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LAMA, SHIYA DAS

EIGHT STEPS TO ENLIGHTENMENT

AWAKENING  
THE BUDDHA  
WITHIN

*Tibetan Wisdom for the Western World*

"A warm, accessible, deep, brilliantly written exploration and adventure along the Buddhist path." —Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D.

# WE ARE ALL BUDDHAS

*May all beings everywhere, with whom we are inseparably interconnected, be fulfilled, awakened, and free. May there be peace in this world and throughout the entire universe, and may we all together complete the spiritual journey.*

## *1911 Kopan, Nepal*

**I**t is morning in the lush Kathmandu Valley. I am in a small, clay, mud-floored hut at the top of Kopan Hill, surrounded by gleaming snow-covered Himalayan mountaintops. The rising sun has started to evaporate the mist covering the rice paddies below. At the bottom of the hill I can see three barefoot young Nepalese villagers filling water jugs from a spring. Soon one of them will put a jug on his head and carry it up the hill and leave it outside my hut.

I am alone for a week on my first solitary meditation retreat. As I watch the sun rise and set each day, I meditate, watching my breath and looking within. Later in the day, following the ancient oral teaching traditions, a Tibetan lama will come to guide me.

There is a joke about spiritual seekers and travelers—men and women like me: Margie Smith, a pleasant-looking woman who gave birth to her children in the 1950s (think June Cleaver or Harriet Nelson), approaches a travel agent.

"I must get to the Himalayas for my vacation," Mrs. Smith says. "I've got to talk to a guru."

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"The Himalayas, Mrs. Smith! Are you sure?" the travel agent asks. "It's a long trip, different language, funny food, smelly oxcarts. How about London, or Florida? Florida is lovely this time of year."

Mrs. Smith is adamant. She must go to the Himalayas to talk to a guru. So Mrs. Smith, wearing her best blue suit and her black pumps with the sensible heels, heads East, taking a plane, a train, a bus, and, yes, an oxcart, until she finally arrives at a far-off Buddhist monastery in Nepal. There an old lama in maroon and saffron robes tells her that the guru she seeks is meditating in a cave at the top of the mountain and cannot be disturbed. But Mrs. Smith came a long way and she is a determined woman who won't be put off.

Finally the lama relents. "All right," he says, "if you must, you must. But there are some ground rules. You can't stay long, and when you speak to the guru, you can say no more than ten words. He lives there alone, in silence and meditation."

Mrs. Smith agrees; and with the help of a few lamas, monks, and Sherpa porters, she starts trudging up the mountain. It's a long hard climb, but she doesn't give up. With an enormous effort of will and energy, she reaches the top—and the cave in which the guru is meditating. Her mission accomplished, Mrs. Smith stands at the entrance, and in a loud clear voice, she says what she came to say:

"Sheldon. . . . Enough is enough! It's your mother. Come home already"  
My name was Jeffrey Miller. But it could have been Sheldon. There was a Sheldon living on the next block in the suburban Long Island town where I was brought up and Bar Mitzvahs. My parents were long-time members of a synagogue; we were a middle-class Jewish family. I was always a regular guy, a three-letter high school jock. I grew up wanting to be a ballplayer. I had friends, good grades, and an intact suburban family. What was I doing meditating and chanting Buddhist mantras and prayers on a mountaintop in the Himalayas? Today, my own mother, Joyce Miller, jokingly refers to me as "my son, the lama," or even more amusingly as "The Deli Lama."

## FOLLOWING THE OVERLAND ROUTE

Like many young people, I first discovered the ancient wisdom traditions as a college student. In my case I was a student at SUNY, Buffalo, when I attended a Zen retreat in Rochester, New York, in the late 1960s. You know the adage about the turbulent sixties: If you can remember them, you weren't really there. In many ways I was very representative of my generation. I went to San Francisco for be-ins, discovered encounter groups and the hot springs at Esalen, marched on Washington, got tear gassed at an anti-war demonstration near the Pentagon, and was rained on at the Woodstock Festival in 1969.

The war, student politics, and the peace movement created a special level of intensity. In 1970, my best friend Barry's nineteen-year-old girlfriend, Allison Krause, was killed at Kent State when, incredibly, fellow Americans who were National Guardsmen from our heartland shot and killed four students. I was deeply and personally affected. As always, death, the great teacher, presented an opportunity for a wide range of penetrating and life-changing lessons. There was also a peculiar coincidence at Kent State that touched my life: One of the other students who was killed was, like me, named Jeffrey Miller, and he too came from Long Island. Friends and acquaintances who heard the news bulletin knew that I sometimes visited friends at Kent State; they became convinced that I was dead. In my parents' home and my student apartment, the phones began ringing nonstop.

Allison's funeral was a blur of emotions, so much sadness and so much grief. For months it seemed as though thoughts of Allison's life and sudden violent death trivialized everything else. I was nineteen years old, and I had been brought face to face with death for the first time.

Only a few weekends earlier, Allison and Barry had come to visit me; I had been sleeping on the couch because they were sleeping in my bedroom. We had all been in the same kitchen, pouring milk out of the same cardboard container while we talked about our shared plans. Allison, like Barry, was an artist; I loved to write. We talked about traveling and the things we could do together. Allison and Barry were in love and wanted to get engaged; I had advised them against it, saying they had plenty of time. Teenage death was the last thing on my mind.

In this period following Kent State, I also couldn't help thinking more about the Jeffrey Miller who was gunned down on his own college campus.

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The tragic photograph of his body lying in a pool of blood with an anguished young woman crying over him was everywhere. It could have been me. If I were to believe my ringing phone, it was me. This swift never-to-be-forgotten lesson in the fleeting nature of this life accelerated the ways in which my direction was changing.

During this painful time, my original life goals seemed more and more misguided and out of touch. I had spent the summer of 1969 working in a Manhattan law firm. Listening to the young Fifth Avenue lawyers complain had convinced me that I was not cut out to be one of the Gray Flannel fifties men, vying ceaselessly for a better berth on the *Titanic*. I knew that I wanted to learn more, not earn more. I had also begun to be disillusioned with radical politics and angry rhetoric. The concept of fighting for peace seemed a contradiction in terms. Kent State helped me realize that more than anything else I wanted to gentle myself and find a nonviolent way to contribute to a more harmonious and sane world.

The day after I graduated from college—alone with only the company of the Eternal Companion who I was still seeking—I started on my search by boarding a plane for London, where I had friends who were staying at a Sufi center. In my money belt was five hundred dollars saved from summer jobs and graduation presents, which I planned to stretch as far as possible. Within a short time, I crossed the channel to France. Writing poetry and hitchhiking, I started to make my way across Europe. In those days I had one main mantra, "Teach me what you know, whatever you call it."

Looking for "wisdom" and answers to questions I hadn't even framed, I was on my way to the Greek Islands to meet a wise man I had heard about in college. He was an elderly goatherd named Theos. When I arrived at the small island of Simi, I found Theos as promised. I stayed with him for a few days, but he spoke no English, and I spoke no Greek. His words of wisdom, if there were any, were wasted on me. Trying to conserve money, I slept on beaches, I slept in pensiones, I slept in Theos' goat shed.

Without realizing it, I found myself traveling through Turkey, Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan on the old overland route through the Khyber Pass and on to India. The farthest reach on this route was Kathmandu. To this day I don't consciously know what drew me to Nepal, except that I was following my heart, and it was pulling me East.

As I traveled, I began to hear more and more about wise Tibetan lamas who, after the Chinese invasion of their remote country, had fled across the borders into India and Nepal. Rumor said that the closer you got to Tibet, the

more likely you were to find one of these genuine sages. There was also talk that one of these learned lamas had a monastery on a hilltop in the Kathmandu Valley and that he had learned a little English and was willing to teach Westerners. That's why in the summer of 1971 I boarded a Kathmandu public bus packed with people and chickens—squawking room only—and headed out of town to meet my first Tibetan lama, Lama Thubten Yeshe. But first I would have to wade my way through the rice paddies and climb Kopan Hill.

## WHAT IS REAL, WHAT IS LIFE, WHAT IS TRUTH?

When I first met Lama Yeshe, I had a thousand and one questions about the meaning of life in general and my life in particular. I was twenty, and my questions were often more subtle than I was. What is the meaning of life? What is my purpose? Where did we all come from? Is there a God? Where is He, She, It? Is God with me? Is God nature? Is God the entire mountain and everything that lives and grows on it? Could I learn to live in a sacred manner? Lama Yeshe's eyes would twinkle with amusement at the cosmic absurdity of some of my questioning. Sometimes he would laugh and say, "You too much, boy." The first time we met, I remember that he asked me what I was looking for, and I had to honestly admit that I didn't exactly know. He said, "Let's see if we can't find out together." *Together* was a magical word.

The next day I went back to Kathmandu to my funky hotel; collected my backpack, sleeping bag, and passport; re climbed Kopan Hill and moved in. As I settled in at Lama Yeshe's, I discovered that several other Westerners were already there. There was no fuss, no requirements, no membership dues. Lama Yeshe was still young, in his mid-thirties. Two Tibetan lamas were living at Kopan there on the side of the towering Shiva Puri Mountain, along with a few Westerners in what used to be an old British villa.

It was a wonderful place. The air was thin and the sun was hot; there was no electricity, road, phone, or distractions. We had two latrines, side by side—one called Sam, the other called Sara. I was starting to learn Tibetan; we were all building houses and huts for the new students who kept coming. Once a day Lama Yeshe would personally teach me for an hour or two.

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Lama Thubten Yeshe, a true bridge builder, was eager to learn more English. I gave him English lessons, and another Westerner taught him about psychology and Freud. Lama Yeshe was like a mother hen to everyone, deeply concerned with our spiritual life, but also aware of our physical well-being. One of the things that most drew me to Lama Yeshe was that he seemed genuinely happy, and he laughed a lot. I like to think that he still does, even though he has since died. Not only was he an erudite teacher, he was also a wonderful living example of the compassionate wisdom he taught.

At the time, there was nowhere else I would rather have been. It felt as if we were on top of the world with all the promise and possibility open to us. The lamas, who had time and only a few students, were unchanged and uncorrupted by modern civilization. The students, like myself, were mostly young, unformed, and open to the beneficent influence of spiritual teachings. It seemed a match made in heaven.

Here, among a community of seekers living on Kopan Hill, my questions and search for purpose no longer seemed strange, weird, or out of place. Suddenly I discovered that it wasn't just me who wanted to find a deeper sense of meaning. My questions were the universal questions asked by generations of seekers—scientists seeking truth, mystics looking for a direct experience of the divine, the pious seeking God. Buddhist, Jewish, Hindu, Christian, Muslim—it didn't matter—there was a whole world and an entire lineage of seekers, of whom I was a part. I *belonged*.

At Kopan I discovered that a trail through the spiritual universe had already been blazed. I learned that there was already a map, explicit directions, and guideposts, and there were ways to measure progress. As I began to learn about the compassionate wisdom of Tibetan Buddhism, I saw that others had been to the mountaintop and they were able to help us get there too. Here, I no longer felt alienated or separate. There was a sense of kinship. I was on the way home.

## ADDRESSING THE BIG QUESTIONS

"How," Lama Yeshe asked, "can you help others if you cannot help yourself? Liberate yourself, and you liberate the world." Lama Yeshe told us there was nothing that he had and knew that we could not have and know. He said, "Open your heart and awaken your mind, and you'll be there."

Almost thirty years ago in Nepal, Lama Yeshe addressed my big questions—questions about life, death, self, illusion, reality, love, and transformation. Now I find myself addressing the same issues and hearing the same questions almost daily from a new generation of seekers and in many forms. The questions come in private meetings as well as large workshops, by letters, phone calls, and now by e-mail, through my "Ask the Lama" column on my home page on the World Wide Web. Its old wine in new recyclable bottles, the same circus with different performers, an ancient tradition with extraordinarily relevant modern applications.

The spiritual life has always been a search for meaning and a search for answers to the two existential questions: "Who am I?" and "Why am I?" A search for truth, personal authenticity and reality, a search for "what is," a search for purpose; these are the foundations of the spiritual way. Men and women who are ready to deepen or formally embark on a spiritual journey are typically standing at some kind of an emotional crossroads. Often they are grieving over some loss or disappointment—separation from or death of a loved one, a personal crisis, health problems, or an overriding sense that something is wrong or missing. Sometimes they are simply looking for a way to better love the world.

In a very real sense all of our day-to-day problems can be linked to spiritual issues and understanding. For example, I frequently speak to men and women who complain that even though they have painstakingly followed Life's Little Operating Manual, they feel as though they are coming up empty-handed. Superficially, it may seem as though they are having work problems or relationship problems or health problems, but scratch the surface and there are deeper unresolved questions. Some of these people seem to have so much—family, career, education. Everything seems to be going their way, yet they are often dissatisfied.

At the beginning of *The Divine Comedy*, Dante, who was just turning thirty-five, wrote, "Midway upon the journey of our life, I found myself in a



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dark wood where the right way was lost. Ah! How hard a thing it is to tell what this wild and rough and difficult wood was. . . ." It was the year 1300 when Dante acknowledged being confused and lost in a dark wood. Yet here on the cusp of the twenty-first century, I can easily relate to these feelings, and in all probability you can too.

Too often life's paths seem paradoxical and confusing. Even in the brightest daylight, the atmosphere is murky; the guideposts are barely visible; and the arrows and directional signals, when and if we find them, seem to be pointing every which way. Don't we sometimes have regrets about heading off in the wrong direction? Staying too long even when we knew we were misguided—why do we do the things we do?

Often when we think about our lives and our experiences, we feel certain that in some cosmic way it must be making sense, but sometimes it seems there are too many problems and too much chaos for us to ever get a handle on life. We don't know why this is so, but on some level we know that we are responsible for our own destiny. When we first hear about karma, the possibility of rebirth, and the ineluctable laws of cause and effect, these teachings not only make sense, they are reassuring.

For Tibetan Buddhists, because karma affects everything, there are no chance occurrences. It is no accident, for example, that you are picking up this book. As you read this sentence, all of your past actions, your present thoughts, as well as your intentions for the future have brought you to this specific intersection of your life where you have opened a book talking about a timeless way of life that was first introduced in Asia some 2,500 years ago.

Those of us who embark on spiritual paths are motivated in different ways. Some of us want to know the unknowable; others want to know themselves; still others want to know everything. Some people want transformation; others want miracles. Many want to alleviate suffering, help others, and leave the world a better place. Most of us are seeking love and fulfillment in one way or another. Everyone wants inner peace, acceptance, satisfaction, and happiness. We all want genuine remedies to feelings of despair, alienation, and hopelessness. Don't we all want to find spiritual nourishment and healing, renewal and a greater sense of meaning?

Don't we all hope to meet God, with his/her myriad faces? Gandhi once said, "I claim to be a passionate seeker after truth, which is but another name for God." As we all search for truth or God, don't we pray that we will find our way, our purpose? Don't we hope to find our true selves, all we are and

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can be? Too often, however, our search for truth or meaning lacks focus or direction.

Like many others, for example, you may have looked for meaning in relationships that failed you, or you may be frustrated by a career that isn't delivering the rewards you expected. It could be that you're disturbed by shaky values and rampant materialism. You can't help asking yourself if this is all there is. Is this really my life? Is this what I will be when I grow up—which is now? Is there nothing more? When does my real life begin? Is there no greater connection, no deeper purpose and sense of truly belonging? Why does life so often feel barren and lonely, and why is there so much fear, doubt, and anxiety in my heart?

Perhaps you sometimes feel a homesickness, a sadness, and a sense that something is terribly wrong. You might experience this as a yearning for something that is lost, something that seems so familiar and yet so distant. You might feel hungry and needy and aware that nothing has been able to fully satisfy you—at least not for very long. It's like drinking salt water while floating adrift on the great ocean; it's a drink that can't possibly alleviate your thirst.

**Rejoice!** You are living the core issues grappled with by every consciously alive human being. This is no small thing—this is the "Big Time," the Great Way walked by all those who have awakened to freedom, peace, and enlightenment. You're in the heavyweight division, wrestling with the multidimensional angels of life. You want to see them, you want to understand them, and—like Jacob—you want to be blessed by them.

Men and women on such a path traditionally have been known as "seekers." As you read this, are you aware of your journey, and do you understand what you are seeking? Are you ready to find it? It is probable that as a seeker, you've always engaged in a fair amount of self-examination and self-inquiry. You may already have a spiritual practice or religious faith and are looking for additional guidance to help you go further and deeper. Searching for more meaning has always been considered an admirable human quality. The French writer Andre Gide once wrote, "Believe those who are seeking truth. Doubt those who find it."

People are often drawn to Tibetan Buddhism for more esoteric reasons. They may have heard or read wonderful stories about amazing saints and yogis, men and women who have mastered body, mind, breath, and energy, as well as retained the memory of past lives. Seekers, curious about the

unknown, might want to know more about levitation, conscious dying, lucid dreaming, astral travel, rainbow bodies, and clairvoyance. However, that's finally not what it's all about. The Buddha did perform certain miracles, but he always instructed his disciples not to demonstrate miraculous powers except to inspire faith in the skeptical. Lamas say the same thing. The magical, mysterious, and occult are special effects that can be produced, but it's not the whole story. The miracle of Buddhism is a miracle of love, not levitation. The goal of Buddhism is enlightenment, not astral travel. The goal is the path, the way of enlightened living.

## ON THE PATH TO ENLIGHTENMENT

The basic, most fundamental characteristic of Buddhism is the promise of enlightenment. Starting with the example of the Buddha, its teachings contain 2,500 years of wisdom about how ordinary human beings can become enlightened—as enlightened as the Buddha himself. These teachings offer explanations about the nature of enlightenment, describe different degrees, depths, and experiences of enlightenment, as well as provide detailed instructions on how to reach this exalted spiritual state. In fact, the Buddhist path can be called a well-laid-out road map to enlightenment and spiritual rebirth.

The concept of spiritual rebirth is not unique to Buddhism. All Christians know the story of Saul being "reborn" on the road to Damascus when self-realization turned Saul from a bigoted persecutor to a saintly soul named Paul. Of course not everyone can experience spiritual rebirth or self-transformation in a flash of light as Paul did. In Buddhism, for example, there are many different perspectives on enlightenment. Some think it happens suddenly; others believe it only comes about through a gradual process of deepening awareness.

When people ask me about enlightenment I almost always answer by saying that it's not what we think it is. Enlightenment is a mysterious process, not unlike God, truth, or love. No one definition is large enough to encompass it. Each experience is unique—as we are each unique. Enlightenment—whether you call it spiritual awakening, liberation, illumination, or satori—means profound inner transformation and self-realization. In fact, there are different degrees and depths of enlightenment experience, stretching from an initial momentary glimpse of

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reality all the way to the fullest actualization of Buddhahood, the fullest form of enlightenment.

Having said that, I think it's important to understand that spiritual rebirth in Buddhism is not a mystical encounter with God. Enlightenment is not about becoming divine. Instead, it's about becoming more fully human. In examining the archetypical experience of the Buddha, we see that his enlightenment represents a direct realization of the nature of reality—how things are and how things work. Enlightenment is the end of ignorance. When we talk about walking the path to enlightenment, we are talking about walking a compassionate path of enlightened living. The Zen master Dogen said, "To be enlightened is to be one with all things."

Today I am firm in my conviction that enlightenment is a real possibility for each and every one of us. However, when I first discovered Buddhism, I wondered whether it was possible for anyone or if it was just a myth. Then I personally encountered some wise masters who seemed to embody it, as well as others who had committed their lives to trying to achieve it. In Tibet, it sometimes seems as though every\* grandmother, monk, nun, beggar, yak herder, farmer, or healer has an enlightenment story. Tibetans tell stories of monasteries as well as remarkable provinces in which all the inhabitants became enlightened through spiritual practice. A beautiful Tibetan prayer wishes that we may all together reach enlightenment—that we may all find the Buddha within and awaken to who and what we really are.

## AWAKENING THE BUDDHA WITHIN

Not that long ago, while I was leading a weekend retreat in Texas at a church there, a local Montessori school invited me to come and talk to their students. There were about seventy-five children between the ages of seven and eleven, and I wondered exactly

From the moment the kids started trickling in the door, they came right up, climbed on my lap and all over me and started asking questions. I had a brass bowl-shaped gong with me, and at the end, we did the Gong Meditation: Follow the sound of the gong, see where it goes, and "just be there" for a moment or two with the sound.

The next day one of the women in the retreat came up to me at lunch to tell me that her eight-year-old son Ryan had come home and told her that something

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very unusual had happened that day at school. "A monk from Tibet, New York, came," Ryan reported excitedly.

Ryan said that the monk—me—taught them about God and Buddha and the Gong Meditation. When his mother asked what that was, he said, "Well, he told us to watch where the sound went and to listen carefully. I didn't know you could watch a sound and listen at the same time. It was very interesting. He said that if you followed where the sound went, that you might get closer to God and Buddha. And I did that."

His mother said, "Yes, and . . . ?"

The boy said. "Well, when I watched and listened to where the sound went, I didn't get closer to God. I *was* God."

What a delight, I thought to myself. "From the mouth of babes," as the scripture says.

When I had finished the Gong Meditation, which only takes about thirty seconds, I asked, "So where did the sound go?" And every hand went up. I said, "Sshhh, don't say." I couldn't believe it. Some kids even had both hands raised! How much we adults have forgotten.

I was very touched by their youthful experience of just sensing. They didn't even question their belief, "What is God?" "What is Buddha?" or "Who am I to say I am God, who am I to know these things?" No such self-editing takes place at that age. Just "Oh yeah. God, I am that."

Whether you say "The kingdom of God is within" as Jesus did (in Luke 17:21) or that we all have innate Buddha nature as Tibetans do, in the end, doesn't it come down to the same thing: *We are all lit up from within as if from a sacred source.* Even a child can experience it. Amazing!

In other words, don't seek externally for fulfillment; rather turn the searchlight inward. "Hey, what are you gawking at? Don't you see, it's all about you!" the twentieth-century Zen master Sawaki Roshi once said. It's a fact: You're not going to find truth outside yourself. Not through lovers or mates, not with friends, not with family, and certainly not via material success. The only place you are going to be able to find your truth is in your genuine spiritual center. Truth is found by living truly—in your own authentic way.

Wouldn't it be sweet to come home and find the Buddha there, simply and utterly at peace, desireless with a hearty warmth and genuine nobility of spirit? Wouldn't it be satisfying to be like that, to be in touch with your own authentic being? That's why an Indian master, when asked what advice he had for Westerners seeking enlightenment, said, "Stay where you are." A statement that is simple, yet profound. Be wherever you are; be whoever you are. When *you* genuinely become *you*, a Buddha realizes Buddhahood. You

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become a Buddha by actualizing your own original innate nature. This nature is primordially pure. This is your true nature, your natural mind. This innate Buddha-nature doesn't need to achieve enlightenment because it is always already perfect, from the beginningless beginning. We only have to awaken to it. There is nothing more to seek or look for.

## INNATE AWARENESS IS THE NATURAL STATE

The wonderful wisdom of the deepest secret teachings of Tibet tell us this: *Each of us can (and ultimately must) become enlightened.* All we have to do is search inward and discover our own innate perfection. Everything we seek is there. *The Dzogchen masters of Tibet say we are all Buddhas.* Not Buddhists, *Buddhas.* I emphasize this because once after a lecture, a woman approached me and said, "But Surya, I'm not a Buddhist; I'm a Roman Catholic. Why do you say we are all Buddhists?" I would like to be more clear about this. Even if you are not a Buddhist, and have no intention of becoming a Buddhist, you are still capable of being a living Buddha. For Buddhism is less a theology or a religion than a promise that certain meditative practices and mind trainings can effectively show us how to awaken our Buddha-nature and liberate us from suffering and confusion.

Buddhism says yes, change is possible. It tells us that no matter what our background, each of us is the creator of his or her own destiny. It tells us that our thoughts, our words, and our deeds create the experience that is our future. It tells us that everything has its own place, everything is sacred, and everything is interconnected, and it introduces a system of integrating all experiences into the path toward realizing innate perfection. Science has made great progress in harnessing and understanding matter. Buddhism, on the other hand, is a profound philosophy that, over the centuries, has developed a systematic method of shaping and developing the heart and mind: a method of awakening the Buddha within.

The problem is that most of us are sleeping Buddhas. To reach enlightenment, our only task is to awaken to who and what we really *are*—and in so doing to become fully awake and conscious in the most profound sense of the word. "When I am enlightened, all are enlightened," Buddha said. Help yourself and you help the entire world.

In Pali, the original language of the Buddha scriptures, the word *Buddha* literally means *awake*. "Awaken from what?" one might ask. Awaken from

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the dreams of delusion, confusion, and suffering; awake to all that you are and all you can be. Awake to reality, to truth, to things just as they are.

### TODAY, RIGHT NOW

*The seeker who sets out upon the way shines bright over the world.*

— FROM THE DHAMMAPADA  
(SAYINGS OF THE BUDDHA)

If you were able to go inward right now and waken your sleeping Buddha, what would you find? Tibetan Buddhism says that at the heart of you, me, every single person, and all other creatures great and small, is an inner radiance that reflects our essential nature, which is always utterly positive. Tibetans refer to this inner light as pure radiance or innate luminosity; in fact, they call it *ground luminosity* because it is the "bottom line." There is nothing after this, and nothing before this. This luminosity is birthless and deathless. It is a luminescent emptiness, called "clear light," and it is endowed with the heart of unconditional compassion and love.

Whatever your past or present religious beliefs, you will probably recognize that Tibetans are not alone in associating luminosity with enlightenment or an incandescent spiritual presence. In Christian churches and Jewish synagogues as well as Buddhist temples, people light candles that symbolize spiritual luminosity. Saints and other figures are universally represented by shimmering halos of light, surrounded by nimbuses and auras. Some people can even see them in reality. The tradition in Judaism, the religion of my childhood, is for the women in the household to light candles at sundown on Friday night. Why? To invite the light and spirit of God into the temple of the home for the Sabbath.

Think about all the millions of men and women who have bowed their heads in prayer while lighting candles. Do any of us really think that the Buddha, or any other penultimate image of the absolute, needs a candle to see or to stay warm? Lighting a candle is just a symbolic, ritualized way of offering light in the darkness. The candle symbolizes the inner light and luminous wisdom that can guide each of us through the darkness of ignorance and confusion. The candle's shining flame is an outer reminder of inner luminosity and clarity—the living spiritual flame burning within the temple of our heart and soul.

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The timeless wisdom of Tibet assures us that when you are able to hear the Buddhas wisdom, when you are willing to ponder his insightful lessons, and when you are genuinely committed to practicing these lessons by doing your best to lead an impeccable life, you can actualize this ground luminosity. You will reach the heart of awakening; you will know where you have been, and you will see where you are going. Your own inner light and truth—the clear light by which we see and are seen—will guide you. This is total awareness; this is perfect enlightenment. Enlightenment means an end to directionless wandering through the dreamlike passageways of life and death. It means that you have found your own home Buddha. How does the Buddha feel? Completely comfortable, at peace, and at ease in every situation and every circumstance with a sense of true inner freedom, independent of both outer circumstances and internal emotions.

Waking up your inner Buddha and staying awake requires extraordinary self-knowledge and presence of mind. It means paying close attention to how you think and how you act, and it means making an ongoing commitment to searching inward for answers. *Inward*. Deeper. Beneath the surface of things, not just inside yourself.

As Westerners, this isn't how we have been conditioned to think. We keep looking outside for answers. We look for lovers, friends, parents, authorities, and even children to answer needs that they can't possibly fulfill. We have fantasies about career, romance, friendship, and intimacy. We are so full of fantasies about the past and the future. Often we don't want to let go of these fantasies because we fear that doing so means giving up on life. But that's not how it works. In truth, unrealistic expectations tarnish our appreciation of life and weigh down the buoyancy of the present moment.

Don't we all tend to think mainly in terms of the gratification of our desires and securing our place in the world? Haven't we all been conditioned to place primary emphasis on persona, or how we appear? Our common languages abound with phrases about projecting a good image. The emphasis is on how you appear to yourself as well as how you appear to others—in order to get what you want. Don't we all seek security, safety, and reassurance?

We're often told, "Don't just stand there, do something!" And we do. We do many somethings. When we are involved in unsatisfying relationships, we believe that our solutions will be found in different relationships; when we have jobs that make us angry and resentful, we believe that new jobs will give us what we want; when we're unhappy with our surroundings, we believe we can resolve our unhappiness by changing locales. Then when our problems



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refuse to go away, we complain that we're stuck and look for ways to get moving.

We take this kind of logic even further when we reduce life to an ongoing competition. Trained and conditioned to believe that life is about achievement, about winning, losing, and self-assertion, we put much of our energy into momentary solutions. It's no wonder so many of us feel alienated, alone, exhausted, cynical, and disheartened.

Buddhism turns these attitudes about winning and achieving upside down and inside out. Buddhist emphasis is not on new ways to conquer outer space, cyberspace—or, for that matter, Manhattan Island. The wisdom traditions tell us that we can afford to slow down, take a breather, and turn inward. To master ourselves is to arrive home at the center of being—the universal mandala. What we seek, we already *are*. "Everything is available in the natural state " as a lama of old once said. So why should we look anywhere else?

Before we go any further, I want to make it clear that I don't want anyone reading this to get hardening of the heartwaves in the name of Buddhism. Let's not use Buddhism to become quietists, or puritanical holier-than-thou fundamentalists. While sitting in meditation, let's not become stiff, rigid, or stuck in any fixed position, like an inert Buddha statue. The spontaneous fullness that is known as Buddha-nature is always open and flowing. It is not static; it is ecstatic. It is not frozen didactic, and it is not fixed. The Buddha within you isn't going to look exactly like the Buddha inside me, or inside any of your friends and family. Buddhahood—enlightenment—has myriad faces, all equally marvelous. Just take a look around.

Taking an inward path is not about cultism or blind faith. It is about genuine leadership, embodying and enacting truth's highest principles—not mere sheeplike followership. Conforming is not the deepest teaching of the spiritual traditions. The deepest teachings are about radiant awareness and the inherently joyful freedom of being. It's not just about maintaining a quiet mind. If all you want is a quiet mind, there is a huge pharmaceutical industry that would be happy to serve that need.

The path to enlightenment and awakening is the opposite of squelching and containing yourself or trying to keep up a nice, efficient, stainless-steel persona—very shiny but also very hard and cold. There is no substitute for living a juicy genuine life of Buddha activity. The Buddha is bubbling, happy, and sad. Waking up the Buddha is about letting go of your fixed persona and becoming awake, liberated, and *aware*.

Starting on a spiritual path means leaving the superficial currents and getting into the deeper waters of real sanity. We're not just swimming against the stream here; we're actually plumbing the deeper waters of being in order to

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reconnect with our own innate nature. Where do we start? After he arrived in India in 1959, an old lama was asked, "How did you manage to escape from Tibet and cross the high and snowy Himalayas by foot?" He answered, "One step at a time."

The path, as always, begins beneath your feet with the first step you take. Where do you stand right now? This is where we begin.

*Breathe.*

*Breathe again.*

*Smile.*

*Relax.*

*Arrive*

*Where you are.*

*Be natural.*

*Open to effortlessness.*

*To being*

*Rather than doing.*

*Drop everything.*

*Let go.*

*Enjoy for a moment*

*This marvelous joy of meditation.*