

the HEART of
WHO WE ARE

realizing
freedom
together

CAVERLY MORGAN



Contents

- Foreword by Michelle Cassandra Johnson . . . vii**
- Introduction . . . 1**
- Chapter One** Return to Community: Creating an Environment of CARE . . . 9
A Practice: Your CARE Journal . . . 19
Collective Practice: Moving from I to We . . . 25
- Chapter Two** Return to Truth: Giving the Gift of Attention . . . 27
A Practice: Directing the Attention . . . 38
Collective Practice: What Is Shared? . . . 40
- Chapter Three** Return to Wholeness: Recognizing the Conditioned Mind . . . 43
A Practice: Fleshing Out Our Conditioning . . . 47
A Practice: Disidentifying with the Conditioned Mind . . . 56
Collective Practice: Undoing Collective Conditioning . . . 58
- Chapter Four** Return to Inquiry: Releasing Negative Self-Talk and Shame . . . 61
A Practice: Inquiring into Negative Self-Talk . . . 67
Collective Practice: Unveiling Beliefs, Assumptions, and
Judgments . . . 77
- Chapter Five** Return to Unconditional Love: Embodying the Compassionate
Mentor Within . . . 79
A Practice of Love . . . 87
Collective Practice: Expressing Love . . . 98
- Chapter Six** Return to Belonging: Unpacking Our Survival Strategies . . . 101
A Practice: Accessing Unconditional Reassurances . . . 114
Collective Practice: Revealing Survival Strategies
and Unmet Needs . . . 124
- Chapter Seven** Return to Unity: Seeing Through Duality . . . 127
A Practice: Exploring Duality . . . 132
A Practice: The Cost of Subject/Object . . . 138
Collective Practice: Dreaming Beyond the Dream
of Duality . . . 148

Contents

- Chapter Eight** Return to Presence: Knowing the Heart of Who We Are . . . 151
A Practice: Being With, Writing From . . . 160
A Practice: Owning Our Projections . . . 164
A Practice: Resting as Ourselves—R.E.S.T. . . . 168
A Contemplation: Resting in Being, as Being . . . 169
Collective Practice: Seeing What’s True . . . 175
A Practice: Recognizing Our Divinity . . . 177
- Chapter Nine** Return to Oneness: Resting in Luminous Being . . . 179
A Contemplation: Resting in Love, as Love . . . 192
Collective Practice: Exploring *There Is Only This* . . . 201
- Chapter Ten** Return to Embodiment: Releasing the Mind into the Heart . . . 205
A Practice: Freeing the Head, Breathing Through
the Heart . . . 217
A Contemplation: Resting in Freedom, as Freedom . . . 222
Collective Practice: Creating Acts of Being . . . 232
- Chapter Eleven** Return to Surrender: Turning Toward What Is . . . 237
A Contemplation: Turning Toward . . . 242
A Practice: Focusing on the Reality of What Is . . . 251
Collective Practice: Being That Which Blesses . . . 260
- Chapter Twelve** Return to Service: Loving and Living Truth in the World . . . 263
A Practice: Rolling Experience Backward . . . 269
A Contemplation: How Shall We Serve? . . . 286
Collective Practice . . . 288
- Acknowledgments** . . . 289
- Resources** . . . 294
- Bibliography** . . . 300
- About the Author** . . . 305

Introduction

Our own self-realization is the greatest
service we can render the world.

—Ramana Maharshi

We all long to be happy. Not happy as in glee but deep contentment. We all long to feel at ease, to know that we're okay, that life is okay, to be at peace. And we're deeply habituated to look for this happiness outside us, to grasp and scramble for an experience that, at best, ends up being fleeting, then something we long for again. We forget that this experience we long for is already seated in the heart of who we are—and that it's always here.

Have you ever touched this peace, this contentment, this deep knowing of who you truly are and then struggled because you recognized the degree to which the world around you didn't reflect this experience of our true nature?

Our true nature.

Oneness. Spiritual practice reveals the reality of oneness. Part of me feels called to write about this reality and nothing else. To live quietly. To meditate often. To be still. To perhaps make goat cheese on an island in the Puget Sound with my husband and our dogs.

Another part of me can't write or teach about this reality exclusively. I am propelled by a deep call to address how in so many spiritual practice settings this oneness is named yet is not reflected in our daily lives as practitioners. Not to mention how many report feeling overlooked, excluded, and ignored in prominent spiritual communities, the realities of their lives unseen, even unwelcome.

The Heart of Who We Are

How can I, a former monk with a lifelong commitment to non-harming, talk about oneness while participating in systems that I recognize as harmful—systems that I can't be teased apart from? How can I speak about this reality of oneness without addressing the ways we often don't act on behalf of this knowing? How can I recognize the privileges afforded to me based on race and class while also coming to terms with the way it is not a "privilege" to be part of a system of domination and othering? What do I mean by "othering"? Actions arising from the perception of separation; behaviors that don't reflect the truth of oneness.

This divide speaks to two realities: the reality of interconnection and oneness—the absolute reality; and the reality of isolation and separation—our relative experience, where we enact the shared delusion that we are fundamentally separate from each other on personal and collective levels.

These are two truths.

The truth of the absolute and the truth of the relative.

The relative—the conventional, the material; things as they appear to be.

The absolute—the ultimate; things as they truly are. Empty.

Empty—not as in a grim void or a kind of nihilism. Not nothingness.

But empty of objective experience. Empty of language. Empty of meaning.

Empty of separateness.

Everything comes from something else.

Everything is connected to something else.

No thing exists in a vacuum.

No thing stands on its own.

Things simply appear to.

Emptiness means empty of limitation.

Emptiness means spaciousness.

Emptiness means openness.

Emptiness—the home of possibility.

The great mystery.

Where nothing is formed.

And nothing is known.

I am called to speak to both the absolute and relative realities, to reconcile these truths, to not omit any part of reality. How can our personal and collective practices be employed not merely to “transcend” the pain of the world but also to help us to accept and be with the pain of the world so we can then transform it? Transforming not only individually but also collectively?

What are the ways that our spiritual practices have been conditioned to have filters? To be by-products of the very distortions we aim to see through? How can we not only directly experience oneness but also apply this experience and understanding to address the impacts of the delusion of separation and pain in the world? Most importantly, to not just address the impacts but also to get to the root issue?

I long to live in a world that reflects the reality of oneness rather than the distortion of our shared delusion. I long to live in a world that reflects the deepest truth of our *shared being*, a term I first heard from the meditation teacher Rupert Spira. I know this world from my meditation cushion in my remote hermitage on the hill, and I know this world from inside the walls of public high school classrooms. What is possible reveals itself in countless ways.

I don't write about anything here that hasn't touched my life directly: teens who struggle with depression and self-harm; an increasing homeless population in the city I live in; wildfire season, now the norm where so many of us live; loved ones who are affected by racism daily; the recognition that we are *all* impacted by racism daily; the pain of seeing how I participate in systems that I recognize as harmful, that we all do. *This* relative plane reality. The reality that so often reflects the pain of living on behalf of the belief that we are separate from each other. The reality where we suffer. How might our experience of oneness be brought to bear on this reality?

It's been painful, yet also freeing, to wake up to the ways I participate in harm. The work of Radical Dharma—based on the book of the same name by Rev. angel Kyodo williams, Lama Rod Owens, and Dr. Jasmine Syedullah—has been particularly supportive of my learning, not only around how I participate but also how I am affected by these systems. How we all are. How none of us are separate from them.

Spiritual practice offers a way to be with this pain. To not run from it, to address it, to transform pain and return to the sanity of the truth of unity. I value being part of collective movements dedicated to the shared journey from the insane to the sane. I know I am not alone in longing for this, in being committed to creating this, in valuing this.

Throughout my life I've received tremendous support from others in my practice to expose and end the suffering that happens within. Everyone deserves such support. We all deserve to know our inherent well-being. We all deserve to be happy. And at the risk of being overly simplistic, if all had such support, our world would appear differently. I have dedicated my practice to exploring how these supports—the tools, teachings, practices that help us end suffering within—can be applied collectively. I've seen it happen in high school classrooms.

I've tasted what's possible.

How can these same practices be applied in an even larger world? I believe the only way we'll find out is through experience, by continually exploring how. I'm inspired by the possibility of the awakening of human consciousness at large. The knowing of our oneness at large, and how that knowing, collectively, might then impact our world.

In my years as a retreatant and in the public sphere, I've learned much about how the ego—the illusion of a self that is separate from life—operates. The revealing of the ego in action—insights about how it functions—has a particular taste, a particular feel. Freedom has a flavor.

I've come to understand how collective systems arising out of the delusion that “we are separate” also have the same resonance as the personal delusion “I am separate.” The workings of the ego, which we might think of as operating on a personal level, and the workings of collective conditioning have the same taste. I've had moments of experiencing how and where delusion—*personal*

or collective—manifests and ripples through the mind and body in the same way, creating the same feel. And seeing *through* distortion, whether we are seeing through personal or collective delusion, has its own same feel. The feel of freedom.

All that distorts the reality of oneness is, to me, worth seeing, worth naming, worth letting go, on any level, in any realm. And freedom is freedom.

In the societal realm, I continue to learn about how I participate in and am impacted by systemic oppression—how systemic oppression operates and expresses itself through me via my personal and collective conditioning. So I speak about race in this book. But this book isn't meant to be a book about race. Rather, it is a book about spiritual practice, and about truth, that includes an ongoing learning process around race, among other things. A book about practice that doesn't leave behind this relative plane exploration or see it as separate.

I'm clear that I don't have all the answers. I'm also clear that no one person does. I have faith in collective wisdom, collective awareness, collective love.

At the end of the day, my mission is simple: live in a world where we all experience our inherent belonging, our inherent wholeness, and our inherent freedom. Where the reality of oneness is fully expressed in the world we create.

I believe that true and lasting world change depends on knowing ourselves in the absolute sense. This book focuses on this knowing and how to move through the world from this knowing. To move through the world recognizing the truth of our shared being while not ignoring all that can appear to get in the way within our relative world—our families, our communities, our society. The relative world of our personal and collective conditioning. True change occurs not just when we know who we truly are or have a direct experience of our shared being but when we act in the world on behalf of this truth, this knowing.

This book is about the *act of being* (a phrase that has been used to encompass many knowings and philosophies, from the Catholic philosopher St. Thomas Aquinas to Mullā Ṣadrā, an Islamic mystic, philosopher, and theologian). It's about knowing a happiness you can't explain because you have no reason to point to. The joy of pure being. Of knowing who you are, resting in presence,

and acting in the world on behalf of this deep knowing. This book is about the pleasure of being aware of being aware, seeing what gets in the way of this—personally and collectively—and learning how to let it go, to undo, to realize freedom together.

I'm not going to begin with the story that this book is going to give you what you need to finally become “the right spiritual person.” My hope is that it doesn't feed the story that if you could only [*fill in the blank*], you could finally be free.

Rather than starting with the assumption that you need to work hard to become free, we begin with a focus on *what is already free*. Already and always.

You are invited to join me in an engaged way, a personal way, a way that doesn't leave the heart behind. This book is meant to be a journey. It's written with the personal and the collective in mind. My first Zen teacher often said, “It's not what, it's how.” That became an important guiding principle in my training. While I hope the content of this book—the *what*—will provide benefit on its own, *how* you engage with this content is what will matter the most.

This book is about practicing being in touch with the heart of who we are and how being grounded in the heart of who we are changes not only our personal lives but also our relationships, systems, and how we move through the world. Here we take what can be a somewhat floaty idea of “oneness” and ground it in actions that create tangible change both personally and collectively.

The contemplative technologies in this book will support your experience of being awake in the world: creating an intentional place to practice, seeing and naming negative self-talk, cultivating the compassionate mentor within, exploring how we learned to survive our lives, recognizing the conditioned mind, just to name a few. We'll explore how each tool applies not only to the creation of personal suffering but also to the suffering that plays out in the larger world as well. In other words, we'll focus on what gets in the way of truth. We'll also focus on truth itself, on presence, on oneness. This book is about you, but perhaps more significantly it's about *us*.

The tools in this book are not supports to become something better or something you are not. These contemplative technologies arise out of the understanding that you are inherently whole, that you are unbreakable. These tools are offerings of remembrance.

Introduction

As we remember what is true, we touch the reality of the absolute—that we are not separate. Our world then changes when we bring this truth to bear on the relative plane of reality—in our churches, our schools, our communities, our society. Our world changes when this truth completely saturates our mind.

You may choose to read this book on your own. You may choose to read it in community. Whether you read it alone or with a group, I hope this book will serve you and your longing to know who you truly are and to live from this understanding.

Reading this book with the support of a collective can take countless forms. You may read it with family members, a church group, your meditation community, a collective of friends who have a shared focus on freedom.

At the monastery where I trained, we were always encouraged to be grateful for the support of the other monks as we practiced being awake in the world. That didn't just mean "when they are supporting me the way that I want to be supported." That also meant "when I'm head cook for a huge retreat and another monk is late bringing the groceries. It's clear that the meal isn't going to be on time and suddenly I'm gifted with the opportunity to practice patience." If you choose to take this journey in direct relationship with others, I invite you to learn from the bumps and the rubs that might arise in this context. All of it is ground for learning. Each chapter includes individual guided practices and ends with suggestions for collective practice.

This book stands on the premise that we *all* long to know Love with a capital *L*. We long to rest in it. We long to know in the depths of our being that we aren't separate from it. We long to recognize ourselves as this Love itself. Ultimately this book is about returning to Love individually and collectively. Acting from being. And finally this book is about realizing that freedom lives here: mine, yours, the world's.

Welcome. I am so very glad you are here.

Chapter One

Return to Community

Creating an Environment of CARE

The next Buddha may be a *sangha*.

—Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh

During my eight years as a monk, my thirst for freedom was so intense I valued it more than I valued my own life. There was a problem, though: I didn't really know what freedom was.

I knew what I thought it was.

I came to Zen because I knew there must be something more to life. I knew I was suffering within. I knew intuitively that the suffering was something I was creating. That, in some sense, made it unreal—or at least not fundamentally true. I also had a deep intuition that the internal suffering I experienced wasn't required.

I had no concept or framework for the way out of suffering, though. Growing up in the Episcopal church where my mother also grew up provided some rhythm and consistency, in spite of the fact that we only went to church when the University of Virginia students were in town (because my mother enjoyed seeing the young men in bow ties).

Most Sundays I skipped Sunday school with my buddies only to gallivant around the shops stealing jelly beans from the bulk bins. (I was a blue-eyed blonde girl in the South, so even if I were caught shoplifting it would at worst have merited a cute, feigned slap on the wrist. I did not understand the injustice inherent in this at the time. I was a thrill seeker who preferred jelly beans to Bible study.)

When it was time to rejoin our parents in church, we'd slide back in, take part in Communion, hear a few songs, and then it would be done. In my sugar-induced hyperactive state, church could never go fast enough. I had trouble being still, which was always scornfully noticed by my mother and grandmother.

I have only one memory of glimpsing a person doing something I can now describe as being in relationship with God. Something more alluring than the thrill of raiding the bulk bins. His name was Mr. Hollison. He always sat in the same pew, close to the priest, facing the central altar. During some songs, he'd lift his arms up in the air mid-verse. Like a child before words calling out to be picked up, his whole being would cry to be held. Head tilted back, singing. A baby bird beckoning to be fed. The longing and the Love were palpable. Though I had no words for it at the time, I knew this longing.

And this Love.

For as long as I can remember, I was offered the model that you were what could cry for God, but there were no guarantees that you would be heard. And pretty early on I figured out that whether someone picked up on the other end had something to do with your behavior. Likely God doesn't answer the phone for little thieves that can't sit still. But maybe if I worked a little, changed my behavior, cleaned up my act . . .

I had few models of unconditional love. I had no experience of inherent belonging. The belief: we are each born needing improvement, like the newest doll that needs batteries to operate yet doesn't come with them. On a deep subconscious level, most of what I did was in response to this framework, which I never questioned.

This book stands on the premise that we inherently belong. All of us.

In Love there is only belonging.

I assume that if you are holding this book, you, too, long to know this Love. That somewhere in the depths of your being you know that it's possible to end