

Awake in the Heartland  
*The Ecstasy of What Is*

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## Author's Preface to Non-Duality Press Edition (2006)

This is a book about what could be called Zen or Advaita or meditative inquiry or radical non-duality in the context of an actual life with all its messiness. Reading the book now, three years after it was first published, I am mostly pleased with it. I do find a few places where I now see or would express something differently, where the writing seems to reify or make some conceptual *thing* out of the ungraspable no-thing-ness of actuality, where it seems to lack sensitivity or in some way miss the mark. Although I have not changed the original text in this new edition, it seems important to remind the reader that life is fluid and that words are temporary pointers, approximations always subject to revision. Waking up is not something that happens once and then it's done. This book isn't intended to provide final answers, but is rather an invitation to question some of our most basic assumptions, to look more closely.

When I speak of questioning or inquiring or looking, I'm not talking about seeking. Seeking is result-oriented, driven by dissatisfaction and restlessness, a kind of addictive or compulsive habit that frequently leaves you with a bad hangover. Questioning or inquiry, on the other hand, is a lifelong (moment to moment) exploration and discovery that grows out of curiosity, interest, and love. It is listening, clarifying, seeing, touching, being – never repetitive or rote, but always new, full of astonishment and wonder. I read something recently in a book by Stephen Batchelor that captures the spirit of such inquiry quite beautifully. He writes: "The penetration of this mystery requires that one not foreclose it by substituting an answer, be it a metaphysical proposition or a religious belief. One has

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to learn how to suspend the habit of reaching for a word or phrase with which to fill the emptiness opened by the question." He also says: "One relaxes into an uncontrived, open spaciousness which is neither a state of self-conscious meditation nor an inattentive state of distraction." It is to that delicate balance, that kind of spacious investigation and open presence that this book points. At times, it falls short. It's easy to learn and spout the spiritually correct answers, to say that "All is One." It's much more challenging and infinitely more interesting to let all concepts go (even Oneness), to *see* this habitual tendency to conceptualize and seek answers as it arises, and to stay with the aliveness of actuality rather than foreclosing it with an answer, however "correct" that answer may seem.

The title of this book may be somewhat mystifying to readers outside the United States. The heartland refers to the center of this country, a region in the U.S. that has the reputation of being ordinary, down to earth, and plain. I was born in the heartland, in Chicago, and this book tells the story of my return there in middle age to be closer to my mother in her final years of life. In the title, I am playing not only on the location itself and the sense of ordinariness, but also on the nuances and implications of the heart.

Advaita (which means "not two") and Zen both point to seeing through the illusion of separation, realizing that there is no independent autonomous self (no subject and object), that there is no-thing apart from everything, that there is only Now (the timeless, spaceless totality). Zen and Advaita both invite the direct discovery of what remains when all beliefs and concepts fall away. What remains in the absence (or transparency) of conceptualization is presence-awareness, the non-dual absolute: the sound of traffic, the taste of tea, the chirp of a bird, the rising of the chest, the cool breeze, the shapes of these words.

Awakening isn't about getting something. It's more about losing something, seeing through what is false. The truth isn't some *thing* that is going to be seen or grasped or possessed at long last. That is illusion.

There is much debate in spiritual circles over whether meditation is eye-opening or misleading, whether waking up is a process or a sudden event, whether there is choice or no choice, whether this teacher or that one has the Real Goods, whether the suffering in the world matters or whether it is only a dream. The answer to all of these questions is both

and neither. Getting caught up in philosophical debates and mental speculation about such questions is both fascinating and unsatisfying. The truth is something much simpler and much more direct.

When we really *see* a flower, or an ant, or a bird, or a human being, or a stone, or a rug, or a plate of cheese, that very seeing (or awaring) is unconditional love. Naturally, we care for all beings (including stones and rugs and plates). Not because we have taken some Bodhisattva vow, but because it is the natural action of clarity. Such natural activity has nothing to do with *ideas* about saving the world, improving myself, or eradicating so-called evil and imperfection. Clear seeing (awareness, unconditional love) includes everything. It *is* wholeness or unicity, undivided by thought.

The imaginary divisions created by thought are apparent, not real. They only exist conceptually, mirage-like, but they bring forth very real suffering on the personal and global levels. Is it possible to wake up from this entrancement? It has been said that nothing real can be destroyed, that the fire in the movie never burns up the screen. What does that mean? One of my favorite sages, Nisargadatta, said, “The heart of things is at peace.” What is that heart to which he refers, and to which the title of this book points? We can’t find it with the mind, with thinking. We can’t grasp and possess it mentally. We can only wake up to the reality of *being* it, and of there being nothing real outside of it. Waking up can only happen *now*, not yesterday or tomorrow. And actually, “we” don’t wake up; it simply becomes transparently obvious that “we” are an idea or an after-thought; that Now is boundless; that there is literally nothing to attain and no one to attain it; that the only reality is *this*.

As a bunch of concepts, this non-dual understanding can be easily misunderstood and adopted as a rather facile belief system, an answer that is clung to for pain relief or to provide a false sense of security, comfort, or meaning – a way to pretend that things such as the holocaust or 9/11 or a failed relationship don’t really hurt or don’t really matter, a way to avoid seeing and feeling deeply. But as far as I’m concerned, what is truly liberating is seeing directly through the conceptual overlay *as it arises* and waking up *now* to the undivided immediacy and aliveness of what is. Nothing else really satisfies, because nothing else is real.

When I subtitled this book “The Ecstasy of What Is,” I wasn’t pointing

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to ecstatic experiences. Experiences come and go. They are inherently impermanent. The subtitle points instead to the ecstatic nature of life in its entirety: love affairs, holocausts, blooming flowers, tsunamis, sunlight, clouds, thunderstorms, airplanes flying into buildings, babies being born, explosions in distant galaxies - the full catastrophe, as Zorba the Greek called it. I don't think I would use this word ecstasy now because it lends itself to misunderstanding and seems somehow extra. Certainly liberation has absolutely nothing to do with feeling ecstasy all the time, and I did not mean to deny the reality of pain or horrific cruelty and ignorance.

Enjoy this book and take from it what feels alive and vital and true. Please don't adopt anything in it as a new belief system. I hope that it will invite you to explore for yourself, to question, to stop, look, and listen. If you find any answers in this book, let them go.

Endlessly liberating to let all the answers go, and to discover what's left.

Joan Tollifson  
Chicago, May, 2006

*Give up the search for something to happen and fall in love,  
fall intimately in love with the gift of presence in 'what is.'*

TONY PARSONS, *As It Is*

*Ram Tzu knows this...*

*You are perfect.*

*Your every defect  
Is perfectly defined.*

*Your every blemish  
Is perfectly placed.*

*Your every absurd action  
Is perfectly timed.*

*Only God could make  
Something this ridiculous*

*Work.*

RAM TZU , *NO WAY for the Spiritually "Advanced"*

*For Zen students a weed is a treasure.*

SHUNRYU SUZUKI

*If you truly want to see God, then take a look around.  
Everything you see, touch, taste, think, hear, feel, know or  
imagine is God!!*

WAYNE LIQUORMAN



# The Tao That Can Be Spoken

*The first utterance about Truth  
Is the first step  
Down the path of deceit.*

RAM TZU, NO WAY

## A Sea of Jewels

One day at the post office in Oakland, I saw a little girl, who was maybe four or five years old, in line with her mother. The little girl was totally alive, looking at everything with amazement. She ran to the wastebasket in the corner and gazed down into it as if into a sea of jewels. She was ecstatic. The mother kept pulling the girl back, telling her to stop this and stop that. Every other word the mother said was “stop” or “don’t.”

Finally they are up at the window, and at the next window there is another mother who has a little baby in a basket sitting on the floor beside her. The first little girl stands beside the basket, and the baby and the girl gaze unabashedly into one another’s eyes with total absorption. The mother of the little girl again pulls her back. As they leave, the little girl waves goodbye to the baby as if to her dearest friend.

It was such a clear display of the unobstructed love, wonder, and awareness that is *naturally* here, and the process of human socialization which trains us to pull back from this aliveness, to stop looking, to stop being ecstatic, to close down. We learn to shut down and to live more and more in a mental world of ideas, so that by the time we are adults we are uncomfortable looking for too long into a stranger’s eyes. And it would *never* occur to us to run up to a wastebasket and actually *see* what’s inside it as something we’d never seen before, with curiosity and interest. Because by the time we’re adults, we think we *know* what’s in there. We’ve got a word for it. It’s garbage. We don’t see it any more. And we don’t see one another, or the love between us, because we’re afraid of it. We’ve learned that a person who would look with wonder into a public

wastebasket, or too long into a stranger's eyes, is a crazy person, a mad person. We're afraid to be in love, except in the allowable, relatively safe confines of romantic relationships, or perhaps in rare moments of communion with babies and very young children. For the most part, we're cool, detached, afraid of the natural ecstasy of being.

Our lives feel empty. We long for the spontaneity, joy, and wonder that we seem to have lost. We take workshops and consume mind-altering substances to regain it. We undertake rigorous meditation practices and throw ourselves at the feet of exotic gurus. We run up enormous visa bills, looking for what is simplest and most ordinary, for what is always already here.

When we finally "get it," we get nothing at all. We have not arrived at some fascinating foreign place. We're exactly where we always have been—right here. Here is all there is. But when we're looking for something else, we don't see how extraordinary here actually is. We're preoccupied.

Here and now is *alive*. It's the only thing that actually *is*. In the clear light of present awareness, *whatever* appears is vibrant, beautiful, sacred. The vibrancy, the beauty is in the awareness, in the presence, not in the object.

## This Is It!

For one instant, abandon all labels, formulas, answers, beliefs, stories, explanations, expectations, and all efforts to understand or achieve a result of any kind. Give up everything you've ever been told, everything you've read, everything you've experienced, everything you know, every idea about what is or what might be. Let it all go. Completely give up. Hold on to nothing at all.

What remains?

If you are trying with your mind's eye to *see* what remains, give up that effort. Let it go completely. Simply be, without words, without knowing anything.



You are here. You don't need to look in the mirror to confirm it. You don't need any authority to tell you. You *know* you are here. *Ideas* about who or what you are (your name; the idea that you are a person; your body image; your life story; your beliefs; all your scientific, spiritual and psychological concepts), these are all added on later. They are an overlay. But *that* you are is undeniable. You *are* here. Here is *always* here. It's *always* now. Now is what *is*. Just as the eye cannot see itself, this *is-ness* cannot be seen. Presence cannot be known in the way we know objects and information, as something outside of ourselves. In that sense, it is utterly unknowable. But at the same time, we *do* know it, without any doubt at all. It is the one thing of which we are absolutely certain.

Call it emptiness, presence, awareness, the Tao, the Self, God, groundlessness, the Absolute, Consciousness, or refuse to speak about it at all. It eludes all attempts to capture it. It is truly nothing. And yet, here it is. Here *you* are. Presence. Awareness. *This*.

What *is* this?

What *are* you?

Are you the character in the story, or the aware space in which the story appears and disappears? Is the character even real, or is it an image—a creation of thought, memory and sensation; a product of neurochemical blips and firings in the brain; a mirage?

If the character is no more real than a dream, what is it that is dreaming?

This is *no-thing* "you" will ever find. Any *thing* you find is part of the dream. But who is the dreamer? Who are you? What *is* the dream itself? What are all the dream objects actually made of?

Any answer is a dream.

## Returning to the Heartland: A Story

*Death is not extinguishing the light; it is putting out the lamp  
because dawn has come.*

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

In the Fall of 2000, I moved from California to Chicago to be closer to my then ninety-one year old mother in the remaining years of her life, however many that turned out to be. She was in good health, still active and living independently, getting around town on the bus, full of zest, but she was also getting frailer. It seemed like time to be closer, to enjoy her while she was still here and ultimately to walk with her to the door of death and say goodbye from up close rather than from far away.

Mom talks openly about dying. “If I go up in a puff of smoke, don’t feel bad,” she says, “because that’s what I’m praying for. Just call the Cremation Society. The card is on the refrigerator.” I asked her once if she was afraid of dying. “Oh no,” she said. “It’s only the body that’s falling off.”

My mother is a passionate woman who loves life. She loves animals, plants, and people. She sees the divine in everyone. She is fearless. She has friends of all ages, races, sexual orientations, and political affiliations, from all walks of life. She knows no boundaries. On her birthday every year she throws a party. Close to a hundred people cram into her apartment to celebrate with her. My father, whom my mother loved dearly, died over twenty years ago. He was a hermit, a loner, a solitary. I inherited a little of each of them.

My father was an atheist and an inventor who read books about the fourth dimension and believed in determinism. He told me that the sun would eventually explode, that the light from the stars was billions of years old, that there is no free will, that everything is one unbroken whole, that nothing can be other than it is, that everything causes (and is caused) by everything else. All of this instantly made total sense to me. When I encountered Advaita, the Hindu philosophy of non-duality, several decades later, it was like coming home to Dad.

My mother, on the other hand, believes in love and the power of

positive thinking. Fear and worry have been banished from her vocabulary. She believes you can do anything if you put your mind to it. She is a woman of boundless, unflagging optimism and good cheer.

I was born in Chicago on the fourth of July, three years after the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan. A little firecracker, they called me. It was the era of Joe McCarthy and the execution of the Rosenbergs. I still recall a terrifying nightmare in which my parents were locked up and electrocuted. Growing up in suburban America in the Fifties was like that film *Blue Velvet*: the surface was idyllic, but an inferno was boiling up underneath.

I fled the Midwest as soon as I finished high school in 1966, heading first to New York and then to San Francisco. Coming back to Chicago in 2000, I rented a sunny, one-bedroom, fourth floor apartment. My two rooms each have large southern windows that look out on two big locust trees. It feels like I am living in the heart of these trees, in a cozy tree house with heat and carpeting. Mourning doves roost frequently in the branches. I hear traffic, screeching brakes and minor fender benders, wailing sirens from ambulances going to the hospital up the street, the train passing through. I see flights of birds, and planes going to and from O'Hare. At night, in the winter when the trees are bare, in the far distance, I can see the Sears Tower. I bought a very comfortable armchair and placed it across the room facing the windows, so I can sit and look out. I call it my bliss chair.

My neighborhood is a mix of Hispanic, Indian, Pakistani, African-American, Asian, Arab, Orthodox Jewish and assorted white folks, including a lot of immigrants from Eastern Europe. On nearby Clark Street, all the signs are in Spanish. On nearby Devon, it's all Indian and Pakistani. On the other side of Western, it's Orthodox Jewish. In the parks, at the train station, in the streets, you see Indian women in colorful saris, men in turbans, bearded orthodox Jews in black suits and black hats, Mexican and Filipino families, old Polish ladies, Arab and Jewish women in head scarves. You hear a multitude of languages. It's a residential neighborhood with lots of trees and big yards and no tall buildings.

People are very into the American flag in Chicago. Long before 9/11 they were prominently displayed on houses, on poles in people's yards,

even on their cars. It was the presidential election year when I arrived, and most of the posters I saw in my neighborhood were for Gore/Lieberman, and one for Ralph Nader in the window of the nearby Heartland Café.

Around the corner are the house where my mother lived as a child, and the elementary school she attended almost a century ago. The streets of Chicago are as familiar to me as my own body. I've been on them since I was born and even before that. I have come home. To my surprise, I am growing to like Chicago.

Chicago is a meat and potatoes kind of place, home of steel mills and stockyards. Transportation hub of the nation, major financial and cultural center, Chicago is a diverse, cosmopolitan city, but the dominant tone is one of Midwestern ordinariness. This place is raw and solid and accepts no bullshit. It has no frills. Tough and streetwise, it was the home of Al Capone and the mob. But mostly, I find it to be a place of kindness and hospitality, the metropolis of the heartland.

The Bay Area, where I have lived for most of the last thirty years, is an airy place of transcendence and breathtaking beauty; the edge of the map and beyond; home to radicals, queers, sages, artists and outcasts; meeting point of East and West. Like many others who jumped or fell out of the American Dream in the Sixties, I landed there. At it's best, California births the new and defies all boundaries and limits; at its worst, it is a smorgasbord of insubstantial fluff.

Chicago is about earth, ground, heart, and roots. It has winds so strong they blow people off the sidewalk, winters so cold that people freeze to death, summers so hot that people die of the heat. The air quality is bad. The traffic is thick. At it's worst, it is everything I fled in 1966: traditional, conventional, straight, flat. At it's best, it is the perfect place to wake up.

And that's really why I'm here. My mother is a kind of excuse, or more accurately, part of the dance. I have always avoided commitment. I like to keep my options open. I've never owned a house or had an enduring committed relationship, a family or a career that tied me down. Coming here is the biggest commitment I've ever made. I'm here for as long as my mother lives. That might be a month; it might be six years; it

might be twenty years. I've finally given up all my options to flee, to seek something better.

And to my surprise, here I am in this big, noisy, polluted, Midwestern city—the last place I ever imagined myself settling or discovering the truth. Oddly enough, it turns out to be a perfect metaphor. Because that's exactly where we do find the truth: right here, in the most ordinary place, amidst what we thought were weeds and distractions.

Being here is about dying in many ways: It's winter, I'm middle-aged and going through menopause, my hair is turning gray, I've left behind aging friends in California, and of course, the spiritual life is always fundamentally about dying, as Krishnamurti put it, "dying to the known." Death is at the heart of life, and is actually the secret of liberation, but when we *think* about it, it often seems to terrify the human mind, this disappearing of everything that has seemed so real.

## The Urn

Mom calls to tell me that a former neighbor who lived down the street all through my childhood, Milly Whipple, has died. We will attend the memorial service on Saturday and perhaps the dinner afterward. I feel dread. Milly's son, Ted, was a hotshot psychiatrist who "cured" homosexuals. We will likely see many former neighbors, all of them rabid Republicans, like the one who served in Eisenhower's cabinet and was a friend of Dick Nixon and Don Rumsfeld. I imagine myself back in my old home town—the exclusive, affluent, and once all-white suburb of Chicago where I grew up—at a gathering of anti-gay, pro-Bush Republicans, on the eve of Bush's inauguration, trying not to explode or commit psychological suicide. I tell myself it is a wonderful spiritual opportunity. But inside, I feel dread.

Saturday arrives. We pull into the church parking lot, we're quite early, and immediately there is a procession coming straight toward us—Episcopal priests, family—and I see Ted, the psychiatrist-son, and he's carrying an urn, which I realize holds his mother's ashes. This is a situation



Emily Post never covered, what to say or do when you see someone you haven't seen in over thirty years coming toward you carrying his dead mother in an urn. There is no time for reflection. I roll down the car window and say, "Hi Ted," and he—holding the urn—leans in slightly and says, "Joanie..." and then the procession moves on.

And then the service. There in that church, in the presence of age and death, all the things that divide us, or seem to—our differing ideologies and lifestyles—all seemed very superficial and meaningless in the face of that which is so much deeper and so much more real—the momentary nature of the play, the beauty of it in its entirety, and the love that sometimes manages to shine through in spite of all the odds against it. Ted's wife kisses me on the cheek with genuine affection. Effie, the sister of the deceased, a woman Mom's age whom I've known all my life, holds my hand.

Three of the four officiating priests were women, one was African-American. Something has changed, even here.

We never did go to the dinner. Mom decided she didn't want to. And now today I know no more than I did before about the Republicans, except that they, too, end up in urns.

## Giving Up Hope

*What is complete attention without a single idea?*

TONI PACKER

It is a dark afternoon, and windy. The birds are being blown every which way across the sky. Black clouds break open, and sunlight comes pouring through. For one glorious moment the bare tree branches shine with light. And then the black clouds close shut, the light is gone, and the all the birds are singing again, the songs they sing before storms.

It so happens that today is the first day of Lent, the season of repentance in the Christian liturgy. I read once in a book by Thomas Keating that the word *repent* means "to change the direction in which you are

looking for happiness.”

Where is it that we are looking for happiness?

So often, we are looking in all the wrong places. We scramble around after more money, more fame, more adulation, more power, another piece of chocolate cake, another café latte, another romance, another vacation, another drink, another snort, another cigarette, another piece of knowledge, another consoling theory, another sexual ecstasy, another guru, another spiritual experience, and finally, what we imagine to be the ultimate experience—enlightenment.

No matter how many substances, experiences, answers, and relationships we acquire, it’s never quite enough. We realize we might lose it all tomorrow. Someone else always seems to have more. There is a persistent unease, a restlessness, a craving, a sense that something is missing, that this moment—as it is—is unbearable, not enough.

Is it unbearable?

Is it possible to stop all of our outward searching and be still and find out?

Is it possible to be right here, right now, with open eyes, open ears, open mind, and open heart—completely present, without judgement or resistance, without any effort to achieve something better?

Do we really *need* more money, more fame, more adulation, more intoxicants, more experiences, or the biggest possible experience? Do we actually even *want* any of these things?

I’m not saying that *any* of these things are bad, or that we should renounce them (a common spiritual mistake). But do they really give us happiness? Are we satisfied? Are we at peace? Or are we suffering, living lives of quiet (or not so quiet) desperation?

True happiness is found only in one place. It is here now. It is unconditional presence, empty of all knowing, empty of all limits, empty of all sense of separation and encapsulation, empty of you (as you think of yourself).

You may, and you undoubtedly will enjoy a variety of experiences and substances, and that’s no problem. But if you imagine that any substance or any experience or any possession or any relationship will give you lasting happiness, you will be disappointed. When you are disappointed

enough, you will be ripe for giving up hope—giving up the search for something better in the future, and turning your attention to what is. This is the beginning and the end of the spiritual life, true repentance, enlightenment.

## Is this Advaita, Psychology, Memoir, Zen, Post-Spiritual Inquiry, or What?

*The Tao that can be spoken is not the true Tao.*

LAO TZU

*I am never lost because I don't know where I'm going.*

IKKYU ZENJI

What if we drop all the labels, categories and frames that we use to contain our experience? What if we're just here? Right now. What is this?

*That's* what this book is about.

It's not about finding an answer. It's about that aliveness that can't be objectified or grasped.

The mind is always looking for something else. It wants a winning strategy, future results, transformation, improvement. This book is not about that. It won't get you anywhere other than where you are now. *This* is the miracle beyond belief.

I don't just mean the *content* of this moment (the sensations, thoughts, experiences, and events that are endlessly appearing and disappearing), but more essentially that which is at the very *heart* of all these varied appearances: the simple fact of *being* itself. The hereness of here, the nowness of now. The eternal present. Presence. No-thing-ness.

Like all of us, I've assimilated a host of theories and explanations. I've been witness to an amazing proliferation of stories and narratives, movies within movies appearing and disappearing in dream-like fashion: the story of my life, the story of the world, the story of the universe, the story of your life according to you, the story of your life according to me, the Hindu story, the Buddhist story, the Judeo-Christian story, the multitude

of scientific stories, the American story, the anti-American story, the modern story, the postmodernist stories.

A story is a way of seeing, a way of understanding, and for a moment, the fabrication appears solid and believable. Our story changes as the perspective changes. We look at life through a Freudian lens, a feminist lens, a Marxist lens, a Zen lens. With each new lens, the story gets re-framed, re-interpreted, re-visioned, re-invented and re-organized, and means something slightly or entirely different than it did before.

Even the way the so-called “bare facts” are reified from an infinite sea of utterly undivided, ever-pulsating, sensation and vibration, in other words, the way some *thing* is made up out of no-thing at all, is already a huge spin. Consider what I have told you so far about my life. The brain selects and sorts unfathomable chaos into seemingly meaningful categories and creates an apparently coherent narrative that is further modified by the distortions of memory and changed every time it passes from one person to the next. It is no longer any secret that what we think of as the factual and true story of our life, or the factual and true history of the world, is nothing but a very partial abstraction of something that never really happened at all. On some level, every twenty-first century person knows this. It’s there in the new physics, in postmodern literature, in the cultural mirrors all around us. And yet, on a gut level, the deep-seated belief in the reality of the illusion persists. It is, after all, a very convincing illusion. Even the notion that there is any such thing as “twenty-first century people” who “have” this illusion is all part of the illusion! The whole thing is made up out of thin air. You, me, the world, the twenty-first century, the whole story I’ve created so far about Joan and Chicago and California: look closely, and you’ll find no-thing at all.

Stories, mythologies, novels, plays, operas, movies, television programs, dreams, daydreams and fantasies are all an expression of the mysterious emptiness from which they spring and into which they disappear. Beautiful, horrific, fabulous, astonishing, breath-taking creations, they serve a function every bit as vital to the dream of human life as the spider’s web is to the spider. They are totally real in a sense, and yet, they are phantasms, protean apparitions forever revising and erasing themselves. Like Rorschach inkblots, they become anything and everything. Like

colored shapes in a kaleidoscope, they tumble endlessly into something new. Like the mirage in the desert, they vanish if you approach and try to catch them.

Stories make apparent sense out of what would otherwise be incomprehensible. They give meaning and importance to the fiction of myself and all that I identify with: my family, my civilization, my ethnic group, my political leanings, my sexual orientation, my subculture, my gender, my generation. Stories are entertaining. God apparently enjoys drama, play, hide and seek, lost and found.

Sometimes a story helps to expose and dissolve limitations; sometimes it creates and reinforces them. Stories can lull us to sleep or wake us up, reveal truth or conceal it. The same story can serve different functions at different moments. It's a great art to discern when a story is breaking open the heart and waking us up, and when it is lulling us to sleep, perpetuating illusion and generating suffering. Likewise, it is a great art to discern the difference between actuality and concept. The conceptual filters through which we think about everything are so ubiquitous and so seemingly real that it's easy to mistake them for actuality. No separate, independent, solid thing really exists, except apparently, in the story.

When I look for what I know to be true beyond any doubt, what I come to is presence itself, the simple fact of being here. Everything else is made up. This bare awareness is the only *real* truth, the only absolute certainty. We use words to point to it, but the words have a way of deadening and obscuring what they describe, for they turn the inconceivable and limitless into something conceivable and limited. Listen to the words in this book with your heart. Their intent is to dissolve structures, not to create new ones. They are meant to leave you with the open wonder of not knowing, rather than with a new set of deadening answers.

In recent years, I have grown ever more interested in awareness itself, simply what is: the sound of traffic, the sensation of a toothache, the song of a bird, the television images of devastation, the vague sense of dis-ease felt upon awakening in the morning, the sound of a lawn mower or a jet plane. I find that these are the moments of deepest truth, when there is simply *this*, as it is—when the urge to explain or get something

out of it, to get rid of or improve it, or to have some ultimate transcendent experience above and beyond it—when all of that is gone.

That interest in what is, that willingness to be present, to not know anything, to simply be alive, to let the imaginary barriers dissolve—that willingness develops slowly. It goes against all our conditioning. It goes against the force of habit. It goes against the social grain. It goes against the prevailing mythology that I am a person adrift in a story on my way to a destination.

Spiritual life is very simple. Utterly simple, utterly obvious, utterly immediate, absolutely ever present and completely inescapable. It has been turned into something enormously complex and apparently hard to get. Intricate cosmologies have been invented; elaborate conceptual grids have been imposed on the indescribable. A whole class of highly trained religious professionals and spiritual experts have sprung up. There are special buildings, special clothes, special cushions, special beads, contorted body positions that are supposed to bring you closer to the truth, wafting incense, inspirational music, all kinds of complicated rituals and practices, maps of the journey, and glorious promises of salvation, *something* that may happen *to you* someday in the future, something much grander than what is. We hear about transcendental experiences, Kundalini explosions, ultimate attainments and final breakthroughs, and we long to have what we have heard described. We get lost in the complexity, the promises, the search. I'm not opposed to *any* of those things if you enjoy them. But they aren't any more spiritual than a seat on the city bus at rush hour. What I'm talking about is fully present right now, right here in Chicago, or wherever you happen to be at this very moment. It is what you *are*, not what you might someday become. This book is about the truth. And the truth is simple.

Joan, the apparent author of this book, is a character more or less like you. She has ups and downs, good days and bad ones, strengths and weaknesses. She's nobody special except in the sense that everyone is somebody special. We humans have a strong desire to put spiritual teachers up on pedestals and imagine that they are beyond neurosis, beyond confusion, beyond doubt, beyond anger, beyond petty personal concerns, beyond flattery and insult, and basically beyond being ordinary

human beings. We love to believe in the Mythology of Perfect People. It's comforting and inspiring to the ego. But this book isn't about personal growth and self-improvement for the character you think you are.

This book is about stepping into the unknown. As far as I'm concerned, real spirituality is about having no answers at all. It is about living without formulas, without conclusions, without beliefs, without comforting ideas, without saviors. It has nothing to do with being a perfect person or having everything neatly resolved. It isn't about arriving anywhere, other than exactly where you are now.

In this Age of Information, we've all heard so much. We've read about "the power of now" and the "wonder of presence," how "Consciousness is all there is" and "You are That." We've been told to "be here now." We've longed for a life without problems, without uncertainty, without darkness. We've looked for something extraordinary, some tremendous result, some final understanding. And life as it is keeps disappointing us. In the face of that disappointment, what do we do? This is a crucial question, perhaps the most crucial question.

Do we brush our doubts aside and convince ourselves to believe in a lie or a fantasy? Do we fall under the spell of some collective hypnosis driven by magical and wishful thinking? Do we go back to getting drunk and smoking dope? Do we plunge into non-stop busyness and distraction? Or perhaps, are we willing to hang out more and more in a place of actual simplicity: not knowing, not seeking, not *doing* some theme park version of "just being," but actually just being present, without answers, without some grand assurance that all is well. Just *this*. That's what this book is about. It points to this, and it shares my own story, my own journey through spiritual obsession and wishful thinking to bare truth. Perhaps this particular story will help to de-mystify spiritual awakening, and encourage us all to be less afraid of what actually is, even when it *looks* chaotic, unresolved, messy, and disagreeable.

The story in this book is essentially a so-called "true story." In some instances, circumstances have been changed or condensed and composite characters created—all in the interest of protecting the privacy of the people I write about and making the narrative less cumbersome. Many events and people of real importance to me have been omitted for one reason or

another-this is not intended to be a complete history of my life. I have changed the names of everyone except my teachers; public figures; Toni Packer's husband and son; and my friend Jarvis Jay Masters, a writer who is living on death row in San Quentin prison, whose real name I used with his permission in the hopes that it might bring some interest and attention to his case. This book is not intended as an objective account of any of the teachers I write about, nor should it be mistaken for an official version of their teaching. This is Joan's story; I speak for no one else.

When I started this book seven years ago, I believed many things that I no longer believe. Much has fallen away. Writing has been a way of exploring. The material is not always sequentially arranged, since time has a way of apparently flowing in all directions at once.



# The Only True Teacher

## In the Beginning: A Story

*Life as it is, the only teacher.*

JOKO BECK

Life always gives us exactly the teacher we need at every moment. This includes every mosquito, every misfortune, every red light, every traffic jam, every obnoxious supervisor (or employee), every illness, every loss, every moment of joy or depression, every addiction, every piece of garbage, every breath. Every moment is the Guru.

My right hand and the lower part of my right forearm were amputated by a fiber in the uterus during my mother's pregnancy. My mother tells me that when I was a baby, I used to reach for objects with my non-existent right hand and then look really surprised. Maybe I experienced a phantom limb. I like to think that this reaching for objects with a hand that turned out to be imaginary might have been my first visceral glimpse into the illusory nature of so-called material reality.

Having one hand has been a wonderful teacher. The funny thing is, I would never choose such a teacher, but now that I have it, I am truly grateful for it. I knew from early on that the body is impermanent, that there is a deeper reality than form, that true perfection must embrace imperfection.

Addiction has been another wonderful teacher for me. It taught me everything there is to know about the etiology of suffering and the question of free will. It took me to places I would never otherwise have gone. Again, I would never have chosen this teacher. But having gotten

it, I'm infinitely grateful for it. Addiction is a superb and relentless teacher.

Growing up in an affluent community was another great teacher. I learned that money cannot buy happiness, that worldly success can be hollow and unsatisfying, that surfaces can be deceptive.

Whatever appears in your life is the perfect teacher for you. No two lives are the same. Don't get lost in comparing your experiences to anybody else's experiences. Each life is beautifully unique, and each reflects the whole.

In college on the East Coast in the Sixties, I encountered alcohol, psychedelic drugs, Eastern religion, existentialism, sexual freedom, and the collapse of the entire cultural construction of my childhood. After college, in 1970, I migrated to San Francisco where I led a wild life and nearly died from alcohol and drug intake. After that, I went through several forms of therapy, tried saving the world with radical politics, and eventually found my way to something that could be called Zen or Advaita, but is best not called anything at all.

In the 1980s, I practiced at the San Francisco Zen Center and its affiliates, lived briefly at Berkeley Zen Center, and eventually studied with Joko Beck, a radical and innovative teacher from San Diego who approaches Zen practice through the koan of everyday life.

By the early spring of 1996, I was living in rural Springwater, New York at a retreat center founded by a woman named Toni Packer. I was forty-eight years old. I was on staff at Springwater for the second time and had been there for about five years altogether. I had just proofed the galleys of my first book, *Bare-Bones Meditation: Waking Up from the Story of My Life*, which was due to be released in the fall.

Springwater had started out as a Zen center, but gradually the traditional, dogmatic, ritualistic, hierarchical aspects of formal Zen had dropped away. Toni Packer is a housewife and grandmother who grew up half-Jewish in Nazi Germany, married an American conscientious objector after the war, and eventually became a Zen teacher in north-western New York. Toni resonated deeply with Krishnamurti and left the Zen Center where she was teaching to work in a new way. Springwater is in the middle of nowhere. The yellow road sign at the turn off onto the

gravel road that leads to the Center's driveway says, "Dead End." Toni is fond of its message.

Toni is someone who has consistently had the courage to stand alone, to put all the books, authorities and traditions aside, and to be here now in all simplicity without formulas or answers. In the spring of 1996, I had been with Toni for almost a decade, and I also continued to work by phone with Joko Beck.

Another one of my teachers was a woman from Idaho named Martha. Of course, I didn't think of her as my teacher. She was a fellow worker on the Springwater staff, and she drove me crazy, or so I thought, until I realized it was my own thinking that was driving me crazy. For a whole year after Martha joined staff, I hated her. It was a nightmare to live and work with her. We pushed each other's buttons endlessly. I felt she was mocking me, laughing at me, not respecting me. She felt similarly. I could never get away from her. She was there brushing her teeth at the next sink every morning and every night, she was there at every meal, she was there on every retreat. The sound of her loud footsteps in the hallway that we shared would make my skin crawl.

And then it broke open, I don't even know how, and she seemed lovely to me, and the same sound—her footsteps—evoked a deep tenderness and affection. I grew to love her.

The teacher shows up in many disguises.



Sometime in the early 1990's, I became interested in Advaita Vedanta, the Hindu teachings of non-duality, through seeing a European teacher named Jean Klein and attending several retreats with him in California before I came back to Springwater the second time. Jean was quite old and frail at the time.

"What do you do?" he asked when I met privately with him on a retreat in the desert at Joshua Tree.

"I'm writing a book about meditation," I replied.

His eyes lit up. "Wonderful!" he said.

“Well maybe not,” I replied. “Maybe it would be better if I was silent...”

“You’re not writing this book!” he said emphatically.

Suddenly there was a strong earthquake. The room began to shake and roll. Jean and I were both laughing.

He was right. Everything came out of nowhere: the impulse to write, the writing itself, the words. It was not personal. Nothing was.



I discovered the Indian guru Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, one of the clearest Advaita sages. He was already dead by then, but there were several wonderful books of his dialogs with people. I felt an immediate resonance and was irresistibly drawn to these teachings.

A friend gave me a video tape of a woman named Gangaji, an American Advaita teacher who was offering satsangs, gatherings where she sat at the front of the room radiating love and deconstructing people’s stories with amazing deftness. I watched the tape over and over, compelled by what I saw and wondering if it was for real.

Before long, I had ordered more tapes. People wrote devotional love letters and sang songs to Gangaji. She threw flower petals at them. In the past, I had looked upon Americans who got involved with gurus and devotional relationships as people who were caught up in some kind of silly, immature projection. Secretly, I had also been somewhat fascinated.

Soon I was corresponding with Gangaji. Before that, if I found myself singing in the shower, or in the car while I was driving, I would often stop myself because I had this idea that it was better to be silently “aware.” Now I *belted* the songs out! My heart was bursting open with love.

I was no longer in Kansas. I had tumbled down a magical rabbit hole into the wonderland of Oz, a world awash in flower petals, gaudy colors, ecstatic songs and love-drunk gopis swooning in erotic-spiritual bliss. Not that all of that was going on around Gangaji, because it wasn’t, but it was in the air somehow—the aroma of Hinduism and India. On top of Gangaji’s scene being Hindu, it was also very American. The packaging

seemed so slick. There was more missionary zeal, entrepreneurialism and promotional thrust than I was used to. I didn't completely trust it. Gangaji seemed like a movie star, and maybe I was a lovesick fan going rapidly off the deep end. But I couldn't resist or deny the truth in it either.

There was something utterly delightful, liberating and heart-opening about this neo-Advaita world, something refreshingly different from the sober, Quaker-like atmosphere of American Buddhism and Springwater. It was breaking my attachment to plain and simple, dissolving my righteous Puritanical streak, confronting all the disowned shadows of my personality (money, fashion, beauty, devotion), allowing the intoxicated bhakti fool in my heart to emerge. For me, it was akin to the leap from modernism to postmodernism.

The whole spiritual adventure became playful. It had a sense of humor. It was juicy and amusing. It was about *being* and not *watching*. It was a mystery beyond the grasp of the rational mind. It became at times a parody of itself, so over the edge that it jumped out of the frame and illuminated the set behind the movie, exposing the transparency of spiritual authority. It was theater. The whole thing lost its deadly seriousness. Rules broke down; multiple realities co-existed. It was utterly genuine and totally fake, off the mark and right on target, all at the same time. The rational mind couldn't contain it then, and it can't now. It was exactly what it was. If I had to pick one word to sum it all up, I'd say love.

Gangaji has a keen intelligence, a sharp eye, and an exquisite ability to cut through the mind and its stories. She also has a beautiful heart. It was with her that I first realized that truth is ever-present and cannot be lost or found. I saw how I clung to the old stories of "not awake yet" and "something missing." I saw that I was actually *afraid* of ecstasy and unrestrained love, afraid to be enlightened. It seemed dangerous somehow. It was safer to be a neurotic seeker, "just little old me," perpetually not quite here yet. That was familiar. That was the habit. And Gangaji was challenging that habit.

Suddenly I was headed to Asheville, North Carolina, where Gangaji was giving a weekend satsang series.



“Oh, you came!” she said when she saw me the first night. There was incredible energy between us from the beginning.

I was intoxicated, swimming in bliss, bursting with kundalini. Gangaji seemed delightfully free. There was so much laughter and love. Unlike the modest, austere, bare-bones style of Zen to which I was accustomed, satsang with Gangaji is a theatrical event with hundreds of people, videotape, spotlights, huge photos of Gangaji’s guru and his guru, flowers, candles. Gangaji sails in wearing her exquisite clothes and sits on a sofa at the front of the room. I hear through the grapevine that she gets \$100 hairdos and always flies first class. I hear other things through the grapevine, too. She doesn’t socialize with her students, she demands royal treatment, she can be ferocious and cold.

I heard many disturbing stories about Gangaji’s guru, Papaji. He spends days on end telling sexist jokes, he tells women they need to get fucked. Devotees gather at his feet for darshan while he watches television. He yells at people, calls them stupid pigs. He does not sound very much like his guru, the great sage Ramana Maharshi, whose lineage Gangaji claims to represent. But people love Papaji. They say he’s a wild rascal, a crazy wisdom teacher, and I want to believe this. I do love the way he tells people to “call off the search.” Like Gangaji, he’s wonderful at waking me up to the truth that I’m already awake.

Lots of people around me had their opinions about Gangaji and her whole scene. And I had my opinions, which changed from one day to the next. It was shattering all the ideas I had about spirituality.

Toni questioned me: Is Gangaji coming from listening, or is she operating from a subtle system, like someone who gets the hang of koan work and knows how to pass them, but isn’t really awake?

I don’t know.



I told Springwater I would be leaving in the winter. Formal meditation had begun to feel unnecessary and contrived, and my heart was increasingly with Gangaji. Furthermore, I wanted to begin talking with people about awareness and waking up. I wanted to share and explore and go deeper into what I loved most. I wanted to teach. I felt in my heart that this was my true calling. I knew I needed to be on my own to let it happen. I needed complete freedom for it to unfold in whatever way it might. I considered moving to Colorado where Gangaji was living, but in the end decided to go home to California.



In November, we went on retreat, my last retreat at Springwater before I would leave. I went deep into the silence. It was a week of snow and ice storms and cold, and the deer hunters shooting in the woods. I went off caffeine. For me, that means days of headaches, body aches, exhaustion, and meeting up with all the mind-states and emotions I try to evade. It is painful, and yet, there is always something I love about withdrawal. It is the stopping. You finally stop running, and you sink in. You meet what you've been running from. You don't move. And it feels like a huge relief. Like some enormous noise has finally stopped. And you're just here.



One night after the retreat, driving Toni home on a foggy, slick, icy road in the dark, I was talking to her about my plans to give meetings and workshops when I got back to California, and I said to her, "I hope you would at least tell me if you thought this was a bad idea." I heard myself wanting Toni's blessing, some unmistakable imperative and sanctioning.

"I don't think it's a bad idea," Toni replied.

I had hoped for something a little bit more exuberant, although why I would expect that when I was throwing myself at Gangaji's feet was surely irrational at best.



“You’re good with words,” Toni said after a long pause, “but are you really here, really seeing? *That’s* the question!”

For a moment I felt defensive, like she was telling me I was all talk and no substance, but afterwards I realized it was a question to live with.

I cried profusely at my going away party. I don’t cry easily or often, and I hadn’t expected that to happen. But the tears just poured out of me and wouldn’t stop. Toni and I went for a walk before the party began. She talked to me about working with people. Listening is everything, she said. Not knowing. Not having any system at all.



So at the end of 1996, I left Springwater and returned to my home in California. I moved in with Adele, an old friend in Oakland, a psychotherapist and body awareness teacher who spent hours rolling on the floor or sitting quietly. We lived together easily and playfully.

It was a wonderful relief to live with someone who was also a contemplative, someone who liked a quiet lifestyle. Our society loves extroverts. If you enjoy solitude or quiet, you are often considered neurotic and maladjusted. There is tremendous pressure to stay perpetually busy and have a full social calendar. It was a great relief to live with someone who never turned on the TV, who enjoyed staying home more than going out, who liked to sit quietly in an easy chair staring out the window, who spent hours rolling on the floor.

Gangaji and her husband moved to California at exactly the same time I did. So, unexpectedly, there she was. I became a volunteer, helping to put on her satsangs. I was a serious devotee, and Gangaji was encouraging me in my desire to teach. I’d come home from her satsangs in speechless, ecstatic states, my heart bursting with love, and Adele would look at me like I was on drugs.

Adele found my interest in Gangaji unsettling. Adele has a naturally reserved personality, tending toward understatement, minimalism and frugality. Like many of my friends at the time, she recoiled from the devotional and upscale scene around Gangaji. She also wondered why I

needed to pursue yet another teacher.

I wondered about that, too. This book went back and forth as I went back and forth. I was struck by how I would revise and rewrite the scenes, making them guru-positive or guru-negative, depending on where I was at. It was a great lesson in how unreliable all history is. Without changing the facts, I could slant the same exact scene in different ways, so that it would have a completely different meaning. I was fascinated by this process.

There were other questions that unfolded in my life and my writing. Was I awake? Was this it? Or was there some kind of even bigger awakening that I hadn't had yet, a total and irrevocable shift like some teachers seemed to be describing, an event that turned you inside out forever, after which all identification with the bodymind, all sense of personal doership, and all belief in the illusory me were completely and permanently erased, never to return? I was still seduced and mesmerized by the promise that maybe there was more to be had, a bigger Big Bang *for me*. I discovered that it's never too late to climb back onto the treadmill of samsara and go for another ride. I went for many rides.

And speaking of treadmills, was there any way to stop biting my fingers? I'd been gnawing on them for years, unable to stop. I'd bite for hours sometimes, making bloody wounds. I'd recovered from alcohol and drug addiction, and had given up cigarette smoking. But this I could not seem to stop. I'd worked on this compulsion with two therapists and every one of my spiritual teachers, and it had gotten better, but it still hadn't stopped completely. Why not? How do addictive patterns end? Is there anything to do, any choice, any practice, any way to make change happen, to encourage it? Or was everything utterly beyond our control?

What was this whole spiritual trip *really* all about? Was it the opium of the masses after all, another narcotic delusion, one more false dream? What were we all doing? What exactly *was* it that I wanted to talk or write about? Before I fell down the rabbit hole into Advaita, I thought I knew. Now I knew nothing.

Somewhere along the line, I remarked to a friend that I couldn't finish this book yet because the issues involved were still unresolved. My friend questioned why they needed to be resolved. Perhaps what I was writing was not supposed to be "the final answer," but rather, the questioning

itself. Perhaps there actually was no answer!

I wanted so much to write a pure book, a book that spoke only the highest truth. But I keep discovering that what people seem to appreciate most in me is my honesty. Being a fucked up mess was beginning to seem like my vocation. Not exactly the one I had been picturing! I had hoped to be an awakened guru. But then, awakening is truly nothing more or less than recognizing God right here in the middle of this actual mess.

## You Are the Present Moment

We are conscious of only a tiny fraction of the information pouring into our senses every moment. Moreover, there is a half-second time delay in transmission, so that all perception is actually of the past. We *are* the present moment, but we can never perceive it. We can only *be* it.

The present moment is presence itself. It is inconceivable.

This is not just another intellectual tidbit to file away. This is mind-shattering, world-dissolving: *everything, without exception, that you perceive, think and experience is the past. It has no reality.* Contemplate this deeply. Let it sink in. It destroys *everything*. It leaves *nothing*. This is horrifying news if you imagine that “you” are located “inside” the bodymind, looking out at an independent “real world.” To suddenly realize that *everything* you see and think is nothing but an unreliable and partial printout from the past leaves you with no way out.

Your whole life has been about finding a way out. You’ve tried therapy, coaching, meditation, bodywork, creative visualization, positive thinking, network marketing, blue-green algae, *everything* you can possibly try to save you. And suddenly you realize there is *no way out*.

There is a complete stop. You are simply here. There’s no escape. Right *here* is the possibility to discover that you are not trapped inside the bodymind at all. *You* are a dream. The bodymind is a dream. The world is a dream. Spirituality is a dream. *Everything* is a dream. Only *this* is real.

What is *this*?

No words can capture it. Bare presence is tremendously alive. It is pure energy. Fall into it, and you fall into nothing. Nothing is inconceivable. The mind finds this frightening. The mind is uncomfortable with anything that seems unpredictable, unknowable and out of control. There is no “me” in bare awareness, no story, no drama, no future, no hope, no meaning, no purpose, no body. To the mind, “nothing” is a terrifying idea: a barren, desolate vacuum, a nihilistic vacancy. It sounds dreadful, like death, like being buried alive. What could be worse?

And so, we pull back from bare presence. We keep very busy. We avoid this terrifying nothingness that lurks just under the surface of everything. We avoid silence. We avoid gaps in the conversation. We turn on the radio or the TV. We read books. We have “meaningful” careers. We raise families. We go on vacations. We chase gurus. We drink. We smoke. We consume. We talk. *Anything* to avoid this dreadful nothing.

But if you allow yourself to stop running away, and you let yourself fall into nothing, and *be* nothing, what do you actually find? Is it the desolate vacuum that you have been imagining and running away from? You may be very surprised!

The only way to find out is to do the experiment. No one else’s results will mean anything to you. You have to take the leap for yourself. And the paradox is that there is no “you” to do that, and no distance to be covered. The “leap” is the dissolution of that entire mirage.

## Can You Find A Boundary?

Right now, close your eyes and simply be aware of all the sounds and sensations that are here, listening openly to the whole thing. What happens if you try to sense where “you” begin and end? Can you actually find a boundary?

You can *think* about some boundary, like “the skin,” but in simple open awareness, can you actually *find it*? Does it have any real substance? Or is your actual *experience* the undividedness of everything?

Are the sounds you hear right now inside or outside you? Again, you can *think* that they are “outside,” but in your actual direct experience, if you listen openly, is there a boundary? Can you find the place where “inside” becomes “outside” and *visa versa*? Is anything outside or separate from awareness? Is there a “you” apart from, or other than awareness itself?

## Who Am I?

*The universe is uncaused, like a net of jewels in which each is only the reflection of all the others in a fantastic interrelated harmony without end.*

RAMESH S. BALSEKAR

Certainly there is *some* reality to the idea of separation, you may say. I can lift my arm, but not your arm. Likewise, I can feel the headache in my head, but not the one in your head. There must be *some* real separation between us and *some* kind of independent, individual intelligence contained inside each of us. Certainly “the world” was here long before “I” was born into it, and will persist long after “I” have died. Surely, it is “out there,” separate from “me.”

It’s a very convincing picture. But *where* is all of this actually happening? Notice that right now, absolutely *everything* perceivable or conceivable is *inside of you*, inside of awareness. You can *think* about “somewhere else,” you can imagine and conceptualize it, but that thought is always happening here, in present awareness.

The only “you” that “I” know about is made up of sensations, perceptions, conceptualizations and memories appearing in present awareness here and now—visual images, sounds, smells, touch—organized conceptually into the *idea* of “you,” supposedly “out there” in space, separate from “me.” It all happens here. That is true of every apparent “I” and every apparent “you.” We are sensations and memories inside one another, so which is which? How real is the separation?

There is certainly *apparent* diversity, differentiation and uniqueness, but is that the same thing as *actual* separation and independence? I can’t

live for more than a few minutes without oxygen, and not for more than a few days without water, or a few months without food. I am utterly dependent upon the environment that seems to contain me. In fact, there is no real separation between me and the environment, between mind and body, between me and you. The mind draws imaginary lines and uses different words, but in actuality, it is one undivided whole.

We say, "I can lift my arm." In this one simple, common, and seemingly innocent sentence, language creates the illusion of subject and object, the illusion of agency, the illusion of time, the illusion of cause and effect, the illusion of separation. It's all done with smoke and mirrors, better known as words. Something utterly inconceivable happens, and the words we use to describe it shape our perception of what it is.

"I can lift my arm." Where is the I? This is a wonderful question to explore. Take a moment to lift your arm several times. How exactly does it happen? We say "I" do it. But look closely at the actual experience as it happens. How exactly do "you" do this action? How do "you" initiate it? Where does the first impulse come from? In this case, you read a suggestion in this book to lift your arm. Where did this book come from? How did it come into your life? And then you "decided" to do what the book suggested. How did that "decision" get made? Can you actually find this elusive "I" that claims to be in charge of all this? The more you look for this "I," the deeper into nothingness you plunge. And the more closely you look at any simple action (lifting your arm, visualizing a flower, making a decision, writing a letter), the more mysterious it is.

We believe that thinking is something that "I" am initiating, but again, when we observe carefully, thinking also seems to come out of nowhere. We could say it comes out of conditioning, or out of the brain, but where do they come from? Can "you" control what your next thought will be? Or is any semblance of control, and of "you," merely another thought?

From the moment we are apparently born, we are told our name, our gender, our place in society. We learn to control "our" body. We are alternately praised and scolded for what "we" do, and told that we are responsible for "our" lives. It's like being gradually hypnotized into a kind of trance. By the time we have reached adulthood, we fully believe

that “I” am truly independent and in control of “my” life. “I” *could* screw the whole thing up. We become obsessed with trying to control the uncontrollable. It never occurs to us that this entire manifestation (movie after movie), along with the main character, along with the entire spiritual search, might all be nothing more substantial than a dream, a play of Consciousness.

By paying attention to our direct experience, we can begin to distinguish the actual subjective *experience* of “I,” which is nothing more or less than unbounded awareness, from the *story* of “me,” an ever-shifting series of fictional narratives about a made-up character in a virtual reality, like a television program.

When the story of separation is believed, solidity and reality are given to limitations and divisions that don’t actually exist. Feelings of guilt, blame, self-doubt and self-hatred arise from the story. When we live out of the story, we are lost in daydreams. We miss the miracle of life as it actually is, because we are forever seeking something else. We can’t relate to other people in a truly free and intimate way because we see only our ideas of them, our projections. We keep tripping over imaginary obstacles. On the global scale, we drop bombs on people we have never met, imagining that they are our enemy. God has incredible powers of imagination and visualization.

“We” don’t do any of this. That’s all part of the story. None of this is personal because the apparent “persons” are only imaginary disguises hiding the One Reality, the Absolute. When that truth is seen clearly (by no one), suffering ends. There may still be pain and what we would think of as terrible circumstances. But there will no longer be suffering. Suffering happens only *in* the story. Suffering is created by the mind.

Whatever *appears* is only the One Reality. It looks like chairs and tables and bodies and airplanes. Those are all thought-forms, concepts, ideas, ways that perception organizes itself in order to function. And that very functioning that sorts and labels and struggles to survive is itself an activity of that same reality. “I” am not separate from or in control of this activity, anymore than “I” created my own brain. “I” is a thought-form, a sensation.



Is the One Reality also a thought-form?

Yes, obviously as soon as we label and conceptualize it, it is. It points to the open space of not knowing, the undividedness of being. But in the blink of an eye, the mind turns no-thing-ness into a *thing*: a Giant Expanded Ego, an objectified Blankness, an upgraded version of God the Father, some Primal Substance, an assurance that all is well, that we are in good hands despite frequent appearances to the contrary. This book isn't about believing in some idea that feels comforting. It is an invitation to let every belief go, even the belief in oneness.

## Is the World Real?

*Row, Row, Row your boat, gently down the stream  
Merrily, Merrily, Merrily, Merrily, life is but a dream*

*Children's song*

*Thus shall ye think of all this fleeting world:  
A star at dawn, a bauble in a stream;  
A flash of lightning in a summer cloud,  
A flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream.*

BUDDHA

*The real position of an awakened person in relation to existence is that of a person in the process of reading a book—I am the reader and I never forget that....But my fundamental non-implication in the hero's turns of fortune in no way affects the reader's pleasure, nor even an identification with the hero!*

STEPHEN JOURDAIN

*To see the illusory nature of the universe is primarily to see the illusory nature of oneself.*

RAMESH S. BALSEKAR



*The World is Illusory;  
God alone is real;  
God is the world...*

*When your standpoint becomes that of wisdom,  
you will find the world to be God.*

RAMANA MAHARSHI

Distressed and outraged by the idea that the world is nothing more than an insubstantial and fleeting appearance, someone once asked an Advaita teacher if the starving Africans are real. The teacher replied, “They’re as real as you are.”

How real is that? That’s a great question to live with.

Seeing through the illusion of a movie or a novel or our life doesn’t mean we can’t enjoy the play. In fact, I would say that we can’t *fully* enjoy it *until* we understand that it is an illusion. And is a movie or a novel “just” an illusion? Calling “you” and “the world” an illusion doesn’t mean there is nothing here. There is, but it’s not what we think it is.

A dog, an ant, and a human all looking in the same direction do not see the same thing. Two humans don’t even see the same thing. Countless studies have shown that people often see what they expect to see, even when it is not actually there. Memory is notoriously capricious and creative. And as we’ve already noted, *all* perception is actually the past. So, does anything actually exist outside present experiencing? Is there such a thing as objective reality, or are there just infinite, momentary, subjective apparitions? And how would we know one way or the other?



Human beings, with our ability to think abstractly and use language, have labeled and classified the universe that we perceive. These labels and classifications are useful for our survival and our day-to-day functioning. We can call this make-believe world created by perception, memory, thought and language the relative world. It is a world apparently divided up into many separate, independent objects. It is a world of opposites. *It is a*

*world that exists only in the mind.*

When attention is absorbed in this virtual reality, it seems like there is “you” and “me” and “dogs” and “cats” and “events” and “problems” and “happenings” and “dilemmas” and “decisions” and “duality” and “non-duality” and “awareness” and “enlightenment” and all kinds of things going on. It’s like turning on the TV and getting absorbed in one program after another. It *seems* real. But how real is it?

This is a question to live with and to explore, not philosophically or abstractly, but through direct inquiry and attention, moment to moment. How real is yesterday? How real is my life story? How real is this problem I seem to have? How real is this room I seem to be in? How real is my body? Where is all this occurring? What *is* it? What am I?

Our language and abstract thinking have divided “the arm” from “the leg,” they have divided “New York” from “New Jersey,” they have divided “you” from “me.” They have divided “up” from “down,” “good” from “evil,” and “the relative” from “the absolute.” But in actuality, no such divisions really exist. The arm is not really separate from the leg, anymore than New York is really separate from New Jersey, anymore than up is really separate from down, anymore than I am really separate from you, or good is really separate from evil.

The absolute is the whole thing, which is no thing. The whole is container-less, boundless, limitless. The relative is all about containers, limits, boundaries, and the resulting objects and dualities. The absolute isn’t separate from the relative. It includes it, but it isn’t confined or divided by the imaginary boundaries and limits that language and thinking create.

The absolute is never not here. Our attention can be preoccupied with the relative, with the map, with the words and the world they create, with our beliefs and concepts to such a degree that it *seems* like the absolute has been lost. But has it? Where could it go?

Actually, the absolute is the only “thing” that really *is* here, but it is not a thing, so it defies all attempts to capture it mentally.

Every *thing* that you can see, name, think about, describe, experience, or understand depends on awareness to be. It is an impermanent appearance, a momentary pattern, an image in the brain or in Consciousness.

It has no independent reality. But we don't usually *feel* that way about ourselves and the world we perceive. Despite everything we know intellectually about the unreliable nature of perception and memory, we nonetheless tend to regard our own perceptions and memories as reliable, factual and true. We tend to regard ourselves and the movie we're appearing in as solid fact. It's a very convincing illusion.

What gives every-thing its apparent reality is the presence in which it all appears. Presence is invisible. When you look to find it, you find nothing. Anything you find is not it. And yet, paradoxically, presence is the only "thing" of which you are entirely certain, without the slightest doubt. It is the one "thing" that cannot be denied.



The absolute is not the opposite of the relative. The absolute is outside the frame of duality. All duality is in it. The absolute includes everything. You don't have to burn the menu to enjoy the meal. And you don't have to deny the world in all its magnificent diversity and texture to recognize that it has no independent existence.

The mind can get itself all tangled up in knots trying to work this stuff out mentally. It won't be worked out. The answer isn't in the mind. It's right here as soon as the mind relaxes its grip and gives up the search.

## The Divine Dance

Giving up or doing nothing is not something the mind can "do," anymore than falling asleep at night is something the mind can do. In both cases, it is a kind of relaxing or surrendering—doing nothing, as opposed to doing something. It might begin with simply *noticing* the tension of seeking and efforting, without trying to change it or make it go away.

Hearing is happening. Seeing is happening. We don't have to *try* to hear the traffic or the birds. Awareness happens on its own. Awareness

is not a strategy. The me who wants to “do” awareness is a thought, the imagined subject of a thought like, “Am I doing it right?” This thought appears *in* awareness. This thought pretends that it refers to something real, that this something (“me”) possesses awareness. Actually, it is the other way around.

As the whole, as awareness, we have no problems, no goals, no purpose. Only the illusory me has problems and destinations, and once we imagine that we are this illusory me, there is no end to apparent problems, no end to imaginary destinations.

We lose track of the fact that thought is thought. We don’t realize that thought is *creating* the world we apparently live in; we think that thought is merely *describing* an objective reality. We think and imagine and believe that we are somebody, that something is lacking, that we have to get somewhere, that we have time to get from here to somewhere else. We imagine that the future is really out there. This all *seems* very real.

But is it?

There is an old Hindu metaphor of a rope that is mistaken for a snake. When it looks like a snake, we experience fear and the sense of danger. The danger seems real. But actually, the danger is only imaginary. The rope is *always* only a rope, even when it *looks* like a snake.

Are you ever *really* lost, or do you only pretend to be? Perhaps if you observe carefully, you will find that you actually enjoy getting lost, just as you enjoy going to the movies. But sooner or later, it is time to be found, time to come home. How to do that? Very simple. You *are* home. You can’t *be* anyplace else. The rope only *looks* like a snake. The problem doesn’t really exist.

## Selling Water: A Story

I started offering two weekly meetings in the Bay Area. I held private sessions with people. Readers of my book wrote me letters and emails, and I wrote back. I talked to some of them on the phone. The New York

Open Center flew me to New York City to give a weekend workshop on meditation. I made more money that one weekend than I usually made in a whole month. I gave talks at several Buddhist centers and a university, and got paid for some of them. Sounds True recorded my book. Maybe my dream of making a living doing what I truly love was actually materializing!

A German publisher bought the German rights and I got a nice advance on that, and then there was a Dutch translation. In addition, I took a job at Peet's Coffee in Oakland, and after that, did part-time office work for a chiropractor. Along with my book royalties, other writing projects, income from my meetings and workshops, the last remaining bits of an inheritance I had gotten twenty years earlier, and some generous gifts from my mother, I was surviving quite nicely. But the end seemed always to be in sight. I've never felt very good at making money. That's one of the stories I tell myself, and I often believe it.

I dreamed once that Toni Packer was giving dharma transmission to Martha, my arch-enemy at the time, instead of to me. In the dream I screamed at Toni, "Toni, I *get* the Absolute. It's the relative I don't understand."

We have a strong value on independence in our culture, a notion that we must each individually pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, stand on our own two feet, carry our own weight, and be self-supporting. There is certainly something to be said for being able to take care of yourself. But in our society, a view that takes the truth of things into account seems largely absent. We feel personally responsible and in charge. In fact, the universe *is* supporting each one of us to do precisely what it wants us to be doing, like the lilies of the field that Jesus spoke of. How could it be otherwise? But the mind doesn't always believe it. The mind tells me that Joan has to pull herself up by her own bootstraps, and she damn well better hurry up and do it before she shrivels up and dies, having ruined her whole life. The mind wants Joan's destiny to be spectacular and painless, not ordinary and terminal. In truth, each lily in the field is utterly spectacular, but only in the most ordinary and momentary way. And each lily is *completely* dependent upon the ground, the air, and the light. No lily worries about pulling itself up by its own bootstraps.



I went through all kinds of agitation about whether it was okay to charge money for my meetings. There were so many ideas floating around about spirituality and money. Vipassana teachers worked only for donation. Monks were supposed to possess nothing and traditionally begged for their food. Likewise, many Indian gurus never touched money, but their society supported them. All these people depended on those who *did* touch money!

Ramana actually *stole* the money that took him to Arunachala, his beloved mountain. Once there, he sat down in samadhi, allowing the insects to chew up his legs while grateful devotees put food into his desireless mouth to keep him alive. He never charged money and wasn't concerned in the least with marketing, financial success, or even the survival of the body. I wasn't about to do anything that radical. Money was therefore a necessity. And *maybe* there was nothing inherently more spiritual about a life of material renunciation.

The old Zen masters saw the humor in what they were doing and happily noted that they were selling water by the banks of the river. But they took it lightly, as a joke. I took it all very seriously, fearing that "I" might do the wrong thing.

When I think about it, it seems obvious enough that in our culture, money is the medium of exchange. The person who provides a spiritual service has to eat and pay rent just like everybody else. If that person has to do other work to earn the money they need to survive, then they will have less or no time and energy for the spiritual work they want to offer. In India, that was understood. If you sat down in bliss at the foot of a mountain to contemplate God, people fed you. They took care of you. It was a deeply respected occupation, doing nothing. In our society, we pay our car mechanic, our hairdresser, our therapist, our entertainers, our baseball players, our consultants. Why not spiritual teachers? When it comes right down to it, isn't *everyone* selling water at the banks of the river?

Was money inherently evil, corrupting, and unspiritual? Or was it just another funny shape that the divine was taking in its cosmic play?



I loved doing the weekly meetings. It was clearly a living process, and while I was shaping it in a certain sense, it had a life of its own and was being created through all of us by something beyond us. I had no idea what would come out of my mouth next or what it all might look like next time. I learned a lot from people's questions and my responses. It was easy to see, in the others, the absurdity of the stories, the flimsiness of the imaginary webs that seem to bind us. Whereas when it was my own story, its apparent reality had a greater hold. So everyone was a mirror in which I could see the emptiness of all beliefs, and the absolute undeniable radiance that is always here.

There was also a certain sadness that came after the very first meeting I held. I'd been *thinking* about doing this for so long. It had been such a big deal in my mind. And suddenly it was actually happening, and I could see that in a sense it was totally ordinary. I was not being transformed like Cinderella into a totally new and perfect Joan. In fact, here I was, still biting my fingers, still making mistakes. The mess remained. This obviously wasn't going to save me either; another dream of salvation bites the dust. I could see my Zen teacher Joko Beck smiling. She always thought disappointment was wonderful.

As the weeks went by, offering meetings made me appreciate more than ever the way that Toni works: spacious, not knowing, not imposing an answer. As I gave talks, I was listening to the talk myself, not knowing what would come out next. I never planned them. I let them emerge from silence, from the listening stillness. I loved being present without a plan. I loved the people who were showing up.

## Meditation: The Joy of Nothing at All

*That there is nothing which can be attained is not idle talk; it is the truth. You have always been one with the Buddha.*

HUANG PO

The spiritual life (true meditation or satsang) is not something we do occasionally at a special time and place. It is rather our whole life, or put another way, it is this moment right now. It is not a method or a technique. It requires no special posture, location, or surroundings. It can happen anywhere, under any and all circumstances. Every moment, just as it is, is meditation. Actually, there is only one timeless moment. *This is meditation.*

There is truly nothing to attain. And yet, whenever that is not seen to be so, there will be suffering. It isn't "you" doing it. It's an impersonal appearance, like the weather. It, too, is the One Reality. But it will hurt.

In the absolute sense, there is truly nothing to do about it, *other than what you do*. You will do whatever you do. You won't be able to do anything else, except what you do. Whatever you actually do is perfect. It is exactly what is needed. Getting dead drunk for several years was an important and indispensable part of my own path. You never know what is needed; you can only see what is apparently happening. The mind will have lots of better ideas for what you could or should do instead. It will provide elaborate criticisms and justifications. It will strategize, take vows, and make plans. And still, you will do whatever you do. The "you" is a mirage, an optical illusion. Actions happen, including thoughts, but there is no individual entity at the controls. Whatever you do is your practice: meditating, watching TV, getting drunk, mowing the lawn, biting your fingers, listening to the traffic.

The notion that something is a mistake, or that something needs to be other than it is, is simply that, a notion. Any intentional "practice" runs the risk of perpetuating the illusion that your true nature is not fully present now, that "you" could ever be separated from it, that "it" is something to be achieved or acquired.

At the same time, just about anything *else* you do is also likely to reinforce that illusion, and at least meditation is *aimed* at seeing through it, which most other activities are not. Doing nothing is sometimes misunderstood as "you *should not* do anything," as in, you should not meditate or engage in any form of intentional activity. *This* "not meditating" is just as much a doing as deliberately "meditating," and is equally rooted in the idea that something is needed (in this case, "doing



nothing”) in order to somehow improve. If you cling to “doing nothing” as if it was something to do, you have missed the point, which is also perfectly okay, and not “your” doing! Doing happens by itself. “Doing nothing” points to the recognition that there is nothing that “you” need to do, or *can* do other than exactly what happens. That might be meditating, and it might be swigging scotch.

If you get stuck on one side or the other of any apparent duality, you have missed the whole truth. The problems are imaginary, and yet the suffering hurts. As my first Zen teacher Mel Weitsman put it, “You are perfect just as you are, but that doesn’t mean there is no room for improvement.” The mystery is too subtle for any position to take root. The truth is in groundlessness.

Meditation is about groundlessness. Formal meditation is an artificially simplified space where you can pay attention to what is. What we call “artificial” is actually as natural as anything else. It all comes from the same nowhere. Meditation is about resting in the absolute, which just means the sound of the traffic, the sensations of breathing, the tightness in the shoulder, whatever is.

*What is* takes no effort to achieve, and in fact, cannot be achieved. *It is*. Any effort to achieve it is rooted in the assumption that this isn’t quite it. And the falling away of that effort cannot be achieved through effort. In fact, that falling away does not even need to happen. The very notion that it needs to happen is the same illusion. If effort appears, then effort appears. There is no problem with that, unless you have the idea that this effort “shouldn’t” be here, that it has to be eliminated. In fact, nothing needs to be eliminated. If the efforting hurts, simply relax. It really is that simple. If you don’t relax, then be tense. No problem. Meditation allows everything to be as it is.

We could say that true practice is wherever life takes you. It might involve getting dead drunk for a few years. It might involve a rigorous formal Zen practice. It might be art making. Or therapy. Or body awareness work. Or an intimate relationship. Or getting a job. Or quitting your job. It might be spending time in prison. There is no single right way because there is no way at all.