

A LAMP UNTO YOURSELF

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO
ASIAN SPIRITUAL PRACTICES,
FROM ADVAITA AND BUDDHISM
TO YOGA AND ZEN

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To all spiritual seekers:
may your lamp shine brightly,
illuminating the path before you
as you step into the mystery.



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PREFACE

Ancient writings from India preserve a story about the death of one of the most influential spiritual masters of all time. This narrative was carried orally for centuries until it was written down in the first century BCE in an Indian language called Pali, in a scripture named *The Discourse About the Great Emancipation* (*Maha-parinibbana Sutta*). The text details the teachings, miracles, and other activities the Buddha performed in his final days.

The Buddha had spent over four decades, from the time of his enlightenment at the age of thirty-five to the time of his death at eighty, expounding his teachings to thousands of people. Yet, even as his illness was becoming progressively worse and his body was beginning to fail, his faithful attendant Ananda asked the Buddha for some final words of wisdom.

The Buddha replied that he had never held back anything from his disciples and had no final secret teaching to reveal. As he would soon no longer be there to provide guidance, he exhorted Ananda to stop relying on him for all the answers. “Be a lamp unto yourself,” he said, “a refuge unto yourself.”* The master had laid out all of the teachings with clarity and precision; it was now up to each student to take up the initiative to put them into practice.

*As is often the case with terms in ancient texts, there is some ambiguity about the Pali word *dipa*. I am following the Chinese tradition, popular among many Western translators as well, to translate this term as “lamp” or “light.” The alternative meaning is “island,” and in my opinion, “be an island unto yourself” works just as well.

This simple phrase has been deeply inspirational for many modern spiritual seekers. It evokes a radically different ethos than we normally expect from religious leaders, doesn't it? The Buddha's message is not that you should take refuge in scriptures, gods, institutions, or charismatic gurus. He does not ask you to place your faith in anything other than your own discrimination and due diligence. He had shared his own discoveries in as much detail as he could, but each of us has to experience the truth for ourselves.

Those qualities of self-reliance, autonomy, and firsthand experience are features of what I call "spiritual exploration," and that's what this book is about. Simply put, spiritual exploration is about empowering you rather than indoctrinating you. There are plenty of other books out there that will mold you into a faithful Buddhist, a good Hindu, a proper Taoist, or a serious yogi. Here, in contrast, we will be investigating what the practice of Asian spiritual traditions can offer us while always maintaining a noncommitted stance. We will treat the entire range of Asian spiritual ideas and practices as a menu of options that all have their own advantages and disadvantages, and that may or may not resonate with different people. You will make up your own mind about what works for you.

There are some concerns and potential pitfalls with this kind of piecemeal approach. You might wonder if it's even possible to practice ancient traditions when living in the hypermodern contemporary world. How can we be sure about the accuracy of our understanding as we learn about new traditions? What about cultural appropriation and other ethical issues? These thorny questions are immensely important, and I talk about them in detail in the final chapter of the book. (If these concerns feel especially urgent or are preventing you from enjoying reading, then by all means please feel free to skip ahead and read that chapter first.)

Despite these potential snags, however, my argument in this book is that it is entirely possible to customize a blend of practices that can be personally meaningful and truly transformative, while also being a good fit for your life and your own priorities. If that

sounds like an approach you would be interested in, then you are most welcome to join me on this journey of exploration!

What's the point of this journey? Perhaps you, like most spiritual explorers, are seeking something deeper, more fulfilling, more alive, more soulful than where you are now. In my experience, the vast majority of people who get interested in this topic are primarily seeking health and wholeness. Many are driven to start this journey because they are either suffering due to their immediate circumstances or else because they bear the scars of past traumas. Others may experience the less acute but persistent discomfort of ennui, a feeling of being limited or disillusioned by the way their lives have turned out. Still others feel fragmentation, like different parts of themselves are always at odds with one another. For me, it was alienation, like I was living from behind a glass bank-teller window that prevented me from fully experiencing my life. I longed for more connection, more presence.

Spirituality proposes to help us realize our own deepest being and to show us how we can embody that realization authentically in our lives. With such lofty promises, it's easy to get swept up in the hype; it's easy to project our fantasies onto spiritual teachers or to imagine that the particular tradition we are interested in is the one and only true path.

But that is not the kind of spirituality that's on offer in this book. Here, I will never ask you to leave your own judgment behind, to take anything on blind faith, or to sacrifice your own values or sovereignty. I will never ask you to dim your own light. Instead, we will approach the whole gamut of Asian spirituality with level-headed objectivity and common sense, and we will always prioritize your own individual values, goals, and experiences.

Does that sound like a useful approach? Is that the kind of spiritual exploration you'd like to embark on? If so, then grab your lamp and come along!

PREPARING FOR THE JOURNEY

Have you ever seen those cartoons where the Western spiritual seeker has to climb to the peak of some faraway mountain in order to find a sagely master living in a cave to ask him the meaning of life? Well, that's not at all how it works anymore.

I'm using the metaphor of a spiritual journey throughout this book, but let's face it, no one in the modern world needs to engage in an arduous trek to the Himalayas or some other remote region of the globe in order to learn about Asian spiritual traditions. A simple Google search pulls up an Everest-sized mountain of reading material that you can peruse without ever leaving your living room couch. The whole spectrum is readily available, from Advaita and Buddhism to Yoga and Zen—and everything in between. Actually, these days, you don't even need to search for it to be bombarded with information on spirituality. It seems that at every turn it's there in books, magazines, podcasts, workshops, and even conversations among friends or coworkers. The problem with learning about Asian spiritual traditions today isn't that information is hard to find; it's information overload.

How Western people react to this information glut varies. (Note that in this book, when I say "Western people" I mean to refer to people of all races and backgrounds who have been raised primarily within the context of Western culture.) While Westerners with Asian family backgrounds are likely to have absorbed a variety of cultural influences, most of us have not had any deep exposure to

Asian traditions. Even fewer of us really get serious about exploring Asian spirituality, at best superficially engaging with memes and platitudes on social media or maybe buying a Buddha statue for the mantle. On the other hand, there are the “die-hards” who become long-term adherents of a particular sect or devotees of a particular guru. They commit themselves wholeheartedly to a particular Asian tradition and sometimes even pressure you to join them.

But what if you find yourself somewhere in the middle? You feel ready to travel beyond the superficial level but are not necessarily sure what the territory looks like. You’re interested but also a bit skeptical. You are not feeling ready to commit to living in an ashram or monastery but feel a little curious about why someone might want to. You definitely want to investigate Asian spiritual traditions more deeply in order to get a clearer picture for yourself of what this world has to offer.

What do you do if you are a curious yet uncommitted spiritual explorer? Where do you turn for reliable information in English? Where can you get a map of the territory that is well-informed but accessible, serious but not overly dogmatic? With yoga studios on every street corner, hundreds of mindfulness apps to choose from, and Dalai Lama memes and Buddha quotes both real and fake constantly streaming into your social media feeds, where do you even start making sense of it all? In this dense forest of information, how can you learn to navigate toward what’s authentic and avoid the baloney?

If that’s the predicament you find yourself in, then I have good news. You are holding in your hands a guidebook that was written for explorers just like you. This book is going to cut through the noise and lay it all out for you. This is not just one more voice in an already crowded spiritual marketplace; here you’ve got a comprehensive map of the whole territory and a trusty guide who will show you how to navigate it.

This is a book for Western people who grew up without being steeped in Asian spiritual traditions and who do not have much previous experience in them. We are focused here on certain threads

of spirituality that originated in the eastern half of Asia (from India to Japan) and that are today readily available in the West (so, no actual travel required). In a nutshell, we are focusing on various ideas and practices that have been drawn from Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and other Chinese traditions that today are practiced globally. Some of the key ideas we'll cover in later chapters include mindfulness, yoga, Zen, nonduality, Tantra, chakras, vipassana, compassion practice, Taoism, martial arts, and Chinese medicine, among others.

How will we approach this material? Let me give you a basic road map. Here, in this first chapter, I provide you with essential orientation for the spiritual journey—answers to questions like, Where are we going? and Are spiritual claims for real? Chapter 2 then gives you some crucial background information for understanding Asian spirituality by laying out the history and doctrines of the major traditions. Chapters 3–6 are the core of the book, where I present a series of practices, detailing how to get started and what kinds of effects you can expect from long-term practice. (You can flip through those chapters if you want a quick sense of what kinds of things you'll take away from this book.) Chapter 7 ties together the previous four chapters by giving you my opinions on how to integrate these practices for optimal spiritual growth. Finally, chapter 8 digs into some thorny issues you may encounter as you further study Asian spirituality, such as cultural appropriation, bad translations, and more.

A BIT ABOUT YOUR GUIDE

Who am I to write a book like this? Why should you trust what I have to say? Those are good questions. We encourage a healthy dose skepticism around here!

Well, I'll start by telling you that I was not raised in an Asian culture or family context. I come from a transnational family that spans South America, Europe, and the US. My heritage is approximately 75 percent Latino, 90 percent European, 10 percent Indigenous

Amerindian, and precisely 0 percent Asian. I have studied Asian religions and cultures for most of my life through texts, travel, and deep immersion into practice, but I did not have the experience of growing up within that cultural milieu.

Further, although I have had a wide range of spiritual experiences, I make absolutely no claims to be enlightened or a sage within any particular spiritual tradition. Personally, I have always been allergic to gurus, and I have no interest in becoming one myself. But there's one kind of expertise I do have, which I will share with you here, and that's understanding the big picture of how all the Asian spiritual traditions fit together. In fact, you could say that that topic is my own personal specialty.

My interest in Asian spiritual traditions started when I was a kid. When I was in second grade, in 1981, I moved with my mother and siblings from Asunción, Paraguay, to a tiny rural community in New England (USA). There, I was mercilessly bullied by my peers for many years. To them, I was an outsider: different from everyone else and not welcome.

This was traumatic for me at the time, but I distinctly remember two things that gave me strength and solace in those days, both of which were connected with Asian spiritual traditions. The first was the idea of “the Force” from *Star Wars*. Don't laugh! It was the early 1980s, and the original trilogy of films—which were released in 1977, 1980, and 1983—was enormously popular with kids my age.

My young imagination was captivated by the idea that there was an invisible force that permeated the universe unifying all living beings. I knew the movie was fictional, but I couldn't help believing that you could train yourself to feel this energy and to use it to manipulate physical objects. I did not know until much later that the original *Star Wars* films were George Lucas's homage to old Japanese samurai films and that the idea of the Force was based on the East Asian concept of *qi* (also known as *ch'i* and *ki*—we'll say a lot more about this in chapter 6). But I remember lying awake in my bed for hours trying to find the Force by “stretching out with

my feelings,” just as Obi-Wan Kenobi instructed Luke Skywalker. And I do remember, once in a while, thinking that I felt something.

The second thing that really consolidated my interest in Asian spiritual traditions was the 1984 film *Karate Kid*. I totally related to the character of Daniel LaRusso, who was also the new kid in town and was also beaten up for being different. I longed for the kind of mentor that Daniel found in Mr. Miyagi and was fascinated by the martial arts techniques that he was learning. Of course, there’s also the clincher at the end of the film, where Mr. Miyagi uses a mysterious energy that seemed to me a lot like the Force in order to heal Daniel and get him back into the competition ring. In the end, scrawny Daniel beats the bullies, wins the pretty girl’s heart, and lives happily ever after. I was hooked!

Looking back, these films were problematic in some of the ways they played on stereotypes about Asia and Asians. I know now that they romanticized and exoticized aspects of Asian spirituality too. But at the time, these ideas had a powerful mystique, holding out an inspirational alternative to the painful status quo of my everyday life. They taught me that it might be possible to tap into invisible deeper layers of reality in order to find healing, power, and connection with the cosmos.

With those early seeds planted, by the time I was in high school I was training in two different forms of martial arts (one Korean and one Japanese) and dabbling in learning Chinese language too. I was reading voraciously about Asian religions—introductory books like *The Tao of Pooh*, dense primary texts like the *Upanishads*, and everything in between. Beginning in high school and into college, I also became intensely curious about Indigenous North and South American as well as European pagan spiritual traditions. I read the whole Carlos Castaneda series, Michael Harner’s books on shamanism, the Gnostic Gospels, the works of Starhawk and Aldous Huxley, and much more. I experimented with astrology, ritual magic, and, ever so briefly, psychedelics. Nevertheless, all along, it was the Asian traditions that continued to speak to me

most strongly, and in college I minored in East Asian studies to explore Buddhism and Taoism more methodically.

These interests came to a head after graduating from college, when I traveled with a friend to the Philippines and Indonesia. We were supposed to be two beach bums on a scuba diving vacation. However, from the moment we arrived in Southeast Asia, I felt that something deeper was calling me, like there was something important that I was supposed to be doing here. I had planned to return from the trip and to move to California to be a professional musician, but those plans quickly fell by the wayside. Instead, I found myself spending the next four years living in the city of Chiang Mai in northwestern Thailand. There, I became seriously engaged in learning about Buddhism and traditional Thai healing practices. I participated in numerous ten-day silent meditation retreats, spent several months in a Buddhist monastery, studied massage and herbal medicine at a traditional medicine hospital and in the living rooms of renowned master healers, and participated in many Buddhist and folk rituals within these different communities.

During those years, I took numerous side trips from Thailand, too, spending altogether about eight months in India, where I seriously studied yoga, Hindu-style meditation, and devotional chanting at an ashram in the Himalayan mountains; took a course in traditional Ayurvedic medicine in Southern India; and visited sacred sites all over the country. I also visited China, Malaysia, Singapore, and Mongolia. I learned aspects of Pranic Healing, Chinese medicine, spirit invocation, and a number of other techniques through a variety of workshops and teachers. I also had a few highly impactful mystical experiences during that time (one of which I describe in my previous book, *Buddhish*), which reinforced to me that there was something to this whole spirituality thing.

In 2001, after having been immersed in the practice of Asian spiritual and healing traditions for several years, I decided to return to the US to enroll in graduate school to study that subject

in a formal academic setting and to make it the centerpiece of my life. I went back to the University of Virginia, where I had earned my undergraduate degree, and enrolled in the East Asian studies master's degree program. I went to school part time, while I also began a thriving practice as a therapist and teacher of Thai massage and herbal medicine. During that time I wrote several books about traditional Thai healing that were geared toward practitioners, but my own trajectory was already leaning in a different direction. The more time I spent in school, the more I realized that I was a natural-born scholar. I felt that I had finally discovered the most fruitful avenue for engaging in these Asian spiritual traditions that I loved so much.

My shift from being a practitioner to being a scholar was complete by 2005, when I enrolled in a PhD program at Johns Hopkins University's medical school to study the history of the connections between Buddhism and Asian medicine. Since that time, I have not engaged with patients or clients as a healer. Nor have I involved myself in intensive meditation or long-term yoga retreats in formal settings. Instead, I have dedicated the majority of my energy to the academic study of Asian religion and medicine.

While studying for my PhD, I learned how to read Buddhist texts from medieval China in their original language. Since that time, I have published many scholarly articles and books on the subject of "Buddhist medicine" in China and beyond. I have also continued to travel to Asia to research and observe many different aspects of Asian spiritual and healing traditions. I spent a year as a visiting scholar at a monastic university in Taiwan. I went back to Thailand for two fieldwork trips and rekindled my connection with various traditional doctors and folk healers. I spent a summer interviewing Buddhist healers in Korea and another summer doing the same on the West Coast of the US. I spent time touring religious and medical sites in Cambodia, Japan, and Vietnam. For years now, I have been the editor in chief of the leading academic journal for the humanistic study of Asian medicine. And I have taught many

college courses on Buddhism, comparative Asian religions, Asian medicine, Asian history, and related topics.

I have also continued to experience profound spiritual insights and altered states of consciousness through my own personal practice over the years. But while this book is informed by these first-hand experiences, I am not writing it as a spiritual teacher or even as a model practitioner of any specific tradition. There was a span of a few years while I was living in Thailand in my twenties when I would have said I was Buddhist. Aside from that brief period, however, I have not been interested in adopting a single fixed spiritual identity or limiting myself to a single philosophy or practice. Instead, I am writing this book as someone who has a deep background in a lot of diverse traditions and practices. Someone who has done a lot of serious investigation of this topic in an up-close and personal way—there is nothing I have written about here that I haven't experienced for myself—but who, nonetheless, ultimately comes before you as a scholar and a critic.

Because of this, I believe I am an open-minded and objective guide to the terrain of Asian spiritual traditions. I have a ton of experience exploring this territory from different angles. I've done a lot of the practices, and they have meant a lot to me in my life. But I've also trained in the languages, studied the histories, and learned to separate the myths from the facts. I like to say that I am a student, friend, and fan of Asian spiritual traditions but also a researcher, a skeptic, and a critic. While I know a lot about these traditions, I'm more interested in what we can learn by comparing them all than I am in what we can learn by being a fundamentalist follower of just one.

Why am I talking about myself to this extent? I'm going through this personal history in detail because it shapes my presentation of the material in this book. You'll see that I switch between a scholarly voice (chapters 2 and 8) and a more conversational tone (3–7), wearing both of my hats as an academic and an experienced practitioner of Asian practices. However, throughout, I am always blending both perspectives because that's who I am and how I understand this material.

Also, my background informs my goals. Although this is not an academic book, my agenda here is an educational one. My purpose in writing this book is to educate Western people from all backgrounds and orientations about the broader world of Asian spiritual traditions, but to do so without requiring the reader to slog through scholarly prose or being pressured to accept any particular teachings as true. If this book can help to turn your curiosity about mindfulness, nonduality, the Tao, or Tantra—or some other thing you’ve heard about—into a greater awareness about how that concept fits into the richness and diversity of Asian spiritual traditions as a whole, then my mission has been accomplished.

WHAT ARE WE EXPLORING?

Before we get too far into this book, we’ve got to deal with a basic matter of definition. What does the word *spirituality* even mean? At the time I am writing this chapter, the following definition appears at the top of the *Wikipedia* page on spirituality, which I believe offers us a good starting point:

“Modern usages tend to refer to a subjective experience of a sacred dimension and the ‘deepest values and meanings by which people live,’ often in a context separate from organized religious institutions. This may involve belief in a supernatural realm beyond the ordinarily observable world, personal growth, a quest for an ultimate or sacred meaning, religious experience, or an encounter with one’s own ‘inner dimension.’”

In the US, where I live, people most often describe themselves as spiritual when they want to indicate that they have adopted certain ideas or practices related to the sacred, supernatural, and inner dimension of the self, while not being totally faithful to the dogmas of any particular religious tradition. Such people will sometimes use the whole phrase “spiritual not religious” to make this stance even clearer. Although individuals who identify in this way might attend a Buddhist meditation group or teach a particular brand of yoga in a local studio, for example, they typically avoid formally joining

traditional religious congregations of Buddhists or Hindus. On the other hand, people who have officially converted to Buddhism and have formally joined a temple usually don't have a problem defining themselves as "Buddhist." Thus, using the word *spiritual* tends to suggest a certain looseness, flexibility, or eclecticism in someone's approach.

Western spiritual exploration of this kind has a long history, which we'll get into in more detail in chapter 2. Generally speaking, spiritual explorers have always been interested in healing, transcending, opening, deepening, integrating, and otherwise transforming themselves. And they value having the freedom to engage in a wide range of activities in pursuit of these goals. They are willing to experiment and to combine practices and ideas from different sources, while preferring not to lock themselves into any particular set of beliefs. Rather than adhere to religious dogma, they tend to use their own preferences and intuitions to mix these ingredients together in order to make their own distinctive blends of self-transforming practices. As we will see, the principal teachings of Asian spiritual traditions fit well with these goals and thus have been integral parts of spiritual exploration in the West for generations.

Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, and other Asian traditions all share the notion that human beings can engage in certain practices and adopt certain lifestyles that lead to a deeper and deeper understanding of themselves and the cosmos. All of these traditions explicitly refer to themselves as a "path" and promise that the end of the path will reveal the true, sacred, or divine nature of reality. Depending on the tradition, these paths are mapped out in ways that are simple or complex, straightforward or variable, secret or publicly known. But, ultimately, all Asian spiritual systems promise that there is some kind of perfected state, a point where we finally gain clear insight into the ultimate Truth, with a capital T. This state is held to be the pinnacle of what is possible for humans.

In English, we usually capture this ideal using the word *enlightenment*, but it's important to keep in mind that we are using this

single word to translate many different Asian terms. In various traditions, an enlightened person is referred to as an *arhat*, a *buddha*, a *jivanmukta*, a *shengren*, a *xianren*, and so forth. In all cases, these terms indicate a person who has attained the highest level of realization. They are said to be perfectly wise, to do no harm, and to have become completely free from suffering. However, there are additional shades of meaning that diverge depending on the tradition. We will explore these differences in more detail in chapter 7.

Despite those divergences, our use of the single English word *enlightenment* often leads us to confuse Asian spiritual models with one another. In fact, in my experience, it is quite common among Western spiritual seekers who have relatively superficial exposure to Asian spiritual traditions to mix them up entirely. Based on an incomplete understanding, they often say things like “Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism are all essentially saying the same thing; they’re like different roads leading up the same mountain.” However, in my opinion as both a scholar and a practitioner, the differences are actually more striking—and more interesting—than the similarities. Once you spend a little time learning about all the diverse forms of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and other Asian spiritual traditions, you’ll see that they share some basic ideas. But you’ll also come to appreciate the differences more and more clearly.

Let me draw an analogy to food. People who are relatively unfamiliar with Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Thai, and Vietnamese cuisine might refer to all of it indiscriminately as “Asian food.” Now, it is definitely true that there are some superficial similarities among these cuisines. It’s true, for example, that all of them use soy sauce. But that certainly is not the most important detail about them, nor does it mean that they all taste the same! To someone with a bit more experience, there are important and obvious distinctions between these cuisines. The Japanese use of miso, the pungent blend of spices in Thai curries, and the Korean delicacy of kimchi have completely different flavor profiles and contribute to the diversity and uniqueness of each of their respective cuisines.

Once you have become familiar with the differences between them, you might feel that people who talk about Asian food as if it was all the same are not only factually wrong but perhaps also a bit offensive. Like, they can't be bothered to learn the differences. Well, it's the same thing with Asian spiritual traditions. When people assert that they're all just "different roads leading up to the same mountain," they are painting a drastically oversimplified picture. They're not doing justice to the individuality and unique contributions of each tradition, and in my opinion, they're being intellectually lazy.

We'll talk more about this issue in chapter 8. For now, please don't worry if you don't yet know enough to appreciate the different flavors of Asian spiritual traditions. That's precisely what this book is for. Here, we'll definitely talk about the similarities among traditions, but we will also spend a lot of time exploring the differences. In these pages, I'll introduce you to miso, curry, kimchi, and a dozen other flavors that are each unique and delicious in their own way. Maybe you'll become a connoisseur of Asian spiritual traditions, with an increasingly sophisticated palate and a hunger to taste more. Or maybe you'll realize that you just like one particular cuisine best of all and will decide to stick with that. What you ultimately do with the information presented here is up to you. But one thing is for sure: as we move forward, it will become clearer and clearer that Asian spiritual traditions are not all the same.

IS THIS JOURNEY FOR REAL?

Can people really become enlightened? Are spiritual ideas such as reincarnation, or that we all have a Buddha nature, or that we are all one with the universe, actually true? Is anything we'll be talking about in this book for real? Well, I should warn you right from the get-go that this book will not give you a definitive answer to those kinds of questions.

In order to explain my approach, let me introduce the distinction between *ontological truth claims* versus *phenomenological descriptions*.

Don't panic! These are just fancy academic terms for making claims about the way things *are* versus describing the way things *seem*.

Ontology is the branch of philosophy that is concerned with the question of what is fundamentally real. In my experience, most spiritual teachers and their students tend to make strong ontological claims about their own traditions. They preach to us that our current way of seeing the world is “an illusion” that needs to be abandoned, replaced, or upgraded. They promise that their particular philosophy describes “reality as it really is” or that their particular form of meditation or inquiry will show us our “true nature.”

This book will describe the truth claims made by different traditions of Asian spiritual traditions, but you will notice that I will avoid making any such claims of my own. Throughout this book, I will be keeping an open mind about all ontological questions, and I will keep inviting you to do the same. While I will avoid making truth claims, however, I will not hesitate to offer you phenomenological descriptions of various spiritual states or insights. That means I will describe what sorts of experiences Asian spiritual teachings or traditions open up; what kinds of perceptions they help us discover; what new ways of seeing, hearing, and feeling they unlock for us. But I won't extrapolate from describing these experiences to making statements about ultimate reality.

No matter what your view of ultimate reality is, there's absolutely no doubt that Asian forms of spiritual practice can lead to some dramatic phenomenological shifts. For example, when I speak about the neo-Advaita style of self-inquiry in chapter 4, I will discuss how this form of practice can lead to a strange and transformative new way of perceiving oneself. Everything we previously knew about our place in the universe seems to flip inside-out. It suddenly seems blatantly obvious that there is no such thing as physical matter and that the only thing that's real in the universe is our own consciousness. However, in that part of the book, I will be underscoring that that is how it *seems*. I will not leap to making claims that this is how things actually *are*—although every

neo-Advaita teacher I have ever heard does turn their phenomenological experience into precisely that kind of truth claim.

Buddhists and Taoists also have their own teachings on ultimate reality, but we don't need to follow any one tradition's doctrinal train all the way to its ontological destination. Instead, we can discuss the phenomenology of these experiences—what it *seems like* to the practitioner who is having such experiences—without making any corresponding truth claims about how reality actually works.

I'm making a big deal of pointing out this distinction because it is probably the single most significant difference between this book and other resources on Asian spiritual traditions for practitioners. Virtually every book, website, podcast, or other piece of media written by a spiritual teacher from any tradition typically argues for the validity of their particular tradition's truth claims. Similarly, when spiritual explorers have profound individual experiences, they may extrapolate from those experiences to making truth claims about ultimate reality. For example, people who have had a near-death experience may argue that that *proves* the existence of life after death or God or some other mystical reality. Or people who have experienced memory of their past lives may argue that the fact they had this experience *proves* the existence of reincarnation.

Truth claims have the effect of pitting spiritual traditions against one another and against other systems of knowledge. Not only do Asian forms of spirituality differ from one another about the nature of reality, they also all diverge from the standard scientific worldview that most readers will have grown up learning in school. And, obviously, they are not the same as the monotheistic worldview of Judaism and Christianity that is so prevalent in Western culture either. If we approach our spiritual journey as an ontological inquiry, we are eventually going to be required to choose a single system as the one true description of what reality is really like and to reject the others. Or else, we will have to invent our own multiverse where all of these worldviews can be ultimately true simultaneously.

In this book, I take a different approach, side-stepping the issue of ultimate truth altogether. Why? Well, for starters, I personally

don't believe that any religion or spiritual system has a perfect, infallible grasp on truth. My own opinion is that human beings can't possibly know the full, unvarnished, ultimate truth about reality. I believe that we are inherently limited by our bodies, senses, and minds to only ever being able to comprehend or perceive things from a limited and partial perspective. I also think it's impossible for humans to transcend our subjectivity in order to arrive at a totally clear picture of what is ultimately real. In other words, we are always stuck perceiving what it seems like, not what it is. Consequently, I prefer to always speak in an agnostic way on matters of ultimate truth, and I refrain from forcing my readers to make those choices either. I will report on the truth claims that are made by the traditions I talk about, but I won't present those views as truths in and of themselves.

Ultimate truth aside, I know from personal experience and from the written reports of thousands upon thousands of other people throughout history that human beings can indeed undergo profound phenomenological shifts in how we experience reality and ourselves through the spiritual practices discussed here. As we'll talk about in the upcoming pages, different practices are designed to elicit different kinds of phenomenological effects. While there is never any guarantee of success, when we sincerely put these techniques into practice over time, we greatly heighten the probability that we will experience these new perspectives. When those shifts come, these new viewpoints usually seem more vivid or more real than whatever ones we used to occupy. In fact, you might say that the definition of a mystical or spiritual experience is one that seems to be revealing a deeper truth about the universe than what you previously had access to. Nevertheless, in my view, it's always safest to conclude that that's just how things *seem*, not how things actually *are*.

At the end of the day, for our purposes in this book, it actually does not matter what you think is ultimately going on. For example, you might believe in a materialist worldview—that the effects of spiritual practice on your perception have to do with the way

it rewires the neurons in your brain, for example. Or you might believe that an almighty god created the world and that spirituality is revealing a path that we can follow toward realizing his omnipresence. Or you might agree with the Buddhist assertion that spiritual realization has to do with how the practice of meditation clears out karmic accumulations that cloud your ability to clearly perceive your natural state. Or you might believe something else altogether. Because I focus on the phenomenology, you can believe whatever you want and still get a lot out of this book.

That being said, my opinion is that you'll get the most out of the discussion in these pages if you keep an open mind on matters of ultimate truth. I suggest taking your time investigating different spiritual traditions, without feeling any pressure to jump to ontological conclusions. Even if you feel drawn toward one belief system over another, I encourage you to maintain an agnostic and even skeptical attitude rather than adopting a rigid conviction about what's real and what's not. That attitude, to me, is the very essence of an explorer's mindset and what differentiates us from die-hard religious devotees.

SETTING OUR COMPASSES

Before you embark, it's important to consider what direction do you want to walk on your spiritual journey. Different Asian models provide different goals, expectations, and experiences for practitioners. So, before you commit to any particular practice, it's important to take a moment to ask where this particular path is headed. Do you know that its goals are a good fit for you? Are you aware of the range of experiences practitioners tend to undergo? Do you know where people wind up after years of long-term practice of it? In other words, my advice is not to just listen to promises a teacher or tradition is making about enlightenment, happiness, and bliss. Rather, closely examine the advanced practitioners of this system, and ask yourself if these are the outcomes you are looking for. Do they fit with what you want out of your life? Do they fit with your values?

If spiritual practice is a process of retraining yourself and re-tooling your life over the long term, think about what you are optimizing for. For example, if your spiritual practice is constantly giving you messages about how you need to “escape the entanglements” of money and social status, then that’s how this practice will be shaping you day-to-day. On the other hand, if your practice is giving you messages about “manifesting” your spirituality through success and prosperity in worldly matters, then you’ll be setting out on an entirely divergent course. The question is not which one of these two options is right but which one is right for you. For example, if you have a family and a career and care about being active in society, then getting involved in a form of spirituality that is strongly focused on “escaping entanglements” will cause tension with the rest of your life. Odds are the mismatch between your spirituality and your life will make you feel conflicted and tense instead of fulfilled and peaceful.

I learned this kind of lesson early on in my own spiritual explorations. When I first encountered Theravada Buddhism while living in Thailand in my early twenties, I became quite enthralled with the practice of vipassana meditation (properly pronounced wee-PAH-sah-nah). I became fixated on my teacher’s promise that serious, sustained practice of this kind of meditation would result in enlightenment. I wanted that for myself and applied myself diligently to the practice. For about four years, I was a veritable meditation junkie. I attended about a dozen ten-day retreats in Thailand, India, and elsewhere, and consistently meditated for two hours a day when not on retreat.

As we’ll get into later in more detail, the particular form of meditation I was doing involves paying focused attention to the impermanent, dissatisfactory, and non-self nature of all human experiences. Predictably, over the time I was seriously doing this practice, I gradually started to become more aloof and more detached from the world. I started feeling like the comings and goings of ordinary life were distractions from my practice. I felt that I could only truly be happy if I became a monk and lived in a monastery

hidden away from the busyness of the world. But, yet, at the same time, I had grown up in a Latino family that placed a great deal of importance on staying connected. I also felt very attached to my girlfriend of many years, who I was living with in Thailand. The tug-of-war between my spiritual goals and my relationships caused a lot of stress for me (not to mention for my loved ones).

In the end, the desire for renunciation won out, and I chose to go live in a forest monastery in rural eastern Thailand. But as I get into in more detail in my previous book, *Buddhish*, not long after my arrival at the monastery I switched to practicing a different kind of meditation called *metta bhavana* (discussed in chapter 5). Instead of focusing on impermanence, non-self, and dissatisfaction, this practice involved mentally repeating positive affirmations of love and compassion for myself and all other beings. There was a lot of time for meditation at the monastery, and I practiced metta bhavana for many hours a day.

Wouldn't you know, in just a few weeks of immersing myself in metta, I had a heart-opening experience that was more mystical, powerful, and transformative than anything I ever experienced in years of diligent daily vipassana. The tension from the tug-of-war I'd been having with myself completely evaporated. I realized that I had been barking up the wrong tree for the past five years. I saw that vipassana was never actually a good fit for me, and that metta was much better aligned with my life and my values. Not only that, but this form of meditation came much more naturally to me than vipassana ever had. Vipassana had always felt like a chore to practice, but I felt joyful about practicing metta, even though I was doing so many more hours per day.

Fueled by this breakthrough, I left the monastery. I reconnected with my girlfriend, married her, started a family, enrolled in graduate school, and set out on the life trajectory that I am still on today. My interest in Buddhism switched from a passion for serious practice of Theravada (a style of Buddhism that is meditation focused) to a passion for scholarly research and teaching about Mahayana (a school of Buddhism that prioritizes compassion). I have never again

thought about being a monk or going on an intensive vipassana retreat but instead threw myself into embodying compassion as a father, teacher, and member of my community.

To this day, I remember clearly when I went to the senior monk of the monastery to tell him that I had decided to leave after being there for just a few months. He looked at me gravely and told me how disappointing it was to hear that I was “giving up.” He was convinced that I was making a huge mistake by succumbing to the “temptations” of the world outside.

I know plenty of meditators who would agree with him, and perhaps you are thinking the same thing too. But my firm position—which I’ll reiterate countless times throughout this book—is that there is no one-size-fits-all system of spirituality. My realization in the forest was that the spirituality I had been practicing up to that point might be the best thing in the world for someone else, but it just wasn’t right for me. I had struggled for years because I had oriented my compass in a direction that didn’t work for me. As soon as I reset that trajectory in a direction that better jibed with my own life and values, the conflict quickly dissolved and things just clicked into place.

The point of my story is that as a spiritual explorer, you should take great care that when you set out on your journey, you actually want to walk in that direction. Don’t lock yourself into one particular practice thinking it’s the be-all and end-all; if the practice isn’t resonating or the results aren’t to your liking, then pull out your compass and set your bearing for another direction. Luckily for you, you’re holding in your hands a comprehensive map that will give you the information you need to always ensure that you’re informed about what lies ahead.

Great news! Our preliminaries have been taken care of, and we have been cleared to set out on our journey of exploration. The first stage of this expedition will be to visit all of the major traditions in

order to hear a bit about the history, philosophies, and practices of each. Make sure you've got your suitcase packed, as we're about to quickly tour India, Southeast Asia, China, Tibet, and Japan.

Are you ready for the first leg of our adventure? Okay, then let's get going!