

attention fully into any situation, we will discover its golden nature. This is the miracle of the spiritual path and real wealth.

## 🌸 The Power of Happiness

The worldly path brings relative happiness. When desirable conditions come together, you are happy. When the sun is shining, your health is good, and your stomach is full, you are happy. But once again, when the conditions fade, relative happiness melts like the morning frost. So much of life is about getting what we want, getting rid of or avoiding what we don't want, and ignoring everything else. We are consumed by the satisfaction of desire, and because desire is endless, so is our dissatisfaction.

The spiritual path, on the other hand, brings absolute happiness. Here we are not happy because we get what we want, we are happy because we finally stop wanting. In the conventional world, we confuse the satisfaction of want with its temporary transcendence. We think we are happy when we get what we want, and therefore we never stop wanting: get that girl, car, job, or house. But if we take a close look, we will discover that we are actually happy when we stop wanting. A moment of satisfaction is just a moment of release from the pinch of desire. That is why the girl, car, job, or house won't do it. External things won't make us happy because the source and satisfaction of happiness is internal.

The spiritual path goes to the heart of the matter and deals not with substitute satisfactions, which are endless and ultimately futile, but with the essence of satisfaction. Zen master Suzuki Roshi used to say that what is ordinary is to strive after something you think is special, and what is truly special is to abide in the ordinary. Stop the pursuit of happiness and you will ironically find it. This is real happiness.

On an even deeper level, we are happy because we can help others. We can put the wants of others before our own. The great Indian master Shantideva says: "If you want to be miserable, think only of

yourself. If you want to be happy, think only of others.” We stop wanting for ourselves, and start wanting others to be happy.

## 🌸 The Power of Peace

In this world of violence and stress, peace is a precious commodity. We seek it in peaceful places, natural sanctuaries like Hawaii or Bali. These spots of refuge offer temporary peace, but true peace is not out there. We will find it only in ourselves. You can move to a peaceful location, but if your mind is uneasy, internal conflict will follow you wherever you go. As Jon Kabat-Zinn put it in the title of his book: “Wherever you go, there you are.” Peace of place does not compare to peace of mind.

In Buddhism, the central meditation is called *shamatha*, a Sanskrit word that means “tranquility, peace.” Other traditions have similar meditations. When we practice shamatha, we are literally practicing peace. “Peace” comes from a root that means “to fasten,” and this etymology has rich implications. We nurture peace and stability in the uncontrolled mind by fastening it to something.

Sit in meditation for the first time and you will bear witness to a subtle form of fury as your mind races in uncontrolled movement. Thoughts are like flying bullets. But by sitting in meditation, you are fastening your moving body to the stable earth. You have taken the first step into peace.

The next step is to deepen your peace by fastening your moving mind to your body by focusing (fastening) awareness to your body or breath. You start with physical peace and then invoke mental and spiritual peace upon that pacified ground. As every yoga, T’ai chi, and shamatha practitioner knows, a peaceful body invites and hosts a peaceful mind. We enter a session of yoga stressed out and speedy and leave with a sense of tranquility.

Every meditation cultivates some aspect of peace because meditation works with holding and stabilizing the mind. When the mind is gently fastened, with a mantra, visualization, or other method, its pacification ensues. But when you first try to fasten the mind to the

body—or any meditative anchor—it bucks in retaliation. Your body is sitting still, but your mind is wild. The ego thrives on motion, and it is trying to throw off the saddle of meditation. With time the kicking is exhausted, thoughts are stilled, and the mind settles down. The lasso that once seemed so tight relaxes as the discursive mind relaxes. At this point we discover the greatest irony: real freedom and peace do not come from a completely free rein—they come from being fastened to the confines of the present moment. This, as the Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön so famously puts it, is the wisdom of no escape.

We may think freedom is found in the fantasies and memories of the roaming mind, but this freedom is a subtle trap. A moving mind actually traps attention in the realm of mere fantasy and dilutes awareness of the life before us. You live in your head and not in reality.

By finding peace within ourselves, we become the peace we want to see in the world. As we radiate this quality, others will fasten themselves to us, for peace not only pacifies, it also enriches and magnetizes. By representing that which so many seek, others will be drawn into our presence. The great saints and religious figures exude that sense of peace and magnetize those who long for it. And why should they care about magnetizing others? Because then they can help them.

## 🌸 The Power of Mindfulness

We can enter the present moment, which is where spirituality begins, in two opposite ways. One is external, the other internal. If our external environment is “loud” enough, if sensory impact reaches a critical threshold, the stimulation can hurl us into our senses. This approach to nowness is the accidental and relative approach. People caught in natural disasters often give testimony to spiritual-level experiences. Veterans of war sometimes reflect with nostalgia about the horrific, yet magnificent, experience of being in combat. Survivors of hurricanes or earthquakes often give similar accounts of being thrown into reality. We get funneled into the moment, but it is a rugged way to get there. And it doesn’t last.

We can reach nowness in a more gentle, predictable, and stable way by approaching it from the other direction. Instead of stumbling into a loud external environment, we live with a quiet interior one. If our internal environment is “silent” enough, if discursive mind drops below a critical threshold, then any stimulation can bring us to our senses. We do not have to be an accidental buddha. We do not have to seek or wait for dramatic events; we discover magic in every event. The mind of someone well trained on the spiritual path is so quiet that every moment is loud enough to bring him or her into the present. At the highest levels, spiritual adepts are permanently tuned into reality because they no longer tune out. They are never distracted. And they got that way because of their training in mindfulness. Mindfulness is the practice of fastening the mind to nowness.

The power of now is the power of mindfulness: having a mind-full-of-nowness. Mindfulness is the common ingredient in every form of meditation—it is what makes meditation. If we are focused and attentive in whatever we do, we transform that activity into meditation. When we bring undivided attention to whatever occurs, we discover a richness in life that is normally diluted by half-hearted attention.

There are two stages of mindfulness. The first is deliberate mindfulness. We have to make an effort to bring the scattered mind into the present; it does not happen on its own. There is a degree of hardship involved at this level because we are working against the current of the discursive mind. But as we progress in this training, mindfulness takes on momentum and starts to occur spontaneously. It becomes easier to place the mind in the moment, and the practice starts to carry us. Instead of being constantly carried away by mindless thought, we find ourselves being carried into the moment by mindful awareness. This is the result of the second stage of effortless mindfulness. We become naturally present.

The world suddenly comes alive when we are fully attentive to it. The world hasn't changed, but our awareness of it has. Studies have shown that long-term meditators literally perceive more of reality. They see more, feel more, taste more, hear more, and smell more

because they are thinking less. When we are not preoccupied with thought, we can more readily occupy our senses. Seeing, feeling, tasting, hearing, and smelling more brings us to life—and it also brings us to others. It allows us to see more clearly what others need, to feel their pain, to hear their stories, and to more skillfully remove their suffering.

Mindfulness is also how we contact the sacred. The difference between experiencing the sacred or the profane is in the manner in which we make contact with reality. Profanity is mindless grasping; sacredness is mindful touching. One demonstration of this in my experience has been learning about shrines. In my tradition we have shrines everywhere, and we are taught to relate to them with reverence. When I approached my first shrine, I brought a “do not touch” attitude to it. I walked up to it with hesitation and a touch of trepidation. A shrine is something holy, and I should keep my hands off. I discovered, however, that this attitude is completely backward. What the shrine teaches is, “touch all things as you would touch me.” Treat everything with the same reverence and sacred outlook. It is a representation of the sacred and a teaching in how to contact it.

In itself, mindfulness is nothing special. But it makes everything else special.

## The Power of Kindness

The greatest power discovered by those who tread the spiritual path is kindness and the ability to benefit others. When we achieve the power of freedom, wealth, happiness, peace, and even mindfulness—what are we supposed to do with it? If we keep it to ourselves, that isn’t real power. That’s ego. Real power is using these resources to benefit others. When we gain these resources on the path, we don’t just hang out glowing in our newfound freedom and peace. We spend the rest of our lives sharing it.

Khandro Rinpoche (“Rinpoche” is an honorific term that means “the jeweled or precious one”) often teaches that the criterion for whether your meditation is working is that you act with greater

gentleness and kindness. My own teacher, Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, once invited a young man to come up and stand before the audience. In front of several hundred people, Rinpoche did something that masters rarely do. He talked at length about how great a meditator this man was, and how he was walking a genuine spiritual path. Why was Rinpoche praising him so much? Was it because he attained great meditative insights? Was it because he attained enlightened peace, bliss, and happiness? No. It was because he took six months off from work to be with his dying mother.

His Holiness the Seventeenth Karmapa has said, “Kindness is the most important point,” and the Dalai Lama always says, “My religion is kindness.” When ego dissolves, and the artificial barriers that separate us from others dissolve with it, our hearts are gradually exposed, and the kindness, compassion, and love that are natural expressions of that heart are revealed.

When we endure the pain of the path, why should we do so? Why should we tolerate all the inconvenience, loneliness, and heartache? We endure it to bring benefit to ourselves, certainly. Freedom, wealth, happiness, peace, and mindfulness are wonderful acquisitions. But if obtaining these is our only motivation, it won’t bring genuine happiness, or meaning, to our lives. We endure the difficulties to help others. In Tibetan Buddhism the deity of power is Vajrapani. He is a formidable presence, wrathful and uncompromising, with tremendous capability and power. Power to do what? To help others. That is the real power of the path.

This is just a sampling of the richness of the path. Books, articles, and testimonials that proclaim its power are common. The spiritual path works. But these glories come at a price, and it is to these challenges that we now turn.

## The Pain

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*It is sometimes easier to wake up when we're in extreme pain.*

—DZIGAR KONGTRÜL, It's Up to You

*If you haven't cried deeply a number of times,  
your meditation hasn't really begun.*

—ACHAAN CHAH

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UNDERSTANDING THE POWER of the path provides the inspiration that keeps us going forward; exploring its pain provides the understanding of what holds us back. It doesn't take long to discover the power, nor to feel the pain. Waking up hurts. And if we don't understand why, we will run from the pain and abandon the path. There are countless people who have become spiritual dropouts, or who are lost in detours because they have not understood hardship.

When your arm falls asleep, it prickles and burns as it returns to life. Frozen fingers sting when they thaw; we jolt awake when the alarm clock rings. But physical instances of anesthesia are mild compared to the anesthesia born of ignorance, and so is the level of discomfort upon awakening. The longer something has been asleep, the more painful it is to wake it up. If your fingers are merely cold, it is easy to warm them up. But if your fingers are frozen solid, it hurts like hell when they thaw. According to the traditions, unless one is already a buddha, an “awakened one,” one has been snoring from

beginningless time, and it can really hurt before we completely wake up. Mingyur Rinpoche writes,

I'd like to say that everything got better once I was safely settled among the other participants in the three-year retreat. . . . On the contrary, however, my first year in retreat was one of the worst in my life. All the symptoms of anxiety I'd ever experienced—physical tension, tightness in the throat, dizziness, and waves of panic—attacked in full force. In Western terms, I was having a nervous breakdown. In hindsight, I can say that what I was actually going through was what I like to call a “nervous breakthrough.”<sup>8</sup>

Every tradition is replete with stories of hardship. Christ suffered in the desert, Buddha struggled under the bodhi tree, Mohammed grappled in his cave, the Jain saint Mahavira wrestled with his asceticism, and the Tibetan yogi Milarepa endured the demands of his guru. We will be hard-pressed to find a sage who slid easily into enlightenment, for great realization brings great obstacles.

We may not practice in caves and deserts, but we sit in meditation and wonder why it hurts. We look into our hearts and wonder why we cry. We enter a path and ponder why life falls apart. Understanding hardship helps us to deal with it, whether it is the anxiety of sitting still for thirty minutes, or the fear of entering a three-year retreat.

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, addressing those who have or will undertake a retreat, gives this advice:

You will fall sick, experience pain, and encounter many adverse circumstances. At such times do not think, “Although I am practicing the Dharma, I have nothing but trouble. The Dharma cannot be so great. I have followed a teacher and done so much practice, and yet hard times still befall me.” Such thoughts are wrong views. You should realize that through the blessing and power of the practice, by

experiencing sickness and other difficulties now, you are purifying and ridding yourself of negative actions . . . By purifying them while you have the chance, you will later go from bliss to bliss. So do not think, “I don’t deserve this illness, these obstacles, these negative influences.” Experience your difficulties as blessings . . . when you do experience such difficulties, you should be very happy and avoid having adverse thoughts like, “Why are such terrible things happening to me.””

As Rinpoche advises, relating to hardship properly depends on the strength of one’s view. In general, having a view is knowing exactly where you want to go and how to get there. It is the vision of knowing what you want. For example, if you have the view to become a doctor, your vision guides you through financial burdens, physical and emotional difficulties, and obstacles that get in your way. You know it will be difficult and involve sacrifice, but with a strong view, you forge to the finish line.

Similarly, if you want to become spiritually awakened, it is the power of your view that gets you there. If you are having a hard time getting to the meditation cushion, or engaging in the necessary study, it is because your view is not strong enough or is incomplete. A partial view, in this case, is one that doesn’t include hardship. You can strengthen your view and accelerate progress by understanding how you lose your view in the fog of hardship, and therefore lose sight of your path.

The Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche provides the proper view for the challenging preliminary practices (ngondro) of Vajrayana Buddhism:

Ngondro is the process of working to loosen our negative karmic seeds, our ingrained habitual tendencies, and to bring them to the surface. Once they are exposed, we can deal with them and transcend them . . . we are creating the causes and conditions for our karmic seeds to ripen. That’s

what is happening. We shouldn't blame the Vajrayana preliminary practices for any of the discomfort we feel or the intensity we go through. That's what we are looking for, it's what makes transcendence possible. Otherwise, if we retreat from those experiences, if we don't take advantage of them and free ourselves from those patterns, it's like starting to pull a splinter out, but stopping halfway when it becomes painful. Instead of completing the job, we try to push it back in. We think "I'll pull it out sometime later." Our aim here is to bring about the ripening of our negative karmic causes and conditions, and, when they are ripened, to transcend or overcome them.<sup>10</sup>

Without the proper view, we do not see clearly, so we project. We project the ideal that spirituality will make us feel good and that heaven or salvation awaits. This is a partial truth, the half-truth that makes us enter the path. Who would enter a path that guaranteed hardship? Knowing there is light at the end of the tunnel keeps us going through it, but understanding the darkness in the tunnel helps us to negotiate it. The full truth is that power comes with pain. Hardship is the neglected and misunderstood second half of the truth, and it completes the view. True spirituality is not about making you feel good. It is about making you feel real.

## ☸ Reality and Spirituality

In common parlance, the spiritual is set in contrast to the material. The material world is the "real" world of hardship and pain, of fleeting joy and things we can't hold onto. It is solid and often so uncaring. The spiritual path is frequently entered to escape from this reality. We want to flee material hardship and find refuge in the spiritual world of love and light. We long for sanctuary in the *unreal*. As the spiritual psychologist A. H. Almaas puts it, "When we embark on a spiritual path, we unconsciously believe that we are setting out for heaven."<sup>11</sup>

With this motivation, entering the path is like going to a movie—we just want to get away. We are fed up and want out. But as Trungpa Rinpoche taught: there is no way out. The magic is to discover that there is a way in. Authentic spirituality is not about escaping from reality but entering it fully. And this is the source of disappointment and hardship. We want to retreat from our pain, not enter it fully. To discover that the path pulls a wicked u-turn and heads directly back into that which we are attempting to escape is what causes many to drop out. It is the great bait-and-switch.

With the proper view, everyday reality *is* spirituality. The spiritual is discovered in the material. The Gnostic Gospel of Thomas says, “The Kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the earth, and men do not see it.”<sup>12</sup> This is one meaning of nonduality—the spiritual and the material are not two. If we are leaving the material for the spiritual, we are leaving out half of reality. And we are going to give ourselves a hard time because the abandoned half will come calling. To complete the path, the material is not rejected, but fully embraced. We will return to these themes in part 3.

There is a thin line between the confusion of escaping and the wisdom of renouncing. Being fed up and wanting out can lead to either one. Renunciation of *samsara*, the Sanskrit word for the confused world of suffering, is to be cultivated. Without renunciation we will never give up hope of finding happiness in *samsara* and we won’t see the need to sacrifice our attachment to it. Without renunciation we are trapped in self-deception.

But *samsara* is not reality. *Samsara* is not “out there”; it is a projection of my confusion “in here.” It is a state of mind, not a state in reality. The Indian master Nagarjuna says, “There is no *samsara* apart from your own thoughts.” And the Buddhist sage Nyoshul Khen taught: “Conceptual thought is the ocean of *samsara*.” *Samsara* was not created before I was, nor does it exist independent of me—it is a mirror of my own mind. So true renunciation is not giving up reality but relinquishing our confusion about it.

With escapism, on the other hand, we want out and do not embrace what we wish to escape. Liberation based on renunciation

involves going into and through our shadows in order to find the light; liberation based on escapism involves denying, repressing, or projecting our shadows in order to avoid the dark. The difference between renunciation and escapism is that renunciation, in a phrase by the philosopher Ken Wilber, “transcends but includes” samsara; escapism merely attempts to transcend. Since samsara, the unwanted, is not included, it is not fully transcended.

Liberation born of escapism is therefore incomplete and the source of unnecessary hardship. As T. S. Eliot wrote in *The Waste Land*: “Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison.”<sup>13</sup> What we are trying to escape from will come back to haunt us, as any psychotherapist will be quick to point out. By denying, repressing, or projecting something we are throwing a boomerang and then wondering what it was that just hit us. These little boomerangs, our rejected neuroses, return to haunt us because they are asking to be healed, to be “whole.” They bonk us on the back of the head because they are asking for our attention, for our love and embrace, and wondering why we threw part of ourselves away. They demand to be included. Buddhist scholar Reginald Ray writes: “What we have to do is become the damned—become that part of our self that has been rejected and cast out. We have to allow ourselves to enter whatever hell our despised experience has been cast into, taking on its full identity and reality, and its full human experience. Only when we are willing to do that is redemption possible.”<sup>14</sup>

Because we define the spiritual in opposition to the material, and the material world is that of suffering, we assume that spirituality promises the opposite. We expect the path to be blissful. If it is not, something must be wrong. But things may be very right when pain barges into our lives, and bliss can be a real problem if it is related to improperly. There might be eternal bliss when the path is completed, but even then it is not our normal notion of bliss. Until then, if we sustain this view of expecting constant happiness, we face broken promises and endless disappointment as our projections of what spirituality should be are shattered by the reality of what it actually is.

## 🌸 The Middle Path

When we divorce reality from spirituality, we tend to embrace our pleasures and reject our pains. We take sides with part of the cosmos. The spiritual path is not about either extreme, and samsara and nirvana are both extremes. Samsara with its pain is on one end of the spectrum, and nirvana with its happiness is on the other end. But isn't sustained happiness the point of the path? Isn't nirvana the goal?

Because we are drowning in samsara, the promise of bliss in nirvana beckons us forward. We swim for the promised land. It is not difficult to glimpse nirvana on the path. We have a peak experience, a spiritual and often ecstatic breakthrough, and we want more. But attachment to anything, including nirvana-like experiences, is a sign we are still stuck in samsara. Ringu Tulku Rinpoche says, “Who cares for enlightenment [nirvana]? That’s the idea. Because as long as you have some kind of attachment to enlightenment, then you’re certainly not enlightened. The point is to see nirvana and samsara as one.”<sup>15</sup>

An exclusively blissful realization is not complete. It may be a legitimate experience of peace, or even a glimpse of enlightenment, but if it excludes pain it is partial. Paraphrasing Chögyam Trungpa, his biographer Fabrice Midal writes: “The danger of spirituality, he [Trungpa] explained constantly, is to create a world apart, a holy world without ties to the solid and direct experience of each person. Such a vision of bliss can never truly help people. It is a sort of unattainable ideal.”<sup>16</sup>

On one hand, the experience of nirvana is cause for celebration—you have glimpsed the top, and you can use this peek to sustain your view. On the other hand, the experience of nirvana can be cause for concern—you might forget about the bottom. It is easy to get stuck on top and forget that you are only part way there. According to some Buddhist schools, this is the trap of the arhat. An arhat is a “worthy one” who achieves individual liberation. Arhats represent the apex of

the First Turning and, according to the early schools, attain the same goal as the Buddha. Arhats are revered, and if we could somehow attain that realization it would be a glorious achievement.

But from the perspective of other schools, “arhat” has a slightly derogatory overtone. From the viewpoint of the Second and Third Turnings, arhats still have further to go. It is never this crisp, of course, and it is hard to imagine someone at that level without compassion for others, but the limitation of the arhat is that he or she is mostly interested in getting out of samsara. Arhats do not want to include samsara, but merely to transcend it.

From this perspective, the example of arhats is used to point out that in order to complete the path, we must descend. We must unite nirvana with samsara and join heaven with earth. We must express our wisdom as compassion and that means dropping back into the muck of samsara. Enlightenment is the nonduality of all extremes, including nirvana and samsara. It is the middle path uniting peace and pain.

The most common representation of the Buddha just after attaining his enlightenment is in the posture known as the “earth-touching posture.” He is sitting in meditation with his right hand touching the ground. Buddhist author Miranda Shaw explains this gesture: “For me this portrays the sense that enlightenment is not something that is going to remove you from the world of sense experience, is not going to take you to another sphere, but is going to involve a profound groundedness in reality and on earth—an enlightened participation in life. . . . [His posture represents] a profound impulse to affirm the world and a sense that the goal of the practice is not to escape the world or leave it to go to a better place.”<sup>17</sup> The Buddha attained a transcendence of this earth, but rooted himself deeply within it.

## Necessary and Unnecessary Hardship

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*Erring and erring I walk the unerring path.*

—KHENPO TSULTRIM GYAMTSO RINPOCHE

*Mill Village was the last intense opportunity [Trungpa Rinpoche] was to have to train the people around him, and he didn't let up for one moment. . . . It was outrageous in a whole new way. . . .*

*It was really tough. . . . He didn't relent until people lost it in some way.* —DIANA J. MUKPO, Dragon Thunder

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IS HARDSHIP NECESSARY? On an absolute level it is not. It is possible to awaken without pain, just as it is possible to have a natural childbirth without going through labor. But realistically, if we want to give birth to enlightenment, we have to deal with labor pains. If our paths are filled only with bliss and light, we are probably tripping in self-deception. We are not interested in getting real, but are caught up in feeling good. Patrul Rinpoche says, “When your belly is full and the sun is shining upon you, you act like a holy person. But when negativities befall you, then you act very ordinary.” The Dalai Lama says,

The Buddha’s life exemplifies a very important principle—a certain amount of hardship is necessary in one’s spiritual pursuit. We can also see this principle at work in the lives

of other great religious teachers, such as Jesus Christ or the Muslim prophet Mohammed. Furthermore, I think that the followers of these teachers, if they wish to attain the highest spiritual realizations within their tradition, must themselves undergo a process of hardship, which they endure through dedicated perseverance. There is sometimes the tendency among the followers of the Buddha to imagine, perhaps only in the back of their minds, that “Although the Buddha went through all of those hardships to attain enlightenment, they aren’t really necessary for me. Surely, I can attain enlightenment without giving up life’s comforts.” Perhaps such people imagine that, because they are somehow more fortunate than the Buddha, they can attain the same spiritual state as he did without any particular hardships or renunciation. This is, I think, mistaken. . . . If we ourselves want the attainments described by the Buddha . . . then we too must endure some amount of hardship.<sup>18</sup>

Yet the spiritual path is not masochistic. If we are not in pain, it does not mean something is wrong. That is the other extreme of unnecessary asceticism, even self-flagellation. This is an important point. Our journey in this book is to understand pain, not to search for it. Feeling good or bad is not the point. The point is welcoming both onto the path. Relate skillfully to whatever occurs and liberate everything in the space of equanimity. Saying “yes” to whatever arises is a big part of the spiritual path.

This book will help us remove unnecessary hardship and show us how to understand, anticipate, and even welcome the hardship that is necessary. We cannot avoid labor pains, but we do not have to make a career out of them. Many people do. They bog down in the difficulties of life, lamenting their situation and grasping onto their pain. For many people something bad is better than nothing.

So much spiritual hardship is unnecessary. We sit in meditation and spin ourselves into a tizzy trying to figure out why it is so hard. We do

a retreat and beat ourselves up because we can't follow the technique. We look back over years of practice and are frustrated because we are not getting anywhere. We drop the whole damn path because things are getting worse. This hardship is understandable but unnecessary.

Unnecessary hardship is often the result of referring a spiritual experience to a materialistic ego. Instead of accepting an experience on its own terms, we tend to relate whatever happens on the path to the ego in an effort to understand it. For example, you are sitting in meditation when an experience of the dissolution of your ego dawns. This can instill either exhilaration or panic. Instead of relating to the experience directly and then letting it go, you hold on, trying to repeat, get rid of, or figure it out. This relationship to the experience distorts it—and creates unnecessary hardship.

It distorts the experience because spiritual experiences do not fit into conceptual frameworks. They are too big. By trying to put it into words or grasp it conceptually, we are trying to stuff an experience into a container that just cannot hold it. Something always gets left out, squashed, or distorted. It never comes out in thought and speech the way it originally came in through experience.

We also create unnecessary hardship because relating a spiritual experience to a materialistic ego is asking the ego to comment on something it knows nothing about. Spiritual experiences are transpersonal, beyond the ego. Egolessness cannot be understood by the ego. We cannot expect it to make helpful comments on experiences that are designed to transcend it. But try we do, for we initially have no other choice. The best result is paradox, irony, or cosmic joke; the usual result is contradiction, frustration, and confusion. And that creates unnecessary hardship. Traleg Rinpoche says, "A mental breakdown or psychotic episode is not the result of an altered state of consciousness or an experience of seeing and hearing things. It is the result of how these experiences are processed by that person's ego."<sup>19</sup> The ego cannot contain transegoic experiences, and when it attempts to do so, it can burst.

So what should we do? Accept the experience for what it is, on its own terms. Do not try too hard to figure it out. When you sit in

meditation and feel like you are about to lose your mind, that's okay. Don't try to find your mind, just ride the experience. When sadness or anger erupts and you want to explode, just be with that. And do not think so much about yourself, which only tends to deflate you into depression or inflate you into pride. In fact, try not to think about it at all. Just feel the experience fully, and then release it fully.

We will discuss the proper relationship to such experiences throughout the book; the point for now is not to refer the spiritual to the material. Let it be. If you need to understand it, then talk to a qualified spiritual friend or teacher. Even then, look into your motivation. Why do you need to share the experience? I have had my allotment of meditation experiences, and when I bring them to my teachers, I am usually looking for confirmation. I want to be told how special I am. In most cases I am instructed to simply continue, or sometimes I am even ignored.

Unnecessary hardship disappears when this inappropriate reference to ego disappears. When spiritual experience is not referred, it becomes a breath of fresh air.

### Don't Leak

Inappropriate reference has a deeper application. Not only should we avoid referring the spiritual to the material, we should be careful in referring spiritual experiences at all. In ch'i gong, the ancient Chinese art of subtle energy movement, the practitioner works to heighten and move the energy of ch'i. At the end of a session, it is common to seal the energy that has been aroused, allowing practitioners to retain the fruits of their practice. Without this final seal, the energy dribbles away. Similarly, spiritual practice in general, and powerful experiences in particular, generate their own energy. If we do not consciously seal that energy, which means keeping it to ourselves, not only does it leak, but it can transform into an obstacle.

There is a two-way process in relation to obstacle and opportunity on the path. If we take the obstacles in our lives and bring them into