



# mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

## putting an end to suffering

**T**he desire to be happy and free of suffering is universal. More than 2,000 years ago, the Buddha offered teachings to that end. Fortunately those teachings have become increasingly more popular in the West. Buddhist teachings are consistent with the teachings of Jesus and the mystics of all religions. Buddhist principles are at the foundation of cognitive-behavioral psychology. Mindfulness has almost become a household word.

I firmly believe that happiness and freedom from suffering lie in a combination of psychotherapy and practice of Buddhist principles. In this issue of *Health&Healing* devoted to diagnosing illness, I want to present my imperfect and simplistic understanding of how to use Buddhist principles to decrease the suffering from any illness.

One of the first Buddhist principles is that pain is simply a part of life. We cannot escape physical, emotional, or even spiritual pain. However, we can learn to decrease our suffering from the painful events in life. *"Suffering results from resisting pain, from wanting something other than what is."*\*

The best way to understand this is through an example: I often suffer from insomnia. I will either have difficulty falling asleep or will wake in the middle of the night for no apparent reason. I read and study anything to do with treating insomnia, both for myself and for my clients, and I have a whole host of "things to try." Sometimes I am successful and fall back to sleep and sometimes despite my best efforts, I continue to simply be awake.

Now, being awake in the middle of the night is not a bad thing. It is quiet and peaceful, sometimes there is a beautiful moon and stars, sometimes there is rain, sometimes it is very, very dark, and it is always still. That is the truth—that is what is. When I just accept that I am in fact awake, it is not an unpleasant experience.

However, it is extremely easy to bring a great deal of suffering to the experience. If I allow myself to get frustrated with not being able to sleep, if I start to worry about what I will feel like the next day, or that not sleeping is bad for my health and well being, I can work myself into a real lather. That is suffering! It is entirely self-imposed, it does nothing to help me get back to sleep and it turns a peaceful experience into a small hell.

The Buddhist principle of acceptance brings an end to that suffering. If I can simply accept that I am not sleeping, the suffering is gone. In fact the peacefulness that comes from acceptance can sometimes allow me to fall asleep, *but*—I cannot pretend to accept the situation in order to transcend it. It doesn't work that way. Acceptance must be real and genuine and for its own sake.

Ending suffering by accepting what is can be applied to any painful situation—from heart-rending grief, to physical pain, to fear and panic. Those painful situations are difficult enough; when we resist and fight them and wish that they could be different, we add suffering to the pain of what is. When we accept our feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations as what *is*, we can then step back from them and offer comfort, and most importantly loving compassion to our situation and ourselves.

To close, I offer a version of the Loving-kindness meditation:

*May I be happy,  
May I be peaceful,  
May I be free from suffering.  
May you be happy,  
May you be peaceful,  
May you be free from suffering.  
May all beings be happy,  
May all beings be peaceful,  
May all beings be free from suffering.*

For more than a decade I have been studying Buddhist precepts, gradually beginning to understand them first at an intellectual level and then at an experiential level. Much of my exploration has been through the myriad of books available and on-line sources, but recently I have come to appreciate the importance of having a guide, a teacher, a group. In this area we have many resources for Buddhist teaching and meditation. Faith Gardner is one such teacher. Faith is in Durham, was trained by Cheri Huber, and offers a meditation group. [h&h](#)

\*Cheri Huber, *Making a Change for Good: A Guide to Compassionate Self-Discipline*, Shambala, 2007, p.26

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