

Wisdom Note – *Choosing To Be*

Lessons in Living from a Feline Zen Master

Author: Kat Tansey

Brief Background

Choosing To Be is, as the subtitle suggests, a book on the “Lessons in Living”. In fact it walks you through the author’s journey of learning, self-development, self-discovery, overcoming obstacles and healing.

For personal development, *Choosing To Be* offers much wisdom on learning the importance of why we should stop just “doing” and shift over to “being” mode. It’s about learning how to make time for yourself, how to slow down and nurture calmness and self-acceptance in yourself, learning to observe what your mind is up to, how to watch your thoughts and how to let go of them without getting so caught up and ‘controlled’ by them, how to make room for new ways of seeing old problems, and how to overcome the inevitable obstacles of life.

The book starts with a poem Kat Tansey wrote on one of life’s biggest health obstacles; depression...the depression was hers:

“For a myriad of reasons not really pertinent to this story,
I descended from my executive office on the top floor
of a sleek and stylish high-rise tower
into the underworld of depression in 1993.

I had been there before.

I suppose you could say I was a frequent visitor,
but I usually stopped at one of the upper floors.

This time I took the express elevator –
straight to the basement, the suicide floor.

And wouldn’t you know, this particular elevator
required a special key to come back up.

This is the story of how I found the key.”

Thankfully Kat found the key and it is one that all of us can benefit from as an aid to unlock our potential and take what may seem to be the “impossibilities” in life and, instead of suggesting goal setting or strong religious beliefs, shows us how to develop powerful “knowing” about who we are (*Choosing To Be*) and what we can do. Sages across the centuries have told us that in this state of higher awareness, our purpose in life becomes very clear, relationships become more spiritual, work endeavours begin to “flow” and decisions are made with ease.

In the introduction of *Choosing To Be*, Patricia Heller tells us that Kat “came back to tell the tale and reveal the hidden treasure that awaits those who travel there – nothing less than inner peace. She created a travel guide for the rest of us.” Travel with me as we listen to a remarkable lady’s journey as she ‘decides to stay’ and walks along a path to discover her ‘true self’.

Big Point

When the Monkey Mind gains real power, we cannot eat well, sleep, love (ourselves or others), laugh, or find beauty or meaning in life anymore.

As is typical of Wisdom Notes I will not talk about the 'story line' per se, rather seeking the nuggets of wisdom that the author writes to help us all in our quest to live a life with inner harmony.

The author describes how she had been "continuing to **exist** in my debilitating state of depression" and picked up a book called "*The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*" by Sogyal Rinpoche. Kat describes reading a passage that suggested the mind is like like a flea (which I quote here from Rinpoche's excellent book): "**Just look at your mind** for a few minutes. You will see that it is like a flea, constantly hopping to and fro. **You will see that thoughts arise without any reason, without any connection. Swept along by the chaos of every moment, we are the victims of the fickleness of our mind.** If this is the only state of consciousness we are familiar with, then to rely on our minds at the moment of death is an absurd gamble."

Kat writes:

"I stopped to consider my mind as it behaved like a flea, watching as it flitted randomly from thought to thought. If my mind was no more reliable than a flea, then **to rely on my mind to make a wise decision about something as irreversible as death seemed like not such a good idea after all.**"

Let's think carefully about this – how's the 'chatter' of your mind right now...can you see those little fleas of thoughts hopping about? Buddhists sometimes use the analogy of the Monkey Mind to describe the agitated way in which an undisciplined mind jumps from topic to topic, sensation to sensation, like a monkey swings from branch to branch. Its almost like Kat was beginning to realise the enemy was actually within herself and **it is difficult for us to face that the enemy in our lives is often inside us.** In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* Friedrich Nietzsche said: "But the worst enemy you can encounter will always be you, yourself; you lie in wait for yourself in caves and woods." The Buddha said the same: "More than those who hate you, more than all your enemies, an undisciplined mind does greater harm." Buddhists believe that when the Monkey Mind gains real power, we cannot eat well, sleep, love (ourselves and others), laugh, or find beauty or meaning in life anymore.

The author discovers a passage in "*The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*" which describes:

"the difference between our '*ordinary mind*' – the mind I had observed hopping to and fro – and our '*Buddha nature*', **the sky-like nature of our mind, which is open and limitless** and the birthright of every living being."

Wow – that's beautiful. Who amongst us doesn't want "the sky like nature of our mind, which is open and limitless"? Kat certainly did and she wisely writes:

"Intrigued by this idea, I decided to discuss this at length with someone wiser than myself"

This is one of the **keys** Kat discussed finding in her poem –someone to talk with. She does turn to someone, and that someone becomes one of her teachers. The teacher starts by telling her:

"One simply ceases to be deluded about the nature of one's own mind" adding

"You Are thinking this way (*considering suicide as a choice*) because you are stuck in ordinary mind. It is this ignorance that deludes your thinking and **clouds your comprehension of what is real.**"

In her book *Zen Miracles. Finding Peace in an Insane World*, Brenda Shoshanna, Ph.D says the ordinary mind "is the mind that thinks, plots, desires, manipulates, that flares up in anger, that creates and indulges in waves of negative emotions and thoughts, that has to go on and on asserting, validating, and confirming its "existence" by fragmenting, conceptualizing, and solidifying experience. The ordinary mind is the ceaselessly shifting and shiftless prey of external influences, habitual tendencies, and conditioning: **The masters liken ordinary mind to a candle flame in an open doorway, vulnerable to all the winds of circumstance.**"

Read that again please "**The masters liken ordinary mind to a candle flame in an open doorway, vulnerable to all the winds of circumstance**" ...The teacher adds:

"You can be quite clever, Kat, but there is an old Tibetan saying, **"If you are too clever, you miss the point entirely."**

To which Kat admits to being "confused, vulnerable and at the end of her rope." Confusion we discover "is an excellent place to begin. **If you are willing to let go of certainty** and allow yourself to be confused" you will "find Buddha nature." The teacher tells her:

"...as to this matter of Buddha nature we are talking about you learning to understand the nature of your own mind." And to do this "You must learn to sit and meditate."

Kat sounds sceptical at first and admits having tried meditation previously with little success (Hands up – how many of us have tried mediation and given up without success?)... We later hear the teacher tell her:

"Trust that you picked up this book....for a reason." "It is a sign. You need to open yourself up to answers you cannot even envision yet."

"You have the opportunity to learn another way of healing and a very different way of viewing the world."

That view of the world is what some people call "conscious living" developed best through meditation and it takes patience and practice as we will discover from Kat's wisdom. However I would just like to add this great point by author Jon Kabat-Zinn who describes it brilliantly in this passage from his book *Full Catastrophe Living*: "We all accept that no one controls the weather. Good sailors learn to read it carefully and respect its power. They will avoid storms if possible, but when caught in one, they know when to take down the sails, batten down the hatches, drop anchor, and ride things out, controlling what is controllable and letting go of the rest. **Training, practice, and a lot of firsthand experience in all sorts of weather are required to develop such skills so that they work for you when you need them.** Developing skill in facing and effectively handling the various "weather conditions" in your life is what we mean by the art of conscious living."

Just stop and think about that and while you are at it pause on one of my favourite things to ask myself and others "How's your inner weather?"

To help Kat, her teacher advises her to get a kitten, and for good reason:

“..one who looks at everything with the awe of seeing it for the first time.”

At that moment Kat describes how she is reminded of one of her favourite poems:

“‘Trailing clouds of glory do we come from God, who is our home.’ William Wordsworth believed heaven surrounds us when we are infants, but as we grow up, ‘shades of the prison-house begin to close.’ **Just the way our ordinary mind obscures our Buddha mind.**”

Essentially Kat is reminding us that as infants we are closer to our essence. Thich Nhat Hahn, in *Peace is Every Step*, wrote “When I was four years old...I did not have much to worry about. I did not think of the future, I did not regret the past. I was entirely in the present moment.” Kat’s teacher reminds her that the kitten will help her by observing it, and cautions her to remember that

“Wisdom only comes from experience and study.”

Which reminds me of Plato, slightly paraphrased “we are born with all wisdom in us. External events just unlock it for us” and Aristotle: “We gain wisdom from experience.”

Wisdom	“Many unhappy people don’t want to work that hard, even to improve their own lives.” Martha Beck <i>Finding Your Own North Star</i>
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We have all heard of the significant benefit of meditation from ancient sages to modern day thought leaders. One of my favourite quotes on the benefit of meditation comes from Ralph Waldo Emerson (who by the way was heavily influenced by the ancient Eastern texts including the Upanishads, Vedas, and The Bhagavad-Gita) who said in his essay *Self-Reliance* that “**Meditation, puts us in tune with universal forces and laws, leads us to ways of being and doing that are inherently right and successful.**” Susan Salzberg in her book *Loving-Kindness* writes “Each of us has a genuine capacity for love, forgiveness, wisdom and compassion. **Meditation awakens these qualities so that we can discover for ourselves the unique happiness that is our birthright.**” Now who doesn’t want that?

Yet one of the greatest difficulties, like most things, lies in perseverance. Recall the quote earlier from Kabat-Zinn “Training, practice, and a lot of firsthand experience in all sorts of weather are required to develop such skills so that they work for you when you need them.” Kat describes perfectly the difficulties she faces as she embarks on her path to the Buddha mind.

The first problem she must deal with is venturing out into the world to meet other people. She attends an Introduction to Buddhism session with a teacher that practices “Insight meditation” which “helped one develop concentrated awareness and gain insight into the changing nature of the mind.” We hear Kat describe that at this session “the combination” of the teacher’s “guided visualization and breathing instruction was quite powerful” and due to this:

“I found myself becoming more centered, and I was even able to let go of my constant mind chatter. What a relief to have a quiet mind, if only for a brief time.”

So Kat was off to a good start....but when she got home and tried to meditate again she describes the difficulty with sitting in the lotus position and then finding different cushions to sit in a position that would not cause her legs and other parts of her body to ache – in essence “the mechanics of sitting”

and “then when I try to concentrate on my breathing, being aware of the in breath and the out breath, I start feeling even more anxious.” Further adding “I became so preoccupied with following my breath that I had trouble breathing at all. I struggled to last the hour and was exhausted...”

I guess that happens in most activities we do. What seems like good progress at first and then...well It's all down hill from there and that's when many quit, taking the path of least resistance. Kat's teacher tells her: “It may be that you cannot learn how to sit by reading a book or having someone tell you how to do it” and invites her to watch him, which helps to a large extent. Kat subsequently decides to ‘enrol’ in a weekly meditation class where she admits that conversations are still “quite exhausting” for her and she is “stuck in my own head most of the time.” She discovers “how difficult it is for a new meditator to follow the breath:”

“The breath is moving and following something that moves can lead to agitation. It might be easier for you to focus on the still points of contact with your body, such as the touch of your hands on your legs or the touch of the buttocks on the floor.”

We hear Kat say:

“Using the still points will be a big help, no matter where I sit. And gently returning my attention to the still points – what a concept! **The key word here was gently. My approach was to force and punish my mind.**”

The teacher suggested:

“I let my thoughts come and go and begin to observe them, then reflect back on them after they had passed. He emphasized gently returning the mind to the still points of the body, such as our hands on our laps.”

To me those last three quotes are just brilliant advice for anyone starting out on meditation. Find a quiet spot, get very comfortable with cushions, pick a still point, your hands touching your knees for example and when your mind wanders, it will, gently return your attention to the still point.

An element I really like about the wisdom in *Choosing To Be* is how Kat describes in detail the problems she experiences (remember this was a lady that was ‘in the suicide basement’ and we discover her determination to climb out):

“Learning to sit in the active Western world, with an active Western mind, is not a particularly easy path.” ... “My body wanted action.....it was often difficult sitting in the busyness of the Western world.”

I'm reminded of Hesiod's brilliant saying “On the path to excellence, the gods have placed many obstacles, and the way is steep and hard to climb” Kat's teacher tells her:

“You should be aware by now that you often have expectations about your sittings. This sitting will be hard, you think. This sitting will be peaceful. This sitting will be – **whatever it is you create in your mind.**”

“Instead of being disappointed with what you call setbacks, look for the deeper meaning. With each setback, it means you are ready to develop the skill and capacity to take the next step. If you look at these passages as opportunities to take your practice to a new level, you will find a way to move through them. You must be open to new solutions.”

Kat explains, what I am sure is relevant to many of us starting out on Meditation:

“For every step forward, there are a thousand steps back. I just don’t think I can do this anymore.”

Yep...been there! Her teacher quotes from Einstein, reminding her that “you can’t solve a problem at the same level at which it is created. In other words you cannot solve the problem in ordinary mind.” “...thoughts are generating more thoughts. And those thoughts are generating feelings.”

“Humans have feelings that are not based in the present, and you carry them about as though they are.”

That’s powerful and so true...we worry about the past, the future, and as we discover from Kat’s teacher so did The Buddha 2600 years ago resulting in what Buddhists call the five hindrances. Kat’s teacher advises that he likes to think of the five hindrances as:

“Clinging, Anger, Sleepiness, Restlessness, and Doubt”

Please reflect on those five hindrances and start to make note of them in your day...

Wisdom	You’re the only person who can figure out exactly what would make you happy. It’s your job to define and articulate YOUR needs.
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As Kat discovers the five hindrances she explains:

“I was very attached to thoughts and memories of who I used to be and what my life was before I got sick.” “I’m finding it very hard to accept myself as who I am today.”

Her teacher reminds her that she is suffering “delusion and ignorance” “The fire of memory was burning with one log and you kept throwing more fuel on it, fanning the flames.” “**Choose not to fuel the flames.**” This reminds me of James Allen to some extent who said “when you have a dark night of sorrow, pain, or misfortune, you must realize that it is temporary and illusory, and that your true nature is light filled the dark shadow that covers you is cast by none and nothing but yourself.”

At that moment Kat realises she is clinging:

“I am causing my own suffering by hanging onto the past.”

That’s big...how many of us are causing our own suffering by hanging onto the past? I can tell you I have and it was not good state of mind. Kat quotes from Jack Kornfield from his book *A Path With a Heart* “**When we look at wanting, we experience the part of ourselves that is never content.**” Please read that again with me “I am causing my own suffering by hanging onto the past.” Followed by “When we look at wanting, we experience the part of ourselves that is never content.”

Her teacher advises Kat that “Acknowledging one’s pain is a necessary part of healing.” And that **“You must learn to face life as it is.”**

We discover that Kat is **angry** about the past and her teacher advises her to **“let go of repetitive thoughts.”** The Buddha called this the “Wheel of Samsara, reliving the same events over and over again.” Kat’s teacher provides this great advice for us all to think about:

“You are allowing yourself to be pulled back into another world, a world that does not exist anymore.” “These feelings you are having are not you. Do not participate in the scene. Do not be overcome by what is happening in it. Step back and look at it from a distance.”

Kat realises that “if I could tolerate uncomfortable feelings and explore them further, I might see different sides of it, like circling around the scene from another view.” She then realises:

“So this is what it feels like when I allow the stories to keep running until I am able to see more sides of them. What seems like a hindrance is really more like a hall of mirrors – if I look at only one of the mirrors, I am holding on to only one interpretation of the story and the hindrances related to that interpretation.”

Kat comes to the understanding, and it’s a good lesson for all of us clinging or angry, that “it’s about the stories I was holding on to about my life.” She then quotes from Sharon Salzberg’s *Loving Kindness* “Love can uproot fear or anger or guilt, because it is a greater power.” Kat later learns that “by naming your fear you take away its power.” Recognizing that **“The goodness, the positive forces are always there.”**

Another one of the five hindrances is sleepiness and this the teacher advises is because:

“There is something that you do not want to deal with” and “it is difficult to maintain a calm state if you do not know how to remain alert.”

The Buddha in the *Dhammpada* said: “Do you have the patience to wait till your mind settles, and the water is clear? Can you remain unmoving till the right action comes by itself?” Kat discovers that paying attention to something is crucial in meditation to help stay alert. Or as Kat puts it Paying Attention with a capital P and a capital A.

Kat is also reminded that sometimes one falls asleep because, well one is tired: “There is no need to look for any hidden meaning. As the saying goes, sometimes a banana is just a banana.”

Kat explains how stepping back into the workplace many old anxieties returned, realizing this she quotes from “Nyanaponika Thera from *The Five Mental Hindrances and Their Conquests* “When the mind is restless, it is the proper time for cultivating tranquillity, because an agitated mind can easily be quieted by it.” Kat adds “tranquillity triumphs over restlessness.” I love that idea of whenever we feel anxious, facing the fear, admitting what it is and taking a few moments to let the anxiety pass. Facing this anxiety helped Kat realise one of the things holding her back and causing her to lose tranquillity was the fear that she “was not good enough”:

“...deep down I believed I was not good enough. It’s hard to believe something so empty and so untrue could have been my driving force all my life.”

Like Kat, I expect that is true of most of us. Whilst on the outside we exude confidence, deep down we have a belief that we are simply not good enough...well as Kat says that is "so empty and so untrue" – let it go.....breathe a deep fresh breath and know you are good enough. Kat then reminds us:

"More damaging for one's personal growth was the second type of doubt: self-doubt, when you doubted your own abilities."

Kat realises that in the workplace she is falling back into her 'old ways', and with that a stark reminder that "Diversion is your test to see if you can surrender your whole being to becoming the master of your mind." And if you can **"You will be able to be in the active world and maintain your mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical health."**

To do this, "accept that sitting is more important than doing." This reminds me of Pascal's belief that: "All man's miseries derive from not being able to sit quietly in a room alone."

Wisdom

"Only one thing has to change for us to know happiness in our lives: where we focus our attention." Greg Anderson

Kat advises that:

"Taking time to reflect.....is of the utmost importance.....reflecting on one's experiences, both in meditation and in life, is what brings wisdom and judgement."

"Learn how to be more circumspect in life, just as you have learned from your own falls and follies."

"Curiosity is of utmost importance in a meditation practice, followed by courage and commitment to stay the course."

"Wisdom and understanding are the antidotes to delusion and ignorance. When you develop this level of understanding, you are able to tolerate, analyze, and adjust the views that inform your behaviour."

Eckhart Tolle wrote that "Doing is never enough if you neglect Being." And "Knowing yourself is to be rooted in Being, instead of lost in your mind." Kat builds on this with this powerful thought:

Kat has subsequently written "I learned that determination and grit are not enough, or were at least not enough for me. Without my wise companions and teachers, without learning how to meditate and therapy, I would not be here today and have whatever small amount of wisdom I possess. Now that I think about it, I applied determination and grit to finding another solution -- Being. Although, if you think about it. *So Doing* was required to find *Being*! This is indeed the human condition – that balance between Doing and Being.



About Colin Ude-Lewis.

Colin is the owner of [wisdomnote.com](http://www.wisdomnote.com) and author of Wisdom Notes.

An avid learner, he hopes that by these Wisdom Notes he can help spread some happiness to a much larger audience on their path of learning. And through the proceeds of Wisdom Notes is raising US\$ 1 Million for orphans. Subscribe at

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