it doesn't work.



In and of themselves, thoughts are no big deal, except when we make a big deal out of them.

This realization is a critical departure from the methods of modern psychology or self-help. Buddhism in general, and Zen in particular, is not concerned with the content of thoughts or feelings, except to recognize that they are the cause of confusion, emotional paralysis, and pain. In and of themselves, thoughts are no big deal, except when we make a big deal out of them, creating a dualistic separation from reality, which is a wordy way to say “a problem.”

“Emotionally we have many problems, but these problems are not actual problems; they are something created; they are problems pointed out by our self-centered ideas or views,” Suzuki Roshi said.

Easy for a Zen master to say, but hard to believe until you see it for yourself. Such is the kindness of Bodhidharma in this koan. Out of boundless compassion, he doesn't give you what you ask for, but he tells you how to find it yourself. Until you free yourself, you won't realize that there is no self to free. You are imprisoned by nothing and no one but your own thoughts, which self-liberate the moment you stop thinking about them.

*Don't think about your thoughts.*

The teacher isn't dismissive, however. He acts with merciful urgency. That thing that is disturbing you? Bring it to me. Your pain, your panic? Show it to me. And the person or things that you think caused the problem—your parents, kids, partner, neighbor, boss, critics, rivals, bad luck, hard karma, the driver who cut you off, the dog that ate your homework—bring that too. Time is running out. Let's end your suffering right here now.

This is the *aha* moment. The student has been wracking her brain for years, debasing and nearly destroying herself, but in this instant, she is rendered empty. She can't bring anything out. There is nothing she can grab ahold of. Life's events are fleeting memories. Thoughts float up and disappear. Feelings overtake and then dissipate.

The mind involved in fantasies, dreams, desires, and attachments—you can't find it. You can't locate yesterday; you can't even go back to the moment you started reading this sentence. If you're holding on to the story of your life, you're holding on to nothing. This moment right now is the only thing there is, and you are not apart from it. You are it.

All that rumination has gotten you nowhere, because there is nowhere else you can be. Perhaps you could just settle here and let things change by themselves—which they will, whether you like it or not.

It can be painful to admit that we create most of our own suffering, but even more painful to deny it. Buddha said there are 84,000 dharma gates, infinite pathways to liberation. Today alone there are 84,000 fresh, new moments to be free.

At last, peace is in sight. Alas, peace is always in sight.

*Face the wall.*

Bodhidharma's practice is still vitally present in Zen, his wall gazing regarded as the most compassionately efficient method for revealing the true nature of our minds. Eyes kept open and cast downward in a soft gaze, Zen students meditate facing an empty wall. Nothing happens on that wall; nothing interferes or distracts. You'd think we'd find relief there. Try it for yourself, however, and you'll see how, when confronted with the absence of stimulation, the egocentric mind revs into hyperdrive. Thoughts race here and there, developing elaborate fantasies and a torrent of self-criticism. *I don't like this. I can't do this. I quit!*

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By counting or following the breath, you can bring your attention back to the present and calm the chaos within.

It's a bracing glimpse of what ego does for you twenty-four hours a day.

Yet by counting or following the breath, you can bring your attention back to the present and calm the chaos within. The mind eventually slows down, and sitting becomes a sanctuary.

Here comes the twist: just about the time we get used to the empty wall, we turn away from it and face into the room with all its messy contents. “The great earth and all beings” is how Buddha described it, “the full catastrophe” in the lament of Zorba the Greek. Can we view *this* “wall,” the world around us, with the same even-mindedness as we see blank nothingness? If we can, we have attained unconditioned, unshakeable, everlasting peace. This is Buddha mind, the awakened mind, appearing in front of us all the time. Right where you are, see what needs doing and just do it.

*End of story.*

Although words have already passed between them, only when the student has dropped his judgments, ideas, and expectations does he finally meet Bodhidharma face to face. Eyes open, looking straight ahead, without a single thought to separate one thing into two, the student enters the gate of repose and bliss, the samadhi of being, where mind rests and self-imposed suffering stops. *End of story.*

Nowadays, Zen students might work through hundreds of koans during a lifetime of training, and every one of them lands us in the same place: where the story in our head ends and reality begins. Resolving one koan isn't likely to take care of the problem. Addictions are hard to overcome, and the addiction to the ego-centric self, with its familiar pain and suffering, keeps calling us back into the shadows. So we keep practicing.

The woman from the meditation class left quickly. I don't know her name or where she came from, but I am still thinking about her. I didn't teach her anything, but recalling that day, spinning vague memories into a story that suits my purposes, I realize what she taught me. It's the same instruction given by all the great masters. Put it down. Let it go. Turn the page.

## Bodhidharma's Wall Gazing

You may alternate facing a wall with facing away from a wall, until you no longer perceive a difference.

1. Make the room quiet. *As if no one were inside.*
2. Eat and drink moderately. *Don't overfill.*
3. Set aside all involvements. *Put everything down.*
4. At your sitting place, spread a thick mat. *To cushion your knees.*
5. Put your cushion or bench on the mat. *To support your spine.*
6. Sit upright. *Like a mountain.*
7. Align your head. *Ears over shoulders; nose over navel.*

8. Keep your eyes open. Lower the gaze and don't look for anything.

9. Give up. Thoughts, ideas, and judgments.

10. Breathe and be still. Count your breaths from one to ten over and over again. If you lose the count, return to one and keep going.

Start by sitting for ten minutes. Use a timer. Lengthen the time gradually as you are able. Sit a little every day and be consistent. Don't make meditation a problem. ✨

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Adapted from Dogen Zenji's *Universally Recommended Instructions for Zazen* (Fukanzazengi).