



**ANDREW HOLECEK**

# **REVERSE** **MEDITATION**

How to Use Your Pain and  
Most Difficult Emotions as  
the Doorway to Inner Freedom

***Reverse Meditation***  
***How to Use Your Pain and Most Difficult Emotions as the Doorway to Inner Freedom***  
**By Andrew Holecek**

Introduction

Part I: The Basics

- Chapter 1: Right View
- Chapter 2: Discovering the Sacred in the Profane
- Chapter 3: The View Behind the Meditations
- Chapter 4: The Forceful Super Contractors
- Chapter 5: The Omnipresent Super Contractors
- Chapter 6: Characteristics of Contraction

Part II: The Formal Meditations

- Chapter 7: Referential Meditation: Shamatha
- Chapter 8: Nonreferential Meditation: Open Awareness I
- Chapter 9: Open Awareness II
- Chapter 10: The Reverse Meditations
- Chapter 11: Reverse Meditation Instruction
- Chapter 12: Further Examples
- Chapter 13: Emptiness, Nonduality, and the Reverse Meditations

## Introduction

The greatest gift has been a complete reversal in my understanding of the workings of the universe. Such a reversal is cause for great optimism because this fundamental shift in worldview allows us to stake out a far grander role in determining the evolution of this universe.

–Eben Alexander

I came to understand heaven and hell in a new way. In a striking reversal of perspective, I saw that hell was not the opposite of heaven, as is usually taught, but the guardian companion of divine realization.

–Christopher Bache

Meditation has found a home in the West. Countless scientific studies tout its benefits, and a multitude of students proclaim its life-changing value. I am one of those students. For over forty-five years I have practiced this ancient art, and continue to reap its remarkable rewards. While I remain a follower of many wisdom traditions, and believe that no one has a patent on truth, thirty years ago I took refuge in Buddhism. The adage, “Chase two rabbits; catch none,” points to the power of commitment, and the dangers of spreading yourself too thin.

My passion for meditation led me into the traditional Tibetan three-year retreat, where I became a monk with robes and shaved head, meditating fourteen hours a day in a remote monastery. I even slept sitting up in meditation posture, practicing the nocturnal meditations of dream and sleep yoga. Three-year retreat is like a meditation university, providing the opportunity to practice dozens of meditations in the most nurturing environment. It remains the most transformative experience of my life.

Of the many practices I was introduced to in retreat, one meditation stands out: the quirky, intense, multifaceted, and revolutionary practice of *reverse meditation*. I learned this practice within the context of *Mahāmudrā* (Sanskrit for “great seal”), a lofty tradition in Tibetan

Buddhism that explores the nature of the mind.<sup>1</sup> This was over twenty years ago, and since then these radical meditations have become a cornerstone of my spiritual path.

They're called "reverse" meditation for a number of reasons. First, these practices are the opposite or reverse of what many of us associate with meditation. Most people think that meditation is about feeling good, getting "Zen," or otherwise chilling out. But this is just one small aspect of meditation. Complete meditation is not about feeling good – it's about getting real. And getting real requires dealing with the reality of difficult situations.

Second, these unique meditations are designed to reverse our relationship to unwanted experiences, which means going directly into them instead of avoiding them. In so doing we can discover the *basic goodness* of whatever arises, which is deeper than interpretative goodness. Basic goodness refers to the ineffable "suchness, isness, thatness" of whatever occurs – good or bad.

If we capitulate to our usual avoidance strategies, we drive acute conscious discomfort into a chronic unconscious cramp. The discomfort is still there, but now it's buried deep in our body-mind matrix, where it works backstage to dictate much of our onstage life. The rejected experience then manifests symptomatically – an undiagnosed reflection of an underlying discord that expresses itself in virtually everything we do. The contraction squirts out as reactivity, psychological duress, physical illness, and all manner of unskillful responses to the challenges of life. Our actions then become evasion tactics that try to skirt these buried uncomfortable feelings.

The reverse meditations give us the opportunity to relate *to* the unwanted experience instead of *from* it. And to also establish a relationship to the contraction that otherwise acts like scar tissue to sequester the unwanted experience from consciousness. Relating *from* the contraction is no relationship at all. That results in our usual reactivity to difficult experience, one that kicks us out of our feeling body and into our thinking head, and into unnecessary suffering. Instead of dealing authentically with the challenging somatic sensation, we leap into inauthentic conceptual proliferation (confabulating and catastrophizing) to buffer ourselves from

---

<sup>1</sup> Four traditions comprise Tibetan Buddhism: the original school from the "old translation" tradition is the *Nyingma*, and three schools of the *Sarma* or "new translation" tradition: the *Kagyu*, *Sakya*, and *Gelug*. Mahāmudrā is a staple in the Sarma tradition. These four schools are further distinguished in that the Kagyu and Nyingma are considered "practice lineages," those that emphasize meditation; and the Gelug and Sakya are "scholastic lineages," those that emphasize study. While I am a student of all four, my main path has been in the Kagyu and Nyingma traditions.

the discomfort of our feelings. We run from the honest pain and real news that come with being human, and into dishonest commentary and fake news. As the 19th century humorist Josh Billings said, “Some of the worst things in my life never actually happened.” Some of the worst things in my life were totally made up by my inability to stay in the firestorms of life.

Third, the reverse meditations reverse or overturn your sense of meditation altogether. They represent a revolution in spiritual practice that turns your understanding of meditation inside out and upside down, and therefore radically expand your practice. Situations that were once antithetical to meditation now *become* your meditation. Obstacles that previously obstructed your spiritual path now become your path. This means that everything becomes your meditation. Nothing is forbidden. You can enter lifetime retreat in the midst of ordinary life.

### Down and dirty

Because the reverse meditations invite unwanted experiences, they’re no day at the beach. Unless you expand your notion of “beach.” Many spiritual practitioners enter the path because they’re looking for peace and happiness. The contemporary teacher A. H. Almaas, founder of the Diamond Way, writes, “When most people set out on the spiritual path they’re unwittingly setting out for heaven.” One limitation of conventional understandings of meditation is the “feel good” agenda. Meditation then slips into the standard comfort plan. If it’s not going to make me feel better, why bother? What’s the point? That agenda is viable, but incomplete. We all want to feel good. But where does your meditation go when things go bad? Where is your spirituality when “rock meets bone” as they say in Tibet, or when the crap hits the fan, as we say in America?

The reverse meditations make you feel better, even when things feel bad. They do so by expanding your sense of what “better” and “bad” truly mean. You really can feel good under *any* circumstance; you just need to enlarge your sense of goodness and refine your understanding of “bad.” Your comfort plan can evolve to encompass even the most uncomfortable experiences. The meditation master Milarepa, who spent twelve years in intensive retreat and dealt with legendary hardship, sang:

When I get a lot of stuff coming up I feel extremely well  
When the highs roll into lows feels even better still

When confusion gets complicated I feel extremely well  
Fearsome visions get worse and worse feels even better still  
The suffering being bliss feels so good that feeling bad feels good.<sup>2</sup>

Feeling bad feels good? Suffering becomes bliss? Is this some twisted form of spiritual masochism? How is it possible to relate to hardship in this way? By reversing your relationship. By discovering the peace that lies within the pain.

Another reason these meditations are called “reverse” is because they’re counter-instinctual, counter-intuitive, and counter to our normal versions of conditional happiness. They go against the grain of our comfort plan. But these unusual meditations lead to the discovery of unconditional happiness – the real beach that lies within the most turbulent situations. Even if a tidal wave slams into your life, you are now equipped to ride that surf. You’ll find yourself on an endless tranquil beach, no matter where you are and what you’re going through.

*By putting your meditation into reverse you’ll actually find yourself going forward.* Step into your pain and step up your evolution. These unusual practices accelerate your path by bringing everything onto it. We go into retreat, even conventionally, in order to advance. But now you no longer need to sit in tranquility on your meditation cushion, or escape into your retreat cabin, to meditate. Just reverse your rendering of meditation, and realize you have the goods to chill out in a blast furnace.

My teacher Khenpo Tsültrim Gyamtso Rinpoche taught, “Nurture your meditation by destroying it.” What he meant is destroy your contracted understanding of meditation. Don’t limit yourself. If you continue to separate meditation from the hardships of life, you end up limiting both meditation and life.

The reverse meditations are earthy, gritty, and very real. At times they will slam your heavenly versions of spirituality smack into the earth, and almost force you to mix dirt with divinity. These practices turn the notion of spirituality on its head. Instead of “waking up,” it’s more about “waking down.” Instead of transcendence, it’s more about “subscendence.” Instead of trying to get out, it’s more about getting in.

This rebellious view often creates a whiplash effect because of its impact. It’s such a sweeping reversal of traditional notions of meditation and spirituality. And the practices that lead

---

<sup>2</sup> From “The Eighteen Kinds of Yogic Joy,” by Milarepa, translated and arranged by Jim Scott.

to the incorporation of this unusual path can be similarly jarring. But so is life. You have to be intrepid to walk this path. It's worth the price of admission, because these practices are your ticket into reality. They show you how to find the spiritual in the material – in the good, the bad, and the ugly – and annihilate the notion of “path” altogether. In the end, you're not going anywhere. This converse path will lead you back into the real world, back into the difficulties you were attempting to flee. They will help you find freedom in precisely what you were trying to avoid.

### Contraction

Over the past forty-five years of studying the great wisdom traditions, I have searched for the irreducible factors behind suffering. What are the common denominators behind *samsāra*, the Sanskrit word for conditional reality and all its hardship? Can these denominators themselves be further reduced into a foundational tenet? Henry David Thoreau wrote:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms.<sup>3</sup>

All my meditation retreats have been “to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms.” And that means finding the lowest common denominator behind suffering. One theme has slowly but consistently emerged as the central player behind all my pain. *Contraction*.

Contraction is what I find when I look deeply into how I create my internal sense of self, and the external world that co-emerges with that internality. You can't have self without other, inside without outside. But the unconscious labor of contraction doesn't just give birth to these twisted twins. It spawns contorted triplets, because suffering is also born with duality.

---

<sup>3</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; Or Life in the Woods*, [chapter two, para 16]

The Kabbalistic tradition refers to the principle of contraction with the term *tzimtzum*, also translated as “withdrawal.” With every contraction, we withdraw from what’s happening, from authentic contact with reality, and into our inauthentic storylines about it. But bona fide spirituality is a contact sport. You have to be willing to get hit. If you relate to the contact properly, you will be hit with the truth, and eventually with reality. The Jewish scholar Zvi Ish-Shalom goes to the deep end of the pool:

Contraction also represents the movement of the infinite light, the light of *Ein Sof* [“no-end, infinite”], into the manifestation of form, until its eventual presentation as the dualistic human experience of separation. When we understand this process we can trace it back, we can follow the experience of embodied form back through all the dimensions of light; this process of repeated contractions and expansion birthed into being, from the most coarse and material into the most subtle and ethereal. . . every individual life, with all of our suffering and all of our contractions, is the potential of the infinite expressing itself.<sup>4</sup>

Like the fairy tale *Hansel and Gretel*, we can follow the breadcrumbs of contraction back home, tracing the reiterative process back to our true nature, to things as they really are before we withdraw. Zvi continues, “Suffering, or contraction, is simply the mistaken perception that we are a separate entity, defined by our self concept. . . When this property of light is contracted in our human experience, knowledge of who and what we are escapes us.”<sup>5</sup> And we forget. The reverse meditations are literal re-membering meditations, taking us back home. Starting right where we are, with gross and constant levels of contraction, we can work our way back to the very subtle primordial contraction, releasing even that in the homecoming that is enlightenment itself, a return to the light of *Ein Sof*. That is our journey in the pages ahead.

The reverse meditations are intimately connected with contraction, and allow us to transform obstacle (contraction) into opportunity (openness). Expansion—and-contraction is the combustion cycle that drives the path forward, or in our journey, “backward.” Understanding this

---

<sup>4</sup> Zvi Ish-Shalom, *The Kedumah Experience; The Primordial Torah*, (Boulder, CO: Albion-Andalus Books, 2017, p 21). This description of the genesis of form is resonant with the *bardo* [“gap, transitional process, in between”] teachings of Tibetan Buddhism. From the radiance of the *luminous bardo of dharmata* we contract into the *karmic bardo of becoming*, and eventually into the *bardo of this life*, which occurs when the contractions of our mother physically reiterate this cosmological principle and literally squeeze us out into the world of form. We then reiterate this process throughout our lives every single time we grasp after something.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 39, 43.



will show us how to treasure our contractions as necessary fuel for the path. Like the beating of our heart, we need contraction to allow for expansion.

The reverse meditations and contraction relate to each other in the following way: if we give in to our habits of avoiding discomfort, we transform conscious pain (mostly emotional and psychological) into unconscious cramps. Never do we contract with such rapidity and ferocity than when we're in pain. We instinctively contract away from unwanted experience, a reactivity that may temporarily remove us from acute pain, but that ironically ensures chronic suffering. Pain and suffering are not the same. Suffering is an inappropriate relationship to pain. And by reversing that relationship we can relieve our suffering. The reverse meditations equip us with the tools to reorder our relationship to contraction by opening to it, transforming contraction into relaxation, closure into openness, and agony into a new understanding of ecstasy.

In so doing, the reverse meditations also heal the fracture of duality, which is born from these reiterative contractions. Our journey will therefore lead to an open, honest, and nondual relationship to reality, which includes pain. The reverse meditations show you how to become one with your pain, how to embrace it rather than brace against it, which magically liberates both you and the pain. The pain is gone. And so are "you." What's left? What remains after this nondual embrace? Even the one becomes none. No-thing is left. Emptiness is left, which is equivalent to a radiant fullness – and a blazing new experience of life. Just what that is will be revealed in the pages ahead.

This book is therefore a practice manual, an owner's guide to the difficulties of life. In this regard, it's more of a repair manual – a profound way to repair our relationship to unwanted experiences by reversing the way we deal with them. It's fundamentally a way to realize unconditional happiness, by pointing out all the ways we make ourselves and others miserable.

### Why me?

As a former dental surgeon, I have spent decades in the pain business. I'm acutely aware of the clinical aspects of intense pain, the pathophysiology of neurological transmission, and the necessity of pain management with standard regimens, including drugs. I have written thousands of prescriptions for pain medication, and countless more for anti-anxiety agents (which amount to anti-contraction mediators.) In Chapter Twelve, I will share a number of stories of how I have

used the reverse meditations to handle extreme physical and emotional pain in my personal life. And throughout the book you will learn how I apply these practices to my spiritual path. I'm not writing this book from an Ivory Tower. This is coming from the trenches on the frontlines of life.

As an author in the field of thanatology (death and dying), as well as the shadow sides of soteriology (the doctrine of salvation), I have wide-ranging experience in the academic and clinical sides of psychological and emotional suffering.<sup>6</sup> But mostly, I'm just like you. I live in a world that can be extraordinarily painful. In this divisive and contentious age, it just seems to be getting worse. Every time I turn on the news, there is more anguish in the world. My heart has been broken. My guts ripped out (almost literally). But I can only tell you that these outlandish reverse meditations have been one of the greatest gifts in my life. A wondrous gift in ugly wrapping paper.

### How to use this book

The heart of our journey lies with the meditations that bring these teachings to life. Meditation is not one practice, just like sport is not merely one activity. There are as many meditations as there are sports, and we will explore a number of them. This book offers a progression of these practices, building and refining upon their predecessors, and culminating in these monstrously magnificent reverse meditations. Because the reverse meditations are so radical, we have to work our way up to them. If you find the way up gets a bit steep in Part I, jump ahead to the meditations in Part II to start bringing the material into your life, and to take a break. Parts I and II bootstrap each other, so feel free to dance between these two sections. The numerous endnotes support the journey for deeper divers, but can be skipped, or left for a second reading.

Three core meditations form the axis of this book: the baseline practice of mindfulness (more specifically, referential shamatha, in Chapter Seven), which matures into the practice of open awareness (the non-referential meditations, Chapters Eight and Nine), which prepares you for the reverse meditations (Chapters Ten, Eleven, and Twelve). Interlaced with these core

---

<sup>6</sup> See my book *Preparing to Die: Practical Advice and Spiritual Wisdom from the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition*; *The Preparing to Die Institute* (a six-month training program); and my first book, *The Power and the Pain: Transforming Spiritual Hardship into Joy*.

meditations are a number of contemplations and “meditation snacks,” designed to be used on the spot in difficult situations. We’ll generate stability with the three core practices, and applicability with the contemplations and meditation snacks.

Contraction manifests in countless ways, some of which will surprise you. Countless antidotes are therefore presented to give you the tools to work with any contracted situation, no matter how overt or covert, acute or chronic. Together, the following contemplations and meditations will slowly untie the numerous knots you have tied yourself into, felt as the underlying tension of your life, and culminates in a deep sense of ease, even when life is filled with dis-ease. The layers of contraction will be pointed out one-by-one, then opened with correlative meditations, releasing vast stores of energy trapped inside. The result is invigorating, liberating, and ultimately enlightening.

But the process that leads to this freedom, the fundamental return to life, is not itself always blissful. If your foot has fallen sound asleep, it feels like pins and needles as it wakes up. If your hand is frozen stiff on a winter day, it can burn like hell when it thaws. This is where the philosophy behind these “defrosting” practices comes into play. With the right view, you willingly endure the discomfort necessary to wake up, because you know that the energy and freedom released by dropping your resistance, and walking the peaceful path of inner disarmament, is worth it.