

The Process of Change

People through finding something beautiful
Think something else unbeautiful,
Through finding one man fit
Judge another unfit.

—Lao-tzu, *The Way of Life*, 6th century B.C.

A Life Almost Lost: Melissa's Story

“I was never going to touch a drop. I saw what alcohol did to my parents' lives. I can still hear the screaming and shouting that went on almost daily. My sister and I used to hug each other to sleep, night after night. I always knew that if I ever started drinking, I would never stop.”

Melissa's prophecy eventually came true. Urged on by friends at a college party, she finally succumbed. “My first drink actually didn't taste that good, but I still went for the second.” Despite the taste, she immediately knew her relationship to alcohol would be a long one. Soon Melissa began drinking regularly at dormitory parties and lived up to her expectations of herself. “The days blended into each other. There were more parties. At first they were a lot of fun. But I slacked off on studying. I began to skip class because I was so hung over. And of course my grades fell. I was flunking everything and feeling anxious all the time. The anxiety became a problem in itself—another reason

to say the hell with it, and just drink some more. I dropped out of school in the middle of my sophomore year and just took a boring clerical job in an insurance office.”

Her dreams coming to a grinding halt, Melissa suffered from a lack of meaning and purpose in life. At one time her spiritual interests and passion for helping others might have led her to a career in mental health—the life dream of her adolescence. But instead, her spiritual yearning became a hazy, alcoholic path, searching for answers in an altered state of consciousness.

On a number of occasions, Melissa came close to death while driving in an intoxicated state. The real tragedy for her, however, was not to be so dramatic as a fatal car crash. Her tragedy was more about the deadly dullness that attends unfulfilled dreams. Alcohol rerouted her onto a path of unsatisfying career choices, destructive relationships, and physical deterioration. Her life was stuck. She took a series of clerical positions well beneath her abilities and never seemed able to get back on track. As she put it, “Every day has been a struggle to get through. Nothing makes sense. I still consider going into mental health, but I get completely overwhelmed just thinking about it. So, what do I do? I pour myself another drink.”

When Melissa came in for her first therapy session, she had stopped drinking for about three weeks. We talked about basic principles: that addiction is often a matter of running away from something that hurts, and that this in turn creates many other problems. She agreed with this in an abstract kind of way. But it was clear that she did not connect these ideas to her own experience at first. In the first few meetings, it was hard for Melissa to reveal much of herself. Whenever she seemed to get close to her pain, she immediately ran from it or tried to neutralize it. For example, she said: “I’m not really happy with the kind of work I’m doing. There’s a feeling that I could be doing more, somehow.” But immediately she added: “But I suppose everyone feels that way.” Then she went on to other, safer topics.

Gradually, she became more capable of befriending her pain. We discussed meditation as a way of learning to be with thoughts and feelings without getting caught up in them. Progress in therapy accelerated when she started meditating. She began to notice how she ran away from her pain the moment it surfaced, and started to see that painful thoughts and feelings often triggered a relapse urge.

As another tool, Melissa started journaling. Through writing in her journal, she began to see life patterns. She realized that she had always been a bit of a Goody Two-shoes. She was the kind of child who loved to be chosen class monitor when the teacher left the room, and who was mortified the time she got her first C on her report card. She started to see that drinking gave her an excuse to relax and be a little wild, a little rebellious. Over time, she came to own her need to let go and have fun, but to do this in less destructive ways.

Toward the end of therapy, she started to talk about her all but forgotten dream to be a counselor. Though she could not afford to go back to school just then, she found a job at a psychiatric hospital as a mental health worker. This represented a cut in pay from her clerical work at first, but she found it more satisfying. There were problems with the institution she worked for, and the state was always threatening further cutbacks in the budget. But somehow she carried these problems differently than problems in her other jobs. They were problems on her own path. In our last meeting, she had begun to consider how she could get additional training and credentials.

Heeding the Signal

Putting your life back together after wrestling loose from an addiction is a gradual process. Melissa is not alone in being able to slowly put the pieces back together. Nor is she alone in losing her way in life. If you are not on your path, there can be a gnawing pain and emptiness in you. What do you fill yourself with? How do you fill your time? How do you occupy your body and mind? Though you may want to run from the pain, pain is a signal that something is wrong, that something needs attention and healing. As a signal, it is valuable, though its lessons hurt.

One of the most important aspects of the art of living is how we deal with pain—especially emotional pain. Will we heed its lessons, or, in desperation, do anything to turn it off—even temporarily? Will we be present to the emptiness, or will we seek to fill it at all costs? Some people try to fill that pain and emptiness with consumerism, ambition, or an endless flow of romantic adventures. Some try to fill it with television, with work and busyness, with computers or video games, never

allowing any space. And some try to fill it with drugs like alcohol, as Melissa did.

Are You Already Full?

While programs for addiction can be found nearly everywhere, it is clear these are not entirely meeting the vast need. This book is for those who are seeking a spiritual view of life to help understand their addiction, but are not entirely content with the spirituality currently offered in mainstream programs. Abstinence is a great first step in the recovery process. But when you eliminate something that was so much a part of your life, you need to be open to the spiritual dimension to help you through the resulting changes.

A Buddhist story illustrates the need for openness. A student approached a famous Zen master for instruction. The student tried to impress the master with his knowledge of Buddhism, and discoursed endlessly from his vast intellectual knowledge of the subject. The master poured tea into the student's cup, and continued to pour over his protests even after it started to overflow. It was impossible, the master said, to give Zen to someone who was already full, already certain of knowing the truth.

If you are open, if your cup is not already full, we will gently guide you toward a path of mindful recovery. Together we will explore the spiritual and emotional impact of leaving addiction behind.

Mindfulness

The connection between addiction and spirituality is ancient and venerable. To date, the spirituality of recovery has been influenced primarily by Western religious thinking. And though people seem increasingly interested in the spirituality of the East, little has been done to connect these traditions with the needs of people who struggle with addiction.

Our approach is based on the Buddhist teaching of mindfulness. Mindfulness is a quality of openness, of present-moment awareness and acceptance. Mindfulness is experiencing this moment, this very

one, the only moment that exists. Mindful living is not about living in the future or dwelling in the past. It is also not about recriminations when you find yourself in the past or the future. Mindfulness is about getting back in touch with your spiritual essence, your true nature.

Mindfulness allows you to be open to your pain so you can learn its lessons and get your life back into harmony, into Tao. You do not have to become a Buddhist or desert your own religious heritage to practice mindfulness. In fact, you do not need to be religious at all in the usual sense. *Mindful Recovery* looks at addiction and explores a more harmonious path to recovery. Because addicted people get caught in unawareness, using drugs rather than face what hurts, mindfulness provides a gentle way to begin to face the pain.

Mindfulness helps in two ways. First, by being mindful, by being aware of the state of your body, emotions, and environment, you receive clear signals concerning what is out of balance and what hurts. When you learn to respect these signals and welcome them rather than push them away, you no longer need to turn the signal off by indulging. You therefore become less likely to continue the destructive, automatic behaviors involved in addiction.

Mindfulness also helps by putting you back in touch with the simple pleasure of being alive. As Rabbi Abraham Heschel said, "Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy." Each moment contains a potential fullness—a simple satisfaction in living—that refreshes the spirit. You need only be open to it. But this opening is difficult for the addicted person, for addiction is about blunting your perceptions, about closing off. And though it may be motivated by a desire to close off to things that hurt, it also closes you off to the refreshment of simple, present-moment experiences: the cool of the morning, a dog barking a greeting, the comfort of your favorite chair. By putting you back in touch with simple pleasures, mindfulness reduces the need to fill the void with drugs and other destructive things.

Flowers by the Road

Mindfulness of the world beyond ourselves and our thoughts, in its richness and color and drama, makes it unnecessary to enhance our lives artificially, filling our emptiness with drugs. Most of us reject this

richer awareness, however, because it does not always conform to our idea of how things *should be* and what we *should* pay attention to. If in driving to work all you are aware of is the pressure to get there on time, you will not notice the other people around you, the sensations of brisk, invigorating cold on a winter morning or the ovenlike, soporific warmth in summer, or the glorious sunrise or mountains or ocean or green trees or expanse of desert. Of course you can't forget that you have to get to work! But if you can tune in to these other, nonutilitarian aspects as well, the experience of driving to work becomes full *in itself*—a means to an end, surely, but no longer *just* a means to an end.

Meditation teacher and author Sharon Salzberg tells the story of one of her teachers who was asked why he meditated. The students waited expectantly for his words, anticipating some deep, esoteric wisdom. He replied that he meditated not to miss the little purple flowers by the side of the road. Mindfulness is about the little things.

To illustrate this kind of awareness, Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh gives the example of doing the dishes just to do the dishes. If you are doing the dishes in order to be able to go on to something you think will be more satisfying than doing the dishes, not only will you not enjoy doing the dishes, but you will not enjoy whatever it is you go on to do next. If you are doing the dishes just to get to your dessert, then you won't enjoy dessert either. For while you are eating your dessert, your mind will again be racing ahead to the next thing—to the video you've rented, the phone call you need to make, or the novel you want to finish. In this way, you fail to live the actual moments of your life because you are instead always trying to get to some other, better moment. You never live, but are always planning to live.

The Need for Clear Experiencing

As food nourishes the body, so experience nourishes the spirit. We all need the richness of direct, clear experience. It keeps the soul healthy and well nourished. When we do not get this food because our experience is blocked by anxieties, fears, worries, and plans, the soul becomes anemic. Psychologists have conducted many studies with what is known as a sensory deprivation tank. This is a small, dark, sound-insulated compartment partly filled with salt water warmed to

body temperature like the womb. The subject enters the compartment and stays in for long periods to explore the effect this has on human functioning and perception. Subjects who remain in these tanks for long periods often begin to hallucinate. The brain, being starved for stimulation, creates its own.

When we are not mindful, when we are not getting the experiential food we need, we get a little crazy. We become psychologically starved. We are plagued by all manner of imaginings and fears having little to do with reality. Worse still, we can run around trying to seek intense stimulation to feed our starving minds. Some people try to do this through drugs and alcohol, rather than by tuning in to the wealth of experience already at hand. But this is a kind of junk food to the mind, filling but not nourishing. They become like people starving in a grocery store filled with food.

Using Western Tools

Eastern spiritual traditions—especially those which emphasize a here-and-now awareness or mindfulness—offer a helpful perspective on addiction. The automatic, compulsive quality of addiction is incompatible with the open spaciousness of a merciful, gentle mindfulness. Where mindfulness is, addiction is not. Where addiction is, mindfulness is not. Cultivation of one leaves less room for the other.

While our approach is rooted in Eastern traditions of mindfulness in its overall spirit and intention, this does not mean that all of the actual techniques have to come from far away. The West has its own approaches to mindfulness. Journaling, narrative psychology, insight-oriented psychotherapy, relationship work, and dream analysis are all tools that have been developed in the West. All of these approaches also create an increased awareness and openness. These techniques have the added advantage of being rooted in our own culture, and are therefore in some ways easier for Westerners to understand. Unlike books about mindfulness rooted solely in traditional Eastern techniques, we present a blend of Eastern and Western wisdom.

Though many models of recovery perpetuate a disease-based focus, we promote a health-based model. That is, we emphasize building on health and strength rather than disease or pathology. Our

approach is about facing what hurts and finding answers. We emphasize staying in contact with the positive aspects of life, and living a full, satisfying, meaningful life rather than focusing on sickness or powerlessness. Only by touching the parts of life that are healthy and positive will any of us find the strength to confront our problems.

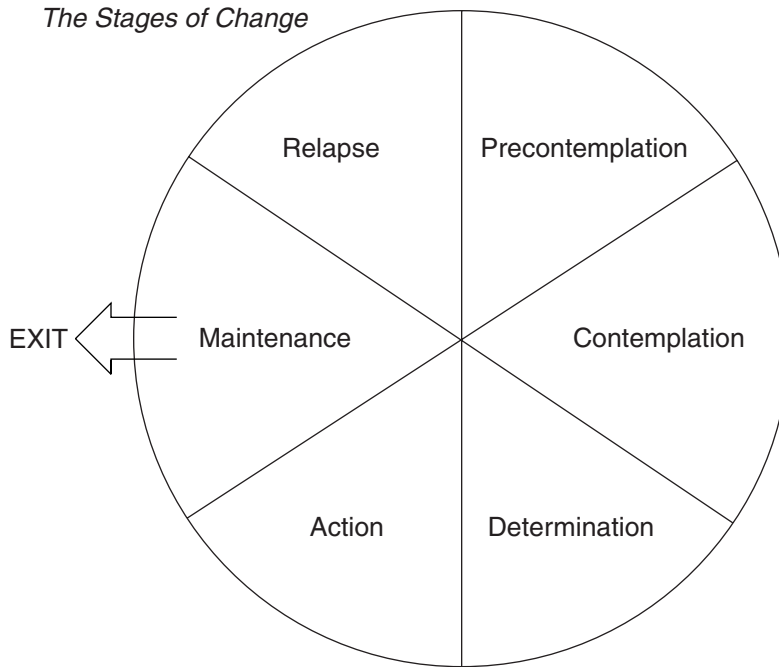
Black-and-White Thinking

One example of how a disease focus can actually contribute to the problem is the abstinence violation effect, or AVE. The AVE is a type of black-and-white thinking. It is similar to the AA slogan, “one drink, one drunk.” The AVE says that recovering individuals view themselves as either completely sober on the one hand, or completely out of control on the other, with no in between. This view creates a lot of problems. For the alcoholic who believes that one drink inevitably and always results in one drunk, and who then has a slip, there will be a greater inclination to engage in self-defeating thinking such as, “I’m a no-good, hopeless drunk. The disease has got me, and I can’t do anything about it. As they say, I’m powerless.” Thinking this way, of course, increases the probability that she will continue to drink destructively. In other words, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. And while it is good to be cautious and avoid slips when possible, this radically polarized view helps ensure that a slip becomes a fall, that one drink will inevitably lead to full-blown relapse.

Mindfulness helps you to see the signals leading to a slip, and also helps you to recognize one drink as just that: one drink. Practicing mindfulness, you are more likely to avoid falling off the wagon in the first place, and you are also less likely to exaggerate the importance of a slip, less likely to see it as ultimate defeat or failure.

How We Change

There are distinctive needs in overcoming addictive or other forms of habitual behavior. The first need is to mobilize resources to stop the behavior: But beyond this there is a need to find a way of maintaining this new state. Recall Mark Twain’s comment about quitting smoking.



Adapted from Prochaska and DiClemente, 1982.

“To cease smoking is the easiest thing,” he said. “I’ve done it a thousand times.” To be successful, you need to do more than just quit. You need to stay that way!

To put this in a larger context, there are distinct stages of change in recovery. In each stage, distinctive needs must be met to progress to the next stage. The stages psychologists James Prochaska and Carlo DiClemente have shown in their research are precontemplation (being unaware of a problem), contemplation (questioning if there might be a problem), determination (deciding to change), action (quitting), maintenance (staying quit), and relapse. Often an individual can go through this cycle several times, relapsing and quitting again, before finally exiting the process and resting steadily in the new, sober way of being.

In order for an addicted person—an alcoholic, for example—to move from the precontemplation stage, where he is totally unaware that there is a problem, to the contemplation stage, something must

happen that poses the possibility that a problem exists. He may notice friends with a similar problem, see a relative falling seriously ill because of alcohol, or may simply notice his anxiety mount when he runs low on alcohol.

In the contemplation stage, the person is not *convinced* she has a problem, but is only aware there *might* be. Internally, you can think of this person as seesawing between thinking there is a problem and feeling there is no problem. The inner dialogue of someone with a drinking problem might sound like this: “I really have to change my drinking. I’m tired of waking up feeling horrible, having to face another day with a headache and a queasy stomach. But on the other hand, I know lots of people who drink as much as I do—or even more! If I’m so bad, what about Charlie? What about Sue? Maybe it’s okay. I’m just having fun, after all. Just letting off some steam. Still, though, I hated the way my son looked at me the other night when I was drunk . . .”—and so forth. To move on from this stage requires some convincing event or information, something that overcomes this ambivalence and seesawing.

One client moved on from the contemplation phase when he found himself at the corner store with enough money for a pack of cigarettes, but not enough for both the cigarettes and some milk for his toddler. He bought the cigarettes instead of the milk. This astonishing act startled him into awareness that he clearly had a problem.

Once you are convinced you have a problem, a window for change opens called the determination stage. To take advantage of this opening requires a plan for change that feels realistic. Your thoughts might be, “I will quit smoking on the first of the month. I will throw all my remaining cigarettes away in ritual fashion. I will write down all the reasons I want to quit, and whenever I am tempted, I will take out that list of reasons and read it to remind myself.” If no realistic plan emerges, the window closes, and you are likely to find yourself back in precontemplation, telling yourself it’s really not that serious.

If you acknowledge the need to change, and can envision a way to carry it out, you enter the action stage. This is a matter of putting the plan into practice, of doing whatever you need to do to quit. In maintenance, however, the needs are quite different. To be successful in this stage, and to ultimately exit the cycle altogether, you need different skills—ones that help you stay quit rather than help you quit, per se.

To negotiate the maintenance stage, you need perseverance. You need the capacity to adjust your skills to changing situations, including ones you had not anticipated.

Stan, for example, had managed to stop drinking for six months. He did this by avoiding high-risk situations, places where he knew alcohol would be readily available and offered to him. However, now he faces the prospect of his brother's wedding, and he knows there will be plenty of alcohol at the reception. Because he wants to support his brother by attending the wedding, his strategy of avoiding risky situations will be inadequate for this. To deal with this type of problem, he needs a way to be around alcohol and still not drink. If he does not find a way to do so, he will enter relapse and go back to the beginning of the cycle, being unaware of having a problem (precontemplation).

It is of great help in staying quit or successfully negotiating the maintenance stage to have a larger focus for your life. This larger focus can be anything from spiritual commitment or service, to things that are much more ordinary. Unsuccessful negotiation of the maintenance stage leads to relapse, and then back to precontemplation.

Most people go through this cycle several times before exiting entirely into sober, healthy living. Very likely, you have known someone who has done this, or have done it yourself. However, this obvious-sounding observation is actually very important. For *recovery is a process*. It is a process of navigating between complacency on the one hand, and self-recrimination and despair on the other. Many know the danger of complacency. They know that relapse is a serious business, in some cases even life-threatening. It is obviously something to avoid if possible. At the same time, though, most people do go through these stages several times before establishing permanent change. For this reason, it is equally important to be able to view a slip, once it occurs, as a temporary setback rather than ultimate failure. Expecting yourself to get it right the first time out can be as unrealistic as expecting to hit a home run your first time at bat: it happens, but it is one for the record books, not the usual way of things. So when a slip does occur, it is important to maintain a compassionate attitude toward yourself, seeing yourself as in a learning process rather than doomed to failure. You are human, and this is the way human beings learn. By bringing mindfulness to the slip and what triggered it, you can form a plan to deal with that kind of situation in future.

This book primarily addresses the needs of people in the maintenance phase. That is, *it will show you how to build a satisfying and meaningful way of life without addiction once you have quit.* After contemplating quitting an addiction, after the decision has been made and implemented, there remains this tedious business of living without the alcohol or other drug. This part deserves special attention. For if you can build a happy, fulfilling, meaningful life, relapse will be much less of an issue.

A Larger Purpose

Mindfulness provides a larger purpose. When you have a larger purpose, a broader context in which to see a problem, things fall into place more gently, more easily. If you are awake and relaxed and aware and enjoying your life, there will be both less need and less desire for drugs, or anything else that you lean on too heavily.

Goals other than mindfulness can provide that larger context which gives us greater resilience and greater enjoyment of the present. For example, people who become interested in health and fitness often find they change other habits such as eating and drinking in order to support the larger goal of health. The Higher Power of the Twelve Steps has worked this way for some. Existential psychologist Viktor Frankl survived the horror of a Nazi concentration camp by having the larger purpose of observing and recording his experiences. He was fond of quoting Nietzsche's dictum, "He who has a *why* to live can bear with almost any *how*."

Awareness or mindfulness itself can be just such an overarching goal. Whether the day ahead presents a busy round of work, or a peaceful day at the beach, the mindfulness practitioner approaches it the same way, with an intention to be aware, to experience fully and deeply. We are the eyes and ears of the universe; we must not cloud our vision or muffle our hearing.

The Tao of Golf: Martin's Story

A larger purpose need not be lofty, spiritual, or overtly religious. For Martin, golf became a means of practicing mindfulness. He had

already quit several times. He would quit his cocaine use successfully for a few weeks, but then start again. During one of his periods of abstinence, a friend invited him to play golf. His friend was a patient teacher, and Martin came to love the game. He loved everything about it: being outside with friends, strolling over the carefully manicured greens, the grace of a swing that flowed naturally and easily as he improved. But one time he had to play while recovering from a coke binge the previous evening. He played terribly and felt worse. That was it. Though cocaine had cost him two jobs and his marriage to Katherine, it was his newly acquired sport that motivated him to become drug free. For him, what was important was that nothing interfere with his golf game. As his passion for golf increased, his passion for cocaine decreased.

Martin's story also points out that while quitting is an essential step, it is not enough. One needs a new focus. While other things can provide it, in our view, the best focus you can have is on living more deeply, more spiritually. In this book, we offer mindfulness as just such a focus—indeed, as a way of life. We offer specific strategies to help you *create a lifestyle that, by its nature, discourages addiction*. To set your feet on a path that is intrinsically healing, we present the ten Doorways to mindfulness.

The Ten Doorways to Mindfulness

Doorway One: *Return to the present moment.* You can get overwhelmed by memories of the past, worries about the future, and other distractions. When that happens, you may be in danger of relapse. By bringing a gentle, compassionate awareness to your surroundings, your thoughts, and your feelings, you will discover that your need to engage in addictive behavior diminishes.

Doorway Two: *Consider your life as a story you are still writing.* Many people hold on to life scripts connected to their addiction, which perpetuate negative life stories as well as continued attraction to drugs and alcohol. You don't have to get stuck there. You can write a new story.

Doorway Three: *Use journaling to deepen awareness of your life story and open the door to spiritual awakening.* Regular journaling brings the power of mindfulness to bear on repetitive problems and aids in contacting your inner wisdom.

Doorway Four: *Practice meditation to become more accepting of yourself and your life.* When you become more accepting of what hurts as well as more aware of life's many positive aspects, you establish a firm spiritual foundation for recovery.

Doorway Five: *Find ways to connect with the natural world.* Addicted people are often alienated from the natural world. A return to nature is incompatible with addiction. Conscious, mindful choices about your recreational time prevent you from squandering it on passive pursuits that do not employ your higher human qualities, such as intellectual, artistic, and spiritual activities.

Doorway Six: *Cultivate healthy relationships to discourage addiction.* Many people become addicted in part because of painful and unsatisfying relationships. In turn, addiction can destroy even the best relationship. As you become more mindful of relationship patterns, you can begin to change them, reducing the need to indulge your addiction.

Doorway Seven: *Explore dreams to expand your view of who you are beyond the limited point of view of your conscious, rational self.* Dreams offer clues about what is missing and what is out of balance. Often these are blind spots which we have difficulty seeing consciously.

Doorway Eight: *Practice mindfulness at work.* A mindful life involves mindfulness in all areas of life. Practicing mindfulness at work can help you stay calm and centered there as well.

Doorway Nine: *Learn to hold and embrace difficult emotions to ensure successful recovery.* There are well-established methods for dealing with difficult feelings. If you need extra help, therapy may be a useful aid.

Doorway Ten: *Practice, practice, practice.* An intellectual understanding of how to change your life is just the beginning. Direct experience brings the peace, health, and wholeness you seek.

Just One Way?

While it is not so everywhere else, in North America the predominant approach to the treatment of addiction remains Alcoholics Anonymous and its related Twelve-Step groups and programs. Individual stories attesting to the helpfulness of AA and Twelve Steps are numerous. Many people know someone who has been helped by a Twelve-Step program.

But is that all there is? The dominance of this one point of view is a two-edged sword—helpful to some, but also limiting the acceptance and development of alternative views with something to offer.

The problem with valuing one thing so much is that our attachment to it then makes it difficult to value anything else. The ancient sage Lao-tzu, credited with authorship of the Tao-Tè Ching (pronounced Dow Deh Jing, sometimes translated as “The Way of Life”) and the founder of Taoism, wrote the words at the beginning of this chapter some time around the sixth century B.C. Because you find one thing helpful, do you have to reject everything else? Because you find one thing helpful, does that exhaust all possibilities?

Lao-tzu’s words teach us that because one thing is good or beautiful or helpful, this should not preclude other things from also being good or beautiful or helpful. A both-and approach is often more useful and more complete than an either-or approach.

Whether you have found other programs helpful or not, our hope is that this book can give you something different, something that may *also* be helpful to you. If you approach this book with an empty cup, with openness, you will find things of value, without having to give up what you already have. And if, on the other hand, you have not yet found what you need elsewhere, we hope this book gives you a useful perspective, and helps you find the courage and strength to change.