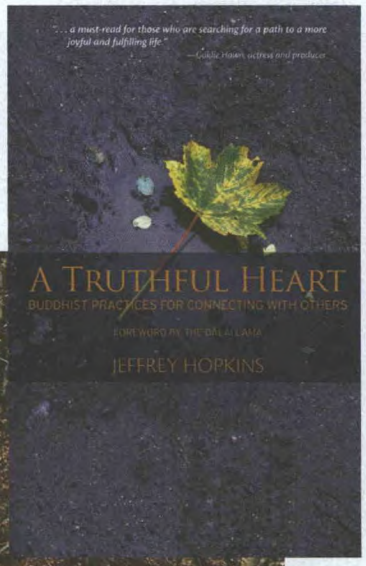
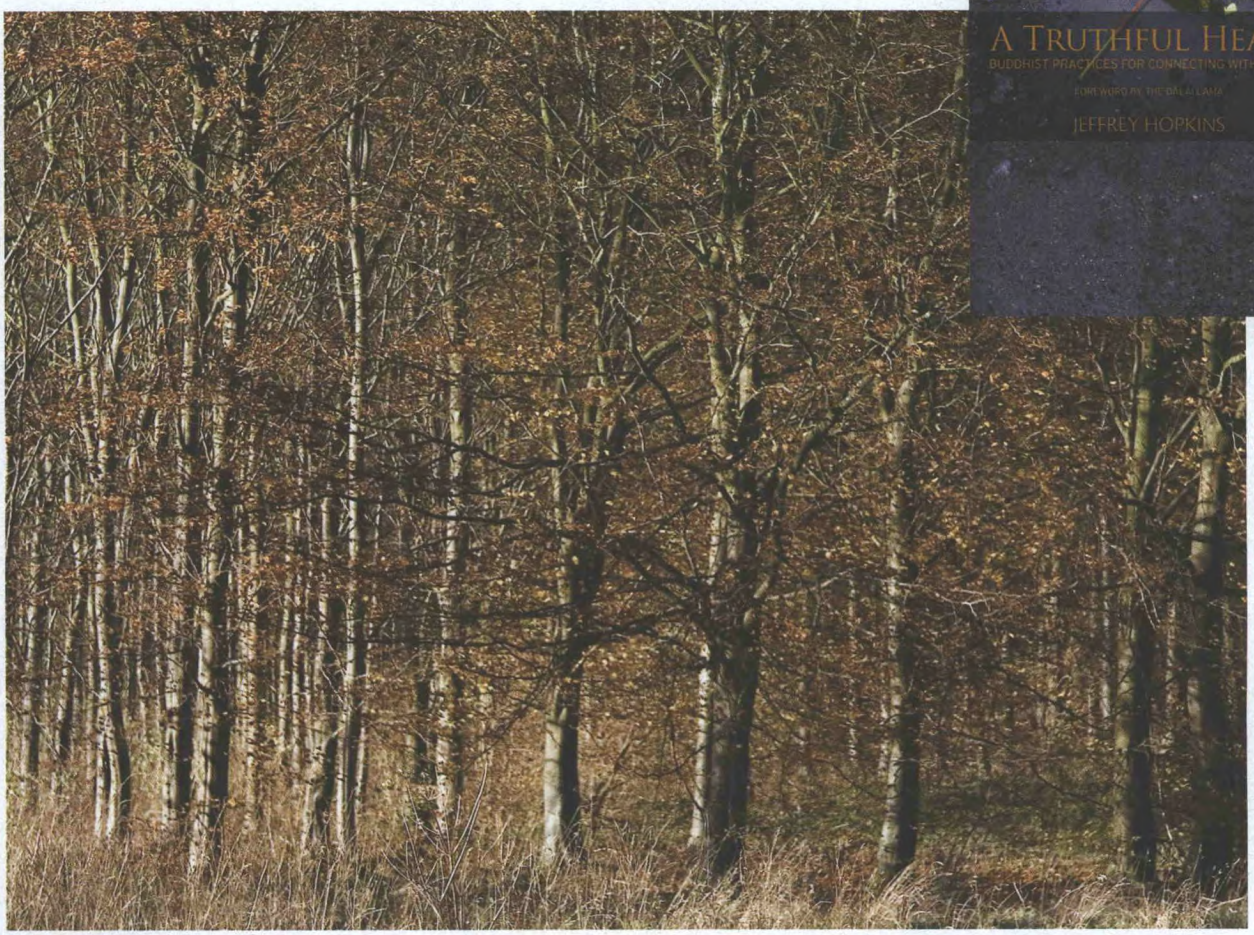
A Truthful Heart

Buddhist Practices for Connecting with Others





I grew up in Barrington, Rhode Island, and my most intriguing memory is of literally jumping off my moving bicycle into a ditch to aid a fallen friend. What made me do this? How did I react so fast?

By Jeffrey Hopkins

As I grew older, I rebelled against the hollow lives and lies of the "grown-ups" and turned into a juvenile delinquent, taking pleasure in seemingly minor affronts such as scaring old ladies by leaning out the window of a car and slapping hard on the side. Other people were totally unrelated to me, objects of scorn. By the age of fifteen, I was a member of a suburban, middle-class gang that drank to get drunk and engaged in random violence against persons and things. I puked so much I was known as "Mr. Puke." Twice I got into ferocious fights that I learned about only the next morning. This was not social drinking, which we despised as pretentious. Why did our disaffection with society turn to violence?

Near the end of the ninth grade, out of fear of the tedium of public school and of the reputation of a particularly aggressive teacher at the high school who treated students as inmates, I went for an interview at Pomfret School in Connecticut, where I was pleased to find myself treated as a human being: when the teacher who was showing me around the campus punched me playfully in the upper arm, I punched him back and he liked it! I enrolled, grateful to escape from the dreary confines of public school. During my senior year, in fourth-year Latin, the small group of us – most of us were avoiding taking chemistry – used to make fun of the alcoholic teacher, who looked ever so slightly like a pig, by oinking when he turned his back, and yet I underwent a most profound change of character watching and feeling how he explained the psychology of Virgil's *Aeneid*. Where did our lack of kindness come from?

I graduated first in my class, receiving a copy of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as my prize, and entered Harvard in 1958. In college I gave up wrestling while recuperating from a cracked rib, even though in prep school I had reveled in humiliating opponents with a half nelson – the simplest of pins, but with power so crushing that my opponents couldn't breathe. But by this time, I just plain felt that I had conquered enough people; I didn't want to do it anymore. Something was starting to change my heart.

After my freshman year, inspired by Thoreau, I retreated to the woods of Vermont, where I went on long walks, came alive to colors, dreamt out all my bad dreams, and wrote poetry. I had found a part of the way toward filling the pit of loneliness and anger that had dominated my life. When the cold weather hit, motivated by Herman Melville's *Typee* and Somerset Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence*, I set out from New York on a freighter for Tahiti. After passing through the Panama Canal, I meditated on the sky for ten days, lying on the small top deck on the windward side of the smokestack, filling my mind with the marvelous blueness of that truly pacific ocean. When I reached Tahiti, I was astounded by the fact that the other runaways had no interest in discussing their own histories; they just wanted beer and a wahine, and indeed the latter would sleep with the rich, get some money, buy us beer at the sidewalk bar, sit on our laps, diddle with us right there, and occasionally spit out the tuberculosis sputum that plagued them. Eventually, the multicolored, flashing scenery of the island became like looking into a kaleidoscope all day long, and besides, the French imperialists found out I did not have a visa; so I left. This was not what I wanted. But what did I want?

Returning to college after a year and a half, I started drinking hard again. I have a dizzying memory of trying to stare at the wooden chair in front of me during my eleven o'clock Russian literature course. One night, a friend gave me a bottle of rum for reading Beat poetry at a Harvard club (where I was almost roughed up for reading Allen Ginsberg). After drinking most of it, I wandered up to Massachusetts Avenue, where I found myself faced by a glass doorway. I

intended to break the bottle against the door, but the opposite happened: I swung the bottle, and the door shattered into pieces. Rushing back to my room, I fell facedown into bed, waking the next morning shaking from the fear of being arrested. But when it dawned on me that I was mimicking Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, I laughed a little and started regaining some of my mental health. Where did these saving moments come from?

A year and a half later, in the summer between my junior and senior years, I retreated for six weeks to a cabin on a lake at North Hadley in Quebec Province. It was hard to get to. I went by canoe, navigating the three miles of choppy water by myself. When I started out, an old man had warned me I wouldn't make it, but I used my pack as ballast and rode perpendicular to the waves. The six weeks away gave my mind the time it needed to settle down. At the beginning I was so physically depleted I couldn't go for walks, especially since the cabin was on a steep hill, but in time I got stronger and stronger and would climb up the hill every day and meditate on the sky.

I spent the rest of summer vacation in Oklahoma near a river, where I continued my practice of lying on the ground staring at the sky. I used to float down The River, as it was called, in a tube. Sometimes I would get off my tube and stare at the water moving over the rocks; I saw that what I imagined as the river was water constantly changing and that there was no river like the one that I, or anyone else, was imagining. The ever-changing water prompted an experience much like one in childhood when, on my high chair at the dining room table, I would stare at a candle flame, seeing that it was always changing. I'd stare right into the center of it, and even though it always had a yellow color, it was always vibrating ever so slightly. There wasn't anything constant there that you could call the flame, as if it actually existed for some time. These childhood perceptions coupled with staring at the sky and now the river led me to realize that nothing remains. The stuff of ourselves is like the flame or the water. What existed a few moments ago is not somehow sitting on top of the present.

One day floating down The River, I saw an old man sitting on the bank, his head drooping to one side, who looked as if he had died. I suddenly realized that his last perception in this lifetime would be no fuller than any of his other perceptions. The accumulated perceptions of a lifetime did not go into the last perception to make it scintillating and rich and profound, but rather he merely would have looked to the side, much as anyone, and then died. Experiences are not like baggage; you don't fill up a suitcase with experiences and have them with you in palpable form. I began to recognize the ultimate futility of external activities, and to turn my attention inward to a light within.

When I returned to Harvard in the fall of 1962, it was as if a coffin had been opened; I had been living my life in a coffin and had not recognized the presence of sky. The Oklahoma sky meditation had developed to the point where, when I returned to the East, suddenly there was sky there too – my whole world opened up.

I had a single room on the seventh floor of Harvard's Leverett House that last year. It faced north with an ugly view, so I covered the bay window with junk plywood from boxcars at the lumberyard that my father managed and where I sometimes worked. I put a nature scene of geese on the covered window, and covered the wooden venetian swing-blinds over the smaller windows on each side with burlap at night so that the windows could be opened slightly but no light would enter the room. I made a rug for the ugly tile floor by sewing together burlap bags from the farm where my oldest brother was working, and with the same burlap I covered the crack between the door and the hall, thus producing a totally dark room for meditation. Total darkness is, in many ways, like infinite sky.

I would lie on my bed sometimes all night long without moving, through and beyond the excruciating pain that comes with utter lack of movement, to the point where the room became alive with hallucinations and all kinds of lights. Sometimes during the day I would do my sky meditation on the banks of the Charles River. One day the sky filled with little points of light; instead of conveying a sense of distance, the sky itself became quite sparkly and low.

I was getting overwhelmed with the fragility of mind brought on by these meditations on the sky and in total darkness and with developing a capacity to put my body to sleep immediately upon sitting down, reducing nervous activity so that my body was in a trancelike state. Hallucinating at will, I followed Jung's advice to use creative imagination and developed a relationship with an eagle that I imagined would fly into my room. But this exercise seemed useless and even counterproductive – I didn't want to be swallowed up by random imagination. I was looking for something else.

A close friend who wanted to help had heard about the Lamaist Buddhist Monastery of America (now the Tibetan Buddhist Learning Center) in New Jersey. We traveled there and saw Geshe Wangyal, a wily Kalmyk Mongolian adept-scholar

who had studied in Tibet for thirty-five years. When he opened the door to his pink ranch house in the flatlands of New Jersey he revealed a Tibetan temple that filled the living room. I was flabbergasted. Never again would I assume that nothing was going on in the living rooms of America!

I didn't have much time with him and wasn't very impressed, but, for a reason I now do not remember, I came back for a second visit about a month later. I asked, "What is emptiness?" He teased, "You should know what shunyata [the Sanskrit word for emptiness] is. You are going to Harvard." But this failed to challenge me. Later in the conversation he said, "You won't be able to go into these topics seriously, but as you are going back and forth to work in Boston on the subway after you graduate, you can think about this." And he taught me a central Tibetan practice on how to develop compassion and altruism. It involves a series of meditations that build one on top of the other, culminating in a strong sense of empathy for all beings.

He talked about the foundational step of this series of meditations – the generation of equanimity, the practice of realizing on an intimate level how everyone has similar and basic aspirations to gain pleasure and get rid of pain. He spoke movingly about visualizing friends, enemies, and neutral people as equally wanting happiness and not wanting suffering. The realization of such equality is the foundation for cultivating compassion, which is the further wish that everyone be free from suffering and the causes of suffering. This preliminary exercise for generating equanimity really took hold of me when I returned to college. Meditating in my room, I would take to mind someone whom I knew. Instantly, my mind was racked either by desire, hatred, or jealousy – very obvious emotions. I felt, "This is my mind, I should be able to visualize people without these emotions overwhelming me," but I couldn't. I became fascinated by trying to conduct the meditation, thinking, "These are just appearances occurring to my mind, and I should be able to take these people to mind just as appearances." But I could not.

So I began methodically to meditate on people, going back through the course of my life. It was a matter of eventually going back to all my classrooms, where I was sitting among all my classmates, and thinking about each one: "This person wants happiness and doesn't want suffering just as I want happiness and don't want suffering." Doing this freed from autonomy the frozen experiences of my life, the fractured state of my mind. Memories of pleasant and unpleasant events in childhood were gradually reinstated. Eventually I was reconnected, reintegrated to the person who

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was crawling around as a baby. I had found what I was looking for – a powerfully beneficial technique to incrementally transform the mind into caring about others.

A month before my last exam, I was so taken by the mental transformation that was under way that I made the decision not to return to the woods to write poetry, as I had intended, but to enter the monastic life. Given that I had finished my course work in three and a half years and that my father would have to pay for the extra credits I had accumulated if I graduated, I decided to forgo graduating. Who needed a degree in a Buddhist monastery anyway! So, I moved to the monastery and I stayed for five years. Initially Geshe Wangyal had me get my books and then sent me back for my final exam (in geology). I graduated magna cum laude and received the Leverett prize for my translation of the Anglo-Saxon poem "The Wanderer." When the Leverett House master awarded my degree, he said (using my first name, Paul), "A modern-day Thoreau, a lover of nature, who travels alone through Canadian forests. A seeker after final truths, Paul is one of the most unusual and spiritually gifted men in his class." (Even now I am still inspired by Thoreau

– though perhaps not so much by his individualism – and wander in woods, overwhelmed by the beauty of it all.)

At the monastery, I learned Tibetan and practiced forms of meditation that are known throughout the vast Tibetan cultural region, which stretches from Tibet itself through Kalmyk Mongolian areas where the Volga empties into the Caspian Sea (in Europe), to Outer and Inner Mongolia, to the Buriat Republic of Siberia, as well as to Ladakh, Sikkim, Bhutan, and much of Nepal. The meditations that form the structure of this book center around cultivating compassion and reflecting on the true nature of phenomena, and to this day they remain the heart of my daily practice.

The two years following my stay at the monastery were spent doing course work in the doctoral program of Buddhist Studies at the University of Wisconsin, after which I went to India for dissertation research on a Fulbright. I quickly decided to go to Dharamsala, where the Dalai Lama lives, although I was specifically told by the director of the Fulbright Commission in New Delhi not to go there because of political sensitivities – which meant that the Chinese government insisted (and still does) that the Dalai Lama be isolated. By luck, two days later, the Dalai Lama began giving a series of sixteen lectures in Dharamsala for four to six hours each day on the stages of the path to enlightenment. Though I originally figured that a governmentally recognized reincarnation could not be very profound, I gradually became captivated by his insights to the point where I wrote several inspired poems of praise to him in Tibetan. Through a series of audiences, he took me on as his private student and eventually as his chief interpreter on ten tours from 1979 to 1989 in the United States, Canada, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Australia, Great Britain, and Switzerland. We collaborated in producing seven books, including *The Meaning of Life* (a bestseller in France). My life was immeasurably enriched through being so often in his compassionate presence and being faced with the intellectual demands that interaction with him requires.

Since starting my training, I have studied with eighteen Tibetan and Mongolian lamas, made ten trips to India and five to Tibet, published seventeen articles and twenty-three books in a total of twenty languages, done this and done that, but the thrust has always been to apply doctrine to practice and never to see doctrine as an end in itself. In this book, I want to share with you what insights I have gained from practicing techniques for cultivating compassion. I feel the topic is particularly relevant because, based on my own experience, I have learned that from the infection of an attitude of "me against the world" – when the bottom line is SELF, SELF, SELF – either despair or merciless competitiveness erupts, undermining one's own happiness as well as that of everyone around us, rending asunder the fabric of society, the very basis of a happy life. Without compassion, biting criticism of others is unchecked, eventually attacking in its own autonomous and random way even one's friends, one's family, one's own body, and oneself. Without compassion, politics becomes a matter of mere power blocks, counterproductively pushing other blocks around to the point where all interests are eventually thwarted. A compassionless perspective leads to the mania of thinking that mere economic success, while admittedly important, is the be-all and end-all of human existence; it gives rise to amoral and even immoral pursuit of money, in which one does not recognize the difference between adequate external facilities and true internal satisfaction.

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The lessons and techniques presented here are especially useful because, as they are able to gradually transform an indifferent and even angry mind into one at least a little more caring and concerned, they offer up hope for a saddened world. Lately, some have declared that this millennium will see a trend toward compassion. May it be so! Since it is not enough to be told to be compassionate, the exercises offered in this book may be valuable; I certainly have found them so.

From A Truthful Heart: Buddhist Practices for Connecting with Others *by Jeffrey Hopkins with a foreword by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. "One of the finest presentations of Tibetan Buddhist mind-training in print," said Stephen Batchelor, author of* Buddhism Without Beliefs. *© Snow Lion Publications 2008. Reprinted with permission. www.snowlionpub.com*