

## AWAKEN to...

*Compassion & Wisdom on the journey of life...*

Published three times a year by Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery, AWAKEN is a FREE bilingual Buddhist magazine that aims to help readers gain insight and make sense of life's journey using the Dharma.



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## Want your story to be heard too?

Are you touched by the stories and interviews featured in this magazine?

Perhaps you too have a story to tell, a story of how the Buddha and His Teachings so inspired you to walk the Buddhist path, or maybe a simple account of the little treasures and blessings in life? Or perhaps you are a budding poet who would like to share a prose and a verse or two about how the Dharma changed your life forever?

Whatever your story or poem may be, we welcome you to write in to us. Share your inspiring tale of faith and awakening with the rest of the world.

Send your entries to  
awaken@kmspk.org or:

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Please include your full name, address and contact details. We reserve the right to edit the stories and letters for space and grammar considerations.

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## Buddhism – a religion of happiness and mental well-being

According to a large, recent study, more than one in 10 people in Singapore will be stricken by mental illness in their lifetime, with many likely to face depression, the commonest mental illness here (The Straits Times, Nov 19, 2011). Every day, four or five people in Singapore try to kill themselves, and at least one succeeds. The people attempting suicide also appear to be getting younger, triggered by issues such as failed relationships and debts that bring on depression (The Straits Times, Nov 23, 2011). Others may be affected by obsessive-compulsive disorder (The Straits Times, Mar 17, 2012).

Perhaps more than any other religion, Buddhism is connected with happiness and mental well-being. Buddhism teaches that happiness and sorrow are our own responsibility, and completely within our control (pg 55). Everything stems from the mind, said the Buddha. “We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world,” said this great teacher. There is no greater harm than an ill-directed mind. But if we tame our mind, happiness will be the result, regardless of the circumstances. Today, a growing body of scientific research is backing up what the Buddha taught more than 2,500 years ago.

Recognising the truth that at our deepest level, we are naturally peaceful, clear and compassionate (pg 44) and making that connection with our original nature can help to heal us (pg 48).

Meditation can be an invaluable tool for depression (pg 36), whether the depression is caused by an external event or chemical imbalances in the brain. Research has shown that learning to meditate can significantly decrease the chances of relapse into depression for those who have suffered repeated bouts (pg 39).

Studies have shown that practising meditation regularly, or cultivating mindful habits or practices has beneficial effects for a range of conditions. These include stress, anxiety, depression, poor sleep and chronic pain. It also has other health benefits like reduced inflammation, improved immunity and lowered blood pressure. Read how Lisa transformed her anxiety into a gift through mindfulness (pg 57).

By being mindful, we are armed with the means to come back to ourselves and find that place of joy, calmness and peace in us (pg 46). Mindfulness notices confusion and gives us ways to dissolve it (pg 43), thus protecting us from developing mental disorders.

Download the mindfulness bell onto your smartphone (pg 62) and come back to your breathing every 30 minutes to break from the hustle and bustle of the office. Or listen to healing music inspired by nature (pg 61).

Contemplating on impermanence will also put life’s highs and lows in perspective (pg 53, 59). Appreciating the positive things in our lives (pg 63) and the fact that we are alive (pg 35) can help lift us into a more positive frame of mind too.

Have a blessed and blissful Vesak.

*Neither mother, father,  
Nor any other relative  
Can do one greater good  
Than one’s own well-directed mind.  
– The Buddha*



Yours in the Dharma,  
Sister Esther Thien



# THE PRECIOUS GIFT OF LIFE

Every morning, when we wake up,  
we have twenty-four brand-new hours  
to live.

What a precious gift!

We have the capacity to live in a way  
that these twenty-four hours will bring  
peace, joy and happiness to ourselves  
and others.

Peace is present right here and now,  
in ourselves and in everything we do  
and see.

The Question is whether or not we are in  
touch with it.

We don't have to travel far away to enjoy  
the blue sky.

We don't have to leave our city or  
even our neighbourhood to enjoy the eyes  
of a beautiful child.

Even the air we breathe can be a source  
of joy.

We can smile, breathe, walk and eat  
our meals in a way that allows us to be in  
touch with the abundance of happiness  
that is available.

We are very good at preparing to  
live,

but not very good at living.

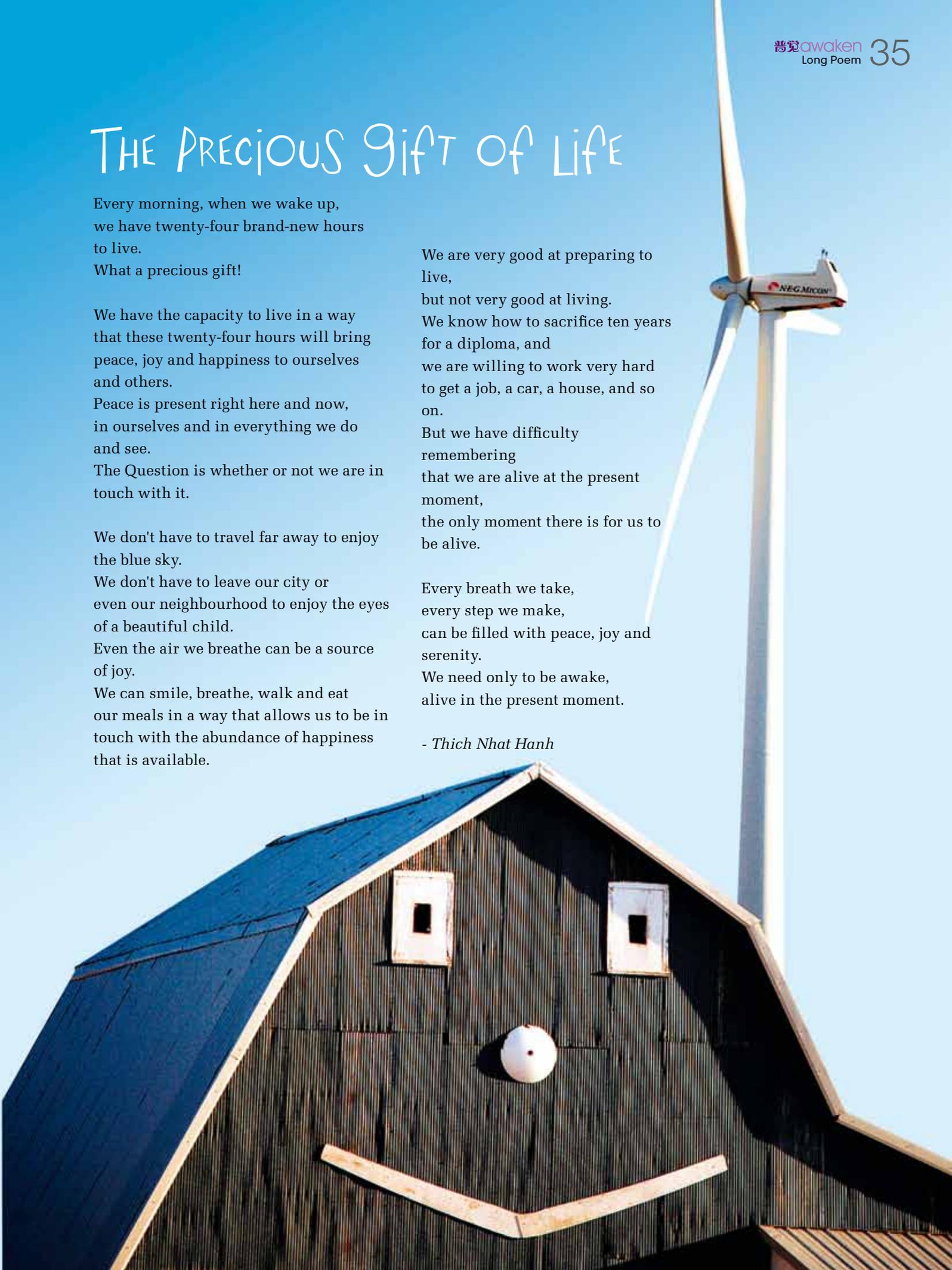
We know how to sacrifice ten years  
for a diploma, and  
we are willing to work very hard  
to get a job, a car, a house, and so  
on.

But we have difficulty  
remembering  
that we are alive at the present  
moment,  
the only moment there is for us to  
be alive.

Every breath we take,  
every step we make,  
can be filled with peace, joy and  
serenity.

We need only to be awake,  
alive in the present moment.

- *Thich Nhat Hanh*





## How can I use Buddhist practices to deal with depression?

**Q:** How can I use Buddhist practices to deal with the suffering from depression? — J

**A:** Remember that the nature of your mind is clear light, that it is Buddha-nature, so you can be free from all problems. The delusions, all the stains of the mind, are temporary. All delusions have beginnings, and can be ended. Depression results from non-virtuous actions caused by delusions in the past. But suffering which comes from delusions can be pacified. The Buddha explained all the methods and the path to do that. By practising them, you can definitely overcome the suffering from depression.

If you have depression because of a particular situation, say a relationship problem, meditate on that situation. If the depression comes without any reason, then meditate as I shall explain below.

You have a good heart, and you can develop this and expand it to all sentient beings. Just like what the Buddha did when he was a bodhisattva, he cherished each and every sentient being and offered extensive benefits to them.

There are many meditations on thought transformation, but the best one is to use depression like a weapon against your self-cherishing thought. The self-cherishing thought is like an enemy. It likes to harm you with depression. So use the depression that the self-cherishing thought has given you in the same way—you hit back at the self-cherishing thought, which so far hasn't allowed you to achieve enlightenment, not even liberation from samsara, or even any realisations. It has only made you suffer for beginningless rebirths, up until now.

As long as ego, the self-cherishing thought, dwells in your heart, you will remain trapped. It will hook many problems onto you, especially obstacles that hinder you from practising the Dharma. Ego won't allow you to have any attainment in the future, not liberation, not enlightenment. Ego keeps you mired in samsaric problems, and continuously tortures you in samsara.

When you think only about your own happiness, thinking it as the most important thing, you are actually being dictated to by your own ego. But each time you are kind to others, you are thinking more about others' happiness, there is not the slightest thought about your own happiness.

who will experience it in the future.”  
Doing so can destroy the ego.

By experiencing this for others, for countless sentient beings, depression becomes the path for you to achieve enlightenment. It becomes the path to enlighten all sentient beings, and the cause of happiness for all sentient beings. So, this should be your top meditation, it is the best one.

You can use both methods: using depression to destroy the ego and experiencing depression for all sentient beings. By using your depression to generate bodhicitta and develop bodhicitta, your life becomes more meaningful than not having depression. If you did not have depression, your life would be filled with distractions and you wouldn't practise Dharma sincerely, experiencing suffering for all sentient beings. Your depression gives you the opportunity to do that all the time.

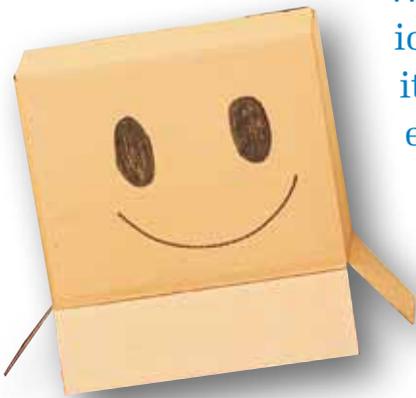
Bodhicitta is letting go of the “I” and cherishing others - letting go of the “I,” from which all sufferings come, and cherishing others, from which all happiness comes. All one's past, present and future happiness comes from cherishing others. This is the most precious thought. By training the mind in this, you completely illuminate the whole path explained by the Buddha. The self-cherishing thought causes depression and all the problems, all the delusions: attachment, anger and especially, the root of all sufferings—ignorance—which is not knowing the ultimate nature of the “I” and ultimate nature of the aggregates.

Using depression to develop compassion enables you to achieve enlightenment as quickly as possible. It enables us to free sentient beings from suffering and bring them to enlightenment more quickly. So, enjoy all these benefits of depression by thinking about them.

In this way, depression becomes like a precious wish-fulfilling jewel that fulfils your own wishes

When depression comes, use it against the ego which has given you the depression. Think and rejoice, “How wonderful

it is to have depression. This means I have succeeded in my past prayers to experience all the sufferings of other sentient beings, especially all their depression. I am experiencing this for all sentient beings who are experiencing depression now and



and those of all sentient beings for happiness: the innumerable hell beings, hungry ghosts, animals, human beings, asuras, devas, and beings in the intermediate stage.

The secret to a happy life and the key to stop depression and all undesirable, unpleasant things simply depends on your mind in labelling things as positive.

Even though suffering is the result and product of past negative karma, if, in this life - today, this minute, this hour, this second - you can look at a situation positively or think about its benefits, you experience a good, positive, pleasant feeling instead of an negative one.



So when you experience a problem, think about the benefits of the problem, and how the problem can help you to develop compassion, loving-kindness, patience, wisdom and all the positive qualities of the path to liberation.

By thinking of the benefits, you develop this precious quality of positive thinking, which brings happiness and stops you from harming yourself

and from giving harm to your family and all living beings.

With positive thinking, you are able to transform problems, obstacles and undesirable thoughts into something meaningful and beneficial. You are able to make your life meaningful. Thinking in this way brings you inner happiness and satisfaction. This wish-fulfilling thought is an unbelievably precious gift that brings forth all positive qualities of the mind and all realisations, inner happiness, satisfaction and fulfilment.

Even a billion dollars or all the wealth on this earth cannot buy this experience. If you generate these peerless, positive thoughts, you can turn any situation (such as somebody getting angry or abusive with you, or you experience failure, or your friend becomes an enemy or a loved one leaves you) into something precious: they become the causes for happiness.

Training the mind in this practice is the best psychology. When the mind is positive all the time, you are able to bring so much peace and happiness to the whole world, to the country, to your neighbours, to your family, and to yourself. In this way, your life is like the sun — constantly dispelling darkness and radiating warmth and light to every corner of the world, so that everyone can enjoy it. Your life shines on all living beings, giving peace and happiness not only to countless human beings, but to countless animals. That's incredible!

If one is able to think like this, then there is no better life than this; this is the best life, the most satisfying life. If one thinks like this, it doesn't matter when death happens, because your mind is totally happy and satisfied. When death comes, you have no regrets, and you are so full of joy and bliss. ☺

— Kyabje Lama Zopa Rinpoche  
[www.lamayeshe.com](http://www.lamayeshe.com)

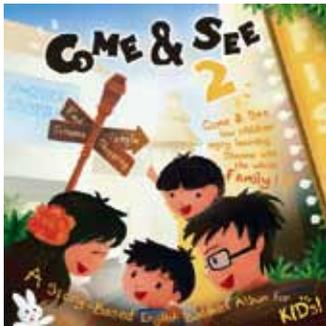
## Come and See CDs now available at Awareness Place

BY | Poh Yong Hui

**Singapore** - Parents who wish to introduce the Dharma to their children using music can now purchase the full series of *Come and See* Buddhist CDs from Awareness Place.

Produced by Viriya Productions, the four Buddhist albums for children under the title *Come and See* have sold some 60,000 copies worldwide.

*Come & See* (2005) is a compilation of eight contemporary children's songs based on the life of Prince Siddhartha from His Birth to Enlightenment. *D-Kidz Chant* (2007) is a collection of Pali chants



accompanied by music, for children to learn chanting in a joyful and simple way. *Come and See 2* contains songs to inculcate positive character development and strong family ties.

For example, the song "Birthday Wish" teaches children that giving is better than receiving expensive gifts for birthdays and reminds them of the unconditional love of our parents and how we can repay this kindness. "Food Reflection" touches on the need to be grateful and thankful for the food we eat.

*Come and See 3: Touched by Love* was released on 15 April 2012 in the form of a children's concert. The album comprised eight songs, each depicting how the Buddha preached the Dharma to both humans.

Besides launching the album, the concert was also a platform for Buddhist youth and children to showcase their talents. The concert brought together various Buddhist organisations in Singapore and Indonesia including Mangala Vihara, My Little Gems Kindergarten, D-Kidz Dhamma Class, Ean Keng Si, and Sekolah Minggu Buddhis.

*Purchase the full range of Come and See CDs at Awareness Place.* 

## Mindfulness Therapy Tackles Depression and Anxiety

BY | Esther Thien

**UK** - Mindfulness meditation is gaining ground in the UK and US as a treatment for depression and mental disorders. Called Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), it is already endorsed as a treatment for recurring depression by the UK National Institute for Clinical Excellence, and has impressive clinical evidence under its belt.

MBCT is a psychological therapy designed to help prevent the relapse of depression, specifically in individuals with Major Depressive Disorder (MDD). Growing largely from Jon Kabat-Zinn's work, it utilises Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and adds in newer psychological strategies, like mindfulness training and meditation.

Cognitive methods educate the participants about depression whereas mindfulness training helps them to focus on their breathing, body sensations, thoughts and feelings in a kind, accepting, non-judgmental way. Mindfulness training shows

participants how to notice and work with their experience rather than engage in a futile struggle to fight or run away from it. They learn to pay attention in each moment without judgment. Through mindfulness, participants recognise that grasping onto these feelings is ineffective and mentally destructive, and this awareness helps alleviate some of the suffering that arises from struggling with life's challenges.

UK research showed MBCT reduced relapse rates in people who had been depressed three or more times by close to 50%. In two other clinical trials, MBCT was found to be as effective as maintenance antidepressant medication.

In a separate US study, researchers found MBCT to be an acceptable and potentially effective treatment for reducing anxiety and mood symptoms in patients with generalised anxiety disorder. 

To neutralise free radicals that cause cell damage in the body, consume our nutritious recipes loaded with lycopene, one of the most powerful antioxidants.

Lycopene in tomatoes is said to help prevent cancers, heart disease, cataracts, amongst others. One study showed that men who consumed 10 servings of tomatoes a week cut the risk of developing prostate cancer by 45 percent.

Another demonstrated that those who consumed more than seven servings of raw tomatoes each week lowered the risk of developing rectal, colon or stomach cancers by 60 percent.

Researchers also found that lycopene is a powerful inhibitor of lung, breast and endometrial cancer cells, while in another research, lycopene in tomatoes has been found to help older people stay active longer.

## Energised Netter for Heart 益气养心烩



### Ingredients:

1pc of cabbage - cut to pieces, 1 medium size carrot - cut to strips, 3 small pcs of mushroom - cut to smaller pieces, 3 medium size tomatoes - boiled, de-skinned and set aside. Some corn kernels and cashew nuts - boiled and set aside.

### Seasoning:

1. Sesame oil, equal amount of black and white pepper mixed evenly, light sauce.
2. Corn kernels and cashew nuts from Ease & Easy Soup (refer to recipe beside)

### Method:

1. Stir-fry the mushrooms,
2. Fry the carrot for 5mins.
3. Add the cabbage and continue frying for another 15mins; add Ease & Easy Soup and place on a plate.
4. Heat the wok.
5. Stir-fry the corn kernels and cashew nuts until they are dry. Add sesame oil and light sauce.
6. Add tomatoes into soup prepared earlier, fry for 10mins. Turn off the fire and add the seasoning.

### 用料:

包心菜1片 - 切片、红萝卜中小1条 - 切成条状、香菇3小朵 - 切片、番茄中3粒 - 煮熟去皮备用

### 调味料:

1. 香油、麻油、胡椒粉黑白各半调均匀、酱青
2. 从“除烦健中汤”中取出黄小米和腰果备用(参考隔壁食谱)

### 做法:

1. 将香菇爆香。
2. 红萝卜条炒5分钟。
3. 加入包心菜再炒15分钟, 炒以少许汤, 盛盘。
4. 热炉3-5分钟。
5. 将黄小米和腰果炒拌至干松, 加入调味料。
6. 把番茄放入汤水拌匀10分钟; 搅拌。熄火不离锅, 加黑白胡椒粉。搅拌。

## Ease & Easy Soup 除烦健中汤



### Ingredients:

5 pre-packed stock-making bags, 1 medium size green papaya (de-seeded, de-skinned, cut to pieces), 20gm of cashew nuts, 2 spoonfuls of corn kernels, small amount of wolf berries - soaked in hot water for about 10mins, filter dry and set aside.

### Seasoning:

Small amount of white pepper, sesame oil, parsley, red chilli.

### Ingredients for pre-pack bag:

Aloe vera, sargassum muticum extract, rutin

### Method:

1. Soak the 5 pre-packed stock-making bags in 100cc of warm water for about 20mins.
2. Add the corn kernels and cashew nuts into 250cc of water, heat for 20mins.
3. Pour #1 into #2, heat for another 10mins
4. Take out the corn kernels and the cashew nuts. Add the green papaya and cook covered for another 10mins; do not lift cover. Reduce fire to moderate and heat for another 15mins (cover closed).
5. Add in wolf berries and seasoning, ready to serve.

### 用料:

汤煲包5小袋、青木瓜1个(中型) - 去籽、去皮、切片, 腰果20克、黄小米2汤匙枸杞子 - 用热水浸泡约10分钟, 滤干备

### 调味料:

白胡椒粉少许、香油、香菜、红辣椒糖

### 汤煲包主要成分:

芦荟、马尾藻体提取物、芸香甘

### 做法:

1. 将5袋的汤煲包放入100cc煮开水(温热适宜)浸泡20分钟。
2. 另黄小米和腰果放入250cc水煮20分钟。
3. 将#1倒进#2再煮10分钟。
4. 取出黄小米和腰果; 把青木瓜片加入汤料中, 再煮10分钟(切物行掀盖) 然后改以温火焖15分钟。
5. 再加入调味料。撒上枸杞子。端上。

BY | Esther Thien

# WHAT'S NEW

## Reduce tension, stress and pain with the healing bianstone

Bianstone (砭石) therapy is the latest therapy to rock the holistic health and healing circle. Said to be the most important aspect of Traditional Chinese Medicine in ancient China, Bianstone therapy gradually vanished due to the scarcity of good stones.

Today, this form of healing has re-emerged, when a Dr Yang discovered the Sibin stone (泗滨). Scientists in Beijing conducted tests and concluded strongly that the Sibin stone bestows the quality of the long-lost Bianstone healing. As the Si Bin stone is very rare, Bianstone therapy is only gradually seeing the light today.

Bianstone has very therapeutic effects. The ultrasonic waves emitted by the Bianstone is said to improve blood circulation and metabolism, rejuvenate the immune system, reduce toxins and enhance digestion. It is good for those suffering from obesity, high blood pressure, cardiac and respiratory problems, tension, headaches, stiff shoulders, neck pain and backaches.

One 87-year old user can even thread a needle after her eyesight became better through the use of the bianstone. Her general health condition also greatly improved. Personally, I find that it exerts a beneficial effect on my headaches and relaxes muscular aches and pain. To find out more, call 6337 7582 or visit [awarenessplace.com](http://awarenessplace.com).

*Editor: A word of caution, there are many fake bianstones in the marketplace. Only purchase from a trustworthy source.*



Scan this to watch the testimonial of the 87-year-old user



# How Buddhism helped transform my difficult times

I grew up in a stable environment. My parents were affluent enough to give me a good education but because of our social status, we thought we were the elites and so looked down on those who were less well-to-do. Later, when I grew up, I got involved with the wrong guy and ended up pregnant. He belonged to a much lower social class. Although my family accepted him eventually, he couldn't quite fit in and tried too hard to be who he was not.

During our merry-making time, we were quite happy together, but in our day-to-day lives, our differences were just too great. When we split, I nearly had a nervous breakdown. To cope with my pain, I started drinking and smoking pot and soon was an addict. I became a recluse.

Then I went to Nepal for a holiday and made some new friends. I must have accumulated some merit in the past for my new friends introduced me to their teacher, a great Buddhist master.

His infinite kindness literally melted me. I cried a lot, tears that sprang deep from my heart. He made me feel that I was not the worthless being I had come to think of myself.

He taught me that compassion is the seed of all goodness and that without loving-kindness towards all beings - insects, animals, humans etc with whom in truth we are absolutely equal - we will never be happy.

From then on, I started meditating on a daily basis and attending the prayers in his monastery. That was more than 10 years ago. Today, I am still learning so much from my kind teacher.

- E.F., 34 years old, part-time social worker

# “ Stuck on something? Use your inner-reset button to get free.”

By Susan Kaiser Greenland, author of *The Mindful Child*, and Founder of the *Inner Kids Foundation* which developed the Inner Kids mindful awareness programme for children, teens and families. ([www.susankaisergreenland.com](http://www.susankaisergreenland.com))

**N**o matter how powerful the hard drive or current the software, computer programs sometimes get stuck and freeze. When a computer program gets stuck, there's an underlying problem that needs to be fixed. But because the screen is frozen, you can't see it. No amount of clicking your mouse or hitting the escape key will release the lock on your computer. Your only recourse is a reset button.

Parents' and their children's minds and brains get stuck sometimes as well. With mindfulness, parents and youth notice that they're stuck and have a strategy to free themselves up and reset their mental 'screens' like the reset button on a computer, thereby allowing them to better see what's happening in their inner and outer worlds and start again. Here's how this computer metaphor works in the real world:

**Start by thinking of your brain as the hard drive on your computer where information about your inner and outer worlds is stored automatically.** Thoughts, smells, tastes, sounds, sights, sensations and emotional reactions are registered and stored in the brain much like data is stored on the hard drive of a computer. There's a lot of data stored on your hard drive you have probably forgotten or were never aware of in the first place. The same is true with the information stored in your brain.

**Next, think of your mind as a software program.**

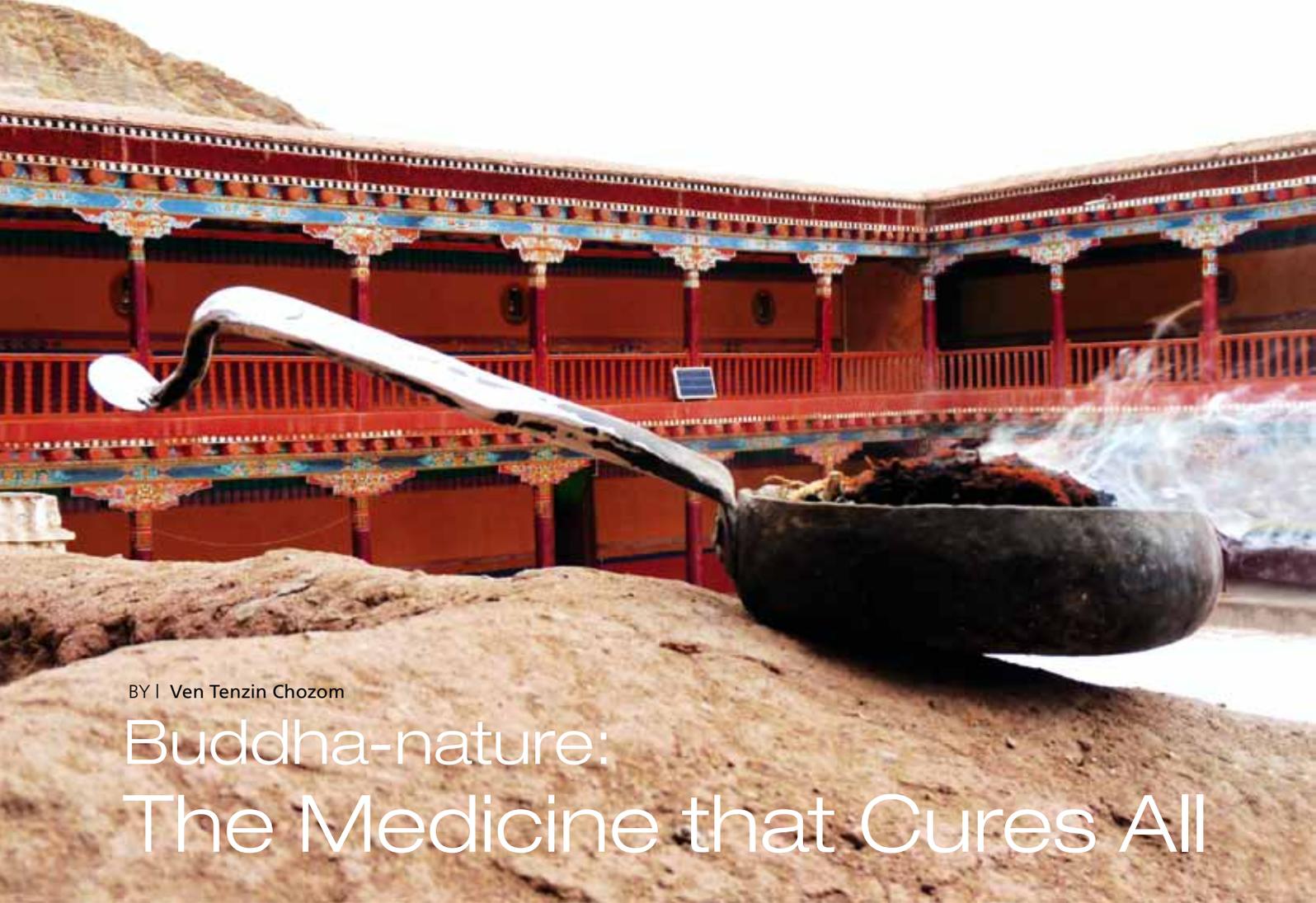
It's active and needs to be updated regularly to

eliminate the software glitches, or bugs that build up over time. These software glitches can be compared to getting stuck on something. Focused attention works like a software upgrade to reset them.

Like a reset button, mindfulness notices confusion and gives us ways to dissolve it. When we notice we're stuck on a thought or emotion we can shift our attention towards a physical sensation (the sensation of breathing, for instance, not thinking about it but feeling it) and create a physical and emotional environment more likely to free us up. We break the lock, so to speak, and are no longer stuck. Then, we can use introspective awareness to look at what's happening inside and out and see it more clearly.

Mindfulness is not a panacea. But when parents and youth put in sustained effort and practice, they can develop a strategy to notice when they're stuck, de-bug their mental software and optimise their inner hard drives to transform many aspects of their lives. 





BY | Ven Tenzin Chozom

# Buddha-nature: The Medicine that Cures All

**T**raditionally, it is taught that Buddha is the supreme doctor who diagnosed the suffering of samsara and the way to freedom with the Four Noble Truths. In the First Noble Truth, Buddha taught that everything in samsara is “dukkha” - often translated as “suffering” but perhaps better understood as dissatisfaction or dis-ease. This may sound grim but it states a sober fact, and explains why we may feel that something is never quite right and struggle with difficult mental states. It is also consoling, because it means we are not the only ones who feel this way: Buddha diagnosed this to be true for every single sentient being. We are born, we grow old, we get sick and we all die. We worry about our families, struggle to make a living and be successful, suffer from not getting what we want and always hope for something more. These were all listed as symptoms in the Buddha’s First Noble Truth of Suffering.

Why should we need another doctor from 2,500 years ago, we might ask, when today we have the

best science and technology ever to sustain life and cure illnesses? This is true, yet we are also seeing higher levels of dissatisfaction and mental diseases in the world than ever before. The World Health Organisation claims that mental health problems “are fast becoming the number one health issue of the 21st century.” Despite all our material achievements, we seem to have developed an acute case of the First Noble Truth of “dukkha” or dissatisfaction. The rapid speed of this modern age, powered by computers, smartphones and the Internet, along with our devotion to consumer culture, have us fooled into pursuing happiness from the outside in the form of money, promotions, holidays, iPhones, physical appearances, relationships and so on. But are we happy yet? The orientation of consumer culture goes directly against the Buddha’s Noble Truth that genuine happiness lies within us. So it’s no surprise that we see a lot of mental dissatisfaction in developed countries, where despite all our quick-fixes and material comforts, we find that we’re still not happy.

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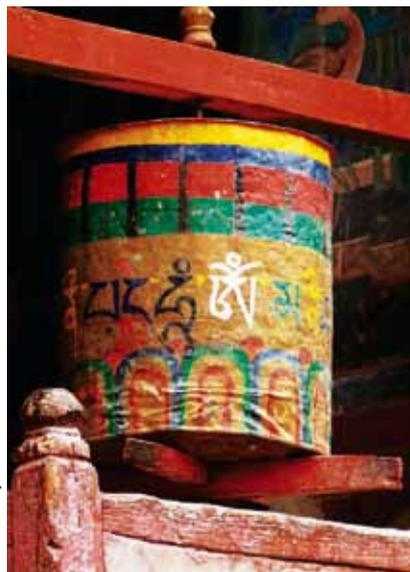
If Buddha is the greatest doctor, what exactly is his medicine? As the root of the problem lies in the mind, as Buddha diagnosed, we could say that Buddhist medicine is like homeopathy: the nature of the mind is the best medicine. Our very mind itself is the prescription.

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Buddha taught that the nature of the mind is Buddha-nature (*Tathagatagarbha*). This means that the truth of who we are at the deepest level is naturally peaceful, clear and compassionate. Our Buddha-nature is unconditioned and always present in us. When it is realised we will find that it is with us all along, but we simply hadn't recognised it. At the same time, we will feel great compassion for others because we'll see that the Buddha-nature is in them too, yet they go through so much unnecessary suffering due to not recognising it.

Therefore, to heal our minds we need to reorientate ourselves to where the real source of happiness lies – in the nature of our minds. We can begin by learning to relax and letting the mind be natural. Are we comfortable putting our phones aside and spending a few minutes in silence? If we are not willing to stop and give the mind rest from constant racing thoughts and distractions, how can we hope to have a healthy mind? A simple mindfulness practice of bringing the mind back to the present moment, for ten minutes each morning and evening, is an excellent therapy and training for the mind. Throughout the day as well, a few times an hour, we can remember to stop and relax the mind in the present moment. We don't need to force the mind to do something unnatural or to stop the thoughts. We are simply training to bring the mind back to the present where it can rest in its natural state. In the beginning, we may feel we're doing battle with a monkey as thoughts and distractions overwhelm the mind. But if we stick with the Buddha's prescription and keep

Photos: Tony



on practising, we will eventually find calm and be able to see thoughts for what they are, just harmless thoughts passing by. Such regular mindfulness practice can help us to develop mental quietude and begin to get in touch with our mind's Buddha-nature, the true source from which genuine happiness and compassion springs.

It helps to remember that the Truth of Suffering is the Buddha's diagnosis for every sentient being in samsara, that all of us are in the same boat together. Keeping this in perspective helps us to have more compassion and understanding for ourselves and others. After all, who acts impatient, controlling, angry and resentful when they are at peace with themselves? People only speak and behave badly when they are disturbed and unhappy inside. Compassion is our greatest ally and gift in this world. By remembering that all of us have the Buddha-nature within, but are suffering under the control of disturbing emotions and confusion, we can respond to others with more understanding and compassion. People are basically doing the best they can in this world at the stage they are at, and they need the love and compassion that we have to give them. The Buddha taught that compassion is our natural inner potential and we can draw on this inner strength by sharing it with others.

The Buddhist path is really a simple one. It is not a path of developing something new, but of learning to let all that covers our true nature fall away. The Buddha with his great insight diagnosed the Truth of Suffering, but his good news is that a peaceful, joyful and compassionate mind is already fully present within us, in our Buddha-nature. Everything we could possibly hope for is already with us.

*To find a Buddha all you have to do is see your nature.  
Your nature is the Buddha.  
And the Buddha is the person who's free:  
free of plans, free of cares.  
If you don't see your nature and run around all day looking somewhere else,  
you'll never find a Buddha.*

— Bodhidharma 



do with it. If parents can have this awareness of mindfulness, their children can also have a different environment growing up. Slowly, in this way, we can introduce well-being to society.

**Ven Phap Uyen:** Our society suffers from the three complexes, where people are always judging if they are superior, equal or inferior to someone. Many times, this creates a lot of competition, as people are always driving and pushing themselves harder. If one doesn't have the time to come back and take care of oneself, one gets burn out very easily. One's brain will also be very active, and the person will hear chatter in his mind constantly.

## The KEY to Mental Wellness

The monastics from Plum Village talk to Esther Thien on the ways we can safeguard our mental well-being.

**Awaken:** There is a global trend of people, especially those in the developed nations, being afflicted with mental disorders such as depression, chronic anxiety and panic attack. Why do you think this is so prevalent?

**Ven Khoi Nghiem:** Concern with mental health is a very real issue for a society like Singapore, which is profit-driven and result-driven. The quantitative aspect of the lives of Singaporeans is very high, but the qualitative aspect is more neglected. I think it is prevalent because people do not know how to come back to themselves anymore. They have lost the ability or awareness to come back and be in touch with their mind and body, when trying to go after other things outside. The Plum Village Sangha is here to share the practice of mindfulness because we see it as important for everybody's well-being in daily life, regardless of race or religion. It is important to raise the consciousness of mindfulness and spiritual practice, so that we learn how to come back to ourselves. Because a lot of people's energies are focused on the outside, at the end of the day when they come home, they find a deep, empty void in themselves. And they don't know what to

**Awaken:** How can we use Buddhist practices to heal these mental disorders?

**Ven Tue Nghiem:** We all have dreams. Each one of us has dreams that are dear to us that we want to realise. Sometimes when we grow up, we may be successful by society's standards but in the depths of our being, these dreams which we hold deep in our hearts are unfulfilled. In our chase, we get carried away and become alienated with our body and mind, and lose touch with the deepest dreams that we have. So we have to find a wholesome path that helps us to grow spiritually. It can be a spiritual path or a path of service that we are passionate about. It is a path that gives direction in our lives, connecting us to people and the world, so that we can be one with the world and not feel alienated or cut off. We can cultivate an aspiration or a vow that would help to anchor our path. Even though we may not have realised this vow, aspiration or dream, we are taking steps towards realising it and that gives us energy and joy. Sometimes, that path may not bring in a lot of money but it is more fulfilling. Even when we are living a simple life, it gives us a lot of joy and satisfaction, to know that we are doing something fulfilling.

I know there are some people who have the tendency to be depressed, the seeds could sometimes been transmitted by their parents and ancestors. But because they have an aspiration and determination to follow their dreams, they overcome their depression, or prevent the condition from forming. So following your own heart, your dream or path, or cultivating an aspiration is something we can do to prevent depression.

Going back to our breath, a simple practice, can help us to live our lives deeply and appreciate that there are so many beauties and treasures inside us and around us. Leading such a life, depression would not happen. Depression only occurs when we don't see the light in our heart and mind, or see the purpose and beauty in life. When we practise to recognise and acknowledge the beauty around and inside us, beginning with a conscious in-breath and out-breath and a mindful step that can help us to heal or prevent depression.

**Ven Phap Uyen:** We need to go to the source or root of the problem. My teacher once shared that to really help these people, we need to allow them to come back and look at themselves. If not, even if you put them in hospitals, many times, it is just a lot of medications, and covering up of the symptoms. Once the medications wear off, they are not healed. We need to use a holistic approach. Therefore it is very good to connect with nature. Be out and feel nature. It can be very nourishing.

**Awaken:** How can we protect our mental well-being via Buddhist practices?

**Ven Phap Kham:** We go back to our mindful breathing, using mindfulness to be aware of what is happening inside our bodies and minds. We calm ourselves to stop our busy minds. One of the reasons why people are more prone to developing mental disorders is because we think a lot, about many unnecessary things. It is good to go back to ourselves, to take care of our mind and body through mindful breathing, and allow our mind to rest.

**Ven Hanh Nghiem:** As people become more success-driven or business-oriented, they get more caught up with technology and material comfort, but they are not able to be in touch with nature. The expectations may also become unrealistic and one may feel lost during setbacks or low points. When that happens, one needs to take baby steps and learn how to find gratitude in one's life and see beauty in nature, so that it is easier to come back to oneself and find that place of joy, calmness and peace. And that will help to heal our mind as we see that there is joy in our being and not by meeting society's standards of status and success. As we find gratitude in the little things in life, we can then connect better with family and friends. We can be more open and

receptive to them because we have a sense of simple stability. That will help to enhance our mental well-being, as we feel more stable in our being. We can find ways to nourish our spirit, and be better able to listen to others.

**Ven Phap Uyen:** Connect with nature. Have a stroll in the Botanic Gardens. Have things around your work desk that can help you in your practice, especially for moments when you are stressed; install a mindful clock application in your computer that rings every 30 minutes to remind you to stop and breathe mindfully. Or have a screensaver that says: "Breathe and smile!" or you can have little notes posted around your cubicle. Every morning, when you wake up, write three good things about yourself. Or you can also try having 52 playing cards with words like compassion, gratitude, kindness etc. Shuffle the cards and draw one. Then try to practise that quality for that week. The more we do that, the more it deepens our aspiration and builds our inner well-being.

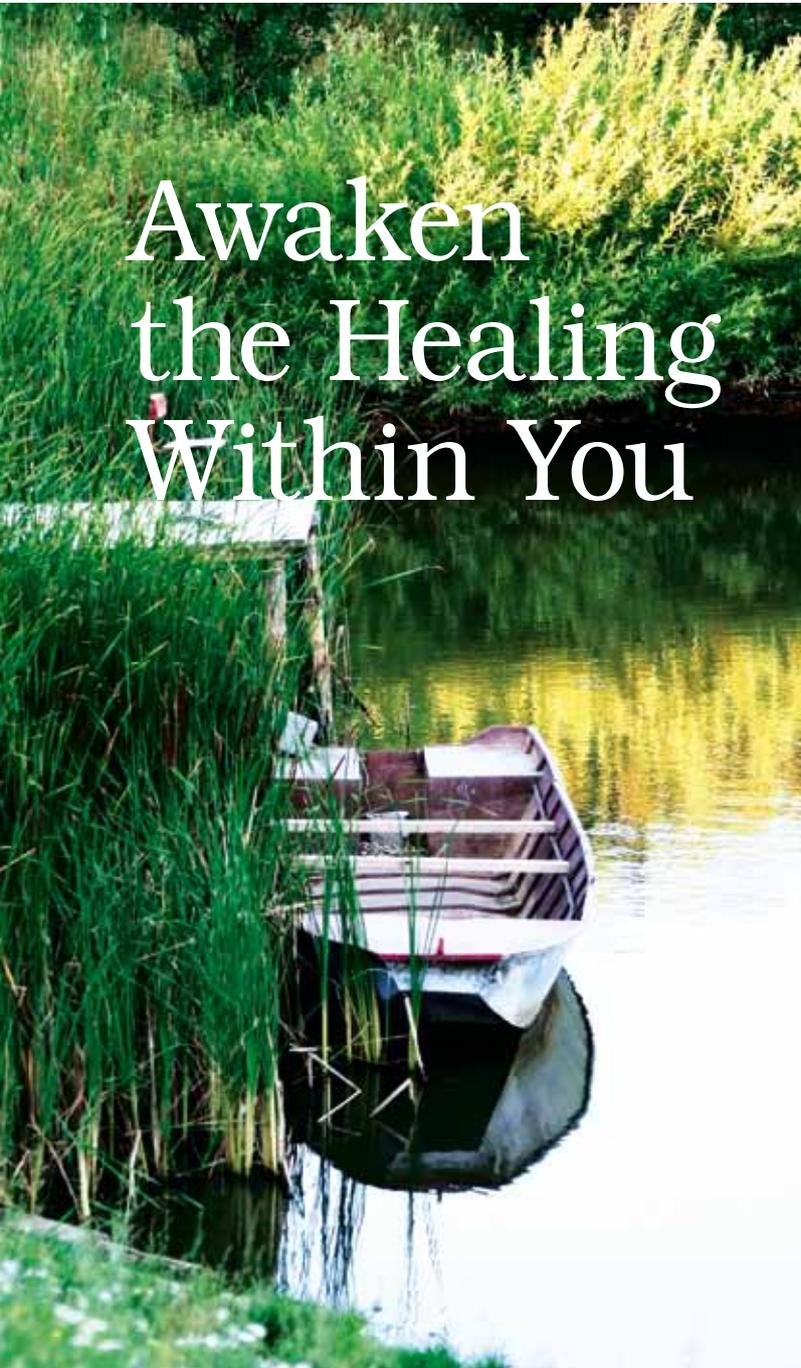
**Awaken:** How can families and friends help those who are stricken with these disorders?

**Ven Phap Kham:** We can offer songs of mindfulness and our joy and presence to nourish them.

**Ven Phap Uyen:** When people are depressed or anxious, we need to pull them out of their thinking. So we need them to focus on their bodies – do physical activities like gardening or take them out for a walk. Get them to join a community of practice for support. For those who feel suicidal, we have to give hope to them.

**Awaken:** How can we teach children aged six to 12 to deal with painful emotions?

**Ven Tue Nghiem:** The Plum Village monastics have noticed that the children here are not exposed to nature much. They seem to have some kind of resistance and it is a pity because nature is a source of nourishment. Expose the children to nature and allow them to see and appreciate the beauty of nature, so that they can find nourishment and joy in this beauty and the connection between them with the earth and nature. 



# Awaken the Healing Within You

John Wong speaks to Esther Thien on his journey in reversing paralysis and blindness to become someone who now passes the light on.

At first glance, John Wong looks like your regular Singaporean. But beneath his smart and confident façade lies a story that is both inspirational and transformative.

## Difficult teenage years

During his growing up years, John was an angst-ridden youth, who constantly felt angry and helpless. He often questioned the existence and purpose of life, and thought a lot. At that time, he was searching for an answer as he couldn't accept the many things he saw and experienced in life. His mind was so active that eventually he developed health problems. "I suffered from sleeplessness. I just couldn't sleep at all for months, virtually for almost a year," John recalled. This led to depression as he was relying solely on his willpower to sustain his daily existence. He also developed severe bodily allergies. "I couldn't bathe at all. Just touching water caused sharp pain and itchiness that was so bad that I needed to dial for an ambulance."

The doctor suspected that he had manic depression, as he couldn't even be bothered to breathe and was blank all the time. But even with all the suffering that 17-year old John had to endure at that time, he realised "that deep down inside every mental patient, there is a normal self locked up within wanting to break free, and so there is hope for recovery."

Somehow that experience allowed him to gain a certain spiritual wisdom and strength to accept things in life the way they are. He went back to his Buddhist practice of chanting from his heart. He gradually recovered, went on to further his studies and graduated from university.

eyesight deteriorated. From then onwards, things spiralled downwards.

Eventually, the illness progressed to complete paralysis from the neck down. Upon examination by a doctor, he had to be admitted into the hospital immediately, and was diagnosed as suffering from multiple organ dysfunction. “My heart, bladder, bowel, large and small intestines all malfunctioned. I also lost my sensation of touch; I couldn’t feel anything. And I went blind. I felt like I was living a ghostly existence, shut off from the world. Every day was a physical torment, from all the pain the malfunctioned organs were giving me. I felt like my organs were being badly punched daily. As my ribcage was paralysed, it was pressing onto my lungs, and I couldn’t sleep well as I couldn’t breathe normally. I felt it was better off to be dead at that time, thinking too that I was a burden to my elderly parents.”

The doctors also had no answers to what he was suffering from. He was put on a cocktail of medications and treatments. Eventually, the doctors discovered that his nerves had experienced extensive damage. As nerves cannot regenerate, all the doctors felt he was a lost cause and would never recover, or be able to walk, dance or drive again.

Today, John is talking normally, has regained his eyesight, and can walk and drive.

### How healing happened

While at the hospital, John started thinking about Buddha-nature, about the true nature of beings, and the suffering he and many others had to go through. He realised that although he couldn’t speak and chant at that time, he could meditate and ponder with his heart.

One day, while meditating, he made a connection and had a flash of insight. From that day onwards, having faith in one’s innate nature, he believed he could recover. It took him a lot of spiritual courage to transcend and discard his ego, to discard what he had learnt medically, and just to focus on healing and believing that he could recuperate based on Buddha-nature or the original nature.

“Day in, day out, I visualised that my nerves were recovering, that my body was in harmony and I was recovering. I also used my breath as my practice.”

### A sterling career

Upon graduation, John embarked on a career in the life sciences industry as a molecular biologist. He delved deep into the research of how the body works, and was one of the pioneering few who introduced the ground-breaking, new technology called tandem mass spectrometry into South-east Asia. “I was given the opportunity to fulfil my dreams of giving training and lectures to doctors and professors, as universities had yet to teach this new technology,” he said. He travelled extensively with his team of scientists. In his late twenties and early thirties, he was at the forefront of food and water safety, environment management and hospital care. A workaholic, he worked seven days a week, often till the wee hours of the morning. He did not sleep for a stretch of four months in order to complete a project, for which he won a top award internationally. “Thinking back now, I felt I was foolish. It was just not worth it for the things that were to come.”

### Turning of the tide

In December 2004, the tides turned. “Suddenly, I couldn’t walk; I couldn’t operate the light switches with my hands properly; I couldn’t bathe normally as I would fall in the bathroom; and eventually, I couldn’t drive as I would go into coma suddenly while on the road.”

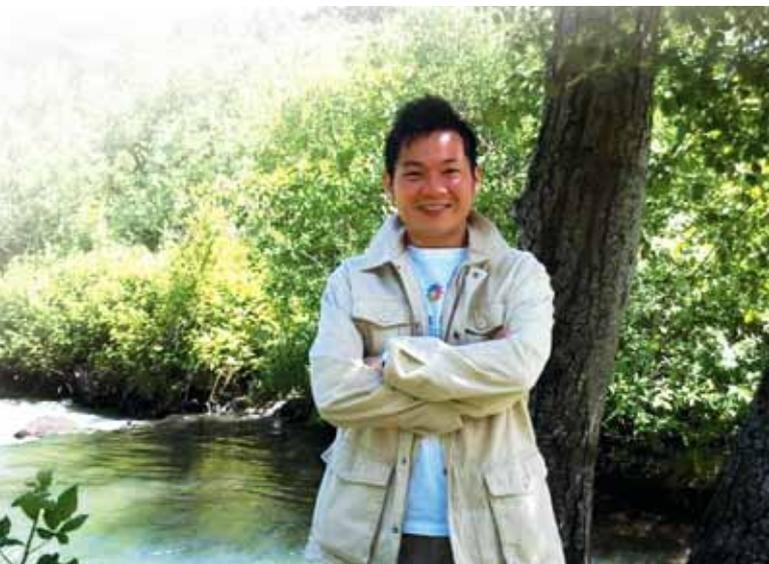
John went to the doctors. They did a nerve test on him and declared that he had to be admitted immediately. Still, the doctor discharged him a month later as they couldn’t pinpoint what he was suffering from.

He still couldn’t control his limbs or balance himself. He would fall when he tried to walk and he had to eat with a spoon strapped with a rubber band onto his hand. He also had weird visions, and his

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Having experienced it in his own healing journey, John also said he is now all the more convinced by the power of distance healing via prayers. “Research has proven that prayers work. It has been proven in the labs that mantra with its certain energies has a positive effect on the human body.”

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Even after he was discharged three years later and went back to work partially blind with walking and balancing problems, he endured the recovery process. But he also became richer spiritually. “Once, due to medication, my condition became worse. I couldn’t get out of bed and everyone was asking me to accept the fact and not fight it anymore. I asked myself: ‘What is the true meaning of acceptance? When is one being overly stubborn and attached, and when is one being courageous, with faith?’ My parents journeyed with me and never gave up on me. My mum chanted with me and in the process healed the tumour in her own womb. When my mum and I were about to give up nine months later, my mum had a moving spiritual encounter three days after I silently asked for help. That inspired hope in us.”

Today, John shares his experience with others through the book he has written that documents his own healing journey. He also shares his experience face-to-face with chronic patients in hospital to help these patients heal themselves by encouraging

them to make the transcendental connection, or connection to their Buddha-nature. “Tumours have disappeared, comatose patients have awakened, even paralysis or mental illnesses have been overcome. People from different religions, and even those with no religion, have healed through making that connection.”

As a parting shot, John exclaimed: “Have absolute faith in our own true nature. Our mind influences matter. Our thoughts and beliefs are very important, and we must take ownership and responsibility for our own recovery. True healing can only begin from within.”

**Q:** There is an increased trend of mental disorders, and many more people these days are diagnosed with chronic depression, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) and anxiety disorder. According to a March report in The Straits Times, Singapore is the OCD capital of the world, with around one in 30 people suffering from it. Do you have any advice for these people and their families?

**A:** People with such illnesses are advised to pray from the heart rather than from concentrating the mind, as the latter could be hard. Whatever comes to the mind, let it come and go.

Get a good, professional and experienced counsellor. With his help, learn to find acceptance with the things that disturb you mentally. Having the support of family and friends is also very important.

**Q:** What can such patients do in their daily lives to assist their recovery?

**A:** The patients must have the innermost desire that they want to recover. Even in the most delirious case, there is a normal self locked up deep down inside. They need to seek correct medical help, and suitable counselling techniques. Most of all, they need to understand that they can recover, but they must be patient as it takes time. Never give up! 🍀

Visit [transcendentalconnection.com](http://transcendentalconnection.com) to read more about John.

The Merits of Producing Buddhist Teachings and Buddha Images

1. One's light karmic misgivings will dissolve, while heavy ones lighten.
2. One will be protected by devas, and be unharmed by natural and man-made disasters.
3. One will always be free from the suffering of hatred and vengeance.
4. One will be unharmed by yaksas, evil spirits and wild beasts.
5. One's mind will be at peace, free from harm and nightmares.
6. One's complexion will be radiant.
7. One will be full of auspicious energy.
8. One who practises the Dharma wholeheartedly will have adequate living necessities.
9. One's family will be harmonious and be blessed with fortune and wisdom.
10. One who practises what one preaches will be respected and loved by all.
11. One who is dull-minded will gain wisdom.
12. One who is ill will gain health.
13. One who is poor will gain wealth.
14. One will be free of being reborn in the negative realms.
15. One will be able to help others grow in wisdom and gain great merits in doing so.
16. One will always be able to learn the Dharma, till one's wisdom and spiritual penetrations are fully grown and one becomes a Buddha.

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Issue 23

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"The religion of the future will be a cosmic religion... if there is any religion that would cope with scientific needs, it would be Buddhism." - Albert Einstein

For more information on Buddhist activities for youths, please visit [bvtm.sg/kings.org/youth](http://bvtm.sg/kings.org/youth)



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**T**houghts of death and putting an early end to life are not uncommon and occur to many. You may have had morbid thoughts about dying and ending your own life, or perhaps you know of someone who holds such thoughts.

### Depression could be the cause

Clinical depression - a serious medical illness linked to changes in the biochemistry of the brain - is believed to contribute to at least half of all suicides. It affects the way a person feels about himself and how he thinks about things. Characterised by overwhelming feelings of sadness lasting for more than two weeks, clinical depression is very different from a temporary case of “the blues” triggered by an unhappy event.

Depression is often accompanied by a loss of interest in life, a sense of hopelessness and helplessness, and can be triggered in somebody who is going through stressful or traumatic life events, or who is terminally ill. Such distressing feelings generally require the attention of a healthcare professional and medication. If you or someone you love needs help, you can call:

- › Shan You Counselling Centre at 6741 9293
- › The SBL Vision Family Service Centre at 6544 2263
- › Hearty Care Centre at 6295 4622 or 6295 4749
- › Whispering Hearts Family Service Centre at 6795 1008
- › Samaritans of Singapore's 24-hour suicide prevention helpline at 1800 221 4444

### Death doesn't end the suffering

People who contemplate committing suicide may think that suicide is the only way out to end all their pain and suffering. But in Buddhism, death is only the beginning of another cycle of pain and suffering for oneself and others, because one's mindstream does not die.

According to the first teaching of the Four Noble Truths taught by Buddha, life is full of dissatisfactions. All the stages of life - birth, ageing, sickness, death – and all the ways of being, wanting and striving are conditions of dissatisfaction. However, the Buddha also taught that an end to a dissatisfactory life is possible with the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Buddha taught us to realise the *impermanence and insubstantiality* of both life and death. Everything changes constantly. Nothing stays the same. Rain might come after sunshine, but so does sunshine after rain. Whatever unfolds in life is impermanent, all suffering comes and goes, nothing stays the same. What is more important is to let



**SUICIDE  
DOESN'T END  
THE SUFFERING**

BY | Esther Thien

## go of your attachments, to tame your mind and avoid creating more causes of suffering.

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By realising that people (their personalities, interests and attitudes) and life situations are constantly changing, it becomes possible to approach each moment with an open mind. One is then able to react and adapt to new situations without clinging to fixed ideas and expectations.

Understanding that each phenomenon comes into existence due to its own causes and conditions, we can live more in the present without clinging onto the past or worrying about the future.

In Buddhism, the mind is seen as central, the cause of both suffering and happiness. The mind is the primary factor that determines the well-being of each person. Through meditation and counselling, the perception of reality for those with persistent negative thinking can be adjusted. This will enable them to better cope with the unexpected changes that life throws at them.

### **Buddhist perspective on suicide**

If one knows how to treasure oneself, one should protect oneself well.

~ *The Buddha (Dhammapada)*

According to the Buddhist teaching of cause and effect, since one does not realise the truth of all phenomena, or does not practise to be liberated from life and death, suicide is pointless. When one's karmic store is not exhausted, death by suicide only leads to another cycle of rebirth. This is why Buddhists do not support suicide; and instead, encourage constructive living, using this life to diligently practise good, thus changing the present and the future for the better.

~ *Chan Master Sheng Yen*

Some people commit suicide. They seem to think that there is suffering simply because there is the human life, and that by cutting off the life there will be nothing... But, according to the Buddhist viewpoint, that's not the case; your consciousness will continue. Even if you take your own life, this life, you will have to take another body that again will be the basis of suffering. If you really want to

get rid of all your suffering, all the difficulties you experience in your life, you have to get rid of the fundamental cause (greed, hatred and delusion) that gives rise to the aggregates that are the basis of all suffering. Killing yourself isn't going to solve your problems.

~ *H.H. the 14th Dalai Lama*

There is no worse misdeed than suicide. It is extremely detrimental. When people commit suicide, later in the Bardo state, they will experience the same suicide again and again, every day, for a very long period of time, with no escape. They will have to undergo this pain repeatedly. People commit suicide because they want to end their suffering but actually they cannot escape from it by committing suicide. Their suffering will only get worse and be even more unbearable. Changing the body will not change their suffering because suffering comes from the mind and the mind cannot die. The cause of a person's suffering is not in his body, it comes from his mind. So if you ever want to be free from suffering you must tame your mind. Regardless how difficult an external situation is, if you do not grasp at it, you will not suffer.

~ *H.E. Garchen Rinpoche*

Taking one's own life under any circumstances is morally and spiritually wrong. Taking one's own life owing to frustration or disappointment only causes greater suffering. Suicide is a cowardly way to end one's problems in life. A person cannot commit suicide if his mind is pure and tranquil. If one leaves this world with a confused and frustrated mind, it is most unlikely that he would be born again in a better condition. Suicide is an unwholesome or unskillful act since it is encouraged by a mind filled with greed, hatred and delusion. Those who commit suicide have not learnt how to face their problems, how to face the facts of life, and how to use their mind in a proper manner. Such people have not been able to understand the nature of life and worldly conditions.

~ *Venerable K. Sri Dhammananda*

This human body and life is difficult to attain but is now attained. The Buddha's teachings are difficult to encounter but are now encountered. If we do not use this precious body to help ourselves, till when shall we wait to save ourselves? 

~ *Buddhist Saying*

I first met Ted, a musician, two years ago. He was then grieving the death of his beloved daughter who had committed suicide. His two sisters had also passed away one after the other. I told him about Dr Steiner's writings on the importance of staying connected with our loved ones after they have passed away, in particular by sending love and blessings to them. I met Ted again recently and he appeared happier. He related that he was doing well personally and financially. How did he emerge from his grief and sorrow? I asked him curiously. He said he discovered messages that came from the spiritual realm. As a result he understood the continuity of life, positive thinking and the Law of Attraction. He practised it in his life, focusing his attention on positive thinking and on what he wanted. In doing so, he freed himself of sadness, fear and anger.

He had close encounters with death many times during the Vietnam War, and had reacted to these with anger. At that time he did not understand that we live in a multi-dimensional world. He never considered the existence of life beyond our three-dimensional perception. Since the death of his daughter, he has been communicating with the non-physical dimension, especially when he performs on stage. He consciously invites musicians from the spiritual realm to perform with him, and he discovers a different experience in his fingers when he plays the guitar.

I asked him to provide a few examples to illustrate the Law of Attraction with thoughts. He said there was a person who borrowed a large sum of money from him and had refused to return it. Every time he thought of this, he became angry and even thought

of harming this person. When he understood the principle of negative thinking attracting more negative events, he swiftly shifted his attention. He thanked this person for helping him to realise the need to transform his thoughts in order to attract what he wanted. Consequently, this person returned the money.

---

Every day, he wakes up thinking that each day is a new beginning, and that he can choose to put his attention on what he envisions and what he wants. Happiness is a choice; life is meant to be joyous. "My happiness does not depend on others, it depends on me."

---

He chooses not to watch the news, neither does he follow the economic situation. Ever since he transformed his habitual ways of thinking, placing his attention instead on the positive and optimistic, his life has improved in many different ways. He upgraded his house; his wealth

*Letting Go of  
Sorrow, Reconnecting  
With The Joy of  
Life*

BY | Dr Lai Chiu Nan

improved; he made new friends, and most importantly, he is happy every single day. He feels love for people and



situations, and only wishes to contribute to make a better world. It is a miraculous breakthrough for someone who used to be addicted to alcohol and drugs. The songs he composes now also reflect his joyful attitude towards life.

There are steps to follow for us to move from sorrow to joy. It requires our commitment to improve step by step – from despair to sorrow, sorrow to rage, rage to acceptance, acceptance to hope, and finally, joy. He advised against resistance and resentment because this would only reinforce what is being resisted and resented.



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If we focus on dissatisfaction, we will attract more of what's dissatisfactory. Those who like to complain will have endless things to complain about. On the other hand, one who has gratitude will attract more conditions to be grateful for.

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People generally pay attention to obstacles, misfortunes and dissatisfactions. Even the news mirrors our inner world. What usually gets reported in the news are catastrophes, criminals and misdeeds. As a result, mass-consciousness

is reinforced with all that is undesirable. We can change this when we shift our focus to what's positive and optimistic. It works the same way in our body. We tend to focus on areas in our body that are uncomfortable, painful and diseased. If we shift our focus to promote and improve health, the body will naturally heal itself of pain and disease.

We need time to overcome our mental habits. As the first step, we have to understand we attract what we feel, experience and encounter, just like trauma creates more trauma. If we wish to change this, we need to release trauma. Contemplate on what we truly want. What do we want to attract into our lives? What kind of feelings do we want to have? Emotions are the greatest attractive force; positive emotional feelings attract more situations for us to feel positive – gratefulness and rejoicing are the best feelings to practise.

Decide upon awakening that today, no matter what happens, I will be grateful. Rejoice in all that we have, including people whom we dislike and consider our enemies. Rejoice in whatever good that happens to them. Dr Mitchell May mentioned once about someone who always said 'Thank you'. This person was full of joy and had the ability to heal. Even a handshake with him healed sick people. Many years ago, one meditation teacher of mine also said 'Thank you' at all times, even when she accidentally dropped a bowl of soup onto the floor. Jack Schwarz emphasised that we are able to heal ourselves when we are in a happy, enthusiastic state. In our modern time, we can work together to transform our adversities to favourable conditions as Ted said, "I live in an amazing world, an amazing place. Life is beautiful! I can decide to improve my life, I feel abundance, I feel blessed." 🌿

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BY | Lisa

## Transforming Anxiety into a Gift

**M**y name is Lisa. I am 37 years old and ‘suffering’ from panic disorder with agoraphobia. I say ‘suffering’ in inverted commas because I don’t quite see it that way now. My life was nothing short of destroyed because of my anxiety disorder. I am sharing my experience so that it may give you hope when things get tough and you feel like giving up.

I was 11 years old when I had my first bout of anxiety. I forgot about this peculiar episode, but the feelings of anxiety would lurk in the background and this indescribable urge to ‘run’ continued. I saw a couple of doctors but no one knew what the problem was so I learnt to keep it to myself and just ‘get on with it’. Life went on as usual. In 1990, I was put under severe stress. My partner lost his job. We were on the verge of losing our home. We slipped further and further into debt and I couldn’t see a way out. I became desperately concerned but I hid all these thoughts and feelings and fought anxiously to regain control of my life. The anxiety grew worse but I ignored it and carried on thinking that it would go away, as it always did.

It didn’t this time. I reached my breaking point and panic attacks ensued. Terrified, I retreated to the safety of my home. Still the panic attacks didn’t stop. My life just got more and more out of control. I was afraid to go out, afraid to stay in and falling

asleep was my only respite. In an attempt to control my attacks, I drank alcohol, not much, just enough to numb my feelings. I thought I was going insane and I couldn’t see a way out. I lived in this way till 2004. One day, a little voice told me enough was enough.

I checked up the Internet and read everything I could on panic disorder, agoraphobia and on all the different treatment options. I was amazed at how attitudes had changed over that decade I spent alone, and by the sheer amount of information and support. Something within me clicked, perhaps I could get better; perhaps I could get my life back! That year, my partner and I decided to go our separate ways and I met someone new. I told him straight away about my disorder and he didn’t bat an eyelid. He accepted me just for who I was and I had finally found someone I could share my innermost fears with; someone who did not judge me. It helped me understand that I had defined myself by my disorder, and yet I was much more than that.

Next, I took a telephone cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) course and set some goals to work on my avoidance behaviour and started a relaxation programme. I also decided to see a therapist to work on my self-esteem issues (panic disorder can reduce our confidence to nothing). I made some great strides and my world started to open up again but I was still

nagged by this feeling that I would never get better and I would always have to live with it. I think this was the flaw in my thinking and perception that hindered my progress. Although I was much better, I still couldn't break free from the grip of my panic disorder. Through more water under the bridge, more reading, more personal discoveries, I become who I am today. I have changed beyond all recognition, yet I am still the same person. Today, I believe I can recover, that I am recovering and that I will recover completely, and because I think I can recover, I will.

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**We are, after all, what we think we are. My perception has changed; anxiety is no longer the terror it used to be. It is now a gift, a chance to wake up and be who I really am. The anxiety was a cry for help from deep inside but I didn't listen. I am learning to accept and work with my anxiety and to let it flow through me so that I truly learn it cannot hurt me.**

---

How has this happened? Well, I decided to take full responsibility for my life. I stopped hopping about, looking for the elusive miracle cure and decided to take action. I knew how hard it would be but I also decided I would rather face up to my disorders than live that way for the rest of my life. Long-term satisfaction became more important to me than avoiding panic. This attitude didn't come overnight; I fought to cultivate this everyday. The past year had been an incredible roller coaster ride in which I found out all sorts of things about myself that I never knew. This has become a journey of self-discovery and learning. I have devoted myself to my own well-being and mental health, and have come to realise that this is not selfish; this is compassionate and skilful action and this is fundamental if we are to get better and help ourselves.

I now meditate every day as a form of relaxation and a mindfulness technique. I participated in another course of mindfulness-based CBT and read many books on the subject (knowledge and education is vital). I read everything I could on panic disorder and accounts of people who had recovered and

how they succeeded. I have also addressed some childhood issues and how my own low self-esteem has impacted on my anxiety disorder. I now see a brilliant therapist and we discuss everything and she accepts me for who I am. But most of all, I am working on this; I am working so hard every single day and simply loving it!

Every day, I am out there practising and practising. It is hard work, exhausting sometimes, but it can be exhilarating, like when I walk with my dog in the brilliant sunshine, kicking the fallen leaves around and running through the grass, just glad to be alive, glad to be free. This is so rewarding! I am, at last, at 37, finding out who 'Lisa' really is. What makes me happy, anxious, angry or sad and in this process I am learning to respect myself just as I am. And as I do this, I find myself softening and opening up; I find I can accept my anxiety as it rises and each time I do this, with patience and kindness, I get to realise more and more that the anxiety is nothing to be afraid of. They are feelings within me, and although powerful, if I feel them, rather than resist them, the anxiety just flows through and disappears.

This is where I think my own recovery rests; in a complete perception change. We all know intellectually that anxiety will not kill us but when we are in the midst of it we don't believe this. This is what I am working on, seeing it through, being with it, learning from my experience and not turning away from it. I am coming to realise that I am not hopeless, that I am not a coward. Nor am I crazy. I am a human being with some problems that I can face and I can work on, even if I do get scared from time to time. I am learning that panic is nothing to be afraid of, it isn't life threatening, it just feels that way. I am learning to be my own 'safe' person and that basically I can handle it. It isn't easy, not by any means. In fact, I think this is the hardest task I have ever taken on so just imagine how strong I will be when I get through to the other side of this, once and for all!

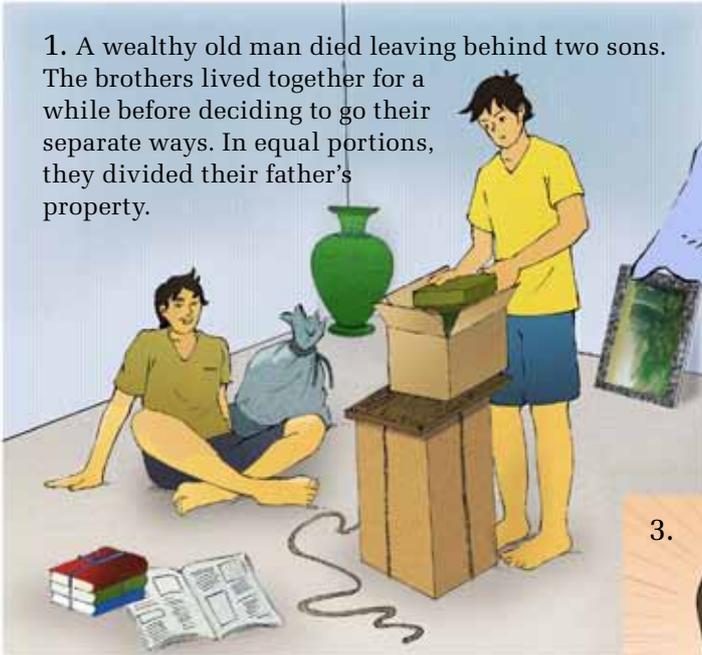
No matter who we are, how long we have suffered or how 'bad' we think we are, I believe every single one of us can recover and be who we truly are. 

Lisa is now helping in a specialist helpline with Anxiety UK, supporting members who wish to talk to someone with personal experience of agoraphobia.

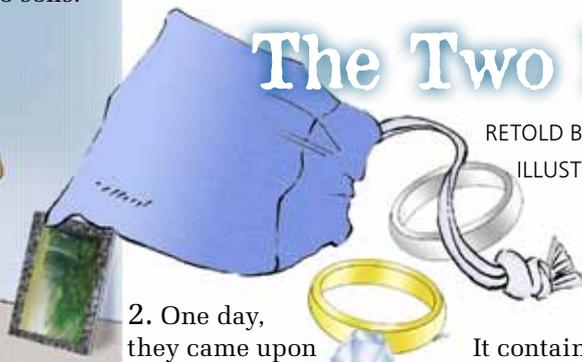
# The Two Rings

RETOLD BY | Esther Thien  
ILLUSTRATIONS | Beeli Chua

1. A wealthy old man died leaving behind two sons. The brothers lived together for a while before deciding to go their separate ways. In equal portions, they divided their father's property.



2. One day, they came upon a small packet belonging to their father.



It contained two rings, an expensive diamond ring and a cheap silver ring.

3.



This diamond ring must be a family heirloom of our ancestors, as it was kept separately from our father's other property. As the eldest, I will take the diamond ring. You take the silver one.

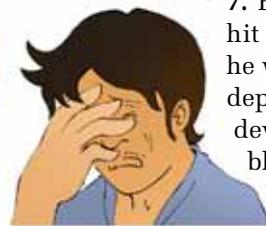
4. The younger brother smiled, agreed and they went their separate ways.



Why did our father keep this silver ring that is worth little?



7. But when his life hit rock bottom, he went into deep depression, and developed high blood pressure and insomnia.



5. Then he saw the engraved words on the ring. "This too shall pass"

This must be father's philosophy of life.

6. Time passed. The elder brother was highly elated when he was at the peak of his life.

9. On the other hand, the brother with the silver ring enjoyed the ups that life brought, understanding that they were not permanent.

8. His condition became so bad that he eventually needed electric shock treatment.



Well, I know the situation will change, and it has changed. So what?

10. And when his life hit the lowest point, he looked at his ring and remembered, "This too shall pass." He did not grow depressed or angry, knowing it too would change. As he understood that nothing in life is eternal or carved in stone, he did not lose his peace of mind and so lived a peaceful, happy life.



*If we forget about impermanence and develop attachment to various situations in life, we will suffer when those situations pass away. All situations are more than just impermanent, they are also unsatisfactory. When good things happen to us (getting married, moving into a new home or getting a promotion or a new car), the satisfaction lasts a while and soon passes away, and we will be looking for our next 'success'. Recognising that all things will pass away and are impermanent will help us enjoy the pleasant situations more fully during the brief period when they are in our lives. And when we hit a low point, we will not lose hope because we understand it will not last. Recognising that all things will pass away helps us to enjoy life moment-to-moment, stay centred, and bring balance to our lives.*

# SEEN

Transcend and find the balance between extremes

## > Black Swan

**Directed by:** Darren Aronofsky

**Starring:** Natalie Portman, Mila Kunis, Vincent Cassel



*Black Swan* is a film about transcendence and finding the balance between extremes. It strongly reminds us of the tragic consequences of not going beyond the polarities of mind in order to find our true wholeness of being.

According to Buddhist philosophy, when the good and bad, beautiful and ugly and all polar opposites find their unity in ground consciousness, the mind is balanced from straying into extremes and a happy, peaceful life may ensue. However, due to our attachment to samsaric illusions, we often erroneously live in either one or the other extreme and never find the true happiness of equanimity that pervades mind's unity space.

Nina Sayers is a young, attractive and brilliant ballerina. She has one fault - her need for perfection that actually inhibits from flowing into the role she is playing on stage, to become it, to be it. This drives her to deeply criticise herself and to have enormous insecurity about her talent and ability.

Her mother had once too been an aspiring ballerina, yet had given up her career when she became pregnant with Nina. Holding much bitterness, she has never gotten over her loss and does not give Nina, who is now 28, the encouragement Nina deserves as an aspiring professional. Instead she treats Nina like a small child, over-protective and fussing over her, so that Nina has no room to grow into her full persona.

At the start of the film, Nina is polarised at her 'pure' extreme, always trying her best to please all. But from the onset, we see her willingness to break out of this to find her balance. A chance to become 'whole' is presented to her when the brilliant choreographer, Thomas Leroy chooses her to become the Swan Queen for his version of the classic ballet. Ironically, the story is about a girl who is trapped in the body of a white swan and cannot be released until true love pervades her. When she sees her twin, the black swan stealing her prince, she kills herself in sorrow.

The Swan Queen must play both the white and black swans, must be whole and complete enough to play both roles, to realise herself as both polarities of black and white in one. Whereas Nina is perfect as the white swan, a new ballerina who joins the troop, Lily, is perfectly fitting for the part of the black swan. As Nina starts to identify herself with her role and break free of her prevailing limitations in order to do this, she becomes obsessed with Lily and hallucinates about her.

Encouraged by Leroy, Nina discovers her repressed side and ends up truly encompassing her part as the black swan. Leroy tells her, "The only person standing in your way is you. It's time to let go, lose yourself!" Yet it is Lily who ultimately helps Nina break free of her white side. However, the swing from one extreme to the other is too harsh and sudden as Nina tragically, yet brilliantly plays her part to absolute perfection.

# READ

Mindfulness helped tide through depressed times

## > **When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times**

By Pema Chodron

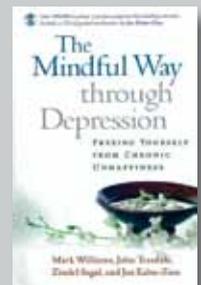
Drawn from traditional Buddhist wisdom, Pema Chodron gives practical, compassionate advice on what to do when your world falls apart. The only way to deal with mental pain that will bring lasting benefit is to approach painful situations with friendliness and gentleness, says the American Buddhist nun. She also gives helpful techniques on how you can use your mental pain to cultivate wisdom, compassion and courage; reverse your negative thinking; and work with chaotic situations. An extremely readable book that will serve you well for a lifetime. Priced at S\$22.00 from Awareness Place stores.



## > **The Mindful Way through Depression: Freeing Yourself from Chronic Unhappiness**

By Mark Williams, John Teasdale, Zindel Segal and Jon Kabat-Zinn

A proven programme from leading scientists, this book is a truly useful guide for depression sufferers and those who are besieged by negative thinking or self-blame. This is a complete and invaluable package for anyone seeking to regain hope and well-being in his or her life. Includes a CD of guided meditations. Highly recommended! Get it from Awareness Place stores for S\$31.90.



# HEARD

Unravel the stress of body and mind with healing music inspired by Nature

## > **Relaxing Melodies of Nature**

By Kenio Fuke

Imagine lying on soft grass under the canopy of a majestic tree, while the warm filtered rays of the sun and a soothing breeze caress your skin as you listen to this music CD. Containing 12 delicate tracks inspired by the mysteries and ineffable beauty of nature, let Brazilian pianist Kenio Fuke transport you to another realm of well-being and peace. Retails at \$23.90 at Awareness Place stores.



## > **Listen to Nature**

By Wind Music

A jumbo 17-CD pack created by a Golden Melody Award-winning musical team, these soothing CDs come in a large pistachio green box. Each one is a 100% original creation. One CD boasts of the unique croaking rhythms of 30 types of frogs. Another showcases the lovely melodies of 43 kinds of songbirds. Yet others embrace the beauty of the sweet, natural sounds of Taiwan's oceans, rainforests and Orchid Island. Partake in the organic symbiosis of nature's rhythm and listen to how nature sings in unison. Buy the set at S\$165.00 from Awareness Place stores.



# Dharma Apps

One good thing about having a smartphone or tablet is that if used in a good way, it can bring you closer to the Dharma, as a tool that connects you to the wisdom of the Dharma 24/7.



## > Zen Koans

By Droid Girl  
Free



If you are drawn to Zen Buddhism, this is the app for you. Koans, often obscure and paradoxical in nature, were designed to help students disregard classical logic and verbalism, drawing them closer towards enlightenment. Study this collection of Zen koans for flashes of insight. Only available on the Android Play Store.



## > Access to Insight

By Samui Interactive (Android)  
By Appmagination (iPhone)  
Free



Envision having the entire collection of AccesstoInsight.org on your smartphone? Now you can. Containing a huge library of a whopping 1,000 sutras, this app gives you a massive compilation of material on Theravada Buddhism and Buddhism in general. Possibly one of the best Dharma apps on smartphones! Available on both the iPhone and Android Play Store.

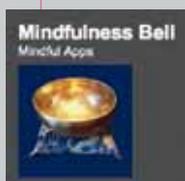


## > Mindfulness Bell

By Mindful Apps (Android)  
Zazen Lite – Zen Meditation  
By Nathan Hangen (iPhone)  
Free



If you are utterly inspired by the peace and calm experienced as a participant of the recent Plum Village retreat at KMSPKS monastery, install this simple app on your smartphone and bring the practice home. Ringing periodically during the day, this mindfulness bell gives you an effective means of developing mindfulness by calling you to be in the present moment with your breath. Available on the iPhone and Android Play Store.



*“Listen, listen,  
this wonderful sound brings me back to  
my true home.  
Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in.  
Breathing out, I know that I am breathing out.”*

Use your smartphone's barcode scanner to scan these QR codes for the apps.  
If your phone doesn't have one, download a barcode scanning app from iTunes or Android Play Store.

We often focus on a few circumstances in our life  
that aren't going well  
instead of all those that are.  
Although we all have problems,  
when we over-emphasise their importance,  
we easily begin to think that  
we are incapable and worthless.

Such self-hatred immobilises us  
and prevents us  
from developing our good qualities  
and sharing them with others.

When we look at the broad picture, however,  
we can see many positive things in our life.  
We can rejoice that we are alive  
and appreciate whatever degree  
of good health we have.  
We also have food (often too much!), shelter,  
clothing, medicine, friends, relatives  
and a myriad of good circumstances.

Many of the people reading this now  
live in peaceful places,  
not in war-torn areas.  
Many have jobs they like,  
and family and friends they appreciate.

We shouldn't take these for granted.  
Most importantly, from a spiritual viewpoint,  
we have access to an authentic path,  
qualified teachers to guide us, and  
kind companions who encourage us.

We have genuine spiritual aspirations  
and the time to cultivate these.  
Thinking about these good conditions one by one,  
we will be filled with joy,  
and any sense of being incapable and hopeless  
will vanish.

– Ven Thubten Chodron

If there is a remedy when trouble strikes,  
what reason is there for despondency?  
And if there is no help for it,  
what is the use of being sad?

So come what may,  
I'll never harm

my cheery happiness of mind.  
Depression never brings me what I want;  
my virtue will be warped and marred by it.

– Nagarjuna

From my own experience,  
coming through a massive clinical depression and  
coming through to the other end, cured,  
I believe self-centredness  
to be the very cause of depression.  
And not just depression,  
but every ailment in the world as we know it.

The irony is, I can only see this NOW, with  
hindsight,  
looking back at my mind state when I was  
depressed:

"ego all the way, me me me, MY problems, MY  
depression,  
MY past, MY MY MY MY..."

That very mind-state of self-absorbed, self-centred  
fascination  
with my own ego and its agenda  
is exactly what kept me trapped in that depression  
for so long.

It's only when I started to consider that maybe –  
just maybe -- as one of the 6 BILLION people on  
this planet,  
other people had problems FAR WORSE than mine,  
that the clouds began to part.

– Joshua Bryer



**Attachment:** Attachments are what keep us turning on the wheel of rebirth. In the Four Noble Truths, Buddha Shakyamuni taught that attachment to self is the root cause of suffering: From craving [attachment] springs grief, from craving springs fear; For him who is wholly free from craving, there is no grief, much less fear. (Dhammapada) Becoming enlightened is nothing other than severing all our attachments. What is meant by “attachment”? It is the investing of mental or emotional energy in an “object”. We can become attached to people, things, experiential states, and our own thoughts and preconceptions. In Buddhist teachings attachments are usually divided into two general categories: attachments to self and attachments to dharmas. For the seasoned practitioner, even the Dharma must not become an attachment.

**Bardo:** Refers to the state of existence intermediate between two lives. According to Tibetan tradition, one experiences a variety of phenomena after death and before one's next birth, when one's consciousness is not connected with a physical body. These usually follow a particular sequence of degeneration. For the spiritually advanced, the bardo offers a state of great opportunity for liberation, since transcendental insight may arise with the direct experience of reality, while for others it can become a place of danger as the karmically created hallucinations can impel one into a less than desirable rebirth.

**Bodhicitta:** The enlightenment-mind. The mind dedicated to attaining Buddhahood in order to help all sentient beings.

**Bodhisattva:** One who aspires to save all beings from suffering, while saving oneself.

**Buddha:** An aspect of the Triple Gem - The Awakened or Enlightened One. A Buddha is one who has attained liberation from all suffering, attaining True Happiness, Perfect Wisdom and Perfect Compassion, among all other virtues for the sake of helping all sentient beings. “The Buddha” refers to the historical Shakyamuni or Gautama Buddha, who is the founder of Buddhism in our world.

**Buddha-nature:** The original nature present in all beings which when realised leads to enlightenment. It is often called the essence of Buddhahood or enlightened essence.

**Compassion:** The quality that makes us aspire to help others with no selfish intention; the ending of selfishness.

**Delusion:** The quality of lacking Wisdom, not knowing the reality of all things. Same as ‘ignorance’.

**Dharma:** An aspect of the Triple Gem - the teachings of the Buddha or the general teachings of Buddhism.

**Dukkha:** The truth that life is full of dissatisfactory experiences.

**Enlightenment:** same as Buddhahood, full enlightenment/awakening. Highest level of development, having forever eliminated all defilements and karmic imprints, and having developed all good qualities and wisdom to their fullest extent.

**Equanimity:** That calm and balanced state of mind that is not affected by attachment or aversion to anything.

**Four Noble Truths:** 1. Life is full of dissatisfactory experiences - ageing, sickness, separation, death etc 2. Causes of dissatisfactory experiences - craving, aversion and ignorance 3. Life can be without dissatisfaction - by attaining Enlightenment or Nirvana 4. The path leading to the end of dissatisfactions - The Noble Eightfold path.

**Ignorance:** The quality of lacking Wisdom, not knowing the reality of all things. Same as ‘delusion’.

**Impermanence:** All compounded things are constantly changing, as a result or effect of changing causes and conditions. All living and non-living elements are thus subject to decay and renewal.

**Karma:** The moral law of cause and effect which states that what we experience is the result of what we had done, that what we do will result in what we will experience.

**Koan:** A brief anecdote recording an exchange between master and disciple or a master's enlightenment experience. Koans are used to bring a student to realisation or to help clarify his enlightenment.

**Lama:** Spiritual teacher. An honorary title in Tibetan Buddhism given to one who has completed particular scholastic and yogic training. It is possible to renounce one's monkhood without renouncing one's lama status, for the purposes of marriage.

**Liberation:** The state in which defilements and karma have been eliminated and no longer subjected to uncontrolled rebirth in cyclic existence.

**Loving-kindness:** The quality which makes us wish for the happiness and well-being of others. ‘Metta’ in Pali language.

**Mantra:** Prescribed syllables (in Sanskrit) to protect the mind from defilements. They express the essence of specific energies. Recitation of mantras is always done with specific visualisations.

**Meditation:** A practice to habituate ourselves to positive and realistic states of mind.

**Merits:** Blessings, positive potential. Imprints on the mindstream of positive actions, leading to future happiness.

**Mindfulness:** An aspect of the ‘Noble Eightfold Path’ - the quality that enables us to remember, and keep our awareness and attention on what is beneficial to one and all in terms of thoughts, speech and actions. ‘Satipatthana’ in Pali language.

**Mindstream:** Continuity of the mind, stream of moments of consciousness proceeding endlessly in a lifetime, between lifetimes, from lifetime to lifetime.

**Nagarjuna:** Great Indian Buddhist Master who revived the Mahayana in the 1st. century AD, after its' virtual disappearance, by bringing to light the Perfection of Wisdom.

**Nirvana:** Nirvana is a Sanskrit term that is interpreted in various ways: 1) cessation, or extinction, referring to the elimination of the afflictions at the time of enlightenment, 2) freedom from desire; and 3) no longer either coming into being or ceasing to be. ‘Nibbana’ in Pali language.

**Noble Eightfold Path:** A systematic and complete formula to rid dissatisfaction and attain true happiness and peace by following Perfect Speech, Perfect Action, Perfect Livelihood, Perfect Effort, Perfect Mindfulness, Perfect Meditation, Perfect Understanding, Perfect Thought (pls read Be A Lamp Upon Yourself published by KMSPKS for detailed info).

**Rebirth:** The continual cycle of birth and death.

**Rinpoche:** An honorific used in Tibetan Buddhism to mean “precious one”.

**Samsara:** This world of rebirth and suffering. Also known as Saha world.

**Sentient Beings:** Living beings with feelings in the six Samsara realms of hells, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, demi-gods and gods.

**Six Realms of Existence:** Also called the Six Paths of Rebirth, it refers to the six categories of living beings who are not enlightened. They are 1) Gods, 2) Humans, 3) Asuras, 4) Animals, 5) Ghosts, 6) Hell-dwellers. The particular category that one finds oneself reborn in depends upon one's karma at the time of rebirth.

**Suffering:** The physical and mental feeling of dissatisfaction.

**Sutra(s):** The recorded teachings of the Buddha. Spelt as ‘Sutta’ in Pali language.

**Tathagata:** One who has found the truth, and is beyond all coming and going. It is the name the historical Buddha used when referring to himself while he was alive.

**Theravada:** A foundational school of Buddhism.

**Venerable:** An honorific addressing of a member of the Sangha.

**Virtues:** Blessings which transcend Birth and Death and lead to Buddhahood. Depending on the mind of the practitioner, that is, on whether he is seeking mundane rewards (merit) or transcendence (virtue), the same action either to merit or virtue.

**Wisdom:** The understanding or discernment based on the direct realisation of the Four Noble Truths, Impermanence, Interdependent Origination, Non-self and Emptiness. The Buddha taught that all things are impermanent, arising and passing away, subject to change, and that knowing this — not in a rational, but empirical manner — is wisdom.

**Zen:** A school of Buddhism. Also known as Chan.