

REVERSE MEDITATION

How to Use Your Pain and
Most Difficult Emotions as the
Doorway to Inner Freedom

A N D R E W H O L E C E K



CONTENTS

Introduction . . . 1

PART 1: THE BASICS

- Chapter 1: Right View . . . 13
- Chapter 2: Discovering the Sacred in the Profane . . . 27
- Chapter 3: The View Behind the Meditations . . . 39
- Chapter 4: The Forceful Super Contractors . . . 47
- Chapter 5: The Omnipresent Super Contractors . . . 63
- Chapter 6: Characteristics of Contraction . . . 77

PART 2: THE FORMAL MEDITATIONS

- Chapter 7: Referential Meditation: Form-Based Practice . . . 99
- Chapter 8: Nonreferential Meditation: An Introduction to Open Awareness . . . 115
- Chapter 9: Refinements to Open Awareness . . . 129
- Chapter 10: The Reverse Meditations: Some Preliminaries . . . 145
- Chapter 11: Reverse Meditation in Four Steps . . . 159
- Chapter 12: Reverse Meditation in Daily Life . . . 177
- Chapter 13: Final Thoughts: Emptiness, Nonduality, and the Reverse Meditations . . . 191

Acknowledgments . . . 203

Notes . . . 205

About the Author . . . 225

INTRODUCTION

The greatest gift has been a complete reversal in my understanding of the workings of the universe. . . . Such a reversal is cause for great optimism because this fundamental shift in worldview allows us to stake out a far grander role in determining the evolution of this universe.

—EBEN ALEXANDER

I came to understand heaven and hell in a new way. In a striking reversal of perspective, I saw that hell was not the opposite of heaven, as is usually taught, but the guardian companion of divine realization.

—CHRISTOPHER BACHE

Meditation has found a home in the West. Countless scientific studies tout its benefits, and a multitude of students proclaim its life-changing value. I am one of those students. For over forty-five years I have practiced this ancient art, and I continue to reap its remarkable rewards. While I remain a follower of many wisdom traditions, and believe that no one has a patent on truth, thirty years ago I took refuge in Buddhism. The adage “Chase two rabbits; catch none” points out the necessity of commitment, and the dangers of spreading yourself too thin.

My passion for meditation led me into the traditional Tibetan three-year retreat, where I became a monk with robes and a shaved head, meditating fourteen hours a day in a remote monastery. I even slept sitting

up in meditation posture, practicing the nocturnal meditations of dream and sleep yoga. Three-year retreat is like a meditation university, providing the opportunity to practice dozens of meditations in the most nurturing environment. It remains the most transformative experience of my life.

Of the many practices I was introduced to in retreat, one meditation stands out: the quirky, intense, multifaceted, and revolutionary practice of *reverse meditation*. I learned these practices within the context of Mahāmudrā (Sanskrit for “great seal”), a lofty tradition in Tibetan Buddhism that explores the nature of the mind.¹ This was over twenty years ago, and since then these radical meditations have become a cornerstone of my spiritual path.

They’re called “reverse” meditation for a number of reasons. First, these practices are the opposite, or reverse, of what many of us associate with meditation. Most people think that meditation is about feeling good, getting “Zen,” or otherwise chilling out. But this is just one small aspect of meditation. Complete meditation is not about feeling good—it’s about getting real. And getting real requires dealing with the reality of difficult situations.

Second, these unique meditations are designed to reverse our relationship to unwanted experiences, which means going directly into them instead of avoiding them. In so doing we can discover the *basic goodness* of whatever arises, which is deeper than interpretative goodness. Basic goodness refers to the ineffable “suchness, isness, thatness” of whatever occurs—good or bad.

If we capitulate to our usual avoidance strategies, we push the acute, conscious psychological discomfort of avoidance into becoming a chronic, unconscious mental cramp. The discomfort is still there, but now it’s buried deep in our body-mind matrix, where it works backstage to dictate much of our onstage life. The rejected experience then manifests symptomatically—it becomes an undiagnosed reflection of an underlying discord that expresses itself in virtually everything we do. Our actions then become evasion tactics—reactivity, psychological duress, physical illness, and all manner of unskillful responses to the challenges of life—as we try to skirt these buried, uncomfortable feelings.

The reverse meditations give us the opportunity to relate *to* our mind instead of *from* it—and also to establish a relationship to our evasion tactics, which otherwise become obstacles that act like scar tissue to sequester the unwanted experience from consciousness. Relating *from* our mind, from our reactivity, is no relationship at all. In place of conscious relationship, we respond with knee-jerk reflexes to difficult experience, a reactivity that kicks us out of our feeling body and into our thinking head, and into unnecessary suffering. Instead of dealing authentically with the challenging somatic sensation, we leap into inauthentic conceptual proliferation (confabulating and catastrophizing) to buffer ourselves from the discomfort of our feelings. We run from the honest pain and real news that come with being human, and into dishonest commentary and fake news. The truth is that many of the worst things in our life are things that never really “happened”!

Third, the reverse meditations upend our sense of meditation altogether. They represent a revolution in spiritual practice that turns our understanding of meditation inside out and upside down, and therefore radically expand our practice. Situations that were once antithetical to meditation now *become* our meditation. Obstacles that previously obstructed our spiritual path now become our path. This means that everything becomes our meditation. Nothing is forbidden. We can enter lifetime retreat in the midst of ordinary life.

DOWN AND DIRTY

Because the reverse meditations invite unwanted experiences, they’re no day at the beach. (Unless you expand your notion of “beach.”) Many spiritual practitioners enter the path because they’re looking for peace and happiness. The contemporary teacher A. H. Almaas, founder of the Diamond Way, writes, “When most people set out on the spiritual path they’re unwittingly setting out for heaven.”² One limitation of conventional understandings of meditation is the “feel good” agenda. Meditation then slips into the standard comfort plan. If it’s not going to make me feel better, why bother? What’s the point? That agenda is viable,

but incomplete. We all want to feel good. But where does your meditation go when things go bad? Where is your spirituality when “rock meets bone,” as they say in Tibet?

The reverse meditations make you feel better, even when the crap hits the fan and things feel bad. They do so by expanding your sense of what “better” and “bad” truly mean. You really can feel good under *any* circumstance; you just need to enlarge your sense of goodness and refine your understanding of “bad.” Your comfort plan can evolve to encompass even the most uncomfortable experiences. The meditation master Milarepa, who spent twelve years in intensive retreat and dealt with legendary hardship, sang:

When I get a lot of stuff coming up I feel extremely well
When the highs roll into lows feels even better still
When confusion gets complicated I feel extremely well
Fearsome visions get worse and worse feels even better still
The suffering being bliss feels so good that feeling bad
feels good.³

Feeling bad feels good? Suffering becomes bliss? Is this some twisted form of spiritual masochism? How is it possible to relate to hardship in this way? By reversing your relationship. By discovering the peace that lies within the pain.

“Reverse” meditations are counterinstinctual, counterintuitive, and counter to our normal versions of conditional happiness. They go against the grain of our comfort plan. But these unusual meditations lead to the discovery of unconditional happiness—the tranquil beach that lies within the most turbulent situations. Even if a tidal wave slams into your life, you are now equipped to ride that surf. You’ll be able to find your way to that endless tranquil beach no matter where you are and what you’re going through.

In other words, by putting your meditation into reverse you’ll actually find yourself going forward. Stepping into your pain allows for stepping up your evolution. These unusual practices accelerate your

path by bringing everything onto it. Serious meditators often go into retreat, even conventionally, in order to advance. But this book will demonstrate that you don't need to sit in tranquility on a meditation cushion, or escape into a retreat cabin, to meditate. Just reverse your rendering of meditation, and realize you have the goods to chill out in a blast furnace.

My teacher Khenpo Tsültrim Gyamtso Rinpoche advised his students, “Nurture your meditation by destroying it.” What he meant is destroy your contracted understanding of meditation. Don't limit yourself. If you continue to separate meditation from the hardships of life, you end up limiting both meditation and life.

The reverse meditations are earthy, gritty, and very real. At times they will slam your heavenly versions of spirituality smack into the earth and almost force you to mix dirt with divinity. These practices turn the notion of spirituality on its head. Instead of “waking up,” it's more about “waking down.” Instead of transcendence, it's more about “subscendence.” Instead of trying to get out, it's more about getting in.

This rebellious view often creates a whiplash effect because of its impact. It's such a sweeping reversal of traditional notions of meditation and spirituality. And the practices that lead to the incorporation of this unusual path can be similarly jarring. But so is life. You have to be intrepid to walk this path. It's worth the price of admission because these practices are your ticket into reality. They allow you to find the spiritual in the material—in the good, the bad, and the ugly—and annihilate the notion of “path” altogether. In the end, you're not going anywhere. This converse path will lead you back into the real world, back into the difficulties you were attempting to flee. They will help you find freedom in precisely what you were trying to avoid.

CONTRACTION

Over the past forty-five years of studying the great wisdom traditions, I have searched for the irreducible factors behind suffering. What are the common denominators behind samsāra (the Sanskrit word

for conditional reality) and all its hardship? Can these denominators themselves be further reduced into a foundational tenet? Henry David Thoreau captures this longing to deeply understand the world:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms.⁴

All my meditation retreats have been “to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms.” One common denominator has slowly but consistently emerged as the central player behind all my pain. *Contraction*.

Contraction is a principle that I will be using to describe the evasion tactics, the reactivity, the self-generated obstacles that stand between us and inner freedom. Later chapters will outline this principle more fully, but for now we can just say that contraction is the retreat from reality that typically happens when things start to hurt.

The Kabbalistic tradition uses the term *tzimtzum*, also translated as “withdrawal,” for this principle of contraction. With every contraction, we withdraw from what’s happening, from authentic contact with reality, and into our inauthentic storylines about it. But bona fide spirituality is a contact sport. You have to be willing to get hit. If you relate to the contact properly, you will be hit with the truth, and eventually with reality. The Jewish scholar Zvi Ish-Shalom gives us a sense of the profundity of the contraction principle:

Contraction also represents the movement of the infinite light, the light of *Ein Sof* [“no-end, infinite”], into the

manifestation of form, until its eventual presentation as the dualistic human experience of separation.

When we understand this process we can trace it back, we can follow the experience of embodied form . . . back through all the dimensions of light; this process of repeated contraction and expansion birthed into being, from the most coarse and material into the most subtle and ethereal.

. . . [E]very individual life, with all of our suffering and all of our contractions, is the potential of the infinite expressing itself.⁵

This is a thick statement that we will unpack in later chapters. In simpler terms: like Hansel and Gretel in the fairy tale, we can follow the breadcrumbs (of contraction) back home. Tracing the reiterative process of contraction back to our true nature, we find our way to things as they really are before we withdraw. Ish-Shalom continues, “Suffering, or contraction, is simply the mistaken perception that we are a separate entity, defined by our self concept. . . . When this property of light is contracted in our human experience, knowledge of who and what we are escapes us.”⁶ And we forget. The reverse meditations are meditations of remembering—or re-remembering, taking us back home. Starting right where we are, with our reactivity and resistance toward unwanted emotions and experiences, through reverse meditation we can work our way back to the source of our discomfort and dissatisfaction—to the very subtle primordial contraction that generates our sense of self.

The reverse meditations allow us to transform obstacle (contraction) into opportunity (openness). Expansion and contraction, together, are a combustion cycle that drives the path forward—or, in our journey, “backward.” Understanding this will show us how to treasure our contractions as necessary fuel for the path. Like the beating of our heart, we need contraction to allow for expansion.

The reverse meditations and contraction relate to each other in the following way: if we give in to our habits of avoiding discomfort, we

transform conscious pain (mostly emotional and psychological) into unconscious cramps. Never do we contract with such rapidity and ferocity than when we're in pain. We instinctively contract away from unwanted experience, a reactivity that may temporarily remove us from acute pain, but that ironically ensures chronic suffering. Pain and suffering are not the same. Suffering is an inappropriate relationship to pain. And by reversing that relationship, we can relieve our suffering. The reverse meditations equip us with the tools to reorder our relationship to contraction by opening to it, transforming contraction into relaxation, closure into openness, and agony into a new understanding of ecstasy.

In so doing, the reverse meditations also heal the fracture of duality (explored in chapter 13)—the birth of the illusion of self and other that is born from these reiterative contractions, a fracturing that is at the root of all our suffering. Our journey will therefore lead to an open, honest, and nondual relationship to reality, which includes pain. The reverse meditations enable you to become one with your pain, and embrace it rather than brace against it, which magically liberates both you and the pain. The pain is gone. And so are “you.” What’s left? What remains after this nondual embrace? Even the one becomes none. No-thing is left. Emptiness is left, which is equivalent to a radiant fullness—and a blazing new experience of life. Just what that is will be revealed in the pages ahead.

This book is therefore not just a practice manual, but a repair manual—an owner’s guide to the difficulties of life. The ideas here present a profound way to repair our relationship to unwanted experiences by reversing the way we deal with them. *Reverse Meditation* is fundamentally a way to realize unconditional happiness, by pointing out the unnecessary ways we make ourselves and others miserable.

WHY ME?

As a former dental surgeon, I have spent decades in the pain business. I’m acutely aware of the clinical aspects of intense pain, the pathophysiology of neurological transmission, and the necessity of pain management with standard regimens, including drugs. I have written thousands of

prescriptions for pain medication, and countless more for anti-anxiety agents (which amount to anti-contraction agents.) I'm not writing this book from an ivory tower. The practices I'm offering come from the trenches on the front lines of life.

As an author in the field of thanatology (death and dying), as well as the shadow sides of soteriology (the doctrine of salvation), I have wide-ranging experience in the academic and clinical sides of psychological and emotional suffering.⁷ But mostly, I'm just like you. I live in a world that can be extraordinarily painful. In this divisive and contentious age, the pain just seems to be getting worse. Every time I turn on the news, I see more anguish in the world. My heart has been broken; my guts sometimes feel like they have been ripped out. The reverse meditations have become a faithful friend I can always count on. A friend that walks with me as I travel along the bumpy road of life, forever ready to lend a healing hand.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Meditation is not one practice, just like sport is not merely one activity. There are as many meditations as there are sports, and we will explore a progression of meditation practices, building and refining upon their predecessors. The reverse meditations are radical—we'll be working our way up to them. If you find the way gets a bit steep in part 1, jump ahead to the meditations in part 2 to start bringing the material into your life, and to take a break. Parts 1 and 2 bootstrap each other, so feel free to dance between these two sections. The numerous endnotes support the journey for deeper divers, but can be skipped, or left for a second reading.

Three core meditations form the axis of this book: the baseline practice of mindfulness (more specifically, referential meditation, in chapter 7), which matures into the practice of open awareness (the nonreferential meditations, chapters 8 and 9), which prepares you for the reverse meditations (chapters 10, 11, and 12). Interlaced with these core meditations are a number of contemplations and “meditation snacks,” practices designed to be used on the spot in difficult situations.

We'll generate stability with the three core practices, and applicability with the contemplations and meditation snacks.

Together, the contemplations and meditations offered in this book will allow you to slowly unravel the numerous knots you have tied yourself into, release the contractions felt as the underlying tension of your life, and will culminate in a deep sense of ease, even when life is filled with dis-ease. The layers of contraction will be pointed out one by one, then opened with correlative meditations, releasing vast stores of energy trapped inside. The result is invigorating, liberating, and ultimately enlightening.

But the process that leads to this freedom, the fundamental awakening and return to life, is not itself always blissful. It's similar to when your foot has fallen sound asleep—it feels like pins and needles as it wakes up. If your hand is frozen stiff on a winter day, it can burn like hell when it thaws. With the right view, however, you willingly endure the discomfort necessary to wake up, because you know that the energy and freedom released by dropping your resistance, and walking the peaceful path of inner disarmament, is worth it.