

Section below taken from

*Rebel Buddha*

*A GUIDE TO A REVOLUTION OF MIND*

Dzogchen Ponlop

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This book is dedicated to my little rebel buddha,  
Raymond Sidarta Wu,

the first generation of my family to be bom in America.

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## REBEL BUDDHA

### introduction

#### BORN TO BE FREE

Rebel Buddha is an exploration of what it means to be free and how we can become free. Although we may vote for the head of our government, marry for love, and worship the divine or mundane powers of our choice, most of us don't really feel free in our day-to-day life. When we talk about freedom, we're also talking about its opposite—bondage, lack of independence, being subject to the control of something or someone outside ourselves. No one likes it, and when we find ourselves in that situation, we quickly start trying to figure out a way around it. Any restriction on our "life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness" arouses fierce resistance. When our happiness and freedom are at stake, we become capable of transforming ourselves into rebels.

There's something of a rebellious streak in all of us. Usually it's dormant, but sometimes it's provoked into expression. If nurtured and guided with wisdom and compassion, it can be a positive force that frees us from fear and ignorance. However, if it manifests neurotically, full of resentment, anger, and self-interest, then it can turn into a destructive force that harms us as much as it does others. When we're confronted with a threat to our freedom or independence and that rebellious streak surfaces, we can choose how to react and channel that energy. It can become part of a contemplative process that leads to insight. Sometimes that insight comes quickly, but it can also take years.

According to the Buddha, our freedom is never in question. We're born free. The true nature of the mind is enlightened wisdom and compassion. Our mind is always brilliantly awake and aware. Nevertheless, we're often plagued by painful thoughts and the emotional unrest that

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goes with them. We live in states of confusion and fear from which we see no escape. Our problem is that we don't see who we truly are at the

deepest level. We don't recognize the power of our enlightened nature. We trust the reality we see before our eyes and accept its validity until something comes along—an illness, accident, or disappointment—to disillusion us. Then we might be ready to question our beliefs and start searching for a more meaningful and lasting truth. Once we take that step, we're starting off on the road to freedom.

On this road, what we free ourselves from is illusion, and what frees us from illusion is the discovery of truth. To make that discovery, we need to enlist the powerful intelligence of our own awake mind and turn it toward our goal of exposing, opposing, and overcoming deception. That is the essence and mission of "rebel buddha": to free us from the illusions we create by ourselves, about ourselves, and from those that masquerade as reality in our cultural and religious institutions.

We start by looking at the dramas in our life, not with our ordinary eyes, but with the eyes of dharma. What is drama, and what is dharma? I guess you could say drama is illusion that acts like truth, and dharma is truth itself—the way things are, the basic state of reality that does not change from day to day according to fashion or our mood or agenda. To change dharma into drama, all we need are the elements of any good play: emotion, conflict, and action—a sense that something urgent and meaningful is happening to the characters involved. Our personal dramas may begin with the "facts" about who we are and what we are doing, but fueled by our emotions and concepts, they can quickly evolve into pure imagination and become as difficult to decipher as the storylines of our dreams. Then our sense of reality becomes further and further removed from basic reality itself. We lose track of who we really are. We have no means of telling fact from fiction or developing the self-knowledge or wisdom that can free us from our illusions.

It took me a long time to see the differences between drama and dharma in my own life. Because they can look so much alike, they're hard to sort out, whether in Asian or Western culture. Looking back from my current life as a city dweller to my early childhood in a monastery, where I received intensive training to fill the role of Rinpoche to which

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1 was bom, I realize that in certain respects these two lifestyles weren't that different. Then, as now, the dramas of life wove together with the dharma of life. In my youth, I had a number of daunting responsibilities.

It was my job, for example, to take care of the business of spirituality to perform ceremonial functions and uphold traditional cultural ways. However, I didn't always see the meaning in these activities or their connection to true wisdom. Though I was too young to understand those feelings, that slight disconnect started me off on an inquiry into what is real— an <l therefore genuinely meaningful—and what is only illusion. It was a dilemma for me, my personal drama, a first taste of rebellion that challenged my sense of identity and role as a future teacher in the tradition of my birth. Nevertheless, it also pushed me in the direction of dharma: my personal search for truth began right there, with questions, not answers.

## Rebel Within

In the summer of 1978, after being in the monastic educational system for eight years or so, I was studying the Vinaya literature, the Buddha's teachings on social science, governance, and ethical conduct intended primarily for the monastic community. While I was enjoying the feast of this wisdom and was genuinely inspired by it, I still noticed that little streak of rebelliousness coming up in me again—the same sense of dissatisfaction I had felt earlier with the empty rituals and institutionalized values of all religious traditions.

Later in my studies, I came across the Buddhist notion of emptiness and felt totally clueless. I wondered what the heck the Buddha was talking about: empty this, empty that; empty table, empty self. I could feel and see the table, and my good old sense of self was still intact. Nevertheless, as I contemplated these teachings, I realized that I had never explored my mind beyond my usual thought processes. I had never encountered certain deeper dimensions of my own mind. This emptiness, it turned out, was a revolutionary discovery, full of possibilities to free me from my lifelong blind faith in realism, which suddenly seemed so naive and simpleminded. I felt so free just from reading

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these teachings, and that sense of freedom only increased with my wholehearted practice of them.

How wonderful it would be, I thought, if only we could practice the teachings of the Buddha as he really taught them from his own expe-

rience—free from the clouds of religiosity that often surround them. By themselves, they are powerful tools for intensifying awareness and triggering insight. Yet it's difficult to distinguish the tools themselves from their cultural packaging. When your friend gives you a gift, is the pretty paper that wraps that gift just paper—or part of the gift? Does the designer label on your shopping bag make the bag more valuable than the contents? Are the ceremonies and rituals of religious observance more important than what is being observed—the inexpressible sacredness of the truth of who we are?

It's not an easy thing to challenge your cultural conditioning, to break through its constraints, and then to go further and penetrate the more subtle conditioning of your own mind. But that's the nature of the search for truth that frees you from illusion. When I think of that freedom and finding the courage to break through the icy formalities of my own perfectionist Asian culture, I always recall the ancient Indian prince, Siddhartha, whose accomplishment still stands as a perfect example of a revolution of mind: a one-pointed search for the truth that led to his full awakening and freedom from all cultural and psychological bondage. He wanted nothing from the outside world. He was not on some emotional trip with an agenda of personal glorification and power. He simply wanted to know what was true and what was mere illusion. His sincerity and courage have always inspired me, and they can be an inspiration for anyone's search for truth and enlightenment.

This search is what Rebel Buddha is about. We all want to find some meaningful truth about who we are, and we're always looking for it. But we can only find it when we're guided by our own wisdom—our own rebel buddha within. With practice, we can sharpen our eyes and ears of wisdom, so that we will recognize the truth when we see it or hear it. But this kind of looking and listening is an art we must learn. So often, when we think we're being open and receptive, nothing is coming in. Our mind is already full of conclusions, judgments, or our own version of

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the facts. We're more intent on getting a stamp of approval for what we think we know than in learning something new. But when we're genuinely open-minded, what happens? There's a sense of space and invitation, a sense of inquisitiveness and of real connection with something beyond our usual selves. In that situation, we can hear whatever truth is speaking to us in the moment, whether the source is another person, a

book, or our perceptions of the world itself. It's like listening to music. When you're totally into it, your mind goes to a different level. You're listening without judgment or intellectual interpretation because you're listening from the heart. That's how you need to listen when you want to hear the truth.

When you can feel the truth on that level, then you discover reality in its naked form, beyond culture, language, time, or location. That is the truth discovered by Siddhartha when he became the Buddha, or "Awakened One." Awakening to who we really are beyond our personal dramas and shifting cultural identities is a process of transforming illusion back into its basic state of reality. That transformation is the revolution of mind we are here to explore. After much thought about my own training, it is what I have tried to present here for modern readers: a culturally stripped-down vision of the Buddhist spiritual journey.

## Beyond Culture

In my role as a teacher, my intention is simply to share the wisdom of the Buddha and my experiences in both traditional and contemporary settings of studying and practicing those teachings. In my teachings in recent years, I have also been trying to clarify frequent misunderstandings about Buddhism—especially the tendency to make Asian Buddhist culture stand for Buddhism itself—by pointing out the true essence of the teachings, which is wisdom joined with compassion. While not always easy to sort out, my various experiences have led me to see the almost blinding influence of culture in our lives and thus the importance of seeing beyond culture altogether. If we're ever to understand who we are as individuals and societies, then we need to see the interdependence of culture, identity, and meaning.

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Since freedom is the goal of the Buddhist path, and wisdom is what we need to achieve that goal, it's important to ask ourselves, "What is real wisdom—knowledge that brings freedom and not bondage? How do we recognize it? How does it manifest in our lives and in the world? Does it have a cultural identity? Are the social and religious norms of everyday life an expression of true wisdom?" These questions inspired me to give a series of lectures on culture, values, and wisdom. It is from these lectures that the present book has been drawn.

To bring the wisdom of the Buddha from one culture and language into another is not an easy task. Simply having a good intention does not seem to be enough. Furthermore, the task is not simply one of direction, say from East to West. It is as much a movement through time as through physical space. It is one thing to visit a neighboring country with different customs and values and figure out how you can communicate with its people. You will find a way, because in spite of your differences, you share certain reference points and ways of thinking just by virtue of being contemporaries—of living together in the twenty-first century. But if you were transported two or three thousand years into the past or the future, you would have to find a way to connect with the mind of that age.

Similarly, we need to find a way to connect these ancient teachings on wisdom with our contemporary sensibilities. Only by stripping away irrelevant cultural and social values will we see the full spectrum of what this wisdom is in its naked form and what it has to offer our modern cultures. A true merging of this ancient wisdom with the psyche of the modern world can't take place as long as we're holding on tightly to the purely cultural habits and values of the East or West.

Like never before, the strict distinctions between East and West are dissolving in a world where globalization is bringing all of us the same problems and promises. From New Delhi to Toronto to San Antonio, we're talking to each other on Skype, sharing our stuff on Facebook, negotiating deals, watching the same silly YouTube videos, and drinking our Starbucks. We're also suffering the same panic attacks and depression, although I might take Valium and you might take Chinese herbs.

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At the same time, every culture has its own unique set of eyes and ears by which it looks out on and interprets the world. We need to appreciate the impact of the psychology, history, and language of each society as it works to uphold a genuine Buddhist lineage of awakening on its home ground. It's one thing to welcome an interesting new spiritual tradition into our culture. It's another thing to keep it fresh and alive. When it starts to age, to become commonplace, we can become deaf and dumb to its message and power. Then it becomes like anything else to which we pay outward respect but little attention. When we lose our heart connection to anything, whether it's an old collection of comic

books, a wedding ring, or the spiritual beliefs that will accompany us until the moment of our death, it becomes just part of the background noise of our life.

This is why, throughout the ages, Buddhism has had a history of revolution and renewal, of testing and challenging itself. If the tradition is not bringing awakening and freedom to those who practice it, then it is not being true to its philosophy or living up to its potential. There is no inherent awakening power in cultural forms that have become dissociated from the wisdom and practicality that gave birth to them. They turn into illusions themselves and become part of the drama of religious culture. Although they can make us happy temporarily, they can't free us from suffering, so at some point, they become a source of disappointment and discouragement. Eventually, these forms may inspire nothing more than resistance to their authority.

### More Dharma, Less Drama

Growing up in a monastic institution in the Indian state of Sikkim, which was surrounded by ethnic Tibetan refugees, as well as tribal peoples of the Himalayan regions of India, Nepal, and Bhutan, I experienced both the richness and challenges of living in a diverse and multifaith culture. However, it was not until I came to New York City when I was fourteen, and then later studied at Columbia University in my twenties, that I really experienced a truly global multiculturalism and diversity of faith.

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I think it was that first trip, when I had the good fortune of traveling with my own teacher, His Holiness the Sixteenth Karmapa, on a tour of the United States in 1980, that sealed my fate and led me to become the U.S. citizen I am today.

The cultural challenges I see in North America are not so different from those I find in Europe, Asia, or the Himalayan mountain communities where traditional Buddhist values are most closely preserved. Because of their power for good or ill in our lives, we need to look sincerely at our cultural traditions and the place we give them in our society. On the one hand, there are cultural forms that retain the wisdom of previous generations and function as important sources of knowledge for us. On the other hand, there are cultural forms that don't retain any of the wisdom they may once have held and that are utterly lacking

in compassion. From the notion of untouchable castes in India, to the feudalistic rule of nineteenth-century Tibet, to the burning of witches in Europe and the slavery of Africans in America, painful and unjust practices devoid of sense or wisdom survived unchallenged for too long. When our thoughts and actions are dictated by powerful pressures from unreasonable social, religious, or cultural values, we can become stuck in a joyless place where we know nothing but suffering and further bondage. True wisdom is free of the dramas of culture or religion and should bring us only a sense of peace and happiness.

However, we're often addicted to our dramas and fearful of the truth. If you want to see real drama, you don't need to turn on your TV—it's right there in your life, which is full of emotions, anxiety, and depression. And if you want to gossip about drama, you don't need to go to a chat room. It's happening right there in your thoughts. Even in this day and age, when we have so many material resources, comforts, and entertainments and distractions available 24/7, we find that we can't get through the day without feeling a little bit depressed, and we don't know how to enjoy ourselves without feeling guilty. Even when we have an almost perfect day, we find ourselves asking, "Do I really deserve this? Did I work hard enough to earn it?" Wherever there is ego-centered drama, there is suffering. It goes on and on until we see beyond this drama to the dharma of our true selves.

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### Nothing Happens

When I was studying at Columbia University and my teachers asked me to introduce myself to my classmates, I was speechless. I wasn't sure who I really was. Was I Tibetan simply because of my parents, or was I Indian because I was born on that continent? Or was I neither—a stateless person without any citizenship? Having immigrated first to Canada and then to the United States, now when I go back to India for visits, everything seems a little foreign to me. My conversations with friends and former colleagues are different. We don't always share the same sense of humor or everyday references anymore, and our values seem to be shifting. Here I go again; I am a foreigner in my own birth country and a stranger to my old friends. While it's not surprising that I'd feel like a stranger at a county fair in the midwestern United States, it is surprising to feel like an alien in the place where I grew up. Now the only places I feel unnoticed and normal are on the subways and

streets of New York City; in my first home in North America, downtown Vancouver; or in my Seattle basement apartment, where my day begins with a cup of coffee and ends with the Colbert Report in the evening. Who am I now, really? And what has happened to me? As the Sixteenth Karmapa once said, "Nothing happens," so perhaps nothing has really happened to me. The fact is I am a Generation Xer, according to some, and a loyal BlackBerry subject, but the truth is I am a rebel without any culture on my way to finding the buddha I know is within me.

My intention in sharing this journey of mind and its culture, here and in the following pages, is to echo the Buddha's message that the truth about who we really are, beyond all appearances, is knowledge worth seeking. It leads to freedom, and freedom to happiness. May everyone enjoy perfect happiness, and may that happiness, in turn, liberate the suffering of the world.

1

rebel buddha

When you hear the word buddha, what do you think of? A golden statue? A young prince seated under a spreading tree? Or maybe Keanu Reeves in the movie Little Buddha? Robed monks, shaved heads? You may have many associations or none at all. Most of us are far removed from any realistic connection to the word.

The word buddha, however, simply means "awake" or "awakened." It does not refer to a particular historical person or to a philosophy or religion. It refers to your own mind. You know you have a mind, but what's it like? It's awake. I don't just mean "not asleep." I mean your mind is really awake, beyond your imagination. Your mind is brilliantly clear, open, spacious, and full of excellent qualities: unconditional love, compassion, and wisdom that sees things as they truly are. In other words, your awakened mind is always a good mind; it's never dull or confused. It's never distressed by the doubts, fears, and emotions that so often torture us. Instead, your true mind is a mind of joy, free from all suffering. That is who you really are. That is the true nature of your mind and the mind of everyone. But your mind doesn't just sit there being perfect, doing nothing. It's at play all the time, creating your world.

If this is true, then why isn't your life, and the whole world, perfect?

Why aren't you happy all the time? How could you be laughing one minute and in despair the next? And why would "awakened" people argue, fight, lie, cheat, steal, and go to war? The reason is that, even though the awakened state is the true nature of the mind, most of us don't see it. Why? Something is in the way. Something is blocking our view of it. Sure, we see bits of it here and there. But the moment we see

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it, something else pops into our mind—"What time is it? Is it time for lunch? Oh, look, a butterfly!"—and our insight is gone.

**Ironically, what blocks your view of your mind's true nature—your buddha mind—is also your own mind, the part of your mind that is always busy, constantly involved in a steady stream of thoughts, emotions, and concepts.** This busy mind is who you think you are. It is easier to see, like the face of the person standing right in front of you. For example, the thought you're thinking right now is more obvious to you than your awareness of that thought. When you get angry, you pay more attention to what you're angry about than to the actual source of your anger, where your anger is coming from. In other words, you notice what your mind is doing, but you don't see the mind itself. You identify yourself with the contents of this busy mind—your thoughts, emotions, ideas—and end up thinking that all of this stuff is "me" and "how I am."

When you do that, it's like being asleep and dreaming and believing that your dream images are true. If, for example, you dream that you're being chased by a menacing stranger, it's very scary and real. However, as soon as you wake up, both the stranger and your feelings of terror are simply gone, and you feel great relief. Furthermore, if you had known you were dreaming in the first place, then you wouldn't have experienced any fear.

In a similar way, in our ordinary life, we're like dreamers believing that the dream we're having is real. We think we're awake, but we're not. We think that this busy mind of thoughts and emotions is who we truly are. But when we actually wake up, our misunderstanding about who we are—and the suffering that confusion brings—is gone.

### A Rebel Within

If we could, we would probably all sink completely into this dream that

passes for our waking life, but something keeps rousing us from our sleep. No matter how dazed and confused it gets, our drowsy self is always linked to complete wakefulness. That wakefulness has a sharp and penetrating quality. It's our own intelligence and clear awareness that have the ability to see through whatever blocks our view of our true

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self—the true nature of our mind. On the one hand, we're used to our sleep and content with its dreams; on the other hand, our wakeful self is always shaking us up and turning on the lights, so to speak. This wakeful self, the true mind that is awake, wants out of the confines of sleep, out of illusion-like reality. While we're locked away in our dream, it sees the potential for freedom. So it provokes, arouses, prods, and instigates until we're inspired to take action. You could say we are living with a rebel within.

When we think of political or social rebels—historical or contemporary, well-known or forgotten—people who fought and are fighting for the cause of liberty and justice, we think of them as heroes: from the fathers of the American Revolution to Harriet Tubman; Mohandas Gandhi; Martin Luther King, Jr.; Aung San Suu Kyi; and Nelson Mandela. Today, we stand in awe of their courage, compassion, and remarkable achievements. Yet such idealists and reformers are always regarded as troublemakers by those they challenge. Their ideas and intentions, and even their company, are not always welcome. Rebels are a mixed blessing it seems—good for the movie business, but in real life, they make people nervous. They're hard to push aside. They keep coming back with questions no one else will ask. They won't settle for partial truths or uncertain answers. They refuse to follow conventions that control or imprison them or the people of their society. Their path to victory runs through some rough territory. But their rebel character is not easily discouraged. Commitment to a cause—a greater vision of what might be—is the rebel's lifeblood.

On the spiritual path, this rebel is the voice of your own awakened mind. It is the sharp, clear intelligence that resists the status quo of your confusion and suffering. What is this rebel buddha like? A troublemaker of heroic proportions. Rebel buddha is the renegade that gets you to switch your allegiance from sleep to the awakened state. This means you have the power to wake up your dreaming self, the imposter that is pretending to be the real you. You have the means to break loose from

whatever binds you to suffering and locks you in confusion. You are the champion of your own freedom. Ultimately, the mission of rebel buddha is to instigate a revolution of mind.

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### Ordinary Buddhas

This book is about a path to freedom described by the historical buddha, Buddha Shakyamuni, twenty-six hundred years ago. There are many beautiful and eloquent stories about the Buddha's birth, his life, and how he reached the state of enlightenment. Some treat the Buddha as an ordinary man who lived an exceptional life. Others consider him a kind of spiritual Superman, a divine being whose actions showed how ordinary people could achieve the same freedom he had found.

Actually, the basic elements of the Buddha's early life are not so different from our own, except for the fact that he came from a wealthy, royal family and most of us don't. At heart, however, what we see when we look at Buddha Shakyamuni's early life—when he was known simply as Siddhartha—is a young man's struggle for independence and freedom against the authority of his parents and society. On one level, it's a classic tale of the rich kid who runs away from home:

Siddhartha, the future Buddha, was born the only son of the king and queen of the Shakyas, a kingdom in northern India.

He lived a protected and luxurious life, closely controlled by his parents, who awaited the day the young prince would succeed his father to the throne. He had every advantage, privilege, and enjoyment you could imagine—the fabulous palace, designer clothes, servants, and grand parties with celebrities and lobbyists. But in the end, Siddhartha wasn't content with a life of just material possessions, social status, and political power. He longed to discover life's meaning and purpose in the face of what awaits us all: sickness, old age, and death. He struggled for a while to fulfill his parents' wishes but finally decided he had to go his own way. In the dead of night, he deserted the palace alone, trading his comfort and protection for the unknown, a destiny he hadn't yet discovered.

If we moved this ancient tale to New York City today, we'd have a modern American story:

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A wealthy and prominent couple were expecting their first child. Understanding the dangers and difficulties of the modern world, they vowed to use their wealth and connections to make their child's life as safe and easy as possible. Even before he was born, he was enrolled in the most exclusive preschool. The child was given a long, illustrious name that echoed the greatness of his family lineage, but his friends all called him Sid. He grew up within the circle of the social and political elite of New York, enjoying every advantage. His parents envisioned a special destiny for him and even imagined his marriage to the daughter of the senator from...

We wouldn't be surprised to learn that Sid eventually decides to join a rock band, go backpacking in Alaska, or just stick his thumb out on the road to see where life takes him. The same holds true for any young person or youthful heart. Whatever our situation, ordinary or extraordinary, we want to discover our own path. We want to find the ultimate meaning of our life.

We know from history that Prince Siddhartha was successful in his quest, but we don't really know about our modern-day friend, Sid. We'll wish him the best. The point here is that, at the moment of their departure, neither one of them knows what the future holds. Both are taking a profound risk, abandoning security and the known world for a leap into the unknown. But it is as natural for Sid to take that risk as it was for Siddhartha to leap the palace fence. The impulse toward freedom is an essential part of our makeup: it is not the exclusive domain of special beings or men in robes from long ago or faraway lands. This desire for freedom is quite ordinary. In fact, "freedom-loving" is a common description of the American character—at least that's what you hear on the news—but take a walk on the streets of any modern city, and you will find the same spirit, especially among the young.

The very youth of America no doubt contributes to this freedom-loving nature. Other than the indigenous peoples of North America, most everyone here now is a recent arrival from Europe or Asia or Africa. While most of us today are somewhat removed from our ethnic roots,

and some may have forgotten them entirely (and believe simply that "I'm an American"), in some sense, what is best and most unique about America is just this global ancestry, pioneering spirit, and independence of character to which all the world seems to have contributed.

This melting pot of America is home to trailblazers, inventors, free-thinkers, and visionaries, as well as pragmatists and puritans. Avant-garde artists and musicians ride the subways alongside corporate bankers and factory workers. Everyone is officially welcome. America's family gatherings are full of sparks—from those at your house to those played out on the national stage and documented by CNN and Entertainment Weekly. But when the sparks from this rubbing together of opposites ignite in an atmosphere of openness, it makes all the difference. Then, instead of pure friction, we get a lively dance that generates a very creative energy. By testing limits, pushing the envelope of old concepts, what was once unthinkable becomes the new norm. For example, not so long ago, no one had ever dreamed of flipping a switch and having a light go on, much less of watching faraway images on TV or surfing in cyberspace. Even as recently as the 1960s, we were amazed as we watched a man walking on the moon from our living room, which suddenly seemed quite small.

### Getting Where We're Going

Just as scientists are constantly striving to unlock the secrets of the external world to discover the nature of reality, Siddhartha dreamed of unlocking the secrets of the inner world of the mind. When he left the palace, he left behind a young wife, a child, and his life of luxury. He was determined to conquer his ignorance and meet reality face-to-face. He went into the forest with no guarantee of a roof over his head, no means of sustenance, and no one to protect him.

At that time, Indian society was at an interesting point. The social structure was very rigid. A caste system decided your place in society, your duty in life, your occupation, and your spiritual standing. All this was set up by the condition of your birth. On the other hand, it was

also a time of intense excitement. Intellectuals and philosophers were persistently engaged in lively debates that produced a number of competing spiritual traditions. Groups of young people began hanging out in the forest, joining one or another of these groups, which existed outside of society. Siddhartha, too, joined in, studying with two of the most renowned forest sages. As it happened, he quickly outstripped his teachers understanding and then joined a group of five ascetic practitioners. More determined than ever to reach his goal, he abandoned all comfort. He took on the torturous practices of the ascetics, including starvation, with the intention of transcending the physical body and exhausting the desires of the mind. After six years of this, Siddhartha was near death. At that point, he let go of his belief that this path of intense deprivation would lead him to freedom. He collapsed by the bank of a river.

Though he didn't know it, Siddhartha was very near his goal. A young girl carrying a bowl of rice milk was passing by and offered him this food. He accepted it, breaking his six-year fast. Seeing this, his five ascetic brothers thought Siddhartha had given up his discipline. Furious, they vowed never to speak to him again and left. Siddhartha contemplated his situation while gradually regaining his strength. He realized that neither his life of self-indulgence in the palace nor his life of self-mortification in the forest was a genuine road to freedom. They were both extreme paths, and attachment to either extreme was an obstacle. The true way lay in the middle of these two. Recognizing this, he was ready for the final push. He sat on a grass cushion beneath the sheltering branches of a tree and took a personal vow to remain there until he knew the truth about his mind and the world.

Siddhartha meditated for forty-nine days, and at the age of thirty-five, he attained the freedom he sought. His mind became vast and open. He saw the truth of the suffering of all beings and the cause of that suffering. He saw that freedom is a reality within the reach of all beings, and he saw how they could attain it. He became known as the Buddha, the Awakened One, and he taught whoever came to him for the next forty-five years. Others followed his instructions. They attained their own freedom, and a lineage of awakening had begun.

But that was then, and this is now. What about Sid? What about his dreams? If he knows where he wants to go, then what he needs is a map and someone to talk to who's been there. A lot of roads look alike, and it's easy to get confused along the way. Some roads change direction; others just peter out. Sid might start out for Alaska and end up in a Chicago blues club or in the suburbs with a wife and three kids. He could become a novelist, a scientist, or president of the United States. Or he could start a new movement, a revolution of mind, and inspire a generation. There are endless possibilities for each of us.

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Since we're talking about the Buddhist spiritual path as a road to freedom, we need to ask, "Freedom from what? And what does this freedom look like?" In other words, we need to find out what the Buddha says about the starting point and end point of this journey. Then we can look into that and see if it holds up under scrutiny, and if it is the right path for us.

Sometimes we think that freedom means simply being free of any outside control—we can do whatever we like, when we like. Or maybe we think it means we're not controlled by inner psychological forces that inhibit the free expression of our feelings. But these kinds of freedom are only partial. If they aren't accompanied by intelligence and basic good sense, we could end up just acting impulsively, letting our emotions off the leash. We might be free to shout at people or stay out all night indulging our appetite for excitement and sensation, but we're certainly not in charge, and we're not free. We may feel temporarily energized and liberated by that kind of freedom, but the feeling is short-lived and usually followed by more pain and more confusion. We may also think that freedom means having a choice. We are free to choose what to do with our life, our time, and our money. We may choose wisely or foolishly, but it's our choice.

This so-called freedom, however, is just a facade when we make the same choices every day, do the same things over and over and react in the same ways. Whether we're free spirits or traditionalists, type A or

type B personalities, our actions are equally predictable. When we look beneath the surface to see what's going on, why we're unhappy, we see

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the same storyline repeated again and again. If we fight with our boss at work, we probably fight at home with our partner or our kids. We struggle here and there in our life with the same unconscious patterns of aggression, desire, jealousy, or denial, until we're caught in a web of our own making. These are precisely the things from which we work to free ourselves on the Buddhist path: the habitual patterns that dominate our life and make it hard to see the awakened state of mind.

If you're interested in "meeting the Buddha" and following the spiritual path he described, then there are a few things you should know before you begin. First, Buddhism is primarily a study of mind and a system for training the mind. It is spiritual in nature, not religious. Its goal is self-knowledge, not salvation; freedom, not heaven. It relies on reason and analysis, contemplation and meditation, to transform knowledge about something into knowledge that surpasses understanding. But without your curiosity and questions, there is no path, no journey to be taken, even if you adopt all the forms of the tradition.

When Siddhartha left the palace to search for enlightenment, he didn't leave because he had such strong faith in a particular religion, had met a charismatic guru, or had received a calling from God. He didn't leave because he was exchanging one belief system for another, like a Christian who becomes a Hindu or a Republican who becomes a Democrat. His journey began simply with his desire to know the truth about life's meaning and purpose. He was searching for something without knowing what he was seeking.

What Are We Looking For?

Why do any of us enter a spiritual path today? What are we looking for? Whether our problem is suffering or a desire "to know," we're living with profound questions every day. Why do you get out of bed when the alarm goes off at 6:30 a.m.? What goes through your mind when you turn out the light at midnight? Our questions get lost in the busyness of our life, but they never really go away. If we can catch them and look at them in odd moments—when we're pouring our first cup of coffee or

waiting at a red light—we can begin to see beyond this “job of life” to life itself. We don’t have to wait until life becomes shaky—until we’re facing the pain of depression, disappointment, loss, or the fear of death—to ask questions that are “spiritual” in nature. All we need to do is let our questions back in. Tell them, “You’re important to me now.”

To discover your real questions, simply take a time-out. Stop looking ahead of yourself at where you’re going or backward at where you’ve been. When you do stop, there’s a sense of going nowhere. There’s a sense of gap, which is a tremendous relief. You can simply breathe and be who you are. At the same time, there is a basic sense of “what?” Maybe that’s your first real question. Just be there with that “what?” with an open mind. That “what?” is like an open door. Something will come through it. It may be an answer or another question. You don’t have to do anything but be there to meet it.

In the beginning, we may think that having questions is a sign of ignorance. The more questions we have, the more we don’t know. The more answers we have, the wiser we are. However, knowing clearly what you don’t know is already a form of wisdom. Real ignorance is not knowing what you don’t know. When you think you know something you don’t, it can lead to a kind of make-believe wisdom, an imaginary sense of knowledge that is powerless to free you from your confusion.

As long as our questions are sincere and honest, not questions that will make us feel smart or look better, the questioning mind opens up the spiritual journey. But we must learn to work with our questions skillfully. We’re going through a process that takes time and necessarily brings up doubt and skepticism. If we merely accept everything that’s thrown at us, then where has our intelligence gone? We actually need intelligent doubt and skepticism; they protect us against mistaken views and propaganda. A healthy dose of doubt and skepticism will lead us to precise and clear questions. Doubt only becomes negative when it continues on and on, never finding its end. If we never get beyond our uncertainty to a sense of understanding, then we can start to feel a little crazy or paranoid. Doubt that leads us to authentic knowledge and confidence turns out to be wisdom in the end.

## What Are We Doing Here?

On this path, we're searching for meaningful knowledge: we want to know who we are and why things happen to us. We also want to understand our relationship to the world and why things happen to others. Even if we're not so concerned on our own behalf, we might care a great deal when it comes to someone else—an innocent child mistreated, a friend in crisis, a village wiped out by nature, a species wiped out by mankind. Aside from managing to survive until we're put in a nursing home by our children, what are we doing here? You can contemplate such large questions for inspiration, but it's best to start where you are. Stay close to home, to your mind, your body, your life. If you can discover a meaningful question right here, it will probably apply to someone else as well—and maybe to the motion of the planets. You never know.

A spiritual question is primarily one we ask ourselves and process alone. Just as our answers must come from within, our questions come from inside us too. They come from the same place. All our questions are connected to something we already know. Each question will lead to an answer that will lead to further questions and so on. As our understanding grows, our questions become clearer and our answers more meaningful. This is how the spiritual path progresses.

At some point, you'll be certain that you have reached a full understanding of your question. You'll recognize it because it's not someone else's answer—it's your own. You should keep questioning until you reach that point. How can you tell if you've stopped searching before you've reached that kind of certainty? One sign is when you look to someone else for answers to your questions. That brings your search to a halt. At that point, your inquisitive mind is no longer working.

It's true that others can help us, but that doesn't mean there is someone out there who can give us all the answers. We can rely on the teachings of the Buddha and on spiritual friends to some degree. Knowledge that comes from sources we respect can help us clarify and refine our understanding. But that doesn't mean that we fully accept what anyone says and give up our search, or that once we've heard from someone we consider to be an authority, it's the end of the matter. Their discovery

and understanding of the truth doesn't help us if we don't really connect with them. If their experience doesn't agree with our own, then it's of no use to us, regardless of how profound a truth it is for them.

Eventually, you'll arrive at some form of final question—a sense of uncertainty or doubt that stays with you for a while. By the time you arrive at that clear question, you'll already have made a considerable journey. You'll already have answered hundreds or thousands of other questions in order to get there. Having a clear question means you know clearly what it is that you don't know. Now you have a question that you can take to your teachers or look up in books. On the other hand, if you ask a teacher a question that isn't clear to you, then nothing he or she says can help you. There can be no clear answer to a half-baked question. On the other hand, if you're simply looking for answers, any answer, then you'll find thousands of books—Buddhist books, Christian books, New Age books, and what have you—that answer all kinds of questions. But none of the facts in those books can enlighten you if your question is vague.

The wisdom we're looking for is not just an answer we get from a religious person or subject matter expert who tells us what to think. Real wisdom is when you find a true question. When you find it, you should not rush to answer it. Stay with it for a while. Make friends with it. We live in "instant times"—instant messaging, instant pictures, fast food—and our mind is accustomed these days to instant gratification. If we bring this expectation to our spiritual path, however, we'll be disappointed. Some of our questions can't be answered right away. We must be as patient as scientists are when they run their experiments and diligently evaluate and verify their findings.

### A Scientific Approach

We often mix together spirituality and religion as if they were one thing. But this doesn't quite work. A spiritual path can exist within or outside a religious context. Religion and spirituality can be complementary or separate practices and experiences. A spiritual path is an inner journey that begins with questions about who we are, and about the nature and

meaning of our existence. It's naturally a process of introspection and contemplation.

Religion, as conventionally defined, refers to a set of beliefs about the cause and nature of the universe, our relationship to the creation and creator, and the source of spiritual authority. We can accept those beliefs at face value or explore and examine our own experience of them. Some religions embrace such questioning, while others discourage it, either openly or implicitly. The point is, we need to be clear about what we're really doing in our spiritual or religious life.

Although Buddhism can be practiced "religiously," in many respects, it isn't really a religion. Because of its emphasis on questioning and working with the mind, it is spiritual in nature. But because it relies on logical analysis and reasoning, as well as on meditation, many Buddhist teachers regard Buddhism as a science of mind rather than a religion. In each meditation session, we gather knowledge about the mind through observation, questioning, and testing. We do this over and over, until we gradually develop a meaningful understanding of our own mind. Some people may even become weary of Buddhism because it gives them so much work to do—they have to ask all the questions and find all their own answers.

The alternative to taking on this responsibility is to let religion do the job for us. We can give up just a little of our critical intelligence by not asking too many questions, which is what most of us do. Or we can go all the way, give up all our questions, and become religious fundamentalists of one sort or another. Then we are relieved from all worries about what to think and why.

In whatever way we label the teachings of the Buddha—as a religion or spiritual path—the body of knowledge that comprises the Buddhist scriptures is not intended to be a substitute for your own questioning process. It's more like a well-equipped research laboratory where you can find tools of all kinds to investigate your own experience. In fact, some Buddhist views would be regarded as antireligious in some quarters. First, it is a nontheistic tradition. From Buddhism's point of view, there is no supernatural entity outside of our own mind. There is no being or force that has the power to control our experience or create

a heaven or hell of it. That capability resides only in the power of our mind. Even enlightened beings like the Buddha don't have the power to control the minds of others. They can't create a better or worse world for us or undo our confusion. Our confusion is created by our own mind, and it can only be transformed by our mind. So the most powerful entity in the Buddhist spiritual path is the mind.

The closest thing to the notion of a god in Buddhism is probably the state of enlightenment. But even enlightenment is regarded as a human accomplishment: the development of consciousness to its highest state. The Buddha taught that every human being has the capacity to achieve that level of realization. That's the difference in the approaches of nontheistic and theistic traditions. If I said, "I want to become God," it would sound crazy or even blasphemous to a theist. It would be considered a very ambitious, very ego-centered thought. But in the Buddhist tradition, we're encouraged to become like Buddha—awakened ones.

The Buddha also taught another somewhat challenging idea: the notion of emptiness. We will take this up later, but for the moment, we can simply say it's the view that there is no real self and no real world that exists in exactly the way it appears to us now. The Buddha said that when we don't comprehend emptiness, we don't see what's really there—we see only a coarse version of reality. So from the Buddhist point of view, there is not only no savior, there is also no one to be saved.

However shocking or radical this sounds, it's not much different from what science is currently telling us about the subatomic world. Thanks to scientific research, we now know that the world we perceive with our naked eyes is something of an optical illusion. Beneath its solid surface, something else entirely is going on. If you try to find the real stuff of matter, all you'll find is particles acting like waves and waves acting like particles, and where any of this is located at any particular moment is pure guesswork. In the view of this cutting-edge scientific knowledge, not only are matter and energy interchangeable, but there may also be multiple dimensions of something called "space-time."

When you hear things like this about the universe from a scientist, it sounds fascinating and very spiritual. But when you hear something

similar about yourself from the Buddha, the idea of an almighty god and a literal heaven might start to sound very appealing. However, what initially scares us about emptiness turns out to be good news. When we look at emptiness more closely, we see that it's actually full. Emptiness is simply a word that describes an experience; our mind then takes that word and makes it into a concept. If we take the concept to be the actual experience, then we miss the best part. If you had never experienced love, for example, and all you knew about it was the dictionary definition, then you'd certainly be missing the fullness of that experience. It's the same with emptiness. In fact, emptiness and love are related. We'll get to this later too. For now, let's just say that when you unite the two, you have an experience that is beyond either one. The experience of this union of love and emptiness is the awakening of your own rebel buddha heart.

### Things As They Are

We're always trying to catch up with reality, which just "is." Whether we love it or hate it, or love or hate each other, we can't change the way things are at their deepest levels. We can't stop being who we truly are, just as we can't stop a subatomic particle from being what it truly is, even if it's contrary to our concepts about it. The makeup of the physical world is constantly being reexamined and reenvisioned. When we bring these views to bear on the world we take to be so solid, we're getting closer to what the Buddha taught twenty-six hundred years ago about the ultimate unreality and unfindability of all phenomena.

In Buddhism, we aren't trying to look at the physical world by itself; instead, we're looking at the mind and its relationship to the appearances of the world. We observe the mind to see what the mind itself is and how it acts in relation to our internal and external experiences of everything—from thoughts and emotions to actual things. To do this, we need a special set of tools that can take us beyond the mind's limitations. Buddhism uses the tools of meditation and a process of reasoning.

We need to ask ourselves in the beginning, "Am I willing to let go of my attachment to what I believe in order to see something new? Am I

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open to the possibility of an inconceivable reality?" Our main problem is that such a reality doesn't fit in with our ordinary experience. If we

believe that our senses and our conceptual mind are giving us a true and complete picture of the world and who we are in it, we're just fooling ourselves. We need to expand our understanding beyond our sense perceptions and concepts, which are nothing but tiny windows through which we see only a partial reality. In order to see a higher level of reality, we need to look out of a larger window. In Buddhism, intellectual analysis on the one hand and opening up to what lies beyond concept on the other are not regarded as contradictory. When we're able to think critically and at the same time be open to experiences that lie beyond what we know, then we start seeing the big picture.

From this, we can see that the Buddhist spiritual path does not fit neatly into the category or general understanding of religion, except perhaps in an academic sense. You can practice Buddhism as a traditional religion, if that's what suits you. There are Buddhist churches that provide a sense of community for their members and a regular schedule of social activities and meditation practice. The values of harmonious, compassionate living are cultivated, and there's a sense of reverence for the Buddha and the great teachers who came after him. This is a valuable aspect of the tradition as well, and it's the way Buddhism is practiced in many places around the world. However, the essence of Buddhism transcends all these forms. It is the pure wisdom and compassion that exists in inconceivable measure within the minds of all beings, and the Buddhist spiritual path is the journey we take to fully realize this true nature of mind.