

# THE DHARMA *of* STAR WARS™



MATTHEW BORTOLIN

“With humor and timeless wisdom, Bortolin offers a new way to think about a pop culture phenomenon. Lead us to Yoda, he does.”

*Publishers Weekly*

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# MORE ADVANCE PRAISE FOR THE DHARMA *of* STAR WARS

“Bortolin [...] may be the ideal person to write about the Buddhist themes in Star Wars: he camped out for tickets to all of the movies—even the less than stellar ones—and possesses his own set of Jedi robes. [...] One of the book’s greatest strengths is Bortolin’s stubborn determination to find something redeeming about [Episodes I and II of the] Star Wars films, and he does actually recover enough of these nuggets to make fans take a second look at those overhyped flicks [...] With humor, strong examples and timeless wisdom, Bortolin offers a new way to think about a pop culture phenomenon.

Lead us to Yoda, he does.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“Star Wars fans will find Bortolin’s pleasant humor and simple directness immensely enjoyable and thought provoking, while long-time spiritual practitioners will discover a new and profound avenue into self-transformation.”

ROBERT A. JOHNSON, AUTHOR OF “OWNING YOUR OWN SHADOW”

“Those movie lovers who haven’t yet gotten their copy of the Star Wars trilogy on DVD may want to wait [until the release of *The Dharma of Star Wars*]—and achieve enlightenment at the same time.”

PW RELIGION BOOKLINE, FALL 2004

# THE DHARMA



*f* STAR WARS

MATTHEW BORTOLIN



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MAY THE MERIT OF THIS WORK BENEFIT ALL BEINGS.



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# PROLOGUE

I.

*SNAPHISS!* The red-bladed lightsaber arches through the air toward its target. At the last instant green-blade rises to meet it, locking the two in static tension. The battle of Jedi and Sith is rejoined.

This is no ordinary battle—but a fight between father and son with the fate of the galaxy, the balance of the Force, and so much more at stake—for as the two battle one another they also battle themselves. Luke Skywalker, the last living Jedi, has entered this fight in order to rescue his father from the abyss of evil, but the way to victory could mean losing himself to the dark side. Darth Vader, the man once known as Anakin Skywalker before he gave himself to the dark side, struggles to climb out of the darkness and return to the light of his former self.

The battle we see played out on the screen in breathtaking acrobatics and flashing green and red sabers is in reality the battle for the participants' very hearts and minds. Jedi and fallen-Jedi,

both struggle to come to terms with themselves and the world, to confront the evil within them, and ultimately transcend it.

Yet the only way to win this momentous battle at its deepest level is to switch off the lightsaber—as Luke does an instant before he destroys his father—and truly break the hold of the dark side within each of us. The only way to real balance within our self and peace in the world is to face the dark side with openness and courage—and come to terms with the truth of reality as it is.

...but we're getting ahead of ourselves. Another part of our story begins two and a half millennia ago, on Earth, in a place called Kapilavastu.

## II.

### A LONG TIME AGO, IN A LAND FAR, FAR AWAY

there lived a man named Siddhartha Gautama. Siddhartha, the eldest son of a powerful king, dwelled in the very heart of luxury and self-indulgence. He was fed on lavish food and drink, and was lulled to sleep by the most melodious music. He was adorned with the finest jewelry and the softest silk. He was uncommonly handsome and graced with a regal bearing. When he came of age, he was blessed with a lovely wife who was both dignified and kind. Siddhartha had everything in life that we commonly believe should content a man—yet he could not find peace in his heart.

Siddhartha's comforts could not alleviate his fear of sickness, aging, and death. No pleasures could truly drive away the pain of sorrow, or the insatiable restlessness of life that we all suffer. For years he struggled with the dilemma of life's suffering, until one

late night, at the age of twenty-nine, he left his palatial home—left even his beloved wife and young son—and forsook his claim to the throne of his father's kingdom. In this moment he went forth to free himself completely from all life's suffering.

Like a Padawan learning from great Jedi Masters, Siddhartha sought out the most respected spiritual teachers of his time and mastered the meditation techniques they taught. But he left each teacher because none could resolve for him the fundamental problems of life and death that plague all humans. And so he plunged ever forward in his quest, now into the forest and the life of an ascetic, a world-renouncer.

Siddhartha joined a group of men practicing intense austerities. They ate but a few grains of rice a day, savagely beat their own bodies, and practiced severe and painful forms of abstinence. Siddhartha was so resolute in his effort that he took his rigorous practice beyond any of his peers—even unto the point of nearly dying. And this taught him that asceticism would not be his salvation.

Siddhartha had lived the life of a decadent prince and a self-denying ascetic, and both paths had proved fruitless. And so he abandoned all the old traditions and began to blaze a new trail, a path that would later become known as the Middle Way. He turned his attention inward, observing his mind and the world of phenomena, no longer denying the world around him but no longer becoming intoxicated by it either. He began to live simply and joyfully.

He sat day and night in meditation, his understanding penetrating deeper and deeper until one night, while sitting at the foot of a strong tree, ignorance slipped from his mind like the haze of sleep from an awakening dreamer—and he awakened to truth. With this awakening came the transcendence of all suffering,

freedom from all fear, and the direct and clear understanding of reality. From that day forward he was known as the Buddha—the Awakened One.

For the next forty-five years the Buddha shared his insights with the people of northeast India, and from there they have spread through the centuries and throughout the world. His teachings, known as the Dharma, detailed the way to be free from the shackles of birth and death, fear, anxiety, anger, jealousy, insecurity and all the other manifestations of suffering. This freedom, he taught, is attained through the cultivation of understanding and compassion. The Dharma shows us how to transform ignorance into wisdom, and greed and anger into compassion, so we may better love ourselves, our family, and all the world.

# III.

**THE STAR WARS SAGA** is a story of human beings and other creatures grappling with issues of freedom, hate, love, power, and suffering. It is an exploration of the human condition writ large across a tale of galactic war, despair and hope, good and evil, and the struggle for peace. Star Wars is not a Buddhist epic. And yet because the Star Wars saga addresses so much of what it means to be human it can appropriately be applied to the Buddha's teachings, and the Buddha's teachings can effectively be used to illuminate our understanding of the

characters and themes in Star Wars. The Dharma of Star Wars is an exploration of the deepest universal themes in the Star Wars saga, using Buddhist teachings to investigate them; simultaneously, it is also an introduction to the teachings of the Buddha, using Star Wars as a doorway through which to examine them.

When we look carefully at Anakin Skywalker, for instance, we can see that he was dissatisfied with life much like the Buddha was before he awakened. Siddhartha found no solace in the luxuries of his life as a prince; Anakin was unfulfilled by his existence on Tatooine and dreamed of becoming a great Jedi. Both fled the familiar, the easy, the known, in search of something more. Their paths led in different directions, but both demonstrate what it is to be human, how our ignorance and attachments lead to suffering, and how compassion and wisdom lead to freedom.

The heart of the Buddha's Way is the teaching of the Four Noble Truths. The first three truths proclaim: suffering exists; suffering has a cause; suffering can cease. The fourth truth outlines the Path leading to the cessation of suffering. Although the Buddha spoke of his insights as "truths," it is up to us to discover their validity—just as each Jedi must for himself experience and understand the Force. This means the Dharma is in no way dogmatic and should not be accepted solely on blind faith.

The Buddha traveled the Middle Way repeatedly, blazing a trail for us to walk, to reflect upon, and to realize in our own way. Personal observation is essential. We must observe our mind, our thoughts, the world around us, and in this way we come to truly understand reality.

To do this, it is essential we develop our ability to be mindful and concentrated. These are the arts of directly touching life in the

here and now, and they are also the practices of the Jedi, the way they live in touch with the living Force.

We turn now to *The Dharma of Star Wars*—and the Jedi art of mindfulness and concentration.

SECTION I:  
THE DHARMA *of* STAR WARS

I

THE JEDI ART



# *of* MINDFULNESS AND CONCENTRATION

*"Don't center on your anxieties, Obi-Wan,  
keep your concentration here and now where it belongs."*

*"But Master Yoda said I should be mindful of the future."*

*"But not at the expense of the moment,  
be mindful of the living Force, young Padawan."*

JEDI MASTER QUI-GON JINN AND JEDI PADAWAN OBI-WAN KENOBI  
IN "THE PHANTOM MENACE"

**T**HE STAR WARS EPIC begins, in this dialogue, with mindfulness and concentration. In Episode I, *The Phantom Menace*, Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn advises his Padawan, Obi-Wan Kenobi, on these practices while the two are aboard the Trade Federation Droid-Control Ship representing the Galactic Republic as ambassadors of peace. Obi-Wan gives voice to his concern about and wariness of a far-off disturbance in the Force. Qui-Gon, sensing his apprentice is lost in the future and not grounded in the here and now, counsels him to practice the Jedi art of mindfulness and concentration. Mindfulness and concentration are also the beginning and end of the practices handed down from Siddhartha, and that came to be known as Buddhism.

These two practices are essential steps along the path of spiritual freedom and happiness; they are methods for cultivating understanding, which is necessary to love ourselves, others, and life; and they are vital elements for being in touch with the living Force, for living in the present. If we are to be truly alive we must touch life deeply here and now because there is no life outside this moment. The past is gone and the future is not yet come. We must stop ourselves from being swept away by thoughts of the past or worries about the future. Just as Qui-Gon Jinn advises young Obi-Wan, we too should keep our attention “here and now where it belongs.”

Yet it is difficult to remain in the present. We become caught in the memories of our past mistakes and lost in fantasies about future triumphs, and in so doing we lose the joy available in the present. In the time of the Buddha his disciples were known to

be exceptionally joyful and even radiant. It was a striking sight: simple monks, residing in the wilderness and eating very little, yet so luminous and serene. When asked how this came to be, the Buddha said, “They do not repent the past, nor do they brood for the future. They live in the present. Therefore they are radiant. By brooding over the future and repenting the past, fools wither away like green reeds cut down.”

When we do not waste our energy brooding and repenting (or whining like Luke Skywalker!), we are freer and have more opportunities to stop and smell life’s roses—and when we do we become aware that there are a lot more roses around us than we ever imagined. In every moment countless small joys bloom, but too often we take them for granted. The Star Wars movies, food, running water, and life itself are just a few examples of the simple joy present right now. Living as Qui-Gon, remaining concentrated and mindful in the here and now, opens our eyes to these wonders, brings us happiness, and in itself relieves much of our daily suffering.

In regard to his ministry the Buddha said, “I teach only suffering and the cessation of suffering.” He was not interested in abstract philosophical theorizing. He found of little importance such questions as “Is the soul one thing and the body another?” “Is the world beginningless?” and “Will the universe have an end?” To him, pondering these was wasted time because it did nothing to cure the problem plaguing the world—the problem of suffering.

This focus on suffering may appear morbid—like a kind of unhealthy fascination with the dark side of life—but truly it is the opposite. It is pragmatic, vital and deeply freeing. Suffering is a fact of life—and indulging in speculative cerebral processing about life and death serves us little when our Jedi master dies or

when our own death approaches. Honestly recognizing suffering is a necessary first step toward transcending it. And transcending suffering is possible if we begin with the teaching of Qui-Gon and practice the Jedi art of mindfulness and concentration.

Living as Qui-Gon instructed, in touch with the present moment, we may observe our present suffering and the causes and conditions that give rise to it. When we look closely, we begin to realize we suffer because of previously unexamined views, beliefs, attitudes, and habits. Mindfulness is a way of watching our mind in order to discover the different ways we create suffering.

One way we create suffering is by playing the “Should Game”: we tell ourselves we or the world “should be” different. We think we should not be the way we are or the world should not be as it is. We tell ourselves we should be better people and criticize ourselves for our shortcomings. “I should be kinder, calmer, and more generous,” is the way *I* typically play the Should Game.

There is nothing wrong with improving myself, but when I start playing the Should Game I make my life a struggle. I struggle against myself. I judge myself and ridicule myself—and right there suffering arises. When I latch on to my “should” thoughts I take myself away from the present joys into an imaginary future world where I will be “better”—but never *happier*, because the Should Game can never be won, and the mind that plays it is never satisfied.

The Should Game, pride, and habitual patterns of suffering are not things we try to get rid of or banish from our psyche. They are not the dark side’s agents of evil that we set out to destroy. They are merely aspects of ourselves that we may observe in the way Qui-Gon instructed Obi-Wan. At the heart of the Jedi art of

mindfulness and concentration one can find the ancient Greek maxim “Know thyself.” When we know ourselves we understand why we suffer, and knowing this eases a great amount of our pain. Mindfulness is the method for coming to know who we are. Mindfulness does not judge or reject the causes of suffering; it is simply aware. And with awareness of the causes of suffering we can learn to let go of them.

The Should Game does not in itself cause suffering. Suffering is created when we *buy into* the game—when we are continuously and dogmatically convinced we need to be something more than what we are. Mindfulness helps us see the idea of “should be” or “should not be” surface in our mind, and then, if we are wise, instead of perpetually trying to remake ourselves or others we simply *do not buy into those ideas*. The Buddhist term for this is *letting go*.

**IN “A NEW HOPE”** Luke Skywalker races his X-wing along the Death Star trench preparing to fire the proton torpedoes that would destroy the Empire’s ultimate weapon. Fiddling with his ship’s targeting computer, Luke hears Obi-Wan Kenobi’s voice, “Use the Force, Luke.” Unsure of himself Luke dismisses the command and returns to what he believes he *should* be doing: targeting his mechanical scope for the crucial shot. Then the voice speaks again, “Let go, Luke.”

When we let go of the things we believe we need—a targeting computer, the new XP-38 Landspeeder, the DVD player with a five-disc changer, or any of the other myriad crutches of life—we

open up to infinite possibilities. Luke let go and allowed himself to touch the Force in the present moment—and of course we know the outcome of his shot! Luke was one with the Force at that instant, fully focused on his one present-moment task. He would not have succeeded in his mission of destroying the Death Star without letting go.

We can also let go of the things we chronically cling to as truth, the things we stubbornly grasp as important, and the things we habitually hang onto as necessary. To remain attached to ideas and habits, mechanical devices and protocol, is to limit ourselves and possibly set ourselves down the path of suffering. To release attachments to these things means they become *choices* we are free to make rather than addictions we blindly follow. But to do that we need to develop what both the Buddha and the Jedi call *mindfulness*.

The method for developing mindfulness is easy to understand—yet surprisingly difficult to put into practice. The practice requires us to focus our awareness on what is going on within us and around us at this instant—being mindful of the living Force. When we read this book, we know we are reading this book. If our thoughts drift off to what we are going to eat for dinner, or what events we have scheduled tomorrow, or what we would do if we had Jedi powers, then we are not reading mindfully. If you are reading, be aware you are reading. When standing, sitting, or lying down, be aware you are standing, sitting, or lying down.

Mindfulness is the energy that shines light on all we see and all we do. It is awareness of what is happening right now. Mindfulness supports *concentration*—the art of precisely and deeply focusing one's attention on an object or task at hand—and together the

two bring us into direct contact with reality, where insight and understanding are born.

Being mindful and staying present with life and its instant-to-instant shifts is much more difficult than it sounds. We may try to comply with Qui-Gon's advice, yet mindfulness and concentration are not light switches we can simply turn on. You cannot just decide to be mindful and be done with it, living forever in deep awareness. But do not take my word for it—try it for yourself. After reading this paragraph put the book down, stand up, get a glass of water, and drink it. Then come back.

**BACK?** Okay. Now, try to recall as you walked to the cupboard, got yourself a glass, and proceeded to fill it, did your thoughts ever drift away? Were you telling yourself stories about the ease or difficulty of the task? Were you *thinking about* being mindful or actually *being* mindful? Did you notice the sound of your steps and tactile experience of holding the glass? Or did you lose yourself in fantasy?

If your experience was anything like most people, then you see that remaining mindful of each present activity—walking, reaching, grabbing, holding, pouring, breathing, drinking, and so on—as it occurs is much harder than, say...successfully navigating an asteroid field! And what are the odds of that? Well, we don't have See-Threepio here to tell us these things, but needless to say it is not easy. (Probably harder than “approximately three thousand, seven hundred and twenty to one”!) So, if you were not as mindful as you would like to be just notice that thought and do not get down on yourself: most of us are not masters of Jedi mindfulness—*yet*.

It is difficult to be mindful because many of us have lived unmindfully for years and even decades. Yoda's words about Luke in *The Empire Strikes Back* can easily be applied to us: "Never his mind on where he was. What he was doing." Likewise, our minds are rarely in touch with where we are and with what we are doing. And in this way we have accumulated many years of living without mindfulness—doing one thing mechanically while thinking about another—and this habit of living distractedly has become ingrained in us.

In fact, the habit of living distractedly is so strong in many of us it has become like a runaway podracer pulling us along. We try to wrest back the controls, but the energy of the thing is too strong. We are swept away by the habit energy of distraction and carelessness, and before we know it we've crashed into the side of Beggar's Canyon, bringing hardship to ourselves and others.

To avoid such a catastrophe there are several ways to develop our mindfulness. One has already been mentioned: recognition of what you are doing at this very moment. Recognition is easy to achieve but hard to maintain from moment to moment. Fortunately there is a powerful tool that gives us a means of staying anchored to the present. That anchor is mindful breathing.

**MINDFUL BREATHING** is simply the practice of concentrating on the breath. With the inhalation, you know that you are breathing in. With the exhalation, you know you are breathing out. You follow the breath in with awareness as it goes in, and you follow it as it goes out. You notice that the breath is long or short when it is long or short. With mindful breathing you just notice the

breath; you do not try to hold it or force it; you do not alter its rhythm or change its volume. Don't hold on to the idea that you should breathe a certain way. Simply become aware of the way your body naturally breathes.

As we focus on our breathing we discover that our mind does not easily stay attuned to our breath, but flies off in a million different directions. But through sustained effort and practice, the podracer of our mind—once flying away heedlessly—begins to slow down. We do not forcibly take hold of the podracer's controls to bring about this deceleration; rather it is with gentle mindfulness that the frenetic machine is ever so subtly coaxed into a state of ease.

**LUKE SKYWALKER** learned the art of mindful breathing on his first visit to Dagobah, in *The Empire Strikes Back*. While climbing up vines, dashing through the undergrowth, leaping logs and rocks, the young Jedi pupil, his master on his back, is being instructed on the dangers of the dark side of the Force. Luke's mind races with a thousand questions about the dark side: is the dark side stronger than the good side of the Force, how can he distinguish it from the good, and why can he not do certain things. Luke's questions come in such a rapid-fire manner that it is clear to Master Yoda Luke has lost touch with the here and the now. Noticing this, and sensing Luke's mind was running away from him, he brings the lesson to an end. "Nothing more will I teach you today," Yoda says. "Clear your mind of questions."

Often we have concerns about a future event or confusion about the way something works and our mind becomes lost in a

labyrinth of questions, doubts, and plans. Aware of this tendency, Yoda stops Luke before he can become bewildered, rather than empowered, by his education and training. By directing Luke to clear his mind of questions, Yoda is instructing the boy to come back to the present moment—to return to his breath. Luke does as he is told and almost instantly he is visibly calmer.

**EVERY DAY WE ACCUMULATE STRESS** and anxiety. This creates tension in the body and mind that can cause physical as well as mental and psychological maladies. The practice of mindful breathing as a way of calming mind and body is a powerful remedy for illness. It is simple to do and always at hand. We don't need a doctor's prescription for the medicine of mindful breathing! We can just turn our attention to the body's breath and notice the natural process of breathing. With the inhalation we silently say, "I am aware of my in-breath." As we exhale, "I am aware of my out-breath." Doing this, we can also learn to stop ourselves from blindly following misplaced emotions or ideas that so often create suffering.

I have said that mindful breathing is like an anchor that keeps us in the present moment. To take that analogy further we can imagine ourselves as boats. Without the anchor of mindfulness we will be swept away by waves of ideas and emotions, and our peace and stability will soon be dashed to bits. But making good use of our anchor, we can avoid being swept away. We can just watch the waves of emotion swell, break, and crash upon the shore. Waves rise and fall; that is their nature. This is called *impermanance*. Because we are anchored with mindfulness we do not get carried

away by the waves and so we do not suffer or cause others to suffer. Yet because we have not yet mastered the Jedi art of mindfulness, we so often unthinkingly lift our anchor of mindfulness and catch the next great swell of urgency just because we believe we have to.

Chasing one thing after another is how most of us live. We ride each new idea into dissatisfaction, and then to escape its drudgery we catch another and another and another—perpetually meeting dissatisfaction. We can call this the “If Only” game. *If only* I had a better job, more money, a girlfriend like Natalie Portman *then* I would be happy. But the If Only game does not produce happiness, only the endless cycle of chasing it.

**THE JEDI PRACTICE OF MINDFULNESS** and concentration helps us discover ourselves and the ways we create suffering. It is a method of observation, not a means of becoming a different person. We do not need to *become* anything, only observe the impermanent nature of our feelings, thoughts, and the world itself. Observation reveals to us when our actions lead to suffering and when they lead to freedom, and that gives us the wisdom to make choices that will keep us off the path of the dark side.

Throughout Star Wars we see the Jedi practicing mindfulness and concentration, and as they do they come to better understand themselves, the galaxy, their own personal suffering, and the dark side within—the subject of our next chapter.