

SHIFT
INTO
FREEDOM

THE SCIENCE AND PRACTICE OF
OPEN-HEARTED AWARENESS

LOCH KELLY

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BEING HOME WHILE RETURNING HOME

Don't go to the tangled jungle looking for the great awakened elephant
that is already resting quietly at home in front of your own hearth.

LAMA GENDUN RINPOCHE¹

Once there was a fish who had heard tales of the Source of Life, which would bring whoever found it their heart's desire. The fish swam to every corner of the ocean, asking: "Where is the Source of Life? How can I find it?" She kept getting pointed toward different tasks and to more remote parts of the sea—farther, deeper, higher.

After many years of seeking, the fish arrived back at the place where she had first started. Entering her home waters, she encountered an older fish who asked, "What is going on with you, my friend? Why do you look so worried and dejected?"

"I've spent years looking for the Source of Life," the fish explained. "I can't even begin to tell you how many things I've tried or the number of places I've searched—all in vain. I don't suppose you know where I could find it?"

The old fish smiled and said, "I've heard many names for the Source of Life in my day, but the simplest is 'water.'"

Just like the fish, we have been searching for an amazing life source. Although this essential source is beyond our ability to accurately

describe in words, we have given it many names: Truth, God, Peace, Source, Love, True Nature, Enlightenment, Unity, or Spirit, but the simplest name is *awareness*. Like the fish, we may have looked high and low, inside and outside, for this source of life and freedom. But what if that which we seek is closer than our own breath? What if the source of life already surrounds and permeates us?

Meeting thousands of people from many cultures and all walks of life, I've found that most have tasted the "water of life." Many have glimpsed the depth and essential quality of our being: an experience of peace and love, free from our limited mind. Like the fish, we long to find and live from that level of awareness, but because most of us have stumbled upon it unintentionally, we don't know how to find it intentionally.

Awareness is the foundation of living a human life. We cannot know anything without it. Yet, although awareness is so essential, we know very little about it. Mostly we take it for granted and focus on content: things we are aware *of* rather than awareness itself. The awareness we seek is right here, right now, and equally available to each of us. Similar to functions of the autonomic nervous system such as breathing, awake awareness is already happening by itself. However, awareness usually remains elusive because we don't know how to recognize it. Awareness is not something we need to create or develop. We will need to find a way to discover, uncover, or recover this awareness. Discovering awareness involves as much unlearning as learning, but I'm convinced there is a way for each of us to shift into awareness, feel the freedom it offers, and learn to live from here. You can glimpse this freedom of awareness and shift into it as easily as you can now shift from being aware of reading to being aware of the sensations in your right hand.

Awareness Is Awake

When our basic awareness is revealed to be the foundation of both how we know and who we are, we can call it "awake awareness." Discovering awake awareness is key to the transformation of consciousness called

awakening that leads to our ability to live from freedom, wellbeing, and loving connection. Awakening is a shift of our identity and also a shift of our way of knowing. Awake awareness is the essence of both our ground of Being and the source of our mind. This transformation is a simple shift of awake awareness from the background of our consciousness to the foreground.

Because we're in the habit of focusing on fast-moving thoughts and strong emotions, and of seeking happiness outside ourselves, we don't notice awake awareness. Our current constellation of consciousness restricts our perception of our wholeness. Awakening does not begin by changing our belief system or improving our external circumstances. Awakening begins with shifting out of the way we organize our current mind and identity, which is creating ignorance and confusion. We can learn how to shift out of our thought-based mind and into an awareness-based way of knowing. Then, from awareness-based knowing, we can embody, connect, and welcome all experience. The feeling of embodied, awareness-based knowing is similar to being in a flow state, being in the zone, being in love, doing selfless service, or laughing with close friends. It is being so fully alive in the now that you "forget yourself." Living from awareness-based knowing gives us true freedom of choice.

Awake awareness is invisible, contentless, formless, boundless, and timeless, but it is the ground of our being. When you shift out of your conventional sense of self, there is a gap of not-knowing. Awake awareness is who we *are* prior to the personal conditioning we usually turn to for our identity. Rather than looking to our thoughts, memories, personality, or roles to identify ourselves, we learn to know awake awareness as the primary dimension of who we are, the ground of Being. Then, with unconditioned awake awareness as the foundation of identity, we can include our conditioned thoughts, emotions, and sensations as waves of the ocean of our life. When people feel awake awareness as their primary dimension of consciousness, they report feeling an essential wellbeing that is free, loving, and safe. Awake awareness, as the ground of being, is the same in all of us, and our individuality arises out of it.

Awake awareness is sometimes called “pure awareness,” but it’s also inherent within all forms of our consciousness. At other times, the term “awakened awareness” is used, but awareness is always awake and so has not awakened. Awake awareness is always already here, and it is only a matter of learning how to directly access it. One of the most important things to learn is how to separate awareness from thinking, and then we can see that thoughts and emotions are not the center of who we are. We then discover that awareness is the source of mind that brings the peace that passes understanding. One student said, “This is what it feels like to be open-minded.” It is our natural wisdom mind, both prior to and beyond conceptual thinking. Awake awareness can “know” something without referring overtly to thoughts, but it can also use thought when needed.

When we discover the important ability to step back into awake awareness, we are no longer identified with our worried thoughts and fearful emotions. That which is aware of fear is not fearful. When awake awareness is then experienced as inherent within everything, we feel unity with all life. We begin to move from open-mindedness to *open-hearted awareness*, the expression of awake awareness that knows unconditional love and interconnectedness with all things. Recognition of awake awareness as the ground of Being is like “returning home” and resting as who you have always been.

Shifting into awake awareness is not like putting on rose-colored glasses; it’s more like taking away our blinders. In the open-hearted awareness approach, instead of trying to tame the wild horses of thoughts and emotions inside a too-small corral, we simply open the gates, discovering the larger field of awareness in which the thoughts can move freely. The most helpful way to be free of disturbing emotional states is not by attempting to “break” or get rid of them, but by realizing that these states are made of awareness itself. Awake awareness, as the primary source of how we know and who we are, can’t be harmed by any strong emotional state. You will discover that essential wellbeing is not found by calming our minds or by changing our thoughts or attitudes, but actually by shifting out of our chattering minds and into a freedom that is already available.

The journey of awakening is a series of shifts and small glimpses. Awake awareness can be glimpsed and directly experienced in an instant, bringing great relief. A man who helped me with my computer one day asked for an experiential pointer to awake awareness before he left. I showed him one similar to the “glimpse” practices at the end of this chapter. He emailed me back, saying, “When I came to see you, I had been anxious, overwhelmed, and stressed for weeks. All of that seemed to drop away in minutes and didn’t start up again. I probably had the best week of my life this week.” This is an example of why awake awareness is often called the “ultimate medicine.” The discovery and uncovering of awake awareness immediately opens us to natural qualities of peace, joy, love, and courage.

Why We Don’t Recognize Awake Awareness

If awake awareness is something we’ve all experienced, and if it’s so close and accessible, why isn’t it more familiar to us? How could we have missed it? Why haven’t we been able to access it intentionally? If awake awareness has so many benefits, why isn’t it primary on our psychological maps?

The Shangpa Kagyü Tibetan Buddhist tradition gives us a poetic response to the question of why we don’t recognize awake awareness. We don’t recognize awake awareness because it is:

So close you can’t see it
 So subtle your mind can’t understand it
 So simple you can’t believe it
 So good you can’t accept it

We are so smart, and our lives are so complex, that it’s hard to believe that simply discovering awake awareness could be the solution to our suffering. It’s also hard to believe that the most important discovery is already here within us; we don’t have to go on an odyssey to find it, earn it, or develop it. We are so used to knowing ourselves through our troubles, our dramas, and our obsessions that awake awareness,

which is our true nature and our basic goodness, is hard to accept as our true identity.

The main obstacle to relief from suffering is our current identity, what Einstein called our “optical delusion of consciousness.” Paradoxically, this same identity is trying to solve the problem of our suffering. This identity seems very real, as if it is a separate self that feels located in our heads. Both ancient wisdom and modern neuroscience now agree that there is no physical location of a separate self that can be found in the brain. Living as if there were a separate self inside your head is considered having a mistaken identity, and this is the root of suffering. We will call this mental self-referencing process *ego-identification*.

Shame-based core stories of being unlovable and worthless are held together by our mistaken identity, but we can be liberated from feeling worthless by shifting into awake awareness. Ego-identification is only one limited way of organizing your identity. Ego-identification is not “you” identifying with “your ego”; it is a pattern of consciousness made up of thinking and ego functions (such as seeking and protection) that form during our early biological development. Once this ego-identification pattern begins to generate the feeling that it has a physical boundary, a central seat of identity is created.

Ego-identification is not our personality, our personal history, or our ego functions. The simple confusion of ego functions (what we do) and self-awareness (the ability to think about thinking) with our identity (who we are) is at the root of this type of existential suffering. Ego-identification is a mental pattern of consciousness that creates the feeling of a “mini-me” inside our heads. It doesn’t have to be fought, repressed, extinguished, denied, or killed. We don’t become a nobody, an angel, or a couch potato. Instead, when we discover awake awareness as our true nature, our ego functions can return to their natural roles and semi-retire from their second job as identity.

One woman said her life had transformed because of these practices. “The panic attacks I had are gone,” she said. “I laugh more, and mostly at myself!” She brought her husband to an introductory

class I was teaching, and he sat at the back of the room with his arms crossed, looking half-asleep during my initial talk. After the second experiential exercise, when I asked everyone what the shift into awake awareness revealed, he suddenly brightened and said, “It’s me! The *real* me I haven’t felt since childhood.”

When we shift out of ego-identification and subsequently know awake awareness as our true ground of being, we feel that there’s nothing we need to gain or get rid of in order to feel okay on the level of identity. We will not discover freedom and love by restricting our physical needs; by creating a stronger, calmer, more focused mind; or by trying to create security and success in the world. Moving pieces on the chessboard of our minds will not clear up our confusion or end our suffering. For that, we need to shift out of ego-identification and into awake awareness.

By deconstructing, or shifting out of ego-identification, we won’t necessarily discover awake awareness. We can end up being spaced out, blissed-in, or lost in our unconscious mind. We can even become caught in meditation states such as being “comfortably numb” or in a detached “witness-protection program.” It is not enough to have an insight into the absence of a separate self. We must also discover the presence of awareness-based knowing so that we can live from here.

Awake awareness might seem like a new experience; however, it’s not an altered state, a transcendent state, or even a meditative state. It’s our innate, true nature that is always here. When we have shifted into awake awareness, we realize that ego-identification is actually the altered state. By recognizing awake awareness, we are dehypnotizing ourselves from the trance of ego-identification.

HAVE WE MET BEFORE?

Many of us have unwittingly glimpsed awake awareness throughout our lives. In fact, we often seek its enjoyable qualities without realizing that awake awareness is their source. From our current level of mind we cannot experience our ground of Being, deep wisdom or

open-hearted awareness. Although we may not have known it, whenever we experienced love and wisdom, it has always been because we shifted levels of mind.

Many of us have unknowingly dropped into awake awareness while walking in nature, being creative, making love, or playing sports; some of us have experienced it through crisis that became opportunity. Although activities like nature walks are pleasurable in themselves, they also relax the dominance of ego-identification, allowing awake awareness to emerge from the background.

When we go hiking and get to the top of a hill, our seeking to reach a goal stops. We relax fully, and our identity as the seeker drops away, revealing the awake awareness that was naturally there all along. At times like these, natural qualities of awake awareness show up—among them clarity, boundless freedom, peace of mind, joy, connection, and a sense of wellbeing. Because we don't know that the source of our joy and freedom is already within us, we might say later, "I feel miserable these days. I'll just have to wait until I can go back to the top of that hill again next year."

There is an old wisdom saying: "Silence is not the absence of sound but the absence of self."² In other words, we don't need to go to a physically quiet place. We can experience both the deep stillness and the dancing aliveness that arise simultaneously. Silence and stillness are here now within you as you are reading this book. Awake awareness and its natural qualities are not connected to any specific place, person, or activity—nor is awake awareness dependent on any internal thoughts or external conditions. If we try to re-create our experience by going back up that hill, our expectant state may keep us from letting go of the seeking mind long enough to allow awake awareness to be revealed again.

Many of us have tried to find awake awareness. We've tried to earn it through good deeds, achieve it through meditation, or pray that it will be granted. Some believe that it is available only to the highly evolved. Others believe it only appears through luck or a kind of grace that is either given to us or absent from our lives. When the obscuration of ego-identification dissolves, it can seem as if grace

or awake awareness had been absent and then newly arrives from somewhere else. What if awake awareness is not earned by good deeds or given only to a fortunate few? What if awake awareness is not missing and does not come and go? What if awake awareness is *always* already here, inherent within each of us? We can learn to become grace prone by becoming familiar with opening to the grace that's always here within and around us.

Many people get caught in the trap of focusing only on manifestations of the invisible awareness. These kinds of manifestations include light, energy, rapture, bliss, external success, charisma, an inner voice, visions, or stillness. These manifestations are real, but they are only transitional meditation effects. They are not awake awareness itself. Positive energetic expressions can be preliminary stepping-stones or doorways to awake awareness.

We can also get caught up in focusing on positive manifestations in the world as our goal. But if we don't recognize awake awareness as the unmanifest source of all manifestations, the positive manifestations can seduce us into believing external things that come and go are the source of our happiness. When we are happy without a cause, we are free to make choices that benefit ourselves and others.

Many who have longed and strived to know awake awareness have missed it, not because they lacked desire or commitment, but because they didn't know where to look or what to look with. One reason we *can't find it, see it, or understand it* is because awake awareness is not an "it." Awake awareness is not an object or thing that can be seen, heard, touched, smelled, or tasted. It isn't a thought, an emotion, image, belief, sensation, or even energy. The Zen tradition says, "To seek Mind with the discriminating mind is the greatest of all mistakes."³ Neither the five senses, the thinking mind, the ego, the will, the imagination, nor attention can know awake awareness. Just as the eye cannot hear sounds, thinking and attention cannot know awake awareness. The one who is reading these words and trying to experience awake awareness cannot do so until you let go of the way of knowing that you use in other areas of life. Only awake awareness can know awake awareness.

The Power of How: Local Awareness

One of the main reasons we don't awaken is because we have not yet solved this paradox of how *only awareness can know awareness*. The question arises: If we are not operating from awareness now, how do we access the awareness that can know awake awareness?

The most common answer is to sit in meditation for long periods of time so the chattering mind will settle and eventually allow awake awareness to be revealed. This usually requires a full-time commitment. However, with the discovery of local awareness, we can immediately access awake awareness in any place at any time. *Local awareness* is the expression of awake awareness that can unhook from thinking and know itself. Although you may not understand what local awareness is or how to find it, once you are introduced to local awareness in the glimpse practices at the end of this chapter, you will discover that using it is as easy as tying your shoes.

The open-hearted awareness approach first introduces you to local awareness, and then local awareness will introduce you to all levels of mind and locations of identity. Then you can begin to navigate through your own consciousness and become able to live from fully embodied, open-hearted awareness. Local awareness, the primary tool of the open-hearted awareness approach, is the mode or expression of awake awareness that is able to move to different levels of mind.

Normally, local awareness is obscured by our faster-moving thoughts and stronger emotions. However, we find that local awareness can easily detach from thinking and shift into awake awareness, which is then our new ground of being. This process of local awareness detaching from thought and then joining awake awareness is called *unhooking* and *recognizing*. We learn a simple set of practices for unhooking local awareness from ego-identification and using it to directly recognize awake awareness. Local awareness is able to know awareness that is already effortlessly awake because it is never separate from it. As soon as we are looking from awake awareness, we have shifted into an awareness-based operating system from which we can live.