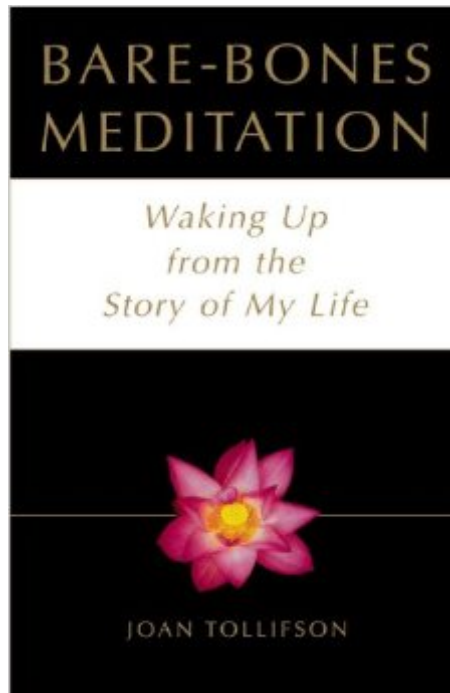


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Bare-Bones Meditation: Waking Up From The Story Of My Life



Synopsis

Born with only one hand, Joan Tollifson grows up feeling different. She comes out as a lesbian in the tumultuous 1960's, sinks into alcoholism and drug abuse, sobers up in 1973, becomes a political activist, embraces Zen Buddhism and then a very bare-bones spirituality that has no fixed form or tradition, and spends a number of years living and working at a rural meditation retreat center. Bare-Bones Meditation reveals the inner process of the mind in a new way, and Tollifson's account is beautifully written--intense and from the heart.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Yes, I know that line is taken, but its how I felt several times while reading this book. Joan Tollifson's birth defect seems to have spun her off a downward path from which she turned away only after a great deal of suffering and no small amount of effort. Part of what she did to herself was to become a habitual in-your-face type of person and a compulsive joiner. These are qualities that by one-third of the way through the book I found made Joan a bit hard to take. Once she manages to shake loose of her drinking problem and to move out of the orbit of groups which focused on her identity as that of one sort of victim or another I had a brief feeling that this was turning into a soft, warm, fuzzies type of book. No such luck, Joan continues to be a compulsive joiner - only this time she's a guru-chaser, one after the other, after the other and back again. There were times if she'd been in the room with me I would have given her a good shaking and probably screamed, "Stick with something, you ninny! Just stick with something for once." It was at those moments that I most

realized exactly how much this woman and I were alike. And her frenetic flitting from one "enlightenment" thing to another was embarrassingly familiar. So, I end up with a one-handed, lesbian, guru-chaser as a mirror. Could be worse. I think, for me, this was lesson enough. By the end of the book I didn't have the idea that Joan Tollifson was ready to hand down any secret doctrine. In fact, that may just put this book leagues ahead of those that attempt to do so.

This book is a very intimate look at the author's process. Here she is, suffering like the rest of us, living on an emotional roller coaster, compelled by habitual behaviours, confused, and at the same time engaged in her practice. She struggles. She learns not to struggle. Then she struggles again. Layers of confusion, resistance, and suffering drop away. At times reading this book was painful. I can see so many aspects of the author in myself. Almost everyone who is engaged in meditation practice should read this book. It is a very personal account, but at the same time it really is about all of us.

Joan Tollifson writes with such directness she causes us to see. Taking us through the muddy waters of her early life--born without a hand, rejected and rebellious, she takes us through her coming out as a lesbian, her fierce love affairs and battles with alcohol and drugs, with being a victim. And yet the book is not about any of this. It could be any life struggle; the essence is seeing it clearly. And through the aid of several meditation leaders she finds her own ability to see and know. Her writing is a cup of tea thrown against our face. When we recover our breath it is easy and full, relaxed with her. Our vision penetrates to the bottom of the pool. At a time when "meditation" books are overflowing the market, this is one you'll want to take into your life.-Larry Smit

One of the best books I have read in a long time and the timing was perfect. The author's life story is powerful and she demonstrates in her writing the constant struggle of letting go of attachments, expectations and judgments. It was a relief to me to hear in her writing an honest depiction of how someone else thinks and contradicts themselves almost within the same moment. My meditation practice and the impact meditation has on my daily life has improved because of this book. sgw

This book is written by a remarkable woman who is handicap, a recovered addict and a lesbian. Already you are into this or turned off. The interesting thing is that the author's "handicaps" are not the important aspect of this book at all. As a reader, one forgets all about Joan as a person because it is so easy to identify one's self with her. Through her journal like writing, the reader gets to

experience her awakenings with her and it is a great experience. I would recommend it to anyone.

As the most visible practices of religion in this country now seem to come from cranks and their crankiness, Joan Tollifson offers a wild ride from crankiness into contemplation. What a relief! She is a disabled lesbian who internalizes her marginalization into something far more painful and crippling than meets the eye. (I very briefly washed dishes next to her, without knowing she was a lesbian and very impressed with her dexterity, which over-matched my two-armed pot scrubbing.) In this book she moves in and out of this despair with the practices of clearness, simplicity, humaneness and directness than Toni Packer has so stunningly written about. It is moving and fascinating to share so intimately in this very human chronicle.

What inspires me about Tollifson is her self-aware honesty. In these memoirs, whatever her thoughts and feelings, she is clear about them, and she doesn't hide them. Born with only one hand, she already feels different before she discovers her lesbianism. She goes through alcoholism and drug addiction, becomes a political and disability-rights activist, embraces Zen Buddhism and Advaita, and finally lets those go, leaving a bare-bones spirituality which has no form. As a woman I particularly appreciate Tollifson's struggles with authority as she works through the impulse to reach for a book or a teacher or a lover when uncertain, and instead learns to be still and listen inwardly.

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