



will *yoga* &  
*meditation*  
really change my life?

edited by **Stephen Cope**

A Kripalu BOOK

PERSONAL STORIES FROM 25 OF NORTH AMERICA'S LEADING TEACHERS







**Q.** *Has meditation changed your life, Phillip?*

**A.** The most profound change I'm aware of just now is a growing realization that life is not personal. This may seem a surprising or even strange view to those unfamiliar with Eastern spirituality, but it has powerful implications. It's very freeing to see that events in my life are arising because of circumstances in which I'm involved, but that I'm not at the *center* of them in any particular way. They're impersonal. They're arising because of causes and conditions. They are not "me." There is a profound freedom in this. It makes life much more peaceful and harmonious because I'm not in reaction to events all the time.

When I began to realize this — not as a philosophy from an ancient text, but rather as my own direct experience — it changed my life. Having this direct experience of the impersonal nature of life allows me not to get caught, not to take everything so personally. Therefore I'm much more likely to be able to maintain the intention of which the Buddha speaks: I can reflect my true values. Rather than saying, for example, "How dare you say that to me," or "I won't put up with that" — making a particular situation into a big drama — I can relax around it. This way of being leads to a much greater sense of ease in the world. Life is difficult by definition, but this shift makes it all profoundly easier.

I see my students' lives also being changed by this insight. My students have always been some of my best teachers. Over the last couple of years, I've been working with a student who's had a series

of emotional and environmental challenges in his life. I see the way in which this understanding of the impersonal nature of life has radically transformed him. It's taken two years of repeating this view to him over and over, but just this one understanding has changed how much actual physical suffering there is for him. As he has learned in his yoga not to take the body's reaction *personally*, he's discovered that there is no "me" or "my" in the center of his experience, just a series of chemical reactions because of causes and circumstances. As a result there is no longer the added chemical reaction of fear and aversion to the pain. He can relate more directly to the *pain itself*.

With this new view, he doesn't have to spin into additional suffering. His body's reactions are dramatically softened, and the change in the internal, emotional experience of his mind is like night to day. This is one of the central insights of the contemplative traditions: The difference between pain and that same pain multiplied by resistance to the pain is enormous. Science supports this. It's not a speculative philosophy. And, of course, the wonderful thing is that this all applies to our lives as they are right now, not at some future time "when I become a great yogi" or get to some future enlightened place.

I believe that one of the most transformative things we learn in any kind of mindfulness meditation is precisely this kind of tolerance: being able to stay present with experience without contracting into it. Contracting into something is to take it extremely personally.

The Buddhist teacher Ajahn Sumedho has greatly influenced my ability to be with things the way they are. He stresses the Buddhist view of the “suchness of things” so beautifully. He says over and over again “This moment is like this.” Your knee is hurting? Ah, “Knee pain is like this.” Oh, my feelings just got hurt. “Hurt feelings are like this.” When you say “This moment is like this,” you are depersonalizing it. It doesn’t mean you’re giving up your relationship to it. In fact, if you don’t take it all so personally, you actually have a wider range of possibilities of responding to any and all moments in your life.

With this skill, life gets richer, not less rich, which is one of those paradoxes about the Eastern approach. Often people say, “Oh yeah, but meditation deadens you to life. Who wants to have that kind of boring life?” It’s not that way at all. In fact, you have your full range of responses available to you because you’re not caught in your contraction, your aversion, or your preconceived ideas about how it should be. Not at all. You get to see just “how it is.”

**Q.** *What are your primary practices these days?*

**A.** In 1983 I began studying Vipassana meditation. I’ve been a committed practitioner ever since. I’ve also been a longtime student of yoga. These two traditions — yoga and Buddhism — have an enormous amount in common, of course, and even today I continue to have teachers from both Hindu lineages and Buddhist lineages. The teachings of Patanjali and the Buddha are more similar, I think, than most people realize.

In any event, it's been important for me to continue to study within both traditions, just as a number of teachers in the Buddhist world study with teachers from various Buddhist lineages. This ecumenical approach has been a fact of life throughout the history of Buddhism, and I deeply hope that it's one of the things that continue in the West.

These days my primary practice is meditation. Almost every day I do a *metta*, or lovingkindness, practice that varies in length. I've probably not missed four days of *metta* in five years. I also do Vipassana almost every day. Then, depending on all sorts of things, I either do a formal hatha yoga practice or some other practice as many days in the week as I can. Mostly, though, I am concentrated on actually living the dharma. I try to make each moment of my life a moment of practice rather than have practice be something that I go off to do.

It's interesting for me to look back on the way my *metta* practice evolved. I was a person who had natural ease with *samadhi* practice. I had wonderful bliss states with *samadhi*, so when I first encountered Vipassana and was asked to give up those delightful altered states, it was difficult.

Then another surrender was required. No sooner had I started opening to Vipassana — the practice of choiceless awareness where there is no one object but you open to whatever is arising — than my teacher introduced to me the idea of *metta* meditation. Another practice??!! I was very resistant, to say the least. I thought *metta* practice was sentimental. It seemed to be trying to promote a kind of happiness that sounded, well, artificial.



My first response was simply not to go into the hall when *metta* was being practiced. When *metta* started I would just leave. After a few days of getting more and more uncomfortable with myself over that, I thought, “Well, if I’m going to have such a strong negative opinion about this practice that is ‘breaking up the wonderful Vipassana work,’ at least I ought to go see what it is.”

It was a great moment when I said that. I went in and the experience of the *metta* practice was deep and rich. If you tell someone about *metta* practice, it can seem hokey, but the actual experience is really wonderful because you’re engaging the heart in basic relatedness to life.

In our modern time what’s rewarded in our society is not so much a *relatedness* to life but a *manipulation* of life. There’s selling people things, there’s trying to get to the top of the ladder and out-do, and competition, competition, competition. There’s very little time for developing relatedness in our everyday life. In practice communities a great deal of time is spent in a kind of relatedness activity, which creates a bond of community and a sense of caring. It is not personalized in a sense, it is just related. The *metta* has a very positive effect in that regard.

*Metta* is also helpful in keeping us from getting too rigid in practice situations. There is a kind of determination in deep practice that involves a certain discipline, and there’s a tendency for people to think that discipline is rigid. It can look rigid, but at the center of it there’s a softening, a surrendering of the heart. *Metta* helps keep our heart in that softened place.

In my experience, all meditation practice is a surrendering more than an achieving, because if you try to make it too much achieving, you end up in duality again. There's a feeling of "There is something I'm not that I must be," which creates two selves. There is this self *now* and there is this *future* self, both of which are going to suffer. But if one surrenders to the inherent wisdom of the mind, one discovers that it's all already moving in the right direction.

“You just stay in the moment; stay with the sensations just as they are; stay with it *just as it is*. This is the path.”

As one surrenders to this inherent wisdom, one develops what's called in Buddhism "clear comprehension." One knows what is appropriate action, right action. Again, coming full circle, this right action is not personal. These actions don't come from a clinging to "me" or "mine," but directly from clear comprehension.

This is action that does not come out of reaction — either craving or aversion. What's pleasant will arrive and what's unpleasant will arrive, naturally. Those things don't go away; they are inherent in the moment. That's *vedana*, or feeling, the second foundation of Mindfulness. It's inherent: it arises with the moment.

Real freedom, however, is precisely not being identified with *vedana* in a way that causes you to act unskillfully. You don't identify with the feelings of pleasant or unpleasant because you come to see

that identification with them is a misperception. It's not that you are getting rid of something when you stop the identification; you're just clarifying a misperception.

**Q.** *So this lack of identification is a fruit that comes from practice?*

**A.** Exactly! You don't quite acquire it, you just do the practice, see clearly, and then you get the fruit because you've seen clearly. You don't have to go reach for the fruit. You just stay in the practice. You just stay in the moment; stay with the sensations just as they are; stay with it *just as it is*. This is the path.

It's a wonderful way to live, because it allows you to be with this very moment. And this very moment is where the life is. You don't have to be a meditator or a yoga practitioner for this to be true. It's true for every living being: This moment is where the life is.

Learning to come into this moment as it is with our inherent values — lovingkindness and compassion and the desire not to do harm — is the way to come into life, no matter what your religious beliefs are. We're not talking about a belief system; we're talking about living life — for all beings. Paradoxically, when we can let it not be about “me” and “mine,” we are free to let more and more of life flow through us without contracting, closing down, holding on, or pushing away. It's an easier way to live in the world. It's a way that's full of life. ●