A PATH WITH HEART

A Guide Through the Perils and Promises of Spiritual Life

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A BEGINNING

In beginning this book I have emphasized my own personal journey, because the greatest lesson I have learned is that the universal must be wedded to the personal to be fulfilled in our spiritual life.

In the summer of 1972 I returned to the home of my parents in Washington, D.C., head shaved and robed as a Buddhist monk, after my first five-year study in Asia. No Theravada Buddhist monasteries had been established in America at that time, but I wanted to see how it would be to live as a monk in America, even if for only a short while. After several weeks with my parents, I decided to visit my twin brother and his wife on Long Island. With my robes and bowl I boarded a train en route from Washington to New York's Grand Central Station, carrying a ticket my mother had purchased for me—as a renunciate, I was not using or handling money myself.

I arrived that afternoon and began to walk up Fifth Avenue to meet my sister-in-law. I was still very calm after so many years of practice. I walked as if I were meditating, letting shops such as Tiffany's and the crowds of passersby be the same in my mind as the wind and the trees

of my forest monastery. I was to meet my sister-in-law in front of Elizabeth Arden's. She had been given a birthday certificate for a full day of care in that establishment, including facial, hairdo, massage, manicure, and more. I arrived at Elizabeth Arden's at four o'clock as promised, but she did not appear. After some period of waiting, I went inside. "May I help you?" exclaimed the shocked receptionist as I entered. "Yes, I'm looking for Tori Kornfield." "Oh," she replied. "She's not finished yet. There's a waiting lounge on the fourth floor." So I took the elevator to the fourth floor. Coming out of the door, I met the waiting lounge receptionist, who also inquired in a slightly incredulous tone, "May I help you?" I told her I was waiting for my sister-in-law and was instructed to take a seat.

I sat on a comfortable couch, and after waiting a few minutes, I decided to cross my legs, close my eyes, and meditate. I was a monk after all, and what else was there to do? After ten minutes I began to hear laughter and noises. I continued to meditate, but finally I heard a group of voices and a loud exclamation of "Is he for real?" from the hall across the room, which caused me to open my eyes. I saw eight or ten women dressed in Elizabeth Arden "nighties" (the gowns given them for the day) staring at me. Many had their hair in rollers or in other multiple fishing-reel-shaped contraptions. Several had what looked like green avocado smeared on their faces. Others were covered with mud. I looked back at them and wondered what realm I had been born into and heard myself say, "Are they for real?"

From that moment, it became clear that I would have to find a way to reconcile the ancient and wonderful teachings I had received at the Buddhist monastery with the ways of our modern world. Over the years, this reconciliation has become one of the most interesting and compelling inquiries for me and for many other people seeking to live a genuine spiritual life as we enter the twenty-first century. Most Americans do not wish to live as traditional priests or monks or nuns, yet many of us wish to bring a genuine spiritual practice to life in our own world. This book will speak to this possibility.

My own spiritual life was triggered at age fourteen by the gift of T. Lobsang Rampa's book *The Third Eye*, a semifictional account of mystical adventures in Tibet. It was exciting and thought-provoking and offered a world to escape to that seemed far better than the one I inhabited. I grew up on the East Coast in a scientific and intellectual household. My father was a biophysicist who developed artificial hearts and artificial lungs, worked in space medicine for the space program, and taught in medical schools. I had a "good education" and went to an

Ivy League college. I was surrounded by many bright and creative people. In spite of their success and their intellectual attainments, however, many of them were unhappy. It became clear to me that intelligence and worldly position had little to do with happiness or healthy human relationships. This was most painfully evident in my own family. Even in my loneliness and confusion I knew that I would have to seek happiness somewhere else. So I turned to the East.

At Dartmouth College in 1963, I was blessed with a wise old professor, Dr. Wing Tsit Chan, who sat cross-legged on a desk while lecturing on the Buddha and the Chinese classics. Inspired by him, I majored in Asian studies and, after graduating, immediately went to Asia (with the help of the Peace Corps) seeking teachings and ordination in a Buddhist monastery. I began practice and when I was finally ordained and retreated to the Thai forest monastery at Wat Ba Pong, led by the young but later quite famous master Achaan Chah, I was surprised. While I hadn't necessarily expected the monks to levitate as they did in T. Lobsang Rampa's stories, I had hoped for special effects from the meditation—happiness, special states of rapture, extraordinary experiences. But that was not primarily what my teacher offered. He offered a way of life, a lifelong path of awakening, attention, surrender, and commitment. He offered a happiness that was not dependent on any of the changing conditions of the world but came out of one's own difficult and conscious inner transformation. In joining the monastery, I had hoped to leave behind the pain of my family life and the difficulties of the world, but of course they followed me. It took many years for me to realize that these difficulties were part of my practice.

I was fortunate enough to find wise instruction and to undergo the traditional ancient trainings that are still offered in the best monasteries. This entailed living with great simplicity, possessing little more than a robe and bowl, and walking five miles each day to collect food for the single midday meal. I spent long periods of meditation in traditional practices, such as sitting in the forest all night watching bodies burn on the charnel grounds, and I undertook a year-long silent retreat in one room, sitting and walking for twenty hours a day. I was offered excellent teachings in great monasteries led by Mahasi Sayadaw, Asabha Sayadaw, and Achaan Buddhadasa. I learned wonderful things in these periods of practice and am perennially grateful to these teachers. Yet, intensive meditation in these exotic settings turned out to be just the beginning of my practice. Since then I have had equally compelling meditations in quite ordinary places, arising simply as a result of committed systematic training. I did not know what lay ahead at the time of my early training

and left Asia still very idealistic, expecting that the special meditation experiences I had found would solve all my problems.

Over subsequent years, I returned for further training in monasteries of Thailand, India, and Sri Lanka and then studied with several renowned Tibetan lamas, Zen masters, and Hindu gurus. In nineteen years of teaching I've had the privilege of collaborating with many other Western Buddhist teachers to establish Insight Meditation, the Buddhist practice of mindfulness, in America. I have led retreats of one day's to three months' duration and worked in conjunction with many centers, Christian, Buddhist, transpersonal, and others. In 1976 I completed a Ph.D. in clinical psychology and have worked ever since as a psychotherapist as well as a Buddhist teacher. And mostly, as I've gone through these years, I have been trying to answer the question: How can I live my spiritual practice, how can I bring it to flower in every day of my life?

Since beginning to teach, I've seen how many other students misunderstand spiritual practice, how many have hoped to use it to escape from their lives, how many have used its ideals and language as a way to avoid the pains and difficulties of human existence as I tried to do, how many have entered temples, churches, and monasteries looking for the special effects.

My own practice has been a journey downward, in contrast to the way we usually think of our spiritual experiences. Over these years I've found myself working my way *down* the chakras (the spiritual energy centers of the body) rather than up. My first ten years of systematic spiritual practice were primarily conducted through my mind. I studied, read, and then meditated and lived as a monk, always using the power of my mind to gain understanding. I developed concentration and samadhi (deep levels of mental absorption), and many kinds of insights came. I had visions, revelations, and a variety of deep awakenings. The whole way I understood myself in the world was turned upside down as my practice developed and I saw things in a new and wiser way. I thought that this insight was the point of practice and felt satisfied with my new understandings.

But alas, when I returned to the U.S. as a monk, all of that fell apart. In the weeks after Elizabeth Arden's, I disrobed, enrolled in graduate school, got a job driving a taxi, and worked nights at a mental hospital in Boston. I also became involved in an intimate relationship. Although I had arrived back from the monastery clear, spacious, and high, in short order I discovered, through my relationship, in the communal household where I lived, and in my graduate work, that my meditation had helped me very little with my human relationships. I was still emotionally im-

mature, acting out the same painful patterns of blame and fear, acceptance and rejection that I had before my Buddhist training; only the horror now was that I was beginning to see these patterns more clearly. I could do loving-kindness meditations for a thousand beings elsewhere but had terrible trouble relating intimately to one person here and now. I had used the strength of my mind in meditation to suppress painful feelings, and all too often I didn't even recognize that I was angry, sad, grieving, or frustrated until a long time later. The roots of my unhappiness in relationships had not been examined. I had very few skills for dealing with my feelings or for engaging on an emotional level or for living wisely with my friends and loved ones.

I was forced to shift my whole practice down the chakras from the mind to the heart. I began a long and difficult process of reclaiming my emotions, of bringing awareness and understanding to my patterns of relationship, of learning how to feel my feelings, and what to do with the powerful forces of human connection. I did this through group and individual therapy, through heart-centered meditations, through transpersonal psychology, and through a series of both successful and disastrous relationships. I did it through examining my family of origin and early history, bringing this understanding into my relationships in the present. Eventually this led me to an initially difficult relationship that is now a happy marriage with my wife, Liana, and to a beautiful daughter, Caroline. Gradually I have come to understand this work of the heart as a fully integrated part of my spiritual practice.

After ten years of focusing on emotional work and the development of the heart, I realized I had neglected my body. Like my emotions, my body had been included in my early spiritual practice in only a superficial way. I learned to be quite aware of my breathing and work with the pains and sensations in my body, but mostly I had used my body as an athlete might. I had been blessed with sufficient health and strength that I could climb mountains or sit like a yogi on the bank of the Ganges River through the fiery pain for ten or twenty hours without moving, I could eat one meal a day as a monk and walk long distances barefoot, but I discovered that I had *used* my body rather than inhabiting it. It had been a vehicle to feed and move and fulfill my mental emotional, and spiritual life.

As I had come to reinhabit my emotions more fully, I noticed that my body also required its own loving attention and that it was not enough to see and understand or even to feel with love and compassion—I had to move further down the chakras. I learned that if I am to live a spiritual life, I must be able to embody it in every action: in the way I stand and

walk, in the way I breathe, in the care with which I eat. All my activities must be included. To live in this precious animal body on this earth is as great a part of spiritual life as anything else. In beginning to reinhabit my body, I discovered new areas of fear and pain that kept me away from my true self, just as I had discovered new areas of fear and pain in opening my mind and opening my heart.

As my practice has proceeded down the chakras, it has become more intimate and more personal. It has required more honesty and care each step of the way. It has also become more integrated. The way I treat my body is not disconnected from the way I treat my family or the commitment I have to peace on our earth. So that as I have been working my way down, the vision of my practice has expanded to include, not just my own body or heart, but all of life, the relationships we hold, and the environment that sustains us.

In this process of deepening and expanding my commitment to spiritual life, I have seen both my effort and motivation change greatly. At first I practiced and taught from a place of great striving and effort. I had used strong effort of mind to hold my body still, to concentrate and marshal mental power in my meditation, to overcome pains, feelings, and distractions. I used spiritual practice to strive for states of clarity and light, for understanding and vision, and I initially taught this way. Gradually, though, it became clear that for most of us this very striving itself increased our problems. Where we tended to be judgmental, we became more judgmental of ourselves in our spiritual practice. Where we had been cut off from ourselves, denying our feelings, our bodies, and our humanity, the striving toward enlightenment or some spiritual goal only increased this separation. Whenever a sense of unworthiness or self-hatred had a foothold—in fear of our feelings or judgment of our thoughts—it was strengthened by spiritual striving. Yet I knew that spiritual practice is impossible without great dedication, energy, and commitment. If not from striving and idealism, from where was this to come?

What I discovered was wonderful news for me. To open deeply, as genuine spiritual life requires, we need tremendous courage and strength, a kind of warrior spirit. But the place for this warrior strength is in the heart. We need energy, commitment, and courage not to run from our life nor to cover it over with any philosophy—material or spiritual. We need a warrior's heart that lets us face our lives directly, our pains and limitations, our joys and possibilities. This courage allows us to include every aspect of life in our spiritual practice: our bodies,

our families, our society, politics, the earth's ecology, art, education. Only then can spirituality be truly integrated into our lives.

When I began working at a state mental hospital while studying for my Ph.D., I naively thought I might teach meditation to some of the patients. It quickly became obvious that meditation was not what they needed. These people had little ability to bring a balanced attention to their lives, and most of them were already lost in their minds. If any meditation was useful to them, it would have to be one that was earthy and grounded: yoga, gardening, tai chi, active practices that could connect them to their bodies.

But then I discovered a whole large population at this hospital who desperately needed meditation: the psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, psychiatric nurses, mental health aides, and others. This group cared for and often controlled the patients through antipsychotic drugs and out of fear, fear of the energies in the patients and fear of these energies in themselves. Not many among these caregivers seemed to know firsthand in their own psyches the powerful forces that the patients were encountering, yet this is a very basic lesson in meditation: facing our own greed, unworthiness, rage, paranoia, and grandiosity, and the opening of wisdom and fearlessness beyond these forces. The staff could all have greatly benefited from meditation as a way of facing within themselves the psychic forces that were unleashed in their patients. From this they would have brought a new understanding and compassion to their work and their patients.

The need to include spiritual life in treatment and therapy is beginning to be recognized by the mental health profession. An awareness of the necessity of integrating a spiritual vision has spread to such fields as politics, economics, and ecology as well. Yet to be beneficial, this spirituality must be grounded in personal experience. For the reader who wants to learn firsthand, chapters throughout this book offer a series of traditional practices and contemporary meditations. These exercises are ways to directly work with the teachings presented here, to enter more deeply into your own body and heart as a vehicle for spiritual practice. The core of the meditations presented here comes from the Theravada Buddhist tradition of Southeast Asia. These are the mindfulness practices of Insight Meditation (vipassana), also called the heart of Buddhist meditation, which offer a systematic training and awakening of body, heart, and mind that is integrated with the world around us. It is this tradition that I have followed and taught for many years, and it is this central teaching that forms the basis of almost all Buddhist practice worldwide.

While this book will draw upon my experience in the Buddhist traditions, I believe the principles of spiritual practice it touches on are universal. The first half introduces the ground of an integrated spiritual life: ways of practice, common perils, techniques for dealing with our wounds and difficulties, and some Buddhist maps of spiritual states of human consciousness and how these extraordinary experiences can be grounded in common sense. The second half of the book will speak more directly to the integration of this practice into our contemporary lives, addressing topics such as codependence and compassion, compartmentalization, psychotherapy and meditation, and the benefits and difficulties encountered with spiritual teachers. We will conclude by looking at spiritual maturity: the ripening of wisdom and compassion, and the ease and joy it brings to our life.

In beginning this book, I have emphasized my own personal journey, because the greatest lesson I have learned is that the universal must be wedded to the personal to be fulfilled in our spiritual life. We are human beings, and the human gate to the sacred is our own body, heart, and mind, the history from which we've come, and the closest relationships and circumstances of our life. If not here, where else could we bring alive compassion, justice, and liberation?

An integrated sense of spirituality understands that if we are to bring light or wisdom or compassion into the world, we must first begin with ourselves. The universal truths of spiritual life can come alive only in each particular and personal circumstance. This personal approach to practice honors both the uniqueness and the commonality of our life, respecting the timeless quality of the great dance between birth and death, yet also honoring our particular body, our particular family and community, the personal history and the joys and sorrows that have been given to us. In this way, our awakening is a very personal matter that also affects all other creatures on earth.