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INTRODUCTION

Awakening to *Meditation*

One summer afternoon during a meditation retreat, I discovered that I contain the entire universe. It happened quite unexpectedly, all in a rush. I was sitting with my eyes closed in a room with several hundred other people, very much aware of the sensations in my body and of the faint rustles, coughs, and other sounds around me. The next thing I knew, there was a kind of implosion. Instead of being around me, the room with all its sensations and sounds was inside me. My awareness started to swell until I could feel the earth, the sky, and even the galaxy inside me. In that moment, I understood, with a surety that was both exhilarating and terrifying, that there is only one thing in the universe—that it is Awareness, and that Awareness is me.

The experience faded after an hour or so, but the understanding it gave me has never gone away.

At the time, I'd been traveling a winding spiritual path for a couple of years. Like so many people, I started meditating not because I longed for enlightenment, but because I was in a moderate life-crisis, and hoped meditation would make me feel better. I was living in New York, writing for *Esquire*, *New York Magazine*, and the *Village Voice*, leading the life that my left-wing humanist upbringing had laid out for me, priding myself on my hipster creds. On the outside, it was fine. I had an advance from a major publisher, a new boyfriend whom I was sure was the love of my life, a rent-controlled apartment—and a chronic case of restlessness and slight despair that never really went away. I'd already investigated marriage, politics, romance, psychotherapy, and the fruits of money without discovering an antidote to my low-grade emotional pain. Meditation drew me because it seemed like a way of getting to the roots of myself. Even in those days, when meditation was still considered an activity for saints, hippies, and other eccentrics, it was supposed to be a great way to settle the mind.

My new boyfriend happened to be a seasoned tourist on the spiritual circuit. He encouraged me to take a three-month spiritual training being conducted by a Bolivian teacher named Oscar Ichazo. The training promised enlightenment—which didn't happen, at least not for me. It did, however, confront me with some inner demons I'd been doing my best to ignore. It also made me fall in love both with yogic wisdom and with the refining power of spiritual community. Along with getting to know some of the tricks of my own ego, I began to crave interior experience.

So when I arrived at that summer meditation retreat, I was ready to let meditation transform me. It was why I had come: the retreat was being conducted by a celebrated spiritual master from India, famous for being able to unlock meditative depth in others.

After that awareness-expanding meditation, I was in a new relationship to myself and to my own inner world.

I opened my eyes to a world scintillating with love and meaning, and felt sure that I had found the answer to everything I wanted in life. Like my expansion of awareness, ecstasy didn't last; but like the expansion itself, it changed everything. The meditation master in whose presence the experience had arisen became my guru—the teacher whose transmissions and guidance would guide my practice for years to come. And meditation became my path.

KUNDALINI AND MEDITATION

What had happened that afternoon was an awakening of the *kundalini shakti*, the inner energy that nearly every esoteric tradition recognizes as the force behind spiritual transformation. Kundalini (literally, “coiled energy”—so-called because when the energy is inactive it is said to be “coiled”) can be awakened in several ways: through yoga postures, through deep meditation, or, as happened that afternoon, through the transmission of energy from a teacher whose own kundalini is active. The awakening of kundalini can be subtle or dramatic, but however it occurs, it brings the energy of Spirit into the foreground of our lives, shifting our priorities and stirring our hidden resources of love, understanding, and insight.

Kundalini's power unfolds as we meditate. The awakened energy draws us into meditative states and begins showing us the tracks of our inner country even as it tunes the body and mind to a new level of subtlety and awareness. Over time, kundalini transforms our vision until we see the world as it really is: not hard and bumpy and irrevocably "other," but filled with a single loving energy that connects us with one another and the world.

The effects of this awakening on my life have been widespread and various. Mainly it has shifted my sense of being. Once I had seen that vastness, no matter how caught up I might get in my thoughts or emotions or agendas, a part of me would always know that I contain a reality beyond all that: that in truth, "I" am expansive Consciousness. Over the years, I have come to measure my spiritual progress by how much I am in alignment with that initial insight—by how firmly I am able to identify myself with Consciousness rather than with the person I sometimes think I am.

It has been a road with many sidetracks and hairpin turns. Yet, little by little, the alignment comes. I've been meditating daily for nearly forty years, and though it didn't happen all at once, I've come to count on entering the space of expanded Awareness for at least a while every day. Over time, meditation has chipped away at my feeling of being only this physical person, defined by my history, my looks, my intelligence, my opinions and emotions. Meditation taught me to identify—precariously at first, then more and more firmly—with that subtler part of myself, with that field of spaciousness behind thoughts, with the tender energy in my heart. With the

pulsation of pure spaciousness that arises when thoughts die down. With love.

From the beginning, sitting meditation has been the most reliable way I know to touch the tenderness of pure being. I have treasured it. Of course, my love affair with meditation has been like any other unfolding relationship. It has had its ups and downs, its fertile seasons, and its apparently barren ones. Meditative states, after all, arrive spontaneously and naturally. They come in their own time and their own way, gifts of the unfolding kundalini. I have fallen spontaneously into meditation while walking, writing, or sitting in a meeting. I have also had weeks when I couldn't touch the meditation bandwidth at all. Meditation is often surprising, and certainly cannot be forced.

But neither can it be approached passively—which is the point of this book. The effort required of a meditator is quite subtle, a matter of attunement and awareness. We learn this attunement gradually, and we learn it by meditating. Fortunately, much of what we learn can be shared, and over the years as I've worked with students and taught classes and retreats in meditation, I've found that some of the attitudes and practices that have helped me have also been useful to other people. This book evolved as an offering to other committed meditators. It is a way to share certain principles and attitudes that meditation has taught me, and that seem to work not just for me but for others as well.

The most important principle to understand about meditation is this: we meditate to know ourselves. We usually think of meditation as a practice or a process, yet meditation is also a

relationship. If it is a process, then it is the process of coming into loving relationship with our own Consciousness. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna defines meditation for his disciple Arjuna by saying, “*dhyānen atmani pashyanti*”: “In meditation, the Self [the pure Awareness that is our essential nature] is seen.”¹ This sounds

*The spirit is so near
that you can't see it!
But reach for it . . .
Don't be the rider
who gallops all night
And never sees the horse
that is beneath him.*

—RUMI²

like a simple enough statement, but as we meditate, we come to realize that knowing the Self is far from simple. Which “self” do we encounter when we meditate? The greater Self, for sure—the *atman*, as the Indian sages call it, the luminous Consciousness beyond the discursive mind. Yet, we also encounter a lot of other aspects of our selves, including the parts of us that seem to hinder the experience of our essence. One of the boons of meditation, if we allow ourselves to engage in it fully, is that we not only come to see all this; we also learn how

to move through it with love. In this daily act of plunging into our inner world, the separated parts of ourselves do come together. The loose ends of our personalities meld with our Awareness, and we become whole.

Of course, this level of transformation doesn't happen overnight. That is where we sometimes get confused. Most of us enter into meditation rather naively. We bring along expectations, ideas, assumptions. For instance, we sometimes imagine that successful meditation is a kind of prolonged honeymoon in which we rove through fields of bliss and float along deep

lagoons of peace. If our relationship with the inner world becomes troublesome, boring, or more intimate than we bargained for, we feel frustrated, disappointed, or even ashamed. We might decide that we really aren't so good at meditation, and it is often at this point that we give it up.

We would feel a lot better if we realized that meditation is like any other intimate relationship: it requires patience, commitment, and deep tolerance. Just as our encounters with others can be wondrous but also baffling, scary, and even irritating, our encounters with the self have their own moods and flavors. Like any other relationship, this one changes over time. And it is best undertaken with love.

CHAPTER ONE

The Lure of Meditation

*M*editation is not something for which you need a special talent, the way you need a talent for mathematics or art. The real key to going deep in meditation is *wanting* to go deep. The more you crave the taste of the inner world, the easier it is to meditate. In Sanskrit that desire is called *mumukshutva*, the wish for the freedom that comes with Self-knowledge. Your desire doesn't have to be huge at first. Even a slight spark of interest is enough, because the inner world is actually yearning to open up to you. Once your meditation energy has been awakened, it keeps pulsing inside, just under the skin. It is constantly sending you signals, whispering, "Here I am! Meet me! I'm your guide! I have so many things to show you about yourself!" That is why the moment you become truly interested in knowing your Self, in entering the field of your own Awareness, the

inner world begins to reveal itself. It can't help it. That's what it exists to do.

The problem is that we aren't always interested in our meditation. Many of us, when we meditate at all, do it because we know it is good for us. Perhaps it is part of our ongoing self-improvement project or a strategy we use to keep stress at bay. Shortly after this book began taking shape, a friend complained to me about her meditation practice. It had become flat, she said. It didn't deeply engage her. In fact, she didn't much enjoy meditating. I could tell from her tone that as a serious spiritual practitioner, she felt slightly ashamed about this. So I asked her, "What's the best thing about meditating for you?"

She thought for a minute, and then said, "It's my therapy. When I sit down, I'm usually burning with inner upheaval, worried about something, or just stuffed with negativity. I repeat my mantra for fifteen or twenty minutes, and when I get up, my mind is calm. I feel quiet. I can go on with my day." Then she said, "I know I have to do it every day, or else my mind makes me crazy."

My friend is getting something important from her practice. In fact, she's experiencing one of meditation's major gifts: its power to clear the mind. Yet because that's all she wants, she gets up from meditation just at the moment when the real sweetness inside her could start to reveal itself. It's when the mind calms that we begin to discern the wideness of our own being, the love inside. If, along with appreciating meditation's therapeutic benefits, my friend could meditate for the sake of entering into herself, she might stay in meditation a little longer and go deeper than she is going now.