

Personal Story

I have been practicing meditation for close to 20 years. It may sound cliché, but I truly can't imagine who I would be without this practice. It has helped me build a life of joy and meaning and given me ways to cope when joy and meaning seem to disappear. I am so lucky to have encountered this practice which, given the circumstances under which I grew up, was unlikely to begin with.

I grew up in the 70s in the suburbs of a large Metropolitan city, which, if you did too, means you will need no explanation of how bland, sterile, and conventional the atmosphere was. From jump street, I did not feel at home. While I was born into enviable external circumstances (stable home life, enough food and money, good education), the internal circumstances were another matter. My earliest memories were of being, well, terrified. There really is no other word for it. I was plagued by night fears and nightmares. I was afraid of the dark, sleep, intruders, ghosts, burglars, murderers. I suffered from insomnia. This was all before the age of 10. I have no idea why and maybe there is no "why." (Perhaps you too are one of those people who was born with a jumpy nervous system and a deep sense of unease.) I believe that I was perpetually close to a nervous breakdown from the ages of about 10-15. It was not pretty. By my early teens, in addition to being fearful, I was cranky, argumentative, and really angry. Perhaps unsurprisingly, those around me were too.

For some unknown reason, my coping method was to reject everything anyone told me and refuse to meet anyone's expectations. No one could tell me what to do, no one. For example, it was assumed that I would be Bat Mitzvah-ed as had every other child in my family. No, I said, no way. I don't believe in God and I won't be a hypocrite. You can forget it. A few years later, I reported to everyone that actually I did believe in God, just not their God and had converted myself to Christianity.

You want me to learn to play an instrument? I refuse to practice. You want me to meet your friends? I'm going to hide in my room. You say education is important and all my peers are planning to become doctors and lawyers? Well, my plan is to flunk 8th grade, barely graduate high school, refuse college, and become a cocktail waitress.

Whatever I was expected to do, I rejected. My parents were on edge. My teachers did not know how to teach me. Nothing in my surroundings made me feel grounded or seen—and rather than trying to fit in to alleviate this anxiety, I embraced not fitting in as my preferred path. I had

no idea who I was. I just knew I wasn't who everyone was telling me I should be, but had no leads on any alternatives. I became very depressed. I felt very alone. I felt crazy.

I brought this extreme fear, restlessness, and disorientation into my early 20s. I worked as a cashier, waitress, and taxi driver and lived for some years perilously close to broke. One day, I was sitting in my cab on a hot summer night when a song came on the radio that said, "There's something happening somewhere, baby, I just know that there is." For some unknown reason, that woke me up. It all happened in a nanosecond. The next day, I threw my stuff in the back of my (sister's) car and drove the f*&k away. I didn't know where I was going and I didn't know what I was going to do when I got there, all I knew was I was headed for "somewhere". (Thank you, Boss.)

Luckily for me, "somewhere" turned out to be Austin, Texas, because my car broke down there and I didn't have enough money to get it fixed. Well, I thought, I guess I live in Austin, Texas now. In this precise moment, on that very day, my life began to turn around. I got a great, great job. Yes, I was still a waitress, but I was a cocktail waitress in the coolest nightclub on earth with live music seven days a week. INCREDIBLE, MIND BLOWING MUSIC. My world became all about the Blues. I got to hear (and serve drinks to and witness late night card games with and hear backstage chatter from) Albert King, Albert Collins, Memphis Slim, Matt Murphy, Buddy Guy, Junior Wells, Clifton Chenier, John Lee Hooker, Bobby "Blue" Bland, Lazy Lester, Jimmy Rogers, Eddie Taylor, the list goes on and on. Every once in a while people would drop by to sit in. By "people" I mean Stevie Ray Vaughan. Jimmie Vaughan. Bono. Bruce Willis. (??!) (I could tell you stories, oh I could tell you stories, but that would be a whole different book.) These superstars were backed by the most soulful house band you could ever imagine. One of the guitar players was my boyfriend!!! After the gig, we'd go for breakfast, then home to sleep until noon, get up, listen to music, go to work, and listen some more. It was pretty much heaven. It was authentic, soulful, and real, the very qualities most notably missing from the world I grew up in. I found myself in a place of character and depth, rooted in its own lineage, the very opposite of a suburb. I began to soften. A lot. After a very tomboyish life and semi-reckless life, I started to feel like (and act like and dress like) a woman.

I let down my guard.

I fell in love.

After only a few months of this completely wonderful experience, I was in a truly brutal car wreck. I was driving home one night, minding my own business (in a sweet restored '67 Beetle), when a drunk driver ran a red light (in a Buick) and t-boned the bejesus out of me. Out the passenger door I went, 20 yards down the road, basically crushed. (Or so I hear. I have no memory of any of it.) I ended up in the hospital for several months and then it took a good few years before I began to feel like myself again. Rather than a reason to close back up, this experience caused me to soften even further because I found that in my new life I was surrounded by love.

At some point during this period, I went to a yoga retreat center. I had never done yoga before. This was the 80s and yoga centers were still considered kooky. But my brother (who was and remains an avid yogi) suggested it to me as a way to heal my inner and outer wounds. I brought with me a book I had been meaning to read for some time called "The Heart of the Buddha" by a person named Chögyam Trungpa. I had never heard of Chögyam Trungpa. I wasn't sure what the difference was between Hinduism and Buddhism, or even if there was one. I had never meditated or found myself drawn to Eastern thought, I just liked the title. The Buddha had a heart? I suppose I thought the book was about how the Buddha felt and if I could get a line on that, perhaps I could learn something about how to handle my own heart. Too, though I read widely in the realms of philosophy, psychology, and sociology, most of the material seemed to lack, well, *heart*. After being nearly killed, I suppose I wanted something softer.

One day I was sitting alone in the retreat center dining hall between meals, reading. It was fascinating: esoteric and clear at the same time. At some point, I happened on a section that said (and I paraphrase), "the only possible spiritual path is your personal experience." Upon reading this seemingly simple statement, I felt as though my past, present, and future selves suddenly met. A powerful light was illuminated and I saw very clearly how true this was. No doctrine, belief system, or ritual could stand in for personal experience. Even if profound, it would only be so for me if I could experience the profundity myself and make a personal connection to it. Independence of mind was prized above all. I realized that all of my instincts had always, always directed me according to this belief. In a flash, I saw that this was at the root of my childhood truculence. I was not a bad girl after all. I was fighting to discover, create, and

own my experience rather than having it handed to me. *I must be a Buddhist, I thought.* I didn't know that's what it was called.

I finished reading this book and went back to my life feeling quite heartened, but without much further thought about Buddhism or Chögyam Trungpa. I kept that book close by though, and when I felt scared or doubtful, would glance at the title. Each time I saw "The Heart of the Buddha," a feeling of well being returned.

Fast forward a few years. My guitar player boyfriend had broken my heart so severely that I could hardly function. (See Chapter Eight.) In a frenzy, I read countless philosophical, spiritual, and self-help books. Finally, I just couldn't take it and moved out of Texas to take a job at a record label in Boston. (By this time, the Austin nightclub had started a record label that I worked at and thus had embarked on a career in the music business.) I had lived in Boston briefly before and thought, well, anything is better than this funk. I have to break the spell. I have got to get OUT.

Move, new job, crying, reading, working, reading, crying; these were basically my life, especially reading. (And crying.) Some books were complete bullshit. Others were quite powerful and began to change the way I thought. Then I noticed something funny. Each book I read that was particularly brilliant and transformative seemed to come with the same bookmark tucked inside. After like the 20th time of noticing this bookmark, I stopped to read what was printed on it. In addition to listing other books that I had loved, it said, "Shambhala Publications." Hmm, I thought, one company has produced all of these amazing books. I wonder who those people are and where they are. They must be in some far off and beautiful place where people are sane and soulful and live according to a different code. Perhaps deep in the Himalayas or atop a skyscraper in Manhattan or some other place far beyond the ordinary world I inhabited. I turned the book mark over. "Boston," it said. Boston. There were in my town. Shambhala was *right here.*

I knew I had to scam a way to meet them. (Which was how I thought in those days.) So I made something up. I called Shambhala and said that I was the VP of Sales and Marketing for a record label (which was true) and had they ever thought of distributing their audiobooks to music stores? (Which was a silly idea.) For whatever reason, their VP of Marketing agreed to meet me. I showed up (at *Shambhala!!*) with my cockamamie idea and a lot of longing. Longing to find out where I belonged. Longing to meet people who knew things I needed to know. Longing to

feel at home somewhere, anywhere. I wheeled my Trojan Horse of an idea in the door and all I knew was that once they let me in, I was going to find some way to stay.

What actually happened was that we went out to lunch and drank martinis. Their VP of Sales, Dan, was a great guy who was fun to talk with. Once we dispensed of the ostensible reason for our meeting, we realized we enjoyed talking about marketing and selling, contrasting our industries, comparing notes. Occasionally I would sneak in a question about a particular author or book but then we'd quickly return to talking shop. And drinking martinis at lunch.

One day, we were in another crowded noisy restaurant and I said, you know, I think I might like to learn meditation.

I have no idea what made me say that. I didn't know it was true until I said it but the moment I did, I knew it was and the atmosphere shifted radically. It was as if all the ambient noise and hubbub dropped away. His eyes locked onto mine. "What kind," he asked. I paused. There were different kinds? I heard myself answer, "Tibetan?" "Oh," he said, "I know someone who might teach you.

A few days later, Dan called to say that this person did not have time to teach me meditation but if any other possibilities occurred to him, he would be back in touch. In the meantime, would I come to a party to celebrate Shambhala's anniversary? Wait, what? Partying with the Shambhalian? Yes, I would be there.

At the party, he introduced me to the person who was too busy to teach me meditation. "I hear you want to learn to meditate," he said. "I'm leaving town for a month, but if you're still interested give me a call when I'm back and I'll teach you."

Long story short. I marked the days off on my calendar and called the day after he returned. He did indeed teach me to meditate and not just how to meditate, but the point of view behind meditation as a path to wisdom and kindness. It turns out that he had been an extremely close student of Chögyam Trungpa, the Tibetan meditation master and author the *The Heart of the Buddha*. Chögyam Trungpa had taught *him* how to meditate and now he was going to teach me. I felt so lucky.

This turned out to be true beyond imagining. (He is still my meditation instructor.)

I've been a meditation practitioner ever since and in 1995, I took vows to formally become a Buddhist. I have never looked back.