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The

BEGINNER'S
GUIDE TO
INSIGHT
MEDITATION

ARINNA WEISMAN

and JEAN SMITH

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Revised Edition



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*To my students, who have inspired me so much with their
courage and efforts, and to my teachers for their purity and
wisdom—AW*

For all my teachers—JS

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Preface

WE HOPE this book touches that part of you which has longed for freedom but hasn't given it a name and which has yearned for lasting happiness but hasn't thought it possible. We hope this book provides a gateway through which you meet these yearnings, entering the world of the Dharma, the Buddha's teachings.

One of the remarkable aspects of Insight Meditation—also called Theravada (“Teaching of the Elders”) Buddhism, or Vipassana (“insight meditation” in the Pali language of the Buddha's time)—is that this path is very simple. Not always easy, but possible. Although no one can know when the results of a spiritual path will manifest, we can be certain that the efforts described here and our endeavors in honor of our heart's liberation will bear fruit. May we find

Grace to live with an open heart and humor
amid the turbulence of life's changes
Presence that illuminates our lives and guides us
in truth
Compassion to hold all life's pain and suffering

—*Arinna Weisman
and Jean Smith*

NOTE: In general, Pali rather than Sanskrit terms have been used, except when Sanskrit terms—for example, Nirvana (Nibbana) and Dharma (Dhamma)—are more commonly used in the West.

chapter 1

The Possibility of Change: A Cinderella Story

When I was a child, the Cinderella story made me distinctly uncomfortable. So did Anne of Green Gables. Here were these images of people who were just too good to be true: They were generous, they were sweet, they were diligent, they worked hard, they were compassionate, they never seemed angry or judgmental or shaming or hating. At some level, I longed to be like them, but I felt that I was more like Cinderella's ugly sisters: They were jealous of each other, they were nasty, they were competitive, and they were social climbers. They thought that they were not good enough and yet they were self-consciously proud. Not until many years later did I learn that within the practice of Insight Meditation I could embrace such seemingly contradictory feelings with peace and even affection.

—AW

MANY PEOPLE experience this rift within themselves. Sometimes we feel anger, jealousy, envy, and desire as the ugly sisters, sort of “bad” people eventually relegated to the dim kitchen in the Prince’s palace or a dark place in our hearts. At the same time, we yearn to have the

qualities of Cinderella and the Prince—beauty, virtue, generosity—and to live happily ever after. The good news is that no matter how powerfully we may feel torn between such conflicting emotions, the Buddhist tradition known as Insight Meditation, or Vipassana, invites us to heal that division.

Insight Meditation teachings do not demand that we live our lives as an eternal bliss trip by judging or cutting off what feels difficult or negative. That simply is not a realistic expectation for any human being. Instead, when energies such as anger, hatred, doubt, and anxiety—traditionally called the hindrances in this practice (chapter 3)—arise, we can learn to recognize them and to hold them in our hearts with kindness and with acceptance. We acknowledge them and even honor them, saying, “Aha, here are these energies inside me. May I hold them with kindness. May I hold them with softness.” That conscious relationship—it is like Cinderella and the ugly sisters merged—is where transformation happens.

If we could not envision how we would like to live and if we did not have the perseverance to make that vision a reality, no human being could change. One of our greatest advantages as human beings is that as long as we are alive, we *can* change.

This capacity feels to me like such a critical piece because when I was growing up I was not very happy. I was quite shut down and judgmental. I'm not saying this out of any sense of shame—it is just a pure acknowledgment of how I was, of how unhappy I was. If it were not for the possibility of change, I would still be caught in those negative energies.

—AW

Even though we sometimes feel as if we are being clutched to the bosom of hurtful energies, the fundamentally good part of our nature is always there and can be awakened. The heart of Insight Meditation teachings is that there is a practice that calls upon our inner potential for wisdom, kindness, illumination, and a deep sense of connection to the beauty of all life. When this potential unfurls without obstructions, we are free—free of suffering, living with happiness that is not dependent on any particular thing, person, experience, or circumstance. This is our possibility. It is not just theoretical or something we are asked to accept on blind faith. We have proof of it in the lives of our spiritual teachers and people such as the Buddha, Mahatma Gandhi, Hildegard of Bingen, Nelson Mandela, Aung San Suu Kyi, and the Dalai Lama.

A passage varyingly attributed to Nelson Mandela and Marianne Williamson elegantly articulates an invitation to express our possibility.

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
 Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond
 measure.
 It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.
 We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous,
 talented, fabulous?
 Actually, who are you *not* to be?
 You are a child of God. Your playing small
 doesn't serve the world.
 There's nothing enlightened about shrinking
 so that other people won't feel insecure
 around you.
 We are all meant to shine, as children do.

We were born to make manifest the glory of God
that is within us.

It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.

And as we let our own light shine, we uncon-
sciously give other people permission to do
the same.

As we're liberated from our own fear, our pres-
ence automatically liberates others.

THE NATURE OF SUFFERING IN OUR LIVES

Insight Meditation teachings recognize the challenges we face in living as human beings and the reality that we often experience pain and sometimes tremendous suffering. Suffering does not mean we are failures or awful people or that we should feel ashamed about what is happening to us. The process of healing begins when we acknowledge our suffering and explore it, when we admit what is happening—and accept it.

As we open to our lives, we face the difficulty of illness. Some of us lose our health in a permanent way, for example, through cancer, heart disease, or arthritis. We all encounter the process of aging. Our bodies disintegrate in different ways and at different rates, but the changes due to aging are unavoidable and often painful. And we will all die—a scary prospect for many of us.

For some of us our deepest challenges may not be physical but emotional, as psychic wounds keep opening up and bringing with them suffering. Perhaps no great difficulties are confronting us right now, but rather a general sense of dissatisfaction permeates our lives. We may believe things are going well, but we may not feel fulfilled, or we may sense we are not living our deepest purpose, or we may even feel that our life is out of control.

The Buddha said that we cannot deny these difficulties. It would be foolish and unrealistic to even try, for we would just be repressing a part of ourselves. This practice is not about repression, nor is it about splitting ourselves off from ourselves or pretending to be some sort of perfect spiritual model that excludes half of our lives. Insight Meditation practice is about relating to ourselves as we are. It is about saying, “Okay, let me find a way to work with these difficulties. How do I do that?” The Buddha said, “This is the way,” and he laid out teachings so that we could live with the challenges of life and still find happiness. They are not like some new-age teachings that push away whatever is difficult. Not at all. The Buddha’s teachings are revolutionary because they acknowledge our difficulties and in doing so inspire us to embrace a spiritual practice that can bring us peace.

As we travel on this spiritual path to freedom, we increasingly understand the importance of clarifying our intentions for undertaking this journey. We see that what begins as an intention we may barely be aware of is in fact what activates all our thoughts, our words, and our actions. When we cultivate mindfulness of our intentions, we enable ourselves to transform the words and actions that cause us and others suffering into opportunities for happiness.

You may have picked up this book because your mate just died or you just lost a job that was very important to you or you have developed a chronic physical disability or experienced some other huge challenge in your life. You say to yourself, “I know I cannot pretend this did not happen. Of course it happened. But how do I live with this with some kind of peace and equanimity? How can I live with this in some kind of kindness to myself?” This book shows that within Insight Meditation practice there are answers to these kinds of questions.

Our first step together could be taking the Refuges.

THE THREE REFUGES

After Siddhartha Gautama's enlightenment, he became known as the Buddha (the "Awakened One"—see chapter 10). Over the centuries since then, many people seeking their own path of awakening have begun their commitment by a process known as taking the Three Refuges. But this practice is much more than homage to a historical ritual. It is an affirmation of our capacity to change. The refuges acknowledge that, first, there is a possibility of our awakening; second, there is a way of living or practicing that can create the conditions for this awakening; and third, we are not alone in this endeavor—we are joined and supported by thousands of other beings and communities.

Some phrases for taking the refuges are:

May I take refuge in my capacity to awaken.

May I take refuge in the ways of living that bring
about my freedom and happiness.

May I feel open to all those who can support me
on this path of freedom.

Taking the first refuge means taking refuge in our fundamental Buddha-nature, with its potential for enlightenment. Taking the second refuge means taking refuge in the teachings that awaken this nature (known as the Dharma). Taking the third refuge means taking refuge in the community that practices together (known as the sangha), which provides a resting place that is safe, nourishing, and transformative.

We often find ourselves taking refuge in other things that we think are going to bring us happiness. We have been taught that happiness comes about through having, owning, and accumulating. If we have a serviceable car, we might still

find ourselves desiring a better model. We may have wished for a new house, longer vacations in more beautiful places, better relationships. These things are not bad, but they do not bring lasting happiness. But there is the possibility of a lasting happiness that does illuminate our beings—that is present whether we have a nice car or not, better furniture or not, a longer vacation or not. This possibility of a lasting happiness that is not dependent on any thing or circumstance is called our fundamental nature, or Buddha-nature.

Taking the first refuge is acknowledging that we have the capacity to be happy in this way. It is a treasure we carry in our hearts more valuable, the Buddha said, than the most precious jewels in the world, than all the treasures of royalty. This happiness is not born of greed or hatred. It is not the kind of happiness someone might feel who has longed for something and through treachery finally gotten it. It is not the kind of happiness people feel who gain power over others and can make them do exactly what they want. This kind of happiness comes from deep kindness and respect for all beings and all life. It comes with a clear wisdom that always sees what is skillful, appropriate, timely, and true. This happiness lives in a heart that has no boundaries of “us” and “them” but comes through our intimate connection with all of life. It is a happiness that expresses being at peace. It is a happiness that comes from being present in each moment. This happiness is our possibility, and the refuges remind us that we can find it.

The first refuge acknowledges the beautiful part of our being and encourages us to say, “No matter what I have done, no matter what I have said, no matter what I have thought, no matter what my job is, no matter whether I’m married or not, whether I have children or not, whether I think I’m a failure or a success, no matter *what*, I have this capacity

inside of me for transformation, and it can bring lasting happiness.” Immediately, our relationship to ourselves changes. We enter into a relationship of honor and respect with ourselves by affirming our fundamental nature. Each time we take the first refuge, we connect with the possibility of transformation.

The second refuge—taking refuge in the Dharma—is the refuge of training ourselves to see clearly how things are, to see Truth. In this clarity there is no conflict, confusion, or suffering. Just as a mirror reflects back the image in front of it at that moment without picking and choosing, we can train ourselves to see how things are without the personal distortions of our projections, desires, aversions, or stories. Insight Meditation calls this type of seeing *wisdom*, and wisdom is not distant or cold—the space created when we let go of our attachments brings a heart that is vast in its kindness. Without our personal prejudices and attachments, we develop a natural friendliness and contentment toward all our experiences and for all beings. Taking refuge in the Dharma supports our development of wisdom and compassion.

The Buddha taught *only* what is helpful in finding the truth through this refuge. He was not interested in metaphysics or obtuse theories, so taking refuge in the Dharma is a straightforward practice of cultivating what brings happiness and renouncing what brings suffering. Through it, we can create the conditions for lasting transformation where all obstacles to freedom disappear.

Finally, the third refuge—taking refuge in the sangha—affirms that we are not alone, that there are many thousands of beings like us who have the same questions and the same search, who are attempting to live in freedom. Originally the word *Sangha* referred to the disciples of the Buddha in his lifetime, but today, in this tradition, we refer to both formal

and informal communities, including our teachers, as sanghas (see chapter 9).

We can also extend the word *sangha* to include all of life. When we are drinking a cup of tea, we are with sangha, with the water that nourishes us, the fire that heated the tea water, the earth where the tea was grown and from which the cup took form. The universe joins us in drinking the tea. We are all in communion. Walking along in a daydream, we hear a bird call and it brings us back to being present with ourselves, so we could say that the bird is also part of the sangha supporting our practice.

Silent meditation retreats usually begin with formally taking the Three Refuges, but part of our cultivating awareness of all our intentions can be taking the refuges each time we begin a meditation or practice period.

EXERCISE

TAKING REFUGE

The Buddha did not demand that we become Buddhists or renounce our other religious practices. His teachings do not require our unquestioning obedience. Rather, the Three Refuges involve strengthening our intentions to let go of suffering and to cultivate happiness. Would you like to take the refuges?

Spend a few moments considering your intentions, then take the refuges formally, using the phrases at the beginning of this section, others that express your intentions, or the traditional phrases for taking the Three Refuges:

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I take refuge in the Buddha.

I take refuge in the Dharma.

I take refuge in the Sangha.

If you would like to, bring your palms together with your fingers pointing to your chin at the level of your heart while you say the refuges.

You can take the refuges as many times as you like during the day and/or at the beginning of your meditation practice (chapter 2).