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The Buddhist Way of Liberation from Suffering

The Story of the Buddha

Siddhartha Gautama, who would come to be called the Buddha, meaning the Awakened One or the Enlightened One, was born five or six centuries before Christ, into a noble family in a part of northern India that is now Nepal. Siddhartha's father, Suddhodana, was the head of the Shakya clan, so the Buddha is also known as Shakyamuni, "the sage of the Shakyas."

When Siddhartha was conceived—so the story goes—his mother Maya dreamed that a white elephant entered her right side, signifying that her son would have an auspicious life. It was foretold that Siddhartha would either remain at home and become a great emperor or leave and become a wandering ascetic and a great religious teacher. Maya died a week after giving birth, and Siddhartha was raised by Maya's sister, who became

Suddhodana's second wife and later the founder of the first order of Buddhist nuns.

Suddhodana wanted Siddhartha to stay at home to become a great emperor, so Suddhodana gave his son a life of luxury and protected him from all unpleasantness, disease, decay, and death. Siddhartha spent his time in his three palaces—one for the hot season, one for the cool season, and one for the rainy season. He wore fine clothes, ate delicious food, and had musicians to entertain him and attendants to serve him. No one who was sick or old or ugly was allowed near Siddhartha, and even dead flowers were removed from his presence. At age sixteen, he married the beautiful Yashodhara, daughter of a neighboring ruler, and when he was twenty-nine, they had a son, Rahula.

Eventually, Siddhartha got bored and restless with his sheltered, pampered life, and he arranged to take a chariot ride outside the palace grounds. His father made sure that everything along the route would be clean and beautiful and that Siddhartha would only see happy, healthy, young people on his ride.

But as it happened, Siddhartha saw a stooped, gray-haired man with wrinkled skin. He asked his charioteer, Channa, about this strange sight. Channa told him that the man was old. Siddhartha asked if this was the only person who was "old" or if there were others like this. Channa replied that everyone who lived long enough would grow old. Siddhartha was shocked and ordered Channa to take him back to the palace immediately, where he sat by himself brooding about this vision of old age.

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On a second trip outside the palace, Siddhartha saw someone who was coughing and shaking and moaning. He asked Channa about this, and Channa explained that this person was ill and that all people are subject to illness. Once again, Siddhartha was shocked and returned to the palace and brooded about this vision.

On a third trip outside the palace, Siddhartha saw a group of sad people carrying a corpse. Siddhartha asked Channa why the man was so still and where they were taking him. Channa explained that the man was dead and that his body was being taken to the cremation ground to be burned. Siddhartha asked if it was unusual for people to die like this, and Channa told him that everyone, without exception, would eventually die. Siddhartha was horrified and confused. How could people just go about their daily lives knowing about the inevitability of suffering and death?

Siddhartha was inconsolable. Nothing would lift his spirits or distract him from his visions of aging, illness, and death. He no longer found pleasure in the delights of the palace, knowing how quickly all things change and that death awaits us all. He saw everything permeated with suffering and impermanence.

Siddhartha took a fourth trip outside the palace and encountered one of the religious wanderers of the time, with a shaved head, a saffron robe, and a look of deep calm and peace. After this fourth vision, Siddhartha knew that he had found his own true purpose.

He returned to the palace and told his father that he wished to leave. His father refused to let him go, but

Siddhartha was determined. In the middle of the night, he took one last look at his sleeping wife and infant son, escaped the palace, and went into the forests in search of a spiritual teacher.

Siddhartha mastered sophisticated meditation techniques with two teachers and then engaged in extreme ascetic practices intended to reduce attachment to sense pleasures. He practiced exercises in breath control, which, rather than leading to liberation from suffering, mainly led to terrible headaches, and he reduced his food intake to a spoonful of bean soup a day, which left him emaciated.

After six years of these austerities, the problems of aging, illness, and death remained unresolved, and Siddhartha decided that the best course was a “middle way” between the self-indulgence of the palace and the self-mortification he had been practicing in the forest. He began to take food to strengthen his body, thus scandalizing his companions in asceticism and leading his later teachings to be known as the Middle Way. He remembered that once, as a child, while sitting under a tree, he had spontaneously entered a meditative state of calm attention, beyond involvement in sense pleasures. He now saw that this was the path of awakening.

Siddhartha went off alone, sat down under a tree, and resolved to persist in meditation until he had found liberation. Through the night, Siddhartha fended off the assaults and temptations of a powerful demon called Mara, and at the break of dawn, at the age of thirty-five, Siddhartha came to complete awakening and liberation from suffering.

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Siddhartha—now the Awakened One, the Buddha—remained under the tree for seven weeks. Although he longed to help all suffering beings, he thought it would be useless to try to communicate his realization. But finally he saw that there were some people who would understand, and he was moved by compassion to begin teaching.

He set out to find his former companions. At first, they spurned him, but then they realized that he had been transformed. They became the Buddha's first disciples and the core of his community, which eventually included monks, nuns, and lay followers. The Buddha spent the rest of his life teaching and moving from place to place, and great numbers of disciples gathered around him. He died at the age of eighty, after eating some spoiled food.

From India, the Buddha's teachings spread across Asia. The Zen school of Buddhism developed in China in the sixth and seventh centuries, incorporating elements of China's indigenous Taoist tradition. From China, Zen spread to Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Just in the past century or so, Zen and other forms of Buddhism have spread to the West.

By the way, you know that smiling bald guy with the big bare belly whom you often see in Chinese restaurants, stores, and homes? That's not the Buddha. That's a tenth-century Chinese monk called Pu-tai (pronounced "boo-dye"), which means "hemp sack," from his wandering through towns with a beggar's sack on his back. The Japanese call him Hotei ("hoe-tay"), and he is also called the Laughing Buddha. He embodies

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several Chinese ideals. He loved children, his large belly symbolizes prosperity, and his smile and relaxed pose indicate happiness and equanimity. The Buddha who founded Buddhism is not portrayed as fat, bare-bellied, bald, or laughing. He is portrayed as a man of thin to average build, with stylized hair, and often with a hint of a smile but not with the big grin of the Laughing Buddha.

Shakyamuni Buddha, the Founder of Buddhism.

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The Laughing Buddha (Pu-tai, or Hotei),
a Tenth-Century Chinese Monk.

Buddhist Teachings: The Four Noble Truths

Buddhism is a practical tradition. The Buddha saw a problem and found a solution. The problem is suffering, and Buddhism offers a way of liberation from suffering. In Zen, the Buddha's teachings are not understood to be divine revelations or doctrines to be believed. Rather, they are understood to be observations

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about human experience—observations made by a human being, the Buddha, that can be made by any human being.

According to Buddhist tradition, the Four Noble Truths were the Buddha's first teaching after his enlightenment, given to his former companions in asceticism. The Four Noble Truths are a summary of the practical wisdom of Buddhism regarding suffering and liberation from suffering.

The First Noble Truth: Suffering

The First Noble Truth is the truth of *duhkha,* a Sanskrit word that means "suffering" or "dissatisfaction." This is the observation that the ordinary, unenlightened human life is permeated with suffering, that our lives don't completely satisfy us. We suffer all sorts of physical pain and emotional pain. We can't always get what we want, and we often get what we don't want. Life never seems to go exactly the way we'd like it to. Of course, we have happy times, pleasant experiences, but we know they won't last, and this makes us uneasy. All things, pleasant or unpleasant, are impermanent. Nothing stands still. All things are changing, fleeting, destined to end, including our own lives. Life is permeated with pain and impermanence, and in the unenlightened life this leads to duhkha, to suffering or dissatisfaction.

Duhkha is what the young prince Siddhartha experienced in his visions of old age, illness, and death. A powerful experience of duhkha is often what brings people into serious spiritual practice—a debilitating illness, a divorce, the death of a loved one.

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Something like the experience of duhkha is what led the narrator of Ecclesiastes to exclaim, “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” He discovered that all of our chasing after satisfaction is in vain. He tried accumulating herds and flocks, silver and gold. He tried building houses and planting gardens and vineyards. He tried keeping slaves and singers and concubines. But he saw that it was all futile, that “all was vanity and a chasing after wind.” Lovers of wealth, he realized, will never be satisfied with their wealth, and when we die, the fruit of our toil is left to those who didn’t toil for it. Even acquiring knowledge and wisdom “is but a chasing after wind.” The wise die and are forgotten just like the fools. We all come from the dust, and we all will turn to dust again. Reflecting on the futility of seeking satisfaction and on the wickedness and oppression in the world, he says that the dead are more fortunate than the living, but more fortunate still are those who were never born. Much of Ecclesiastes is an expression of the suffering and dissatisfaction of the ordinary human life.

Something akin to duhkha is also what Saint Augustine experienced when one of his dearest friends fell ill and died. Augustine says in his *Confessions* that in his grief, his soul “was a burden, bruised and bleeding,” and he found no rest or peace in his usual pleasures—in the company of his friends, in laughter and song, in “the pleasures of love,” or even in books and poetry. His mind was filled with thoughts of how death would seize everyone, just as it had seized his friend. Wherever he looked, all he saw was death. Augustine’s encounter with the pain and impermanence inherent in life left him “sick and tired of living and yet afraid to die.”

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Buddhism can sound rather gloomy or pessimistic, having as its first premise the truth of suffering, but there are three more truths to go. The first two are the bad news, and the last two are the good news.

The Second Noble Truth: The Origin of Suffering

The Second Noble Truth is the truth of the origin of duhkha. Buddhism observes that the origin of suffering is *trishna,* or craving.

The Sanskrit word *trishna* was originally rendered in English as "desire," which is misleading. Naturally, we have desires—desires for water, food, shelter, sex, companionship, the desire to be comfortable instead of uncomfortable, to have pleasant experiences and avoid unpleasant experiences, the desire to stay alive. Saying that the origin of suffering is "desire" makes it sound like the ideal human state resembles being severely depressed. But Buddhism is not about eliminating desires. Desire, in itself, is not the problem.

The problem is when simple desire becomes "craving"—that is, when desire is possessive or aggressive, when we feel that our desires *must* be satisfied no matter what, when we believe that our joy in life depends on satisfying these desires and we go frantically chasing after what we crave. But this is a chasing after wind. Our desires are inexhaustible, and continually chasing after them leaves us exhausted, frustrated, and still unsatisfied.

As a sort of elaboration on the diagnosis of craving, Buddhism observes that the origin of suffering is the so-called

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Three Poisons: attachment, aversion, and ignorance. We crave pleasant and satisfying experiences, and we react to them with attachment—with greed, clinging, grasping. We crave freedom from unpleasant and unsatisfying experiences, and we react to them with aversion—with hatred, anger, aggression. Our attachments and aversions—our possessiveness and aggressiveness—lead us to act in ways that cause suffering for ourselves and others. As the First Noble Truth observes, life is full of pain, and all things are impermanent. So if true satisfaction can be found, it cannot be based on attaching to pleasure and averting pain. We can never completely succeed at either. True satisfaction is found in noticing and letting go of our struggles with our experience and simply being with the experience—*being* the experience—and responding with wisdom and compassion.

These struggles with our experience—our poisonous reactions of attachment and aversion—are rooted in the third of the Three Poisons, ignorance. This refers to a specific sort of ignorance. We are ignorant of what Buddhism calls no-self, or selflessness.

Our usual way of dealing with life is focused on self-centered attachments and aversions, on the desire for things to be the way we want them to be. We view life from the vantage point of "me": what pleases me and what doesn't please me, what helps me and what harms me, what I approve of and what I disapprove of. We tend to think and behave as if we are separate and distinct entities, completely independent of everyone and everything else. Our lives revolve around the "self," which we think needs to be gratified with pleasure, protected from pain, and above all protected from nonexistence.

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But our "self"-centeredness is ill-founded. Buddhism observes that the "self" we're so desperately concerned about is an illusion, a fiction, a construction. Our ultimate nature is no-self, or selflessness. This doesn't mean that we don't really exist or are somehow unreal. Of course we are real. It means that our independent "selfhood" is illusory. Everyone and everything is interconnected and interdependent. The Second Noble Truth observes that the ignorance of our selflessness is the origin of our attachments and aversions, which are in turn the origin of suffering.

The First and Second Noble Truths articulate the bad news of the human condition, the bad news of suffering and its origin. I have always liked that Buddhism begins with the bad news. As observed in *The Hobbit,* "It does not do to leave a live dragon out of your calculations, if you live near him." The dragon of pain and impermanence is not just our neighbor but our roommate, and Buddhism begins by acknowledging the dragon in the living room. We seek out the great wisdom of the world because something is wrong, because we hurt, because our life isn't the way we want it to be. The First Noble Truth meets us where we are. It recognizes the suffering we experience over the stark and frightening facts of life: pain and impermanence. Similarly, I have always liked the centrality of the crucifix in Catholicism—not just the cross, but Christ crucified on the cross—an image of God's participation in the fundamental human experiences of pain and death. Because Buddhism and Christianity recognize so clearly and understand so deeply the bad news of human life, I am able to trust

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that their good news is not naively optimistic but profoundly hopeful. I am able to trust that they have some wisdom to share about living with a dragon.

The Third Noble Truth: The Cessation of Suffering

Now we come to the good news. The Third Noble Truth is the truth of the cessation of suffering, the observation that liberation from suffering is possible. The Second Noble Truth observes that the origin of suffering is craving, and the Third Noble Truth observes that it is possible to be free of craving and thus free of the suffering it causes. We can be free to live a life of joy and compassion.

If we awaken from the ignorance at the root of suffering—the ignorance of no-self—we are liberated from the tyranny of egoism and thus from the suffering created by egocentered attachments and aversions. We awaken to joy—a joy not dependent on our circumstances—and we awaken to all-encompassing compassion. We are freed to truly care for others and also for ourselves, instead of being caught up in the possessive and aggressive cravings of the "self." We are freed to be "selfish" for everyone and everything, since there is no one and nothing separate from "me." If you hurt, I hurt, because you and I are not separate. If you rejoice, I rejoice, because egoism isn't getting in the way.

In a word, the good news of Buddhism is selflessness. Buddhism is a way of awakening to no-self, or selflessness, and it is a way of compassion, or selflessness. In awakening to

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no-self, we are freed for the practice of compassion. In awakening to our selflessness, we are freed for a life of selflessness. Buddhism is not self-help but selflessness-help.

This notion of selflessness is not alien to Christianity. When Paul says, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me," I hear him describing a similar letting go of "self." When Paul says to the church in Rome that "we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another," I hear him speaking of our interconnection and interdependence. The commandment to love your neighbor as yourself is about selfless compassion. I think we generally hear it as an exhortation to love others as ourselves despite our natural inclination to do otherwise, but perhaps we can hear it also as an exhortation to realize that others are not separate from us in the way we usually assume they are—that they are not truly "other"—an insight that will lead us *naturally* to love others as ourselves. As C. S. Lewis says, "If I loved my neighbour as myself, most of the actions which are now my moral duty would flow out of me as spontaneously as song from a lark or fragrance from a flower."

To say that our ultimate nature is selflessness doesn't mean that the whole notion of a self is useless or that we shouldn't use the word *I.* Buddhism observes reality from two perspectives: the absolute and the relative. From the absolute, or ultimate, perspective, the "self" is seen as illusory, as a construction that is empty of inherent, independent existence. But from the relative perspective—the ordinary, everyday, conventional perspective—we see a conventional "self" independent of other people and things. In our regular everyday lives, whether we are

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enlightened or not, we operate from the relative perspective, in which the "self" is a useful illusion and the word *I* makes sense. To chop a carrot, I need to perceive myself and the carrot and the knife and the cutting board as separate from one another. And yet from the absolute point of view, I and the carrot and the knife and the cutting board are *not* separate. The absolute and the relative are called the two truths, or the two levels of truth. Both are true. (Much of the paradoxical-sounding rhetoric in Zen comes from mixing together the absolute and relative ways of talking about reality.)

An analogy might be helpful here. If we examine a strip of film, we see lots of small, separate, still pictures in a row. This is the "absolute" view of a movie. When we run that film through a projector at the right speed and aim the projector at a screen, we see one large moving picture. This is the "relative" view of the movie. From the relative perspective, calling it a "movie" or a "motion picture" makes sense, even though the motion is ultimately illusory. The movie is both many small still pictures and also one large moving picture.

Both the absolute and the relative are important, but Buddhist teachers tend to emphasize the absolute view because it is so much less familiar than the relative view. When we get a glimpse of the world from the absolute perspective, we begin to realize the illusory quality of "self," and we begin to carry our "selfhood" more lightly. The more fully we realize no-self, the more we are freed from our subjugation to ego-centered attachments and aversions. The "self" may keep on making its possessive and aggressive little demands, but instead of groveling in submission, we can smile in amusement and *decide* how to

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act. We are freed to live more joyfully and compassionately. We are freed to more fully appreciate the wonder of life, with all its pleasure and pain, its beauty and ugliness, and we are freed to center our lives in the needs of all of reality, including ourselves, instead of in our possessive and aggressive desires.

Note that Buddhism does not try to solve the problem of suffering by saying that pain is illusory or unreal. Pain is real—as we are all well aware—and Buddhism will not try to talk us out of that. There is a story about the eleventh-century Tibetan Buddhist teacher Marpa, who was grieving the death of his eldest son:

> His students went to him and found him in great grief, sobbing and wailing. Shocked, they asked, "Teacher, how can you weep when you have taught us that all is impermanence and illusion?"
>
> "Yes, it is true," he said, "and losing a child is the most painful illusion of all."

We are not liberated *from* pain; we are liberated *within* pain. Buddhist meditation teacher Sylvia Boorstein (who is also, incidentally, a practicing Jew) puts it like this: "Pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional." Suffering is the complication that our egoism constructs around simple pain. To be free of suffering doesn't mean that if you lose a child you won't grieve or if you have a root canal it won't hurt. It means, rather, that we can live this pain-full life freely, fully, beautifully, joyfully, compassionately. We can be free of the egoistic delusions that turn pain into suffering for ourselves and others.

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Since the complete cessation of suffering can sound like an awfully remote possibility, Sylvia Boorstein has added her own "Third-and-a-Half Noble Truth": "Suffering is manageable." On the way to complete liberation from suffering, our suffering gets more and more manageable. With practice, pain becomes less scary, difficulties can be borne more gracefully, and egoistic desires become less heavy and serious, lighter and more humorous.

The Third Noble Truth says that liberation from suffering is possible and comes from realizing no-self—not from understanding or believing in no-self but from practicing and directly experiencing no-self. So, then, how do we realize no-self? How do we make it real? The Fourth Noble Truth tells us.

The Fourth Noble Truth: The Path

The Fourth Noble Truth specifies the path to the cessation of suffering, the Eightfold Path. The path is divided into three sections—wisdom, ethical conduct, and meditation—which are called the Three Trainings. Every stage of Buddhist practice includes training in all three, but the practice focuses first on ethical conduct, then on meditation, and finally on wisdom.

The word translated as "right" in each step of the Eightfold Path has a connotation of "complete" or "whole." Each step contributes to completeness and wholeness rather than incompleteness or brokenness. I have also seen the translations "skillful" and "realistic." To follow the Eightfold Path is to live skillfully, to live in accord with reality instead of with our ego-centered delusions about reality.

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The Four Noble Truths

1. The truth of *duhkha* (suffering or dissatisfaction):
   Life is permeated with pain and impermanence, and in the unenlightened life, this leads to suffering.
2. The truth of the origin of *duhkha:*
   The origin of suffering is craving—or more specifically, attachment, aversion, and ignorance of no-self.
3. The truth of the cessation of *duhkha:*
   Liberation from suffering is possible.
4. The truth of the path to the cessation of *duhkha:*
   The Eightfold Path leads to liberation from suffering:

Wisdom:

1. Right view
2. Right intention

Ethical conduct:

3. Right speech
4. Right action
5. Right livelihood

Meditation:

6. Right effort
7. Right mindfulness
8. Right concentration

Ethical Conduct. The foundation of the Eightfold Path is ethical conduct, which includes the practices of right speech, right action, and right livelihood. That is, in what we say, what we do, and how we earn a living, we refrain from harmful and self-centered conduct and cultivate helpful and selfless conduct. We try to minimize behavior that causes suffering for ourselves and others and maximize compassionate behavior.

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In the history of Buddhism, various monastic codes and sets of ethical precepts have been developed that prescribe more specifically what ethical conduct consists of. We'll take a look at the Sixteen Precepts of Zen in Chapter Four.

Meditation. To do a thorough and lasting job of cultivating ethical conduct and to enable ethical conduct to flow naturally, we need to uproot the source of our unethical conduct. We need to see and uproot our attachments and aversions so that they won't keep growing new sprouts of suffering. So when we have a foundation of ethical conduct, the emphasis of the practice shifts to meditation, which includes right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Right effort is active, energetic engagement in overcoming unwholesome states of mind and cultivating wholesome states of mind. Right mindfulness is maintaining clear, open awareness of reality, observing the experiences of the present moment, both physical sensations and thoughts. And right concentration is collecting and focusing the mind, resting the attention in one place—on the breathing, for instance. Most of the practices in this book involve both mindfulness and concentration; the last practice, "just sitting," is a practice of pure mindfulness.

As we practice meditation—as we put effort into cultivating mindfulness and concentration—we see the thoughts that preoccupy us, the egoistic attachments and aversions from which suffering arises, and we practice noticing them and letting them go, instead of allowing them to dictate our behavior. We begin to experience reality in a way that is clear instead of cloudy, selfless instead of self-centered.

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Wisdom. To do a thorough and lasting job of being free of the attachments and aversions that lead to harmful and self-centered conduct, we need to go one step further and uproot the source of those attachments and aversions. So the emphasis of the practice shifts to wisdom, which includes right view and right intention. Right view is understanding reality as it actually is. This unclouded view is based on understanding the Four Noble Truths and no-self. Right view is a selfless view, seeing the insubstantial nature of "self"—experiencing this directly, not just understanding it intellectually. Seeing through the illusion of "self" uproots the source of attachments and aversions, which are the source of suffering. Right intention is an intention in favor of selfless renunciation, nonaggression, and compassion. Meditation is an antidote to two of the Three Poisons, attachment and aversion, and wisdom is an antidote to the root poison, ignorance.

But you may wonder, if wisdom is what frees us from the root cause of suffering, why not start there instead of focusing first on ethical conduct, then on meditation, and only then on wisdom? It simply doesn't work that way for most of us. Without having first tamed the worst of our harmful and self-centered conduct, we will have little luck sitting still with our own minds in meditation; and without having first developed the practice of meditation, we will have little luck uncovering wisdom. The Eightfold Path has been observed over time to be an effective way of liberation from suffering.

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The Poisoned Arrow

A student complained to the Buddha that he ignored such issues as whether the universe is eternal or not eternal, whether the universe is finite or infinite, whether the soul and the body are the same or different, whether the Buddha exists after death or doesn't exist after death, or both exists and doesn't exist, or both doesn't exist and doesn't not-exist. The student had decided that if the Buddha wouldn't either answer these questions or admit that he didn't know the answers, the student would leave the religious order.

The Buddha replied with an analogy. Suppose a man is wounded by a poisoned arrow, and his friends rush him to a doctor. Suppose the man says to the doctor, "Wait! I will not let you remove the arrow until I know who shot me—what his name is, what caste he is from, whether he is tall or short or of medium height, what his skin color is, where he comes from. I will not let you remove the arrow until I know what kind of bow was used to shoot me, what kind of bowstring, what kind of feather is on the arrow, and what the arrowhead is made of." This man will die with these questions unanswered. What he needs is to have the arrow removed as quickly as possible.

Likewise, the student of the Buddha who insists on knowing whether the universe is finite or infinite, and so forth, will die with these questions unanswered by the Buddha. We

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have been wounded by suffering, and we need immediate treatment. Trying to find the answers to all our metaphysical questions will only distract us from the urgent matter at hand. And whatever the answers are to these questions, we still face illness, old age, and death.

The Buddha is a doctor whose first concern is to heal us, to remove the poisoned arrow. The First Noble Truth names the symptom from which we seek relief: suffering or dissatisfaction. The Second Noble Truth diagnoses the cause of this symptom: craving. The Third Noble Truth offers the encouraging prognosis that we can be cured of the disease of craving and thus be free of the suffering it causes. And the Fourth Noble Truth prescribes a course of treatment: the Eightfold Path.

Zen and the Four Noble Truths

The Four Noble Truths are part of all forms of Buddhism, but different Buddhist traditions appropriate these teachings in different ways.

Although Zen does talk about the Eightfold Path, the image of spiritual practice as a path doesn't actually work so well for Zen as it does for some other forms of Buddhism. If Zen is a path, it's a peculiar sort of path. On the Zen path, we eventually realize that we don't need to go anywhere and haven't gone anywhere. In Zen, enlightenment is not understood as a journey from *samsara,* the realm of delusion and suf-

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fering, to *nirvana,* the realm of enlightenment and liberation, but as a realization that samsara *is* nirvana. Liberation is found right here, right now, in the midst of this life of pain and impermanence. We practice the Eightfold Path of ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom not as a way to get to buddhahood but simply because that's what buddhas do. We are expressing our innate buddha-nature. Zen is not a way *to* liberation but a way *of* liberation—a way that manifests our inherent liberation.

I discovered another peculiarity of the Zen appropriation of the Four Noble Truths when I was preparing to teach an adult Sunday school class on Zen and Christianity. I pulled a bunch of Buddhist books off my shelves to see how different authors present the Four Noble Truths, and I found a variety of presentations in textbooks on Buddhism and in books by teachers in Buddhist traditions other than Zen, but I found not a single systematic presentation of the Four Noble Truths in my shelf-and-a-half of Zen books. This isn't actually surprising, given Zen's thoroughgoing and uncompromising focus on practice and experience as opposed to ideas. Zen teachers do regularly allude to the Four Noble Truths, apparently assuming that Zen students are familiar with them from their own reading, but in Zen, even the Buddhist teachings are seen as potential diversions from the removal of the poisoned arrow of suffering.

The heart of the Zen way of liberation is not learning or understanding or believing but practice and experience.

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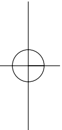
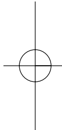

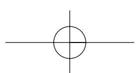

Practice

Noticing Thoughts

Zen meditation is often misunderstood as a practice of stopping thoughts or having no thoughts, but it's actually a practice of noticing thoughts. Zen is not about eliminating thoughts but illuminating them.

Thoughts Are Not Distractions

If you try the practice of counting the breath for even five minutes, you'll probably notice something a little disconcerting: our minds are usually full of noise. It feels like someone left a TV on in there, with the volume way up. And the radio is on too, and the phone is ringing, and the dog next door is barking.

It's easy to assume that all the busy little thoughts scampering about in our minds and capturing our attention are distractions from meditation. But they're not. In fact, *distractions* is precisely the wrong word. *Distractions* implies that all those ideas, emotions, images, plans, memories, fantasies, judgments,

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and so on, that arise during meditation practice are somehow *other* than practice, that they distract us from what we're "supposed" to be doing. But thoughts are not distractions from practice, interruptions to practice, a hindrance to practice, or an indication of poor practice.

Thoughts are an intrinsic part of Zen practice. They're the fodder for practice. We bring compassionate awareness to the physical sensations of breathing or walking, and we bring compassionate awareness to the thoughts that carry our attention away from the breathing or walking. We notice our wandering thoughts and gently return our attention to the present moment, over and over and over.

People sometimes think, "I can't meditate. My mind is too busy." But your mind isn't too busy. All those thoughts are just stuff to notice, and Zen practice is about noticing.

There's no need to repress thoughts or ignore them. There's no need to judge them or scold them. Simply notice the thoughts. Be aware of them. And if you find yourself repressing,

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ignoring, judging, or scolding your thoughts, there's no need to repress, ignore, judge, or scold *that.* Simply notice it and return your attention to the breathing or the walking. Whatever arises, notice it and return your attention to the physical sensations of the present moment.

Once while I was living at the Zen monastery, I had a dream that I had put a boom box on the floor in the middle of the empty meditation hall and was blasting Led Zeppelin. I realized that I had been repressing emotions in my Zen practice, and some part of me knew better. Emotions are fine. They are not distractions. Let them arise, notice them, and return to the present moment.

Some thoughts are more insistent than others. Sometimes you notice a thought and let it go and it pops right up again and keeps popping up over and over. It may be that this thought needs some special attention after the meditation period is over. It may point to something you need to take care of. There was a long stretch when, in my zazen, I kept having thoughts about how much I hated my job. I finally realized that I didn't need to just keep noticing and letting go of these thoughts; I needed to get a new job!

Sometimes in zazen, you may experience odd little hallucinations, known as *makyo.* They are often visual—for instance, the light seems to dim or images appear in the surface in front of you—but they can involve any of the senses. Makyo are just another type of thought and are treated like any other thought: notice it and return to the present moment.

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The thirteenth-century Japanese Zen master Dogen Zenji said:

To study the Buddha Way is to study the self.
To study the self is to forget the self.
To forget the self is to be enlightened by the ten thousand things.

To realize our inherent selflessness, we study the self. We carefully observe what our minds are up to. We notice our attachments and aversions, our possessiveness and aggressiveness. All those thoughts we get caught up in are not distractions from our Zen practice. They are the activity that we call "self." To observe this self is to be free from its domination and to be enlightened by "the ten thousand things," which means everything.

Noticing Thoughts Compassionately

But what exactly does it mean to "notice" a thought before you return to the breathing or walking?

When I started Zen practice, I tended to stomp on my thoughts or whack them away like hockey pucks, or else I'd try to ignore them or pretend they were never there. But that's not what zazen is about. To notice a thought simply means to bring a moment of attention to it before you return your attention to the physical sensations of the present moment. Know what the

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thought was. Hear an echo of it. Take a flash picture of it. There may have been a five-minute-long sequence of thoughts that captured your attention, so just notice the last one, the one you were involved with when you realized you were thinking. Don't analyze the thought or elaborate on the thought or think about the thought. Just bring your awareness to it momentarily. Then let it go and gently return your attention to the breathing or walking.

The noticing in Zen practice is precise but also gentle. You notice the thoughts and physical sensations with precision—seeing exactly what's happening with a kind of scientific attentiveness. But this precision is not harsh or critical. You notice the thoughts and physical sensations with gentleness also—with kindness, tenderness, compassion.

Here's a helpful image I learned from a meditation instructor. You're at a train station. Your train is leaving in two minutes. You're weaving through all the people and you run into a friend you haven't seen in a long time. You stop and smile and say a few words and maybe give your friend a hug. Maybe you encourage your friend to give you a call soon. And then you run off to get your train. You don't ignore your friend. You don't run by as if you didn't notice your friend. But neither do you get into a long conversation and miss your train. You stop for just a moment to be with your friend in a warm and genuine way, and then you move on. You don't need to make your friend go away; you just let your friend be, while you run off to get your train.

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Treat the thoughts that arise in meditation like that friend at the train station. When you notice that a thought has carried you away from the physical sensations of the breathing or the walking, be with the thought for a brief moment. Don't ignore it or run by without making real contact, but don't get into a long conversation with it either. Stop for a moment to bring compassionate awareness to the thought, and then let it go. (It'll probably give you a call later.) You don't need to make the thought go away; just let it be, and return your attention to the breathing or walking. Hug each thought goodbye and return to the present moment.

Listing Thoughts

The format of my Zen meditation groups for Christians is based on the format of the Christian contemplative prayer groups led by the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation. Part of the Shalem format is written reflection following the prayer time, so I decided to try including written reflection in my Zen groups. Even though Zen is so deliberately nonverbal and nonconceptual, I thought it was worth experimenting with written reflection, and I've found it to be helpful, especially the exercise of listing thoughts. I invite the participants in my meditation groups to list all the thoughts they can remember that arose during the meditation time. This exercise helps reinforce the point that thoughts are an intrinsic part of the practice, and writing the thoughts down can help us see more clearly what

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we are preoccupied with, precisely what our own attachments and aversions are.

You might want to try this now and then. Immediately after a meditation period, jot down as many thoughts as you can remember from the meditation period—every bit of mental activity. If it seems like it was one big blur of thoughts, just try to pull out a few vague shreds of ideas, emotions, images, or whatever.

This list is for no one's eyes but yours, and you can discard the piece of paper or delete the computer file as soon as you've finished, so there's no need for censorship. Include the lustful thoughts, the angry thoughts, the frivolous thoughts, the bored thoughts, the anxious thoughts, the surreal thoughts, the thoughts about the practice—everything.

There is no moral value, good or bad, to the thoughts that simply pop into consciousness. When Jesus says that if you look at someone with lust, you have already committed adultery in your heart, I understand "looking with lust" to mean intentionally entertaining a lustful thought—indulging the thought, savoring it, elaborating on it, spinning fantasies from it—not simply having a lustful thought appear in consciousness. Paul says to the Ephesians, "Be angry but do not sin." Angry feelings in themselves are not sinful. It's what we do with the angry feelings that can be sinful.

As we quickly discover in meditation practice, thoughts arise without our control or consent. I like what Trappist monk Thomas Merton says about this: "Sometimes pious men and

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women torture themselves at meditation because they imagine they are 'consenting' to the phantasms of a lewd and somewhat idiotic burlesque that is being fabricated in their imagination without their being able to do a thing to stop it." But as Merton also says, "There is no real danger in these things." Morality becomes an issue if we intentionally entertain a thought or, of course, if we act on a thought; but there's nothing moral or immoral about simply having a thought. So feel free to notice *all* of your thoughts, whether naughty, nice, or neither.