

## *Praise for I Am That I Am*

I gave this review of Francis Dale Bennett's book *I Am that I Am: Discovering the love, peace, joy and stability of the True Self* without being solicited to give a review. I think it is a marvelously simple but radical book. Anyone can read this and feel into the direct experience of what he is saying, whether one is a long term spiritual seeker, someone raised in a Christian church, or someone right off the street who has never looked into these things. There is a flow of simplicity and clarity in the pages that made it very readable. I didn't have to stop and ask myself what he meant by certain words. I could see he was using words very lightly, inviting the reader into an always, already present freedom, peeling apart many of the self-beliefs and beliefs about reality that keep so many people spinning their wheels in this lifetime.

Francis' background as a Catholic Monk makes this book even more delicious to me. He has the ability to speak to those in the Christian Church in a way that is fresh and transforming.

Do read this book if you are seeking. It keeps it simple, yet utterly profound.

Scott Kiloby

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# I Am That I Am

Discovering the Love, Peace, Joy and Stability  
of the True Self

FRANCIS DALE BENNETT

NON-DUALITY PRESS

This book is dedicated to my brother, Don, who has taught me much about the power of unconditional Love, and to Eric Kolvig, who encouraged me to share what I've experienced.

I AM THAT I AM

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# CONTENTS

God is in Everything and Everything is in God.....	1
1. Shift: Paying Attention to What Is Already Here.....	24
2. The Search for Happiness.....	35
3. Discovering Who We Always Were.....	48
4. <i>Now I Am</i> .....	65
5. Living the Awakened Life.....	77
6. Spiritual Practices .....	95
7. But How Do I Just Become ‘More Aware’?.....	110
8. Think About What You Think About.....	122
9. The Way of the Cross .....	133
10. The Purest Teaching is Silence .....	139

The whole truth can be summed up in one verse from  
the Jewish/Christian scriptures, "I am that I am".  
And the entire method for realizing this truth is found  
in another of those scriptures,  
"Be still and know that I am God."

*Sri Ramana Maharshi*

## GOD IS IN EVERYTHING AND EVERYTHING IS IN GOD

**T**his book is about the greatest, most important discovery ever made. It is about the discovery of the key to happiness and fulfillment. I myself have made this discovery and was overjoyed to do so, but the key to happiness is not a *new* discovery and I am most certainly not the first to have made it, nor will I be the last. Down through the ages many people from every culture, religion and historical setting have made this same, wondrous discovery and, unlike most discoveries in science, mathematics or other fields of knowledge, each one of us has to discover this for ourselves. No one else can do it for you. Hearing about someone else's journey may assist you in making your own, but the only way for you is the path you walk yourself. There is something ironic about discovering this key to happiness: even though we may spend a lifetime looking for it everywhere we can think of, it has always been within us all along. That's precisely why we each must discover this for ourselves.

So let's dispense with all this suspense. About now, you may find yourself asking: *So what is this key to happiness and fulfillment?* Well, the key to happiness and fulfillment is contained in the realization of the following simple truth:

Who you really are, on the most basic level, in your own direct experience, is simple present-moment *awareness*. And the essential true nature of this *awareness* is itself happiness, peace and pure bliss.

So, when I discover who I really am, I immediately discover that I am blissfully happy, because who I am is happiness and bliss. These may seem like pretty big opening claims. But don't take my word for any of this. You can experiment with this on your own and discover for yourself whether or not these claims are true. This little book may be able to assist you in conducting just such an experiment in your own life. That is certainly my hope in writing it.

### **The 'story of Francis'**

I would like to begin by sharing with you a little of the journey that led me to my own discovery. Hopefully, my story will help you along the path to yours. Since I made the discovery that who I really am is present-moment *awareness*, I don't really think too much about my so-called 'personal' history anymore. Recently, I had to put together a résumé so I had to think about where I had been, what I had done, where I went to school, what professional training I had completed. After I finished the résumé and was reading it over to check for possible formatting and spelling errors, it felt like reading a description of somebody else's life or like looking at a kind of simplified, thumbnail sketch of a character in the Cliffs Notes of a novel. So I am about to tell the 'story of Francis'. Of course, none of us are our stories in any absolute sense. Our story is an account of the role we have played on the human stage we call life. However, an interesting character in a story can sometimes point to something beyond the

story. All stories we hear in plays, on the screen or in children's books, have something to tell us indirectly. They act as simple pointers. Every story has a moral. We need to look at that to which the story points and not focus too terribly much on the story itself.

I share with you this 'story of Francis' because it may help you, the reader, if I set the scene for the book as a whole. But I share it with the caveat that you do not focus too much on the story itself but simply let it point as it was meant to.

When awakening happens, what we awaken from is an absolute belief in the story. Contrary to popular belief, the story does continue after awakening. The difference is that we then see it for what it is: a simple story. We no longer take it to be reality.

When I was an idealistic young man, a personal quest to experience a greater sense of what I thought of as the *presence of God* led me to the somewhat radical decision to become a Trappist monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani, just a week after my twenty-third birthday.

How did an ordinary, rather sociable, young man come to make this life-changing decision? The seeds were sown when I was a senior in high school. I had been writing religious poetry and songs. My favorite high school English teacher had read some of my poetry and said it reminded him of the work of Thomas Merton, who had been a Trappist monk at a monastery in Kentucky called Gethsemani. The teacher gave me a book by Merton called *The Seven Storey Mountain*. It was an autobiography which told of his spiritual conversion after a life of wild living and partying during his college years in New York City and his subsequent entrance into this Trappist monastery. Merton's life had



been pretty different from the somewhat sheltered one I had led up to that point, but he was an intellectual, literary type and I was thinking of myself as a budding intellectual at the time and admired his writing and academic background. I was also fascinated by his descriptions of the monastic life and how the monks lived in silence, dedicating their whole lives to seeking a mystical experience of God's presence. Hearing about all this both fascinated and terrified me at the same time. I was a very social and talkative young man who had many friends and was very involved in a lot of activities, hobbies, music and fun. Even though I was spiritually intense and earnest in my quest to experience the *presence of God* more deeply in my life, the idea of becoming a silent Trappist monk with a shaved head—I had long blond hair that I was very proud of—seemed a little extreme, even for me.

But after high school, while I was attending a college seminary, I began visiting the Abbey of Gethsemani, where Merton had lived and written so many of the books I was now so avidly reading. During many weekends, I would drive down to the monastery in Kentucky from Columbus Ohio. It took me about four hours. I became a regular at the Abbey guest-house and during the course of several years, I got to know a few of the monks and the vocational director, Brother Giles. They had all known Merton personally and had interesting, humorous stories about him that fascinated me. Merton had become my spiritual hero. By the time I was twenty-two, I had read all of his books and felt an overwhelming attraction to the idea of becoming a Trappist monk myself. After having gotten to know a few of the monks pretty well over several years of visiting the monastery, the prospect of

entering the Abbey of Gethsemani was a lot less scary and intimidating. So, in the fall of 1981, I entered the Abbey with the lofty goal of becoming a joyful saint like Saint Francis of Assisi or at least a modern mystic like my hero, Thomas Merton. It was a very idealistic, romantic notion, but I think I was experiencing a genuine earnestness and authentic longing for God that I hoped would be answered by entering the monastery.

### **Thomas Merton, Zen and the *presence of God***

As I had become more familiar with the whole body of writings that Thomas Merton had produced during his twenty-five or so years as a Trappist monk, I was exposed to his long-standing interest in Eastern spirituality and mysticism. Merton had deeply investigated Zen Buddhism, Hindu Advaita Vedanta and Sufism, the mystical branch of the Islamic tradition. The last portion of writings that Merton produced in the decade before his death were often focused on these various spiritual paths, and his interest in them had left a marked effect on Gethsemani that was still evident in my time there, thirteen years after Thomas Merton's death

When I was a young professed monk at Gethsemani in first, temporary vows, we had a Korean Zen Master coming to the monastery occasionally and giving Zen *sesshins* to any of the monks who were interested in coming. I attended all these little retreats of Soen Sa Nim, the founder of the Providence Zen Center. He had a group of students at the time in nearby Lexington, Kentucky, and so, whenever he came to Kentucky to visit his students there, he would come over to us Trappists and offer us a little retreat and teach us about Zen meditation. I also began corresponding with

this Zen Master and tried to see if maybe I could get enlightened like the Zen Buddhist monks I had read about in Merton's book, *Mystics and Zen Masters*.

Several times, when I was practicing Zen and working with this teacher, I had little inspirational glimpses or what the teacher called *satori*, when I suddenly found myself wholly in the present moment. I specifically remember the first one, as I was walking down the stark cloister hallway at Gethsemani just after a Zen retreat with Soen Sa Nim. I wrote the following little poem about this *satori*.

### I am That

*Simply, the Sun is beaming in, slanting through the  
long, clear, narrow windows, as the dust particles  
dance in the bright, white sunbeams and all there  
is, in this beautiful, clear light is, THAT.*

It was a first, fleeting but wonderful moment of simply being fully, consciously present. These little realizations of *presence* happened many times during my Zen period and I began to make a connection between the experience of present-moment *awareness* and the experience of what I called the *presence of God*—the fleeting glimpses I had had as a young boy and teenager. They seemed to be essentially the same experience, just called by different names. I experienced in both, the same sense of transcendent love and joy and ecstatic awareness, the same sense of *presence*. There was in both experiences a literal *ex-stacy*: a standing out of, or freedom from, the habitual sense of a little 'me'. I had wonderful glimpses that, while experiencing the *presence of God*, or the present-moment *awareness*, there really was no possibility of a petty little person

called 'me', with a personal history, a name or role or definable identity. All there was, was *this*. And what *this* was, was the presence of the holy mystery we named God.

After I left the Trappists in 1987 I went back to school, worked, took care of my dad for a time (he had been diagnosed with cancer twice and eventually died of it in 1999). But between 1993 and 1998 I was back with the Trappists several times, this time at a smaller daughter house of Gethsemani in South Carolina.

During those years I became very involved in Vipassana meditation practice and came to meet my friend and teacher, Eric Kolvig. Eric trained at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, under the American Vipassana teachers, Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg. In my day-to-day life in the monastery, I was doing a lot of very simple mindfulness practices, based on the Vipassana techniques. When I had questions or concerns about my practice, I would contact Eric and he would always offer wise advice and assistance. Though I never sat an actual retreat with Eric, he was a mentor and guide for me during those years and I am grateful for the warm spiritual friendship we formed then, and have sustained to this day.

In 1998, I left the Trappist monastery in South Carolina and returned to Columbus, Ohio, to take care of my dad. During that time I met Bhante Henepola Gunaratana, who became my teacher and spiritual friend. 'Bhante G' is a Theravadin Buddhist monk, the oldest living Theravadin elder or *Mahathera*, in North America. He is a very kind, humble, wise and compassionate teacher and was another guide whom I was very fortunate to have met. When my father died in 1999, I

went to live for a year with Bhante G at his little forest monastery and retreat center in nearby West Virginia. During that year I received a temporary ordination in his Theravadin monastic lineage and helped him with some of the administrative duties at his center.

During this period of intense Vipassana practice there was a more frequent and sustained *awareness* of being in the present moment and a calmness, clarity and ability to focus developed more fully. And yet, there was still often a sense of suffering and unsatisfactoriness that would arise. Also, the present moment, or ‘holy presence’, was still playing hide and seek with me most of the time. It seemed that, no matter what I did in the way of practice and no matter how intensely I did it, I was present, then not present, present again and not present again. I frequently had an experience of *presence*, but it was doing a constant appearance and disappearance act. What could I do, what inner work could I undertake, to sustain this experience of *presence*?

Another insight that seemed to arise at this period was the realization that all the stories I continually told myself about everything—stories about myself, God, others, what happened, what didn’t happen—were just that: a bunch of stories in my head. I began to see that when I could let the stories go what remained was simply this present moment, right here and now.

All the insights and calmness that had developed over the years were helpful in terms of navigating the inevitable ups and downs of life more smoothly. I had definitely found a certain relative happiness and peace. But I still felt that something indefinable, that I couldn’t quite put my finger on, was missing somehow.

In 2000, after the year studying with Bhante G

and the temporary Theravadin ordination, my elderly mother began experiencing a lot of pretty serious health concerns and so I returned to Columbus to take care of her for the next seven years, until her death at age ninety-one. During those years of taking care of my mom, I completed a two year residency in Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) and worked as a hospital and hospice chaplain. I loved this work and learned so much from the people with whom I was privileged to walk through their experience of terminal illness. I would consider several of them to be real spiritual teachers for me as much as any Zen Master or meditation teacher with whom I had ever worked.

### **My Zen Master, Mary**

Through my years of seeking I worked with several very fine and articulate teachers from whom I learned a great deal of 'spiritual' truth. One of my principal teachers, however, was not a formal spiritual teacher at all. And yet, I would have to say that I learned as much from her as I ever did from any of the classical spiritual masters I was privileged to meet over the years.

I met Mary when I was working as a hospice chaplain. She was originally the patient of another chaplain with whom she had not exactly hit it off. Mary had not felt particularly comfortable with this chaplain, nor was the chaplain particularly comfortable with Mary either! And so the other chaplain had asked me if I would be willing to visit her, just to see if the two of us might be able to establish a better rapport. However, she made this request coupled with a warning. She told me that Mary was a forty-three year old wife and mother, with an invasive and fast-growing form of cancer of the tongue that was now spreading into her face. The

chaplain said, “This patient is a very bitter woman who is angry at God for permitting this disease in her life, and she is looking for answers that no one can really give her, and she seems to be projecting her anger at God onto whoever she sees as God’s representative (aka, the chaplain). Sooo, good luck!”

It had started with a lesion on the tongue that Mary’s dentist had noticed and had some concerns about. They got a biopsy done and, just as the dentist had feared, it was cancer—a very rare and virulent kind. By the time I came to see Mary, half her face was already gone and she was in the final weeks of her life. When I entered the living room of Mary’s home, where her husband had set up a hospital bed for her, I saw a petite woman in a beautiful chiffon negligee with a gauzy, flower print veil covering up the lower half of her face beneath her eyes. Peering at me from over the veil was a set of the most beautiful green/blue eyes I had ever seen, with long dark eyelashes and carefully arched eyebrows. There was a picture on the wall of a lovely young woman from what seemed like a different lifetime, with the same beautiful eyes, smiling and surrounded by her young family in front of the Enchanted Castle at Disney World. As I walked into the room, Mary held up a carefully crafted sign that said *Hello!* Since she no longer had a tongue or lower jaw, she could only communicate by writing on a tablet or holding up little signs she kept within reaching distance beside her bed. I told her I was the hospice chaplain, introduced myself and told her we could visit a little if she wanted to. Once she knew I was the chaplain, she wasted no time in any social niceties. She picked up her writing tablet and wrote a heart-wrenching question: *Why is God allowing this to happen to me?* I immediately

felt a wave of sorrow and compassion wash through my whole being. "I don't know," I said after a few seconds of eye contact. I continued, "Mary, I really don't know, but if you want to explore this question more deeply together, we can." After a few more questions between us, we ended our first meeting.

Most of the time, I could visit patients during the day and be very present with them during these visits. Even though I would be fully engaged with the person in the moment, when I went home at night, I was generally quite able to let go of my thoughts about them and focus on being present with my elderly mother, for whom I was primary caregiver. With Mary, things were different somehow. Even after that first meeting, I seemed to think about her and her question many times a day. Even for me, that question was a bit like one of those formal Zen koans I had worked on with my Zen teachers. The koan is an enigmatic question that, on a logical/rational level, really has no answer at all. One sits with the koan until there is a breakthrough with it. One answers the question by transcending it as a question. The answer to a koan is that there is no answer in any sense that is satisfying to the rational mind. My Zen teacher used to say, "You must *become* the question." Life had given Mary a very mysterious and challenging koan and she had certainly become this question. She lived and breathed her koan every moment of every day. She was wrestling with her koan as intensely and passionately as any serious Zen student could ever hope to.

Mary and I began to form a kind of liturgy, a ritual, in our visits. It went like this; I would enter the room. Mary would hold up her *Hello!* sign. I would smile. She would generally write on her tablet: *How's your mother?*



I would give her the latest report on mom's health and ask her how her family was doing. She would give me the latest reports on them and after a brief pause, she would begin to write her koan. It was usually not the same direct question of *Why?* which she had penned on the first day. Normally it took the form of a bitter complaint against God. I was just fine with that. I could understand why she was bitter. It all seemed very unfair to her and to those around her. She was a lovely, good and decent person who had done her best to be a good wife and mother, a good neighbor and a good Christian. This thing called cancer seemed to her like a malicious thief that had snuck in through the back door of her life and was hell-bent on taking from her everything she dearly loved.

In the formation I had experienced in my CPE residency, we were reminded again and again that giving pat and standard answers to life's more thorny questions was seldom really helpful. It was emphasized that most people who are suffering seem to find some therapeutic comfort in the simple reality of being listened to and truly heard. They have a very personal story of suffering and misery that often has no possibility of a material or physical resolution. People suffering from a terminal illness, as the very name suggests, are all too aware that they are inexorably headed toward a terminus, an inevitable end-game. So, they either give up in a kind of despair, or they slowly learn to draw on all the spiritual, psychological and material resources they may have at their disposal. Mary had the resources of a fine intellect and the strong character traits of curiosity, a sense of justice and love for her family. All these characteristics came into play in her desperate attempt to make sense of what was happening to her and her

family in terms of this disease that seemed to be invading her life.

One day I went to visit Mary as usual. That morning I had attended mass and found myself gazing up at the large, life-size Spanish crucifix that adorned the wall of the church I normally attended. The Christ on the cross was bloody and beat-up. It was not one of these sanctimonious, sanitized versions of Christ on the cross, with a serene look gazing placidly out on the world. The Christ on this cross was clearly in great pain. His face was not serene, but rather contorted in a grimace. His body was pitifully bruised and broken. Looking at this man on the cross, I thought of my friend Mary. I could almost hear the words of Jesus from the cross, spoken so many centuries before, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In that moment I had the thought that Mary had indeed received the very same koan from the Father that Jesus himself had received. And I had been given this koan from Mary in a lineage of pain and suffering. In that moment, I knew she was an important teacher for me.

When I got to Mary's house later that morning, we began our usual liturgy without delay. She was writing out her usual lament against God, like a passage from the book of Job. I was sitting there listening, or rather reading, Mary's written comments, as I usually did. Suddenly words were coming out of my mouth that I had absolutely not planned on saying at all. Normally I would allow her lament against God to simply play itself out. It seemed to generally go on for about twenty to thirty minutes. Her husband would then come in and give her some medication or other, we would all visit together for a few more minutes and I would leave. But on this day there was a different energy in the air.

From the time I entered her room that morning, it was as if the image of Jesus on the cross was superimposed upon the person of Mary herself. Whenever I looked at her I saw the same image of the suffering Christ I had seen that morning. The atmosphere in the room seemed charged with a sacred presence that day. About ten minutes into her lament I heard strange words suddenly coming out of my mouth.

I said to her, "Mary, I can hear how painful and difficult your experience is right now. Do you want to be free from all this pain?" She set down the writing tablet and stared at me, her eyes brimming with tears as she shook her head up and down indicating a *yes* in response to my question. Her eyes were filled also with something else besides tears, something new I had never seen before. There was a tenderness in her expression and perhaps a kind of expectancy of some kind. I had never asked her a question like this before. Normally I just listened. I think she was curious about what I was going to say next, but not any more curious than I was myself! My experience after that was that time seemed to proceed in slow motion. Words were coming out of my mouth, but there were no thoughts forming in my head beforehand. The words were simply appearing in the room and I was listening to them arrive as if someone else were speaking them. I realized that I also had tears in my eyes as I spoke these words and there was an overwhelming feeling of love that was saturating the room. I heard the following words being said and the words themselves were arising out of this presence of all-pervading love.

I said, "Mary, the only way I know of to get beyond the kind of pain you are experiencing right now, is the way of absolute surrender."

Just as soon as I spoke these words, I began to wonder if I had made a grave mistake. By that time Mary and I had established a kind of trust, and yet I wondered if she might be offended by these words and ask me to leave her house. Wasn't I giving her one of those pat, standard answers that my CPE supervisors had warned me about? I didn't really know for sure. But one thing I *did* know. The words had already been spoken. They were still lingering in the room like the tell-tale tone of the little high-pitched gong my old Zen master would strike at the beginning and end of a meditation session. I couldn't take these words back. All I could do was to wait for Mary's response. Her beautiful eyes filled up more fully with tears and the tears began brimming over and rolled down her cheeks into the sheer silk flowers of her face veil. We just gazed at each other for probably three minutes or so and, at the end of three minutes, she wrote something on her writing tablet and held it up for me to see. It said: *Thank you Francis!*

Mary had surrendered completely and utterly that day. She seemed to be a different person. All the bitterness disappeared and an unconditional joy appeared in its place. Her birthday was about two days after this event and it was the most joyous party I had ever attended. There was a presence of peace and joy that surrounded Mary from that day forward that was palpable. Everyone around her could feel it. When I visited her after that day, I felt absolutely uplifted in her presence. She was transfigured, radiating a living light and peace and serenity. The next week she wrote on her tablet: *I used to ask God and myself every day, Why me? Now I find myself saying, Why not me?* This statement, coming from a woman who, just a week before, was so

bitter and angry at God, seemed truly incredible to me, like a miracle. She had definitely 'passed' the koan that the cancer had given her.

Mary only lived about two more weeks after this breakthrough.

**Are you going to wait until you are about to die to surrender, or will you do it now?**

Soon after her death I was driving in my car and suddenly felt an overwhelming sense of the same *presence* that seemed to surround her in her final weeks. I was so overcome with emotion that I had to pull the car over and get ahold of myself in order to continue driving. The following strange question formed itself in my mind: *Are you going to wait until you are about to die to surrender, or will you do it now?* I didn't answer the question with words, but there was a kind of emotional and spiritual release that happened there on the side of the road that seemed to be a kind of watershed moment for me. The fruit of this experience was that, from that day to this, I have had a deep sense that what I used to think of as 'my life' was really no longer mine and that all was unfolding somehow as it was meant to, simply as it had to. How did I know this? Because whatever was unfolding was, and is, simply the way it is right now. How could it possibly be otherwise? There hasn't been very much worry since then, even when things are not going as I might prefer. There is an overwhelming sense that what I used to think of as my life really has very little to do with 'me'. Life lives itself seemingly through this 'me', but none of it is any of my business! This is not to say that I no longer do what I can to try to improve some situation or other, or to act for the best in all circumstances. Paradoxically, this seeming

intention toward change is still a normal response to certain situations. But there is a kind of ground of deep acceptance and profound surrender that permeates life and makes even the challenging times much more livable. I attribute all of this, with deep gratefulness and palms held high together, to my Zen Master, Mary, of the beautiful green/blue eyes. I will never forget her.

### **I learn about self-investigation**

After my mom died in 2007, I entered Roman Catholic monastic life again. This time at a little monastic community that was originally founded in France. They had made a small foundation in Montreal in 2004, which is where I entered. Here I discovered the teaching of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi. He had lived and died in India some years before I was even born, but I would certainly consider him one of my most important teachers, perhaps even the most significant teacher I ever had. Even though he was a Hindu, Sri Ramana taught me the most about what, I have come to believe, was Jesus' essential message and the good news about who we all really are in our deepest heart. I had heard of Sri Ramana before, when I was a Trappist at Gethsemani, and had seen photos of his face, with its extraordinary luminous serenity, but I had never gone deeply into his teachings. Now I ran across a little book called *The Spiritual Teaching of Ramana Maharshi* and I found that his simple method of 'self-inquiry' struck a chord for me. This is a very simple spiritual practice that I actually prefer to call self-investigation or self-abiding because I believe these words more accurately describe what happens in this practice. A more complete description of the practice can be found elsewhere in this book, but there are hints

of it in virtually anything I have to say about spiritual practice.

### **God is in everything and everything is in God**

I was happily living the monastic life again and trying to practice the self-abiding I had learned from Sri Ramana. It was a serene and happy time. Several years into all this, I experienced what I could only call a deep awakening that changed my whole world. This was a major shift in perception that was incomparable to anything I had ever previously experienced in all my years of seeking and practice. In fact, this so-called experience was not an experience at all, but was rather the simple discovery of the pure *awareness* in which every experience rises and sets.

At one point, right in the midst of Mass, it was as if a bolt of lightning had struck the crown of my head and sent a strong energy current through my whole body, from head to feet. I suddenly clearly saw, in that instant, that in reality, the *presence of God* that I had been seeking my whole life had actually always been already within me and all around me: *God is in everything and everything is in God.*

Why hadn't I been able to see this before? It was so obvious. And this was not merely some kind of philosophical or theological concept. I clearly *saw* this and felt it with every fiber of my being.

There was a deep intuitive knowing in that instant that my own most basic sense of simple existence or beingness, the *I am* or the Self that Sri Ramana had taught so much about, is, in fact, always, effortlessly, eternally present here and now. There is simply no possibility of it ever not being present. And this simple sense of *presence* in the eternal now is nothing other

than the *presence of God*. Simultaneously included in this split second seeing and knowing was the understanding that this eternally shining presence of *I am* was and is and always will be my own true identity.

The 'story of me' fell away utterly and completely. I could still remember facts of personal history, but there was no longer any personal identification with any of it. I saw clearly in that instant that any 'story of me' was simply a concept in the head, having absolutely no foundation in living reality. All of this happened in a fleeting, lightning flash in time, and beyond time, and yet it was indelibly marked on my deepest consciousness. It has never left me since. In that instant, I saw that who I am is simply this eternally existing, simple presence of *awareness*. I am the *I Am*; nothing more, nothing less. It seems that, once clearly seen in this way, it is not really possible ever to un-see this Truth.

This realization is, by its very nature, the realization of true love, peace, joy, and vast spaciousness. For lack of a better term, I sometimes call it the realization of our true nature as God's beloved child. But all of these words and metaphors can only poorly point to this reality, this *silence*, which is entirely beyond words.

I hope that this brief account of my so-called 'life', together with what I have shared in the pages that follow, will help point you toward the true Self that dwells deep in the heart of each one of us. The writing of this little book is a feeble attempt to share with you what I have come to know of this true Self or *presence* that we all already are, as God's beloved child. I have found that the true Self is, in fact, the wondrous discovery of all the love, peace and joy that you and I have been so earnestly seeking our whole life long. The truly ironic thing is that it has never left us for one



moment of our existence. It never could and never will leave us because, in the most profound sense, it is us. It is life or existence itself, which is really what and who we all are.

### **The fruits of awakening**

Awakening is a waking up to the reality of the absolute, and yet there are certain results of awakening on the relative level of life. It's quite natural for us to want to be happy, free from care and anxiety. We search and search to find these blessings and we continually think we will find them in some person, place or thing. But when we awaken to the absolute level of reality and see it with great clarity, we are not only seeing clearly the absolute, we are also seeing clearly the relative. There is really no problem with the relative. The only 'problem' we have with the relative is when we wish for the relative to be absolute. Once we see with clarity the relative nature of all the forms appearing and disappearing in this physical world we live in, we no longer feel the need to insist that they be in any way different than what they are. We now learn to accept the temporary, ephemeral nature of the relative world and we see no problem with it.

It's just like when we receive a rose from someone on a special occasion. We love receiving the rose and we enjoy its beauty. But we never expect that rose to be around twenty years from now, do we? No, we know full well that the rose is temporary and fleeting. Its evanescent nature is actually part of its beauty.

So an awakening to the absolute level of reality is also an awakening to the relative level. All anxiety is basically caused by our wanting reality to be other than it is. What we come to see is that the relative

is not separate from the absolute at all. The relative is simply a temporary manifestation happening within the space of absolute consciousness/awareness. All the relative forms that exist in our experience must arise and cease in the absolute spaciousness of awareness. So all forms, all physical manifestations are actually, and paradoxically, part of the formless.

Awakening brings with it the realization that while, relatively speaking, many things matter in life and have a certain heavy portentousness or emotional urgency, they do not matter in the same way, absolutely speaking. This helps us hold all the forms that arise in our experience in a much lighter manner. Things, people and events that used to bother us don't seem to have nearly the impact on us that they once did. There is so much less anxiety and life is consequently navigated more easily.

Most of us are looking for stability and peace. Once we realize the absolute level of reality, we are plugged in to the source and summit of stability and peace. Spacious awareness is the one stable, unchanging reality. When our focus is rooted in simple awareness rather than in all the appearances arising and ceasing in that awareness, we realize that stability is always present. We realize that we ourselves are stability itself.

When we learn to live in the spacious stillness and silence of the absolute, we begin to learn how to listen, because we come to realize that the silence that we are on the absolute level is always listening. This is a great help in the cultivation of healthy human relationships. Many people go through life feeling unheard. Many people don't really listen to others too well. They are so busy composing some kind of response to what they

think the other person is saying that they don't have much energy left to actually listen to another.

The other way in which awakening assists us in the area of relationships is that we realize that no person on the planet is ever capable of really satisfying us or making us happy in any ultimate sense. This takes an awful lot of pressure off of a relationship. If we are not looking to the other person to fulfill us, we can begin to relax and enjoy them just as they are.

When you know with deep certitude that your essential being of spacious awareness is actually not separate from the reality of God, the source of ultimate happiness and peace, you come to realize, in your direct experience, the absolute happiness and peace for which you have been searching the world over.

Right now, with absolutely no effort on your part, a peaceful joy and happiness is already present at the very core of your being. This peaceful joy and happiness is the essence of who you are on the very deepest, most absolute level of your being. This joy and happiness is entirely unconditional. That is to say, it has absolutely no dependency on conditions at all. The ultimate fruit of awakening is this abiding, unconditional joy and happiness. This joy and happiness is actually your undeniable heritage as God's beloved child. You are, in fact, yourself infinite love, joy and happiness. Realizing this truth is perhaps the most wonderful, practical result of awakening. After all, isn't every human being on the face of the planet seeking happiness and peace? Some would even say that this pursuit of happiness is the whole reason any of us are here in the first place.

My deepest intention is to dedicate what remains of this life to sharing with you the liberating truth of who you really are. All you are seeking is already fully

within you. My deepest wish for you is that, as you read this little book, you may wake up and realize who and what you are already, who you always have been.

## ✧ CHAPTER 1

# SHIFT: PAYING ATTENTION TO WHAT IS ALREADY HERE

Sometimes we overlook the most obvious things. It really all depends on where we place our attention. It's like being in a movie theatre watching a movie you are intensely interested in. Once the movie has started, you don't really notice the movie screen at all. And yet none of the scenes in the movie could appear before you without the screen. The screen is the backdrop of the entire movie. Of course the movie is your primary focus, so you tend to look right past the screen. But the screen is what makes the experience of the movie possible.

During the entire course of the movie, the screen is present, yet, at the same time, it is entirely unaffected by what appears on it. An idyllic, romantic scene can appear on the screen or a nightmarish, tragic scene can appear on the screen, but the screen always remains the same, no matter what happens to be appearing on it.

Our simple presence/awareness/consciousness, that which knows all that arises in experience, is likewise always here and now. This *awareness* is the backdrop of every experience as it comes and goes within it. The simple fact that *awareness* is always present,

underneath every experience, shows us that there is a stable, unchanging, true essence. This has been called the true Self, or our 'spirit'. I like to call it 'God's beloved child'. All of us are already that, whether we are aware of it consciously or not. Nothing can ever change this reality of who we really are. Whether you feel aware or unaware, this simple consciousness of pure *awareness* is actually always aware—aware even of your apparent non-awareness. This *awareness* can never fail to be present. It could even be called your most basic, essential sense of existence. Can you ever manage to exist more than you already exist? Or is it possible to exist less? So it is equally quite impossible for the simple presence of *awareness* to ever be more present or less present. *Awareness* is, in fact, the foundation, the bedrock, on which every single experience rests. Experiences come and experiences go, thoughts come and thoughts go, emotions come and emotions go, but the one remaining reality behind them all is the simple, clear, ever present, ever peaceful *awareness* which knows all of them. Any spiritual practice worth its salt simply teaches you to shift your attention to this underlying pure *awareness*, just as in the midst of a movie you might suddenly shift your attention toward the screen on which you are watching the movie.

I had a very graphic experience of this analogy in the 1980s. I was with some college friends at a showing of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, a cult classic film, made in the 1970s. Some of the audience used to dress up like characters in the film and would physically interact with the story appearing on the screen. It was a lot of fun to see such a strange spectacle unfold in an ordinary movie theatre in Columbus, Ohio. Sometimes the more dedicated members of the audience would

get a little carried away, spraying the other audience members with water, for example, during the rain storm scene. Most people, if they were smart, took umbrellas to the showings of this film, or at least wore no expensive clothes. One night while I was at the film (we would all sometimes go on Saturday nights when we had nothing better to do), I witnessed a member of the audience take a bucket of some kind of red liquid and suddenly pitch it all over the bottom of the screen. Needless to say, we all suddenly shifted our attention from the movie we were watching *on* the screen to the presence of the screen itself. The young guy who did this was unknowingly playing the role of a spiritual teacher or a spiritual practice. He was quite forcefully shifting our attention from one level of reality to another. If my memory serves me correctly, he was dressed as a vampire.

No matter what you are experiencing, try to begin to shift your attention from exclusively focusing on the experience to that which is aware of the experience as well. Simply notice that which is knowing an experience in any given moment. Notice right now, for example, that which is looking at the words on this page. Your thoughts and experiences are constantly changing, always arising and passing away, but that which knows them all is ever the same. It never arises and passes away because it is always present. This noticing of the *awareness* that is already always present is actually the essence of all spiritual practices. And perhaps, paradoxically, this simple noticing is also the goal of all spiritual practices. The path and the goal sometimes seem quite distinct, but in this case, they are not two, but one. In the authentic spiritual life the journey and the destination are always really one and the same.

This natural *awareness* that is always present at the core of any and every experience you could possibly ever have is open, unconditioned and pure. It is like the empty space in a room. When you are looking around a room, you would normally not notice the space in the room, unless you are a feng shui expert. Most people are much more interested in the objects appearing in the room. Most people see rooms every day and completely ignore the space in those rooms. Just take a minute and look around the room you are in right now, or even around the park or outdoor scene that may be appearing before you. Instead of focusing exclusively on all the objects you see appearing in the space, notice the space itself all around the objects. Simply shift your perspective a little. When you really consider it, space (which seems empty, although science tells us it is not really so) is everywhere we look. And isn't the space in our universe absolutely necessary in order for any object to exist? Just as the space in a room is completely unaffected by what happens in the room, so the clarity and purity of *awareness* is wholly unaffected by whatever arises in it. No experience leaves any trace on the clear, pure *awareness* in which it arises. Even in the midst of the most seemingly difficult experience, we may begin to shift our attention and notice more and more the simple presence of that which knows the experience, instead of just the experience.

Of course, this does not mean that we now need to ignore experiences. Our attention to the experience is still there and the experience may even be calling for a response, but the focus on the experience is somehow softer. We begin to notice and rest more fully in the peaceful *awareness* in which every experience comes and goes.



We begin to focus on the unchanging *presence* that knows every experience. We have inadvertently discovered the *presence of God*. When we make this amazing discovery we simultaneously learn that we can be happy, no matter what. This sense of 'just being' is always right in the middle of what we call 'well-being' because, no matter what is happening, life is always still living, existence is still existing, *presence* is constantly present. As the old saying goes, "God's in his heaven (which is always actually here and now) and all's right with the world." Or as the wonderful mystic Julian of Norwich put it, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."

The open spacious presence of *awareness* can contain any experience whatsoever. This open spacious presence is actually who you are on the deepest level. It is the true Self within us all. It is the *Imago Dei*, the image and likeness of God within us. It is God immanent. In Hinduism it is called *atman*, which means our indwelling divinity. Once we see this clearly, we are free. We see that the presence of *awareness* can accommodate absolutely anything that arises in our experience and we are at peace. We may still sometimes not feel very peaceful emotions, but the spaciousness of our *awareness* can contain even that experience of non-peace.

This *awareness* is itself the peace of God that passes all understanding.

This open *awareness* in which all things arise and cease, in which all appears and disappears, cannot really be defined as any object. It transcends the concepts of subject and object. This reality can be known in a certain sense, but not at all objectively. We 'know' *awareness* by simply *being awareness* and, lucky for us,