



THAT IS THAT

Essays About True Nature

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"Poonjaji, Master of Love" - painting by Giri Maruta

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YOU CANNOT BE HARMED

Consciousness is affected but not harmed. It is the nature of aware consciousness to be affected by everything it experiences. Every color and sound, every event and experience, and every passing thought or feeling affects your consciousness. That is why we call it consciousness. A rock is not as affected by these things, and so we consider a rock less conscious than a person.

And yet consciousness is not harmed by anything. That is its nature, that it cannot be harmed. The form of anything can be permanently changed or harmed. Your body can be harmed, but the consciousness that inhabits your body cannot be harmed.

This is good news. It is like a get out of jail free card in Monopoly. No matter what happens, you as consciousness are completely unharmed. What a relief! There is nothing that can harm you. No one and nothing has ever harmed you.

This is not to say that consciousness is not affected deeply by both the good and bad things that happen to us. Every hurtful and unkind act leaves an impression in the consciousness of those involved. It is just that the impression does not permanently limit or damage the awareness of those involved. If something has an effect on us that is permanent, then it could be said that it has harmed us. But if the effect is temporary, then what is the ultimate harm? Everything that profoundly affects our awareness, from the painful to the tragic, eventually passes. It is the miracle of our consciousness that it can heal from any wound, even if our body cannot.

What you are is eternal aware space or consciousness. You have a body, but you are not that body. So, while your body can be permanently harmed just like your car or your camera can be harmed, you as consciousness eventually heal or recover from all of the experiences that affect you. Even if the affect lasts for lifetimes, eventually the karma or debt is released. From the perspective of something eternal, even many lifetimes is not that long.

When you realize that your true nature as consciousness cannot be harmed, that puts all of life's difficulties in perspective. Similarly, when someone's car is totaled in an accident but they are not hurt, we consider them lucky. This is because we have a perspective on the relative importance of damage to their car. It's not such a big deal really, especially relative

to a serious physical injury or death. If you realize that you are aware space, then everything else is like the totaled car: no big deal.

Some things are still more important than others. Physical harm is still a bigger difficulty than harm to a car or other physical object. But by knowing the truth of your nature as un-harmable space, then the bigger difficulties and even tragedies in life can be seen in perspective.

A simple question to ask is, What effect does this experience have on my eternal soul? And while everything leaves an impression on your awareness and ultimately your soul, nothing can ever permanently harm your soul, your true nature as empty awareness. In fact, every experience enriches your soul. Every moment adds to the depth and richness of your deepest knowing. We sense this in people who have faced a lot of difficulty in life and who are willing to accept their fate. There is a depth and wisdom that only comes from a wide range of experience, including painful and unwanted experiences.

This willingness to meet and have any experience can come from the simple recognition that what you are is open spacious awareness. Your body, mind, personality, emotions and desires all appear within that awareness, but they are not you, and the real you cannot be harmed.

WHAT DO I DO WHEN THERE IS NO DOER?

Spiritual teachings suggest that there is no doer, that there is no separate self that is the source of our actions. This teaching is the source of much confusion, as it is contrary to our experience. It seems that there is a doer and that “I” am the doer: “I” get up in the morning, “I” walk the dog, and “I” drive to work. How do these things happen if there is no doer? And if there is no doer, then what do I do? How do I live my life if there is no one here to live it? What do I do if there is no doer?

This confusion exists because spiritual teachings point to something that doesn’t exist in the usual way. The nature of reality can’t be described or explained with words, and it can’t be experienced through the ordinary senses. In speaking about something that can’t be spoken about, the easiest approach is often to use negation. If you can’t speak directly about something, then you are left with saying what it is not.

So spiritual teachings contain a lot of negation: There is no self. There is no doer. The world is an illusion. Not this. Not that. Negation can be effective in pointing us away from false ideas about the ultimate truth of things, and it can encourage us to look within to see the falseness of the idea of a “me.” If you take a moment to look for yourself, you will see that there is nothing you can identify as a separate self. So, in this sense, it is accurate to say that there is no self and no doer.

However, the mind can’t conceive of or even really experience nothing. If you are experiencing something, then that is by definition not nothing. So when the mind is pointed to nothing or to the absence of a self or a doer, it makes a picture or concept of nothing and thinks about that. If we are told there is no doer, the mind makes a picture of the absence of somebody, something like an empty chair or a broom sweeping by itself.

Again, this contradicts our actual experience. There is something in the chair when I sit down in it. The broom only sweeps when somebody picks it up and starts sweeping. So there is obviously a distortion or inaccuracy in the approach of negation. While it does evoke a certain experience of emptiness that can be spacious and restful, it doesn’t capture the totality of reality. It leaves out our real world experience.

Another approach is the opposite: Instead of saying there is no self and there is no world and there is no doer, we can say there is only Self, the world is all one thing, and it is this totality of existence that does everything. In other words, “everything” sweeps the floor and sits in the chair. If we look deeply into our experience, there is some truth to this perspective. If we trace back all of the causes of any action, we see that there are an infinite number of influences or causes for the simplest action.

For example, you may sweep the floor because your mother taught you to keep a spotless house and your dad taught you to be responsible, not to mention all of the other messages you received from the culture and society about cleanliness and responsibility. Add to that all of the people that influenced your mom and dad and everyone else who ever had an impact on you. And what about all the factors that led to the particular path of evolution that gave you those opposable thumbs that allow you to use a broom? If you really trace it back to all of the factors at play when you pick up a broom and start sweeping, you can see how it might make more sense to say that everyone and everything is sweeping the floor. There is a doer, but it is not you. It is everything. And by the way, all of these factors are at work if you don’t sweep the floor. Not doing something is just another thing we do.

This approach of including more and more instead of negating everything is also a useful teaching tool. It evokes a sense of the oneness and richness of life. But again, it doesn’t really capture the direct experience of an action like sweeping. If only “everything” would sweep my floor, then “I” could go take a nap. Speaking about everything doesn’t really capture the sense of no self that is experienced when we look within using spiritual practices such as self inquiry.

So if it is not a complete description to say there is no doer, and it is also not a complete description to say that everything is the doer, what is wrong with just saying that “I” sweep the floor and be done with it? For purely practical purposes this is enough of a description, but is it really a complete description? As we have already seen, it leaves out all of the rich and complex causes of our actions, and it leaves out the absence of a separate self that we discover when we look within. It also doesn’t suggest that there is more to this reality than meets the eye. Even if deeper spiritual realities can’t be described with words, does this mean they don’t exist?

So we are left with quite a dilemma. It is incomplete to say there is no doer, it is incomplete to say that everything is the doer, and it is incomplete to say that “I” am the doer. It is like a multiple choice test where all of the answers are wrong! Yet what is it like to not have an answer? What is it like to hold the question even when we have exhausted all of the possible answers?

The question of what is going on here, what is this experience of doing, can be a rich experience in and of itself. The question can put us more in touch with our experience than any answer can. The question invites a direct sensing of all of these various levels of our experience. As the broom moves across the floor, is it possible to simultaneously experience the emptiness within, the richness and oneness of all things and the personal actions of our particular body? Why do we have to choose one?

And what about the original question, What do I do? Could this also be a rich opportunity to explore all of the dimensions of existence? Why does there have to be a right answer? Can the question itself evoke a deeper sensing of life and an endless willingness to question again and again? What do I do now? And what about now? The gift may be in the question itself, not in some final answer. Life is unfolding in ever new and different ways, so maybe we can only discover in each new moment what the everything and nothing is going to do next.

There is an assumption that spiritual teachings are supposed to bring us to spiritual answers, that we are supposed to get somewhere finally. But what if the point of this spiritual journey is the journey itself? What if all of the answers are true and relevant when they arise, and yet they become irrelevant in the next breath?

The question of what is doing is never done, never fully answered. And so perhaps the question of what to do is not meant to ever be done or fully answered. Letting go of the idea of a right or final answer can make the question come alive in this very moment. What are you doing right now? What is most true to do now? And then what about now? It is always time to ask again because it is always a new now.

Just for this moment, find out what happens if you just allow yourself to not know what is the right thing to do, who would do it, and even if there is anything to do, or if doing even really happens. When you question that deeply, is there more or less of a compulsion to act in unhealthy or ignorant ways? Or is there a natural curiosity and sense of wonder that arises and puts you very much in touch with all of the mysterious elements that make up this particular moment? Does this curiosity lead you to rash and silly decisions, or does it allow impulses and intuitions to arise from deeper places within your being? If you know less and less about doing, what happens next?

The gift of the deepest spiritual questions arises in the day-to-day living of life. Asking What do I do? can lead you on an exploration that has no boundaries, and the journey can only start here and now. What most often limits us is our conclusions, and the simple antidote is to ask another question.

What do I do when there is no doer, when everything is the doer, and when it is also up to me to do something or not?

A LOVE POEM

*Your hands have a cool dry touch
And yet they warm my heart
Your eyes are emptier than the night sky
And yet they pierce my defenses
Your body does not even exist
And yet you dance so beautifully
That I am lost in tears*

*How can silence say so much?
How can empty space feel so full?
Chasing after more and more is so futile
When only less will satisfy*

TWO POSSIBILITIES

In every moment, there are two possibilities. One possibility is to have all of our curiosity, attention, and passion focused on what is happening. The other, is to have that same curiosity, attention, and passion focused on what is *not* happening, what is not present, or what we think should or shouldn't be happening. In every moment, the question is: What are you giving your attention to? Are you allowing *what is*, or going to battle with it—trying to change it in some way?

When our focus is on *what is*, our experience of *what is* opens up and becomes bigger, richer, and more complete. But when it is on *what is not* (the past, the future, or any thought about *what is*), our experience of the moment contracts and becomes narrower and full of suffering and struggle, because inherent in a focus on *what is not* is a struggle with *what is*.

When we look, we discover that most of the time we are in opposition to *what is* and oriented toward *what is not*. Life is mostly about how to make things better and get more pleasure, or how to get rid of the things that are painful. We are constantly evaluating our experience, looking to see what's wrong with what we are experiencing and how it could be improved. We tend to be focused on what's wrong with the moment or on what could be added to it to make it better. As a result, our attention becomes very narrow and our awareness very limited.

Once we see how much time we spend struggling with *what is*, the tendency is to go to battle with *that*—to try to fix that. We think the solution is to fix this tendency to try to change everything. But that only changes the content of our struggle: Now we are struggling with our tendency to try to change things. We suffer over the fact that we are suffering.

The other possibility is to just notice how much you suffer, without trying to do anything about it. Just allow the fact that you don't allow much. Just recognize that that is the way it is. This struggling with *what is*, is just what we were conditioned to do; and this conditioning is also a part of *what is*.

Once we stop being in opposition to *what is*, it is possible to see how all of our struggling comes from the idea of a *me*. Without the assumption that something is *my* experience, there wouldn't be much point in trying to change anything about the moment. Our effort and struggle to change *what is* only makes sense if there is a *me*. It is all in service to maintaining the idea of a *me*. In fact, the struggle is the *me*. When there is no struggle, there is no *me*. All of our suffering is the result of how we have and maintain an identity.

Once we realize this, the tendency is to try to fix this—to try to change our belief about who we are. We focus on getting rid of identification, which is again, focusing on *what is not*. We are still suffering because now we are at war with our tendency to identify. Instead of being oriented toward and accepting of *what is* (our tendency to identify), we are oriented toward how we think it should be: I should know better than to be caught in identification; I should know who I really am.

Another possibility is to be really present to this tendency to identify, without making any effort to change it. If that's what is happening, then that's what is happening. You just let it be that way. You can even be amazed by it all, including the fact that there is a sense of a *me*. You see how unreal this *me* is, but you don't struggle to be rid of it. There's no longer an assumption that something is wrong that needs to be fixed.

When it is finally okay for the moment to be just the way it is—including the fact that we identify as *me* and therefore battle with the moment—then more of our experience can be recognized and included in our awareness. If we are willing to be present to and allow our identification, then it is also possible to notice something beyond identification, something beyond our struggle and effort to maintain a *me*. What that something is, for lack of a better word, is Being.

Along with awareness of identification and the struggle and suffering inherent in that, is an awareness of this larger ground of Being in which everything is happening. When we see that all the *me* is and ever has been is a lie, but we don't turn away from that awareness or judge ourselves for it or try to get rid of the *me*; then we start to notice that, along with the struggling inherent in the *me*, is a beautiful, rich presence of Being, which is allowing everything, including the experience of *me*. We come to see that the *me's* struggle is only a tiny percentage of our entire experience and that this struggle is happening in an ocean of allowing. This allowing is Being.

When we are allowing, we include in our awareness what it is that is allowing, and that is Being—which is who we really are. This realization can be a very jolting experience or a very quiet one because Being is actually very familiar. Every moment of allowing has actually been a moment of experiencing Being.

EXPLORING EMPTINESS

Sometimes we feel an inner sense of emptiness. When we look within, it seems like nothing is there, so we distract ourselves with something on the outside, like food or television; and yet, these outer distractions only temporarily take care of the emptiness, or more accurately, they only temporarily keep our attention. When the distraction is over, the emptiness returns.

What is it about emptiness that makes us want to move away from it? Is emptiness really a bad sensation? When you consider the literal meaning of emptiness, how can it be a problem? Is it possible for “nothing” to hurt you? And with the inner sense of emptiness, is that empty feeling actually uncomfortable, or is the restlessness and activity of trying to avoid it or distract ourselves that which is uncomfortable?

This is an important distinction. We are so used to assuming that lack or emptiness or something missing is a problem that we are uncomfortable when that is our experience. But is the emptiness itself the source of our discomfort? Or is the action we take in response to emptiness the source of our discomfort, including the inner activity of distracting ourselves with ideas and judgments about the fact that we feel empty?

It's not our fault that we tend to avoid feelings of emptiness. We were taught to do it by everyone around us who was doing it. In fact, there is a good reason to avoid one feeling of emptiness—the feeling of hunger—as it is important to eat when you are hungry. However, we are so unfamiliar with the sensations of emptiness that we often interpret a lack of something else as a lack of food. Have you ever eaten when you weren't really hungry to try to distract or relieve yourself from a feeling? It's possible to simply experience the sensations of emptiness or lack and discover that they aren't bad sensations. Try it and see for yourself:

Exercise: What happens right now if you just allow any sensation of emptiness or lack or there not being enough? Are those sensations painful, or are they just particular sensations? Perhaps there is something in particular that feels lacking: a lack of strength, energy, or self-worth; a lack of excitement or interest; a sense of there not being enough security or safety; or a feeling that right now there is no joy or happiness

present. And yet are the sensations unpleasant that let you know these things seem to be missing? What happens if you just let them be here for a moment?

It certainly would simplify life if we didn't have to do anything about these feelings of lack. So much of our activity and effort and our inner striving and longing is meant to get us more of what we seem to lack. But what if it is okay to lack something? What if we could just be here feeling empty? What a relief! So much less to do!

Even more surprising is that the sensations of emptiness can be enjoyed. There is a richness to silence, to stillness, to space itself. We have been overlooking the richness of the inner silent spaces in our being. In a sense we are quite unfamiliar with them because we have been looking away from them most of our lives, so we are not very discriminating about their nature. Just as a wine connoisseur can make finer distinctions in the flavor and quality of wine than someone who has only tasted wine a few times, we can become connoisseurs of emptiness.

Perhaps the biggest surprise is when we discover that the very thing that feels lacking in an experience of emptiness is often found in the emptiness itself. For example if we are feeling weak or lacking strength and energy, and we stay present to that specific sensation of weakness or lack, then we may notice a deeper more subtle sense of strength appearing in the emptiness. It is hard to say if the strength appears in the emptiness or if it was always there, but we were just too busy trying to avoid the emptiness to sense the subtle strength within it.

Inner experiences of strength, joy, peace, and love, which can be found in the empty places within us, are much more subtle than the feelings we generate from our usual attempts to feel strong or happy or loving. However, as we focus on subtle, inner strength, joy, peace or love, the experience can become powerful and real in a way that far exceeds our expectations. Who knew that there was a deep reservoir of infinite peace lying under the restless feeling of a lack of peace? What a surprise to find abundant joy in the dry, empty sense of a lack of excitement and fun?

This principle—that there is a true source of strength, joy, peace and love to be found inside our strongest feelings of emptiness and lack—is a radical new perspective. But this truth can only be known fully by diving into each experience of inner emptiness we encounter. It is so contrary to our conditioning and therefore to much of our experience that it requires a completely new habit of paying attention to the feelings of emptiness in order to discover for yourself the richness waiting there.

This would be easier if every time you turned your awareness towards an inner feeling of emptiness, “not enough”, or lack, you were immediately filled with a sense of abundant peace or joy. But the experience of emptiness is many-layered, like an onion. So, as we move into a particular feeling of emptiness we may find a deep inner sense of strength or love, or we may just uncover a deeper layer of conditioning. Initially, the sense of emptiness or lack might get worse. As we allow the feeling of there not being enough or of being inadequate to just be there, painful memories or a strong aversion to the sensation of emptiness may be triggered, which can make it difficult to keep your attention on the emptiness itself. Each time we are distracted or find ourselves avoiding the sense of something lacking, we miss the chance to discover a little more of the true nature of that inner emptiness, including any subtle inner quality to be found there. What is needed is a new habit of staying with each new layer of feeling and memory and sometimes stronger sensations of emptiness and incompleteness. There is nothing you can do to make the deepest feelings of peace and joy appear except to stay with your experience until they do.

Exercise: Notice what you are feeling inside right now. Especially note whether there is any sense of emptiness or lack. It could be a lack of worthiness or capability or clarity and understanding. Or it could be a lack of peace or joy or love. For now, just allow any sense of lack to be here. Notice specifically how you experience the sense of lack. Where is it located? How big is the empty space? What are the sensations associated with it? Is the emptiness itself uncomfortable or is it just empty? Keep paying attention to the empty feeling and notice what happens next. Are there thoughts or memories that arise? Is it easy or hard to stay with the experience you are having? Remember to drop into your Heart or give space to the feelings, as this can help you stay with your experience. Know that whatever arises next is exactly what you need to experience right now. If there is a painful memory or uncomfortable emotion that is triggered, then just stay with that as best you can. Notice if there is an even deeper sense of emptiness or lack in each emotion that arises.

If a strong desire or urge to move away or distract yourself arises, just stay with that urge. And again, notice if there is a deeper or bigger sense of emptiness that lies behind or beneath the desire to distract or move away. Especially be curious about the empty spaces or direct sensations of lack that you discover as you stay with your experience. Are the empty spaces painful or just empty? What qualities does the space itself have? Is it moving or still? Does it have a color? Is it clear or foggy? How big or deep is the emptiness?

When your attention is simply on the empty space itself, you may notice something present or moving within the space. What is present in the center of the space where something is lacking? Is there any peace here in the emptiness? Is there any joy or

happiness? Is there any love? Set aside for a moment any expectations of what that peace or joy or love should look like and just be curious about any that you find. Especially set aside any expectations about how big or strong the feeling should be, and just be curious about the smallest sense of strength or clarity or peace that is present right now. Notice what happens as you pay attention to the center of the emptiness. Does the feeling of peace or joy get stronger, or does touching into a true sense of peace or joy trigger an even deeper longing and sense of lack? Stay with whatever arises for as long as you can. If any strong emotions or desires are stirred up by this exercise, take some time to just rest and settle after you stop exploring. This can be intense and difficult work, and it is important to nurture yourself in the process.

It is the most surprising and liberating discovery to find that everything that really matters in life, such as peace, joy, strength, power, clarity, value or worth, support, nourishment, and love, can be found within you—and not just when you are lucky enough to be already experiencing them fully, but also when it seems like they are absent and have never been there. Once you have discovered them in the sense of lack and incompleteness many times, then it becomes possible to just relax and know they are always there, no matter what the present moment feels like.

This is the key discovery. Experiences of our true nature come and go like every other experience, but to deeply know that love is here in all of its glory even when you are experiencing the absence of it frees us from struggle and suffering. To know that everything you could ever want or need is already here, even when you are experiencing the opposite, frees you from having to acquire inner or outer experiences of satisfaction.

Satisfaction is available, whether an experience is manifesting or just here in potential. Just as the potential energy stored in a battery means that you can be so sure of experiencing light when you turn on your flashlight that you can also turn it off when it isn't needed, so knowing the true potential of inner space or emptiness means that you can trust that everything is fine even if you are not experiencing any peace, joy, or love. It is still here in pure potential. In fact, the experiences or expressions of love and joy can never capture the infinite potential of the source of love and joy within us. Unlike the physical battery, which has limited potential energy, the source of peace, love, and joy in the emptiness of space or Being can never be exhausted. There is always more to be discovered, so much more that the ultimate vastness of it can't even be conceived, let alone experienced. So, you can finally just relax and know that it is here where it can never be lost or used up. Enjoy it while it appears, and enjoy the stillness and spaciousness that remains when there is not a particular manifestation of Presence or Being appearing.

DESIRING WHAT IS

The Buddha said that desire is the root of all suffering. He didn't say *most* of the suffering or *much* of the suffering but *all* of it. Every single contraction of being is caused by desire. Because desire is such a powerful force, it is worth looking into.

As powerful as desire is, every desire is a lie. Every desire is based on the idea that things can be different than they are, and that is just not true. Things have never been different than they *are* in any moment. Things are always the way they are. You can see how this lie might come to be because things are always different than they *were*. Because things are always changing, we think we can decide how it will be next, which is another lie. Take your own experience: How often have things turned out the way you wanted them to? Unfortunately, every now and then, things do turn out the way we want, so we get hooked on desiring—like playing a slot machine. But, like a slot machine, it's a matter of luck: If you play the game of desire enough, once in a while you will win.

When people see this lie, they become more accepting of the way things are. It's funny, though, their acceptance often has the quality of defeat or resignation: I'll accept it, but I don't have to like it! I invite you to consider another possibility. It's a strange possibility, but the results are wonderful, and that is to desire *what is*: Meet *what is* with the same passion you may have had for *what could be* or *what should be*. Meet *what is* with that kind of passion, with the same force that is able to generate all the suffering in the world. Bring that force to bear on the truth instead of on a lie.

Gratitude is another word for this way of meeting *what is* in the moment. Gratitude is different than acceptance. Acceptance lacks passion and juice. That's why, even though people may see that things are the way they are, they often go back to the juiciness of wanting things to be different. At least desiring has drama, intensity, passion, and life—even if it does result in suffering. The alternative to this suffering is desiring *what is* wholeheartedly—truly saying yes to this moment exactly the way it is right now—bringing that kind of passion and aliveness to the way things are. This results in instant unlimited happiness because every desire for *what is*, is always fulfilled!

The reason people don't make this choice to want *what is*, is because it is so simple. Nothing is needed. People shy away from this because, in wanting *what is*, there isn't anything left

for “you” to do. That is the price to be paid: To truly want *what is*, you have to give up the idea of being someone who can change *what is*. There is no longer a place for that. Changing anything would be working at cross-purposes to what you desire.

Then you come up against the inescapable paradox that even your desire for things to be different is something that you need to desire. You can't leave that out. You can't leave out the desires that arise—for a relationship or for money or for spiritual awakening. You have to meet them with the same gratitude.

You are never done being grateful because *what is*, is always changing, always new. Every moment is a completely new chance to be grateful. Whatever is happening has never happened before: Every emotion, thought, sensation, and experience arises completely fresh and new in the now. The opportunity to meet whatever is arising with gratitude and to passionately desire it, is always available. You never run out of things to be grateful for. Recognizing that whatever is, is only here for this moment and will never be exactly this way again gives us the passion to meet it with gratitude.

Often, the reason we don't dive in with gratitude in moments of suffering or pain is because we think that if we do, things will stay the same. We think that if we love this moment the way it is and all of its pain (if that is what is present), we will get stuck in the pain, when the opposite is true: only when we resist *what is* does it stick around. If, instead, we embrace the moment, it naturally unfolds into the next new experience.

What cuts through suffering is simply choosing to love *what is* in every moment, including every thought, feeling, and desire. It's not more complicated than that. You just meet whatever is arising with passion and gratitude, no matter how often it appears. The invitation is to find out for yourself what happens when you are willing to waste your desire on *what is*. Don't take my word for it. For just this moment, meet whatever is present with a passionate embrace, and then see if you can find any suffering here.

EVERY MOMENT IS SELF-REALIZATION

Recently, a teacher and friend made a simple comment that the soul is the sum total of all of our experiences. It struck me how this meant every experience adds to our soul and there is no experience that can detract from it. If the soul is just that, the sum total of our experience, and not some special spiritual identity structure within Being, then there is no way you can lose—or gain—your soul. It is just here as the totality of everything that you have ever experienced, and it is always being added to by this moment's experience. No experience ever subtracts from it.

Since we share experience with many other souls, that would mean that our souls overlap. Anywhere our experience overlaps, our souls would also overlap. And since we overlap with so many other souls, ultimately all souls are connected through this sharing of experience. Whenever a particular soul has a profound experience of awakened consciousness, their experience of the totality of consciousness by definition includes all experiences and all the apparent souls out there.

Every experience is actually an experience of self-realization. In each and every experience we are realizing a capacity or aspect of our soul, and by extension an aspect of our ultimate nature as Being. Since ultimately all there is, is Being, every experience is an experience of Being. Every experience adds to the totality of our understanding and realization of our true nature. There is no other possibility.

Now this is a dilemma for the parts of us that believe there is a better, truer, more spiritual aspect of our Being that we want to be realizing. What if my anger is part of my true nature? What if my greed, lust, fear, sadness, confusion, and pain, are all part of my true nature along with all of the love, peace, and joy that are also part of Being? In hoping and waiting for a better experience, we may be overlooking the profound significance of our present moment experience just as it is. It is not that sadness or greed are equivalent to peace and joy. While every experience is an experience of true nature, they do not all come in the same size. Not all experiences are equally significant. But they all have some significance.

The experiences that we may reject because we think they are not the correct experience may actually be made up of the same peace, joy, and love we are hoping to have. We think

of this world as a world of opposites or dualities. But if we look more closely, we find that the so-called opposites are really just different amounts of one thing. Light and dark are an example. There really is no such thing as dark; it is only light that exists as photons. There are no “darkons.” You can’t buy a “flashdark” and point it at things and make them disappear. However when there is little or no light, we call that dark, even though there is no such thing. Similarly, the only thing that exists is our true nature, which is filled with joy and love. If we are experiencing little or no joy or love, we may call that sadness or fear—even if that is really only the relative absence of joy and love. And of course, there is often some joy in sadness, and some love even in fear.

What if every experience is a unique jewel of our multifaceted Being? What if every experience adds to the abundance of our soul, and moves us towards the greatness of our true nature? What if what you are experiencing right now is unfolding your self-realization in the most amazing and unique way? Perhaps there is not some special experience of self-realization that is the only worthwhile way to realize true nature. Maybe every soul’s realization of true nature is meant to unfold in a completely unique way, so that every soul’s experience can also add to the experience of the One Being that all souls are a part of, just as every experience adds to the richness of your soul.

We resist this perspective when we really want self-realization to look a certain way. We want our realization to be like the dramatic experiences you read about in spiritual biographies of the great masters and teachers. We use the fact that there are bigger experiences of self-realization to discount and reject the smaller experiences we are already having. And yet the experiences we are having are also aspects of the truth of our Being. Everything from the most human thought or emotion to the most cosmic dimension of existence is an aspect of the totality of Being.

While there is freedom in experiencing a profound realization of an infinite dimension of our true nature, that freedom is only added to by an experience of a very human or limited dimension of that same true nature. Every experience adds to your soul, and no experience subtracts from your Being. This doesn’t mean you don’t discriminate the difference between a small experience and a big one. Just as you can easily tell the difference between a teacup and a swimming pool, it is inherent in a small experience for it to feel small, and it is inherent in an infinite experience for it to feel infinite.

While the experience you are having right now while reading these words may or may not be the biggest realization of your life so far, it is the realization you are having right now. It will naturally feel big or small or somewhere in between. It will naturally have the specific qualities of this unique moment, and not the qualities of any other experience. And yet, because it is happening right now, it is the most important realization you can have. In fact, it is the only realization you can have. It is too late or too soon to have any other experience

than the one you are having right now, and it is making your soul richer and more fully realized than it was a moment ago.

Will you accept the precious gift the mystery is giving you right now?

*why fear this moment
when no thoughts come
at last I lie naked
in the arms of experience*

*why fear this moment
when no words come
at last I find rest
in the lap of silence*

*why fear this moment
when love finds itself alone
at last I am embraced
by infinity itself*

*why fear this moment
when judgment falls away
at last my defenses
fail to keep intimacy at bay*

*why fear this moment
when hope is lost
at last my foolish dreams
are surrendered to perfection*

LOVE IS FOR GIVING, NOT FOR GETTING

*(The following is an excerpt from the book, **Living from the Heart** by Nirmala. Part 2 of the book is available as a free download at <http://www.endless-satsang.com/Ebooks.htm>, or you can purchase the entire book at <http://www.endless-satsang.com/Bookstore.htm>.)*

What is love and where is it found? We search for love and try to get love, and yet it seems like we never get enough. Even when we have found love, it can slip away as time passes. What if there is a source of love that never fades and is always available? What if love is as near and easy as breathing? What if we have been “looking for love in all the wrong places” instead of actually lacking love?

Love is both simpler and more mysterious and subtle than we have imagined it to be. Love is very simply the spacious, open attention of our awareness. Awareness itself is the gentlest, kindest, and most intimate force in the world. It touches things without impinging on them. It holds all of our experience but doesn't hold it down or hold it back. And yet, inherent in awareness is a pull to connect and even merge with the object of our awareness.

It is this seemingly contradictory nature of awareness—the completely open and allowing nature of awareness and its passionate pull to blend with and even become the object of its attention—that gives life its depth and sweetness. There is nothing more satisfying than this delicious dilemma of being both apart from and at the same time connected to something we see, hear, or feel.

Awareness is the beginning of all separation. Prior to awareness, there is just “oneness” or “is-ness,” with nothing separate from the oneness that would be able to experience it. With the birth of awareness, there is the subtle distinction of two things: that which is aware and the object of awareness. And yet, those two are still connected by this mysterious force we are calling awareness, or love.

This flow of awareness and love that connects us to all we experience is the true source of satisfaction and joy. We have all experienced it to some degree. Whenever you fall in love with a person, pet, piece of music, or beautiful object, you have felt this flow of intimate, connected awareness. Unfortunately, we have been taught to believe that the source of this

good feeling was in the object of our affection. So, we suffered whenever we lost our apparent source. When our lover leaves, our beloved pet dies, the concert ends, or our dream home is repossessed, we feel bereft of that loving, connected feeling.

But what if we are the source of the awareness that connects us to everything? What if the love we have been seeking has always been right here inside our own hearts? What if it doesn't really matter what our awareness is touching, but only that there is awareness flowing? That would profoundly simplify the search for love. Anything or any experience would be a suitable object for our love.

The sweetness of love is in the flow of awareness itself. The completely allowing openness and freedom we might look for from a perfect lover is already here in our own awareness. It doesn't have to try to be accepting because awareness is by nature open and allowing. Awareness by itself cannot do anything but touch. Awareness cannot push or pull or demand something from or limit the freedom of what it touches. And yet, awareness is not an aloof distant observer. Awareness is deeply and intimately connected to the object of awareness. In fact, awareness and the object of awareness are ultimately the same thing.

This connection and intimacy that is natural in awareness is satisfying and fulfilling regardless of the object of awareness. In other words, whatever you are experiencing right now is your true love. Whatever you are experiencing is an opportunity to also experience the depth of your true nature as open, loving awareness. Your true nature is true love. It is the perfect lover you have been seeking, and not only is it always here, but that is who you really are.

You might be thinking, "But wait, I don't feel like I am in love or loving all the time. Sometimes I feel lonely or angry and cut off from love and satisfaction." So how can it be that love is here, but we don't feel it? Is love really absent in those moments, or is it just limited in its expression and flow? Are there really moments when there is no awareness? Or is there always some awareness even if there isn't a lot? If there truly was no awareness, then there would be no problem because awareness is the beginning of separation, and the end of awareness is the end of separation. Practically speaking, without awareness, there cannot be loneliness, anger, or anything else. So when you are lonely or angry, there is at least some awareness, although possibly not much.

Even when awareness is contracted and tight, as it often is when we are lonely, angry, sad, hurt, or afraid, the awareness has the same nature as when we are happy and excited. Even a single drop of water is still wet, and even a single drop of awareness is still open and allowing of whatever it is touching. The only trick to experiencing the open and allowing nature of awareness is to look for it in the actual experience you are having. When our awareness is contracted by judgment or fear, it is not actually touching the object of our

judgment or fear. Instead, it is touching the judgmental or fearful thought we are having. Awareness is completely allowing and open to that thought. That is the definition of awareness: it is the open and allowing recognition of the content of our experience. If awareness is not open to something, then we are not aware of it.

The key to experiencing love is to notice where awareness is flowing right now. That flow of awareness is love, and it is the most satisfying and nourishing thing we can experience. There is naturally a direction to this flow of awareness. It moves from within our being to the objects and experiences we are having. We can only fully experience this flow of aware love as it moves in this direction.

When someone else is lovingly aware of us (not of their judgments or desires regarding us, but simply of us as we are), we can experience the outer expression of their love. We can see the way they are looking at us, the smile on their face, and the responsiveness of their reactions to us. But the awareness of us is arising in them. The love is flowing from them towards us, and so it is filling them with this sense of satisfaction and joy. If we are to feel satisfaction and joy, it will depend on whether we are experiencing a flow of love towards them. It is our own open awareness that fills us with that sense of connection and appreciation. We are filled with love when we are giving it to someone or something else.

Obviously it can be easier to open your heart and allow a fuller expression of your own love when the requirements of your conditioning are being met. When someone who matches your ideal for a lover is exhibiting attraction and interest in you, it is often especially easy to give them that same openness and attention in return. So naturally, when two people are falling in love, they are both feeling the fullness and richness of the free flow of awareness. Yet the contact each person has with the love is within themselves. It is their own love and awareness that is filling them up so richly.

This truth, that we are filled with love when we love someone or something else instead of when we are loved, can free us from the search for love outside of ourselves. If you are still not sure that it is your own love that fills you, think of a time when someone else was in love with you, but you were not in love with that person. The flow of loving attention towards you was not satisfying, in fact it could have been uncomfortable having someone so interested in you when you were not feeling the same way.

In contrast, when we are falling in love with someone, it can be rich, exciting, and energizing, even if it is not reciprocated. There is an intensity and beauty even in unrequited love. It is the outward flow of love that is filling us in that moment. So, along with the disappointment and hurt of not being loved back, we also experience a fullness and aliveness just from loving the other. In the Renaissance, unrequited love was even seen

as an ideal. It is the love flowing out from our heart that fills us with joy and satisfaction. The source is within you.

There is just one awareness and one Being behind all the individual awarenesses. The way we as can reach that oneness of Being is by experiencing the flow of love from within our being. Paradoxically, the place where you are connected to others is inside your own heart. You cannot really connect to another externally. Even if you used super glue to attach yourself to another person, there would still be a sense of separation in your outer experience, not to mention how hard they might be trying to disconnect!

On the inside, you are already connected to everyone and everything. The connection is this flow of awareness that is here right now reading these words. It is in the loving nature of awareness that the sense of connection is found, not in the objects of awareness. We are connected to others in the awareness flowing from within us to them. Connection is not found in the flow of awareness and love towards us as, by definition, that flow is connected to its source inside the other person.

This is good news! We can experience limitless love no matter what anyone else is doing. The only thing that matters is how much we are loving, not how much we are loved. Right now you can be filled to overflowing with the incredible sweetness of love, just by giving awareness to anything and everything that is present in your experience. Don't take my word for it, test it out with this exercise:

Exercise: Allow your awareness to settle on a physical object nearby. Take an extra moment to allow your awareness to fully touch the object. Just for the sake of this experiment, give as much love, appreciation, and acceptance as you can to that object. Then notice another object. As your awareness rests for a moment on that, give it as much love, appreciation, and acceptance as you can.

Now allow your awareness to notice a sound in your environment. As you listen, give that same loving appreciation to the sound you are hearing.

If you have any difficulty giving love and appreciation to a particular object or sound, try another object or sound. It will be easier at first to experience loving something for no particular reason if you pick a more neutral object or sound.

Continue allowing your awareness to land on various objects, sounds, colors, tastes, smells, and sensations. With each one, allow as much love and appreciation to flow towards it as you can. Take as long as you like with each experience, and if it is difficult to feel love towards something, just move on. It will get easier to love for no reason as you repeat this exercise.

Now notice other things that may be arising within you: an uncomfortable sensation, a thought, a feeling, or a desire. Take an extra moment to send loving attention towards it. Just for now, you can love each sensation, thought, feeling and desire that appears within you.

As you get the hang of this, you can just allow your awareness to move naturally to whatever it touches next, either inside or outside of you. Whatever it lands on, give it love and acceptance. Just for a moment, let it be the way it is.

What is it like to give simple awareness and love over and over to things that appear in your experience? How open and full does your heart feel when you are able to give love in this way? If you come to something that is difficult to love or accept, just notice that it is difficult and then love that it is difficult right now. You can even take a moment to simply love the way some things are harder to love than others. Then move on to whatever is in awareness next.

Just go ahead and love whatever is in front of you, and in that way be filled with love. It is that simple if you remember that the essence of love is awareness and space. The ideal human lover is someone who gives you lots of space to just be yourself but somehow connects with you as you are. Awareness is like that. It doesn't limit the object of its awareness, but it makes contact.

Awareness is easy to give, and it doesn't cost anything or deplete you in any way. We sometimes withhold love and awareness because we think that true love requires more than this simple, open attention. Our conditioning suggests that love requires things like compromise, sacrifice, and unconditional giving of our time and effort. Perhaps some of these are necessary for a relationship, but not for the essence of love.

This is an important distinction, as we sometimes confuse love and relationship, which is another example of how our conditioning leads us to believe that the outer object of our love is also the source of our love. If we recognize that the true source of love is within us, then relationship can be seen in perspective. Relationships are important, but they are not as important as the essence of love. This is clear when you consider how a relationship without love is not satisfying, but the experience of this inner flow of love is satisfying either with or without a relationship. You can experience it with a beautiful object of art in a museum, a moving piece of music, an exciting moment in a sporting activity, or in the deep connection of a relationship with another person. The love is what makes relationships and everything else worthwhile.

What a rich possibility: that all of the love you have ever wanted is available right now, just by giving it to everything you encounter both within you and in the environment. Love is

for giving, not for getting. And the more you give, the more fully it fills your heart to overflowing.

*I may think I feel love
but it is love that feels me
constantly testing the woven fibers
that enclose and protect my heart
with a searing flame
that allows no illusion of separation*

*and as the insubstantial fabric of my inner fortress
is peeled away by the persistent fire
I desperately try to save some charred remains
by escaping into one more dream of passion
I may think I can find love
but it is love that finds me*

*meanwhile, love becomes patient and lies in wait
its undying embers gently glowing
and even if I now turn and grasp after the source of warmth
I end up cold and empty-handed
I may think I can possess love
but it is love that possesses me*

*and finally, I am consumed
for love has flared into an engulfing blaze
that takes everything
and gives nothing in return
I may think love destroys me
but it is love that sets me free*

THE GHOSTS WITHIN

Most of us think of a ghost as something that only exists after we die. We imagine it to be a piece of us that continues to hang around and haunt the places we lived while alive. What if there are ghosts of yourself that are around while you are alive? What if what you think you are is actually a ghost?

As we usually think of them, ghosts are insubstantial forms that come and go. They are not quite solid or real, and most people can't see them. And yet how substantial or real are our images of ourselves—our ideas about who we are? If you have an image of yourself as an attractive person one day and as an unattractive person the next day, how real was either image? And can other people see your self image? What does it mean if you have a self image of being unattractive and someone acts attracted to you anyway? Maybe they can't see your self image. Maybe your self image is a kind of ghost.

We are not always willing to see that our idea of ourselves is a kind of ghost because we really believe that is what we are. We may wonder, Who am I if what I think I am is something insubstantial and not real? What is here besides the ghosts of my self images? There is a strong sense that we do exist, that we are real. But does this sense of existence and reality come from our image of ourselves? Or does the sense of being real and of existing come from somewhere deeper within our being? It's difficult to know for sure since the image and the sense of realness can both be present at the same time, and our egoic idea of ourselves can co-opt that deeper sense of realness we naturally have.

One way to distinguish what is real from what is not is to ask yourself how real your ideas of yourself are. One measure of how real something is how long it lasts. The more real something is, the longer it lasts. How long do ideas about yourself last? They come and go (like a ghost in a ghost story) and don't last very long at all. A thought is often over so quickly that we can't remember a moment later what we were just thinking. Our images of ourselves are constantly changing and fading away to be replaced by another thought about ourselves or a thought about something else altogether. So those images or identifications must not be very real. They may just be ghosts in our minds.

What about the pure sense that you exist right now? Does that come and go? How often do you have the opposite sense—that you don't exist at all? The sense that you exist is more

real than your ideas about yourself because it doesn't come and go. You exist, but your ideas about yourself are just ghosts. What you are is not contained in your ideas or identifications. What you really are is still here even when your ideas about yourself fade away, like ghostly images in a movie.

It is the real you that matters. You can become more curious about this real you than you are about the false ghosts of identity. What is the real you made of? What is it like? What does it want? What can it do? These are rich and meaningful questions to explore, but remember that the real answers are not to be found in your ideas about yourself. The truest answers can be found in the simple sense that you exist.

WHAT IS A SPIRITUAL TEACHER

In general, a teacher or mentor is a person who guides, instructs, or helps another in the process of gaining knowledge, understanding, or skills. What about a spiritual teacher or mentor? What is their role? And more specifically what does a spiritual teacher or mentor in the nondual or Advaita tradition do?

A spiritual teacher/mentor's role is unique in that the goal is not to transmit knowledge or understanding as much as it is to somehow bring about a recognition in the student of the student's own pre-existing nature. This is a much more subtle thing than simply teaching someone a skill or understanding. It is not that a spiritual teacher never gives knowledge or understanding, but that knowledge or understanding by itself is not the goal. A student can have a broad knowledge of spiritual principles, and yet can still not have truly recognized those principles as being inherent in his or her own being. So spiritual teachers or mentors may teach a lot or they may not teach anything, depending on what the student needs in that moment to experience this deeper recognition of their own true nature.

This may seem like a subtle distinction between the role of a spiritual teacher and a regular teacher, but it makes a huge difference. The regular teacher usually has something specific to transmit, and there is often an implied assumption that the student will have more understanding or be better off when the teaching is completed. But the spiritual teacher is pointing to something that is already present in the student. It is like teaching someone to have shoulders. You can't really teach the having of shoulders to someone who already has shoulders! But you can make them more aware of the shoulders they already have.

In the case of an Advaita or nondual spiritual teacher, the teacher or mentor is pointing to the most fundamental qualities of the student's already existing nature, specifically, the qualities of oneness, awareness, and emptiness. Advaita means not two and is referring to the mysterious oneness of all existence. Fundamentally there is only one substance of reality that everything is made of, including the teacher and the student.

Some take this fundamental truth of our nature to mean that there can be no such thing as a teacher or mentor, or a student for that matter. If it's all one, then distinctions or differences are taken to be meaningless illusions, including the difference between a teacher/mentor and a student/mentee. Yet, while ultimately all appearance is temporary

and, therefore, not fundamental to our being, our being exists on many levels, not just on the absolute level of our ultimate nature. It also expresses on this relative level where there is an apparent teacher and an apparent student. And these roles function on the relative level until students have recognized their true nature and there is nothing left to teach them.

So the teaching function of a spiritual teacher operates on the relative level until it's simply no longer needed because the student has realized his or her deeper nature. There's nothing wrong with this functioning, and there's no need to take the identity as a teacher or as a student too seriously. It's a quirk of our language that we turn concepts that are actually best expressed as a temporary verb into the implied permanence of a noun. Someone whose function is to provide medical care becomes a "doctor," which is just a conceptual way of expressing the association of that function with that person. It's not a permanent or fundamental quality of their true identity. Similarly, spiritual teaching and mentoring is simply a function that sometimes serves in our spiritual unfoldment. It's not a fundamental part of anyone's true nature and is not any more real or unreal than any other functioning of our relative lives. One way this is expressed is that not everyone who realizes their true nature is also equipped to be, or even interested in, being a spiritual teacher.

There are some practical considerations in the choosing of and working with a spiritual teacher. There are qualities one would expect to find in someone who is truly serving this function of pointing to the deeper truth of Being. Unfortunately, there are many examples of teachers that don't always live up to the ideal. While even a poor teacher may serve someone's spiritual unfoldment, it's just common sense to use some discrimination. As a starting point there is a list of qualities to look for and to avoid on the following webpage: <http://www.spiritualteachers.org/guidelines.htm>.

In this age of abundant information available on the web, it can't hurt to do a search and thoroughly explore other people's experiences and perspectives of any spiritual teacher you may wish to be involved with, while keeping in mind that any individual's experience expressed on the internet is colored by their own conditioning and particular experience.

Lastly, there's the question of surrender and/or devotion to the spiritual teacher. Is it necessary to completely give up all control and direction to the spiritual teacher in order to receive the deepest benefit of their teaching? In a word the answer is no. It's not necessary. It does sometimes serve especially within the context of a long term committed relationship with a particular teacher who is of the highest level of integrity, but it's not absolutely necessary. All of the true nature being pointed to is already present in the student. There is nothing that the teacher has to give you or take from you for the recognition of this deeper nature to occur. Anytime there is a surrender or insistence on

total devotion, there is also equally a danger of misuse and abuse of that power. Beware of any teacher who demands this kind of total surrender. The truth can be freely given, as it is limitless, and doesn't need to be guarded or doled out only to a few.

However, there is another form of devotion or love that can naturally arise within the teacher/student relationship which is the immense gratitude that arises when the truth is seen. And while ultimately, every experience is our teacher and with the fullest realization there is gratitude for all of existence, there can also be a natural deep appreciation for the apparent person who has pointed you to that truth. It's a strange kind of gratitude as you are grateful to them for everything and nothing, but it is there nonetheless. So if there is a human teacher, there may be this gratitude and love that arises in response to the gift they have shared with you. But of course at that point there is no need for surrender or giving up of control, and a true teacher doesn't need devotion or surrender from anyone, even if it does arise.

The true spiritual teacher is here simply to serve your own recognition of your true nature. The final measure of his or her functioning in this capacity is the degree of your own depth of realization. The rest is relatively unimportant unless it serves this simple but subtle goal.

TWO SIMPLE INSTRUCTIONS

*(The following is an excerpt from the book, **Nothing Personal, Seeing Beyond the Illusion of a Separate Self** by Nirmala. Part 1 of the book is available as a free download at <http://www.endless-satsang.com/Ebooks.htm>, or you can purchase the entire book at <http://www.endless-satsang.com/Bookstore.htm>.)*

The Practice

Spiritual practice can be boiled down to two simple instructions. The first is to notice your experience and be curious about it. This is really all that the practice of spiritual inquiry is about. It just points you to the experience you are having right now. Get curious about it. What's going on right now? Who or what is listening? Who or what is breathing? Who or what is thinking? Curiosity is the willingness to see through everything. It is the natural tendency of our being to uncover more.

Noticing your experience and being curious about it brings a deep joy because this is what your being does naturally. It is what your being *is*, actually. You *are* this fundamental awareness and curiosity, or fascination, with every experience. So, awareness and curiosity aren't really something you *do*, but before you realize this, you are given this instruction as a spiritual practice. All this practice does is allow you to recognize your being, which is already noticing and curious about everything.

The second simple instruction is to know that whatever you are experiencing is the right experience and therefore to allow it— to surrender to it. This is what I've been calling resting. Even if you are deep, deep into suffering, that is the right experience. Whatever is happening is what is needed in this moment. You allow things to be the way they are not because it will get you to some buried treasure but because it is the only honest thing to do: things are the way they are. When you do this, you find that there is something very satisfying about the truth of every moment, whether it is a moment of struggle or ease.

Allowing things to be the way they are also brings joy for the same reason that noticing and being curious do: it is fundamental to our nature. Allowing isn't really something we do but who we *are*. I like to point out that you are already allowing 99.99% of your experience. For instance, you probably have no problem with most of the sounds in this room or with the ceiling. And

what about outside this room? Do you have any problem right now with the stars? If everything outside the solar system is okey-dokey, right there, that takes care of most of the universe.

Regardless of what is happening—whether you are experiencing fear, desire, or cosmic bliss—you can carry out these two simple instructions. However, you can't carry out one of these instructions without carrying out the other: you can't really get curious about something if you are trying to get rid of it, and you can't really allow your experience if you are not present to it. So, there is really only one instruction: notice your experience and know that it is the right experience.

Noticing

You are always noticing your experience. Just try to not to. See if you are able to not notice anything about your experience. You are always noticing things like the temperature of the room, your body's sensations, and what thought or feeling is currently arising. What I'm suggesting is that you include even more of your experience in your awareness.

We usually only pay attention to part of what is going on. We tend to narrow our attention onto the *content* of our experience— onto the particular thoughts, feelings, and desires that are arising— and even more particularly, onto the *content* of these thoughts, feelings, and desires. We become engrossed in the story attached to them. For example, if an emotion is arising, our attention is usually on what evoked it, our conditioning around it, and how to either get rid of or maintain it rather than on the actual experience of it. And if we are having a thought, we usually don't experience thinking as much as we experience the content of that thought. This tendency is especially strong with desires. We build an elaborate fantasy about how to manifest that desire and what it would be like to get it rather than on the experience of desire in that moment. We become so mesmerized by our fantasy that we go to sleep to our actual experience in the moment.

The invitation is to notice not only the content of a thought, feeling, or desire but the *context* in which it is arising. Notice the actual experience of desire or the experience of doing or thinking or feeling, not just the storyline that they have generated. The experiences of thinking, feeling, and desiring are very mysterious. Notice the space in which thinking, feeling, and desiring are happening. Who or what is noticing? The noticer is part of your experience too. Who or what is thinking, feeling, or doing? This is a complete mystery. Where do thoughts, feelings, and actions come from?

When you include the *whole* of your experience, not just the content of it, you discover the deep joy in simply uncovering the truth in this moment, whether this moment is a painful one, a profound one, or an ordinary one. The true joy is in meeting all of life.

This has made me think about how I show up in the moment. What I do is notice my thoughts about what's happening and the pictures in my head, and I try to notice what body sensations are happening too, like where there is tension.

Also notice the actions of your body, simple things like the restlessness being expressed by your foot tapping. Then, also notice your fundamental stance toward the experience. Notice what the noticing is for. Is it just a new, improved way of trying to get away from any discomfort or get more pleasure? Is it just more ammunition for battling with what is or is it true curiosity?

When you do this, you're likely to discover that most of the time your basic stance towards what is happening is one of trying to avoid pain or get pleasure. This is often the underlying unconscious motivation. If that is the case, then just get curious about that. We think that noticing is another technique that will finally fix things. So, we use inquiry this way and then wonder why we continue to suffer. The way you keep inquiry innocent is to include as much of your experience in that moment as you can, and that means not leaving out why you are doing inquiry.

* * *

Where do I put my attention?

You've got plenty—just waste it! Spread it around. Throw it at everything. You've never run out yet, have you?

That's the problem. My attention is everywhere.

Just put your attention on that also. You've got plenty of this Awareness, or Love. What happens if you don't hold it back from anything? It doesn't matter whether what is showing up is a profound thought or an ordinary one, a spiritual thought or an unspiritual thought. What happens when you just keep throwing this attention—this Love—at everything that shows up?

I'm aware of how I've been working at putting my attention only on the right things.

That's where the struggle lies—in trying to have the *right* thoughts. What if you just give this love to all of your thoughts? What happens if you become a slut for experience?

I've been trying to drop out of experience.

How's it going? Everywhere you drop, there's another experience! You don't have to change anything; just get curious about this thing you call dropping out of experience. It doesn't matter if you succeed or fail at it. If you are curious and in love with whatever is showing up, it won't matter to you whether it is a good thought or a bad thought, a good feeling or a bad feeling, a good experience or a bad experience. And if you are curious about a desire that is showing up, it won't matter if it gets satisfied or not.

* * *

Does that curiosity just arise for you? Do you cultivate it? I had an experience the other night while having a headache in which I felt held by the Beloved, and I had no trouble being curious about that. But ordinarily I don't give the truth my full attention. I'm caught up in all my old habits.

Just for a moment, peel away the boundary between the Beloved and all of your ordinary experiences. Is there really a boundary between them? There is deep joy in being curious about the Beloved. What needs to be seen is that it is all your Beloved, even the habits, even the lies. The Beloved went to a lot of trouble to create those lies just so it could give you the joy of seeing through them. You don't have to go looking for the Beloved somewhere else. It's diving into your arms all the time.

The moment you allow your old habits, they aren't your old habits anymore. Besides, there is no such thing as an old habit because you have never had the same experience twice. The one thing this Mystery is incapable of is repeating itself. So, when a so-called habit arises, it is a completely unique experience.

* * *

How do you get curious about being bogged down?

Just let yourself be bogged down. What is it like if you just let it be this way? What is that experience? What is the experience that you are calling “bogged down”?

Being hit in the face with patterns.

Drop into the experience of being caught in a pattern.

What I want to do is talk about the story behind the pattern: this happened when I was ten . . .

If that is what’s happening, then that is what’s happening. If those thoughts are coming, then those thoughts are coming. It’s okay. All I’m saying is to get curious about what this is like, especially if you stop fighting it and just let those thoughts come. What’s that like?

It’s definitely more comfortable. Ahhhh!

Now that it’s more comfortable, does it really matter if these thoughts keep coming? If the joy is in uncovering this moment, then it doesn’t have to look any other way than it does.

Maybe the experience of the moment is one of repetitive thought. If you actually experience repetitive thought it can be ecstatic. What a profound mystery! What a wondrous thing! Besides, you never really have the same thought twice. That’s the big lie of these so-called patterns. If you are really curious about your experience of each thought, you’ll realize that every thought is a completely new experience. This thing we call thought is a profound mystery, and it’s showing up in a form right now that it has never shown up in before.

This thing that we are calling “your experience,” which I’m telling you to pay attention to and allow, is like a 600-pound wild animal—an unbelievable force of nature. Thought is a completely unpredictable wild animal. And feelings . . . ! And experience— what is that? You can never get hold of it. By the time it registers in your mind, it’s already gone.

* * *

Sometimes curiosity has spontaneously come up, and I've been able to surrender to the experience, but that doesn't seem like something I do. It's a kind of grace that just happens. Is there another kind of curiosity that I can do or do I just have to wait for that grace to happen?

Every experience is that grace happening. What is this experience you are calling “no grace”? Is there really such a thing? Can you find a moment in your entire existence when there was no Awareness, no curiosity? Awareness and curiosity are both qualities of your being. We make it sound like a technique, but all I'm doing is describing what has been happening every moment of your existence and telling you to do that. This instruction, to notice your experience and be curious about it, only points you to the seeing and the curiosity that are already happening. Awareness and curiosity already *are* in every moment. I challenge you to stop being curious. See if you can shut it off.

* * *

What is grace?

Grace is what shows up when you show up, and she's a master of disguise. In one moment, she'll show up as the perfect lover, maybe even literally. In another moment, she'll show up as the worst possible lover, literally or figuratively. Everything that shows up when you show up is grace. Even the painful, mistaken ideas are grace. They are the result of being cut off from something true, so it's a good thing that they are painful because they get our attention so that we can see that they aren't true. The pain is the grace. Every moment is perfect. Every moment is grace. Every experience points to a deeper truth.

Allowing

Noticing requires allowing. To really be aware of your experience as it is, you can't be busy trying to change it. If you're trying to change it, you are not noticing it the way it is. However, we tend to go beyond noticing whatever is happening to trying to fix it or change it. We treat our experience as a project—the “me” project. We are always looking to make whatever is happening more, different, or better than it is. We don't just allow whatever is to just be the way it is. But if whatever is happening is the right experience, that implies allowing it just the way it is.

Once you allow everything to be the way it is, then you can get curious about what is really going on. What is this mystery called awareness or thinking or doing? When you just notice without trying to change anything, it is possible for your awareness to include more of an experience of the *whole* mystery rather than just some of the objects within it.

A funny thing can happen with allowing: we can become complacent. We not only take our hands off the steering wheel but close our eyes and go to sleep to our experience—we disconnect from our experience. We become too passive. One way this manifests is through indulgence. For example, if an emotion like anger is arising, rather than just allowing ourselves to have the experience of anger, we indulge it and express it. We dump our anger on someone or something else. Another way we indulge is by rationalizing: if my experience is always the right experience, then I'll just have another beer or eat some more cookies.

What's missing when this is happening is noticing and really being curious about your experience. Just as noticing requires allowing, allowing requires noticing to stay balanced. You not only allow anger, for example, but you get curious about it before it gets to the point of being expressed or repressed. Both are necessary: noticing your experience as it is and allowing it—not doing anything to change it and not doing anything to move away from it. Both allowing it and being curious about it are necessary. The arising of something like anger or fear or doubt is not a problem, but if you don't become curious about it you will tend to express it.

One way to suffer is to try to fix the moment. Another way is to try to escape the moment. The good news is that in the very next breath, if you become curious about that effort to fix or that attempt to escape, you won't be suffering anymore. You don't have to undo anything or do penance; you only have to be curious about what it is like to try to change the moment or to try to escape from it and then allow the whole of that experience. Whenever you are really present and curious about your experience, you are free. Your suffering is gone.

We all have moments when we neither struggle with the moment nor try to escape it. Often this is when everything is going great. Who wouldn't pay attention then? Who wouldn't allow it then? Whenever there is a meeting of the moment with open eyes and an open heart, the moment opens up and becomes fuller and richer. When you are *there* in the moment, the truth reveals itself. All you have to do is show up in the moment. But when you try to change or get away from the moment, the opposite happens. Your experience gets smaller, tighter, more constricted, and less satisfying.

All that matters is that you meet your experience with everything you've got—an open mind, an open heart, and a surrendered attitude. You surrender to whatever is going on. Eventually you discover that true liberation is in the inquiry, itself, and not in the place that it takes you to. The true joy is the inquiry itself, and that joy comes whether the inquiry is into something profound and wonderful or something not so pretty. The true joy is in seeing the truth. The only thing that really satisfies is uncovering the truth of this moment. What I mean by truth is what is present right here and right now that opens the heart. Until you find that, nothing else will satisfy.

If you meet every experience, nothing can make you suffer. Find out if there is something rich and true in even the most painful moments. Find out what happens if you are intensely curious about your experience just the way it is. Find out what that can unlock and reveal.

It's a lot easier to talk about than to do it.

How hard is it to just meet this experience?

It's probably harder to avoid it.

That's where all the effort is.

It can seem harder.

Get curious about it being hard. Often if it is hard, it means you are not allowing your current experience. Even if it's hard, it is easy to let it be hard. Any moment becomes ridiculously easy when you just allow it to be the way it is.

Have you ever been able to shut off this curiosity? Just like farming was part of the sons' nature, curiosity is part of ours. The only reason for practicing curiosity is to realize your own nature. The farmer's sons finally realized they were farmers. They didn't *become* farmers; they were born farmers. Rather than trying to remember to be curious, just notice that you already are.

* * *

When I dropped my computer and was without it for two weeks, acceptance was difficult. I was really frustrated.

What if, fundamentally, frustration is as rich an experience as getting what you want? Having a broken computer and having a brand new one are very different experiences, but what if both of these events have just as much experience in them? What if the measurement was not how much pleasure or pain is in an experience but how much experience is in an experience?

There's an equal amount.

The only thing that changes is your measuring stick. Pleasure and pain don't go away, but they no longer are your measuring stick. Experience hasn't become free of challenges or problems, but the measurement is no longer whether something is problem-free or not. All that matters is what is happening, which doesn't always match our ideas of what should be happening. You can even get curious about the experience of not accepting if that is what is happening.

* * *

How do you accept boredom?

If you are experiencing boredom, it means that there is something under the surface that hasn't been seen. It's really very simple, just ask: What is true now? Boredom is a place of suffering or you wouldn't call it boredom but peace. So, there must be some resistance present—you want something else to be happening.

If you experience the emptiness at the core of your being only through your mind, you will feel bored and are likely to look for something to fill it up, like TV or eating or shopping. If, instead, you allow a moment where nothing is happening to be empty and you find out what is true about it, you'll discover richness in the most ordinary moments. All of sudden, you might appreciate how the light just shifted when the cloud went behind the sun—nothing exciting. It won't impress your friends or be in the *New York Times* tomorrow, and yet it is a very rich experience.

Just notice and allow whatever is. If boredom arises, pay attention to it and get curious about it. You call it boredom, but do you really know what boredom is? Have you ever really experienced it or have you always grabbed for something to make it go away? And if you are doing that, then just allow that. The only trick to this is to do it with *whatever* is arising in this moment. If resistance to boredom is arising, just allow the resistance and get curious about it.

When you explore your resistance, you are not your resistance because you're exploring it, so it's kind of fun!

There is a deep joy in this exploration of truth.

* **

So, if I am experiencing pain, then to be harmonious, I need to accept it fully?

Why would you want to be harmonious? Probably to get rid of the pain. The suffering comes from the effort to try to be harmonious or to get rid of the pain.

One should accept pain? Is that the right word?

It's the right word, but you don't accept the pain for any particular reason. You accept it because that is what is happening— because that is what is true in that moment—not because accepting pain will make it go away.

So, as long as there is no ulterior motive . . .

The truth is we're full of ulterior motives. So as long as there are ulterior motives, just accept them also. Get curious about it all.

* * *

Could you explain how, with enlightenment, it is said that you don't have to do anything and yet you have to work hard?

You have to work hard at not doing. You give what is everything you've got and yet you don't do anything to try to change it. You fall in love with what is. Being in love is actually a lot of work, right? To be a good lover, you have to pay attention to the object of your affection. It doesn't feel like work and it's very satisfying, so you do it naturally. Rather than wait for the perfect experience, just fall in love with the whole of your experience the way it already is.

WHAT IS ADVAITA OR NONDUALITY?

Advaita means nondual or “not two.” This oneness is a fundamental quality of everything. Everything is a part of and made of one substance. Often the question arises, If it is all one thing why don’t I experience it that way? This is confusing oneness for the appearance of sameness. Things can appear different without being separate. Just look at your hand for a moment. Your fingers are all different from each other, but are they separate? They all arise from the same hand.

Similarly, the objects, animals, plants and people in the world are all definitely different in their appearance and functioning. But in their ultimate nature, they are all connected at their source. So, this one Being has an infinite number of different expressions that we experience as different objects.

It also turns out that your fingers are all made of the same substance. As you explore the nature of your hand with greater subtlety, you discover more and more similarities. Your fingers are actually made up of very similar tissues, cells, atoms, and ultimately subatomic particles. When your experience of reality becomes even more subtle, you discover that everything is just a different expressions of one field of Being. Below is a wonderful little story written by Dennis Waite that explores this in more depth.

What about your experience right now? Is it possible to discover this subtle oneness in ordinary experience? It is, if you set aside the expectation of a dramatic experience of oneness and explore the oneness a little bit at a time. Just as even a single drop of water is wet, you can experience oneness in even simple everyday experiences, since oneness is a fundamental quality of everything that exists.

As an experiment, just notice your fingers and the palm of your hand. Can you really say where one starts and the other ends, or are they one thing? To take this further, where does your hand stop and your forearm begin? Can you experience the oneness of your hand and your forearm?

If these are not separate, then what about all the other parts of your body? Are your feet and your ears really one even though they are so different? Now notice if there really is a separation between your thoughts and your head. Where does your head stop and

something else called thought begin? What about feelings or desires? Are they really separate from you or your body?

Now, notice the simple sensations you are having: the sounds you are hearing, the sensations of touch, and the objects and events you are seeing. If you are seeing, something, where does the seeing stop and something else called the eye begin? If you are hearing sounds where does the sound start and the ear stop? Perhaps the hearing and the sound and your ear are all one thing. Yes, the ear is different from the sound, but in the act of hearing they become one thing.

Then, where does the source of the sound stop and the sound itself start? For example, if a bird is singing outside your window, where does the bird stop and the sound of its song begin? Or are they one thing? If the bird and its song are one thing, and your hearing and the song are really one thing, then is it possible that you and the bird are one thing also?

Advaita, or oneness of Being, has often been thought of as something hidden or difficult to experience, when it is quite ordinary and available in every moment. Of course a big experience of oneness, where you directly experience the oneness of everything, is a rare and dramatic event. But why wait for something so rare when this sweet and satisfying oneness is right here, right now?

LIVING LIFE AS A QUESTION

*(The following is an excerpt from the book, **Nothing Personal, Seeing Beyond the Illusion of a Separate Self** by Nirmala. Part 1 of the book is available as a free download at <http://www.endless-satsang.com/Ebooks.htm>, or you can purchase the entire book at <http://www.endless-satsang.com/Bookstore.htm>.)*

Many of the questions and concerns in satsang come in a similar form: How do I get or keep a particular experience? How do I get or keep a sense of awakesness or expansion or openness or freedom or loving kindness or Presence? Or if worldly concerns are the issue, the question is the same: How do I get or keep more health, more wealth, more comfort, more security, more romance? Another form these questions take is: How do I avoid falling asleep or feeling stuck or being contracted or being sick or losing love? They're good questions. There's nothing wrong with them. They're real for the person who's asking them.

Within each of these questions is the assumption that you need to do something—you need to get or keep or avoid something. Right there, in that assumption, is our suffering. The effort to get or keep or avoid any experience is what makes life miserable, difficult, diseaseful.

In satsang, another possibility is pointed to, a way of touching your experience without either trying to hold on to it or push it away. It's a way of reaching out to your experience and really seeing what's it's like. In doing this, the questions become: How open or stuck am I right now? How open or closed is my Heart right now? How happy or sad am I right now?

And when the answer comes, the question becomes, What's that like? What's it like to be expanded or contracted or whatever it is you are experiencing? What's it like to have an open Heart or to not be in touch with your Heart at all in a particular moment? What's it like to be filled with love? What's it like to feel a lack of love? This is reaching out and touching the experience as it is and as it naturally changes. It's not a static question, but an alive one; you're never done with that question.

In doing this, rather than trying to change life, you're living life as a question. What's this like? And what's it like now that I've noticed what this is like? And what's it like now? And now that it's changed again, what's it like? Even your noticing something changes it, so by the time you've found an answer, it's time to ask the question again.

We've been so conditioned to think that the point of questions is to get answers that we overlook that the point of answers is that they get us to more questions. The questions are as valid and rich as any answer because every answer is full of questions. You can even begin to enjoy the questions, even trust the questions, as much as any answer that comes.

When you value the questions themselves, you just naturally hold the answers more lightly because they aren't the goal. If the question is just as rich as the answer, then it's fine if the answer comes and goes. Have you ever noticed that you've forgotten everything you once understood? Every insight you've ever had has faded, and that's great because then you're back in the question. You're back in this really alive place where you're getting to find out what you know now, what's happening now, what's moving, what's changing, what it's like now. What is it like now? You'll never be done with that question. What's happening now? You could say that answers are just a temporary side effect of having questions.

This is a gentler, more respectful way of being with your experience. It's a more intimate way of being with your experience every moment to ask what it's like instead of How can I fix it? How can I get more? How can I get less? How can I improve it? How can I change it? How can I avoid it? How can I hang onto it? Do you see how all of these questions have an effort to them? They have a sense of violence to them—a sense of being in battle with or in opposition to your life. It's hard to be intimate with someone when you're pushing them out the door or trying to keep them from leaving. There's no intimacy in that kind of interaction. How much possibility is there for real, deep contact? The same thing is true for other dimensions of our Being. The opportunity is to intimately experience the expansions and contractions, the openings and the closings, the freedom and the stuckness, the wonder and the confusion, the understanding and the lack of understanding.

So, what question is moving in you right now? No matter what that is, that's the place to start because that's what's moving in you right now. If a desire is moving in you right now, what's it like to want something? Or if it's a fear, what's it like to fear something? There are no wrong questions; they're all entry points, places where this inquiry can open up and become soft and intimate. So, what's moving in you right now?

THE ENDLESS TO-DO LIST IN THE MIND

The mind has a tendency to label everything as bad or a problem. If we wake up stiff in the morning, the mind calls that bad and then worries about getting older. If we find out we are being let go at our job, the mind immediately assumes the worst and again worries about the future. Even if something good happens, the mind then sees the possible downside or worries about losing what it has just gained.

The mind sees its job as rejecting the now in order to bring about a better future. Its logic is that if we are happy now, then we won't do anything to make things better. So, we need to find out what is wrong with now so that we can figure out what to do to fix or improve it. This keeps the mind very busy and leaves us with an ongoing sense of incompleteness and lack. There is always something in the now that can be labeled as bad, and then there is more to figure out and do something about. As a result, we have an ever-expanding "to-do" list in our minds. With this tendency to find something wrong with the mind's picture of the now, we are constantly creating more to do. We may feel the need to improve our diet, our appearance, our finances, our health, our relationships, our career, and even more immediately, we may feel the need to change how we feel emotionally or physically whenever a strong feeling or sensation occurs.

Even spiritually, we continue this tendency to find fault with our present moment experience and then try to figure out what to do about it. We are not aware or awake enough. We are too judgmental. We have not experienced the deepest truth yet. And all of that just adds to our spiritual "to-do" list. Spiritual teachings are mostly descriptions of what is already true about our deepest nature, and yet spiritual seekers want to turn them into prescriptions for what they can do to achieve a deeper, better reality. We often aren't looking for the truth as much as we want a better and more spiritual "to-do" list. Even if we are told that awareness is all there is, and life is already loving and perfect, we immediately want a list of steps to take so that we will feel that way more often in the future.

There is a simple question to ask that can short circuit this process at its beginning: Is this moment really so bad? Is there really anything present right now that is a problem? What if stiffness in the morning is just a particular sensation and not a bad sensation? What if it is actually okay to feel stiffness? And we can ask the same question about anything we are experiencing. Is sadness a bad sensation? Is confusion a bad sensation? Is the lack of money

causing us harm in this very moment? Is the loss of a job or a relationship actually causing us harm in this very moment? It turns out that while everything affects awareness, nothing actually harms awareness. All of the effects are temporary. And so there is never anything in the present moment that is actually bad or causing harm to awareness itself.

This kind of questioning does the opposite of adding to our “to-do” list. Instead, it can reduce the sense of needing to do something about what is happening right now. Even if there are still things to do in a practical sense, questioning our mind’s conclusions can put the actual need to do something in perspective and reduce the sense of overwhelm created by the endless litany of problems the mind can imagine, and the ever growing list of things we think we need to do about those problems.

And more importantly, inquiring into the truth of this very moment can put us in touch with the beauty and wonder that is always present in this mystery called life. Not only is there really nothing bad in the here and now, but there is a limitless amount of profoundly rich depth and fullness to be found in the present moment. Everything that really matters, such as peace, joy, satisfaction, connectedness, and love is found in the here and now, and only in the here and now. There is nothing we need to do to experience this fullness and wonder, except to question the conclusion that it is not here already, and then look for ourselves to see if it is here. Is there any peace present right now? Is there any love at all in this very moment? What is that peace like? What is the nature of the love that is here now? Asking these kinds of questions is all it takes to get in touch with the amazing richness of the present moment. And there is nothing we need “to do” about it.

GOD IS IN THE DETAILS

*(The following is an excerpt from the book, **Embracing the Now: Finding Peace and Happiness in What Is** by Gina Lake (Nirmala's wife). Her website is at: www.radicalhappiness.com. Radical Happiness is dedicated to spiritual awakening and living in the Now. It provides tools for moving out of the ego and into the Now, where true happiness—radical happiness—lies.)*

One of the reasons we reject being in the now, or the present moment, is that we overlook the details of what we are experiencing. Many moments are ordinary and seem similar to other moments we've experienced: You get up and do the same thing every morning, you walk the dog on the same path, you cook the same food, you drive the same roads. The routines of life seem boring to the ego. It assumes those moments are like every other similar moment, and it overlooks what is going on and draws you into thoughts about something else that it deems more interesting and exciting. The egoic mind tries to take you out of every moment and into its world of thoughts, and we are especially willing to go along during those moments that seem like ones we've experienced before.

The truth is, however, that no moment is the same, and no real joy can be experienced by living in the ego's mental world, where all thoughts refer back to "me" and "how my life is going." For real joy, we have to be present to what is real—what is really going on right now, in this moment. If you assume the now isn't interesting or useful to pay attention to, as the mind does, then you will never discover the inherent joy, aliveness, contentment, and value of being in this moment, no matter how simple it might be.

When you do allow yourself to be very present to what is going on, what you discover is the joy that Essence (your true Self) has in experiencing life, including the details of life. The joy is in noticing the light reflecting off the silverware, the specks of dust floating in the sunlight, the contentment on your dog's face, the way the folds of the curtain fall, the shadows cast by the rocks, the clouds changing shapes, the smell of fallen leaves, the taste of butter on bread. There is infinite variety available in this moment to enjoy, if you notice, but you have to be willing to notice the small things—the details—because they are often what sets this moment apart from other moments.

The egoic mind sees something it has seen hundreds of times, and it assumes it knows it, it might think about it, it might analyze or judge it, or it might just overlook it. It skips over the experience and substitutes thoughts for experience. In assuming it has already had the

experience, the ego misses experiencing it altogether, which is where the juiciness and aliveness of life is. The ego's mental world is a dry one. It lacks connection with experience—with real sensory experience. The richness in being alive comes through our senses. And when you experience what is coming into your senses, you feel alive, and you feel the joy Essence feels in being alive.

When you stop taking the mind's assessment of things as true and start just allowing yourself to have the experience you are having—fully and in great detail—you experience, at last, the happiness and peace the ego promises but doesn't deliver. The ego offers us its world—the world of thought—when we pay attention to it, but this comes at a high price, and that price is experience. When you give your attention to the egoic mind's thoughts about an experience, you lose touch with the actual experience. We can't really have both the experience and thoughts about it. Our attention is either on one or the other, although it often moves very quickly between the two.

When you are just present to what you are experiencing, you notice all sorts of sensory details that are usually overlooked. The surprising thing is the amount of joy that is felt in experiencing the simplest of things fully—the warmth of the sun, the softness of the fabric against your body, the brilliancy of the blue sky, the squishiness of the earth below your feet, the scent of a pine tree, the buzz of something in the distance. The ego isn't satisfied with these things because it isn't satisfied with anything, and you aren't either when you are identified with it because involvement with the egoic mind keeps you from fully experiencing them. But what is life but the experience of these simple things?

The egoic mind creates a drama out of life, and at the center of this drama is the "me," when really life is an experience of one simple moment after another, and what is experiencing this is no-body, no-thing, but the spacious emptiness that is your true Self. Without the mind's interpretations, judgments, fears, doubts, and other overlays onto this moment, this moment—life—is a simple sensory experience that is free of problems, and that experience is more than enough to be happy. In fact, it is the secret to happiness.

FILLING THE EMPTINESS

We are taught at a very young age that emptiness is filled from outside. Our hunger and thirst are provided for by others. Our discomforts are relieved by mom and dad or whoever is raising us. Even before we have language, we have a conditioned response to inner sensations of emptiness or lack. It seems so natural and obvious to assume that if there is a feeling of emptiness or lack that we need to look outside for something to fill us up. It is this fundamental part of our conditioning that leads us so far astray from the true source of our soul's nourishment and love.

More simply, it means that we develop very little familiarity with the experience of emptiness or lack. We are too busy trying to resolve or reduce the sensations of emptiness or lack to explore them in greater depth. And yet, what is the sensation of emptiness like? How does nothingness feel when it appears inside of us? How big is the empty space? Can the emptiness inside actually feel bigger than our body? How is that possible?

And what is the texture or quality of the space that seems to be lacking something? Is it completely clear and lacking all qualities, or is the emptiness dark or bright, heavy or light, dry or moist? Even if the open space inside of us feels lacking in something we want like love or a sense of our own worth, is there anything else present in the space? And finally, does the emptiness itself actually hurt or cause us any harm? Or is it our resistance to the feelings of lack and the effort to change our experience that cause us to suffer?

Questions like these can inspire some curiosity about the emptiness itself. We might even discover that emptiness itself is a freeing experience, not necessarily a problem. Empty space is the softest thing in the universe, and it is very low maintenance. There is nothing it can do to harm you, and nothing you can do to harm it. Perhaps the most surprising discovery of all is that nothingness is the true source of everything that really matters in life. All of the peace, joy, and love we experience in life comes directly from the still, silent, pure emptiness of our true nature. It turns out the biggest problem in our life, our sense of lack or incompleteness, is actually our greatest blessing. What a surprise to find so much richness coming from such an unpromising source.

GRATITUDE

Gratitude is usually suggested as a well meaning prescription. We are told to be grateful for what we have, or to show some gratitude. And yet it is difficult to feel something you are told to feel, even if it would feel better than what you are feeling. But what if gratitude is a description of your deeper nature? What if deep within you already feel gratitude?

Awareness is full of gratitude. It loves the sensations, experiences and thought forms that it touches in each moment. There is a natural appreciation for all that exists in awareness itself. It can't help itself, because on the deepest level awareness recognizes everything it touches as its own self. There is only awareness and so that is what it experiences in every moment, and that is what it is grateful for.

And yet that is not our conscious experience in many if not most moments. It seems like much of what awareness touches is not something we appreciate or are grateful for. What about our problems and our painful experiences? It can seem ridiculous to suggest that we are full of gratitude for those, when we are rejecting them.

The key to finding this deeper level where gratitude flows so freely is very simple. It only requires that you notice the gratitude you do feel in this very moment. And when you are rejecting or resisting a problem or painful experience, what you are grateful for is the capacity to reject or resist. Even in a moment of active opposition to some aspect of our experience, we are not usually also in active opposition to our own opposition. We are actually happy to be so upset about our situation, as we have been taught to believe that this upset will help us feel motivated to deal with or change the problem.

For example let's say you have just rear-ended a parked car. Even if you are not physically harmed, immediately you feel a big "Oh no!" arise inside of you, followed by thoughts of being late for work, higher insurance rates, and other complications. And to a large extent in the moment when you are saying "Oh no!", you are not really experiencing the actual reality in front of you of twisted bumpers. That is what you want to go away! You want to take that moment back and do it again only this time stopping just in time!

And it is this inner defense against the painful reality that your awareness is grateful for, in part because it is serving you in that moment to reduce the impact of the experience on

you. By being upset, you get to take in less of the reality of the problem. Your awareness is distracted by all of the stories your mind starts to spin about the situation, so much so that you may not even notice some aspects of the experience, say for example if the cars are actually not so seriously damaged. It may take a while to really become aware of what has actually happened while you wait for your upset to settle down.

Awareness is grateful for the upset because it is either serving you in that moment to be upset, or a similar upset has served you in the past in similar situations. And even more fundamentally awareness just loves experience of all sorts. So even if you are unable to get past your upset to the actual reality of the circumstances, then awareness just enjoys the upset. Every emotion and sensation is richly unique and awareness at its core is deeply grateful for every experience that comes.

Again the key to recognizing this inner gratitude is simply to notice what awareness is actually touching in this very moment, as that is where the gratitude is rising to the surface of awareness.

KNOWING WHO YOU REALLY ARE

Self-realization is knowing who you really are. How do we know something? Is it enough to be told? Or is there something more that must happen for us to truly know something? And do we even need to be told who we already are? It would seem the easiest thing in the world to know yourself. After all you are right here. What could interfere with knowing this most intimate reality, your own self?

And yet from the very start we were not told who we really are, and instead were told something erroneous. We were told that who we really are is the body, mind, and personality. Not only were we told this explicitly, we were also reminded of it constantly by assumptions and implicit references to our body and mind as who we are. On top of that, we were reinforced for acting from our ego and personality. We were taught that good boys and girls do not do what comes naturally, but rather what their parents want them to do. And so we formed a false identity to make our parents happy. This was a necessary thing to do to get along and survive, and in the process we developed a lot of awareness and capacity to control ourselves and our own actions.

However, there comes a time when it is no longer necessary to control our actions in this way. It turns out that our true nature is actually quite loving and wise and careful. Even when our true nature acts spontaneously and a bit wildly, it is doing so in the context of its own great wisdom and perspective. So as we mature, our ego becomes a limitation and a distortion of our inherent wisdom and ability.

In the meantime, we have forgotten who we really are, so we come back to this question of knowing. How do you remember something you have forgotten? How can we recover a sense of the love and joy that is our innermost nature? While it helps to be told something, is that enough? For most of us, it takes something more than just being told. To really know something, it takes direct experience of it. If simply being told points us to the experience, then we can begin to know it.

Often it is not enough to simply be told something to then experience it. It also requires a willingness to deeply sense and explore your direct experience. We must follow the words to our actual sense of existing, and then explore the mystery of the capacity to hear, think, feel, see, touch, ponder, and be aware that is present right now. The good news is that since

what we are exploring is our own self, there is never any searching required. It is always right here wherever we are.

There is no formula as to how much direct experience of our true nature is needed to realize an aspect of it or even the whole truth of our being. So, we can only keep exploring, questioning, letting ourselves be pointed back to ourselves, and touching listening, sensing all that we can of the mystery of our own awareness and the pure empty space at its core. Ultimately, we are never done. The truth of our nature is limitless and eternal and always new. We are here to realize our true self, and it turns out that will only take forever. But what a way to spend eternity! Our being is an ever fresh, ever new dance between emptiness and form.

So while experience is necessary to realize our true nature, experience itself never contains our true nature. The point of every spiritual experience is to make that experience irrelevant. Experience is like the envelope that our true nature is delivered in: it is totally necessary until you open it, and then it is useless. The point of experience is simply to develop the knowing of our true nature to the point that it doesn't matter anymore what we experience. Once we trust the source of our experience and know it as our own self, it no longer matters what we are experiencing. We can just go ahead and enjoy and explore our experience and our nature for its own sake, not to gain anything and especially not to gain our self. We are already here. There is nowhere to go or nothing to get. What a rich possibility it is to know that, and then simply enjoy its ever new expression.

SELF INQUIRY

*(The following is an excerpt from the book, **Nothing Personal, Seeing Beyond the Illusion of a Separate Self** by Nirmala. Part 1 of the book is available as a free download at <http://www.endless-satsang.com/Ebooks.htm>, or you can purchase the entire book at <http://www.endless-satsang.com/Bookstore.htm>.)*

Beyond focusing on the content of our experience and even beyond noticing whether we're expanded or contracted, a wonderful question is: Who or what is experiencing this? This is a variation of the classic self-inquiry question, Who am I?

As I was going through my email the other day, I ran across a quote from Course of Miracles that essentially said that you'll never find satisfaction in the world. This assertion is at the core of most spiritual teachings. Spiritual teachings and practices attempt to turn us in another direction, away from the usual places we look for satisfaction. They're designed to shift our focus from the world of form to Beingness. Self-inquiry is one technique for doing that. In self-inquiry, we simply ask, Who am I? or What am I? or a variation on that, Who is having this experience?

When you look to see who is having this experience, you don't find anyone. There's nothing there. The Experiencer can't be experienced, just as the eye can't see itself. You don't find any thing, nothing you can touch or see or hear.

When nothing is discovered, people often keep looking instead for something they think they're supposed to find. It's only natural to look somewhere else when you don't find anything. We don't expect that nothing is the answer. So we go back to our mind for the answer—we think about it, check in our memory, or imagine a good answer—instead of just staying with the question. But inquiry done only with the mind is dry—it lacks juice. After a while, because this experience is not very rich, the mind often gets bored and quits. There isn't much in it for the mind.

Another way to ask the question is with your whole Heart. You ask it with everything you've got, as if your life depended on it. If you ask the question with this kind of passion and intensity, it will bring you beyond what the mind is able to figure out. When you ask it with your whole Heart and you don't find an answer, you just stay there, not knowing. You

just let yourself not know. There's nothing but that space, and you just stay present to that space, to that sense of there being nothing behind your eyes, nothing behind your thoughts, nothing behind your feelings. Instead of turning back to thing-ness when you don't find anything, you just stay there in the no-thing-ness and get curious about it. Nothing—what's that like?

In looking and finding nothing, what you discover is even more space. Staying with the question Who am I? opens up space. Nothingness is very spacious; there's a lot of room in it. When you stay in that nothingness, you discover that there's a lot of stuff in that space, stuff that is real in a way that the stuff in the world has never been real. What moves in that space are true qualities of Being, such as Love, Compassion, Insight, and Strength.

Every time you turn towards Beingness, a different quality shows up. Being has an infinite number of qualities, which show up fresh and different in every moment. These qualities can seem to exist in another dimension, as they have a depth and solidity about them that is more real than physical objects.

These qualities have been there in the nothingness all along, and as you stay with the nothingness, they begin to be apparent. One way of staying with the inward focus is by repeatedly asking the question, Who Am I? Stay with the question even when you experience nothing and have no idea who you are. Just ask, Who or what doesn't know?

THE GAP IN AWARENESS

We usually think that suffering is caused by bad experiences, but it's actually caused by our attention flowing towards something that's not really there—towards something that's not very true in that moment, such as an idea or a fantasy, which are very small truths. Suffering ends when our attention is flowing towards what's actually happening, what's true in the moment. Suffering is the distance—the gap—between what you're oriented towards and what is. However large the gap is between what's actually happening and what you're putting your attention on is how much you will suffer. If there's no gap, then there's no suffering.

That gap can be present regardless of whether something good or bad is happening. For example, if someone close to you is dying, your awareness may be so fully focused on what's happening in that moment that the experience lacks the suffering you would expect, although suffering may appear later if thoughts creep in about how things should have or could have been. In contrast, there are times when things are going really well and you're suffering, often because you're afraid of things changing. If this truth is understood—that it doesn't matter what happens—it can change your life. It may or may not change what's happening, but it will change your experience of what's happening.

Our hopes, dreams, desires, fears, doubts, and worries aren't really happening so they are very small truths. When we give our attention to something that isn't actually happening, we suffer. When our attention is focused on these things, we never feel satisfied because they don't nourish us. But when we give our passion and curiosity to more of what's true in the moment, we don't suffer. What are you giving your awareness, your passion, your curiosity to?

It's very simple: Our suffering is a matter of how much of our attention is flowing towards what's not actually present, such as hopes, dreams, desires, fears, doubts, worries, ideals, and fantasies. What we're desiring isn't present or we wouldn't be desiring it. Nor is what we fear. Our fears are just as much of a figment of our imaginations as our desires. None of these things are real, and turning our attention towards the unreal brings us out of contact with the real, where the aliveness of Being can be experienced.

Rejection and desire are the mechanisms with which we resist what is, which results in our suffering. They operate in a cycle: We go back and forth from rejection to desire. We think, "This isn't good. Maybe if I got this or maybe if I meditated more or if only I had a better lover or more money or more freedom, it could be better." Then we go about trying to fulfill that desire and, regardless of whether we succeed or not, we come back to the point where we still reject whatever is present now. Even when we get what we think we want, we may find that it's not that great, so we dream up something else we believe will make things better.

This activity of desiring what isn't present and rejecting what is creates and sustains the sense of a small self. If things are lousy, they're lousy for whom? For me. And if things could be better, better for whom? Better for me. We're often not even conscious of rejecting and desiring because we're caught up in the content of our desires and fantasies. We get so hypnotized by our fantasies that we're not even aware they're contracting our sense of self and making us feel very small, incomplete, deficient, and unsatisfied.

Nevertheless, that sense of incompleteness can be trusted. It's telling you how true it is that your fantasy will make you feel better. The sense of incompleteness and smallness in the experience of fantasizing shows you just how little truth there is in your fantasy. Fantasies aren't very true. They only exist in our minds. There isn't much substance or reality to them.

You can also trust when your heart feels very full and complete. The simple alternative to rejection and desire is to give all of your attention to what is here right now. The only trick is to include all of what is present right now. Every sensation can be included. There is no suffering in any sensation that you give all of your attention to. The suffering comes in when we have an idea about the sensation that pulls us away from it.

And the biggest surprise is that ultimately there is no suffering even in our suffering! When you give all of your attention to the actual experience of rejection and desire, the suffering inherent in it dissolves. When we become curious and attentive to the process of rejection, it no longer has any sting. If you simply become fully present to the movement of thought, it can be recognized for what it really is: just a thought! Suffering is like a mirage that you never actually reach. It dissolves whenever you get close to it.

WHAT ABOUT THE AWAKENESS THAT IS HERE NOW?

Someone emailed to say how much they want to awaken, and I wrote back:

If you truly want to wake up, then I invite you to get very curious about the awareness that is here right now. Are you aware of anything at all in this moment? What is that awareness like? Just as a single drop of water is wet, the awareness that is reading these words has all of the qualities of your ultimate true nature as pure awareness. Does the part of you that is already awake need to wake up or is it already profoundly and mysteriously aware? Just for a moment, instead of seeking more awareness, find out more about the awareness that is already here.

The awareness that is here in this moment is alive, spacious, discriminating and full of love. Everything that really matters is found in this awareness. Love, peace and joy flow from within us out to the experiences we have of the world. Seeking the source of peace or love in the world is like looking for the source of the water in the puddle that forms under a water faucet. Not only is the source here within us, but it is flowing right now as the simple awareness that is reading these words.

THERE IS ONLY ONE SOURCE FOR EVERYTHING

There is just one source for everything. It all comes from an infinite potential within existence itself. Don't take my word for it. Reach out and touch something with your hand, like a piece of furniture or other simple object. For a moment, just sense its pure existence, the simple fact that it exists. Then, sense even more deeply to feel the source of the object. See if you can sense how ultimately it is coming into existence freshly in this moment. In every instant, it is a completely new version of itself. You may be able to sense its source directly, not with your mind or through logic, but with your fingertips and with your Being.

Now touch another object and see if you can sense its source. Where is this other object's existence flowing from? You can also hold your hand out and simply touch the space in front of you. First, just experience the reality of space with your fingertips. There is a mysterious open allowing spaciousness here that everything else fits in. As you sense the wonder of the space in front of you, see if you can also feel its source. Where does space come from? Where is the space itself flowing from? Although you may not be able to sense the source of space by thinking about it or figuring it out, you may be able to directly sense the underlying source of infinite space through your fingertips and your most subtle inner sensing. It's a matter of sensing with your whole being the wonder that lies just beyond your fingertips, even when you are only touching empty space.

Now reach down and touch your own body. Once again, just sense the wonder of your body's existence. And then sense the source of that miraculous form you often call "me." Where does the body's existence come from? You can touch your legs, your face, your other hand, your hair, and with each part of your body, see if you can sense from a deeper place the infinite potential that can form itself into a living physical body. It can help to drop down and sense the body from your heart instead of from your head. This allows a fuller sensing with all of your physical and subtle senses.

To whatever degree you have a sense of the source of these various objects and of space itself, notice if there is any difference or separation between the source of the objects and your body or empty space. Is it the same source that is forming the furniture and your body? Is there any separation between the source of the space around you and the source of your body? Don't worry if this doesn't make logical sense, and simply sense with your

heart the source of space and the source of your body at the same time. Are they separate or are they one and the same?

You can explore further with nonphysical experiences. Notice the flow of thoughts you are having right now. Even if you can't touch them with your fingertips, just sense their existence and their source in infinite potential. Where do thoughts come from? Where does the energy of feelings arise out of? What is the source of your desires? We are often so involved with the object or direction of our thoughts and desires that we rarely pause to consider their source.

What do you find? It's fine if you only have a vague or slight sense of the source of an object or space or your thoughts. What is this vague sense of the source like? Is it a similar sense for all of the objects and experiences that you explore? Can you find a boundary between the source of your body and the source of your thoughts? Can you find separation between the source of objects and the source of space itself?

Differences and separation are very obvious at the level of form. Your body appears very different and separate from the objects in the room you are in. It has very different qualities from the space around you, even if it is not really separate from the space around you. This is the beauty and wonder of the world of form and experience: It offers endless differences and the appearance of separation. That's what makes it possible for two forms to dance or play. But what about the source of these experiences and forms? At that level are they separate? How pronounced is the difference between the source of your thoughts and the source of your physicality? Do your body and space come from the same subtle presence that lies behind all experience and differences?

It is at the level of the source of existence that oneness is obvious and clearly true. If we look for oneness in the world of form, we can easily doubt its reality. Often at best, oneness is a vague concept we try to imagine. But if we sense the source of everything, we find that there is a deeper and infinite potential that everything comes out of and everything is made of. Then, if we continue to sense the underlying source of the various forms, we can more clearly sense their oneness even while we enjoy and appreciate their endless differences.

SENSING INSIDE

We often look into our mind to know something, and so when we want to know ourselves, we often look into the mind for that also. But the mind is full of thoughts about what we want to know and never the thing itself. You will never find an apple or a lover or a sunset or anything in your mind, just thoughts about these things. And you will never find your true Self in the mind, just a lot of thoughts about the true Self. That is just what the mind is made of and so that is what you find in there.

What if you sense in your heart instead? I am not suggesting you think about what you might find in your heart. What if you actually sense the space inside your chest? What is actually here right now within the space of your body? It can be helpful to rest your hands over your chest, and then simply notice what is really present beneath your hands. No need to think much about it, just directly sense what is here.

First of all, how mysterious is it that there is a body with a heart? And even more mysterious is the simple existence of space beneath the hands resting on your heart. What is this simple mystery of a place called here? Why is there a “here” that holds your body and everything else that is present? What is that space itself under your hands like? If for just a moment you do not think about what is here and instead just sense the actual space under your hands, what do you find?

And even if right now you feel relatively little or even nothing in the space of your heart, what is that “nothing” like? What are the qualities of the space itself? Is it light or heavy, bright or dark, clear or foggy? And if there are specific sensations present in the space of your Heart, what are those like? What does it mean that there are sensations here inside of you? How is it possible to be sensing them? What is sensing them?

These questions are not meant to get you thinking about the mystery of your body, the space your body is in or the awareness that senses the body and space. These questions are simply an invitation to experience all of it just as it is right now. Your thoughts will never satisfy your curiosity about your true nature, but this direct sensing can show you more than you ever imagined about your true nature.

STAYING FOCUSED ON THE SELF

Someone asked about the teachings of Ramana and how I stay focused on the Self. Here is my response:

In my experience, the great power of Ramana's teaching is in the focused simplicity of the message. Self-inquiry can point you all the way back to the source of Being in pure Presence. And yet, I also at times find that to be its limitation. Formless awareness loves to play in form and all of the many levels of existence....it even loves forming egos!

Perhaps, a balanced perspective is that there is a place for discovering your true nature as empty awareness, and yet that is not the end of the inquiry but just another beginning. There are all of the endless possibilities inherent in Consciousness to be explored and enjoyed as well.

And so in answer to your question as to how I stay focused on the Self, I would say that as I discover more and more about the Self I keep finding in deeper ways that there is nothing else here. That makes it easy to stay focused on the Self as I can't miss. Every experience is worthy of inquiry and deeper understanding and love. It is like eating at a buffet instead of having to order something specific off of the menu.

THE HEART'S WISDOM IN RELATIONSHIPS

Here is a response to a question someone sent about listening to their heart to know what is true in their relationship. Specifically they wanted to know if when their heart contracts in response to the other person's words, is that a sign of how true the other person's words are or is it a sign of how true something is that is being triggered inside of them. Please note that this response refers to how the opening and closing of our heart shows us how true our experience is. For more about this form of heart centered wisdom, please see the free download of part 2 of Nirmala's book, Living from the Heart which is available here: www.endless-satsang.com/Ebooks.htm

Here is the response I wrote them:

As for your questions, one of the challenging aspects of our inner knowing is that it is responding instantly to whatever is in awareness right this very moment, and then in the next breath it is responding to whatever is in awareness then. So in interactions with others or even with your own thoughts or insights, there may be a series of expansions and/or contractions as words are spoken, thoughts and feelings arise, and conditioned reactions or beliefs are triggered. For example if someone criticizes you, your heart or other wisdom center in your body may contract as they are speaking in response to the relative truth of their criticism. But if in the next moment you think "They are right, I am a jerk" then your heart may contract even more. In contrast if you compassionately think "Oh, they just lost their job, it is not surprising that they would be in a bad mood today" this wider perspective on what is happening may start your heart opening. So the responses of your Being are as fast as thought, and lord knows we can have a lot of thoughts in a very short period of time. And yet our heart or other wisdom center in the body will always be responding in that instant to the words as they are spoken, or the thought or reaction you are having in that very moment.

And when it comes to relationships, it can of course be hard to catch what is true and what is not true as there are often so many reactions in both people that are being expressed verbally and nonverbally, and your heart is responding to each one even if only for an instant. That is why I often say it matters more what the overall climate of a relationship is like, than what the weather is like today. One can ask if in the midst of triggering each other

all day long into temporary contractions, are there also moments of truly expanded love and joy? Which is predominant? And of course the joy and love in just a moment of true heart connection and celebration can be enough to counterbalance a lot of petty little annoyances that may also be a part of being together.

Same thing is true when it comes to making choices about relative matters like where to live, whether to stay in a job, etc. What matters is the overall sense of a particular direction over time, not just what your heart is responding to in this moment. So when it comes to major decisions, it is best to take some time sensing the overall climate of your being's responses to the various options and all of the reactions you may have to the various options and any related ramifications of each option that you can think of before deciding. And at some point there is enough evidence in your heart to know the relative merit of the various choices. And by the way, your heart is still working fine if there is no overall difference between choices. That just means it really does not matter what you choose in that situation!

Another dynamic at play is that we unconsciously use the contraction of awareness that occurs with a judgement to avoid experiences. By thinking about an experience, we contract our awareness onto the content of our thoughts and in that way we are less aware of the content of the original experience. Anytime you contract your awareness, you expand your unawareness. So this is a good thing to keep in mind as you gently sort out whether you are contracting in response to the relative truth of what someone else does or says, or if you are contracting due to a defense mechanism of judgment arising in yourself. And by the way, there is nothing wrong with defense mechanisms. Thank god for all of our defense mechanisms as none of us would have made it out of childhood without them! But we can simply recognise them as they arise now and notice how true they really are...which is usually not very true. We do not really need to defend against reality especially now that we are adults and capable of responding to the situation. Instead we can recognise the smallness of a defense mechanism and then simply notice what else is true.

And yet in that noticing, we can also at times get an accurate read on how true someone else's actions and behaviors are. If you are always contracting when someone does something, it could be your heart's accurate response to the truth of their actions. The question is really what happens in the next moment. Do you "get the joke" and just laugh it off and move on, or are you still thinking about it an hour later? If the latter, then there is probably something in your own conditioning to look at. But that does not mean that if they are repeatedly triggering you all day long over and over that there is not something in them that needs to also be seen for what it is. You are under no obligation to stay around someone who is always acting without integrity or awareness.

MAKE BELIEVE

We live in a make-believe reality. We make up our beliefs and then live as if they are true, and in that sense they are true for us. But we make them up; we make believe. And in any moment, we can make believe something else. Belief is just a thought or pattern of thought, and in the time it takes to have a new thought, we can start to experience a new belief. If that new thought gets repeated often enough, then we say that our belief has changed, and therefore our make-believe reality has changed.

There is nothing wrong with this. We are by nature belief-making creatures. Just like squirrels hide their nuts, humans make up beliefs. It is how we create the meaning in our life and how we organize and define the story of our life. Each of us is the novelist or screenwriter for the story of me, and we do this by making believe that what we think about our life is the whole truth of that experience.

However, it is possible to realize that while this process of defining our reality is very creative, challenging for our minds, and even fun, it is never complete or fully accurate. Our beliefs, by their nature as thought, leave out a lot of the reality of a situation. If we believe someone is a nice person, we have left out that person's shadow side. If we believe that someone is a jerk, we have probably left out some of the good things about him or her. This limited nature of belief applies not just to our beliefs about others, but our beliefs about ourselves. We have an identity that is composed of our beliefs about ourselves, and that identity is therefore as fluid, changeable, and incomplete as any other set of beliefs.

This is not a problem and is even a very creative process. However, we can often simply forget that we are making it up. We make believe that we are a good person, or better than others, and then forget that this is at best only half of the truth, and it is all made up. It is like when we watch a movie and forget that it is fictional and still feel upset by the actions of the characters for hours or days after the movie has ended. The actors were paid to behave badly, and yet we have forgotten it was all made up.

So, while there is nothing wrong with our beliefs and our identities, they can cause us to suffer when we forget that we make them up. If we start to hold them rigidly and defend them from any contradiction, they can start to limit our awareness and our actions. We are

stuck in a make-believe movie created by our own mind and forget that we can change the script anytime. However, knowing that it is all make believe doesn't necessarily mean you change anything about your experience. Simply knowing that reality is not as you believe it is can also allow you to enjoy the experience as it is. Knowing that you are watching a movie can allow you to enjoy the outrageous antics of a superhero or the desperate acts of a heart-broken loser without taking it so seriously. Forgetting that your interpretations of your own life are just as made up can mean that, instead of enjoying the richness of every experience, you are busy trying to change things in order to solve the problems your own beliefs have created.

What does it mean that you are broke or wealthy? What are you like when someone has made you the butt of the joke? How do you feel when your career soars or crashes? Who do you think you really are? You get to make up the answer to all of these questions and millions more, and in the midst of this incredibly creative storytelling about your existence, there is also the opportunity to look beyond the story to see what else is here. What is present right now that is not a part of your beliefs? What is the real reality underlying your make-believe reality? What creates the physical world? What creates the mind that is creating your beliefs? There is no need to reach a definitive answer to these questions, as that would just be another belief. Instead you can play with endless new answers to every question, and thereby discover the limitless potential of your true nature. Make believe is fun!

BEYOND NO SELF

*Here is an excerpt from one of Nirmala's free ebooks entitled *Beyond No Self* that you can download at www.endless-satsang.com/Ebooks.htm:*

The spiritual journey is a movement away from over-identification with the body and mind to the rediscovery of our true identity as infinite Being, and this can be two different movements. The first is dis-identification with the body and mind. Since identification is simply a movement of thought, dis-identification is simply a movement away from thought. The ego identification that we experience most of the time is the result of repeated thoughts about "I", "me," and "mine." That is all there is to it, but while we are thinking these thoughts the sense of self is contained in them. And since most of our self-referencing thoughts are about our body, our thoughts, our feelings, and our desires, the sense of self is usually contained in the body and mind.

Dis-identification from the thought form of the ego can occur whenever there is a deep questioning of the assumption in most of our thoughts that we are this body and this mind. Inquiry using the question, Who am I? can naturally weaken the assumption that I am the body and the mind. In fact, any deep questioning of our thoughts and assumptions can loosen our over-identification with thought, since so many of them are not very true. Experiences of no thought can also weaken the identification because in the absence of thought, there is an absence of identification. We all experience this when we get so caught up in what we are doing that we completely "forget ourselves."

Alternatively, directly sensing the presence that is aware of the thoughts can also disentangle the tendency to identify with the thoughts. The second movement of the spiritual journey is this recognition, or realization, of your true nature as presence or limitless empty awareness. It is a wonderful surprise to discover that everything that really matters in life, including peace, joy, and love, is found in this empty awareness. This emptiness is incredibly full and rich. It has intelligence and strength and compassion. Whenever we experience a deeper quality of Being such as clarity, peace, insight, value, happiness or love, it is coming from this spacious presence.

The surprising thing is that while these two movements can occur simultaneously, they can also happen apart from each other. When this happens, the movement from ego identification to our essential nature is not complete. For example, you can question deeply your own thoughts until the false assumptions in them are seen through. The over-identification that results from constantly thinking about me and mine and my body and my problems can't survive closer examination. It can be a shock to see how completely we assume that I am this body and I am this mind, and an even bigger shock and relief to discover that it is just a thought, and it is not true. The identification is really just a thought. There is no actual equivalence between you and your body or your mind. You are that which experiences the body and the mind, but you are not contained in them.

Even though this is a profound insight and a huge relief (after all if I am not my body, then these are not my aches and pains; and if I am not my mind, then these are not my problems), by itself this insight only reveals the false assumptions. It does not reveal the underlying truth. And since the underlying truth of your nature is more of a heart-centered experience, it is possible to dissolve the ego without touching your true nature. In a sense, you can wake up in your mind, but not in your heart.

When this happens, there is both the sense of relief from all of the grief caused by the over-identification with the body and mind, and often a deep sense of meaninglessness. If "I" don't exist, then what is the point? It doesn't matter anymore what the fictional "I" does or what happens to it. In fact, nothing matters at all because it is so clearly all an illusion.

When seekers are led or just find their own way to a deep experience of no-self, they can then form a new more subtle belief that this absence of self is all there is. "I am not my body, I am not my mind, I do not exist" are seen as the final conclusions. From a purely logical perspective, what more is there to say, since there is no one here to say it or hear it! And while these conclusions are true, they are not the whole truth.

Underlying all of the activity of the mind is the non-conceptual reality of Being, or our true nature. Underlying the concept of apple, one can experience the reality of a sweet, red piece of fruit. However it is more subtle when it comes to our true nature, because the reality underlying our false identification with the ego is not physical. It is a pure empty aware space that is full of the subtle substance of presence in all of its essential forms: peace, joy, love, clarity, strength, value, and much more.

How can that be—empty space that is full of everything that matters? The mind cannot grasp it fully, as presence exists beyond concepts and even beyond its own forms; and yet, that is what you are. You can experience it with more subtle senses than the physical

senses and the mind. Ultimately, you “sense” it by being it. You just are this full empty presence.

It is this second movement of realization of essence, presence, and fullness of Being that counteracts the belief that since I (as ego) do not exist, therefore nothing exists and all is illusion. It gives a heartfelt sense of meaning and purpose back to this relative life of the body and mind, not as a means of gratification to your idea of yourself, but as a pure expression of the wonder and beauty of this deeper reality. Instead of living a life in service to the ego’s wants and needs, you can find yourself fulfilling the deepest purposes of a human life: to serve and express freedom, joy, beauty, peace and love. By itself the realization of no-self can end up dry and lifeless, but when the heart opens wide to the bigger truth of the true Self, life is anything but dry and lifeless.

AM I?

*(The following is an excerpt from the book, **Nothing Personal, Seeing Beyond the Illusion of a Separate Self** by Nirmala. Part 1 of the book is available as a free download at <http://www.endless-satsang.com/Ebooks.htm>, or you can purchase the entire book at <http://www.endless-satsang.com/Bookstore.htm>.)*

Inquiry is the practice that's offered in the tradition I come from. Inquiry is a way of exploring our experience and our Being. There are many possible questions. The granddaddy of them all is the question Who am I? One thing that has always bothered me about that question is the presupposition that I am a who—I am a somebody. The question What am I? is a little more open to other possibilities, but there's still a presupposition that I am some thing.

So, lately, I've been playing with stripping that question down to the question Am I? and noticing what that's like, what discovery that allows. This question not only eliminates presuppositions but brings the questioning down to something very fundamental, which is the simple fact of our existence. And yet in exploring this, it turns out that this is not such a simple fact; our existence is a profound mystery. The question also could be rephrased as Do I exist? If the question is kept this simple, then the answer is always in the affirmative—there is existence here. I am. But it gets dicey if you start adding anything to it.

This question Am I? points to the simple fact that you are, regardless of what you are experiencing. Beneath everything that's going on, is a sense of existing. This question points to a dimension other than experience.

Once that sense of existence is in your field of awareness, then it's possible to find out what's true about your existence, to explore that. What's it like right now to just be? Is it enough right now to just exist? Or is there a sense that it's not enough? All our lives we've been told it's not enough: You have to be smarter, richer, prettier, more enlightened, more compassionate, more loving, and on and on. You have to be some thing.

We have the sense that if we could just be what we're supposed to be, then we could just be. Take a fantasy about being richer, for instance: What's great about being richer is that

you think it will finally allow you to just be because you no longer have to become richer. We think that being richer or smarter will finally allow just being to be enough. Wherever this inquiry takes you, it's amazing to discover both the extent to which our existence is enough and the extent to which we think it isn't.

For most, this sense of existing is associated with the body. Existing seems to happen there. However, does your sense of existence stop where your body stops? Discover for yourself where your experience of I am is right now. Is it in the body or is the body in it? Would it be more accurate to say "I exist in the body" or "the body exists in me"? Be willing to hold the possibility that who you are goes beyond the body even if you aren't experiencing that directly right now. The experience of the body never goes away, but the link between the me and the body can soften or dissolve when "I am the body" is seen as only part of the truth. If you experience the me outside the body even a little, then the body can't be the whole truth of who you are.

Where does your sense of me stop? Right now, for instance, allow more of your experience of the room in. When you include in your awareness the energy and information that's flowing in and out of the body, is there a greater or lesser sense of me? What is more true, to say, "I exist in this room" or "this room exists in me"? When you include the totality of the room and beyond, are you more in contact with your me or less in contact with it? Most people find that the more they include in their experience, the larger their sense of me. When you ask these questions, you discover there's not such a clear-cut boundary to me.

Of course, this exploration doesn't have to stop with your body or with this room. Try sensing the reality of the surrounding city. Is there a greater or lesser sense of me when you do this? You can also ask the question: Do I exist in space or does all of space exist in me? Which feels truer?

SEEKING, GIVING AND BEING

The spiritual life can be divided into three stages: seeking or acquiring, giving or expressing and finally being. These three each have unique characteristics and qualities, and all of them are equally important and necessary. They are not a linear progression, but rather a cycle that moves from one to the next and back again.

The first stage of seeking is a period of searching for truth and trying to get there. It is the period of greatest doing and also the greatest sense of a separate self that is seeking. This is what most of the world is up to, although most people think they are seeking or acquiring wealth and fame and the other goals of the ego. But underlying even the activities of the ego is a deeper pull to find love, peace and happiness. The ego just mistakenly thinks money or fame will give it peace and love and happiness. And then eventually the individual finds that these outer forms do not really satisfy and so the seeking becomes more subtle and direct. We eventually seek peace itself and love itself, not something that will bring us peace or love.

The second stage of giving or expressing is what naturally happens when we start finding true love and happiness. It is such a joy to find the real sources of satisfaction and fulfillment that we are inspired to give them to others and to express them in everything we do. This phase is still a phase of doing but there is much less of a sense of a separate self that is doing it. It just seems like we are being done by the love and joy flowing through us.

The third stage of being is really a moving beyond the duality of the first two stages into a place of such complete fullness and perfection that there is no more need or pull to do anything. There is a simple recognition that you already are everything and so is everybody else. So what need is there to seek or find, or to give or express? Everything is already fulfilled beyond any possibility of improvement or gain. Outwardly this is a time of very little doing beyond the simple necessities of physical life. There is no motivation to do anything for what it will give you or accomplish, so it is enough most of the time to just rest and be.

The first thing we tend to do when we hear of these stages is to immediately try to apply them as a prescription for our spiritual life. We try to do the actions of the second and especially the third stage as a way to get there. And yet these are not a prescription, but

simply a description of the phases or cycles that our life moves through in the spiritual realm. This is a description of how essence or Being moves in this world of form. In fact to try and get to the second or third stage is really an expression of the first stage. It is trying to achieve or acquire spiritual depth.

Instead we can simply be curious about how these stages are unfolding in our life. Ultimately they are all necessary parts of the unfoldment of life, and one is not really better than the other. Each phase can naturally follow the others in an endless cycle of a movement from pure resting being to active creation and doing and back again.

It is also possible to overemphasize any of the stages, or to become stuck or attached to any point in the cycle. Most of us have experienced the sense of being stuck in the first phase. We are often very attached to our hopes of achieving and acquiring more satisfaction and eventually spiritual fulfillment and realization. And in the process of seeking these, we also become attached to the activity of seeking itself. It gives us a sense of a mission and purpose. It is quite a dramatic and inspiring thing to be a spiritual seeker.

But we can become just as stuck in the identity as one who has found the truth, and is now here to give it to others. This is not a criticism, but simply an observation that the more subtle sense of identity that comes from being a spiritual teacher or guide is also quite seductive. While it is natural and fulfilling to actually be the teacher or guide when you have found the deeper truths, there is no lasting identity to be found in this activity, and any attempt to form an identity will eventually become a source of suffering.

One cannot really speak of getting stuck in the third stage as it is not a place where any identity can form or any activity of attachment can happen. There is only everything being as it is and no sense of a separate self to be stuck. However as the cycle repeats and we find ourselves back in a phase of doing or giving, we may then form an attachment to our memory of the pure state of being we have apparently lost.

THERE IS ONLY LOVE

Here is an excerpt from Nirmala's book, [Living from the Heart](#). You can download a longer excerpt for free on www.endless-satsang.com/Ebooks.htm or purchase a complete copy on www.endless-satsang.com/Bookstore.htm.

Anything you or anyone else has ever done has been the movement of love. What shapes this movement of love is the sense of me. What we're always doing is taking care of the self, whether it is a small sense of self or a more expanded one. Whenever that sense of self is contracted and small, we take care of that me. And when it's expanded, we take care of that larger sense of self. All we have ever done is tried to take care of the self in the best way we know how, which is always a loving act.

But, of course, when our actions only take care of a contracted me, they don't take care of or take into account other things. For example, we might take care of our taste buds, but not our whole body. Or if we are so identified with a feeling that all we can do is take care of it, we may not be taking care of our whole Being. Taking care of only the taste buds or only the emotions is still a loving act, but because it's such a narrow way of loving ourselves, it can be neglectful or even harmful to other aspects of our Being.

We can be afraid that if we see love in everything it will mean we will allow rape, murder, and other horribly narrow ways of taking care of a small separate sense of me to continue. Yet in discovering that there is only love, the surprising thing is that our actions naturally become more loving. If we see murder as an evil that needs to be abolished without also seeing it's true loving nature, that's when it makes sense to murder. If murder is really bad, then it makes sense to kill someone who has murdered someone else. Or it even makes sense to kill someone before they kill us. It makes sense to bomb a country before it attacks us. But when we see the loving nature of even murder, we can respond to it in a way that doesn't perpetuate it.

It is possible to recognize the love that is already inside of us and already acting through all of us. It is in recognizing that love that the possibility exists for even greater recognition of love. Contrarily, when we reject any aspect of love—which includes anything that's happening—the more contracted our experience will be and the less completely loving our

actions will be. So, in condemning, we actually become more like what we condemn. Seeing the beauty, perfection, and love within something is what allows it to transform, to move into a more complete way of loving.

When the sense of our self expands, our actions aren't really any more loving; they're just more loving towards a more complete view of the self. When our loving actions take care of a larger sense of ourselves, we appear more saint-like because they're taking into account everybody, since we recognize that we are everybody. These actions are still self-gratifying, but they're gratifying to a much bigger sense of self.

SEA OF SENSATION

Without looking to the mind for an answer, can you just notice what is here right now? Does the sea of sensation and energy and presence that is here right now really make up some thing called a body or a person? Or does it make up a sea of sensation, energy, and presence? We are used to letting the mind tell us what is so, just as we get used to having the news on television tell us what is happening. And yet when it comes to our own experience, we can go directly to the source.

What is the sensation in your arms right now? Can you even really put it into words or is it something beyond words? And what about the space around your arms? Does your sensing really stop where the skin stops, or is there some kind of impression of the whole area around your physical arms in awareness right now? Where is the awareness that senses your arms located? Is it in your head, or is it in your head and your arms?

Questions like these are not meant to lead you anywhere but right where you are already. There is no particular need for a profound experience of bliss or cosmic light, when every experience including the most ordinary is so mysterious. And if you happen to have an experience of bliss, then you can check it out also. But for now, why not check out what is here already?

The wonderful thing about this simple form of inquiry is that you are never done. There is always a new sea of sensation, energy, and presence unfolding into each moment's experience. Even thoughts and feelings are just a flow of internal sensations: voices, pictures, and emotional energies that ebb and flow. How do you know what you are sensing right now? How do you know what you are thinking or feeling right now? What is it that registers all of the movement, color, sound, pressure, texture, language, contrast, and space that is happening right now as you read these words?

There is a wonderful relief in asking the questions and not having to formulate an answer in your mind. The questions are like an invitation to fully taste and savor the exquisite flavors of all of these qualities. Life doesn't need a conclusion to be alive.

NOT KNOWING

We spend much of our life in pursuit of knowledge. It seems you can never know too much and our families and culture all support this approach to life. As a result most of us find it uncomfortable or even frightening to not know something. It seems difficult to not know what to do, what you want, or what is going to happen.

But what if there is a richness and possibility in the experience of not knowing? What if in our rush to get to the place of knowing and certainty we pass over the empty spaces of uncertainty that may contain even deeper truths? Life is complex and has many dimensions. Some of the more subtle and yet profound elements of our life may not fit so easily into concepts and ideas...our usual type of knowing. Discovering these deeper dimensions may require a slowing down in our thought and action to allow the quieter and deeper aspects of existence to be recognized. Is not knowing really a place of lack or incompleteness, or is there something worthwhile to be found in the silent moments even when we truly do not know anything?

There is nothing wrong with knowing something when you do know it. But it turns out there is also nothing wrong with the experience of not knowing, and not knowing can even lead to surprising new depths of knowing. Becoming familiar and comfortable with not knowing can also allow a more complete and satisfying experience of life as it is. Since what we do not know is often much greater than what we do know, the space of not knowing is where much of life is actually happening.

Right now, do you really know how your heart manages to beat so regularly? Do you really know how electricity works, where your life is going, how to grow and improve as a person, what love really is, who to trust, and why you are here? And yet your heart is beating, electricity does seem to work, your life is going somewhere and you somehow seem to grow as it unfolds, love and trust do happen, and finally you are here, you do exist. All of these experiences are not contained in or dependent on your knowledge and yet they are happening and add tremendously to the richness of your life.

And yet we struggle against not knowing. We strain and strive to know as much as we can. We push ourselves to learn more and more. What if this pushing and striving is a source of

our pain and difficulty in life? What if not knowing by itself is a perfectly fine sensation? It is only when we are struggling against that experience that it becomes painful. Again there is also nothing wrong with knowing, or not knowing. It is our striving and efforting to have another experience that is painful.

To simply not know can be a profound relief from the struggle. And it can even open our awareness up fully to allow ourselves to not know. It is when we do not know that we tend to pay attention. In the blank space of not knowing is a natural curiosity and hunger for the truth. This curious hunger is an alive and always changing experience of the richness of all that can be known and all that is beyond our usual ways of knowing.

THE TRUE NATURE OF PAIN AND SUFFERING

Being alive in a human form is often an experience filled with difficulties. We struggle and suffer and rarely just feel all right with the world and ourselves. What is the source of this sense of difficulty? Is it pain? What is pain and discomfort? How do we know we are experiencing the difficulty of pain or a lack of ease? Is pain a particular sensation or can a whole range of sensations be painful? What does it mean to suffer?

Every moment is full of a symphony of sensations, thoughts, feelings. Take a moment just to experience how much is happening right now, sounds, sights, tactile sensations, smells, internal sensations, thoughts, feelings, pressure, desire or longing. It is impossible to even compile a list of everything you are experiencing in this very moment because there is so much. And all of it is constantly changing into a new set of sensations, thoughts and feelings.

Along with the raw sensations and random thoughts filling the moment, there is often an internal reaction to the experience we are having. Most of the time we are internally busy with a rejection of or attempt to manage the experience we are having. This internal activity is effortful and requires a tensing and pushing, either literally against something that is present, or internally against a subtle experience. And it is this internal efforting that is the true source of all of our pain and suffering.

This is good news as it means that no sensation by itself can cause us to suffer. We have to resist or struggle with it for it to become painful. And if we simply allow awareness of the sensation we are having to be here fully, the suffering or pain is gone.

WHAT IS THIS MOMENT'S TREASURE

What is this moment's treasure? There is so much happening right now as you read these words. Thoughts, feelings, desires, sensations, and the whole world of objects and events are all taking place in this very moment. And yet we often look outside of this moment for happiness, satisfaction, freedom, and ultimately our true nature. When you look outside of what is actually happening, all you can ever find is an idea or fantasy. That is what is meant when we say someone is not in the present moment. It is not that they actually are somewhere else, it is just that they are looking somewhere else and the only other place to look is in their own mind at a story about another time.

The tricky thing is that our stories about the future or past are very convincing. The mind is a good storyteller. And every now and then, one of our stories comes true: the thing we were imagining in one moment actually happens. If we are honest, we have to admit that this is quite rare. Most of the time, instead of being able to say, "I told you so," we really should say "I never imagined this happening!" However any psychology student will tell you that an intermittent reward is more powerful as a reinforcement than even a constant reward. We are so powerfully rewarded when a story our mind tells comes true that we simply overlook the many times our stories turn out to be irrelevant.

Where is there a more constant reward? What can we pay attention to that is accurate and true? One thing we can say about our present moment experience is that it is always accurate and true. We do not have to wonder if it is going to come true or not, as it already has! So the content of our present moment experience is always true. Even our thoughts are truly thoughts. It is undeniably true that we are thinking whatever we are thinking, even if the content of the thought is not very likely to become true. So every experience we are having right now is a true experience. It has some reality and significance, unlike the content of our thoughts which may or may not turn out to have significance.

If our present moment experience is always present and real and true, why do we pay so little attention to it? Why aren't we filled with wonder and curiosity about this endless parade of true, real experiences showing up in every moment? It's not a lack in the present

moment. It's our simple misunderstanding that what matters is what happens, when what makes a moment satisfying and worthwhile is the awareness of what happens.

If our focus is completely on what is happening, then there is always something better that could be happening instead. And since we all have perfectly good minds that can easily tell us what could be happening instead, we focus even more on what should or could be happening. If what matters is what happens, then it makes sense to pay attention to what we want to happen, or at least to what we don't want to happen in hopes that we can then prevent it from happening. If the important thing is the content of our experience and by extension the content of our thoughts, then of course we will pay attention to that.

But what if the most important thing is what is aware of what is happening? What if what really matters is both the ultimate nature of awareness and also the specific quality of our awareness in this moment? This is the 900 pound gorilla in the room that nobody is talking about. The awareness of the present moment is a constant feature of every present moment. The awareness is a complete mystery, and yet it is the source of every experience of joy, peace, happiness, satisfaction, and love that we have ever had. The only difference when something we want to happen happens is that we usually pay full attention to those experiences. And in that full flow of awareness there is always a quality of our Being which is satisfying. The satisfaction is not in the content of our experience; it is in the flow of awareness.

Recognizing this fundamental truth about the source of our joy, peace, and love can dramatically simplify our lives. It turns out it doesn't matter that much what is happening. The real treasure in this moment is always to be found in the awareness of this moment, and not in the content of our experience. So it's not that important if something better is happening or not. Discovering this simple perspective is like finding out you live in a candy store. Everywhere you turn is another goodie!

Beyond that, is the recognition that this endless supply of goodies is what you really are. You are not the content of your experience; you are the awareness that brings life and joy to every experience. Talk about not having to worry about what happens! Nothing that happens can change what you are, and what you are is the biggest treasure. It is hidden in plain sight right in front of you, always in the experience you are having right now.

INTERVIEW WITH NIRMALA

(Interviewed by Andrea Young on July 21, 2000 as a radio interview aired on KAJX/Aspen Public Radio)

Andrea (A): Can you tell us a little bit about yourself? Do you consider yourself in the spiritual tradition of Advaita Vedanta?

Nirmala (N): I don't label myself as anything. It's simpler that way; it's truer. There are no certifying boards for spiritual teachers, so I don't claim to be anything.

(A): Is it that you consider yourself a spiritual teacher?

(N): I finally figured I had to call myself something, so I settled on 'spiritual teacher,' as the least distorting description. It's simpler than saying 'ahhh' and not having an answer every time someone asks: 'What do you do?'

(A): For those listeners out there who know this interview has something to do with spirituality, what would you tell them is most important?

(N): It's actually a very simple message: The peace and love and happiness that we've all been seeking is always already present. It's always here right now, before, during, and after any seeking you do. And that's wonderful news because you can just rest, you can just stop, you can just be in this Truth. And it's, at the same time, really bad news if you're a spiritual seeker because when you find out that what you've been seeking is already present, you're out of a job.

The job description for the ego now is to do nothing, and that's not such good news for the ego. The ego likes the job of spiritual seeker. It gives it something to do. It adds a lot of beauty and drama and intensity to life, to be seeking for the truth. Then, to find out that it's already here—that it's present in every moment—can be a shock. But it's also really wonderful news because then you finally get to rest; you finally get to just be in the Truth that you are, which is this Love.

Actually it's more accurate to say that the source of peace, the source of love, the source of happiness is always present because it sometimes appears with the quality of peace, and then in another moment it will appear with the quality of love. Strangely enough, the same source that is the source of peace and love and wisdom and happiness is actually the source of everything. That makes the spiritual seeker's job even smaller because you don't even have to weed out the peace from everything else that's present. It's all coming from the same source, so there's no need to get rid of anything in order for the source of peace to be recognized.

(A): Would you say that your message is only for spiritual seekers then?

(N): No, actually the message is for everyone, and in fact it's a great blessing if you're lucky enough to skip the stage of being a spiritual seeker. You don't have to go through quite as much identification with that kind of struggle. If you're lucky enough to hear this Truth before you've gone looking for it, it can save you a lot of trouble.

(A): And isn't this Truth really just Being, just Beingness? Isn't it like, sort of a joke?

(N): Yes, it is a wonderful joke because it is always present, even before you knew to look for it. The joke is that it's very ordinary; the joke is that it's the most natural thing about all of us, about every experience. The source of all has no qualities, and yet all of these qualities of peace and quiet and stillness and loving embrace all come out of it. But the joke is that it is also present in very ordinary moments. It is also that which listens to the news every night on TV. It is also that which brushes your teeth every morning. It is also that which sometimes gets irritated at your neighbor. It is also that which takes the dog out for a walk. It is present in all of those different experiences, all of the different emotions, all of the different thoughts. They are all occurring in and coming from this Presence, this empty kind of Presence that is the source of everything.

(A): Do you see, as other teachers, do that this is quite an extraordinary time, in that very ordinary people are waking up?

(N): Yes there seems to be a greater possibility today of recognizing this Truth. Recognizing this very ordinary and yet also extraordinary Presence is easier now, and I have no idea why that is; it's just an observation. It is happening to people who've been long-time spiritual seekers, and it is happening to people who don't have a spiritual bone in their body.

(A): Have you always been a spiritual seeker?

(N): I went through a period, in my teens, when I was deeply involved with spiritual seeking; and then it seemed like I needed to go out and live in the world and find out what that was all about. I couldn't take a short cut; I first had to try to make it in the real world of careers and marriage and owning a house. It was only when I had been successful in a material sense and had all that success fall apart that I found myself looking for a deeper truth again—something that was more satisfying. I found that there wasn't real happiness in the surface of things and that I had to go to the source for that.

(A): And was there a path that took you there? Obviously there was.

(N): You know, the great thing about my teacher is that she wouldn't teach me anything: She wouldn't give me a path; she wouldn't give me anything to do. Anytime I tried to turn her words into a way of understanding, a way of grasping onto this Truth and containing it in an understanding, she would pull the rug out from underneath me. And yet there was something about her that was undeniable. There was a presence, an atmosphere around her that was irresistible. I dropped everything in my life in order to be in her presence. But there was also nothing there for me: There was no understanding, no great teaching or path to follow, no great explanation of everything. Instead, it was up to me to let go of all of that and find that Presence in myself. And there is no 'how.' The closest thing to how is to do nothing, be quiet, rest. The mind doesn't like that because it doesn't get any credit that way.

(A): And when you say 'rest,' obviously you're not talking about sitting down on the sofa and not moving for a period of time. Do you mean resting the mind?

(N): I mean resting from the struggle to find the Truth, resting from doing anything to improve yourself or your experiences or your emotional state. Obviously you still get up in the morning and eat breakfast and go about your day. It's a surrendering of all of the effort to make this Love and Peace that is already present, be present. When you drop the effort, then the underlying Truth that it is already here becomes obvious.

(A): Do you mean dropping the effort, whether it be in creating happiness or in being happy or sad or whatever the emotions or whatever's going on?

(N): It is so wonderfully simple: It's already here. There's nothing for you to do. When you realize this, then there is the possibility of just looking in your present moment experience and finding what's already present here and now. I would also add that this Truth, this place of peace and quiet, can often seem very quiet and small. So at first, you may only have a very small recognition in your Heart that there is Love already present, there is peace, there is acceptance of the way things are. This recognition may be very small and therefore

seem insignificant. But if you give that little sliver of peace that's present right now your full attention, you may find that—even though it is very quiet, very simple, and very ordinary—this Peace is actually very big, very vast; and that it is much bigger than your so-called problems or your sadness or fear or anger. It turns out that this quiet, simple Truth is much bigger than what you first think. The invitation is to give this peaceful, aware Presence all of your attention, to trust the one thing you can trust, which is your own Heart, your own recognition of Truth.

(A): Well, I know that some of the listeners must have the same questions I have, and I'm sitting here thinking, yes, but how are we going to get world peace and how are we going to make goodness happen in the world, because it almost sounds to me like not doing, nondoing.

(N): In the teaching I do, which is called satsang, I'm often pointing to the half of the truth that people are overlooking. This quiet, peaceful place of Beingness is the place we lose track of when we're so involved in doing in the world and making the world a better place and making our lives better. So the pointing is to this overlooked half of the truth. But that still is only half of the story.

Once there's been a recognition of this deeper, more all-inclusive Truth, it would be a big a mistake to hide from the world in this peaceful Beingness. One of the potential pitfalls is a tendency to hide out there, to think: "Now I've got peace, so I can't be bothered with the rest of the world." If you do try to hide, what you've done is formed a new ego—a new spiritual ego as someone who has become enlightened or awakened. You've just shifted your identity to an equally limited part of yourself.

Beyond that, is the opportunity to bring this realization into action in the world, and to find out what this peaceful loving presence is capable of. For this, the most important question is: Where is this action coming from? If you're trying to save the world out of a place of personal interest and identity, it may look like you're doing good work; but if you scratch beneath the surface, what it is really about is making you look better and satisfying your personal desires and needs.

However, something profound can happen when you embrace the whole truth. Not only are you willing to recognize the perfection that is always present, even before the world has been fixed, you are also willing to look your own life, your own actions, and the world straight in the eye and see what is in alignment with this bigger view, and what needs to be changed in order to be in alignment. Then the changes can come from a place of loving acceptance, instead of a place of painful resistance. When change comes from a place of loving acceptance, it is more often based on a clear and true seeing of what is needed. When

change comes from a place of painful resistance, it is often based on personal needs or desires, and it is not as wise and clear seeing.

In the whole truth, what is missing is the sense that it is all about me. That is the other reason why it is not good news for the ego to find out that the peace and the love and the happiness are already here. Because along with the job of seeker, what also goes is the sense of the Truth having anything to do with you. There's nothing personal about this Truth; it is very impersonal. And yet, it is completely at ease in the world, doing whatever needs to be done.

I read a quote recently where another teacher said he doesn't understand what all the big fuss is about enlightenment because, to him, the only value of enlightenment is if it allows there to be more love in the world. Enlightenment for enlightenment's sake is just a way to get your own needs met. So unless that realization is put in service to this Truth, and this peaceful, loving Presence is put into expression in the world, then what's the point—what's the difference whether someone is enlightened or not?

(A): Well, I guess I would ask you that question, what is the point?

(N): The ultimate truth is always one step ahead....so it's always a mystery. When we see very loving actions coming out of someone who has had a profound spiritual experience, we often think that all we have to do is act like them, and then we'll have profound spiritual experiences too; so we act like Mother Theresa or we act like an Indian saint. But where are these actions coming from, what are they in service to? If they are in service to an idea of yourself as even just a spiritual person, then those actions will get distorted by your needs. But if they are coming from Love, which is not personal, which is not yours in any sense, then they have a freshness and unpredictable spontaneity to them.

One of the qualities of this Presence is that it is very fresh, very unexpected. My teacher was a master at totally surprising me. Whatever I thought she would do, she would do something so completely different and unexpected that I would be left breathless in astonishment.

(A): Who is your teacher?

(N): My teacher's name is Neelam; and she spent time with her teacher, who was Papaji, in India. Then she came back and has been traveling around giving satsang, doing this teaching, or in her case, non-teaching.

(A): What does your name mean and where does it come from?

(N): I got my name from Neelam, and it's a Sanskrit word that means 'pure.' A friend of mine gave me a bar of soap from India; and just like Ivory soap says 'pure' on the box, this soap said 'nirmala.'

(A): What part of your work brings you the most satisfaction?

(N): What is amazing to me is how much satisfaction I find in everything nowadays. There is a great sense of joy when someone is getting this simple message, and there is a great sense of joy and wonder when someone is struggling. And there is a great sense of joy when I'm resting in what is; and there is also a great sense of joy and wonder when I get caught again in suffering, by trying to make my life better or do it better.

(A): Would you say something about how one might directly experience something one has fought all one's life?

(N): Do you mean a part of your life that's not fulfilling or giving you trouble?

(A): Yes, in the sense of something that you push away.

(N): The simplest thing is to start with whatever is, whatever is present. If it is really true that the source of everything you've been seeking is already here, then the obvious thing is to start with whatever is here. So if what is, is that you are resisting or pushing away something, then you get curious about that. Find out what the experience of resistance is. Who or what is resisting? What is that really like?

One quality of this Truth, this mystery that we are, is awareness; it has consciousness. It's hearing this voice right now and feeling the sensations of the body in this moment; so awareness is present, right now. This is a good quality to start with to understand this mystery because it is always present. Even if you're in great suffering, in great struggle, and resisting life with all your might, there is also awareness of the resistance. This may not seem like that big a deal, but the invitation is to notice: What is it that is aware of the resistance? What is this very ordinary quality of experience we call awareness that is always present?

Without doing anything to the resistance or to the problem causing it, just notice that there's also awareness present, and get curious about that. Then, some wonderful questions can be asked: What is Awareness' perspective on this problem? And what is Awareness' perspective on your resistance to it? The funny thing is, Awareness doesn't have a problem with anything, not even with your resisting your problems. So when you ask that question, when you look out from a place of just Awareness, you can't find

problems anymore. All of the same elements are still present in your life, but Awareness itself has no problem with any of them.

(A): In being spiritually enlightened, does it mean that you always recognize this Awareness or that you've had some big wake-up call?

(N): Like everything else in life, no two people experience any aspect of life the same way. The same thing is true of this experience that the word enlightenment points to: There is no formula for it. There are people for whom it's a big, explosive experience, which completely obliterates any suffering or struggle or resistance. And there are others who very gradually, almost imperceptibly, have moved into a place where they are recognizing and living out of more and more of the Truth. I have friends who don't consider themselves enlightened because they never had a big experience, while it is obvious to everyone around them that they are living out of an enlightened perspective.

Because of all these different experiences, any formula you put on this very mysterious thing we call enlightenment or awakening is going to unnecessarily limit it.

(A): Do you still struggle?

(N): I was telling a friend over lunch today that the difference is that I can't keep up the struggling for very long. Now when I start to struggle with what is happening or go to battle with reality, the experience is similar to putting on a pair of underwear that's about five sizes too small. In the past, I would pull that underwear on anyways because it was my underwear, dammit, and I was determined to wear it until I wore it out. Now it is more like I get the underwear half way up and say, nah, its not worth it. So I can't say that there isn't a movement to resist, but it's very difficult to sustain resistance because there's such a recognition of the contrast between the suffering and this place of peace. The contrast is so obvious that there's less of a tendency to keep going, to fight and struggle all the way into the too tight underwear of a so-called problem.

(A): Do you feel that you are a channel for some energy or entity?

(N): I don't feel that I am anything; and so all there really is, is this energy, this Presence. Another way of saying the same thing is that everything is a channel for this energy; everything is an expression of this Presence. The Presence itself has no preferences. There is no better expression of this presence. It is all perfect; it is all beautiful just the way it is.

(A): And would you say your realization is still deepening?

(N): Endlessly, endlessly. I feel like I've barely scratched the surface.

(A): And if there's one thing you would say to our listeners today to assist them in seeking Truth, what would that be?

(N): Simply check beneath your shoulders. It's not that the truth is located anywhere physically in your body; but, somehow, in including the knowing that comes from beneath your shoulders, you automatically include more of your Being than just your mind. It's not that the mind is wrong or a mistake; but when you include more of your Being, there is more of a recognition of the whole truth. Especially include your Heart when you look for the truth of your experience. When you include the Heart in finding out what is true, you include this impersonal, yet wise and clear Presence that is always here. What is it that your Heart knows in this moment already, before you've succeeded in improving your life, in improving your self? What is it that is already present in your Heart?

NIRMALA'S STORY

(Adapted from a talk given in Boulder, CO on January 19,1999)

The important thing to remember is that this is just a story and that nothing I'm going to say now is at all necessary or relevant to knowing the truth of who you are. There are a few exceptions to that, which I'll point out along the way.

About two years ago, I was busy attending naturopathic medical school and I thought happily married. And then out of the blue, at least from my perspective, my wife told me she was leaving me for another man. The intensity of feelings that surfaced was amazing. I was aware of feeling equal and opposite feelings: intense feelings of both grief over the loss and relief from being released from the struggle of making a relationship work. Amidst overwhelming, paralyzing fear was intense excitement over all the new possibilities created by the space that had opened up in my life.

Upon reflection, I realized that this had always been the case, that in every experience in my life I've always had equal and opposite feelings. That's just the nature of feelings; they're always present in opposite pairs. For instance, with naturopathic medical school, I was both enjoying and resisting every minute of it. The problem was that these opposing feelings were so intense in the days and weeks after my wife left me. It felt like I wasn't a big enough container for that much fear and that much excitement, that much sadness and that much relief. I felt like I was being torn apart or stretched, and I couldn't contain all the disparate emotions.

Then, by luck or by grace, I heard about a thing called the "Sedona Method," which is a technique for releasing emotions or, alternatively, for just allowing them to be there with no need to release them. It's based on the idea that there is no need to repress emotions or express them—you just let them be, or just let them go. It was so obviously appropriate for me that I had to check it out. I called up Hale Dwoskin of the Sedona Institute and ordered the tapes that taught the method. I had a week off and just sat down and went through the tapes.

The Sedona Method starts off with letting go of all the uncomfortable emotions. Then what is revealed are the more positive emotions, which it also suggests that you let go of. One day I was practicing this technique and I had a moment when I followed it all the way—I just let go of everything, all the painful emotions and all the peace, happiness, and joy. I just let it all go, and there was this incredible silence that I'd never experienced before. It happened when I was out for a walk, and suddenly I was so present to everything—the trees, the sidewalk, and the sky. I was so moved by this experience of silence that I immediately turned around, went home, and called Hale and asked him if I could come to an advanced training, even though I was just a beginner. He said, "Sure, come on." I signed up thinking I'd get more of this wonderful technique, which I saw as a profound form of stress relief.

What I didn't know at the time was that the Sedona Method had been developed by a man named Lester Levinson as a tool for awakening to one's true nature as limitless Freedom, and there was a whole community of people who had spent ten, fifteen or even, twenty years using this method in the effort to become awakened, or truly free. Finally, one of them (other than Lester, who had died a few years earlier) had "made it." Her name was Pamela, and she was co-teaching the advanced Sedona Method course. When I showed up at the course, I saw a room full of forty or so people, all desperate to awaken. I was at first resistant, but I had to admit there was something about Pamela that was undeniably attractive. She had a presence of pure happiness and a literal sense of Freedom.

It also happened that Pamela had made arrangements for a spiritual teacher named Neelam to come to town to give satsang. At the time I didn't even know what "satsang" meant. Every day we practiced the Sedona Method and every night we went to satsang with Neelam. This undeniable sense of Freedom that I had felt in Pamela was even more present in Neelam. Even though my mind couldn't grasp it, I couldn't let it go; I couldn't forget about it. I looked around the room at everyone else who had come, and I saw them really suffering over this desire for awakening or Freedom. It was almost palpable; they wanted it so badly. However, I found myself holding back: I wanted to be like Pamela and Neelam, but I definitely didn't want to be like everybody else. It felt safer just to pretend that I didn't want it.

In one of the classes, Hale presented a chart of "wants," and the last want, the most fundamental desire, was the desire for Freedom. He spoke about this desire for Freedom as the desire that burns away all the others, which, paradoxically, you also must let go of. That night, in my room all alone, I had this great idea—why not take a short cut and just let go of the desire for Freedom? I thought, "I'll start at the end, at the last step. I'll let go of the desire for Freedom, and then I will be Free." But a troubling doubt appeared: "What if I'm fooling myself? This short cut could be like cheating. I'd better ask Hale about it tomorrow."

But then I remembered that Hale rarely answers questions; he just does the Sedona Method until you get the answer from within. So, I figured I must already know the answer, and I just got very quiet and asked inside, “Can I use this shortcut to become free?” The answer that came was: “It’s not up to you. There is nothing you can do to become free.” At that moment I knew this was true beyond a shadow of a doubt—there was absolutely nothing that “I” could do about it. It was simply not up to me.

The fact that I couldn’t do anything about it was a completely devastating realization because, in that exact same moment, I also realized that I wanted Freedom more than I had ever wanted anything in my life. And I burst into tears—not just sobbing, but wailing for hours because I realized there was absolutely nothing I could do about this thing that I wanted more than life itself. And yet after being in the presence of Pamela and Neelam, I just couldn’t let it go. I had this sense there was surgery going on in my chest, like it had been ripped open. This is one of those important elements to the story. I could just stop the story here because once I had admitted I wanted this Freedom more than anything else, even though I absolutely knew there was nothing I could do about it, there was no turning back to my old life.

A few weeks later I was at a satsang retreat with Neelam, and at one point she moved into the center of my heart. I suddenly knew that whatever it took, I was going to be with Neelam. She was a master at completely bypassing my mind. I would formulate these nice, neat questions, and she would lovingly pop them like a balloon. There’s no way I could get around her, through her, or past her with my mind.

So, I gave my share in our house to my wife and I quit medical school. These are the irrelevant parts, by the way. You don’t need to have a spouse leave you. You don’t have to give away your house, drop out of school, quit your job—whatever. But I did all that to follow Neelam through Europe and on to India. I had never had a strong desire to go to India with all of its poverty, disease, and other challenges; and I had even less desire to go now that I was going. It had nothing to do with India; that was just where Neelam was going to be.

The next relevant point in this story came during a satsang in England, on the way to India. I can’t remember exactly what Neelam said, but in that same way that I had known there was nothing I could do to get Freedom, I also knew that there was nothing that I had to fix about myself first in order to become Free. There was truly nothing that I had to change or improve. Trying to fix myself, make myself perfect, had been a lifelong task and a huge burden because it was so obvious that in my case it was hopeless. I had participated in endless workshops, trainings, and self-improvement techniques—even the Sedona Method. They were all attempts to become better. Finally, from what Neelam said, I got it that none

of that was necessary. And so not only was there nothing I could do to become Free, but fortunately there was now the recognition that neither was there anything I had to do to become Free.

The story could stop here because from that point I just got happier and happier. Even awakening and Freedom no longer mattered. I was perfectly happy the way things were. For example, I used to run the sound equipment for Neelam, and one day, fifteen minutes into satsang the whole system stopped working. I was pushing buttons and turning knobs, and it just wouldn't work. Meanwhile, I was just getting happier and happier—"It's wonderful, the system's not working!" It's just that it really didn't matter anymore—even this whole notion of awakening or Freedom. I was ready to spend the rest of my life going to satsang with Neelam, running the sound equipment. This was the letting go of even the desire for Freedom that Hale had spoken about.

Eventually, we went on to India and ended up in Rishikesh at an ashram called Phool Chatti in the jungle on the banks of the Ganges. There we spent our days in satsang with Neelam and our nights singing devotional songs.

Whenever I wasn't in satsang, I sat by the river, especially late at night after everyone had gone to sleep. I would sit about ten feet from the edge of the Ganges along this stretch of ten-foot tall rapids. The river was an incredible roaring presence of rushing white water.

One night as I was sitting there under the full moon, I recognized that the rock that I was leaning on was me—"Oh, yeah, this is me; this rock is inside of me." Once I realized that about that rock, I saw the same was true of all the rocks in the huge field of boulders along the river's edge. Then since the rocks were so obviously "me," the river was obviously "me" too, not just this stretch of the river but the entire Ganges from one end of India to the other. Very quickly, I saw that not just the river but the whole continent was "me." It struck me as obvious that it was all inside "me"—and then it was the whole world, and the whole solar system, the entire galaxy and universe. This kept going until the mind could not keep up. There was no longer any possibility of my mind containing all of this endless space, and yet it was all "me" in the same way that one of my limbs was "me."

Then there was a wonderful moment when "me" included not only infinity in terms of space but "popped" to include all time. It was obviously who I had always been, and it included all the past and all the future. Then I laughed and laughed and rolled around in the gravel because it was suddenly so silly that I had imagined myself to have suffered. I had always been so free that I was even free to have this illusion of not being free. That's how complete the Freedom is. So I just laughed and laughed.

I sometimes call this experience a non-awakening because what I realized in that moment is that all there is and ever has been is Awakeness. There's no need for awakening in Awakeness itself. All of life is just the play of this that has always been fully awake.

I would like to emphasize again that the specifics of this experience are not important. This Awakeness/Consciousness does not even make a snowflake the same way twice, so it is reasonable to assume that it would not have an awakening experience the same way twice. What is important is the transformation of perspective that the experience allows. And the shift in perspective to knowing that you already are free does not depend on having any particular experience.

Since that time, there has been a simple desire to share the perspective of Freedom. I began doing this in informal conversations with friends, and then through giving satsang after being invited to.

*time on my hands
can I wash them clean
send the past down the drain
scrub away the future
leaving nice pink rosy fingers of now
touching everything within easy reach
and yet grasping only momentarily
to express my depth of gratitude
for the warmth in every touch
then releasing it forever
before a memory
sticks to my skin
and calls me back to the sink
for another washing*

*time out of my hands
I can only touch
but can never hold more than a single breath
until it too goes
leaving only another now
no scrubbing needed*

THE FLOWER OF AWAKENING

Consider the miracle of a flower. What is it that causes a plant to flower? Does sunshine cause a plant to flower? Does lots of water? Or is it good soil? Maybe all of these together? Or is there really something more subtle in the nature of the flower itself that causes it to flower? Is it something in the DNA of the plant? Does that mean the whole process of evolution over eons of time is involved? What other factors might cause the flowering? Does gravity play a part? The season and the temperature? The quality of the light? (Some plants will not flower under glass or artificial light.) What about animals that eat the fruit and spread the plant? Or the birds or bees that pollinate the flower? Do they cause the subsequent flowering of the newly established plants? Are there even subtler influences? What about presence and love? The intention and attention of a gardener? And is the existence of the world of form itself necessary for a plant to flower? And what about consciousness? Is there an ultimate force that directs the creation and unfolding of all expressions of form that is behind the appearance of a rose or a daisy?

What if it is a combination of all of the things mentioned? And also what if they have to all be in the right proportion? Is that proportion different for every species of plant? Some plants need lots of water or light to flower. Others will die with too much water or light. There is a unique formula that is involved with the appearance of the simplest apple blossom and the most complex orchid.

When you consider all of these influences and even more that were not mentioned or can't even be known or imagined, then it truly is a miracle when a flower happens. It is impossible to say what causes it to happen with any certainty or completeness. Yet, it's an act of incredible grace whenever all of these diverse, subtle, and gross influences come together in just the right way for an iris or a bird of paradise to open its unique petals to the sky. Ultimately, if you trace all the factors back to all their causes, you find that everything that exists is somehow intimately connected to the cactus flower or dandelion in your front yard. We need a vague and powerful word like "grace" to name this amazing interplay of forces and intelligence. Obviously, to reduce it to a formula doesn't come close to capturing or describing the vast richness of variables and forces at play. There is no formula complex enough to capture the whole mystery of a magnolia blossom.

Awakening is a kind of flowering of consciousness. When consciousness expands and opens into a new expression, we call that an awakening. And while there are as many kinds of awakenings as there are flowers, they are all equally mysterious. What is it that causes a child to start to awaken to the nature of words and language? What causes the awakening of sexuality in a teenager? How does one suddenly know they are falling in love? Or even more profoundly, how does one explain the birth of unconditional or divine love?

Finally, what are the causes of the most profound spiritual awakenings, where consciousness suddenly recognizes its ultimate true nature? Why does that type of flowering appear in one consciousness today and another one tomorrow? If the formula for a simple petunia is a vastly complex interplay of earthly, human, and even cosmic forces, then imagine how complex the formula is for the unfolding of a human consciousness into full awakesness as one's true nature. The good news is that we cannot and do not need to know the totality of the formula involved to grow some petunias, and we cannot and do not need to know the formula for spiritual realization. Yet, we can be curious about all of the factors involved and even play with them to see what effects, if any, they may have in our individual experience of consciousness unfolding.

Sometimes the mysteriousness and unpredictability of the whole process of awakening leads us to shrug our shoulders and say it is all up to grace or to God. And, of course, that is true; and yet, does that mean there's no place in this unfolding for our own actions? Is there a place for spiritual practice? What about meditation, self-inquiry, or study of spiritual texts? And how about devotional practices or the transmission of presence from being with a great teacher or master? We can easily become disillusioned with any or all of these activities because the results they produce are so unpredictable and varied, and it can seem simpler to avoid the question of their role altogether. Ask any gardener if it works every time to water and weed and fertilize a plant? Or does a plant sometimes fail to flower no matter how well it is cared for? But does that mean you never water or fertilize your plants?

At other times we can be overly convinced that our practice or inquiry will lead to the desired results, often because it seemed to work at least once for us, or for someone we know. The only problem with spiritual practices is that they occasionally work! Then we think that we have the formula and that every time we sit down to meditate or ask, "Who am I?" we will have that same experience of expansion or awakening again. That is like thinking you will always have a bumper crop of marigolds every time you plant them.

There is a middle way between denying the importance or role of spiritual practice and having unrealistic expectations that inquiry, meditation, or devotional practice is going to, by itself, cause an awakening. We can experiment and play with these processes, just as a gardener will experiment with different fertilizers or watering patterns to see what

happens. It ultimately is all up to grace, and yet, what if grace works through us as well as on us? What if spiritual practice is as much a part of the mystery of existence as anything else?

Maybe we can hold the question of what role inquiry, devotion, effort, surrender, transmission, meditation, gratitude, intention, silencing the mind, study of spiritual books, involvement with a teacher or master, ripeness of the student, karma, grace, and luck play in our awakening with an openness and curiosity, instead of a need to define their roles once and for all. The flowering of consciousness in your own existence is as unique as every flower, and ultimately we are all here to discover how it is going to happen uniquely this time around. What is your consciousness like right now? How open is the flower of your awareness? Is it still budding or has it blossomed? Just as every flower fades and another comes along, what about now? And now? What happens this time when you meditate? What happens now when you inquire "Who am I?" How does it feel right now to open your heart with gratitude even if nothing much is happening? What impact does reading this article or any other piece of writing have on you? Every stage of a plant's existence is valuable and even necessary for its flowering. Your experience is always adding to the richness of the unfolding of consciousness in this moment. May you enjoy the garden of your true nature.

THAT IS THAT

I am That.

You are That.

And that is that.

CONTACT INFORMATION

For information about Nirmala's satsang* schedule and to download free copies of his other books and publications, visit:

www.endless-satsang.com

You can contact Nirmala at Nirmalanow@aol.com.

For information about Nirmala's teacher, Neelam, visit: www.neelam.org.

For information about Nirmala's teacher, Adyashanti, visit: www.adyashanti.org.

For information about Nirmala's wife's books, visit www.radicalhappiness.com.

Nirmala has also been profoundly inspired by the teachings of A.H Almaas and his work, The Diamond Approach: www.ahalmaas.com.

* *Satsang* is a Sanskrit word that means coming together to speak about and share Truth.

ABOUT NIRMALA

After a lifetime of spiritual seeking, Nirmala met his teacher, Neelam, a devotee of H.W.L. Poonja (Papaji). She convinced Nirmala that seeking wasn't necessary; and after experiencing a profound spiritual awakening in India, he began offering satsang and Nondual Spiritual Mentoring with Neelam's blessing. This tradition of spiritual wisdom has been most profoundly disseminated by Ramana Maharshi, a revered Indian saint, who was Papaji's teacher. Nirmala's perspective was also profoundly expanded by his friend and teacher, Adyashanti.

Nirmala offers a unique vision and a gentle, compassionate approach, which adds to this rich tradition of inquiry into the truth of Being. He is also the author of several books including *Nothing Personal: Seeing Beyond the Illusion of a Separate Self*. He has been offering satsang throughout the United States and Canada since 1998. Nirmala lives in Sedona, Arizona with his wife, Gina Lake.

ABOUT NONDUAL SPIRITUAL MENTORING

Nondual Spiritual Mentoring with Nirmala is available to support you in giving attention and awareness to the more subtle and yet more satisfying inner dimensions of your being. Whether it is for a single spiritual mentoring session or for ongoing one-to-one spiritual guidance, this is an opportunity for you to more completely orient your life towards the true source of peace, joy, and happiness, especially if there is not ongoing satsang or other support available in your location. As a spiritual teacher and spiritual mentor, Nirmala has worked with thousands of individuals and groups around the world to bring people into a direct experience of the spiritual truth of oneness beyond the illusion of separation. He especially enjoys working with individuals in one-to-one sessions because of the greater depth and intimacy possible.

Mentoring sessions with Nirmala are an opportunity for open-ended inquiry. In your session, you can ask any questions, raise any concerns that are meaningful to you, or simply explore your present moment experience, which is a doorway into a deeper reality. Regular weekly, biweekly, or monthly mentoring sessions can be especially transformative.

These mentoring sessions are offered either in person or over the phone and typically last an hour. You can email Nirmala at Nirmalanow@aol.com to arrange a time for a spiritual mentoring session. Please include your phone number and location in your email. At the arranged time, Nirmala will call you if you live in the United States or Canada. If you live in another country, you must initiate the call to 928-282-5770.

FREE E-BOOKS BY NIRMALA

The following PDF e-books are available for free from www.endless-satsang.com:

Part Two of Living From the Heart

(The entire book is also available as a paperback for \$11.95)

A collection of teachings about the Heart, including:

Part one: From the Heart: Dropping out of Your Mind and Into Your Being: Offers simple ways to shift into a more open and accepting perspective and to experience your true nature as aware space.

Part two: The Heart's Wisdom: Points the reader back to the Heart, the truest source of wisdom.

Part three: Love Is for Giving, Not for Getting: Points to the true source of love in your own heart. It is by giving love that we are filled with love.

Here are some excerpts:

“The Heart is wise and accurate and can show you how true it is to stay or go, how true it is to buy a house, how true it is to take a new job, even how true it is to eat another cookie. But it also can show you much more of the possibilities inherent in this life and much more of the truth of your ultimate Being. In relation to these bigger truths, the practical questions of your life turn out to be relatively small matters. Using your Heart only to know things like what to do or where to live is like using a global positioning satellite system to find the way from your bedroom to your bathroom; it utilizes only a small part of your Heart’s capacity.

However, following your Heart day in and day out can put you in touch with the richness of the functioning of this dimension of your Being. Along the way, you may also find your Heart opening in response to the deeper movements of Being that touch every life.”

“In the midst of a very profound and large experience of truth, the sense of your self can become so large and inclusive that it no longer has much of a sense of being your Being. When you awaken to the oneness of all things, the sense of a me can thin out quite dramatically. If you are the couch you are sitting on and the clouds in the sky and everything else, then it simply doesn’t make sense to call it all me. If it’s so much more than what you usually take yourself to be, then the term me is just too small.

In a profound experience of truth, the sense of me softens and expands to such a degree that there’s only a slight sense of me as a separate self remaining, perhaps just as the observer of the vastness of truth. Beyond these profound experiences of the truth, is the truth itself. When you’re in touch with the ultimate truth and the most complete sense of Being, there’s nothing

separate remaining to sense itself there's no experience and no experiencer, no Heart, and no sense of self. There is only Being.”

“You may think it matters what happens. But what if the only thing that matters is where you are experiencing from, where you are looking from? What if you could experience all of life from a spacious, open perspective where anything can happen and there is room for all of it, where there is no need to pick and choose, to put up barriers or resist any of it, where nothing is a problem and everything just adds to the richness of life? What if this open, spacious perspective was the most natural and easy thing to do?

It may sound too good to be true, but we all have a natural capacity to experience life in this way. The only requirement is to look from the Heart instead of from the eyes and the head—and not just to look, but to listen and feel and sense from the Heart.

In some spiritual traditions you are encouraged to look in your Heart, and yet what does that mean exactly? Often we are so used to looking and sensing through the head and the mind that when we are asked to look in the Heart, we look *through* the head into the Heart to see what is there. Usually we end up just thinking about the Heart. But what if you could drop into the Heart and look from there? How would your life look right now? Is it possible that there is another world right in front of you that you can only see with the Heart and not with the mind?

This book invites you to explore this radically different perspective and to find out what is true and real when the world and your life are viewed from the Heart of Being. It may both delight and shock you to find that so much richness and wonder and beauty lie so close and are so immediately available to you.”

Beyond No Self

Nirmala's newest free e-book explores the fullness of Being found in the absence of a separate self. It ends with a simple fairy tale that offers a sense of how one Being can appear as so many. Here is an excerpt:

“How can that be—empty space that is full of everything that matters? The mind cannot grasp it fully, as presence exists beyond concepts and even beyond its own forms; and yet, that is what you are. You can experience it with more subtle senses than the physical senses and the mind. Ultimately, you “sense” it by being it. You just are this full empty presence.

It is this second movement of realization of essence, presence, and fullness of Being that counteracts the belief that since I (as ego) do not exist, therefore nothing exists and all is illusion. It gives a heartfelt sense of meaning and purpose back to this relative life of the body and mind, not as a means of gratification to your idea of yourself, but as a pure expression of the wonder and beauty of this deeper reality. Instead of living a life in service to the ego's wants and needs, you can find yourself fulfilling the deepest purposes of a human life: to serve and express freedom, joy, beauty, peace and love. By itself the realization of no-self can end up dry and lifeless, but when the heart opens wide to the bigger truth of the true Self, life is anything but dry and lifeless.”

Gifts With No Giver

A free collection of non-dual poetry by Nirmala. Here is a sample poem:

*every taste
every sensation
every possible pleasure
is already present
in the timeless
awareness
that is beating my heart
what use
in chasing dreams
that have already
come true*

Part One of Nothing Personal, Seeing Beyond the Illusion of a Separate Self

(The entire book is also available as a paperback for \$16.95)

In this concisely edited collection of satsang talks and dialogues, Nirmala “welcomes whatever arises within the field of experience. In the midst of this welcoming is always an invitation to inquire deeply within, to the core of who and what you are. Again and again, Nirmala points the questions back to the questioner and beyond to the very source of existence itself—to the faceless awareness that holds both the question and the questioner in a timeless embrace.” – From the Foreword by Adyashanti.

“*Nothing Personal* is an excellent book, very clear and warm-hearted. I love it and recommend it highly. Nirmala is a genuine and authentic teacher, who points with great clarity to the simplicity and wonder of nondual presence. He invites you to ‘say yes to the mystery of every moment.’ Good stuff!”—Joan Tollifson, Advaita teacher and author of *Awake in the Heartland*

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