

Three Book Reviews

In a slight departure from previous feature articles, I would like to review three books. The titles explore different meditation styles: Vipassna and Zen Buddhism, and Taoism. They are written by experienced Western practitioners, they describe their own personal and others' experiences and they describe practical applications to daily life. I find myself repeatedly recommending these books during classes and consultations.



***Radical Acceptance* by Tara Brach**

Brach is a Vipassna meditation teacher and a therapist. This is an easy to read exploration of how she utilizes simple Buddhist practices of mindfulness and compassion toward self acceptance. This is 'radical' because of our tendency to stay away from those parts of ourselves that most need attention and acceptance.

Excerpts:

The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change. Carl Rogers

Radical Acceptance reverses our habit of living at war with experiences that are unfamiliar, frightening or intense. It is the necessary antidote to years of neglecting ourselves, years of judging and treating ourselves harshly, years of rejecting this moment's experience. Radical Acceptance is the willingness to experience ourselves and our life as it is. A moment of Radical Acceptance is a moment of genuine freedom.

...we begin with the fears and wounds of our own life and discover that our heart of compassion widens endlessly. In holding ourselves with compassion, we become free to love this living world.

The way out of our cage begins with accepting absolutely everything about ourselves and our lives, by embracing with wakefulness and care our moment-to-moment experience. ...we are aware of what is happening within our body and mind in any given moment, without trying to control or judge or pull away. I do not mean that we are putting up with harmful behavior-our own or another's. This is an inner process of accepting our actual, present-moment experience.

Brach's writing is amazing for interweaving personal experiences with basic Buddhist principles. Each chapter ends with a simple guided meditation to explore the information presented.

***The Tao of Natural Breathing* by Dennis Lewis**

Here is a book which explores in complete and wonderful detail the simple, yet miraculous process of breathing. Lewis presents simple anatomical and physiological information as a basis for understanding emotional and energetic connections to breath.

Breathing practices are a foundation for almost every meditation and spiritual system. Even if we don't follow a system, it is well worthwhile to understand the importance of breathing to our physical, emotional and spiritual well being.

Excerpts:

The process of breathing, of the fundamental movement of inspiration and expiration, is one of the great miracles of existence. It not only unleashes the energies of life, but it also provides a healing pathway into the deepest recesses of our being. To inhale fully is to fill ourselves with the energies of life, to be inspired; to exhale fully is to empty ourselves, to open ourselves to the unknown, to be expired. It is through a deepening awareness of the ever-changing rhythms of this primal process that we begin to awaken our inner healing powers-the energy of wholeness.

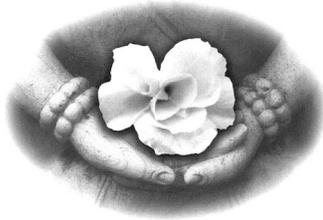
The process of breathing is a living metaphor for understanding how to expand our narrow sense of ourselves and be present to the healing energies that are both in and around us.Every time we inhale, we absorb oxygen expelled into the atmosphere as a 'waste product' by the earth's plant life. Every time we exhale, we expel carbon dioxide as a 'waste product' into the

atmosphere where it can eventually be absorbed by this same plant life. In nature, nothing is wasted. Our breath is a link in the cosmic ecology-in the conservation, transformation, and exchange of substances in nature's complex metabolism. It connects our so-called inner world with the vast scale of the outer world....

For the Taoist, the conscious cultivation of breath offers a powerful way not only to extract energies from the outside world but also to regulate the energetic pathways of our inner world, helping to bring our body, mind, and emotions into harmonious balance.

'The True (person) breathes with his heels; the mass of (people) breathe with their throats.'
Chuang Tzu

Those familiar with Taoist chi kung, will find here many useful correlations with well know techniques.



Lotus in the Fire by Jim Bedard

This book is about a long time Zen practitioner's experience once he was diagnosed with leukemia. It is a compelling and detailed account of the crippling effects of both disease and treatment. It is also an inspiring story of the practical application of meditation to real life.

A word of caution: this book is not for the fainthearted. Bedard gives very personal and graphic details about his medical experiences. And that is also part of the power

of this book. It gives us direct insight into both the severity of dis-ease and the healing power of spiritual practice. Along the way, Bedard shares how he developed the meditation practice that helped him stay present with his own healing process.

Excerpts:

'If it is true gold,' I had heard my teacher say, 'test it in fire.' Spiritual insight must be tested in the fire of our everyday life. It is one thing to sit quietly and undisturbed in spiritual retreats, experiencing peace and happiness; it is quite another to take this practice into the world in order to reify it in the midst of activity.

Several times over the next year or so I would sense what felt to me like a sudden shift of responsibility: the doctors would imply that the responsibility for my welfare was in my own hands..... While it seemed to me at the time that I was being handed a huge burden, it was just the simple truth, an acknowledgment of the facts, modern medicine realizing its limitations.

With serious illness one is quickly stripped naked for all to see. The different masks we hide behind dissolve. All I identified with as my self was breaking up and dispersing....I had no guarantee of a future, my past identity had been eradicated, and the present was demanding one hundred percent of my attention. However grim that sounds, I was now free....The leukemia had forced me to live in the present, here and now. This is the way of Zen: the ever changing entity called 'myself' responding fully to conditions of the moment, flowing from one thing to the next.

For me illness was indeed a spiritual practice, as it still is, as is good health. How can we separate our life from our spiritual practice? Spiritual practice does not begin or end with sitting in meditation, chanting, or saying a prayer.

This is the kind of personal story that moves me to tears, opens my heart in compassion, and motivates me to continue my own practice – following wherever it may lead.

We don't have to consider ourselves committed

Vipassna or Zen Buddhists, or Taoists to learn and gain benefit from these meditation practices. These three books give easy access to centuries old traditions that we may

utilize in a very practical way in our daily life. All three titles are available at the county library.

~ **Enjoy** ~

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