ALREADY FREE

BUDDHISM MEETS PSYCHOTHERAPY ON THE PATH OF LIBERATION

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INTRODUCTION

RECENTLY A YOUNG MAN in his mid-thirties—we'll call him Darren—walked into my office. He was looking for help with a recurring pattern he had noticed in his life. In brief, he had a very hard time following through on almost anything he started. He would leave relationships after they became too serious; he would find a reason to change his job or even his entire career just as he was approaching success; and while he had experimented with a variety of therapies and spiritual paths, he hadn't stuck with any of them long enough for them to prove helpful.

As he approached midlife, Darren was becoming increasingly anxious that he would never settle down in a relationship, livelihood, or spiritual path. He had done enough personal work to know that he was the common denominator in all these scenarios, but he felt hopeless about changing the pattern.

Darren is by no means alone. This kind of recurring pattern is what brings clients, both individuals and couples, into my office every day. Some find me when they're going through unfortunate life circumstances, but the majority of the people I see are suffering from more chronic issues—patterns of behavior and experience that have been with them for years. Usually, there is an intuition that this suffering is largely unnecessary and somehow self-created. Perhaps, like Darren, they have trouble maintaining successful relationships, finding enjoyment in their

work, or seeing results from their spiritual practice. Perhaps they feel disengaged and uninspired by the lives they've created for themselves. Or perhaps, more simply, they have a hard time feeling happy and content, but they know that somehow a more satisfying life is possible. You might have picked up this book for very similar reasons.

Over the course of more than thirty-five years in practice, I have investigated and worked with a variety of different approaches to bringing awareness of and freedom from the deeply embedded conditioning that keeps us in these historical patterns—often these patterns have been with us for our entire lives. From my experience of what actually works most effectively, my practice has evolved into a combination of Western psychotherapy and traditional Buddhism. Used together in an ongoing dialogue, these two styles offer guidance for how we can liberate ourselves from unnecessary suffering and experience a freedom that is already present in our lives.

After many years of working in these ways myself and of offering this path to my clients, I now have the pleasure of offering it to you in this book.

FREEING OURSELVES

Clients come to see me for all sorts of reasons—relationship issues, personal issues, work issues. But underneath it all, they come to me for one reason: in some way, they are not experiencing themselves as free.

What do I mean by "free"? Freedom is by its very nature hard to define. It seems to include the qualities of freshness and spontaneity, expansiveness, contentment and well-being, completeness, openheartedness, and open awareness. Freedom is also experienced as inherently satisfying and meaningful, not as a means or

condition for some greater good. By contrast, many of our more familiar goals—a good relationship, good health, money, political and social justice, and so on—are usually seen as *conditions* that will bring about a greater good. "If I just had better health, more money, etc., *then* I would be happy." With the experience of freedom, life does not become perfect, but we do have a sense that everything is workable, that nothing is missing. When we don't feel free, on the other hand, it seems like something is keeping us from experiencing joy and contentment. At times we feel this sense of completeness and presence, and we know on some level that it's available at any moment. But something about our life feels off, and we experience a sense of complaint. I almost always find this sense of basic dissatisfaction beneath the specific problems my clients present when they first sit down in my office.

Whenever we're talking about freeing ourselves, we're implying that we are already experiencing a type of imprisonment. We're saying there's something we need to resolve or remove in order to experience freedom. So a major theme in my work is to investigate the nature of any such obstacle. Do we feel imprisoned in our lives because of our life circumstances? Because of unresolved issues from our history? Or might our imprisonment be more about how we relate to our experience?

The first view is basically that of Western psychotherapy. The Western tradition says there are actual difficulties in our lives that can and should be resolved. The goal of Western therapy is to improve our sense of self and our life circumstances so that we can feel more free, more satisfied, and more engaged. The second view is the Buddhist view, which says that *how we relate to* whatever we're experiencing is even more important than the experience itself. Obviously, it makes a big difference for most of us whether we're healthy or sick, whether we're in poverty or have adequate money, and whether we have to deal

with depression or have an easy sense of well-being. But from the Buddhist view, how we relate to each of these experiences is actually more impactful to our sense of freedom than the circumstances themselves. So from the Western view—which I will also refer to as the *developmental* view—we try, appropriately, to improve ourselves and our circumstances. But from the Buddhist, or *fruitional,* view, our work is not primarily to improve our experience; instead, it's to invite a shift in perspective so that we are willing and able to fully relate to any experience we might have, regardless of what it may be.

My passion for the past thirty-five years or so has been to combine what is most skillful about therapy with what is most skillful in Buddhism. Both are powerful, yet both focus on a limited range of phenomena; neither addresses everything. Some people have a tendency to appreciate therapy and be cautious about a spiritual path; others are very invested in a spiritual path and somewhat cynical about therapy. My experience is that although both are very helpful and important, they are probably impossible to fully reconcile. In my opinion, the basic assumptions of therapy and the view and practice of the spiritual journey cannot be integrated into one path. Therapy, as an expression of Western culture, takes as a given that we are independently existing selves. It makes complete sense, therefore, to protect and improve this self; the challenge is to do so in a skillful and up-to-date way. Buddhism asserts the view that our experience of being a separate self with some essential nature is mistaken. Therefore, our work is to investigate this appearance, see through it, and experience the freedom that comes from having open awareness and compassion, rather than a personal self, as our basic ground. The fundamental lack of resolvability between these two views is what I find most fertile and interesting to work with.

MY INTRODUCTION TO THE TWO VIEWS

The ideas, views, and practices discussed in this book come not only from my clinical work with clients, but also, most fundamentally, from my own personal experience. I have never felt comfortable taking other people's ideas without testing them myself. And both Western psychology and Buddhism have been central to my own personal journey, starting when I was in my twenties.

After college, I started a PhD program in clinical psychology, but I dropped out after one year. More accurately, I ran out screaming. There seemed to be an assumption built into the program that anyone studying psychology was, by definition, sane, and anyone in the client chair was, by definition, neurotic (or worse). I was so disturbed by this unexamined assumption that I left the program and, soon thereafter, the country. I spent two very formative years abroad, traveling by motorcycle through Europe, North Africa, and West Asia. In India and Nepal, I encountered the Tibetan community in exile and became very interested in Tibetan Buddhism. When I returned, I met my teacher, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a Tibetan lama who had moved to the United States and had begun offering the Buddhist teachings to a lay audience.

In this tradition, I found a sophisticated and deep understanding of the nature of mind, practical ways to work with one's most difficult experiencing, and a view based on our greatest potential rather than on pathology. When Trungpa Rinpoche began the Naropa Institute, he encouraged the establishment of a master's program in psychology, which I soon enrolled in. At that time, in the 1970s, no one was really articulating a way to join therapy and Buddhism, so our classes alternated between work with very skilled Western psychotherapists and lessons in Buddhist practice and theory. In hindsight, this was a fortunate

experience: we were forced to hold these two approaches with no theories offered about how they might be integrated. (Trungpa Rinpoche himself had no apparent problems with contradictory energies. At one moment, he would be encouraging of our training, and in another, he would describe therapists as "cosmic vultures," living off the experience of others.)

Over time, I have become more and more passionate about this work. I think about it every day. Every day, with some exceptions, of course, I ask myself how I can be helpful with whomever I may be relating to. When working as a therapist, I am continually experimenting with how I might support the person who has courageously placed his or her vulnerability in my hands. How can this person find some relief from any actually unnecessary suffering and experience more freedom in daily life? Freedom that may *not* require that person to be in therapy every week for ten years. Even though I am a therapist and working with clients pays my bills, like all ethical therapists, I am not interested in keeping people dependent on therapy. I would rather offer them tools that might actually make a significant difference, teach them how to use these tools, and then support the integration of this work into their daily life.

For me, something shifted a number of years ago. I think of it as a change in my psychic center of gravity. Before this shift, my baseline—what I returned to, spontaneously, off and on, every moment—was feeling, to some extent, like a problematic person. I was always trying to improve, trying to wake up, trying to feel completely at peace. From that ground of dissatisfaction, moments of clarity, peace, and freedom would arise. But those moments were temporary, and I would always return to a more fundamental sense of problem.

Then this shift happened, over some time and with no apparent cause; it was certainly supported by my Buddhist meditation

practices, my many years of personal therapy, and the good fortune of relating to some very wakeful and kind teachers. My personal opinion is that waking up is not caused *by anything*. Not meditation, not prayer, not devotion. How can we cause something that's already present? But it does seem accurate that we can invite this experience, make it more likely that what's already true may arise into our awareness. As American Zen teacher Baker Roshi once said: "Enlightenment is an accident—but meditation makes us accident-prone."

Since this shift, my baseline has been an experience of open awareness, freedom, and well-being. Coming from this new basic ground, it makes sense to be kind to oneself, to everyone. I no longer have to approach this as a practice; it simply takes place spontaneously. I still get captured by historically conditioned issues at times and disturbing emotions continue to arise, but they happen less and less frequently and are difficult to take too seriously. This shift has been so powerful for me that, especially as a therapist, I'm endlessly interested in how I might invite others to experience a similar change. How can we investigate our experience in a way that ends our constant postponement of experiencing freedom? How can we cut to the chase and see what's true, right now, in the present moment? How can we discover whether there's actually a problem in our self or in life?

My experience is that waking up seems to happen along a continuum. It's usually not some sudden, black-and-white change. I have found that my own conditioned history hasn't stopped displaying itself. I still have my personality style, my core vulnerabilities that I don't like to feel. But I don't seem to be adding the *drama* anymore. I don't really mind that I still have to work with my familiar patterns, my confusion, and my messiness as a human being. In fact, it's actually very interesting.

In the environment of freedom, it turns out that there's no problem with being fully human. There is no goal of transcendence or of invulnerability in the fruitional view. We're not trying to rise above our humanness. In fact, in this environment, it's completely the opposite. The intention is to go so deeply into our confusion, our panic, our joy, our rage, our boredom, and our fear that we find out for ourselves that there's no essential nature to any of these experiences, as vivid as they may be. This discovery not only strengthens our confidence in the workability of being another confused human, but it also gives rise to a spontaneous sense of compassion for, and interest in, others. We see that others not only have real pain in their lives, but that they, too, are creating unnecessary suffering on top of it. We realize we're all in the same boat. We begin to ask how we can help ourselves in order to better help others. Are we ready to stop pretending to not be fully present and engaged at every moment? To stop waiting for some future enlightenment, or for our past wounds to heal, before we're fully committed to, and available to, life? We find that pain is a valid part of life, but that it's completely workable. It is difficult to have pain, but it's not a problem.

My training in the Western, or developmental, view was, of course, congruent with Western culture. As I mentioned earlier, in the West, we believe that a better quality of life comes from improving our sense of self and our life circumstances. Obviously, much of this approach is very accurate; it's true that better health, financial security, political freedoms, and positive feelings about ourselves are all wonderful qualities. In our culture, we associate many of these positive experiences with a state of freedom. Yet this means that our experience of freedom depends on a combination of external circumstances and how we feel—neither of which we have full control over. Because of

this, there's a certain tentative quality to any freedom we might achieve using this approach. At any moment, our circumstances, both inner and outer, could change for the worse, and our sense of freedom could be diminished or lost once again.

In a less familiar way, the Buddhist, or fruitional, view asserts that freedom lies in how we *relate* to our experience—whatever that experience is, whether we like it or don't like it. So it's not about whether we feel depressed or happy; rather, it's about our willingness and ability to participate fully in any and all of our feelings. The experience of freedom arises not from acquiring our preferred lifestyle and our preferred state of mind but from a willingness to stay with ourselves—to be completely committed to experiencing our lives—regardless of circumstance.

As different as these two views are, together they offer a powerful path to move from a sense of suffering to a sense of freedom. We want to be free. We want to feel whole. We want to feel at peace. The dialogue between Western therapy and the Buddhist view asks, "In what way is our experience of freedom dependent on our life circumstances and how we feel? And in what way is our experience of freedom arising from our unconditional commitment to the truth of our experience, whatever it may be?" Throughout this book, we'll go back and forth between these two views. Both have their value. Both have their limitations. The purpose of this book is to welcome a dialogue between them, making use of the gifts both have to offer as we begin to experience ourselves as being more wakeful, more free.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

The book is divided into eight chapters. Chapter 1 offers an overview of the core of Western psychology, which I call the *developmental view.* This view is the idea that we can improve

our life circumstances and our sense of self by changing our historically conditioned behavioral patterns or strategies. It is called the "developmental" view because it postulates that what we experience as young children has a profound impact on the way we engage with life and take care of ourselves as adults. Chapter 2 covers the *fruitional view,* which arises from the Buddhist idea that our basic nature—freedom—is available right here, right now. If we can shift our perspective on whatever is happening, we'll find that all the qualities of our own basic nature are already present. Chapter 3 explores the dialogue between the developmental view and the fruitional view from the perspective of my own clinical practice. For example, we can more effectively challenge patterns of experiencing that no longer serve us when we understand the healthy function they played when we were young. And finding that it's completely workable to show up in each moment, without relying on a familiar drama, gives us an alternative to that drama—a ground from which to challenge our historic patterns.

In chapter 4, we turn our attention to the experience of anxiety and struggle. Although anxiety is a very disturbing experience, it's actually a natural part of being human. It's also central to how we generate unnecessary suffering for ourselves and others. Anxiety is explored as a physical and an emotional experience, as well as a signal of how intensely open our minds and our lives actually are. Chapter 5 is about embodied awareness. Most of us tend to take our thoughts and ideas as actual descriptions of reality, which is not accurate and is rarely helpful. Embodied awareness provides direct access to the unique and inherently workable nature of our noninterpretive experiencing. As we train ourselves to stay in our immediate experience, it's helpful to have an ongoing dialogue between our *ideas* and our immediate, embodied *experiencing.*