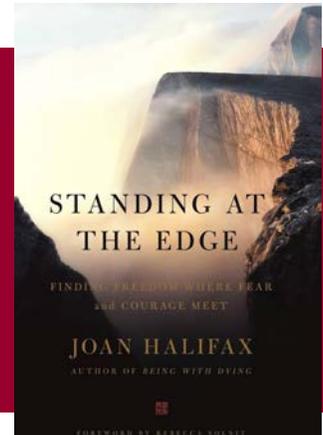


# Standing at the Edge: Finding Freedom Where Fear and Courage Meet

A book excerpt by Mobius Friend Roshi Joan Halifax



**“I love this book. *Standing at the Edge* places Roshi Joan alongside our greatest teachers and practitioners — Pema Chödrön, Thich Nhat Hanh, Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, and Dr. King. By exploring the big themes of altruism, empathy, integrity, respect, engagement, and compassion, she helps us take a stand in a bad time, and to stand there in the fullness of wisdom and compassion. Given our violent, inhuman world, this timely book will help us become more nonviolent and more human, to do our part for a more nonviolent world. What a gift!”**

**—Father John Dear**

## **A View from the Edge**

I have heard that things grow from their edges. For example, ecosystems expand from their borders, where they tend to host a greater diversity of life.

My cabin sits on the boundary between a wetland fed by deep winter snow and a thick spruce-fir forest that has not seen fire in a hundred years. Along this boundary is an abundance of life, including white-barked aspen, wild violet, and purple columbine, as well as the bold Steller’s jay, the boreal owl, ptarmigan, and wild turkey. The tall wetland grasses and sedges of summer shelter field mice, pack rats, and blind voles that are prey for raptors and bobcats. The grasses also feed the elk and deer who graze in the meadows at dawn and dusk. Juicy raspberries, tiny wild strawberries, and tasty purple whortleberries

cover the slopes holding our valley, and the bears and I binge shamelessly on their bounty come late July.

I have come to see that mental states are also ecosystems. These sometimes friendly and at times hazardous terrains are natural environments embedded in the greater system of our character. I believe it is important to study our inner ecology so that we can recognize when we are on the edge, in danger of slipping from health into pathology. And when we do fall into the less habitable regions of our minds, we can learn from these dangerous territories. Edges are places where opposites meet. Where fear meets courage and suffering meets freedom. Where solid ground ends in a cliff face. Where we can gain a view that takes in so much more of our world. And where we need to maintain great awareness, lest we trip and fall.

*Reprinted with permission from the author. Standing at the Edge: Finding Freedom Where Fear and Courage Meet. New York: Flatiron Books. Copyright 2018*

**STANDING AT THE EDGE:** *from the foreword by acclaimed journalist, historian, activist and contributing editor to Harper's magazine, Rebecca Solnit, on the importance of Mobius Friend Roshi Joan Halifax's latest book.*

We have undergone a revolution in our understanding of human nature in the past few decades. It has overthrown assumptions laid down in many fields that human beings are essentially selfish and our needs essentially private—for material goods, erotic joys, and family relationships. In disciplines as diverse as economics, sociology, neuroscience, and psychology, contemporary research reveals that human beings originate as compassionate creatures attuned to the needs and suffering of others.

Disaster sociologists have also documented and demonstrated that during sudden catastrophes such as earthquakes and hurricanes, ordinary human beings are brave, improvisationally adept, deeply altruistic, and often find joy and meaning in the rescue and rebuilding work they do as inspired, self-organized volunteers. Data also shows that it is hard to train soldiers to kill; many of them resist in subtle and overt ways or are deeply damaged by the experience. There is evidence from evolutionary biology, sociology, neuroscience, and many other fields that we need to abandon our old misanthropic (and misogynist) notions for a sweeping new view of human nature.

The case for this other sense of who we really are has been building and accumulating, and the implications are tremendous and tremendously encouraging. From this different set of assumptions about who we are or are capable of being, we can make more generous plans for ourselves and our societies,

and the earth. It is as though we have made a new map of human nature, or mapped parts of it known through lived experience and spiritual teachings but erased by Western ideas of human nature as callous, selfish, and uncooperative, and of survival as largely a matter of competition rather than collaboration. This emerging map is itself extraordinary. It lays the foundation to imagine ourselves and our possibilities in new and hopeful ways; and suggests that much of our venality and misery is instilled but not inherent or inevitable. But this map has been, for the most part, a preliminary sketch or an overview, not a traveler's guide, step by step.

In our best self, even on our best days, we run into obstacles, including empathic distress, moral injury, and a host of other psychic challenges that Joan Halifax charts so expertly in *Standing at the Edge*. She shows us that being good is not a beatific state but a complex project. This project encompasses the whole territory of our lives, including our fault lines and failures.

She has gone far and wide in these complex human landscapes and knows that they are more than lands of virtue shining in the distance. She has seen what many only point to from afar—the dangers, pitfalls, traps, and sloughs of despond, as well as the peaks and possibilities. And in this book she offers us a map of how to travel courageously and fruitfully, for our own benefit and the benefit of all beings.

— Rebecca Solnit, 2018



© Doug Silsbee

Our journey through life is one of peril and possibility—and sometimes both at once. How can we stand on the threshold between suffering and freedom and remain informed by both worlds? With our penchant for dualities, humans tend to identify either with the terrible truth of suffering or with freedom from suffering. But I believe that excluding any part of the larger landscape of our lives reduces the territory of our understanding.

Life has taken me into geographically, emotionally, and socially complex geographies. Organizing within the Civil Rights and Antiwar movements of the sixties, working in a big county hospital as a medical anthropologist, founding and leading two practice and educational communities, sitting at the bedsides of dying people, volunteering in a maximum-security prison, meditating for extended periods, collaborating with neuroscientists and social psychologists on compassion-based projects, and running health clinics in the remotest areas of the Himalayas—all have introduced me to complex challenges, including periods of overwhelm. The education I’ve gained through these experiences—especially through my struggles and failures—has given me a perspective I could never have anticipated. I have come to see the profound value of taking

in the whole landscape of life and not rejecting or denying what we are given. I have also learned that our waywardness, difficulties, and “crises” might not be terminal obstacles. They can actually be gateways to wider, richer internal and external landscapes. If we willingly investigate our difficulties, we can fold them into a view of reality that is more courageous, inclusive, emergent, and wise—as have many others who have fallen over the edge.

**Edge States**

Over the years, I slowly became aware of five internal and interpersonal qualities that are keys to a compassionate and courageous life, and without which we cannot serve, nor can we survive. Yet if these precious resources deteriorate, they can manifest as dangerous landscapes that cause harm. I call these bivalent qualities Edge States.

The Edge States are altruism, empathy, integrity, respect, and engagement. They are assets of a mind and heart that exemplify caring, connection, virtue, and strength. Yet we can also lose our firm footing on the high edge of any of these qualities and slide into a mire of suffering where we find ourselves caught in the toxic and chaotic waters of the harmful aspects of an Edge State.

**Exploring and working with Edge States**

EDGE STATE	Example at the high edge	Example of falling over the edge	Example of supporting practice explored in the book
ALTRUISM	Forgetting the self	Help that harms	Bearing witness
EMPATHY	Somatic empathy	Emotional blindness	Deep listening
INTEGRITY	Moral nerve	Moral outrage	Expanding the circle of inquiry
RESPECT	Washing others’ feet	Displaying power over	Five gatekeepers of speech*
ENGAGEMENT	Involvement	Addicted to busyness	Practicing Right Livelihood

\*Five gatekeepers of speech: 1) Is it true? 2) Is it kind? 3) Is it beneficial? 4) Is it necessary? 5) Is it the right time?

- **Altruism** can turn into pathological altruism. Selfless actions in service to others are essential to the well-being of society and the natural world. But sometimes, our seemingly altruistic acts harm us, harm those whom we are trying to serve, or harm the institutions we serve in.
- **Empathy** can slide into empathic distress. When we are able to sense into the suffering of another person, empathy brings us closer to one another, can inspire us to serve, and expands our understanding of the world. But if we take on too much of the suffering of another, and identify too intensely with it, we may become damaged and unable to act.
- **Integrity** points to having strong moral principles. But when we engage in or witness acts that violate our sense of integrity, justice, or beneficence, moral suffering can be the outcome.
- **Respect** is a way we hold beings and things in high regard. Respect can disappear into the swamp of toxic disrespect, when we go against the grain of values and principles of civility, and disparage others or ourselves.
- **Engagement** in our work can give a sense of purpose and meaning to our lives, particularly if our work serves others. But overwork, a poisonous workplace, and the experience of the lack of efficacy can lead to burnout, which can cause physical and psychological collapse.

Like a doctor who diagnoses an illness before recommending a treatment, I felt compelled to explore the destructive side of these five virtuous human qualities. Along the way, I was surprised to learn that even in their degraded forms, Edge States can teach and strengthen us, just as bone and muscle are strengthened when exposed to stress, or if broken or torn, can heal in the right circumstances and become stronger for having been injured.

In other words, losing our footing and sliding down the slope of harm need not be a terminal catastrophe. There is humility, perspective, and wisdom that can be gained from our greatest difficulties. In her book *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970), Iris Murdoch defined

humility as a “selfless respect for reality.” She writes that “our picture of ourselves has become too grand.” This I discovered from sitting at the bedsides of dying people and being with caregivers. Doing this close work with those who were dying and those who were giving care showed me how serious the costs of suffering can be for patient as well as caregiver. Since that time, I have learned from teachers, lawyers, CEOs, human rights workers, and parents that they can experience the same. I was then reminded of something profoundly important and yet completely obvious: that the way out of the storm and mud of suffering, the way back to freedom on the high edge of strength and courage, is through the power of compassion. This is why I took a deep dive into trying to understand what Edge States are and how they can shape our lives and the life of the world.

### **No Mud, No Lotus**

Thinking about the destructive side of the Edge States, I recall the work of Kazimierz Dabrowski, the Polish psychiatrist and psychologist who proposed a theory of personality development called positive disintegration. This is a transformational approach to psychological growth based on the idea that crises are important for our personal maturation. Dabrowski’s concept is similar to a tenet of systems theory: living systems that break down can reorganize at a higher and more robust level—if they learn from the breakdown experience.

Working as an anthropologist in Mali and Mexico, I also observed positive disintegration as a core dynamic in “rites of passage.” These are ceremonies of initiation that mark important life transitions, and are intended to deepen and strengthen the process of maturation.

Years later, I was to hear the Vietnamese teacher Thích Nhất Hạnh—or Thây (as his students call him)—echo this wisdom as he spoke of the suffering he experienced while being in the midst of the war in Vietnam and then later on as a refugee. Quietly he would say: “No mud, no lotus.”

Reflecting on the difficulties we can experience in serving others, from pathological altruism to burnout, the toxic side of Edge States can be viewed from the perspective of positive disintegration. The rotting mud at the bottom of an ancient pond is also food

for the lotus. Dabrowski and Thây remind us that our suffering can feed our understanding and be one of the great resources of our wisdom and compassion.

I once read about a geologist whose special area of research was the study of beaches. He was being interviewed during a massive hurricane that was slamming into the Outer Banks of North Carolina. The geologist told the journalist, “You know, I’m excited to get out to that beach as quickly as I can.”

After a pause, the journalist asked, “What do you expect to see out there?” Reading this, my attention sharpened. I expected the geologist to describe a scene of total destruction. But he simply said, “There will probably be a new beach.”

A new beach, a new coastline: gifts of the storm. Here at the edge, there is the possibility of destruction, suffering—and boundless promise.

\*\*\*

### Interdependence

Many influences have shaped my way of seeing the world and have contributed to my perspective on the Edge States. During the sixties, I was young and idealistic; it was a difficult and exciting time for many of us. We were outraged by the systemic oppression in our society—racism, sexism, classism, ageism. We could see how this oppression fed the violence of war,

economic marginalization, and consumerism, as well as the destruction of the environment.

We wanted to change the world. And we wanted a way to work with our good aspirations—to not lose them, nor get lost in them. In this atmosphere of social and political conflict, I began reading books about Buddhism and teaching myself to meditate. I met the young Vietnamese Zen master Thích Nhất Hạnh in the midsixties, and through his example, I was drawn to Buddhism because it directly addresses the causes of individual and social suffering, and because its core teaching says that transforming anguish is the path to freedom and the well-being of our world. I also liked that the Buddha emphasized inquiry, curiosity, and investigation as tools of the path and that he did not recommend we avoid, deny, or valorize suffering.

The Buddhist concept of *interdependent co-arising* also gave me a new way of viewing the world: seeing the intricate connections between seemingly separate things. As the Buddha explained this concept, “This is, because that is. This is not, because that is not. This comes to be, because that comes to be. This ceases to be, because that ceases to be.” Looking into a bowl of rice, I can see sunshine and rain and farmers and trucks driving on roads.

In a sense, a bowl of rice is a system. Soon after I started studying Buddhism, I began exploring systems

**“Whether compassion is rooted deep in our biology or springs from our conscience; Whether it is instinctual, intentional, or socially prescribed, we know from scientific research that compassion enhances the welfare of those who receive compassion and also benefits those who are compassionate. It even benefits those who simply observe an act of compassion. Compassion is one of those experiences that deeply affects the human heart, whether we give it, receive it, or observe it.”**

theory, which is a way of seeing the world as a collection of interrelated systems. Each system has a purpose; for example, a human body is a system whose purpose (on the most basic level) is to stay alive. All parts of the system must be present for it to function optimally—without a working heart or brain or lungs, we’ll die. The order in which parts are arranged matters; you can’t mix up where the organs are.

Systems range from micro to macro, from simple to complex. There are biological systems (the circulatory system), mechanical systems (a bicycle), ecosystems (a coral reef), social systems (friendships, families, societies), institutional systems (workplaces, religious organizations, governments), astronomical systems (our solar system), and more. Complex systems are typically composed of numerous subsystems. Systems peak, move toward decline, and finally collapse, leaving room for alternative systems to emerge.

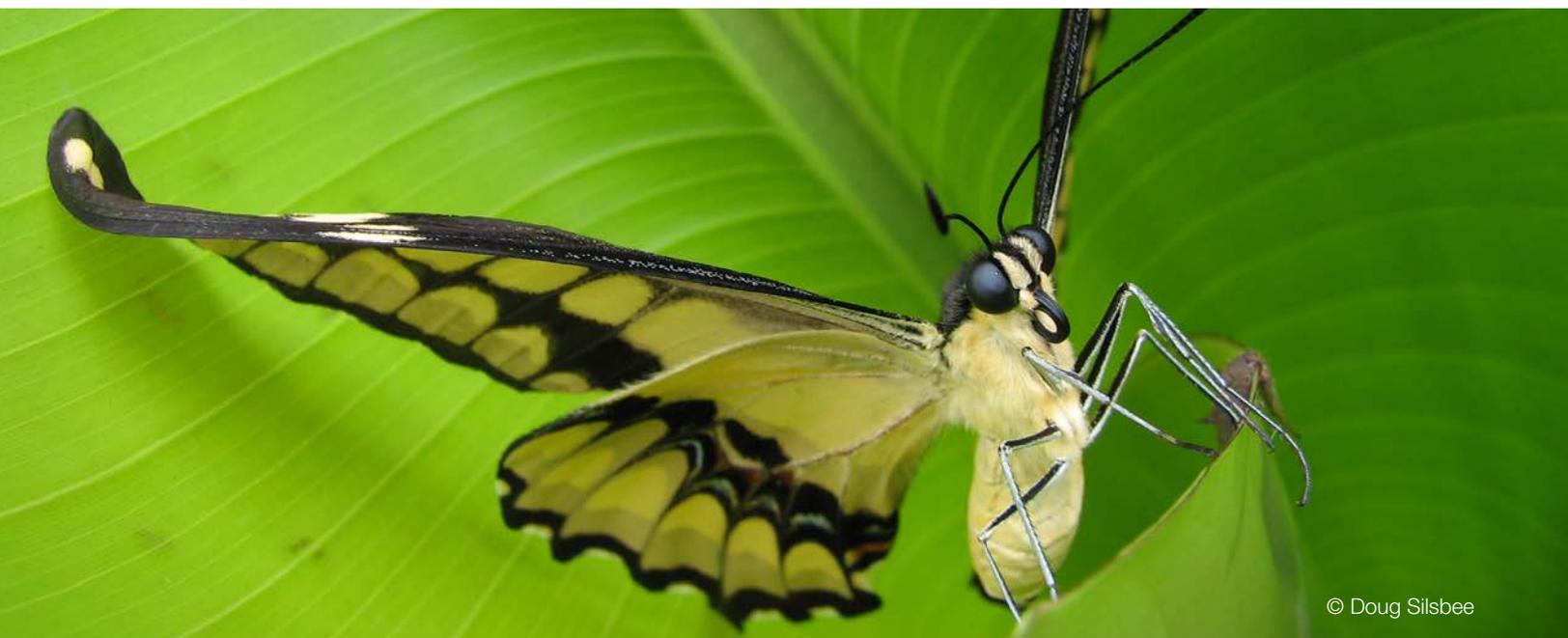
I mention this because, together, the Edge States are an interdependent system, influencing each other and forming our character. And systems are the ground in which Edge States develop—interpersonal relationships, the workplace, institutions, society, and our own bodies and minds. As systems decline, so also can we encounter ruin. Yet often, from collapse, a new and more robust perspective on reality can emerge. ■



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mobius Friend Roshi Joan Halifax, PhD, is a Buddhist teacher, Zen priest, anthropologist, and pioneer in the field of end-of-life care. She is Founder, Abbot, and Head Teacher of Upaya Institute and Zen Center in Santa

Fe, New Mexico. She received her PhD. in medical anthropology in 1973 and has lectured on the subject of death and dying at many academic institutions and medical centers around the world. She received a National Science Foundation Fellowship in Visual Anthropology, was an Honorary Research Fellow in Medical Ethnobotany at Harvard University, and was a Distinguished Visiting Scholar at the Library of Congress. Her books include: *The Human Encounter with Death* (with Stanislav Grof); *The Fruitful Darkness, A Journey Through Buddhist Practice*; *Simplicity in the Complex: A Buddhist Life in America*; *Being with Dying: Cultivating Compassion and Wisdom in the Presence of Death*.



© Doug Silsbee