The Radical Embrace

A Meditator's Guide to Embodying Love

Singhashri Gazmuri

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Preface

This book was written between January 2020 and June 2025. The world currently faces increasing humanitarian and environmental crises that seem to be accelerating and worsening by the day. My greatest challenge in writing this book has been keeping it relevant to the here and now as events continue to unfold. It's easy to feel helpless in the face of so much suffering.

We can't control everything, but we can take responsibility for our own thoughts, words, and actions. We can join together with other people of conscience who also deeply long for liberation from suffering for all beings. We can be a model for others and shine the light towards a better way forward. We can be more than the sum of our parts, harnessing the power of collective healing and transformation.

Many different, and sometimes conflicting, parts of me have shown up in the process of writing this book – the queer, the immigrant and child of immigrants, the activist, the Buddhist practitioner, the teacher, the friend. What I've done my best to centre in this work is my deep longing for humanity to wake up to our individual and collective suffering and choose a different path.

I believe that, given the right conditions, it is possible to collectively change course towards a more life-affirming, sustainable future. And I believe that what each and every one of us does, alone and together, makes a world of difference. My deep heart-wish for all who read this book is to practise

what is offered here in the spirit of supporting the emergence of a more just, peaceful, loving world.

With love and in solidarity,
Singhashri, 30 June 2025

Foreword

by Lama Rod Owens

As I write this, the world feels like it is on fire. The United States is quickly becoming a fascist state as key governmental sectors capitulate to the greed, apathy, and hate of authoritarian leaders. Many Americans are losing rights to bodily anatomy as well as access to health care, housing, affordable healthy food, and even clean drinking water. Right-wing white supremacist groups are gaining increasing power in many countries, including the UK, Germany, Italy, and France. The Palestinians are fighting for survival under the violence of Israeli Zionism. The Sudanese people, like those in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, struggle through a civil war resulting in genocide, famine, and rampant sexual violence. Ukraine is still fighting against the aggression of Russia. Meanwhile, people everywhere are feeling more and more hopeless as they struggle to imagine what a peaceful world could possibly look like now.

In the *Adittapariyaya Sutta* or *Fire Sermon*, the Buddha teaches how everything that we see, hear, touch, taste, smell, and sense is on fire with passion, hatred, and delusion. We are fooled and confused by the realness of what we think we are perceiving. Our confusion leads to attachment, aversion, or apathy. I also believe that this confusion leads to an experience of rigidity in which we can feel trapped by the heaviness of phenomena and phenomenal experience. I often compare this heaviness to the experience of carcerality or the experience of being limited, bounded, and policed.

There are many reasons we find ourselves where we are in the world. There are critical and complex analyses rooted in histories of power and control, conquests and subjugations. There are explorations of racial caste systems and economic classes that all specialize in the disenfranchisement of vast swathes of people and communities. Like Singhashri, I have studied and written about these insights. However, these days, when people ask me to offer a concise explanation, I say that this moment is rooted in severe apathy. This apathy is the struggle to relate to others, to get curious not just about others' discomfort, but about our own. As I often say, many people are losing the capacity to 'give a shit' primarily because to recognize our personal pain is to admit that this pain is a symptom of the historical trauma of oppressions.

When I was first asked to write the foreword for *The Radical Embrace*, I instantly felt that this text would be an important medicine for the suffering of this moment. Having been friends, colleagues, and collaborators with Singhashri for over a decade now, I deeply trusted her commitment to serious practice as well as dedication to social justice. She has been a strong and important supporter of my work with *Radical Dharma*, a seminal text I co-wrote with my colleagues and dear friends Rev. angel Kyodo williams and Dr Jasmine Syedullah, exploring racism in Western Buddhist communities.

The Radical Embrace adds to the growing spiritual literature within the genre and tradition I call spiritual abolition. Spiritual abolition demands that everything must get free. I know that freedom can feel like an ambiguous idea, an idea that perhaps feels too idealistic. I have spent a good deal of time trying to understand what freedom means for me, drawing on how my enslaved ancestors thought of freedom

as well as on a Buddhist framework of freedom. Socially, freedom means that we have access to the resources we need to be safe, happy, cared for, and well. Spiritual freedom is awakening to the nature of our minds and the nature of all phenomena. We are already awakened beings, but, at some point, we got distracted from our awakened state and normalized the distraction, which has given rise to a reality that feels real. The realness of phenomena feels rigid and inflexible, which translates into an experience of carcerality or the experience of being trapped in something that's holding us against our will.

Since the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, abolition has gained a wider appeal and following. Contemporary abolition is rooted in a critique of the carceral state and its violence of surveillance, domination, and subjugation, and further advocates for the abolishment of systems and institutions that perpetuate this violence. My practice of spiritual abolition borrows from Radical Dharma while being rooted in anti-slavery abolition, which expresses a belief system that says everything must be free, not just beings from oppressive systems: spiritual liberation recognizes that even phenomena must be liberated from our misunderstanding of them.

Buddhism is the work of waking up from this distraction and getting clear about what we are. I am reminded of Mariame Kaba's important abolitionist text, *We Do This 'til We Free Us*, in which she reminds us that our work for a real abolitionist future takes dedication, focus, resiliency, and care. The Radical Embrace, rooted in the wisdom of Buddhism, reminds us that our work of liberation also takes a dedication to focus and care, as we struggle to stay with the

moment as best we can while opening to its energy. When we are focused and open to the moment, we slowly begin to understand how to re-orient back to our awakened nature and away from distraction.

Re-orienting towards who and what I am has been a crucial part of my work. One of my contributions to *Radical Dharma* was the practice of radical presence, a practice that Singhashri explains inspired her work with the Radical Embrace. When I wrote about radical presence, it was an attempt to show people who I was and how I made choices to show up. It was an effort to express my authenticity and how this authenticity was the foundation of my teaching style. I wanted folks to understand that I was choosing my most honest embodiment over performing something that matched other people's comfort level. Radical presence is learning how to be fully ourselves and to hold ourselves with care and gentleness. I see the Radical Embrace as a powerful practice that helps us to embody radical presence.

As I have sat with this beautiful text, I have often felt that the practice of the Radical Embrace explored in this text is like a gentle touch. This touching is a deeply caring tending to everything that we struggle to hold kindly, like our bodies. I am also reminded of the Buddha here. As he approached his awakening under the bodhi tree, the Buddha realized that the body is imperative in the labour of attaining full awakening. He understood that everything must be held in loving and tender awareness for us to feel safe enough to relax into a space that allows us to open into the experience of emptiness, where we remember what we truly are.

The practice of Radical Embrace is one where we invite ourselves to be clear about how to hold ourselves in

awareness, as exemplified by the Buddha in his awakening story. When Singhashri writes that the Radical Embrace is asking us to get clear about what is happening in our direct experience, she is asking us to tell the truth. Telling the truth means that we must learn how to notice what's happening. Our collective moment is asking for truth because we have become so distracted by our thoughts, emotions, storylines, and how we create narratives and thus realities that are often based not on what is happening, but on how we feel about what is happening. To tell the truth means we pay attention, acknowledging what feels hard to acknowledge. We can't begin to get free until we know what we are getting free from.

Next, Singhashri asks us to experience what we notice, which is rooted in getting curious. The more we are struggling to feel safe or well, the harder it is to be curious because this curiosity is an invitation to lean into the discomfort. However, what we know is that there can be no liberation without experiencing, no matter if it is joy or suffering.

Singhashri asks us to embrace and practise courage when she asks us to meet whatever is arising with, above all, acceptance and kindness. I often teach that everything must be loved to get free, especially the things that seem unlovable. Love is an expression of real acceptance. To love like this, learning to accept what is happening is necessary before we can choose to change what needs to be changed. I believe that love and truth must mirror each other and, to really get free, we must learn to meet the truth of our experience with tenderness.

As we are telling the truth, we must have a lens through which this relating is conducive to clarity. Singhashri asks

us to take on a dharmic perspective. Dharma is wisdom that translates into clarity. So, as we view and experience through dharma, we simply get clearer about what is happening and how it is happening. This clarity allows us to make decisions that can reduce harm and suffering.

What else is possible when we stick with a dharmic lens? This stage of the Radical Embrace is about a return to creativity, dreaming, and fluidity. These expressions can feel very lacking in our collective right now. There is less and less willingness to open to the potential of what is possible because there is so much fear of the future. We think that, if things are falling apart now, then they will continue to fall apart in the future. What a real struggle for liberation asks us to do is trust that, if we tend to the moment, we are planting seeds of freedom that grow into a garden of open, fluid, and clear experience in the future.

Singhashri understands that the goal of this process is to change. This change is basically developing a relationship to the truth of who we can be as our least violent and most caring selves. This shift will have an impact on our relationships and in our engagement in social justice. I often teach that the goal of practice is not to develop superhuman abilities but simply to learn to care a little more about our well-being and the well-being of others. Any change that results in more awareness of who we are along with more care for ourselves and others is change that should be celebrated.

What you will experience reading this text is a powerful practice of liberation rooted in Singhashri's many years of dedicated practice and labour in both spiritual and political liberation. If you have been looking for a liberatory somatic practice that embraces justice along with spirituality, then this

text is for you. *The Radical Embrace* is important medicine for this moment. Please open to it and allow it to support your work of getting free.

Lama Rod Owens, writing from the ancestral lands of the Cherokee, Creek, and Muscogee People in the city now called Atlanta, GA.

Introduction

> Not by hatred are hatreds ever pacified [...]. They are pacified by love. This is the eternal law.[1]

These were the words painted on a banner in the reception area of the San Francisco Buddhist Center. It was 2003 and a group of us were gathering to join a protest march against the war in Iraq.

Later that day, with the light fading and the march breaking up, I found myself standing on a street corner watching a crowd forming around a well-known reporter from a conservative TV channel. She was on the street with her camera crew, and they had just wrapped up a live report of the protest.

A few in the crowd began shouting at her, accusing her of misreporting on the march. Suddenly, a pie hit her square in the face. The crowd began cheering. My heart contracted, my stomach dropped, and I froze.

Immediately I sensed an angry, self-righteous part of me that wanted to cheer alongside them. But there was another part too, quiet at first, that held me back from joining in. The part that wanted to cheer felt like an old version of myself. The other part was newer. It had more perspective and, surprisingly to me, compassion for this woman who, given the information at hand, was ostensibly the enemy. I walked away from the crowd.

That was the first time I noticed the profound effect meditation was having on me. No matter who this woman

was, she did not deserve to be on the receiving end of violence. And I knew it in my body. My heart and stomach told me so. That experience gave me confidence to keep going with Buddhist practice.

No One Is Free until We Are All Free

Sometime early in life, I realized that much of my comfort and security was predicated on the suffering of others. The food I ate was most probably picked by low-paid, migrant workers. The clothes I wore were made by child labourers in far-off factories. The oil that heated our house contributed to greenhouse-gas emissions, and on and on. I remember the dismay of learning that a 'healthy' economy depended on a certain percentage of people remaining unemployed, and that the destruction of the Amazon rainforest wasn't front-page news.

I was viscerally sickened learning of the history of racialized violence against Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour. The more I learned about the North Atlantic slave trade, theft of native lands, and degradation of ancient cultures and traditions, the more I longed to understand how people could have allowed such atrocities to take place right under their noses.

I began to wake up to the harsh realities of our world. And it pained me deeply. To address my distress, I tried to imagine how I could live in a way completely free of violence against other people, animals, and the planet. I eventually came to the conclusion that, even if I could find a way to live like that, it wouldn't undo the years I'd already lived in a way that was

dependent on violence. I felt completely helpless and full of horrified anxiety.

Years later, after a series of personal tragedies, I sought out meditation because I believed it could help me make sense of my life. I thought it would free me from all my suffering. I wanted it to make me a better person.

On my ordination retreat, twelve years after I started meditating, I finally reached a place where I felt at peace. I dropped into a space of deep stillness, tranquillity, and bodily ease. Following the instructions of my teacher to recognize and familiarize myself with such experiences, I delved deeply into and began exploring my embodied experience.

Subtle at first and then unmistakably present, I noticed a deep tension in the very centre of my heart. As I breathed into the space, I noticed that the tension stretched from the very depths of my belly to the crown of my head. I breathed with the tension for a long, long time. Slowly, a clear message began to emerge.

What I found surprised me. As much as I'd healed and as much as I'd changed, it was not enough. As long as I continued to suffer and cause others suffering, and as long as others continued to suffer, I would never be free. It was clear that my suffering and my freedom were inextricably linked to the suffering and freedom of others, and theirs to mine.

Shifting from Domination to Love

> We, in the West, have inherited a deeply rationalistic and objectifying view of the body, and therefore of

> ourselves and each other. It is an interpretation of the body as separate from the (more important) thinking mind. [...] The disregard of sensing dismisses a realm of information that holds both evolutionary wisdom and interdependence.[2]

It is not enough to simply want liberation for ourselves. We live in a world shaped by forces that have left us cut off from our own bodies, our internal lives, each other, and the natural world. For example, as a result of the scientific revolution, Western culture privileges the rational, cognitive mind over the wisdom of the body – both the individual and the collective body. This imbalance has left us alienated from our own and others' aliveness and humanity. Most of us have lost touch with our deep sensitivity and connection with one another and the earth.

Our economic models reduce the human mind and body to commodities to be fought over in the marketplace of ideas and products. Our technology and devices have left us overstimulated by a deluge of words, sounds, images, and messages in every moment of our day. In a time of unlimited access to information, the danger is that we feel lost, unable to find our way. It is as if we're under a spell, unable to recognize our true selves.

One of the stories that shapes our world is the idea of 'progress'. Some might say that, since the industrial revolution, humanity has made incredible progress, but at what cost? The progress many in advanced countries enjoy still eludes those living in most of the rest of the world. And, even in advanced countries, there is extreme suffering and ever-increasing inequality. Progress has depended on

violence against and exploitation of the most marginalized among us, while those with power benefit directly.

Even with everything that's been invented, all humanity's designs on how to live a better life, many of us are deeply unhappy, and mental-health problems proliferate. Polarization and fear of the 'other' are on the rise, leading to increased violence against people of colour, LGBTQIA+ people, disabled people, women, immigrants, religious minorities, and the economically disadvantaged. The planet is struggling to maintain climate and ecological health under the weight of decades of unchecked environmental degradation, and suffering abounds.

We live in increasingly complex times when the institutionalized forces of greed, hatred, and delusion threaten to annihilate us, all of life, and the habitable ecosystems of our planet.[3] We have recently come out of a global pandemic, and there are predictions of more to come, alongside calls for greater social justice due to centuries of oppression of Black and Brown bodies.

The crises of coronavirus and systemic inequality are intimately linked. They hold up a mirror to our ignorance of the impact of our treatment of nature and each other. Democracies around the world are crumbling, and fascist and other authoritarian regimes are on the rise. And war, genocide, and famine proliferate. Many activists, organizers, and spiritual leaders frame these challenges as indicators of the end of old, outdated models and the chaos that follows system collapse. I count myself among them.

It's time we reclaimed our birthright and redressed the balance as a global community. It's time we came home to our own humanity and realized the potential within each of

us to manifest a totally different way of embodying our lives, relationships, communities, and the world. This reclamation, this coming home, calls for individual and collective healing from the effects of the intersecting traumas of patriarchy, imperialism, colonialism, white supremacy, and capitalism on us, our families, and our communities. This healing can, in turn, support a radical shift in perspective from a world based on domination to one rooted in love.

The Radical Embrace provides one such way to bring about this critical shift. It is a practice that supports us to tap into deep reservoirs of love and awareness, so desperately needed in the world today. The Radical Embrace implicitly and explicitly includes and reconnects us to other beings and the rest of the world, from whom we are not ultimately separate. The wisdom embodied through such a practice supports a deepening orientation towards non-violence, which is the cornerstone of a life born of love and grounded in truth.

First Do No Harm

At the heart of Buddhism is the principle and practice of *ahimsa*, or non-violence: a way of relating to ourselves, others, and the world that is grounded in love. This life-affirming principle has also been instrumental in framing some of the most important social-change movements of our times, and is just as relevant today as ever before, if not more so.

One truth that unites us as a global community is our inheritance of a world predicated on violence. We are all deeply shaped by this violence, often unconsciously. It can be painful to wake up to this shaping, both individually

and collectively. We might agree with *ahimsa* as an ethical principle, but holding it as an ideal won't be enough to free us from the grip of this shaping. Violence lives in and through our bodies. Through the committed work of individual and collective healing and transformation, we can begin to fully embody non-violence.

When fully embodied, *ahimsa* takes us beyond objectification and utilitarianism and towards interconnectedness and a deep respect for the inherent value of all of life. It is the foundation from which unconditional love is born. For those who are committed to practising non-violence, it is our responsibility to embody it as fully as possible. This book is an offering, among a rich and growing abundance of offerings, to support both meditators and those engaging in social- and environmental-justice activism to do just that.

The Embodiment of Love

How do we learn to embody love? One tried and true approach is through a dedicated meditation practice. Meditation supports us to start where we are, with the mind and body we have right now. Through a committed practice, we learn to listen deeply to the wisdom of the body. We learn to tap into important information and previously unconscious forces that support us to heal from past traumas, make sense of our lives, and transform ourselves. The language of the body invites us to learn and inhabit new ways of relating to ourselves, one another, our communities, and the world.

This book was written to guide and accompany you through teachings and practices that heal, transform, and

liberate through the body. Perhaps you've come to meditation and this book with anxieties about the world, and an empathetic response to your own pain, and that of others. An important first step in this healing process is opening to the truth that we, other people, and the world are not simply this or that, Black or white, male or female, old or young, self or other. Life is much more complex and beautiful than that. As we see this more clearly and awareness broadens, what we are able to let in and be with increases. This in turn supports us to go beyond narrow, self-centred ways of thinking and acting, and discover the great gifts waiting for us on the other side.

As the practice deepens, we sense the possibility to fully relate to and empathize with the complex ecologies of our own hearts as well as those of any other human being on the planet. This expansiveness supports us to love and connect deeply not only with ourselves, the people we know, and our immediate home environment, but also all forms of life and the ecosystems that sustain them. From this seat of love, we are then able to more creatively respond to the challenges of our times.

Creating Beloved Community

Imagine what else might be possible when we've gone beyond the habits that keep us bound to suffering. To imagine this, it can be helpful to first open to the fact that change is not only possible but already taking place. We are highly adaptive and resilient by design. Remembering this can support us to recognize the ways in which we have changed, are changing, and will continue to change. We can even find pleasure in this

recognition and build confidence in ourselves through it. This growing confidence supports us to harness our body's natural capacity for healing to enable transformation towards greater wisdom and compassion.

Picking up this book is one way you're answering the call of that which is already awake within you. This awakening inherently includes others. In opening to, accepting, and learning to love ourselves just as we are, we learn to do the same in relationship, in beloved community, to use the language of the great social-justice activist Dr Martin Luther King, Jr.[4] The reverse is also true: in learning to accept and love others deeply, we learn to do the same towards ourselves.

What if we don't like what we find? Through these practices you may encounter parts of yourself that you have ignored, blocked out, rejected, or banished. These parts show up in our experience as sensations, behaviours, impulses, urges, emotions, memories, images, thoughts, and projections. In relationships, these are often the parts that get triggered and reflected back through the ways others respond to us. And, sometimes, the very things we don't like in others are the things we are unable to come into relationship within ourselves.

The processes and practices outlined in this book purposefully regard unwanted experiences as having value and integrity. They often hold the key to our ultimate liberation from suffering. The Radical Embrace challenges us to welcome all these parts back home and, through this return journey, invite them to transform.

This is one of the many things that makes it radical. In turning towards and embracing the fullness of our embodied experience, we learn to relate to it not as fixed or unchanging, and not even as *ours*. We begin to see it simply as it truly is

when we stop clinging to experience or pushing it away. We see that we can be with all of life as it flows through us, and realize the deep relief and sense of connection that comes with this clear seeing. From this place, more becomes possible than was ever possible before.

This attitude is at the heart of the Radical Embrace. It is an attitude of complete and total acceptance of whatever we might find when we recognize and choose to turn towards our direct, lived experience. It includes embracing who we are when we begin to practise, the different parts of us showing up as we engage in practice, and how we are changing in the process. It is an attitude that actively supports a movement from what is known to what is unknown, inviting the unfamiliar to become familiar.

As we open to these parts of ourselves and heal from the trauma of having been cut off, we are made whole. In this wholeness, we also recognize the wholeness of others. In the same way that we can't heal until we begin to integrate all these parts of ourselves, so humanity can't heal until we unlearn our deeply held habits of othering. We've inherited these habits and unconsciously participate in their proliferation within our own hearts and in relationship with one another. Until we can wake up to this fact, engaging in the deep work of personal healing and transformation, we will not be able to do so collectively, and in turn work together to fully address the challenges of our times.

But what about people who cause harm? Are we meant to simply accept them as they are? Not at all. This practice invites us to first accept that things are as they are so that we may respond from a place of wisdom and compassion. Acceptance in this sense is not about passive resignation. It

is about acknowledging that, without practice, we often act in ways that go against our deep longing for freedom from suffering for ourselves and others.

This practice supports us to learn how and when to set clear boundaries, say, and do difficult things to protect ourselves and our communities, and hold one another accountable from a place of strength and conviction. It also supports us to create and sustain communities that fully embody non-violence. These are the communities of the future that we can begin to bring into being through radical acts of individual and collective imagination and practice. There are many wisdom traditions that can support such a bringing into being. This book is based on one such wisdom tradition, Buddhism. The Buddhist path of liberation is known as the *dharma*.

What Is the Dharma?

The dharma has something important to teach us about how we might find our way back to connection and wholeness. For thousands of years, many have practised the dharma as a way of bringing about such a change. The dharma comes to us from a high-caste Indian man named Siddartha Gautama, more commonly known as the Buddha, who lived and taught in India over 2,500 years ago. For the first 500 years, his teachings were shared orally, and then later both orally and in written form. These teachings have reached us through the practice and elucidation of those who have been courageous enough to teach the dharma, starting with the Buddha.

The dharma has always been an emergent tradition, meaning it has both maintained its essential elements and

changed shape as it has passed through the generations and across cultures. Each practitioner who communicated what they'd realized did so in a way that both honoured the tradition and was based on their own unique conditioning and realization of the truth.

Dharma practice includes meditation, and it is particularly through the practice of meditation that we find a direct and immediate path to healing and transformation. It is not through the methods alone that this shift takes place, but through the fundamental attitudes we bring to the journey.

Some Helpful Background on Buddhist Meditation

> The path is a symbol, representing the fact that we can change [...] [T]he path itself is not out there; it is in here. [...] The path simply represents the individual solution to your own particular predicament. If you know and understand yourself as you are now, that puts you in a position to develop in your own way.[5]

After his awakening, the first thing the Buddha taught was the truth of suffering. He wasn't making a philosophical statement about life or being pessimistic. He was saying that, quite literally, in any given moment, there is the potential for suffering. He was pointing directly to the experience of his followers and inviting them to see that there is suffering. I imagine him emphatically saying, 'It's right there, right in front of you!'

The Buddha implores us to stop trying to ignore or deny our suffering and simply acknowledge that suffering is

happening. He then encourages us to get curious about how we are relating to our experience to discover how suffering is caused. In seeing this, we can find freedom from suffering by following his teachings. The four truths that

1. there is suffering,
2. there are the causes of suffering,
3. there is freedom from suffering,
4. and there is a way to get free

provide the cornerstone of the whole of the Buddhist approach to liberation.[6] They are the four noble truths.

The Buddha was basically saying that, without accepting suffering, fully and in real time, we won't be able to find our way out of it. He was also saying that there is suffering *and* there is freedom. Both are equally true, and freedom is just as possible as suffering.

Perhaps most counterintuitively, to get free we need to delve deeply into our embodied experience of suffering and its causes. We've got to go through to get out. Now that doesn't mean we simply accept experiences of suffering if there is something simple and straightforward we can do to alleviate them, like in the case of physical pain, an unavoidable fact of embodiment. This practice also includes deep care for self and others where we do what we can to be well and happy. Even then, without realizing it, we still create unnecessary suffering for ourselves and others.

So how do we begin? We start by getting to know ourselves and familiarizing ourselves with moment-by-moment embodied experience. We befriend ourselves. Meditation supports us in gaining clarity about who we are: our history,

culture, personality, various identities, the traumas we've survived, as well as the joyful experiences that have shaped us, the habits we've embodied, and the ways we've grown and changed. This familiarization slowly opens us to sensations of both contraction and numbness, as well as expansion and energy in the body.

As we open more fully to ourselves, we create space and provide the conditions for healing. Our sensitivity deepens and we discover new ways of being, based on a more creative and positive response to ourselves, the people around us, and ultimately the world. By knowing who we are and having confidence in our impact in the world, we ground in our own dignity, connect deeply with the dignity of others, and invite others to do so as well.

Broadly, this book is structured around the meditative principles called *samatha* (a calm and settled state) and *vipassana* (insight gained by seeing through delusion)[7] in Pali. Using the language of somatics – a field of practice that supports greater body awareness – we can think of these as synonymous with healing and transformation. Both these principles are essential to a complete meditation practice leading to awakening. Slowly the body opens; we relax a bit and see things a bit more clearly. Then there is more opening, relaxing, and gaining even more perspective.

A Mandala of Practice

For some of us, it can be helpful to have a model and reference points for what might be unfolding in our practice. Sangharakshita, founder of the Triratna Buddhist

Order, developed a system of practice to provide such a model. This system draws out the aspects of *samatha* and *vipassana* into five stages. These stages are integration, positive emotion, receptivity, spiritual death, and spiritual rebirth.

In creating the Triratna system of practice, Sangharakshita recognized a pattern in the process of waking up that is universal to all of us, based on how our mind and body engage in learning and growing. The chapters of this book are organized using this model, with further chapters drawing out specific aspects of each stage.

In keeping with the theme of the Radical Embrace, I've renamed the second stage as the path of non-violence, rather than positive emotion. This is because, for some of us, using the language of 'positive' and 'negative' when it comes to our emotions can set up all sorts of problems around judging ourselves when we aren't feeling particularly 'positive'.

Emotions that we may initially experience or label as 'negative' can be transformed in the light of awareness and kindness, yielding a great deal of energy, new insights, and strengths. An embodied non-violence, when fully practised and realized, is inherently positive in that it includes all other positive qualities, even those that may initially appear negative but ultimately have goodness at their heart. For example, anger – when met with awareness and love – can reveal our deep sensitivity to injustice and unlock a conviction to act with clarity and courage.

It can be helpful to find ways to connect with any model or system using language, images, and metaphors that work for us. Although the Triratna system of practice has progressive stages, here we'll be relating to it more as a

mandala, or labyrinth, with multiple pathways leading to a unified centre. At different times, we may need to walk different paths, circle round again, go backwards, find another pathway, and so on. Practice can sometimes feel much less linear, and a bit more spatial, than stages on a path. In fact, sometimes it feels as though it exists outside of time and space entirely.

That may sound very mysterious, but a clue might lie in what can happen sometimes in meditation. For example, after years of sometimes experiencing painful emotions in meditation, I thought that I was 'done' with a particular episode from my childhood. I related to it as if it had been made sense of, processed, and fully integrated.

Then one day, while meditating, I was overcome with grief followed by flashes of memories. The grief felt like a heavy weight in my heart and a welling up of energy from the belly to the throat. It was like nothing I'd experienced before and painful to feel at such a depth. Using a linear model, I could easily have told myself that I'd failed, got something wrong, missed something entirely.

Instead, I saw clearly that I had not yet been ready to feel the depth of my grief until that moment. Now that it was here, I could accept it for what it was, lean into it with love, and get curious about it. I took a deep breath and allowed myself to feel what wanted to be felt using the resources available to me in that moment. With confidence, I was able to bring the whole of my practice into relationship with this moment of suffering. Afterwards I sensed a clarity of heart and mind new to me, but also somehow deeply familiar.

Sources of Inspiration

This book draws on the core Buddhist practices of the four foundations of mindfulness, *satipatthana* in Pali, the mindfulness of breathing, *anapanasati* in Pali, the cultivation of loving-kindness, *metta bhavana* in Pali, and pure awareness, or just sitting. These are some of the core practices of the Triratna tradition, which are also recognizable to Buddhists across traditions.

In addition to the enormous contribution Sangharakshita, founder of the Triratna Buddhist Community, has made to my understanding and practice, this work is also informed by the writings of bell hooks, Larry Rosenberg, Pema Chödrön, Reginald Ray, Lama Govinda, Ayya Khema, Bhikkhu Anālayo, and Sharon Salzberg. It is also deeply inspired by other Buddhist teachers such as Larry Ward, Bhikkhu Bodhi, Spring E. Washam, Ruth King, angel Kyodo williams, Kaira Jewel Lingo, Pamela Ayo Yetunde, Vimalasara Mason-John, Joanna Macy, and Lama Rod Owens, who are making important and explicit connections between personal and collective liberation.

The practices shared here include methods to help heal deeply held trauma, and are informed by the growing field of somatics, particularly the works of Peter Levine, Resmaa Menakem, Staci Haines, Prentis Hemphill, and adrienne maree brown. These teachings are also informed by aspects of secular mindfulness, particularly ways in which it has contributed to making meditation more accessible and trauma-informed, as taught by David Treleaven and my friend and trailblazer Vidyamala Burch.

I also owe a great debt of gratitude to my good friend, teacher, and preceptor (the person who ordained me and gave

me my Buddhist name) Viveka. I had the incredible luck of stumbling upon her teaching at the San Francisco Buddhist Center in the late 1990s. She met me with so much compassion and curiosity, teaching me what real unconditional love is all about. In addition to being an accomplished practitioner and teacher, she is also a skilled coach and facilitator, working at the intersection of somatics and social justice – a true exemplar of what it means to put our practice into action for the good of the world.

Getting to the Root

At the heart of this book is the value of what Lama Rod Owens calls 'radical presence'.[8] The Latin for 'radical' is *radix*, meaning 'root'. Whatever lies beneath the surface, which we have cut ourselves off from, has been left out and forgotten, or kept on the periphery of our experience, can be turned towards, reclaimed, centred, and folded into the greater mandala of our lives.

The Radical Embrace calls us to have confidence in our experience, and the curiosity and conviction to allow healing and deep transformation to take place. It is work that most often happens entirely in the body, our thoughts and emotions playing an important role in helping us make sense of our experience, but no longer dominating it. It requires a deep trust of our somatic experience, the wisdom that can be discovered there, and the healing and transformation that become possible through a committed practice.

By practising the Radical Embrace, we learn to become more whole and more fully present and available to ourselves and

others. Opening to wholeness means we start to relate to our experience in a way more aligned with reality. And we begin to see that reality is much more complex than it first appears. A complex web of conditions, as Sangharakshita said.[9]

The Radical Embrace asks of us the following:

1. What is *actually* happening in our direct experience? When we stop identifying with experience, what do we find?
2. How is it? What does our *direct, embodied, moment-by-moment experience feel like*? Is it pleasant, unpleasant, neutral? How is it changing?
3. How can we *meet what is happening* with acceptance, kindness, confidence, curiosity, and conviction? What supports us in this meeting?
4. How can we begin to *relate to experience* from the point of view of the dharma (i.e., its true nature)?
5. *What else is possible* when we stop identifying with experience and begin relating to it with a dharmic perspective?
6. What *impact* might this exploration have on our relationships with others, our communities, and our experience of and response to social and environmental injustice?