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The Wise Heart: A Guide to the Universal Teachings of Buddhist Psychology

by Jack Kornfield

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historic schools of Buddhism: the Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma, the eight-thousand-verse “large version” of the Heart Sutra, with its teachings on

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“Just as the great oceans have but one taste, the taste of salt, so do all of the teachings of Buddha have but one taste, the taste of liberation.”

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They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

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Whether practiced in a forest monastery or in the West, Buddhist psychology begins by deliberately cultivating respect, starting with ourselves. When we learn to rest in our own goodness, we can see the goodness more clearly in others. As our sense of respect and care is developed, it serves us well under most ordinary circumstances. It becomes invaluable in extremity.

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Suzuki remarked to a disciple, “You are perfect just the way you are. And...there is still room for improvement!” Buddhist psychology offers meditations, cognitive strategies, ethical trainings, a powerful set of practices

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When we clearly realize that the source of disharmony and misery in the world is ignorance, we can open the door of wisdom and compassion.” Each person who comes for spiritual teachings or psychotherapy carries his or

her measure of confusion and sorrow. Buddhism teaches that we suffer not because we have sinned but because we are blind. Compassion is the natural response to this blindness; it arises whenever we see our human situation clearly. Buddhist texts describe compassion as the quivering of the heart in the face of pain, as the capacity to see our struggles with “kindly eyes.” We need compassion, not anger, to help us be tender with our difficulties and not close off to them in fear. This is how healing takes place.

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Compassion is our deepest nature. It arises from our interconnection with all things. When I first came to Buddhist practice as

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As children, many of us were taught courage in the form of the warrior or the explorer, bravely facing danger. In the Buddhist understanding, however, great courage is not demonstrated by aggression or ambition. Aggression and ambition are more often expressions of fear and delusion.

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The courageous heart is the one that is unafraid to open to the world. With compassion we come to trust our capacity to open to life without armoring. As the poet Rilke reminds us, “Ultimately it is on our vulnerability that we depend.” This is not a poetic ideal but a living reality, demonstrated by our most beloved sages. Mahatma Gandhi had the courage to be jailed and beaten, to persevere through difficulties without giving in to bitterness and despair. His vulnerability became his strength.

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When we shift attention from experience to the spacious consciousness that knows, wisdom arises.

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Buddhist psychology posits that consciousness is the condition for life, and that the physical body interacts with consciousness but is not its source. If you sit

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In its true state, consciousness is simply this knowing—clear, open, awake, without color or form, containing all things, yet not limited by them. This open quality of consciousness is described as unconditioned. As with the sky, all kinds of clouds and weather conditions can appear in it, but they have no effect on the sky itself. Storms may appear or disappear, but the sky remains open, limitless, unaffected by all that arises. Consciousness is unaffected by experience, just like the sky.

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Recognize the mental states that fill consciousness. Shift from unhealthy states to healthy ones.

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become your own psychologist,” says Lama Yeshe, “you don’t have to learn some big philosophy. All you have to do is examine

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We take things very personally. The more tightly we hold self, the more problem. No self, well...[laughing]...no problem. —Master Hina-Tyana

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notion of identity, asking who we are in the midst of all these roles. As we do, we find the layers of identity opening and dropping away or dissolving gradually through

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Our ideas of self are created by identification. The less we cling to ideas of self, the freer and happier we will be.

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In dialogue with his followers, the Buddha regularly asked them to inquire into their true nature. “Monks, these things which are constantly changing, can we call them the self?” “No sir, they are not.” “Are the changing sense experiences of the body the self?” “No sir,” they replied. “Are the changing feelings and perceptions the self?” “No sir, they are not.” “Are the changing thoughts and mental formations the self?” “No sir, they are not.” “And are the changing states of consciousness to be grasped as self?” “No, venerable sir.” “In the ultimate sense,” the Buddha went on, “all these are found to be selfless.” What we take to be a self is tentative, fictitious, constructed by clinging, a temporary identification with some parts of experience. Self arises, solidifying itself, like ice floating in water. Ice is actually made of the same substance as water. Identification and clinging harden the water into ice. In a similar way, we sense ourself as separate.

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When we compare the understanding of self in Buddhist and Western psychology, the language can be confusing. For example, there is a dual use of the psychological concept of ego. Technically, in Western psychology, ego describes a healthy organizing aspect of mind. But in common spiritual parlance, ego has a more negative connotation, as in egotistical, selfish. Similarly, in describing the self, we find a sometimes bewildering multiplicity of terms, all the way from the healthy sense of self to the Buddhist description of no-self. The following diagram offers some clarification:

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The Indian guru with whom I studied, Sri Nisargadatta, used to laugh and say—“You identify with everything so easily—with your body, your thoughts, your opinions, your roles—and so you suffer. I have released all

identification.” He would explain by holding up his hand. “Look how my thumb and forefinger touch. When I identify with my forefinger I am the feeler and the thumb the object that I experience. Reverse the identification and I am the thumb, feeling this forefinger as an object. I find that somehow by shifting the focus of attention I become the very thing I look at...I call this capacity of entering other focal points of consciousness love. You may give it any name you like. Love says, ‘I am everything.’ Wisdom says, ‘I am nothing.’ Between these two my life flows.”

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policewoman can't relax and be just a human being when she's out with her friends, she is imprisoned by her identity. If a CEO can't let go of his work when it's time to care for his son, they both suffer. I think of a cartoon I saw of a family on a Martha's Vineyard beach. Everyone is in swimsuits except the father. He is wearing his three-piece business suit and holding his briefcase. His wife is laughing, “Just because you go to the office every day...” The cartoon is funny, but it has tragic undertones.

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present. As Pema Chödrön tells us, “Being preoccupied with self-image is like coming upon a tree of singing birds while wearing earplugs.” When

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“Since you are searching for understanding of self, don't ask about caste or class, riches or birth, but instead ask about heart and conduct. Look at the flames from a fire. Where does the brightness arise? From the nature of wood—and it doesn't matter what kind of wood. In the same way the bright heart of wisdom can shine from wood of every sort. It is through virtuous conduct, through loving-kindness and compassion, and through understanding of truth that one becomes noble.”

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And then there will be times when more limited roles must be fulfilled: parent, breadwinner, citizen, community member, contemplative. A mature life requires an ability to enter each of the roles given to us. Freedom arises when we hold them lightly, when we see them for what they are.

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intuitive and wise way. Yet he never forgot the importance of honoring the tangible realities of the world. On one level, everything is like a dream. On another, what

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person has seventeen thousand thoughts a day. Just as the

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meditation class, we are forced to acknowledge them all. As Anne Lamott writes, “My mind is like a bad neighborhood. I try not to go there alone.”

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When we first pay attention, we discover that unhealthy thoughts are sticky, hard to step out of, like treacle. As Ajahn Buddhadasa observed, most of the time we are “lost in thought.” Fortunately, with training, we can become mindful of the patterns of thought that condition our perception. We can cut through the sticky patterns of fear or competition, jealousy, judgment, or ambition.

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seize on trivial virtues and discount genuine faults, and in conversation they avoid conflict and seek harmony, even by dishonesty.

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feeling of insecurity, boredom, or emptiness arises, desire

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people are highly successful in their professions they lose their senses.... Sight goes. They

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A dedicated commodities trader learns to blend dispassion, rhythm, and good intuition. The best lovemaking is not about a goal.

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And it does indeed seem that happiness and simplicity go hand in hand. My good friend and colleague

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Then she returned to the United States, to her well-stocked kitchen and study, to her comfortable bed and bathroom, to piles of mail and visits with friends, to working and shopping. Afterward she said, quite simply, “Living in that concrete hut in India was the happiest month of my life.”

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relax and let my motivation be one of compassion and loving-kindness.” The absence of greed and wanting does not bring about a withdrawal from the world. Instead, we awaken to the abundance of the world.

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Benedictine brother David Steindl-Rast explains it this way: “What is truly a part of our spiritual path is that which brings us alive. If gardening brings us alive, that is part of our path, if it is music,

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mind, do it. Whether it is a gift of money, time, helping care, or offering a possession, if you even think of a generous act, follow it. Sometimes we worry that we will regret our generous acts, we second-guess ourselves,

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Don’t believe the doubts. Instead, look for any spontaneous thoughts of generosity and follow them. You will find that they inevitably make you happy. Try it.

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Those who have hate will experience the pain and grief born of hate. Anger and revenge, domineering and scolding, obstinacy and contempt are not the way. Train yourself to abandon them all. —Majjhima Nikaya When

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villagers who live in extremely poor conditions can be astonishingly happy. Happiness is within us. Studies of winners of state lotteries show that after receiving the money, the winners’ happiness increases for about two years and then it usually returns to its original level. If we were

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In our delusion we forget we are all nomads. We pretend our bodies will stay young, our children will not grow up, our fortunes are secure, our marriages will not change. Yet praise and blame, gain and loss, pleasure and pain, fame and disrepute weave an ever-changing fabric of our lives. “To call a thing good not a day longer than it appears to us good, and above all not a day earlier—that is the only way to keep joy pure,” says Nietzsche.

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“Did you never see a man or woman eighty, ninety years old, frail, with tottering steps, broken teeth, wrinkled, with blotched limbs? And did the thought never come to you that this will happen to you? Did you never see a man or woman grievously ill, sick and afflicted, lifted by some and put to bed by others, and did the thought never come to you that you also are subject to disease? Did you never see the corpse of a man or woman one or two days after death, swollen, blue-black, full of decay, and did the thought never come to you that you also are subject to death, that you cannot escape?” These are startling direct questions. They challenge our complacency; they guide us to live with wisdom in the light of death.

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temples, we also have to pass the statues of fierce guardian demons who stand at the gates. How we walk through the demons of our own greed, aggression, and ignorance is the

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absently turn a prayer wheel or finger a rosary, repeat a fossilized, rote performance out of custom or habit. Ritual can be superstitious or even corrupt. For many of us in the West rituals can also feel superstitious, silly, or awkward, like a first date (which is, of course, a particularly difficult ritual). We have a cultural discomfort with spirituality and the sacred even though

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“My life has been filled with terrible misfortunes—most of which never happened!” When we become

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cultivate the following thought. ‘If the problem can be remedied then there is no need to worry about it. And if there is no solution, there is no point in being worried, because nothing can be done about it anyway.’ Remind

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helpful, they can be based on the phrases from loving-kindness practice: May I love myself just as I am. May I sense my worthiness and well-being. May I trust this world. May I hold myself in compassion. May I meet the suffering and ignorance of others with compassion.

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well-trained mind can become so unshakable that even the loudest shock will not cause the slightest reaction. Recently, neuroscience researchers Richard Davidson and Paul Ekman fired a loud gunshot next to an adept meditator practicing concentration. This meditator showed no startle response or disturbance, a stability of mind previously unimagined by Western science.

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learning, at sea regarding the inner life. Science developed computers and put us on the moon, it gave us antibiotics and antidepressants, but it cannot guide us in matters of virtue, love, inner meaning, or spiritual understanding.

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For the protection of myself and others, I undertake the practices: To refrain from killing To refrain from stealing To refrain from harmful misuse of sexuality To refrain from false and harmful speech To refrain from the misuse of intoxicants

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Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do children as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is not safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure or nothing.

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Whenever our goodness is seen, it is a blessing. Every culture and tradition

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When we live in the present, joy arises for no reason. This is the happiness of consciousness that is not dependent on particular conditions. Children know this joy. Maurice Sendak, author of *Where the Wild Things Are*, tells the story of a boy who wrote to him. “He sent me a charming card with a drawing. I loved it. I answer all my children’s letters—sometimes very hastily—but this one I lingered over. I sent him a postcard and I drew a picture of a Wild Thing on it. I wrote, ‘Dear Jim, I loved your card.’ Then I got a letter back from his mother and she said, ‘Jim loved your card so much he ate it.’ That to me was one of the highest compliments I’ve ever received. He didn’t care that it was an original drawing or anything. He saw it, he loved it, he ate it.”

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But suffering is not the goal, it is the beginning of the path. Now in the retreats I teach, I also encourage participants to awaken to their innate joy. From the very beginning I encourage them to allow the moments of joy and well-being to deepen, to spread throughout their body and mind. Many of us are conditioned to fear joy and happiness, yet joy is necessary for awakening. As the Persian mystic Rumi instructs us, “When you go to a garden, do you look at thorns or flowers? Spend more time with roses and jasmine.” André Gide, the French novelist and philosopher, enjoins us: “Know that joy is rarer, more difficult, and more beautiful than sadness. Once you make this all-important discovery, you must embrace joy as a moral obligation.”
