

ONE

Falling Apart or Falling Open?

“I’m not interested in how spiritual you are. I’m interested in how willing you are to stand as openness in the face of brokenness and loss.”

The Essence of Openness

Openness is your essential nature. It is what was *already here* before the story of your life got created. And it is what remains when the story of your life ends. It is the space within which your experience appears, and disappears. It is the space within which *you* appear and disappear. It is what is *always here*, come heaven or hell. You cannot get rid of it, you cannot taint it or harm it, you can neither add to it nor take away from it. It has no boundary, no edge, no beginning, and no end. It has no substance, no weight, no position, and no conclusion.

Openness is simply itself. It is not a valve that opens and closes. It is not a sea-anemone that expands and retracts. It is not a faucet you turn on and then turn off. It is simply here, as presence itself. Openness underlies the whole of your existence—like the paper on which history is written, like the sky in which the universe hangs, like the emptiness that contains fullness.

Openness is the “I” that sees, that senses, that knows its own experience. And yet it is not experience itself. It is the awareness

that recognizes itself. And yet is not identified by itself. It is the consciousness that is *always here*, come what may. And yet this openness is so often missed, so often overlooked and unrecognized. It's as if we look in the other direction, concentrating on the content of our experience, focused on the endless narratives that rise and fall like waves on the surface of the ocean. We are so concerned with finding our identity in our "doing" and "having," in our feeling and thinking, that we get ourselves snarled up in the world of vicissitudes.

There's a fear that if we open, we'll be taken advantage of, we'll be abused or harmed. There's a tendency to believe it's dangerous to be vulnerable or tender—that we'll be overwhelmed by the depth of our feelings, that it will kill us to allow our hearts to be pierced by the horrors of the world. So we employ some clever acrobatics to bypass our experience—to numb out, to stay asleep. These clever strategies are short-term medicine, but don't work in the long run. Eventually we get so contorted, and the internal pressure of keeping ourselves together builds up to such an extent, that we fear we might burst and collapse into a worthless heap of jelly. The fear of falling open is so huge that we refuse to let go of our need to control and resist that which is uncomfortable and unwelcome—what a problem life is, from this perspective!

My invitation is for you to know the unshakeable openness of your essential nature. You can still have healthy boundaries, you can still say *no* when someone is out to harm or hurt you, you can still walk away from abuse, you can still be human and know where you start and where you end in the world of form. It is, of course, necessary to have healthy boundaries on a physical and psychological level in order to navigate the earthly world.

But none of this has anything to do with the openness that is your essential nature—that which is here prior to your *yes*

and your *no*, that which is beyond where you start and where you end. Your essential nature—what you truly are beneath the surface appearance of a personality—is infinite and ever-present. When you know this openness as your foundation, then even your most vociferous *no* will not come from reactivity—it will come from love. It will be right action. It will be intelligent response.

The invitation of openness is to fall into the infinity of your true nature. It is from here that true freedom can begin.

“What is freedom?”

When we speak of freedom, there are all sort of ideas as to what this means. The mind imagines freedom to be “*doing what I want, whenever I want,*” never feeling uncomfortable feelings, never feeling pain or sadness or confusion or doubt. The mind imagines freedom to be a kind of super-state of elevated consciousness in which “*I am all-powerful, all-seeing, all-knowing*” and not subject to the human condition of feelings and emotions and the complexities and concerns of living in three-dimensional reality. This kind of freedom is an imagination. The only true freedom is the freedom of openness.

When we live as openness, we live awake—because it’s our natural state. It’s not an elevated state, it’s not a special state, it’s not even a spiritual state. It’s more essential than that. Essentially, openness is the willingness, the tenacity, the capacity, to meet reality *as it is*. It’s the end of resistance. It’s the end of resistance to your experience, the end of resistance to your *human* experience.

The human experience inevitably includes loss. It inevitably includes pain. And it inevitably includes heartbreak. The end of resistance means that we can meet all of that, and there is grace in it. It’s a grace that includes it all—the whole bloody mess of

being human and the excruciating inevitability of life's movement. There is grace in it because life flows like a river through you—*as your experience*—and there's no resistance to that. Life becomes graceful. This is the only true freedom there is—the freedom to experience the river of grace that is always *here*, in heaven and in hell.

*“Are you saying that I don't need to
be spiritual in order to be free?”*

I'm saying that there is something more important, more essential, and more direct, than trying to be spiritual.

First of all, develop the art of listening—listen to the narratives that are running the movie of your life. These narratives are an indicator of how much argument there is with reality. First of all, you have to see this argument, you have to see how it plays itself out in the background. It's like the movie director, and you—and all the parts of you—are the actors on the stage. Freedom demands that you're honest with yourself about these narratives, that you develop the capacity for true listening, that you expose the truth of the narratives running your show.

When you admit that you're giving your allegiance to the argument with reality, then something starts to crack open. If you cannot even admit to the argument—if you're attempting spiritual practice while the argument is still raging in the rest of your life experience—there's no transformation. The argument has to come to an end. And then you won't be concerned about being spiritual or not. Being spiritual won't have any meaning to it. It's just a phrase, a concept, an idea that cushions us from the full depth and breadth of our human experience.

When life is met fully open and fully awake, then—and only then—can there be freedom. It's a freedom that has nothing to do with an elevated transcendent state. It may have moments of transcendence, it may weave in and out of both transcendent

and terrestrial states, but all states come and go. The only true lasting state is openness. And openness is what many of us fear the most—because we are seemingly vulnerable in a state of openness. Most likely we’ve been open in the past and been hurt, so here is the proof that being open is dangerous. Perhaps when you were a child, small and powerless, you were abused. And that powerlessness has become equated with openness and now you’re afraid of being open. You’re afraid that somebody will take advantage of you, that somebody will tread all over you, that somebody will use you, that somebody will reject you or abandon you. You’re afraid that you are so open that you can’t function in the world. So it’s a good starting point to become sensitive to where you hold back, where you create a subtle tightening around openness, and to be honest about this even if it exposes a feeling of vulnerability.

The beauty, and the paradox, is that openness is where our true strength is. This is where our true power is, where our true invincibility is. Because as openness, there’s nothing that can be taken away from you, there’s nothing that can be diminished. As openness you are life itself. The fact is, you are not separate from life. To the mind rooted in separation, it might seem as if you’re outside of life trying to get something from life or trying to push life away. But the essential truth is that you *are* life. There is no actual separation, except in your imagination. So what harm can truly be done? The physical organism experiences pain—the pain of illness, the pain of loss, the pain of failure, the pain of death. But all these things are inevitable and they only have to do with the form, not with the essential openness that you are.

“My deepest longing is to be free, but the search for freedom seems to be endless. When will it stop? When will my search come to fruition?”

Initially, we look for a spiritual teacher or a spiritual teaching or a spiritual practice that will erase all our suffering, that will erase our unwanted feelings and give us what we want. What we want—even if we are not fully conscious of this wanting—is the bliss, the endless peace, the unbounded awareness that we’ve heard about, or read about, or been promised. What we want is to transcend the messy human experience. When the imaginary reward is not given, we make *this* teacher or *this* teaching or *that* practice “wrong” and we go off to find the “right” teacher or teaching or practice. But the imaginary holy grail never materializes. The search for freedom becomes a kind of battle, with either victory or defeat as the projected outcome.

When the battle exhausts us, when we seek and fail to find what we think we’re looking for—when we seek and fail, seek and fail, and seek and fail some more—we arrive at a bifurcation point. The choice here is to collapse into the story of “poor me” or to rise up into awareness. The choice here is to sulk into closure or surrender into openness—to regress, or to evolve. This is your moment of truth! Now that you have failed enough, been broken enough, been worn down enough, been humbled enough, now that you’ve been stripped of your imaginings of what freedom feels like, now that you have no fantasy to cling to as a lifeline, no holy grail to chase, no idea of what being spiritual means . . . well, now perhaps you can return to rest in the bare facts of what is here. Perhaps now it can stop being a spiritual issue and start being a human issue. The issue is how to be with the bare bones of our human experience. How to stop running away, and just *be here?!!*

If you are honest enough with yourself, if you can lay bare to yourself what stands in the way of just being here with what is, you return to yourself. This is not a regression into unconsciousness but a transformation into love. When there is no

more attempt to avoid or escape any feeling or experience, you discover there is nothing to run away from and nothing to run toward. You discover that truth is not a perfect state of understanding, nor is it a perfect state of non-feeling. It is the very aliveness of this moment, however it shows up. And this acceptance of what is here, this intimacy with what is here, is the very freedom that you seek.

Now instead of a spiritual high there is a spiritual maturity. You stop rejecting and sulking, and start opening and welcoming. In openness, there is no problem because there is no resistance to what is. The whole spectrum of the human experience—from heaven to hell—is deeply accepted. You stop trying to be spiritual, stop handing over authority to your imaginings of how it should be, and come to rest in the true authority of your innermost openness.

And when you seem to fall, when you seem to fail, when you find yourself back down on your knees broken open by life's vicissitudes, you will remember that you don't need to cower in shame, or fix yourself, or look for salvation in spirituality. You will remember to be right here, in the bare bones of our humanity—in love with the openness that holds every experience.

Is It OK to Fall Apart?

“My world is falling apart, nothing makes sense any more. I feel as if I'm falling apart, I can't keep my life together. I'm afraid. What should I do?”

It really *is* ok to let go, to fall apart. I do not say this lightly, as I have walked this path and understand that fear.

Falling apart sounds scary, so we do everything in our power not to fall apart. We keep our emotions in check, we keep our feelings hidden . . . even from ourselves. We contort ourselves

around family rules: they tell us not to rock the boat, not to be too wild, to just fit in with their expectations and everything will be fine. We conform to society's norms: they tell us to work hard, to save for a rainy day, to have a family, to secure our future in order to live a good life. We perform mental acrobatics to convince ourselves that we are fulfilled. We sacrifice our inner truth in order to belong. It seems we will do anything in order to not fall apart, because falling apart conjures up images of devastation, of depression, of despair. And even worse, it conjures up images of a big black void that swallows us up so that there's nothing left of us. It stirs up an existential terror, in which there is no ground beneath us and we are falling into an eternity of emptiness.

But what if the effort of holding it all together becomes just too much? What if you're so weighed down, so constricted, so suffocated by your trying to keep it together, that one day a tiny chink in your armor lets a sliver of light in? And even though it's terrifying, some distant part of you celebrates. Yes, celebrates! Because finally, you can let go. Finally, you can stop trying to hold it all together. But . . . it's so scary. You fear you will die. You fear it is the end of you. So you waver between gripping on for dear life and relishing the letting go. You teeter and totter, neither this way nor that, stuck in resistance to the inevitable. But when the cracks appear and a great fear arises, it's a potent invitation to let go—a sign that an old world is dying and a new one is being born. It's a sign that a more true *you* is ready to emerge, like the butterfly releasing itself from the chrysalis.

So, it really *is* ok to let go—to fall apart. In fact, you have no choice because eventually you will be forced to let it all go—when you take that final breath before you leave this earthly body. You might as well do it now—you might as well experi-

ment and see what happens when you give yourself permission to fall apart.

Perhaps you'll discover that falling apart is not what it seemed in your imaginings. You might discover that what falls apart is the arsenal of defenses you've been building up to protect you from heartbreak and grief and hurt and loss. You might discover that what falls apart is your idea of being separate from the fullness of life's flow, from the wild grace of the earthly experience, from the holy brokenness of this crazy ride of being human. And you just might discover that everything you imagined held you together has no real validity.

You might just discover what really holds you together is the breath that weaves you into existence. You might just discover that in falling apart you are resurrected into this sacred moment. You might just discover that you are held in the open hand of being-ness.

So yes, it's ok to fall apart. It's your feelings you're scared of—your vulnerability, your shame, your brokenness, your helplessness. But feelings cannot extinguish who you really are. Once the tempest has moved through you, you are left clean and naked, stripped of the burden of pretending to be who you are not. And in this naked awareness, you see that you're not really falling apart—you are falling open.

“The idea of falling is still very scary to me.

Can you say more about that?”

I speak a lot about falling—falling into openness, falling into the unknown. To the mind these words are scary, they don't make sense. But even though the mind scrambles to understand and comes up with all sorts of theories as to what this means, there's something in each of us to which it speaks so deeply, with which

it resonates so deeply. Because this falling into openness is our deepest longing.

This openness *is* the freedom that we're seeking. It's the freedom from our own mental narratives—freedom from the clenched fist in the belly, freedom from the armoring around the heart, freedom from the defended-ness of the personality-self. This freedom is what we're really seeking through everything we're doing, whether it be in the outer world of acquiring wealth or security or relationship or the inner world of positive thoughts and good feelings. This freedom from our mental tightness brings an openness that allows us to relax—although this relaxation is mostly temporary.

We yearn to know the freedom of this openness. We yearn for it because it is our true nature. It is where we came from, it is where we're going, and it is what we already are. So when I speak about falling, when I speak about openness, I speak directly to that longing. This speaking is not a language of the ordinary world because it's not relevant there. We have to function in and navigate the world, so a different focus of language is used for that. But when we embark on the path of deep inner inquiry—when we gather in a *sangha* (spiritually oriented group) or go on spiritual retreat, we need a language to help us tap into this new freedom. We can receive nourishment just from the dialoguing itself, just from the language itself, just from the places it takes us. There is a deep nourishment in that.

So, even though the mind cannot understand this openness, how can we recognize it . . . more and more? How can we give our allegiance to this . . . more and more? Even when there are hardships in life, even when there are unwelcome experiences? Even when there is pain and loss and brokenness? These are the questions. And by asking the questions, there is a discovery.

This discovery has nothing to do with the mind's knowledge. The discovery happens as we soften. It happens as we start to trust ourselves, trust ourselves in listening more deeply, in speaking more deeply, questioning more deeply. Then it starts to happen by itself. It comes as an inner intelligence, an intelligence that takes us all the way home to the open hand waiting for us at the core of our being.

Living as the Open Hand

“The metaphor of the open hand is very resonant. It speaks to my innermost. But how do I live as the open hand?”

Well, it has nothing to do with how awake or enlightened you are. It has nothing to do with how spiritual you are. Nor has it anything to do with how kind or compassionate or charitable or good you are. Although all these qualities will start to start to come through you when you know your true nature as openness, and when you live from that openness naturally.

Living as the open hand means softening, letting go, and relaxing within the experience that you are having—*whatever* that experience is. This softening is neither spiritual nor unspiritual. It is neither enlightened nor unenlightened. Whatever experience is happening within you—whether it is heaven or it is hell—is a potent invitation to the infinite openness of love. You are invited to notice where the clenched fist is still operating, where there is turning away, or numbing out, or the tug of wanting something to be different than how it is. Even if the wanting it to be different is here as your experience, you are invited to relax into that. It can get very subtle. And you can get so much closer to your innermost. What I'm really speaking about here,