# Depression as a Spiritual and Psychological Experience

First published in 1991, *The Depression Book* is one of Cheri Huber's books intended to help those who are lost in depression to find their way out. Like *The Fear Book*, Huber is able to communicate in a clear, simple voice some very meaningful truths about the nature of depression, fear, anger, self-loathing, and other such negative emotions. As Huber herself explains in the Introduction, "We are offering this little book neither as an explanation of nor as a cure for depression... The primary point of this book is to suggest that depression, like anything else in life, can be received as a gift that will aid you in your spiritual growth." (i)

Huber explains that the key to finding relief from depression is not merely therapy or medication (although she recommends those as well), but a careful, patient process of self-examination and compassion for ourselves. Speaking personally, I really enjoy that her books are written in a handwriting font, as it makes the reader slow down and savor the points she makes.

The subtitle for *The Depression Book* is "Depression as an Opportunity for Spiritual Growth." Does it make sense to talk about depression as a spiritual experience? How about anxiety? As we have seen in the story of Robert Pirsig, author of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, certainly psychosis can resemble one, or even lead someone into one. According to the American Psychological Association,

*Psychology has begun to encompass and explore a number of exciting > new topics — meditation, forgiveness, acceptance, gratitude, hope > and love. Each of these phenomena has deep roots in Eastern and > Western religious traditions and philosophies. Even so, researchers > and practitioners have been careful to treat these processes as > secular in nature. “You don’t have to be religious to meditate” has > become a mantra in the literature. (Pargament)*

## Mindfulness and Meditation Before Psychology

Readers of Huber will recognize a lot of similarity between her methods and practices like ACT and mindfulness. Mindfulness, the practice of being present in the moment, aware of ourselves, and completely open to experience, is central to Huber's practice in *The Depression Book* and is a key part of Zen Buddhist practice as well. Huber explains early in the book,"What we're moving toward is letting go of everything that keeps us from being present with ourselves." (6)

This idea of being "present with ourselves" is not unique to Buddhist spiritual perspectives. A blog on Spirituality and Practice explains that: "The world's religions all recommend living in the moment with full awareness. Zen Buddhism especially is known for its emphasis on "nowness." Hindu, Taoist, Jewish, Moslem (sic), Christian, and other teachers urge us to make the most of every day as an opportunity that will not come to us again." (Brussat)

Mindfulness practices can be found Hinduism, one of the oldest organized religions in the world. For instance, the sage Sri Ramakrishna lived from 1836-1886, and spent nearly his entire life in uninterrupted contemplation of God. Like many other such masters (including the Buddha), he did not set out to become a spiritual leader, rather he only wanted to examine himself and reach a higher level of consciousness, free from suffering. Sri Ramakrishna had a turbulent beginning, was prone to episodes of "spiritual madness," and even threatened to kill himself if God did not reveal himself. He would plunge into prolonged "God-intoxicated" states at times. Thankfully, later in life it seems he found some peace, as a traveling monk named Totapuri is said to have led him into the highest spiritual experience, and he remained in a meditative state unaware of his own body for six months. (Sri Ramakrishna)

Was Sri Ramakrishna's madness spiritual or psychological? Were his early troubles a mental illness, and was his six months of "God-consciousness" meditation simply an extreme version of mindfulness meditation? It is not for me to say for sure, but it definitely seems that he was suffering very intensely until he was able to find peace in contemplation. I think it is safe to say that the seeds for mindfulness practice were already there in Hinduism. One follower on HinduWebsite.org explains that, "according to Hinduism, a person is evolved or self-aware to the extent he is aware of the true nature of his Self. It is this awareness which distinguishes an ignorant person from the self-realized one." (V) As you can see, mindfulness is a very old practice that modern psychology is only beginning to catch onto. Conversely, in a piece for *Psychology Today*, Melanie Greenberg explains, "Experiencing [mindfulness] can help us feel more whole and relaxed; we move from reacting automatically to having more choices about how we respond, based on a fuller understanding and acceptance of our own sensory, physical, and emotional experience." (Greenberg) I have also talked about mindfulness quite a bit in relation to *The Fear Book* and ACT. Mindfulness is central to the modern practice of Cognitive Behavior Therapy, and many therapists today even recommend contemplative experiences like yoga and meditation. So, there is a lot of overlap in the messaging and methods between spirituality and psychology for sure. Which approach is more effective depends on the person, and their spiritual (or secular) worldview.

In *The Depression Book*, Cheri Huber recommends a decidedly less extreme form of elevating our consciousness than the one practiced by the Hindu masters: "Take up an awareness practice that enables you to let go of false beliefs and assumptions about how you and the world should be. This will enable you to live in the current moment which soothes body, mind, spirit, and emotion." The Zen Buddhist approach, while it is definitely spiritual in nature, more closely resembles the psychological approach because the idea of experiencing the divine consciousness of God is stripped out of the language. Does this make it less of a spiritual practice? I would say that this depends on the practitioner, but most definitely Huber wanted to write a book for everyone, and not just those interested in Buddhist spirituality - which is fitting, because one of the tenets of Buddhism is that it should be universal.

## The Nature of Depression

When we are depressed, what are we *depressing*? The Zen Buddhist (according to Huber) interpretation of the nature of depression also closely resembles the psychological interpretation. When a depressed person goes to therapy, the counselor usually works to try to figure out what is "underneath" that depression. Where is it really coming from? Freud would ask us to talk about our mothers, Jung would probably look at the symbols of our dreams, and a modern therapist would have us talk about what we *think* the problem is, while probing underneath it to understand what's really underneath it.

Cheri Huber asks this same question directly many times in *The Depression Book*: *"What are you depressing?"* Depression, she says, always sits on top of something else, holding it at bay for one reason or another. Further, for the person who has clinical depression, the depression doesn't always "depress" the same thing. As Huber explains, "Perhaps *what* you are depressing changes. *How* you depress remains the same." (7)

The two most relevant answers to "What are you depressing?" for me are happiness, and anger. Many people with depression actively depress their own happiness. Often this is because they feel like they may be setting themselves up for disappointment. The idea is that if we don't get our hopes up, we won't be devastated later, or, as Huber says, "If I maintain a low grade depression, maybe I can shield myself from real disappointment ." (28)

Though a lot of what is said in *The Depression Book* has more or less a direct analog in psychology, the field is surprisingly pretty divided on this point. According to a study cited in the *Daily Mail*, "British scientists found that day-to-day wellbeing does not reflect how well things are going, but whether things are going better than expected." (Spencer) The study goes on to say that lowering one's expectations will, as Huber says, increase the likelihood that a given outcome will exceed expectations. The study does, however, say that higher expectations are better for happiness in the short term, while living with lowered expectations may be melancholy, but leads to better overall long-term happiness. In any case, I can't honestly believe that their findings should apply to someone with depression of any severity. I would say that for me, the spiritual approach is superior on this topic.

Huber always recommends that we approach both our depression and whatever we are depressing with compassion and acceptance. She also recognizes that many of us, myself included, depress anger. She says, "We depress what we're experiencing for a reason. For example, I'm angry. I depress that anger, and in focusing on the depression I don't need to see that under the anger is hurt, and under the hurt is disappointment, and under the disappointment is fear." (97) This really rings true for me personally. There are days when my depression gets so bad that I just shut down. I don't talk to anyone or do anything, I just sit, and seethe. On those days, anything that happens to me makes me unbelievably angry. The dog sits too close, my shirt itches me, or I have a hair in my face - any of these things can send me into tearful, blind panic because they're just so invasive in that moment.

Cynthia Lubow writes in "Experiences of Depression," "The irritable or angry experience of depression is often not recognized as depression, either by the person who experiences it or by those around then. For the person experiencing this kind of depression, the people around them may seem disappointing, irritating, or intolerable, and the depressed person may feel as emotionally uncomfortable as someone with severe poison oak feels physically. They may feel very frustrated that they can’t get the people who seem to be causing their suffering to change." (Lubow) This is very accurate, but I think Huber gets to the heart of the matter more efficiently - underneath that anger, I am hurting and afraid, and those are the feelings that mindful meditation can set free. I have been to many therapists, and more often than not I clam up. I tell them what they want to hear. It isn't helpful - once again, the spiritual process is better for me.

Further illustrating the spiritual approach to anger, Jim Tolles writes for *Spiritual Awakening Process*, "My current favorite way to describe anger is as trapped energy." (Tolles) This is echoed by Huber in *The Depression Book* when she describes depressed people as "living beings tensed up against life." (31) Depression seems like lethargy and a total lack of energy, when really it is constant tension, a continually building pressure that builds until it breaks. If we approach depression as a purely spiritual illness, can we experience those breaks as moments of Hindu-like "God-intoxication?" If we do, are they more or less pleasant than the secular version? Huber says that we should regard our depression as a gift, as a gateway to a higher spiritual awareness. If this is true, then it should be just as true for the breaking points, the worst moments when we feel we are losing control entirely, as it is for the days of just pure monotonous sadness.

## Conclusion: Is My Depression Spiritual?

Huber, as a Zen Buddhist and not a Hindu, recommends that we approach our depression not with the sense of awe or rapture that someone like Sri Ramakrishna would have, but simply, and with compassion. She says just as we would have compassion for a good friend who was suffering from depression, we should extend that same compassion to ourselves. On this point, modern psychology agrees, according to Tori DeAngelis: "When we are mindful and awake in the moment, we have the capacity to empathically sense the suffering within and around us, and to respond with compassion." (DeAngelis). Compassion is a concept that is definitely well represented in many world religions. It is central to Buddhism, and it is central to dealing with depression and other mental illnesses.

Has my own depression been a spiritual experience? I would say that it has. Over the years that I have struggled with my disorder, there have been many doctors, many medications, and too many hopeless days. Through all of that, I have thought to myself how much easier it would be to just be an atheist, to stop believing in anything so I could stop being angry at whatever God there may be. However, no matter how depressed I got, I just couldn't ever get myself to stop believing.

Through the process I have read books on spirituality and religion from Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Wicca. I bought a Bible, and I even read one book on how Satanism helped the author recover from addiction. I am active in a Lutheran church, though I don't call myself a Christian. I attend and perform Hindu pujas, but I do not call myself Hindu. I meditate and chant daily, and I keep home shrines for Ganesh, Lakshmi, Radha-Krishna, St. Mary, St. Jude, and St. Sophia. I like the peacefulness of the experience and the sense of community and the idea of touching the divine in many forms. If I ever do call myself Christian, Christianity for me won't be independent of the influence that Buddhism, Hinduism, and other religions have had on my life. My depression has definitely been a spiritual evolution for me.

Huber's book begins, "So you're depressed... this is your best opportunity to see the cause of your suffering, to accept where you are, to embrace yourself in compassion, to let go and to end the suffering." (1) For myself, I have done the first two things. I know where my suffering comes from, and I am accepting the reality of my situation. The last three steps are still in progress, but I'm working on it every day.

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