



"A. H. Almaas is one of the foremost spiritual teachers
of our time." —JOAN BORYSENKO, PHD, author of
Minding the Body, Mending the Mind

The UNFOLDING NOW

Realizing Your True Nature through
the Practice of Presence

A. H. ALMAAS

“Almaas is a genius at revealing both the core qualities of Essence and the veils that obscure it, always in language that helps peel away those veils, always holding open the door to the unfolding presence and awareness that remains when the veils have dissolved. *The Unfolding Now* leads the reader through a masterful series of inquiry processes, invitations to sense and know ourselves at increasing levels of subtlety, gently walking us deeper and deeper into Truth.”

—Sally Kempton (Durgananda), spiritual teacher and author of *The Heart of Meditation: Pathways to a Deeper Experience*

“I love the unfolding Almaas! His clarity never diminishes, yet each book brings an increasing simplicity and gentleness. As I worked with this latest material, I felt like I was receiving a transmission of pure compassion. His strong, true voice reminds us that beyond the endless self-improvement projects and idealized mystical states with which the spiritual path is strewn lies the simple but exquisite taste of our own being.”

—Cynthia Bourgeault, author of *Mystical Hope*, *The Wisdom Way of Knowing*, and *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*

ABOUT THE BOOK

The keys to self-knowledge and deep contentment are right here before us in this very moment—if we can simply learn to live with open awareness. In *The Unfolding Now*, A. H. Almaas presents a marvelously effective practice for developing the transformative quality of presence. Through a particular method of self-observation and contemplative exploration that he calls inquiry, we learn to live in the relaxed condition of simply “being ourselves,” without interference from feelings of inadequacy, drivenness toward goals, struggling to figure things out, and rejecting experiences we don't want. Almaas explores the many obstacles that keep us from being present—including defensiveness, ignorance, desire, aggression, and self-hatred—and shows us how to welcome with curiosity and compassion whatever we are experiencing.

A. H. ALMAAS is the pen name of Hameed Ali, the Kuwaiti-born originator of the Diamond Approach, who has been guiding individuals and groups in Colorado, California, and Europe since 1976. He is the author of *Spacecrusier Inquiry*, *The Pearl Beyond Price*, *Facets of Unity*, and other books.

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Realizing Your True Nature
through the Practice of Presence

A. H. ALMAAS



SHAMBHALA
BOSTON & LONDON
2012

SHAMBHALA PUBLICATIONS, INC.

Horticultural Hall

300 Massachusetts Avenue
Boston, Massachusetts 02115
www.shambhala.com

© 2008 by A-Hameed Ali

Cover photograph by Corey Kohn

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Almaas, A. H.

The unfolding now: realizing your true nature through the practice of presence / A. H. Almaas. 1st ed.

p. cm. (Diamond Body Series; 3) Includes index.

eISBN 978-0-8348-2557-4

ISBN 978-1-59030-559-1 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Attention. 2. Self. I. Title.

BF321.A46 2008

153.7'5—dc22

2007042699

Dedicated to all the students of the Diamond Approach:

BY LEARNING TO VALUE and appreciate experiencing, knowing, and accepting where you truly are, you give our human potential the opportunity to deepen and soar to heights that humanity greatly needs. This has always been an inspiration for me to see how, by sincerely following a genuine teaching, you provide an opening for reality to reveal its perfections and hence offer the world a glimpse of the harmony possible for it.

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Editor's Preface

THE HIDDEN RICHNESS THAT rests in our life, in our heart, in our experience is *here*—not *over there*, some better life, in some other house, in some other career, in some other relationship or country or spiritual school. One time, perhaps, we actually knew that—and then we forgot. From time to time, we are reminded by others of that richness, or we rediscover it ourselves. But over and over, we forget.

When we lose touch with the fullness of who we really are, when we ourselves cannot recognize or appreciate it, when it is invisible to us or seems inaccessible, the knowledge that we are the location and source of what we are seeking is only abstract information, irrelevant to our personal situation. It cannot affect who we are or how we live if we can't find this richness in our immediate experience. We can't feel it or taste it or sense it directly. In fact, what we find is that most everything in our lives works against our turning that knowledge into the currency of personal inner richness.

Our beliefs about what will allow us to survive, or what can help us solve our problems, or what will make us happy, or even what will fulfill our desire to make a difference in the world all seem to point us away from *here*. We are always going somewhere, internally or externally—to the store, the movies, the beach, the office, the restaurant, the television, the Internet, the newspaper, the late spiritual teacher to come to town, our partners, our children, our friends, our parents, our worries, our concerns, our fears, our hopes. And on and on. We are in motion, going after, seeking out, restless, never satisfied, never at peace.

This seems to be the central dilemma of human life—that it is easier to desire what is *over there* than to appreciate what is *right here*. In fact, what is here seems to be so fundamentally inferior, less than, or inadequate compared to what is apparently over there, that it hardly seems worth the effort to look here. Why not just go over there?

Why, indeed? All spiritual paths, traditions, and schools have been attempting to answer this question for us for thousands of years. Each in their own way teaches that your spirit or your soul—your original unconditioned consciousness—exists only in you, so going elsewhere can never give you access to your essential nature, to who you really are. And the essence that is *you* is purported to be something quite magnificent: Your true spiritual nature is said to be full of love, peace, strength, beauty, joy, compassion, wisdom, and intelligence.

But even imagining yourself with this spiritual nature immediately conjures up the belief that you can only find these qualities somewhere else. After all, it is not what you experience in yourself now, right? You're not there . . . yet. Spiritual paths and techniques thus become ways of getting *there*—the place where you feel real, where you will become all these wonderful things. So you meditate, attempting to empty your mind or calm yourself or focus on an image or let go of all attachment. Or you chant and dance to invoke your spirit. Or you say prayers and go on vision quests. Yet all these techniques of finding your deeper self subtly imply that where you are now in yourself is not where you need to be.

You are seeking some ideal of the spiritual self and using these methods to attempt to reach that ideal. The result is that the spiritual search can evoke the same dilemma that all other aspects of your life do. Since you cannot feel anything essential or profound in your present experience, you must travel away from here to find what you are looking for—even if it's your own True Nature.

What if you found a spiritual method that focused completely on being right here? What if it did not require you to change yourself in any way in order to find yourself? What if you didn't have to go

away from yourself in order to go deeper? What if you could stop comparing yourself to something someone that you imagine to be better or truer or more spiritual? What if transformation were natural, spontaneous process that occurs only when you stop being so busy trying to change yourself?

The Unfolding Now is an introduction and invitation to just such a path. A. H. Almaas, the founder of the Diamond Approach® to inner realization, presents a progressive unfoldment of understanding what it means to “be where you are.”

Though being where you are may seem equivalent to stopping the search or seeing through the search or waking up to the oneness of reality, the path of the Diamond Approach is distinctly different from the Advaita paths of spiritual realization. These approaches invite one to directly see through the false identities of self in order to recognize and be the oneness of reality. Almaas’s approach is not a sudden awakening or a confrontational breakthrough but a gradual and gentle unfoldment of the realization of our True Nature. This subtle realization is not a single state but includes myriad possibilities—including the state of oneness.

In one sense, it is the simplest possible experience to be as you are in this moment without any inner movement away from yourself, without any judgment or reaction, without any explanation or justification, without any longing or seeking after something else. However, what Almaas does reveal how multifaceted this simplicity of being actually is. We do not generally appreciate why the simple act of being is so difficult and why it challenges so much in our familiar sense of ourselves. In particular, it confronts the belief that becoming more real, more truly who we are, can only happen through our own intervention. But it is because of this very belief that we are always leaving ourselves. It is also why we believe that our spiritual development requires great effort and achievement.

This book offers a welcome alternative to all that struggle: a way to honor yourself where you are, how you are, and who you are, without judgment and without comparison to any standard.

To be where you are does not mean adopting a particular spiritual posture, such as clarity and equanimity, or an open-hearted stance of compassion and love. To be where you are means just that—to be where you are. Exactly where you are—warts and all, as the saying goes. But it also means becoming aware of where that is—aware in a way that is open, respectful, curious, and welcoming.

It is this process of opening to where you are that Almaas invites and encourages with great compassion and directness. He reveals many of the specific barriers to this allowing awareness and natural appreciation of wherever it is that we find ourselves. And he shows how, as the barriers are recognized, we can begin to see the ignorance implicit in them. This ignorance—that which we simply are not aware of—has set in place and maintained many of our beliefs about ourselves and reality. As that ignorance gives way to understanding, the barriers become less solid and fixed. Our knowing of where we are grows.

In this way, the teaching gently awakens in us the preciousness of what it means to leave ourselves alone, what it means to stop all of our subtle and constant inner activity of messing with ourselves. We can taste how deeply relaxed and at rest we feel when we don’t try to direct or manipulate our experience in any way. And we can also feel our resistance to that relaxation based on a deep fear of becoming passive, dependent, or helpless about our life.

Our relaxation into exactly who and where we are is what allows us to stop defending and hiding who we truly are. In the restfulness, we can simply be—be with awareness and awakeness and aliveness. This is something quite different from the passivity we feared. In simply being, we discover the implicit nature of Being, of *our* Being. We find that this Being is dynamic and intelligent. It becomes the agent of change—transforming our consciousness by revealing deeper and deeper truths. In this process, we begin to taste flavors and qualities of our True Nature, our essence.

This is the perennial wisdom: who we truly are is always right here, hidden within our experience.

waiting to reveal itself. And this revelation is available and will happen if we are willing to open what it truly means to be where we are. If we give ourselves the gift of not going anywhere, not trying to do anything, and not looking elsewhere, we step into the very real possibility of knowing the essence of who we are. This core principle underlies the practice of inquiry, the primary method of the Diamond Approach. The teaching presented in this book elucidates this principle and its profound relevance for living a satisfying human life.

The Unfolding Now is based on transcripts of a summer retreat given by Almaas for the members of his spiritual school. The presentation has been modified from its original format so that it communicates more clearly on the printed page, while retaining the experiential component of the inquiries into the material that the students engaged in.

This component is in the form of exploration sessions at the end of each chapter. These reflections and questions provide guidance to help you absorb the subject matter in a more direct, personal way. We suggest that you enter into these exercises with as much curiosity, openness, and willingness as you can.

I leave you with an old Sufi story. It illuminates the basic misconception that creates the need for the inner journey Almaas describes in this book.

Someone saw Nasrudin searching for something on the ground.

“What have you lost, Mulla?” he asked.

“My key,” said the Mulla. So they both went down on their knees and looked for it.

After a time the other man said, “Where exactly did you drop it?”

“In my own house.”

“Then why are you looking here?”

“There is more light here than inside my own house.”

— IDRIES SHAH

The Exploits of the Incomparable Mulla Nasrudin

The Unfolding Now invites us to bring light inside our own house so we can find what we have long touched with in ourselves.

BYRON BROWN

Note to the Reader

THE UNFOLDING NOW is an introduction to a spiritual path that is based on being with your own immediate experience in an intimate and curious way. It is not about doing anything to your experience, but neither is it simply detaching from your experience. The spiritual practice that facilitates and supports being with your experience is what we call inquiry. Inquiry is based on an open and curious desire for knowing the truth of your experience exactly as it is. This truth is inherent in each moment of your experience and therefore a sincere interest in discovering it will invite the truth to reveal itself.

The way Almaas presents this teaching is itself an invitation to do inquiry. So feel free to stop at any time and explore within your own experience whatever he is describing. To help you focus your explorations, specific suggestions for inquiry are included in the text. At the end of each chapter, an Exploration Session will specify an area of inquiry related to the subject matter to guide your exploration and the development of your capacities for this practice. You are encouraged to do these inquiry exercises either alone through journaling or verbally with fellow explorers.

If you choose the first approach—writing out your answers in a journal—it is good to allow between fifteen and thirty minutes for each exercise. This will provide time for the questions to sit awhile, bringing up responses from deeper in your consciousness rather than simply what is most readily available. Don't worry about writing style or grammar or spelling—what's important is to allow all of your thoughts and feelings and awarenesses to flow out and be articulated. This will make room for insights and recognitions to emerge about what you have written and for your experience to continue to unfold.

If you choose to do the exercises with someone else, generally it is good to plan on an hour of time to explore together, but it could be less if need be. You can use the simple format of taking fifteen to twenty minutes each to do the exercise. While one person inquires, the other is a silent witness who is practicing being present to his or her own experience while listening in an open, curious way to the inquiry. This is a particular benefit of exploring with others: your own inquiry process will be deepened by witnessing another inquiring. It is also good to allow time to discuss together the inquiry process and what you have discovered by doing it.

Should you find yourself especially interested in the inquiry practice itself beyond the exercises presented in this book, you are encouraged to read *Spacecruiser Inquiry: True Guidance for the Inner Journey* by A. H. Almaas (2002).

Inquiry is a spiritual practice, and like any other, it develops over time. Reading and rereading this book as you follow the gradual unfolding of your inner life can support and enrich the depth and subtlety of your inner journey. Finding your own rhythm and pace of opening will thus allow inquiry to reveal the hidden richness of your Being.

Acknowledgments

THIS BOOK BEGAN AS A TEACHING retreat that I conducted during the summer of 2003 in Sacramento, California, for experienced students in the Ridhwan School. I intended it to be a simple and direct guidance on how to work on oneself, how to meditate, and how to explore one's reality and the reality of the world. By the end of the retreat, many students had expressed their wish that this teaching be put in written form. Many thought it could be a readable, approachable book for a larger audience beyond members of the School, even though it deals with profound matters.

I liked the idea, saw the point they were making, and discussed it with Byron Brown, my chief editor. He agreed that it would be a valuable support for traversing the inner spiritual path and one that could speak to people who are not familiar with the teaching of the Diamond Approach. He asked Elianne Obadia, whom he had supervised on other projects, to do the primary editing and worked with her to turn the transcripts of the talks and meetings into chapters with practice exercises. Elianne, with Byron's guidance, did a wonderful job in transforming my talks into good, readable prose. And Damaris Moore provided timely support through her meticulous proofreading of the completed text.

This book did not come into its final form without the kind and supportive guidance and feedback of Shambhala's able editors: first and foremost, Kendra Crossen Burroughs, who was a strong proponent of its value for spiritual seekers, and later, Liz Shaw, who nursed it through to completion. I am indebted to both my editors and Shambhala for making it possible for *The Unfolding Now* to find its way to you.

Loving the Real

WITHOUT HEART, WE ARE not really human. And the possibility of having an authentic and deeply satisfying human life is only a pipe dream when our love is not directed to what truly fulfills the heart. To find true fulfillment, many of us at some point in life turn to the spiritual search. But what is it about spirituality that gives this fulfillment? Where does this deep satisfaction come from?

To answer this question, we need to find out why we become involved in the spiritual search in the first place. What are we looking for when we begin the journey? To experience new and remarkable states of consciousness? To travel to extraordinary realms beyond our everyday world? To be liberated from the difficulties and constraints of the world? Or are we looking to enrich and deepen the meaning of the lives we are living here on Earth? If our aim is to engage in our spiritual work so that it can impact and transform the way we live, we have to begin by seeing what we are actually doing in our lives. What are we up to? What do we really want?

We live in a big, noisy, distracting world. And when we look deeply into our hearts most of us find that one of the primary things we want is something quite simple: We want peace. We want rest, ease, and quiet. We want to stop our constant doing. We want space from all the struggle, conflict, desire, fear, and hatred. We are drawn to people who are peaceful, to situations where we can have peace and quiet. Simplicity without stress. Being at ease. In some very deep sense, this desire leads to greater fulfillment than our urges for pleasure, happiness, and freedom, for without this ease of simply being, none of the other things we pursue will truly satisfy us.

Most of us tend to look for quiet by changing our physical surroundings. We look outside of ourselves for this peace and ease of being. But much of the constant activity is actually inside our head. Even if we go away from the highways, from the supermarkets, from the TVs and telephones, sit and meditate—even in the quiet of our own room—it doesn't mean that we are getting away from the noise inside. And why is there so much noise, so much activity? The answer, of course, comes to us as more noise—more activity in our mind. To explain, analyze, work with, or discuss why our minds are so busy can only increase the busyness inside. You have probably already noticed this about yourself.

So our mind tends to be noisy and busy, just like the world we live in. We are hearing so much noise, that after a while we don't know what we are doing here. There isn't enough quiet space to feel ourselves in a simple, immediate way; we don't have enough space to just be ourselves. All this external stuff is competing for our attention. And if we do make the space to feel ourselves, what we find inside is mostly busyness, so the possibility of peace seems like a pipe dream. That is how our world is, how our life is, and how our mind is, too. Most of the time, we don't even question it; we think that is just how it is. It is a noisy world, so we learn to live with it.

No wonder that for some people, getting ready to leave this world is what it takes to quiet down. In the dying process is slow, by the time they finally leave, it has usually quieted down inside. You might have seen this in someone you know. Often it requires something that radical for us to be quiet.

something like death. In this book, we want to learn how to let death quiet us while we live—how to be quiet in the midst of the noise before we reach the end of life.

So much is going on in the world and in our minds that it reminds me of being in a movie theater nowadays. You go there to relax and enjoy a film, and more often than not, you are assaulted by loud noises. You can't even feel anything about what you are watching because of all the clanging and explosions, all the yelling and screaming, all the loud action and intense suspense. It is like entering a war zone. Everything is turned up to the maximum.

Living in our minds is actually like that. Have you noticed how busy your mind is just reading the words? The mind is always occupied with reactions, judgments, questions, associations, desires, and attitudes. And we have become like teenagers who are used to all that noise. We think the noise is what reality is and no longer recognize what is truly real. We are not feeling ourselves in the intimate, simple, relaxed way that we like but may have forgotten exists—the feeling we would like to have when we go to a movie to relax and watch something interesting.

In contrast to our modern multiplex cinemas with their Hollywood blockbusters, what many of us would love is to go to an old-time movie theater where the sound is rather tame and quiet and the story evolves slowly, so we can actually follow what we feel about it. And we would love to be able to do the same thing with ourselves in our own experience, to be with ourselves in such a way that we can see where we are, notice what is happening, and know how we feel about it. This would let us feel more real.

What we miss when we don't feel that kind of simple quiet is an awareness of ourselves in our experience in its immediacy, in its fullness. Instead, we are hearing echoes, reverberations, and reflections. All of our ideals, our ideas, our projects, our worries, and our fears become noise that overwhelms our immediate experience and the subtle sense of what we are. The preciousness of just simply being here in the moment is forgotten, lost in the shuffle, lost in the noise.

The spiritual journey is not about having experiences, interesting insights, or unusual perceptions, although those will often arise as part of it. I am not saying they don't have their place and value, but they are not the point of the inner journey. Inner practice is basically a matter of settling and quieting. It is about settling into the simplicity of just being ourselves and feeling our realness—being in reality instead of in the echoes of reality.

THE NATURE OF BEING REAL

Reality is not what is usually reflected in our minds. Reality is so much cleaner and simpler, and in comparison to the noisy world of our usual inner experience, so much more settled and at ease. There is an exquisite intimacy in us just feeling ourselves, being ourselves. And when we are quiet and settled like that, we simply feel real. We recognize the realness of our Being, the realness of our awareness.

Being real happens when the noise has subsided and the complexities dissolve and we are experiencing ourselves just as we are in our true condition. Not the reflection, not the picture, not the echo, not the memory, not the thought, not the reaction, but the thing itself. Usually, we assume that reality is full of all kinds of sounds and noise, and we believe most of what we hear. We focus on what the noise is saying or else we are busy responding to it—defending, justifying, reacting, explaining, judging, thinking, planning, remembering. But those activities are just the reflections of what is real.

Being real is what we are, what we truly are, and we experience it in the moment. And being real doesn't require that we experience anything in particular. It is more about the *way* we are being, rather than *what* we are being. It is like the difference between hearing one thousand loud noises and hearing one single note, simple and gentle, which makes us feel closer to who and what we are. Closer to our

heart. At that moment, we feel that our heart is alive and tender. Our heart has its tenderness when we are feeling ourselves. We recognize ourselves in that tenderness, in that nearness to what is real.

When we have lived through years of noise and drama, pushes and pulls, manipulation and struggle and maybe after many years of spiritual practice or work, it is possible to recognize that what is needed is to simply be real. We want to be what is real in us, to remember or recognize the realness of what it is to be a human being—an aware, awake being—and then experience this beingness consciously. In other words, what we are is about reality, about being real—not about getting anywhere in particular but simply to be as we are. We want to learn how we can be here in as real a way as possible: How can I be completely here and completely myself, or as completely as possible? How can my atoms, which are scattered, vibrating, and oscillating in some kind of frenzy, slow down, collect, and settle here as what I am?

THE DESIRE FOR BEING REAL

As we go along, you will see that we can learn to be real, to connect with and become aware of our realness. And you will notice that something about this attracts us. We are attracted to the condition of being real. We like being real. And this is because we know the difference between being real and so much of what our usual experience is. Most of these things are not what is real; they are just reflections and distortions.

Many people get caught up in spiritual experiences and perceptions and all kinds of interesting, subtle impressions, some of which can be exciting and uplifting. But there is nothing like the simplicity of being oneself—settling into yourself, just being there, recognizing what you are, and feeling the sense of intimacy and realness of that. All of the inner journey, all of spiritual practice ultimately comes down to this: that we are able to be genuinely what we are. If you want to do inner practice in order to develop certain powers or go to other dimensions or have special experiences, you still don't know what spiritual work is. And this is because you are not yet recognizing what reality is or what being real means.

On the other hand, you already appreciate being real if you genuinely want to do inner work for its own sake. Being real means being the way you are when you are by yourself and quiet: "I know this about me and I know what that is like and I am comfortable being it. I have no conflict about it. And when I am interacting with someone, it is that reality of who I am that is interacting." People don't generally make the effort to do inner work if they don't want to be real, if they don't feel that being real is something good, something they want, something they appreciate. There is something precious about being real in an interaction, something that cannot be analyzed. Being real has nothing to do with getting something or giving something, being seen or making the other feel seen—none of that. It is just me, as what I am, actually being the one who is doing or saying something.

But it would be missing the point to want to be real so that we will feel satisfied or happy or accomplished. No, we want to be real because in fact we love being real. We love reality and we love to feel it, to see it, and to be it as much as possible. Only when we can slow down and rest in these simple, precious moments of living, can we recognize that we love this quality of realness for its own sake and not because of what it does for us.

We don't love it because it makes us feel good or is good for us, or because it means an attainment of one kind or another, or because it represents some kind of enlightenment or advancement. We love it because we know that when we are real, we are home—no matter the sensation or the flavor. Sometimes being real means allowing pain or accepting a painful truth. Yet something in us aligns with an inner ground of authenticity when we are real. We love it because of its inherent rightness: our soul, the sense of "Aha, here I am and there is nothing to do but be."

Wanting to be real indicates having a measure of self-love, some kind of love of what we are. So when we want to move toward being real, we are already expressing a lovingness and an appreciation that is essential to spiritual work. If that lovingness is not there, our practice is done for the wrong reason; it is part of the noise. What I'm pointing to is not a selfish kind of self-love; it is not possessiveness or self-centeredness. This heart attitude toward realness—this feeling that our consciousness, our soul, our awareness, has about being real—is very subtle and difficult to explain. To recognize this appreciation for the real in ourselves indicates that we have already developed a certain level of maturity and a specific guidance for our practice.

It is a precious moment when we recognize this love, this appreciation—when we know that we are not practicing to accomplish something. I am not meditating, praying, chanting, or working on myself to make myself better. I am not doing this work so that I will be as good as the next person or because I have an idea or some ideal I developed or heard about and decided was a good thing to go after. It is not a matter of going after anything. It is just a matter of settling down with myself.

It means learning how to recognize our agitated activity, our noise, and how not to go along with it. Instead we learn to simply settle, relax, and be. And I don't mean that when you relax and be, you just sit and meditate. Meditation is something we practice, but ultimately, engaging inner practice and living life are not two things. Being real, learning to be real, is our practice in every moment; it becomes the living of our real life. And being real transcends any dimension, any experience, any perception—regardless of the content. It is just the experience of feeling no distance from yourself—no dissociation, no scattering, no dispersion, no distraction. And the more you recognize this collectedness, this presence, this hereness, this settledness, the more you have a sense of being real, of reality.

So at some point, we see that spiritual practice is a matter of learning reality, learning to recognize realness, learning to be real, and learning to be ourselves in our realness. And we see that we are only interested in learning these things if we have the appreciation and love of being real. We have to love being genuine to go through the trouble and the discipline of inner work. It is because we are being authentic, because we are approaching reality, because we are being touched by reality, that we love it and are willing to go through the various processes of acknowledging and seeing the truth—whether it is painful or scary or pleasurable.

Our first step is to recognize the love and appreciation in us that draws us to reality. Regardless of what motivation we start with for doing inner work, our love of reality at some point reveals itself if we are sincere. We recognize that we just like being near reality, we love being comfortable with it, and having no conflicts about it, and we like being as intimate with it as possible. We want to become so intimate that we simply are what is real . . . and that is what we love.

EXPLORATION SESSION

Your Relationship to Being Real

This exploration will help you clarify your own relationship to reality and realness and how it affects your life and your spiritual journey.

When have you felt most real in your life and how did you recognize it? Think of a situation in which you felt you were truly being yourself, perhaps when it was a real challenge to do so. What responses did you notice in your mind? In your heart? In your body? Contrast this with another incident when you felt distant from your own realness or authenticity. What did you experience then?

Do you believe it is a good or moral thing to be real? Is being real part of your spiritual ideal? Do the desire to be real play a part in your interest in this book?

Is realness something you want more of in your life? If so, why? What would you give up in order to be more real? Do you feel compelled toward being authentically yourself? Do you love it? If so, how the love of realness motivated your choices or led you to practice in certain ways in your life?

Learning to Be Real

LEARNING TO BE REAL IS a full-time job. It doesn't work to just practice it at certain times. But to make that kind of commitment, you have to love and appreciate reality. You have to *want* to be real at any cost. You have to *love* being real—even if you don't like what you're feeling or who you think you are in any particular moment. That kind of love is the most powerful motive—the real inspiration—for our inner work. If your longing for reality is lukewarm or if it comes and goes, where will the passion and inner support come from to sustain yourself as you learn to be real? The more you are in touch with your love of being real, the more you will be inspired . . . and the more you will be fired up to do the work.

But what does it mean to be real?

BEING YOURSELF

You can't be real if you are not yourself. You cannot be something other than what you are and be real. Observe and you will discover that most of the time, you are not real because you are not being yourself. So what are you then? Who are you being? What are you doing? Most of us are being an image, acting out an image of ourselves—an idea, a picture, a concept. If, in this moment, you are an image of who you truly are, you can only be distant from yourself.

And most of us are even further away from our real self than that, because we are an image of something *other* than what we are—for example, an image of our body or an image of how we were as a child. And the unrealness becomes greater still when we are being an image or picture of someone else altogether, such as of one of our parents.

So what is the practice of being real? It is the same as the practice of being oneself. To be real means, "I am not an idea of myself. I am not pretending to be myself. I am not being in reaction to something or someone or their image of me. I am being what I actually am." But it is not as though one can just stop being unreal and start being oneself. After all, who knows what that actually means? How are you going to try to be yourself? It is not as though you have many selves on a shelf, and you can take the real one down and put it on.

The good news is that no matter how distant you are from yourself, something in your experience at any given moment expresses who you really are. You can wander far from your realness—you can even become disconnected from it—but who is it that is far away or is disconnected? It's still you. Whatever your experience, wherever you are, whatever you are perceiving, is connected to what you are who you really are.

If you reflect a bit, you will notice that you are always experiencing something. There is always an impression, always an awareness, of something happening in the moment. Right now, a number of things are happening, and you are aware of them. As you are reading this sentence, for example, you are seeing, comprehending, and perhaps also thinking, feeling, sensing the pressure of your body on

chair, or hearing sounds around you.

~~So we are always someplace in the experiential field. That place is always changing, but we are~~ always someplace in the field of myriad possibilities. There's nothing esoteric in that; it is merely what we are experiencing every moment. You can recognize from your own life that the only time you are not experiencing anything is when you are in deep, dreamless sleep. So the moment there is consciousness, there is experience. This applies whether the experience is special (according to your value system) or quite ordinary. Think about what's going on while you're having breakfast. You are moving your arms, you are chewing, you are experiencing tastes and flavors in your mouth and movement and textures in your hand, and perhaps you are having a sense of appreciation or revulsion or boredom. Thoughts, feelings, imaginings—all of these are happening.

So, something is always going on! And whatever that something is, is related to who you are in the sense that it is more reflective of who *you* are than of who someone else is. If you are sitting in meditation, your experience is more a reflection of who you are than a reflection of who President Bush is, for instance. So if you are going to find yourself, you don't go look into George Bush's experience, you go look into your own experience.

TRUE NATURE

What does this fact mean for our practice? To learn to be ourselves, we have to start with what we have—and what we always have is our experience in the moment. If we allow ourselves to be in our experience in the moment—to feel it, to see it, to taste it, to hear it, to smell it, to be aware of it—becomes possible for us to find out what we are and to be who we are.

To be ourselves, or to be real, basically means that we are being our true self, or we are being the realness of who we are. You may have heard it said, "My True Nature means the true or the self-existing nature of who I am." That can sound esoteric, but it just means that your True Nature is not false, not fabricated, not created by anybody; it is what you truly are. It is the real you.

Being *who* we are requires first finding out *where* we are. And although being aware of where we are does not necessarily mean we are being ourselves yet, it's a start. That's because it contains a certain element or flavor of our true self. And that flavor, or that element, is what we call "truth." So wherever we are, whatever our experience happens to be, is related to our True Nature in some way. It may be distant or disconnected, or it may be a reaction, a reflection, or a substitute. But it still is somehow related to who we truly are.

In the early stages of our practice, we often don't know what this relationship is. But we can begin by looking at our experience and finding where we are: I am sitting here, bored . . . or, I'm hungry and impatient as I am driving around trying to find a restaurant that's open . . . or, I am lying in bed feeling guilty about what I just said to my husband . . . or, I am sitting in front of my computer feeling fidgety, worried about my stocks . . . or, I am trying to relax and I can't stop thinking . . . or, I am meditating and I am feeling empty and anxious. Looking closely, you discover that each one of these is somehow related to who you truly are.

The key is: If you can find a way to understand how your present experience is related to your True Nature, then you are closer to accessing that True Nature—and that access is called *truth*. So how can you do that? At first, even when you have some sense about where you are, you don't understand what is happening in a given situation. Most of our experience is half-conscious and not comprehended. When you are more fully intimate with your experience and have some real understanding of it, you can then say that you are seeing the truth of your experience. But what is the truth of our experience and why is there such a thing?

Truth is always an expression of our True Nature, which is the ultimate truth. To understand you

experience, you need to see how it is related to your True Nature, how it is connected to who and what you really are. That is why every time you understand your experience and see the truth, you feel a little more real, you feel nearer to your True Nature—because you are beginning to see how the experience is related to who you really are.

Let's say I am spending time doing a hobby I usually enjoy. After a while, I recognize that I am feeling bored. If I attempt to dispel my boredom, I will be resisting where I am. Because I want to be more real, I choose to stay with my experience even if it is unpleasant. (We will see more about this as we go along.) When I explore my boredom, I realize I'm bored because I am feeling a kind of emptiness, a kind of meaninglessness. I am seeing the truth of my experience, which is the reality of my feeling boredom, which I experience as a meaningless emptiness. I see the truth and that makes me feel a little more real. But I don't yet understand in my mind how it is related to my True Nature.

But if I think about it a little bit, I can see that where I am and how I am feeling are connected to my True Nature. The fact that I am feeling a meaningless emptiness reflects the fact that I have a True Nature and that I am distant from it. This is because True Nature has implicit in it a sense of significance. If I had no True Nature, there would be no way to feel a meaningless emptiness. Why is that? Usually, I take meaninglessness to indicate a loss of some external source of meaning that I have been accustomed to. However, if I pay attention to the experience of meaninglessness itself, I can recognize that it actually feels like a loss of contact with my own sense of significance. In other words, I implicitly know what meaning feels like in my soul and that feeling is missing.

So as we inquire into *where* we are, experience the truth, and follow the thread of truth, that thread eventually will connect us with the truth of *what* we are. That is why truth brings more reality. Truth and reality are related; they are two sides of the same thing. The more we see the truth of where we are in the moment, the more we recognize something about the relationship between *where* we are and *what* we are. That recognition makes the distance between them shorter, and we feel more real. And that is why when we are real, we tend to see more of the truth of the situation; it works both ways.

BEING AWARE OF WHERE YOU ARE

If we are interested in being real, we naturally become interested in being as clear as possible about what is happening, and we want to experience it as intimately and fully as possible—we want to be totally in touch with it. If I am feeling anxiety, for instance, or fear, or terror, I am aware of it. Well, what does that mean? I don't mean looking at it from far away through a telescope: "Oh, there is fear over there." No, it's about *feeling* what the terror is like, what the anxiety is like, what the anger is like, what the love is like, what the pain in my knee is like.

Being aware means immediacy. It means that the tentacles of my soul are wrapping themselves around the feeling, penetrating it and all its parts, feeling it from inside and outside—because my awareness extends everywhere. If I am not fully aware of the situation, how am I going to find out the truth about it? And if I am not interested in paying attention to what is happening now, what does it mean when I say that I love being myself?

When you love somebody, you want to find out everything about them, don't you? When you love something, what do you want to do with it? You want to know it. Love always translates into awareness, into knowing. If you love somebody, you want to see them, you want to know them, you want to be as completely familiar with them as possible. If you are really interested in being yourself, that interest begins with the awareness of where you are at this very moment. Being *who* you are can only arise from the love of being *where* you are.

It now becomes clear that being where you are is central to the practice of being real. And this is not separate from the practice of self-inquiry, for it is self-inquiry that will ultimately allow us to simply

be by bringing us into more intimate contact with what we are being. Self-inquiry consists of two basic elements:

1. Observing your experience until you become clear about where you are. That is, becoming aware of any moment of what you are actually experiencing. Just remember: Since you are always somewhere, it is always possible to recognize where you are.
2. Beginning to ask, “What is making this happen?” The moment you ask this question, the inquiry begins to expand our experience of where we are. Since you are not able to immediately comprehend most of your experience, it is natural that you will want to know, “What is making me feel this way?” in any given situation. As you ask what is happening, as you become interested in understanding more about where you are, you will begin to see some truth about your experience. And that understanding will eventually lead you to grasp the relationship between your True Nature and where you are.

Seeing something that we call truth—something that gives meaning or coherence to what is happening—gives us an overall picture we can comprehend. It’s not only a mental explanation but a felt sense of it being experientially meaningful to us. It makes sense to our heart, to our soul. As this meaning is revealed, we have the experience of insight in our heart, we discover some truth, something we can then know in our mind. And if we continue being where we are and exploring from where we are, the discovery of the truth becomes a process, a deepening thread.

THE LIGHT OF TRUE NATURE

The recognition of the truth—if you truly glimpse it, if you see it in its actuality—brings more awareness, which opens up your experience. It means that you can see more—as if there were more light available. This is referred to as the light of awareness. It is the penetration of the light of your True Nature into your experience. When you see the truth, when you have insight about what is happening, it is as though a light had broken through. That is what it means to have insight: insight brings enlightenment. And it is actually more literal than that. You see ignorance and shadow clearing away and brightness coming through into your experience. What is the light that does this? It is the light of your nature. It is the light of who and what you are. So, by seeing the truth of where you are you are learning to be real and you are learning to be yourself.

Let’s take my earlier example: “I’m bored because I am experiencing some kind of meaningless emptiness.” If I explore why I’m feeling meaningless and empty, I recognize that it is because I am identifying with a representation, a particular image. When I explore why that makes me feel empty and meaningless, I recognize that this identification disconnects me from simply being, and when I am not just simply being here, I am not being myself.

What I have just explained sounds simple. But I remember spending ten days or ten weekends in the past explaining it. It is actually a giant step to understand this. So let’s break down what we’re trying to understand into these three smaller pieces that are easier to digest:

1. What is our practice?
2. What are the insights that underlie our practice?
3. How is awareness necessary for our practice to begin and how does our awareness develop?

The answer to the first question is simple: The practice is learning to be real, which requires understanding what it means to be ourselves.

Second, the basic insights that underlie our practice are:

- We learn to be ourselves by recognizing the truth of our experience.
- We cannot recognize the truth of our experience if we don't know where we are in the moment.
- We won't recognize where we are if we resist being where we are. Not allowing ourselves to be where we are prevents us from understanding our experience for what it is, and we won't see the truth of the situation.
- When we don't see the truth of the situation, it is because something is obstructing the shaft of light that could be breaking through.

Practically speaking, what this comes down to is that we need to be able to see where we are. Not *where* we are is not *what* we are—at least at the beginning of the path. What we are is our True Self, our True Nature. But we have already seen that by understanding where we are right now, we can recognize our distance from our True Nature.

But how can we see where we are if we don't attend to the moment, if we don't pay attention to what is happening? We need to be interested in what is happening, we need to be aware of what is arising in our experience. The points below will help clarify this third key element of practice.

What the practice is: Bringing awareness to the present moment, every moment, moment by moment.

What it means: Simply paying attention to what is going on, being aware of what is happening.

What to do: Attend to whatever is happening at this very moment. You only need to be aware of the facts of your experience, whatever they may be: I'm talking . . . I'm sitting . . . My back is sore . . . I'm breathing . . . I'm hungry . . . I'm bored . . . The food I'm eating is tasteless . . .

Why it's needed: If we really love being real, that love will have to translate into an interest in what is going on now. We can't *be* where we are if we don't *see* where we are.

What it can look like in real life: If I am bored, but I don't know that I am bored, how will I ever know that meaninglessness underlies my boredom? If I am bored, but I think it's just because the food I'm eating is tasteless, there is no chance to understand the situation. So the first thing I need to do is attend to what is happening. Maybe the first thing that strikes me is not that I am bored, but that the food is tasteless. Maybe I am bored, but I don't feel I am bored. Instead, I feel it's me rather than the food that is tasteless. Or perhaps I am not paying attention to the fact that the food is tasteless because I'm on the phone talking to somebody because I don't want to taste the tastelessness. And the food is tasteless because I am actually bored. And I am actually bored because life feels meaningless to me. And because I prefer not being aware of any of that, I end up talking on the phone about a movie or some family business.

How it works: As we become aware, we begin to recognize how we were *not* aware. The more we are aware of the situation, the more we recognize how we don't understand it, how there are gaps in our understanding of how it doesn't make sense. That gives us the opportunity to inquire, become more aware, and find the truth in the situation.

What can get in the way: First, most of us will want to pay attention to our moment-to-moment experience only if it is pleasant—if the food tastes good and we're happy, or if we feel secure and loved. Then maybe we'll pay a little attention, maybe we will be present enough to experience how the

food tastes. But most of the time, we are too scattered to do that.

Second, ~~it's easy to fall into the trap of wanting something from your experience or wanting something to happen.~~ True awareness means simply perceiving what actually is happening, and recognizing that it has value in and of itself, that it is something we can appreciate.

What must come first: Our appreciation and love of reality must become our primary interest. Not interest in the sense of attachment—wanting something from it—but interest in the sense of wanting to know it, wanting to be aware of it, wanting to feel it, to experience it as fully as possible, to be intimate with it as we can. If your love for being real is strong, you are naturally interested and inspired to be aware.

What we're really after: Understanding any situation is a matter of having greater and greater awareness of what is happening. The more aware we are of what is happening, the more that awareness becomes dynamic and reveals the meaning of what is going on. That awareness gives a coherent sense to our experience, which makes us feel more real, more genuine, because it brings us closer to who we are.

Sometimes when you are aware, you may feel that you're efforting to be aware and sometimes you feel like it's just happening. Either way, it doesn't matter for your practice. The fact is, awareness is always happening on its own. When it feels as though we are doing something in order to be aware, that means that we are disciplining our awareness by attending to the situation and thus counteracting our tendency to distract ourselves. Because in general, we tend to resist being aware. So, when we feel some sense that we are doing it, we are using will or discipline. But when you investigate that closely you will see it is a doing that is an undoing of our resistance to awareness.

You want to practice awareness as much as possible. What you need to remember about your practice is that at all times—whether sitting in meditation or having a meal or talking with a friend or listening to somebody giving a lecture—you can be present and aware. You can remember to be present to what is going on. Learning to be real must begin with recognizing what is real in our experience, and that always begins with being aware of where we are in the present moment.

EXPLORATION SESSION

Bringing Awareness to Where You Are

This exercise will help you to attend more fully to where you are. Begin with your experience right now. What is going on? Where are you in this moment? What is happening to you? What are you feeling, sensing, thinking, noticing around you?

You want to feel where you are. You want to see it, experience it, recognize it, understand it. You don't want to go anywhere; you are not trying to accomplish anything. You just want to find out where you happen to be in this moment and to explore where you are consciously, fully and with awareness and presence.

After you've done this for a while, consider the experience you've just had. Your awareness can expand and deepen, or become limited and more constricted. What expanded your awareness? What limited it?

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