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INTRODUCTION

This book has arisen from fifteen years of speaking with people around the world—those in search of spiritual enlightenment, those seeking answers to the current climate of separation and war on our planet, and those simply looking for solutions to their personal suffering.

Until I met my teacher in 1990, my life was preoccupied with my own personal story of suffering. Although I was fed, sheltered, and educated by my parents in a relatively safe environment, I perceived myself as lacking, as needing something that hadn't been given.

I was brought up in a small town in Mississippi, with all the freedom and privilege of a white child of the middle class, yet I was secretly tortured by my family dynamic and shamed by my parents' alcoholism. I had the sense that I was involved in a huge mistake, that some force of darkness was surrounding me on all sides. The

Christian religious instruction I received did little, ultimately, to dispel this sense. In fact, it was amplified by the fear of everlasting hell for my inadequacy. For a brief time, I took refuge in the love of Christ, and throughout my entire childhood, the generous, unqualified love of my grandmother, Mammy, was the light that revealed the sanity and peace of the heart. Yet my childhood was not a happy one.

As a young woman, I married a wonderful doctor and gave birth to a beautiful, healthy child. Yet again, I was struck by the unhappiness that even my better circumstances could not dispel. What was the problem? I concluded that it must be me, so I began a search, exploring many avenues to correct what I thought was *me*, to improve *me*, to finally fix *me*.

By the time I came face to face with my teacher, I had worked on myself quite a lot. I had worked on my personality, my emotions, and my neuroses, and was relatively successful in those realms. However, I was still aware that I was living my life on a ground of suffering. I had tried many avenues to alleviate this sense of suffering—psychotherapy, affirmations, meditation, various workshops, channelers, astrology, visualization, automatic writing, dancing, psychotropic substances, acting out all my desires, and repressing all my desires. I had tried loving myself, and I had tried hating myself. None of it worked. There had been some beautiful moments, of course—

moments of grace, joy, bliss, and peace. But a thread of suffering ran through it all. Negativity and strife continued to arise within my own mind, and I continued to see it arise in those around me.

At that point in time, I had a wonderful life by all the usual measures. I was deeply in love with my second husband, Eli. We had a lively and passionate meeting on all levels. I had a daughter who was happy with her life. My health was okay. My finances were better than most people's. I had a career I believed in and loved. *Still*, I sought more; I feared losing what I had; I alternately hoped for and dreaded what the future might hold. It was exhausting! I became deeply disillusioned with myself and with the constant, everyday attention I placed on trying to fix myself. I had come to realize that there was a certain cycle to my self-involvement. At one end of the cycle was a sense of personal satisfaction, of the rightness of life's unfolding. At the other end were feelings of impending doom, an underlying experience of misery, and a belief in the hopelessness of the plight of the entire universe.

After a cycle goes around millions of times, it begins to get very familiar. The thoughts, images, emotions, and conclusions that were appearing had all appeared before. The jealousy, the envy, the seeking for experiences of gratification—at first sensual and intellectual, then finally spiritual—all led me back to my personal version of dissatisfaction.

Even as I recognized that my “story” differed from some people’s stories, and was similar to others’, I still believed it, and my suffering continued. Even as I recognized the tragically romantic story that overlaid most events in both my inner and outer life, I had no idea that this story was not actually *real*.

I didn’t know what to do. How was it possible to be relatively happy, even deeply fulfilled at times, and yet continue to have a deep longing for something I couldn’t even name? I had tried everything I knew to unravel this psychological knot of suffering.

Finally, I recognized that I needed help. I needed a teacher. So, I prayed for a true teacher, a real teacher, a final teacher—having no idea what a true teacher was, what a true teaching was, or what the result would be. I simply knew that I wanted to be free of the struggle. I wanted to realize the truth of my existence, but I didn’t know how to do that. I recognized that I had tried every avenue I knew, and I finally gave up.

Within just six months of praying for a true teacher, through a miraculous set of circumstances, I found myself in India, face to face with H.W.L. Poonja (Papaji). He greeted me in a most extraordinary way. Eyes flashing, he invited me to come in and take whatever he could give me. He did not check my credentials; he did not check my karma; he did not tally up any merits. He saw in my eyes that I was thrilled to see him, and he said, “Tell me what it is you want.”

I told him, “I want freedom. I want to be free of all my entanglements and misconceptions. I want to know if final, absolute truth is real. Tell me what to do.”

First he said, “You are in the right place!” Then he said, “Do nothing. Your whole problem is that you continue doing. Stop all your doing. Stop all your beliefs, all your searching, all your excuses, and see for yourself what is already and always here. Don’t move. Don’t move toward anything, and don’t move away from anything. In this instant, be still.”

I didn’t know what he meant, because I *was* sitting still. Then I realized that he was not speaking of physical activity. Instead, he was directing me to stop all mental activity.

I could hear the doubts in my mind, the fears that if I didn’t think, I wouldn’t care for my body, I wouldn’t get up out of bed, I wouldn’t be able to drive the car, I wouldn’t go to work—I was terrified. I felt that if I stopped searching, I might lose all the ground I thought I had covered in my search. I might lose some of what I felt I had attained.

But he was a huge presence, and in that moment of looking into his eyes, I recognized a force, a clarity, and a vastness that stopped me in my tracks. I had asked for a teacher, and luckily at that moment, I had the good sense to pay attention to the teacher I had asked for. In the spirit of investigation, I was willing in that

moment to stop following and believing in the thoughts beneath my doubt and terror. As I fell into what initially seemed like an abyss of hopeless despair, the fulfillment and peace I was searching revealed themselves to be here, to have always been here, with no possibility of ever leaving. Most shocking, I saw that I had always known it! In that instant, I realized that everything I could ever have wanted was already here as the ground of pure, eternal being. All of the suffering I had called “me” or “mine” had actually taken place in shining pure beingness! Most important, I saw that the truth of who I am *is* this beingness. This same beingness is present everywhere, in everything, visible and invisible.

In this realization, there occurred a remarkable shift of attention from my *story* of being to the endless depth of being that had always existed underneath the story. What peace! What rest! I had previously experienced moments of cosmic unity or sublime bliss, but this was of a different order. It was a sober ecstasy, a moment of recognizing, *I am not bound by the story of “me”!*

The simplicity of what I realized in that moment was difficult to believe. I had thought that it couldn't be so simple. I had always been taught that unless you are free of sin, greed, aggression, hate, and karma, you can't reach this place, and I had believed what I had been taught. Finally, I realized that *whatever* I thought was always only a thought, impossible to rely on

because it was subject to conditioning and disappearance. In the discovery of truth, thought could no longer be trusted. Thought could no longer be the master. The previous fear of not knowing was transformed into the joy of not knowing. To *not know* was the opening of my mind to what could not be perceived by thought. What relief! What profound release!

After I had spent some time with Papaji, after he had questioned me and tested me, he saw that my thoughts had indeed stopped. When he saw the results of that stopping, he asked me to go “door to door” and speak with others of my experience. I said to him, “Papaji, I truly don’t know how to do that.” His response was, “Good. Then you can only speak from your own experience.” He gave me the name Gangaji, after the holy river Ganga (Ganges) in India, because I had met him on its banks and because I had appeared to him in a dream as the goddess Ganga.

Eventually, others were interested in what I could share of my experience. The gatherings quickly outgrew our living room, and I began, as Papaji had requested, to travel “door to door,” holding public meetings all over the world and speaking with people from every walk of life.

When Papaji died, an interviewer asked me what Papaji had meant to my life. I answered, “Before Papaji, I didn’t have a life. I had a story of suffering. There were moments of pleasure, even

moments of bliss, but still a story of suffering. In meeting Papaji, I lost my story and gained life.”

Since I have stopped searching for fulfillment in the mind or in external circumstances, my life is now lived on a ground of joy. There are moments of unhappiness, anger, and distress; there are moods that pass through; yet all is occurring on a ground of joy. No mood needs to be feared, no moment needs to be avoided. Finally, I see that all moods, all states of mind, all feelings, anything that is truly investigated, points back to the same source—that pristine sky of fulfilled consciousness that is the truth of who I am, and is the truth of who you are.

I have been asked if I am a guru or the head of a church or religion. I do not think of myself as a guru, and I am definitely not the head of a church or religion. Some call me “teacher,” but in truth I am no different from anyone else. We are all aspects of, or points of reference for, the one essential consciousness. I am able to play the role of a teacher only because I know that no role is finally real. The true teacher is alive within each of us and finally reveals itself in everything on the apparent inside and the apparent outside.

What I speak about has nothing to do with religion. Although my teacher’s teacher, Ramana Maharshi, was a Hindu, and my teacher, Papaji, was raised as a Hindu, this teaching has nothing to do with East or West. It makes no distinction between Hindu,

Christian, Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, pagan, male, female, you, or me. It is the recognition of the omnipresence of being in which everything appears—you, I, ocean, mountain, and sky, all bliss and all horror. That field of pure presence is alive and intelligent and has the potential to consciously recognize itself in you.

The truth of who you are is consciousness: not your name, not your body, not your emotions, and not your thoughts. These are just coverings that come and go. They have a birth, an existence in time, and a death. Consciousness does not come and go. It is here now. It knows no other time.

Consciousness is free. It is not bound by any name or concept. It is not limited by notions of time or space. It is not affected by emotions or disease. You are pure consciousness. You have always been free, for you have always been consciousness. You have experienced yourself as a point in consciousness and, from that, imagined yourself to be limited to a body.

This recognition, even if it lasts only an instant, is the beginning of an infinitely deepening self-investigation. It is the end of preoccupation with the cycles of self-definition, and the beginning of true self-exploration that knows no limits.

To “stop” is to stop searching for yourself in thoughts, emotions, circumstances, or bodily images. It is that simple. The search is over when you realize that the true and lasting fulfillment you have been

searching for is found to be nowhere other than right where you are. It is *here*. It is in you, it is in me, it is in all life, both sentient and insentient. It is everywhere. As long as you are searching for it, it cannot be found, because you assume that *it* is someplace else. You are continually chasing a lie.

The truth of who you are is utterly simple. It is closer than your thoughts, closer than your heartbeat, closer than your breath. If you believe your thoughts to be real, if you follow your thoughts as the basis of reality, you will continually overlook what is closer, what has been calling you throughout time, saying, “You are here! You are home! Come in. Be at home.” To be home is to simply *be here*. To postpone simply being here is to engage in the infinite complexities of self-definition and misidentification.

Right now is the opportunity to stop and tell the truth about the flame of consciousness that is the essence of your being. To choose to deny it is to suffer. To choose to surrender to it is the end of all unnecessary suffering. When you meet yourself, when you love yourself, when you recognize that this flame of truth that you love *is* yourself, you have no need to search for love or to try and extract love. You are fulfilled.

At this point in our human history, what was once reserved for the most rare beings is available to ordinary people. Because we have considered ourselves ordinary, we have kept a certain door closed

within our brains and within our hearts to the truth at the core of it all. But, at this time, there is a crack in our conditioning. If you are reading this, you are already aware of it to some degree or you wouldn't have picked up this book. This is a time of the ordinary awakening. This means *you*, not only those born under the brightest stars but the ordinary person as well.

It is my assumption that if you are reading this book, you must have some deep intention to be free, some intention to awaken. It is this intention that calls you home. It is the intent of this book to support the return of your individual consciousness to its source, the ocean of consciousness. They are never separate from one another in reality.

My intention is not to fix anyone or teach anything. Regarding the simple, absolute truth of who you are, nothing needs to be learned. The truth of who you are is closer than what can be learned. What if, in this moment, just as an experiment and in the spirit of self-inquiry, you put aside everything you have learned about who you are—including all your hopes and fears of who that might be—and open your mind to discover the *truth* of who you are? It is very simple. That truth is always here. My invitation is to stop all movement of your mind away from truth so that you can discover directly, for yourself, this jewel that is alive within you.