**Mastering the core teachings of the Buddha 2**

This is a compilation of warnings about the possible dangers/side effects, which can occur because of an intensive meditation practice.

**Chapter xxi: Foreword and warning**

#1: p. xxi (19): for whom this book is (not) written for

*”It is also the unrestrained voice of one whose practice has been dedicated to complete and unexcelled mastery of the traditional and hardcore stages of the path rather than some sort of vapid New Age fluff or pop psychological head-trip. If that ain’t you, consider reading something else.  
As a highly regarded senior meditation teacher and scholar (who will remain anonymous) said to me after skimming through an earlier draft of this book, “Most Buddhists are just aging boomers who want to do something to feel better about themselves as they get older and are not really interested in this sort of thing.” I wish them great success in getting those valid needs met.  
I must reluctantly advise such individuals to avoid reading this book or at least the chapters marked with a lightning bolt. This is simultaneously an admission of the limitations of this work, an invitation to adopt a more empowering view of what is possible on the spiritual path, and a warning.”*

#2: p. xxi (20)

*“Read this as another warning: if you get good enough at these practices, people will often have bad reactions to you if you go around talking about it, and the number who will instead find your achievements a source of inspiration and empowerment, an opportunity to learn something for themselves, as they rightly should, will likely be few.“*

*… ”Reading between the lines, you should take this admission as yet another warning. If you  
go way into this stuff, you will discover this same loneliness.”*

#3: p. xxi (21/22): about mental health and material stability

*“This should be seen as another warning: this book and the path presented in it are not for  
those who at this time find that they are unstable spiritual seekers. Meditation at the levels I am  
about to describe requires a baseline mental and material stability; and with respect to the latter,  
not necessarily wealth or even a 401(k), but ethically acquired requisites such as food and a safe,  
conducive shelter. You must have your psychological trip very together to be able to handle  
and integrate the intense techniques, side effects, and results I am about to discuss. In this book,  
I will explain in detail what is meant by “have your psychological trip very together”, with the  
key requisite skills being an ability to identify difficult mind states when they arise and handle  
them with kindness and aplomb. Luckily these are learnable skill sets.*

*There are plenty of gentle techniques and schools of practice available for people for whom it  
would be more skillful and constructive to apply those techniques. There are also many skillful  
healing modalities available today to help those who need to heal psychological trauma or clear  
up barriers to more intense practice. If you need those, you are highly encouraged to do that  
crucial work first. Many of the techniques and doses recommended in this book are for those  
who already have a solid platform of mental health and are willing to accept the risks inherent  
in intensive training.*

*Stated much more explicitly: people who do strong and intensive practice can hurt themselves and freak out. Just as serious athletes can hurt their bodies when they take a misstep or push themselves beyond their limits, just so serious mental athletes can strain their minds, brains, and nervous systems, and strained brains can sometimes function in very strange ways.  
To rewrite the operating system rapidly while it is running doesn’t always go so well in the short term or occasionally in the long term. Thus, while I will include nearly endless exhortations to find the depths of power and clarity that you are capable of, I will also add numerous warnings about how to keep from frying yourself.*

*By “frying yourself”, I mean explicitly severe mood instability and psychotic episodes, as well as other odd biological and energetic disturbances, with some practitioners occasionally ending up in inpatient psychiatric facilities for various periods of time. Exactly how much of this is nature (their own “inherent wiring” and potential for mental pathology), how much of it is nurture (practicing hardcore meditation techniques in high doses such as those presented here), and how much is related to other unidentified factors is a question that is still being worked out, just so that you are not in any way uninformed about the still-developing state of modern science as it applies to the art of intensive meditation.*

*Some who have read this book apparently have only noticed the former message, that being to find the depths of power and resolution you are capable of (a message put in to counterbalance a culture full of people who are underutilizing or not recognizing their inherent potential), and they missed the parts that discuss how and when to back off, a message found in numerous places in this book, much to their chicken-fried detriment. Hopefully putting this here right up front will again help people to hear both messages and find the balance between the two that works, as I am a firm believer in people being informed not only of the benefits but also of the risks so that they can make informed decisions and practice accordingly. You wouldn’t want to do power lifting without proper training, spotting, and technique, nor run marathons without lots of careful training, stretching, hydration, great nutrition, and the like: same with hardcore meditation practice. You also would be naive to imagine that you can push your body to its limits without risk: same with your brain and hardcore meditation practice.”*

**Part 1 – The Fundamentals**

**Chapter 1: Introduction**

#4: p. 3 (27)

*“If you have not yet read the Foreword and Warning, please do so now.”*

#5: p 4 (28): About pitfalls, limitations, and shadow sides of the “Three Trainings”

*“Chapter one, “The Three Trainings”, introduces morality, concentration, and wisdom (see also The Long Discourses of the Buddha, or the Digha Nikaya, sutta 10, usually referred to as DN 10)”*

*…*

*“Each training has its own specific set of premises, goals, practices, and standards of mastery for those practices. These are different from each other, and problems can arise if we conflate the premises of one training when pursuing the others. Each training also has its common pitfalls, limitations, and shadow sides, which are rarely made clear, and failure to do so has caused much confusion.”*

**Part 2 – Light and Shadows:**

**Chapter 17: Introduction to parts two through five**

p. 103 (127): contemporary meditation scenes

*“The practical reason for including Part Two at all is that what often happens between trying to apply the basics of technical meditation discussed in Part One and successful entry into real meditation territory discussed in Parts Three through Six is that we run into the mainstream culture of contemporary meditation scenes and the communities that develop around them. We need support, friends who are into what we are into, good teachers, and places to practice. We wish to be in the company of fellow adventurers rather than be lone wanderers in strange lands. The Buddhist term for this is that we want sangha, a community of like-minded people. Unfortunately, much of what we find is not particularly conducive to healthy adventure and deep exploration at all  
Thus, as one small dissenting voice against the tide, I have included Part Two to help those who want to go deeper than many around them and avoid the numerous cultural sidetracks and disempowering voices that will keep them from achieving their goals.”*

p. 104 (128): about traps and pitfalls

*“Further, the numerous traps and pitfalls presented in this book are so common that each of us needs to be wary, reflecting regularly and honestly on how we have fallen into them once more. I sometimes find myself re-reading this book and thinking, “Wow, that was a good point. I should try to remember it.““*

*… I think that most spiritual practitioners could and should become much more comfortable admitting what they don’t know and seeking clarifcation. The times when I myself have failed to do so have been much to my detriment, manifesting in the forms of slow progress, more pain and confusion than were necessary, stagnation, and occasionally regression of practice.*

p. 105 (129): about attainments

*“There are those who hold the view that attainments will always speak for themselves and that people will be able to tell, but this is not always true. There are others that point out that plenty who claim attainments are either being deceptive or err in their assessment of themselves. Perhaps it is purely my time and cultural conditioning that creates my view that reasonable, open discussions of attainments and qualifcations to teach are reasonable and valuable.”*

p. 105 (129): about counterbalancing imbalances

*“However, any point I make in some attempt to counterbalance what I perceive to be generic imbalances may not apply to you. Such counterbalancing effort can cause further imbalances in you if you are substantially to the other end of things from the mainstream. For example, if I say something like, “Make tons of effort in meditation,” and you are already overpowering your practice, then you need to be able to figure out if my advice is targeted at you specifically, and, if not, take it in context and move on to other points. In other words, reach for balance and recognize that this book was written in a specific cultural context with specific assumptions that might not apply to you at all.”*

**Part IV Insight**

**Chapter 30 The Progress of Insight**

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One of the most profound things about these insight stages is that they are strangely predictable regardless of the practitioner or the insight tradition. Texts that are 2,000 years old

describe the stages just the way people go through them today, though there will be some

individual variation with respect to the individual specifcs today as then. The Christian

maps, the Suf maps, the Buddhist maps of the Tibetans and the Theravada, the maps of

the Kabbalists, and many non-Buddhist traditions of India are all remarkably consistent in

their fundamentals. I chanced upon these classic experiences before I had any training in

meditation, and I have met many people who have done likewise. These maps, Buddhist or

otherwise, are talking about something inherent to how our minds progress in fundamental

wisdom that has little to do with any tradition and much to do with the mysteries of the

human mind and body. The maps are describing basic human development. These stages

are not Buddhist, but universal, and Buddhism is merely one of the traditions that describes

them, albeit unusually well.

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Luckily, if the meditator really is into insight territory, then continued, correct, sensation based practice has a way of facilitating progress given time. Also, when the proverbial crap is

hitting the fan, having a map can help the meditator not make too many of the common, tempting, and occasionally disastrous blunders of that stage, as well as provide the meditator with

encouragement that they are on the right track when they hit the grueling, weird, or captivating stages. Contextualization and knowing that some of the strange or hard stuff is expected,

normal, and doesn’t last can be extremely important to help people fnd the courage and perspective needed to persevere. These stages can signifcantly color or skew a meditator’s view of

their life and experience until they master them, and it can be alleviating and even life-saving

to remember this when navigating rougher waters while trying to remain functional in our

endeavors and relationships. Those who do not have the beneft of the maps in these situations

or who choose to ignore them are much more easily blindsided by the psychological extremes

and challenges that may sometimes accompany stages such as the Arising and Passing Away

and those of the Dark Night.

The maps fll in the juicy details of the seemingly vast gap from doing some seemingly boring

and simple practice to getting awakened. Further, providing this extremely precise information on exactly what to do puts the responsibility for progress or its lack clearly on you, the

meditator, which is exactly where it should be. If after reading this book you don’t put this

extremely powerful information into practice, the fault is yours alone, or perhaps is the better

part of valor if you feel you are currently too unstable to attempt these sorts of practices and

strive for the effects they create.

'Chapter 30.11, Equanimity

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In Equanimity, there is a settling in, a rediscovery of what we seemingly always knew but

temporarily forgot. Equanimity can have a rough start, strangely enough, as well as some mildly

painful and irritating sensations, but the meditator feels that some barrier has fnally broken, a

weight has lifted, and practice can continue

Strangely, some may fnd the openness, ease, and spaciousness of Equanimity disconcerting,

disorienting, or ungrounding, particularly if they have spent a lot of time being in signifcantly

more contracted modes of being. This may cause some to then retreat into those more contracted modes, such as the Dark Night, as that sort of familiar discomfort may actually be more

comfortable to them in some strange way than the ease and openness of Equanimity until they

get used to it. Milan Kundera’s book title The Unbearable Lightness of Being sums up well this

surprising but understandable phenomenon

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In the early part of Equanimity, reality may appear a bit “chunky” for a while, like some halfway point between the irritation of the late part of the Dark Night and the fowing, open phase

that happens as Equanimity more fully develops. Practice in this early phase may seem quite

possible but may seem to require steady but sustainable work. If we are tired, we may begin

having dropouts and head-drops that are like what occurred in Dissolution but more extreme,

sort of like when we start to have our head nod while driving when extremely tired (something

I have done way too many times and strongly advise against).

These head drops are among the things that people can mistake for Fruitions (described later), but Fruitions almost never

involve the head dropping as these Equanimity head-drops do.

In this third subjhana phase of Equanimity (ñ11.j3), the broad, out-of-phase phase, it may

be hard to read and pay attention, hard to hear people and listen, hard to notice where we are

and what we are doing. It can have some resemblance to Dissolution but is less slothful and

more diffuse and spacious and makes people more prone to “spacing out”. The arising of fear

of madness and death is not uncommon in this phase of Equanimity, but usually does not cause

too much trouble and may even seem comical or welcome.8

For others, this mini Dark Night of Equanimity can make things complicated, and in the face of that seeming complexity some

will either try to power the thing (unlikely to work well in Equanimity), or try to solidify the

pleasantness they may have experienced right before it and turn something open, fowing, and

accepting into a more stable and safe-feeling fourth shamatha jhana, which is equanimous but

still more frozen and static than works well for reaching stream entry. In this way, people can

stagnate in Equanimity

We may get a sense that something strange and perhaps scary (namely, “reality” vanishing)

is about to happen. A related and common feeling in the early part of this stage is the general sense that something big and exciting is about to happen, like kids on Christmas morning

before they’ve opened their presents, like young couples on their frst date, though this feeling

is also common before an A&P Event. These feelings are worthy of sensate investigation in a

broad and inclusive way, just as with other sensations. It is common at these times to apply

familiar practice tactics that worked in previous stages, such as going for very fne details about

small phenomena as we did building up to the A&P, powering investigation, or noting fast as

we may have tried to do in Re-observation, or some other gamey strategy that we borrowed

from an earlier part of the path. Few of these are likely to help and most will hinder, but many

people will try them again and again until they learn this, and there is something to be said for

learning for ourselves by trial and error. As Mahasi Sayadaw says in Practical Insight Meditation,

we may feel that the noticing and the objects are not close enough. We are not yet recognizing

that the “objects” know themselves where they are and on their own naturally

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In MCTB1, this section caused considerable confusion and needless complexity: hopefully

this version will clarify things. Vibrations in the higher part of Equanimity tend to be very

different from how they were in earlier phases. In the A&P they tended to be fne, fast, of one

clean frequency that tended to modulate its rate by the phase of the breath, and either localized

in one small area or spread out across our skin and the like. In the Dark Night stages, vibrations start slower (the shamanic drum-like beat of Fear) and then later speed up, but in an edgy,

irregular, irritating, complex way that is around the edges of attention.

However, in Equanimity, particularly as it develops out past the “chunky” phase, vibrations

tend to be slower, more fowing, more volumetric, more about waves of moving attention-spacephenomena all together. Equanimity is more inclusive, almost like the graceful interpretative

dance of attention and space creation itself. Many people don’t really notice much about the

vibrations or fow and that is also okay. It is much more a question of fow, a shifting back and

forth of attention like gentle waves on a beach, like tracking a falling leaf, like the easy settling

of attention and phenomena into themselves on their own.

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Remember, it is not that we are trying to get rid of these subtle patterns that seemed to be the

most “us”—they are just fne and they never were a self, never are, and never will be. The point

is to just perceive those sensations clearly, and the thing will fip over to another way of perceiving them in which they are just a part of all of this natural transience. Like so many categories

of experience we gradually got used to in order to get to this point, these core processes learn

to be seen automatically as they are by the simple repetition of gently bringing attention to the

sensations that make them up, and fnally nothing is left that doesn’t automatically know the

truth of itself, including all the parts that were masquerading as a practitioner and a practice.

These can be subtle, but in Equanimity we have the chops to do this, and they need not be

blazingly strong or ultra-clear. No need to dissect them ruthlessly or catch every tiny detail of

them: that sort of stuff worked well in the early stages, but Equanimity sacrifces a bit of that for

the bigger prize: wide-open, total, all-the-way-through understanding. Just an ordinary, simple

clarity, with the natural curiosity of a fascinated child, will do just fne at this phase of practice—

a child who is willing to become wakefully absorbed in the daydream that is whatever the mind

does and wherever it goes.