

The Power and the Pain

Transforming Spiritual Hardship into Joy



Andrew Holecek

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This book is dedicated to my parents,
Frank and Maria,
whose love continues to sustain me.

And to Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche,
whose genius continues to destroy me.



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Foreword by the Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche

IN HIS BOOK, *The Power and the Pain*, Andrew Holecek directs our attention to two key points of the Buddhist spiritual journey: suffering and the obstacles and opportunities that suffering presents us with as we try to understand and transcend it. Essentially, it is a book about the hardships of the journey that sometimes take us by surprise, wear us down, or even discourage us from continuing. At the same time, it is an intelligent, clear, even humorous look at just those states, coupled with some very good advice from someone who knows the ins and outs, and highs and lows, of this trip firsthand. I have had the pleasure of knowing Andrew and working with him for over fifteen years. I am delighted to be able to offer a few words of recommendation for his excellent first book. As usual, he knows his topic, and the message he delivers comes from the heart. He is a respected teacher, philosopher-scholar, and a committed veteran of the Buddhist path. It is often said that the signs of success in practice are a clear, peaceful mind and a kind heart; in others words, wisdom and compassion. I think you will find both in this book.

Certainly many books have been written about suffering, and there will be many more to come. In fact, the topic of suffering pervades all Buddhist literature. It was the subject of the Buddha's first discourse millennia ago, and that little chat with that very small audience was so successful that we are still talking about it. We have heard about it so much by now, it's like a tune we can't get out of our head or a background noise that we no longer pay attention to. Yet the topic of our human distress will never be exhausted or our understanding

of it complete until we are awakened like the Buddha. When we are getting along well, we like hearing descriptions of our buddha nature and all the wonderful qualities we'll possess in the future. Suffering sounds boring. But for someone facing real hardships, nothing could be less boring or more worth getting to know. When we take the time to look into it more deeply, as Andrew helps us to do here, we see that our suffering is not just misery; it is full of potential for not only pain but also power and joy.

As the Buddha taught, our path to enlightenment isn't perfect from the start; our experience is always mixed. The very nature of the path consists of ups and downs, happiness and suffering, clarity and confusion. That's what the path is all about—transforming negative states into positive ones and adverse conditions into circumstances that are conducive to our awakening. Still, the spiritual hardships that each of us face along the way can be hard to bear, whether these are purely psychological pressures or events that affect us on a physical level as well. Yet they can be ameliorated when we see their connection to our path as a whole. That is the distinctive gift of *The Power and the Pain* for contemporary Buddhist practitioners. It helps us make sense of our individual experiences, which, as unique as they are, have been challenging practitioners in different ways since the time of the Buddha.

Ordinarily, when you are faced with a painful experience, you might conclude that you (or someone else) are doing something wrong and that that wrongness needs to be righted. *The Power and the Pain*, however, explores the hardships of the spiritual path from the perspective of the acceptance of hardship, first, followed by an increasing understanding of its causes and its relationship to the process of transformation. There is hardship, yes, but there is also a cause for it that we can understand. On the other hand, there is an end to hardship ultimately, and there is also a cause for that ending that we can understand. If we can look at our experiences as we progress along the path with this view, then we can, as described here, begin to see patterns of hardships and patterns of becoming free of them. If we see only the way we fall into suffering without seeing any way

out, then we might as well just cross our fingers and hope for some good luck.

Although we may associate words like transformation and transmutation with blissful states and heavenly realms, they imply change at the very core of our being, which is a very personal and sensitive matter. In some sense, it's a surgical process; we are going under the knife—the knife of our own intelligence, which we are sharpening all the time with our studies and meditation. We can't count on simply rising above our pain without changing at all.

When we move beyond our theories about the spiritual path into the actual practice of it, that is when the insights and methods offered in this book will become truly useful. Although the map of our journey is laid out in logical steps—we go from here to there, getting closer to our goal every step of the way—it doesn't always feel like we are following a perfect ABC kind of pattern. To say that there is a thread that runs through all of our experiences from most confused to fully awakened means that our journey doesn't have to be linear. Wherever we are, we are connected to both the beginning and end, to confusion and wisdom.

If we say that confusion is like a territory fixed within certain boundary lines and wisdom is that same territory without any boundary lines, then we can see how our path is simply a process of bringing down this fence. In fact, we don't have to take it down all at once. The minute we cut through one place, the fence can't do its job of being a fence anymore. A sense of spaciousness and openness enters our mind. It is just at such points that we might experience a sense of heightened neurosis or groundlessness. We might feel more confused than ever because our experience of who we are is in flux. The old ego model doesn't quite work anymore, and we are still too shy to see our buddha nature nakedly. So in some sense, spiritual hardships can be the result of our very successes on the path: it's only when we see something clearly that we can be shocked by it or be faced with the task of living with and up to a new understanding.

Although we are fundamentally alone on the path, the Buddha emphasized three refuges, reliable sources of wisdom, knowledge,

and comradeship. While these are all ultimately within us, aspects of our own mind and heart, they also exist in the world in the form of teachers, teachings, and fellow practitioners. This means that we always have someplace to go when we are struggling. Andrew's book is in this sense a compassionate refuge for troubled times. It is also a kind of beacon or lighthouse that shows the way and illuminates the sometimes rocky ground we are walking on.

Such a book is an indispensable resource for the journey of brave pioneers who want to explore the path of discovering genuine enlightenment in everyday life. May this book fulfill the compassionate intentions of the author and become a true source of support to countless practitioners of the Buddhist path, now and in the future.

Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche
Nalanda West
October 25, 2009
Seattle, Washington

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A deep thank you to the Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, an extraordinary teacher whose wisdom and warmth has graced and shaped my life for nearly twenty years. His ability to transport the brilliance of the East into the culture and vocabulary of the West is benefiting countless beings.

The biggest influence in my life, and a presence felt in every page of this book, is my teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. He faced

hardship and obstacles beyond comprehension and taught me how to transform darkness into light. The Western spiritual world, and my life, will never be the same because of his boundless love.

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CHAPTER 1

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CHAPTER 2

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