

## Ten Essays on Healing

August 13th, 2018

The following essays are adapted from *Ending Racism, and A Belief in the Miraculous*. I have added an introduction.

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## Introduction

Today in my newsfeed, in just a few minutes, there were no less than five mentions of the term 'trauma', dealing with different deep injuries that demand our attention. I'm sure that others today are having a similar experience, and that they are also seeing this common thread - *that we are collectively seeking a deeper healing to each one of our suffering conditions*, whether it be because of personal loss, or hardship, or in relationships, in how women have been treated, in response to intergenerational trauma, or in putting an end to the continuing effects of racism in our culture.

Any of these can and should be worked with by themselves, as deeply as needed. What I'd like to point out here to my brothers and sisters today is how these individual works can be addressed by Buddhist methods.

The healing we seek, individually and collectively is something we all have a responsibility to bring about, from wherever we are in life, as a family member or a friend, or in a community. We are each a part of healing across generations, and there are the resources available in spiritual traditions that we can use to accomplish our aims.

For much of my adult life, the word 'trauma' was almost always used to refer to only to the result of the sudden, extreme sufferings a person could experience - such as war, or assault, or going through a natural disaster or an accident. The last fifteen years however, gradually, the term has been used more and more to refer to other kinds of injury, from witnessing harmful acts, to being a descendant of grave historical injustice, as with genocide, or the slave trade and Jim Crow. Recently I've seen the same word being used to refer to being hurt in relationships, to being born, and to the mere fact of living.

This can be useful in a way, as it indicates a spectrum of injury that has a lasting effect on a person, until it is resolved. The way this resolution takes

place, and what it is named by those who teach surely will differ, but they have this much in common - that they are all aiming to remedy the past effect a person or his family or group has experienced, and to arrive at a state wholeness, health and peace. This differs from merely suppressing the suffering or its being held temporarily in abeyance. Not all who teach healing of trauma aim to go this far, but some in fact do.

Although the Buddha didn't use the word 'trauma', he did find a way to be with all of his past and to learn from it, to find peace and wholeness. He didn't advise escape or neglect of our conditions, but he did teach methods to reach deeper insight and the freedom from limitation and suffering.

May we all find our way to great healing, as far as it needs to go in us, and may we then share the blessings of our life with all those we meet, and with all our families, and with all generations.

## Finding the Missing Piece in Healing

Introductory thoughts on Refuge, joy and resilience, meditation, retreat, wisdom, and heart qualities, as they apply to healing trauma

From what I can tell, there are ideas and resources and in spiritual traditions that have not yet made their way yet into the ways we usually engage trauma. A few of these ideas seem to me to be indispensable, if we are to accomplish the deep healing we are looking for. I have no doubt that at a certain point suffering brings with it an open mindedness. It can awaken our intelligence and willingness to look into causes, and so it's with this in mind that I'd like to offer the following preliminary thoughts. May they help all who suffer to find complete freedom and peace.

### On Refuge

In his recent workshop on healing trauma as a prerequisite to spiritual practice, one teacher explained how a person needs to feel physically and emotionally safe before they open themselves and can address their suffering. I thought while listening to his presentation of the traditional Buddhist teachings on what is called refuge. This is the context in which we can work.

So many times we've depended on people or institutions or even teachers that have let us down. Disillusioned, we draw back and trust less, but something in us still naturally looks for support, even if we don't let on publicly about it. For me, spiritual study and practice have always been the most personal things I could imagine, and they do not allow for compromise! The shadow side of such independence though, is isolation, and I've learned it need not be this way. I realize now that we don't have to go through our healing alone, and in fact it's more effective when we connect with a tradition of worthy spiritual friends.

Finding a reliable teacher, and a Noble, accomplished community brings safety and spiritual nourishment. It's like discovering precious treasure. It is warm encouragement, every step of the way. That is *true refuge*. By comparison to what's ordinary, we find it's something we can count on. It proves itself over time, and then becomes a resource for our whole lives. Because we feel protected and that there is wisdom in the tradition, we can open, more and more, and receive the blessings of this life.

## Joy and Resilience

On the path of healing, we're then going to want to gather around ourselves a wealth of supporting conditions. These can include good friends, a peaceful environment, a flexible schedule at work, or time off, enough exercise, plenty of rest and good food. The most important factors we can bring together are those that nourish our spirit. Being surrounded by art does this for me, as does bringing to mind and celebrating the good things people have done, and are doing now in our world.

It's easy to overlook the place of joy in healing, and in having a full life. Sometimes it seems almost indulgent, from a time-pressed, Western materialistic, practical point of view to enjoy ourselves. But this is something we all need to regain balance, and to gain in strength.

In her book *Maps to Ecstasy*, Gabrielle Roth taught that,

*In many shamanic societies, if you came to a medicine person complaining of being disheartened, dispirited, or depressed, they would ask one of four questions: "When did you stop dancing? When did you stop singing? When did you stop being enchanted by stories? When did you stop being comforted by the sweet territory of silence?"*

The good news is that there are beautiful resources all around us that we can enjoy, and that can reconnect us to all the best things in life. The flight of birds, the endless beauty of our natural world, and children, literature,

music, extraordinary acts of love, all of these feed us deeply, and make our spirits robust.

We can develop a strong psychological immune system. I hope we can all discover how it's possible to build up our resilience, so that *whatever* we meet, we feel we can respond to it well. What's more, we can feel confident we have the resources to deal with the suffering in our lives, however it has come to us, and to reach a deep resolution. When we are well nourished spiritually, our constitution becomes strong, and life takes on a new character. We become durable, adaptable to changing conditions, fearless and full of joy.

### Meditation and Retreat

For most of us on a path of healing, time and study becomes something essential. The suffering we have known in ourselves or in the world is central to our lives, until it's fully understood, and resolved. It's natural then that we're going to want to read and listen to what people are saying on the subject. Books are written, and talks are given, and today, we can go online at any time and find more information than we could use in a thousand lifetimes. Ultimately though, finding what works for us is all that matters.

While most of the teachings on healing in the 21st century come from psychology, and lay teachers, using spiritual methods is less often associated with healing. The result is that, if they are used at all, it's as an adjunct to science. In contrast to this, the teachings on inner freedom have come down to us through lineages of men and women who practiced meditation, as the foundation of their spiritual life. As working people, and particularly as educated Westerners these days, we may think it's enough to read books or occasionally take time off to practice, but then the results are less than they could be.

If someone asks, *How much meditation should I practice?*, the answer really depends on how much we feel it's needed.

*How strong is the suffering, or the motivation to help ourselves and others?*

Like anything else, motivation comes before action, and it arises naturally out of our needs, but it seems these days that we need to give ourselves space and permission for spiritual practice. Taking care of ourselves can be looked at as contrary to a productive life in a materialistic culture, and yet, this is the foundation of all that we would do in the world. I hope we will all give this some serious thought, and decide what we need, and then have the inner freedom to act on that motivation to care for themselves in the best of all possible ways.

Meditation is defined in a few ways, but there is one traditional meaning that can help us to make progress, whatever specific methods we use. If we cultivate a mind that is bright and clear and and peaceful, then we can go deeper with whatever practice we have. We need a certain amount of concentration to break through the veil of appearances. This is something that's easy to miss, if we are not living as contemplatives, and so it should be said right from the beginning. The proposition here is that there are levels to the mind that we can know.

What is called *calm abiding* can be practiced right along with our chosen method, but traditionally, it's cultivated separately. We're encouraged to experiment and see what's more effective.

Another tradition that's not often mentioned when addressing laypeople's suffering is that of retreat. This is something quite different from taking a vacation - it's a time of days, weeks or months of deeper, intensive spiritual practice. For some of us, practicing in our spare time, outside of work and relationships and family will be enough to ease our suffering somewhat, but for others it's not enough. Sometimes we feel we have no choice but to step away to take better care of ourselves. There is then this time tested

path, that leads away from our everyday involvements, and into deeper levels of healing.

Although we may not have the social approval, or the time or resources yet to get away for extended periods of time, it should be known that this option exists, and has been taken in the past by people just like us, who have suffered, and were strongly dedicated as we are now to healing.

### Wisdom and the heart qualities

The essential insight in the Buddhist Wisdom teachings is that when we are deluded, or unaware of our true nature, we are not who we take ourselves to be. In Buddhism this ignorance of not knowing ourselves is the cause of suffering.

It's a fact that when we're hurting we may stay on the surface and use our time and energy without getting to the roots of problems. When we're mistaken about ourselves though, and take an idea to be who we are, and who others are, we are missing something essential. In our responses involving what we regard as our self or the self of others, we may even be reinforcing our problem. The best we can aim for in that context is to accommodate our ego, when there is more to be done. There's a deeper truth to be known and embodied.

It's been said that *All the Buddhist teachings were given for the sake of wisdom*, but this can easily be overlooked, dismissed or set to the side when dealing with difficult conditions, or emotions or memories. This is especially true in our impatient culture. When I think of healing though, I always return to this point about the need for wisdom because of its prime importance for us.



## The exceptional qualities of the heart

I remember being in a class in Arizona, about ten years ago, on what is called 'mindfulness based stress reduction'. This was being given at a hospital, so there were a good number of health care professionals there, as well as a few people with chronic pain. I remember sensing the goodness of some of these people, and that I was amazed it wasn't talked about as a precious resource we could all apply to our healing. It may have been that particular teacher's own framework, limiting what was being encouraged in that class, but from I understand, this is how it usually is when mindfulness is taught here.

When science talks about the mind and attention, it's true that it does some good to highlight how with mindfulness, breathing slows down, circulation and digestion improve, along with the assimilation of food and medicine. Patients have a faster recovery time. All this is measurable, and so it's supported, and even paid for by insurance. What this leaves out however is a deeper understanding of the mind, and the potentials we all carry within us.

As I looked at the grandmothers in the class, I couldn't help noticing their beautiful kindness and their deep gentleness. Others had joy and optimism to share, and some brought with them peace and stability and groundedness. All these qualities, I could see, are able to have an effect on our entire self, mind, feelings as well as the physical body when used together with directed attention. What's more, these precious qualities can be cultivated, and the results can be experienced by anyone.

Attention is far from being just a generic quality, as it is so commonly misunderstood and undervalued. This mind of ours has a range of wonderful qualities that can be brought out to nourish and to heal. If we experiment, I'm sure we'll find these things for ourselves.

*May we all find our way to methods that heal,  
and may we share our joy with all the world*

## Inner Strength, Capacity, and Focus

Those among us who would meet this world and all our family with an open heart, and with the willingness to help where we can are bound to come up against our limitations. Here I'd like to offer a few thoughts on what I see as our capacity, and how we can increase our ability to be with others in a way that is useful.

When I look at how we avoid dealing with suffering, I don't see it always as a lack of willingness, but that we don't have enough inner strength. Although our attention span is short, and only a narrow band of what is actually going on in our world is focussed on in the news, still, even this is too much for most people to bear. We have potential, but we haven't been taught why or how to cultivate it.

The inner strength to accomplish an aim, or to be with what is difficult comes from the conviction that this has ultimate importance for us. We can say that it comes from love, as a depth of feeling and commitment that doesn't waver when faced with challenges, that is not seeking the world's approval, and that doesn't depend on seeing results in order to continue.

Such love is stable and lasting, and clear and bold, and empowering. When we find our inner strength in this way, this love is a source of energy and guidance independent of external conditions, one we can rely on.

When I see people overwhelmed, and unable to face suffering in themselves or their own family and community, and when I see this in myself, I know it has to do with having such strength of mind and spirit, and with feeling capable.

A strong motivation alone often is not enough. We need to translate that into *a greater capacity* to be with what is difficult, and to meet present needs with skill and resourcefulness.

What *is* capacity? and how can we improve our ability? These are surely questions that can only be addressed by our whole way of life, but I find that even having the thought of wanting to go in that direction more and more to be generative. It would have us be on watch for opportunities to take care of ourselves in such a way that we're better able to be of use, healthy and strong where it's needed most.

There is the aspect of *taking care of our constitution* that I can reference here. This is something I've been watching since the 1990's, when I was a student of Thich Nhat Hanh's, who has always seemed to me to be the most completely present and solid kind of person. He teaches breath meditation with an awareness and appreciation and care for this precious body of ours. I can remember seeing my own central nervous system and subtle energy body go from being frail, easily effected, and taking long to recover from upset, to becoming quite strong and resilient.

I add to this breath meditation a loving kindness practice, bringing the best qualities I can manage, and together with being nourished and fortified by quiet, I can see that practicing in this way leads to greater health and strength of body and mind.

The reason I referred to capacity as a whole life's practice is that it's not enough to meditate in this way if our environment is not supportive of developing greater resourcefulness. We are all effected one way or another by our surroundings, and so being aware of how friends and family and the media and the sounds of the city and the suffering we see effects us is one part of having greater choice over the life we would create. We can then step away from what limits our vitality and joy, and move into a fuller sense of living.

The last year I've had the thought that there is more to be said, leading on from strength and capacity, *to where we focus our attention and resources.*

We live in a time of overlapping social causes. Movements such as Black Lives Matter, Me Too, and those addressing animal rights, climate change and protecting the environment from corporations, economic inequality, discrimination, the rights of oppressed people, and militarism, and more, all deserve our attention and involvement. Even dedicated activists feel the pull in different directions, and that there is only so much they can do.

We see BLM protesters question the commitment of people who are not people of color, and those who work to advance women's rights looking for more support from those on the left who have taken up other issues. The list could go on. We turn to each other for help, and rather than accuse one another of not caring enough about our cause, I think it's more useful, and *more productive* to see that we each have a role to play in the work for social justice. Depending on our history and education and affinities, a person of color, or a woman, or someone who is gay, or who comes from a poor background can be in a better position to advocate for those causes.

We can all learn from and support each other, and it may very well be that we all organically have a value and an equally valid place in the greater work of making this a just world, where all are honored, where the rights of all are respected.

My first teacher had a magnet on her refrigerator that read, 'Grow where you are planted', and I think this points in the direction I'm talking about here.

We can support each other, and listen to those with a deeper understanding than our own. This naturally gives rise to an informed commitment on our part. Rather than even subtly denigrating the work of others, which happens sometimes, we can see all these different compassionate movements as coming from the same ground of our shared life here. And as our capacity to be with and respond to what is difficult increases, we'll have more to offer.

*May it go on this way as long as even a single need exists anywhere in this beautiful world of ours.*

On the need for a spiritual perspective in healing

{Adapted from Healing Racism - A Buddhist View}

*Homage to all teachings that lead out of suffering*

A contemplative of any tradition can offer a unique perspective on healing the effects of the deep injuries we or our family have suffered. They can bring qualities of restorative energy, as well as insights not found in the ideas of intellectuals, and social philosophers. This is something that is denied by materialists, of course, but what we are left with then is often a barren ideology, depressing, abstract, and removed from the earth, the heart and the body.

To me, all contemplative traditions, Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, as well as Native and other religions, lead to an experience of depth, the sacredness of this life, our equality and unity with all others. The fact that there are these religious and spiritual traditions means that we don't have to go it alone. Traditions and teachers at their best have worked out the ways of knowing deep truth, and living from there. That is their function, their whole purpose. If we connect with one or more of them, they should clarify for us what is essential.

Of course, we don't need religion to reach the truth about ourselves and our being here. Any person of depth and moral substance can reach universal water. What traditions can do is to put us in touch with like minded people, so that the clarity and power of what they have found can become part of our world-view, and our work.

In addition to the view that serves as a basis for their lives, contemplatives and religious traditions also offer methods to accomplish our aims. At their best, spiritual traditions are repositories of practical wisdom, the hard earned experience of previous generations, their gifts to us, motivated by

love. Although the challenges we face are new in this generation, we should never think we are the first or only ones to ever face threats. We are wise if we are humble and receptive enough to learn from others.

### The place of renewal and joy

If the value of self care is becoming more well known these days, what is less often talked about is how *joy and being in touch with beauty is vital for us as human beings*. Without it, the world grows dark. It appears in a distorted way to the depressed, angry, and fearful person. Joy is in fact essential to sustained activism, and to a full flourishing of our human intelligence. All this is laid out quite scientifically in Buddhism, and in other traditions that teach psychological causality. More than just a theory though, this idea is offered as encouragement for us to see for ourselves.

Deeply nourished by beauty, the world appears as it is - luminous, enthralling, a sacred place. We live with what Abraham Joshua Heschel called *a radical amazement*. We are also empowered, more than ever, to meet challenges, and to uplift and inspire others.

What is needed now, what has always been needed is the deeper knowledge of the ocean of light that is in the self, this essential freedom we all carry in us at all times, victim or victimizer. If we only know and identify with the conditioned self, there is no end to re-living or reacting to the past.

The same view the individual person needs is also what is needed most in our collective culture: the widespread knowledge of this life's profound, and precious nature. We each need to awaken fully, and to help all others achieve this very same state.

There is a phrase I've been hearing just recently in the media, 'to be a prisoner of the moment', which is a vivid and interesting expression. It means that we can be so caught up in the immediacy of what is happening now



that we lose perspective. It also implies its opposite - the state of being not caught, or of being free in this moment. When that happens, we are not having what is going on dictate our reactions.

When meeting with people's indifference, or bias, with discrimination or outright racism, don't let the flaw in their vision become the flaw in your vision, about yourself, or about them. In that moment instead, become the radical knowledge-medicine we all need.

*"An incomparable spark of divinity is to be found in the heart of each human being, waiting to radiate love and wisdom everywhere, because that is it's nature. Amazing!"*

- Eknath Easwaran

*"Dwelling deep within our hearts and the hearts of all beings without exception, is an inexhaustible source of love and wisdom. And the ultimate purpose of all spiritual practices, whether they are called Buddhist or not, is to make contact with this essentially pure nature."*

- Lama Thubten Yeshe

We find then that a spiritual perspective is unyielding. It is ever a source of inspiration and renewal. It is constant, illuminating and healing all generations.

## Caring for the Past and Finding Freedom in the Present Moment

I remember Thich Nhat Hanh telling the story of a young boy who practiced at Plum Village, who especially wanted to live in peace, without the anger his father had shown him in his young life. One day, he said, he was watching his sister playing on a swing set, when she fell off and cut her chin. The young boy thought to himself, 'Oh, how stupid she is! I'll go give her a piece of my mind!' - but he caught himself, and thought 'Oh no!, I'm just like my father!' He stopped and practiced mindful breathing and continued to look, and he saw that his father could have received the seed of anger from his father before him.

At that moment, according to Thay, the young boy's resentment towards his father vanished, and was replaced by compassion for him. Not only was the continuity of anger passed down through generations cut in that very moment, but the wish to help his father was born right then as well. Thay said that in following years, the boy even brought his father to Plum Village to practice meditation, and to learn to care for and to transform the suffering in himself.

I met a therapist at one of the first retreats I went on, who said that, for her clients, negative experiences could be 'as though trapped in amber'. For some reason, the image stayed with me, and I have often asked myself in the years and decades since then, how this could happen? and what could be done about it? So much is at stake here. I think there are truly formative experiences, both positive and negative that we carry with us, and if we don't learn to transform our relationship to the injury we have received, then our lives and what we can be and do in this world will be heavily conditioned and limited by that.

Rumi said,

*You are not a single you  
You are a sky and an ocean,*

*an nine hundred times huge downing place  
for all your hundreds of yours*

Despite all the ways we have become conditioned, spiritual traditions all teach that we do have this potential for freedom from limitations, the partial and unbalanced living that defines suffering. How can we make our way there? What methods and living resources are there that we can make use of? Spiritual traditions, when functional, offer just this.

## The treasures we carry

In their studies of Native Americans, African Americans, and Jewish descendants of victims of the holocaust, scientists speak nowadays of trauma being passed on through our DNA, and this feels true to me. It also feels like, once again, science is late to the game, catching up only now with what contemplatives, poets and healers have long known.

*And while it's true that we have inherited from our family lines the memories of harms that have been done, great injustices, and devastation, we've also inherited great riches from them.* I don't expect science to catch up with this part of our human experience any time soon, and so I will have to at least try to speak of this here.

If it's possible to inherit ancestral trauma, in ways that can now be measured, then it only makes sense that we have also inherited positive experiences, insights and abilities from the past. These are also something we don't have to do anything to create or manufacture - they are our true inheritance. I would go further though than identifying as our legacy only what we've received through our parents. I would say that all of humanity's injuries, insights and qualities are ours as well. This was the idea behind what Jung called the collective unconscious.

Why is it that we don't know these things? I would say that it's the volume and intensity of our experiences that often blocks this knowledge. We have abundant resources in us, but are we able to quiet down, and to access them?

Our past and present familial inheritance is closer to us than the more general collective, and this is where most of us can begin our meditations to access the strengths and qualities that we need now.

My father and his father, mother, and grandfather transmitted their strength and courage, their creativity and great love. When I can tap into

this, there's a fresh stream of light and inspiration I can bring into my work and daily living.

The same goes for my mother's side of the family. Though I only met one uncle of my mother's, their guiding influence and love are certainly now a part of my life.

We can also speak of inheriting the lineages of social activism that came before us, and that are with us now, empowering each generation. All this is with us now, if we choose to tap into it, and use it in our work.

Our spiritual traditions and teachers past and present too have an element to them that goes beyond any one era, enhancing, vivifying, illuminating, nourishing each generation of practitioners. If we have a connection, and faith, then without a doubt, their blessings pour down on us, and move through our lives in profound ways.

We have all this to draw from in our life and work.

## Healing intergenerational trauma

When we talk about healing the effects of past harm, in some cases we're talking about centuries old legacies, as well as fresh manifestations of the same injury. No discussion of change would be complete without addressing both of these. Of course, we need the eyes to see injustice, and it's historical effects, as well as the new forms of what is essentially the same problem. Where do we begin?

If we were a doctor, entering a village for the first time where people were suffering, the first things we would do would be to look for an immediate cause, such as in their water or food supply. Entering a community where people are suffering from being discriminated against, the first thing we'll want to do is to try to stop the immediate, obvious causes of suffering. By itself, this doesn't nearly go far enough, but it's where we have to start.

Were the doctor then to move into that village, and invite other healers to join him, after the first aid had been given, they would start to question the history and present nature of the hurt, with the aim of ending it all.

We live a nominally secular country, where no one religion gets to tell everyone how to worship, if at all. Ideally, this is an affirmation of faith in our basic goodness and inherent wisdom, that we can find our way individually and collectively without an external organization dictating our actions. So what I will say here is intended as a statement of universal truth, available to all, regardless of faith. Test it out and see if it is so.

Today, this is what I would tell the people of this village:

Undoing the damage that has been done, as far back as it goes, begins with understanding our nature. When we understand conditioning of this mind of ours, we can understand what makes both the heaven and hell realms.

Imagine an infinite line, extending in both directions. In one direction is all the evil people have done, all the abuse, the genocides, the degradation, the cruelty and barbarity; in the other direction is all the good people have done and are doing now, all the beauty in the world, the integrity, courage, and altruism.

If you focus on the evil, you can, for a time, lose the perception of the good. We've all had this happen to us at times, and we can see many examples of this happening today. People then have less resources to draw from, and a lesser vision of what it is to be a human being, and where we should be aiming to go.

On the other hand, if you learn to focus on the good that is in us and around us, to tune into this and to tap into this power, you can understand both the good and the evil that people do.

From the tormented hell realms, you can't see the heaven worlds. That's part of their nature. By contrast, from the vantage point of the more pure states, if we choose to, we can see both the upper and lower realms. We can also access what we need to help ourselves and others.

How do we treat ourselves? How do we see the oppressor? How do we treat the created underclasses, those we have labelled criminals? What kind of minds are we fostering in ourselves and in those people?

And what of the minds of those well meaning people who would be helpers, or allies, in law enforcement, in the fields of criminal justice and social service? How do they see themselves and those they interact with? What resources of insight and intelligence are they bringing to bear on these human problems?

If those who are supposedly treating the problems hold a negative, partial and distorted view of this world, of themselves and of those they interact with, they will project and replicate that view in the world. They create

what is in them. They will not only not help, they will instead perpetuate and increase the suffering.

And those who, to this point, have been traumatized, how should they be treated? Not with additional violence, of course, but with infinite compassion and understanding. If their world until now has been a horror show, of pain, neglect, discrimination and fear; of marginalization and punishment, such a mind almost certainly will be contracted, unable to see more than threats, and the struggle to survive. Add the obscuring influence of drugs to the equation and the way forward seems blocked, and all but gone. This is one kind of mind of a hell being - aggressive, fearful, not seeing any way out.

How then are we to heal such minds? The fundamental potential of the mind, for knowing and embodying either good and evil is indestructible. In that we can take solace, however grim circumstances may appear. The light in us is eternal.

Both in the short term and the long term, the way forward is this: We must ourselves know the way. We must embody and demonstrate the full spectrum of understanding and compassion to them. If it is, or if this becomes nothing more than a theory, then there will be no lasting power to our words and actions. This awakened life must be what we know and promote in others, until it is established here.

When it is still dark out, we all know it's easy to stumble on an uneven road. When dawn comes, we will of course see the trenches and gullies, and we can easily avoid them. It is only the functioning of our wisdom to do so. So it is when we wake up to our own depths, and to the richness and beauty of this life and world that we share with others. We will know how to care for ourselves and for one another, and this is what we then will teach our children, and pass on through them to the future generations that will inhabit this earth.



## Healing Trauma - Breaking with the Past

*The visible at first obscures*

*Go to where the light is*

*- Theodore Rothke*

The only way to break the continuity with the past, personally and culturally, is to realize a deeper identity. If we don't do this, we are bound to repeat those unwanted patterns of action and reaction. Even if our karma is pacified for a time, when the conditions are right, old ways of thinking and acting can resurface. The only way to become free of this is through a deep, sustained and integrated insight into who we are.

It has been interesting to read modern historians on race using terms such as 'reification' and to 'essentialize' a person or group identity. Although race does not exist as we believe, people produce and fix on this idea, of genetics determining inherent characteristics, and then hold onto it tightly. This is the exactly the same insight offered by Buddha when he pointed out the root cause of suffering more generally as self-grasping ignorance.

When we can see the working of our own mind and its effect on our experience, we have at that moment an opportunity for greater freedom.

Liberation has been talked about in many ways over generations, as freedom from suffering, as ultimate healing, as touching the ground of our being, and as the experience of the unconditioned. When all we have known is identification with an idea of who we are, such freedom can seem remote at best, or like yet another ego-fantasy trip. Such criticisms, fortunately for us have been heard and woven into the teachings on finding greater freedom.

Vi-raga and Nirodha

*'The resolution of karma is when they bear no further trace...'* - Sean Feit Oaks

Two terms have been useful to me over the years. These come from the traditional texts and commentaries on meditation practice. The first, *viraga* refers to the cooling of passion, and sometimes translated as 'fading away'.

Because we've all experienced the lessening of some mood or attitude, we all know this what this experience feels like, even if we haven't practiced meditation. In the context of finding freedom from suffering, and especially as it relates to changing our sense of who we and others more truly are, if we are attentive, it's pointing out that we can notice the gradual fading away of clinging to a false, lesser idea of who we are, and the lessening of discomfort and difficulty. I find this very encouraging to think on. It means that realization happens slowly, gradually, in ways we can actually measure in our meditation and in our lives.

The second term is equally inspiring to think about. *Nirodha* means cessation, or extinction. Clearly this is something more than a pause in some thought or pattern, feeling or way of experiencing. We can certainly identify this too in some ways, in looking back at our own life. There are thoughts or beliefs we used to have, that have no more basis in us. When it comes to realizing our nature more deeply, what has the potential to cease entirely is our old ways of seeing ourselves and others. Complete transformation is possible, because things don't have a fixed nature.

When we look at racists, or loud, ignorant people, or our own shadow tendencies, we may think they or we could never change, but it can and does happen. This is what we should devote ourselves to realizing.

We need at least a degree of concentration to break through the veil of appearances to our mind. If we are restless and scattered, endlessly reactive, we stay just on the surface. This is why traditions have always taught the basic practice of quieting and centering the mind, making it bright and clear enough to allow us to see things more deeply. We can all certainly experiment and see what method works for us, but we should

know that time honored traditions tell us about the universal need for calming the surface mind as the basis for insight to arise.

## From 'Finding Medicine'

### Wisdom is the ultimate remedy

We may form the words that we are more than our suffering, more than our history, what we have done or had done to us, but if underneath we hold the belief that we or others are defined by our conditions, we haven't gotten down to the root cause of the conflicts, and the ignorance that has manifested in hundreds and thousands of ways.

We all need to know our own profound depths, take our stand there, and teach others to do the same. Until each one of us is enlightened in this way, there is danger, like a sleepwalker or deranged persons roaming our neighborhood. We are not safe until every last one is contained, and roused from his stupor.

### The Bodhisattva Vow, Samadhi, and Prajna

In these essays I've mostly tried to stay away from Buddhist language, knowing that not everyone who reads these words will be Buddhist. I've also taken up the challenge of expressing traditional teachings in new ways. This is useful as far as it goes, but I'd like to introduce three factors at this point, using the Buddhist terms. To me, these are present throughout *Ending Racism*, but here I would like to make them explicit. Sometimes traditional language is the most direct way to get something across.

The Bodhisattva Vow is the aim to awaken to the truth, so we can help others reach that same peace, and wholeness. We have to *become* the freedom from delusion, from false identifications we are talking about, rather than have it be something we read about, or have only a passing experience of. Once we've glimpsed the depths and beauty of our own inner life, that needs to be stabilized, and revealed, as there is such great need for all of our wisdom to shine forth in this world.

A vow can be something strong, middling, or weak. The strongest vows come from deep reflection, done over time, with a clear mind. Thinking about how discrimination has harmed us, and how it will continue to unless the causes are addressed in full has to lead a person to the kind of dedication I'm talking about here. We should all cherish what I call 'a divine dissatisfaction', that won't settle for easy or comfortable non-answers to the problems we face. Nor should we settle for mere emotion, that may feel good, and necessary at the time but that leaves us no better off than before. We need deeper answers, and this is the motivating force for the Bodhisattva Vow.

A Bodhisattva is a man or woman who takes up the benefit of all beings as his or her life's work. Seeing the misery in the world, in our lives, and in the lives of those we love, we aim with all we've got to alleviating both the suffering and its cause, for now, and for the future. This then requires time and energy, and sacrifice to accomplish our purpose. Shantideva wrote:

*As long diseases afflict living beings,  
may I be the doctor, the medicine,  
and also the nurse who restores them to health*

*May I fall as rain to increase the harvests that must feed living beings,  
and in times of dire famine,  
may I myself be food and drink*

*May I be a protector of the helpless,  
A guide to those traveling the path,  
A boat to those wishing to cross over;  
Or a bridge or a raft.*

*May I be land for those requiring it,  
A lamp for those in darkness,  
May I be a home for the homeless,  
And a servant to the world.*

Having this motivation is the heart of the Mahayana Buddhist path. A person doesn't need to be a Buddhist to take up this vow, or this great aim, in my opinion, and so we can have Christian, Muslim, Hindu or non-affiliated person with the same dedicated heart.

My appreciation for the Buddhism I found my way to, thanks to great teachers such as Thich Nhat Hanh and Lama Yeshe, is in part because it points out universal truths, and it is non-dogmatic. It shows the principles at work, and encourages us to see for ourselves.

How then does the Buddhist tradition say we should accomplish our aim of helping others? They say that in addition to this great love and compassion, the motivation to help others, we need what is called *samadhi*, or deep and clear meditation, and *prajna*, or wisdom.

We may have a glimpse of some deeper truth about ourselves, and others, but for that insight to be transformative, we need meditation. Our mind has great power, but it needs to be trained so that whatever knowledge we gain can be fully integrated. Our knowledge can overwhelm ignorance and habitual ways of relating to ourselves and the world, but we need the cultivated strength of mind for wisdom to be fully effective.

Calm abiding meditation can be developed separately, and then combined with the insights we gain through study and reflection. This is how teachings on liberation from mistaken views and suffering are traditionally presented.

There are many ways we can approach freeing our own mind, and transforming our experience from one of contraction, self doubt, and self denigration to self worth and inner freedom. Some people come upon teachings for taming the mind and emotions, and can settle themselves quite comfortably, and perhaps think they have attained an irreversible state. Traditional teachings tell us that in addition to a calm and clear mind, we need *prajna*, or wisdom.

Wisdom, in the Buddhist sense, is seeing through the illusions we have held, and those of our society. Enlightenment is found right here, in understanding thoroughly how mistaken perceptions come to be, and how they are brought to an end. This is our study, as Buddhists, and as people looking to end ignorance and its effects.

Buddhism points directly to ignorance of our true nature as the cause of suffering, personally, between people, and collectively. The freedom, joy confidence and strength that come from insight are the gifts that we then share with one another.

### The Stages of the Path

We're all at a different place when we read a book, or listen to a lecture. We all have different needs when it comes to what to practice. There is no one-size-fits all spirituality, or path, so how can we tell what practices to pick up? How can we know where should to place our attention and efforts *now*?

A skillful teacher, one who practices herself is of immeasurable value. If we can connect with an experienced person to guide us that's ideal. If we don't have such a connection, there are outlines we can reference, called The Stages of the Path Teachings, or Lam-Rim, in Tibetan. What they point out so clearly is that the effects we seek, such as calm, or insight, all arise due to causes. So, for example, we want to calm our mind but find it difficult to do so, an outline, or a book on the Stages of the Path, such as *The Way to Freedom*, by The Dalai Lama, will affirm that we need a good ethical foundation, and sobriety to settle ourselves well. It's all there, from entering the path to accomplishing freedom for ourselves and our greater family.

For those outside of any tradition, it still has great value, I would say, just as a reliable map would for any traveller.

To say healing is possible is a statement of deep faith that can only come from insight into the spiritual nature we all carry with us, at all times. Without this, we continue many of the same dynamics that brought us this far. We may choose to identify with something less than what we are, but this then becomes the template for working with others. The kind of awakening we would encourage in others is not yet complete.

The collective is made of individual elements, some wise, some ignorant and influential. Changing how we see ourselves and each other on a group level happens because many have awakened to what it means to be a true human being.

True medicine is seeing through all the veils, past the conditioning, and the histories, to something fundamental and everlasting, our noble heritage. This is what we receive and transmit, across generations.



## Touch the Present, Heal the Past, Create the Future

*“You might think that the present moment is not the past, is not the future - but as you continue to look deeply into the present moment, you see that the present moment contains the past, and contains the future. And touching the present moment, you’re touching the past, you’re touching the future. And you can even heal the past, and create the future, while you dwell firmly in the present moment.”*

- *Thich Nhat Hanh*

Whether or not we think about it, the past is a part of who we are now. This is true whether we are speaking about our personal life, or the life and history of our people, or our country. The sum total of our past is what brought us to where we are today. We may not want to think of the past, or acknowledge it, but it is here, and it influences how we see the world, and how we treat each other.

In a sense, the past is fixed. We can’t change what has happened. What is not fixed however is how we now understand and choose to carry the past going forward. In other words, the present is not fixed. We have choices, and so the future is not yet determined.

Some people either deny what has happened to themselves or in this country, or they give it scant attention. But this is simple math: if we want to come to terms with something significant in our own life or in our history, we have to give it the time it deserves to understand it, to reconcile ourselves to it, and to remedy and heal its effects going forward. If we don’t give these things enough time and attention, choosing instead to move on in a facile way, at best we’ll get a small result in terms of health and insight, in the times ahead.

Where is this past to be found? It is found in our very bodies. If we learn to steady the mind, focus in, and look, we can see that so many causes have come together for us to be here as we are today: magnificent causes, tragic

causes, uncountable blessings, unspeakable sadness. Because we all have this natural wish for our own happiness, and that of our children, friends and neighbors, we need to look at what will secure the peace and well being that we seek. Our past, individually, as a people, and as a country needs to be looked into to see what got us here, and so that we can secure the best outcome, for ourselves and loved ones.

Sometimes we may avoid looking at the painful parts of our history because we feel we can't do anything about them. We may feel we are not up to the task of healing it. We think that to look would just be reopening old wounds, and we recognize that sometimes the best thing we can do is to leave things in the past. But there is a whole category of events that don't heal completely by leaving them alone, and *those* we need to understand more deeply. Moreover, *we need to recognize the capacity we all have to heal the past, in the present moment.*

Thich Nhat Hanh said something interesting a number of years ago when talking about the three times. He said, *Touch the present, heal the past.* Clearly, not all the ways of accessing our history has a healing effect, so what did he mean by this? *I think he was talking about touching the past with love, and with the intention to care fully for this body, and for the wounds we have carried so long in our heart, as our heritage.* If we are not to perpetuate the injury and anguish of what's come before, we need to bring our very best resources to bear on this body.

All the past suffering that has come down to us, and that has shaped us and influenced who we are now can be met with mindfulness, and compassion, leading to insight and healing. We don't need to be prisoners of the past. If we train ourselves, we can become free individuals, and pass that on as our gift to our friends, family and future generations.

## Past, Present, and Future; Politics taken to the level of Spirit

We may think that we can leave some things in the past, socially or personally and that they will self-correct, or leave us in peace. There are some experiences that are like that, no doubt, but the really formative events don't go anywhere, even when the surface changes. They can be like roots pushing upwards beneath what is seen in our lives or in our culture, waiting for a chance to manifest. Not only does the past live on in us in some way, it can recur, and even take more terrible forms. It also conditions how we experience our lives now, acting as a filter, and shaping our values and responses to what we know. Not only is our own history included in this, the history of our family and ancestors is here with us as well.

Both our personal story and our history are an inheritance we carry, and both can be held and understood and healed in us, if we make this a conscious choice. We do need to step back from repeated injuries, and stop them from happening, and that is an important first step, but by itself this doesn't go far enough.

In the enlightenment story of the Buddha, during the first watch of the night, it's said that he remembered his past. Certainly it was a past that experienced many kinds of suffering and misunderstanding, but that then became the foundation for his wisdom.

Where do we find forgiveness, for ourselves for our own wrong actions, and for others, individuals and groups? I've noticed that for me, whenever forgiveness happens, there are causes behind it, principally those of understanding that it's confusion that leads people to harmful actions, and my own wish for peace. To be more precise, without an insight into *my own* ignorance and suffering, it's likely that I'll put myself down, and that I'll blame others and lash out at them. Being close to and understanding our own evolution out of bewilderment and misery opens the way to having compassion for others, for forgiveness, and healing, in ourselves and our

world, going forward. This takes a lot of courage, and a great deal of faith in our potential to heal, and to become whole.

In the Buddha's teaching on loving kindness, he said that we should extend our care to those *already born, and yet to be born*. This is in complete accord with the First People's view that we should take care of each other and this earth *in a way that reaches to the seventh generation*. How to do this? How to live now? We must think deeply about these things, especially now when so much seems to threaten our survival.

*In this very moment, in this very body  
we practice looking deeply,  
embracing our loved ones, and this earth  
with all our care*

We have inherited not only the errors and harms of the past, but also our ancestors' great wisdom, courage, and compassion. Look within - this is also what we carry with us now. These holy gifts have been passed down to us through the generations, to be drawn from especially in times like these.

So many times when we want to change our culture we are facing outwards, racing all over, when we should be looking within at what we carry, and our potential. If as individuals we take the healing of our world in ourselves as far as we can go, this is the best thing we can do. We have to take this healing to the level of the spirit, both for our own sake, and for all of our loved ones.

The following is a poem I wrote about healing ourselves and our world, as we have received it, right here in this very body and mind:

*All the ancient suffering,  
of exclusion, and exile,  
of discrimination, and persecution*

*All the wounded memory, held tight,  
and fears -  
oh, for there to be ease!*

*If this sorrow is not to continue  
for generations to come,  
what is sought,  
the vision carried,  
needs to be known now,  
as a balm reaching back  
all the way to the first injury,  
and forward,  
flourishing through the ages*

We may have an idea of ourselves as separate from each other, from our natural environment, and even from our past and future generations. This deeply held idea keeps us from knowing ourselves and each other as we truly are. Once we've moved beyond identifying with an ego-idea, understood it as a mere convention and seen through it, the world opens up. Because we are connected in profound ways with our world and with each other in every moment, communication is possible.

*Once you have demolished the world which is built on the foundation of ignorance,  
then wisdom itself moves to build a world based on the foundation of wisdom.*

- from an oral teaching by Tara Tulku, as told to Robert Thurman

In the Avatamsaka Sutra, a Buddhist teaching from the first century A.D., there is an image called the Jeweled Net of Indra that describes how we exist in the world, and how the world exists in us. It is imagined as a net as vast as the universe, and on every intersection of the net is a jewel. All the jewels are reflected in each one jewel, and each one is reflected in all the others. We exist in this world right now, and the totality of this world exists in us.

We are not closed systems. Because in this very moment our bodies and minds are permeable, porous, we can breathe, receive oxygen, eat and digest food, and listen to and share knowledge and information with each other through time and space. Communication is possible. How then should we live? How can we best care for ourselves and each other? One of the secrets of this mind of ours is that it is not only an organ of perception, it is also an instrument of transmission. We can receive and transmit blessings and healing energy with our mind. We can heal ourselves, and help to heal our loved ones and our world.

Once we know our connection in this very moment to our world, to one another, to past and future generations, and our own potential, it changes how we view personal and collective problems. Let us then bring the very best qualities of mind to these challenges we have now, and those to come, and heal it all, down to the very roots. We can do this with great love and compassion, with meditation, and prayer, with mantra, ritual, and good works, and in all our relationships.

The following prayers are based on teachings by Thich Nhat Hanh

*I carry the experience and wisdom of my ancestors,  
and I ask them for their support, protection and strength...*

and

*I see my teachers and spiritual ancestors in me  
and I open myself to their inspiring, positive energy...  
I vow to practice to transform the suffering in myself and in all others,  
and to transmit their love and wisdom to future generations...*

## Healing the World Soul

The end of one book is always the beginning of another. We take whatever we have gathered that has been edifying, or that we think may be useful to us, and carry that forward. I'm including the following reflections here because they point in the direction I want to face, and to where I feel we need to be directing our attention and energy, to make this world a better, safer place for all our family, and for future generations. Take this as a seed then.

## Healing the World Soul

*Ghosts who refuse to fade away.*

*Ghosts we are haunted by today.*

*Those who demand their names and fates be recorded in the Book of Life.*

*Our legacies reemerging and transforming before our very eyes today.*

I think of where we are also as a spiritual place. There is a level to our being here that could be called the group soul of this country. On that level, there is a great deal unanswered for, legacies that only occasionally appear in dramatic ways, but that are present in our lives, in our attitudes, in our homes and games, and diet, and economics, and education.

We are so used to thinking linearly, in simple cause and effect terms that we don't see dramatic or tragic events as related to our wars, or for example here, to this country's imperialism, and to the historical justifications for crimes. *The sum total of all that is latent violence in us manifests in countless ways*, but we see only a part, respond to even less, and collectively accumulate more fear and aggression.

Were we to address the source of all these forms of violence, then more than mass shootings, or our being a carceral state would be prevented. The problem is we don't ask deep questions. Our urgency hasn't translated yet into relentless, focussed inquiry with the aim of healing our national soul.

Beyond this one place, we are also a part of this world. Its virtues are our own, as well as all its tragic histories. Were we to reach deep into our national psyche, we would find wellsprings of thought, and sources of strength and insight that began long before our ancestors arrived on these shores. We would also find atavistic impulses, the draw towards tribalism, exclusion, bias and learned indifference.

We carry all this with us.

Why do we act as we do? If we ask this in a superficial way, impatient to move past violence, or wars, or racism, or materialism, we'll get only a superficial, and ultimately unsatisfying answer.

If we ask this same question on deeper levels however, we find how we are made of the past, of both the wisdom and ignorance of our ancestors, the triumphs and still to be resolved dynamics set in motion long ago.

Deeper than the personal and familial, can find a national soul in us, and deeper than that, a cultural, and then a world soul as well. Healing means to heal all of these.

We begin with ourselves, with our own lives as they are now. They carry all of our past in a unique form.

*We may say it was not our doing,  
that this past should have no claim on us,  
but the jewel box placed in our crib at birth  
also has these dark mysteries  
no one has ever walked in  
and until it is finished  
this work of revelation  
will wait and will haunt us  
a pressing weight that one day has to speak its name*



Claiming our lives here as they have come to us is a mighty act. It means on a visceral level shedding the unspoken assertion of ourselves as individuals unconnected to our family's past, unconnected to our nation, culture, and world.

Only by going deep in contemplative practice does any of this make sense as more than an idea, or an ideal.

All that needs to be healed must be addressed as both what has made us, and in the greater context of our awakened lives.

*This world holds that one in its embrace*

Wisdom and ignorance struggle in us, and every step forward any one of us makes benefits us all.

Beyond the partial identifications, and beyond exclusion, there is a wholeness that acts dynamically in us when we sense it. This work that we are doing now, on any level we identify is really the work of healing the world soul. Artists and parents and recluses and activists are all working, united by hidden lines of force that are made of one kind of love.

See for yourself if what I am saying is true, and it will be your truth as well.