

belonging here

A Guide for the Spiritually Sensitive Person

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Introduction

Spiritual Sensitivity

ALTHOUGH WE ARE all capable of spiritual awakening, people who are drawn to the spiritual path often possess, from their earliest years, a particular kind of openness or sensitivity. This may take the form of heightened perception, abundant energy, exceptional emotional depth, or the ability to see into the truth of situations. Each of these gifts can be an entranceway into the subtle, spiritual dimension of life. They can mature into the unconditional love and clarity of spiritual realization. But when they appear in childhood, they may also produce difficulties such as conflicts in our relationships, a low tolerance for sensory stimuli, or a feeling of being at odds with the values held by our surrounding culture.

The various challenges that spiritual sensitivity may produce, and the protective strategies that we use to cope with them, can interfere with our development, and remain with

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us as adults. They can become obstacles in our personal and spiritual lives. They may cause us to feel alienated from the world around us and also from ourselves. Even people who have followed a spiritual path for many years may find themselves unable to proceed past a certain point in their spiritual awakening because of the impact of these early problems.

All children must find ways to cope with the challenges of their environment, the limitations or lapses in love and security that are present even in the most loving, secure families. But spiritually sensitive children face a unique set of challenges. From early on, they live in a dimension of perception, emotional experience, and insight that is not shared by most of the people around them.

Sometimes, they even look different than other people. Their bodies often seem softer or more permeable than other people's bodies. Their eyes have depth and luminosity. Their faces and bodies are often fluid and expressive, and their emotions can rock the room with their intensity. They may appear to be "deep," as if they were looking out at the world from a deeper place inside of themselves.

Especially in childhood, their softness may cause them to feel weaker than their peers. They may become the targets of bullies or relegated to the outcasts on the fringe of their school society. They may grow up feeling extremely self-conscious about their differences from other people. For example, I work with a young man who always contracts his body inward, as if to hide from sight. He feels unable to stand up to the judgment of other people, and yet, deep

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down, he knows that he is gifted, in a way that is difficult for him to describe to other people.

People who are spiritually open are deeply impacted by the world around them. They are usually highly empathic, experiencing the emotional and even physical suffering of others as if it were their own. They may be so aware of the suffering in the world, that it feels selfish to them to pursue their own happiness.

Another manifestation of spiritual sensitivity is an abundance of energy. All healthy children have a lit up, animated quality, but spiritually gifted children often stand out as remarkably radiant and strong-willed. This can also make them more difficult to manage, more demanding, and less compliant than their siblings.

People with abundant energy may experience themselves as larger or more powerful than others. As children, they may even feel more powerful than the adults in their lives. Some people with this sense of extraordinary power grow up afraid to experience or express the fullness of their being, for fear of alienating or injuring other people. By adulthood, they may appear particularly timid or apologetic, as a way of masking their vitality. They often express the concern that they are “too much” for other people.

Energy can be experienced as vitality, and it can also be experienced as fluidity. When people feel internally fluid, rather than feeling powerful, they may experience themselves as extremely malleable and impressionable. Instead of feeling like enclosed, separate entities, they feel permeable,

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like everything around them can come into them, and as if they can “leak out” into the life around them. They may feel that they merge with or even become the identities of other people they encounter. “I’m like a chameleon,” a woman told me. “I become my surroundings.” Although there is sometimes pleasure in the experience of becoming, or merging with other people and things, there is also confusion and exhaustion, a loss of our own moorings, as if we were “blown about by the wind.”

People who are very fluid can also become easily ungrounded or diffuse. As children they may use their abundant energy to rise up above their bodies or expand outward from their bodies in order to lessen the impact of painful or overwhelming circumstances. As adults, this chronic ungrounded condition may cause them anxiety and disorientation. They feel that they have no foundation for their abundant energy, and no sense of connection to the earth. I worked with a woman who could barely feel her feet on the ground; she felt most alive in her head, or even above her head. She often complained of a lack of support from family and colleagues, and of having to make everything happen herself. This complaint stopped when she felt the support of the ground beneath her feet. She said that everything she did seemed to require less effort when she could feel herself resting on the ground.

The depth and openness of spiritually sensitive children means that they can be easily and deeply wounded, for example, by a parent’s fleeting expression of anger,

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disappointment, or disengagement. As one woman said of her relationship with her parents, “I could feel every shift, every nuance of their emotional states.” These children may be intensely affected by events that have much less impact on their siblings. As a result, they may become the “identified patient,” their pain or outrage a source of bewilderment or ridicule from other family members.

Spiritually sensitive children can also suppress their experience or their self-expression with particular depth and force of will. In order to defend themselves against emotional pain, or to mold themselves to fit in with their family and peers, they may create deep fragmentations and constrictions in their bodies. As a result, there is often a striking degree of imbalance in their personal development: as adults, they present an unusual mixture of maturity and immaturity, openness and rigidity. A person may be extremely compassionate and capable of deep emotional contact with other people, and at the same time, be so severely constricted in their pelvis that they avoid intimate relationships. Or someone may exude exceptional wisdom and kindness, and yet feel so constricted in their voice that they cannot express their own needs or insights.

Children sometimes express their spiritual sensibility directly, describing experiences such as visions of subtle light, out-of-body flights, and other phenomena. If their reports of the spiritual realm are met with disbelief or censure from other family members, they will sometimes search for a context for their experiences. I know a man who, as a young

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child, always saw light around people. Although his parents dismissed his claims, he noticed that this light resembled the angels' haloes that were painted on the walls of their church. He kept this association to himself, but he was intrigued by this resemblance of ordinary people to angels, and comforted by the knowledge that what he could see had already been seen and recorded by other people. This explanation served him well. It allowed him to maintain and develop his subtle vision, which contributed to his exceptional ability as a healer when he grew up.

Other children may come to conclusions about their perceptions and experiences that are not so benign and that may develop into fantastical belief systems limiting their participation in life as adults. I knew a woman who, since childhood, had been able to predict events, such as the deaths of relatives, or the gender of unborn family members. She grew up believing that she had "supernatural powers" that marked her as entirely different from other human beings. Combined with her alienation from her family and her childhood religious education, this belief was a source of terror that she would suffer as terrible a death as Christ if her powers were ever exposed. It took her many years as an adult to discover that there were other people with similar gifts and that her abilities could be a source of appreciation instead of persecution.

Spiritually gifted children, because of their sensitivity, emotional responsiveness, and insight into other family members' pain, sometimes feel and appear more mature than

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the people around them. They seem like “old souls,” alert to the suffering, hypocrisies, and complexities of family life. This quality often casts them in the role of confidant or even of savior within the family, the one who listens to everyone’s problems. They may feel that they are the only one in their family who knows what is really going on beneath the veneer of normalcy and propriety. But if they have no support for their observations, they can begin to doubt their own senses, or even their sanity. They may feel guilty about their perceptions. Or they may feel guilty for failing to heal the distress that they see in their parents and siblings.

Children who feel in some way older than their parents or teachers may grow up believing that there is no one who can actually guide or nurture them. Thus, they often lack a feeling of safety in the world. Although they may express a strong sense of independence, they also harbor a deep need to find someone who will finally take care of them. They may have a sense of having never been a child, and at the same time, of never really growing up.

They may also feel that no one can truly connect with them in the depth of their being, or truly recognize them. Or that they need to get far away from other people in order to truly be themselves. The lack of genuine connection with significant others in their childhood may derail the development of their own connection with themselves, and their ability to feel close with other people.

Spiritually sensitive people often have difficulty finding effective psychotherapy. Although they suffer from the

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same psychological ailments and employ many of the same defensive strategies as other people, the causes of these problems, and thus the path to resolving them, may be different for people who are spiritually open. Also, the extreme vulnerability of spiritually sensitive individuals to environmental stimuli, the intensity of their emotional pain, or their rejection of conventional social values may seem severely pathological to psychotherapists who do not have this type of sensitivity themselves. This means that their gifts may be treated as symptoms of their suffering, rather than as causes, and those aspects of themselves that they know are valuable may not be validated or developed in the therapy.

I have worked with spiritually gifted people as a psychotherapist and spiritual teacher for thirty years. Almost all of these individuals have felt some sense of being out of sync with the ordinary world, some sense of not truly belonging here. Their dilemmas—of being too impinged upon by sensory stimuli, of feeling unbearable empathy for the suffering of other people, of having no filter against the hypocrisy and brutality of the world around them, of not being able to truly connect with others or to find their true place in life—are the reasons that I have written this book. The following chapters offer a way to feel more at home in oneself and one's environment, and at the same time, to develop the gifts of sensitivity, emotional depth, and insight. They show how these gifts can be entranceways into both the everyday world of shared human connection and the most subtle, spiritual dimension of our being.

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The book is divided into two parts. Part one presents the Realization Process. This is an embodied approach to spiritual awakening that includes psychological and relational healing. The first chapter in this section focuses on embodiment and its effect on our sense of identity, our experience of balance and grounding, our breath and energy, and our relationships with other people.

When we live within the internal space of the body, we feel internally whole, and at the same time, we are able to deeply and authentically connect with the world around us. By inhabiting the body, we uncover a fundamental dimension of ourselves—which I call *fundamental consciousness*—that pervades our body and environment as a unity. Because we experience this subtle consciousness pervading our body, it is the basis of direct contact with ourselves and feeling comfortable and alive within our own body. Because we experience it pervading our body and environment at the same time, it is the basis of a sense of oneness with everything and everyone that we encounter.

The relationship between mind and body, or consciousness and matter, has been a central mystery of human life throughout our history, and is still the “hard problem” for today’s scientists and philosophers. Many religious traditions either ignore the body, or negate it as something to be left behind in pursuit of loftier realms, while most medical treatments ignore the influence of the mind on the body. Even if we recognize the role of the mind in illness and healing, we often speak of this in a divisive way as “mind over matter.”

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But even if we cannot grasp the relationship between body and mind intellectually or scientifically, we can resolve the body-mind division experientially. To inhabit our body is to become conscious throughout the whole internal space of our body. We experience that we are made of the transparency and luminosity of consciousness. At the same time, we experience that everything around us is also made of this same transparency. In this way, body-mind integration reveals the spiritual essence of our individual being and of all life.

Chapter 2 presents the main Realization Process practices. The exercises described in this chapter and throughout the book provide a way to uncover fundamental consciousness by inhabiting the internal space of the body.

These practices provide a way for us to tolerate extreme sensory sensitivity by developing our inward contact with ourselves. When we embody fundamental consciousness, the stimulation of our environment moves through our body without overwhelming us. At the same time, attunement to this dimension of ourselves can refine our perceptual ability, so that we become even more sensitive to subtle phenomena such as the vibrations of light and sound emitted by living organisms. The Realization Process exercises can also help us live comfortably with our emotional responsiveness by finding the stillness and steadiness of fundamental consciousness within the movement of our emotions. They can help us become more grounded, centered, and able to live in the world of suffering and confusion without losing connection to our own sense of truth.

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Chapter 3 shows how the Realization Process exercises can help us recover from the traumatic events of our childhood. This includes ways of recognizing and releasing the protective patterns in the body that produce a sense of estrangement from ourselves and our surroundings, and that obstruct spiritual awakening.

Today we know that trauma is not limited to relatively rare events of extreme horror, such as rape, or war, or a terrible accident. Contemporary psychologists speak of “relational trauma.” This is the result of painful interactions, especially in one’s childhood, that are too overwhelming to be fully experienced in the moment. These “unlived” moments of fear, anger, grief, and confusion become bound up in our bodies, along with all of the various bodily attitudes that occur during these overwhelming encounters, such as cringing away from danger or deflating the chest to suppress sadness.

These events of relational trauma, especially when repeated over time, become hardened in the tissues of the body, constricting and fragmenting our body and mind so that we cannot experience ourselves as a whole within our bodies. Even though they affect the body’s physical anatomy, they actually occur in a more subtle aspect of our being, in which the body and the mind are in close relationship. In order to contact and release the traumatic memories bound within our body, we have to contact ourselves inwardly. We need to find that aspect of our consciousness that is not just in our heads, but everywhere within our bodies.

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Awakening to fundamental consciousness by inhabiting the body assures that we will become more alive and whole as unique human beings, at the same time as we transcend our individual selves. In this way, embodiment contributes to both psychological and spiritual maturity.

Part two of the book looks at five specific difficulties that spiritually sensitive people often face. These are the challenges of becoming resilient to sensory stimuli, being grounded and authentic, feeling content with life without losing one's compassion for the suffering around us, and accepting oneself and the world as it is. In these five chapters, by presenting some of my clients' experiences with the Realization Process exercises, I show how cultivating embodiment can help us bridge to our environment, and at the same time, progress in our openness to the spiritual dimension.

Of course, people never fit neatly into categories. Although I present stories of people who have grappled with these issues, I have taken just one thread from their complex lives to illustrate each chapter's theme. I have also combined and altered peoples' histories in order to protect their privacy. As you read this book, you may find your own unique mix of personal challenges and spiritual gifts among these categories.

I play the roles of therapist and teacher with the people who come to work with me, but I also recognize these people as my peers, my precious companions on the spiritual path. It is often said that the skillful psychotherapist or spiritual teacher serves as a kind of mirror for the client or student, in which they can see themselves with acceptance

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and compassion. But in my work with these spiritually gifted people, they have also been a mirror for me. They have helped me to have compassion for my own struggle to become a grounded, resilient, authentic human being and to live comfortably in a world that once seemed alien to me.

I grew up in a strictly atheist home. Yet, from earliest childhood, I sensed a kind of presence that seemed to animate the tree branches outside my bedroom window and the sky beyond them, and that was even just barely detectable in the cleanly rational air of my childhood home. I never lost my need to know this tantalizingly subtle presence, to bring it closer to myself, but for a long time, I felt that I had to keep this strange need private. I was in my late twenties before I finally discovered that there were many other people who were also following the thread of some subtle sense or intuition toward some barely tangible potential. We met in the ashrams and the newly minted Buddhist monasteries, the mystical churches and synagogues, or just “on foot,” finding the way ourselves.

Zen Buddhism says of enlightened masters, “Like two thieves in the night, they recognize each other at once.” But all of us on the spiritual path seem to recognize each other, and to meet each other with some relief. I hope that as you read this book you will recognize something of yourself in the following stories of healing and feel inspired and supported in developing your own spiritual gifts.

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