

# The Novice

*Why I Became A Buddhist Monk,  
Why I Quit and What I Learned*

— press kit —

*“Stephen Schettini’s *The Novice* is a lively read with a deep meaning ... told with ruthless honesty and understated humor in an engaging combination. I recommend it enthusiastically.”*

**Robert Thurman**

Professor of Buddhist Studies, Columbia University  
Author of *Inner Revolution* & *Why the Dalai Lama Matters*

*“What a story! By turns epic and heroic, tender and touching, *The Novice* imparts a hugely important lesson to our times. It is a gift to every Western seeker of the ‘spiritual’ East. With the seductive verve of a novelist, Schettini tells a subversive and liberating tale.”*

**—Glenn Wallis, PhD**

Author of *Basic Teachings of the Buddha*,  
*The Dhammapada*, & *Mediating the Power of Buddhas*

# THE NOVICE

## *Why I Became a Buddhist Monk, Why I Quit and What I Learned*

As a young man in the 1970's, Stephen Schettini abandoned his home, education and career, traveled thousands of miles, across continents, countries, and cultures, and traded in his birth culture of English-Italian Catholicism for Tibetan Buddhism. He was on a soul-searching mission to find truth, to discover life's purpose, to put meaning in his existence and find a foothold in life. He eventually found what he was looking for, but it wasn't what he expected. Did he really have to go to the other side of the world just to come back empty-handed? Although he didn't have the answers, he realized over subsequent decades that some powerful questions had taken root. Why do we seek security? What are we afraid of? Why are we driven so compulsively to control our surroundings? Why are we here? Rather than bright inner lights and spiritual transcendence, he was led to a profound calm, clarity and joy that, he realized, had been within reach all along.

Schettini reveals significant insights on life as he shares his personal story of how, at age 22, he became a Tibetan Buddhist monk, and at age 30 abandoned it, in his page-turning and thought-provoking new book, *The Novice: Why I Became A Buddhist Monk Why I Quit And What I Learned*.

Stephen shares with us, in an intimate, intelligent and insightful way, the following:

- The rise and fall of a Westerner as a Tibetan Buddhist monk.
- What it was like to live 8 years as a Buddhist monk in India and Switzerland – and the challenges of following 253 rules, remaining celibate during the sexual revolution, eating only one meal a day, and the difficulties of meditation.
- How being a monk helped him overcome kleptomania, drugs, and a childhood of angst, normalized abuse, and confusion.
- How he hitch-hiked across the world to discover a new culture, a new religion, a new language, and a new nation.
- How hard it was to acclimate back to a post-monkhood society focused on materialism, sex, entertainment, and money after living in solitude and isolation for so long.
- The many truths he discovered along the way of his search for meaning and purpose in life.
- How he survived a life-threatening bout with black water fever.
- Why institutional religion does not provide the ultimate answers on how we should live our lives.
- Why people are drawn to Buddhism.
- How he overcame years of feeling low self-esteem and isolation.
- Why it took him decades to write about his experience as a monk.

“I wrote this book because I was mystified by my own life,” says Stephen. “Why would a middle-class, privately-schooled Anglo-Italian Catholic boy from rural Gloucestershire abandon his education, career and family to travel to the Tibetan refugee camps in India and become ordained as a Buddhist monk? Why would he then abandon it all and spend twenty years trying unsuccessfully to write about his failure?”

Stephen’s book reveals a tortured soul who pushes himself to the edge. In the end, only monastic discipline can bring him back from the brink of self-destruction. Tibetan Buddhism promises even more: critical reflection, universal love, tantric mysticism, endless study and a lifetime of meditation. But once he’s back on track, the very teachings of the Buddha himself propel him back into the world. Only then does he begin to discover what makes him truly happy.

“This book is for people seeking meaning in a society and time that’s being drained of meaning, now more than ever,” says Stephen. “It doesn’t patronize or provide glib answers. If you are cynical of modern values, and especially if you have difficulty recognizing your inner voice, this story will inspire you to stand on your own feet, understand the difference between habitual thinking and genuine intuition and trust yourself. It also addresses the core questions of humankind without pretending to answer them, especially the increasingly pervasive sense of alienation, inadequacy, and loneliness.”

A life of middle-class comfort and security awaited young Stephen but feeling trapped by the conventional expectations of his parents, teachers and culture, he scorns his unhappy childhood and determines to pursue his deepest hopes and dreams. This intimate, colorful memoir tells the story of a disillusioned 22-year-old who sabotages his university finals, abandons homes, family, and possessions and journeys through Europe, the Middle East, and Asia in search of a meaningful life. Narrowly escaping death by sickness and drugs, he encounters the Tibetan refugees in exile, and entranced, finally stops running.

With eye-opening accounts of the most famous Tibetan lamas to escape Chinese occupation, poetic descriptions of faraway places and faces, and dozens of evocative photos, Stephen’s book, in retrospective detail and lyrical prose, recounts his monkhood in the Buddhist tradition. As he stares down the gaping hole at the center of his life to come back strengthened and confident, Stephen provides a raw profile in human fragility, with a writing style that is rich in emotion, evocatively descriptive, and intensely filled with self-examination.

Through the eyes of a young man who wants to believe but needs more, it examines the motives behind the modern spiritual quest for meaning.

**PUBLICATION DATA:**

THE NOVICE: *Why I Became A Buddhist Monk, Why I Quit and What I Learned* by Stephen Schettini; Greenleaf Book Group; September 2009; Cloth; Can. \$29.95; 362 pages; ISBN: 978-1-60832-005-9

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# STEPHEN SCHETTINI

## *biography*



Stephen Schettini is the author of *The Novice: Why I Became A Buddhist Monk, Why I Quit and What I Learned*. The new book (Greenleaf Book Group, September 2009) tells of his unusual journey, from England to India, with stops along the way in Switzerland, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan, the U.S. and Canada. He has spent a lifetime searching for truth and purpose.

Schettini is not your typical spiritual teacher. Instead of offering a philosophy, he tells a story that provokes deep philosophical thought. Rather than giving answers, he shares some stubborn questions.

Instead of advocating a life of seclusion and withdrawal, he plunges whole-heartedly into life. Disdaining any claim to enlightenment, he speaks frankly of the stresses of life in a fast-paced, technologically challenging, sometimes soulless consumer culture. He has found that by developing trust in himself and by honing his intuition he can contribute to contemporary life without having to withdraw. Relying entirely on his ability to learn from experience, without sooth-saying or philosophical pretensions, he is on a par with students and readers.

This deeply personal memoir shares how a middle-class Italian Catholic boy hitch-hikes from his native England to India to become a Buddhist monk in the Tibetan tradition, from 1972 to 1980.

He learns to speak and read Tibetan, lives and studies in Sera Monastic University as the only resident Westerner, and is trained at the *École des Hautes Études Tibétaines* in Switzerland to interpret and teach Tibetan Buddhism to other Westerners.

Eight years later, and after a year in a Tibetan refugee camp in Southern India and a prolonged encounter with austere southern Buddhism, he grows disillusioned and abandons his monastic path.

He moved to Montreal to measure what he'd learned as a monk against the realities of life. There he acquired the skills he needed to support himself in his new life, founded a print communications company and married unsuccessfully. After recovering, he encountered his present wife Caroline, and experienced for the first time a successful relationship and family life. After dozens of failed attempts to write *The Novice*, this provided the nurturing environment he needed to move forward with his lifelong project, which he now completed in ten years.

Stephen is the founder and director of Kudo.ca Communications and Quiet Mind Seminars. He's led hundreds of meditation workshops in the Montreal area since 2003 ([www.thequietmind.org](http://www.thequietmind.org)).

He has contributed columns regularly to local newspapers and to *The Suburban*, Quebec's largest English-language weekly. He also freelanced for the *Montreal Gazette*.

Stephen made a living in print communications and over the next 20 years authored, co-authored, illustrated, and designed dozens of books on information technology and health science.

He resides with his wife Caroline, in Hudson, Quebec. More info: [www.schettini.com](http://www.schettini.com).

# FIFTEEN TRUTHS REALISED

## *during the journey of the novice*

Stephen Schettini has spent a life-long journey seeking a purpose for his life. He hasn't got all the answers but he does realize that that's not the point. He sheds numerous insights in his inspiring and moving book, *The Novice: Why I Became A Buddhist Monk, Why I Quit and What I Learned*. Rather than seeing beliefs as a basis for life, he takes the measure of life itself as a basis for his beliefs, which, he insists, should be kept to a minimum. Here are some truths that Stephen has experienced:

1. Questioning the things you believe in most earnestly leads to peace.
2. True insight comes from personal experience, not from language, scripture, philosophy or higher authority.
3. The most worthwhile goal in life is to replace self-cherishing with practical empathy and ruthless insight.
4. Expand beyond the expectations imposed upon you, or assumed by you, and look beyond the daily norm of your life. Be willing to leave behind convenient truths to eventually find what you're looking for – even if it's to discover something unpleasant.
5. We have an instinct for right and wrong but push it aside when it's inconvenient.
6. What's true today isn't necessarily so tomorrow.
7. The more deeply we are motivated by emotion the more stubbornly we pass it off as reason.
8. Denial is at the root of all self-inflicted suffering, and is our principal obstacle.
9. Ethical codes are likely to produce as much hypocrisy as goodness.
10. Belief in anything just for the comfort or security it brings is precarious, especially when it demands certainty.
11. No religious scientific or academic faithful can be trusted unless it can laugh at itself.
12. The only way to respect truth is to take it with a pinch of salt.
13. Life leads nowhere until we consciously take the direction it provides.
14. The notion that we're continually bettering ourselves, through either technology or belief, may be the great myth of our time, the bickering of science and religion just another vanity.
15. The pursuit of truth has more to do with letting go of certainty than finding it.

# LIFE AS A BUDDHIST MONK

Stephen Schettini took a journey that led him across continents, cultures, and religions, abandoning his Italian Catholic upbringing in England to become a Tibetan Buddhist monk in India and Switzerland. His eight-year experiment and pursuit of life's hardest truths and purpose ended in 1981 when he became disillusioned by the seclusion of monkhood and the institutions of an ancient tradition. He reveals life as a monk in his deeply personal and moving memoir, *The Novice: Why I Became A Buddhist Monk, Why I Quit and What I Learned*.

The monk's vow entails 253 rules, including celibacy and dietary restrictions (one meal a day), and the lifestyle includes frequent periods of meditation and silence. In the Tibetan Gelugpa school of which Stephen was a part, there's also a great deal of scholarly study and debate. He was just 23 when he became a monk. It was the early 1970s, a time of great exploration in the world and of opportunity for those willing to take risks.

On his fondest memories of being a monk, Stephen says: "The early days were pretty heady. I thought my path was set, my destiny sure and my prospects fine. However, that was a transient sense of elation that ultimately proved treacherous. On the other hand, from my present perspective as a busy family man, I remember those days in which I had nothing to worry about except my studies and meditation with some incredulity – once I describe the freedom of that life, many people ask why I gave it up. But below the surface those years were characterized by angst. Monkhood was a crutch that healed my broken spirit and then thrust me back into the world again on two good legs. The work that takes place in my family, my business and my teaching is both harder and more rewarding. I was just a novice then."

He'd eventually leave monkhood and get married. Being celibate during his prime may have ended up helping him to get the attention of women. He says: "At age 22 women had sworn me off long before I got a chance to return the favor. I was an awkward and insecure young man, and what's less attractive than insecurity? I was repeatedly rejected, and hoped with all my might that monkhood would 'cure' me of my longings, that I'd grow free of the humiliation of being such an unappealing specimen. Of course it didn't, but it *did* cure me of my insecurity. After monkhood it was easy to get the attention of women, but I had no idea how to conduct a mature relationship. I made two utterly inappropriate marriages before discovering that there was more to an intimate relationship than just filling one another's needs, and that a marriage could be uplifting, meaningful, creative and just as introspective as the life I'd left behind – perhaps even more so. Marriage is a vow too, but the partnership has to be realistic."

Some of the things Stephen was searching for came to him as a monk, but as he pursued the questions posed by the Buddha himself, there came a time to leave the monastery and stand on his own feet. Today, he encourages others to seek out their own truth and meaning to life. If you really want to travel halfway around the globe and study as a Buddhist monk, that might be what you have to do, but it's not for everyone, and it's certainly not the only way. Schettini reflects, "My hope is that this book will inspire people to delve into their own sense of what life should be, and measure it against their experience."

# STEPHEN SCHETTINI

## *q&a: the novice*

1. **After 20 years of trying to write your book, how did you finally manage to deliver *The Novice: Why I Became A Buddhist Monk, Why I Quit & What I Learned*?** Despite an overwhelming compulsion to write, the process only took shape when circumstances were right, just as meditation only happens under certain conditions: one has to be basically sane and balanced. For years my past was too unresolved and my present too turbulent for me to turn those events into a coherent story. I needed distance, but that didn't simply emerge from the passage of time; the indispensable ingredient was the emotional contentment that came with my successful relationships as a husband, a father and a son. Those relationships were in turn made possible by years of therapy, once I admitted a lot of painful truths to myself and stopped running.
2. **You were raised Catholic. What drove you to become a Buddhist monk?** Catholicism never sat well with me, in part because my earliest teachers, being superstitious and poorly educated, expected me to quietly accept whatever I was told. Still, I tried very hard to make sense of what I was taught, and never doubted that it was worthwhile to look beyond the superficial, purely material life. Although my teachers succeeded in instilling those qualities in me, the tools they gave me – prayer, faith and fear of damnation – just didn't work for me. Buddhism on the other hand had enormous appeal. It's like a Home Depot of mental-emotional tools, practical, down to earth, explicable and open to the enquiring mind.
3. **Your book speaks to us on many levels. One that sticks out is your theme of seeking out a truth or direction to follow. What did you conclude in this regard?** That you have to seek it; it doesn't just come to you out of the clouds. I've read several books published in the last few years by authors who claim to have been granted sudden enlightenment, or views of ultimate truth, or insight into *real* reality. There's nothing new in these claims, and I think they're made mostly to get people's attention. The desire to believe such things is universal, and it takes effort to push past this lazy thinking. People in all places and all times want to believe that an answer exists outside of themselves, that they can escape their demons without facing them and don't have to step out of their comfort zone. Nothing is more disabling. Nobody's out there trying to delude us; that's unnecessary. We delude ourselves with illusions of certainty and security.
4. **Does any religion have a handle on “the way” we should live our lives?** I don't believe that any system of belief or explanation of how things work can replace a sense of inner balance and intuitive understanding. However, those inner qualities don't come without inner work. We human beings have an extraordinary intellect that can't explain everything; we also have deep sensitivities that can lead us down dark and foreboding paths. Until we use our wits to integrate the two, we remain blind in one eye, unbalanced, incomplete and ruled by our insecurities. That's why all our material progress, for example, has had such little impact on the number of wars or the scope of poverty and starvation in the world.

5. **When you recollect your childhood, you seem to matter-of-factly speak of feeling misunderstood, unhappy, and mistreated by your dad and out-of-place. Does this feel any less painful now, given the distance and perspective of time?** Time doesn't heal by itself. The more we try to ignore childhood trauma, the more we drive it underground. The instinctive defenses I developed as a child still tend to rear their collective head, but I've learned to deal with them and to develop alternative responses. My own experience as a father, which came late in life, has taught me about my childhood as of course nothing else can, and that in turn has been an empowering foundation for the inner work of psychoanalysis and mindful reflection, not to mention the exhausting, gut-wrenching, exhilarating, painful, revivifying ten-year writing of this book.
6. **As a young man, you shoplifted, took drugs, and felt uncomfortable with the life you were living. How did you find the courage to leave it behind you and seek a change?** Most of the things in my past that others describe as 'courageous' strike me as simply desperate. How could I *not* leave that downward spiral behind at the first opportunity? My father intimidated the hell out of me, and he hurt me, but he was also larger than life and terrifically inspiring. I saw him as fearless, and grew up simply expecting to inherit his fearlessness. In the opening pages of the book I thank Dad, 'for the grit.' That's no mere formality.
7. **You traveled to far-off places when travel abroad wasn't as easy as it is today. What did you like most about being in places like Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India?** I liked being lost and out of touch – the old-time adventure of it all. I'm appalled at the thought of satellite phones and GPS. They're great for getting things done, but I think it's a shame to take a practical, goal-oriented approach to *everything*. I'd never have experienced the exquisite wonder or danger of wilderness, or of being a stranger in strange lands if the information highway, not to mention my entire family, had been just keystrokes away. Of course, the places I visited are far more dangerous today. I read the news from Afghanistan in particular with great sadness. However, no place stands more indelibly in my memory than India. It's like heaven and hell all rolled up into one.
8. **You developed hepatitis and were hospitalized in another country with no friends or family around you. How did you get through this?** I don't know. I had no choice. I carried the I-Ching everywhere and that helped me maintain some inner continuity. Later, I got my hands on the complete works of Shakespeare, and a copy of the King James Bible. I consumed them both, mostly while I was recuperating from something or another. I was also inspired by the people who lived off the land, their instinct to survive no matter what. Their poverty was beyond my experience, their powerlessness something I couldn't conceive, but I saw how it toughened them. Without saying a word, without even paying attention to me, they shamed me out of my self-pity and my weakness of spirit. They inspired me to never *ever* give up.
9. **What are some of the Buddhist tenets or teachings that you continue to appreciate even though you're no longer a monk?** Most importantly, that freedom begins with taking responsibility for our own actions. The Buddha taught that empowering truths must be self-evident, which means that we have to look for ourselves. No one can hand us the answers, because it's the questions that count – whether we answer them or not. Ironically, his teachings convinced me to let go of everything I learned as a monk. Clearly, what stayed with me is what remains significant. The Buddha's remarks about the way we think we should be have led me to appreciate the deep simplicity of his meaning,

even when it seems most complicated. This concocted self-image lies at the root of all defensiveness, all evil, and suffering. When it seems most impossible to fathom, it's most definitely our own illusion. Delving into that has brought me freedom I never imagined. The Buddha was an awesome teacher. Still, I no longer call myself a Buddhist and do not wish to represent any tradition.

10. **You write in your book, "To this day, comfort makes me nervous." Why?** Because comfort and pleasure are routine substitutes for happiness. Apart from the fact that their pursuit puts true happiness on the back burner, the misapprehension itself causes real misery. The age-old spiritual malaise of humanity all comes from the illusory security of having stuff – and not just material stuff. Look at reputation, control and spiritual rectitude. The ultimate comfort is certainty. It's an illusion of course – look where we all end up – but projecting that illusion is an industry that grows in direct proportion to our culture of comfort. There's no greater source of imbalance and disharmony in the world, both between peoples and also between the human race and the environment.
11. **Why did you stop believing in God? Do you believe now?** I think because I tried so hard to believe. My disappointment at not being answered turned into bitterness, but in time I saw the diversity of people and beliefs, the impossibility of proving anything or anyone ultimately right or wrong, and all those emotions evaporated. I see God as a way of speaking. My parents used to say, 'God bless you,' and I still find that a tender wish. I find myself saying it to those I love. I sometimes need to express intelligence itself, the order we find in – or project upon – life. The word God seems appropriate. I don't believe in a person in the clouds or an intelligence that willed us into existence, more because I so strongly disapprove of insistent believers than because I need to disbelieve.
12. **Did you learn to speak another language as a Tibetan Buddhist? What was that like?** I picked up a smattering of Sanskrit, but mainly I learned to speak and read Tibetan. It was a real pain because, unlike French, Italian or even the Indian languages, there were absolutely no common roots. Even the sounds were foreign. Once I got past that, however, it was fun. Tibetan is grammatically and syntactically much simpler than English, though like English it leans heavily on idiom for its subtleties, and has similar tones and rhythms. Written Tibetan hasn't a fraction of the punctuation that we use in English – not even spaces between words – so as a writer I really appreciate the flexibility of our own written language and all that's gone into it.
13. **Why did you write, "I'm heartened by those who can face their weaknesses or do good, without having to resort to some proprietary belief system?"** Beliefs can be helpful, but only if we take them with a grain of salt. Beliefs that must stand no matter what make people crazy. I don't care if those people call themselves religious, scientific or atheistic – I deeply distrust them. They insist on certainty, believe that explanations can account for everything and are motivated unconsciously by fear of life's ultimate uncertainty. Those who cannot embrace this obvious truth are incapable of true humility. They're a danger to mankind and the planet.
14. **Are we in a period of unprecedented self-examination?** A lot of people want to think so. The times and places in which both the Buddha and the Christ lived were times of great change and questioning, and that may or may not be true of today; only time will tell. The thought that we can destroy our own planet is having a sobering effect on us as a race, but it's certainly not unprecedented. I think every child that's born sooner or later asks, 'What's the point? Why am I here? Why am I me?' However, things start to get

interesting when we bring those questions into our adult life alongside the certainty that they'll never be satisfactorily answered. Some people are doing that, but most people always have and always will invest in wishful thinking. They can't imagine living without certainty.

**15. How did your Italian Catholic family respond when you went off to become a monk?**

They were pretty confused, but my parents were also afraid I'd take off and never come back, so they took a soft stance and tried to understand. They didn't know where to begin though, and kept asking me questions like, "But what do you *do*, all day long?" Some of the others took a cautious step back, but once they saw I wasn't out to convert them, most were mildly interested.

**16. What advice would you give to someone who is searching for answers, truths, or direction?** You say you are a skeptical seeker of truth, but you discovered a number of truths, such as this: belief is precarious, especially when it demands certainty. Tell us what else you've found. Belief systems are a vanity. The thought that we can know why we're here and what we should do is a desperate attempt to anchor ourselves in a sea of uncertainty, not a genuine claim to knowledge. Let's begin with the admission that we don't know. Of course, we can know things like how drive a car or to run a household, as well as stuff we should and shouldn't do, such as (not) hurting others and working for the common good. The problems begin when we try to come up with universal explanations, or unambiguous systems of knowledge. Life is contradictory and unpredictable, and yet we build monuments to our ungrounded ideals and then expect life to conform. We're setting ourselves up for disappointment and, when we abnegate responsibility for it, disharmony rules.

**17. It seems you spent most of your life feeling inadequate, but at some point in your monkhood you discovered a newfound self-esteem. So why did you end up walking away from it?** The teachings of the Buddha himself led me away from my cozy nook in the august tradition of Buddhism. By following his directions to pursue my own enquiry, I came to see that adopting the conclusions of others would never set me free. I learned that true belief is belief in oneself, and the only faith that counts is faith in one's own instincts to figure things out and find one's own way. That's why I grew self-confident from it, and why I walked away from it. The two are inseparable. An article I wrote in 2005 for *Tricycle* magazine, entitled *A Sense of Belonging*, explored the paradox of institutionalizing the path to freedom.

**18. Why do you say that meditation is not about seizing control of your life, but of letting go?** Meditation works in part by frustrating your expectation of it. That's how we let go of illusions, and that means identifying those illusions in the first place. They're of our own making but they're largely subconscious and we hide inside them, hoping for security. The thought that we can take control of our lives is an ego trip. Of course, to the extent that we have political and economic freedom, we also have a say in how we orient ourselves, but to call that 'control' is absurd. What befalls us on the path of life is never free of chance and circumstance. Insisting on our expectations just ratchets up the sense of entitlement that's strangling our world today. It's no way to ground and balance ourselves.

**19. Did you envy or mistrust those who seem to exude a certainty or confidence about life through their level of beliefs or religious faith?** There was a time when I profoundly envied them, and there are times even today when I hear of somebody's claim to

certainty and feel a flash of regret, but that response barely survives a moment. It flies in the face of everything life's taught me. It's hard to resist things we really want to believe, but believing because we want/need to is a vicious circle and a recipe for disaster. It's immature – a teenager's way of cutting corners and avoiding inconvenient truths. When we work under such false pretenses, the flaws break through and the house of cards collapses.

20. **Why are people drawn to Buddhism?** I think people are drawn to Buddhism for a number of reasons. It has a reputation in the West as a 'scientific' or 'atheistic' religion, even though its Asian forms can be intensely religious and even superstitious. Buddhism demands faith, but only as a means to an end. What counts ultimately is faith in one's own ability to change, not in divine intervention, which is simply not an issue in Buddhism. If you don't get it right away, you need to trust that the historical Buddha's teachings will eventually make some sort of sense, but of course the same is true of physics and other fields of study. Most appealing of all to Westerners is Buddhism's repertoire of transformative tools. That's a sharp contrast to the Abrahamic religions which insist that you must be good, but never bother to explain how to stop being bad, let alone why something is bad.
21. **Did Buddhist psychology address your biggest concerns of fear, guilt and disappointment?** At the time that I was studying it most intensely, no. It was just a bunch of definitions. I saw no Tibetan or Sanskrit word remotely close to 'guilt,' or saw fear described as the root of denial and delusion. However, Chogyam Trungpa, the first Tibetan to bridge the East-West gap and certainly the most successful so far, had an extraordinarily clear-minded take on disappointment and the meditative process. Disappointment is key to identifying our illusions, for it arises from the expectation that life will serve our desires. Life does no such thing, and the acceptance of that fact, as unpleasant as it is, is accompanied by potent insight. Who knows what's around the next corner? Who's exempt from tragedy?
22. **You almost died from black water fever. How did that experience change your perspective on life?** It made me glad to be alive. I've never quite lost that. I don't see how anyone who skirts death can forget it for long. There are times when I deliberately recall that experience, in order to shake my present preoccupations into perspective. There's nothing like the reality of death to iron out the wrinkles and help you see straight.
23. **How did your life as a Buddhist monk help you become a happy family man? Isn't that a contradiction in terms?** Only if you think of Buddhism as a set of rules. The reflective lifestyle of a monk helped put me back together and gave me the tools I needed to make it on my own. For years I scorned the simple rewards of life as trivial, but I no longer shy away from domestic joy. Loving relationships, as John Welwood points out, are an ideal crucible in which we can intimately acknowledge and work with our wounds, fears and illusions. The life I live with my wife Caroline goes beyond the narcissistic pleasure that characterized my first marriage, or the confusion of my second, when I attempted to fit into conventional life without accounting for my years as a monk. My situation today is a constantly challenging, ever-renewing ground of introspection and facing up to reality. It's profoundly different from the family in which I grew up. I understand now why I was so angry and so cynical about marriage and family.

24. **Do you think everything happens for a reason?** I believe in cause and effect, but that phrase is often used to imply that some benevolent supernatural force is making things happen just the way they need to happen for one's personal betterment. I don't think the universe is for us or against us; we have to work for rewards like that and, precisely *because* I believe in cause and effect, that we have to work it the right way. Good intentions are not enough; wishful thinking and choosing to see the negative as positive are not consistent with clear-mindedness. A meaningful life demands skill, strategy and insight.
25. **What's Mindful Reflection? Is it a sort of meditation?** Yes and no. I coined the term to distance what I teach from the banal view of meditation as a tranquil escape from reality. I'm interested in getting to the root of stress, not avoiding it. The Buddha taught mindfulness as a way to increase one's attention, deconstruct subconscious judgments and grow kinder. He also advocated specific reflective practices in which we develop a more adaptive view of the world as well as a context in which to change mental habits and resist entropy.

# THE NOVICE

## *selected excerpts*

### *Nothing is Black and White*

As a young man I struggled and failed to escape my Western patrimony. For better and for worse, I discovered that the pretensions of scientific objectivity permeate the ways I think and write. On the other hand, my incurable meditations as an attempted Christian and Buddhist unleashed a storm of subjective realities. Buddhism and life have shown me that both these truths, objective and subjective, are relative, conventional and contingent; and although I believe in right and wrong I also know that nothing's black and white.

### *Facing the Truth*

I don't know, as some people say, that our society is entering a golden age of spirituality, but I'm heartened by those who can face their weaknesses, or do good, without having to resort to some proprietary belief system. We all want to be happy. We know at heart that we're better off facing our truths, no matter how unpalatable. I grew up spiritually terrorized by totalitarian religion, searched high and low for refuge and, for a while, thought I'd found it – but I was just clinging to an elaborate signpost. The real journey began only when I let go. The day I gave back my robes I fell precipitously from the imaginary heights of spiritual ascent, and it took me twenty years to clamber back on to dry land. Now at last I have worth in my own eyes and scars enough to expect no guarantees. For a brief, shining moment, I aspired to an awakening of transcendental light and bliss. The illusion faded, I cried bitterly, but in time the simple truth settled down again, plain as day. It was, and always had been, staring me in the face.

### *Growing up with Normalized Abuse*

Dad stood in for God – patriarchal, all-powerful, silent and incomprehensible. He was selfish and unfair, generous and thoughtful. As children do, I trusted that every beating was my fault, after all I'd been warned. Besides, there was nothing unusual about it in those days. From smacks on the bottom to public thrashings, tales of crime, punishment and bravado quickly buried the pain and humiliation. [My brother] Phil was once chased through the house as Dad swung a broom at him, and got over it by joking afterwards about how funny he must have looked as he dodged the blows. We were old-school Catholics, and denial was an indispensable tool of our household.

### *The Horrors of Conventional Life*

Nevertheless, I craved a world of reality, not of ideas. Marx had said that philosophers only interpret the world, and that the point was to change it. Already convinced of this, I found my suspicion of academia deepening. I had a thirst for knowledge, but distrusted most of what was being spoon-fed to me. I felt education circling like a vulture, waiting for me zombie-like to conform to the curriculum, be shunted from college into the workforce and

end up as the brainwashed servant of a faceless system. This was even worse than Dad's predicament. Mired in his work, with a family he didn't appear to enjoy, with nothing to look forward to but retirement – it seemed a fate worse than death. The spectre of a pointless life loomed large. It was no passing depression but a lasting feature of my mental landscape that not only withstood the test of time but fuelled my restlessness for *real* life. If all this sounds unbearably ponderous, then perhaps I've properly conveyed my state of mind at the time.

### *Self-worth*

I'd turned away from God and towards Communism, then from materialism to spiritualism and from good sense to convenient sense. I rejected the bourgeois drugs of alcohol and religion in favor of consciousness-expanding marijuana and hashish. I even rejected my generation's sacred new counter-culture, cut off my long hair to protest the counter-establishment and wore it short-back-and-sides thereafter. I manufactured my own world. Right and wrong weren't absolute but relative truths, conscience a lubricant on the conveyor belt that carried us from school to work to family to grave. I'd do better on my own, I decided. Gradually, I lost touch with school, Tom, my old comrades, even the girls at Ponders End. I approached drugs like a sacrament, music as a neo-religious experience and contrarianism as a dogma. Morality was evil. I wanted true freedom. My unfounded self-doubt flipped into rootless self-worth.

### *Falling into Drug Abuse*

Over the next couple of weeks I injected myself sporadically, forgetting my emptiness, refusing to acknowledge my loneliness, falling back on the cot, oblivious to pain. I stared at the ceiling and recalled health and strength in the cool green of England, dreamed of clean water, fresh fruit and damp fields. Would I ever go back? I longed for the distraction of books, music and company thousands of miles away; lifetimes too. I might as well have been on the moon.

I walked often to the pharmacy and back. The pharmacist saw me coming up the steep path and had my order ready by the time I arrived. The transaction was always surreal, and as I carried the poison back to my sickbed I felt the moral vortex tugging at my heels. But as soon as the morphine coursed through my veins any urgency for my wellbeing receded. It became routine. The opiate rush was psychologically featureless, and even disdain couldn't dislodge it. It was just a relief to be shielded from my own judgment.

### *India, 1970s*

I ogled the narrow laneways of Amritsar, trying to take it all in. The fragrance of fried snacks from roadside *dhabas* wafted alongside the stench of rotting vegetables, urine and excrement. Cyclists, scooters, pedestrians, cows, rickshaws and cars jostled; ringing, beeping, shouting, mooing, hailing and honking out their rights of passage. Frighteningly disfigured beggars whined routinely for alms. Urchins wandered through plentiful food markets, shooed uncaringly from one pot-bellied merchant to the next. Sacred cows roamed freely, eating at will. Fabric stores and sari shops displayed their dyed wares. Spice vendors

sat behind pyramids of brightly colored powders. Voices and instruments screeched from tinny transistor radios on window-sills, barrows, bicycles and rooftops. The sky glared. The air quivered with frenetic life. My senses bulged.

## *Repentance*

Something had changed. My self-destructive near-misses finally convinced me that my apparent love of freedom was just a fear of discipline. I now found myself amenable to moral order, and with that came a new confidence. All the ideas that had collaborated to confuse me now seemed to cooperate. I credited Buddhism for this new perspective. It helped me recognize that my sense of isolation and entrapment were self-imposed. I was no longer the odd-one-out. Uncertainty was normal. Life was unpredictable. Denial's rooted in the pretence that we know what's going on, and most of the time we're too scared to admit otherwise. I still felt lost, but no longer alone. Buddha grew from an understanding that both the world and our knowledge of it are transitory, and that the more we seek happiness in such uncertainty, the more we set ourselves up. All emotions lead to pain.

## *Feeling like a Novice Monk*

Measuring the change in me since I'd first turned up here six years earlier, just after hitting rock bottom, things were indubitably better. But here was no hint of self-mastery. My newfound stability was little more than a result of fitting in and feeling secure, and even that was fraying. Once again I was losing trust in the status quo. A part of me would have given anything to remain starry-eyed, but it was a weaker part. Awakening, that's to say real freedom, is the end of views. Faith, belief and devotion are means to an end. When they became ends in themselves, you're lost. But it seemed too soon to let go, I was fully ordained now, spoke Tibetan well and was ready to start teaching. Why did I still feel like a novice?

## *Two Worlds*

I had a particular advantage when it came to understanding the graphic messages that barrage us day and night. Having lived outside of consumer society for so long, I had more resistance to the enticements of consumerism and modernity, although I was horrified to see what a sophisticated consuming machine I remained anyway. My years apart had barely dented the instinct to seek happiness in shiny new stuff. I had greater resistance, but had to keep resisting; the effort was endless. I was just as skeptical of the impulse to look back nostalgically on my Tibetan years; my memories were too vivid. Both lives were unsatisfactory, but they were all I had.

## *Life was Strange*

This psychic distance meant I took less for granted, and saw angles on life that others missed. North American society was strange indeed. On the surface it offers unprecedented freedoms, but its day-to-day operations encourage those nurtured on television and pop culture to huddle in consensus and flock to the malls for succor. Even academe is subverted to job-training, and although I met some enlightened teachers, they seemed powerless against the tide of conveyer-belt education. I met prospective young graduates who, rather

than preparing to explore the world, were setting up timetables for building wealth and predictability. They expressed amazement at the risks I'd taken, but I was infinitely more amazed by their myths of security and permanence.

### *How Civilized are We?*

What's the value of all our technical and scientific 'progress' if we have no more handle on brutality and war, poverty and starvation than our ancestors of five millennia ago? Underlying all our attitudes and objectives are our accumulated, self-administered illusions about life and happiness, an interdependent web of automated patterns and subconscious denials that today enable us to obliterate the biosphere. As civilized humans have always done, we pretend that everything's just fine.