8. OUR PERSONAL EMOTIONAL HISTORY

WITH A LITTLE REFLECTION, we find that much of our habitual behavior is an attempt to get rid of unpleasant feelings or to divert our attention from them in other ways. We chase pleasure, substances, or distraction via Facebooking, texting, shopping, gaming—anything to push away the stress.

Of course it would make more sense to tackle our deeper problems so that we can alleviate our long-term suffering. So why do we instead habitually avoid what's really going on with us? Buddhist thinking tells us that it is not a simple procrastination, but a cycle of inclination, feeling, and craving.

Early experience creates underlying moods and inclinations (*namarupa*, in Pali) for the way we relate to our bodies. One could think of the namarupa as a kind of proto-personality, a realm of impulses. As we stumble across various situations and experiences, given our own namarupa, feelings (*vedana*) of comfort and discomfort appear. For example, because of my own namarupa, if I find myself alone at a gathering, I may feel insecurity, first as tension in my abdomen, chest, and shoulders, which makes me start gulping air. This is how my

insecurity manifests. If on the other hand, I meet someone and we connect, I'll feel relaxation in those same places and my breath will be deep and smooth.

Our namarupa may develop inclinations to seek or avoid certain feelings, which leads to craving (*tanha*) to get rid of what feels uncomfortable and cling to what feels good. In my example above, in order to avoid the discomfort of my insecurity, I might crave to speak to someone immediately or to have social media on my phone distract me. Or I could avoid the discomfort by avoiding gatherings altogether. In any case my craving is to avoid the discomfort and/or seek some other comfort.

With a little reason and reflection, it is easy to see how this applies to each of us. What are some things that we seek or avoid? What are the feelings we experience that inspire us to seek or avoid them? What are the underlying moods and inclinations behind those feelings?

A Lifetime's History of Anxiety

The Natural Anxiety of Vulnerability

The earliest form of anxiety is the anxiety of vulnerability—some call it "annihilation anxiety." As infants we're helpless, incapable of defending ourselves against anything. We're in a large world with very little control over our own bodies or movements, so we feel a sense of vulnerability to the world. Our parents help us to establish a sense of security by lifting us up and cradling us, giving us a sense of security. Someone is watching over us.

The connection that relieves this anxiety arrives through touch, glance, movement, because we are yet too young to understand words. When someone holds, caresses, and soothes us with soft facial expressions and cooing tones of voice, a felt sense of security appears. All of these nonverbal messages and caretaking behaviors provide the first powerful feelings of being safe in the world; a wellspring of positive emotions arise from feeling connected.

Separation Anxiety

Eventually we acquire language and our parents reassure us verbally, but our parents are not always there. As infants we can feel that insecurity any time our parents are out of view: for example, every time we wake up alone. As toddlers we might feel this if we find ourselves lost in a store or are first left at kindergarten. If we actually lost a parent during childhood, say to death or divorce, this feeling will be even more intense and long lasting. The negative feelings of loneliness and sadness that build up around feeling disconnected become separation anxiety.

As children, when we expect a separation might happen, we will deal with it in a couple of different ways. One is that we resort to protest behaviors—flop to the ground, kick, and scream until someone heeds us, or until we wear ourselves out. Or we might retreat into the realm of imagination, fabricating a distracting reality to suppress the feelings of insecurity and isolation.

Later in life these manifest as two different ways to relate to anxiety triggers. On the one hand, we can act out

by expressing the anxiety. We do this in order to avoid or manipulate the world around us, to keep the dreaded experience from happening. On the other hand, we can repress our feelings: unconsciously try to keep the experience itself at a distance by retreating into the mind, away from the body where we feel the contractions of vulnerability. The feelings of separation are overwhelming and painful. In either case we unconsciously react to threat of abandonment.

Neurotic Anxiety

Neurotic anxiety is the concern that we will act on an impulse that will make the world—everyone else—reject us. As our attention turns from ourselves to the rest of the world, our anxiety conversely shifts from worrying about the uncertainty of the world to the uncertainty of ourselves. This anxiety develops as we start to socialize; we worry that an unconscious impulse will assume control of our actions, resulting in embarrassing behaviors.

So our personal development of anxiety has progressed from unease over what might be out *there* to an apprehension over what might be in *here*; our own urges and impulses. The mistrust has turned against us: the danger might actually lurk within us.

When we are children and we cry loudly from fear, spill food in frustration, gesture angrily, and a stressed caretaker becomes exasperated, our "secure base"—the safe space to express our needs—dissolves. We begin to see that some of our own impulses and urges lead to abandonment. So when we begin to socialize in school, where it seems that the other

kids know each other and have been given the "How to Be Cool" rulebook that we seem to have missed, we worry that our awkward, bumbling attempts to connect will result in ridicule and rejection. We begin to mistrust our own inclinations and emotions. What arises from us may apparently result in rejection, ostracism, and desertion.

In adolescence, once again, we defend ourselves by acting out—lashing out with hostility or contempt—or by retreating into the many fantasy lives available to young people: TV, movies, comic books. The realm of fantasy becomes less appealing, however, as we enter our teen years and adult life. We naturally develop different ways to cope with anxiety, but our new methods can still be sorted into those same two categories: (1) ways of seeking shelter in our minds, or defense mechanisms, and (2) ways of manipulating the world around us, or acting out.

Defense mechanisms can be less apparent to us than our ways of acting out, so I'll give some examples here.

Defense Mechanisms

Intellectualization

Intellectualization involves focusing on *solving* the issue, rather than attending to the feeling of the experience. Too often, our thoughts provide a false refuge, an escape hatch from what's happening: an unending stream of thoughts to distract us from what's really going on. The Buddha called this *ditthi upadana*, clinging to views and opinions as a form of resistance to experience.

Catastrophizing

Catastrophizing is visualizing the worst outcome of any situation. It's a variation of intellectualization, in that it distracts us from the underlying emotional experience with that old core feeling of believing the world doesn't love us. Any kind of scarcity—a lack of work, friendship, sex—efficiently activates our fear of loneliness. We don't want to feel lonely, so we might instead consider all of the worst things that can happen. If we don't have work, for example, we can imagine all of the ways that we will go broke. If we are without friends or lovers, we can imagine all of the ways that we will die alone.

It begs the question: Why would we prefer all of these nightmarish realities to the feeling of loneliness itself? Catastrophizing stories are alluring; they make us feel prepared. They can even provide a false sense of security: as if, since we have considered the worst, it won't happen. But its most obvious effect is concealing the embodied emotional experience.

Avoidance Coping

Avoidance coping is the tendency to simply avoid those things that make us uncomfortable. Phobias are a very common example of this. Almost everyone has something that gives them anxiety. Very common ones include a fear of heights, public speaking, etc. In these two particular examples, the anxiety is often not produced by the threat of something else coming to do harm to the person, but rather by the fact that we might betray ourselves. Many people feel anxiety around ledges. It's not often that they are worried about

being pushed, so much as they feel a strange impulse to leap. Likewise, most people who imagine speaking in front of a crowd don't imagine being overtly rejected but simply imagine that they will do something embarrassing.

In these two examples, though, one might catastrophize as described above, imagining the worst-case scenarios. But, given how uncomfortable that is, why not just avoid those situations altogether? If I am uncomfortable near ledges, I'll just stay away from them. If I might be embarrassed at social functions, I'll just stay home. Avoid all the bad thoughts as well as the bad feelings. In the end, I may end up avoiding my community, or sources of help, as well.

The Results of Anxiety-Based Repression

Eventually our anxieties can instill defense mechanisms that are too efficient, keeping us unaware of a wide array of important emotional information. Our ability to function mentally or socially might be hindered by discomfort we feel beneath the surface, for example.

We need to rely on far more than logic or reason if we're to navigate the complex arenas of interpersonal life. We constantly rely on embodied feeling-states—our guts, so to speak—in order to make wise decisions in critical situations. When we are really good at something, we often rely on intuition, which is another word for an emotional response. People who cannot read the emotional body become incapable of making wise judgments. We cannot survive without our full emotional palettes.

The question may be asked "When is it safe to follow our intuition, and when should we override our gut feelings and seek external guidance?"

A basic rule of thumb practice would be as follows: *We should trust our instincts only in arenas wherein we've developed a significant degree of solid experience.* For example, if an interior decorator is asked what color a room should be painted, they need not ponder the physics of color or solve the issue intellectually; their years of training and discernment, stored in largely unconscious memory storage, will use the fast circuits of the mind to provide a quick response. On the other hand, in arenas in which we have little acquaintanceship, we should learn to seek other people's insights before fully trusting our intuition. For example, when traveling to unknown cities and locations, following instincts could easily lead one into unsafe or thoroughly disappointing neighborhoods; this is why wise travelers consult either travel guide books or trustworthy local residents for suggestions.

Furthermore, in relationships, if we have either anxious or avoidant tendencies, then we should learn to override our intuition—which is telling us to worry or run away—and turn instead toward the challenging tasks of stating our needs aloud. In this case, happiness will be found where our gut instincts won't lead us: with secure partners who do not run when we seek intimacy.

Still, according to neuroscientists such as Antonio Damasio, we cannot be rational without considering our emotional, gut reactions to situations. Scientists have demonstrated that

we constantly rely on physical feelings of intuition in order to make wise decisions in critical situations. People who cannot read the emotional body by interpreting their physical feelings—perhaps due to damage to certain parts of their brains, substance addiction, or self-numbing tendencies—are incapable of sound judgment; they flounder and become indecisive to the point of confusion and despair.

Our most painful feelings—sadness, despair, loneliness, and frustration—contain crucial information. For example, they can let us know when we're disconnected from support or in partnerships that are no longer satisfactory. There are many individuals who'll stay in loveless, empty relationships, as they can see no sense in seeking a deeper happiness with another. It is deceptively easier to repress the recognition that there's something fundamentally wrong with our priorities. It is deceptively easier simply to keep ourselves blind to needs we've failed to address, and ultimately, to live without integrity.

Emotions also constantly prime us to take action. We can mask an emotion, replacing an unsafe experience, such as fear, with one that feels more secure, such as aggression. We can minimize our feelings, by telling ourselves and others that we're not really hurt. We can take drugs to alleviate the emotion altogether.

But our impulses don't simply vanish because they're inconvenient to the rational, narrative mind. No matter how efficiently we repress our emotions by focusing on our inner chatter—which effectively deflects our attention from

the body and the unconscious messages it conveys—their driving forces remain locked and loaded waiting to express themselves. Repressed feelings will rise up from the shadows whenever a present situation in any resembles a previously wounding experience, at which point fear, anger, sadness, guilt, embarrassment once again return, reappearing in tidal waves of pent-up energy, utterly unregulated, flowing energies too strong for others to handle.

No one can indefinitely repress the authentic, spontaneous, and true impulses, memories, and feelings that render us whole. Repression strips us of our dynamic experience, leaving us squeezed into tidy boxes that may look good on the outside, but are internally suffocating. The more authentic energies we bury, the greater the sense of being hollow inside, for that is what we're doing: emptying ourselves of that which animates life. Reliance on narratives, intellectualization, and catastrophizing simply delays underlying unease rather than teaching us how to simply be with those core feelings.

The View from the Dharma

The Dharma presents the same core observation as modern psychology: the mind is capable of hosting and pursuing entirely incompatible agendas. Anxiety, panic, dissociation, and sudden outbursts are messages from the unconscious mind, informing us that it's terrified or enraged.

During such bouts of anxiety and emotional disruption,

internal awareness provides the most useful tool for recognition and regulation of emotions. *Sati*, or inner awareness, is a practice in which we prevent the mind from wandering away with thoughts, observing all the embodied sensations and moods that underlie our present experience. This can be accomplished alone with eyes closed, or in a business meeting or crowded subway car with eyes open. It's a liberating practice, in that when we learn to detach from the inner chatter and mental movies that so easily captivate our attention, we can return home to the body, which is the gateway to self-integration; at last, the intellectual and emotional can become aware of each other and begin the process of healing, rather than relying on anxiety to signal we're not of one mind.

Turning to our emotions can feel like a strange practice, as we live in a hectic, materialist culture that encourages us to achieve and accumulate rather than attend to difficult emotional activations such as anxiety. When internal stresses become too great, and they result in anxiety or panic, we're encouraged to medicate—which can provide some help, but is never the entire solution. If we want to heal and live authentic, meaningful lives, we should view our agitation as important messages worth reading rather than suppressing, repressing, or all-too-quickly medicating them away. In essence, anxiety is a challenge, an invitation to become whole: will we answer it or keep running away?

Practice: *AIM*

For working with anxiety I'd like to recommend a simple practice called AIM, which is an acronym for *Accept*, *Inquire*, and *Mother*.

The *A* for *acceptance* involves the open, receptive recognition that a strong emotion is present. All this requires is turning toward what's present, rather than resisting. I like the phrase "I see you, Mara!" as a tool to aid in this process. You see, the Buddha had a shadow-self called Mara, a representation of all the sensual urges and indulgences he put aside to pursue the path to enlightenment. Of course the Buddha's repressed urges didn't go away quietly, so Mara would arise now and then, urging him to abandon his difficult spiritual journey and return to material splendor. Unlike Jesus, who commanded his devil away, the Buddha would respond with, "I see you, Mara," in essence acknowledging rather than repressing or indulging those urges.

Let me provide an example: Fifteen years or so ago, I went on a sober retreat to an island in the Caribbean, a vacation for which I had been amassing funds for some time. Also attending the spiritual retreat, and staying in the same hotel, was a very loud and boorish private group. They ignored every instruction and request from the retreat's staff, cut in food lines

with the greatest entitlement, chatted loudly during times set aside for meditation and yoga, and so forth. I reached a point where simply stumbling upon any one of them—and they were everywhere—would trigger fury, which in turn would encourage my mind to engage in endless inner speeches about rudeness and how certain people are better off as meals for sharks. The solution was to think, "I see you, Mara" as I encountered each of these tiresome individuals. The practice reminded me to accept their presence and turn, instead, to what I was experiencing internally, rather than engage upon another endless inner speech about manners and the like.

The *I* in AIM stands for *inquire*, means pulling attention away from thoughts or external dramas and paying attention to what's occurring in the body, gut feelings, even the energy levels of the mind. Inquiring or investigating emotions requires creating a "safe container," a body that can relax around the activations. So, for example, if my anxiety expresses itself via a tight abdomen, I can relax the muscles of the arms and legs, release the shoulders, open the chest, breath comfortably. The less tension I feel elsewhere in the body, the easier it will be to hold the principal activation.

The *M* for *mother* reminds us to nurture what's present, to soothe the agitation. After all, most of my fears

were ingrained when I was very young, when I didn't have the skills that are available to me now. Today I can survive the conflicts, rejections, setbacks, and frustrations that would have left me distraught as a child, but my fear doesn't know that unless I take the time to gently reassure these emotions. So I'll use a simple phrase, such as, "I care about you, I'll take care of you," and repeat the words, slowly and calmly, in the mind while I focus on the body. While the emotional mind struggles with words and ideas, as it is largely located in the brain's right hemisphere, which doesn't have the language centers of the left hemisphere, it understands moods, feelings, images. By repeating a soft, simple phrase such as "It will be okay" in the same comforting tone one would speak to an agitated child, we can "speak to" emotional circuits and slowly deactivate them.

This practice helps me stay with emotional states as they present themselves, while cultivating a deeper understanding of what underlies or fuels my anxiety. I offer it has a way to approach agitation, a way to transform the upheaval into a revealing experience that can be held and safely expressed.

4. CONTEMPLATING DEATH

Living in the Shadow of Death

DEATH IS INEVITABLE. And may arrive even sooner than we dread. A truth is revealed in the precariousness of the human condition, in the body's vulnerability to infection, disease, and injury: mortality is not the result of fortune or a world gone awry, but a consequence of life itself. While it has been established that we are living in the safest era our species has known, a long life is never guaranteed. While we make assumptions about our safety and life expectancy, and we eat bran and install fire alarms in the hopes of bettering our odds for longevity, our existence is only a blood clot or viral infection away from extinction.

How we relate to this certainty determines how authentic, meaningful, and purposeful our lives are. The more we deny the inevitability of death, the more we will make decisions that are shallow and incomplete. Think of how painful it will be when we're confronted with imminent death—in an accident, or when a disease is diagnosed—and we realize that we have traded far too much for apparent emotional or financial security.

We can't truly understand this truth using rational thought, in part because that same rational thought helped us to justify so many bad choices; rational thought tells us that the job we hate pays the mortgage or the partner we don't love is a good person who's nice to our friends. This truth reveals itself by raw experience: We must experience loss.

For me, experiencing 9/11 woke me to the realization that I was enacting purposeless rituals, fulfilling empty obligations taken on without considering that life can end without the slightest forewarning. As I turned away from the plume of smoke emanating from the remains of the World Trade Center, trying to find my way back home to Brooklyn—most of the bridges were closed, the subways shut down—I felt like I was in a trance, only partially alive. And over the course of the next few months, the full despair set in: my life was devoid of real meaning.

Mindfulness of Death

While contemplating our own mortality can seem to be a downer at best and downright depressing at worst, reflecting on it is a terrific way to investigate our priorities and routines.

When I decide whether or not to take on a project, if I don't weigh the commitment against my time limitations, given the certainty of death, I make the choice without fully considering the real implications. I have only so much time left; is this job, or relationship, or life circumstance, really how I want to spend it? Every significant choice we make

should, in one way or another, be evaluated against the Buddha's first noble truth of life: the inevitabilities of old age, sickness, death, and separation from the loved.

Thinking about death also puts resentment and bitterness in perspective. It helps us practice forgiveness and have compassion for the mistakes of others because we realize that time is short. We can relieve ourselves of the resentment and bitterness that we carry through life as so much inner chatter, stress, and hostility. In letting go of resentment, we also acknowledge that we have made mistakes for which we must forgive ourselves, if we are to live free of shame and remorse.

Reflecting on the inevitability of death and the fragility of life doesn't mean that we will choose a lifestyle of hedonistic, immediate gratification. More likely, we will consider the real value of our time spent. We might take the time to find more invigorating employment or cut down our work hours, or it might simply change the way we relate to our responsibilities exactly as they are. We may become more attentive to our loved ones or spend more evenings with friends. The understanding of death opens up new possibilities for life, rather than keeping me plodding along the same path, day in and out, hemmed in by ingrained routines and misguided beliefs.

Death provides the most truthful perspective on how to live. When it comes time to die, we'll care more about what we've done for others and what contributions we've made than we will about how much money we have. We want to look back and see an authentic and meaningful life.

The certainty and unpredictability of death sheds light on life's meaning and priorities. So why wouldn't you spend a

lot of time thinking about it? Because our denial of death allows us to remain deluded, preoccupied, and distracted by unfulfilling bullshit. Living any day as if we've been guaranteed countless more lies at the heart of our delusion and out-of-whack priorities. The natural tendency to ignore our mortality is a tool we use to get through another day without meaning. Our refusal to acknowledge our imminent death is also an obstacle to staying present and connecting to our reality at this moment. For this reason, spending a whole life living in the denial of death would be both tragic and dishonorable.

Living with Awareness of Death

An awareness of death shouldn't be crippling. It is, after all, an acceptance of the inevitable, the reality we harbor within. It requires that we evaluate and reevaluate our priorities, but it doesn't mean that we should live in fear.

Some see death as looming darkness. But we can also see it as a darkness that lights our path in a different way—it can lend gravity and import to otherwise weightless, meaningless moments, and it can free us from caring about needless chores and meaningless frustrations.

While I certainly do not look forward to its arrival, the recollection of death need not be a matter of dread. Yes, it's a reminder that no matter what path I follow, the destination is the same: that time when I can no longer act, think, or feel. And yes, the awareness of death can create feelings of vulnerability and dread. But while I may not like to dwell

on my fragility, in every moment I enact it nonetheless. And to pretend life is not fragile and without guarantee is just another way of admitting it, for in the denial of mortality I acknowledge how difficult and challenging it is for my limited psychic faculties to process.

However, *immortality would not solve the problem of life*; unending life would deprive us of the absolute against which all our decisions and choices are weighed. What meaning would sacrifice, love, or creative efforts achieve if they were simply another set of actions spewing out of existence without end? Moments and deeds would be drained of all weight or meaning. Life without death is life without meaning or purpose. Were my time on earth to continue perpetually, life would simply be weighed against exhaustion, which is hardly a superior arrangement.

So the question that confronts me is this: how do I live within the framework of a meaningless world and a looming death? How do I incorporate what is unavoidable yet uncertain as to its time of arrival?

I am tasked with fully opening into each moment, yet I cannot allow myself to be swallowed by the moment; I must write these words against the fullness of the project itself, which implies a future. To live entirely in this moment would mean I would have to relinquish caring about the results of this action as it plays out. I must act as though this moment might be my last, but I also must take into consideration the moments and actions that might follow. So while I live now, my awareness always slips toward an outcome; again, I am ultimately given meaning by my death.

Death Asks Us to Live Authentically

Staying aware of death helps us to be honest about who we are. Thinking about our mortality forces us to think about the choices we make in life, but it also makes us reflect on our authenticity when dealing with others. The Dharma reminds us that the future is unknowable and speculating about it leads to madness. Our sole connection to that future lies in the quality of our intentions, and there is no greater intention than to live openly, fully, with empathy and appreciation of all that is available.

Keeping death in mind helps us extract ourselves from identifying with the roles we've assumed. Although we are born into an established social structure, we don't need to allow ourselves to be drawn into views that are inauthentic.

I worked with one individual, whom I'll refer to as Debra, who grew up in a family in which her needs for attention and support were put on the back burner, as her younger brother suffered from a long-term illness that drained the energy of both parents. Even before the onset of her teen years, Debra was relegated to a caretaking role, and there was no one available to help coregulate the anxieties associated with high school, socialization, sexual impulses, and so forth. This set the template of Debra's life; in each relationship and friendship she instinctively repressed her own emotional impulses for intimacy and support and invariably prioritized others, managing their feelings at the expense of her own.

Debra's own mortality was never emotionally recognized

and accepted, for she was too busy regulating other people's anxieties as a way to safely maintain each relationship. What broke this pattern was initiating a practice of reflection on death. She meditated with the phrase "one day this body will breath no longer" while observing the sensations of the breath and visualizing how her own aging might play out, so she could acknowledge and express authentic fears and interpersonal needs. Astonishingly, within a few weeks of starting the practice, Debra was capable of standing up for herself in her interactions with a verbally abusive boss. Placed against the recognition of how little guarantee of life she (and we) have, it was no longer worth it to bite her tongue and accept unjust criticism. In her own partnership she became less easy to manipulate as well; when the truth of our own demise is acknowledged, many finally discover the courage to pursue "bucket lists" and refuse to mince words.

Interestingly, I've yet to meet an individual who has lost a job or relationship simply from expressing himself authentically. While many of us believe that stating our needs clearly will invariably lead to rejection, abandonment, or losing work, almost invariably these beliefs are unnecessary, maladaptive coping strategies that helped us survive our family systems but keep us disempowered in adult life. Reminding ourselves we don't have the time to waste is certainly one approach to shedding these self-sabotaging habits.

Though the materialistic beliefs our world is founded upon try to push death out of mind, we can open up to life by keeping death in our awareness. It can bring a new sense of our priorities into every choice we make. We might

remain in our career, or choose to leave it. We *create* our purpose. We might pursue a more conventional life that follows a well-trodden path, or we might walk away from it all, like the Buddha. Regardless of our specific choices, we are liberated when we open ourselves to the simultaneous certainty and unpredictability of death. Aware of our mortality, we can recreate ourselves in each moment by pondering and pursuing whatever we know to be worthy of our effort, given the very short time that we have.

As there are few transcendent givens, certainties, or absolutes beyond death, we aspire to have a life comprised of choices that are made by weighing our lack of guarantees. In a world without ultimate meaning, filled with "fish fighting for food in dwindling puddles," as the Buddha put it, we create meaning by extracting ourselves from the tendency to identify with the roles we've assumed in the world, the performances we put on to pay the rent and purchase food and clothing.

When we reflect on death, we reflexively consider how we would like to be remembered. It becomes more apparent in this reflection that the more our activities interfere with caring for others, the more we abandon ourselves. If we think now that the way we will be remembered is at odds with our present activities, then we know that something is amiss. For my part I would like to be remembered as someone who was caring, insightful, and creative. The degree to which my life as a Dharma teacher and friend adheres to these principles is the degree to which my life is authentic and meaningful.

Knowing that death is imminent and that I have little time to leave an impression, the lesson is clear.

Practice:
Mindfulness of Death

What does a meditation on death in spiritual practice look like? We might sit quietly for a while, keeping our breath in mind until our attention settles on the physical sensations of inhalation and exhalation in the abdomen or chest, or the sensations of air entering and exiting the tip of the nostrils or mouth. When we're focused, we might slowly, silently repeat a simple thought: "One day this body will stop breathing" or "This breath could be my last."

As we add these reflections, note how the words affect how we attend to the sensations of the breath. We observe how these simple truths, when kept in mind, influence how we perceive our experience. Then we shift our attention to our external senses of sight and hearing: "One day the world will blur as my eyesight fails; the sounds will fade with the loss of my hearing; memories will vanish into remote areas of the mind; all the skills I take for granted will evaporate."

Finally, we might bring to mind the five daily recollections of the Dharma: "I am of the nature to grow old, to become sick, and to die; I will be separated from

all that is dear to me; all I really own are the actions I take."

After repeating the five recollections, we might purposely bring to mind our life's dramas—the lingering resentments toward family members, friends, or foes; looming financial bills; or mounting responsibilities—and ask ourselves, when framed by the inevitable, how much do these really matter? Knowing that I will be separated from all I cherish and hold dear, are these little dramas really so critical?

We may find that these recollections change the way we greet the frustrations, setbacks, and travails of life; they may well fade in significance when one's final moments are visualized. Perhaps we will be proud, from this perspective, of the choices we've made, or perhaps some decisions won't fare well under such scrutiny. As all of life moves deathward, we can at least transform our greatest sadness—that we know we must die—into our greatest source of wisdom.

5. LETTING GO OF IDENTITY

WE ALL WANT our lives to mean something, so we build up and cling to an identity, hoping that it will provide meaning. It may just be, however, that we find meaning not in identity, but in letting go of identity.

Over thousands of years we have evolved to be mentally oriented toward symbols and language. As a matter of survival, we have had to transmit information to one another and to future generations. One generation taught the next about hunting, agriculture, making tools, food preparation, etc. Language makes our communication precise and immediate. Were we still primates, we would have to establish bonds and convey relational information by means of grunting and grooming behaviors. Language permits us to exchange elaborate details about our every facet of life.

However, there are some downsides to our use of language. For instance, we have a running monologue in our heads that shapes our understanding of who we are, what the world is, and why it is so. Because our language helps to create important meaning for us, we begin to seek meaning in everything that

occurs to us—as a result, we live our lives with an expectation of meaning.

Narrative, language-based ideas allow us to plan for the future and visualize solutions to threats and challenges; they run on the fuel of acetylcholine and dopamine and provide sensations of power, which make us feel safe and alleviate our anxieties of vulnerability and abandonment. Our beliefs and ideas present themselves as protection and salvation, but really inner chatter and language leaves us fully addicted to thinking rather than experiencing, to "figuring out" every challenge, as if life is simply a problem to be solved. Eventually we create a world that mirrors abstract, linear thought: a world of billboards and commercials that reifies wealth and the accumulation of goods and power. In trying to figure out what every experience means, instead of truly feeling, we may just feel a little safer. But thought is only an interpreter that distracts us from the deeper truth: we're not sure why we act the way we do, as so many of our impulses are preconscious and beyond our control.

We feel as though our lives are not simply chance occurrences, that they must stand for something greater. It's not simply that we *want* them to matter; we *need* them to matter. By the simple virtue of our inner monologues, we expect our moments on earth to mean something beyond our sensory experience of them, or the mere fact that they happened. We demand significance. So each of us, as we live our lives in language, want our lives to have a big idea, a depth, a value; we want to matter in some profound way that we can divine with our rational minds, like interpreting poetry.

All of this must surely mean something, right?

Finding Meaning and Purpose

The search for meaning and purpose often leads people to religion. The theistic religions provide believers with an omnipresent power, a presence said to be everywhere. Deities provide excellent security; when we need them, when we are most vulnerable, gods are available to us. They provide refuge in times of danger and support during times of loss. Divine forces provide a secure base from which we can move through the world with less anxiety.

The Buddha didn't deny in that kind of god, though. There are many suttas in which the Buddha schools various gods, such as Baka, who believes his status as a deity is permanent, never subject to end. The Buddha warns Baka that even gods are subject to impermanence. Any survey of the suttas will reveal that the worship of gods is not the answer; liberating ourselves from suffering is our own work. We create the suffering; we must alleviate it.

If belief in an omnipresent deity isn't the answer, we might look for a god within—some part of us that transcends material reality. This is thought to be an essential self beneath—or perhaps behind—all our thoughts, emotions, and feelings. The concept of a core essence within us is very alluring when we are need of security. The Hindus of the Buddha's time believed in a transcendent self they called the *atman*, which was immortal and changeless. For a Hindu the meaning of life was to gain awareness of the atman in order to be liberated.

The Dharma, however, maintains that no such essence can

be located in our experience, and it would be a waste of time to try. Too much of our internal experience—thoughts, feelings, moods, physical sensations—are constantly in flux, appearing and reappearing in different arrangements. Pondering the existence or nonexistence of a lasting identity only results in what the Buddha referred to as a "tangle of thoughts."

It should be noted that Dharma doesn't claim we don't have a self, or what could be called *self-hood*: a subjective, individual perspective of the world that is not shared with others. Self-identity is another matter entirely, though; that proposes constancy, an unchanging essence, such as a set of thoughts or feelings that would be present throughout life, providing an underlying unity. When I can bear to listen to a decade-old recording of myself, prattling on in Dharma talks, I have a *self-hood* while listening, and I recognize the *self-hood* of the speaker, but I really don't *self-identify* with the younger version of me; the perspectives, ideas, feelings, and emotions evidenced in the recordings are substantially different from what I experience today.

In the *Gaddula Sutta*, Buddha says,

> Like a dog that is tied to a stake by a leash keeps running around the stake; in the same way the spiritually naive will believe that a transcendent, lasting self can be found amid the body, feelings, perceptions, mental content [thoughts] or consciousness.

In the *Anatta-lakkhana Sutta*, the Buddha demonstrates that if we pay close attention to our experiences of self—our thoughts, bodies, feelings, perceptions of the world, and sense consciousnesses—we'll find these aggregates are in ceaseless flux. Our bodies are always changing: sometimes energetic, sometimes tired, sometimes ill, other times well. Our feelings switch from the comfortable to the tense or agitated countless times each day. Our sensory experience changes with every second. Our thoughts and perceptions change perpetually. Within all of these, how could anyone find a consistent identity? The truth is that there is no single thread of identity that stretches from birth to death.

The Illusion of Continuous Identity

The illusion of continuous identity is most likely a byproduct of the mind's inner narrator: that is, the internal language-based thoughts that interpret and comment on our ongoing experiences. Neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga refers to this explanatory faculty as the Interpreter. The role of the Interpreter is to produce explanations, to edit and arrange the incessant parade of internal and external stimuli into a coherent story, complete with views, opinions, meanings. The mind's inner chatter is similar to the voice-over in a documentary film, for it helps us make sense of the flood of experiences in each day of life.

The Interpreter is quite herculean, meeting the monumental, unending demand to translate life's random encounters and unconsciously produced urges and impulses into a

lucid tale. Whether it's interpreting dramatic events in the outside world, or our internal flow of perceptions, feelings, moods and behavioral impulses, the Interpreter tries to find meaning, or at least tell a story, even if no discernible pattern exists.

What Gazzaniga's research clearly demonstrated was that the Interpreter often creates entirely incorrect theories and explanations, no matter how dubious. For example, a patient who has had the two hemispheres of their brain separated can be instructed to stand by a window and wave; since this action uses the right hemisphere only, the patient's left hemisphere will have no idea why they waved. If the patient is asked to explain the behavior, the Interpreter, which is a function of the left side of the brain, will with impressive swiftness fabricate a plausible though entirely bogus story: "I saw a friend outside." What's truly fascinating is that the patient has no idea they're essentially lying; the left hemisphere's job is to rationally annotate everything and believe its own stories, even if they're made out of whole cloth.

It is hard to overemphasize how much influence our thoughts have in our perception of experience. Studies show that if we have recently heard or seen the word *eat*, we will likely to fill in the word puzzle "S O _ P" as *soup;* conversely, if we were recently exposed to the word *hygiene*, we'll solve the same world puzzle with *soap*. Should I encounter a California condor, if my first thought is "a vulture-like predator with a nine-foot-long wingspan," my reaction to the bird, including my memory of it later, will be far different from if

I added the thought "a majestic, endangered species with a population of only 230 living in the wild."

Likewise, if I annotate the disappointing news that my elderly cat has a terminal kidney illness with "Why are so many bad things happening to me right now?" I will feel alone in my disappointment and won't reach out to others to share my sadness. I might even be less caring for the animal than if I interpret the news with "This sucks, but it was bound to happen eventually."

The Interpreter, due to our indoctrination into the dominant Western cultural ideas throughout our family interactions, our education, our bombardment with mass-produced culture, primes us toward a number of particular beliefs and actions:

- Self-sufficiency must be maintained at all costs ("I know how to take care of myself, thank you very much!"), whereas dependence on others is derided.
- Accumulation of social recognition, perhaps even fame, is worthwhile, whereas the obscurity of quietly working toward the benefit of others is humdrum.
- Being the "life of the party" means we've had a good evening, whereas spending the time listening to others means we "sat in the background."
- Perhaps the greatest delusion of all: I am a wholly unique individual with a core personality that stays

> consistent throughout life; in other words, I have a lasting identity. The Interpreter's explanations create the sense of an abiding and consistent self—an identity that's controlling all of our actions, authoring all of our decisions—the illusion of continuity where there is actually a fluid, shifting, changing stream of neural events.

The search for a lasting identity is a stressful waste of time; it's disappointing to keep looking for something that doesn't exist. The more we seek our true nature, our underlying identity, the more we find it slipping away. Sooner or later we experience a thought or feeling that doesn't fit into the scheme we've constructed. The mind is like a river through which everything flows eventually; we can have hideous, wicked thoughts one moment and in the blink of an eye have thoughts as compassionate as the Buddha's. Searching for a transcendent self amid our personal experience is a Sisyphean endeavor at the very least.

However, this doesn't mean that we have no kind of self at all. We each have a conventional identity that allows us to function in the world. We go to work and perform the tasks that keep us employed. I have a name and so do you. When I introduce myself to someone, I don't launch into a diatribe about not having a transcendent identity; I introduce my conventional self.

But the self I feel right now as I type is not going to be the same self I experience when I sit down to meditate, or check my emails, or settle in to watch a movie. I will experience

each of these settings from a different perspective, or shade of personality. If I ever believed in an enduring self, it's now barely possible; I can barely listen to my Dharma talks from the last decade, as the thinking process I hear is now utterly foreign to me.

The Buddha said there's something liberating and joyous derived from letting go of the fierce belief in self.

We change how we think and act depending on the settings in which we find ourselves. When we stop attending to our inner monologue and really pay attention to what we're saying and doing, we make an interesting discovery: we behave differently when we feel safe and secure from when we're uncomfortable. When we are around strangers, for instance, our self-consciousness makes us somewhat controlled and guarded. When we feel secure, loved, and accepted, we are uninhibited by self-consciousness and more open to things. The less self-conscious we are, the more we engage the world around us. We can dance or play, be creative, funny, or serious; emotional, passive, or intellectual. When we are secure, more fluidity and playfulness emerge.

The search for self is a yearning to be anchored, tied to meaning, while the world, both external and internal, shifts and changes. By trying to create something enduring in the midst of change—a permanent self—something which itself always ends up changing, we end where we started. But if we give up the search for permanence, we can release the feelings of insecurity.

The point may lie instead in seeking meaning relationally, in the secure attachments with others that allow us to open

spontaneously, to connect and create from an unguarded place. The meaning we've been looking for may reside in the last place we expected to stumble across it—not in identity, but in letting go of the demand for identity.

19. A MIND THAT CONTAINS EVERYTHING

ALL SPIRITUAL PRACTICE, especially meditation, fundamentally involves a change in outlook, in how we relate to the daily events of life. It's not about keeping something in mind, such as the breath, or pushing other things out of mind, such as worrying thoughts; it's essentially a purposeful alteration of how we respond to sensations, impressions, feelings, moods, and thoughts. The entire path of liberation depends upon supporting this transformation in attitude.

What point of view, or attitude, are we moving away from? The habit of identifying with our thoughts, feelings, and emotions. The default way we relate to being angry, disappointed, worried, depressed, anxious, or exhausted is to take these states personally, as predicaments that won't change naturally on their own unless we do something. We feel inclined to get involved, to either (1) control the world, including other people, in such as way as to make life as easy for us as possible, or (2) control our thoughts, feelings, and moods with the goal of creating an enduring, positive,

pleasant state of mind. We want to feel good all the time, and we spend a lot of our energies trying to make everything feel pleasant.

But let's face it, despite all the self-help books and online spiritual courses and weekend retreats with gurus and yoga and healthy probiotic natural lifestyles, feeling swell all the time just isn't in the cards. We can save all the money we need, retire, get to the perfect beach with the perfect conditions, and bang, something goes wrong. An unpleasant memory arises, or a worry about our health, or loneliness, or clouds will arrive and bring with them torrential showers. It's not because we haven't stumbled across the right way to live, or the perfect getaway; it's simply that pleasant experiences cannot last.

Fortunately, if we don't take life's neutral and even, gulp, unpleasant moods and feelings personally, as states we must remove or repress, then we manage to attain something far greater than pleasant moods: we can develop some peace and calm. For while comfort isn't meant to last, there's a deep peace that arises from welcoming and exploring each state of mind, no matter how unpleasant. Liberation is when we turn the intention to "live and let live" inward, toward our own emotions, moods, thoughts.

To be emancipated is to develop a way to simply observe thoughts and emotions. The change in attitude we're seeking is quite the opposite of the working, busy mind, which is always putting out fires, dealing with crises, getting a handle on things, making a go of it, and so on. The need to fix and solve is okay at work, but if we bring it home and try to fix

and solve our loved one's feelings, or our own feelings, we'll be stuck in an ongoing campaign that will never end.

Fortunately stress and suffering can be vastly lessened, scaled down to a place where life isn't something that has to be dealt with.

How do we achieve this? We observe and learn. What are the ways of greeting experience that create stress and agitation, and which are the approaches that reduce agitation? What are the attitudes and beliefs that produce peace, lack of agitating criticism and inner chatter, acceptance, and calmness? When are we not struggling with life? In short, we're not focusing on the content of mind—topics, concerns, fears, moods—but the way we greet and relate to these contents.

The only available orientation toward life that can cultivate calm abiding is *nonjudgmental, present-time awareness*. As we've discussed elsewhere, judgmental, or critical, awareness adds views and opinions—cognition—to our experience. And Killingsworth and Gilbert's study "A Wandering Mind Is an Unhappy Mind" demonstrates that we humans tend to spend almost as much time lost in thought as we stay focused on present-time tasks—yet being lost in thought creates distress.

So the question boils down to this: Can we stay with whatever we're experiencing? Can we experience life without commenting on it, adding to it, abandoning it? Can we stay with what's happening, without producing a virtual reality to replace our lived experience?

When we learn to really observe what's happening right now, we're invariably struck by how complete and full each

moment is. There's nothing to push through or survive, for moments take care of themselves; they pass on their own. It's not necessary to develop patience, as that appears as a byproduct of observing what's happening rather than taking control.

Practice:
How Do We Practice When Life Really Sucks?

When we encounter the unpleasant or uncomfortable, we acknowledge it, then expand attention beyond that area, to sensations outside the discomfort. We always keep the mind as expansive as possible. For example, if a stressful thought about a conflict with a family member appears, we note the thought, then enlarge our awareness to include background sounds, or the sensations of the breath, or perhaps the lights flickering behind closed eyelids. If our stomach is knotted, we acknowledge sensations beyond the abdomen: perhaps comfortable feelings in our palms.

We can open our awareness. Rather than harboring a goal to get rid of anything—even fearful thoughts—we develop the capability to be with the thoughts, sounds, anxiety, alertness. We include everything that's present in an awareness that encompasses the entirety of this moment of experience. When we allow the mind to become truly open and flooded with present awareness, the sense of a self that persists from the past to the future wanes; all that remains is a sense of

sensory completeness and freedom to fill space with consciousness. Any sense that awareness has a center begins to recede, along with the ideas of "me" and "not," and "mine" and "not mine."

When the mind is as vast as the sky, we make sense of experiences without relying on adding commentary but by receiving all feelings, emotions, sensations, memories, images. Possibilities open up; we are free to engage in different ways of conceiving ourselves, others, purpose. This is a way out of the habits and prisons of the mundane mind. In openness, space, time, self, and other are thrown into disarray. This is a practice of leaning into the completeness of each moment.

Eventually, as we put aside the need to do anything about experience, the observing mind becomes the core, underlying, foundational state of being. When we remove everything that comes and goes, we're left with awareness. Everything else—happy, sad, fear, anxiety, anger, envy, confusion—comes and goes. Awareness is constant, though unappreciated, as it's the body of water that contains all the ripples and waves that can stir us up. So the key isn't to focus on the ripples or waves, but on the lake itself, which always returns, eventually, to pristine and clear.