

Sustainable Happiness

The Mind Science of Well-Being,
Altruism, and Inspiration

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 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

<http://sustainablehappinessbook.com>

Introduction

Recent Breakthroughs, Timeless Methods

And now, I think, the meaning of the evolution of civilization is no longer obscure to us. It must present the struggle between Eros and Death, between the instinct of life and the instinct of destruction, as it works itself out in the human species.

(Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*¹)

Our Global Challenge: Lasting Happiness, One Heart at a Time

At the dawn of a new millennium, the twenty-first century has brought us face to face with the awesome challenge and promise of a new, global age. In healthcare, the economy, the environment, and daily life, we and our fellow citizens the world over are caught in the grips of a crisis of global scale and inexorable scope that seems to threaten not just our dreams but our whole way of life. The problems we face as individuals, societies, and as a planet seem so complex and intertwined that the old adage, “In crisis lies opportunity,” seems hollow to many right now. Is there a thread that ties together the runaway cost of healthcare, the epidemic rise of obesity and school violence, the bursting of the latest financial bubble, and the present dangers of terrorism and global warming? If the challenges before us have no obvious precedent in our lifetimes or those of our forebears, where do we turn to find our way?

As a physician and psychotherapist, I see something similar to today’s global crisis on the individual scale every time someone new comes to me with their hopes dashed by a life-threatening illness, a heart-wrenching divorce, or a career dead-end. I specialize in meditative maps and tools that help people find ways to heal, grow, and change, just when their lives seem to be falling apart. My work is to teach the insights and skills they need to clear a path through their trauma towards a new way of being. Time and again, I’ve seen people gradually arrive at a new way of life better than any they’ve known or could have dreamed possible. At historic points like these, when the whole world seems to be on the verge of a global meltdown, I feel incredibly lucky to have over twenty years of such uplifting experience to fall back on; twenty years and a thousand stories that have given me an unshakable confidence

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in the truly boundless potential we human beings have to heal ourselves and transform our lives.

I've written *Sustainable Happiness* as a crash course of sorts, meant to introduce a broader audience to what I believe may be humanity's most complete and systematic approach to finding optimal health and lasting happiness in complex lives like ours. It makes accessible the healing insights, skills, and life-strategies I use to help individuals navigate cataclysmic change, in the awareness that the global solutions we need today must begin and end with solutions on the human scale: one mind, one heart, one life at a time. The book answers two questions that were once issues just for the few, but are now everyone's daily business. "Is lasting happiness possible in an age of shrinking resources, growing interdependence, and inexorable human limits?" "Is there a reliable way anyone and everyone on this shrinking planet can reach and sustain such true happiness?" This book gives affirmative answers, based on my life's work integrating the latest science of human life and well-being with a science almost as old as history itself.

The new science I explain here is actually the convergence of several promising lines of research around a single hub: a surprisingly hopeful new view of humans and our environment as naturally prepared to exist in stable harmony and interdependence. The new brain science, new views of human evolution, research on stress and the benefits of meditation, the new behavioral economics, and the complex science of global sustainability have begun to come together like the pieces of a world puzzle that promises to provide a clear map of where we've gone wrong and what needs to change. The difficulty with this puzzle is that there is still no clear consensus on exactly how the pieces come together, much less on how to read and apply the new perspective to chart a course-correction for our personal lives and for civilization as a whole.

Back to the Future: The Time-Machine of Indic Contemplative Science

Fortunately for us all, the last decades have introduced us to more than one kind of new science. Although we moderns have lost touch with our own traditional wisdom and life arts, growing access to the cultures of India, East Asia, and Tibet has opened a whole new route to ancient traditions of contemplative science that anticipated in startling detail the new view of human nature and happiness we have only recently stumbled upon in the West. While these timeless sciences differ from ours in their language and methods, their surprising agreement with our latest breakthroughs lends support to our new science, while also offering a time-machine of sorts that allows us to glimpse what it might look like centuries from now. Those of us who have been lucky enough to take that time machine into the future by studying the precocious sciences of classical India and modern Tibet have been able to bring to the current crisis of health and happiness the perspective and technical mastery that normally comes of centuries of gradual advancement. My

senior colleagues in this journey, Herbert Benson, Jon Kabat-Zinn, Daniel Goleman, and Marsha Linehan, have translated the most basic insights and skills of India's contemplative science into the young disciplines of mind/body medicine,² mindfulness-based psychotherapy,³ and emotional intelligence.⁴

In this book I share the fruits of my own time-travel: a program in sustainable living that integrates the emerging new science of human happiness with a rare Indic tradition of contemplative science that holds enormous promise for us all. Although all the first civilizations from Greece to China shared a fascination with contemplative states, it was India that made contemplation into a science and healing art. Of all human cultures, India long ago foresaw the need for teaching the art of contemplative living not just to spiritual elites but to average people of all inclinations, backgrounds, and walks of life. This is why ancient Indian practices like yoga and mindfulness meditation have gone mainstream so quickly in the West. Fortunately for us all, these now popular practices represent only the first installment from the vast time-capsule of the world's most complete and accessible systems of contemplative living and learning. While my colleagues have focused on skills like mindfulness, developed for monastic living, my work and this book are based on an exceptional tradition tailored to lay students facing the challenges of everyday life in the world. This tradition evolved at Nalanda, a world-renowned teaching center in North India that hosted the world's first university a millennium before the first universities in the West, open to all students: secular and religious, lay and professional, national and international.⁵

Over time, Nalanda's masters combined the most effective meditation skills, healing insights and life strategies into a step-by-step system of life-long self-healing called the gradual path.⁶ Before Nalanda was destroyed by invaders, this unique system was fully transplanted into Tibet, where it thrived for centuries. Because Tibet was so isolated until the Chinese forced the Dalai Lama and others to flee in 1959, this world class approach to self-healing has come to our attention only in recent years. Prophetically, the most modern form of this rare tradition is called the *Time Machine* or *Wheel of Time*.⁷ According to legend, the art and science of the *Wheel of Time* have been preserved in a time-capsule: the mountain kingdom hidden in Central Asia called Shambhala (depicted as Shangrila in the classic film *Lost Horizons*). To prime your imagination, see the image of the *Wheel of Time* in the color insert, the main figure framed by its living role-model, the Dalai Lama, and flanking Shambhala rulers Manju Yashas and Rudra Chakri (above), as well as by twin protective archetypes, the *Fierce Mother* and *Diamond Thunderbolt* (below). As the prophecy goes, the crown jewel of the kingdom, its system for teaching contemplative life in a world torn by stress, trauma, and violence, will help spark the dawn of a new global era of inner and outer peace for all humanity when the world is ready. The program spelled out in *Sustainable Happiness* is the fruit of decades of work distilling the essentials of this unique system of contemplative living into a form that is both accessible and effective for contemporary minds and lives.

An Ancient Wisdom More Modern than Modern Science

At the heart of this program is the *Wheel of Time's* vision of the future of human science and civilization, based on surprisingly current views of our inner and outer environments. Anticipating the breakthroughs of quantum physics and systems theory, the natural science of the *Wheel of Time* views the world around us as a cosmic clockwork, in which all things and events unfold in harmonic waves of total, mutual interdependence. Anticipating the breakthroughs of social evolution and the mind/body connection, the life science of the *Wheel of Time* views humanity as inseparable from nature, and as thriving in personal and social harmony through the cohesive forces of inner peace and loving interdependence. Based on this scientific vision, the *Wheel of Time* views the progress of human individuals and societies as guided and advanced by a timeless, contemplative science that teaches all humans how to adapt our body, speech, mind, and intuition to the future of global interdependence. The keys to this science are the meditative skills, insights and life-strategies that help us tame the biology of stress and the psychology of trauma which block our instincts for peaceful living and civilized happiness. These keys are the very insights and arts that have been tailored to the demands of everyday life in the gradual path teachings I've woven into the program presented in this book.

While the *Wheel of Time's* vision for our planet sounds refreshingly hopeful, is it realistic or just wishful thinking? Does it really square with what modern science has taught us about the nature of reality and human potential? In struggling with this question over the years, I arrived at a conclusion that initially hit me with the disorienting force of a culture shock. After decades of following breaking developments in seemingly unrelated frontiers of science, it began to dawn on me that much of the science I'd learned in grade school, college, and medical school was already outdated. As the pieces of the new frontier science began to fit together, a decidedly different view of nature and life began to emerge. I began to realize that what I'd been taught was not just science, but science woven into a cultural view of the world based on assumptions that were now centuries old. The view that our world is made of atoms in a void, and is nothing like mind, came as much from the philosophy of Aristotle and Democritus as it did from the discoveries of Galileo and Newton. The view of nature as hostile to life, as a place where beings evolve accidentally and thrive only by constant struggle came as much from the philosophy of Epicurius and Lucretius as it did from the discoveries of Darwin. And finally, the view of human history and society as a war of all against all, a competition for scarce resources which only the most aggressive and self-seeking win, grows as much from the philosophy of Gorgias and Hobbes as it does out of the "classical" economics of Malthus and Adam Smith. Woven together into a fabric that was part science, part philosophy, these views painted a picture of the world as made of atomic bits of matter and life, all forced to collide into one another with a violence more likely to cause mutual destruction than stable bonding.

Enter the new science of the last half century. Quantum physics gives us a world in which matter is made of energy and space, more intangible by far than the stuff dreams are made of.⁸ Sociobiology and neuroscience provide a new picture of evolution and development, as intricate, living webs of interdependence and social connectivity.⁹ And social ecology and behavioral economics give us the imperative that humanity must progress towards a sustainable future that can support the global pursuit of happiness.¹⁰ Woven together into a fabric that is part science, part futuristic vision, these views paint a picture of the world as made of waves of energy and life that we all must learn to conserve and cultivate. So the bottom line is this: the teachings of the *Wheel of Time* can look like wishful thinking or visionary science depending on the lens through which we read them. If we choose the science that shaped our parents' and teachers' view of the world as a lens, the *Wheel of Time* will read like a fable straight out of *Alice in Wonderland*. But if we use the mind-expanding science of the twenty-first century as a lens, the *Wheel of Time* reads like an encyclopedia of science for the next generation, brought back from the future by time machine.

Even assuming that the *Wheel of Time's* optimism is closer to current research than the science most of us learned in school, we naturally wonder, "Can such an ancient, contemplative vision truly be relevant to our technological culture and complex way of life?" The answer to this question lies in another question. How do we understand the demands that make our lives feel so stressful and our future so uncertain? As part of our modern view of history, most of us attribute the predicament we're in today to what's happened in the last few decades, if not the last few hours or minutes. Our modern faith in progress teaches us not to look further back into the past, but to dismiss as irrelevant most if not all of what humanity has confronted and learned in the course of its history. We attribute the stress in our lives to a recent health challenge, a setback at work, or conflict in a primary relationship. If we're really stretching, we may point to our iPhone or Blackberry, the recent financial crisis, global outsourcing, or larger concerns like terrorism and the environment—all things that have never happened before in human history. Yet such common complaints barely scratch the surface of our predicament. In effect, they confuse what *triggers* stress with its root causes.

We now know that the overwhelming majority of the harm done by stress is not directly caused by external events, but by the internal cascade of responses those events can trigger in our minds and bodies.¹¹ It doesn't take a laboratory to prove this. Experience teaches us that one man's stress is another's passion; and that what stresses us royally today may roll off our back tomorrow. So what is it in us that takes the bait of a trigger and gets us trapped in a heart-pounding nightmare of self-defeating fear, rage or shame? In most cases, what gets us to take the bait is our ingrained habit of worst-case thinking, backed up by memories of prior trauma; and what gets us trapped in reliving those traumas is the biology of the stress response, a self-protective reflex pre-programmed into the oldest, reptilian part of our brains.

In the chapters that follow, we will explore the psychology and biology of these internal forces, along with the contemplative insights and skills we need to master them. For now, I mention them to underscore a point. The root causes of the all-too common feeling we have that our lives are overwhelming and unmanageable are not the latest gadgetry and complexities of our age, but certain elements of our nature that reach beyond the dawn of civilization, beyond the birth of humanity, almost as far back as the origins of life on earth. Viewed in light of the natural history of these causes, the recorded history of civilization is less than an eye-blink. This is why the wisdom of great sages like Socrates, Buddha, Isaiah, Zoroaster, and Confucius, who taught in the so-called axial age when humanity was first turning to civilization, still speaks to us quite directly today. And this is why the Buddha's diagnosis and prescription for the human condition, compounded with centuries of refinement into the time-release formula of the *Wheel of Time*, can be as relevant and beneficial here and now as it was in twelfth century India and Tibet.

Life on the Fence: Human Nature in an Unnatural World

What exactly is Shakyamuni Buddha's diagnosis of the human condition? And how do the healing teachings of the Nalanda tradition, preserved in the *Wheel of Time*, provide practical solutions for our predicament today? In light of contemporary biology, the inexorable stresses and strains of the great majority of humans who live in civilization is the result of an evolutionary mismatch. While our early human and pre-human ancestors evolved over hundreds of millions of years to survive in the wild, we and our civilized forbears have increasingly been living in an unnatural environment less than ten thousand years old. As a result, our nature is simply not that well matched to the challenges of our daily lives. The problem is that for almost the entirety of our natural history, we humans and our mammalian ancestors have had to straddle two very different environments. On the one hand, we've had to survive the life-or-death challenges of being part of the food chain and the natural order, always vulnerable to fiercer predators and natural cycles or disasters. On the other hand, as mammals we also evolved to create and thrive in social environments of unnatural safety and abundance, produced as a result of ever-widening circles of ever more intelligent cooperation.

To meet the polar challenges of these two divergent environments, early mammals built on the binary nature of the reptilian brain. One mode of that brain supported the work of survival: seeking out food and shelter, fighting, flying, or freezing in the face of predators or prey. The opposite mode of the reptilian brain supported the work of abundance: resting and digesting, healing and growing, exploring and playing, mating, and tending offspring. The early mammalian brain added an extra layer or cortex that enhanced the complexity, range, and scope of both these binary modes.¹² Enhanced attachment and panic responses allowed our highly vulnerable yet collaborative mammal ancestors to engage others in the work of survival. Enhanced capacities

for empathy and communication allowed our highly sociable and teachable mammal ancestors to engage others in nurturing the young, social learning and play. Further enhancements along the same lines were made possible by the evolution of another layer, the new cortex, in higher mammals like our primate ancestors. Yet throughout the entire fifty million years of their evolution, except for the eye-blink of the last several thousand years of human history, our mammalian ancestors had to be ready to turn on a predator's growl or a sudden windfall from one mode to the other.

Not surprisingly, then, our nature remains perpetually on the fence, ever alert to the shifting winds of survival or abundance. Meanwhile, the rise of complex social systems, animal husbandry, and sustainable agriculture finally tipped the primeval balance of life in the wild towards the advent of civilization. Increasingly over the last ten millennia, humans have lived in an environment that was more and more artificial, less and less natural. By the time of the axial age, around five hundred years before the common era, advances in agriculture and social organization had created unprecedented and unnatural conditions of more or less continuous security and abundance. This was especially true for those living in the first city-states around the great river valleys of Eurasia.¹³ Humanity quickly rose to the top of the food chain, making the survival mode and its primitive fight-flight responses all but obsolete. Finally, civilized living gave free reign to the abundance mode, supporting the lifelong development and fullest use of humanity's incomparably social and creative brain.

Yet, as humanity experienced this revolutionary change for the better in its average expected living environment, human nature didn't change one *iota*. We humans have remained on the fence, ever on the look-out for the next life-threatening predator or disaster. And since human ingenuity tamed one predator, one force of nature after another, we turned our fear, rage, and shame onto ourselves and projected them onto other members of our own species. Enhanced by our powerful brains, something as artificial and arbitrary as a deadline can easily be mistaken for a death-threat, triggering our traumatic memories of childhood helplessness, which in turn trigger the mindless reflex of the stress-response.¹⁴

This would all be just a nightmare were it not for the fact that, under perceived life or death stress, the reptilian brain prepares us to face the physical threat of a predator by overriding and shutting down the mammalian brain. Tragically, this reptilian override shuts down not just bells and whistles but precisely those higher faculties we need to navigate the complex social stresses of civilized life. So it is that our binary nature keeps us feeling perpetually on edge, leaving our higher mammalian brain ever vulnerable to being hijacked by our own inner reptile, like a dinosaur stomping through the china shop of our daily lives. To make matters worse, the damage done by our inner dinosaur can pile up. If our time spent hijacked by stress outweighs our time recharging in abundance mode, the wear and tear literally eats away at us from within. Over time, our natural systems of immunity, healing, learning,

and collaboration erode, predisposing us to what some call the diseases of civilization: addiction, obesity, heart disease, cancer, anxiety, and depression, not to mention compulsive behaviors like boom-and-bust risk taking, compulsive hoarding, and explosive violence.¹⁵

The on-the-fence syndrome of civilized humanity largely explains why smart, able people living in unprecedented leisure and opportunity can still feel and react like cornered animals so much of the time. And there's one more rub. The trouble caused by the mismatch between our binary nature and our unnatural lifestyle is aggravated by the self-protective bias evolution has pre-programmed into our nervous system. Given this bias, the aversive conditioning of stress and trauma seems to have a greater grip on our mindset and responses than the positive reinforcement of security and happiness.¹⁶ Of course, this makes good intuitive sense. As a fail-safe, it's more crucial to our survival that we cling to the memory of any remotely life-threatening event than that we recall even the most abundant windfall. As a result of this bias, it takes an unwavering certainty and many decisive acts of will to get us off the fence, to unequivocally let go of our inner dinosaur and choose instead to live in sustainable abundance as totally committed mammals.

An Endless Web with One Root: The Fractal Logic of Our Discontent

Is it really possible for one evolutionary mismatch to cause the many, seemingly unrelated problems that make up our current global crisis? The idea runs counter to the analytic logic of modern science and medicine. This logic teaches us to look for the origins of problems—and hence their solution—by isolating problems and reducing their elements to the minutest particulars. This is the logic that seeks to reveal the mysteries of the universe by smashing atoms into more and more ungraspable fragments and searching through them for an “elementary particle” or “fundamental structure” of matter. It is the logic that seeks to unravel the intricacies of life by reducing complex living systems to the molecular blueprint of DNA. And it is also the logic that seeks to diagnose and treat all illnesses, physical, mental, behavioral, and environmental, by reducing them to the molecular level of biochemistry and eventually to single genes. At the heart of this logic we recognize the atomistic assumptions of the paradigm of modern science we inherited from the likes of Galileo, Newton, and Darwin.

In stark contrast to this approach is the new paradigm of interdependence, weaving together quantum physics, systems biology, ecology, and medical anthropology with current research in physiology, neuroscience, and functional medicine.¹⁷ Representative of this paradigm is the new science of stress, inflammation and neuroimmunology, which seeks to understand illness and health by mapping complex interactions that coordinate all body systems in response to the challenges of an individual's changing mindset, behavior, and lifestyle.¹⁸ This new science has clarified linkages between disorders

long thought to be quite distinct, from atherosclerosis and obesity to cancer and autoimmune syndromes.¹⁹ In the realm of neuropsychology, researchers have mapped most of the disorders in modern psychiatry—from anxiety and depression to addiction, post-traumatic stress, and even schizophrenia—along a spectrum of progressive wear and tear caused by the brain’s chronic exposure to the corrosive effects of stress hormones and inflammatory cytokines.²⁰

Finally, the findings of mind/body medicine, the latest research on violence, and the emerging field of neuroeconomics allow us to extend this web of linkages to public health epidemics like obesity, domestic abuse, and school violence, as well as global crises like our boom-and-bust markets, international terrorism and global warming, tying them all to one root: the neuropsychology of stress and trauma.²¹ These linkages should not be surprising when we consider that stress and trauma affect the whole organism, mind and body; and that, since we are such social animals, the stress and trauma of relationships—between individuals and between social groups—is handed down the single greatest source of stress affecting humanity. Since understanding these linkages is crucial, we will examine them in more depth in the chapters that follow. I mention them here to help dispel the skepticism with which we tend to view any approach that tackles problems by connecting the dots or fleshing out the big picture of our lives and world. The fact that contemporary research is inexorably heading towards a big picture very much like the one drawn by ancient contemplative science should help reassure us that that ancient science may well help us see the forest for the trees, despite its exotic origins.

The Global Legacy of Shakyamuni, Our Luckiest Sage

So it is that my colleagues and I have increasingly begun to turn for ideas and tools to humanity’s timeless contemplative traditions and the civilizing wisdom of the axial age. From time immemorial, human spiritual traditions around the world have taught our ancestors the importance of choosing our abundance instincts for peace, care, and love over survival instincts for fear, rage, and shame. Born in the cradles of civilization, the great sages saw its rise and spread as the inevitable future for all humanity. Enlightened by that vision, they tried in various ways to prepare their students to fully adapt to civilized living, teaching people to cut through instinctive confusion and disarm the destructive emotions that fuel stress and trauma. Since the secular mainstream of the modern West has steadily drifted further and further from that ancient vision, it not only has fallen prey to the corrosive effects of stress and violence, but also has tragically lost the civilizing wisdom and arts of its own contemplative traditions. Fortunately for us all, other cultures have carefully preserved and refined the teachings of the axial age. The luckiest and most successful of humanity’s ancient sages was Shakyamuni, the sage of the Shakya clan, also known as Buddha, meaning someone awakened or enlightened.

Unlike his contemporaries elsewhere in the world, Shakyamuni had the benefit of access to India’s yogic contemplative arts as well as the support of

a wealthy, tolerant, and enlightened community that embraced him and his teachings. After six years of meditating in the wilderness, the former prince realized he had personally ended the repetitive cycle of senseless suffering that plagued his people and all humanity. His first public teaching of four noble truths diagnosed the human condition as one of mindless, self-destructive compulsion, caused by a cycle of repetitive, traumatic actions and reactions, rooted in our instinctive confusion and destructive emotions.²² In the optimistic conviction that all of us have the potential to end this cycle and cut its roots, he taught a way to heal our traumatic condition and to re-learn how to live in peace, care, and love.

Shakyamuni believed that we humans, along with our animal ancestors, are endowed with two kinds of instincts between which we must choose: violent self-protective instincts that drive traumatic development and compulsive life; and non-violent, self-transcendent instincts that foster peaceful development and benevolent life. In the course of his enlightenment, he came to see the natural history of his own self-transcendence as a series of many lives in which his prior incarnations, both human and mammal, chose to respond to life-or-death challenges by renouncing violent reactions in favor of peaceful acts of compassion and altruism. The way he taught was a path of self-healing powered by the liberating forces of wisdom, contemplation, and ethics. Working in synergy, the healing disciplines he prescribed foster the self-knowledge, will-power, and self-mastery that enable ordinary humans to take the decisive actions needed to cut our ties to our violent memories and instincts, and to commit to the peaceful, benevolent side of our nature, one breath at a time.

So it is that, as strange as it seems, the great sage of ancient India, along with his colleagues in China and Greece, arrived at a diagnosis and treatment of the clash between our ambivalent nature and civilized life long before modern sages like Freud or the new science of stress and trauma. Fortunately for us all, Shakyamuni was far luckier and more successful at implementing his healing message for humanity than his contemporaries to the East and West. Privileged by his royal birth and sheltered by the exceptional security, wealth and tolerance of the city-states of North India, Shakyamuni was free to teach for fifty years until his natural death at eighty-four, and was widely supported in his efforts to found and refine his own teaching community.

As a result of Shakyamuni's good fortune, after his death, the influence of his teaching and community steadily grew.²³ Its spread was due in part to the recognition and help of the first emperor of India, Ashoka, who was India's Julius Caesar and Constantine rolled into one.²⁴ Unlike the Socratic academy in the West, the Buddhist academy was never forced into decline by India's political or religious elites, but reached out to educate people of all races, genders, and classes in the Buddha's civilizing science of contemplative living. While the West fell into a "dark age," Buddhist India rose to its place as a world beacon of enlightenment, exemplified by the fifteen hundred year history of the great university of Nalanda.

Far from being repressed, the classical wisdom of Shakyamuni was developed and refined at Nalanda into a science of contemplative living and sustainable civilization that profoundly changed the course of mainstream science, political economy, and spirituality in India.²⁵ In fact, Buddhist contemplative science and civilization became India's single most important contribution to world history, as visiting scholars from China, Japan, Korea, Burma, Thailand, Indonesia, and Tibet came to Nalanda for new insights, methods, texts, and expertise to help guide their cultures of origin. Among the latest societies to import this tradition, Tibet is unique in that it preserved the final, most complete version of Nalanda's curriculum. Among the least developed societies to integrate Indian Buddhism, Tibet was also free to incorporate this tradition in its entirety, as a blueprint for the world's greatest experiment in non-violent civilization. So, despite centuries of isolation from the ancient river valley centers, the contemplative science of Tibet is not only among the world's oldest and most continuous wisdom traditions, but is also one of the most universal, comprehensive, and scientific.

On the Way to Contemplative Science: De-Polarizing the Modern Mind

In the course of sharing the fruits of this rare tradition with a broad range of individuals and groups, over the years I've encountered in others the same mental blocks to understanding Indic contemplative science I've had to overcome in myself. So before I introduce the logic and format of *Sustainable Happiness*, it may help if I share what I've learned about the preconceptions that keep the Western educated mind from fully integrating insights and arts that come from a culture so far removed from ours in place and time. In my experience, these preconceptions cluster in two polar mindsets that have diverged increasingly in the West since the Renaissance and Enlightenment eras. These polar mindsets stem from the rivalry between the secular and spiritual faces of Western culture, based on modern science and the Judeo-Christian religious tradition. For convenience, I call these "materialism" and "romanticism." In most Western educated minds, as in Western culture itself, these two conflicting outlooks coexist in a complex tension a biologist might call "symbiosis," and a psychologist, "hostile dependence."

Our materialist mindset tells us that science is all about objective, physical facts, which can only be known by eliminating, as much as possible, the subjective element of human language, culture, and experience. It tells us that life evolved from the mutation and selection of various forms of DNA, and that the diversity of bodies and minds emerge mechanically from these forms. This mindset pictures the origin of life in a way that makes conscious intentions and actions appear to have had little or no real impact on the course of evolution and development. It tells us that nature pits each individual and species in a struggle for scarce resources against all other life, a struggle which only the fittest—those with the fiercest mix of brute force and self-interested

cunning—survive. And finally, it tells us that human cultures—with all their diverse ways of knowing and living—are likewise engaged in a process of evolution in which the most modern are necessarily the most advanced, and in which greater material wealth and power is the final arbiter of cultural superiority or progress.

On the flip side of our hybrid worldview is the romantic mindset. This mindset tells us that physical science is in conflict with ultimate truths and moral values that are eternal and independent of nature and nature's laws. It tells us that humanity is the only form of life with an eternal soul, created with a purpose by a divine mind or spirit whose absolute knowledge and will ultimately decide the fate of all individuals and groups. It tells us that human societies are the reflection of a divine community governed by eternal values revealed by God, values not subject to human understanding or alteration. And it tells us that human culture and history are involved in a process of inexorable decline from a golden age of revelation, a process in which only those cultures that follow the letter and spirit of that revelation without innovation will be spared decline, to triumph in the end.

The relevance of these two mindsets for those interested in learning from the contemplative science of India and Tibet is clear. Despite the point by point polarity of their preconceptions, both our materialist and romantic mindsets share a tacit agreement on one deeply held conviction: there is no viable way to bridge the gulf between modern science and humanity's ancient spiritual traditions. So the very idea of a "science" that is "contemplative"—that employs reflective or meditative techniques drawn from human spiritual traditions—strikes both our mindsets as doubtful at best, and at worst as an oxymoron or contradiction in terms.²⁶ Our materialist premise that science applies only to physical facts and not to the mind, makes the idea of understanding and mastering our lives with the aid of meditation sound subjective, even spiritual, rather than truly scientific. On the other hand, our romantic idea of meditation as a sacred means of knowing God, not a pragmatic discipline of self-knowledge or self-mastery, makes the idea of understanding and changing our lives with its aid sound secular and mundane, rather than truly contemplative.

Not surprisingly, things look quite different from the standpoint of the Indian and Tibetan traditions. Since Indian science and spirituality, while always distinct, never diverged as radically as they did in the West, the idea of a convergence of science and contemplation seems so commonsensical from the Indic perspective that using meditation as a tool in medicine, psychological self-healing, and education seems like a no-brainer. Similar culture clashes appear when Western educated people are first exposed to the views of life, society, and history assumed as givens by Indian and Tibetan contemplative science. The fact that such doubts occur so predictably to the Western schooled mind yet seem odd or extreme to those schooled in the Indic traditions led me to look into why we in the West have evolved such polarized views of science and contemplation. As I see it, there are two contemporary disciplines which can help shed the most light on this question: psychotherapy and mind/body

medicine. Among them, I find psychotherapy most helpful, since I believe its insights and methods offer the closest cross-cultural match with the contemplative science of Buddhist India and Tibet.

Psychotherapy and Contemplative Science: The Future of Civilized Happiness

Given the complex, global nature of our present crisis, a natural reference point for our look at the relations between science and contemplation in the West is the “new science” of Sigmund Freud. I opened this introduction with a quote from *Civilization and its Discontents*, the classic in which Freud applied all he’d learned about our human nature and potential to humanity’s first global crisis, ushered in by the unprecedented violence of the first and second world wars. Anticipating the insights of recent science and reaffirming the wisdom of humanity’s ancient sages, the father of psychoanalysis traced the crisis of his day to the mismatch between our binary human nature and the social-emotional challenge of civilized living. His depiction of the evolution of civilization as “*the struggle between Eros and Death, between the instinct of life and the instinct of destruction, as it works itself out in the human species,*” dovetails quite neatly with the diagnosis of the human condition shared by contemporary biology and Buddhist contemplative science. And although his prognosis is more guarded, the treatment he prescribed also shares a deep resonance with current mind/body medicine and with traditional Buddhist psychology.

Kin Under the Skin: Deep Resemblances Between Psychotherapy & Buddhism

From a global perspective on civilization, if we consider all human cultural traditions as part of one extended family, and link them not by the surface criteria of cultural history but by more deeply shared aims, insights, and methods—by their cultural DNA so to speak—I believe that we find something surprising about the traditions I align in this book. The resemblances many of my peers have observed between contemporary psychotherapy or mind/body medicine and ancient disciplines like the contemplative arts and sciences of India and Tibet are not superficial but deep. They reflect a commonality as deep in us as the roots of our ways of life: our simplest daily needs and activities.

Like other mammals, we all seek happiness; we want to live well. We each have minds and bodies for which we must care; and we all have relationships about which we care. More than any other creatures, even other mammals, we humans learn to live well—to care well for ourselves and others—in and through intimate bonds with others of our kind. In fact, we cannot learn to live much at all as humans without such bonds. Yet unlike most modern disciplines and relationships, those in which we learn to live well do not divide us—matter from spirit, thought from experience, reflection from action—but teach us to care by caring for us as we are, as whole living beings.²⁷ That means

that they care for us in body *and* mind, speech *and* reflection, experience *and* action.

Given the way we are, it should not be surprising that most, if not all human cultures have evolved disciplines and bonds devoted mainly to helping individuals and groups learn to live well. This is why, when we get beyond our own cultural resistances to comparing these distinct traditions, we find not only striking similarities in aims and methods, but deep and pervasive family resemblances even in the working details of theory and practice. And these deep resemblances help explain why, despite the exceptional role both psychotherapy and Buddhist psychology play in conventional science and medicine today, they are both very much in demand among professionals and in the larger universe of contemporary culture and life.

As for the confluence of psychotherapy and Buddhism, so much fine work has been done in this fast-growing field by so many close colleagues and friends—Mark Epstein,²⁸ Jeremy Saffran,²⁹ Chris Germer and Paul Fulton,³⁰ Jeffery Rubin,³¹ Pilar Jennings³²—that we need only review a few key points here. Of course, most of their groundbreaking work has focused on the deep synergy between mindfulness meditation and the free-associative method of psychotherapy. Given my own approach to this work—as one who combines contemplative teaching with contemplative therapy, and draws on the modern science of Tibet as well as the classical science of mindfulness—I see this confluence through a wider than usual lens.

Where most of my colleagues tend to view psychotherapy and Buddhist psychology as two complementary healing techniques, from the vantage of my interdisciplinary work, they appear to me more broadly as two complementary science-based ways of seeing and transforming human life. Specifically, beneath the surface historical and cultural differences, I see the two sister traditions deeply related by their common effort to see and treat the human condition from the perspective of the life-shaping power of the embodied mind. In particular, these sibling traditions are deeply aligned not just in the fact that they take a primarily psychological approach to the world, but also specifically because they both share an approach to the mind that is deeply scientific, evolutionary, and therapeutic. A quick glance at the three key elements of theory and practice that earmark these two approaches to the mind will help us see them as intimate human cultural relatives under the skin.

First, what distinguishes these two as scientific psychologies is their shared commitment to mental causality. That is, the assumption that mind works not by personal forces like will—whether it be the will of the self or of God—but rather by impersonal forces of cause and effect, distinct from but as natural as the forces at work in the physical world. Second, what distinguishes them as evolutionary psychologies is their shared commitment to a naturalistic, multi-life view of the origin, development, and potential of the human body and mind, a view that stresses the interaction of nature and nurture, instinct and learning. Third and last, what makes them both therapeutic psychologies is their shared reliance on a healing pedagogy: an empathic art of replicating the

parent-child bond as the natural context for healing childhood trauma and for modeling an adult life of loving and caring human development.

What Goes Around Comes Around: The Necessity of Mental Causation

For modern psychotherapy and Buddhist contemplative science, the assumption that consciousness is governed by a form of causality as natural as the causality of inanimate matter is what earmarks any psychology as scientific, that is: as a truly realistic and effective way for humans to understand and control their own minds. Freud insisted that every activity of the mind had determinate causes and effects that were neither reducible to neural events nor randomly disconnected from them. In so doing, he was taking his new science into a no man's land between our materialist and romantic worldviews, where it would draw fire from both mindsets. The materialist in us tends to see mental events as too flimsy to cause anything, and equates the idea that they have real effects with the Western religious claim that the soul, like God, works in mysterious ways, above and beyond natural law. The romantic in us tends to see the idea that mind and its acts depend on the brain as robbing the mind, spirit, or soul of its autonomy, potential, and power.

Long before Freud, Shakyamuni's first teaching of four noble truths—suffering, origin, freedom, and path—charted a new middle way between science and spirituality. His truths presented human suffering and happiness as the predictable effects of psychological causes, rather than as determined by some divine order or by mindless matter. While most historians of science attribute the insight of causality to the Greek physician Hippocrates, his rough contemporary Shakyamuni deserves equal credit for the breakthrough. Its revolutionary importance was not lost on the Sage's followers, who hail his contribution to this day with a formula that sounds more like a scientific theorem than "the Buddhist creed," as some scholars dubbed it: "All things spring from causes; so the Realized One taught those causes; and how to master them; such is his way! Hail that Great Sage!"³³

Admittedly, the idea of mental causality is not very sexy; and it doesn't immediately spring to mind when we think of the contributions of psychoanalysis or Buddhist psychology. Yet as a fundamental assumption, it is directly responsible for the most distinctive insights that characterize and link these two diverse traditions. The very term *psycho-analysis* describes the idea that the human psyche is not a fixed unit or whole, as we normally see and feel it to be, but can be easily analyzed into causally related parts. The power of psychoanalysis lies in its ability to help us understand and control the unseen causal forces of instinct and emotion that drive our behavior, much as modern physics and astronomy helped reveal unseen forces that govern how matter moves on earth and in space.

Likewise, the premise of mental causality quietly shaped the way Shakyamuni approached the mind. He and his heirs did not call their psychology

“Buddhist” but described it as “the psychology of selflessness,” based on his most profound and revolutionary insight. When the human mind is laid bare by contemplating its causal workings, it is found not to be the fixed, unified whole we imagine, but a complex process of constantly changing systems and elements, including instinctive emotions, sensations, thoughts, and perceptions. The critical insight of selflessness is complemented by the positive theory of dependent origination, which traces the needless suffering of repetitive stress and trauma to a twelve-fold cycle of interactive causes normally unseen within the mind. The power of Buddhist psychology lies in its ability to help us learn to recognize and control the unhealthy elements that drive this cycle so that we can break free of it and cultivate the healthy factors that foster the healing circle of inner peace, freedom, and happiness.³⁴

Nature Plus Nurture: The Evolutionary Outlook of Shakyamuni and Freud

A second key element that links psychotherapy and Buddhist contemplative science is their common assumption of an evolutionary outlook, that is: a naturalistic, multi-life view of the origin, development, and potential of the human body and mind. Expanding on Darwin, Freud’s psychology is in large part an attempt to give the West a scientific view of the mind based on the theory of natural selection. Out of this basic assumption come two distinctive features of his new science. The first is an emphasis on the role instincts like narcissism, sex, and aggression play in driving and shaping the life of the mind. The second is an emphasis on the way early parent-child interactions catalyze and inform the individual’s developing personality and mental life.

Although our current theory of evolution is distinctively Darwin’s, many if not most human cultures through history have held some form of the view that humans evolved naturally from and with other animals, rather than being created by God. Mythological symbols of creatures that were part human and part animal—like the Greek Minotaur—attest to the common human wisdom that we share primal instincts with other forms of animal life. Likewise, Freud’s notion that the human ego is formed based on the developing mind’s instinctive choice of one parent as an object of desire and the other as an object of identification was inspired in part by the myth behind Sophocles’ tragedy, *Oedipus Rex*.

So it should come as no shock that the Greeks’ Indian contemporaries, Shakyamuni and his heirs, saw human nature in similar terms: as driven by primal narcissism and instinctive emotions inherited from past human and animal lives, stretching back in an unbroken continuum through “beginningless time.” Nor should it surprise us that Buddhist psychologists, like their Greek colleagues, viewed human development as an interplay between the physical process begun by the union of egg and sperm and a distinctively mental process. According to tradition, this latter process begins when the nascent consciousness, driven by instinctive narcissism, desire, and aggres-

sion, forms a new ego by choosing one parent as a love object and the other as a rival or role-model.³⁵ While there are major differences in the way modern psychologists and their Buddhist counterparts see human evolution and development, the insight that the life of the mind grows out of the interplay of inherited instincts and patterns with present interactions is clearly fundamental to both these traditions.

The Science of Reparenting: Harnessing the Strong Force of Civilization

The last commonality to consider, a healing pedagogy, has to do with the common assumption psychotherapy and Buddhist psychology make about the best way to alleviate human suffering. Based on their shared view of the interplay between human nature and nurture, both traditions agree that the future of civilized life critically depends on how well we humans learn to care for ourselves and others; and both agree that an art of empathic communication modeled on parent-child bonding is the most natural and effective way to teach people how to reduce stress, heal childhood trauma, and build an adult life based on loving human development. As our lives become increasingly complex, there are fewer and fewer times and places where we can share our personal experience with others as whole human beings, including all our conflicting thoughts, instincts, emotions, and habits. This trend is made worse by the growing gulf between our secular society and the spiritual communities which traditionally helped us through personal distress and crisis.

These factors help explain why psychotherapy has steadily grown in importance as an exception to the rule: as one of the rare contexts in contemporary life, even within modern medicine, where we are accepted and cared for as whole individuals. This is no accident but the fruit of Freud's work crafting the context of "talking therapy" as an improved version of the parent-child bond. In so doing, he encouraged people to bring their unmet childhood wishes and needs into the therapy-bond, transferring them onto the person of the therapist. The challenge of the therapist is to respond to these with greater insight and empathic awareness than the parents, helping the client to overcome childhood traumas and to model a more mature way of being in the world. The way psychotherapy does this is by combining emotional support through the healing bond with two factors that open and challenge the mind: a shared, contemplative state that expands and heightens awareness; and the empathic analysis and insights of the therapist, which challenge the client's self-limiting thoughts, emotions, and actions.

What does this modern medical art of psychotherapy have in common with the spiritual tradition inspired by Shakyamuni and his teaching? We think of spiritual traditions as more intent on *saving* souls than on healing them, and imagine that their methods are limited to indoctrination and ritual. Yet the four noble truths which stand at the bedrock of Shakyamuni's teaching define his primary aim as therapeutic and his method as pedagogical. The

truths begin not with some revelation, but with the obvious human condition of senseless suffering: physical and mental as well as spiritual. More to the point, they approach human suffering in a scientific way Shakyamuni and his heirs likened to a physician's diagnosis, etiology, prognosis, and treatment.

This therapeutic approach translated directly into the Buddha's empathic art of teaching. Instead of pronouncing one doctrine supposed to fit all, he responded differently to each of his students, and was renowned for tailoring his insights and advice to their particular inclinations and needs. So the great Sage was said to listen to each student as his only child, and offer various teachings (symbolically numbered at 84,000) like so many medicines for the different forms of suffering that ail people of all kinds. This interpersonal way of teaching is embodied in the very idea of what it means to belong to the Buddha's community, in his day and in ours. Entry into the Buddha's care is said to begin with the act of personally asking for his guidance and advice, an act known as "taking refuge."

As the primary source of reliable guidance, Shakyamuni himself is usually considered the first refuge, while his teachings and the community of others who follow them are the second and third. I say usually because older, more experienced students were also considered reliable guides, and over the centuries after Shakyamuni's death, came to be seen as Buddhas in training or even "second Buddhas." This shift was institutionalized in the Buddhism preserved in Tibet, where personal mentors are added as a fourth refuge, even taking first place because they personally introduce students to the Buddha and other reliable sources. This underscores the importance Shakyamuni and his heirs placed on the teacher-student bond as the gateway and living matrix of all Buddhist healing and learning. Since this bond is modeled on the parent-child bond, those who seek guidance from the Buddhist tradition are seen as engaging in an act of conscious re-parenting, effectively making them "Buddha's child," or "a child of Buddha's family."

Although re-birth and re-parenting are common metaphors in spiritual traditions, the way Shakyamuni and his heirs saw the pedagogic "method of reliance on a healing guide" has far more in common with Socratic teaching or psychotherapy than with spiritual teaching as we conceive it. This is obvious from two pointers Shakyamuni gave to his own students about how best to rely on him and his teaching. The first warns students against unexamined reliance or uncritical faith, urging them to analyze and test in the same way a modern science teacher might: "Just as a goldsmith buys gold, after testing it by melting, cutting and polishing, the wise accept my words after full examination, not just out of faith (in me)."³⁶ The second warns of the opposite extreme, a self-defeating skepticism that rejects the unfamiliar out of hand, without openly examining or trying it: "Though a man wounded in battle with a doctor at his side might want to ask the name, birth-place, caste and clan of the doctor before accepting treatment, verily he might die before he learns all these things."³⁷

So Shakyamuni's healing pedagogy, like Freud's "reeducation," was one which provided a safety and care reminiscent of the parent-child bond, while challenging students with analytic insights that expose unhealthy habits and with contemplative states that unlock and expand the mind. The conventional wisdom handed down to this day by Tibetan teachers epitomizes the Buddha's middle way between healing personal care and contemplative education. Students should heed their mentor's teachings as they would a doctor's instructions, and apply those teachings as the ultimate medicine for their particular form of the human condition. The great Indian master Matrceta summed it up like this: "The Great Sages don't wash away sins with water; they don't heal suffering by laying on hands; they don't transmit their realization to others; but by teaching reality, they set people free."³⁸

Psychotherapy and Buddhist Contemplative Science: Apples and Oranges?

Even briefly considering these three shared assumptions—mental causality, evolutionary psychology, and healing pedagogy—may be enough for you to appreciate the deep resemblance in theory and practice linking modern psychotherapy and Buddhist psychology. Yet this introduction would not be complete if I didn't also address the differences that make these traditions equally distinct. Apart from the surface distinctions in cultural origins and history, a quick look at three key differences may help map the divide we must bridge if we wish to open an authentic interchange between these traditions.

First of all, the two traditions differ in their prime institutional base. Where psychotherapy grew out of the modern secular institution of scientific medicine, Buddhist psychology evolved from the ancient spiritual institution of contemplative learning. Second, there is a major cultural divide in their approaches to evolutionary psychology. Where psychotherapy assumes the modern materialist take on evolution advanced by Darwin and his heirs, Buddhist psychology assumes the ancient ethical take on evolution formulated in the Buddha's theory of *karma*. Finally, there is a key difference in the pedagogic methods the two traditions employ. Where psychotherapy relies more on individual dialogue and a mild alteration of mind/body state, Buddhist psychology relies equally on individual, group and peer learning, and employs a broad range of increasingly more profound contemplative and yogic states.

Humanistic Medicine, Therapeutic Philosophy

The distinct institutional settings in which these traditions are based accounts for many of the differences that are often used to draw a stark contrast between them. Psychotherapy is supposed to be focused on the disease model, helping individuals with more extreme forms of mental suffering, while Buddhist psychology is more focused on positive or optimal well-being, helping

individuals struggling with the garden variety afflictions of the human condition or blocks to peak performance and optimal human development. Yet of all the disciplines within modern science and medicine, psychotherapy is clearly the most open and attentive to the suffering of everyday life, as well as the positive aims of self-realization, healthy intimacy, and creativity. If we include lesser known schools like humanistic psychology, existential and gestalt therapy, Jungian and Reichian analysis, the distinction becomes even blurrier. And if we factor in the integration of psychoanalytic thought into mainstream culture—from the contemporary social sciences to Hollywood films and TV series—the distinction begins to fade entirely.

Meanwhile, on the Buddhist side, Shakyamuni placed such an emphasis on alleviating all forms of suffering that the community and institution he founded were largely responsible for making medicine and psychology rational, academic disciplines in India and Indicized Asia.³⁹ Buddhist monks and nuns were expected to be able to diagnose and treat their own physical and mental ailments, as well the illnesses of those around them. As early as the classical era, the study of medicine was a required part of the scientific education of all students in Buddhist monastic colleges and universities. The first hospitals and medical schools in Asia were founded by Buddhist communities. Notably, no less an authority than His Holiness the Dalai Lama sees Buddhist learning as equally grounded in secular, scientific knowledge, based on the first two noble truths; and in ethical, spiritual wisdom, based on the last two noble truths. In the course of conversations with His Holiness over the years, I've learned that he sees Buddhist civilization as standing on the legs of two sciences: one for the body, including both physical medicine and biological psychiatry; and one for the mind, including abnormal psychology, the psychology of ordinary life and the positive psychology of self-healing and spiritual experience.

As I see it, both psychotherapy and Buddhist psychology assume a convergence of healing and learning that locates them midway between the clinic and the classroom. In my view, the apparent cultural distance dividing them is more a function of the disparate cultural environments in which they operate than of any intrinsic difference between them as disciplines. Psychotherapy is the most humanistic and contemplative discipline within the universe of modern Western science and medicine; and Buddhist psychology is the most therapeutic and scientific discipline within the universe of ancient Indian philosophy and spirituality.

The Inheritance of Character: Psychic Imprinting or Continuous Agency?

A second key difference between these two traditions is the distinction between modern Western and ancient Buddhist evolutionary psychology. Although Freud definitely assumed Darwin's view of evolution, in order to explain his clinical experience he felt a need to postulate a parallel form of

inheritance operating in the psychic realm, based on his equally basic assumption of mental causality. While some of the similar behavioral traits observed in parents and children could be explained by genetics, others must have more to do with nurture than nature. General disposition or temperament for instance is thought to be genetically based, as well as neuropsychological traits like handedness and the dominance of verbal or sensorimotor processing. Yet most of the habits of thinking, feeling, and acting children share with their parents or other caregivers are more likely transmitted by modeling than by genetic inheritance. Recent studies of the behavioral traits of twins separated at birth generally support Freud's clinical observation, suggesting that nature alone accounts for less than half of the final outcome of human mental development.⁴⁰

What about the better half? Freud proposed that many mental traits were transmitted by a primitive form of social learning akin to what animal biologists call "imprinting," a sort of mental imitation or role-modeling that precedes and complements language learning. Since the unconscious minds of parents contain not just their life memories, but internalized models of their parents and their parents' lives, along with their parents' own role-models, and so on, when children fully imprint or internalize the unconscious worlds of their caregivers, in a sense, they psychically download a vast data-base of ancestral models and habit-patterns. Some of these ancestral patterns may serve as raw material which the child incorporates in fashioning her own personality and life out of the complex interaction between her nature and the nurturing interplay of early development. At one point, Freud described this process as "a reincarnation of former ego structures which have left their precipitates behind in the *id*."⁴¹

Freud's outlook on the inheritance of mental traits offers a surprising bridge to the Buddhist perspective on evolutionary psychology. Of all the elements of Indic contemplative science, the one that meets with the most resistance from our preconceptions is the complex and controversial theory of rebirth or *karma*. While the features of Buddhist psychology most Western educated people find counterintuitive challenge our preconceived notions about *either* science *or* spirituality, the theory of *karma* challenges *both* our conflicting mindsets, materialist, and romantic. The Sanskrit word *karma*, in the simplest sense, does not mean rebirth, reincarnation, destiny, fate or retribution, but literally means "action." The law of *karma* may best be fleshed out to mean the causal link between action and consequence, activity, and development.

While the evolutionary psychology of *karma* is complex and multi-faceted, one simplistic way to understand what it means is that our personalities and lives are not given to us or created for us by nature, by our parents, or by God, but rather are mainly by-products of the creative power of our own mental, verbal, and physical activity. Read in this way, *karma* theory obviously challenges the religious idea that our lives and world are the work of a Creator God; and it is equally challenging to the scientific idea that the history of life

mainly reflects impersonal forces of nature over which our minds and actions have little or no influence. So the theory of *karma* does not easily square with either pole of our modern mindset.

In an effort to make Buddhist science and civilization accessible to the West, some translators have gone so far as to suggest that *karma* theory is a dispensable, culture-bound belief that can be separated out from the active ingredients of Buddhist psychology. As I see it, this is like throwing the baby out with bathwater. While each school of Buddhist psychology sees it differently, all consider some version of *karma* indispensable to understanding evolution and development. This is because they all view *karma* in its most basic scientific sense, as nothing other than the fundamental assumption of mental causality: the idea that all mental activity has some determinate effect on the future state of the mind, neural energy, body, and behavior.

When it comes to the vision that we (and most Asian Buddhists) associate with *karma*—the image of the soul detaching from the body at death and floating through some intermediary space to rebirth in the next—Shakyamuni and later Buddhist psychologists took a more critical view. Knowing that bodies come not from nothing but from a series of prior lives linked by egg and sperm, Shakyamuni assumed that the infant’s mind develops not from mindless matter but from a series of prior minds linked by patterns of action transmitted from one generation, one mind to the next. How did he view this transmission? He refused to pin it on an eternal soul, spirit, or mind, but viewed it instead as a simple transfer of information and energy, likening it to one seal stamping two drops of wax and one candle lighting another.⁴² According to the second noble truth of origination, the seal or flame that carries this *karmic* DNA like a seed is not material in the ordinary sense but the information-matter encoded in symbolic strings made of “mere words and images.”⁴³ Linking this critical understanding with the Buddhist theory that the ego emerges from instinctive interactions with parents, I believe it is possible to bridge the gap between *karma* theory and modern views of mental heredity like Freud’s.

If the mental causality of *karma* is hidden, it must be hidden in plain sight. It must be as humble and commonplace as the birth of an infant or a child’s acquisition of language. And it must be as natural as the song of the birds and the dance of the bees. I see *karma* at work in the kind of causality people struggle with every day in psychotherapy: patterns of action handed down across generations, incorporated into a “new” personality and perpetuating themselves through the force of repetition and habit. And I believe that this stream of mental heredity, conserved and transformed by learning within and across lives, is a natural bridge linking the theory of *karma* with what Freud called “the reincarnation of ego structures” and contemporary family-systems therapists call “the intergenerational transmission of character.” In my clinical experience, this perspective on human development adds a whole new dimension to psychotherapy, empowering people to see healing their own

childhood trauma more clearly and objectively—as part of a heroic, multi-life struggle with the ingrained forces of instinct and habit that threaten all of us from within.

The Couch or the Classroom: Where Does Contemplative Learning Belong?

The last key difference distinguishing these two traditions is their choice of pedagogic methods. While Freud incorporated light hypnosis and the interpretation of dreams to help overcome “internal resistances” to his “reeducation,” he distanced himself from the more profound altered states cultivated in the world’s ancient contemplative traditions, notably Christian mysticism and Indian yoga. Given the materialist mindset he faced, it was vital to the future of his new science and the healing art of psychotherapy that he inoculate them against the charge of being influenced by any of humanity’s ancient spiritual traditions, Western or Asian. This in part explains why he felt a need to break with his favorite disciple, Carl Jung, who overtly adopted contemplative arts from both Western and Asian traditions.

In place of the deep altered states human beings have used from time immemorial to unlock and transform the mind, Freud relied on the power of the doctor-patient relationship. By meeting frequently, sometimes daily, and working together so closely for years at a time, analyst and client take a long and winding path down into the depths of the mind and back up again, typically to surprising new heights, like Virgil and Dante travelling together through the epic journey of *The Divine Comedy*. The trouble with this intensive tutorial method is that its cost in time and money is so prohibitive that it restricts the path of deep healing and change to the lucky few.

Meanwhile, five decades of research on Indian yoga and meditation have yielded mounting evidence that they help people access the normally unconscious depths of the mind and control neural functions thought to be beyond the reach of higher consciousness.⁴⁴ Outside the lab on Main Street, Indian yoga and meditation have shown themselves to be at least as accessible to the Western public as psychotherapy, if not more so. An interesting line of research strongly suggests that mindfulness meditation and free association seem to have more or less the same effects on the brain, indicating that the methods of these two traditions overcome blocks and enhance learning in similar if not identical ways.⁴⁵ So we should not be surprised that the first generation of Western therapists trained in Indic meditation techniques has woven some of them into new therapies that seem to work more effectively than conventional psychotherapy. One such method, Dialectical Behavior Therapy or DBT for short, offers a promising bridge between the pedagogies of these two traditions.

Incorporating the skills of mindfulness meditation into a hybrid educational strategy, DBT mixes group classes and a sense of community with individual

psychotherapy. In many ways, it reflects the multi-modal, multi-disciplinary teaching style of the Buddhist contemplative tradition. The brain-child of psychologist Marsha Linehan, DBT was created with the explicit intention of offering those struggling with the effects of severe childhood trauma the healing and learning environment she experienced in her encounter with Zen Buddhism.⁴⁶ Like the Indian tradition on which it was based, Zen teaching embodies the insight and spirit of interdependence, which Linehan compared with the romantic philosopher Hegel's vision of human consciousness evolving through an organic process of "dialectical" cross-fertilization.

The earliest and most complete records we have of Buddhist pedagogy in ancient India come from Chinese scholars who, along with colleagues from all parts of Asia, travelled to study at the epicenter of Buddhist learning, the monastic university of Nalanda.⁴⁷ A student entering Nalanda or its sister colleges in Nepal and Tibet would typically be assigned a tutor for his academic studies as well as a personal mentor for the disciplines of meditation and ethics. He would have hundreds of classes a day from which to choose, group training in arts like debate, as well as required communal retreats and group confession. While role-modeling relationships with tutors and mentors had some of the flavor of psychotherapy, deepening in intimacy over the years, they were balanced and enriched by group classes teaching the general principles and practices of self-analysis and self-healing, as well as communal experiences that fostered a sense of belonging and exposed students to a wide range of role-models and peers.

The closest analogue to such a rich learning environment most of us experience today is the undergraduate context of a liberal arts college or university. Yet there are also key ways in which the traditional Buddhist learning environment is closer to the holistic learning context of psychotherapy, especially in the enhanced mode reflected in DBT. While our modern universities broke from most human traditions of learning by divorcing knowledge from human experience and unlinking expertise from ethical action, Buddhist pedagogy has remained faithful to the contemplative methods Shakyamuni shared with Socrates and Confucius. According to these paragons of liberal education, learning should not cram the mind with facts but open it with the wisdom to embrace ever-new perspectives on the ungraspable nature of reality. It should not gloss over or bypass the heart, but unlock and cultivate the emotional intelligence on which all effective social action depends. And it must not leave individuals' human interests, motives, and lifestyles unexamined, but unlock their highest motivation and potential to live in ways that are truly satisfying and beneficial.

In short, the aim of education should not be to mass produce fill-in-the-blank minds and caffeine-wracked bodies to satisfy society's bottom-line hunger for "human resources." Instead it should help individuals know and heal themselves well enough to give them a fair shot at creating an examined life of higher awareness and larger purpose.

Contemplative Learning Therapies: The Wave of the Future?

I often think of psychotherapy as offering the life-expanding ingredient of contemplative wisdom and art that has been expelled from our modern institutions of learning. In line with this idea, you might think of Buddhist pedagogy—with its aim of self-healing, its method of interdependence, and its core disciplines of wisdom, contemplation, and ethics—as arraying a whole-health college campus around the individual life-tutoring bond of psychotherapy. Given everything neuroscience has taught us since Freud—especially how stress impedes learning and emotional intelligence fosters it—one would expect such a pedagogy to be more effective than either contemporary education or psychotherapy.

If we take DBT as a pilot study of its efficacy, the findings are fairly compelling. Working in the short time-frame of six to twelve months, with a population that is notoriously unresponsive to conventional therapy, the first DBT programs yielded dramatic positive outcomes that have been replicated in a range of studies over decades.^{48,49,50} While the efficacy of DBT is usually attributed to the cognitive-behavioral style of Linehan's therapy, the introduction of mindfulness along with the self-healing insights and ethos of Buddhist pedagogy give DBT and similar methods like mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (or MBCT) a healing flavor and punch that distinguish them from conventional cognitive therapies.⁵¹

The bridge of Buddhist-inspired therapies like DBT helps make the otherwise implausible case that Buddhist pedagogy is not only compatible with modern psychotherapy but may have much to teach us about how to help people heal and change. This is plain enough when we consider the fact that mindfulness meditation is traditionally seen as basic training for more potent contemplative methods like deep quiescence meditation and quiescence-based insight meditation. If we add to this the distinctive methods of the Nalanda tradition preserved in Tibet, including mind-clearing, role-modeling imagery, and sublimation, it's clear that we've barely scratched the surface of this vital tradition. And its enormous potential is not just a matter of access to more powerful tools. By integrating a broad array of skills into a comprehensive system of contemplative living, in a teaching style and format tailored to a lay audience, this rare tradition may help advance mental health care and health education in more ways than one. This explains why my own work combines public teaching with private counseling and mentoring.

Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy: A Bridge to Buddhist Contemplative Science

I've taken this time to explore the growing convergence of psychotherapy and Buddhist psychology for several reasons. First of all, psychotherapy is the point of interface in our culture where it is easiest to bridge the gulf between

the Western and Buddhist scientific traditions and open a path for substantive dialogue. Understanding the similarities and differences between them helps us to remove the materialist and romantic lenses that make us biased against the very idea that Buddhist contemplative science may be compatible with our current culture and lifestyle. Second, the heart of this book is devoted to my own experience integrating insights and methods from the Nalanda tradition into the practice of psychotherapy and mind/body medicine. So our brief comparison of psychotherapy and Buddhist psychology serves as a background sketch for the book, setting the stage for the journey we will take together in the pages that follow.

My last reason for exploring the convergence of these traditions is historical. Since psychoanalysis came into its own in the years between the two world wars—during humanity’s first great global crisis—Freud felt obliged to apply what he’d learned about human nature to seriously address his generation’s fears about the future of civilization. While his views on what science tells us about these questions may be dated, they still stand as the closest modern precedent for a comprehensive response to our global challenge today. So Freud’s work and the work of his heirs like Kohut, Jung, Reich and others provides an ideal backdrop for the integrative response to our current crisis I present in this book, based on recent trends in science and the latest research on Indic contemplative traditions. Lastly, though I’ve relied on talking therapy as a bridge to Buddhist science, I should point out that the program I share in this book is equally applicable in the context of mind/body healing, professional education, consulting, and self-help. What psychotherapy offers that so closely aligns it with Buddhist psychology is less a matter of content than one of process. Of course, I’m referring to the intimate process of social-emotional re-parenting, sustained by long-term mentoring bonds.

The Wheel of Time: The Fourfold Mandala of the Gradual Path

When I set out to teach the gradual path to mainstream individuals and groups, I envisioned a program like a working *mandala*: an ideal space for healing, learning, and change. Like a virtual university or portable retreat center, the healing-learning space of the program may be entered through many gates, depending on each individual’s aims and needs. The most common ways people come to the program are through its four main gates: sustainable well-being for individuals; sustainable altruism for caregivers; sustainable inspiration for leaders; and sustainable happiness for individuals, couples, and families. The experiential learning format of the program also allows for it to be offered in a wide range of settings: in the context of long or short term psychotherapy; in skills-learning groups meant to enhance psychotherapy; in the mind/body context of teaching stress-reduction and self-healing to individuals or groups; in the business context of individual coaching or consulting to organizations; in the academic contexts of early schooling, undergraduate

education, post-graduate training, and continuing education; and in the public context of group workshops and retreats to support recovery and self-help.

Inside the *mandala*, the gradual path unfolds as an inward spiral through four concentric spheres of contemplative life, starting with the most elemental life-or-death facts and arriving at the deepest sources of human potential. Called the body wheel, speech wheel, mind wheel, and bliss wheel, the four spheres cover four progressive domains of contemplative healing and learning: personal, social, cultural, and natural. The needs and aims that define these span the whole continuum of human development: self-care and inner peace; healing relationship and unconditional love; life purpose and creative vision; life energy and inspired integration. In fact, while each wheel may be engaged as a whole contemplative path distinct from the rest, traditionally they are seen as the four wheels of one vehicle. From the standpoint of the innermost, bliss wheel of natural healing, the three prior phases of the path are all seen as preliminary steps, building the peace we need to let go of compulsion, the compassionate openness to engage others proactively, and the congenial vision, affirmative thinking, and inner attunement it takes to embody our selfless genius for sustainable happiness.

In practice, the journey into the *mandala* involves four meditative power tools that take people beyond simple yoga and mindfulness to build a contemplative way of being in our stressful world. I call these tools deep mindfulness, mind-clearing, role-modeling, and sublimation. Since bringing mere awareness to the here and now is not enough for true healing or change, the gradual path teaches *deep* mindfulness to help people tap into a profound altered state of inner clarity and calm that guides healing insight and life change.

To help guard this inner space from the industrial strength social stresses of life outside the monastery, the art of mind-clearing helps us disarm the traumatized childhood self that triggers mindless social reactions, and replace it with a proactive, mature self ready for caring social engagement.

Designed to empower this proactive self, the skills of role-modeling imagery and affirmation use congenial mentors and scripted visualization to rehearse a new way of being in the world, like a life simulator that primes our plastic mind/brains for deep learning and transformation.

Finally, in order to sustain a new way of being in the world, sublimation fuels the proactive self with the energy and chemistry of pure passion, by powering affirmations with a breath-holding technique that elicits the uplifting biology of the diving reflex and the sexual response.

Beyond introducing these potent skills, the program also departs from popular meditation and yoga instruction by observing the holistic learning format of the gradual path, weaving skills-learning together with the healing insights and life strategies people need to put their new power tools to work in complex, active lives. This format is vital to teaching people with no background in contemplative life, whose lives demand they get all they need for their journey—tools, maps, and road tips—in one stop.

The four parts of *Sustainable Happiness* follow the arc of contemplative living and learning mapped by the gradual path and built into the program, with each part covering one of the *mandala's* four wheels: body, speech, mind, and bliss. The first chapter in each part introduces one of the four meditation skills that power the wheels. These chapters cover all aspects of practice: explaining basic ideas and skills, discussing nuts and bolts of practice during meditation sessions and in daily life; and guiding “homework” with scripted meditations that dovetail with audio files readers can download (in MP3 format) from the web.

The second chapter of each part explores the basic science and healing insights needed to understand how each of the four skills works in and through daily practice. These chapters compare selected breakthroughs from Western physical science with the precocious insights of Indic contemplative science, to help people grasp key concepts and practical principles of contemplative learning.

Lastly, the third chapter of each part unpacks specific strategies for change, meant to support the effectiveness of each of the program's four skills in gradually altering the course of everyday life. These strategies help program participants practice shifting from survival motivations like fear, anger, and shame to healing alternatives like peace, care, and love, as well as changing stress-reactive routines to a proactive lifestyle that supports well-being.

Mapping the whole universe of human happiness into the *mandala* of the program, the book offers a global solution to the stressful complexity of our way of life. It introduces the reader to a complete tool-chest of skills, insights, and strategies tailor made for finding sustainable happiness in the midst of a fast-changing world.

Where Two Rivers Meet: The Convergence of the Old and the New

How can one program, one book take a diverse, mainstream audience through this whole journey of contemplative life? At least half of the answer lies in the thumb-nail history I've sketched. The painstaking work of refining the power tools for daily life and a suitable teaching style for a lay audience has already been done for us by the exceptional tradition behind the program and book. The second half lies in the lighter work of conceptual and practical translation. Since setting out thirty-five years ago to make this system accessible to the public, I have seen how current breakthroughs in physical science and psychology can help Western-educated moderns readily grasp the ancient insights and methods of Indic contemplative science. Over the years, I've also found reliable ways of teaching the four meditative skills of the Nalanda system to diverse audiences in a wide range of settings. The last ten years have been spent incorporating my experience into the contemplative self-healing program presented here.

The program was originally offered at the Columbia Presbyterian Center for Meditation and Healing and tested at the Cornell Center for Complemen-

tary and Integrative Medicine, thanks to my close colleagues, Drs. Ina Becker and Mary Charlson. Clinical studies involving women recovering from breast cancer and men and women after angioplasty have shown that it is eagerly embraced by a mainstream audience and more effective at improving quality of life than other comparable interventions.⁵² Over two decades' experience integrating this program into long- and short-term psychotherapy for individuals and couples has shown me time and again that its contemplative skills empower people to transform their lives, often more quickly and completely than conventional psychotherapies.

Given the growing need for caregivers to teach and model self-care, I have offered the program to countless health professionals and psychotherapists seeking skills beyond simple yoga and mindfulness to prepare individuals to heal, grow, and change in ways conventional healthcare can't. With the help of executive coach Michael McDermott, I have also found the program highly effective in helping leaders in business and the non-profit world develop more sustainable ways of inspiring and mentoring others. And last but not least, I have offered the program regularly over the last ten years as a workshop in self-healing and self-transformation to mainstream audiences at Tibet House US, the New York Open Center, and the non-profit contemplative learning community I founded with my students and colleagues, Nalanda Institute for Contemplative Science.

While further studies are underway⁵³ and still others planned, my experience helping people facing all kinds of challenges has left me with an abiding conviction that the method I've found—translating Indic insights in terms of Western science while teaching meditation skills and life strategies in traditional Tibetan ways—does help even the novice integrate the ideas and tools of this powerful system quickly and effectively.

A welcome antidote to the fragmentation of our age, the *mandala* I offer in *Sustainable Happiness* crystallizes all the know-how people need to meet the super-human personal challenges of today's global age. It melds more effective mindfulness and emotional intelligence skills together with the high performance skills of role-modeling and sublimation, covering all the scopes of contemplative life, from the mediation retreat to the world marketplace. Robust enough to tame the fierce warriors of Mongolia and Tibet, the gradual path of contemplative living is ideally suited to help us as individuals and communities make the shift from the stress-driven cycles of boom and bust, health and illness, addiction and trauma, to a sustainable curve of outer and inner growth and progress.

At the convergence of the world's most time-tested mind science with the emerging new science of life, I believe that *Sustainable Happiness* will help make the next watershed of self-healing arts accessible to a world burned by stress and thirsting for true contentment. The modern system of active contemplation distilled in this book is the perfect medicine for the driven mindset and lifestyle of the West, just as it was for the dynamic peoples of Central Asia, who conquered the world centuries before us. It arrives at a crucial and

promising time, when the expert and public consensus is coming to see the future of human health, growth and happiness in contemplative ways of being and sustainable ways of living.

Starting your Journey though the *Wheel of Time*

I trust this introduction has helped you see the critical value and vast potential of infusing Buddhist contemplative science more fully into our contemporary culture and way of life. And I hope that the scientific and historical background I sketched has made it clear that the groundswell towards a convergence of the new science of life and the timeless science of contemplative living is neither a passing fad nor a romantic escape to an exotic past. In reviewing the work of bridging modern psychotherapy and Buddhist psychology, I've exposed and challenged the most common mental blocks that limit our ability to integrate the profound healing wisdom and time-tested arts of Indic contemplative science. Hopefully, you can see clearly now the distinctive qualities and unparalleled potential packed into the time-capsule of the Indian Buddhist science and civilization evolved at Nalanda and preserved in Tibet. Of course, the only way to know for sure what this tradition can offer you is to do the experiment for yourself. Now that I've brought you into the learning circle of the Nalanda tradition, and walked you through the time-machine of its gradual path, I invite you to join me in the journey that will unfold in the pages that follow.

Entering the Virtual Campus of the *Wheel of Time*

Now it's time to take our first step. Imagine as vividly as you can that this page opens a time portal which transports you straight to the heart of the timeless campus of the *Wheel of Time*. To prime your imagination, see the 3-D image and blueprint of the *Time Machine mandala* in the color insert. Around you in all directions are majestic old libraries and halls that seem to be made of brick and marble but are really working holograms of gem toned crystal light. Before you, up two vast flights of gem-toned stairs, stands the great domed library where your tutor waits. Climbing the stairs and passing through the columns to the library's high eastern door, knock three times. From behind the door, imagine you hear the deep, sweet voice of your tutor call, "Who are you, and what do you want?" As you pause to think, breathe easy and deep enough to feel your heart pulse and your gut fill out, and then let your out-breath say, "I'm a Lucky One, and I want lasting happiness!" After a pause, hear your tutor respond, "And what will you do with it?" Again breathe this in, to think and feel, and as you let your breath out, say, "I'll commit myself whole-heartedly to peace, and to building a loving way of being in the world!" Now imagine the door flung open, and your tutor in jeans and a work shirt, her/his academic robes slung over her/his left arm, beaming at you with affection and reaching out her/his right hand to take yours and pull you into the sky-lit library rotunda. Now here we go together to your first class!