

the
FULLNESS
of the ground

A Guide to Embodied Awakening

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Introduction

What does it mean to become whole? What does it mean to feel oneness with other people and with your surroundings? Are these just New Age clichés or empty promises of some alternative reality? In this book I show that we have the potential within our own body and within our ordinary reality to become more unified within ourselves as individuals and at the same time to transcend our individuality and uncover an experience of actual oneness with everything around us.

This unity of oneself and one's surroundings is called nonduality. In the following chapters I describe the experience of nondual realization, of what it feels like to know one's whole self—to be able to think and feel and sense all at the same time—and the extraordinary experience of whole-body openness, of the felt continuity between our own being and our environment. I also illustrate the depth of contact and intimacy with ourselves, with other people, and with our surroundings that emerges with this unity. And I point to the ease and happiness that we can uncover within our bodies that is strangely independent of circumstances. This enduring happiness is not a vacuous, detached state. Nor does it interfere with the richness of life or with our natural tendencies to grieve our losses, feel anger at tyranny, or fear when there is actual danger. Yet when we awaken to and embody nondual reality, this sense of well-being is always there, at our foundation, supporting us and helping us to help others.

Throughout these pages, I will show how to access this wholeness and oneness, for it is easily accessible and well within our reach. Through methodical and gentle refinement of our perception and a deepening of our inward contact with ourselves, we can discover what has been here all along. We can uncover our birthright as human beings.

This book is a guide to embodied nondual realization and its profound effect on our senses; on our ability to love, think clearly, and feel pleasure; on our enjoyment of our own authentic existence; and on our connection with other living beings. The method offered here for achieving nondual realization differs from many traditional and contemporary approaches. It is not solely a technique for emptying the mind or expanding awareness. Rather, it teaches the opening of our whole body and being to the experience of oneness. This transforms all of our experience, deepening and refining our capacities for awareness, emotion, and physical sensation.

The practices included here provide the best way I know to convey the message of our spiritual potential. They stem from an approach to embodied nondual awakening called the Realization Process, which I developed and have taught for four decades. The Realization Process is a series of attunement practices for inhabiting your body and uncovering a subtle ground of being, an undivided fundamental dimension of consciousness that you can experience pervading your body and environment as a unity. The Realization Process also includes practices for releasing trauma-based constrictions from the body, which I described in my last book, *Trauma and the Unbound Body*, as well as movement practices and relationship practices to help heal and deepen our intimacy with other people. This book focuses specifically on the Realization Process practices for nondual, spiritual awakening. If you are new to these practices, I hope you will try them out. For this is not a book about metaphysical claims or spiritual beliefs. It is a book about experience. And although I attempt to describe that experience, my effort can only consist of two-dimensional words until you experience their meaning for yourself.

In the Realization Process, nondual realization is experienced as the laying bare of fundamental consciousness. When we uncover it, we experience that our own body and our surroundings are pervaded by

and made of this same undivided expanse of consciousness. We recognize it as our primary nature, the fundamental ground of our own being, and at the same time, the ground of our experience of the world around us. Again and again, people who discover this unified dimension say, “Amazing! I have never been here before!” and yet they have not moved at all. They are just perceiving themselves and their world more clearly from a perspective that reveals an underlying unity, a subtle luminosity, and a sense of truth, of immediacy, in all of their experience.

Fundamental consciousness is seen and felt as unbroken, unwavering space that pervades all of the changing content of our experience. Our own body and the world around us appear to be both substantial and made of space at the same time. But this space is not just emptiness. It is experienced as empty, sheer transparency and at the same time as being full of quality-rich presence. When we know ourselves as this ground, our own body and everything and everyone in our environment appear simultaneously to be made of emptiness and radiant presence.

An important consequence of fundamental consciousness pervading both our body and our environment is that we arrive at an experience of our internal wholeness that coexists with our experience of unity with everything around us. Far from eradicating the sense of our individual existence as many nondual approaches attempt to do, with the realization of fundamental consciousness we mature as unique human beings while at the same time experiencing undivided continuity with other people and with our surroundings. Pervading our body, fundamental consciousness emerges with the impact of authenticity, a sense that we have finally come home to ourselves, that we are finally who we really are.

The first part of this book begins with an explanation of nonduality, especially as it is understood and experienced in the Realization Process. It then looks at some of the prevalent views of other nondual teachings regarding the existence or nonexistence of the self and the effect of nondual realization on emotional suffering, desire, agency, and our ability to think and feel.

Throughout this book, I draw on nondual teachings from Buddhist and Hindu¹ traditions to support and contextualize the Realization Process. Although I have studied with masterful teachers in the

Zen Buddhist and Tibetan Buddhist Dzogchen and Mahamudra paths, as well as the paths of Advaita Vedanta, Bhakti yoga, and Kashmir Shaivism, I have never considered myself to be a Buddhist or a Hindu. Growing up in a strictly atheist home, I was left on my own to explore my early spiritual intuitions and experiences. The Realization Process developed out of that exploration. However, my own spiritual unfolding and the development of my work have been profoundly influenced by the Asian nondual teachings. Because it is beyond the scope of this book to offer a detailed or nuanced portrayal of these vast, complex spiritual philosophies, I have only included those teachings that have been relevant to the development of the Realization Process.

I have great respect for people who commit to one spiritual path and in doing so help to keep their chosen tradition intact. Many of my students feel that there is no conflict between their traditional spiritual path and the Realization Process and have found it helpful to integrate the Realization Process practices with those of their chosen tradition. But I also believe that the wisdom with which these traditions illumine the understanding and cultivation of our human nature belongs to all of us. The insights of these religions can touch our innermost core, with each one touching that core from a slightly different angle. This is how I have held the Buddhist and Hindu nondual teachings that I have been fortunate to encounter.

All of the world's great religions arose in a specific part of the world and in a specific time in human history and carry with them that time and culture's beliefs and customs. Many of these traditions spread throughout the rest of the world and endured into later historical eras where they maintained their deep roots and original form but also produced offshoots of new religions. These newer religions sometimes arose from a critique of the older religion's limitations and sometimes from an adaptation of the older religion's tenets to the time and culture of the new religion. When Hindu and Buddhist teachings arrived in the West, they met with the existing psychological knowledge that had developed in Western culture along with other aspects and attitudes of Western society. This produced the New Age movement of spirituality in which many hybrids of psychology and Asian philosophy emerged.

I regard most traditional and New Age metaphysical assertions to be speculative, and readers may be surprised that I am critical of some of the Buddhist or Hindu teachings or at least the prevalent interpretations of these teachings. This criticism is based on my work as a psychotherapist and spiritual teacher where I have observed the harm that some interpretations of the teachings can cause; for example, when people attempt not to exist or not to have emotions because their spiritual teacher advised them that enlightenment requires that kind of suppression.

Now that we have access, through global transportation and communication, to all of the world's spiritual systems, we can see that they sometimes disagree with one another. For me, in this post-postmodern philosophical era, I find it necessary to live with metaphysical uncertainty. It seems to me that there are some things that we simply cannot know. That is not a criticism of religious traditions but a contemporary perspective on them. But this uncertainty does not interfere with our ability to realize the nondual ground of our being. And the experiences of realization that are described, especially in the nondual Asian traditions, can help guide, support, and affirm our present-day nondual realization.

The second part of this book presents the Realization Process path to realizing oneself as fundamental consciousness. It describes the defining attributes of this fundamental ground of our being so that we can recognize and continue to open to this primary aspect of ourselves. It also includes instructions for the main spiritual practices of the Realization Process, some that returning readers will have found in my previous books, and some that have not been published before.

The third section of the book presents ways to bring the Realization Process practices into our daily lives, while walking, speaking, and relating with other people. It includes practices for couples to experience how meeting as fundamental consciousness can deepen, balance, and enhance their connection with each other. All of the practices can help us stabilize in nondual realization as an ongoing transformation rather than a temporary peak experience.

Fundamental consciousness is beyond our habitual, constructed templates of experience, but it is not just ideas or mental constructs

that impede our opening to it. For most of us, the realization of fundamental consciousness as one's own nature cannot be achieved with a simple mental shift. Nor can we just decide to settle into this ground and find ourselves there. Our limiting grip on ourselves is embedded and bound in the tissues of our body. We need to make deep contact with ourselves within our body, to become conscious throughout our body, and to let go from the innermost core of our body to free our authentic nature from the chronic patterns that obscure it.

Most importantly, we do not need to suppress any aspect of our experience to realize nonduality. Fundamental consciousness encompasses and pervades all of our perceptions, thoughts, emotions, and sensations. As fundamental consciousness, we experience the ground of our being as both unwavering stillness and full of the movement of life at the same time.

Two Views of Nonduality

It is all one!” has been the exclamation of mystics throughout the ages. It is a pinnacle, an ultimate revelation of spiritual aspiration. Yet spiritual oneness has been understood, expressed, and taught quite differently within different traditions. It has been understood as oneness with God, as an ecstatic merging with the vibrations of the universe, as a loss of self in the other, and as a gaining of Self that encompasses all otherness. It has been taught as a stopping of one’s thought and emotions, even as the disappearance of all perception of form, and it has been taught as the most fluid freedom of thought and feeling, as the sharpest perception of objects and events. All of these perspectives and more have been offered by different teachers, spiritual texts, and traditions as nonduality.

As I will describe in this chapter, most of the teachings on nonduality can be divided into two main categories: those that recognize an essence or ground of being that is the basis of the experience of oneness and those that claim that there is no ground, only the constantly changing flux of experience. Tibetan Buddhist scholars have neatly classified the first as “empty of other” (Tibetan: *shentong*) and the second as “empty of itself” (Tibetan: *rangtong*).¹ These two points of view also appear in both ancient Greek and contemporary Western philosophy, but it is the Tibetan Buddhists who have produced a neat and explicit division between the two. Although the main divisions within Hindu philosophies concern the relationship of ultimate reality to our material world, there too

we can find a distinction in the teachings about whether or not there is a knowable, fundamental ground.

I am not presenting these two views in order to be argumentative. Within Tibetan Buddhism this is a complex subject, at times involving political and doctrinal concerns and also giving rise to attempts to integrate the two views, saying that they are really the same or that they go to the same endpoint. But of greater interest to me and, I believe, of relevance to the contemporary spiritual seeker, is that these are really two distinct perspectives. They each offer a different understanding of our essential nature and how to uncover it. However, especially among New Age teachers in the West today, one or the other view is often taught simply as nonduality. This means that the spiritual seeker has no options and can only accept their teacher's particular view. But given the choice, some people will naturally be drawn to go more deeply into the experience of a world that is empty except for the constantly changing flux of experience, and others will be drawn, as I have been, to explore more fully a unifying ground that pervades and encompasses this constant change.

The differences between traditional conceptions of nonduality are important for the spiritual student. They have significant bearing on the direction and goals of our spiritual realization, such as whether nonduality means that we still have emotions, whether we can embody nonduality, whether we can have relationships in nonduality, and even whether we continue to exist as distinct human beings.

It may be easy for us, with all the world's traditions at our fingertips, to get lost in a labyrinth of spiritual teachings, riddled with conflicting signposts. I have included a description of these two categories of nonduality in this book partly to help guide the reader in the direction they wish to go and also to explain why the Realization Process is aligned with the shentong "empty of other" perspective. The purpose of the practices presented here is to uncover fundamental consciousness as the foundational ground of our being. This ground can be called the essence of our being because it is experienced as unchanging and unmoving. Unlike all of the changing content of our experience, it is not constructed or imagined—it is revealed as we refine and deepen our attunement to ourselves.

As the most subtle potential of our own being, nondual realization can be nurtured within a religious structure, cultivated without a traditional structure, or even discovered spontaneously. For most of us, even if we have had a spontaneous revelation of oneness, we need some sort of guidance, some sort of practice in order to experience nonduality as our stable, ongoing reality. Many of these practices can be found within religious traditions, especially within the structures of Buddhism and Hinduism. However, the understanding and method that I present in this book are not part of a religious tradition. They are based on my own realization and on the needs and discoveries of my students. However, many of my students have used the Realization Process practices to deepen their realization within their own religious tradition.

Like most contemporary Western nonduality teachers, I have spent many years in the study and practice of Asian spiritual traditions, mainly the Mahamudra and Dzogchen teachings of Tibetan Buddhism and Zen Buddhism and the Hindu teachings of Advaita Vedanta and Kashmir Shaivism. They have had a profound influence on me and, I believe, on much of the spiritually awakened elements of our society. What I found especially useful in these traditions was the confirmation and enrichment of the spiritual experience that I had privately treasured, in its nascent form, since my childhood. As a child, I glimpsed what appeared to be a numinous presence in the sky and trees in my backyard. As an adult, during the intense inward process of healing myself of a back injury that had stopped my career as a dancer in its tracks, I found this subtle consciousness again. I no longer experienced it as a presence separate from myself but as the foundation of my own being. But I felt that I recognized it from my childhood, as if it had always been there and was now more clearly revealed.

The experience of fundamental consciousness can seem very odd. It reveals one's own being and one's environment as both substantial and made of empty, luminous space at the same time. In the Buddhist and Hindu literature, I found descriptions of this odd experience that seemed to resemble my own, as well as guidance for deepening and stabilizing that realization. I felt assurance that an experience that seemed more subtle and more personal to me than my own breath has been known, described, and valued for thousands of years.

Having had some experience of fundamental consciousness emerge during my process of self-healing, I was more interested, from the start of my spiritual path, in accounts from those teachings that pointed to a fundamental ground of being than those that denied it. I searched the spiritual literature for any mention of this ground.

Although the rangtong “empty of itself” perspective is more widely known in the West than the shentong, we find references to a unified ground of consciousness in both the Advaita Vedanta and Kashmir Shaivism philosophies of Hinduism and in some teachings, or some interpretations of the teachings, within Zen Buddhism, Taoism, and the Mahamudra and Dzogchen philosophies of Tibetan Buddhism. As you will see in the quotes below, this ground is called by a variety of names, including Buddha-nature, Self, pure consciousness, primordial mind, and the clear light of wisdom mind. The literature of these spiritual traditions also contains many firsthand accounts by spiritual sages expressing delight in knowing themselves as this spiritual foundation. Even though these accounts come from different traditions with different and even conflicting philosophical and metaphysical systems, the experience they depict appears to be recognizably the same.

Here, for example, are two quotes from the fourteenth-century Tibetan Buddhist teacher Longchen Rabjam, also known as Longchenpa. He wrote, “Within the spacious expanse, the spacious expanse, the spacious expanse, I Longchen Rabjam, for whom the lucid expanse of being is infinite, experience everything as embraced within a blissful expanse, a single nondual expanse”² and “Mind itself—that is, the nature of awakened mind—is pure like space, and so is without birth or death . . . it is unchanging, without transition, spontaneously present, and uncompounded.”³

And this is from Shankara, the ninth-century teacher of Advaita Vedanta: “I am the Supreme Brahman which is pure consciousness, always clearly manifest, unborn, one only, imperishable, unattached, and all-pervading and non-dual.”⁴

This final quote is from a root text of the Kashmir Shaivism philosophy: “The individual mind intently entering into the universal light of foundational consciousness sees the entire universe as saturated with that consciousness.”⁵