

THE  
DEEP  
HEART

OUR PORTAL  
TO PRESENCE

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## THE PILGRIMAGE FROM HEAD TO HEART

*In the room of lovers  
I can see with closed eyes  
the beauty that dances.*

RUMI, "My Burning Heart,"  
translated by Deepak Chopra and Fereydoun Kia

THERE IS A LIGHT in the core of our being that calls us home—one that can only be seen with closed eyes. We can feel it as a radiance in the center of our chest. This light of loving awareness is always here, regardless of our conditioning. It does not matter how many dark paths we have traveled or how many wounds we have inflicted or sustained as we have unknowingly stumbled toward this inner radiance. It does not matter how long we have sleepwalked, seduced by our desires and fears. This call persists until it is answered, until we surrender to who we really are. When we do, we feel ourselves at home wherever we are. A hidden beauty reveals itself in our ordinary life. As the true nature of our Deep Heart is unveiled, we feel increasingly grateful for no reason—grateful to simply be.

Rumi discovered this truth eight hundred years ago, as have ordinary people like you and me. It is the call from the depths of every human heart. It is the call from your heart as you read these words and something within you stirs in recognition. Rightly understood,

everything that happens invites us to recognize this heart-oriented way of being, knowing, and feeling.

## The Inner Pilgrimage

You have heard of pilgrimages and perhaps been on one yourself, such as the famed Camino de Santiago that winds through Europe and ends at a Catholic cathedral near the Atlantic coast in Spain. For millennia, people have walked long distances in India to visit holy shrines or sacred mountains, such as Mount Kailash in the Himalayas or Arunachala in the south where the renowned twentieth-century sage Ramana Maharshi was drawn when he was sixteen and where he spent the rest of his life. Devout Muslims try to visit Mecca at least once in their lives. There are secular versions, as well, such as the pristine John Muir Trail in the high Sierras in California or the Appalachian Trail on the East Coast of the United States.

Whether our pilgrimages are religious or secular, they spring from the same source and ultimately have the same destination. They are archetypal in nature, arising from the depths of the human psyche. These journeys are attempts to return to wholeness—to recover our innocence, openheartedness, and inherent knowing. They are journeys toward the Deep Heart.

*What is the most important thing in this brief life?*

*What is most real and true?*

As powerful as these outer pilgrimages may be, the essential pilgrimage is inner. Rather than taking place over long distances and difficult terrain, *the inner pilgrimage is the abiding shift of attention from the forehead to the heart area.* Our attention is usually caught in the judging mind and identified with imprisoning stories and images. As a result, we feel vaguely located in our forehead or behind our eyes. Yet our true home is the Deep Heart—loving awareness, the very center of our being. The direction of our journey is not forward but

backward, a falling back and letting go. This inner pilgrimage is a profound surrender into a different way of knowing, feeling, and being. It requires an attunement to and trust in something in the core of our being that is as compelling as it is invisible.

This inner pilgrimage almost always involves both understanding and some effort, at least at first. Spurred by suffering and drawn by an inner sense that there is something truer within us, we begin an inner search. We start to examine our direct experience more carefully and to question our commonsense assumptions about reality. Existential questions arise: *Who or what am I, really? What do I most value and care about? What is the most important thing in this brief life? What is most real and true?*

Along the way, we begin to realize that what we have thought was true is not. Increasingly we see that we *don't* really know who we are. The familiar scaffolding of personal identity becomes shaky. Our metaphoric nametags—who we thought we were—become scuffed and faded. Am I only this identity that I have constructed or this role that I play? What if these beliefs that I have clung to so tenaciously are not true? Perhaps I am not this unworthy person, essentially lacking or flawed, that I have subconsciously believed and felt myself to be? What if I am not actually a separate-self, cut off and alienated from everyone and everything (as most people seem to think and feel)? What if *all* of these identities are illusory, no more real than the characters in last night's dream?

We begin to realize that we are suffering from a case of mis-taken identity. In other words, we see that we have taken ourselves to be something that we are not. It is as if we are actors in a movie who have forgotten who we are and instead believe that we are the character we are playing. Fine actors immerse themselves in their roles without becoming lost in them. Yes, we do need to play our roles, most of which are natural and useful, yet we are neither defined by nor confined to them. For example, we may play the role of being a woman or a man, mother or father, American or Netherlander, Christian or Buddhist, conservative or progressive, worthy or unworthy, yet these social and psychological roles come and go. Who are we prior to our various social roles and psychological identities?

I recently offered an online session for hundreds of personal coaches who were interested in working from presence—that is, the conscious awareness of their being. After leading a guided meditation and giving a short talk, I had them break into twosomes with partners they had never met and to take turns posing the following question to one another: *Who are you, really?* I invited them to innocently listen to the question, take their time, not go to their mind for an answer, and then spontaneously respond. They broke away to work with this question and came together a few minutes later. As we debriefed, many were astonished at what this simple inquiry led to. They experienced their familiar identities quickly falling away and the emergence of a heartfelt clarity and joy.

Equally interesting, even though these coaches were scattered across the globe, the whole group shared a palpable sense of intimacy. They only needed to be willing to honestly explore, pose the right question, and enter into a different way of listening. As a result, a profound inner dialogue quickly unfolded that was followed by a contagious sense of well-being. It was striking to see and feel how resonant this discovery was for so many people who had never met before. They had quickly tapped into their shared ground by sincerely questioning their commonsense identities. Rather than being unnerved, they were delighted by what they discovered within themselves and between themselves and others—a vibrant communion.

*It is a huge relief to see and feel that we are not who,  
where, or when we have taken our self to be.*

There is so much that we take for granted that isn't really true. For example, we think that we are a separate-inside-self living within a separate-outside-world.<sup>1</sup> In other words, we think we are inside this body somewhere, although when we carefully look, we can't locate exactly where. How often have you actually questioned this assumption? Alan Watts, the self-described philosophical entertainer, wrote, "The prevalent sensation of oneself as a separate ego enclosed in a bag

of skin is a hallucination.”<sup>2</sup> Are we really separate and divided from the whole of life?

This particular question is a variation of a classic form of self-inquiry. *Where* exactly are you? If you sit with this question with an open mind, you will be surprised by what you discover. If you are honest and quietly observant, it becomes increasingly difficult to find the boundary between an inner self and an outer world. Indeed, you may discover that rather than being in the world, the world is in you—as open, infinite awareness, not as the little *me*.

For that matter: *When* exactly are you? We usually take for granted that we are moving on a timeline from the past to the future, like an inchworm working its way along a marked ruler. Yet if we reflect on our actual experience, we realize that we have never experienced the past other than in our thinking. The so-called past is always a memory in present time. Nor have we experienced the future other than in our imagination—again only in present time. When we consult our direct experience, we realize that the past and future are only concepts. Even more surprisingly, when we try to find the so-called now, we can't. Now, in fact, is timeless. So when are we? It is hard to say, isn't it? Is it okay to know that we are essentially a timeless being? Can we still pay the bills on time with the revelation that we are, in truth, free from time?

If we are scrupulously honest, we discover that we actually don't know what we are, where we are, or when we are. This discovery is unsettling and profoundly liberating. Once we get over the initial shock, it is a huge relief to see and feel that *we are not who, where, or when we have taken our self to be*. The truth is that we don't know and can't know any of this—at least not with our ordinary strategic, goal-oriented mind.

We discover that we can rest in not knowing. This is not the same as being ignorant. We are not ignoring anything. In fact, we are facing an important truth—the limits of the conditioned mind. There is a great deal in life that we don't know, can't know, and perhaps most importantly, don't need to know. This insight frees attention to move from its temporary residence in the forehead to the depths of the heart area. Acknowledging that we *don't know* opens us to a different type of knowing.



## Heart Wisdom, Homecoming, and Sacred Grief

Not knowing opens us to wisdom infused with love—to heart wisdom. An initial clarity unfolds into wise love. The sacred inner pilgrimage, unconsciously played out repeatedly in painful outer scenarios, finds its fruition with this discovery. As we know this for ourselves, we feel increasingly at home and free.

The curious thing is that once we find ourselves at home, it feels strangely familiar, as if we have known it all along. We have. We lived here once before as little children, albeit unknowingly. When we were very young, we were in our natural innocence and wholeness, but without consciously realizing it. It is obvious when we observe toddlers delightfully exploring their world or when we look into the transparent, open pools of their eyes. This innocent way of being was once true for each of us. We once experienced a simple joy, wonder, and beauty. Do you remember a time when you were “trailing clouds of glory” as Wordsworth wrote? Do you have moments when this truth peeks out now?

We inevitably forget our native innocence as we grow, leaving it behind like buried treasure as we adapt and individuate. We turn away from our essence to face the world—above all the world of people. If we are lucky, our caretakers will be relatively stable and loving. Sometimes, however, they battle their own inner demons of trauma and unworthiness, and, as a result, they may be neglectful, poorly attuned, highly critical, or even abusive. When this is the case, we quickly learn to harden ourselves.

If we sense that we are not safe or loved, we instinctively shut down. The earlier this happens, the less conscious the process is. Very early on, few if any conscious thoughts are involved. We can sense and feel an unwelcoming environment before we are even capable of forming a belief. Gradually or suddenly, consciously or unconsciously, we close our heart and armor our body and mind, all to protect a native sensitivity that we do not consciously recognize or understand.

Even when we have a relatively benign upbringing, our brain and mind naturally develop to overshadow a more direct and intuitive way of being that we knew as young children. Our systems of education

tend to reinforce this analytic mode since it is so useful for solving external problems. In addition, there are always shocks and losses along the way that we must somehow navigate—uprootings, divorces, illnesses, and deaths.

Recently, during a day-long retreat, I partnered with one of the retreatants to explore the question: *What is the true nature of your heart?* Once she relaxed and settled in, she reported an emerging sense of awe as she felt her heart area opening into “a vastness that includes everything.” Later when we debriefed, she realized with gratitude that she had unknowingly sensed this innocent and open way of being as a small child.

The loss of innocence often passes unnoticed. We are usually too busy learning and adapting, and thus lose touch with what we leave behind. We carry this loss into our adulthood as a formless grief and sense of alienation. When we slow down and start to sense the heart area, we can sometimes feel a profound, hard-to-define loss that does not seem to be linked to a specific person or place. This is puzzling if we think of loss only in terms of losing a loved one. If we feel profoundly sad, it seems that we must have lost someone or something, even if we can't quite put our finger on who or what this might be. In fact, the lost beloved is the knowing and feeling of our Deep Heart.

I have often encountered this nameless grief among my clients and students who are undergoing a deep inner search. It took me awhile to recognize what it actually was, since it was not described in the conventional psychological literature. I now see this grief as existential and sacred. If we open to it and follow it all the way in, it leads us back to the treasure that we left behind. In this way our existential grief can guide us to a profound self-knowledge and abiding joy.

*Until the Deep Heart awakens, we will believe and feel that  
we are a separate-inside-self in a separate-outside-world.*

Life does not end with the completion of this inner pilgrimage. As this essential search winds down, a new life begins. While the search

for our true inner home ends with the awakening of the heart, the discovery of life continues to unfold and be expressed in surprisingly vibrant, creative, playful, and intimate ways. When we knowingly return to our native innocence, life opens up, and we are able to see “the beauty that dances” that Rumi alluded to in the opening epigraph. The death of our socially constructed, commonsense identity makes space for a profound renewal and discovery—a rebirth.

## **It’s Not the Pump**

When I write about the human heart, I am not referring to the physical pump on the left side of the chest, despite its interesting electromagnetic qualities. Rather, I mean the center of extraordinary sensitivity in the center of the chest that has infinite depth. It is a multidimensional center of being, knowing, and feeling. Our experience of it can range across a wide spectrum—from the gross, through the subtle, to the infinite. Our sense of self can accordingly vary from being highly constricted and exclusive to being infinitely expansive and inclusive. Likewise, our knowing can range from being densely veiled and distorted to being transparently clear. Further, our capacity to feel can range from being relatively numb to being exquisitely attuned and quietly joyful, or anywhere in between.

Our subjective experience of the heart varies enormously depending upon how intimate we are with it and, correspondingly, how separate we take ourselves to be from others. If we are distant and alienated from our Self, we will in turn experience this with others. For example, if on some level we are caught in a story of our unworthiness and the related feelings of shame and the fear of rejection, we feel split within ourselves and separate from others. To put it simply, our heart feels closed, so much so that we may not even know what an open heart feels like. Most of us have had at least episodes of thinking and feeling this way. If this state becomes chronic, we will feel that we are lacking or flawed in an uncaring or hostile universe. As a result, we suffer unnecessarily, radiating this suffering out to those around us.

Regardless of our level of personal self-esteem, until the Deep Heart awakens, we will believe and feel that we are a separate-inside-self in a separate-outside-world. Existential psychologists call this a self-world view. Most of us are identified with and trapped in such a view, at least to some degree. The extraordinarily good news is that we don't have to be.

I will discuss methods of investigation in subsequent chapters, but at this point I want to introduce you experientially to the domain of the heart simply by inviting you to shift your attention from the head to the heart area, via a centering breath, touch, and feeling. As you learn to pay attention to this area, your sensitivity will grow and a surprising depth will unfold. Doing so at first may feel like tending a garden with only a few budding plants or a hearth with a few glowing embers. It may take a little effort to focus your attention in this new direction. In time the process develops a momentum of its own and becomes effortless.

## MEDITATION

### **Tending the Heart**

Sit comfortably where you won't be disturbed for a few minutes, close your eyes, and take several deep, slow breaths. Then ask yourself, "Is there a problem right now? Is there anything that needs my attention right now that can't wait for a few minutes?" If there isn't (there almost never is), let your attention drop down to the center of your chest. Imagine that you can inhale into and exhale directly from the heart area. Put a hand over the center of your chest and think of someone or something that you love, appreciate, or feel grateful toward. Notice what you sense, and stay with your experience for another few minutes, allowing it to develop.

Bring your attention out and go about your day. Notice the shift in your sense of being and way of relating that happens afterward.

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