

ROBERT J. WICKS

Study & Discussion Guide

riding
the
dragon

10 lessons for
inner strength
in
challenging
times

"compassionate and wise"—Jack Kornfield

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Riding the Dragon:

10 Lessons for Inner Strength in Challenging Times

Robert J. Wicks

Preparation

- 1) Choose a leader for each of the chapters. The leader's responsibility will go beyond leading the discussion on his or her assigned chapter. In advance, they should review the suggested questions and be prepared to raise other questions, especially relevant to the group. They might find it helpful to read other sources that compliment the chapter under discussion.

The leader's primary task: keep the discussion on track.

- 2) You may choose to have everyone read the entire book in advance, or just the chapter planned for discussion.

For each chapter, everyone, as they read, should prepare for the discussion not only by reviewing the suggested questions, but also by making a short list of questions that occur to them.

- 3) However you approach the questions, don't feel that you have to use all of them. There are no "correct" answers. Address those questions that are most challenging to the group. Forget the rest.

If you are reading this book outside of a group setting, consider keeping a journal of your thoughts using these questions as a guide.

Good Reading!

Questions for Discussion

Introduction

- 1) Much of this book focuses on ways to engage the dark times in our lives. The author begins by sharing a time when he felt “I might never return to a place of perspective and peace.” When have you felt this way in your life? When and why have you “hit bottom without realizing how you got there?”
- 2) The author uses the metaphor of a basement or cellar to describe his experience of spiritual darkness. If you could name your own dark experience as a physical place, how would you describe it? What is its appearance, taste, sound, touch, and smell?
- 3) The despair that challenged the author seemed to be connected not to external failure, but to “the hurt I had caused people close to me.” What feelings tend to assail you in your dark times? How do you grasp the “handle of hope” in response?
- 4) Tibetan teacher Chogyam Trungpa warns spiritual seekers: a true spiritual path is arduous and demanding. And yet, it is also “quite simple and powerful,” as the author suggests, “to spend a little time each day reflecting on our lives.” How do you

experience the spiritual path as arduous? As refreshing and life giving?

- 5) What is the difference, in your life and in the world around you, between “ordinary unhappiness” and “riding the dragon”?
- 6) What characteristics of our culture and society make it difficult to “ride the dragon,” and what tempts us into “ordinary unhappiness?” What can we claim from our culture that will help us?

Enhancing Your Use of the Lessons

- 1) Which one of the seven techniques listed would you like to try? Or, perhaps focus on one for each day of the week, for one week, and share the results with others.
- 2) The final comment suggests that you “drop” the lessons that interfere with rather than strengthen your daily life. What techniques would you “drop”? What technique(s) should you work on?

Lesson One:

Prune Carefully . . . and Often!

- 1) “One of the greatest gifts we can give . . . is a sense of our own peace.” When have you been in the presence of someone who simply communicated peace? What is it about the person that allowed them to emanate peace?
- 2) When have you consciously “pruned” away activities in your life? What prompted you to take out the pruning shears? Was the process painful?

What, eventually, were the blossoms that burst forth?

- 3) The author suggests we ask ourselves, "When does the cost of approval become too psychologically and spiritually expensive?" What other realities are becoming too expensive for you?
- 4) Where in your life today do you feel called to prune away? What makes it difficult for you to do so?
- 5) The author states, "I don't believe most people are self-centered today." And yet Freud mentions the "ordinary unhappiness" that most people live with. How do you respond to these seemingly contrasting views?

Lesson Two:

Recognize Your Renewal Zones

- 1) As the author describes different experiences of burnout and stress, what memories arise in your consciousness? How have you come through such times?
- 2) In the words of the author's friend who was dying of cancer, "What good things are you doing now?" What "good things," forms of renewal, have you always wanted to try? Is there something you could take time to do this week, and share the experience with the group?
- 3) Do you feel that you prioritize enough time for renewal? If not, what obstacles or resistance keep you from making enough time? Could you experience renewal as both a gift from God and a

gift to others for whom you want to be available and healthy?

- 4) St. Augustine said that the glory of God is the human person fully alive. When have you felt fully and freely alive?

Lesson Three: Catch the Slide

- 1) Reviewing the day is a spiritual practice that spans traditions—the examination of conscience in the Christian tradition, the countertransference review of psychotherapy, the discipline of Eastern meditation, journal keeping, or talking quietly with a friend or spouse. What practice do you use?
- 2) If you do not practice a time of reflection at the end of each day, try it, for just ten minutes, each day for a week. What difference does it make?
- 3) With whom do you share your spiritual journey?
- 4) When you fail to step back from yourself periodically, who or what is the “hidden puppeteer” that tends to take control of your life? What are the “hidden puppeteers” that seize control of our societal and global relationships?

Lesson Four: Seek Hidden Possibilities

- 1) “The kind words and gestures of another are like buried treasure” to which we can turn when we need encouragement. What “treasures” of kind

words or gestures do you remember most? What gestures of yours have meant the most to other people in your life who have suffered?

- 2) "The more we are involved in life, the more we can expect failure." Is this a depressing or an encouraging statement? How have your spiritual mentors "failed"?
- 3) Have you been formed as a worrier? What are your patterns on the "worry treadmill?"
- 4) Why do you think that possibilities of life and growth are to be found hidden within suffering? Is the opposite also true? Why or why not?

Lesson Five:

Engage the Spiritual Darkness

- 1) This chapter is full of quite blunt statements. Consider the following: "Spiritual darkness is an unsolvable, permanent, and unwanted reality." "Life is filled with joys and chronically unsolvable problems." "We must either surrender in trust or remain lost forever." What are your reactions to these statements? Did other statements strike you in particular ways?
- 2) Our culture so easily leads us into doing, fixing, controlling. How have you learned the value of "letting go" in times of darkness?
- 3) When have you reached an impasse of darkness in your life? What has happened since then?
- 4) Who are some figures that come to mind, from movies, history, or literature, that have engaged spiritual darkness with trust and courage?

- 5) What is “the meal you are being served now?” What about the meal that the global family is being served? Where are we called to be grateful and to trust?

Lesson Six: Pair Clarity and Kindness

- 1) How do you balance self-love and self-criticism? Do you err more toward clarity or toward kindness? Why? How do you balance the two in your relationships with others?
- 2) How have the great spiritual teachers—Jesus, the Buddha, and others—treated themselves and others with both clarity and kindness?
- 3) What quotes, stories, or suggestions touch you most deeply in this chapter, as you seek the balance of kind but rigorous honesty?
- 4) If it is true that “the most exhausting thing in life . . . is to be insincere,” then why, do you think, is it such a struggle to be truthful?

Lesson Seven:

Find Love on Small Deeds

- 1) Cindy describes how her mother’s simple gesture made her realize, deeply, that God loved her. What is a touchstone event in your life, in which God’s love became “real?”
- 2) Many people struggle with belief in an all-powerful God who seems to willfully let evil happen. What does it mean to you that “God is vulnerable?” How do you understand God’s humility in the light of

other affirmations such as “God is all-powerful”? Have you ever felt God revealing vulnerability to you in prayer, through another person, or life experience?

- 3) The author suggests that “being grateful . . . would change our behavior.” How has gratitude for a simple gift opened you to greater wonder and thanksgiving? How have you missed opportunities for gratitude and giving? What about our whole nation—what are our national gritudes and blind spots?

Lesson Eight:

Seek Perspective Daily

- 1) Our culture values spontaneity. But this chapter indicates that it is important to consciously avoid getting pulled about by emotional reactions. How do you react to the statement that “caring means being willing to keep enough distance”?
- 2) How do you understand the author’s suggestion that “the more we use our reactions to learn how we are giving away power, the more vital we will become”?
- 3) What are your “red flags”? How can you use them as a learning paradigm?
- 4) What are the communal “red flags” that reveal signs of stress in your family, religious community, workplace, and in our society and world? How might you and others respond to them?

Lesson Nine:
Build a Barrier of Simplicity

- 1) How do the ideas and descriptions of asceticism differ from other ways you might have learned about this “sometimes harsh” word? What opportunities to practice asceticism arise daily in your life?
- 2) The Chinese hermit Deh Chun embodied simplicity and peace for one young man. Who are your models of simplicity?
- 3) “In becoming freer we don’t obtain something, we drop it.” Compare this statement to differing ideas about the meaning of “freedom.” What are the concepts, attitudes, or practices that you are invited to drop?
- 4) How is “persistent radical honesty” a challenge? When it is a source of joy?

Lesson Ten:
Come Home Often

- 1) “When you are fooled by yourself, it is fatal. No more medicine.” Many spiritual writers indicate that the practice of meditation and reflection is a matter of life and death. Do you experience this to be true? How so?
- 2) Why are our resistances to meditation so persistent? What has been your experience of resistance? How do you respond to it? What are some built-in times each day you might use for meditation?

- 3) Most people come to the practice of meditation as adults. How might we foster the practice among our children? In families? Schools?
- 4) The author speaks of both deep loneliness and great unity in a meditative life. When have you felt deep loneliness? Has your desert ever blossomed, surprisingly, in a unitive experience? How so?

Epilogue:

Be a Dangerous Listener

- 1) Many of us are concerned about security, but the author keeps describing the spiritual life as “dangerous” and insecure. When have you experienced the danger of spiritual path? Is there security as well?
- 2) The author has shared numerous stories, anecdotes, and quotes throughout this book. Which ones remain most firmly in your memory? Why?
- 3) The author mentions numerous books, spiritual masters, and spiritual traditions that have shaped his life. What people, books, traditions have been your Teachers?
- 4) What criticisms would you raise of this book? Are there ideas or points you feel are missing? What unanswered questions did it provoke?
- 5) What single lesson will you carry away most clearly after reading and discussing this book?