
Ethan Nichtern

The Road Home

Buddhism for the 21st Century

'Ethan is the future of Buddhism' Sharon Salzberg

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Acknowledgments

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Does your life feel like an endless commute?

Are you always on the go, never feeling you've arrived?

Ethan Nichtern shows us the road home, taking us on a journey into our hearts and minds, to a place of inner calm and belonging. Drawing from contemporary research on mindfulness, and his experience as a senior Buddhist teacher in the Shambhala tradition, Nichtern explains how to create a true refuge wherever we are. A place where we can feel secure, satisfied and accepted – home.

It's always okay to admit we're struggling. There's action we can take. Nichtern offers teachings for developing self-awareness, living in the moment and transforming our sense of what's possible. Along the way, he describes what meditation is and isn't, plus helpful concepts such as karma and compassion.

The Road Home also covers how we fit into the wider world. We don't need to be commuters stuck in the traffic of life. Discover how to step away, work with your own mind, and make yourself at home, right here, right now.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ethan Nichtern is a senior teacher in the Shambhala Buddhist tradition and the author of *One City: A Declaration of Interdependence*. He is also the founder of the Interdependence Project, a nonprofit organization dedicated to secular Buddhist study as it applies to transformational activism, mindful arts and media projects, and western psychology. Nichtern has taught meditation and Buddhist studies classes and retreats across the United States since 2002. He is based in New York City.

The Road Home

Buddhism for the 21st Century

Ethan Nichtern



RIDER

LONDON · SYDNEY · AUCKLAND · JOHANNESBURG

*For my parents, who set me on this path.
For my teachers, who keep me on this path.
For my colleagues and students, who keep me honest on
this path.*

FOREWORD

BY SHARON SALZBERG

I STARTED READING my advance copy of *The Road Home* while in a hotel room, far from where I live. Internet access was in fits and starts, the busy highway outside left me stranded in this little enclave, and there were no restaurants open anywhere. I was at the tail end of a book tour (seven cities in ten days!) and had woken up that morning directly into the cliché “Where am I? I don’t know at all where I am.” I was so tired I felt lucky I wasn’t waking up to “I don’t know at all who I am.”

My experience of fragmentation and unease was perfectly captured by Ethan in the early part of this book, in his description of a “commuter,” someone always on the go, someone anchorless.

Sitting in that hotel room, I saw right away that I wanted a stronger sense of community than the one my iPhone could offer in those fits and starts of Internet access. I very much wanted to find renewal and openheartedness, so I could be in the next place with the next people in a good way. I also wanted some greater quiet—not isolation, but a sense of repose, stopping, being at ease. I wanted the relief and support of being at home.

Thanks to my many years of meditation study and practice, I knew how to directly find and actually follow a road home, even though I wasn’t going to be seeing Massachusetts anytime soon. This is the best kind of home—independent of conditions, accessible even if my plane

was once more delayed, unencumbered by the need for successful and timely baggage delivery.

The Road Home is a guide to taking this special kind of journey into our own hearts and minds, a true refuge for us wherever we are. And we're home not just for a tiny, fleeting visit, only to recall it distantly and nostalgically when we are once again far afield, feeling lost, wondering where we are. "Remember that great time, when I felt connected and aware? That was a really good time! Ah, to be back there." It's not a journey to a finer address, or an exotic voyage to foreign lands, or an effort to go back to the past and build a monument to what once was and then irrevocably slipped away. It's a journey that we can have confidence in right here and now when we remember to embark.

The road home Ethan describes includes looking deeply at what meditation is and isn't, to carefully hone self-awareness. It includes examining often misunderstood concepts in Buddhist teaching, like karma, ethics, and emptiness, to transform our sense of what is possible for us. This road explores the awakened heart, empowered by the basic truths of interdependence and relationship, and the strength and vitality of wise compassion. And it encompasses looking at our shared communities and societies, to discover cultural, social, and political meaning to our journeying.

While writing in a completely contemporary idiom, Ethan draws here from different perspectives and schools within the Buddhist traditions, including the Shambhala tradition, of which he is a second-generation member. This journey home has been a part of Ethan's world his whole life.

When Ethan asked me to write this foreword, he also asked me not to say anything that would embarrass him, reminding me of the time when I did just that by introducing him to one of my teaching colleagues, Sylvia Boorstein, saying, "Ethan is the future of Buddhism." But it

fits very well in the flow here, it's quite a good closing statement, it's kind of fun to embarrass him, and I mean it sincerely. So, I'll just close by expressing my great respect for this work and by strongly encouraging you to use it as a practical guide, not a mere abstract reflection. And I'd like to specifically add, "Ethan is the future of Buddhism."

INTRODUCTION

Where Do You Live?

WHERE IS HOME? Is your address your home? Is your body your home? Do you feel at home in your own mind? Where, oh, where is home?

In many ways, these have been the central questions of my life. The quest to answer these questions—or at least to feel more capable of understanding them—is the primary reason I have chosen the path of Buddhism^{fn1} and the primary reason I practice and teach the path to others.

For me, the question of home is emotional. It's a poignant metaphor. It's rarely been a literal dilemma. I've always found a place to crash, at least, and have never faced a serious threat of losing the roof over my head. In that way I'm luckier than many people. This relative safety and comfort allow me a privilege I try to never forget: adequate space and time to contemplate existence. Still, the main question this book asks about "home" is an existential one; we aren't talking about a physical address. We are asking: Where, when, and how do we *feel* at home? How do we handle the fears and insecurities of not feeling at home?

It's possible, maybe even likely, that you don't feel completely at home right now. That might be the whole reason you picked up this book. If you're currently in commute, watching the world stream by through the isolating window of some train, plane, or bus, then you know the feeling. Or if things recently fell apart for you, in one of those limitless ways that Things Fall Apart for us

mere mortals, then you're probably in a time of transition. If that's true, you may know what I mean about home in a very immediate way, and you might be hoping for something to come along to end this disorienting commute, to get you back to a place where you belong, where you are safe and sound, loved and understood.

But what if you're actually reading this at home, at the place where you lay your head most often, the place your mobile phone bill gets delivered, the place where you most often caffeinate? You might be lounging in the most comfortable chair you've ever owned, with the most creatively named pet snuggled in your lap. And yet, there still might be a hovering aura of stress or anxiety, an underlying insecurity that makes you feel shiftless, just a little bit uncomfortable about everything. Maybe feeling not-at-home makes you check your newsfeed way too often or scratch an itch that isn't quite there. Or, maybe you're just dreading the next time you're going to have to leave the comfort of home and head back out into the big strange world in which the pretense of knowing what you're doing is a constant prerequisite, that world in which there is still no manual on how to be you.

The sad fact—the fact that binds us together in our shared struggle as human beings—is that even when we actually are at home, it is so damn difficult to feel at home.

The tradition that I study, practice, and teach—Shambhala Buddhism—traces the journey that we each make to find where we belong, and describes what happens when we get lost in transit. First and foremost, practitioners of this tradition look at how we have lost touch with a feeling of belonging and trust in our own mind. Then, we can examine how the feeling of not-at-home makes us avoid the trickier aspects of our human relationships. Finally, we can look more broadly at how our inability to settle with our own being leads to communities

and societies of mutual distrust, cyclical dissatisfaction, and violence.

LOST IN COMMUTE

The Sanskrit word *samsara*—which traditionally represents the summation of all our confusion and destructive patterns of behavior—literally means “wandering around.” The Tibetan word for a sentient being caught up in confusion—*drowa*—could be translated as “always on the go.” I like to think of this word as meaning “commuter.” From the standpoint of our struggle, we are wanderers, commuters addicted to a state of transit, always thinking that we will be most satisfied somewhere other than here. We may struggle our whole life, on a relentless and unsettling journey from cradle to urn. Lacking the tools to get comfortable in our own skin and safe in our own mind, we get lost again and again in the existential transitions of life, blindly hoping that a true and permanent home lies around the corner, after just a bit more struggle to prove ourselves, a bit more time figuring out how to belong in our life. So often our idea of home is whatever we hope will magically be waiting for us after the current disruption. For the commuter, “home” becomes a shifting mirage in an increasingly repetitive desert.

In this desert, we experience our past as a collection of lost opportunities: Maybe I already missed my chance at a true home? Memories blend into a potpourri of nostalgia: Maybe I really was at home, once upon a time, back in the day, but then I lost it, or it was taken away from me. The future becomes a carnival of hope and fear. We clutch at the belief that “home” will be waiting for us at the end of our current transition: “Life gets better, it’s gotta get better, I just need to find the right _____.” Filling in this blank is fraught with stress and anxiety.

From this point of view, human life is a nonstop quest for anything that makes us feel temporarily safe within the rudderless journey of aging. Ultimately, what we are seeking is a feeling of belonging in our life. It's the feeling of relaxation that comes with knowing there's a place for us right here in this present moment. But if we never feel like we belong in the present, we quickly become cynical and apathetic, human zombies on a commute from moment to moment, day to day, year to year. Below is a version of such a dark story from the point of view of samsara, the cycle of restless wandering.

THE COMMUTER'S STORY

When the commuter is born, he cries from the depths of his being, not knowing where or who he is. Breath is both a gift and a burden. As a baby, the commuter clamors for safety in a world in which he is utterly defenseless. His parents try to protect him as best they can, but they, too, struggle to deal with the anxiety, regrets, and uncertainty created by their own commutes through life. They don't dare tell him the whole truth about their own struggles, afraid that they might poison his chances at happiness. Childhood brings many lighthearted moments, but few answers to the many questions that define his personal cosmos. As he moves through his world, "why"—a word full of wonder and terror—becomes a constant on the young commuter's lips. Why the sun? Why these grass stains? Why does strawberry ice cream have to melt so quickly? And, most important, why all the sadness that the grown-ups never really talk about? Sometimes he gets a real answer to these questions, but even those answers almost always strike him as incomplete or beside the point, simply opening the door to new "why"s.

In his free time, the child commuter begins to invent his own fantasies, private creation myths to explain this

universe and his place in it. He feels disempowered by an inability to reconcile his vast imagination with the confining rules of this place he is slowly learning to inhabit. Taller, fatter people called “adults” make all these rules, which they pass off as objectively true. They tell him that when he grows a little more, he will begin to belong to this place, this society, this earth. If only he commutes through life a little longer, they say, everything will start to make sense to him. He will get it. He will arrive at home. He awaits high school as if it were some holy Mecca.

Adolescence brings longer limbs with which to roam, but little that helps him understand how people treat themselves and each other. Nobody explains to the commuter how to just BE, much less how to BE with others. So he travels onward, imprisoned in a rapidly changing body, adopting a persona of shifting interests and preferences. He discovers only one apparent constant among the flickers of his perceptions, a feeling of tender awkwardness underlying all his steps, a vulnerability he may spend the rest of his life trying to pretend does not exist.

He becomes disillusioned by existing systems and hierarchies, coming to the cynical teenage view that most of the adults in his midst have as much of a clue about what’s really going on as did the toddler he used to be. To make matters worse, some of these clueless adults have a ridiculous amount of power over other people, tremendous control over the systems that govern the world. But don’t worry, he lets himself be convinced: after graduation, after he leaves his native home, the story goes, is when the real experience begins, when he gets to find his own place on this earth.

He dives into postadolescence, privileged enough to enter the invisible bubble of a university, and watches fellow travelers move on to some of life’s other institutional pit stops. In college, the other commuters he befriends

nervously tell each other that when “we” get out into the real world, that’s when life starts to get good, even though “the real world” is just the name of an old reality TV show.

The commuter stumbles his way into intimate relationships. But without knowing his heart, without knowing himself, it’s a maddening dance to share another person’s affections. He struggles to learn the unique language of someone else’s mind, the floor plan of chambers inside another heart. He feels the accumulation of deep wounds. His capacity to let himself stay open seems to weaken with each disappointment. Wandering through the emotional ups and downs, he gets insatiably lonely when single and relentlessly restless in relationships. He tells himself that eventually, if he just wanders onward a little further, he will find the right person, or at least someone to keep the bed warm. Then he will feel at home—safe and, above all, understood. But romantic disappointment turns saviors into tyrants in the blink of an eye. He decides to take a break from the tyranny of intimacy, and he journeys on alone.

For a while, the commuter builds his home out of a righteous independence from the bondages of human connections. Maybe liberation lies in the freedom from having to depend on anyone or anything, he decides. For a while, this spiritual libertarianism becomes his favorite place to hang his proverbial hat. He could practically write a manifesto on self-reliance. But, in the end, building an off-the-grid existence with an isolationist heart doesn’t help if his relationship with his own mind is unsustainable.

He journeys onward, pursuing a career, making his life purposeful, angling to leave a mark through his labor, his achievements. He commutes through graduate school and work life: socially networking, linking in profiles, exaggerating skills on résumés, passing out business cards, dissing bosses and coworkers behind their backs, searching for status, success, and, above all, security. But what, from

the point of view of this narrative of dissatisfaction, is a career, anyway? It's just the many hours spent between literal commutes, a blur of moments staring at the movements of a clock, waiting to head back to a home that doesn't quite feel like one.

The commuter finds time to travel abroad, wandering like some Xerox of a Xerox of Kerouac across this lonely planet. He decides that maybe a little spiritual odyssey will open his eyes, and lend him the perfect Kodak moments to post on Instagram. On his pilgrimages to places that are sacred to someone else, he takes brilliant pictures of filtered sunsets. As the light flees each day, each day one closer to death, he accumulates passing "likes" from all the other commuters out in cyberspace. Who doesn't want to be the most popular wanderer?

Eventually, he settles down and finds a partner, a partner with whom the miscommunication is bearable and the snuggles are sheltering, and they give birth to children, welcoming a new generation of commuters. He convinces himself that this nesting process will bring the home he and his partner were always seeking. He lets himself feel cautiously optimistic that they will erase the neurotic mistakes of their own generation, which are version 2.0 of the mistakes of the previous ones. He will provide these new, improved little beings with a home and a clear path to belonging. But parenting brings a new kind of commute through upheaval and groundlessness.

It turns out, of course, that everything brings groundlessness, because everything comes from groundlessness. But he just can't settle with this liberating and terrifying truth: everything that starts, ends.

So he commutes onward, idealizing the oncoming Valhalla of the middle-aged—the empty nest. That's when he'll really be able to get some time back to himself, to finally deepen his relationship to his own being, to achieve spiritual insight or else complete long-forgotten creative

masterpieces. Or maybe he'll just take a good long nap on the couch.

Finally, he decides, it's when he retires, if he is lucky enough to afford retirement, that he'll really be able to relax, to explore spiritual pursuits easefully. Then he will have the time and space he needs to transform an entire lifetime of neurotic motion into some kind of experiential wisdom, like the carefree sages of ancient times. He will leave behind a road map for future wanderers, complete with step-by-step instructions, stating exactly what they should do to find their way home. Or maybe he'll give up on the idea that life offers any lessons at all, and just write a tongue-in-cheek memoir, sarcastic and witty enough to undermine anyone's need to believe deeply in anything. But, after retirement, the fossil fuels of hope and fear that drove his constant commute through life continue to pollute his mind. He finds little rest. Finally, there is only one commute left, a choiceless journey into old age and death, a kind of mass transit that even the most seasoned traveler might be unprepared for.

Even with all the assumptions and generalizations of this story, how unsatisfying and isolating would such a life lost in commute be? To make this story even more of a downer, all of the above is just the best-case, most privileged scenario for a life spent in anchorless commute. The above is a life defined by what friends of mine like to call "first-world problems." Many of us don't even have the option of wandering all the way into an unsatisfying old age. Sickness, accidents, and violence can cut this story short before its climax. And the great majority of humans on this planet not only face these existential dilemmas, but are also oppressed by the external forces of systemic poverty and bias produced by the greed, intolerance, and delusion that have gone viral across the globe.

The commuter's narrative is a tale of resentment, grasping, and isolating fear, a story with which most people I've met are familiar.

THE GOOD NEWS

Our lives and societies certainly generate a lot of bad news for anyone brave enough to pay attention. It's a mark of great maturity to realize that we can't become properly optimistic about life, and can't take responsibility for the state of the world, until we're willing to very honestly face the confused side of our situation. This honesty is where the road home has to begin. The historical Buddha first taught about the truth of dissatisfaction that comes from not knowing how to deal with our own mind to a group of intensely depressed spiritual seekers who were literally torturing themselves in the pursuit of happiness.^{fn2} Given this context, I've always thought that the Buddha's description of our dissatisfaction with the commute through life was simply meant to create a moment of honesty and relief in which his students could admit that they were having a hard time. This is my favorite phrasing of the first noble truth: *It's always okay to admit you are struggling*. Why are we struggling so much? To reinterpret the second noble truth in the language of home: people struggle because we don't know where we belong, and we always assume that home lies somewhere other than here and now, a mistake that sets us on an exhausting commute.

The first noble truth—the simple acknowledgment of our struggle—is actually good news. If we start any journey with rose-colored glasses or false promises, we end up disillusioned. If we start with an acknowledgment of reality, free from shame or embarrassment, connecting our own struggle with the struggles of others, then we can move toward a genuine optimism.

The good news about being human is this: the commuter's story is based on a mistake, a fully workable mistake, which is the third noble truth. Our life is never told in just one story or one story line. If the commuter should ever find a way to feel at home, the whole vantage point of life changes. If we change the lens through which we view our experience, then the narrative always shifts as well. Cynicism can quickly become optimism. If he finds a road home—a path outlined in the fourth noble truth—then the commuting zombie eventually turns back into an empowered human being.

All of us have at least glimpsed another way of moving through life, an alternative narrative that arises in parallel to this story of alienation. Sometimes, even for just a moment, something in us shifts, and we don't fixate on whatever will happen at the end of this particular transition. For a moment, we actually arrive in the present, feeling safe, belonging right here. A whole new realm of possibility emerges when it feels like we actually belong in our present experience; we start to appreciate life in a way that is impossible to express verbally. It's nothing magical, unless you consider experience itself to be magic. It's just the feeling of reality shining through the gauzy filters of hopeful daydream and fearful nightmare. If we can learn to consciously reproduce the feeling of returning home to the present, we start developing confidence that we belong here. Maybe we belong here even as much as the great saints and sages of human history, the enlightened people who actually figured something out about life.

If we feel like we belong here enough, we experience the great relaxation that comes with not competing against idealized images of a different, better "me," ideals that by definition we could never live up to. Shame and guilt about who we are slowly subside. Momentarily liberated from deeply engrained forces of selfpunishment, we start to take responsibility for what happens to us. We smile and

recognize our own mental agency. Then we open our eyes and start looking other people in the eye, listening to their stories more deeply. True friendship and intimacy take shape only when we are present enough to experience more than just one narrative, as well as to participate in our shared human experiences. Suddenly inspired and naturally energized, we can even begin to take responsibility for belonging to planet Earth, for feeling at home in relation to all of this planet's commuting inhabitants.

In this alternate story, our experience of time itself ceases to be one of cyclical entrapment, the *déjà vu* pain of just going through the motions. Life is no longer about just trudging onward toward oblivion. In this alternative, empowered narrative, the passage of time starts to represent spontaneous opportunity. Every day is new, every moment fresh, every relationship sacred. In this story, no one is ever doomed. "Now" is always the moment of creative potential. In this alternate story, we are awake.

WHERE DO YOU LIVE?

My father, David, has been a meditator for forty-five years and a Buddhist teacher for almost forty years, all while maintaining his day job as a composer and musician. Dad tells a funny story of a conversation he had with a Tibetan teacher, or Rinpoche, when the teacher was staying at our old loft in New York's NoHo neighborhood. This lama, named Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, is widely renowned for his meditative prowess. He is also renowned for being impossible to engage in small talk. If you asked Khenpo Rinpoche a question about, say, gluten-free pancakes, he would give you an answer about the nature of mind. Ask him about his favorite painter, and the response would be about emptiness-luminosity. It's a pretty interesting experience to talk to someone who has no

interest in chitchat. Imagine trying to send him an instant message. How do you even start a conversation? My father (who loves small talk) decided not to ask a question about the Buddhist teachings. Instead, he asked Rinpoche a small-talk question: “Where do you live?” It was a simple enough question, a little dose of chitchat to blend with all that profundity. “Where do you live?” Dad asked. “When you aren’t on the road—traveling, moving around, teaching—where do you live, Rinpoche?”

When he heard the question translated, Khenpo Rinpoche raised the brows above his wide eyes and said something in Tibetan to his translator. My father didn’t break his gaze with the powerful little man. I imagine this was quite an eye-locked moment, brow to brow, mind to mind. My father heard the translator’s voice ethereally in his ear as he stared into Rinpoche’s eyes. Cue climactic theme music.

“Rinpoche says to tell you that he lives in the center of his awareness!”

“You know you’ve met a true yogi when you get that kind of answer,” my father finishes the story. “As for me, I live on Great Jones Street!”

That’s quite an answer to a simple question. When Rinpoche said, “I live in the center of my awareness,” I believe he was saying, with full confidence, that he had developed the tools to experience complete acceptance and relaxation within the space of his own thoughts, perceptions, and emotions. He was claiming a kind of fearless intimacy with his very being, a comfort with oneself that is rarely seen. He was saying, “It doesn’t matter where I live, because I always feel at home. I belong HERE. No matter where HERE is. If you were HERE, you’d be home by now.”

In psychological terms, this space of basic awareness, the home for all our subjective experience, is called the mind. In more romantic terms, it’s often called the heart. The totality of our personal experience—what the Tibetan

teacher called his awareness—involves our cognitive, emotional, and intellectual processes, all at once. For that reason, the path of awakening views our intellectual intelligence and our emotional wisdom as completely entwined, existing in a unified space of consciousness that needs to be experienced and developed in an integrated way. “Mind” alone doesn’t seem like a sufficient word for this space, and neither does “heart.” Let’s instead talk about the “heartmind,” and how to learn to live there.

Our heartmind is where we will always live, where we will always come home. Whether we live well in our awareness, or whether we trash the place, is quite another story, but the fact is that our heartmind is where we must lay out the welcome mat. What could possibly be more important than taking care of our true home?

The decision to prioritize your relationship with your heartmind is deeply connected with what it means to practice Buddhism. People often ask, “What’s the definition of a Buddhist?” I’ve always done my best to answer, but there are a lot of possible responses—it’s very personal and definitions are always debatable. Of course, there are formal vows that you can take to become a Buddhist, and many people do, but not everyone chooses this path. The vast majority of folks I’ve worked with on the Awakeist teachings are interested in some definition that is accessible and relevant to life in the fast-paced, global society of the twentyfirst century. Most of us are not looking to take on anything that sounds like a new religion, preferring a socially relevant and ethically responsible psychology and philosophy.^{fn3} As Eastern ideas converse with Western science, culture, art, and politics, and especially Western psychology, the definition of a Buddhist is open to an increasingly lively debate, and the range of definitions seems to evolve almost daily. Some people are adamant about what does or doesn’t make someone a true

Buddhist, or a “good” Buddhist, a real-deal practitioner. Of course, every tradition has its purists, obsessed with policing authenticity. However, the purists end up simply authenticating—within a huge array of traditional perspectives available to them—the aspects of the tradition that support their narrow claims.

Here’s my personal definition of a Buddhist: someone who prioritizes cultivating her relationship to her own heartmind—and her relationship to other sentient beings—above whatever else she might achieve in life.

An Awake-ist is anyone who has come to the decision that her heartmind is her true home, and develops the tools to train to live in her awareness with skill and compassion. An Awake-ist uses contemplative and ethical tools to travel the road home, and to help others feel at home in whatever way she can. For me, in this vast and diverse world, the only meaningful definition of a Buddhist is this broad and inclusive one.

It turns out that my father’s small-talk question to the Tibetan lama was actually immensely profound.

In thinking of home, we have to move beyond considering home as a physical address. We have to start asking what home feels like. My main teacher and guru, Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, emphasizes that it is never enough to have good ideas—we need to familiarize ourselves with how experiences make us feel, on a deep and personal level. It is beneath the frameworks of ideas, in the very taste and texture of experience, that true insight is born. We use language to describe and communicate feelings, but the feelings described by language are actually the most important thing to befriend. To be a sentient being literally means that we feel first, and that we think and act later, on the basis of these feelings. So, how does it *feel* to feel at home? How do we act when we feel like we belong?

When I feel at home (or when someone else truly makes me feel at home), I feel comfortable, supported, safe, and relaxed, like I don't need anything. At those times, my past ceases to be a neon marquee of regrets, and my future is no longer an unending to-do list, bullet-pointed by unrealistic expectations. Feeling at home is the feeling that I can just be myself. It would be wonderful if there was a more psychologically complex description of this feeling with which to impress some academic journal. I'd love to concoct some seven-syllable yogic word that sounds mystical, ancient, brilliant: JUSTBEYOURSELFASANA. But, in fact, the simplicity of being ourselves is actually the ideal outcome of traveling the path of awakening. When I feel at home, I can also begin to feel truly available to others, because their presence no longer compromises my identity or threatens my safety. When other people no longer seem like threats, I open my eyes and take greater interest in the society we share, this earth on which we are all natives and locals.

Is it ever really possible to feel completely at home all the time, to be free of anxiety and struggle? What's the actual difference, anyway, between someone who lives fully in the center of her awareness, and a confused person? Are awakened beings born that way, neurologically or spiritually different from the rest of us? Is that Tibetan lama made of a different substance, a more enlightened bloodline? In this era of self-aggression and idealistic celebrity, there is always a tendency to "other-ize" positive qualities, a tendency that is unfortunately amplified by the fact that the Buddhist teachings originate in a foreign cultural context.

You could say, from the perspective of the tradition of meditation, that there is actually very little that separates an enlightened being from a zombie commuter. Both have to deal with the pains and pleasures of life; there's no way to bypass them. The only difference is that the confused

person is constantly lost in commute, grasping for home among the slippery and unstable objects along the road. The enlightened person is already at home, living in the center of her awareness. The enlightened person has made the space of her own being into a sustainable home, with immeasurable square footage. The awakened person has plenty of mental space to accommodate and deal skillfully with the entire range of life's emotional experiences—making room for fear, lust, anger, uncertainty, jealousy, and all the other emotions that come with being human.

We could ask this very same question about confusion and wisdom on a larger scale: What's the difference between a confused society and an enlightened society? A confused society, a deeply endangered society, is a group of people all lost in nightmarish commute. The systems, institutions, and culture of such a society discourage people from feeling the trust and belonging that come with being at home in your world. A confused society is a society of isolation and exclusion, one in which fear becomes profitable and self-reflection becomes a threat to established bureaucracies.

An enlightened society is one where the culture encourages time for self-awareness, belonging, and connection. An enlightened society would actually foster cultural and social relationships to help commuters find their way home. It's that simple—in theory. But "simple" should never ever be confused with "easy." Our personal journey is rarely easy, and our global journey is even less so. Because everything is interdependent, we have to work on both of these levels at once. Trying to change society without deeply understanding our heartmind won't work. Your own road home can never be separated from society's journey. We need a unifying theory and language that allow us to link the lessons of our personal journey with the situation facing our world. The important question then, a question laced with a gorgeous irony, is, "How do we get