

Darkness Before Dawn

*Redefining the
Journey Through
Depression*

An Anthology
edited by Tami Simon



sounds true
BOULDER, COLORADO

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1

Depression, Meditation, and the Spiritual Journey

Reginald A. Ray, PhD

The reason depression is so powerful is because you actually have to let go of pretty much everything you think or have thought in order to explore it. You have to let go of your hopes, your fears, your ambitions, the things that are working, the things that aren't working—your whole world. That's why depression is so powerful for spiritual practice: because if you step into it, it is actually a process of letting go of your entire known self.

One of the difficulties with this term *depression* is that it has such a negative connotation in contemporary society. Just using the word can be a way of discrediting what we're going through. In modern culture, depression is more or less automatically something that is undesirable. You hear it used for almost any state of mind that people find to be down and difficult. For spiritual practitioners, I think it is important to just let that label go—it's not really very useful; we need to look at "depression" freshly. We need to try to see its possibilities and potentialities, and even why it may be happening to us in the first place, as a critical and perhaps necessary step in our own journey. We need to learn to work with the energy of depression. It's fluid, and it's very, very painful, but there's really nothing to be afraid of. We need to be fully present to it, explore it, work with it, and see what happens. The

pain is real and raw and undeniable, but it doesn't mean there's a problem here. If we can take the labeling and negative judgment out of it, then we can start to find out what's really going on and recognize the opportunities it is offering us.

Periodic depression, of one kind or another, is probably part of the experience of every person on the planet—where the energy of engagement with the world just isn't there, for external reasons or internal reasons, and we take a different view of our life. Suddenly, we see that a lot of the things in which we've invested so much of our energy and hope are in fact not legitimate. They're not valid; they're not real. In fact, they might not even exist, and the energy just drops into a big space of openness, emptiness, and, sometimes, overwhelming sadness. If we can't recognize the value of this periodic dismantling of our investment in the external world—if we label it a bad thing—then our response is going to be to turn against our depressive state of mind; we will then do whatever it is we do to control or simply check out of our experience. Frequently, in too forcefully encouraging us to “get better,” the people around us will only drive us deeper into this avoidance—“Why can't you be connected with life? Why don't you have a positive attitude? Get over it.” All of this pressure, both from others and generated internally, leaves no space for our actual experience and pushes us to cover over and deny the state we're in.

This is the challenge of living in a culture where anything on the painful side of the spectrum is regarded as being a bad thing, something that must be controlled, avoided, denied, or even destroyed, such as with heavy-duty psychotropic prescriptions. In our culture, we have so many ways to try to eliminate any state of mind we find uncomfortable—through psychiatric medications, recreational drugs, alcohol, our electronic devices, the Internet, television, consumerism, or simply keeping busy all the time. We seem to have little or no respect for our human experience, as such.

What we seem to be largely unwilling to deal with or even face is simply the way human life is given to us: the facts of life and death, of pleasure and pain, of health and disease, of success and failure, the facts of day and night, the facts of storms and sunshine. This is the human

condition, and this has been the human condition going back all the way through the primates, even to the beginning of life itself; as a human being, you are going to have to experience everything. You can't just factor out one side of the equation, because then nothing happens. Life isn't easy; it shouldn't be easy. If life's easy, you're dead; there's nothing happening. Life is a challenge, and it should be a challenge. That's how people grow; it's the only way people grow.

If we read the great spiritual classics, in all the great religions, we hear that those moments of almost transcendent sadness, those moments when we suddenly see the futility of our ordinary activities, *those* are the great transition points on the journey. Those are the moments when we step back, almost as if the seeds of our external life have gone underground in winter to germinate, waiting for the moment when they can begin to grow again and appear above the ground.

Depression is a time of spiritual hibernation. If we know how to be with depression and journey through it, it is extraordinarily significant and impactful, but our belief system has enormous potential to get in the way. Whether we fall into thinking that we're going to live forever, that our "self" is real, or that depression or another challenging psychological experience is a negative thing to be denied or fixed, then the life journey, the spiritual journey—for they are one and the same—becomes very, very difficult.

Although challenging psychological experiences such as depression are part of the path and the unfolding of the meditative process, if we aren't approaching them from this perspective, it's going to be very hard for us to actually accept them and reap the benefits of doing so.

The meditator never takes anything for granted. It doesn't matter if you run into a state of mind you've experienced seemingly a million times; if you look closely, you'll see that it's actually always a new thing—and we have to find out what it is. If you can do that with a state of mind like depression, the experience will be very, very fruitful.

When we run into a very low state of mind—what we would call depression—at that point we usually check out and stop examining it: "Oh, I'm depressed." And then we start thinking about it in the way we usually do: it's some big problem, something really scary, something

we have to modify or change as soon as possible, something that is getting in the way of what we want to accomplish, and so on.

But we could look at depression simply for what it is in itself: an extraordinarily powerful energy. It's an energy that is very dark, very hidden, very low; it's *nothing*, from a certain point of view, from ego's point of view. Strangely enough, because we can't handle the intensity of depression, we start thinking about it in negative ways: "I'm no good, and my life's never going to be any good. Everybody else is living their life and having these great things happen, and here I am at the bottom of the well." This goes on and on and on.

Often, the disillusionment we feel when our dreams fall apart becomes an obsession, and people get hooked on the fact that they're not happy. For those of us who've been through terrible circumstances, sometimes the suffering itself turns into an identity, a sense that "I'm different from these other people because I've been through something they haven't, and so I understand something they don't." Being unhappy becomes a new self-image, which is just as much an ego response, and just as naive, as obsessively trying to hang on to happiness.

However, if we take depression as something to be explored, we begin to find that there are a lot of subtleties within it. If we can let go of the idea that we're depressed and simply take depression as an energy or a neutral manifestation of our life, then there's a real journey there for us. Depression is so powerful because you actually have to let go of pretty much everything you think or have thought in order to explore it. You have to let go of your hopes, your fears, your ambitions, the things that are working, the things that aren't working—your whole world. That's why depression is so powerful for spiritual practice: because if you step into it, it is actually a process of letting go of your entire known self. Few are the people who have the courage to actually do so right off the bat.

The habitual response when we hit that state of mind, the way we retain ourselves and maintain it, is by going back up into thinking. We create this whole story line around *my* depression, and *What am I going to do about it?*—and the whole thing becomes solid and self-sustaining. We use it to maintain a sense of self. But if we're willing to not go there, then the depression itself becomes this very, very powerful journey.

One of the first talks I heard my teacher Chögyam Trungpa give was on the topic of depression. He said that of all of the samsaric states—all of the ego-based states of non-enlightenment—depression is the most dignified, because it's the most real and the most accurate. You see what life really holds, ultimately. You see things as they are. You see the wishful thinking that we all indulge in all the time, and how empty and fruitless it is. Seeing the pointlessness of it all is incredibly intelligent, though it can be absolutely terrifying. Enlightenment, then, is just one little step further; instead of fighting this insight about the pointlessness of life—which is how depression maintains itself—you let go, accept it, and step into it. Then there is the most incredible feeling of relief and freedom and joy: “Wow! I am free of *myself*.” It is such a small step. When we are really depressed, we are so close.

This particular theme came up in Chögyam Trungpa's life after he had escaped the Chinese occupation in his native Tibet and was living in the United Kingdom. This happened in 1967, before he came to the United States where he became one of the main Tibetan teachers in this country. In England, he was a well-educated, articulate, inspired, charismatic Tibetan monk. He radiated peacefulness and love, and was quite adored by his disciples. Unlike most other Tibetan teachers at that time, he had great respect for his Western students and wanted to offer them the full range of Tibetan teachings, including those considered the highest. For this he was severely criticized, but he stuck to his guns and kept teaching with an open hand to everyone who came to him.

Then he had a fateful stroke, and the car he was driving crashed; he was left paralyzed on one side of his body. At that point, he really didn't know what was going to happen. He got very sick because of complications related to the paralysis, and became very, very depressed. One of his students in the UK who came over to the United States with him told me about a visit that some of his disciples had made to the hospital to see him during that period. Chögyam Trungpa lay in bed with his face to the wall and was so depressed he couldn't even turn over to greet them. He was gone, because he felt like his life was over. He thought he wouldn't be able to teach again, and for him that

was the only purpose of his life. From that time until he came to the United States in 1970, other traumatic events, one after another, befell him, including even being expelled, by other Tibetans, from a monastery in Scotland that he had founded, and being not just attacked and criticized but vilified by his fellow countrymen, including his best friend. And all for wanting to teach the Dharma openly to Westerners. By the end of his time in the UK, he felt like he had lost everything and, according to his wife, Diana, came right to the brink of suicide.

I met him just after that period, in 1970, when he arrived in the United States. The first talk I heard him give was on depression, and it was that talk that sealed my desire to study with him, for I also had suffered greatly from depression throughout most of my twenties. He said that depression is a passage, a beautiful walkway, a walkway of the journey, of transformation, if you're willing to relate to it in the way we're talking about here—if you're willing to give up that last reference point of “poor me.” That's the last shred to hang on to with depression. Are you willing to let go of “poor me, I'm the victim, I'm the least member of humanity,” or whatever your approach is? Are you willing to be with the energy of it as a meditator and do what we're talking about here, which is to take your depression as your object of attending, of attention and mindfulness?

If you can be with it and look at it, then you can begin to see in the dark. If you're always looking at it from the viewpoint of the conventional world that you *think* exists, you won't be able to see; then, depression is just a black hole. But if you're willing to actually go into the depression, then you begin to be able to see in the dark, and you see that there are things going on there. There's something going on, and there's indeed a very powerful invitation—an initiation, really—to enter into the arena of death, the death of self.

Again, the reason depression is threatening is not because it is in and of itself a problematic state of mind. To reiterate, as Chögyam Trungpa pointed out, it's actually very close to the awakened state, because in the awakened state you see that ego-based, samsaric existence is absolutely hopeless and not worth living, and that there's no point in taking another step. And that's the definition of enlightenment: you

see that samsara is completely unworkable, and you just don't go there anymore. Depression is so very close to that. It represents so much of the intelligence of the awakened state. And that's why people are so threatened by depression—because from the point of view of ego, enlightenment is annihilation, so that's the way we view it: as a threat.

So depression is maybe the most difficult of all the so-called “negative energies” to work with, but what is true of all of them is also true of depression: when we leave the discursive thinking behind, or at least slow it down through the practice of mindfulness, we discover all kinds of things going on in us—real things, not just thoughts—and we begin to pay attention to them. Pay attention, be with them, open to them, and just be. And then a journey starts to unfold; it's our human journey, and it's a journey that passes through many, many phases as we go, and from which we can learn so much.

For instance, depression doesn't necessarily need to involve suffering. Depression represents a certain kind of insight into the fundamental hopelessness of ordinary human life with its hopes and fears, its wishful thinking, its unrealistic ambitions to make everything easy, comfortable, and pain free. If you contemplate death deeply, if you've lost people close to you—people whom you love, people whose human face was part of your life, whose human heart nourished you and loved you—if you've lost people like that, you definitely do realize where it ends. Human life ends in the grave. That's what it all comes to, no matter what we accomplish, and if you understand that really, really deeply, depression is no problem. What we call depression is simply realizing that actually the whole thing is pretty empty and hopeless, from an ultimate point of view. Yes, short term there can be happiness, but long term, we lose everything in death.

When you land in that viewpoint and you look around, you see how phony we all are, with our little smiles on our faces, our forced cheerfulness, *no matter what*, saying, “Well, I'm happy. What's wrong? What's the problem? Everything's fine. In fact, everything is *great*. I have a great life.” Often, we have somebody close to us—a parent, a sibling, a child, a friend—who is in some state of terrible emotional suffering or physical illness, or whose life is deeply tormented in some

other way. But we are nevertheless determined to ignore this truth and keep that smile on our face, whatever may be going on around us. We may even seem somewhat oblivious to the very great suffering in the rest of the world. We are *that* threatened by the pain and suffering of ourselves and others.

We obviously haven't thought about things. Some of us even manage to disconnect from our actual experience in a sort of permanent way—we are permanently cheerful. This is not good. With all due respect, when we manufacture and maintain a high level of artificial cheerfulness and positivity in this way, we become among the most boring people one could ever meet. In such a state, nothing happens with us. We may even be completely numb, and when you're numb, absolutely nothing happens. There's no creativity, because creativity comes out of the unknown, groundless space of darkness—always.

That's really what we're talking about when we talk about the problem with resisting depression and other such challenging emotional states. The more beautiful life is and the more you appreciate it, the more excruciating it is, in a way, because you know that it's so fleeting. It's so fragile, and it's only just for a moment. But that kind of knowledge brings us to a path. It brings us to practice, and it inspires us to practice.

Within this context, you might say that the purpose of meditation is to learn how to relate creatively with depression and the other so-called “negative” states. Meditation, then, is not undertaken to escape the uncertainty, the fragility, and the discomfort of human life, but to enter into it more deeply. It's the recognition that if I can't force life to be what I want, then let me *let go*; and if my experience of life deepens the more I let go, then let me really understand how uncertain and fragile it all is, so I can drink in every moment of my life fully. I think that for many of us, the most excruciating thing is not really life's uncertainty and discomfort; rather, it is the sense that we're actually missing our life. We're cruising along, thinking we have a happy life, but there's some part of us that knows, *I'm missing something here. Something's not right*. Then depression can be a wake-up call for us, a teacher and a guide.

By moving beyond the preoccupation with suffering, we can see that the existence of pain and pleasure is not a problem. The fact that people get sick is not a problem. The fact that all of our dreams come to nothing is not a problem. Fundamentally, there is no problem in life, because everything that happens is actually part of the human journey and human awakening, and all of it is leading us deeper and deeper into reality. In that sense, there's no problem, even as we continue to go through these difficult mind states and experiences in the relative sense.

So, it's about opening. It's about letting go. And counterintuitive as this may seem, all of it will come through the practice of meditation, just *being with* rather than *trying to do*. That sense of the fragility, sacredness, and tenuousness of the whole thing just develops. You don't have to go looking for it—it will come to you. Because on some level, in spite of our resistance and our denial, we are already aware of it. True joy happens when you realize that you can afford to experience your life, no matter what it brings. You can afford to open to it without any reservation or judgment. You can give yourself that much latitude and that much room. That's freedom, and there's a tremendous amount of joy in that. And then you can look back at your depression and realize what a gift it was: it led you right to the door of your own deepest life; all you had to do was relate to your depression simply, directly, and nakedly, and then the door opened by itself and you found yourself just stepping right on through.

2

A Heroic Passage

James S. Gordon, MD

In pulling ourselves from the swamp of our unhappiness, in navigating the straits of our fears and moving beyond self-imposed limitations, in our minds and bodies, and in our present circumstances, we are making an effort and taking a journey that is every bit as difficult, and as healing and heroic, as any that humans have taken or can take.

Depression is not a disease, the end point of a pathological process. It is a sign that our lives are out of balance, that we're stuck. It's a wake-up call and the start of a journey that can help us become whole and happy, a hero's journey that can change and transform our lives.

Images of this journey have been with me for almost fifty years. Healing depression, overcoming unhappiness, means dealing more effectively with stress; recovering physical and psychological balance; reclaiming the parts of ourselves that have been ignored or suppressed; and appreciating the wholeness, the integrity, that has somehow slipped away from us, or that we have never really known. But this healing is dynamic and expansive as well as integrative, not just a series of tasks, but an adventure.

Depression almost always brings with it—along with the sense of loss and inadequacy, of gloom and uncertainty—a feeling of immobility, of stuckness. It feels as if we've broken down, alone and lonely, in some dismal, charmless backwater that no one would ever choose to visit. The beginning of the end of depression comes when we recognize