Loving Awakening

A Practical Guide to Embodied Spirituality and Healing with Metta, IFS, the Imaginal and Community

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Lovingly dedicated to Kaloyan, Tereza, Sasha, Dani, A, M, R and all other peers, friends, teachers, mentors, guidees and students of mine, as well as my sangha Mind Is the Gap

Contents

What Is Loving Awakening?

What is loving awakening, besides a cheesy pun? Spirituality and healing that's interconnected, trauma-sensitive, embodied, holistic and radically inclusive. It's practicing in the body and in the world, with others, without bypassing or escapist goals and without the need for extreme effort. The word "loving" is not to imply fluff or toxic positivity. Things that would not normally be considered loving, such as anger or resentment, also belong. So does calling out mistreatment and oppression, which I feel is an integral part of love. Being loving is not the same as being nice or just sitting on the cushion being blissed out on your inner peace.

I believe that love is a fundamental aspect of reality and conversely, that it's loving to have grounded, realistic expectations of how things work and don't work. In this book, I also set out to debunk many misleading claims prevalent in spiritual circles or in the field of psychology, related to e.g. meditation and meditative states, trauma, what enlightenment is and isn't and what psychotherapy is and isn't. Neither meditation or therapy is anywhere near harmless while the benefits of some meditative attainments have been greatly exaggerated. That's the bad news. The good news is that many lovely things are actually much closer to your reach than commonly believed.

You don't have to be a particularly loving person to feel at home in this book. If you're someone who really struggles to access feelings of love, if you're depressed, pessimistic, lonely, bitter, self-absorbed, outcast, dejected, emotionally numb or shut, traumatized or dissociated, then this book is *especially* for you. I believe there is love in you and in this world that you can access, as you are, without ignoring your real issues or having to become a vapid, lovey-dovey spiritual person. Love can coexist with misery, grumpiness, resentment, doubt, restlessness, self-loathing, anxiety, poor concentration and many other ails. If you struggle to feel love, then you can turn the title into reverse: *Awakening Loving*.

Like love, loving awakening is not far out, it's practical and pragmatic. I feel this book is much more so than most "pragmatic dharma." You won't find "hardcore dharma" for the karma-kazes here, but this approach is highly effective and efficient. There's no need to speedrun as it produces results anyway, and it's also geared towards minimizing unnecessary discomfort. Yet in my experience, no matter how gently you indulge in spiritual practice, the results will likely be a bit "hardcore" at times.

I draw liberally from Buddhism, occasionally also Hinduism, but my goal is to steer clear from lofty and confusing spiritual language or throwing around Sanskrit, Pāli or Tibetan when it's not needed. I try to avoid getting stuck on minutiae or giving vague and ambiguous instructions. If you find my ideas compelling, you can translate them into actual practice. (And if some of them you find less compelling, it's not because you were confused or zoned out.)

I also discuss Western psychology, such as psychotherapeutic approaches. I believe there is a wealth of highly valuable ideas in that field, especially when it comes to trauma. Again, I attempt to keep my approach pragmatic and down-to-earth, without getting bogged down with Latin and science that may be intriguing but not really relevant to healing.

Radical inclusivity means that this book and the approach is for everyone, not just for white, upper-class, straight men. And if you happen to be a white, upper-class, straight man,

that's also great, there's just a little more thought for other genders, LGBTIQ folks and people who are non-white, disabled, neurodivergent or living in poverty or otherwise very challenging conditions. Most of that you won't even notice. I've often felt very alienated by the solipsism in spiritual books and I know I'm not the only one, so I'm doing my best to avoid that.

Many teachers recommend against combining different practices, but I disagree with this view. A professional swimmer will probably also go to the gym and run laps, perhaps also do yoga or tai chi and work with visualization exercises. Similarly with awakening and inner work, one style usually isn't enough to cover everything. I feel like it would be highly beneficial for every meditator to also look into psychotherapeutic and healing approaches and some kind of bodywork, if possible. Also, one practice may be suited for a certain period in your life and then it may be more helpful to move on to something else.

Yes, there is a risk that you won't get deep enough in one practice or that you keep running around chasing new techniques and methods just in case they are better than your current ones. But the synergy and the more holistic approach are so incredibly powerful that I believe it is well worth taking the risk, while being mindful not to add too much on your plate or switch things up just for the sake of it. Most well-known Western dharma teachers have trained in multiple lineages of Buddhism and often in non-Buddhist traditions, too.

This book introduces quite a repertoire of methods. Some are described in detail so that you can actually engage in them, with others offered more as teasers with pointers on how to learn more. You don't have to read this book in order or in its entirety. While it's written for beginners and advanced practitioners alike, those with more experience might find a few sections unnecessarily basic. However, I do recommend reading the chapters on Internal Family Systems and trauma early on, as a lot of the rest builds on concepts introduced there.

While I have intentionally steered clear of some big name teachers because of their unfavorable character or track record, I have cited or otherwise referred to some teachers, therapists, researchers and authors who have (or are alleged to have) engaged in behaviors I condemn or held problematic opinions. Many of the trailblazers in fields like psychotherapy and bodywork were born in the late 19th or early 20th century and often held racist, sexist, homophobic and misogynist views—and later experts have hardly been free of such baggage, either. This is not to excuse them, but someone being mentioned in this book should not be taken as my endorsement of them as a person nor lack of awareness of their thorny sides.

My Own Journey

A constellation of disabling chronic illnesses has been a central part of my journey. I tried to begin this story with something more light-hearted and socially acceptable, but it just didn't feel honest. Suffering is the main route that leads people to spirituality and being sick was a major reason I started practicing.

My chronic conditions all stem from Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, a hereditary connective tissue disorder that is curiously prevalent in spiritual circles, something I've seen a number of people point out. My health has often determined why I've chosen the approaches I've used while being unable to engage with many others. It's also why I've struggled with both actual practices and to feel like I belong in the spiritual world.

On the other hand, spirituality has also made it hard to fit in disability communities. Often it has felt like a no-win situation, while it has also given me plenty of perspective on life. The first Buddhist books I owned were both about disability, Lorenzo W. Milam's *CripZen* and Toni Bernhard's *How to Be Sick*, I just wasn't ready when I first read them. (I feel like many important spiritual works have appeared in my life a tad too early, and perhaps that might also be the case for some readers of this book.)

I started out with mettā (loving-kindness) meditation, which was love on first sit, quite literally. I'm a very loving and joyful person by nature, so it seemed like a perfect fit and almost immediately propelled me into studying Buddhism—if they invented this, the whole thing must be great. My life was painfully lonely and I felt deeply disconnected from the world, both related to my health and for more complex reasons. As an extreme extrovert, this was agonizing, but mettā seemed to spark a sense of connection, so I clung to it as my saving grace.

I began believing that if I just kept practicing mettā, that was all I needed and I could be happy forever. It sounds innocent and silly now, but it made sense to me: I was happy, I had little suffering, this is what Buddhism promises, so it checks out. And of course, I really *wanted* to believe this!

I had heard of dark nights of the soul and kundalinī awakening (mostly as a horrifying condition that ruins your life, which made me determined to avoid anything to do with kundalinī), so I thought I knew what I was getting into. I don't think I really had any clue what I was getting into. Mettā has remained the heart and soul of my practice and my life, but there have been many unexpected impasses, segues and side quests, many of them interpersonal.

My background is in medicine and I'm deeply fascinated by brains and bodies, but I've also come to love the less corporeal aspects of humans. Besides meditation, I have a soft spot for numerous other methods that can enrich the lived experience both personally and interpersonally, from yoga to imaginal journeys and various self-therapy techniques (these are also termed *psychotechnologies*, but to me it sounds too much like a word from a cyberpunk novel).

I love learning different practices and combining them eclectically as if concocting magic potions. I've hosted e.g. a series of hypnosis poetry workshops, which have been a delight. Shared practices have played a vital role in my journey, but I believe they can also be valuable for the more introverted types, perhaps even more so. We are all in this together.

A Shared Journey

I've never had an official teacher, which I realize will make some people consider me unqualified to voice any views on spiritual matters. I accept that perspective and hope that what I actually have to say will convince you otherwise. The Buddha talked about 84,000 dharma doors or gates to enlightenment. I feel like my door has been friends as peer teachers, some of them Buddhist, most walking completely different paths, even nihilism. I talk about spiritual friendship, shared practices and teachers in more detail in the closing chapters.

A book is a bit of a silly format for capturing a continuing evolution of thought and being, but let's call it a snapshot. Besides people I mention elsewhere in this section, I would like to thank M, Dani, Ilia, Heikki, Luke, Jane and Rosa for participating in this evolution by commenting on parts or the whole of this manuscript, and several of them have also inspired me in other ways. All nasty typos, illogical trains of thought and awkward misunderstandings remain mine.

One friendship I particularly cherish has been with Kaloyan and Tereza. Kaloyan has taught me a great deal about the imaginal, the energetic world, spiritual crises and nonduality, which has been priceless. Even more importantly, both of them have opened me up to humbling and at times very painful lessons about friendship, listening and being a kind yet flawed human being in communities where it feels like some people are trying to transcend human beingness altogether. This is a shared process of learning.[1]

A prominent thread in my life, I'd even call it *the* core one, has been that people with severe dissociation and attachment trauma are drawn to me in ways I can't provide a materialist explanation for. I haven't struggled with such issues myself and yet these people have been

finding me from all over the world for over 20 years, even through the mundane Angelfire website I built in my teens which never touched upon the human condition in any deeper sense.

Some of these people have been my friends, others wanted to be lovers but were too triggered by me, some attached to me like a mother figure. Some have been disciples, mentees or students, while many weren't on the path at all. They've also all been teachers, including some who were abusive towards me.

Many of these relations have been turbulent and wrenching. Some of them violated my physical boundaries and in a few cases even resulted in irrevocable concrete harm to me. Yet they've also taught me much about friendship, love, life, trauma and being human. Another friend, A, also stands out. He has by far the worst trauma I've ever known anyone to have and yet he also turned my life around in the very short span of time he was able to be in it (at least for now). I don't think I'm able to convey with words how much these wonderful people have shaped me, my life and my worldview, but I hope their wisdom, love and energy will shine through this book.

This book is for you, but also *of* you and *from* you. May you be happy, heal all your trauma and find your own dharma door—this goes for them-you, *you*-you and all the yous-*us*.

Maija

Part I
THE BASICS

Chapter 1
Spiritual Concepts

This book discusses some Buddhist and occasionally also Hindu beliefs, yet I'm leaving out some key Buddhist concepts and others I only mention in passing. It's not that they aren't important, but they're less important to explicitly bring up and discuss in this particular text. Some of the terms I bring up can be translated in a number of ways and come with many different interpretations. As this is not a scholarly work (nor a strictly Buddhist book) nor am I a scholar, I'm not going to delve deeply into these debates and mostly not at all.

Yes, sometimes it may be relevant to discuss how words like *dukkha* should be translated—I'm a poet and translator who adores Sanskrit, I certainly care about words and their meanings and precise use, but my main goals are clarity and relevance. To other Sanskrit aficionados, I apologize for the retroflexes that succumbed on the altar of typeface aesthetics. (If you don't know what retroflexes are, don't worry, they aren't sentient.)

Different Schools of Buddhism

It might be helpful to provide some basic background on the different branches of Buddhism, especially since many people are familiar with one tradition but not the others. I've had to cut some corners here for brevity's sake. There are three main schools (also termed *yānas* or vehicles) of Buddhism: Theravāda, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna, though Vajrayāna is often counted under Mahāyāna. Zen and the related Chinese Chan, Korean Seon and Vietnamese Thien are all Mahāyāna, as is Pure Land Buddhism, which is focused on reciting devotional mantras rather than meditation.

Vajrayāna is mostly synonymous with the terms Buddhist Tantra and Tibetan Buddhism and also known as Esoteric Buddhism, though it is also practiced in Nepal and small offshoots exist in e.g. Japan. Tibetan Bön may be viewed as a school of Vajrayāna or its own religion and shares many of the tantric beliefs and practices.

The traditions follow a somewhat different set of scriptures. Theravāda is based on the Pāli canon, where the suttas are in Pāli, a language very similar to Sanskrit, as well as some later commentarial texts. Mahāyāna includes most of the Pāli canon and additional sūtras. Vajrayāna adds numerous texts called tantras to Mahāyāna. The difference between Pāli and Sanskrit is why we have words that exist in two closely related versions, like sūtra vs. sutta and dharma vs. dhamma. Calling loving-kindness by its Sanskrit name *maitrī* instead of the established *mettā* would come off as a bit weird. Or imagine if Kurt Cobain had named his band Nibbana?

Theravāda is also known as Hinayāna, which many see as pejorative as it means "the lesser vehicle." Another name for it is Southern Buddhism, as its strongholds are located in Southeast Asia, such as Sri Lanka and Thailand. Theravāda prides itself on being based on the Buddha's original teachings—as much as that is possible with scripture that was preserved orally for hundreds of years, that exists in several, at times contradictory versions and that has been altered and added on by later authors.

Theravāda is heavily based on monasticism and the ultimate goal is escaping the wheel of rebirth by reaching full enlightenment, but this is not considered a realistic aspiration in the current life for the vast majority of people. The so-called Vipassanā movement grew out of Theravāda, though in the West it has also been heavily influenced by other traditions.

Instead of personal liberation, the goal of Mahāyāna Buddhists is being a *bodhisattva*, who doesn't leave *samsāra* until all beings are freed from suffering. All Buddhists take refuge in the *triple gem* (the Buddha, the dharma and the sangha or community). For Mahāyānists, there are also bodhisattva vows to pursue this path both in the current life and all future lives. The bodhisattva path also relates to the concept of *bodhicitta* or "enlightenment-mind," the wish to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all beings that arises from deep compassion.

Mahāyāna also features two seemingly ontological key concepts that have been interpreted in various ways. They are often misrepresented and some argue that they are in contradiction with each other or even with Buddhism as a whole. These are emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and *buddha-nature*, which are both often viewed as facets of nonduality (see Chapter 8). Emptiness, taught in the famously pithy *Heart Sutra*, is not so different from the no-self doctrine expanded a bit deeper so that nothing has an inherent existence. However, many Theravādins view the idea of all beings' buddhanature as espousing something akin to a soul or self and as such not real Buddhism.

Vajrayāna generally subscribes to Mahāyāna tenets, but also adds a large number of esoteric practices to be learned from your own guru or that at least require transmission from one. The guru is the heart of tantra, which can't be practiced without. Tantra also relates to life and emotions in a characteristic way, viewing things like desire and anger as pathways to awakening rather than hindrances to eradicate. Enlightenment is considered something very attainable in this life.

The word "tantra" refers to esoteric traditions in Hinduism and Buddhism, but what people actually refer to with the term depends on the context with. In some circles, "tantra" mostly means tantric sex. In others, it refers to New Age ideas with a vague connection to Hinduism which may or may not feature sexual aspects. And if you're in a heavily Buddhism-influenced community, they're probably talking about Vajrayāna (which includes consort practices, but they are mostly conducted imaginally). Curiously, some authors have suggested that even Theravāda includes some tantra.[2]

All this may sound confusing and contradictory. Some Buddhists are very dogmatic, but you don't have to choose a side or adopt beliefs, it's enough to just practice and see what resonates with you. To me, Theravāda seems rigid, conservative and detail-obsessed compared with Mahāyāna, though I do appreciate that their lists and maps can be highly useful. E.g. the progress of insight (see Chapter 9) was originally described in Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga.* TWIM, a form of loving-kindness meditation (see Chapter 6), also originates from the Theravāda tradition, but other than that, this book mostly draws from Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna views.

The vast majority of Buddhists of the world are Buddhist by heritage. Most of them do not meditate, but often engage in other, more religious practices, which are less popular outside of Asia. In some countries, householders mostly support monastics in the hopes of gaining merit for future lives, and that is the extent of their practice. This is completely different from the Western world, where most Buddhist converts or Buddhist-adjacent people found their way to the dharma through meditation.

Suffering

The key Buddhist concept of *dukkha* is mostly translated as suffering, but many teachers and scholars feel that sounds too heavy. As a result, more and more often it's rendered in

other ways, such as *dissatisfaction*, which I'm fine with, and *stress*, which I find highly problematic. I'm a medical writer and firmly of the opinion that stress is a physiological phenomenon and not to do with psychological valence. "Eradicating stress" also sounds like a capitalist proposition: "Now we can work long hours without any negative repercussions!" Meditation teacher Leigh Brasington suggested the translation *bummer*, but I'll use the oldschool *suffering* here.

According to Buddhist teachings, suffering is a property of everything. Together with impermanence and no-self, it is one of the three characteristics of existence that are observed in insight meditation. Unpleasant things cause aversion while pleasant things make you desire and cling to them, rendering them unsatisfactory.

Unpleasant emotions, sensations and experiences are not considered to inherently cause suffering, but suffering derives from resisting them and reacting to them, the so-called *second arrow*. Western psychology calls a comparable phenomenon *catastrophizing*. If you have a headache, you might feel annoyed that you got it today of all days, consider it unfair and wonder if it will ruin your plans, not realizing that it's your rumination, not the pain, that is ruining your day.

That physical pain and suffering are two discrete phenomena is not just a philosophical position, but also true on a physiological level. There is a distinction between *nociception* (a signal of tissue injury, even in cases where there may be none) and the way the brain construes this into pain.[3] It is possible to have pain without suffering, though it's tricky. With psychological pain, it gets more complicated, complicated enough that I will return to it e.g. in the next two sections.

The Buddhist view that all suffering can be eradicated is a *religious belief*, just like the claim that faith in Jesus Christ gets you into Heaven. There are several factors, though, why it's easy to take it as a factual statement, as many do: 1) The second arrow theory makes sense and often *does* apply 2) Many get into the dharma because they noticed meditation reducing their suffering, so it makes sense that suffering could be (mostly) eradicated 3) And many have heard of enlightened people or even met them, and if the supposed enlightenment does exist, it makes sense that it also does what it promises. After all, the Buddha said: "*I teach only suffering and the end of suffering*."

The Four Noble Truths are also about suffering and its end. Eviatar Shulman curiously claims in his academic book *Rethinking the Buddha* that in Early Buddhism, they were not a core tenet nor meant as statements about the *world* (nor dubbed *noble* truths).[4] Based on his scholarship and the Pāli words used in the suttas, Shulman posits them as *meditative observations of current contents of consciousness* rather than a metaphysical notion. Several suttas feature sections analogous to the noble truths, but substituting another concept (e.g. another link of dependent origination) for dukkha. I'm not necessarily suggesting I endorse Shulman's ideas, but they would explain the drastic divide between reality and some Buddhist beliefs.

"Enlightenment eradicates suffering" is a difficult claim to falsify, just like one can't prove the non-existence of God. If an enlightened person admits they do in fact still suffer, perhaps quite a bit, someone can claim that they aren't in fact enlightened. If they were, wouldn't they be free of suffering? Another interesting proposition I've heard is that instead of translating dukkha as suffering or any other similar word, it should be specified that this actually refers to *suffering caused by the "offness" in the experience of duality* (or having an illusory self), which is a small subset of all suffering.

Some stages of meditation tend to greatly decrease suffering levels (see Chapter 9). Unfortunately and non-intuitively, this reduction can be *stronger* than in the final product. The overwhelming energetic adjustments that often follow enlightenment may even lead to increased suffering (see Chapter 11) and enlightenment itself can make some types of experiences more

painful. E.g. nondual teacher Rupert Spira has discussed how nonduality can make the sense of separation feel *worse*.[5]

If you are keen to minimize your personal suffering and the suffering of your loved ones, I'd recommend prioritizing trauma healing and other inner work over enlightenment. The same goes for happiness. If you're more interested in increasing positive affect rather than just less experiencing of negative emotions, I feel like healing practices are a better bet. Meditation can certainly help with both, but it is a very unpredictable pursuit. Healing is hard yet generally worth it. The friends of mine who have extolled the benefits of their practice the most are usually talking about trauma healing rather than meditation.

Self and No-Self

The notion that Buddhism aims to "eradicate the self" or show you the illusoriness of the self is familiar even to many non-Buddhists, yet the concepts of self and *anattā* or no-self often confuse practitioners, too. Some friends with severe traumatic dissociation have told me that they don't even have a sense of self, does that mean they're already enlightened? Others are extremely triggered by the thought of losing their self (though everyone tends to be triggered by this to some extent). In such cases I feel like using the equivalent Hindu concept of "true self" instead can help convince scared parts that you are not actually about to lose anything.

Some Buddhist teachers have also endorsed a similar view. Zen master Joseph Bobrow Roshi wrote: "*The true self or no-self is actually a whole self: radically inclusive, unfettered, unhindered, and unimpeded in its responsiveness. Unsequestered and undivided, this whole self includes the bombs, the fires, the poison, the greed, hatred, and ignorance, the joy, the pain—all we can see and all we can't see. Everything 'outside' and 'inside,' conscious and unconscious. All of it belongs. Realizing and living this truth, however, requires an underlying sense of self, agency, personhood. It requires a sense of worth, freedom, and empowerment, as well as a clear understanding of no-self.*"[6]

Some mental health issues involve impairments in the sense of self. A disrupted sense of self is often considered a core aspect of schizophrenia in particular. Those with dissociative identity disorder (see Chapter 3) can experience "being possessed" when they don't recognize an alter personality as being a part of themselves, while people with schizophrenia may supposedly interpret their own internal narrative as someone else commenting on their life.[7]

The claim of the self being illusory and extraneous has also intrigued psychology researchers. Social psychologist Daniel Wegner called it "the illusion of conscious will": people believe they have agency and free will, because they construct a sense of self, "the mind's best trick" to explain mental causation.[8] Some researchers have also proposed a condition named "ontological addiction."[9] This refers to the idea that the self (in a fairly Buddhist sense) and especially excess attachment to it is a common issue that might engender conditions such as depression, anxiety and alcoholism. In practice, realizing the illusoriness of self doesn't necessarily cure these issues.

Insight meditation (vipassanā) focuses on observing the three characteristics of reality, which are *dukkha*, *anicca* (impermanence) and *anattā*. There is disagreement whether anattā should be translated as no-self, non-self or not-self. Often the concept of anattā is explained in common sense terms, such as that the self is fluid and ever-changing—how could you have a solid and permanent self when you're not even the same person in the company of your boss and your mom. The Internal Family Systems view of the bodymind as a collection of parts also points to a related idea: the self is more of a modular setup (comprised of elements that may not exist in the conventional sense) rather than a single, solid *thing*.

These conceptualizations can no doubt be useful in some ways. Perhaps they can even help loosen the overall reification of self in a sense that may be conducive to actual no-self realization, yet I feel like they are somewhat misleading. You might find it amusing, fascinating or even liberating that you are a different person in different company or on different occasions, but acknowledging the self as insubstantial is *wisdom* more than *experiential insight*. No meditation is needed to come to such a conclusion. And if the perception of nonsolidity of the self is due to dissociative fragmentation, it may even result in the person actually clinging *more* to those aspects of "selfhood" or identity that they *do* experience.

Anattā doesn't have much to do with understanding what the self is or isn't. It's about the structure of all experience shifting to a state where some forms of self-identification can no longer be found, others are more loosely held and still others may feel quite similar to before. Some teachers have suggested "selfing" as a verb rather than a noun: that instead of a *thing*, there are processes constantly running that construct a sense (or senses) of self. A meme image called anattā "selfn't" which I found funny, but also quite appropriate.

In psychology, self is often divided into autobiographical self and current self. Putting developmental psychology and various philosophical ideas aside, on an everyday, experiential level the self consists of multiple different yet interrelated components, such as the following:

- Self as a sense of existing ("I am")
- Self as body ("I" am my body)
- Self as a location ("I" am in my head, behind my eyes)
- Self as agency ("I" am the ability to will my body to act)
- Self as thoughts ("I" think, therefore "I" am)
- Self as narrative or autobiographical knowledge ("I" am my profession, hobbies, affiliations and relationships)
- Self as a continuum of memories ("I" am the same person who was "me" at age 5, 10 and 20)

Keith Johnstone claims in his seminal book *Impro*: "*The placing of the personality in a particular part of the body is cultural. Most Europeans place themselves in the head, because they have been taught that they are the brain. In reality of course the brain can't feel the concave of the skull, and if we believed with Lucretius that the brain was an organ for cooling the blood, we would place ourselves somewhere else. The Greeks and Romans were in the chest, the Japanese a hand's breadth below the navel, Witla Indians in the whole body, and even outside it. We only imagine ourselves as 'somewhere.*'"[10]

Anattā is particularly concerned about self as a location and self as agency. "Agency" as a term can refer to two discrete concepts: perceiving that you "will" your bodymind to act on a moment-to-moment basis and that you're able to affect the circumstances your life (e.g. that you could switch jobs if you wanted to). Loss of the former tends to come off as liberating, while being low in the latter type of agency feels demotivating. It happens in depression or difficult life conditions (e.g. severe illness) and is unrelated to no-self.

However, it is possible to become disembodied or lose narrative self-knowledge as a result of awakening. In one meditation study, several of the participants at least temporarily believed they had lost their personality, one even forgot her name.[11] In extreme cases, people have even felt they no longer exist. Shifts in the sense of body ownership can briefly feel dissociative ("I'm in a strange body") but this rarely lasts for long. With reduced identification with the body, the desire to benefit "this" body often only strengthens, such as wishing to live healthily.

Verbal thoughts tend to gradually diminish in the course of awakening and the sense of intentions arising disappears. "I'm thirsty, I'll get a glass of water" becomes just getting a glass of water in the exact same way. You can still do complex math, have complex conversations

and make complex decisions. If needed, the sense of (verbal) thinking comes online, such as when you have an idea that needs careful formulation, but it's seldom necessary.

Much of the enjoyment present in many pleasant states derives from the sense of self being barely perceptible or even merging with someone or something else. These include flow states, dancing, sex, being in love, taking drugs and deep meditative states. Unfortunately, shedding the sense of self permanently is not a lasting rapture, like an extended version of these.

Realizing no-self does tend to reduce suffering caused by self-consciousness and attachment to self. You might still think of yourself as "I am a socialist," but if someone misunderstands your ideas and calls you a libertarian, it will likely bother you less. Or if you used to suffer from having a large nose and feeling like everyone is staring at you, this kind of self-absorbed existence would also likely be greatly relieved—though probably long before you attained the full "no-self." Yet if your ex called you a bad parent, it might still really sting, as such an assessment goes much deeper emotionally and relationally.

Awakening

Buddhism makes awakening or enlightenment out to be a huge thing that completely transforms your life. After all, the whole religion was founded for attaining this. People also call the goal liberation, perfect freedom or seeing your true nature, which sounds very impressive. It can certainly make you happier, but for many, it's not such a big deal after the initial period of astonishment and afterglow wears off.

Renowned meditation teacher Jack Kornfield wrote a wonderful book titled *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry* about the struggles and challenges that follow enlightenment and other spiritual attainments. Kornfield has meditated for decades, but he also interviewed dozens of practitioners from different traditions, from Tibetan lamas to Christian monastics. Most of the book could be summed up in this quote: "*Perfect enlightenment appears in many texts, but amid all the Western masters and teachers I know, such utter perfection is not apparent. Times of great wisdom, deep compassion, and a real knowing of freedom alternate with periods of fear, confusion, neurosis, and struggle.*"[12]

Of course, a good question is what we're even talking about when we talk about awakening or enlightenment. In my view, what I'm discussing is the same thing that Theravādins would call the fourth path, arahantship or full enlightenment, sometimes also Buddhahood or nirvāna/nibbāna. I also claim this to be the same as *moksha* or *jīvanmukti* in nondual schools of Hinduism. Zen Buddhists refer to it as *satori*.

These are not the only views about awakening even inside Buddhism, however. Tantrikas endorse additional stages such as the rainbow body, which I'm not very familiar with. There are also Internet sources with their own maps of e.g. seven levels of awakening, claiming higher attainments than the Buddha. I'm slightly suspicious about this, but it's possible that suspicion merely stems from my limited realization.

As mentioned earlier in this book, a core part of Theravāda is that enlightenment is the only way to get out of the cycle of rebirth. Mahāyāna Buddhists, however, believe that if you have taken the bodhisattva vows, this will not happen, as you have vowed to be reborn until all other beings are enlightened, as well. However, within both schools, there are several different interpretations on what actually happens when an enlightened person dies (e.g. is *parinirvāna* non-existence or some kind of a metaphysically incomprehensible realm). An awakened person is not supposed to incur any karma by their actions. I'm not going to vouch for the accuracy or the lack of it for these theological claims that cannot be tested in this life.

Some people posit that different traditions and techniques take you to a different enlightenment. I believe they can all take you to the same place, your practice can just give it a dis-

tinct *flavor*. E.g. if you awaken by mostly practicing mettā, your experience is likely to be colored by love, tenderness and prosocial qualities. Someone reaching the same point with vipassanā might be more drawn towards the structure and qualities of consciousness. Yet even two people awakening with the same method could perceive a very different reality, as our brains, minds, bodies and lived experience can be so diverse.

Earlier in this chapter I discussed self and no-self, which are intimately related to the Buddhist concept of awakening. I talk more about the Theravāda paths in Chapter 9, which describes one fairly detailed map for the bumpy route to awakening—though it's worthwhile to keep in mind that unlike route maps, Buddhist maps are often more descriptive than prescriptive. Nonduality is explained in Chapter 8, which tries to convey something about the meaning and phenomenology of unity experiences, the permanent peak form of which is also called enlightenment.

"Awakening" can also refer to the overall process of spiritual maturation, opening our hearts and growing more intimate with ourselves and the world. I consider this far more meaningful than just reaching a certain point on the Buddhist maps, as there is so much growth and development that cannot be attained by meditation alone.

One interesting way to conceptualize awakening is the rainbow map created by spiritual teacher Rosa Lewis together with my friend Kaloyan Stefanov.[13] I don't agree with everything posited in it, but I like the way it includes the traditional Buddhist model of awakening as merely one of the colors in the rainbow of awakening, the indigo. Most of the colors derive from those traditionally associated with the chakras (see Chapter 10), e.g. green is for love and red is physicality, but there is also black for the shadow. The entry for each color of the map also lists common sticking points as well as aspects of individual vs. collective experience.

Buddhist enlightenment is more about concepts and limitations falling away and revealing previously concealed things, rather than gaining something. As such it feels easier to define it by what it's not, especially in ways where its reality conflicts with canonical beliefs. Buddhism claims that enlightenment ends all craving or desire, even all wanting, which is unfortunately not true. Many of our wants or desires are either biological or near-biological. Maslow's hierarchy of needs still applies, and your personality also remains.

Awakening may make you lose interest in having a Ferrari, or you might still dream of that but suffer less when you can't have one. Yet if you e.g. wish to have children but can't, this kind of desires can even become *more* painful, as it's a very deep and fundamental longing and awakening makes things harder to suppress.

Awakened individuals can still have trauma and dissociation and develop new traumas. They can get stressed, triggered and confused and exhibit behaviors that suggest narcissism or inflated ego, even though they're not supposed to have a self. They remain susceptible to mental and physical illnesses. They get angry and sad, have sexual desires and may enjoy material possessions. They often still eat meat, drink alcohol and might even take drugs (though losing the desire to get drunk is very common).

They can lie, speak harshly and be smug know-it-alls on social media. They are likely to come off as kind and altruistic, but they can also treat you badly and feel bad about it, or treat you badly and refuse to own it. They may yell at their kids, struggle in relationships and end up divorced (in fact, they very often do). They are unlikely to come off as all Zen and peaceful, unless that was always their personality. In fact, they probably come off close to how they always did.

Awakened people have not eradicated all suffering. They may not seem unusually happy, though they do often seem more *joyful* than most people. While they tend to give off pleasant vibes, most of them don't have a special aura of holiness or otherworldly wisdom or compas-

sion. Such individuals do exist, but that doesn't seem to correlate with enlightenment so much as diligent and compassion-focused spiritual pursuits lasting for decades.

An interviewee in Kornfield's book reminisces of post-enlightenment reality: "*I could give inspired lectures, but if you talk to my wife, she'll tell you that as the time passed I became grouchy and as impatient as ever. I knew that this great spiritual vision was the truth, and it was there underneath, but I also recognized how many things didn't change at all. To be honest, my mind and personality were pretty much the same, and my neuroses too. Perhaps it's worse, because now I see them more clearly. Here were these cosmic revelations and I still needed therapy just to sort through the day-to-day mistakes and lessons of living a human life.*"[14]

So how can you tell if someone is actually awakened in the Buddhist sense, if they don't necessarily seem happier, wiser or better people nor radiate with a divine glow? For the most part, you don't, unless you also are, and can discuss the intricacies of their perceptual reality with them. And it's okay. If someone on the Internet claims they're awakened and you call bullshit, what difference does it make? When choosing a teacher, claims of attainment can be relevant, but I still feel like it's more fruitful to focus on their other traits and abilities, such as kindness and communication skills, and many teachers will not reveal they are enlightened, anyway. (I talk more about teachers in Chapter 20.)

Ontology and Materialism

Many people are drawn to the dharma by its philosophical and pragmatic sides. Whether Buddhism is a religion or not is a perpetual ground for discussion and arguments. To me, the answer feels clear: Buddhism features concepts like gods, demons, rebirth, superstition, rituals, heaven and hell, devotion and worship, theology and cosmology, even though these tend to be minimized outside of Asia.

You can argue that gods don't play an integral role compared to other religions, which is true, but that still leaves the rest. A lot of Buddhist cosmology is *wild*. And as I stated earlier, the Buddha's views about suffering are religious beliefs. Buddhism is not a "science" no matter how often it's marketed like that.

Of course, that doesn't mean Buddhism can't be practiced secularly, millions of Westerners would disagree. It's certainly possible to meditate and benefit from somatic work or Internal Family Systems while holding a materialist worldview. This goes even for something like acupuncture, which for the most part can be explained with the mainstream medical concept of myofascial trigger points without any energetic components.[15] I've even had friends who were into magick and rituals and who felt that for them, any benefit was due to the psychological support of setting intentions rather than anything supernatural.

There are several possible ways of relating to gods. They can be considered real entities, Jungian archetypes or even parts of the mind (see the next chapter). All of these are popular approaches among those friends of mine who find gods a useful and meaningful concept. David Chapman, who has written numerous essays on Tantric Buddhism, believes that regarding the Vajrayāna pantheon as archetypes makes no sense, considering their extremely specific attributes and iconography.[16] He also points out that whether they "exist" is hardly relevant as no one can even decide what existing means, whether in the context of Mahāyāna Buddhism or in general.

You can argue that enlightenment is a purely cognitive shift, trauma is a nervous system phenomenon and energy is a symbolic concept constructed by ancient cultures who lacked a modern understanding of human physiology. I once believed all of that. I do find it unlikely you will be able to retain those views when you go deep into these things, such as reaching high meditative attainments or doing a significant amount of embodied trauma work.

If you are a materialist and encounter events that point to non-materialism, refusing to accept them can result in dissociation. Starting off with materialism and reluctantly tacking individual phenomena on it, you tend to get what I call a "materialist plus" worldview, I've been there. "The rest of woo isn't real, but I have a reliable experience of this sort of woo, so I'll add it to my worldview as something that's probably physical but science just hasn't yet figured it out." In the end, the whole thing will collapse in a heap of incense smoke and crushed ontologies.

Even for scientific materialists, having a certain amount of magic and wonder surrounding your reality makes things much more enjoyable and wholesome. When you fall in love, you likely don't spend your time trying to "debunk" that feeling into oblivion by reminding yourself that you might be imbibing a cocktail of serotonin, dopamine, endorphins, oxytocin and whatnot. It's nicer to just blissfully soak in it because trying to figure it out would actually detract from it. Love is a deeply spiritual experience yet even the most hardcore materialists generally let it be a wonderful and intoxicating mystery.

This doesn't mean that you have to accept all spiritual ideas nor that it's bad to be skeptical and doubtful or have concerns stemming from materialism. It might make sense to you that energy healing by direct touch is real, but you can't comprehend a mechanism with which it would work remotely. It's fine to believe in healing crystals but not astrology, or vice versa, or neither. Spiritual communities too often try to push the view that you should accept, resonate with and be able to experience all phenomena relegated to the realm of New Age, or there's something energetically missing or wrong with you.

I suspect it can be equally dangerous to adopt a worldview completely opposite to materialism, that everything happens for a reason and according to some sort of a divine plan. Among the people I know, this has in some cases led to disturbing results and damage to their mental health. Western psychology views it as harmful magical thinking, characterizing psychotic-type conditions, OCD and narcissism.[17] There are many articles warning how this kind of ideas can be especially deleterious for those with OCD.[18]

I'm concerned that the belief in everything unfolding according to a plan can diminish the sense of agency and personal responsibility, if nothing is seen as a mistake. I've also witnessed how feeling like the universe is constantly sending you messages can be extremely distressing for some people. To me this seems like a potential precursor to psychosis, where the main issue is interpreting everything as meaningful and connected.[19] Several friends of mine with experience of psychosis avoid consuming New Age material because they feel it can exacerbate their condition.

Spiritual Bypassing

Originally coined in 1984 by Buddhist psychotherapist John Welwood, the term *spiritual bypassing* refers to using spirituality to avoid normal emotions and human experiences. A characteristic form of bypassing is the idea that spiritual practice makes other types of psychological work unnecessary. (Of course, most of Buddhism would also fit under this umbrella, as it's based on the idea that once you get rid of that pesky, illusory self, all suffering ceases.) Bypassing is everywhere in the spiritual scene and many who explicitly denounce it still perpetuate bypassing attitudes.

Robert Augustus Masters formulated it like this: "*Aspects of spiritual bypassing include exaggerated detachment, emotional numbing and repression, overemphasis on the positive, anger-phobia, blind or overly tolerant compassion, weak or too porous boundaries, lopsided development (cognitive intelligence often being far ahead of emotional and moral intelligence),*

debilitating judgment about one's negativity or shadow elements, devaluation of the personal relative to the spiritual, and delusions of having arrived at a higher level of being."[20]

Overemphasizing the positive can turn into toxic positivity, which can include accusing others of having "negative energy/vibrations" or "manifesting negative things." Yoga teacher and counselor Karla Herbert writes: "*The Bible says that in the beginning, darkness was upon the face of the waters, and then there was light. It says too that the light was good, but this does not mean that the dark was bad.*"[21] I also find the idea that everything happens "as a part of a bigger plan" a problematic form of bypassing.

One nefarious form of spiritual bypassing happens when someone attains a permanent state of nonduality (see Chapter 8) or get glimpses of it, and becomes convinced that problems in the real world do not need to be tackled, since on the absolute level, everything is already perfect. I've called this confusion of relative and absolute levels "toxic enlightenment," an intentionally provocative term that hasn't appealed to everyone. Meditation teacher Michael Taft dubbed a similar issue "nondual fundamentalism."[22]

Especially Neo-Advaita teachings may encourage these sort of ideas about nonduality (which do not originate from the Advaita Vedanta school of Hinduism, but its modern, mostly secular interpretations[23]), luckily usually as a temporary stage. Those who attain nondual realizations from Buddhist teachings seem much less likely to have this issue.

Formal psychological research is being conducted on the effects of spiritual bypassing, including a research scale for measuring it.[24] That same scientific paper enumerates, citing other authors, quite a shopping list of possible harms of spiritual bypassing, such as "*need to control others and self, dichotomous thinking, shame, spiritual obsession, fear, emotional confusion, addiction, high tolerance for inappropriate behavior, codependence, compulsive goodness, narcissism or ego inflation, obsession or addiction, blind belief in charismatic teachers, spiritual materialism, developmental arrest, and abdication of personal responsibility.*" The vast majority of these I've witnessed numerous times.

Compared to those exhausting and pompous lists, former Buddhist nun Thanissara described the phenomenon succinctly like this: "*Spiritual bypassing means we don't see our effect on others.*"[25] It's easy to treat spirituality as a *thing* that we put on a pedestal and build our lives around, when I feel like it would be best viewed as a *flavor* of the world. This book has much more to say on the subject of bypassing, particularly in Chapter 3 and 4 and in the chapters exploring interpersonal connection at the end.

Chapter 2
Internal Family Systems

Generally in this book, ideas and concepts are discussed earlier on, followed by instructions for actual practices. With this section, I've had to mix up things a bit, to ensure that the chapters that follow are comprehensible, as a lot of this book is built on concepts from Internal Family Systems (IFS). IFS is a form of psychotherapy and self-therapy, but also a revolutionary worldview that can untangle intrapersonal and interpersonal problems and help with understanding other people, even the whole of society.

I believe IFS can also explain and benefit many aspects of spirituality and awakening. It can boost felt sense (see Chapter 12), the awareness and capability to understand our thought processes or *metacognition* (in ways that meditation doesn't touch) and the mind's capacity for change in general. All of this can also be tremendously useful for spiritual practice and self-reflection in general.

IFS was developed by family therapist Richard Schwartz in the 1980s. In recent years it has rapidly gained popularity for a multitude of reasons. IFS can be used to treat simple and complex trauma, addictions, many types of mental health conditions as well as everyday issues like procrastination and perfectionism. Its benefits are often quickly apparent. IFS takes into account the person's current situation (such as systemic injustices) and doesn't pathologize or call anything maladaptive. In contrast to most types of psychotherapy, in many cases IFS can be practiced as self-therapy or with a peer, though severe traumas may be best left to professional IFS therapists.

The key concept of IFS is that our minds comprise of *parts*, kinds of subpersonalities, which make us the incredibly complex and fascinating beings we are. Parts are why we sometimes act in ways "uncharacteristic" to us, why we may do things we don't want to do (as with addictions, bad habits and arguing) or don't do the things we want to do (like going to the gym or expressing our boundaries).

Most parts have developed in our childhood and may be mentally stuck there, viewing the world through the lens of a child. We can contact these parts, hear them out, comfort them and solve many issues that way. Healing a part may take time and require working with many other parts first, but occasionally a life-long issue may even be resolved in half an hour.

In IFS, it's usually helpful to treat parts like real people, even if you think of them as just facets of your mind—real people longing to be seen, heard, understood, valued and loved. One of the core concepts of IFS is that *all parts are welcome*. Even if some parts make you feel like they're sabotaging your life, they are just trying to help, and when you get to know them, you'll discover their good intentions. A part may be stuck at age four, and four-year-olds aren't so good at tackling adult problems. They may hold extreme beliefs like "If I'm not perfect, no one will love me" or "Nothing will ever get better" or they may confuse your friend—or weirdly, even *you*—with your dad.

The Self

Parts language comes quite naturally to us. People often voice concerns like "That idea is tempting, but somehow a part of me resists it!" Carl Jung (1875–1960) talked about subpersonalities and the concept of Inner Child also comes from Jung. It has become a common idea in pop psychology, though it feels a bit funny from the IFS perspective—there is no one "inner child," there are dozens of inner children! This multiplicity is also consistent with current neuroscientific views about the nature of the mind and self.[26]

IFS is not the only form of therapy focused on parts of the mind. The established schools of schema therapy (often considered a form of cognitive-behavioral therapy), ego state therapy (which has largely gone out of fashion) and Gestalt therapy also use the concept of parts, as do hypnosis parts work, many NLP techniques (see Chapter 14), Inner Relationship Focusing and Voice Dialogue.

The difference between IFS and most of these other parts-based therapies is the concept of *Self*, which is outside of any part and the cornerstone of therapeutic work. When you are in Self, not *blended* with any part, certain positive qualities like curiosity and compassion naturally arise. Even though alcoholism or withdrawing emotionally may have ruined many things for you, from Self you are able to appreciate the parts behind these issues or at least meet them with curiosity. Most other forms of parts work either have you go into a part or communicate with it indirectly, e.g. by writing, which tends to work much less well.

Typically in an IFS session, the goal is to be at least mostly in Self when you communicate with parts, though sometimes approaches like consciously blending with a part or a part talking with another person's Self are used. If you are reacting to a part or the session with emotions such as frustration, anger, anxiety, resentment, fear or impatience instead of warm openness, you're not in Self, but blended with a part and other parts can sense that.

When you are in Self, you are not emotionally reactive and can face the difficulties of life, including interpersonal issues, with calm spaciousness and compassion for both your own and others' parts. After all, if someone hurt you, that was likely caused by a hurting child part of theirs.

IFS work allows you to see how almost all interpersonal issues are caused by these kind of dynamics. It is easier to forgive yourself and others for past mistakes, as you realize that even a very hurtful part is not only trying to help, but also, it's only a part of the person, not the whole truth of who you or they are. And if the parts happen to be yours, you can likely heal them or at least mitigate the issue.

The long-term goal of IFS is to become *Self-led* in daily life. The more parts you heal, the more your system begins to trust Self and you're less likely to react to things from a part. Even when triggered, you may have the ability to remain partially in Self, such as feeling like your husband is the worst person ever, yet simultaneously being aware that this belief emanates from a wounded child part and may not be true. This would be much preferable to being blended with the part and fully holding this belief.

Communicating with Parts

In the IFS model, parts are divided into three types. *Exiles* carry pain and are guarded by protector parts, *managers* and *firefighters*, who try hard to stop the pain from coming to your attention. Managers have more rational approaches to this, while firefighters fight fire with fire and may escape into addictions or even self-harm. A protector may have multiple exiles and an exile may be guarded by more than one protector. Sometimes a protector may be exiled. You

are supposed to ask a protector for permission to work with its exiles. In practice, this classification is often too simplistic and I've rarely found it useful in my own IFS work.

Parts can communicate with words, images, sounds, emotions, felt sense (vague vibes that may be difficult to put into words, see Chapter 12), spatial locations and bodily sensations and movement. Many can see their parts, often down to detail such as their facial expression, body language, clothes or haircuts, but this is not necessary. Parts may look like you as a child, or something different altogether, e.g. archetypal/symbolic, a cartoon character or even an item. They may resemble someone you know, like a family member or an ex-partner.

When people first hear of IFS, they often imagine it as an inner negotiation process, and at times it does involve negotiation, but this approach can become you telling your parts what to do, when IFS is all about *listening and being there*. Sometimes being heard is enough to heal a part. For many, IFS tends to revolve around soothing and comforting your young parts, which makes sense as most parts are children. Our "inner languages" can be very different, however. When doing IFS, some people mostly perceive their parts as disembodied inner dialogue or somatic sensations, while others enjoy rich imaginal scenarios with many parts present at once.

Parts typically crave nurture, safety and/or play the most, though for those who've been severely neglected as children, they often aren't able to receive these things at first. It can take a while before a part trusts you enough to say a word or even be present to you. Nurture and safety are best provided from Self, though some people have or develop nurturing parts to support other parts. Occasionally parts want imaginary scenarios where they break things or hurt or even pretend-kill those who have harmed you. This may be disturbing to other parts, but it is harmless and often empowering. It tends to work even better with somatic elements, though (see Chapter 15).

Polarization refers to two or more parts holding strongly opposite views and engaging in a kind of tug-of-war. E.g. addictions usually feature many polarized parts and instead of the "addicted part," you may have to start with the protector that's trying to stop you from indulging. One very common polarization is one part that is determined to work hard and another that just wants to play or relax.

The goal is to heal all involved parts in a polarization or at least negotiate with them, so they all agree to let go, at least a bit. IFS books tend to recommend meetings for the parts to accomplish this, but I've generally had good results just by healing all the involved parts with normal IFS work. Of course, polarizations also happen between the parts of two individuals (or groups of individuals).

Often "meta parts" crop up when doing IFS. They may be annoyed at the number of parts showing up and feel like the whole thing is a chaos, be convinced you're doing it wrong or just imagining everything or they may be critical of IFS as a whole. They may be voicing their real objections, e.g. an inner critic grumbling you can't do anything right, *but they may also be covertly attempting to interrupt the whole process*. Most traumatized people carry strong anti-healing parts—to the point they can even stop you from reading about IFS.

There may be parts that make you feel tired, scatterbrained or confused in order to hinder you from doing IFS or getting to a particular exile. It's possible to be blended with a *Self-like part*, a manager part that believes it's Self. If you don't notice this, they make it difficult to progress with therapy. A Self-like part might want to get the session over with quickly or claim it welcomes all parts in an attempt to silence or fix them. Self does not have an agenda.

The classical "magic question" in IFS is asking a part "What do you fear would happen if you didn't do your job?" What would happen if that part didn't make you overeat, procrastinate or act snarky? You may discover surprising motivations that would have never occurred to you via rational analysis, because emotional logic isn't amenable to analyzing. (Perhaps your sensible explanation for that behavior *is* true, but there may be several other parts behind it, as

well!) If the behavior is clearly rooted in a past situation or parts you already healed, you can ask the part if it could give you a break from its job to see if things might work without it.

Many parts live in the past and their sense of time can be quite strange: they may be angry at your boss yet still not realize you're an adult. It's often very helpful to let parts know your current age, that you are an adult who is capable of dealing with this issue, and e.g. that abusive people of the past are no longer in your life, perhaps also that you have a job, a partner or friends, if you do. This is one of the most powerful "IFS moves" and occasionally is enough on its own to heal a part.

Another impressive move is asking a part if it is willing to step aside for a bit to let you access Self. And usually they do oblige! This may seem perplexing: I can ask my anxiety if it would go away and it does, how is that even *possible*? Because you're not wishing for a part to go away, as we so often do, you kindly ask it to *step back for a moment* (unblend) for a good reason.

Even if a part doesn't immediately agree to let go, if you assuage any fears it has (e.g. let it know it can still follow the session and intervene if needed) or promise to get back to it, it often complies. Also, if a part is trying to flood you with its pain, you can ask if it is willing to tone it down so that it's easier for you to communicate with it. Just like with people, if you treat someone with kindness and respect, they tend to respond well to your requests.

A slightly unusual "magic question" I developed when guiding is asking fiercely critical parts how they would rank their *own work* as critics, e.g. on a scale of 1 to 5. In my experience, they usually judge themselves too, rating themselves something like 3/5. This has led to constructive conversations about their tireless work and how it feels to be judged.

Locating Parts

The trickiest aspect of IFS for many is locating the first part to work with. For some this comes quite naturally: the concept of parts makes immediate sense to them, and they may have been noticing parts all their life. Others find it much more challenging. The easiest part to locate may be one of your inner critics, which is perhaps voicing derogatory views of you. Or you may sense your addiction as a "monster," but this is likely something too heavy to start practicing IFS with. You can try bringing to mind a situation where you got triggered and see if that leads you to a part.

There are many ways to locate a part, but in my opinion, through your body may be the easiest and most beneficial way. If you feel any emotions somatically, you're already sensing parts. Even if you believe you don't normally "feel things in your body," you likely perceive some physical sensations connected with feelings, such as nervous tension or trembling, warmth from anger, a knot in your stomach, or stress or anxiety tightening your chest or throat.

You can try if focusing on that area of your body gives you any words, images or felt senses or if it will respond to questions. Finding the part behind such a coarse sensation can help you later locate other parts that may be much subtler physically. Once you discover just one part in your body, it often opens the door to locating many, many more, which can open your whole experience into a more embodied direction.

Some common types of parts include:

- judges others
- makes you aloof and disconnected from your emotions (e.g. can't cry)
- seeks intimacy, connection or commitment, polarized with parts terrified of that
- terrified of rejection and abandonment
- terrified of conflict

- people don't love me if I'm X/unless I'm X
- shame (especially related to sexuality)
- seeks aliveness and vibrancy
- hates the grown-up world or finds it drab
- feels burdened by gender roles
- angry at people who've harmed you
- reacts to money, food/eating or sex
- can't tolerate boredom
- can't tolerate responsibility
- gets angry if it feels you're told what to do
- terrified of being alone
- feels you aren't human (common in severe trauma)
- controlling (of other parts and/or people)
- hopeless or catastrophizing
- overreads into social interactions (e.g. everything means people don't like you)
- impostor syndrome
- fixated on how bad your life is or how unfair that is
- fixated on solving every problem
- trying to earn your parents' love
- wants to "show someone"
- wants you to "leave your mark"
- I know things better than others
- afraid of expressing your wants, needs, boundaries or possibly anything at all
- causes issues with your voice
- terrified of you healing your trauma or dissociation lifting
- "I'm probably doing this wrong" (IFS or other things)

They are all trying to help, and deep down they long to feel safe and loved. Does reading this list evoke any reactions in your parts? Remember that such reactions may also be defensive ("that's ridiculous!").

The Process of Healing

Many IFS books suggest a series of "rituals" performed to heal a part: reparenting, retrieving, witnessing and unburdening. Which ones of these are done and how always depends on what the part wants and needs. Self-like parts are often tempted to rush into fixing the part before it's ready to heal.

Reparenting is utilized in other therapies too, but it works much better when done from Self. It may involve going back to a particular memory in the role of an ideal parent and changing the situation, such as defending the child against parental abuse. Reparenting may also be done with a grown-up part carrying trauma. Most of the time, parts just want you to be there for them, in the now, e.g. soothed, held or tucked in.

Retrieving refers to helping the part out of an unsafe past situation into a safe environment, e.g. your home or your body. A blanket fort is a classic and oft-loved lodging! Some parts aren't afraid of the past, but a situation in your current life, such as interacting with a parent or someone being angry at you, or another part. In that case, the part's safe place might be something like a fortress, or you might build a force field around yourself as a boundary. Parts can also be told that if they dread being present when you do something that's boring or

scary for them, *they don't have to be*. E.g. when you go to work, a child part might be drawing instead.

Witnessing is the part showing you memories of why it adopted its current role, *to make you understand how awful the whole thing was for it.* Often this is unnecessary, as we now know that normally in trauma therapy, you don't have to focus on the original trauma. However, the events to be witnessed need not be deep wounds, it could be e.g. occasions of your parents calling you lazy: so-called *small t-trauma or microtrauma* (see the next chapter).

Unburdening is based on the idea, to my knowledge unique to IFS, that many parts carry a *burden*. The part may believe it *is* the burden—similarly to how an entire human, blended with a part, may believe they are nothing but a failure. A burden is an emotion like shame or a negative belief like "I'm unlovable." The part can be asked if it carries a burden and if and how it'd like to dispose of it. The typical way is dissolving it into the elements, like burning with fire or burying in the ground. I once guided someone's part in disposing its burden into a washing machine.

Parts with severe trauma may be terrified of witnessing or unburdening. In that case, it's possible to reassure them that you can start with just a portion of the burden. One can initially witness 20% or unburden 10% of a particular trauma. If the part agrees to this, the remaining portion can be stored in an imaginary box or another container between your sessions. (This may sound like silly play-pretend, but the box technique is also used in other therapies.)

In practice, these steps are not always needed. My own parts usually aren't in a "place" and can't be retrieved, they rarely show me any memories and their burdens almost always heal without explicitly focusing on them.

There may be physical sensations associated with a part healing. It can make you feel more spacious and often it moves you to tears. Afterward the part may be keen to adopt a new role in the system. A critic may become a mentor or an exile wishes to infuse your life with more playfulness. Or a manager just wants to go on a holiday and rest. (In IFS theory, healing a part doesn't make it disappear, but occasionally they do seem to vanish.) The healing can often be completed in one session, sometimes it takes many. Sometimes the burden heals but comes back later and additional work is needed. If you notice no change in the issue you worked on, there might also be more parts involved.

Different Approaches to IFS

There is a decent amount of research on IFS, though most of it is conference talks, book chapters, dissertations or otherwise not peer-reviewed and there is a scarcity of proper trials. Also, most of the research has been done in specialized target groups (like people with a certain chronic illness) or combining IFS with approaches like art or dance therapy. There are even papers discussing IFS in the context of law or entrepreneurship. This diversity poses limitations of how evidence-based IFS can be considered, but it also demonstrates how multifaceted it is and how it can be used in a wide variety of ways, in various contexts and melded with other approaches.

The most popular IFS guidebook, Jay Earley's *Self-Therapy*, is useful but also somewhat formulaic and prescriptive. I feel like IFS should be more like improv. Janina Fisher's *Healing the Fragmented Selves of Trauma Survivors* is influenced by both IFS and sensorimotor psychotherapy. It focuses on stabilizing the system when there is severe trauma and structural dissociation, such as by naming all emotions as coming from a part rather than "me." Susan McConnell's *Somatic Internal Family Systems Therapy* utilizes e.g. touch, movement and breathwork.

IFS combines well with other types of therapy. Later in this book (Chapter 15) I discuss somatic approaches that make parts work more embodied. I also include a description of an entire session which included elements from both IFS and Somatic Experiencing. Incorporating IFS with hypnosis (see Chapter 14) or EMDR (Chapter 13) is also relatively common. From an IFS perspective, all psychotherapy works with parts, explicitly or not. When you benefit from therapy, it's because it healed one or more parts. It just tends to be much more effective to access parts explicitly.

IFS and meditation can be combined in a number of ways. Some people do IFS under the influence of psychedelics or MDMA (Chapter 12). You can journal from a part or to a part or let parts express themselves through art, music or poetry (Chapter 18). The IFS framework can also be a valuable tool for writing fiction.

IFS is a deeply relational therapy that takes into account the person's living conditions and systemic factors. Most parts are stuck in the past, but a part may also be reacting to a current physical illness, unhealthy relationship, poverty, systemic racism or other ongoing oppression. In IFS, no reaction is ever considered "pathological" or "maladaptive." And sometimes e.g. voicing your needs really *isn't* safe.

IFS was developed based on family therapy, and it is also used in family therapy and couples therapy. Concepts from IFS can be used in communication outside of therapy settings too, e.g. one member of a family talks for a part of theirs from Self, while other family members listen trying to stay in Self. When people are familiar with the IFS frame, it can be used in everyday conversations too: "It really hurts some of my parts when your critical part judges me," which tends to be better received than I-you-talk.

Chapter 3
Trauma

Trauma is a complicated subject as it encompasses so much of human experience. Many old definitions of trauma have later been found to not be inclusive enough: an event does not have to be extraordinary or to threaten your physical safety to be traumatic. One way to describe trauma is as an emotional response to a distressing event that overwhelms your coping mechanisms to the point you're unable to fully process it. But that still leaves out a lot.

Trauma is not just mental anguish, it also affects the body and the autonomic nervous system (see Chapter 12). It can cause dissociation and attachment trauma as well, fundamentally altering your perception of yourself and the world. Both of these phenomena are discussed later in this chapter. Please be mindful that even though I don't go into causes of trauma in detail, if you have severe trauma yourself, reading this chapter could still be quite triggering. It might be helpful to proceed in small chunks to let you digest it. The next sentence might be one of the most triggering parts.

Bessel van der Kolk calculated in a medical journal article that in his view, more than half of depression, two thirds of alcoholism and three quarters of suicides, drug addiction and domestic violence would be eradicated if there was no child abuse.[27] And this of course is just one source of trauma. Trauma affects the lives of most people constantly; it molds our friendships, relationships and spiritual practice. It plays a role in almost every interaction between two or more people. Even having a chapter dedicated to trauma feels a bit silly, as most of the content of this book relates to trauma in some sense.

Besides post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), trauma plays a role in most mental health conditions. Even ones like schizophrenia that are often considered "biological" in origin have been strongly connected to childhood abuse in many studies.[28] The so-called borderline personality disorder and most other "personality disorders" are just labels for *constellations of parts that behave in a certain way because of trauma* and they respond well to parts-based approaches.

Types of Trauma

Most literature divides trauma into two main types. Simple trauma (type 1) develops from a single incident, such as a severe injury. Complex trauma (type 2) is a response to a more long-term situation, such as an abusive relationship or childhood neglect. The latter can result in a condition called complex PTSD or cPTSD, which is considered to have a more fundamental effect on the personality, but it is still trauma that can be healed, not a life sentence. Type 1 and 2 are distinct phenomena. Many treatments that help simple trauma may be inappropriate for the complex variety, or may need to be applied with great care to not exacerbate the symptoms in debilitating ways.

There is also a third, less often discussed type. Trauma that is still ongoing is known as *continuous traumatic stress* (CTS).[29] In some sources, the acronym refers to a continuous traumatic *situation*, as by many authors it's not considered to be a mental health issue, but a nor-

mal response to ongoing unsafety. Most studies on continuous trauma have been done in areas with ongoing conflict, but the amount of CTS research seems to be on a marked increase. Things like systemic oppression, chronic illness and medical trauma can lead to CTS.

The distinction between PTSD and CTS is crucial, even though some trauma literature conflates CTS with cPTSD. Ordinary trauma, whether caused by a single incident or multiple ones, is a *past assessment of unsafety that has ceased to be true but is still felt as true*. Continuous trauma is more about the present situation and the future than the past, and it is not an inaccurate assessment. CTS can usually not be fully healed, as it is natural to feel threatened by current unsafety. You can't feel safe if you aren't safe. There is still potential to reduce its impact by healing parts reacting to it, e.g. feeling unworthy because of racism or ableism.

A helpful concept used in some psychotherapy literature is "trauma with a small t," also called psychological *microtrauma*.[30] This refers to a seemingly minor occurrence continuing to negatively influence our thoughts or behavior, especially when such events accumulate. An example could be a disparaging comment on your appearance having lasting effects on your self-image and decisions you make, such as choosing a haircut or avoiding beaches. Or a parent calling you lazy, making you reluctant to say no to others to avoid such remarks. Even if those events did not lead to full-blown trauma, such long-term consequences on your life would not be insignificant.

Some authors have suggested that the accumulation of microtrauma can, in fact, lead to PTSD.[31] I've witnessed something reminiscent of this in some people I know, and it can be a confusing situation. How can I feel traumatized when nothing *really bad* happened? My dad always *meant well*, my boss was not a *bully*, why do I still hurt? But trauma is purely your subjective experience, there is no international panel of experts judging it. Your mind is the expert panel for your experience.

Denial and Minimizing

Many severely wounded people believe they have no or very little trauma. They may have dissociated (blocked out) traumatic memories away completely or the memory and its emotional charge are stored separately. In the latter case, they may remember an awful event but not feel anything in reaction to that memory, concluding it didn't really affect them much. Trauma pioneer Peter Levine even describes the shocking case of "Gladys" who exhibited signs of an obvious trauma reaction. When he inquired about stressful events, she described being kidnapped, tied down and threatened, but claimed none of it was scary.[32]

Traumatized people may also know others who were severely abused and either believe they themselves endured what they perceived as "milder" abuse (e.g. only verbal, not physical) or no abuse of any kind. But trauma does not require the presence of abuse. Circumstances like emotional neglect, hospitalization, parental separation, death or serious illness in the family or extreme poverty can also lead to severe trauma, as can attachment issues taking place in very early childhood (more about this a bit later).

I suspect that some of the minimizing beliefs around trauma are also related to misunderstandings originating from cinematic depictions. E.g. in the movies, flashbacks look like videoclips, but this says much more about the medium (film) than how most people experience flashbacks. A tactile or somatic flashback is harder to comprehend as relating to past trauma, while auditory flashbacks can be confused with psychosis.

I find it very unfortunate that trauma developed in adulthood is rarely discussed compared to childhood wounds or is often mentioned in disparaging tones. I recently saw a newspaper headline claiming that divorce cannot cause trauma! Many non-abusive behaviors can traumatize, while people may suffer overtly abusive treatment that they don't mentally label as such,

e.g. at work or from friends, relatives or neighbors. Chronic illness and healthcare (or the inability to access it) as well as giving birth are common sources of trauma. Just because a situation or an event was seemingly insignificant doesn't mean that it can't have traumatized you, or that you are weak if that ensued. If it caused you trauma, it was hardly insignificant.

My goal is, of course, not to gaslight you into believing you have trauma if you don't. Mild trauma is tricky to avoid, but there are people who had great parents and lovely childhoods without major misfortune and haven't struggled much in their adult lives. There are those who really struggled yet emerged almost unscathed, somehow. I believe, however, that people without trauma are much less likely to be reading this book. Spirituality tends to attract wounded individuals. Psychotherapist John Welwood wrote:

"*Many of us—and I include myself here—originally turn to the dharma, at least in part, as a way of trying to overcome the pain of our psychological and relational wounding. Yet we are often in denial or unconscious about the nature or extent of this wounding. We only know that something isn't right and we want to be free from suffering.*"[33]

Trauma as a Societal Phenomenon

When many people use the word "karma," I think they'd be better off speaking about "trauma" instead, naturally depending on what they mean by the term. Especially the interconnectedness aspect of karma that some emphasize makes much more sense to me when we're talking about trauma instead.

We now know that trauma appears epigenetically heritable to some extent. It modifies gene expression in ways that can be passed on to the offspring and even to further generations, even though the amino acid sequence of the DNA isn't altered.[34] The actual importance of this is yet far from being well understood, but trauma clearly exerts major intergenerational effects. Most of this likely manifests through cultural inheritance. Those who have been abused or neglected tend to perpetuate the cycles of abuse and neglect, and their attitudes, dynamics and patterns transfer on to the next generation (which IFS calls *legacy burdens*). Besides families, this takes place in relationships, friendships and communities, as well as between strangers with some forms of abuse.

In addition, a major cause of trauma that often gets left aside when discussing abuse and neglect is structural oppression such as racism, sexism, homo/transphobia, ableism and medical abuse. According to Judith Lewis Herman's classic book *Trauma and Recovery*, trauma is always political. For a long time, war trauma could not be addressed and it took improvements in women's rights for the society to be able to talk about sexual violence and domestic abuse. Medical abuse and abuse of disabled people are still hardly mentioned—including in Lewis Herman's book, though they feature in David Treleaven's *Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness*, which has a prominent focus on the ways systemic oppression leads to trauma.

Treleaven writes: "*Trauma is both prevalent and political. We live inside of social and economic structures that are designed to respect and create safety and opportunity for some groups, while systematically disregarding others. This is a 'power over' model that shapes all of our lives and perspectives, even when we have altruistic intentions. Each of us has to do the internal and external work of becoming conscious of these different systems in order to conduct trauma-sensitive work.*"[35] Being trauma-sensitive or trauma-informed includes considering all these complex and intersectional intricacies.

In certain communities, people lean towards taking a "nuanced and neutral" stance towards trauma and abuse. And everything is nuanced, of course. Someone being abusive or having behaved in problematic ways doesn't make them a monster, but that also doesn't mean abuse can be brushed aside as "interpersonal dynamics." Such attitudes actively perpetuate

harm. Lewis Herman put it very bluntly: "*It is morally impossible to remain neutral in this conflict. The bystander is forced to take sides. It is very tempting to take the side of the perpetrator. All the perpetrator asks is that the bystander do nothing.*"[36]

Attachment

The word "attachment" can appear a bit confusing in a book like this. Buddhists use the term to point to clinging and grasping to both things and people, clinging and grasping that should be eradicated. It has a similar meaning in Hinduism, but often refers to attachment to goals and results in particular, and detachment is seen as desirable. In Western psychology, "attachment" means something entirely different, however—and in many languages other than English, the words aren't the same, e.g. the Buddhist idea is referred to as something like "clinging" and the psychological concept as "bonding."

Based on John Bowlby's attachment theory, we are all thought to have one of four attachment styles (though it's really just a certain combination of parts). None of them are set in stone or "bad," some just add more difficulty to your interactions with the world. Sometimes when individuals with different attachment styles interact, it may feel like the parties are conversing in a different language, when everyone is just trying to get their basic human needs met.

If your early childhood is emotionally secure—a caregiver is present, attuned to your needs and soothes you when called for—you will likely grow up *securely attached*, which encompasses 50–60% of people. You are able to commit to a partner (without smothering them) and can handle things such as conflict or your spouse needing more or less space than you do.

Lacking that emotional security in childhood tends to lead to a type of *insecure attachment*. This can show up as e.g. being "clingy" (*anxious attachment*) or aloof (*avoidant* or *dismissive attachment*) in relationships—and clingy people often find themselves attracted to aloofness and vice versa, complicating things further. In other words, if you weren't sure you could rely on your caregivers, even as an adult you may fear your partner is about to leave you any moment and become preoccupied with that (anxious attachment is also known as preoccupied attachment).

John Welwood's observations match mine: "*I'm afraid that what many Western Buddhists are practicing in the relational area is not nonattachment, but avoidance of attachment. Avoidance of attachment, however, is not freedom from attachment. It's still a form of clinging—clinging to the denial of your human attachment needs, out of distrust that love can be reliable. . .Many of us who are drawn to Buddhism are avoidant attachment types in the first place. When we hear teachings on nonattachment it's like: 'Oh that sounds familiar. I feel really at home here.' In this way a valid dharma teaching becomes used to support our defenses.*"[37]

Attachment trauma can ensue without any abuse. As attachment styles are primarily formed in early childhood, the person may also lack memories directly related to it. Postnatal depression or parental bereavement in the first two years of life can give rise to insecure attachment in the child, who might not recall any maltreatment or neglect. Even conditions during pregnancy, such as prenatal depression, are now considered to play a possible role in attachment foundation.[38]

While anxious and avoidant attachment styles can result from parents simply being "out of tune" with their child, abuse eliciting fear in the child (and possibly also caregivers being dissociated) may lead to *disorganized* attachment, also termed *fearful-avoidant*. It combines neediness with a strong desire to withdraw, provoking a chaotic pattern of relations. It's not the same as having anxious patterns in some relationships and acting avoidant in others, which is much more common, but more like enduring both simultaneously. This type covers just a few

percent of people. Disorganized individuals crave affection, but can't take it, or may leave their partner preemptively to avoid being left. They also tend to dissociate heavily.

Attachment style isn't exclusive to parental or romantic relations, but affects other close bonds and other aspects of our lives, as well. Attachment trauma can even color our whole worldview.[39] Securely attached people tend to be more optimistic, trusting and forgiving, while those with insecure attachment may struggle with compassion and altruism (which is of course not to say they cannot be compassionate). An anxious attachment style correlates with anxiety and fear overall. Avoidant individuals are prone to being angry, suspicious and critical and often project heavily on others as a defense mechanism.[40] In that sense, "dismissive" is a better term, as it's much more than just being emotionally distant.

Also, those with anxious attachment tend to blame themselves for being clingy and needy—and unfortunately, so does the rest of the world, at least the Western culture. Avoidant people are more likely to believe their experience is just *how things are*: it's not that they lack trust or fear commitment, but people just aren't worth trusting or built for long-term monogamy. Amir Levine's and Rachel Heller's bestseller *Attached: The New Science of Adult Attachment and How It Can Help You Find - and Keep - Love* reminds the reader that no attachment style is "pathological," but more like the opposite: they help explain behaviors that too often are regarded as weird or inappropriate.[41]

Attachment styles are often viewed as labels, that you either are securely attached or not. But attachment involves many parts and even the most securely attached person likely has some needy or avoidant traits. New attachment wound can develop in adulthood, but it's not as pervasive as our attachment style, formed in the early years. People with late attachment trauma tend to be very conscious of its origin: "I felt safe in relationships until my ex-husband cheated on me and since then I just can't trust anyone."

Attachment theory is an established part of the field of psychology with numerous studies supporting it. This includes different cultures, though some authors believe it may not fully apply to e.g. cultures where parenting is carried out by the whole village rather than in a nuclear family.[42] I maintain that attachment trauma is an extremely important concept and learning more about it can be life-changing, in books such as the aforementioned *Attached* or online.

A healthy romantic or therapeutic relationship with a securely attached person can help heal attachment wounds. They can also be processed like other types of trauma, with methods like Somatic Experiencing (see Chapter 15) and IFS.[43] The Self can work as an attachment figure, allowing parts to become securely attached. There's also a somewhat IFS-like practice for attachment repair called Ideal Parent Figure.[44] To begin with, it can be illuminating to look into the ways that your and your potential partner's attachment style may affect your relationships and the way you perceive yourself, others and the world. Even if you're securely attached, others' attachment style can have a huge influence on your life.

Dissociation

Early-life trauma is not just hurt and pain: it structures the whole psyche around avoiding that pain, making survival possible but many other things infinitely harder. In dissociation, trauma is "split off" from consciousness so as not to feel unbearable, a stronger form of compartmentalization than just exiling a part. This provides a vital survival mechanism particularly in cases of continuing maltreatment, e.g. living with abusive or neglectful caregivers while attempting to behave in a way that minimizes their harmful actions.

Dissociation refers to two somewhat different but often related phenomena: "spacing out" (which may also come off as derealization, confusion or fogginess), which the person usually is

aware of, and compartmentalization, which may not be noticed consciously. The former is often caused by a single part producing confusion to prevent the person from going anywhere near the trauma, while the latter is more about parts (typically a large number of them) becoming disconnected from each other.

Sometimes also benign everyday phenomena not necessarily related to trauma like daydreaming and zoning out while driving are included under the umbrella of dissociation. Those who dissociate tend to be high in a trait called *absorption*, which refers to e.g. the ability to get deeply engrossed in fiction, games and films. Dissociation may be linked to higher levels of creativity.[45] As an author and artist, I've always felt a bit envious of the imagination and absorptive abilities exhibited by many of my friends who dissociate heavily. Many people with dissociation lose hours at a time daydreaming, often also interacting with *tulpas* (imaginary friends) or fictional characters.

In cases of severe chronic developmental trauma, the whole personality may become fragmented. Most parts are walled off from each other, which also tends to make them more extreme and polarized. It's like a family that stops talking to each other while resenting the other family members and being convinced they are dangerous. There's a common idea that dissociation equals lack of embodiment, "not living in your body." Often this is indeed true, but I've known people who are unusually attuned to bodily sensations, yet they still dissociate heavily in other ways.

The theory of *structural dissociation* categorizes trauma-related parts into five types: fight, flight, freeze, fawn/submit and attach.[46] As the names suggest, these parts can also affect the autonomic nervous system, as in the fight or flight response. Fight parts can be aggressive, judgey, paranoid or controlling, but may also direct their vitriol inwards. Flight parts fear commitment and flee into addictions and other escapism. Freeze parts feel numb, detached, scared and anxious. Fawn parts are ashamed, people-pleasing, conflict-avoidant and lack boundaries. Attach parts feel needy and seek comfort in others, but fight and flight parts do their best to get away. I'll talk more about these types in the next chapter.

You may have heard of dissociative identity disorder (DID), which used to be known as multiple personality disorder. It can develop when there is serious abuse or neglect in early childhood, possibly also if the parents are very dissociated. People tend to picture DID as a group of fully-formed personalities taking turns, but DID can manifest in many different ways, and there is a spectrum from the normal multiplicity of mind to severe compartmentalization.[47] Some of these *alters* and parts are aware of each other while others aren't, and more than one of them can be present simultaneously. DID is often assumed to be very rare, but its prevalence has been estimated to be over 1%.[48]

Nearly 10% of people struggle with other types of severe dissociation[49] (in spiritual circles likely a larger percentage), so this is not a marginal problem. The number may sound high, but many manage to function well in life despite severe dissociation. This is thanks to the heroic efforts of the so-called "going on with normal life self," in structural dissociation theory known as ANP or *apparently normal part*. It would be easy to confuse the part with Self, but ANPs are managers. This part may go to work and do the taxes even if the rest of the person is crumbling under re-experiencing of trauma.

Those with an avoidant and especially disorganized attachment style tend to be quite dissociated in nature, as pushing things away is natural for them. This may also include shutting out the actual attachment trauma, such as dissociating away the avoidant traits or using dissociation to gain the needed space in a relationship. Those with anxious attachment sometimes do this too. If they feel like they're seen as too clingy and needy by others, they may succeed in blocking off "acting out" these traits, while the actual trauma remains.

Avoidant and heavily dissociating people often have deeply escapist motives for spiritual endeavors. They may have a very high motivation to practice, often to the point that they isolate themselves from others in the belief it helps them progress, which tends to have the opposite effect. They can't stand being present in themselves, in the world or with others. Being in their bodies often isn't so great either, but may be tolerable, especially if they only have to watch their breath or find vibrations, and their teacher tells them everything else is just junk signal to be ignored.

John Welwood noted: "*Meditation is also frequently used to avoid uncomfortable feelings and unresolved life situations. For those in denial about their personal feelings or wounds, meditation practice can reinforce a tendency toward coldness, disengagement, or interpersonal distance.*"[50] In cases of severe dissociation, *meditation may not even be appropriate* (see e.g. David Treleaven's book *Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness* or Chapter 11 of this book). Carelessly thrusting someone with severe trauma onto a supercharged healing or awakening path can be immensely destabilizing.

Many practitioners don't want to deal with trauma. They're looking for transcendence, a nobler form of dissociation. Instead of who they are, they wish to become a mythical *arahant* (someone else), an enlightened being with no suffering. Unfortunately even the arahant is not free from suffering by far, and those who do manage to awaken without dealing with their stuff first will have to face it eventually. The spiritual path doesn't give you a choice when you deal with it, like therapy lets you do to some extent. It's generally heaped on you and often at a very inconvenient moment. Seeking transcendence is understandable, it just doesn't work.

Boundaries

Most people struggle to set boundaries, which can result in conflicts, feeling hurt and triggered and blaming others for your own issues. Someone can be assertive, dominant and even controlling, yet still switch to a fawn response when they would need to voice an objection. Setting boundaries is in no way in conflict with any dharma teachings or spiritual ideals like compassion, generosity or boundless love. Saying no can be an act of love both towards yourself and the other person.

Boundaries are one of those things that comes naturally to us when we are in Self. If you aren't sure what you want (and more importantly, what you don't want), IFS work can help with figuring that out. Using IFS-based communication or Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication (NVC) can aid with expressing your needs in a way that is less likely to trigger others.

Yet boundaries can also turn problematic in several ways. You need wisdom to utilize them optimally: not too lax nor too rigid. In my experience, the more fixated someone seems on boundaries, the more common it is that they are tight and rigid about their own ones, but may not have the capacity to respect those of others.

Wounded people sometimes end up weaponizing boundaries to control others, perhaps because they still have so many unexpressed needs in other areas. This is rarely done maliciously, it's a trauma response. Especially some people with an avoidant attachment style have a tendency to control the world by pushing others away. Psychologist Alison Cook suggests asking yourself some questions to check if you might be weaponizing boundaries, including "*Are you mostly interested in trying to change their behavior?*" and "*Are you secretly hoping they'll 'see the error of their ways' as a result of your actions?*"[51]

In general, the concept of boundaries is best fit for those with avoidant attachment. Their main need tends to be having more space, which is where boundary setting works well. "No" is always acceptable as a boundary. On the other hand, an individual with secure or anxious

attachment might struggle much more with unmet relational needs (e.g. for support or affection). Some people have plenty of "no" energy and could benefit from embodying more "yes" energy, and vice versa.

Sometimes people are just so overjoyed to learn that setting boundaries is even a thing that they attempt to isolate themselves into a bubble where nothing bothers them. Any transgression or mistake and you're out, and soon everyone is out. They may try to cut out from their lives not only those causing them pain, but also anyone who *experiences* pain. This happens especially with those who lack *internal* emotional boundaries because of overactive fawn parts (see the next chapter). They feel others' pain too strongly and try to solve that by turning everyone away.

Brooke Sprawl, LCSW, wrote in an article that I found a helpful summary of what boundaries are and aren't: "*It's important to understand what true boundaries are. When we mistake them for pseudo-boundaries, requests, and ultimatums, we end up believing we are advocating for ourselves when we're actually behaving in ways that are passive, entitled, manipulative, or controlling*."[52]

Chapter 4
Spirituality, Parts and Self

A common idea among Buddhists is that practicing meditation and studying the dharma provides you with a wealth of wisdom. I'm not entirely convinced. I don't think things such as the three characteristics and nonduality are wisdom in themselves. They can definitely stimulate and incite wisdom, such as impermanence instilling clarity on what kinds of things are and aren't important. However, loved ones dying or falling gravely ill (or being seriously ill yourself) appears to impart comparable practical insights about this.

Nonduality reveals the interconnectedness of all beings in a way that's a massive insight for some people, while to me and others, interconnectedness was always obvious. Meditation can make you discover that you don't have to believe all your thoughts, often a life-changing realization. Others land to this conclusion through completely different means or have been aware of it as long as they remember. You can learn self-love from mettā practice and yet many have always had this capacity.

For me, wisdom is something that helps you understand the world better in a practical manner, not just existentially. "Practical" almost always refers to interpersonal skills. While meditation can provide relational insights and the Buddhist canon also has guidance, these are not the main focuses. The Buddha's interpersonal advice was based on an Indian society that has not existed in thousands of years.

In my view, wisdom is also about nuance, complexity and fuzzy logic, less "yes" and "no," and more "maybe," "depends on the situation" and "it's complicated." Dogma and doctrine is, by definition, rarely based on those things. They can also muddle the waters between the absolute reality and this titillatingly complex house of cards we inhabit in conventional reality.

I believe it's easier to acquire deep wisdom if you're not revered as a holy master, as then there are more truly two-way sharing conversations taking place. Carl Jung wrote in his memoir: "*From my encounters with patients and with the psychic phenomena which they have paraded before me in an endless stream of images, I have learned an enormous amount—not just knowledge, but above all insight into my own nature. . .My patients brought me so close to the reality of human life that I could not help learning essential things from them.*"[53] (This is a translation from German, but "insight into my own nature" sticks out as curiously mirroring Buddhist terminology, also in the original.)

Ethical behavior is considered primary in most religions and Buddhism is no exception: *sīla* or morality is hailed as the foundation for everything else. You are not supposed to just meditate to reach enlightenment, but first of all to train your mind in virtue. This is supported by the ethical code of the *vinaya*, but it's also about choosing skillful actions based on the circumstances rather than just following a set of rules. One of the main critiques of secular Western mindfulness is that sīla has been forgotten.

Moral discernment, like many of the qualities that meditation is supposed to train, is available simply by being in Self as IFS sees it. Obviously, the word "simply" is doing some heavy lifting here. Some people, even heavily traumatized ones, can easily get into Self just by sitting on the cushion or attempting to do IFS, while for others, the whole concept seems elusive and

alien. Even if you can access Self at will, that ability may quickly crumble as soon as you're triggered.

In Self you are naturally compassionate, equanimous and non-reactive (of course, something troubling happening can boot you out of Self). I really like how Jack Kornfield expressed this: "*We do not have to improve ourselves; we just have to let go of what blocks our heart. When our heart is free from the contractions of fear, anger, grasping, and confusion, the spiritual qualities we have tried to cultivate manifest in us naturally.*"[54]

These positive qualities are all already available in you and it's not so much about training but unveiling them. This parallels the Mahāyāna perspective on enlightenment as not being something to be attained or sought so much as an innate quality in you just waiting to be discovered. From Self, our parts can also offer us much more wisdom, like a whole committee of mentors that is always available to us.

Singer Alanis Morissette writes in the foreword to *No Bad Parts* by Richard Schwartz: "*It was encouraging that my angry part and my mother part and my artist part and my financially responsible (or irresponsible!) part and my free-spirit part could somehow bring wisdom to me if I but opened my heart and my curiosity to them. Each part—as scary or illuminating or mysterious as it may appear to be—could offer wisdom and solace and vision. I came to see these internal parts as messengers. Dialoguing with them could offer helpful guidance and insight.*"[55]

The self is an illusory construct, we aren't truly separate, and nothing has an inherent existence; these things are all true but not always *helpful*. I believe that a more important aspect of wisdom can be distilled from a parts-based model of the world. You can view the conventional reality, *Indra's net*, as a fractal-like structure of hurting child parts and seemingly arrogant protectors guarding them, all enveloped in Self even if you can't always see it, and that people form similar collectives also on the macro level. I believe that is highly conducive to true wisdom: love, compassion, spaciousness, communication, conflict, resolution, forgiveness, humor, learning and growing together, the "no but" and the wonderful mettā phrase of "yes and."

Spirituality and Exiled Parts

"Shadow" is an originally Jungian idea that there are large aspects of ourselves that we have pushed away and repressed, when it would be wiser to face them and integrate them.[56] Nowadays it's a popular term in the New Age scene. Shadow is an easily understandable and down-to-earth concept, but it is too often used to forge a division of good and bad parts, as do other dichotomies of good/bad, such as "cleansing" or "dark energy." The goal is to accept and integrate, yet the name itself suggests that there *is* something dark or undesirable about the material, and even more so when we talk about someone else's shadow.

I've been told that these terms are necessary, but to me it is compelling that IFS does not use such frameworks at all. The IFS approach is pretty much the opposite with its slogan of "All parts are welcome" and warning against exiling parts as unwanted. In general, I feel like concepts of something being "dark" or "pathological" belong to outdated therapy models and newer ones tend to have done away with it, for a reason. I've never heard of anyone whose progress became stalled because they focused too much on self-acceptance, but am aware of numerous stories to the contrary and have experienced it myself, as well.

Many sources equate Jung's shadow and exiled parts in IFS. This makes sense, yet they tend to be used in different ways, confusing things. People might say "Kate is cynical and judgmental, that's her shadow side," which may or may not be something Kate knows. Perhaps she is aware that she can be a bit harsh. In IFS she might discover that the sardonic parts are protecting an exiled child part who feels ashamed for having needs. That would be the actual "shadow" and it would likely not be visible to others.

In spiritual circles, certain types of parts tend to be much more accepted, while others are pushed away and exiled. Here I'm using the division into fight, flight, fawn, freeze and attach parts from structural dissociation theory, as these categories often apply and are useful even if you don't dissociate.

Fight parts get a bad rep, as anger is not viewed as a "spiritual emotion." Yet there is nothing wrong with anger in itself. Vajrayāna sees anger as a powerful force for good, as is evident from the plentiful wrathful deities. In deity yoga you would embody their wrath, wrath which stems from boundless compassion. This righteous anger destroys and transmutes the obstacles to enlightenment. From the perspective of tantrikas, the idea of anger not being "spiritual" is quite funny.

Despite their name, fight parts aren't always looking to fight. Their anger may take the form of frustration or cold resentment. The book *Trauma-Stewardship* provides an interesting perspective on how anger can manifest: "*I've heard many people say, 'I'm not an angry person. We're not angry at our workplace. We don't have anger issues,' and then they talk about how funny they are and how they're a cynical bunch. While anger is a natural feeling and in and of itself does no harm, cynicism is a sophisticated coping mechanism for dealing with anger and other intense feelings we may not know how to manage. Its undercurrent is anger, and yet it is often witty, quick, sharp, easy to laugh at, and incredibly alluring.*"[57]

It's tempting to confuse fawn parts with compassion and kindness. The person being fawned doesn't see the people-pleasing and lack of boundaries. They may feel like the other person is just being nice, considerate and helpful. If someone treats you very nicely, perhaps even a bit too nicely, it's much more appealing to chalk it down to them being a kind or spiritually advanced person (or perhaps you're just so damn nice that it makes others treat you like this!) rather exhibiting a trauma reaction.

Unfortunately, fawn parts tend to be polarized with fight parts that don't feel like pleasing anyone—and they have a point, aiming to please is generally not a healthy habit. This means that playing the role of a serene spiritual person and suppressing your anger can make you feel even more furious, which then increases the impulse to suppress it even more.

Psychologist Jay Earley discusses the polarization of people-pleaser (fawn) and passive-aggressive (fight) parts in his IFS book *Self-Therapy, Vol. 3*.[58] The people-pleaser dishes out promises, while the passive-aggressive part resents these offers and believes it must have been forced into them (because "it" didn't make those promises, it was another part!). The resentment can make it view the other party as controlling or manipulative. This dynamic has played a huge and devastating role in my own life, especially related to my chronic illness and people who had parts that were eager to help me and parts that loathed the idea.

Attach parts also tend to go unappreciated in spiritual circles. The focus of many practitioners is to rid themselves of all attachment, in spite of people attaching to each other being a healthy, natural impulse of human beings. Freeze and flight parts, on the other hand, are viewed as highly compatible with practice, as they are easy to confuse with equanimity, non-attachment and deep spiritual aspirations. I've talked with many people who realized their meditation practice tends to mostly be dissociation (freeze).

Flight parts can be behind the impulse of leaving the world behind, like going on a long retreat, joining a monastery or shutting yourself in a cave to meditate, so you don't have to deal with daily life or interpersonal relationships. Quite a few people see the whole of Buddhism as a dream of transcendence: let's stop wanting anything or caring if anything bad happens, including those we love, the ultimate avoidant attachment of having no attachments.

Ideas of things being "wholesome" or "unwholesome" also tend to encourage dissociation. Anger isn't okay, fear (especially fear of death) isn't okay, sexual and material desires are frowned upon, so the safest way to handle normal aspects of being human seems to be pushing them

away. Yet we contain a symphony of emotions that can all co-exist, there's nothing unwholesome about it. I think this quote from Karla Herbert is worth pondering: "*I don't believe we must be either full of the peace that passes understanding or a victim wallowing in self-pity. I don't think it must be an either/or option; it can be both/and.*"[59]

Compassion Mimics

There are various definitions for empathy and compassion, in psychology, neuroscience, philosophy and religious traditions (as well as different kinds of empathy recognized in psychology). It is commonly asserted that if you feel compassion for someone, you will also feel their pain. For some people with severe trauma and lack of emotional boundaries, this is a major problem: *they may feel others' pain so strongly it becomes unbearable*.

This is not empathy or compassion. It's parts reacting to trauma. It's parts making others' pain about themselves. They are trying to help, but end up only making things worse both for the person and their loved ones. As an extreme example, several friends with such parts have tried to convince me that I should not talk about anything negative or painful with them or even on social media at all, as that's too triggering for them.

Like all trauma, these parts can be healed. They are often resistant to the idea though, as they tend to feel morally superior. They believe they represent real empathy or even a special form like "hyperempathy," that they're necessary for spiritual progress (when they actually interfere with compassion practices), that they make you "an empath," a good person or more specifically, *make you good person, unlike those horrible, ruthless people who treated you badly in the past.* None of this is true. But the parts really believe that and believe that not crumbling under others' pain would be terrible.

In Self you naturally feel compassion for yourself and others, yet their suffering does not trigger or overwhelm you or feel like a burden. That may sound incredible to someone who has only felt parts-based "compassion," yet this is an innate capacity. It does not make you "cold" or "distant," quite the opposite. In this headspace you project authentic caring and the problem doesn't become about you. You can think clearly about the best course of action and need not worry about compassion fatigue.

Another extremely common compassion mimic are *rescuer parts*. These are parts of the psyche that want to fix others, e.g. their practical problems or (perceived) spiritual stagnation. Most people have them, and my chronic illness has given me an unfortunate front row seat to what they can look like and it's not pretty. But what having these parts *feels* like is being a deeply compassionate person burning to help others. This can be true, too, but deep down these parts' motivations are not about altruism but control. It can turn quite ugly if the other person isn't keen on being controlled, or if the fix the parts propose isn't successful.

There may also be parts that want to be seen as good people. Meditation teacher Gregory Kramer brings up "the hunger to be," equating the desperate need to be praised for our goodness with the core Buddhist concept of "craving to exist."[60] Not receiving appreciation and recognition from others would mean not being seen, not existing, it would mean *death*. Unfortunately, this urge cannot be satisfied as no amount of praise is ever enough.

I suspect that most of what is discussed as "compassion" in fact has nothing to do with it, and this also goes for spiritual contexts. Having these kinds of parts doesn't mean one isn't empathetic or compassionate underneath them, but for many, true compassion is mostly or even fully veiled by childhood trauma. With the aid of spiritual practice and inner work, we can unblend from and heal these sneaky mimics of compassion. This opens up a completely new dimension to love and caring about others and their pain.

Self-Compassion and Self-Love

In recent years, self-compassion has become a mainstream subject. Curiously, it is often defined a bit differently from compassion in general. Most approaches to self-compassion focus on being gentler on yourself and not judging yourself too harshly, making it hard to distinguish from self-acceptance. We could certainly do with more self-acceptance, as most of us have strong inner critic parts, yet healing those parts would be even more helpful.

For some people, inner critics are more like a nagging parent that can be tuned out but it's always there (and often they *are* internalized versions of our parents), while others take this criticism as the *truth*. Especially those with an anxious attachment style tend to be prone to feeling inferior and worthless to the point it may be their primary self-image, which I find heartbreaking. It's good to remember that we don't always have to believe others and we don't have to believe our own thoughts. Some people have such extreme inner critics that it's almost impossible to proceed with any inner work without healing them first.

Self-love is more active than just tolerating your flaws and not regarding yourself cruelly, it's actually deeply loving yourself and delighting in yourself. It's not easy and often it's also not socially sanctioned. I come from a culture where all compliments have to be received with extreme self-deprecation and in which "self-loving" is a pejorative word for narcissism. I've had fellow Finns tell me that loving yourself is always narcissistic, which feels like a very sad perspective. It's not that narcissists love themselves; they have a very fragile ego which requires attention and adulation from others to supplant self-love.

In mettā meditation (see Chapter 6) you direct love towards others and yourself, which many people really struggle with. Mettā is a great way to practice loving yourself. Jack Kornfield wrote: "*The Buddha says, 'You can search the tenfold universe and not find a single being more worthy of loving kindness than yourself.' Sometimes we need to let go of self. And sometimes it is our self-hatred and unworthiness that is the problem, and our healing and freedom of heart will only come through love of the self we have rejected.*"[61]

I believe that IFS can be even more helpful—and the combination of IFS and mettā is self-love dynamite. All obstructions to self-love are something that can be healed. Shame, guilt, judgment, parts that believe a particular aspect of you (such as weight or lack of academic success) makes you unlovable. It might take time, but it's all healable. From Self, self-love is natural and effortless. It's not just "you sending love to you," it's soaking in the beautiful essence of you-ness that *is* love. I've cried in IFS many times simply because I've felt such overwhelming love for my parts.

Many people at least subconsciously presume that self-love just means another form of hating yourself. Someone I know admitted: "*I honest to god thought that 'self-love' was just a metaphor for beating yourself up more effectively. I never imagined it meant actually loving yourself.*"[62] At its deepest, self-love feels bubbly, elating and intoxicating, not too different from falling in love romantically. Granted, you aren't likely to feel like that full-time, as may initially be the case with infatuation, but it also doesn't have to fade away. I'm not sure if I've ever used the word "birthright" before, but this truly is your birthright.

I have to disagree with the common claim that you can't love others until you love yourself. It feels like a hurtful way to put down traumatized people by telling them they aren't even capable of love. It is certainly easier to have a healthy intimate relationship if you don't hate yourself (and especially if you don't expect your partner to fix your self-hatred). Yet depressed and traumatized individuals can make good partners and glean happiness from loving and being loved. On the other hand, the opposite is very much true: someone who feels strong self-love finds it easy to love others.

Awakening and Parts

From an IFS perspective, it appears the components making up the aspects of self that can dissolve in spiritual practice are mostly or all manager parts. For me, such parts were concentrated in the head area: eyes, throat, crown, the center of the head and the back of the head, but especially in the jaw. There were a couple in other areas of the body too, but it felt like most of my selfing was clustered around the jaw, for some reason.

"Ego managers" can be well-hidden and definitely seem to work akin to the layers of an onion. Initially none may be perceptible, but as you heal more parts overall and more ego managers, more and more will surface. IFS can greatly speed up the awakening progress, but it also seems to me like IFS alone would be enough to attain enlightenment.

Just like parts can be against healing trauma, they can also protest practice as a whole, a specific technique or awakening. I believe most practitioners have such parts, and Daniel Ingram has also brought the subject up in an interview.[63] I suspect they are one of the main reasons why some people seem to make lightning-fast progress while others meditate for decades and feel like nothing has changed. I had a friend who was really into the idea of concentration meditation, but wanted to avoid the progress of insight (see Chapter 9) altogether and he did manage to dodge it for years.

Anti-awakening parts can manifest in different ways. They may be actual ego managers or parts that don't want you to heal ego managers. They might try to prevent you from meditating altogether (of course parts can also do this for more global procrastination reasons). Or you might meditate regularly and it feels nice, but you aren't making any progress even in the scale of years. Curiously, for multiple people I know, such a part has manifested as a certain bodily location that "protests" meditation, e.g. by drawing attention to itself and sabotaging concentration. Especially when working with nondual practices, parts may crop up that feel like losing the sense of self is like death and as such either heartbreaking or terrifying.

The parts may have sensible arguments (not having a self would be scary) or completely bizarre ones. I had one that felt the point of my existence is to be right. Mostly they fear death, either yours or their own, or that they won't be able to control you any more if there is no self. They can be healed similarly to other parts. One of the benefits of doing IFS is that parts tend to show up in a more obvious way outside of sessions too, rather than just wrecking havoc in the background. They may heal on their own or your practice may be able to override or "sneak past" them, but that tends to take more time.

Parts hung up on e.g. suffering or dissociation, and trauma in general, can also hinder spiritual progress. Unhealed wounds don't preclude enlightenment, but they can slow things down or even become a bottleneck. Especially after stream entry, trauma seems to form more of a hindrance than before it.

Parts may believe no-self means death for them, but awakening doesn't eradicate parts. Neither is the Buddhist notion of self in conflict with Self in IFS. Several authors have suggested that the IFS Self has more to do with the Mahāyāna concept of buddhanature.[64] Those who have dissolved their sense of self can still do IFS without problems. They may find that they don't really perceive "having" Self as such, but I feel like that boils down more to parts work in general changing after nonduality as the "structure of consciousness" is transformed. There's a global background awareness as well as parts that are simultaneously somatically localized and boundless.

Part II
WALKING THE PATH

Chapter 5
Meditation

Meditation is considered a very important practice in most schools of Buddhism. It's also a part of several other religious traditions, including some Christian denominations. People meditate for many different reasons and motives, such as relaxation, quieting their internal chatter or hoping to attain enlightenment. All reasons are valid, though with some of them, I find it questionable whether meditation is the right tool. I've known people who sit to gain improved cognitive function or higher levels of motivation, yet I believe long-term practice is more likely to have opposite effects.

Considering the myriad of possible adverse effects I discuss in Chapter 11, I'm quite cautious with talking about benefits of meditation. It is often promoted for e.g. anxiety relief, while it can also cause anxiety. With that said, meditation can make you calmer, kinder, more relaxed, patient, equanimous, compassionate, self-aware and perceptive as well as less reactive and judgmental, though some of these qualities depend on the type of practice.

Potential physical benefits of meditation include lower blood pressure, improvement in some chronic health conditions and reduced need for sleep. This book does not delve into the evidence and physiological correlates for the benefits of practice. If you're curious on how meditation affects your body and brain, I recommend David Goleman's and Richard J. Davidson's book *Altered Traits: Science Reveals How Meditation Changes Your Mind, Brain, and Body*.

It's also good to be aware that a large portion of psychology research consists of small studies done with poor methodology. Such studies frequently don't replicate: other scientists are unable to get the same result, which is usually because the original finding was due to chance or another factor. So if you see a study claim something like "loving-kindness meditation helps preserve telomere length"[65], that does not mean it has been *proven* that mettā slows down physiological aging, even if newspaper headlines claim that.

Meditation is hard to even define, as there are so many different types and styles that can be almost opposite in their goal. Most practices delineated in this book, from IFS to Alexander technique, are close enough to meditation that some count them under the same umbrella. I probably wouldn't, but I still believe that almost any of them would be enough to attain enlightenment by itself for at least some people.

There are, however, some beliefs about meditation that may be misleading or not universally applicable, and not necessarily healthy. Some of these views are mostly pervasive among those who don't meditate and beginners, while a few are held even by advanced practitioners.

A common belief is that you have to empty your mind on the cushion. People may then conclude that because they can't do this, they are not suited to practice. Some types of meditation are explicitly concerned with creating the object of focus, such as a visualization. If your mind was blank, you would be failing at such a practice!

Also, even if the point was to empty your mind—which may be taken as a decent approximation of the object of *some* types of meditation—that is by no means immediately expected. Just like with playing the violin, the long-term goal is to produce beautiful music, but it is

simply not possible to get there without first playing numerous discordant notes. No one would expect to be a successful violin player in a month or even a year. Some people do seem to master meditation rapidly, with some sort of natural inclination, but that's rare and such talent is not needed.

Many find meditation apps supportive of their sitting, either for their gamification aspects (like keeping track of streaks) or because some apps let you meditate with others. And if it helps you, great! I still feel like tailoring your practice to your personality and life situation in other ways can be even more fruitful.

Recommendations vs. Practice

Quite a few meditation books try to convince you that you want to be a *real meditator* and avoid the nasty pitfalls that would make you "that guy." "That guy" might be e.g. a *jhāna junkie*, someone who just deconstructs their drama on the cushion, falls prey to reifying *kriyās* (involuntary movements), visions or dark nights or mistakes a temporary stage for enlightenment. These warnings contain a lot of truth to them, but they can also direct one's path towards becoming an acceptable meditator rather than actually being with experience and listening to your intuition.

Some teachers insist you should pay no mind to any thoughts or kriyās arising on the cushion, that they're just distractions. I feel like this is a very harmful notion! You've likely already been ignoring messages from your body your entire life, why would you keep on doing that? When your body finally feels safe enough to talk, it's worth listening. If you do, you'll understand why it was important.

Most sources recommend meditating in a sitting position, such as the half-lotus (legs crossed normally) and with your back straightened, but not unnaturally so. Kneeling on a bench is also popular. This works well for many, but those with back or leg issues may find it difficult or even impossible. Trauma can also play a role in how safe or natural a particular posture feels. Some types of meditation are done in another position, such as yoga nidrā, which is usually practiced lying down.

There's also a notion that in meditation, you should never move your body (or you are *that guy* again). even though many meditative practices are based on movement. This view can be damaging when it's held as an ideal that you either fulfill or fail at. Or as some teachers put it: "*Another assumption of Structural Spiritual Bypassing is that still, quiet bodies are reflective of equanimity, nonviolence, and mindfulness. When this is held as the only valid spiritual practice or path, there is an implicit assumption that the more still and quiet, the more mindful the person.*"[66]

Yes, 95% of the time it's probably a good idea to try to stay still on the cushion if you're physically able to do that. It's also fine if you sometimes need to adjust your position, switch to a yoga pose, jot down notes, pick your nose, scratch, fart or scream. Pulling up your socks or getting a glass of water doesn't mean you fail or have poor equanimity, and at times you might face such intense emotions or kriyās that stillness is not even an option. Luckily, there's no meditation police who's going to fine you and discomfort doesn't score you any extra points.

There is no point in practicing in a position that ruins your health or acts as a limiting factor. If you can only sit for 15 minutes in the lotus but can meditate for 30 minutes lying down, the latter is probably going to be more helpful. Reclining carries the risk of getting sleepy or even dozing off, but lying on a hard surface instead of the bed, meditating with your eyes open and/or keeping your knees bent (and soles against the floor) may mitigate this. Keep-

ing your eyes open can reduce drowsiness in general, and in some lineages (e.g. Dzogchen) this tends to even be the norm.

Some hardcore practitioners claim you need to meditate an hour or two every day. I've seen claims that sessions shorter than 20–30 minutes are useless, as your mind has no time to calm down. This contributes to the notion that there is good/useful and bad/useless meditation and that real meditation is an extreme sport. An hour or more is certainly more likely to get you results, but even 10 minutes a day can be highly rewarding Most of my own sessions have been 5–20 minutes, though I used to amass up to half a dozen short sits per day.

While meditating daily may be ideal, pulling it off is not always realistic. Curiously, I know some people who mostly practice on retreats with little sitting in daily life, yet they feel they are making progress this way. As for the time of the day, pick whatever works the best for you. Mornings are often depicted as the most suitable time for practice, but with chronic illnesses, early in the day is often the worst timing for alertness and focus.

In general, most teachers and guidebooks tend to reify high concentration. This can result in frustration and feelings of inferiority, especially for those whose ability to focus is limited by such issues as ADHD, chronic illness or chronic sleep deprivation, and may even lead them to quit the whole practice. I remember being overjoyed early on in my practice when I read a Reddit comment reassuring someone else that dullness in meditation caused by chronic fatigue doesn't prevent one from awakening. This was just a random person on the Internet, but I clung to the claim in hopes it was true. And it is true.

As paradoxical as this sounds, *your level of concentration doesn't matter much even if you're doing so-called concentration meditation*. A friend told me that was the most helpful advice I ever gave her and helped her emerge from a dark night that had lasted for years. It's fine to have a deeply flawed practice. Getting distracted is not meditating badly or failing at meditation, but a part of meditation. A high level of concentration can make sitting more enjoyable, but it is not required for awakening or even for things like the jhānas (see Chapter 7).

Many conclude that meditation isn't for them, e.g. because they are busy, have ADHD or suffer from chronic pain and feel like meditation makes it worse. Some autistic individuals have found that mindfulness practice makes them hyperaware of their bodily sensations (such as gut motility) even off the cushion in a deeply disturbing way. This may be related to the belief that there is only one type of meditation; that you have to focus on your body and if this feels very aversive, it means you aren't cut out for this. (In general, it doesn't seem like autism poses any limitations or issues with practice.)

Still, there are people whom I feel probably should *not* begin to meditate. In certain circumstances, the potential short-term or long-term side effects would pose a major risk. This includes many with severe mental or physical illness, people in a very unstable life situation and those who simply can't take time off. If you are e.g. a single parent, carer for a family member or can barely make ends meet with no paid sick leave, meditation practice might wreck your and others' life (see Chapter 11). Of course, if you practice already, then it gets much more complicated.

This might sound like an excessive cautious approach, even scaremongering, but some teachers go much further. Mark Lippmann even believes that e.g. those living with children or women who may choose to have children in the next 10 years should not engage with the practices he teaches at all.[67] He recommends extreme caution for several other groups of people, like those with cardiovascular and immune system conditions.

Different Types of Meditation

There are many styles of meditation that can be categorized in various ways. E.g. Buddhist meditation is traditionally divided into two main types: *samatha* (often translated as concentration, but something like "calm abiding" may be more accurate) and *vipassanā* (typically rendered as insight or mindfulness, but could also be called observation). Samatha calms the mind and vipassanā is for gaining insight into the nature of the mind and reality. Often the goal is to first practice samatha and then vipassanā, with the reasoning that a more calm and concentrated mind is ripe for receiving insights, though some people go for the route of "dry insight", or vipassanā only.

In reality, most types of meditation contain aspects of both samatha and vipassanā, even if one side is emphasized more. Many teachers point out that originally these were not even supposed to be separate *styles*, but qualities of the mind to be trained. Breath meditation is a good example: it features both calm abiding and observation. Mettā (loving-kindness) is usually counted as either samatha or its own category, but it also contains a strong insight facet. Nowadays nondual practices are also often considered separately. In this book they're included in their own section (Chapter 8), as many of them are not strictly speaking meditation.

The following list of meditation styles is by no means intended as conclusive, as I'm not familiar with practices like analytical meditation. The Buddhist canon expounds at length the benefits of quite a few practices which have fallen out of fashion, such as focusing on the repulsiveness of the human body. Mettā meditation is covered in detail in the next chapter.

Breath Meditation

Mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānasati* or just anapana) is a basic Buddhist meditation technique, as well as popular in many other religious traditions. It is often seen as the quintessential type of meditation, yet I believe its efficacy pales in comparison to many other styles. Usually the breath is followed at the nostrils, but sometimes at the belly, with no attempts to control it (if the breath is intentionally manipulated, it's generally considered breathwork, not breath meditation).

Sometimes breaths are counted, verbally or with *mala* (prayer) beads, or the focus may be more vipassanic, observing the characteristics of the breath. Many find breath meditation a great way to be in their bodies, but I've known several people for whom all breath-related practice has been highly dissociative.

Body Scan

Body scanning is a popular type of vipassanā both for hardcore practitioners and those just looking to relax with the help of a guided meditation. It was popularized by Indian teacher S. N. Goenka and his 10-day retreats, held in many different countries, which still rely on recordings of Goenka's teachings. It resembles the popular winding-down technique called progressive relaxation, where you focus on one part of the body at a time. The goal of body scanning isn't to relax, however, but sweeping your attention to *observe* the body for any kind of sensations.

Initially it may be hard to perceive much, but with practice, more and more sensations will be noticeable. Later you may start to notice vibrations: perceptions are not solid but consist of undulating waveforms. They may first be felt in the body but later in other senses too, even the whole field of awareness. This demonstrates impermanence, one of the three characteristics of existence. Some people recommend starting body scanning sessions with breath meditation to increase the "resolution" of the scan.

Noting

Noting is another popular vipassanā style, particularly endorsed by e.g. Daniel Ingram based on Burmese master Mahasi Sayadaw's teachings. In it you mentally label either all perceptions (e.g. "thought" or "sound") or only a specific type, such as only the breath, only getting distracted from your meditation object, or sensations in your feet in walking meditation. In rapid noting you drop the words as you try to get up to such a high speed that they'd slow you down.

Shinzen Young is another popular proponent of noting, though his approach is a bit different. He maintains that the most powerful way of doing noting is only noting "gone" when sensations *end*, which he believes is kind of like self-inquiry, but done in the reverse.[68] Meditation teacher Jason Siff is concerned that noting can actually reify perceptions like "hearing" as something that actually exists and he reports witnessing this in his students.[69] Perhaps Shinzen's approach would be less likely to lead to this.

Noting can also be used in mundane ways, such as to relieve anxiety. In a stressful situation, you can note different sensations with surprisingly calming effects. In psychology, naming emotions is termed *affect labeling*, which has been shown to support emotion regulation.[70] It doesn't require that you label your feelings with perfect accuracy; abstract and vague is fine. Noting acknowledges an emotion or perception while creating distance and reducing identification with it. There's no "I'm scared" but only "fear."

Objectless Meditation

There are a number of styles of meditation where the object is "just sitting." They're mainly associated with nondual traditions, though the actual practice instructions differ between them. The most famous form is likely the Zen practice *shikantaza*, but there are also similar ones in Tibet. Usually the goal is to sit in nondual awareness, so these kinds of approaches tend to be particularly useful for more advanced practitioners who can access such awareness easily, or have already stabilized it.

Walking Meditation

Walking meditation is particularly popular on retreats, where periods of sitting are often alternated with walking practice. This helps combat lethargy, torpor and muscular tension and also keeps us more connected with our bodies. Walking meditation is often done indoors or repeatedly treading a short outdoor route, so that you can fully focus on the practice without having to mind distractions in the environment. Of course, for most people walking more natural routes outdoors is much more enjoyable.

There are several approaches to walking meditation, such as focusing on the sensations in the legs and feet only, following the breath in addition to that or sending mettā while walking. In the yogic versions of walking meditation, you either do certain kind of *prānāyāma* (breathwork), e.g. the "box breathing" of 4–4–4–4 but counting steps instead of seconds, or repeat a mantra while walking (a practice named *chankramanam*).

Mantra Meditation

Mantra practice is used in almost all schools of Buddhism, as well as other traditions. It may involve repeating the mantra out loud or in your head. It may be a common one, like the Buddhist mani mantra ("*Om manipadme hūm*") or the Hindu *mahāmantra* ("*Hare Krshna, Hare Krshna*" etc), it may be a single syllable (e.g. "*Om*") or it may be given to you by a teacher. Many believe that mantra meditation works on multiple levels. It can be a concentration practice and a form of contemplation, manifestation or prayer related to the meaning of the

words. If you recite the mantra out loud, the sound waves also produce physical vibrations in your body.

Often with mantras, each syllable also has a specified meaning (e.g. referring to a particular deity) besides the connotation of the words they're contained in. E.g. "padme" means lotus, yet the syllables "pad" and "me" also carry additional significance. Many consider it important to pronounce the mantra correctly, especially if it is Sanskrit, so if choosing a mantra from a text, you might wish to check the pronunciation. (Note that Tibetans pronounce many Sanskrit mantras like the mani mantra slightly differently.)

Kasina

In kasina meditation, you gaze either at a colored disc or e.g. a candle flame, then usually close your eyes and try to focus on the afterimage for as long as you can sustain it. The kasina is a traditional style of samatha meditation in Theravāda, described in the *Visuddhimagga*. In Hindu traditions, a similar practice is known as *trāṭaka*. Fire kasina is particularly popular and is also used by some for shamanic or magickal purposes. Daniel Ingram wrote an entire book *The Fire Kasina*, available as a free eBook, about this aspect together with Shannon Stein.

Tibetan Practices

Visualization-based practices are particularly prominent in the Vajrayāna. They may feature highly detailed and ornate imagery of deities or mandalas or visualizing energy flow in the body. Deity visualizations are not limited to images, but you also embody their positive qualities, such as the boundless compassion of Avalokiteśvara/Chenrezig. If you are doing deity yoga/yidam practice, you would imagine yourself as Avalokiteśvara and possessing his capacity for boundless love.

Tonglen ("taking and sending") is a Tibetan compassion meditation where you breathe in others' suffering (often a specific type of suffering, such as pain or shame) and imagine sending them relief with the out-breath. Like with mettā, you can also breathe in your own suffering and the suffering of those struggling with similar issues.

Skygazing is a popular Dzogchen practice which, as the name suggests, involves literally staring at the sky. This is related to the idea that the nature of the mind (*rigpa*) is vast, timeless and pristine like the sky. Even though clouds may pass through the sky, they don't sully its true nature. There are several variations of this practice, one of which includes releasing your emotions to the sky.

Chapter 6
Mettā or Loving-Kindness Meditation

Many people are under the impression that breath meditation or a form of vipassanā is the "default" or even the only existent type of meditation. *Mettā bhāvanā*, often translated as loving-kindness meditation, is one of the most widespread Buddhist practices and among ones the Buddha extolled the most. In secular circles it has also attracted interest as a wellness practice. Many Buddhist practitioners underestimate it, seemingly thinking it's some sort of a cute "side project"—that you should do an hour of real meditation and then five minutes of mettā to wrap it up.

That feels like a regrettable misunderstanding to me. All you need to attain enlightenment is mettā. *The only instruction needed to awaken is: send mettā to yourself and other beings until there are no more "you" and "other beings"* even off the cushion. That's it. No need for the breath, vipassanā, observing the three characteristics or "deconstructing yourself"—you can't "do" the latter anyway, but the mind is quite capable of deconstructing itself (as well as observing the three characteristics more implicitly) when suffused in mettā. It's generally the fastest path as far as gradual paths go, and the most wholesome. If this book was about attaining Buddhist enlightenment in the simplest possible way, this one sentence in italics would be enough to comprise it.

Perhaps mettā is simply too delectable to be taken seriously by some productivity enthusiasts, who feel like meditation should be hard work and at least somewhat boring. They are missing out on so much. Yes, mettā tends to be highly enjoyable, which also helps to increase the motivation to meditate. It doesn't feel like just a chore or a means to an end, but something you actually look forward to and that usually leaves you in a good mood (and sometimes it's incredibly hard, and that's okay, too).

Rob Burbea beautifully wrote: "*When qualities such as generosity, metta, and compassion are strong, all perception is coloured. We see beauty everywhere, in other sentient beings, in nature, in the most mundane and ordinary situations and objects. Things can seem to be lit from within themselves with a quality of love, peace, or joy. . .That quality can seem to pervade the universe, to be mystically woven in to the very fabric of the cosmos, and to hold all things within it.*"[71]

Practicing mettā helps you treat others in a more loving and understanding manner and sending mettā to yourself can be deeply nurturing. For some, even the *joyfulness* feels healing, if their life is otherwise deprived of warm feelings. When you practice mettā, you're spending time regularly being wrapped in love, and what could be more wholesome than that? There's a reason why pretty much all religious traditions heavily focus on love. What else? As Jack Kornfield put it: "*All other spiritual teachings are in vain if we cannot love.*"[72]

I feel like many people also misinterpret the concept "your life is practice." It does not require high mindfulness, and I believe it's much more fundamental to have a constant stream of mettā, sīla, bodhicitta and metacognition. Obviously these aren't in any way exclusionary, but many seem to target their resources on mindfulness. Spirituality isn't about the refresh rate of reality but interacting with the world with love. Mettā and bodhicitta are the heart of this

whole thing and they're also the most enjoyable part of it. They are where the deepest and most satisfactory happiness is found. Yet mettā goes deeper than just good vibes. Lama Rod said: "*One of the blessings of lovingkindness practice is that the heart remains raw, sensitive, and open to pain.*"[73]

Mettā has also been translated as e.g. boundless love, benevolence, friendliness and good will and described as being like the love that a mother feels for her child. It belongs to the four *brahmavihārās* or "divine abodes," which are regarded very highly in Buddhism. The others are *karunā* (compassion), *muditā* (sympathetic joy) and *upekkhā* (equanimity). You can also practice the others as meditation, though mettā tends to be much more common. The Buddha also discussed it numerous times in the suttas, including Karanīyamettā Sutta and Mettānisamsa Sutta, which are both sometimes referred to as the Mettā Sutta.

Some sources call mettā compassion meditation, but they are not the same thing. Mettā refers to wishing good things for others, while karunā is more about wanting to alleviate their suffering. This may seem like semantics, but I've found this to be a crucial distinction even in daily life. Especially if you have any fawn parts hurt by or feeling responsible for fixing others' pain (see Chapter 4), compassion can lead to compassion fatigue, but mettā does not.

Practicing mettā does build compassion, as well, and compassion meditation like tonglen (see previous chapter) also helps mettā arise. If you actively wish someone joy and happiness, you naturally also hope that they don't suffer, while the reverse is not necessarily true. In general, mettā tends to give room to many positive, prosocial emotions such as forgiveness, gratitude and the aforementioned sympathetic joy. It resembles forgiveness in that it does not require any response from the other person and you still reap the benefits.

People sometimes mention being able to access mettā and compassion through concentration meditation, even if they don't explicitly focus on cultivating these qualities. This often comes with an implied question: why should I focus on them? To me the answer feels quite clear. Concentration is an optional tool, while love is both the path and the goal of it.

How to Practice Mettā

The most common contemporary style of practicing mettā involves phrases like "*May you be happy*" and "*May you be safe.*" You close your eyes, relax and bring to mind the sentences while trying to feel their contents as much as possible, to really invoke a strong wish that the recipient be happy and safe. It's better to keep a little pause between each phrase and focus on the emotion rather than repeating them quickly.

The phrases are typically directed first at oneself, then at a close friend or teacher (the order of these first two may vary), then at a neutral person such as a cashier or a bus driver you recognize and last at an enemy. This may be followed by sending mettā to the whole city, the whole planet and/or all beings. "Sending" is the usual term, but Bhante Vimalaramsi has likened it more to a candle that radiates heat quite effortlessly.

If the phrases feel clunky, you don't have to use them, if you can get the feelings to arise even without them. You can also come up with your own sentences, like "*May you be free of trauma*," "*May you feel supported*," "*May you feel self-compassion*," "*May you get rest*" or one of my favorites, "*May you get to be just as you are.*" Later in the practice, the phrases are generally ditched anyway. The target people are often visualized, possibly with the mettā imagined as e.g. golden light, though this is not necessary. Some guided mettā audios also include the less canonical visual of others sending mettā to you.

A traditional Buddhist style is to send mettā to different directions instead of specific people: forward, backward, left, right, up and down. This can help reduce attachment compared to directing your love to particular people, but it can be harder to arouse the feelings of mettā, so

this is a more advanced version. Personally I've never really used this approach, though I've practiced plenty of objectless mettā, just feeling it deeply without sending or radiating anything.

There are many lovely guided mettā audios online. E.g. Tara Brach has many good ones. My YouTube channel https://www.youtube.com/user/diamondie also features several, including an IFS-influenced nondual one and one inspired by Tibetan practices for arousing bodhicitta.

Some people send mettā to other passengers on public transport. I do portrait drawings and other art for my friends, write letters and mail other gifts as a form of mettā practice. Dancing, playing music, cooking for others and playing with your kids can be done with the loving attitude of mettā. If I struggle to feel mettā for a friend because of some sort of a conflict, I try to arouse the feelings by focusing on either gratitude or their precious qualities.

Sensei Alex Kakuyo described it like this: "*Each time we practice Buddhist ritual, we say, 'I love you.' Each time we prepare food for our families or smile at a co-worker, 'I love you.' And each time we engage in action that creates benefit, not harm, for ourselves and others, we say, 'I love you,' to the world.*"[74] And then there's the most challenging part, saying "I love you" to ourselves.

Mettā and IFS work beautifully in conjunction. In a way, IFS can even be seen as a form of mettā practice, as one of the most efficacious moves is not talking with parts, but sending them love. Especially when you have plenty of IFS work under your belt, some parts may heal just from being in contact with your mettā and Self-energy. You can call up IFS parts in a mettā session, or send love to other people's parts, either more abstractly, like all parts of all beings, or e.g. a part of a loved one that you struggle with.

Rob Burbea proposed many interesting approaches to mettā, like sending mettā to *phenomena* instead of people: feeling love towards aspects of experience or the whole of it. This includes mettā towards the experience of mettā and the intentions of feeling it. If there is resistance, then also directing mettā towards that.

Some people are curious about the difference between mettā and prayer. I don't think there's necessarily a difference, but if the prayer label bothers you, you don't have to use it. There are, some deity yoga-like devotional approaches to mettā, such as described in Tulku Thondup's book *The Heart of Unconditional Love*, where you receive and absorb into yourself the boundless love of a higher being such as Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion.

Another common question about mettā is whether it can in some way benefit the recipient, as well. A popular answer to that seems to be "it can be helpful to believe that." Of course, if your worldview accepts that thoughts can affect reality, then the answer from that perspective would be an obvious yes.

If you have an energetic connection with someone, they may be able to feel when you are sending them mettā even when you are not in the same physical location or otherwise connected (such as talking on the phone). I was quite shocked when I discovered this, as before I hadn't been entirely convinced mettā can affect the target person. Directly transmitting mettā into someone's energy body is powerful, at times it has even felt psychedelic to me. If this seems like a bit much to consider, at least if you regularly send mettā to someone, they will probably sense the warmth you feel for them while they are in your presence.

Tranquil Wisdom Insight Meditation

Developed by Theravādin monk Bhante Vimalaramsi, tranquil wisdom insight meditation is a way of practicing mettā that focuses on accessing the jhānas (see the next chapter for more about the jhānas) and reaching *nibbāna* (enlightenment) that way. Instead of switching between

different targets of mettā, in the initial phases of TWIM you only send mettā to yourself and a close spiritual friend, the same person every time, to make the feeling of mettā as strong as possible. You are also instructed to smile when sending mettā. However, in some cases, breath meditation is used instead. Vimalaramsi is adamant that TWIM is what the Buddha actually taught in the suttas.

The "6Rs" of relating to distraction with six relaxation-based steps also form a core part of TWIM. In many schools of practice, if you notice your attention has drifted away from the meditation object, you're supposed to ignore and quell the distraction to minimize its impact. In TWIM, the goal isn't to suppress anything. How can you be mindful of something if you suppressed it? When you notice your mind has drifted away from your meditation object (typically mettā), you follow these six steps, which soon become an automatic routine:

1. Recognize (the distraction)
2. Release
3. Relax
4. Re-smile
5. Return
6. Repeat

"*When a feeling or thought arises, you release it, let it be there without giving any more attention to it. The content of the distraction is not important at all, but the mechanics of 'how' it arose are important! Just let go of any tightness around it; let it be there without placing attention on it. Without attention, the tightness passes away. Mindfulness then reminds you to: Relax: After releasing the feeling or sensation, and allowing it to be there without trying to control it, there is a subtle, barely noticeable tension within mind/body. This is why the Relax step is being pointed out by the Buddha in his meditation instructions. Please, don't skip this step! It would be like not putting oil in a car so the motor can run smoothly.*"[75]

Officially TWIM isn't just mettā practice, though. According to Vimalaramsi, as you progress through the jhānas, the feeling of mettā naturally changes first into karunā (compassion), then muditā (joy) and finally upekkhā (equanimity). This way you move through all the brahmavihārās—the eighth jhāna has no more object as it is too subtle and nonconceptual for that. My own experience and that of some of my friends is somewhat different, though, which goes for several other aspects of TWIM, as well. Instead of "strict TWIM," I could describe my approach as mettā influenced by TWIM, which has been my main practice since 2017.

The best book for learning TWIM is probably David C. Johnson's *The Path to Nibbāna* with the caveat that you may disregard some of the physiological and theological claims if they feel peculiar to you. The actual meditation instructions and the detailed descriptions of the jhānas are excellent.

Troubleshooting Mettā

Some people get mettā to "work" immediately. For others, they can't feel much and may get frustrated and assume they just can't do it. But with everything, it's normal to not master it right away, it's called practice for a reason. *Bhāvanā* in mettā bhāvanā means cultivating or development, not that it has to be there already. You are not failing, but engaging in beneficial, wholesome meditation practice, even if the feelings don't seem to arise.

Choosing your partner or kids as the target can make things easier. Many teachers frown upon sending mettā to your partner or other people you're attracted to, as it can arouse sexual thoughts, but usually this is not a major problem. If you're not initially able to feel mettā strongly for anyone else, it might be worth it, anyway. Sending mettā directly to someone, in

their presence may work better. You can also try to observe if all mettā sentences seem equally difficult.

A possibly helpful starting point is picturing puppies licking your face, or a memory of feeling deep joy or happiness, which is technically not mettā, but it can be close. If you have children, you might bring to mind when they were little babies—or even imagine any mettā target as someone who has once been a sweet, innocent baby, full of wonder.

Sometimes nothing seems to do the trick. I've had people tell me they can't practice mettā because they can't really feel any warm emotions towards others even in daily life—ouch. That may sound shocking, but these are caring individuals with traumatic experiences that block them from accessing feelings of love and warmth.

Bhante Vimalaramsi suggests using forgiveness meditation as a "bridge" to mettā. It's a an analogous practice, but instead you focus on phrases wishing forgiveness for yourself and others. This has helped some people I know and some have found this a valuable practice in its own right. Working on the emotion-blocking parts with something like IFS is often the best way to solve the issue. It also enables you to feel more positive emotions in daily life, which can be scary at first, but I assure you it's worth it! I've occasionally been able to guide someone to heal such parts in one session.

To me, meditation feels similar to exercise in that it's better to find ways that you actually end up doing regularly rather than to push on yourself things that feel off, as they won't stick. That is, if you can initially only feel warmth towards your dog, your crush or your favorite fictional character, it's better to practice like that than to abandon the whole thing out of frustration and feelings of inadequacy.

Multi-Player Mettā

There are different versions of shared mettā practices and this is one I developed back in 2018. Guiding it at real-life events has produced interesting results, like instant bonding between strangers. Two-person mettā is particularly lovely practiced with a friend, partner or family member. It may really hit the spot if there is tension between you two, such as after an argument, or if one of the parties is feeling stressed or low.

You should sit comfortably, facing each other. The first part is the traditional meditation, sending mettā silently with your eyes closed, either towards the other person only, or first towards yourself, then towards the other person. Focus the feelings on the real person in front of you instead of a visualization.

You can decide on a shared list of 4–6 mettā sentences beforehand, such as wishes for happiness, safety or feeling loved, or you can spontaneously generate appropriate well-wishes geared toward the other person, or a combination of these two. For example, if the person is feeling overwhelmed at work, you may wish them relaxation in the upcoming weekend. If they have a low self-esteem, you can wish that they're able to accept themselves.

Set a timer for the meditation part, probably for 5–10 minutes, and when it rings, both of you open your eyes. Or instead of using a timer, you can agree e.g. that you both go through a list of five mettā wishes twice. When both participants have their eyes open, the next part commences.

Look each other in the eye. You can also hold each other's hands, if that feels natural. Taking turns, say the mettā sentences (one at a time or all at once) out loud to the other person, feeling the wish behind the words. After you have completed the whole list, you can hug each other and reflect on the feelings this practice has generated. If you have difficulty sending mettā to yourself in solitary sitting, it may later help to remember this other person conveying well-wishes to you.

Chapter 7
Jhānas

The jhānas are meditative states commonly viewed as concentration practice that may be used to facilitate insight meditation. I, like many teachers and scholars, see them as important insight practice in themselves, which I will discuss later in this chapter. They are highly enjoyable and much easier to access than commonly assumed, without requiring high levels of concentration, and very useful for meditation progress.

Each of the first four jhānas is based on a certain positive emotion. For example, the first jhāna is a state of joy and bliss, while the fourth jhāna is characterized by equanimity. The first four are *form* or *material* (*rūpa*) jhānas and the next four are *formless* or *immaterial* (*arūpa*). Sometimes only the material ones are counted as jhānas proper—jhānas 5–8 are viewed as variations of the fourth jhāna or something different altogether. While either four or eight jhānas is the standard number, occasionally Cessation, the ultimate goal of practice (see Chapter 9), is considered the ninth jhāna.

You normally learn and enter the jhānas in order, though it's possible to skip some of them. People may also end up in the formless jhānas by accident, without having accessed the first four. This is particularly common in the insight stage of Equanimity, which I will get to in Chapter 9. Once you grow skilled with the jhāna, you can also access some of them off the cushion in walking meditation and even during activities like household chores.

The Eight Jhānas (and More)

The first jhāna is all about rapture. It can be mildly blissful or extremely intense to the point of overwhelm, like every cell of your body is exploding from ecstasy. The afterglow can be euphoric as well, but spending too much time in the first jhāna can leave you drained. To me it feels like feel-good neurotransmitters have been depleted. Traditionally the first is considered the only jhāna where you can still have discursive thought.

The second jhāna is rooted in more grounded and less ecstatic happiness (though its intensity varies) and thoughts quiet down. You can proceed from the first to the second jhāna either by toning down the intensity of the bliss or by jhāna teacher Leigh Brasington's trick, taking a long, deep breath. The latter was very helpful for me initially when I felt stuck in the first.

The third jhāna is simultaneously pleasant and quite neutral, so the key to getting there is trying to calm down the joy even further. I've described the vibe as like looking at the sea: enjoyable, serene and vast. It may be difficult to tell apart from the fourth jhāna, which goes deeper into neutrality, tranquility and equanimity, but the third also has a broader and more diffuse quality to attention. The fourth is considered by many the most useful jhāna for insight. Some people regard it (and occasionally also the third) particularly suitable for practices beyond meditation, like magick or energywork.

The first four jhānas don't have names, but the four formless ones do. They are called the base, realm or sphere of something, depending on the translation. If you find it tricky to access them by natural progression from the fourth jhāna, you can try focusing on the relevant

aspects of consciousness. Like the fifth jhāna is known as the realm of infinite (or boundless) space and one way to get to it is to imagine space (or the mettā you're sending) expanding. You may feel like your body disappears as you enter the formless realms.

The sixth jhāna is called the realm of infinite consciousness. Rob Burbea claimed that many mistake it with a variant of the fourth jhāna and that the sixth is more about "awareness of awareness" than infinitude as such.[76] Leigh Brasington describes the sixth as subtle, while for Burbea it was "striking," which is much more concordant with my experience. For me, it has always had a strong aspect of "infinite energy," a buzzy quality which stands out between the calmer fifth and much more tranquil seventh.

The seventh jhāna is the realm of nothingness, though Leigh Brasington commented that he'd rather name it *no-thingness* instead. It is quite subtle and takes more concentration to get to than the others, to the point that I find it the easiest to enter by first going to the eighth jhāna from the sixth and dropping down. This of course requires you already have access to the eighth. Despite the quality of nothingness, there is something very pleasant about it, like your brain going on a nice, relaxing holiday.

The eighth jhāna is named "the realm of neither perception of non-perception." I guess this doesn't really describe it in a comprehensible way, though I'm not sure how it can even be described. It's peculiar and I feel there's something a bit hypnagogic to the weirdness, but that doesn't mean that if you fall into a hypnagogic state from the stage of Equanimity (see Chapter 9), that's the eighth jhāna.

It can be difficult to stay in the eighth for more than seconds at first and any thoughts will probably boot you out. Occasionally I've encountered a weird phenomenon where it feels like I'm "locked" into it and it's almost effortless to maintain. Daniel Ingram believes that even a few seconds in the eighth jhāna gives you potential access to some highly advanced meditative states.

There are also jhānas outside of this sequence. The five Pure Land jhānas are supposed to be accessible by repeating the mantra "*namo amitābha buddha*" three times, but I've never succeeded in entering them myself. According to meditation teacher Kenneth Folk they require the third path of enlightenment, but based on my friends' results, previous experience with normal jhānas does not seem to be necessary.

Disagreements About the Jhānas

Commonly, jhānas are portrayed as deep states of unwavering focus that require very high levels of concentration to attain, for many a feat achievable only during retreat conditions. The high concentration is typically generated by breath meditation, but other methods can also be used, such as kasina (gazing), visualization, mantra or mettā practice. When concentration reaches a sufficient level, this is known as "access concentration," as you use it to access the jhānas. This view of jhānas is also depicted by Leigh Brasington in his popular book *Right Concentration: A Practical Guide to the Jhānas*.

The term "access concentration" originates from *Visuddhimagga*, a 5th-century commentarial work central to Theravāda Buddhism. The *Visuddhimagga* lists the sequence of jhānas accepted elsewhere not as actual jhānas but mere *pre-conditions* to reaching the *first* jhāna. However, the *Visuddhimagga* view has been widely criticized as excessively strict and as a misrepresentation of what the Buddha said.[77] Many scholars have also suggested that Buddhaghosa, its author, did not meditate himself. Some sources discuss sutta jhānas and Visuddhimagga jhānas separately.

Sometimes small children spontaneously enter the jhānas, which may seem like a bizarre claim in light of the previous paragraphs. In the depiction of the Buddha's awakening in the

Mahā Saccaka Sutta (MN 36) and some other suttas, he recalls having reached the first jhāna as a child and upon remembering the incident, he realized that "*this is the path to awakening*." Brasington also mentions in his book that about 10% of his students report similar childhood experiences.

Almost every source characterizes the jhānas as deep states of concentration, but this is not true of all types of jhānas. You could best describe the jhānas as *feedback loops*. The first jhāna, for example, is delight feeding on itself: feeling so much joy that you feel joyful about that feeling itself and it keeps building up. This makes it much easier to conceive how children could accidentally access such states.

For those who are able to arouse strong feelings of mettā, it gives you a powerful shortcut to the jhānas. The emotional tone of deep loving-kindness is very close to the tone of the first jhāna, which is joy, or better described as bliss, rapture or delight (*pīti*). You don't need to reach a high level of concentration. It's sufficient to feel strong meditative joy or bliss and build a feedback loop around it just by really feeling into the mettā. If it's strong enough, you will find yourself in the jhāna. People sometimes manage to learn this in a matter of days.

Some sources claim that mettā can only take you to the third jhāna, but Bhante Vimalaramsi believes this shown incorrect by the Haliddavasana Sutta (also known as Mettāsahagatasutta, SN 46.54)—and in my experience and the experience of many friends, it is definitely incorrect. After entering the first jhāna, you drop the phrases, as other jhānas don't allow for sustained verbal thoughts, and by the seventh jhāna, you will also have to drop the mettā.

The traditional notion of the jhānas is that they should be as deep as possible, such as by attaining a very strong level of concentration, stronger than needed for access concentration alone, before entering them At first glance, this makes sense intuitively—the deeper the better—but there are arguments as to why deep jhānas may in fact be *less useful* than lighter ones.

Concentration vs. Insight Aspects

According to many teachers, including Leigh Brasington, deep one-pointed jhānas are used as tools for insight. Once you *exit* the jhānas, your mind is very sharp and this state is ideal for insight meditation. However, in the lighter jhānas, you can do insight practice while you are still in the jhāna. This is also the central approach of TWIM and Kerel Arbelvs scholarly book *Early Buddhist Meditation*, which states that emerging from the jhānas to initiate insight practice doesn't make sense nor is it in the suttas. It is a creation of Buddhaghosa's. Eviatar Shulman also discusses this a lot in *Rethinking the Buddha.*

Bhante Vimalaramsi, who developed TWIM, divides jhānas into two types: *one-pointed absorption jhānas* and *tranquil aware jhānas*. They follow the same sequence, e.g. in both types the first one is founded on bliss and the fifth on infinite space. But he asserts that it's a big mistake to use one-pointed concentration to access the jhānas. That is what the Buddha initially learned from his teachers and *found unhelpful*, until realizing that he should use the tranquil aware jhānas instead, like the one he entered as a child. The sutta narrative where the Buddha learned some of the higher jhānas from his previous teachers, found them unhelpful yet suddenly realized the first jhāna *was* helpful, has confused many people, and I find this one of the most sensible explanations for it.

Vimalaramsi contends that the usual view of what jhānas is supposed to be is based both on the *Visuddhimagga* and on mistranslations of some Pāli words. *Samādhi* is usually translated as *concentration,* but he is not the only one to disagree with that, and *ekaggatā* is often rendered as *one-pointedness*. According to Vimalaramsi, ekaggatā means "*tranquility, peacefulness, and stillness of mind. It doesn't mean one-pointed or absorption, but rather, collected and unified.*"[78] Several other sources also translate it as the mind being collected or unified.

Well-known Theravādin monk, translator and scholar Thānissaro Bhikkhu also espouses the idea that jhānas should be light states with awareness and mindfulness.[79] Bhante Gunaratana, another Theravādin monk and author, supports the same view, stating that "*If Jhānic concentration is the same as being absorbed by our object of focus then yes, we must leave Jhāna to practice Vipassanā. But, when we become absorbed into our object of focus, what we are practicing is 'wrong' Jhāna. When we practice 'right' Jhāna we will be able to see things as they really are.*"[80]

Culadasa, in the jhāna appendix of his popular meditation guide *The Mind Illuminated*, concluded that "*A reasonable conclusion, therefore, is that* all *states of absorption in meditation, of* any degree*, are* jhāna*, provided they are wholesome, stable, and associated with the* jhāna *factors.*"[81] That sounds like a nice compromise! Except as mentioned before, some teachers believe the *right* type of jhāna *are not absorptions*. *The Mind Illuminated* introduces three types of jhānas, whole body jhānas (also dubbed "very lite"), pleasure jhānas ("lite") and luminous jhānas (deep), all of which follow the same sequence, though it notes that this is far from a conclusive list.

Benefits and Downsides of the Jhānas

There are differing views as to whether jhānas are something essential for awakening. Many scholars and teachers believe the answer is a clear yes according to the suttas. Some view jhānas as highly useful but inessential; others see them as mildly beneficial or even just as a distraction. A few opinions fall somewhere in-between, such as that merely the first jhāna is necessary or that only the attainment of the two highest stages of enlightenment requires mastery of the jhānas. My own view is that clearly they are not required, but they do help a lot.

Keren Arbel notes: "*If, as argued by Walpola Rāhula [a well-known Theravādin monk and professor], 'all these mystic states, according to the Buddha, have nothing to do with Reality, Truth, Nirvana,' why are they described in eighty-six different places in the Nikāyas and mainly in the context of awakening?*"[82]

Bhante Vimalaramsi believes in the importance of all the jhānas, including the formless ones, especially the eighth jhāna where craving is at the lowest possible level before nibbāna. He claims that absorption jhānas allow you to see the three characteristics, but only tranquil aware jhānas let you see deeply into dependent origination.[83]

"Jhāna junkie" refers to someone who gets hooked on the pleasant qualities of the jhānas, forgetting about insight or progress. Daniel Ingram in particular warns sternly of this multiple times in his book. Others counter that someone like that likely has an addictive personality anyway, and it's much healthier to be addicted to beneficial mental states than something else. Bhante Vimalaramsi posits that absorption jhānas can be addictive, but tranquil aware jhānas are not.

The jhānas can be profound experiences and some meditators confuse attaining them with enlightenment. Supposedly this goes for the seventh jhāna, "the realm of nothingness," in particular, with its extremely restful subtlety. Unlike awakening, the jhānas are just passing states, even though they can come with spectacular afterglows.

Sometimes jhānas do also have lasting effects. Entering the first jhāna for the first time permanently transformed some aspects of my inner emotional landscape and worldview. For a friend of mine, who was able to attain the first jhāna very quickly with mettā combined with his regular relaxation practice, it was a deeply transformative event that seemed even more life-changing than mine.

Chapter 8
Nonduality

Nonduality can refer to multiple different things. When that word is used nowadays, it usually points to experiencing reality without separation between the seer and the seen, you and your experience, which is very close to the Advaita Vedanta view. Depending on whom you ask, it can also be roughly equated with monism, or the notion that everything is "made of the same isness." Here, I'm primarily talking about the experiential side of nonduality instead of a philosophical or ontological position. And talking about these things isn't easy, as they're beyond language and all words are more or less misleading.

Many Theravādins argue that Buddhism isn't in any way nondual: well, Mahāyāna may claim that, but this belief results from corruptive influences from Hinduism, as the Buddha never preached anything like that and it isn't found in Theravāda. E.g. the Pāli canon often divides things into opposing categories, such as either wholesome or unwholesome, while Mahayānists with their emptiness (*śūnyatā*) teachings claim that even samsāra and nirvāna are the same.[84]

Yet curiously, one of the most famous nondual dharma teachings that many associate with Zen is actually found in the Pāli canon, in the well-known Bāhiya sutta (Ud 1.10). "*Herein, Bahiya, you should train yourself thus: 'In the seen will be merely what is seen; in the heard will be merely what is heard; in the sensed will be merely what is sensed; in the cognized will be merely what is cognized.' In this way you should train yourself, Bahiya. When, Bahiya, for you in the seen is merely what is seen. . .in the cognized is merely what is cognized, then, Bahiya, you will not be 'with that.' When, Bahiya, you are not 'with that,' then, Bahiya, you will not be 'in that.' When, Bahiya, you are not 'in that,' then, Bahiya, you will be neither here nor beyond nor in between the two. Just this is the end of suffering.*'"

Meditation teacher Leigh Brasington adds some interesting notes to this translation by John Ireland, including that from the context, this appears to be the Buddha's no-self version of an Upanishad (Hindu) teaching, which Bāhiya would have been familiar with.[85] Brasington also believes that a more accurate translation would be "*In seeing let there be merely seeing; in hearing let there be merely hearing; in sensing let there be merely sensing; in cognizing let there be merely cognizing.*" Now the language is even more like a *direct pointing-out*, a concept we'll get to in a bit.

The Inside and Outside of Enlightenment

In many schools of Buddhism and Hinduism, enlightenment equates with permanent nonduality. No-self (see Chapter 1) and nonduality are essentially the same, even though Hindu traditions tend to use names like "true self," which can be confusing as it's the same as no-self. No-self expresses how you relate to your sense of self ("inside") and nonduality how you relate to the world ("outside"). In the end they turn out to be the same thing, as there is neither inside or outside. Before that is fully realized, some shifts may feel like they're about the sense of self diminishing and others like they are about the structure of reality opening up.

Nondual states are also most likely what various religions refer to when they describe "union with God," though e.g. the first jhāna can also come off like this. I believe that all major schools of Buddhism that believe in reaching enlightenment through meditation (so practically all but Pure Land Buddhism) aim to attain what e.g. Advaita calls nonduality, though Vajrayāna also has other ultimate attainments beyond that. However, some traditions specifically focus on inducing nondual states as a way to realize permanent nonduality. They are thus called nondual traditions (and nondual practices). The main ones are the Tibetan Dzogchen and Mahāmudrā, which are quite similar, but Zen is also often included.

Hinduism can be divided into nondualist (Advaita), qualified nondualist (Vishishtādvaita) and dualist (Dvaita) traditions. Honestly, no matter how much I study this (which clearly may not be enough to properly understand it!), for me the latter two feel a bit confusing. The Hindu *Vedas* tout union with Brahman (the ultimate reality) as the ultimate goal in Hinduism, and that Brahman is the same as Ātman (self), yet Dvaitans don't believe they are the same or that you *completely* merge with Brahman.

Advaita Vedanta is the best-known school of nondual Hinduism in the West, the name "Advaita" literally meaning not-two. Most Western nondual teachers teach so-called "Neo-Advaita," dropping the religious aspects out of it and focusing on attaining nondual awareness. Lesser known is Kashmiri Shaivism (also called Trika), which takes a more tantric approach. Contemporary Western teachers who have been influenced by Kashmiri Shaivism among other traditions include Rupert Spira and Shambhavi Sarasvati. She isn't well-known, but has written several interesting books on Trika.

(Neo-)Advaita teachers often point out that everything is awareness (I-amness), which many people feel is the same as the Mahāyāna concept of buddhanature. Advaita is, however, not panpsychism: everything being consciousness doesn't mean that e.g. a tree is conscious or has "an" awareness. Neo-Advaita uses the term "direct path," as opposed to the gradual path of e.g. Buddhism. The direct path can be a faster way to awaken, but I'm not fully convinced doing things the fastest way is always for the best.

In Tantric Buddhism, even outside its specific nondual teachings, the idea of "dualities dissolving into nonduality" is a key concept. Even though tantric sex is most often a symbolic and imaginal practice rather than carried out in the real world, it is about the feminine and masculine, wisdom and compassion, form and emptiness dissolving into one.

The actual shift to nondual awareness is the same, it's just interpreted differently depending on the tradition. As a result, many of my dharma friends have followed Neo-Advaitin nondual teachings (e.g. talks or pointing-outs), as these are much more widely available and accessible than Buddhist nondual teachings.

It's curious to me though that from a Hindu perspective, Buddhist teachings are one route to attaining the truth (though some Hindus look down on Advaita as "Hinduism corrupted by Buddhism"), while Buddhism sternly rejects Hinduism as "wrong view" as it espouses the notion of self—despite this "true self" being experientially the same as "no-self." There's a great deal of unfortunate historical baggage here.

Experiential Perspectives

Nonduality can be a bit difficult to understand. You can't intellectually grasp it, only experience it (and even that word may not be entirely fitting). Many religious depictions of nonduality try to explain what it is *not*, such as the *Ashtāvakra Gīta* and Adi Shankara's *Nirvāna Shatakam*, both classical Advaita texts, and the Buddhist Heart Sutra is also similar. Describing nonduality for what it *is* may not help you attain it experientially, but I feel it is likely still interesting.

Nonduality sounds like something you either experience or not. Surely things either are "not-two" or they aren't? In practice, there tend to be multiple stages of nonduality as well as aspects that could be described as levels or intensities. It's possible to e.g. be in "99% nonduality." There are also "flavors" to nondual awareness. It may come off as equanimous spaciousness that feels free from suffering, or the love aspect of reality might feel obvious to the point of being overwhelming. The latter can also be perceived as compassion or God's grace depending on your framework and religious background.

Switching to nondual awareness can feel incredibly blissful, with tears of laughter or tears of relief. Everything can look more bright and vibrant, even food may taste better. You might have heard of "headlessness" and the sense of having a head can indeed vanish in a perplexing way. One of the first times I encountered this, I lay down on my bed with an arched neck support and it felt really strange, like I was *physically* missing my head, so what was I even placing against this plastic contraption?

The sneaky thing is that 99% nonduality and 100% nonduality feel in some ways entirely different. In my own experience, the 99% was for the most part *much more enjoyable*. In almost full nonduality, I felt like everything was made of love, bliss and God. Hindus call this *sacchidānanda*, or the bliss of true consciousness. Yet after the final shift, I completely lost this lens. Instead of a wonderful, ambrosial substance, suddenly everything was just made of "isness," which is as neutral and boring as it goes.

People often ask whether the IFS Self and nonduality are the same thing. E.g. Buddhist nondual teacher Loch Kelly seems to imply that they are one and the same (no pun intended), even though this doesn't really match most people's experience. My impression is that in Self, the vast majority of emotional parts are inactive, but "narrative self parts" remain. When these parts go offline, you are in nondual awareness, so it's a kind of "turbo Self." Nondual practice tends to make it much easier to stay in Self when doing IFS. Despite this, you can still get triggered (blended with emotional parts) in full nonduality.

Pointing-Outs

Direct pointing or pointing-out is an approach used particularly in Hinduism and Tibetan nondual traditions, where a teacher points out the nature of reality to a student. This can result in a permanent transformation or a temporary glimpse that shows the person what they're aiming for. It's typically done face to face (or nowadays on a videocall) and is largely an energetic transmission. A friend told me that his teacher supposedly helped an old friend switch to nonduality by saying it is like blackout when you're drunk! Which may seem puzzling considering it's not a good description, but I assume it was more about the energetic dimension.

Pointing-outs can also work in text form. I've received highly effective pointings in a chat, and some classical texts on nonduality, such as the Advaitin *Ashtāvakra Gīta*, can be considered pointing-outs, though I feel like a chat carries the energetic aspects much better than a book. Also with classical texts, a good translation is essential to produce the desired effect.[86] I suspect many modern translators don't have direct experience of nonduality.

YouTube is full of pointing-outs from many masters, from Tibetan lamas and self-taught teachers to names like Ken Wilber. After trying out many of these without any effects for a few years, my first taste of nonduality was thanks to a pointing-out done by Loch Kelly on Sam Harris's podcast (available on Harris's Waking Up app). Kelly had me focus on the "me" that can feel my breath and then I was directed to notice whether this me had a color, shape or location, which popped me into nondual awareness.

Technically, as the presence of a realized teacher or words written by them can be enough, almost anything coming from such a person could be considered a pointing-out. You can even do pointing-outs for yourself in a sense. Some people have classified Douglas Harding's "headlessness" exercises as a form of inquiry, but they often contain literal pointing and other physical gestures as tools to realize you can't see your own head or face.[87]

Pointing-outs can be said to have a "difficulty level" of sorts. E.g. most of Loch Kelly's glimpses are meant for beginners and may not be so useful if you have already stabilized a decent level of nonduality. Rupert Spira has very lucid ones also suitable for more advanced practitioners, as do Fred Davis and Tony Parsons in a slightly more eccentric fashion.

Self-Inquiry

Self-inquiry focuses on the sense of awareness or "I am" or questions related to that as a portal to realizing that everything is made of this "I amness." It was popularized by legendary Hindu sage Ramana Maharshi, though related practices have also been used in e.g. Zen. Ramana mostly used the question "Who am I?" but there are many others one can ask. Soto Zen priest Melissa Myozen Blacker put it like this: "*There are thousands of traditional Zen koans, but they all stem from two fundamental inquiries: 'Who am I?' and 'What is reality?'*"[88]

Loch Kelly presents a form of inquiry for two people in his book *The Way of Effortless Mindfulness*. I found this an extremely powerful practice that I did with quite a few different people. Even on Zoom it felt much more potent than doing inquiry alone, or pretty much any other technique.

Kelly lists about 30 different questions that can be used. Based on his book and influences from many other sources, like IFS, Wholeness Process and Alexander technique, I have compiled a list of inquiry questions that work particularly well in two-person inquiry. You can of course contemplate them on your own, too. Some of them are more like traditional pointing-outs, others more "trick questions" reminiscent of kōans.

Who hears the sounds that are present?

Does the hearer have a color, shape or location?

What is it like when you don't try to experience anything?

What is it like when you don't try to answer this question?

What are you adding to this moment that is fabricated?

Can you stop doing?

Can all parts of your mind let go and merge with awareness?

In two-person inquiry, one person asks the other one question at a time, reading it calmly and slowly. You can experiment with emphasizing different words, like "you" or "don't." The other person relaxes, tunes in and answers out loud (if possible). They can also request the next question or the same one to be repeated. It's a good idea to ask the question multiple times before moving on to the next one, as repetitions can yield completely new results. Sometimes you'll notice that you are already deep in nondual awareness in less than a minute. You aren't thinking or speaking, but somehow words come out of your mouth!

These questions are a bit more "advanced" than "Who am I?" As such it's good to keep in mind that the answers don't come from the thinking mind. There may also be parts tempted to give the "right" answer (e.g. that there is no hearer), based on what they've heard from nondual teachers, but that obviously isn't the point of this practice. Besides verbalization, a major difference between Zen and this flavor of inquiry is that a Zen practitioner may study the same kōan for years, while in inquiry, you may go through multiple questions in the span of just a few minutes.

Diamond Approach, the contemporary lineage of A. H. Almaas, has also inspired many Western Buddhist teachers despite not being Buddhism. Diamond Inquiry forms a core part of it.[89] It resembles Hindu varieties of inquiry in some ways, but is a more complex and multi-faceted process. As I've only been instructed on it in passing at an event, I don't feel qualified to expand on it.

Other Nondual Practices

Wholeness Process

Wholeness Process (or Wholeness Work) could be described as a "spiritual self-therapy." Connirae Andreas developed it on the basis of NLP (see Chapter 14) and Advaita. It also has similarities to IFS, Gendlin's Focusing and Somatic Experiencing. Andreas first introduced an NLP self-therapy method called Core Transformation, which also has spiritual undertones. Some of my friends have found it very helpful. I never got much out of it, but WP seems to have much more potential and is more likely to induce deep nondual states.

To get started with WP, first you decide on a behavior or a thought process that you would like to explore. It might be something like feeling attacked when people criticize you. You then search for a part in your body that's experiencing this in such a situation. That includes the location, size, shape and sensory quality of this felt sense, e.g. whether it's dense, tingly and round (and as this is not IFS, you only focus on these qualities).

After you've managed to locate that, you then think "I am aware of this sensation" and try to find the "I" who is aware in a matching way. If you can't locate the I, you can just pretend you know where it is, in your body or outside of your body. Then you again try to observe its size, shape and sensory quality. Can you also find a second "I" that is aware of this "I?" Again, pay attention to the bodily felt sense of it, and see if you can locate more "I"s until no more turn up.

Then, you ask the latest "I" if it would like to "open and relax in and as the fullness of awareness." There may be a sense of the "I" dissolving. You ask each I in turn if it wishes to do the same and then the original sensation, if it hasn't dissolved already. These dissolutions can take a while. This process may sound mystifying if you have no prior experience of similar practices, but if you have, it might go quite smoothly. If not, you can read more in Connirae Andreas's book *Coming to Wholeness* or search for tutorial videos on YouTube.

Dynamic Concentration

Dynamic concentration is a practice endorsed by controversial Vajrayāna teacher Kim Katami. It involves sharply shouting syllables out loud from a relaxed yet alert state to enter nondual awareness. Typically the syllable used is "phet" (pronounced like the English word "pet" but with an additional "h" sound, so there's no "f"). The effect resembles popping a bubble, only the bubble is dualistic consciousness.

After shouting once or a few times, you just rest in the nondual awareness and after it fades, you can repeat the shout. Entire mantras can also be recited like this, such as "Om! Ma!-Ni!Pad!Me! Hum!" I found this a highly effective practice that is easy and quick to try out and get into, but it requires actual shouting. If I didn't live in an apartment building, I'd have likely done much more of it.

Yoga Nidrā

Yoga nidrā is a Hindu practice, translated as yogic sleep, which aims to induce a special state between wakefulness and sleep. This state is said to be extremely restful and to effectively substitute for sleep, e.g. such that 30 minutes of yoga nidrā could replace an hour of sleeping.

This is likely why it has greatly increased in popularity in recent years and is also referred to as "NSDR," or non-sleep deep rest.

Most of the study on yoga nidrā has been done on insomnia, stress and menstrual disorders, but the claim about it substituting for actual sleep hasn't really been studied. I never noticed any effect on my need for sleep. However, the original goal of yoga nidrā was not just relaxation but attaining nonduality.

A typical yoga nidrā session lasts for 20–45 minutes and is done lying down (in *śavāsana* pose), usually listening to an audio or a live instructor. The practice includes a sequence of different components, such as a body scan (different from vipassanā body scans), breathwork, visualizations (which may be related to the chakras) and *sankalpa*, setting an affirmation-like intention.

Dream Yoga

Dream yoga is a tantric practice based on the belief that like dreams, our normal reality is also an illusion. As such, lucid dreaming is considered as an important way to realize that daily life can also be perceived as a dream. In practice, dream yoga is much more complicated than that. Depending on the lineage, it's usually an elaborate process that involves various methods of first getting a lucid dream (typically by focusing on the chakras or visualizing letters of the Tibetan alphabet before falling asleep) and then using different kinds of practices in the actual dream.

Sneezing

Yes, you can experience nonduality by sneezing—or actually, feeling a sneeze coming on, but blocking it! This is a method I learned from Osho.[90] It works quite well, even if it doesn't have a 100% success rate, especially if the urge to sneeze is very strong. Besides inducing a nondual state, it has been handy in COVID times to avoid the grossness of sneezing into a mask.

If you feel a sneeze coming, immediately close your eyes and try to enter a somewhat relaxed state, but don't actually spend time on this. Focus simultaneously on the sensation of the impending sneeze (e.g. a tickle in your nose) and your crown chakra (the top of your head). That's it. If it works, the urge to sneeze disappears and you might feel a surge of energy, or just a calm spaciousness.

Chapter 9
The Progress of Insight

The insight stages (*ñāna*) are a cyclical sequence of phases that everyone is thought to cross during the course of awakening. Their intensity varies greatly, however: some don't seem to even notice them, but for others they are very clear. A few people feel like they do show up, but are atypical, out of order or otherwise don't fit the common descriptions. Most stages can last from seconds to months or years, but days, weeks or months would be the most common. Many other traditions also have similar maps, though they tend to depict experience less concretely.

Originally the insight stages were described in several Theravādin commentaries, most famously the *Visuddhimagga*. Daniel Ingram covers this subject in a commendable and studious fashion in his *Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha*. I feel like at times his presentation gets stuck on minutiae rather than relevance and I don't fully agree with all of his views, but all discussion of the progress of insight will inevitably build on the work of Ingram.

There is a common belief that the insight stages will only manifest at all or clearly if you do vipassanā (insight) practice. I've read several books that claimed the type of meditation they teach will not cause bad dark nights or even that you will not go through the progress of insight at all, even if you were to reach full enlightenment. I'm not sure where the latter claims come from, as this is not true. Most of the people I know with the most vivid experience of the stages have never done vipassanā.

If you do practice insight meditation, you may observe things about the stages that others may miss, such as the frequency and quality of vibrations. On the other hand, practicing jhānas can muddle the meditative aspects, as you are simultaneously in a jhāna and an insight stage, but you would still observe their effects off the cushion.

Some people argue that learning about the progress of insight is not a good idea, as that will only lead to suggestible individuals going through things they otherwise wouldn't. This probably has some truth to it, yet I believe it can be priceless to grasp how much the insight stages can affect your life. As an example, a friend of mine spent over a decade in the dark night thinking it was just mental illness. Her whole demeanor transformed once she got into Equanimity; she literally seemed like a different person.

For me and some of my chronically ill friends, insight stages have had drastic effects on our physical well-being. A&Ps can foster a lot of physical energy, possibly more than we've had in years, while Dissolution and Reobservation may result in days spent bedridden. Those in good health may struggle to comprehend how crucial it is as a chronically ill person to know why you have suddenly crashed. The stages can also markedly affect energy levels in healthy people and influence the way you feel about your own life, which could lead to damaging life decisions if they are not taken into account.

When beginning a meditation session, most people will start from the "beginning" (either stage 1 or 4) and then cycle forward until they get to the stage where they are currently outside of meditation. I've never witnessed this phenomenon, though. For me, meditation has always

commenced in the same stage where I'm in my daily life, which supposedly can happen if you practice very frequently.

The insight stages can be divided into four *vipassanā jhānas*, but I feel like this classification should be abandoned as it's not particularly useful and can lead to confusion. Here *jhāna* doesn't refer to a "temporary state attained during meditation" but a stage (or sequence of multiple stages).

The first insight stage Mind and Body can feel quite nice or even extremely pleasant. You are really into meditation and it's finally starting to make some sense. It's followed by a stage called Cause and Effect, which supposedly gives you insight into causality of phenomena and can feel a bit mechanical and jerky. It has been indistinct for me and the people I know, I assume it's more noticeable for the vipassanā gang.

The third stage is named Three Characteristics as there you first gain insight into the nature of the trio of suffering, impermanence and no-self, which are what vipassanā is all about. This phase can come off as quite annoying, resembling the dark night (and can be confused with the dark night). You may feel fatigued, irritated and nothing feels quite right. There may also be muscle pain and tension.

Arising and Passing Away

The most striking insight stage is Arising and Passing Away, commonly shortened to just A&P. If you practice vipassanā, you will probably observe how sensations arise and then pass away, a vital insight on impermanence. Unless your A&P is the subtler kind, other aspects of it will likely still dominate. "Kundalinī awakening" usually refers to A&P, but for some people, actual kundalinī symptoms start occurring earlier or later (see the next two chapters for more on this). I believe most people would just call it an intense mystical experience, or perhaps something to do with God, as everything tends to feel amazing and profound. It can last from seconds to months, though from a few days to a few weeks seems to be the most common.

An A&P can mimic a manic episode or even psychosis. You feel great and energized and naturally wake up refreshed after a few hours of sleep. You may encounter "supernatural" phenomena or other things you would have previously shrugged off. Your sexuality may be greatly elevated. All of these sound characteristic of a manic episode and may have others worried. There may also be many other symptoms, such as seeing colorful lights when meditating (this is how many people recognize the mini A&P they hit on the cushion) and vivid dreams featuring mystical themes, blinking lights or vortices of energy.

One major distinction is that those going through bipolar mania tend to engage in destructive activities, e.g. blow all their money on cocaine or clothes or start a company out of the blue. Someone in an A&P might suddenly decide to start a religion or move to India to follow their guru, but they generally wouldn't pursue foolish worldly things. While in A&P meditation can be "wild," concentrating on the cushion is very easy. Bipolar mania tends to make it a huge challenge.

An A&P can be induced by meditation and other spiritual practices, taking psychedelics, reading spiritual books and profound life experiences like a massive crisis or giving birth. Sometimes they just show up out of nowhere for a person who has never shown an interest in spirituality. You can spot depictions of an A&P in memoirs of many mystics. I suspect therapy is a fairly common trigger even though I'm not personally aware of such cases. A&P is a point of no return: from that on, you are on the path, whether you like it or not.

Some A&Ps can be difficult to tell apart from attaining a path (a stage of awakening). Both can make you feel like something extremely profound happened. Occasionally an A&P also culminates in a so-called "A&P event" which can resemble the depictions of a Fruition, includ-

ing a momentary "glitch" in reality. A commonly suggested differentiating factor is that stream entry leaves you with permanent changes and an A&P doesn't, but honestly to me it seems almost like the opposite is true. First A&Ps often feel life-changing even years later while stream entry may not. The biggest distinction is what follows after the event: is it a dark night or a Review.

The Dark Night

The term "dark night" originates from the Spanish Christian mystic St. John of the Cross, who was having a hard time in the 16th century. It has become widely used in Buddhist circles, with two somewhat different meanings. In the context of the insight stages, it is synonymous with the *dukkha ñānas* (knowledges of suffering), a sequence of insight stages that can feel very rough (or, if you're lucky, only mildly uncomfortable). Many people use the acronym "DN" which can refer to either term.

Others use the term to point to highly distressing and existentially wrenching parts of the path, whether encountered during the dukkha ñānas or not, when I would be more likely to use a term like spiritual crisis. In this book, "dark night" refers to the dukkha ñānas, the insight stages 5–10.

The dark night kicks off with a stage named Dissolution, which can feel like your sense of self is dissolving. This is usually unpleasant, but it can be interpreted as positive. Often it's more like low-grade depression without any existential content: you're tired and feeling low and everything feels a bit drab. It can resemble hypothyroidism and occasionally even appears to cause a temporary dip in thyroid function. Dissolution is not such a bad stage to be in, but after the wonders of A&P, it can feel like a letdown.

The next up is Fear, which tends to be the most energizing dark night stage. There's a jittery "fight or flight" consistent with fear even if you don't really feel scared. I have mostly enjoyed it, though it's possible for weird fears to arise. You may recognize them as being a part of the stage and that they seem bizarre, but it can still be hard to dissolve them.

The stage of Misery feels like a bit of a misnomer, at least for the non-vipassanā crew. In my own experience and for the people I know, it has been one of the least bothersome parts of dark night. The next stage, Disgust, can feature physical nausea or revulsion, but also more existential aspects. These may make it hard to differentiate it from the following stage, Desire for Deliverance, which can range from slightly disagreeable to nerve-wracking desire to get away from everything.

If Misery has a misleading name, so does Reobservation, just in the opposite direction. The first phase of Reobservation is the culmination of dark night. It can feel like sadness, depression, anger and trauma blending into agony, often with severe fatigue, possibly also flu-like symptoms or paranoia. Everything appears disagreeable, intolerable and off. My shortest Reobservation only lasted for a minute, but they can persist for years. The latter part of the stage tends to feel like exhausted relief. You may well not be able to tell apart the middle stages of the dark night and they might not cause any issues, but you will likely notice Dissolution and especially Reobservation.

Meditation can be tricky in the dark night, but you shouldn't let the feeling of "offness" discourage you. It is doable. Practicing mettā, if you're able to, can be even more beneficial than usual as it helps to offset the dark vibes of what's going on. Also, in the dark night I found a valuable tactic to be "sit with everything, believe nothing." Let all the pain be there, but don't believe the lies your mind tells you. This tends to get much more difficult in the third path, though, as instead of obvious and even absurd, those painful ideas can become highly convincing.

Equanimity

Reobservation is followed by the relief of Equanimity. For some people, this transition can be muddy and it's not always clear whether they're in late Reobservation or early Equanimity. The first time I underwent the shift, it was very sudden and extremely obvious, to the point I decided I must look into these insight stages. For someone who has had a turbulent life, getting their first taste of Equanimity can feel highly empowering. They are not only getting respite from the dark night, but their normal existence, as well.

It's possible to slip from Equanimity back into Reobservation, potentially numerous times. Some people find that they can initially cross the dark night quite quickly, but then end up swinging between Reobservation and Equanimity for months. It can be distressing and frustrating.

Equanimity tends to feel great in a mostly neutral way, as its name indicates. Everything is fine, like in that meme image of a cartoon dog sipping tea surrounded by flames. Even if bad things happen in your life, it may not be a big deal (unless it kicks you back into Reobservation). Practice is effortless and pleasant, though especially early in Equanimity one may easily drift off into hypnagogic states. Meditation in general may have a daydreamy quality and it can be an ordeal to stay awake.

Equanimity can be further divided into either two or four substages. I've always struggled to classify it that neatly, even if there are clearly different phases of it on the cushion. The later stages often feel extremely peaceful, yet occasionally they had a completely different, migrainous, even seizure-like quality to them, like being plugged into the mains of the universe.

Cessation

Fruition or Cessation can take from seconds to years to attain after first arriving in Equanimity. A Fruition that completes a path is technically divided into four separate stages: Conformity, Change of Lineage, Path and Fruition. I don't feel like this division is very meaningful, as it all happens in a rapid succession likely lasting less than a second. The first time you get a Cessation, you attain the first path of enlightenment (though supposedly, some people may also attain it without one), but later you will likely experience them on their own, at least in Review.

Well, you don't really experience them, as in a Cessation, awareness "stops" for a moment and there is no experience present, but people often perceive the entrance and exit of a Cessation. It may feel like reality was pulled away from beneath them, blinked or did a weird glitch or "jerk" (which can potentially be confused with falling asleep in Equanimity).

Especially outside of formal practice, many people miss those edges of the actual Cessation, too. They only notice the bliss wave that hits afterward and may be very intense—yet that can also be missed, e.g. if you do jhāna practice and are used to your meditation being blissful. With the first path in particular, people may also feel their head exploding or the top of the head blowing off, which may overshadow any momentary glitches.

The bliss wave is usually followed by an afterglow that especially with paths can last for a full day or more. Curiously, with my second path I didn't really have an afterglow, I just felt weird and a bit like I was "on drugs" the next day, while with the third path, it felt euphoric, magical and divine.

After a path follows Review, which can last from a week up to a couple of months. In Review, you course through the stages (from 1 or 4) until Fruition and then it repeats again. A full cycle typically takes up a couple of days, though it is not always a procession of complete cycles. Reviews can be intense, often containing the worst dark nights but also dazzling in-

sights. Despite the name, Review isn't really just "looking at old stuff again." Many of the insights and shifts of a particular path may only take form there.

So if you had an earth-shattering experience and soon after it, you enter a stupor-like state likely lasting for several days, it was probably an A&P and then Dissolution. If instead it's followed by something that resembles the depictions of Review, it could have been stream entry (or another path). Still, it actually doesn't make much of a difference whether something was an A&P or stream entry. Generally the great and important stuff starts from the second path onward.

The Four Paths

There are many different models, maps and views of awakening. Daniel Ingram's *Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha* picks apart many of them and their shortcomings. Beliefs like enlightenment resulting in perfect wisdom or virtue are hardly compatible with the failures and even abuse that many legendary teachers are infamous for. I'm only delving into the Theravāda four-path model for two reasons: it is closely connected to the progress of insight and it, as described by e.g. Ingram, also seems to depict quite well what actually ensues for many as they pass a certain number and type of cycles.

However, this interpretation is not exactly in accord with the suttas. They define the paths as shedding of certain *fetters*, but no one's experiences seem to actually match this. E.g. according to the fetter model, an *anāgāmi*, someone with the third path, would not have any sensual desire left. I've yet to encounter anyone at this stage who endorses this. As a result, some have concluded that the pragmatic dharma model is mistaken and those who report or are "diagnosed" with these paths don't have the same attainments that the Buddha described. This would also explain why people don't actually experience the promised cessation of suffering even after the fourth path.

So it boils down to whether you're satisfied with the pragmatic dharma interpretation of enlightenment. It is quite attainable for a layperson, often in a couple of years. It doesn't rid you of desire, attachment or suffering, yet many people still really like it. Or do you insist that's not what the Buddha actually taught and want to pursue paths according to the fetter model, which many believe no contemporary person has actually succeeded in? Perhaps the latter is an actual thing, but if not even the most diligent practitioners seem capable of attaining it, personally I feel like it may not be very relevant.

The first path is called *sotāpanna*, or stream entry in English. Many people presume stream entry is spectacular and life-changing. It can be, but often it's just a minor blip, to the point that many miss theirs altogether. One curious feature that occasionally accompanies stream entry is sustaining a nondual state for as long as 1–3 months. This can contribute to the idea that the person actually got fully enlightened.

I maintain that most people who have meditated regularly for several years have had stream entry, and some attain it in less than a year or without any meditation. If you feel like "*Oh, then why don't I have it?*" I suggest that you may have just missed yours. Daniel Ingram and some others warn of overdiagnosing paths, which no doubt happens, but among people I know, missing them and underestimating progress has seemed much more common.

The second path (*sakadāgāmi*) tends to be much more enjoyable and spectacular than the first. It typically offers both joyful happiness and a sense of balance and stability reminiscent of the stage of Equanimity. Nothing bothers you too much and most things that would normally trigger you just feel insignificant. From an IFS perspective, you can trivially stay in Self in almost any circumstances.

Getting the second path was the greatest and most life-changing thing that has ever happened to me, e.g. full nonduality can't hold a candle to it. One reason was that it also healed all my trauma (most of which I had accrued in the previous two years), which is not a common occurrence. I suspect some of those who experienced an extraordinary stream entry in fact missed their first path and this was the second one already.

The third path (*anāgāmi*) is peculiar for two reasons. It is not one path (cycle), but usually numerous ones, often in a slightly fractal-like manner. At first the cycles may last for weeks or months, but they grow faster and faster until you go through several in a day. It can also be dark night-like as a whole. Even when you're in Equanimity, it feels like a dark night. This may abate and you think you have beaten it, your suffering levels keep decreasing—and then it hits again. It can feel immensely frustrating and I believe this is why it's crucial to recognize what is going on. Otherwise it easily seems like you were happy and very resilient, but somehow lost all that ability, which can come off like a deep personal failure.

The third path may be slow and gradual, so that the final shift is quite subtle, or the transition to the fourth path can be dramatic. After the fourth path, one has full and permanent nonduality, has no sense of self from a Buddhist perspective and is technically enlightened (*arahant* in Pāli, *arhat* in Sanskrit). I discuss the effects of that more in Chapters 1 (the section on Awakening) and Chapter 8.

Implications of the Progress of Insight

The progress of insight can be quite a ride. Some people endure it with high intensity for years. For others it's much subtler, but that doesn't change the fact that you are still in a permanent "rapid-cycling bipolar disorder" that there is no way to cure or even mitigate. And this is not intended to make light of bipolar disorder at all. It is quite a big life change to get used to and accept—and one that would likely sound completely incomprehensible to most people you know, making it alienating.

It can be hard to work around the insight stages. You shouldn't make life-altering decisions in an A&P, a post-Fruition afterglow state or the dark night (e.g. about entering or ending a relationship), but then again Equanimity, especially early on, can even be too equanimous. For example, if your partner tells you they're leaving, you might have no objections, even though the "normal you" might have suggested counseling or other solutions.

Unfortunately, after A&P, "the normal you," who is not in any insight stage, no longer exists. Even if you fully awaken, you will still have to conduct your life under the influence of this "mysterious force." Scheduling things like medical procedures, including normal dentist visits, for Reobservation isn't great either. Obviously these things aren't always avoidable, especially when you start cycling all the stages multiple times per day.

A&Ps are often spectacular, but not always, and they, too, can be missed. Especially if an A&P takes place under the influence of psychedelics, it may not stand out from the expected effects of a trip. Then an important question may be: how do you know if you've suffering clinical depression or a dark night, if you can't pinpoint an A&P? There is unfortunately no way to know for sure, but if the onset of low mood was quite sudden with no obvious predisposing factor, it would be worth considering this possibility.

Chapter 10
Energy and the Chakras

Most people I know who practice meditation started out with a materialist worldview. They weren't looking for a religion or anything supernatural, let alone prayer or rituals. Yet almost everyone has eventually relented, even those following Theravāda Buddhism, which generally tries to stay away from energetic perspectives. There comes a point when these things cannot be ignored any more.

This section is meant as a very basic overview of kundalinī energy, the chakras and energy-work that can provide some guidance in somatic and imaginal practices. I'm no means an expert on the subject and the main point I want to make here is that the chakras and kundalinī energy are real and important. If you really need to, you can squeeze them into a materialist worldview as some sort of physiological phenomena, though it gets tricky with the remote aspects. You can clearly notice their effects and for many, they are anything but subtle! And they are often nothing like you've experienced before.

Kundalinī energy plays a big role in Hinduism and Tantric Buddhism. Several other Asian religions contain similar concepts and kundalinī has also been compared to the Holy Spirit in Christianity by some. Kundalinī is considered to lie dormant at the base of the spine, often pictured as a snake, and can be "awakened" from there to raise upward. It also has strong sexual undertones. Hindus view it as feminine energy (Śakti), to unite with the masculine Śiva. Some aspects of kundalinī can be regarded as symbolic or up to interpretation, but many perceive the awakening and rising up of energy quite viscerally in their bodies as a powerful electric current.

Other schools of Buddhism do not have this kind of a concept (Zen has *hara*, which could be described as an energetic center in the lower belly, but it's more complicated than that), but people practicing in those traditions also tend to encounter kundalinī symptoms. "Kundalinī yoga" is a specific type of yoga, though all yoga works with kundalinī energy. Kundalinī is also closely related to trauma healing, as they are both talking about the essentially same thing. Trauma pioneer Peter Levine was fascinated by this obvious connection already in the 1970s.[91]

Mapping the Energy Body

The chakras are energy centers, often depicted as small wheels or flowers of different colors along a vertical line running through the center of the body. They can affect the physical body and be sensed in ways that feel very physical, but they are considered to exist on their own layer, the *subtle body* or *energy body*, where they're connected by three adjacent central channels and numerous smaller energy channels. The subtle body may be divided into several layers, but for the purposes of the practices detailed in this book, distinguishing them rarely seems necessary.

Some sources propose associating the chakras with anatomical features. The classical mapping has been to link each chakra with an endocrine (hormone-secreting) organ and explain their function like that.[92] This can be a nice perspective for materialists, but I don't find it a

very compelling argument. There are important anatomic structures that may be relevant, though, such as the *plexuses*, bundles of autonomic nerves like the solar plexus (in medicine usually termed the celiac plexus), where "solar" refers to the way nerves radiate from it like the sun's rays. Most of the chakras are located near plexuses or other similar systems.[93]

There are also purported science books that associate energetic phenomena like energy healing with physical concepts such as the electromagnetic field of the body. However, most of the "science" included in such volumes would not convince anyone who well-versed in science. This may not be the fault of the authors alone. It's difficult to get methodologically sound research about energetic phenomena funded or published, as it would be considered too pseudoscientific even to be studied. Alas.

Chakras are often described as being "open" or "blocked," sometimes also as overly activated. I feel like this is a bit misleading view for the most part, too dichotomous. It's possible for a chakra to be nearly fully shut off, but someone opening their root or having a very open heart center doesn't mean they can't have any issues related to that type of energies, most likely they do.

Often there are physical symptoms associated with the chakras, such as gastrointestinal upset with the lower chakras and voice issues with blockages of the throat chakra. I strongly suspect most voice issues that aren't obviously fully physiological relate to the throat center. *Kriyās* refer to sort-of involuntary movements that are extremely common with awakening. They usually aren't fully involuntary, but it is definitely easier to let them surface than to resist them.

Various remedies are prescribed for solving chakra blockages, such as particular yoga āsanas, mudrās (yogic hand gestures), essential oils, crystals, sound frequencies, foods, mantras or utilizing the color of the chakra. Personally I've had the most success with someone lending a hand energetically, but yoga and Solfeggio frequencies have also occasionally been helpful.

People often ask how chakras relate to parts in IFS, as parts are often located in or near chakras, but can inhabit any area of the body and change their location. My impression is that certain kinds of parts tend to congregate in particular chakras or areas represented by them. Fight parts are often situated in the jaw, which maps to the throat chakra, while for some people, anger tends to be located more in the arms and hands—probably related to whether it is more verbal or physical in nature.

There are several different chakra systems, most of which contain 5–9 major chakras. The systems primarily diverge in the area of the belly and pelvis. The Chinese system only includes three *dantiens* in the entire body. Location-wise they correspond to the sacral, heart and the third eye centers, though the concept is somewhat different from the chakras.

There are maps containing more, including some with dozens of minor chakras. The most common systems only allocate chakras in the head, neck and torso. Some people resonate more with arrangements that also contain chakras in the limbs, though in the systems lacking those, the torso centers usually map to areas in the limbs. Some sources also assign chakras to organs like the liver and spleen and to areas of the brain. A few systems include additional centers below and above the physical body.

The Seven Chakras

The root chakra (*mūlādhāra*, red), located in the perineal area, could also be said to be your roots in a way, as it relates to the sense of safety, connection and being grounded. It is the energetic foundation of the body, where kundalinī energy is said to lie dormant until it awakens.

The sacral chakra (*svādhisthāna,* orange) can be found a bit below the navel. It is associated with sexuality, including sexual shame, though the root chakra also plays a role in sexuality.

The sacral also relates to connection and relationships outside of sexuality too (which somehow is discussed less often), as well as creativity, emotional intelligence, pleasure and joy.

For many people, the solar plexus (*manipūra*, yellow), situated at the navel, a bit above it or closer to the diaphragm area (depending on who you ask) is the hardest chakra to sense properly and often feels a bit "dim." I wonder if this has any connection to why some systems completely lack this chakra. It's related to fear, control, confidence, assertiveness, boundaries and (in)security.

The heart chakra (*anāhata*, green) is located at the center of the chest, not where the physical heart lies. For many it's the most familiar chakra, as even those who aren't highly embodied can often feel warm emotions in their chest. You might have also sensed some of the minor chakras below or above the heart—occasionally the one below it is actually called the heart chakra.

Throat chakra (*viśuddha*, blue) blockages are very prevalent and often relate to the sense that we can't or are not allowed to express our needs. Besides voice issues, they can manifest as cold-like throat symptoms, thirst, acid reflux or a sense of being choked or struggling to breathe.

The third eye (*ājñā*, indigo) is located between the eyes and often connected with the pineal gland. It's likely the most famous of all chakras, often represented in art and having a strong association with spirituality, enlightenment and nonduality.

The crown chakra (*sahasrāra*, purple, sometimes associated with white instead) at the top of the head is also related to spirituality, pure consciousness and connection with the whole universe. It can feel like an antenna that both transmits and receives signal.

Working with Energy

Some people can observe other people's energies quite acutely. This can happen in a number of ways, like seeing auras or other visual representations. For me, other people's energy mostly shows up as kriyās, physical sensations, sensing their parts in my own body—if they have a certain part in their left shoulder, I'd sense it in my left shoulder—and feeling their emotions (different from normal empathetic transfer). Occasionally I've even been able to hear their parts talk and get visual felt senses too: sensing what their parts look like to them. It also works on calls, and for a few close friends, even through text chats or fully remotely. Some people dissociate so heavily that at times it's been clearer to me than them what is going on in their body.

I'm not talking about this to boast any sort of extraordinary skill, far from it. I know many others who can do the same or much more. This ability developed quite suddenly in two phases. First there was the ability to perceive the field of my closest friends and later to sense everyone at least if I focused on them. For some people this may sound unbelievable while other readers might shrug, as they have experienced this all since childhood and it's as normal as noticing emotions in people's facial expressions.

If you don't yet have any capacities like this, it's quite possible some will develop later in the process. That said, sensing other people's energy is not just a positive ability, it can feel intrusive as well as emotionally and even physically painful. Receiving e.g. the monologue of someone's suicidal part can be heartbreaking. Some people sense others' energies all the time with no way to avoid it. Perceiving other people's energy bodies opens up the possibility to help move their energies, which should only be done with full consent and good intentions.

Energy can be moved and manipulated in many different ways. Everything is energetic, so in a sense even talking is energywork. Practices like meditation always work with energy, whether it's done explicitly or not. One intriguing way to put it is that if you aren't sure how

to do energywork, pretend that you know. The saying goes that "Where attention goes, energy goes" or "Where intention goes, energy flows."

Numerous Vajrayāna practices work with energy through e.g. visualization, though many of them require a transmission from a lama. For me, one of the most interesting ones is *tummo* or inner fire meditation, which combines breathwork and visualization. There are differing opinions as to whether tummo is appropriate to practice for anyone but advanced practitioners, as it can be very powerful, but Lama Yeshe wrote a popular book introducing it to the West titled *The Bliss of Inner Fire*.

There are also practices like reiki, martial arts and numerous others that I'm only familiar with in passing. My own favorites are Somatic Experiencing (Chapter 15), imaginal practice (Chapter 17) and hypnosis (Chapter 14). Nowadays there are quite a few reiki videos on YouTube and I've found some of them to quite clearly do *something*. I have no doubt that working with energy can be helpful for psychological, emotional and spiritual issues, but I am quite skeptical about the way people liberally recommend it for treating physical conditions, as well.

Chapter 11
Side Effects of Spiritual Practice

Meditation is generally considered calming, relaxing and helpful for stress. As a result, it is now widely recommended by therapists and doctors for various purposes. Sam Harris even dubbed Buddhist enlightenment "the epitome of stress reduction," but I feel like the reality may be closer to the opposite of this claim.

I believe everyone who meditates for long enough will almost certainly develop at least moderate side effects from it, and even serious harm is quite common. My own issues have mostly been relatively mild, but I have watched friends writhing in pain, thrashing around, rolling on the ground, involuntarily screaming, crying uncontrollably, going into psychosis and other symptoms that have been shocking to witness.

Three contemporary authors in particular have been documenting the adverse effects of meditation. Daniel Ingram, who is also a medical doctor, has focused on the progress of insight in his book *Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha* and David Treleaven on the interactions between meditation practice and trauma. Willoughby Britton and her research group at Brown University have looked more widely at different types of harm. Treleaven's work, which includes the book *Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness* and some academic papers, is very inclusive of systemic trauma and oppression in its framework.

That spiritual endeavors can cause harm is nothing new, of course. Most Buddhist traditions discuss this risk at least in passing. The legendary transpersonal psychologists Christina and Stanislav Grof coined the term "spiritual emergency" in the 1980s. They authored a book titled *Spiritual Emergency: When Personal Transformation Becomes a Crisis* as well as several later works on the subject. Zen master Hakuin wrote of Zen sickness back in the 18th century. Yet the public discussion on mindfulness still brushes over this aspect.

One of the most important papers on the side effects of meditation was published by the Brown University research group in 2017. They only interviewed people who had reported serious adverse effects and concluded e.g. that "*Meditation-related adverse effects that were serious or distressing enough to warrant additional treatment have been reported in clinical and medical literature. These include reports of meditation-induced psychosis, seizures, depersonalization, mania and other forms of clinical deterioration.*"[94] Unattributed quotes in this chapter originate from this research article.

In that paper, it's also interesting that the appearance of serious adverse effects reportedly took from one day to more than ten years, the latter even applying to 25% of the respondents. On the other hand, 12% of participants reported problems within the first 10 days of practice, so it was also common to sustain harm almost immediately.

The field of Western psychology has neglected to report on the side effects of non-spiritual approaches as well, simply focusing on their benefits. This transpired in psychotherapy research and also with meditation, contributing to the notion of its harmlessness. "*First, the vast majority (>75%) of meditation studies do not actively assess adverse effects; instead, they rely solely on patients to spontaneously report any difficulties to the researchers or teachers. However, patients are unlikely to volunteer information about negative reactions to treatment with-*

out being directly asked due to the influence of authority structures and demand characteristics."

There is no consensus on whether severe side effects are unavoidable or a sign that something is amiss. This, of course, is not a falsifiable claim, as one can always insist you must be doing something wrong, or you wouldn't be having such symptoms. No type of meditation is free of risk, but dry insight practices have been suggested to be particularly hazardous. David Treleaven warns that even though body scanning can have use in trauma healing, he believes it's among the practices with the most potential to destabilize.[95]

I strongly suspect that meditating in the style of *The Mind Illuminated* is especially risky. Most people I've known in real life who used TMI developed severe side effects, including multiple cases of psychosis. Several of these people had been safely practicing other types of meditation for a long time. They believed that the forceful focus TMI has on the unification of the mind, which can exacerbate dissociation, was heavily related to their difficulties.

There are several possible causes of the adverse effects from a materialist point-of-view. The Brown University group concluded: "*Meditation can cause symptoms of hyperarousal (anxiety, panic, traumatic-re-experiencing, perceptual hypersensitivity) through multiple pathways, including sensitization, somatosensory amplification, dual process theory, and relaxation-induced panic.*"[96] Some phenomena may not be explainable by neuroscientific perspectives alone, however.

Personally I would divide spiritual side effects into six categories, even though they aren't fully distinct. Multiple things may be going on at the same time and it may not always be clear which category a particular symptom belongs to, as physical ailments tend to be tied to the insight stages and so on. This classification, like classifications often are, is incomplete and oversimplified.

1) Dark night of the soul and other insight stages (discussed in Chapter 9)
2) Physical symptoms, often called kundalinī symptoms
3) "Energy stuff" (purifications, processing trauma somatically)
4) Dissociation either worsening or lifting
5) Increased rumination (e.g. worsened anxiety, depression or OCD or increased awareness of physical illness or bodily processes)
6) Downsides of the intended effects of meditation

Much more extensive lists have been compiled by some e.g. in the field of transpersonal psychology. Monica Goretzki lists several additional categories of spiritual crises in her thesis *The Differentiation of Psychosis and Spiritual Emergency*, such as "the shamanic crisis," "the crisis of psychic opening," "the past-life experience," "the near-death experience" and "spirit possession."[97]

Kundalinī Symptoms

Internet resources abound that discuss a myriad of symptoms of "kundalinī awakening." They include many physical ailments but also ecstatic spiritual experiences, such as extrasensory phenomena (ESP), sudden whole-body orgasms and spontaneously adopting yoga poses. Among people I know, the effects have mostly been more mundane, and in general the mystical aspects (often characteristic of an A&P, see Chapter 9) tend to give way to a different set of more chronic issues.

Common physical symptoms include e.g. fasciculations, trembling, muscle pain and tension, involuntary movements, insomnia, exhaustion, flu-like malaise, irritability, stomach up-

set, pimples and various skin rashes, eye irritation, nasal congestion, hot and cold flashes, migraines, changes in appetite, changes in libido and lymph node swelling. Less commonly there may be vomiting, edema, urinary retention, fever, vocalizations and hallucinations. Kundalinī can also affect the menstrual cycle in various ways, especially increasing flow. At times it appears to alter thyroid function, at least in people with pre-existing hypothyroidism, which may necessitate adjustments in medication dose.

Just like with various peak experiences and dark nights, whether you endure none, a few or many of these maladies and whether they are mild or intense, it does not say anything about how "advanced" you are spiritually. Those with severe trauma do appear to be more prone to suffering heftily, but in general, if you are a long-time meditator with few energetic symptoms, you are lucky. If you have loads of them, that's unfortunate.

Some of these ailments that mimic allergies (like nasal congestion) do appear to be essentially allergic in nature. Quite a few people I know have reported new symptoms of allergy or issues that only occur in certain insight stages and that respond to antihistamines. Many sources, though most of them fairly questionable in veracity, also propose a link between kundalinī and histamine.[98]

It's hard to verify whether a symptom is energy-related, but if it surfaces or changes with insight progress or during meditation or is clearly related to the area of a particular chakra, this suggests it could be. However, one thing that must be emphasized when discussing symptoms having energetic or psychosomatic causes is to *not assume causation too hastily*. Some practitioners are used to a bizarre repertoire of energy symptoms that may evolve on a daily basis and are likely to attribute any new ailment to such a cause. This can be hazardous if a medical condition is missed, or at least cause major discomfort that could have been avoided.

For example, vitamin B12 deficiency is very common and can cause tingling and other paresthesias—as well as numerous other symptoms. It is easily treatable, so it would be regrettable to miss. Even in the pandemic, some friends have reported symptoms that to me sound suspicious of COVID, yet they concluded it must be just energetic.

All this raises the question whether these issues, which may be intense and scary, can even be dangerous or damage the body. There doesn't seem to evidence pointing either way. Indirect harm is obviously possible, such as having an accident because of involuntary movements or sleep deprivation. One paper from Brown University mentioned several cases where adverse effects from meditation impaired the ability to drive, including an actual incident where the person hit several parked cars.[99]

"Energy Stuff"

"Energy stuff" is a highly nonscientific term that most of my friends use, typically in the context of "having energy stuff come up." This isn't quite the same as kundalinī symptoms, such as your chakras tingling in meditation (though they aren't always possible to tell apart), but more akin to how the term *purification* is used in Buddhism. Some also call it "cleansing the energy body." To me it sounds much less clunky and pompous to say "Could we maybe talk about this a bit later, I have energy stuff coming up really badly?" Also, I'm not a huge fan of good/bad-focused terminology involving concepts like purity.

So what is this "energy stuff"? A poorly definable phenomenon that different people describe and experience in unique ways, but generally it refers to strong emotions thought to be related to past trauma arising both psychologically and in the body. There is also a sense that they can't be avoided and need to be processed. It may be related to something going on in your life, but often it comes randomly, out of nowhere. This phenomenon usually begins fairly

deep into the awakening process (while other types of trauma symptoms can begin immediately with meditation) and can really intensify after enlightenment, potentially for years.

Something like getting mildly triggered every time your partner criticizes you is a fairly normal occurrence. But if you suddenly feel completely overwhelmed by it without any obvious reason and like you have no choice but to attempt to deal with this trigger for good, even if the timing is extremely inconvenient, we're veering into this territory.

I have also included "energy stuff" separately from other manifestations of trauma. Typical of energy stuff is that new stuff bubbles up almost constantly, it feels pretty much unavoidable and impossible to suppress and it tends to be heavily somatic—sometimes it only unfolds in the body with no mental aspect. These incidents tend to be accompanied by symptoms like exhaustion, bodily pains, migraines, muscle tension and kriyās, feeling hot and cold and changes in body temperature, occasionally also outwardly visible signs like skin rashes or a runny nose.

The intensity of energy stuff also seems have some correlation with dissociation. In one small study of Vajrayāna practitioners reporting mainly energetic and emotional symptoms, "*While some practitioners viewed these experiences in relation to a normative Tantric soteriology of purification, almost all practitioners with a trauma history reported traumatic re-experiencing and tended not to adopt a purification framework.*"[100]

Rumination, Dissociation and Psychosis

Meditation can have a pronounced effect on dissociation, either making it worse or lifting it. I've had several people confide in me that they realized their practice mostly consisted of dissociating. One of them was still convinced that if he just stays with his practice (of dissociating), it will fix itself. Dissociation can also be confused with attaining meditative goals with a reduced sense of self, which also seems to be quite common.

The latter possibility, dissociation lifting, may sound like a positive occurrence, but dissociation is a protective mechanism that exists for a reason. When vital safety barriers are pulled down at once, it can lead to overwhelm by trauma, potentially resulting in severe destabilization or an acute crisis. I suspect this is the main cause of severe spiritual crises where people even become suicidal.

Dissociation can be hard to catch. Many don't even know they have it. Quite a few people have suffered from severe dissociation without seeking mental health care (or only for temporary depression or anxiety, which does not appear alarming). An article in the Buddhist magazine *Tricycle* recommends and I concur: "*If you are suffering from severe depression, anxiety, or PTSD, it is probably not a good idea to join an intensive retreat. Try meditation classes instead, or a one-day or non-residential weekend retreat.*"[101]

Meditation is unfortunately well-known for causing psychoses and they hardly seem rare—I'm aware of half a dozen cases even among friends I've met in real life. Psychoses or psychosis-like episodes may only last minutes, but in several cases I know, they endured for more than six months. Some of these people had pre-existing diagnoses like bipolar disorder, while most didn't. Pretty much all of them, however, have had severe dissociation before the psychotic break.

Perhaps not surprisingly, when psychosis hits in the A&P, people may be especially prone to delusions of grandeur, while paranoia tends to hit in the dark night. Antipsychotics are not pleasant drugs and can have deleterious side effects, but in some situations they may be necessary as otherwise there is a threat to life, other people, employment or prized relationships.

Christina and Stanislav Grof believed some factors can distinguish spiritual crises from psychosis. Those struggling spiritually tend to be well aware that they're in the throes of an inner process and would be glad to receive help and support for it. They can also communicate

and cooperate reasonably well. Someone with psychosis would be more likely to blame their battles on external factors, have little insight into their condition and refuse any assistance.[102]

Excessive rumination and obsessive focus on mental and bodily sensations can be features of e.g. depression, anxiety, OCD and neurodivergence. Some studies have pointed out the propensity of mindfulness meditation to potentially alleviate these traits while making them worse in other individuals. Occasionally these tendencies can worsen to a highly distressing extent, like developing a constant hyperawareness of interoceptive signals, which may be similar to what has been termed sensorimotor OCD.

Dark Sides of Intended Effects

Some Prajñāpāramitā (Perfection of Wisdom) sūtras central to the Mahāyāna canon depict people vomiting blood and having heart attacks upon hearing the Buddha talk about emptiness.[103] In the highly disturbing Vesālīsutta (SN 54.9), sixty monks succumb to self-destruction after the Buddha made them so disgusted by their own bodies. Luckily these kinds of events are not likely to pose a risk in modern times, but Buddhism didn't develop as a relaxation practice for stress relief, but to dismantle some core views about reality.

Even when everything goes well, when you manage to dodge heavy dark nights and bizarre physical symptoms, meditation in itself is disorienting and destabilizing. It's meant to deconstruct parts of your cognitive structure, and what the process actually feels like is unpredictable. These changes are largely permanent, and while most people like them, not everyone does, and they can be harsh.

In the earlier mentioned *Tricycle* article, meditation teacher Daniel Lawton describes the experience he had on his 15th or so retreat that caused PTSD and led him to quit his own practice: "*Intensive meditation has to some extent changed the way that I experience the world, and some of those perceptual changes just don't feel very good.*"[104]

Your worldview and interpersonal relationships can also be drastically affected. Not all partnerships survive the turmoil. There might be deep existential loneliness and a feeling that no one can understand you. You may be relentlessly pummeled with painful realizations. While meditation doesn't give you perfect clarity or insight, there is a marked increase in clarity. And clarity has its obvious benefits, but many times it feels extremely unpleasant and can't be undone.

Especially if you've been suppressing things about your life, you might discover that you simply have to end your relationship, switch careers or carry out another drastic life change, no matter the fallout. Or as happened to me, you might discover the full magnitude of your life feeling painfully "off" and unaligned without any opportunity to change it, which is a wrenching experience. (Privileged people often forget this kind of situations exist.) Especially full nonduality can really put things in context, and that may not always be for the better.

Peak Experiences

Peak experiences are a common feature of meditation and are often looked down upon as "illusory, temporary states that people get attached to." I believe they also provide many beneficial effects, such as motivation to practice. Most Buddhist traditions warn about them, though Vajrayāna considers them to have both negative and positive aspects while Zen and Theravāda tend to be more uniformly critical and view them as distraction. Peak experiences can include the jhānas (see Chapter 7), A&P and afterglows of various states and attainments.

A common warning about peak experiences is that they could lead to egoistic pride about meditative attainments. I believe that in practice, this is seldom very harmful. Excess pride can

be dispelled by not reifying or glorifying things like the jhānas or stream entry, as some Buddhist traditions do (to the point you're not even allowed to discuss them), but presenting them as the nice yet fairly mundane achievements that they are.

There are definitely risks to such experiences, e.g. the way A&P can lead to psychoses or making life choices that could be regretted later. "*In other cases, intense positive affect did not alternate with low arousal states, but instead escalated into destabilizing conditions resembling mania and psychosis, which often required hospitalization.*" A spontaneous A&P in itself, even if pleasant, can be terrifying, if the person has no idea what's going on.

How to Reduce Harm

With severe adverse effects, having a break in practice can help or even be unavoidable. Yet with some types of unpleasant symptoms, this may change anything, as they are not so much about active effort, but a process that keeps running and can't be stopped. In the case of dark nights, meditation can actually provide relief, as it greatly increases the chances of getting past them.

The Brown University paper notes: "*For example, lack of sleep, inadequate diet, and lack of exercise tended to be associated with (or preceded) destabilizing experiences, and could be corrected as remedies by increasing sleep amount, making dietary changes, or getting exercise, as well as by engaging in other activities described as grounding, calming, or embodying.*" This can be particularly tricky in a retreat setting, which often involves little sleep and traditionally only two meals per day eaten before noon. In case of severe adverse effects, many teachers recommend a grounding diet, such as meat and other heavy foods, even alcohol.

The same paper also suggests: "*For certain symptoms in the somatic domain, body-based healing regimens (such as massage, acupuncture, or healing techniques that manipulate the subtle 'energy' of the body) were also attempted and reported as helpful by some but not others.*" Christina and Stan Grof recommend dreamwork and artistic expression to deal with processing difficult material.[105]

Seeking support for spiritual adverse effects can be a challenge, as the vast majority of medical and mental health professionals have no idea what is going on and the symptoms will likely be misdiagnosed. Altered states have a long history of being pathologized in the West as mere signs of mental disturbances.[106] I know people who have faced this concretely with deeply traumatic consequences.

In general, having the chance to talk openly about the fallout would be indispensable. In several articles and papers about the adverse effects of spiritual practice, people who had incurred such harm were disturbed that they weren't allowed to discuss it, e.g. because their Theravāda or Zen teacher told them that kundalinī awakening doesn't exist and so they should stop having these symptoms.

Willoughby Britton's team has compiled a Meditation Safety Toolbox for teachers, which includes material about e.g. screening tools, informed consent, monitoring and the effects of trauma on meditation practice.[107] The page also has a three-hour and 20-hour paid training courses available on the subject.

Part III
THE HEALING JOURNEY

Chapter 12
Pathways to Healing

Trauma healing has a close connection with spiritual practice to the extent many feel like there's no point in even separating the two fields. IFS is particularly often associated with Buddhism, but there are also many articles and even books discussing it in relation to Christianity and non-sectarian spirituality. Psychotherapists Paul Ginter and Karen Horneffer wrote: "*The [IFS] model assumes that we are spiritual beings and that we do not need to achieve or become something—that we are already complete.*"[108]

The last chapter in Peter Levine's book *In an Unspoken Voice* is dedicated to the connection between trauma and spirituality, expressing awe at the incredible healing capacity of humans and how it manifests. "*In fact, it was not unusual after that profound internal shift of feeling the 'goodness of self,' perhaps for the first time, to refer to their therapeutic work as 'a holy experience.'*"[109] For some, even the first taste of Self can have mystical qualities. I've had my share of deeply spiritual experiences during IFS, including sensing a strong presence of God.

Healing and awakening can seem like onions. You might feel relief over clearing a phase, dealing with an issue or processing something fully, but suddenly it's back, worse than ever, because you just peeled off one layer of it and there's much more underneath. The way the insight stages (Chapter 9) repeat over and over again didn't make any sense to me at first. After several years of being pummeled by them, the whole thing became easier to grasp.

It can seem never-ending, and in a sense it is a process that may never be fully finished. Yet simultaneously past trauma is completely healable, no matter its severity. This may sound like a contradiction, but humans are bundles of delightful contradiction.

I'm not a fan of ideas like "suffering is a gift," and such concepts are often utilized in toxic ways. I do agree with some visionaries in the fields of psychology and spirituality that trauma can also provide great wisdom and growth, as well as opportunities for awakening. Deeply traumatized people seem to possess a unique depth, spirit and vibrancy that healing really brings out. This is a complex issue, as obviously there is also tremendous suffering involved. It's not a silver lining, but a door that can open to incredible beauty.

Curiously, nowadays I feel like being preoccupied with one's trauma is a promising "prognostic factor" for healing. This may seem counterintuitive. I also used to think it meant having a victim complex that would be difficult to let go of. But now I believe a certain fixation with one's trauma is actually *a close precursor to healing*, and the exact opposite of the most common and most problematic state to be in: complete denial of the trauma.

Physiology and Healing

My background is in medicine, but for the most part, this book contains very little physiology and neuroscience. Trauma literature often deals with these things, focusing on areas of the brain like the amygdala and the insula, while authors discussing meditation talk about the default mode network and so on. However, neuroscience, neuroanatomy and physiology tend to

be much more complicated and much less well understood than most popular science would have you believe.

Bizarrely, I cannot even point you to a paper for evidence that trauma is stored in the body. I just have to hope that if you don't take my word for it, you'll take the word of hundreds of trauma experts, or trust your own experience. What everyone agrees with is that trauma can *affect* the body in numerous ways, such as interfering with interoception and exteroception, the ability to interpret signals from inside and outside the body, so that benign cues get misconstrued as alarms for danger.

Also, discussing this topic is often used as slippery slopes to pseudoscience or at least theories that are not fully proven but are presented as science. In one otherwise excellent book on Alexander technique, the author even made claims about which brain regions were influenced by the exercises based on how it "felt" to her. Obviously the book you're currently reading is not a hard science book, so someone could argue that I also present "pseudoscience" here, but I don't argue that mettā is good because it calms down your amygdala—a brain structure that often gets misrepresented in trauma literature anyway[110]—or because it maintains your telomere length (because one study said so).

A lot of writing on trauma (including ads for shady techniques and technologies) also discusses epigenetics and neuroplasticity, two intriguing concepts that we don't yet understand well. I find them fascinating and have read multiple books on both, but still on a practical level, they mostly boil down to two things: things you do change the way your body, brain and nervous system work.

Epigenetics means that *gene expression* can be modified by almost everything we do. This takes place e.g. through little "tags" that are added to and removed from our DNA, even though the actual sequence of the DNA isn't altered. Some of these changes even appear heritable, but this area isn't yet well understood. Neuroplasticity refers to the brain and the nervous system being highly pliable and amenable to change, in both good and bad. The potential for transformation is far greater than we usually imagine possible.

I question whether it's helpful to picture something like "I'm quieting down my amygdala" (or the default mode network). Even if it was true, the practice could still be working through another mechanism we haven't discovered yet. And as noted, many people are trying to find explanations for everything through brain imaging, when likely much of awakening and healing processes take place either elsewhere in the physical body or the subtle/energy body. In the rest of this chapter, I'm presenting both hard, well-proven science and some more speculative ideas that I believe actually have practical relevance

Since almost everything in human interactions and uman experience is related to trauma, some people forget that not *everything* is trauma. Both mental health professionals and healing-obsessed mystics struggle to tell apart two distinct issues: past trauma and current difficult or hostile conditions. The suffering caused by them can be compounded by past trauma, but unsafety, oppression or deprivation in the present won't go away by "feeling deeply into it," "letting go of resistance" or healing part burdens (or getting enlightened).

Even though trauma is stored in the body, most bodily symptoms are not caused by it. Blaming e.g. chronic pain on trauma is damaging and dangerous. Medications can be essential for both physical and mental illness. There can also be physiological reasons behind mental health issues, such as hypothyroidism or vitamin B12 deficiency, which are both very common. This cannot be stressed enough, as such misdiagnosis is pervasive.

The Autonomic Nervous System

The autonomic nervous system is relevant to most of topics discussed in this book, but especially trauma and meditation. I also have a major personal interest in ANS function, as autonomic dysfunction is at the core of one of my chronic illnesses. The traditional medical consensus is that the ANS consists of two axes which have opposite physiological effects in almost every way: the sympathetic nervous system ("fight or flight") and the parasympathetic nervous system (sometimes dubbed "rest and digestion"). You may have heard about the wonders of the vagus nerve and its stimulation, and the vagus is the main commander of the parasympathetic side.

Trauma used to be thought to result in a continuing or excessive activation of the sympathetic axis. Now it's understood that especially long-term trauma is more likely to do the converse, leading to a persistent freeze state, or these two extremes can alternate. I believe this is indicative of what the field of trauma as a whole has ignored for decades, as dissociation tends to be much easier to miss (or ascribe to things like depression) than a chronic state of panic and hypervigilance.

Neuroscientist Stephen Porges's Polyvagal theory divides the parasympathetic nervous system into two branches: the *ventral vagus*, which responds to cues of safety and social connection, such as in body language and tone of voice, and *dorsal vagus*, which shuts the body down into a freeze state if it detects danger. In the fields of medicine and evolutionary biology, the theory is considered controversial or even pseudoscience, as there is no actual evidence behind its claims. Several of them have in fact been discredited.[111] Nonetheless, many trauma therapists, including big names like Peter Levine and Bessel van der Kolk, have adopted it and several popular books have been written on it.

In a sense, it does not matter whether the polyvagal theory is anatomically accurate—whether some signals are mediated by the myelinated part of the vagus nerve and others by the unmyelinated part, as Porges claims. We know freeze states exist and are crucial for understanding chronic trauma, and that the human body is built to respond to subtle cues of social connection, which is also pertinent in the healing process. Besides fight, flight and freeze, there is also a proposed stress response called "tend and befriend." It was first thought to be only utilized by women, but since it's been found to associate with attachment security rather than gender.[112]

Most spiritual practices lead to parasympathetic dominance—not really surprising that relaxation triggers a physiological relaxation response in the body. This includes most types of meditation, breathwork and yoga. Chanting and singing can directly stimulate the vagus nerve in the throat. Parasympathetic activation has been postulated to explain many of the physical health benefits of meditation demonstrated in studies, as it can e.g. reduce inflammation. However, if someone is stuck in a chronic freeze response, it may not be beneficial.

There are some types of practice that may boost the sympathetic side instead, such as Wim Hof breathwork and tantric techniques like tummo (inner fire) meditation and yidam practice.[113] They would be expected to be less prone to precipitating dissociation and drowsiness. While mettā meditation generally feels relaxing, it can also stimulate the sympathetic nervous system, as it requires a higher focus and arousal than following the breath.[114] I suspect that with mettā, the ANS effects likely depend on several factors, e.g. how strongly you're feeling the love and which jhāna (if any) you are in.

To me it seems highly likely that some of the physical ramifications of the insight stages (see Chapter 9), such as elevated and reduced alertness, also stem from the autonomic nervous system, though unfortunately there is no research into this yet. A&P and Fear appear to exemplify sympathetic dominance while Dissolution seems like a freeze state.

Some forms of trauma therapy as well as David Treleaven's trauma-sensitive mindfulness utilize the concept of *window of tolerance*. This also goes by other names, e.g. in Somatic Experiencing there is a technique named *pendulation*. If the person in the course of therapy or practice drifts too far into either direction, fight-or-flight (hypervigilance) or freeze (hypoarousal), they are helped to return to a more regulated state. This can be through grounding into the body, grounding into the environment through the senses or shifting attention to something that feels safer and more positive.

The breath is a common method to regulate the ANS. Typically breathwork activates the parasympathetic side. A commonly recommended type of breathing for anxiety is "box breathing" or 4–4–4–4 *prānāyāma*: breathing in counting to four, holding for four, breathing out for four and again holding for four. If the outbreath is longer than the inbreath, this also stimulates the parasympathetic side particularly strongly, with a calming effect.

Doing the opposite: breathing faster or with the inhale longer than the exhale engages the sympathetic side, combating hypoarousal and freeze. The yogic practices of breath of fire (*agni pran*) and skull-shining breath (*kapālabhāti*), which both feature fast, rhythmic breathing, are also recommended for this purpose.

Memory Reconsolidation

Emotional learning refers to the way we can know something rationally, e.g. that we are valuable human beings and that having ADHD doesn't make us lazy, yet also carry beliefs that contradict these ideas and *feel* more real to us. This can result in a myriad of issues from trauma to depression and bad habits. The concept is quite alike schemas in cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and part burdens in IFS. Mere affirmations are rarely enough to undo emotional learning, it has to be something more tangible.

Luckily there is a physiological phenomenon that was only discovered in the late 1990s called *memory reconsolidation*.[115] Studies suggest that activating and then experientially contradicting or mismatching emotional learning can dissolve it completely, resulting in permanent symptom relief. The book *Unlocking the Emotional Brain* postulates that all successful psychotherapy works through this process: it makes us *feel* the contradictory information. E.g. trauma therapy (including EMDR) allows integrating the sense of past unsafety with experiential knowledge of safety, usually based on the individual's current life. In some cases, it may be an imaginary revisiting of the original traumatic situation changing its contents.

While therapy relies on memory reconsolidation, there's nothing that inherently requires the presence of another person, such as a therapist. The process can even happen spontaneously. At times people undergo sudden, major shifts, which may even heal a long-term problem, while having an everyday conversation, reading a self-help book or completely out of nowhere.

Some people I know have managed to naturally nudge their inner ruminations into a direction that enables memory reconsolidation. My own experience suggests that a large amount of trauma work can train the system to do this automatically. Yet for most people, incidental use of this process usually fails. People struggling with an issue such as feeling unlovable are seldom cured of it as soon as someone shows love for them. It can happen, yet most of the time it doesn't. I suspect that "resilience" may be partially explained by the person's subconscious being more naturally adept at carrying out this process.

Felt Sense

Felt sense refers to both a sensory modality and an individual sensation felt through it that are central to many spiritual and therapeutic practices. Originally the term was coined by psy-

chologist and philosopher Eugene Gendlin (1926–2017) who developed Focusing based on it. Focusing puts you in touch with your felt sense and it has been highly influential in the fields of psychotherapy and self-therapy.

Gendlin went through numerous hours of recorded psychotherapy sessions to figure out what transpired differently when therapy produced positive changes versus when it didn't.[116] He discovered something very interesting. Those who benefited from therapy were attuned to listening to their bodies, which showed up as "iterating" their depictions of their inner world, such as "*It made me feel sad, no, that's not the right word. Desperate? No... Devastated. I felt absolutely devastated.*"

This is one way felt sense can be used: to check whether something "intuitively" fits, whether it resonates in the body or feels slightly off. Originally Gendlin labeled the felt sense as something always sensed in the body, but other authors believe it may be more vague than that.[117] It requires you to be tuned into your body, but instead of a bodily sensation, it can show up as just *knowing* something intuitively. Felt sense can initially be scary for people with severe trauma, as using it means having to be with their bodies.

Hitting the sweet spot can produce a so-called *felt shift.* This feels comparable to someone being a great listener and you feel like you were heard *exactly.* In this case it's you hearing exactly what your body is trying to tell you, when you may have previously been overriding its message with intellectualizations.

If intellectual analysis was an effective way to solve emotional problems, smart and neurotic people would have solved all their issues, which unfortunately isn't the case. Contrary to common ideas about how psychotherapy works, insights produced in effective therapy are normally based on felt sense instead of analysis or "getting advice from the therapist."

Felt sense also refers to other types of experiences, like the sense you have of someone's "vibes" that you can bring to your mind, or that there is a word on the tip of your tongue and you have a vague sense of what it is like. Felt sense is also a powerful tool for artists and poets. A poet may struggle to find the perfect word, yet be certain that one exists, and the *almost* right one just won't do.

A felt sense may have a shape, color, texture and often a visual appearance, too. Sometimes there are no words that fit, but there's a dark, sticky, spiky sensation in your belly. In a practice like IFS or an imaginal journey, typically you don't "make up" parts or scenes. Obviously they are made up in a sense that they're fabricated by your bodymind (and you don't actually have a raccoon or a wizard inside you), but they just come to you, akin to a dream.

Peter Levine presents an interesting exercise for training the felt sense in *Waking the Tiger.*[118] He asks you to look at a book or a magazine with many pictures (this was 1997, you can also use Instagram or Pinterest now). Look at the first picture and feel your full emotional reaction to it. It may be subtle, but there is something, e.g. that you like the image but find it a bit weird and artificial. Then, try to feel into *how* you know this. What is going on in your body that conveys this information? Be with the sensations and see if they change in any way. Then you can move on to the next picture. If it becomes too much, shift your attention to a pleasant memory or a thought instead so as not to get overwhelmed.

Psychedelics and Other Substances

Psychedelics are undergoing a major renaissance. With more research showing their benefits, they have lost a lot of the stigma associated with "taking drugs." These substances include magic mushrooms, LSD, DMT, ayahuasca (which also contains DMT), 5-MeO-DMT, ibogaine, some research chemicals, mescaline (from peyote cactus) and salvia divinorum. In the past, psychedelics were often dubbed hallucinogens, but this misrepresents their purpose—few people

take these substances for hallucinations and other perceptual effects. Usually they are used as a tool for "opening the mind," to get past the limitations of our usual cognitive patterns and filters.

Many people have their first mystical experiences while tripping and it often serves as a gateway to meditation and spirituality. There's of course nothing new about the use of psychoactive plants or mushrooms for spiritual purposes. Psychedelic plants and fungi grow in most parts of the world and it did not go unnoticed in ancient cultures.

With the exception of LSD which is synthetic, all other major psychedelics (as well as amanita mushrooms) have traditionally been used for visionary and healing purposes. Many of them remain in use in sacred ceremonies and are often referred to as *entheogens*. Peyote and ayahuasca have also received a religious exemption in the United States, meaning that even though they're considered illegal drugs, certain indigenous groups are allowed to use them ceremonially without repercussions.

The holy books of Hinduism, the *Vedas*, sing the praises of a sacred drink called *soma* that was also supposed to convey immortality. The identity of this ambrosial drink has inspired dozens of theories suggesting it contains entheogens such as cannabis, amanita mushrooms or Psilocybe mushrooms, or possibly a psychoactive but not psychedelic plant such as opium poppy or lotus flower. One of the most popular candidates is an Ephedra species, containing potent stimulants but no psychedelics.

Many psychonauts also believe in a historical link between psychedelics and the dharma, especially Vajrayāna. This has also inspired a handful of recent books, such as *Psychedelic Buddhism: A User's Guide to Traditions, Symbols, and Ceremonies*, *The Master Plant Teachers: A Spiritual Journey into the World of Amazonian Plant Medicine and Tibetan Buddhism* and *Secret Drugs of Buddhism: Psychedelic Sacraments and the Origins of the Vajrayana*, while *Altered States: Buddhism and Psychedelic Spirituality in America* examines this subject from a more contemporary perspective. There's of course Terence McKenna's controversial classic *Food of the Gods* which draws some wild conjectures on human history and evolution, e.g. based on statues where historians see a phallus, but he perceives a mushroom.

The physiological mechanisms of most psychedelics are understood quite well. Classical psychedelics bind to the 5-HT_{2A} serotonin receptors, which has e.g. anti-inflammatory effects, and they increase brain connectivity and neural plasticity. Besides studies of their benefits in mental illness, psychedelics are also being explored more and more for alleviating physical conditions, such as psilocybin from magic mushrooms for the excruciating cluster headaches.

A big question in medicine is whether the benefits of psychedelics have more to do with their pharmacological action, or their ability to induce profound mystical experiences.[119] Attempts are underway—of course—to find related molecules that would provide the same benefits without producing (much of) a trip.

The mainstream critique of psychedelics has mostly focused on their risks, like bad trips and long-term psychological harm, as well as their legal status. My take is that they are likely much safer than meditation. People regard substances with much more caution, but the concept of *set and setting* may also be relevant.

Psychedelics are usually only taken for a couple of hours per month at most, and with the exception of very bad trips, any negative consequences would normally be absent during the sober periods. With regular meditation practice, severe adverse effects can occur any time, not just on the cushion, and no one can have an optimal setting 24/7. I know many more psychonauts than meditators yet a massively larger number of cases of severe psychological harm caused by meditation.

The more cultural critique of the current psychedelic movement has echoed the criticism of the mindfulness movement and neoshamanism. Thousands of years old traditions, often

reserved for a small subset of the population, have been stripped of most of their core components. They've become mainstream in a completely new form, with new goals often tied into capitalism.[120] When microdosing psychedelics first became a fad, it was associated with tech workers and creatives reporting increases in productivity, while traditionally the psychedelic movement has held that the substances would turn people away from capitalism and neoliberalism.

Nowadays, some tout psychedelics as a miracle cure for just about any mental illness, including trauma. I've even seen claims like "psychotherapists are not even needed any more since psychedelics exist"—even though the therapy component of psychedelic therapy is very important, too—or even that the whole society would be transformed if everyone took psychedelics.

It's crucial to understand that simple trauma (resulting from a single harrowing event) is vastly different from complex developmental trauma and structural dissociation. I've known people with DID who have taken psychedelics with no ill effects, but it has rarely been beneficial, either, and sometimes has even resulted in new trauma. Proper psychedelic therapy with a professional might provide relief, but it's a far cry from dropping heroic doses on your own because people claim these substances will cure trauma. At the time of this writing, there were no studies of psychedelics conducted in dissociative disorder and only one study done in complex trauma, which was a survey.[121]

Ketamine and MDMA (ecstasy) are also tacked on to the psychedelic boom. Ketamine is a dissociative anesthetic, though especially in lower doses its effects resemble those of psychedelics. In the recent years, it has been approved as a treatment for severe depression, where it has the benefit of very rapid onset of action compared to traditional antidepressants.

MDMA is being studied as a treatment for PTSD and has been suggested to be particularly helpful for unblending from parts. It is sometimes classified as a psychedelic while others refer to it as an *empathogen*. Neither category seems fully appropriate to me. MDMA can appear to increase empathy by e.g. stimulating oxytocin secretion, but oxytocin is not exactly the "love hormone" it has been branded as—it can boost tribalist behavior[122] and multiple studies have found that in some situations it may *increase* anxiety.[123] Also, the aftereffects of MDMA such as serotonin depletion seem concerning to me compared to psychedelics, especially considering that trauma work can come with drastic comedowns on its own.

Some people also find certain non-psychedelic psychoactive substances useful for spiritual purposes, such as for aiding meditation or inner work. Common ones include e.g. cannabis (which can have psychedelic properties in large doses), CBD, green tea/L-theanine and lion's mane mushrooms. People looking for such a "boost" may be after different things, however; is e.g. tiredness, poor focus or anxiety interfering with practice. I suffer from severe, constant fatigue and sleepiness, and for me nicotine gum has been extremely helpful for meditation, IFS and imaginal practice, it just cannot be taken on a daily basis or the effects quickly diminish.

Chapter 13
Psychotherapy

Three decades ago, Mark Epstein wrote in *Tricycle*, in an article titled "Awakening with Prozac": "*For many, Buddhist meditation has all of the trappings of an alternative psychotherapy, including the expectation that intensive practice should be enough to turn around any objectionable emotional experience. Yet the unspoken truth is that many experienced dharma students, like Leslie, have found that disabling feelings of depression, agitation, or anxiety persist despite a long commitment to Buddhist practice. This anguish is often compounded by a sense of guilt about such persistence and a sense of failure at not 'making it' as a student of the dharma when afflicted in this way.*"[124]

Considering meditation some sort of a psychotherapeutic or healing work is not entirely unwarranted. It can make trauma bubble up to the surface, potentially in a violent fashion, while mettā and forgiveness meditation in particular contain aspects that can facilitate more gentle healing. Some people I know have instinctively developed elements reminiscent of IFS, Somatic Experiencing or coherence therapy into their practice. Improvement in mental illness isn't unheard of. But if you believe you're going to fix your depression, anxiety or another condition with meditation, I'd recommend looking into other avenues. John Welwood noted:

"*In my psychotherapy practice I often work with dharma students who have engaged in spiritual practice for decades. I respect how their practice has been beneficial for them. Yet despite the sincerity as practitioners, their practice is not fully penetrating their life. They seek out psychological work because they remain wounded and not fully developed on the emotional/relational/personal level, and they may be acting out their wounding in harmful ways.*"[125]

While meditation can help us see things more clearly, it can also create a false, overly elevated sense of how clear that vision is. Even "insight into the nature of reality" doesn't teach us relational or other life skills. Such wisdom can ring a bit hollow and disembodied. Equanimity, non-reactivity and compassion can certainly make it easier to deal with interpersonal problems, but are rarely enough to solve them. In some situations, spaciousness can even manifest as indifference and aloofness to others.

Welwood continued: "*We need a larger perspective that can recognize and include two different tracks of human development—which we might call growing up and waking up, healing and awakening, or becoming a genuine human person and going beyond the person altogether. . .If we hold a perspective that includes the two developmental tracks, then we will not use absolute truth to belittle relative truth. Instead of the either/or logic of, 'Your feelings are empty, so just let them go,' we could take a both/and approach: 'Feelings are empty, and sometimes we need to pay close attention to them.'*"

Different Types of Therapy

A popular belief in the field of psychotherapy is that all schools of therapy are roughly equally beneficial, and it's the therapeutic relationship that produces the results. This view is based on several studies which evaluated different types of therapy. I feel like this notion has

multiple problems. These comparison studies have not incorporated the styles that I believe to be much more effective than others, such as Internal Family Systems and Somatic Experiencing. Of course, one can counter that we cannot know this, because they were not studied. But it feels misleading to conclude all therapeutic modalities are equally effective just because some mainstream ones are.

Or are they? Even the comparisons that have been made seem questionable, as the various approaches differ greatly in factors like their expected duration. E.g. CBT and solution-focused brief therapy normally only take 5-20 visits. Psychoanalysis may last for many years with multiple sessions per week (in the past, five a week wasn't unusual!), for a total of hundreds of sessions. Even if the end result was the same, that hardly translates to equivalent efficacy.

The benefits of psychotherapy are hard to measure, as both the therapist and client are likely to overreport them and certain factors may increase the risk of this. E.g. a longer duration of treatment likely produces more attachment and sense of sunk cost—if you've taken a liking to your therapist and invested hundreds of hours of your time, you want to report that they're helping. Psychotherapy can also cause significant harm, but in most research, these risks are not properly assessed.[126] Even if two approaches were alike in efficacy but one came with greater propensity for harm, that would tip the scales.

Of course, the therapeutic relationship *does* make a big difference. Jerome Frank, a former professor of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins and an influential author on psychotherapy, even curiously and controversially theorized: "*My own hunch, which I mention with some trepidation, is that the most gifted therapists may have telepathic, clairvoyant, or other parapsychological abilities. . .They may, in addition, possess something. . .that can only be termed 'healing power.' Any researcher who attempts to study such phenomena risks his reputation as a reliable scientist, so their pursuit can be recommended only to the most intrepid. The rewards, however, might be great.*"[127]

Some schools of psychotherapy are based on the belief that the client is thinking *maladaptively* and the goal is to correct these damaging thoughts. This is particularly true of CBT and its offshoots like DBT. Disability activist Alana Saltz lambasted it: "*CBT as a modality is based around gaslighting. It's all about telling a patient that the world is safe, bad feelings are temporary, and that pain (emotional or physical) is a 'faulty or unhelpful' distortion of thinking. That's literally in CBT's definition on the APA website.*"[128] Numerous authors have echoed a similar sentiment. CBT has been criticized for pathologizing both normal grief and suffering[129] as well as harm caused by oppressive systems.[130]

I don't think viewing a type of thinking or behavior as maladaptive is useful. All of it was devised adaptively, to protect survival, and resolving issues doesn't require viewing them as negative. Rather the opposite is true, as IFS and some other therapies show us. There is no need to exile any part of ourselves—which most of us have been unsuccessfully doing all our lives, anyway—and it presents a hindrance to healing. And if someone who is experiencing current oppression, abuse or other forms of continuous trauma is told that the world is safe and that their thinking is just distorted, this is indeed gaslighting and a form of abuse. The same unfortunately goes for some spiritual teachings, as well.

Janina Fisher, a psychotherapist and author whose work combines IFS with sensorimotor psychotherapy, holds that the field of therapy went badly amiss for years by presuming that it's important to turn trauma into a verbal narrative.[131] She believes this approach only strengthens the pathways responsible for trauma, when the focus should be on its effects in the present, not the memories. Peter Levine agrees that it's unnecessary and even harmful to dig up old trauma memories in therapy.[132] Unfortunately e.g. exposure therapy, a form of CBT and one of the most popular trauma treatments, relies on this outdated paradigm, which makes it prone to causing harm.[133]

Buddhism, Spirituality and Psychotherapy

Mindfulness has become a mainstream approach in psychiatry, which has not been without criticism. It has been viewed as watering down Buddhist ideas (e.g. stripping away *sīla* or morality teachings) as well as glibly recommending something as a panacea, even though it may not be suitable for all populations. Several established forms of therapy have drawn inspiration from Buddhism. These include acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and some of its offshoots like MBCT, as well as dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT).

Even though MBSR has been accused of diluting the dharma by focusing on mindfulness, it was designed by Jon Kabat-Zinn who is a long-time practicing Buddhist, and was influenced by Theravāda, Zen/Chan and even Advaita. He has often discussed the difficulty of distilling thousands of years of religious wisdom into secular concepts to make it palatable for other clinicians, but he believes he retained more Buddhism than the name might suggest.[134] Being mindful can certainly relieve stress, but any mindfulness-based approach can also kickstart the progress of insight (see Chapter 9).[135] This can lead to years of something completely contrary to stress reduction.

DBT is mainly used to treat people diagnosed with the unfortunately named "borderline personality disorder." Several authors have suggested renaming this condition *chronic relational trauma disorder* as it reflects its genesis and mechanisms much better.[136] Unfortunately DBT does not offer anything for such trauma and focuses on making the person act in a socially sanctioned way, like suppressing self-destructive urges. In my view this makes it completely unsuitable for treating its target group and it often causes considerable harm.

Even though DBT was influenced by Zen Buddhism, I believe the heavily behavioral approach focusing on emotional suppression and containing highly manipulative and distress-inducing elements such as "withdrawal of warmth" render it wildly antithetical to Buddhism. I'm concerned that ACT also contains some rather problematic elements similar to the gaslighting aspects of CBT. At least the Buddhist influences in it do mostly reflect Buddhist values and it is much less emotionally manipulative than DBT.

My support for IFS as a highly effective and non-pathologizing form of therapy has come through loud and clear by now. Somatic Experiencing (see Chapter 15) is another good one. IFS and SE therapists are generally trained to have at least basic knowledge of oppression and continuous trauma. I appreciate hypnotherapy too (see the next chapter), with the caveat that it includes a wide variety of approaches. Coherence therapy and EMDR also appear valuable and are discussed in more detail below.

Solution-focused brief therapy is likely a good choice in a limited number of situations, where the issues relate more to current circumstances rather than trauma. Focusing-oriented psychotherapy is based on Gendlin's Focusing (see Felt Sense in Chapter 12). There is also a form of it called Indigenous Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy (IFOT) which is used in working with postcolonial trauma. Hakomi is a somatic and spiritual form of therapy with a deep focus on mindfulness which sounds intriguing, but I'm not personally familiar with it. The main use I see for CBT is for insomnia without a physiological cause, e.g. insomnia that has become chronic after an acute stress reaction.

Many spiritually oriented people would find it hard to open up to a therapist who isn't knowledgeable about the subject. Discussing things like nonduality, dark nights, kundalinī symptoms or more far-out aspects could be construed as signs of pathology, even psychosis. It may not be a safe subject to bring up with the average therapist, though nowadays there are quite a few Buddhist psychotherapists practicing even in non-spiritual styles of therapy.

Luckily with many types of therapy, you don't have to talk about your daily life. You can focus on things like your parts, your body or past events. One notable exception to this is couples and family therapy. I feel like counseling would be a great idea in almost every relationship in which at least one partner is going through an intense spiritual path (see Chapter 19), but currently it's tricky to find a marriage counselor who understands the complex and often bizarre issues that can arise in such situations.

The Role of Self-Therapy

Some types of psychotherapy such as CBT, ACT, DBT and schema therapy have workbooks available for using on your own, but other than that, self-therapy as a concept isn't really discussed much. Psychotherapy is often viewed as talking about your problems. A common professional notion about therapy is that it's mostly based on interpersonal aspects like the therapeutic relationship and transference (e.g. the client projecting their parents on the therapist).

Neither of these views seem compatible with the concept of self-therapy, yet I believe the efficacy of solitary inner work is greatly underestimated. It's not a substitute for professional therapy and not suitable for everyone, but for some people, it can be nearly or even equally helpful, or it can supplement working with a professional. Being able to heal or relieve an issue you have been struggling with by yourself can be highly empowering. In a practice like IFS, the therapeutic relationship, based on unconditional positive regard, *is there*, it's just between Self and the parts rather than between two individuals.

For many people, self-therapy equals IFS. Even the most popular IFS book, by Jay Earley, is titled *Self-Therapy.* But there are also many other types, such as Gendlin's Focusing, Internal Double Crux, Ideal Parent Figure, Bio-Emotive therapy (Nedera), Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT), Core Transformation, Wholeness Process (see Chapter 8), Naikan, The Work, Lefkoe method, Sedona method, Immunity to Change and CT Charting, as well as numerous NLP techniques (see Chapter 14 for more about NLP).

Whether all of these are actual forms of therapy or "self-help techniques" is a valid question, as there is no clear distinction. Some are limited to working on a specific type of problem and are more suitable for minor issues rather than trauma or mental illness, but others are highly effective forms of psychotherapy you can practice on your own. The section on memory reconsolidation in the previous chapter sheds light on how most of these methods work: by accessing information (emotional learning) that would normally be unavailable to you, and then updating it.

Additionally, hypnosis allows for solo practice both with self-hypnosis and listening to hypnosis audios, either pre-existing ones or ones created for you by a hypnotherapist. TRE (Tension, Stress and Trauma release) is usually learned from a professional but then may be done on your own. Somatic Experiencing and coherence therapy aren't normally counted as self-therapies but can be practiced alone. Some people believe this also applies to EMDR, but EMDR therapy contains many stabilizing and supportive components as well besides the hand movements and trauma processing.

Most psychotherapists nowadays have received at least some training in multiple modalities. Similarly in self-therapy, it can be highly valuable to learn several different techniques and blend them together, and also experiment with combining them with non-therapy approaches, from running to drumming. Some forms of self-therapy are also well-suited for peer work. The role of the peer may even be just silently listening, distinguishing it from actively conducting therapy. I will discuss peer work more in Chapter 20.

Coherence Therapy

In coherence therapy (formerly known as depth-oriented brief therapy) you first uncover the emotional learning behind a symptom: a negative belief based on past events that continues affecting your life. It is then integrated with evidence showing a mismatch between the schema and reality using memory reconsolidation (see Chapter 12). The belief cannot be deduced by rational analysis but usually must be discovered with the felt sense, and activated by feeling deeply into its contents.

Many such schemas follow the format: "I am _____," "I will always _____," "I will never _____," "I will _____ if _____" or "I won't _____ unless _____," such as "I won't be lovable unless I'm perfect." Utilizing emotive and personalized language that really resonates with the emotional learning is recommended for this, e.g. "If I ever need stuff from others, then I'm just a whiny loser and a failure." When working with a therapist, this might be written on a card and occasionally reviewed until the next session.

For the actual reconsolidation, you'd find an example to mismatch with the learning, e.g. your grandpa acting very caring in a situation when you messed up, contradicting the belief of imperfection making you unlovable. Then you kind of mentally "juggle" the original emotional learning of unlovability and the memory of a situation proving it wrong, switching between them in your experience and deeply feeling both. This process can be repeated in the next five hours, a window during which the memory is activated and in a physiologically unstable state.

Some people wonder why they should invest in learning IFS, as coherence therapy sounds like a simpler and more efficient way to accomplish the same. This obviously boils down to personal preference, and I do occasionally use coherence therapy instead of IFS. Still, I feel like IFS offers a more holistic, system-wide approach, especially when combined with somatic work. It's not just about laser-focusing on individual issues, but nourishing your whole system, growing your self-awareness and supporting you in the journey towards self-actualization and becoming Self-led.

EMDR

In EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) trauma is processed while simultaneously focusing on bilateral sensory input. This is typically done by tracking the therapist's hand moving side-to-side. The bilateral stimulation tones down the intensity of re-experiencing the trauma, though how it works is not fully understood. It has been suggested to function analogously to the lateral eye movements in REM sleep (though alternating tactile stimulation can be used instead of gaze fixation) or through *dual awareness*, focusing on two things at the same time. EMDR is often combined with other therapies, such as IFS or the similar ego state therapy.

There is quite a lot of evidence of EMDR in PTSD and also some in other conditions, from depression to addiction. Unfortunately, most of the studies are not very high quality. This has led to a peculiar situation where in some countries, EMDR is derided as pseudoscience, while in many others it's considered a standard treatment for trauma and covered by the state or insurance providers.

The main problem with EMDR compared to other effective trauma therapies seems to be that it can be more destabilizing, especially in severe dissociation such as DID, where serious caution is advised.[137] The risk of destabilization has been proposed to stem from standard EMDR overriding protector parts.[138]

Chapter 14
Hypnosis

It feels very unfortunate to me how misunderstood and underappreciated something as fascinating as hypnosis is. In some countries it's widely used medically and in psychotherapy, possibly also in fields like sports coaching, in others it's considered a relic of the past. I believe learning about hypnosis can contribute to the understanding of the mind and even spirituality for three reasons in particular:

1) Hypnosis is likely behind why many spiritual phenomena "work" and some techniques intentionally produce altered states. Gurus often induce hypnosis in their students, some even by their mere presence. Trance states are also a part of everyday phenomena, e.g. watching a movie and getting sucked into it. Keith Johnstone claims in *Impro* that e.g. acting takes place in trance and that states of trance cover a larger portion of our lives than "normal" consciousness does.[139]

2) Hypnosis was practically the first type of psychotherapy. Especially through pioneers like Milton Erickson and Richard Bandler, it has greatly influenced the field of modern psychotherapy and even bodywork techniques, approaches like IFS, Core Transformation, Wholeness Process and Feldenkrais. The study of hypnosis has also added to our knowledge of dissociation and vice versa, as these phenomena are closely related, a connection that was discovered already back in the late 19th century.[140]

3) Hypnosis demonstrates how incredibly powerful the mind is and its potential for drastic change, both immediately and in the long term. It can help you find ways to better influence your own mind and others' minds (in a loving, noncoercive fashion). This also relates to how you might be inadvertently affecting others in more manipulative ways, especially if you teach or guide people, and how someone might be manipulating and influencing you. (Of course, this chapter alone cannot give you a deep understanding of the whole field and its intricacies.)

So what is hypnosis? Let's start with what it's not: quackery, faking, manipulation, a zombie-like state or sleep. Despite hypnotists using commands like "Sleep!" people don't actually doze off (though this is also possible to do with hypnosis). There are about 15 different theories on the nature of hypnosis, and many of them posit it is not a discrete state. People are affected by suggestion outside of trance, as well. However, there are e.g. fMRI studies that I believe provide strong evidence that hypnosis is in fact a state.[141] According to brain imaging, hypnotic anesthesia is also a separate phenomenon from the placebo effect.

Hypnosis is often described as a state of relaxation and focused attention. You might wonder how it differs from meditation, and there is no clear-cut answer. Meditation isn't one specific state, but a collection of related states that may have converse features, such as focused attention vs. open monitoring. People who dissociate heavily can spontaneously enter self-hypnotic states, so they may also go into trance on the cushion. Many guided hypnosis audios probably induce trance states in less susceptible listeners, too.

Hypnosis has been compared to jhānas, pointing-outs and mantras, but I feel like it's more related to yoga nidrā and fire kasina (see Chapter 5). Yoga nidrā recordings tend to resemble

guided hypnosis audios and some people intentionally use fire kasina to induce trance states. Holding your breath can also contribute to going into trance.

Almost everyone can be hypnotized, but some people are more susceptible than others. A substantial amount of research has gone into hypnotizability and what kind of personality traits and other qualities correlate with it. The conclusion is that it's complicated, but having traumatic dissociation tends to make a person more hypnotizable, while some traits like high empathy and so-called openness to experience may contribute, too.

Since you're reading this book, which already implies certain things about your mind and personality, I consider it unlikely you couldn't be hypnotized. The required level of hypnotizability depends on which hypnotic phenomena are attempted, though. I've never met an individual in whom I could not induce a state of extremely deep relaxation, but only a tiny percentage of people are hypnotizable enough to have fully realistic, open-eye visual hallucinations.

Uses of Hypnosis

The most common uses of hypnosis are psychotherapy, medical hypnosis (e.g. for pain relief), stage hypnosis and erotic hypnosis. It is also used in sports coaching. Medical hypnosis has evidence in a huge variety of conditions, from asthma to warts. The largest amount of modern hypnosis research is likely done in the treatment of IBS.[142] It's even possible to conduct surgery using hypnosis as the anesthesia.[143] For many symptoms and medical conditions, one can find a hypnosis audio on YouTube, though the success rate is probably lower than with one made for you by a professional.

It's curious that hypnosis isn't more commonly used for everyday recreational purposes, such as relaxation. In hypnosis you can tell someone "You'll relax more, you'll go even deeper into relaxation, you'll get twice as relaxed" and that actually works, all the way to states of extraordinary tranquility likely unachievable by other means, even by meditation. (And you can also add in time dilation, so that the person can spend 15 minutes blissfully rested, yet feel like it lasted an hour.)

Hypnotherapy is not strictly speaking its own type of therapy. Hypnosis can be utilized in e.g. CBT, family therapy, trauma work and for treating addictions. There's also hypnoanalysis, which draws from psychoanalysis. A meta-analysis of 16 studies found that CBT with hypnosis provided substantially better outcomes than CBT without hypnosis.[144] Psychotherapist Michael Yapko, who has written several books on hypnosis, believes that *all* major schools of therapy use hypnotic techniques, even if they are not labeled as such.[145]

In hypnosis you can dig up buried traumatic memories and process them with distancing techniques such as watching them unfold on a movie screen or even looking at yourself watching them on the screen (double dissociation). Besides my earlier warnings about re-experiencing trauma in therapy, exploring childhood trauma in hypnosis comes with a *major* caveat: it can fabricate false memories that cannot be distinguished from real events. The same risk goes for other therapies, as well, but some therapists' use of hypnosis to fabricate memories of nonexistent childhood abuse has greatly harmed the whole field.

Hypnotic suggestion can also be used for contemplative purposes, e.g. for inducing jhānas or nondual states, at least if the person has previous experience of such states. It can facilitate lucid dreaming or other dreamwork. I've found hypnotic suggestion very helpful for energywork, as you can basically tell energy how it should move. Hypnosis works well for inciting emotional states by direct suggestion, which can be used e.g. for mettā purposes.

I've recorded a hypnosis audio which attempts to induce several contradictory emotions at the same time.[146] This was inspired by some guided yoga nidrā recordings as well as a claim I

read back when I was a child that supposedly people in hypnosis can be suggested to picture a shape that's a square and a circle at the same time. They will swear they did see this, but can't explain what it looked like. My audio tends to produce wildly individual results, e.g. some people enter a nondual state and others feel rapid, flickering switches between the emotions.

Hypnosis in Practice

There are many ways to induce a hypnotic trance, such as relaxation suggestion, moving body parts, visualization, eye fixation and overloading with multiple simultaneous sensory inputs. These can also be combined in various ways. With rapid inductions, the subject doesn't even realize they're being hypnotized, the most famous example being handshake inductions. This can cause issues with consent, which stage hypnotists often completely brush over. The trance can be deepened with e.g. various counting-based methods (like an elevator that takes you deeper at every numbered floor) and fractionation, where the subject is brought out of trance and put back deeper, usually by having them open and close their eyes.

I'm very fond of Dave Elman's legendary Elman induction and variations of it, especially the parts that rely on eye closing and hand drops. The full Elman induction contains five components, but I've never needed to use all of them. For eye closing, you can either verbally suggest that their eyes grow so relaxed that they close and will not be able to open anymore (you can also first tire the eyes with eye fixation) or gently press them closed with your fingers giving the same suggestion. Especially the latter tends to be a shockingly fast and effective way to put people into trance. For the hand drops, you pick up one of their hands from the wrist and tell them that you dropping it into their lap will take them much deeper, usually repeating this three times.

For remote and recorded inductions, I typically combine eye fixation + overload (instructions to focus on their gaze, breath and my voice at the same time) + eye closing + relaxation suggestions + sometimes the descending elevator, which can all be done in 5–6 minutes. For most people this is unnecessarily overdoing it, especially since I mostly utilize hypnotic phenomena that don't require a very deep trance. Then again, like the Elman induction, it guarantees that if some aspects don't work so well on the particular subject, they'll still be decently deep.

Consent is essential in hypnosis. You should ask for permission to hypnotize someone, but also if you are e.g. going to touch them during the induction. Acquiring consent also creates a "yes set," and some inductions use it for this purpose, to ease the person into yes-anding you. You have to also confirm beforehand that the particular techniques and suggestions you are planning to use aren't likely to trigger phobias or trauma reactions, such as about elevators, moving their body into a certain position or creating immobility. Some inductions can even trigger physical issues like motion sickness in susceptible individuals.

This is something I'd like to see more in spiritual circles in general: discussing areas of discomfort before initiating shared practice. Way too many people appear to believe that if the person gets triggered or uncomfortable during practice, this is always beneficial in the long run. It might be, but this is making big assumptions.

Most benefits of hypnosis rely on post-hypnotic suggestion. Hypnotherapy would not be very useful if you could only sustain relief from pain, anxiety or cigarette cravings for the duration of the trance state. Posthypnotic suggestions can be general and vague, like for better self-esteem, or *anchors*, that if something specific happens, it triggers an action. This should be done carefully, so that e.g. a relaxation anchor doesn't trigger while driving. Suggestions related to dreams tend to work particularly well, as this is working on the subconscious through the

subconscious. Even people who can normally never recall their dreams can usually be suggested to be able to.

Hypnosis works well remotely, too, including audio-only calls. It's even possible to put someone into trance via text. I'm not talking about mesmerizing page-turners here, but books, other texts or online chats using specific techniques. The most famous example is hypnosis and NLP pioneer Richard Bandler's puzzling fairy tale *The Adventures of Anybody*. It hardly contains subtle or masterful storytelling, but definitely works. A certain kind of poetry can also have a hypnotic effect on the reader. Unfortunately for me, this tends to be quite different from my own style, e.g. with abstract imagery and rhythmical repetition.[147]

Hypnosis, especially stage hypnosis, is often a hypermasculine field, where people are controlled with authoritarian demeanor and without full consent. Yet it need not be authoritative, it can be gentle and nurturing. There are various ways of delivering suggestions, from direct to indirect and even hidden. You can experiment with this on your own, just try to avoid suggestions like "Your wrist pain will be gone" (instead something like "Your wrist will feel very pleasant"). Steer clear of anything that could cause harm in the wrong situation or if misinterpreted, like "Cigarettes will smell disgusting to you."

The most common way to bring people back from hypnosis is to have them count from 1 to 5, or 1 to 10 if they're deeper. You should simultaneously suggest that they will come back and will feel good and fully alert and remember everything that happened. Others consider the counting method a bit forced and rather suggest the person returns at their own pace.

The Legacy of Milton Erickson

One of the prime trailblazers of hypnosis was Milton Erickson (1901–1980), whom I also admire for his brilliant disability and neurodivergence representation. He was dyslexic, tone deaf and later a wheelchair user with chronic pain and slurred speech from post-polio syndrome. While hypnosis had been used since the 19th century, in the mid-1900s, psychoanalysis was pretty much the only available type of therapy. It was a huge investment of time and money, with multiple sessions per week for years. In Freudian analysis, the role of the therapist was to be "invisible", while the client would speak and project their issues on the analyst.

Erickson's approach was completely different. He would often only need one session or a few to heal a problem and he regarded patients warmly and personably. Erickson's consideration of the client's living conditions and environment was unheard of back then and unfortunately still remains underappreciated in most schools of therapy. He would work with their whole family if needed, at a time when this was considered off limits and family therapy as a field was only beginning to take shape.

Erickson used "pattern interrupts" such as his famous handshake induction, but he also believed in interrupting patterns therapeutically. One of his maxims was that small changes could produce major effects, which is particularly true of interpersonal issues. Interrupt one pattern and others' patterns dependent on it cannot manifest. At times he even did this by encouraging the client to exaggerate their presenting symptom.

Erickson's ideas had a large influence on the field of psychotherapy, especially solution-focused brief therapy and family therapy. Often his approach resembled what is now known as CBT—he just did it in a much less pathologizing and much more clever ways. His focus on resources as opposed to failings also brings to mind modern positive psychology. Erickson would even put people into trance and just leave them in it, reasoning that the brain is capable of therapeutic work on its own.[148]

Language plays a big role in Ericksonian hypnosis. He turned suggestions into metaphorical stories or hid them in seemingly normal sentences where they were subtly emphasized. He

also induced trance by using semantically confusing language, an approach I've seen compared to kōans. Erickson has even been quoted as saying "Confusion precedes enlightenment," though he wasn't referring to anything to do with Buddhism.

Erickson's approach led Richard Bandler and John Grinder to develop neurolinguistic programming, which remains a popular but controversial field. In practice NLP includes hundreds of techniques, often heavy on visualization, and language isn't always an integral part of it. Most linguistic tricks utilized in NLP are also far from Erickson's style.

Visualization sees many different uses in hypnosis. It is possible to e.g. give a direct suggestion for pain reduction, but the client imagining the painful area changing color or being in the control room of their body and turning the pain lever down can work much better. NLP often pays importance to where in the visual field things are pictured.

A major difference between the hypnotic imaginal and imaginal journeys (see Chapter 17) is that the hypnotist usually provides the material. They might ask hypnotee to visualize something specific, instead of the content emerging organically. Still, both approaches use metaphor as a way to converse with the subconscious. Metaphorical suggestion is harder to resist than direct commands, and things arising from the subconscious in metaphoric form, as also happens in dreams, can be less threatening to work with.

Even outside of trance, Erickson considered it important to delve into the patient's metaphor. If the patient describes "drowning in their problems and being pulled under," the hypnotist would respond with another water metaphor to signal they're inhabiting a shared world, akin to what goes on in an imaginal journey.

Many NLP techniques also utilize parts. Hypnosis parts work is quite old: ego state therapy was developed back in the 1920s and is often done in hypnosis. I've even come across comments from hypnotherapists that parts work must be done in hypnosis as otherwise you might not come across "real," unconscious parts, but "made-up" ones. This does not appear to be the case, but then again, I suspect someone with severe dissociation enters a trance state when doing IFS even without any induction. Some of these parts-based approaches can be very reminiscent of IFS, though they don't utilize the Self and some other IFS concepts.

Chapter 15
Somatic Trauma Work

Psychoanalyst and pioneer of body-based psychotherapy Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957) wrote about the somatics of trauma and energy blockages already back in the 1930s.[149] He introduced the concept of *armoring* as a protective mechanism causing stagnation in the body, and *de-armoring* for stripping it off) His theories were highly controversial, partially also because of his extremely leftist political views and there are even claims he was psychotic. Nowadays his ideas are typically considered quackery. In the last couple of decades, Bessel van der Kolk and Peter Levine have been more successful in gaining support for the somatic nature of trauma, which builds on Reich's ideas.

Materialists often press me: if trauma is stored in the body, where is it then? In the muscles? Nerves? Any type of cells? Extracellular fluid? I'm not sure it's that simple. Even though this storage is likely mostly on the energetic level, I suspect medical tests like EMG (of the involved bodily areas) should reveal something, but somehow no one has looked.

While I find this a compelling question, I don't think it ultimately matters. We already have highly effective trauma therapies that work well despite the limitations of our current knowledge. Another question I've heard a few times is that if a trauma is held in the leg and you amputate the leg, is the trauma cured? Again, I don't think the answer matters much as we are not going to use amputation as a trauma treatment.

The implication of trauma being stored in the body is that it can be incredibly helpful to access it through the body. This can involve exercise, physical manipulation (such as massage or acupuncture) or mentally focusing in the body. Some types of physical activity, like yoga, can be enough in and of themselves for healing. Generally though, you have to "bring up" the trauma first. If exercise alone was sufficient, there would be no traumatized athletes and gym rats. Doing IFS and then hitting the gym can be highly useful. For some people, even having a massage can lead to memories bubbling up, though I've never had such an experience myself.

I'm unable to exercise because of a severe physical health condition, so I'm glad that there are also somatic methods for tuning into the body. One of the pioneers of this is Peter Levine, who developed Somatic Experiencing, inspired by e.g. Gendlin's Focusing and shamanic practices. Levine observed that after a high-stakes situation such as escaping a predator, an animal would shake off the excess charge that had built in its body, but humans often neglect to do this. TRE, or Tension, Stress and Trauma release, is also based on this theory, but it induces the shaking and trembling through muscle exhaustion.

According to Levine, if you're assaulted and try to run away or fight back but are prevented from doing that, this incomplete movement is stored in your body as stuck energy.[150] I find this theory likely too simplistic to encompass all types of trauma, but Somatic Experiencing—or my bastardized version of it developed by guiding hundreds of sessions—is definitely effective. SE is a trauma therapy but also bodywork and direct energy work, making it valuable for spiritual progress, too.

While Levine's books contain exercises to do on your own, officially SE is not a self-therapy method but something you do with a professional. This is the optimal way to work with

severe trauma in general. Unfortunately not everyone is able to afford or otherwise access therapy, or specifically a somatic practitioner. I've taught my implementation of somatic trauma work to many people, including quite a few with severe developmental trauma and strutural dissociation, and it appears highly effective and safe in self-work. Of course, nothing is ever 100% safe and without risk, certainly not healing practices.

Interacting with Parts Somatically

Levine's original Somatic Experiencing includes several elements that mine doesn't, such as *voo* breathing (deep out-breaths with vocalization to stimulate the vagus nerve) and following a more step-by-step protocol. My version of somatic trauma work rests on five main components: 1) expanding and moving parts 2) sending sensations to parts 3) narratives 4) moving the body and 5) releasing energy, all of which I'll be describing in a bit. As with IFS, you can start with whatever is present in the body, or you can bring to mind a trauma or another issue and follow the bodily sensations evoked by that.

All of these steps are optional and often blend with IFS approaches. A session might utilize elements 1 and 4 while another one would make use of 3 and 5. A common workflow of mine when guiding others is starting with 1 and then going into more IFS-y approaches, or beginning with IFS and ending with 5. It really depends on the person and the session. For most people I guide, 1 has been very helpful, but it has rarely done much for me.

Sometimes I also use my version of Levine's *titration* and *pendulation*. If you hit upon inundating material, you alternate between that and something more positive and soothing to avoid overwhelm. There are other ways of grounding and to me it doesn't seem needed as a calming move very often, but it seems like it might also activate memory reconsolidation (see Chapter 12). *Resourcing* is another SE technique which focuses on positive sensations and sensations of safety among turmoil. I feel like in my work it tends to be more built into other elements rather than its own, specific move. If things get too dark or the ANS dysregulated, there is always something you can focus on to return to the window of tolerance.

"The expanding move" works particularly well with parts related to fear, sadness and anxiety. You send the bodily area a sense of expansion and spaciousness and/or verbally (with inner speech) letting it know that it can expand as much as it wants to, even outside the confines of your body and "past" other parts. This often provides some immediate relief, which can even be lasting. It can also be used for alleviating anxiety in a situation where you aren't looking to do any other inner work. Some parts only expand a little bit, others may grow out of your body in all directions.

The part may also want to move somewhere else in your body. IFS instructs you to ask a part if it would like to reside closer to your heart, or to come into your body if it's completely or partially located outside of it. A headache or stomach pain may disappear if the part causing it agrees to move location. A challenging energy may also temporarily move with good results, e.g. swirl around in your body.

Besides expansion and spaciousness, you can send parts many other things too, especially something contrary to the sensations coming from the part. I'm curious if this can also serve as the required mismatch in memory reconsolidation, but either way, it works well. If the part feels cold, heavy and dense, you could offer it warmth and lightness (weight-wise). The warmth can be just the sensation of heat, or it can come with a pleasant meaning, like the comforting warmth of a fireplace or even hot chocolate.

Sending things like relaxation or calm is trickier to pull off. It's fine to e.g. channel a sense of peace or the feeling of your muscles melting under someone massaging you, but you wouldn't want to convey a non-welcoming feeling to "calm down already" to an anxious part—

if telling worries to calm down worked, no one would have anxiety. You can also try relaying such a part a sense of freedom, if you're able to access it.

It might feel confusing how one can "send an area of your body expansion or spaciousness." Experience with mettā meditation (see Chapter 6) can help with this. It's similar to directing loving-kindness to a person or a part, even if the target is an area of your body. It may take a while to learn this approach, but it may well work even if you feel like you can't do it and are just "making things up."

An interesting thing about sending "sensations" such as spaciousness or lightness as opposed to love and compassion, as is done in IFS, is that parts are much less likely to resist them. Warm emotions can come off as very triggering to some exiles while physical sensations tend to feel safer. Also, it usually does the trick even if you are not in Self. Parts may not respond to compassion or nurture if you're blended with a part, but these things seem to work differently. In general, in purely somatic practice you don't have to worry about being in Self. Of course it's not always clear-cut whether you're doing IFS or somatic work, or even if "being in Self" is applicable to your current workflow at all.

You can also focus on a sensation that's already present in a part. Finding some kind of movement or aliveness, even if subtle (like tingling) tends to be particularly easy. You can then make this motion larger, more prominent and more pleasant, such as turning it into bubbles or waves of the ocean. As trauma is stagnant energy, introducing a sense of movement can be very helpful.

This is where the juxtaposing approach doesn't really apply. If a part feels restless, it would be better to be with the restlessness, even exaggerate it, and to play with it rather than trying to pacify it. Aliveness can also be expressed more imaginally. Hardness can melt, plants can sprout in what first was rock or arid land. Any change you can introduce in a part is usually a good sign, even if it's subtle or not what you expected.

Healing with Narratives

Narratives work similarly in IFS and somatic work, but there are differences too. In IFS, parts often appear anthropomorphic and looking for safety, nurture or play. They might ask for imaginary cuddles, a teddy bear or ice cream. In SE, things can be much more symbolic. Sometimes a part in your body is looking for re-enactment of the trauma, like a replay of the situation where now you defeat the attacker. There may be a bizarre, dreamlike storyline, such as your shoulder being a camel that wants to be ridden. Once my feet insisted they be pretend-painted white. You may have no idea which trauma you're even working on and how this could possibly help, but somehow, it does.

Somatic narratives tend to be more vivid, imaginal and embodied, resembling imaginal journeys (see Chapter 17). Often in IFS, even if I sensed the part in my body, any imagined interactions unfolded in front of me, a child "floating in space" wanting a teddy bear. In more somatic narratives, scenery would often feature full background, like a sunset, even sounds you would expect to hear in that environment. It might be an altered state that for me is present in SE but IFS alone didn't induce it, though it does not feel like trance as such.

When something appears in the narrative, it's often fairly intuitive what to do with it. With a pen you can draw or write and a dog you might pet or play with. Once when I was guiding, a part showed up as butter that wanted to be spread on toast and eaten! The person felt awkward about it, but I reassured them it was okay. With a book, reading its contents seems like the obvious choice, but in one session, this didn't work (perhaps because the altered state was too dreamlike), nor did my other ideas. Eventually my suggestion that it be turned into a film or play did the trick.

If you encounter fog or clouds, it's almost always dissociation, as are walls, which are very common. The fog you can try to traverse or interact with. You may discover different areas in it, or even memories in bubbles. Walls can become less impenetrable if you drill holes into them, peek over them or throw something over, but sometimes this is too scary for parts. In that case I suggest trying to make the material of the wall less solid or letting parts draw or write on it.

Changing imaginal objects in any way keeps things moving. Materials can play a big role in SE, whether something is "made of" wood, metal or plastic—or perhaps goo. Objects melting into goo is often a good option that emerges spontaneously. Reframing can also be a powerful tool. In one session I guided, an emotion showed up as very messy, which the person found ugly. I asked if it could be framed in another way—after all, nature is messy but rarely considered ugly—what if it could be e.g. wind-scattered. The wind became a major element in the session.

In somatic work, it's common for your point of view to blend with a part's. This isn't the same as emotional blending: you can be in Self yet still see the world through the eyes of a part. SE narratives are particularly effective for working with anger, such as by imaginally attacking someone or destroying their property. Especially then it can come in handy to intentionally embody a formidable entity, like a monster, predatory animal or a superhero. You embody this figure and its power and ferocity as well as the anger, which is essential. Just having a murder fantasy doesn't solve anything, but carrying it out in a vivid, embodied way can be deeply healing.

It is fine to pretend-murder anyone, including your spouse or family members. Besides past abusers, there tends to be the most pent-up rage directed at the people you love the most, because in such relationships you're the most prone to suppressing the anger. Working with anger has to be done skillfully, however. It's a vital protective mechanism and the goal isn't to get rid of it, especially anger that is actively needed for setting boundaries or fighting injustice. In such a situation, the goal is often just to take the edge off, so that you neither need to suppress it nor does it boil off inappropriately. Constructing imaginal boundaries such as a protective bubble, armor or force field can also work well.

Working with Movement, Touch and Energy

Moving the body is not necessary in SE, but can be an important part of it. It allows completion of the "unfinished movement" that Levine theorizes originated in the traumatizing situation. There is often an obvious urge for a certain body part to move, or you can ask if a particular body part or the whole body would like to move in some way. It can feel pleasant and restorative to follow the urge, generally in a slow and mindful way, but sometimes more rigorously. Later you probably don't even have to ask, your body knows it's allowed to move intuitively. Remote sessions can come in handy here, as some people want to turn off the camera and audio if they are making weird faces or grunts.

It can be useful to try to contextualize the movement, e.g. if the legs want to run, are they running away or towards something? Is the running taking place in a particular location? Could there be more springiness or more sense of power to the steps? Levine also recommends placing a pillow on the floor and mindfully making running movements against it while seated. The desired activity is not always physically possible, at least in the current moment, e.g. if the part wants to jump on a trampoline, but then it can be experienced imaginally.

Touch can also be utilized in somatic work. Consent is of course essential and even asking for consent can feel pressurizing—who would refuse a hug from a friend? There are other

caveats too: it can be intimidating for parts and another person's touch could be interpreted romantically or sexually by a part, even if the person knows this is not the intent.

Touch does not necessarily require the physical presence of another person. It can also be transmitted on an energetic level. Touching the area of the part yourself, to convey your presence with your hand or to caress the part, can be healing. This can be scary for parts, too, but it can also gently override managers that stop your verbal messages from reaching the part you'd like to talk to. Nonsexual self-touch is not something most people indulge in, but it can alleviate trauma and dissociation caused by past touch. You can also hug yourself or an object like a pillow or a stuffed toy.

What does require another person, at least remotely, is sending your emotions to them to hold. If you feel overwhelmed by sadness or anger, you can transfer this energy to them with their permission. This can feel mildly unpleasant for the recipient, but rarely excessively so, and can be incredibly helpful for the sender. People who don't believe this can possibly work tend to be surprised by its efficacy. Emotions and energy can also be temporarily stored in an imaginal box or another container.

Often somatic work automatically discharges any stagnant energy it has freed. You can also let parts know that if there is any past energy that has become unstuck or feels extraneous, it is now free to release. If that energy is located in the legs, it may flow into the ground. From the arms it may shoot out of the fingertips, and so on. It may also fall or trickle off or be released into the elements, like unburdening in IFS, or *as* elements such as fire or water. Sometimes this release results in the body shaking and trembling, or the parts may ask for an imaginal scenario with visualization. You can remind the parts that if all energy isn't willing to let go now, it can also exit the body at a later time, such as when you sleep.

Trauma work can be intense, but somatic sessions may be surprisingly enjoyable, even fun, even when dealing with really heavy stuff. Some sessions end in a profound positive emotion, such as joy, peace or freedom. You can let it soak in and be fully absorbed into your mind and body.

All healing work may be followed by mental and physical discomfort, potentially lasting for several days. Bodily discomfort is particularly common after somatic sessions and seems to cause the most issues after processing anger. Typical symptoms include fatigue, irritability, foul mood, anger and physical restlessness, which can be severe, possibly also muscle twitching or changes in body temperature. Occasionally people forget this and just feel a sense of doom and gloom, that their life is going terribly wrong, without realizing any connection to the session, which can even lead to suicidal thoughts.

Physical movement is highly effective in releasing any energetic residues present after a session. Yoga, dancing and swimming in particular can really hit the spot, but anything goes. Going to the gym and ball games can dispel excess anger. Alas, this kind of advice doesn't work so well for severely disabled people like me. I've told my chronically ill guidees that if they are unable to do anything else, they can try to roll around in bed. Massage may also help.

A Sample Somatic Session

The following is a description of my second ever session of freeform IFS/Somatic Experiencing, done on Zoom, though I had been working with IFS for two years before that. This was transcribed immediately afterwards as the session wasn't recorded. It is quite characteristic of SE, especially with the deadness coming alive, with some IFS mixed in. It resembles many sessions I've guided myself. As is common with SE, it was not clear to me which traumas I was working on. I just knew they were somehow related to the severe abuse I endured in the preceding two years.

My body feels tense, especially my legs. They tense up so much it feels almost like a tremor. I locate a small, slightly cartoonish child part, who is very fearful. It doesn't seem to be the same part causing the tension. She claims to be three, but I think she's a bit older than that, later she says she's 4–5–6–7. She wants to die and to disappear, but deep down yearns for safety and comfort. She doesn't want to be hugged or held, but would like me to stroke her hair, so I do. I try to convey her my love and compassion, but she only half takes it in. At times I'm close to blending with her, as her sorrow is just so deep and heartbreaking.

A part that's me at age 20 or so, with a distinct felt sense of me at that age, feels disappointed and exasperated that she hasn't been able to take care of the child. She feels "mother-like but not motherly." I ask her to step aside for now, though she occasionally continues voicing her concerns.

I feel a sudden urge to hug a pillow. I grab one and cuddle it while continuing the session. The therapist remarks that I'm probably hugging the child (no surprise there). After this I take the child's pain onto my lap, and it feels huge, like a boulder, yet not heavy. *[IFS Unburdening.]* The child finds this amusing, like a real child might. My legs feel leaden, so I ask her if she could tickle them to make them more alive. This is funny to her, but she gets frustrated when it doesn't work, "silly legs." I tell her they're a bit slow to respond.

The therapist asks if the child wants to be taken somewhere else, but she doesn't seem to have a spatial existence, so "somewhere else" doesn't make sense. *[Attempt at IFS Retrieving, which almost never works for me.]* She wants to be tucked in, so I do that. The bed is more like a queen-size one, not a child's bed. Again I stroke her hair. The child starts to develop more and more features of another person and the therapist asks me if I can separate it into two separate children, which I do. *[Some very personal content removed here.]*

A part I talked to in the previous session, which is black and like a cat, owl or monster, appears and as usual, tells me I'm disgusting. It sits near my left shoulder, while previously it was perched on my right shoulder, but the children are now on my right side. I ask if it can step aside. Another part feels unease, but I don't get a very concrete sense of it.

The children feel safe now and have fallen asleep. I leave that scene and try to focus on the monster-like part, but I can't really connect with it, so I decide to focus on my leg tension instead. My lower legs feel like tree trunks, later more like statue legs of iron or bronze. The felt sense is paralyzed, stuck in place, but despite my therapist's insistence I can't get a sense of proper emotion out of it (I feel like "stuck in place" is an emotion, but she disagrees).

When I focus on the insides of the legs, there appears to be a river flowing in them, its aliveness juxtaposing the paralysis and stuckness. The metal begins to feel more and more like just a shell. I let the river flow out of my legs and I can "sense" the room starting to fill with water. It's not clear how the water is replenished, but it doesn't run out. Water seems to be "my element," it appears often in e.g. my dreams. My first poetry collection was titled *Heavy Water*, which feels apt now.

My therapist asks what my legs would like to do. I answer "dance," which feels clichéd. Soon I realize it means ballet. I have to "go" to a separate dancefloor, as I can't dance in my water-filled room. I have proper ballet attire and dance classical ballet, which seems to perfectly capture the sensations of both rigidity and aliveness I had in my legs.

I feel a sense of peace, a slightly uplifting feeling but mostly just calm. My lower legs remain tense. The muscle tension was so severe it's not going to just immediately relax, but there's now a strong sensation of physical warmth in them. We wrap up the session. I mention that perhaps I should try dancing with the little girl some time.

I wake up at night with leg aches, not very surprising, but luckily strong arnica gel calms them down.

Chapter 16
Bodywork

Jack Kornfield writes: "*You may have heard of 'out-of-the-body experiences,' full of lights and visions. A true spiritual path demands something more challenging, what could be called an 'in-the-body experience.*'"[151]

Early on in this book I described loving awakening as *embodied*, yet I've struggled to convey what it actually means. I'll defer to a definition from Peter Levine, not because it's necessarily the best one, but I like it and the way it connects with the end of the previous chapter. "*Embodiment is about gaining, through the vehicle of awareness, the capacity to feel the ambient physical sensations of unfettered energy and aliveness as they pulse through our bodies.*"[152]

Some bodywork techniques could also be described as exercise, even if the main object is not to physically train or strengthen the body. Others are mostly about tuning into the body mentally and still a third type involves another person touching or manipulating the body. Personally I would not count techniques based purely on energetic aspects, such as reiki, under the umbrella of bodywork, though someone might argue similarly about the practices I present here, as they're more about training the mind through the body.

The most popular types of bodywork in spiritual circles are likely yoga and breathwork. Both encompass numerous schools and techniques from thousands-of-years-old religious praxis to modern or recently reformulated practices aimed at non-spiritual or quasispiritual goals—and obviously much of yoga consists of breathwork, the poses form just a small part of it.

I would have liked to write about both of these practices, but I have limited experience with breathwork and it hasn't been very inspiring for me. I'm a long-time yoga practitioner, to the extent that my health allows, yet still don't feel competent to really discuss its intricacies. At least there are two intriguing practices that I do feel qualified to comment on briefly in this chapter.

Bodywork can be something simple and mundane too. Peter Levine recommends sitting on a gymnastic ball, so that your body is constantly involved in small balancing movements and you don't zone out of it so easily.[153] He also endorses mindful showers, preferably with a pulsating showerhead installed, where you focus on the body part that the shower is currently pointed at. Water can make an excellent backdrop for bodywork, whether you're swimming or bathing, as it gently supports being in your body. If you're prone to dissociation, it provides a container to demarcate your confines and feel more grounded in your surroundings.

Bodywork in general can combat dissociation. Formerly disconnected areas of the mind and body wake up and form alliances again. In some cases, bodywork may also temporarily *worsen* dissociation, likely because the mending of the mind-body disconnection is felt as too painful or scary. It's crucial that bodyworkers like massage therapists are aware of this possibility of aggravating things, so they can notice when a client is dissociated and gently re-establish contact.[154] For some people, all relaxation can be triggering, a phenomenon that has been termed *relaxation-induced anxiety* (RIA).[155]

It can also be hard to be embodied when your body feels like a battlefield. Many chronically ill people are firmly against practices like mindfulness. Why would they tune into their

bodies, when the body is just an exhausted slab of meat that hurts everywhere? I understand this opposition well, yet I also feel like no matter how sick you are, there are also some neutral and even positive sensations and experiences to be found in the body.

The body may feel like a container for suffering, but it's not made of suffering. You can love your body while also hating it, that's allowed. Don't believe anyone who tells you otherwise. You can also excel in and find joy in body-oriented practices, even if you feel like your body is terrible at being a body. Supposedly F. M. Alexander called a twisted and crooked old lady his best student as she was so good at applying the principles of the Alexander technique.

Alexander Technique

F. M. Alexander's (1869–1955) Alexander technique is best known for its effects on posture and its use by singers, musicians and actors. It's often relegated to the realm of bodywork, but that label is a bit misleading. AT isn't really about exercise or movement, but instead it has been compared to meditative practices.

AT teachers may also adjust the posture of a client with their hands. This is done with gentle, elastic touch, it's nothing like chiropractic manipulation. These adjustments often have other effects too, like inducing a nondual state or bringing up old trauma—and the official theory doesn't talk about energy in any way, this is only supposed to happen on the level of tissues. For me, besides hypnosis, Alexander technique is one of those modalities that feel the closest to magic.

There are also AT principles and practices that are well suited for working on your own, perhaps for several short bouts during the day when you're doing something else. One of these is *inhibition*, which in AT is a positive concept. An example would be playing the piano while thinking that you're not playing it. This may sound confusing, but it can be very useful if you have parts that are trying to "do" playing the piano instead of just playing. In the long run, it helps to calm down habitual reactions to stimuli, such as muscles tensing in anticipation of a particular activity. With your body less tense, you also feel less stressed, nervous and averse to doing things.

Non-doing in general is an essential aspect of Alexander technique. It's not about doing *nothing*, but, carrying out activities without extra cognitive layers. You don't think "I'll have to move my wrist at this angle and hit the ball in 2.3 seconds" or "As soon as my finger leaves the G# key, I'll hit the E and I should relax my index finger more this time." Such an approach may work during practice or on beginner level, but a professional can't perform like this. You let your body do its thing and your thinky brain needs to shut up. When athletes and musicians suddenly begin to struggle, it's often because they've forgotten about non-doing and slipped into thinking. Non-doing is in no way restricted to these kinds of pursuits, however.

Directing refers to sending instructions to your body. A common direction is asking your neck to be free and for your body to "lengthen" up and a bit to the front. You don't attempt to move or to do anything, you just relay this intention. Doing this regularly in short bursts for a few weeks greatly reduced the number of migraines I get. You may also notice an immediate effect on your singing and speaking voice. An intriguing variation is imagining that you're being pulled up by the gravity of the moon.

One of the core ideas in AT is that even though we believe we sit up, stand and walk naturally, we probably don't. There are all kinds of extra muscles and processes doing work that's not needed. You can't learn a healthy posture by trying to sit or stand up straight. That just adds more layers of extraneous and likely misguided muscle work, when you would need to drop unnecessary tension instead. As an example, I realized that when I carried things in front of me, I was tensing my shoulders upwards, even though this movement doesn't help in any

way. Either lengthening or inhibiting would have helped, I'm not sure which one I actually used.

When you learn to drop these bodily tensions, it becomes easier to also release mental layers of tension and contraction, which is very helpful for spiritual practice and inner work. Like AT teacher Michael Ashcroft says: *you can't "do" falling asleep, but you can stop "doing" awake*.[156] Letting go of "doing awake" allows you to fall asleep at night. Letting go of the tension of selfing allows you to awaken. In healing practices, it's much more beneficial to try to let go of aspects of e.g. negative self-image rather than to attempt plastering over them with positive ones.

In AT, *end-gaining* is seen as something that is best avoided: losing sight of the actual process by being too fixated on the end-result (which might not even be achievable with the current approach, but we forget to consider that). This is, of course, similar to views in e.g. Zen and Hinduism. Being able to drop end-gaining can open up creativity in particular, and creativity encompasses much more of our lives than just so-called creative pursuits. Whenever you're given a choice of something, it's a chance to exercise your creativity, and often there are hidden choices when you don't even notice them.

One more key concept is *expanded awareness*. People often contract their attention around whatever they are doing, but it's possible to practice expanding it, such as to cover the whole room, including above, below and behind you. For some people, this also works to open up nondual awareness. Michael Ashcroft does a pretty astonishing demonstration on YouTube on how it also produces obvious changes in your demeanor and presence even on video.[157]

AT also has a specific rest position, the *semisupine* or active rest. It involves lying on a carpet or another slightly padded surface (not in bed), with your knees bent, soles against the floor and hands on your ribs. You need a couple of paperback books (usually 2–4 inches worth) to support your neck, preserving its natural curvature and having just the slightest give. The purpose of this is to let gravity relax your muscles and realign the vertebrae. This practice should preferably be repeated multiple times a day, even if it's just for 5–10 minutes. It's rest, so you aren't supposed to listen to music or podcasts during it.

Like all beneficial self-improvement methods, AT may also have interpersonal applications. AT teacher Carolyn Nicholls believes that "*One of the most useful things the Alexander Technique can offer an individual is the ability to retain an awareness of self when in the company of others. This doesn't mean being egocentric or self-obsessed or ignoring other people. It means that you have the ability to stay mindful of your ongoing shifting reactions to the interplay between yourself and a group of people and not let tension build up in you. Simply being able to keep your neck free is a help.*"[158] I find an intriguing connection between this paragraph and Insight Dialogue (see Chapter 20).

It's hard to describe most AT exercises briefly in a satisfactory way. One intriguing little exercise, described in Missy Vineyard's *How You Stand, How You Move, How You Live*, consists of imagining a piece of paper in your mind and then picturing it turning into a cube.[159] Many people this makes their mind feel different. For some, it apparently even affects their posture! I also recommend Carolyn Nicholls's book *Body, Breath and Being*. Michael Ashcroft has excellent material focusing more on the mental side of AT, like expanded awareness.[160]

The Feldenkrais Method

I'm tempted to call the Feldenkrais method a cross between Alexander technique and vipassanā. Its developer Moshé Feldenkrais (1904–1984), a physicist, engineer and martial artist whose life story was like straight from a Hollywood film, took lessons with F. M. Alexander and was also inspired by Milton Erickson's work.

Feldenkrais is a method for learning body awareness but unlike in AT, the focus in the practices is often in a small area of the body like the eyes. As such it's also used to treat specific health concerns such as temporomandibular joint pain in the jaw. Moshé Feldenkrais's goal, however, was to lead the individual to their maximum potential, and he believed that "correction of movements is the best means of self-improvement." Interesting changes in perception may be noticeable even after one session and they can be particularly prominent during meditation.

Feldenkrais can be practiced in two different ways: Functional Integration (FI) sessions delivered individually by a Feldenkrais practitioner and Awareness Through Movement (ATM) which are typically group lessons. Many ATM audio lessons are available online both commercially and for free, such as on https://openatm.org. A dozen are also included in text form in Moshé Feldenkrais's book *Awareness Through Movement*. The book is a short and intriguing read. Feldenkrais was aware of Asian traditions and he also discusses nondual experiences, yet the book is explicitly not spiritual but very matter-of-fact, like a rationalist version of *Impro*.

Though the ATM lessons are based on movement, they have nothing to do with exercise. You're generally instructed to make the movements as small as possible (or even just think about them), as the goal is not training muscles but sensorimotor learning. As such, they would be suitable for many chronically ill people who can't exercise.

Feldenkrais isn't normally considered a healing method or trauma therapy, but some professionals use it like that. E.g. practitioner Erin Ferguson finds Feldenkrais to support trauma work as it helps to calm the nervous system, reconnect with your whole self (in the body), reactivate the thinking brain and to develop a sense of self.[161] The latter two might sound a little strange in light of the overall content of this book, but she refers to people with severe trauma being in survival mode and less able to access more advanced modes of cognition, as well as feeling alienated from themselves.

Chapter 17
Imaginal Practice

"*How might we think about 'the unconscious,' that rich source of imagery and of course, of other processes? I would like to say simply: the unconscious is the body.*" — Eugene Gendlin.[162]

Imagine if you could have embark on a fully lucid dream and also invite your friends along into the shared dreamworld? Imaginal practice is an exploration of the subconscious, both on an individual level and the shared space inhabited by two or more people. Like dreams, it often works on the level of metaphor, which can be deeply personal yet can also forge a common territory. Milton Erickson, whom I discussed in Chapter 14, was fascinated by how shared this world could be. He discovered that people in trance could even understand the messy automatic writing of another person scribbled in trance, which was not legible in the normal state of consciousness.[163]

Carl Jung was also a fan of automatic writing, but he delved much further into the imaginal. He is better known for his contributions to the fields of psychiatry and psychotherapy, but he was also fascinated by Asian religions, mythology and mysticism. Jung's Active Imagination also entails a form of imaginal practice used in psychotherapy to get in touch with the hidden sides of us.[164]

Better known is also Jung's introduction of *archetypes*, the theory that certain mythical, symbolic imagery is built into us. He believed figures such as the warrior and the healer to originate in our *collective unconscious*. Our mind clearly is a powerhouse of churning out the most amazing symbolism, as we've discovered in our dreams. Jung often used previous dreams as a starting point for entering the imaginal.

Yet imaginal practice isn't about *deciphering* anything or *figuring things out*. I feel like deep down it's about freedom on several levels, exploration of our minds, bodies, metaphor and shared space. A world where anything is possible and there are no rules about what you can or cannot do. You can jump into a bonfire, which may "kill" you, turn you into fire, teleport you or something else altogether, there's only one way to find out. Imaginal guide Rosa Lewis believes that imaginal practice is a unique way to connect with our parts that have been rejected, exiled and dissociated away, combining freedom, safety and creativity.

She also writes: "*Imaginal practice is a way of holding space for what is in our inner world to express itself through us while we are meditating. We connect with our emotions, sensations, energy bodies, intuitive feelings, perceptions, desires and intentions and allow our creative minds to turn these into expressions that we can observe or feel. All meditation practice has an aspect of the imaginal to it. We are letting go of our rational, conceptual way of looking at the world and embracing a softer-focus way of making sense of the world through our imaginations and felt senses.*"[165]

On the other hand, engaging in freeform imaginal practice can be a great way to open up IFS work and other more therapeutic explorations into new, less constrained directions. It serves as a reminder that even though these techniques purport to have "rules," the imaginal does not. There is really nothing that can't be done, a question or suggestion that can't be

posed in an "IFS" or "SE" session. Even the sky is not the limit, it's just a possible starting point.

Shamanic Traditions

Shamanic practices have evolved all over the world for thousands of years. The traditions tend to possess curious similarities, even in cultures half the Earth apart. Many indigenous cultures still retain their shamanic heritage and some well-known religions, such as Tibetan Buddhism and Japanese Shintoism, incorporate shamanic approaches. Zen teacher Zenju Earthlyn Manuel claims that even Zen Buddhism is shamanic at heart.[166] Both IFS and Somatic Experiencing have been influenced by shamanic traditions.

However, many indigenous people believe the term "shamanism" when used by non-indigenous people is a loaded word, in most cases cultural appropriation. E.g. in my country of origin, Finland, people have long oppressed the indigenous Sami and mocked their culture, while making a buck with cheap imitations of their spiritual heritage. And this of course *is* highly problematic, and contemporary practices including elements of shamanism can be seen as cultural appropriation or colonialism. I'm mostly referring to imaginal journeys here while recognizing it doesn't free this discussion from its colonialist baggage.

Of course, Western neoshamanism or as Michael Harner styled his version, core shamanism, differs from indigenous shamanism in one crucial way: for many people practicing it, it's not a way of life. Someone may come home from the office, conduct a journey or rituals and watch Netflix afterwards. To some this may seem inappropriate, but I feel like it can be an integrated approach. It doesn't mean elements of the practice don't show up in other areas of life. In many cultures, there was also a clear distinction between the healer and the patient, while nowadays two or more people can work on shared healing.

Traditional shamanic practices have several potential purposes, such as divination, clairvoyance or treating physical illness. Nowadays people mostly undertake imaginal journeys for inner exploration or healing of trauma. In imaginal work, it doesn't matter which label you give (or don't give) to an issue. Whether something is grief, sadness or depression, you can explore it all the same. Some people use the concept of "soul retrieval," which has also been likened to IFS-style parts work.[167]

A shamanic journey traditionally started with initiating an altered state, which Michael Harner named SSC, *Shamanic State of Consciousness*, either entering trance with singing, dancing or drumming, or with the aid of entheogenic plants. Modern imaginal practices may use e.g. drumming, fire kasina (going into trance by staring into a flame), or the altered state is not explicitly induced but is likely created less implicitly.

In my own experience, drumming journeys and other journeys differ greatly in themes, imagery and tempo. The drumbeat tends to make for rapidly changing visuals. While drumming, everyone has their own individual journey—though marked, sometimes perplexing, synchronicities may emerge. Curiously, I've often felt giggly and euphoric after a drum journey in a way I haven't experienced in relation to any other practice.

I used to participate in drum circles with a mostly pagan-identified group who were heavily influenced by the ideas of Mircea Eliade, a historian of religion, and anthropologist Michael Harner, who both studied shamanism. These include traveling to the Lower, Middle or Upper World and starting the journey from a real spot in the nature near your current location: bringing e.g. a real tree stump or a hole in the ground into the imaginal landscape.

Freeform Journeying

A modern imaginal journey, the way I've learned and conducted them, may involve two or more people, who inhabit the same imaginal world through verbal communication. Pair work tends to be more intimate than group sessions, and they may focus on one person in particular, such as exploring a particular trauma. It is possible to attain an intimate atmosphere in groups, but those types of journeys more often explore the shared space. While face to face is ideal, I've done most of my journeys over Zoom and that also works well.

Nature makes for a lovely setting, yet the most intense journey I ever undertook was in a car parked next to a Lidl at 8 AM on a Sunday morning, as that's how things came together at that time. The natural world often features heavily in journeys no matter their physical location. Many people discover spirit guides on their journeys, which may make regular appearances. These may be ancestors, animals, gods or mythical creatures. Some also connect with their guides outside of journeys, either in dreams or consulting them in daily life.

A journey may start with setting intentions or focusing on a particular concept or theme. Still, it shouldn't be too goal-oriented and forced with a fixed idea of where it's going to go, how and why, as it might take us into somewhere completely unexpected. Someone may do an intro where they describe the imaginal setting. Or you can just explore whatever turns up by tuning into the bodily, emotional or energetic sensations of one of the participants. Once we commenced with the scent of an essential oil when we were in the same physical space. A typical journey lasts at least an hour but a bit longer is usually better. I've participated in some group sessions even shorter than 30 minutes, but they felt like scratching the surface.

There may be vivid visual elements, at times to the point that it feels like an improvised movie or a role-playing game. I've had two journeys where colors played the main role. Other sessions may be more about parts work and energywork, potentially very close to IFS and Somatic Experiencing. Some people see rich and detailed visuals which I'm slightly envious of, but you can engage in imaginal practice even if you have aphantasia (inability to use the mind's eye). Then the focus is likely to be more on the other elements. Many people who can't visualize well or at all can discern by felt sense what is happening "visually," e.g. they "know" there is a purple tree ahead.

I've found journeys valuable for healing, but they have also had surprises in store. When my experience was already deeply nondual, but before full nonduality, I could use imaginal practice to investigate concepts such as enlightenment, self and even nonduality itself. How fascinating that things beyond all concepts had a reality on the metaphoric level that felt relevant and meaningful to explore! Nonduality showed up e.g. as an enchanted flower in my third eye that at times even had the fragrant scent of a gardenia and acted as a portal to infinite love. It was also a boundless sea and a fountain which allowed the energy of all beings to flow through me, especially the latter of which produced a profound shift.

Harner writes: "Shamanic enlightenment *is the literal ability to lighten the darkness, to see in that darkness what others cannot perceive. This may, in fact, be the most ancient meaning of 'enlightenment.' For example, the special ability of the Iglulik Eskimo shaman to* see *is called his* qaumanEq*, his 'lighting' or 'enlightenment,' . . .which enables him to see in the dark, both literally and metaphorically speaking, for he can now, even with closed eyes, see through darkness and perceive things and coming events which are hidden from others; thus they look into the future and into the secrets of others.*"[168]

I do recommend also trying drumming journeys even if you practice the more contemporary kind. You can find drumming audios on YouTube, including by Michael Harner, though it's quite a delight to get to play or at least listen to a real frame drum. They have a resonant, beautiful sound, and of course even better if there is a whole circle of drummers, possibly

other instruments too. I've found that my Tibetan tingsha cymbals greatly add to the emotional intensity of the journey. Michael Harner recommends a BPM of 205–220, but I prefer a bit slower tempos and some people I know prefer quite a bit slower.

Shared Imaginal Practice

It's hard to compose written instructions for a journey, as it can commence in a number of ways and launch into almost any direction from there. Shared imaginal practice was developed by teacher and imaginal guide Rosa Lewis and is a bit easier to teach, as it comes with a more formal structure. It's also less intimidating for newcomers to the imaginal, as one person is responsible for the guiding, which often feels less scary compared to mutual guiding. Also, one session only lasts for 15–20 minutes.

An attendee can be a speaker, question-asker or witness (if there are 3–4 people; in two-person practice there is no witnessing role). There is also a list of questions one can choose from. Usually roles are switched so that everyone gets to try out each role. The witness doesn't say anything during the actual session, only offers their presence.

The exploration starts from a verbal concept, either one word or a set of words such as "a heartful demon" or "an ocean of uncertainty," which the speaker comes up with or picks from Rosa's list of examples.[169] First the attendees settle into their bodies with the breath. The speaker is asked to say the concept out loud and then to repeat it slowly, and tune in to see whether it evokes any emotions, visuals or energetic or bodily sensations. And you go from there, depending on which sensory channel resonates the most and how the sensations and images change (or don't). Like in a journey, you can engage all the senses, though not everyone is able to imaginarily smell or taste things. Some of Rosa's example questions include:

"Where do you feel it resonating in the body?"

"Does it have a color? Or a shape?"

"Would you like anything to happen? Or does it feel like seeing it is enough?"

Everyone tends to have a different guiding style, which is often fascinating and inspiring. I was once asked "*What would it be like if we fell through the floor together and kept falling for 10 years?*" which made me go "Wow, I didn't know one could even ask something like this!" A question like this contains multiple explicit and implied dimensions, yet often it's fine to just ask "Can you be with this? What is it like?" The questions I ask often tend to be influenced by Somatic Experiencing and might include things like:

"What would happen if these two things present combined?"

"Can this thing flow through your body? Are there any areas or nooks where it can't reach or isn't allowed?" (If free flowing is too scary, you can ask if one drop is allowed to flow to a place that's scared to receive it, which is almost always acceptable.)

"Do you want to absorb this [positive emotion] into your body?"

While all parties generally keep their eyes closed (though opening them is also fine), the question-asker also keeps an eye on the clock so that the session can come to a smooth ending after the agreed-upon time. They can ask if there's anything more that needs to happen and possibly ask the speaker to repeat the concept again to see if anything has changed about it. Everyone comes back to their bodies after which there's a few minutes of discussion about the session and how it felt for all the participants.

I feel like 15 minutes is usually too short for this type of exploration, but 20 minutes is often enough to get quite deep and to get a lot out of it. In fact a surprising amount of things can arise and shift in such a short session, one that comes with no other goal than the exploration of a concept. Tears often flow, but some sessions are completely hilarious. Sometimes deep wounds reveal themselves, sometimes things connect in ways that now seem obvious but

weren't that way before, sometimes we discover nooks and corners in ourselves or the world that weren't visible before. That's the power of shared practices.

Chapter 18
Art as a Gateway

Some of the most beautiful buildings in the world are churches, mosques, synagogues and temples. I've always been in awe of Islamic architecture, as it really seems to capture the sense that we're dealing with something divine and boundless. I've also admired numerous other gorgeous places of worship, like the cathedrals in many Dutch cities and the white marble Jain temple in Antwerp, Belgium. Vibrant, ornate aesthetics really speak to me, like Tibetan *thangkas* and incredibly colorful Hindu temples I've only got to admire in pictures. Zen tends to have a more minimalistic aesthetic, but it also features its own artistic pursuits, like calligraphy, including the *ensō*, a freehand circle that symbolizes emptiness and enlightenment.

I'm from a very secular family and was raised in a very secular area, but it makes me a bit sad that I come from a place with one of the blandest modern religious traditions. The Finnish Evangelical Lutheran church is like the instant oatmeal of religion with its gray concrete cubes for churches and lifeless Protestant services. Hymns never tickled my fancy, but at least there's something to soothe your soul even when singing inside a box that looks like an insult to God.

Various types of art and music have found their way into psychotherapy, with fields like bibliotherapy, art therapy, music therapy and dance therapy. Yet this reinvention also feels ostentatious, considering that art and music have been a central part of spiritual and healing practices in most cultures. *They've always been here.* Artistic pursuits are integral to being human. As Bessel van der Kolk put it: "*The capacity of art, music, and dance to circumvent the speechlessness that comes with terror may be one reason they are used as trauma treatments in cultures around the world.*"[170] Poetry, music and art are also used to support people with dementia. When our own memory fails, the collective memory is still there.

Art can be a boon for healing dissociation, yet curiously artists and musicians also tend to exhibit more dissociation than the general population.[171] It's also interesting to me that on psychedelics, people tend to be extremely drawn to art, especially music and visual art. When trying to figure ourselves out, we gravitate towards artistic pursuits, and figuring ourselves out is also a process that inevitably changes us, too.

Both enjoying art and creating it can be nourishing spiritual practices, whether it's constructing elaborate visionary artworks or finger painting as a meditation. Art is also an excellent way to explore non-doing. I've worked with a wide variety of mediums, but for me gesture drawing, making quick sketches of people's poses, has been the least "brainy." There's no time to think where you're going to put the pen.

It's curious how one of the most legendary drawing books has been described: "*The methods developed by Dr Edwards in* Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain® *develop the perceptual skills necessary to see things as they really are.*" The second half of this sentence might sound familiar from a completely different context. When it comes to writing guides, Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way* is one of the most famous (it introduced the concept of morning pages) and the full title continues *A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*. There's also e.g. Diana Raab's *Writing for Bliss* which views non-fiction writing as a healing and meditative process.

Illustrator Kleo Bartilsson contemplates: "*There is something spiritual about this for me. Maybe because I'm a person who tends to overthink things. Drawing from life is true presence. It's seeing what everyone else is missing. It's gaining entrance to a world most people don't know exists. Like how fluffy a downy feather actually is. Or how beautiful the wing of a moth is. It's beyond beautiful. I guess you can't describe it in words, and that is the whole point.*"[172]

Poetry

They say art is at its best when it's beyond words, and approaches like Alexander technique, drawing on the right side of the brain and *Impro* are trying to get you out of the verbal side. So how do you write poetry or fiction, when it's inevitably made of language? It's a corresponding mode of not-thinking, even if you are working verbally, intuiting instead of scrutinizing every word.

Many people believe they don't like poetry. Nothing wrong with such a preference, but it's curious considering that almost everyone likes music. Most of my friends enjoy songs with vocals and pay at least some attention to the lyrics. It's a shame that school has given poetry a boring rep, considering how popular it has been in history, how deeply woven into the flourishing of humanity. Numerous religious texts in Asia in particular have been written in verse. The Japanese used collaborative *renga* poems to converse with each other. Even now, poetry is most of all a form of communication.

When someone says they don't write poetry because they wouldn't know how, it likely has more to do with excessive self-criticism than ability, as the hypnosis poetry workshops I host have revealed time and time again. We can all write poetry. Writing a bad poem can be liberating and is completely safe, with no harm incurred to anyone.

There are also many fascinating forms of experimental poetry. Visual poetry includes e.g. erasure poetry (crossing out words from someone else's text) and asemic poetry, which looks like typographic compositions but without semantic content, e.g. isn't made of real letters. So you don't even have to write to compose a poem: you can just take a text and remove the parts that don't belong there. A bit like Alexander technique.

Your relation to verse could well change in the course of the spiritual path. If you've been practicing but haven't read any poetry recently, I recommend trying some. It may hit differently with your felt sense being more finely tuned, perhaps also having a more acute sense for imagery, nuance and symbolism, even rhythm. A good modern poem can grab you and warp your mind like a kōan multiple times in its course and go through a new emotion in every line to an extent that music is rarely capable of.

Spiritual poetry remains a popular artform, with several literary magazines dedicated to it. Haiku has a particular association with Buddhism, its terse, minimalistic vibe jiving with that of Zen, though itäs a fairly recent development in Japanese poetry. Bob Dylan, who was the first person to be awarded the Nobel Prize in literature for his song lyrics, has been described as having significant Buddhist influences in his texts. Another lyricist giant Leonard Cohen used to practice Zen, an influence that clearly shows in his last music video *Happens to the Heart*.

The most famous mystical poet in the West is no doubt Mawlānā Jalāl-ad-Dīn Rūmī (1207–1273). It's hard to find a contemporary spiritual book that doesn't quote his verse. I find this complicated though, as Rūmī was a Sufi Muslim and his poetry is distinctly about Islam, but the most prevalent translations by Coleman Barks all but erase this aspect of his works.[173]

Spiritual poetry doesn't have to be lofty, peaceful and minimalistic, the verbal equivalent of calligraphy. It can be wild, goofy, quirky, corny, angry, bizarre, sarcastic or abrasive, like a Tibetan thangka of a wrathful deity. It might be a gangsta rap or an asemic poem about empti-

ness, or both at the same time. Composing a poem about the serenity of focusing on your breath that adds something new to the genre is challenging. That doesn't mean you shouldn't attempt it; art is all about challenges after all, but often the most interesting verse is found in the harsh corners, jarring parts and poor fits.

Some of my favorite Buddhist poems include Albert Saijo's beat poem "Bodhisattva Vows," which pokes fun of the martyr-like impossibility of the bodhisattva path, and Gary Snyder's prose poem "Smokey the Bear Sutra," both funny and sharp in their iconoclasm. I used to have the former hanging on my wall. Yet the most profound take on emptiness I've seen in verse is Patricia Lockwood's "When We Move Away From Here" which is about the ontology of Popeye and could qualify as a surreal, 15-page long pointing-out, I'm not kidding.

Music

I love singing, though my neighbors probably love it less. Alexander technique teacher Carolyn Nicholls writes: "*Singing weaves you into the fabric of your own life and into the lives of those before you. There is something very compelling about singing something that has been sung by generations before you, hundreds of years ago. It speaks of survival and the enduring nature of the human spirit.*"[174] Some pieces I enjoy singing have lyrics that date back several millennia and yes, it does feel precious.

Bhakti or religious devotion is close to the heart of many Hindus. One way to express that is through *kirtan* music, which is usually done in a call and response style: the vocalist sings a phrase and the audience repeats it. Typical accompaniments include an Indian harmonium (which sounds somewhat reminiscent of a church organ), tabla drums and small chimes. There may be other traditional Indian instruments as well, often together with Western ones like acoustic or electric guitars, string instruments, flute, saxophone or other types of drums. The lyrics consist of mantras, prayers or religious stories, usually in Sanskrit or Hindi but sometimes in English or other Indian languages like Bengali or Marathi.

There are differing opinions on whether mettā and bhakti are the same thing at heart. I feel like they are not, as bhakti has an elevating aspect. It's also often taken to imply a personal connection with a deity, though I find it hard to express what bhakti even represents for me. I can't describe what I mean when singing "Hare Ram," but I know it has filled my being with love many times. Even if mettā and bhakti aren't the same, they both take you out of the "small you" and let you feel the love aspect of reality.

There have been periods when almost all of my practice and music listening has revolved around kirtan. I own a harmonium, a calabash drum (just a dried half of a calabash squash, no actual drumskin) and tingsha cymbals. The latter two I've also utilized for other spiritual purposes.

It feels a bit embarrassing, but my favorite kirtan artists are all from the West, which is mostly to do with the singing style. I'm particularly fond of Krishna Das, Gaiea Sanskrit and Edo & Jo. The Mooji sangha in Portugal and the Bhakti Marga ashram in Germany, which I don't otherwise endorse, produce plenty of quality kirtan music. ISKCON (Hare Krishnas) have also been a major force in popularizing kirtan. Nowadays many bigger cities host kirtan events and even kirtan festivals.

Kirtan was first properly introduced to America by Paramahansa Yogananda, best known for his *Autobiography of the Yogi*. In the early 20th century he established a canon of dozens of kirtans in English, both original compositions and translated from traditional Indian songs. These *Cosmic Chants* are quite reminiscent of hymns with their old English, even referring to God as He, Thou or Lord. While kirtans are usually joyful, many of Yogananda's are melancholic and poignant in tone, such as lamenting that God has forsaken you. Their likeness to

Christian hymns no doubt made them more accessible to the American public at a time when yoga and Eastern religion were far from mainstream.

Lee Mirabai Harrington performs what she calls "Buddhist mantra kirtans" and she feels they can take you to ecstatic states. "*I get the same reaction each time. People feel blissful, totally tapped into their bodhicitta. There's something about singing the mantras and riding on the gandharva-melodies that carries us straight into the bliss realm.*"[175]

Some Hindu kirtan artists have also recorded a few Buddhist songs, but compared to Hindu devotional tunes, Buddhist kirtan hardly exists. There are Tibetan chants which are a bit too somber for my taste, and a few other famous Buddhist musicians, like Japanese Zen monk Yogetsu Akasaka, who combines mantras with live looping. Music does play an important role in some Vajrayāna rituals, like chöd, though it's more of a shamanistic element.

The scarcity of Buddhist music is not a coincidence. Hindu monks are allowed to sing and dance, but the monastic code of most Buddhist schools is much stricter. Reciting and chanting are allowed in some circumstances, but actual singing or instrumental music are not. The Buddha warns sternly about the dangers of music in the Gitassara Sutta (AN 5.209): "*Bhikkhus, there are five dangers of reciting the Dhamma with a musical intonation. What five? – Oneself gets attached to the sound, – others get attached to the sound, – householders are annoyed, saying, 'Just as we sing, these sons of the Sakyan sing', – the concentration of those who do not like the sound is destroyed, and – later generations copy it.*"

However, some traditions have made good use of the reciting and chanting that they are allowed. Trent Walker, who has studied Buddhist music particularly in Cambodia and also authored a book on the subject, writes in *Tricycle*: "*The legacy of orality, music, and performance in Buddhism is so significant, widespread, and salient to the identity and history of the religion that scholars should no longer avoid studying musical traditions along with texts. Sound has been one of the primary mediums by which the dharma is transmitted—a medium as significant as the visual images of Buddhist art and the written words of the canons.*"[176]

For me, this discussion on whether Buddhist music is allowed or not doesn't really make sense. Everyone who has ever enjoyed religious music can attest to how it brings incredible aliveness and divinity to ancient teachings. When Krishna Das sings, you can hear God present in that song. The notion that this form of spirituality is somehow too banal and "worldly," that it corrupts the religious content and even the partaker, just doesn't sound like a form of religion I want to be a part of.

Dance

Bessel van der Kolk considers dance a valuable healing practice. "*I observed the force of communal rhythms in action when I watched Archbishop Desmond Tutu conduct public hearings for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa in 1996. These events were framed by collective singing and dancing. Witnesses recounted the unspeakable atrocities that had been inflicted on them and their families. When they became overwhelmed, Tutu would interrupt their testimony and lead the entire audience in prayer, song, and dance until the witnesses could contain their sobbing and halt their physical collapse.*"[177]

Dance is rhythm, movement, trance, flow, expression, embodiment and emotion. It's simultaneously elegant and primal. There is something intrinsically pleasant about following some kind of "rules," such as rhythm (especially together with others), yet being free to do anything. For me, dancing was always distilled aliveness. I can't do much of it anymore because of my health, but I also enjoy watching dance performances. Curiously, it's the only form of art that feels markedly different to me since attaining full nonduality. The space aspect is more prominent, as if the movement cuts through space.

This isn't exactly an astute observation but completely obvious to many, but raves and other electronic music parties have served a major spiritual role for the current generations. Even if you have never taken any party drugs, these kinds of events tend to induce strongly altered states of shared ecstasy. Rave ideology has been summarized in the longstanding tenet "PLUR" or Peace, Love, Unity and Respect, which sounds a bit live-laugh-love-esque, but it's hard to fault love and respect.

Perhaps surprisingly, Joseph Houseal claims in the *Buddhistdoor* magazine: "*Buddhism has more dance than any other religion. . .As religious art goes, there is no religion that depicts so much dancing as Buddhism does. It is everywhere in the cultures and in the art. It is a core religious expression, being energized life itself.*"[178] I lack the expertise to comment on the factuality of these stunning claims, but dancing is mainly popular in Vajrayāna. In the West, the Aro gTér lineage (in the Nyingma tradition) in particular makes use of dancing. It's not a thing in e.g. Theravāda, especially since monastics are banned from dancing. They're really missing out on practicing mettā while grooving out!

In Hinduism, Shiva and occasionally other deities dance the vigorous, divine *tāndava*, the dance that creates and destroys the universe. Despite its significance, tāndava can also be partaken by mere mortals. One form of it is an important practice in some lineages of Kashmiri Shaivism. Author and tantrika Daniel Odler describes the Kashmiri tāndava in a mesmerizing article: "*The body is perceived as space and it is precisely this perception which lets the yogini access her true self, unhampered by any divisions of the ego.*"[179]

Theater and Improv

European theater was built on religion. After all, its roots are in Ancient Greece, where any plot holes could easily be fixed by *deus ex machina*, divine intervention. On the stage, mortals can be gods, or anything at all. Theater is play on the self and a play of illusion. If we're told a metallic pole is a lush tree, we will believe it. And we might believe something like that outside of the stage too, we'll just be less conscious that we're simultaneously believing and disbelieving.

Nondual teacher Rupert Spira uses Shakespeare's *King Lear* as a metaphor for the illusion of small self. The actor John Smith represents infinite awareness just temporarily contracted by the role he has taken on.[180] He might get so into his role as King Lear that he forgets his true self exists at all. A friend told me of his friend, a locally well-known actor, who he felt had reached some spiritual attainments through his theatrical work, playing with disposable and illusory selves.

Bessel van der Kolk discusses the benefits of theater and improv at length in *The Body Keeps the Score*. "*Traumatized people are terrified to feel deeply. They are afraid to experience their emotions, because emotions lead to loss of control. In contrast, theater is about embodying emotions, giving voice to them, becoming rhythmically engaged, taking on and embodying different roles.*" [181]

Author Natalie Grigson reminisces about picking up improv classes: "*Immediately, I felt that same home feeling I did when first starting to meditate. Improv is an exercise of being in flow—of living in the moment and allowing the vibrancy and joy of life to bubble up and animate you. So of course, I was hooked.*"[182] There are quite a few articles on improv as spiritual practice. Many of them argue that the main tenet of improv, which everything builds on, "yes, and," is a spiritual teaching in two words. Or as Shinzen Young puts it: "*You can think of equanimity as the ability to quickly and deeply say YES! to each new sensory arising.*"[183]

Part IV
PRACTICING IN THE WORLD

Chapter 19
Friends, Lovers and Teachers

Being in the company of other people and truly opening to their presence is a good way to discover there are really no "other people." Gregory Kramer noted: "*If you are with another person, you may notice that there is not such a rigid divide between what that person is saying and what you are thinking; both just arise and are known. In here and out there is not such a big deal. As you become comfortable with this, you may begin to notice the between, the relationship itself as it manifests between yourself and others.*"[184]

I'm discussing various sorts of interpersonal relationships here, but there is no section dedicated to family. It's not because of any underestimation of this area. I don't have children nor a family, so it would feel even more pretentious to touch that matter than the topic of having a teacher. I've read parenting advice from childfree men in some Buddhist books and even from my limited perspective and understanding of the subject, that was incredibly *cringey*.

I can't say much about parenting except that it's clearly hard and complicated yet also joyful. Mixing in the parents' spiritual and healing journeys makes it even harder and more complicated, possibly also more joyful. When people are aware of trauma and its ubiquity, it often translates into stress about raising trauma-free kids, which obviously isn't realistic. Like all human relations, it's not about perfection but doing your best, as we generally do.

What I do know is that kids who aren't my own have taught me many lessons, especially about love and acceptance. Kids love games, but they don't *play games*, they love stories, yet they are much less prone to construct a story out of *you*. After a lifetime of people projecting the most bizarre beliefs, narratives and bogeys on me, this feels like the purest expression of unconditional love.

Whether we're alone or in the company of others, in a way we're always surrounded by little ones: our own child parts and the parts of others. Being aware of this and how society is just a macrocosm of our own inner systems is illuminating. Sometimes it's frustrating to notice all the cranky child parts in conflict situations, but it can also help us feel more compassion for the other person(s). So many little kids trying to solve grownup problems that mostly have been caused by other child parts. Poor sweet little things.

Spiritual Friendships

Friendship might not be something that comes to mind when most people think of Buddhism. Yet Buddhists take refuge not just in the Buddha and the dharma, but the *sangha*, the community, as well. The Buddha famously commented to his closest disciple Ānanda that spiritual friendship isn't just half of holy life, but *all of it* (Upaddhasutta, SN 45.2). It has stayed with me like no other dharma quote. Of course, the Buddha's view of "spiritual friendship" (*kalyāna-mitratā*), which he elaborates upon in many suttas, was very different from mine. In other translations the concept appears as admirable or beautiful friendship.

Zen priest angel Kyodo Williams even proposes the name "Mitrayāna," the friendship vehicle.[185] Traditionally Theravāda/Hinayāna was seen as the first turning of the wheel of dharma, Mahāyāna was the second turning and Vajrayāna is sometimes called the third turning. Rev. Williams posits Mitrayāna as the fourth turning of the wheel of dharma. We're at the wheel of this ride together!

I would define spiritual friendship as a deep, authentic, vulnerable, intimate, wholesome relation that doesn't shy away from conflict or pain. As a result, it may be very intense in ways that are normally only reserved for romantic love. Yet it also includes all our worldly pleasures and conversations about the most mundane things, too, as we live in the world. There are likely to be lots of tears, but also hysterical laughter.

There will be mettā, karunā, muditā and upekkhā, mutual support and deep feelings of love, appreciation and gratitude. There might be harsh words, crankiness, misunderstanding, melodrama, envy, complaining, idolizing, maligning, judgment, guilt, shame, sulking, meltdowns and hurt feelings. Snapping at each other during dark nights and after mundane sleepless nights. Covert comparisons of perceived spiritual progress and resulting feelings of inferiority or superiority. Triggering and getting triggered, likely lots of triggering and getting triggered, it just happens more in the open than usual.

Some friendships flow like rivers, others are extremely hard and challenging yet also rewarding. Like romance, they can end up on the rocks and blow up. And like romance, they can sometimes still be salvaged, likely more often, as the compatibility requirements tend to be less strict. A crisis can be a growth opportunity if both parties wish to treat it that way.

There's a notion that trauma can only be healed in a relationship, and while I feel that isn't completely true, it has a lot of truth to it. Often "relationship" is interpreted either as a therapeutic relationship or a romantic bond, but friendships also allow us to discover our stuck patterns and provide a fertile ground for nurturing our hurt parts. Lama Rod reminds us: "*Opening our hearts to woundedness helps us to understand that everyone else around us carries around the same woundedness.*"[186]

Even if we would like to hide our wounds, often we can't. Many spiritual people are highly energetically sensitive. It can be unnerving if you're doing a good job covering up emotions like fear or anger, but others can still pick them up. One can still misinterpret these signals and perceive them through the lens of their own trauma and worldviews, projecting on others and trusting their energetic readings over what may be actually unfolding. Perhaps because of the depth or perhaps because of people's trust in their own infallibility, projection is often a much bigger issue than in more superficial friendships.

There are things that I feel are optimally not a part of spiritual friendships, but that may be confused with the good aspects. For the brahmavihārās, the *Visuddhimagga* lists "near enemies" and "far enemies." E.g. the near enemy of mettā (loving-kindness) is, depending on the translation, desire, lust or attachment (*rāga*), while its far enemy is ill will. Near enemies can be sneakier to tell apart from positive qualities than their far enemies, which are essentially their opposites.

The way I see it, the near enemy of openness and vulnerability is a dynamic where everything just becomes talking about trauma. The far enemy would be loftiness and pretension, "My friend is very awakened and I bet he doesn't have any anger left, so I have to suppress my anger too." For honesty, the near enemy is what I call *toxic honesty*; the belief that every single negative thought fabricated by some of your parts must be aired out or otherwise "you're not being honest." You need wisdom here, too. Deep honesty does not mean that everything needs to be said. Instead of honesty, this becomes a form of control.

Spiritual friendships may dive right in at the deep end. This can be wonderful but can also encourage unhealthy patterns. This can take the form of *lovebombing*: expressing fondness in

an effusive, idolizing fashion early on, which tends to turn into devaluation and withdrawal of affection later. I've also had people trying to manage my life decisions within a couple of weeks of (barely) knowing me. I discuss this kind of controlling patterns in more detail in Chapter 21.

Tor-Mentors

You have as much wisdom as your friends have, and people can impart a wealth of wisdom without being wise themselves. The Buddha lists dozens of good qualities for friends but also many disqualifying factors that exemplify bad character (including dancing and sleeping late in DN 31). Yet people are complex and complicated. Friendship can be nourishing despite being very flawed, e.g. if one of the friends is struggling with addiction or poorly controlled mental illness.

Richard Schwartz, the creator of IFS, calls people who are difficult or triggering in a helpful way "tor-mentors." Famous Tibetan bodhicitta pith instructions put it like this: "*Even when someone I have helped, / Or in whom I have placed great hopes / Mistreats me very unjustly, / I will view that person as a true spiritual teacher.*"[187]

This is an idea that is easy to twist and misunderstand. I want to make it clear that I'm not suggesting staying with abusive or otherwise highly problematic people just for the sake of psychological or spiritual development. But *in some select cases*, challenging friendships, even if they are nothing like what the Buddha recommended, can provide a huge growth opportunity—even though in most cases, you would only be bashing your head against the wall.

This is *somewhat* similar to the New Age concept of *twin flames*, which is not the same as soulmates, but more focused on mutual growth and healing than "happily ever after." Twin flames may not be romantically involved and even if they are, they might still never end up a couple and any romance might not last. I see good sides to this concept and it's less toxic than the idea of soulmates—believing you are supposed to be together with someone when the relationship isn't healthy or possible can be very damaging. Yet in practice, many use it just to elevate on-off romances and cat-and-mouse pursuits into spiritual struggles.

People often suggest asking yourself: does this person bring out the best or the worst in me? I believe this can be a trick question in several ways. A person who only compliments and adulates you would make you feel good, and as a result you'd likely also be on your best behavior. It's tempting to let a friend treat you like they're your biggest fan, but often this dynamic is anything but healthy. On the other hand, if you have attachment trauma, even someone regarding you with warmth and kindness can come off as triggering. It may seem like someone is "making you feel bad" and it's tempting to blame that person, when it's just trauma playing up. Our attachment systems can be devious at making up issues!

In general, attachment styles play a big role in friendship conflicts, as well. A person with avoidant attachment can appear as indifferent, aloof or judgmental, even hostile, which can be particularly puzzling in a deep spiritual friendship. For them, an anxiously attached friend can come off as "too intense" and even secure traits may be distrusted and maligned. I feel like attachment trauma can actually lead to *more* issues between friends than partners or romantic prospects, as the customs, rules and depth of friendships tend to be much more vaguely defined.

Intimate Relationships

A partner can offer an even richer source of insight, growth, lessons and humility. Especially if you live together, there isn't much room for escaping your feelings or facing away from

your unwanted sides. Whether your partner is familiar with the term "spiritual bypassing" or not, they will probably tell you when you're trying to do that and keep your feet on the ground.

Buddhist psychotherapist John Welwood wrote several books on romantic relationships as the path, which are otherwise good but *very* heteronormative. He worked with Eugene Gendlin back in the 1970s, an influence which is clearly visible in the somatic aspects of his approach. In his view, relationships always feature both conditional *and* unconditional love, which I find a lovely and thought-provoking observation.

Welwood believed that intimate relationships present the choice of going toward *sleep* or *wakefulness*, forcing us to face many of our core existential issues: "*our family history, our personality dynamics, questions about who we are, how to communicate, how to handle our feelings, how to let love flow through us, how to be committed, how to let go and surrender. If relationships are difficult, it's because being a human is difficult.*"[188]

Longer relationships tend to become tangled with all kinds of trauma (especially attachment trauma), patterns, dynamics and vicious cycles. One person triggers their partner and the partner gets triggered by this. We form habits and make assumptions. Many of these patterns are molded slowly over the course of years to the point that neither partner notices them anymore, but healing practices can sometimes make them abruptly and painfully clear.

Welwood recommends starting the path of rediscovery from "I don't know," akin to Zen master Suzuki Roshi's *beginner's mind*. It can help to ask yourself: is what I believe about my partner right now really true? Is this really what's motivating them? How do I know? What if it's not true? When you're in Self from an IFS perspective, stories often reveal themselves as stories and you feel naturally curious to discover how things really are.

Spirituality can cause major friction in relationships, whether only one partner or both are involved with it (I'm using words like "both" here, but obviously all this also applies to poly relationships, just like it may be relevant to non-romantic life partnerships). If only one party is on the path, the partner may feel left out, alienated, inadequate, uninteresting and like they can no longer relate to their spouse. It may seem this is no longer the same person who they fell in love with—which likely *is* true on some level.

They may become envious of and bitter about their partner's teacher and sangha. This can lead to resentment about the large amount of time and resources spent on practice (especially if the person is keen to attend retreats). Jack Kornfield describes a thought-provoking case in which a meditator's wife was very supportive of her husband's spiritual pursuits, to the point it became a form of codependency as he withdrew from his life and she enabled this.[189]

Severe side effects of practice, like bad dark nights, disturbing kundalinī symptoms and even psychoses can be scary to witness and not exactly a glowing endorsement for the benefits of this new "hobby." The practitioner may be convinced that this is a temporary phase and they will eventually become a better person, spouse and parent, but the partner is unlikely to have the same confidence in this. They might just see their loved one being intolerable, even unable to participate in household chores, take care of kids or show up at all. Obviously these kinds of issues don't always arise, but when they do, this is not exaggeration.

Values, priorities, worldviews and notions about marriage, career, parenting, pastimes and living situations may change, temporarily or permanently. Contrary to the common ideas of "ego dissolution," those in heavy throes of spiritual struggles can temporarily become very self-absorbed. Formerly skeptical materialists start gushing about energy, spirits and crystals. Their libido may rise sky-high and tank to zero. During some phases, the partner might appear euphoric and doting—I wouldn't be surprised if this can even trigger suspicions of an affair. The next day they might hardly display any care or interest towards their family. It's a challenging situation to be in, but it can be even worse for the spouse.

With both partners on the path, the hardships aren't eliminated, just different. Each person is likely to be at a unique point in their journey and competitive aspects can arise. Are they better than me? How can they be farther along? Maybe they won't accept me if I'm not awakened? It may feel like one of the partners is always in a dark night, which shifts the focus from pleasant activities to constant darkness and moodiness. Or perhaps both hit an arduous phase at the same time, which makes things very intense and can exacerbate any existing conflicts.

Healing can also greatly alter the dynamics of a couple. People who are working on heavy trauma may be moody, angry and irritable, but even the long-term effects are often unexpected. Introverts become extroverts (and vice versa), attachment styles change, those who needed emotional caretaking can do without or a formerly codependent person may no longer feel like providing the care. These are healthy changes of course, but they can disrupt the entire core dynamic of lovers. Long, painful crises may ensue, even to a point where the relationship may not be salvageable.

As with other close relationships, talking for parts (instead of *from* parts) can be highly beneficial for solving impasses. Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication is often recommended when the situation is inflamed and attempts at repair become perceived as personal attacks. I believe that methods grounded on IFS principles have even more potential. The book *Internal Family Systems Therapy: New Dimensions* has an excellent chapter on couples therapy that illustrates healthy parts-based approaches to communication.

Teachers and Gurus

Teachers come in many different flavors. Jack Kornfield wrote: "*To the surprise of many, this variety of teaching styles cannot be neatly divided by tradition. . . In each tradition some teachers are rascals and coyotes who trick and surprise their students; some are harsh taskmasters who point out a student's every fault, trying to whittle down ego and pride; others teach more through honoring and encouragement, nurturing the best in a student; some teachers lecture like a professor; others can melt us open with their love and compassion or show us the space and humor in all things.*"[190]

The guru, however, is no ordinary teacher. Especially in Hinduism and Vajrayāna, the guru is viewed as an embodiment of the Buddha or a God, either symbolically or concretely. They're not just someone you listen to for advice, but a person you love and at least near-worship. The whole of Vajrayāna is based on such a relationship. Hindu gurus are often considered omniscient and to be able to read their disciples' thoughts. Every action they do in the presence of a student is seen as something done for the student's benefit, which is hard for me not to view as problematic.

I've never had a guru or an official teacher (yet I also don't feel like I've had any shortage of teachers), so take my ramblings on this with a grain of salt. I do find the subject fascinating even if I have my doubts, especially since abuse seems like such a ubiquitous issue with gurus. Status is intoxicating and this unfortunately goes for enlightened people, too.

One common trap with gurus is confusing charisma with wisdom. This is what we constantly do in daily life too, mistake charisma for good qualities, but many gurus have particularly shiny and magnetic personalities. Occasionally people treat even charismatic lay teachers (who in no way present themselves as gurus) as infallible sages. I also recommend reflecting on the sections about control and dark triad behaviors in Chapter 21.

With e.g. multiple popular Hindu and Neo-Advaita gurus residing in Europe, often a single Google search would reveal a number of abuse allegations. While I'm not a fan of renunciate approaches, at least relational abuse is easier to recognize in a context where sex with a

teacher is categorically inappropriate, as opposed to tantric lineages, where this is not necessarily off-limits. Lama Rod discusses this at length in *Love and Rage*.[191] He found out his lama had engaged in sexual misconduct and at first, he literally refused to hear such accusations, as they felt too impossible to comprehend. Later he was forced to confront the situation, which was deeply traumatic. It's a huge spiritual crisis I cannot fully imagine.

Even when the guru is benevolent, treating them like a god often seems to result in an unhealthy relationship with a lot of baggage. Buddhist teacher Sangharakshita considered it peculiar how many gurus are addressed as mother, father or, as is common in India, Dada-ji or "grandfather."[192] He believed this is how emotionally immature individuals latch onto a parent substitute so to avoid feeling responsible for their own lives. John Welwood similarly warns that people projecting their unresolved family issues on teachers can lead to desperate attempts to win their love or be their favorite student.[193]

Kirtan legend Krishna Das's memoir *Chants of a Lifetime* also illustrates this painfully well. Attachment issues turn an idolized relationship with Maharaj-ji into a bizarre play that alternates between ecstatic bliss when you are in the guru's spotlight and complete agony if they pop into another room.

Trauma being triggered presents an opportunity to work on resolving it, but that doesn't seem to take place in Krishna Das's book or many other similar accounts. Healing requires first questioning the status quo. From my limited European perspective, it seems like a relation between two humans rather than a human and someone revered as a god might provide a more fertile ground for that.

I do have a favorite guru anecdote that I find deeply heartwarming. In Paramahansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of the Yogi*, he relates a story of his own guru Sri Yukteswar.[194] It was 1 AM and they had just gone to bed when Sri Yukteswar suddenly got up. He had sensed some students were on their way after missing their original train connections, so he slipped into the kitchen to cook them rice and daal (lentils). Soon enough, the students arrived after having mixed up the train schedules, apologetic about the late hour. They were astonished to find their guru in the kitchen preparing them food in the middle of the night. I think we can all aspire to this, if we can't find such a person, at least be a little more like this person.

Chapter 20
Shared Practices and Guiding Others

Meditation is seen as a solitary effort, which feels like a missed opportunity to me. Sure, retreats are popular, but at most of them, the practices are not really shared as such. You're not allowed to talk with the other attendees, only the teacher. This is done for a reason, but considering how insights tend to blossom in conversations between people, I'm not convinced it's the best way to go about things. Human communication is a near-magical tool for generating wisdom. I feel like set-ups like "meditate for an hour, then chat for an hour" tend to be much more fruitful.

Gregory Kramer, who developed Insight Dialogue, believes that "*Interpersonal meditation reveals the suffering associated with our relational lives, and in society as a whole, much more directly. It is exceptionally effective at revealing desires and fears about being seen, the dynamics of loneliness, and the powerful but hidden processes by which we construct a self-image.*"[195]

He continues: "*Meditating individually, we lack any practice that explicitly addresses the interpersonal realm. We may sense vaguely that something is awry but cannot see what is missing. We are not clear that the personal and interpersonal paths are profoundly connected, nor do we know how easily and even elegantly they can be interwoven. A wider vision is available to us. It is so simple.*"

Meditation and talking can happen simultaneously! Besides Kramer's Insight Dialogue, there are other mutually shared practices, both for two people and for groups, such as two-person mettā (see Chapter 6), two-person inquiry (Chapter 8), and imaginal work (Chapter 17). There is no shortage of ritualistic and magicky-type practices that this book doesn't delve into as it's not really my jam. Some people enjoy eyegazing meditation, where you just gaze into another person's eyes in silence.

Besides these more equally shared practices, there are others where one party acts as the guide. While with IFS, one person is usually at the helm, there's nothing preventing you from switching roles during a session. Different styles of practice often blend together smoothly, anyway. I have fond memories of a remote session that felt like a combination of an imaginal journey, IFS, mettā, pointing out and inquiry.

Shared practices also lend themselves well to remote use, usually over videocalls. Kramer started using Insight Dialogue online already back in 1995 via text chats and bulletin boards.[196] He finds that besides the obviously lacking elements, there are benefits to this approach, as well: the words remain visible on screen allowing investigation and reflection to continue for longer. I've occasionally guided IFS and somatic work via text. Obviously it's not the same as interacting with speech, and some people would not be able to focus like this at all.

Witnessing and Listening

Many people are able to practice modalities like IFS on their own, but often a peer makes things flow much better. They can ask questions and notice blending with parts that the person doing the actual work has missed. Sometimes it's about holding space and offering care if

things get rough and the peer is not even supposed to actively participate in the process. For me, the biggest perk relates to how I'm way too tired to focus on my own, and the IFS partner helps to keep my sympathetic nervous system activated enough.

One of the core tenets of IFS is that if you do it together with another person, whether a peer or a therapist, *that person should always be in Self*. Parts will get triggered, but then their main job is to notice it and return to Self. Most IFS books intended for therapists dedicate long sections to the importance of "being a part detector," as it is so crucial. If you are irritated by the person's parts or itching to fix them, if you feel like they should be doing the work differently, you not in Self but blended with a part.

Being in Self is an excellent principle for shared practices and any kind of interpersonal contact, though it's not always possible in something like a journey and in daily life it can be very triggering for some people. Interacting from Self also accomplishes what therapy pioneer Carl Rogers (1902–1987) termed "unconditional positive regard," a core tenet in many schools of psychotherapy. In Self, unconditional positive regard naturally arises. It has become painfully clear to me how lacking that doesn't just diminish the benefits of healing work but can do active harm.

Jay Earley has an entire chapter on peer work at the end of his IFS book *Self-Therapy*, where he also states: "*When someone is there to witness you, it makes the whole exploration more inviting. It provides a holding environment for your wounded and defended parts. Even a silent witness provides presence and support that is very helpful for most people.*"[197]

It's curious how much the witness can help. In IFS, inquiry and other practices, just narrating your experience out loud can be very useful as opposed to playing it all out in your mind. You *can* narrate things on your own, too, and some people use a recording device to play the part of a listener, but it doesn't normally have the same effect.

In IFS peer work, the person actually doing the work (Earley calls them the *explorer*) is in charge of what happens, which is a bit different from how the process is treated with a therapist. Earley lists three stages for witnessing: silent witness, active listening and full facilitation, but even in the third stage, the explorer is still responsible for their work. With imaginal practices, if one person is inexperienced, the other may act as a guide and does hold some responsibility as to where the exploration will lead.

Carl Rogers also developed *active listening*, which Jay Earley, Eugene Gendlin and many others build on. In active listening (which Gendlin calls *absolute listening*), the crux is showing the speaker that you're present and listening, without anything additional, like interpretations, solutions or judgment. An essential aspect of it is "saying back," nowadays also called *mirroring*. It refers to repeating back the most important parts of the speaker's message. I have to say that personally, this has never worked well for me. Even understanding the reasoning, someone repeating my words to me just comes off as mechanical.

For Gendlin, absolute listening was simple to define. "*Never introduce topics that the other person didn't express. Never push your own interpretations. Never mix in your own ideas. There are only two reasons for speaking while listening: to show that you understand exactly by saying back what the other person has said or meant, or to ask for repetition or clarification.*"[198] According to him, you need to demonstrate that you understand exactly, or if you didn't, you repeat what you did grasp and ask for clarification for the rest.

Insight Dialogue has six principles: Pause, Relax, Open, Trust Emergence, Listen Deeply and Speak the Truth. The formal practice uses these all as a sequence, while the book also describes ways you might only apply some of them in daily life. It starts with mindfulness (Pause) instead of going into reaction, followed by calm and acceptance (Relax). You open up relationally and hold space (Open), letting things arise without the need to control them, such as planning your words (Trust Emergence). You listen attentively and mindfully, not getting lost in

the story (Listen Deeply) and speak appropriately, kindly and mindfully (Speak the Truth). Here it's about the quality of the actual listening rather than responding in a certain way.

Lovely, Messy Peer Work

Relational pursuits are intrinsically messy. Staying in Self is a key principle, but in real life it won't happen perfectly. Often people believe they are in Self even when they aren't. Most peer work is more complicated than just witnessing or active listening and that's where things can get tricky. Triggered parts, poor boundaries and power imbalances abound and it's okay when the participants are aware of this. Conflict isn't necessarily bad, as it can lead to problems being solved, unexpressed needs being expressed and eventually more closeness. Reconciling tends to be easier when there is no hierarchy, just peers.

Another factor is a lack of understanding of the therapeutic process and mental health compared to a professional—though I've heard way too many stories of the same issues unfolding with licensed practitioners. It would be highly valuable for the witness or guide to understand at least the basics of trauma, including dissociation and attachment. Attachment trauma often gets projected on this kind of a relationship.

The reality is that not everyone who needs psychotherapy is able to access it, typically for financial reasons but also for therapist shortages. E.g. my home country of Finland has such an awful shortage of psychotherapists that even in the capital region, people may search for years to find a therapist—not necessarily one that's a good fit for them, but just *any* professional who takes on new clients.

When using an effective method of inner work, I struggle to see how a therapist you don't feel a connection with would be more helpful than a caring, trusted friend. Even if we discount techniques like IFS, a large review done back in 1979 of studies utilizing mental health "paraprofessionals" for counseling purposes found that in almost all of them, the non-qualified volunteers were not inferior to mental health professionals and in a number of studies, they actually achieved *better* outcomes.[199] In some studies these paraprofessionals were e.g. nurses, psychiatric aides or medical students, but often college students or community volunteers.

Peer work doesn't just pose risks for the explorer. The witness can also sustain *secondary trauma* (being traumatized by others' experiences). If you feel like this might be going on with you, the book *Trauma Stewardship* is a good resource on how to deal with it. At times friendship and therapy can mix so heavily that in deep conversations they may become indistinguishable. This may or may not be a bad thing, depending on your preferences (and how well those involved are able to stay in Self).

Work with a professional could be expected to have stricter boundaries, both in good and bad—at least on paper. The reality seems to be that people in general have poor boundaries, including many licensed therapists. If something goes awry with a peer, you may be able to extend the session, work in a short debrief later in the day or perhaps talk with their partner with the person's permission, if you happen to know them. If a real-life journey leaves someone in shambles, you can hold them without having to worry about lawsuits or inappropriate conduct. Gendlin believed peer work to actually be *safer* than professional therapy. If the person doesn't find it beneficial, they're more likely to just get up and leave, instead of deferring to authority.[200]

Mental health professionals would consider it a major ethical violation to be friends with someone and also conduct therapy on them, regardless of which of these came first or if they are taking place concurrently. I firmly believe that the benefits of peer therapy can greatly overshadow any ethical considerations or other messiness. Shamanic traditions and supporting your friends with healing go back thousands of years longer than formal psychotherapy. Sha-

mans knew the people they were working with—it was a part of the process. Do check your local laws, however. E.g. in some US states, practicing hypnosis without credentials is illegal.

Milton Erickson, whose approach was more humanistic, also considered it fine to practice therapy with his friends. Likely the most famous proponent of peer counseling in the field of psychotherapy, however, has been Eugene Gendlin. He used Focusing as a basis for the development of Changes peer groups. Already in the 1970s, they were even being used to teach institutionalized people with schizophrenia peer counseling, well ahead of its time.[201] Gendlin was so impressed by the effect of peer presence supporting inner work that in 1987 he even predicted that "*in a decade or two, everyone will have a partner for personal processing.*"[202] If only!

Qualifications for Guiding and Teaching

Many people have a huge impulse to help others. Trauma tends to increase it further, as it gives you a clear, concrete awareness of how bad suffering can get and yet how it can also be alleviated. Many if not most of my guidees have expressed a wish to support others with their healing once they have worked through enough of their own issues. Anyone can offer such assistance, at least when it comes to close relationships. Yet not everyone is suited to actually being a guide, teacher or therapist.

It's crucial to examine your qualifications, skills, limitations and motivations. Why are you looking to become a teacher or a guide? "To help others" is the obvious answer, but what does it include and entail? To make money, to gain status, to be a good person, to be respected for your wisdom? None of these are necessarily bad things, but they are important to acknowledge and explore. Many teachers have issues that greatly impede teaching or that I believe even pose a contraindication until they're dealt with. This includes prominent versions of the parts I discussed in the section on false compassion (see Chapter 4).

Someone can be brilliant at math yet not suited to be a math teacher at all. Another person might make a great university professor yet shouldn't teach calculus to kids, or vice versa. It seems like e.g. many of the nondual teachers on YouTube are young people who attained full nonduality and figured that qualifies them to teach, even if that's the extent of their experience.

Teaching as an interactive profession isn't about knowledge or speaking wisely, it's mostly about listening. Whether you're wearing the hat of teacher, therapist, guide, mentor, witness or a life coach, your job is primarily listening (typically from Self), and this is where guidance from earlier in this section can come in handy. Even if you aspire to be a crazy wisdom lama or a Zen master whose main teaching is whacking your students with a stick, being in Self and listening well is essential, even if it's not always active or absolute listening.

These days the term spiritual teacher can refer to someone who mostly appears on videoclips or podcasts, but podcast know-it-alls usually also guide groups and individuals. And if you aren't listening, where does your supposed wisdom even come from in the first place? Another common stumbling block is feeling like your experience generalizes to everyone. This often correlates with being a poor listener, as thoughtfully listening to others makes you less likely to slip into solipsism.

Not only might your students and guidees have entirely different backgrounds, life experiences, worldviews and internal working models of the world, even their cognitive structure can radically differ from yours. As an example, an autistic person may be better able to process information if the teacher speaks a bit slower, yet someone with ADHD may have the opposite need![203]

My view is that anyone wishing to be a teacher of *anything* needs to understand trauma. A basic grasp of neurodivergence would also be excellent. If you teach online makeup courses for

grownups, trauma sensitivity may be less of a priority, but overall I feel it strongly applies whether you teach calculus or nonduality and whether you have a diploma or lineage to show. And if your students ask you questions, you need to be able to answer them, including questions like "Could this cause me any harm?"

I don't think people under the age of 30 or so should be spiritual teachers. If someone has been raised in a monastery since childhood, perhaps they have a deep and mature understanding of the dharma even at 20, but do they have a deep and mature understanding of the world and people? It seems to be less about brain development and more about life experience, such as the ability to evaluate your own ideas more critically and to take meta perspectives, perhaps something corresponding to stages 4 and 5 in Kegan's stages of adult development.[204]

In my experience, the biggest issue in teaching and peer work tends to be rescuer parts (see Chapter 4) who feel superior and want to fix the other person. Parts exhibiting false compassion can be very insidious even to those usually skilled at teasing out their own issues. This is likely ensnared in a complicated fashion with the society at large being confused by what compassion and helping others mean.

It's possible to serve others out of pure or nearly pure altruism or for selfish and even damaging motives. Most of the time people helping each other is likely a mixture of altruistic and less altruistic motivations. It may be 90% altruism and 10% smug parts eager to boast their greatness, and this often works out fine, but in other situations, it can get really messy.

I propose that those with an insecure attachment style owe it to their students to work on becoming securely attached before they start teaching. I believe this greatly reduces the risk that you will harm your students by ending up entangled with them in weird ways or projecting on them qualities that aren't really there. Projection makes it hard to instruct the individual in front of you, as opposed to the person you *see* there.

Obviously none of these many caveats are to suggest that the teacher has to be perfect or superhuman, that's far from what I'm suggesting. Healing your most pressing issues and having some inkling of where the remaining ones lie greatly increases the chances you will actually be teaching or guiding from the heart, for the benefit of all beings.

Shambhavi Sarasvati suggested: "*Instead of thinking of a student and a teacher primarily as people, think of studenting and teachering. Studenting and teachering are dependent; one cannot exist without the other.*"[205] With peer work, it's possible for one person to be a teacher and the other a student at one time and then the roles can reverse, which feels healthy and nourishing. Rosa Lewis also presents an intriguing perspective: "*People can flow in and out of these modes at different times and treating people as if they are capable of being a teacher, if only to themselves, earlier on in their path, tends to get people much further much faster.*"[206]

Another thing worth exploring is what people mean when they proclaim e.g. "May this practice be for the benefit of all beings." I'm not talking about the impossibility of something benefiting all beings on a concrete level, which is the paradox of all of Mahāyāna Buddhism, but the intent behind these words. Who do your all beings include? Who is left out? Are there beings that could actually be harmed and should something be done about that? Do all beings include you and what does that mean? These may sound like vague and abstract concerns, but all beings are not an abstraction, they are real people inhabiting our shared world.

Chapter 21
The Dark Side of the Sangha

Communities with a spiritual or self-improvement bent are teeming with scarred and wounded individuals. People turn to these pursuits because they've had turbulent lives and may struggle with heavy trauma and mental illness. This isn't necessarily a bad thing—those with poor mental health are often kind and lovely people with unique wisdom to offer to others.

On the other hand, most dysfunctional behaviors and interpersonal patterns are caused by trauma, and many of them play into each other. Spiritual communities tend to attract both people with significant problems and those looking to rescue others, people with parental vibes and those looking to be parented (not always a problematic dynamic, but can be). There are people with a tendency to manipulate and control others, but also insecure and highly suggestible individuals who are easy to manipulate.

The Good Old Times weren't just peace and love, either. Jack Kornfield writes: "*The first seven volumes of the Buddhist scriptures, devoted entirely to the topic of spiritual community, spell out hundreds of tales of the conflicts, misdeeds, and difficulties that arose among the monks and nuns even while the Buddha was still alive.*"[207] Some of this chapter is not so much about Buddhist sanghas, however, but the eclectic, vaguely dharma-influenced New Age scene and peer-led groups.

Unfortunately, as discussed earlier in this book, spiritual practices can actually make mental health issues worse. Depending on the community, I've seen the whole gamut of reactions to such adverse effects, from "meditation/our technique can't possibly do harm" to "almost everyone develops psychosis from practice at some point, so there's no need to worry" to "it's normal to believe you possess God-like powers and can change the destiny of the whole humankind, it's not related to mental health."

In the world of spirituality and self-development, people tend to assume that they and their peers are unusually mature, deep thinkers and capable of earnest self-reflection. This may not always be true, at least to the extent it is counted on. Many seekers believe, and can fool others into believing, that because they can converse eloquently using Sanskrit, Western psychology or neuroscience concepts, they are much farther along than they really are. Too often, the implicit assumption is "I would know if I behaved in problematic ways and as a group, we are above such mundane issues."

My own relationship with spiritual communities has been thorny, to say the least. I was a part of a sangha that initially felt cozy, but later lapsed into cultish behavior, manipulation and overt bullying, and two collectives formed around spirituality and self-therapy which had their own tangled webs of various issues. This nearly put me off communities altogether.

Luckily, founding my own online sangha as well as finding community on Twitter turned out deeply nourishing and both have blessed me with real-life connections too, though not without some very rough patches. Without exaggeration, 95% of the trauma I've accrued in the course of my entire life has derived from spiritual communities and friends made in them.

Obsession with Healing

Religions generally don't recognize the concept of trauma, yet some New Age communities are formed around trauma healing. This may seem like the opposite of spiritual bypassing: working with emotions instead of ignoring them. In practice, it may become a model fixated on inner work, "cleaning" and integration to the point where members' whole lives revolve around it. So it can actually turn into bypassing, as other areas in life are neglected. Sometimes "healing" seems like code for "pain is only acceptable when it's expressed and explored in socially sanctioned ways."

Counselor and yoga teacher Karla Herbert is not a fan. "*It bothers me that so often spiritual and self-help books seem to present the opportunity for spiritual growth in opposition to the experience of feeling contracted, closed and impenetrable in our sorrow. The message is often that those visited by tragedy and grief are willfully choosing to remain in this state of unhappiness and stunted spiritual growth, as though we are refusing to 'heal.' The cult of happiness and positivity so prevalent in our society, including spiritual communities, allows the pain of grief and trauma to be obvious but only for so long.*"[208]

The deeper you throw yourself into the whirlpool of healing, the cooler and more spiritual you supposedly are. When you're very cool and spiritual, it's tempting to start advising others and insisting they copy your exact approach. This can become detrimental when people start submitting constant, unwanted "bug reports" of their friends' "shadow sides" or "blind spots." In some circles, this is common and even encouraged, while declining such notes may be seen as not being open to feedback, even as a sign of emotional or spiritual immaturity. It's much more appealing to debug others' shadows than your own.

Being nudged toward noticing something in yourself that was clear to others but outside your own awareness can turn out very valuable, or it can be misguided and hurtful, a form of control and asserting superiority. I feel like the more eager someone is to point out such concerns, the less accurate they tend to be and more likely to be projecting their own issues on you—and less willing to accept they could be wrong.

Many spiritual people will tell you that feeling into an aversive emotion deeply enough will resolve it, resembling the Buddhist belief that suffering only arises from resisting unpleasantness. This view has some truth to it, but reality is much more complex than that, especially when it comes to oppression, difficult life circumstances and other continuous trauma (see Chapter 3). It's another claim that's not falsifiable, as someone can always insist that you just didn't feel the pain fully enough. It can be very frustrating to attempt to discuss any issues with a person who is convinced everything can be solved like this. Here healing again crosses over to bypassing.

Related problematic ideas include everyone being responsible for their own stuff, possibly just their internal emotional landscape, but sometimes external circumstances too, and that psychological pain is always beneficial, as it leads to more healing. These forms of bypassing may find their way into hurtful gaslighting. Especially combined with the magical thinking of "everything happens for a reason," they can even be used to argue that if someone hurt you, they were actually doing you a *favor*. This not only enables abuse, it's victim blaming—a common phenomenon in spiritual circles which is rarely allowed to be discussed.[209]

"You're responsible for your own emotions" is a great principle in many circumstances, like being triggered or others not being able to fulfill your needs. In such cases, someone may be unduly blamed for causing hurt despite doing nothing wrong. Yet the same does not apply for actually problematic behavior, as then the person *is* responsible for harming others.

Hierarchy and Control

The spiritual path is supposed to be about relinquishing control, but this is much harder than it seems. I believe that most people display at least some controlling behaviors, and awakened individuals are no exception. There is discussion about controlling parents and dominance in romantic relationships, but much less about communities and friendships.

Almost all friendships, even if otherwise healthy and nourishing, have some uneven power dynamics with one or likely both parties exhibiting at least occasional controlling patterns. Even timid and submissive individuals commonly harbor such patterns and they can be much harder to spot. Yet especially if you have an avoidant attachment style, it's good to keep in mind that you're likely wired to sometimes see attempts to control you *even when there are none*.

Hierarchies easily form even in groups with no official leadership.[210] Some types of manipulation are much easier to pull off in communities where it's normalized to use New Age and psychological jargon to explain one's and others' behavior, while in most circles this would come off as a major red flag in itself. These issues appear somewhat contagious: if you see those around you controlling others and no one bats an eye, it is easy to adopt such patterns.

One rarely discussed factor is *suggestibility*. Of course, a skeptical view is that most spiritual experiences are based on suggestion and altered states, but it can also go much deeper than this. Suggestible individuals may absorb pack leaders' opinions by osmosis or appear to change their worldview or guru du jour with every new YouTube video. They may even start mimicking the descriptions of others' spiritual journeys. Many suggestible people are also alexithymic, as both traits tend to correlate with dissociation.[211] This means they *struggle to sense how they feel inside*, not just on the level of nuance but even whether they are angry or sad, allowing others to talk for them.

Spiritual prescriptivism can be a big issue with controlling types. Only their way of practicing is right, either because their guru said so or because they just decided it themselves. To me it feels self-evident that others' worldviews should be respected and aggressively trying to override them isn't okay. Many practitioners enthusiastically rank others below them for perceived flaws and deficits. If your beliefs are different, it's because you haven't yet seen the light like they have.

Certain perspectives become so ingrained in the collective New Age psyche that people push their views on how the world works *without even realizing they are doing that*. To them it's not a belief, but obvious *truth*, and everyone who doesn't see it is just "on a lower level" or "not energetically open enough." Things can be labeled as "spiritual" or "non-spiritual" quite sneakily, not necessarily using those terms but with clear dichotomous thinking of good and bad, us and them.

John Welwood pointed out a pattern that seems almost impossible not to notice: "*Avoidant types tend to be dismissive of other people's needs because, guess what, they're dismissive of their own needs. What happens is that people feel justified in not respecting each other's feelings and needs. Not surprisingly, 'need' becomes a dirty word in many spiritual communities. . .If I'm not able to own my own needs, then I will tend to dismiss others' needs and see them as a threat because their neediness subconsciously reminds me of my own denied needs. And I will judge others and use some kind of 'dharma logic' to make them wrong or make myself superior.*"[212]

Controlling traits can manifest in seemingly benign or positive ways, such as the compassion-mimicking rescuer parts discussed in Chapter 4. Someone offering a hand can be lovely, yet if the offer is coming from rescuer parts, it can quickly turn sour—the helper gets offended if their solution isn't considered beneficial or suddenly sets conditions for receiving the help.

This can make the whole friendship crumble down and I've watched it unfold many times in spiritual contexts. Controlling people may come off as deeply caring and it can be tricky to figure out how much of it comes from Self versus parts with an agenda.

Dark Triad Behaviors

The dark triad refers to the personality traits of psychopathy, Machiavellianism and narcissism, which may occur together or separately.[213] Sadism may be added for "dark tetrad." Narcissistic people are drawn to dominant roles. In spiritual circles, they tend to be charismatic, mysterious and widely liked (but sometimes edgy and controversial) teachers or self-appointed sages with wild stories of travel to every astral realm. Their spiritual journeys are shocking, extraordinary and often completely incomprehensible. Unlike the stereotypical narcissist, the spiritual narcissist doesn't say "You're worthless," they say "I'm special and I could make you a little more special too," which is a tempting offer.

There are numerous articles on spiritual narcissism online and there is some research on the topic, as well. An article from the *Scientific American* cites several studies, such as one that found that yoga and meditation *boosted* the trait of self-centrality, instead of reducing it.[214] Most spiritual communities have a surprisingly high tolerance for dark triad patterns, like judgmental, manipulative, controlling and self-elevating behavior, extreme projection and refusing to apologize or make amends. People with such traits may gloss over the stunts of other narcissists, and narcissists also tend to ramp up their level of disagreeability slowly with time, making it harder to spot.

One study on the subject concluded: "*Our results illustrate that the self-enhancement motive is powerful and deeply ingrained so that it can hijack methods intended to transcend the ego and instead, adopt them to its own service. . .The road to spiritual enlightenment may yield the exact same mundane distortions that are all too familiar in social psychology, such as self-enhancement, illusory superiority, closed-mindedness, and hedonism (clinging to positive experiences) under the guise of alleged 'higher' values.*"[215]

The media depiction of narcissists and psychopaths tends to be extreme and highly problematic. Many sources paint narcissists as so emotionally undeveloped that they're barely even human, which really rubs me the wrong way. The definition of psychopathy has been based on the inability to feel empathy, though research has suggested it's not about lacking the capacity, but turning it off.[216] Narcissists are also believed to not feel empathy or only low levels, but studies have shown that this is untrue, and they may also be turning this capacity off at will.[217]

I've had several close spiritual friends who are genuinely kind and loving, yet also possess some disturbing dark tetrad traits. This would fit with a concept called *dark empath*. These are individuals with dark triad traits who are also high in both cognitive and affective empathy and also tend to be highly extroverted and fairly self-critical.[218] In the original dark empath study, 20% of the study sample fit this classification, so this is no marginal group of people.

After a possible honeymoon period of flattery, narcissists are thought to constantly elevate themselves at the expense of others. Yet *communal narcissists* are keen on uplifting people in the same community, often in idolizing ways, as their core belief is that they are *unusually helpful.*[219] *Closet narcissists* (sometimes treated as a synonym for covert narcissists while other authors see them as separate types) are described as "*being afraid that other people will see all their flaws. Instead they find ways to attach themselves to people, causes, religions, and other things that they admire and consider special. They then feel special by association.*"[220]

People are of course multifaceted, with much more complexity and nuance than psychology research tends to suggest. Possessing dark triad traits doesn't invalidate someone's spiritual progress or mean they can't be genuinely kind and caring. Narcissism is one way childhood

trauma can manifest and interact with the rest of the personality. Someone can have narcissistic parts and parts that are completely opposite. Real empathy and contrived, socially sanctioned niceness may coexist, and likely do in most of us. While most abuse relates to dark triad traits, not everyone with narcissistic traits is abusive.

Oppression or Radical Inclusivity

Often people seem a bit puzzled: what difference does your skin color or whether you want to date men, women, both or neither make for something like meditation? It's not like the guy who came up with Buddhism was white. But the oppression of minorities has a long and complex history which may be much less obvious to those who haven't faced oppression. On the ultimate level, things like skin color don't exist. Even individual people don't really exist, as such. But we cannot shake off the fact that we live in the messy, complicated, prejudiced, very much relative world.

The lived experience of a queer person, disabled person or person of color can be miles apart from someone outside of these communities. They're often hypervigilant for signals of unsafety, *after experiencing a lifetime of unsafety.* Meditation teacher and psychotherapist Larry Yang asserts: "*Part of awakening as a community is acknowledging how people's differing needs may affect how safety is generated differently for various groups.*"[221] Meaningful practice is only possible in a safe environment, and too often spiritual communities don't feel safe to minority members.

Many spiritual communities perpetuate oppression, such as racism/white supremacy, ableism and queerphobia. This general dynamic of oppression and refusing to see it has been called *structural spiritual bypassing.* "*A core assumption of Structural Spiritual Bypassing in the mindfulness movement is that sociocultural power differentials are irrelevant, or even an illusion. This silences any acknowledgement of privilege, which becomes veiled in spirituality, denying the often obvious but sometimes subtle dynamics of power and privilege in our world.*"[222]

I'm a white disabled queer person, so I'm focusing on ableism and homo/transphobia here, which is not to be taken as minimizing racism. That aspect is much better covered (along with queerness and intersectionality) in some other books, like Larry Yang's *Awakening Together* and *Radical Dharma* by Rev. angel Kyodo Williams, Lama Rod Owens and Jasmine Syedullah, as well as Rod Owens's second book *Love and Rage.* I found the last one in particular highly enlightening.

Richard Schwartz has written a book chapter on racist parts, based on working with his own racism as someone with a progressive worldview. One such part of his was hypervigilant and scanning for danger, while another felt entitled and hated weakness. "*[The part] is jaded and cynical and rationalizes inaction either with right-wing* (they're stupid and impulsive)*, racist* (it's genetic) *or New Age* (it's Karma) *explanations for the plight of those who are less privileged.*"[223] These two formed a coalition with a pessimist part and a denier part. They're all protectors and their exiles would need to be healed, mere education won't solve the issue.

Most of us likely harbor this kind of parts, no matter how unpleasant that idea might seem, not just racism but many other forms of discrimination and judgment. After talking with many men and their parts on this subject, it strongly appears that *all* cis men have misogynist parts, no matter if they are woke feminists raised by progressive parents—those men are just more likely to have deeply exiled such parts. Conversely, women tend to nearly universally have parts exhibiting internalized misogyny (and sometimes also parts hating men). Not to forget disabled people: we amass copious amounts of internalized ableism.

Just like with other harmful behaviors, people may feel like they are too kind, wise or self-aware to be acting in discriminatory ways. Lama Rod points out: "*That's the shadow. We've learned how to pack everything away, because we're really invested in being good people. You can say, 'I am a good person. I am not a misogynist. I am not transphobic. I'm a good person.' Sometimes being a good person or my attachment to being a good person actually gets in the way of me looking at all the rough spots, at all the shadows that I'm working with.*"[224]

The combination of spiritual bypassing plus the obsession with healing is often taken to mean that the universe is perfect (nothing to fix there), while simultaneously we are all imperfect versions of ourselves to be fixed. This can get particularly toxic when things like sexual orientation, gender identity, asexuality, neurodivergence and chronic illness are viewed as "attachment to body/identity" or "things just waiting to be healed."

Even if there is no overt discrimination, the majority of spiritual circles fall into a huge bypass trap and fail to consider how to make different groups of people feel welcome. Obviously every community doesn't need to cater to every demographic, but diversity also brings in a wider spectrum of perspectives and excluding large swathes of the population because of thoughtlessness and indifference doesn't seem very enlightened. When you're boasting that you work "for the benefit of all beings," are you really only including beings like you?

Homophobia and especially transphobia sadly run rampant in spiritual contexts. Besides "healing damaged masculinity/femininity," views of masculine and feminine energies as two opposites (e.g. by interpreting Jungian psychology[225]) can lead to narratives hostile to LGBTIQ+ people. Discussion of gendered energies isn't inherently heteronormative or transphobic, but often it veers into this territory. I find it particularly regrettable in light of how many deeply spiritual cultures have celebrated gender variance in concepts like *two-spirit* (a Western label for a number of indigenous genders) and even viewed it as divine.[226]

Ableism and Disabled Dharma

Ableism (discrimination against disabled people) is everywhere in society and everywhere, often even more so, in the spiritual scene.[227] Many view Buddhism as a disability-friendly religion, as it discusses suffering and compassion extensively and appears to champion equality. The Pāli canon contains a story (spread among several texts like Dhp 25 and Ud 5.10) where the Buddha helps a learning disabled man named Cūlapanthaka attain full enlightenment by instructing him to mindfully sweep the floor.

Yet unfortunately the Buddhist canon and the revered commentarial works also discuss disability in a negative light numerous times.[228] Interpretations of the Buddhist concept of karma have devastated the lives of disabled people in several Asian countries.[229] Drastically, modern Thai Buddhism even bans disabled people from monastic life, which in the Theravādin context renders them unable to pursue awakening.

In the West, the worst spiritual ableism tends to be directed toward illness. Chronically sick people get told they can be fixed with meditation, magick, manifestation, ayahuasca, trauma work or energy healing—with people implicitly and often also openly telling me I'm practicing wrong since I'm not cured. This ties into the Just World hypothesis, a pervasive form of magical thinking also behind much of non-spiritual ableism: if only we do things right, we are protected from nasties such as illness.[230]

As a result, chronically ill people tend to deeply distrust the whole scene and might be the group who feels the most aggressively unwelcome in spiritual spaces. A common joke in chronic illness circles is "Have you tried yoga?" as we have heard this line in an invalidating tone so many times it has become a trope.[231] (Hello, rescuer parts!) When I mention my meditation practice, many disabled people flinch, as they wonder if I'll start preaching about mindfulness

and crystals. This experience has been deeply alienating—it's hard to find a spiritual home where I feel welcome instead of a problem to be fixed, but I feel too far out for most disabled communities, too.

They are right to flinch. When multiple spiritual friends insist you should stop taking your meds, without which you would rapidly and inevitably perish, and to "trust magic" or "trust the universe" instead, it's easy to grow disillusioned with the whole scene. This *is* too far out. It is New Age guilt, essentially the same thing as "If you had prayed more, your cancer would be cured."[232] It is curious though, considering that even the Buddha himself had chronic pain and several revered contemporary teachers suffer from chronic illness or died from it, but somehow I'm expected to get well.

There are different interpretations of the concept of karma and not everyone who believes in karma holds this (unfortunately quite traditional) retributive view, but telling someone they're chronically ill (or e.g. LGBTIQ) because of something they did in their current or past life is abusive.[233] The same goes for touting more New Age narratives where someone "chose" a disability or was "given" it before birth, so they could "learn a lesson," as well as some world-class bypass tactics claiming that illness doesn't even exist—honestly I shouldn't need to say any of this. It is no less problematic than a "Christian" telling someone they're going to Hell.

For me, my health was the main reason I didn't seek out a teacher. I don't think I could have felt comfortable with an abled one and trying to fit their methods into my extremely limited capacity. One of the reasons I wrote this book was also my disability. While we are lucky to have more and more visible queer and PoC leaders in the Buddhist community, we don't have many openly disabled voices.

Sure, there are Tara Brach, Pema Chödrön and Toni Bernhard—the latter two both have CFS/ME, as do I. There was Culadasa, and wise men who lost their health in old age, but most of them have never penned "disabled dharma." Talking about disability tends to turn off abled people. Vidyamala Burch has written several books related to meditation and her experience as a wheelchair user with chronic pain, but she's not very well known, especially outside the UK.

This book isn't specifically about disability or for disabled people, but chronic illness affects me every second of my life, so it's also about disability. For me, the dharma of disability is raw, harsh, tender and vulnerable. It's very much about suffering and compassion, but also impermanence. I have half a dozen conditions that can kill me, some of them carrying the potential for sudden demise. These teachings run deep in ways I don't think abled people, at least relatively young ones, can really fathom. Buddhism has practices like contemplation of death or contemplating the repulsiveness of the human body. I don't need to "introduce" such a practice; they're a part of my everyday existence anyway.

A lot of the suffering in disability is not caused by the condition itself, but the society reacting to it in a hostile and triggered way.[234] Chronic illness can be both a Pure Land and a charnel ground, but the charnel ground tends to dominate. Disabled dharma is deeply about interdependence. I'm not well enough to take care of myself but also not really able to receive support or assistance. For me, like many others, it's an experience of severed, wounded interdependence and interconnectedness.

Awakening is a funny word when you struggle to literally stay awake—but it's less funny when most teachers ignore that sleepiness in meditation isn't necessarily about meditation and "lethargy" features on many Buddhist lists of Nasty Stuff. I had this noble idea of wanting to awaken so I can tell other chronically ill people they can do it too (or some of them can, many are much sicker than me), but now I question whether it even makes sense for someone seriously ill to pursue this at all. It may not. I've had to accept that for the privileged ones, enlightenment *is* both less risky and more beneficial. Sometimes I wonder if we should just let

that repugnant overt ableism chase other sick people away. *You are good enough and you don't have to do this.*

Maintaining a Community as an Act of Love

When Rev. angel Kyodo Williams was asked what to do when your sangha is hurting you, she didn't mince her words: "*If you are putting down the seeds of your practice and having it grow in conditions that are so violent—it's not that it's just unsafe; it's violent. It's an assault on your being, and it's a restriction on the potential for your liberation, and so you must leave. You get out of spaces like that; it's a revolutionary act.*"[235]

Seems reasonable, but what *then*? How do we go about tackling these issues after or other than leaving? What kind of a place should one head to? How do we set up a thriving community, without controlling, oppression and spiritual bypassing? It's a tricky balance between feel-good vibes where darker material is banished and an environment where that darkness becomes the undercurrent of everything. Rev. angel also said: "*If it's all warm and fuzzy all the time, then someone is really not dropping wisdom.*"

I realize this book is more at risk of sounding like doom-and-gloom rather than lovey-dovey; that I keep drilling in this message where we're all broken and everything interpersonal is difficult and messy. *Radical Dharma* suggests a solution: "Go where you're loved," which is inspiring but easier said than done. I couldn't find such a place, so in my case, it has meant setting up new spaces in search of that, not just where I'm loved but where I am allowed to love.

We need to love skillfully. Communities exist in many different ways and settings, but if you're founding a sangha, I believe it's important to 1) set rules/terms/code of conduct for the members and hold to them, 2) consider how to make different groups of people feel more welcome, 3) make it easy to report misconduct or issues and 4) if you're unsure if there is a problem, don't assume there isn't. And especially if it's a group that gathers in real life, you need to mind accessibility as well! Accessibility is love.

Many informal communities lack any sort of official rules. In my experience, one prime reason you need them is that when someone starts misbehaving, it's often a person you know and like, *a good person*, so you are tempted to let it slide. This has been a major issue in my past sanghas. Problematic behavior also has a tendency to escalate from minor transgressions to downright abuse. People are more likely to bring up abuse (especially discrimination) if it is explicitly labeled as unacceptable. If you're a man, you might wish to announce a non-male person to whom members can report issues and concerns.

If you already belong to a community, the first thing to do is to contemplate whether you might be contributing to any of these dynamics yourself, passively or actively. Likely we all do, and it's not the end of the world, but noticing it is hopefully a beginning. Patterns and dynamics can be reshaped and new healthier ones established. Problematic behavior should be called out in an appropriate way, if it feels safe for you to do. This does not have to mean a punitive approach, but "Is everything okay?" or "Are you and person Y cool or is something wrong?" Asking "Is everything okay?" can be scary (in case the answer is no), but it's a core spiritual question.

I believe it can be very helpful to have some idea of what things like psychosis, bipolar manic episodes, structural dissociation and narcissistic manipulation are and how they might manifest in a group setting. This is one reason I discuss these things extensively in this book. Such issues will almost certainly materialize in your community at some point, if they haven't already.

This may seem like a tall order—if you are not a mental health professional, obviously a book and Google can't make you one nor should you start giving diagnoses. It's about providing people the right kind of support as well as noticing unhealthy dynamics that may show up subtly at first. By the time they grow obvious, things might already be a mess. This is complicated issue, but I also firmly believe it's an important one.

Setting up a spiritual community is much more than just opening a Facebook group or booking a real-life space. It's hard work and comes with a large responsibility. Then again, we always have some responsibility for the well-being of those around us, whether we are the boss or leader or not. For many people, "responsibility" is a scary word, but I believe it to be one of the synonyms of interconnectedness. We are all responsible for each other, for trying to make the world and our communities better in a radically inclusive way. For actively welcoming goodness, calling out damaging patterns, for admitting when we mess up and seeking to mend things.

I'll close with Larry Yang's beautiful and compelling words: "*Being mindful means moving with delicacy around everyone's experience. That is the loving nature of awareness.*"[236] Well, actually I'll end this book with a poem of mine which I feel expands on this theme. I still haven't fully figured out what it means to "go where you're loved" or whether such a place even exists, but I'm trying to find out.

Mandala, or Things That Happen on My Videocalls

dogs bark
neighbors drill
grapes are devoured
babies climb on dads
backlight creates silhouettes on the cave wall
a smudged lens makes you a blurry ghost
the stamp gallery is alive
words are written on air
muscles twist into kriyās
refuge is taken in the sangha
the phone levitates into another room
you freeze and then disappear
or was it me who was gone?

things flow:
- love
- laughter
- tears
- gratitude
- prāna
- jhāna

(that audio feedback is Zoom doing its own jhāna?)

all encased in the existential 1-0's too small to be seen
but morseing pixelated trails in the cloud chamber

things open:
- links
- portals to breakout rooms
- channels to other dimensions
- hearts
- chakras
- doors of perception
- the mind
- space

so many Sanskrit words for this mandala
of mundane astral projection

freeze, disappear, rejoin: the kālachakra
impermanence dancing
light is language, sound is waves you can swim in
even with the camera off, I see you
the screen is a mirror
and I can always see myself
flowing, opening

About the Author

Maija Haavisto (b. 1984) guides and teaches Internal Family Systems, somatic work, imaginal practice, loving-kindness meditation, nondual practices and hypnosis. She has also worn the hats of novelist, journalist, translator, poet, medical writer, playwright, artist, photographer and disability activist. She has had 17 books published in Finland. Severe disability has forced her to drop many past passions such as cooking, dancing and swimming, but she stubbornly refuses to pare down her collection of 50 houseplants

Maija has found herself loving traumatized and neurodivergent people all her life, one of whom dubbed her "The lighthouse for lost souls." She maintains the Discord community Mind Is the Gap, which focuses on the subjects discussed in this book. Her favorite Buddhist scripture is the Prajñāpāramitā Sutra in One Letter. Singing in Sanskrit, hugs and eating ice cream are her preferred spiritual practices. They are all very good for embodiment and for the vagus nerve, especially the ice cream.

You can follow Maija on Twitter at http://www.twitter.com/DiamonDie. Maija also has guided meditation and hypnosis audios and poetry readings available on her YouTube channel, https://www.youtube.com/user/diamondie

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