

COLLECTOR'S EDITION

# THICH NHAT HANH

His Profound  
Buddhist  
Teachings &  
Inspiring Life

Mindfulness Pioneer



Zen Master & Activist



A Teacher for Our Time



*“Your True Home Is  
the Here and Now”*

FROM THE PUBLISHERS OF **Lion's Roar**

# What Thich Nhat Hanh Has Taught Me

Four people whose lives have been changed by his teachings

## CONFESSION OF A POOR BUDDHIST

“I can say I’m trying even as I fail,” says author **HOWARD CUNNELL**.



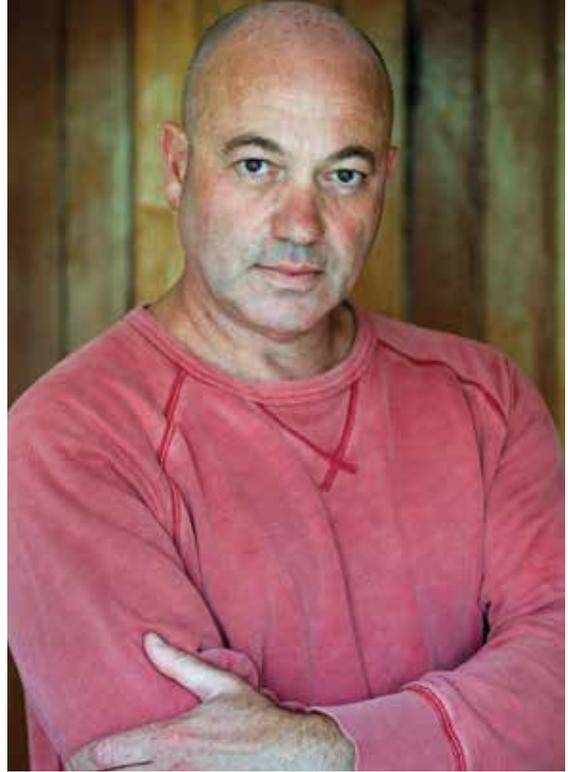
Cunnell's Tibetan motif tattoo, inked by Jim

IT MUST HAVE BEEN the tattooer and painter Jim MacAirt who first talked with me about Thich Nhat Hanh, probably in Jim's light-filled and white-washed studio Good Karma in Eastbourne, our hometown on the south coast of England, in the mid-1990s.

I was brimful of anger at the time, though I didn't always know I was. Growing up without a father had left a black hole inside me, which I mostly tried to fill with harmful things. I had first been exposed to Buddhism by Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*. I knew there was something there but couldn't make the step toward finding myself. I was then, and still often am, good at doing the things that are bad for me, and bad at doing the things that will help.

Jim was the first Buddhist I'd met. He'd been introduced to Zen at Eastbourne Art College but during the time I'm talking about he was practicing in a Tibetan lineage, and later took refuge in that tradition. We'd known each other when we were younger but I'd lost touch when I moved to London to try and be a writer. I'd always been interested in tattooing and when I heard that Jim was working as a tattooer in Eastbourne I came back home to see him.

My boots rang out on the metal stairs that led up to the third floor studio. Prayer flags were outside—sun and wind faded, stiff with salt—and the Kalachakra mantra (about which I understood nothing) was painted on the front door. Inside, there was a large reception room and two workspaces. Lead letters embedded in glass panes spelled out the *Om Mani Padme Hum* mantra.



What a wonderful space the studio was! A place of refuge, where pain was transformed into beautiful and amuletic images on the skin. Over the past twenty-two years Jim has tattooed me with amuletic mantras and auspicious symbols (as well as pirates and sharks!).

It was because I respected and admired how Jim was trying to live that I first picked up *The Miracle of Mindfulness*.

Talking to Jim on the phone yesterday I told him how some of Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings expressed in a single phrase or idea had immediately resonated with me. As a mindfulness teaching, "washing the dishes to wash the dishes" was like a great flare in the darkness. It's one of two teachings that I say to myself every day.

Thich Nhat Hanh's strong emphasis on love and compassion also resonated strongly—perhaps most strongly—because love and compassion are what I most need to practice.

I also love the idea of socially engaged Buddhism. A really powerful idea. I think this is partly because this was what I saw Jim practicing in the studio.

In those days tattooing was still really only for the outsiders—it hadn't caught on the way it has today—and many of us who came to get work from Jim were hurt and suffering, even if we didn't know it. One kid came straight from Lewes prison to get a tattoo. He had this one idea in his head and £40 in his pocket. While Jim was tattooing him he asked the kid, "What will you do for money after you've given me £40?"

The kid said, "Well, I can always knock somebody over in an alley and get some more money that way."

Jim listened, and when he'd finished the tattoo and the kid went to pay him, he told him to keep his money.

Jim told me to write this from the heart, which I'm pretty sure is what Thich Nhat Hanh would say, too. I'm a poor Buddhist, full of suffering and anger. I feel like a fraud writing this article, which is supposed to be about how I've put Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings into my life and work, but which so far has been about my friend. But in a kind of triangulation process, I always connect Thich Nhat Hanh's writing with Jim's example, and then I see the way.

I'm a writer, which means that because I have worked hard at my writing practice for a very long time, I'm a better person on the page than I am in real life. I think my writing is where the influence of Thich Nhat Hanh is felt most strongly. Also,

writing is good practice in being present (as is being tattooed). In my last book, I finally tried to tell stories about my father with love and compassion, rather than anger. If only I could be as loving and compassionate in real life!

The two story arcs of that book are, first, from suffering to love, and second, from not knowing to knowing who you are. The second journey is a tributary of the great river of the first. Thich Nhat Hanh reminds me of this all the time.

If we are peaceful, he writes in *Being Peace*, if we are happy, then we can smile, and everyone in our family, our entire society, will benefit from our peace.

Such a powerful teaching. I repeat this to myself too, every day.

I can say I'm trying even as I fail. I have not sat for a few days but I do try and meditate regularly. I try and read some lines from Thich Nhat Hanh every day. I try and wash the dishes to wash the dishes. I try to be kind, but it's a day-to-day struggle. I'm just more used to being angry. I've been angry for a very long time.

I'm so bad at doing the things that are good for me that, despite knowing that his words will always help me, and having read him for over twenty years, I had never heard Thich Nhat Hanh's voice before this spring. The idea that I should be, deserve to be, unhappy is so powerful, but things seem to be moving somewhere else now, at last. So finally I did listen, to a talk in which he teaches and demonstrates how to "invite the bell to sound."

I was alone in an empty apartment in Charlotte, North Carolina, where I was teaching at the university. I cried when I heard that gentle voice which for many of you will be so familiar and so beloved. The sound of the bell is the sound of the Buddha, he said, welcoming us back to our true home.

HOWARD CUNNELL's most recent book is the memoir *Fathers and Sons* (Franklin Library, 2017).

# TO SERVE AND PROTECT, WITH MINDFULNESS AND COMPASSION

**CHERI MAPLES** brought the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh to her career as a police officer and justice professional.

I WAS SEVEN YEARS into my twenty-year police career when I attended my first retreat with Thich Nhat Hanh. I had real doubts that his teachings could be incorporated into the life and work of a cop. And I was sure that if anyone at the retreat found out I was one, I would be negatively judged.

Eventually, though, I was convinced. I saw that a police officer can employ the gentle compassion of understanding, as well as the fierce compassion of setting boundaries to protect others. And that includes using force to intervene if necessary. It's not just possible to be kind and compassionate as a police officer. It's also safer and more fulfilling. So it pains me to see the current crisis in American policing.

The problems are well known. The unnecessary—even deadly—use of force, racial profiling, and the militarization of police departments are increasingly the subjects of public outcry and media scrutiny. There's mistrust between communities and police departments, a lack of strategies to address the emotional health of police officers, and the unconscious and unspoken agreements embedded in police culture.

At the root of much of this is the fact that as police officers we sometimes cannot see and respond to what is in front of us—a human being in need of help. It can be hard for veteran law-enforcement officers to recognize that our hearts may have stopped quivering in response to the suffering of others.

It's true that police officers often see people at their worst—people generally don't call us when things are going well. But left unchecked, cynicism and distrust are likely to fester in a police officer's heart. That's where mindful awareness comes in.

Buddhism gave me an ethical framework and practice that helped me do my job with a more open and tender heart. Not that everyone bought it. The most frequent question I got asked as a Buddhist cop was, "How can you do this kind of work?"

Early on, Thich Nhat Hanh put that question to rest for me. He asked me, "Who else would we want to carry a gun besides

somebody who will do it mindfully?" Carrying a gun, he said, can even be an act of love if done with understanding and compassion.

Once I was able to view my work through the lens of kindness and compassion, I rarely regretted any action that I took. When a police officer starts with a commitment to nonaggression and preventing harm, the gun and badge become symbols of skillful means, rather than symbols of authority and power.

But it can be lonely out there. Those of us who are committed to nonviolence and are working in professions that sometimes demand the use of force need your support. If communities want compassionate police forces, they must get deeply involved with them. This means organizing to call for changes in police leadership, hiring, use-of-force policies, and training practices. As Buddhists, we need to undertake this with awareness, right speech, an understanding of the police officer's job, and compassion.

Creating a better public-safety system is a shared responsibility between the community and its police department. Here are five questions that can help both citizens and law-enforcement officers examine these issues deeply.

## 1. Why is racial profiling happening?

How do we become more aware of the conscious and unconscious bias operating in our individual and organizational decision-making? How do we monitor and shift the unconscious agreements that lead to racial profiling?

## 2. How can trust be reestablished between the police department and the community?

The principles of restorative justice ask us to look at all harm that has occurred, recognize those who were harmed, and explore how to set things right. The most important thing is the intention to do no further harm. How do we foster this



in ourselves, in police officers, and in our community? What will help police officers and community members to step out of their fear, reactivity, aggression, and resistance?

**3. How can coordinated community responses be set up to address problems?**

How do we build informal safety nets, especially in challenged neighborhoods? This includes issues involving mental health and poverty. Are there tools available to us that are not being utilized?

**4. How do we address the emotional effects of incremental trauma that officers experience over time (whether they recognize it or not)?**

What are the early warning signs? What are the evidentiary signs indicating the need for departmental and community intervention?

**5. What are the root causes that underlie patterns of crime in our communities?**

Because all things arise due to causes and conditions, what we do in response matters. What we care about matters.

What pathways we cultivate in our hearts and minds in response to these tragedies and problems matter.

As part of my dharma teacher ordination in 2008, I composed and recited the following *gatha*, or practice poem, for Thich Nhat Hanh:

*Breathing in, I know that mindfulness is the path to peace.  
Breathing out, I know that peace is the path to mindfulness.  
Breathing in, I know that peace is the path to justice.  
Breathing out, I know that justice is the path to peace.  
Breathing in, I know my duty is to provide safety and protection to all beings.  
Breathing out, I am humbled and honored by my duty as a peace officer.  
Breathing in, I choose mindfulness as my armor and compassion as my weapon.  
Breathing out, I aspire to bring love and understanding to all I serve.*

*CHERI MAPLES, who died earlier this year, worked in the criminal justice system for twenty-seven years and was cofounder of the Center for Mindfulness and Justice.*

# MY HEALING JOURNEY

Her path from physician to monastic has taught **SISTER DANG NGHIEM** that mindfulness is the best medicine.

I HAD GRADUATED from medical school and was doing my residency in family practice when I met Thich Nhat Hanh and his monastic community. Soon after that, my partner died suddenly in an accident. His death helped me make a decision to follow a life of Buddhist practice. I left medicine after seven years of training and became a nun.

I have been a monastic for seventeen years. Yet I see now that you do not need to leave your profession in order to live a mindful life, whether it's medicine or another kind of work. In everything you do, you can bring to it awareness of your breath and body.

You can unite body and mind, instead of keeping them separate from each other. When you stand up, you can be aware that you are standing up. When you stretch your body, you can follow your breathing and your movements. With mindfulness of the body, your listening becomes deeper and you are more aware of what's going on around you. Then take that awareness into your daily life and into your work.

Imagine that you're a doctor and you're listening to a patient. If you're thinking about other patients in other rooms and you ask the patient the same question several times, this will only add to their sickness and fear. The patient already feels vulnerable from being sick in the hospital. Now they feel that you're not truly present for them. If your mind is thinking of other patients in other rooms, you're wasting your time and your patient's.

The present moment is the only moment we have. It's the only moment in which we can make a difference for ourselves and others. Whatever we are doing and whomever we are with—whether it's ourselves, patients, clients, friends, or strangers—if we are truly anchored in our breath and our body, we can touch the moment deeply and be of benefit.

When I was a medical student, I took on a patient with end-stage gallbladder cancer. It was only three months into his diagnosis, but the cancer was already full-blown. The patient, in his sixties, had become depressed and refused to eat. He was abrupt and harsh toward the nurses and doctors.

In the beginning, he wasn't friendly to me either, but slowly he opened up. Then he was given the option to have an operation to see whether or not the cancer could be removed safely. He was reluctant and afraid. I told him that he had my full support in whichever decision he made. He decided to go through with the operation. Unfortunately, when the surgeons went in, they found that the cancer had metastasized to adjacent organs,

and they closed his abdomen immediately.

That night I was on call and went to visit him. It was two o'clock in the morning. The other patient in his room was already sleeping, and the only illumination was from the light in the hallway. I sat quietly next to his bed. He said to me, "You know, doctor, I have no more hope. Yet, strangely enough, I feel more at peace in this moment than I have ever felt before."

I just sat with him. Before the operation, I had told him about my grandmother's death in Vietnam. She knew she was going to die and was peaceful about it. She called for all of her children to gather around her and she reminded them not to let me and my young brother know about her passing, because we were in the United States then and she didn't want to affect our studies.

My grandmother remained alert and peaceful during the last hours of her life. When I heard this account six months after her death, it changed my way of thinking about dying. When we live beautifully and when we die beautifully, it's a gift to ourselves, but it's also a gift to those who witness our lives and our deaths. This gift of nonfear is in fact the greatest gift that we can offer to our beloved.

I said to my patient, "My grandmother died peacefully and beautifully. You can also choose to die like that. You can recall all of the grace you've received throughout your life and you can give thanks. You can die, knowing your time of death and staying peaceful."

When my patient was sent home, he was put on morphine for pain control, and he became confused and violent. His wife was frightened and saddened by this. Yet, during the last moments of his life, he became lucid. She called me the next day and told me, "He was so quiet and peaceful. Even though he couldn't talk to me, he knew I was there, and it made me so happy!" At least twice she told me that she was happy.

In my spiritual practice as a nun, I don't feel that I have left medicine. In fact, mindfulness is the most profound medicine that I can use in my daily life to take care of myself, and it's the greatest medicine that I can offer to others. I do not regret that I spent twenty-four years in school, then became a nun. There's no regret when you have done everything you can. If you give your whole heart to something, then when you make a shift to do something else, there is nothing to regret. Every moment is an opportunity to live and discover ourselves.

*SISTER DANG NGHIEM is the author of Healing: A Woman's Journey from Doctor to Nun.*

SMALL BUDDHAS WITH LOTS OF TABLETS IN THEM, FROM THE INSTALLATION BUDDHIST MEDICINE TEMPLE, BY ZHAN WANG. PHOTO COURTESY OF HAINES GALLERY.

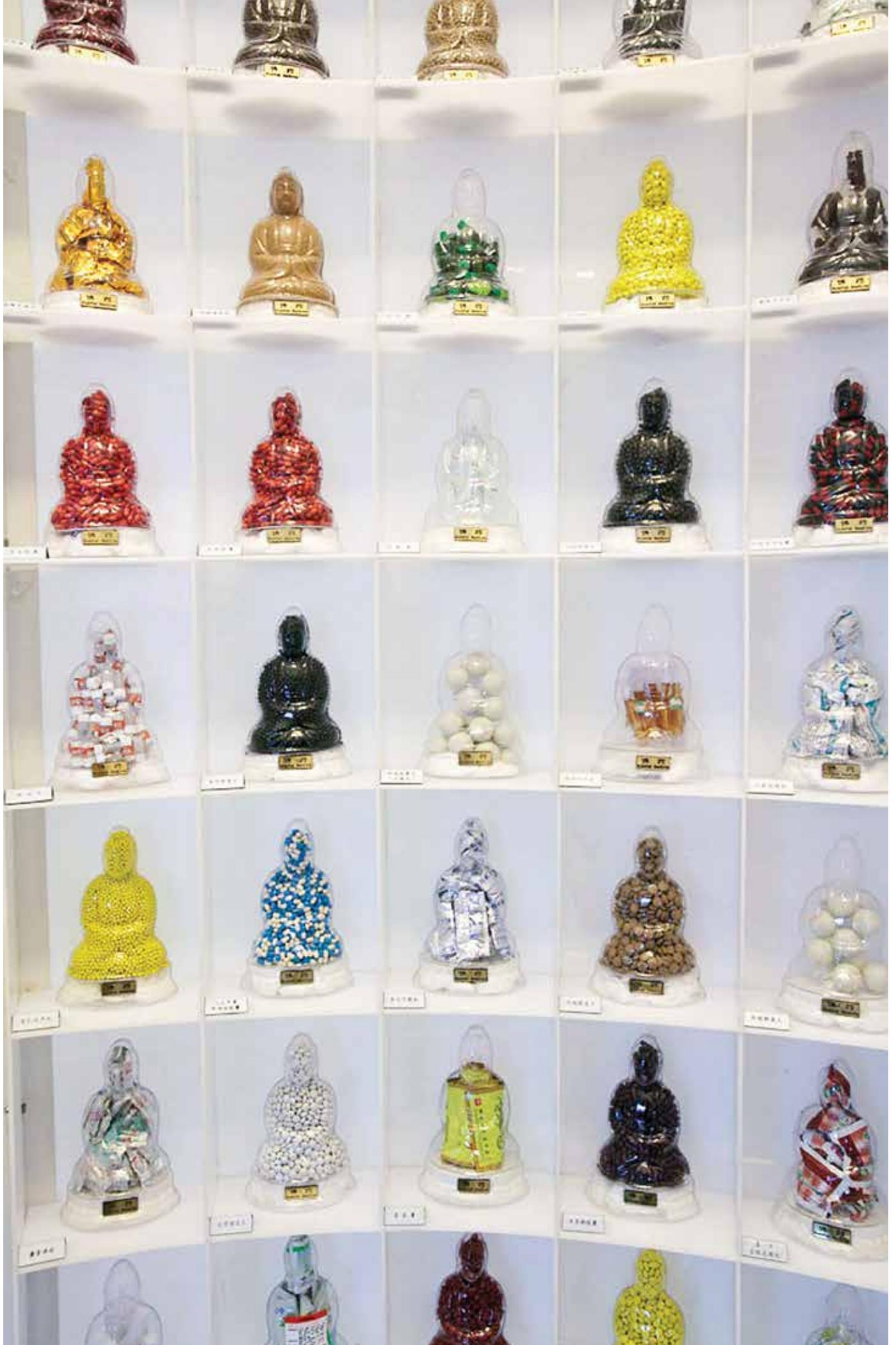




PHOTO BY SHARON HOLOVIK

# THE DAUGHTER I LOVE

How Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings helped **STEPHEN HOLOVIAK** love and care for his autistic daughter—and himself.

OUR DAUGHTER, NOW THIRTY-SIX, is autistic, nonverbal, and has pervasive communication issues. She was an infant when diagnosed in 1981. Back then there was little knowledge of autism, even among health care professionals, and not much in the way of support.

There was never a question of our being committed to our daughter's well-being and proper care. But physical care doesn't fill the void each of us feels—even those who struggle with conditions like autism. My wife and I soon learned that our journey to raise her in the way we envisioned would challenge every definition of love we ever thought possible, and would eventually lead us to the profound Buddhist teachings on emptiness.

Like many parents whose child has just been diagnosed with autism, we turned to our local minister for help. While he was empathetic, the only guidance he could offer was that it was "God's will" and we are never given more than we can handle. Unfortunately, this offered little solace for our daughter and no help for our sagging spirits. We abandoned Christianity, along with its lure of receiving a miracle if only we prayed long and hard enough.

I had been introduced to Buddhism as a boy while living in Japan in the fifties, but had hidden it from my family because they would have put a stop to my long hours at the monastery and temple near our home, during which I pestered the monks and nuns endlessly with questions. Although I remained intellectually interested in Buddhism over the years, the problem was that I had never needed Buddhism—until our daughter's birth.

At first Buddhism did not seem to be a path that would help us with the difficult day-to-day struggle we were immersed in as we tried to help our baby girl. But we continued to search, and found help in the Buddhist values of self-reliance and the teachings on emptiness.

During a retreat with Thich Nhat Hanh many years ago we learned about the three doors of liberation, especially the first one: emptiness. I'm sure he wouldn't recall my questions during a walking meditation he led. It was supposed to be in silence but I maneuvered to be near him, feeling that I desperately needed guidance from a person of his immense knowledge. I later suffered embarrassment in private moments of reflection for badgering him during that walk, but his clarification greatly helped our decision to pursue the teachings on emptiness as a guiding source. He also suggested other points of Buddhist doctrine, which we employed when we faced challenges in future decades as we strived to raise our autistic daughter with dignity and respect. I am forever grateful to him for his help, and for his patience with me.

Thich Nhat Hanh cautioned that we should not look to

emptiness as a philosophy, and over-intellectualize it. Instead we were to see it as a door we could go through to find help with our suffering. At first we weren't sure about this being our suffering—wasn't it our daughter who was suffering? But the truth was that my wife and I had experienced a great deal of mental suffering because of our daughter's autistic condition. We saw her as "apart"—a separate entity, an imperfect, isolated girl. We realized our daughter was actually a very happy, positive, and loving person. She seemed to accept us and our troubles. It truly was more our issue.

As we came to see our daughter as she was, we began to experience her in an entirely new way—one that allowed us to see the beautiful and often funny ways that autistic people interpret the world. For example, if we ask the typical "normal" person to put their hands behind their back, they will place them on their back. Our daughter and other autistic children we observed would put their hands on their stomach. If you think about it, this is literally correct because the stomach is actually behind the back. The precision she uses or understands in language is often not only amusing, but serves to push me to be more precise in my own communications.

At another Buddhist retreat, a friend recommended we study the *Samiddhi Sutra*. This sutra encourages us to return to the present moment and be aware of our happiness here and now. We realized we had been putting happiness off; it was always something that would occur later, when our daughter could talk or write or do something else. My wife and I find this not only strange but nearly unbelievable, considering that we are consultants who train managers in positivism and mental reframing but had been unable to bring these aspects into our own lives. We were compartmentalizing, something we regularly caution those in our seminars not to do.

Our daughter's journey is exciting, yet it can still evoke states of depression within us. One moment she may display subtle insights and awareness, and in the next we may feel some embarrassment because of her lack of social awareness, or rage because of how she is being treated by members of society. It's easy to slip into negative and frustrated thinking. During these times we are reminded of the real value of the discipline of meditation.

There is no Disney-movie ending here. This is an ongoing story of trying to remain present in each moment, no matter how difficult, and finding help from an unexpected source—the dharma teachings on emptiness. ♦

*STEPHEN HOLOVIAK is a professor of management at Penn State University.*