

## INTRODUCTION

# The Invitation of Openness

*“I invite you to reject nothing, welcome everything, and surrender into the deepest falling of the open heart.”*

Over the years of dialoging with spiritual seekers—listening to stories of challenges and confusions on the path of awakening, listening to questions about how to attain the holy grail of enlightenment, or how to transcend the world and its suffering, or how to hold onto peace once it has been glimpsed—I have come to see that underneath all the seeming convolutions of the spiritual journey is just one issue: the refusal to meet life without resistance. And so, through the years, my teaching has been refined to its essential message: the invitation to fall into openness. Falling into openness—a dissolution of the psychological knot of ego—is the doorway to freedom.

Initially, my dialogues with seekers tended to revolve around personal concerns—how to find peace in the midst of turbulent emotions, how to deal with the conflict between the demands of everyday life and the inner journey, how to face the fear of aloneness when an intimate relationship ends, and so on. Today, the dialogues inevitably include concerns about the world—how to deal with anxiety about a world in crisis, how to cope with

the seemingly endless suffering of sentient beings, whether a collective awakening can save humanity, and so on. So while I mostly speak about the falling away of an inner world—the collapse of psychological structures that uphold a self-identity based on inherited beliefs—I also speak about the collapse of an outer world.

On a personal level, this may be experienced as the falling away of the motivation to chase previously cherished desires and dreams, or the departure of a partner or family member who is threatened by our spiritual journey, or the loss of a job that is no longer meaningful. On a global level, this collapse is experienced as the increasing turbulence of world events, political and economic structures that no longer support us in feeling safe, chaotic weather patterns that threaten life on earth, and a general uncertainty about our future as a species.

While the invitation of openness is a timeless one—it is the essential pointer to freedom that cuts through all cultures, all ages, and all traditions—it is also a very timely one. As collective consciousness exhibits an increasing polarization leading to increased fear of those with a different worldview, it also mirrors the underlying grip of egoic consciousness that fears its own demise. Nations go to war with each other; the ego goes to war with the present moment. The resolution to both the inner tension of ego-self and the outer tension of the world is the willingness to surrender the argument with what is: to meet reality without resistance. This willingness to surrender is a falling—moment to moment—into silent awareness. And it is up to each one of us to take responsibility for this.

Silent awareness is an undivided state in which the dream of separation comes to an end. It is a falling open into our essential nature—a falling into the infinite silence of consciousness that

is here prior to the birth of any inner or outer worlds. It is only when we act from this inner silence that there can be right action in the world. But first we must be willing to lose our world.

The world—inner and outer—is always falling apart. When we get right up close and intimate with our experience, we see that every thought is like a drop of rain falling into the ocean, every feeling is like a brush-stroke that fades in the sunlight, every breath is a fleeting whisper. Just like a flower bursting into the glory of a temporary bloom, so our individual lives are a temporal blossoming. Perhaps humanity in its current manifestation is also one flower amongst many, destined to be a blip in cosmic time, blossoming and then dying to make way for the next flower. Without grasping for certainty or meaning or hope, we can meet life without trying to save it and come to rest in something much deeper than the vicissitudes of the world.

It is only when we meet life from the unknown—and that is what silence really is, an open-ended unknownness—that we can really listen to what is true. And only the truth will set us free.

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Like most people, I used to meet life with fear. However seemingly loved I was in my relationships or however seemingly successful I was in my academic career, I carried a gaping hole of emptiness like a hungry ghost that demanded to be filled with something. This “something” was sometimes food or pretty dresses, and at other times it was the accumulation of knowledge (initially scientific knowledge and later on spiritual knowledge) or the sense of hope that came from reading self-help books. Of course, none of that alleviated the inner discomfort and eventually it became so unbearable that I wanted to die. I believed it

was a physical death that would solve the problem of my human existence, and I attempted suicide several times.

It took me many years to acknowledge that the cause of my pain was the unloved feelings I had buried under a mountain of denial. Rage, shame, hurt, grief . . . they were all knocking on the door of my heart but for a long time I refused to listen, preferring to take refuge in the ivory tower of my mind. Eventually the dam had to break and my perfectly constructed inner (and outer) world fell apart. It was the beginning of a long journey of unravelling identity, welcoming all feelings, and opening to the aliveness of the present moment.

Many years later, on one ordinary day, an existential void—an unfathomable aloneness—arose from deep within and filled me with an overwhelming terror. By grace or by luck—or perhaps it was all the previous years of dancing on the edges of surrender—I didn't do what I usually did when faced with an unbearable feeling of abandonment or powerlessness. I didn't employ any mental acrobatics to avoid the impending sense of doom. I didn't clamber for a way out: I simply stayed exactly where I was. In that instant of my mind standing still, I felt myself reduced to an infinitesimal pin-prick in the vastness of existence. And right there—in the midst of the abject horror of an inevitable annihilation of my self (the “me” I thought myself to be)—I vanished into an eternal nothing-ness. Unexpectedly, this emptiness revealed itself to be the same as an alive fullness, and when I regained my senses in the next instant, I found that all resistance had fallen away—I had fallen into the infinite openness of this moment. It was the end of “my life” and the beginning of life as it is. Just this. Life as itself.

From that moment on, there has been an inner silence—an openness that meets both sky and clouds equally and allows a

deep listening to what is essential. This deep listening is available to you, too, in the midst of your ordinary life—whatever your circumstances and wherever you are on your personal journey of spiritual unfoldment. It is available to you when you meet this moment with curiosity instead of conclusion, when you welcome your feelings into the softness of your heart, and when you slow down enough to allow silent awareness to reveal itself to you.

The dissolution of the tight knot of ego doesn't necessarily happen in one fell swoop. It is more likely to be a gradual process of unfoldment—a weaving in and out of the open spaciousness of being and an often indiscernible erosion of resistance to what is. Your journey of awakening is unique and is unlikely to look like mine—there is no path but the path *you* are walking. But wherever you are on this path and whatever your circumstances, in every moment the freedom of openness is available. And the personal and global crises we experience in today's world offer a potent opportunity to turn our allegiance from the war with reality to the silent awareness that is always here.

I invite you to fall open, even when your world is falling apart.

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The pages that follow offer what has become my “essential teaching.” It is not a teaching based on knowledge or belief or spiritual tradition, and it is not meant to be read by the mind that wants information. It is based on some of the living dialogues with those who have been drawn to attend my meetings and retreats. As such, I hope to preserve the aliveness of the dialogue by mostly keeping to a question & answer format and providing a context for your own inquiry.

You may find there is much repetition and even contradic-

tion. I invite you to put aside your linear mind, the mind that wants to “get the truth.” This book is a transmission. Do not read it. Feel it. It is like the finger pointing to the moon: if you get hung up on the words and concepts, you will only see the finger. You will miss it. But if you look beyond the words, if you feel into what is essential, you will be guided back to the listening in the depth of your heart.