



Nothing Personal

Seeing Beyond the Illusion of a Separate Self

by Nirmala

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FOREWORD

After years of Zen practice my teacher asked me to begin teaching, and she gave me these words of advice: Always tell the truth and speak from your own experience. In the years since, I have found this advice to be crucial to both teachers and students alike. By inquiring into truth, we are led ever deeper into the unknown—beyond beliefs and ideas to the very core of who and what we are. This inquiry takes the highest degree of integrity and fearlessness we can muster; it challenges us by taking us out of our heads and into the heart of our deepest experience of being, which is beyond limitations of body, mind, and conditioning. Telling the truth is the secret of all true spirituality, and in order to tell the truth, you must find out what truth is. It is my experience of Nirmala that he embodies my teacher's advice both as an individual and as a teacher.

In the West, we are in need of a practical mysticism that reveals not only the deepest core of being but also addresses how to act and relate from that core in this event called “life.” In order to accomplish this, we do not need another set of how-to instructions, which are so popular within our modern consumer culture of quick fixes. What we need is an ever-deepening inquiry into how spirit dances as this very life, for what we call “life” is but an expression of spirit and therefore fully spirit itself. As I often say to my own students, “First you awaken out of life, then you awaken as life itself.”

The beauty of this collection of Nirmala’s talks and dialogues is that it covers much of the spectrum of spiritual awakening, from the initial experience of one’s true nature to the practical challenges, which always call for a deeper seeing and deeper understanding of how spirit manifests as all of life and beyond. Within these talks and dialogues you, the reader, will find Nirmala to be a living invitation to look within.

What is appealing about Nirmala is his humility and lack of pretense, which welcomes whatever arises within the field of experience. In the midst of this welcoming is always an invitation to inquire deeply within, to the core of who and what you are. Again and again, Nirmala points the questions back to the questioner and beyond to the very source of existence itself—to the faceless awareness that holds both the question and the questioner in a timeless embrace.

I invite you into these talks and dialogues—not as a spectator but as an intimate participant. Look within and see exactly who and what is doing the looking. In a timeless instant, now, become aware of yourself as awareness itself.

Adyashanti
March, 2001

INTRODUCTION

Unlike most books, this one is not meant to add to your knowledge or understanding. It is about the Truth that cannot be spoken or written. Although the Truth cannot be contained in this or any other book, each word written here is intended to point you toward that Truth. Many of the words and ideas may seem paradoxical or contradictory because what they point to is larger than our conceptual frameworks. Many questions are asked, which are not answered anywhere in the book. Find out what the experience is like to ask yourself these questions, even if they leave you emptier of knowledge and understanding. In this emptying, you just may discover what you are looking for.

The Truth is revealed when we allow ourselves to not know, so I invite you to set aside all that you know for the time being and allow yourself to look with innocent eyes at what the words are attempting to unveil. Take the time to experience the unspoken truth in each section before moving on to the next. Resist the temptation to read these words with your mind, which is likely to rush right past the Truth. Allow the words to sink into your heart and reveal the truth of who you are.

PART 1

Moving from the Mind

into the Heart

*mind finds a path
to struggle along
never reaching the goal
heart knows it already rests
in the path of something wonderful
it cannot escape
 mind seeks to hold on to
 a still point
 of final understanding
 heart knows it is being held
 by an unmoving whirlwind
 that it will never comprehend
mind tries to feel safe enough
to allow love
out into the open
heart knows love is never cautious
and cannot be kept secret
once all hope of refuge is abandoned*

Finding What Doesn't Come and Go

We all want the same thing: we all want to be happy. We look everywhere for happiness—in experiences, in possessions, in other people, in pleasures, in success, but we come up empty-handed because they are not the *source* of happiness. We have to go to the source. But how? How do we find the source? All of these things we are chasing after come and go, so we must look to that which doesn't come and go—that is the source. It turns out that the source of everything is also who you are. You are the source of everything, but don't take my word for it. Let's discover this together. Since the source of everything doesn't come and go, it must be here right now, in this very moment. So, let's look into this moment and see what is present in it and what, among the many things that are present, does not come and go.

Let's start simply by noticing the sensations that are present. Just for a moment, be present to the ongoing flow of sensation. One of the things you'll notice is that sensations are always changing. Your sensory experience is never the same from one moment to the next. Nevertheless, there is a continuity to them; they flow from one to the other. So, while sensations do not qualify as something that doesn't come and go, they are woven together in a way that gives an impression of continuity.

In contrast, notice the lack of continuity in the experience of thought. Thoughts are very fluid. When you are present to your thoughts, you discover how unsubstantial, incomplete, and disjointed they are relative to the experience of sensations. Memories, which are just thoughts about the past, are a good example of this. You never have a truly complete memory of an experience because it would take as long as the experience itself. Most of our memories are like still photos or a series of photos highlighting something that was important or stood out about an experience. They are whittled-down, highly-edited versions of what happened. Like an amateur movie, they are jumbled and patched together, often without even a thread to the story line.

Notice for a moment how these highly-edited thoughts differ from sensations. Like sensations, thought is always changing, but the changes can happen much more quickly. In thought, you can move the furniture around instantly. Thoughts allow us to play outside the boundaries of space and time; however, thought is not as well constructed as sensory data or the material world.

Another difference between thought and sensory data is that thought is always either a memory about the past or a fantasy about the future, while sensory impressions happen in the present. Thoughts appear in the present, but their content is always about the past or future because there is never enough time in the present to have a thought about the present. You can't think that fast. By the time you think about an event, it is already in the past.

The difference between thought and sensory data is obvious to us, but it's not to everyone. Some people in mental hospitals can't tell the difference. Many of their thoughts are real to them. They can't distinguish between a thought and a thing. The ability to distinguish this makes it possible for us to function in the world. Some thoughts are so convincing that we scare ourselves, but we can usually tell the difference between thought and sensory data. The reason thoughts can be very convincing is that they are often based on previous sensory experience.

It's good to notice that thoughts and memories don't have as much solidity or consistency as we'd like to think. They are always changing. I challenge you to have the same thought for even fifteen seconds. Even your memory of a particular event is always changing. For example, the memory of your first date with your spouse will not be the same after twenty years of marriage as it was a week after you met, and certainly not the same if you divorce. Many studies have shown how surprisingly inaccurate memory is. When ten people witness an event, you get ten versions of it, none of which match the actual event. Thoughts or memories definitely don't qualify either as that which doesn't come and go and therefore cannot be the source of happiness, peace, and love.

Now, just for fun, I invite you to have a particular thought—the thought of “I” or “me.” Really experience this “I.” Does it have the quality of something real, or is it more like a memory, something that is

incomplete? What does your character look like in your internal movies and how accurate is that? Has it ever been several days since you looked in the mirror, and when you did, it surprised you because it didn't match your idea of what you look like? You'll notice that you can never get a consistent image of this "I"; you can't pin it down. You can't find it, any more than you can find the thought you had five minutes ago.

Another thing you'll notice is how the "I" fluctuates. Sometimes you have a positive self-image and sometimes not. We have all had moments of being caught in the idea of being a hopeless nobody. You're really believing that, and then an attractive person shows interest in you, and you forget all about that story of being a nobody. Or, have you ever been walking along with an upbeat "I" thought, when someone criticizes you and suddenly you're stuck with a dejected "I" thought? This "I" thought has the same fluidity and amorphous quality of every thought and memory.

Although the "I" is often associated with the body, it can't be the body because we say things like "I have bad eyesight" rather than "I am bad eyesight." Whenever we refer to the body, there is still something called "I" present as well. Clearly, the body is a part of physical reality; it's a thing that can be referred to. However, the "I" doesn't refer to any *thing*. You can have an elaborate story about "I," and you can refer to that story and worry about how that story is going, but there is no thing that all of that refers to. "I" is just a lot of memories patched together to make what we call a self-image, which is an accurate description of it—it's an image. It turns out that the "I" is just thoughts about "I."

Really notice this moment's experience of "I." No matter how hard you try, it is nothing more than a movie clip. What is even stranger is that you are usually included in the movie clip, when you rarely actually see yourself, except in a mirror. Most of us have never seen ourselves eating breakfast, for instance, but we all have images of what we look like doing that. We completely manufacture images of ourselves doing things. We manufacture memories and call them "me." Then, we work at improving our self-image, when all that can accomplish is to improve this memory! In our culture, we focus on creating a positive self-image,

as if an image has any power. No one's self-image has ever accomplished anything.

We also have a fantasy that our self-image is what people see, when what they see is *their* image of us. No one relates to your image of you—they can't see your internal image. Somehow, we think that our self-image will protect us or make us well liked. The truth of this moment is that your self-image isn't doing anything. Your self-image isn't what is hearing these words or having the thoughts you are having. Your self-image is itself a thought. No matter how polished your self-image is, you can't send it to work while you stay home. Hearing and thinking are present, but the mystery is: who or what is doing these things? If you are honest, you can't assign credit for that to what you call "I" or "me."

Have you also noticed that there are big gaps in this thought called "me," when you forget to be somebody? You get engrossed in something and forget to maintain your self-image. Even when people are holding a self-image of being depressed, there are moments when they forget to feel depressed because their attention is elsewhere. If we're looking for that which doesn't come and go, this "I" certainly doesn't qualify. It qualifies even less as the source of happiness than anything in sensory experience, so all the time spent trying to improve it doesn't pay off. It's not the object of our search.

So, what else is present right here, right now—besides sensations, experiences, thoughts, feelings, and "you"—that doesn't come and go? What is it that notices the sensory data? What is it that hears the internal dialogues? What is it that notices the self-images and isn't fooled by them? What is the source of all the thoughts, even the "I" thought? It's not something you can sense. You can't find it in the body or in the brain, and yet it is here, right now. And—here's where it gets even spookier—you can't even think about it. Your thoughts about who you are will never adequately represent who you are.

There is this Mystery that thinks and sees and feels and has a body. This Mystery has the fundamental quality of awareness: it is aware of thought, feeling, and sensation. So, even if you haven't been paying attention to anything I've just said, I guarantee that paying attention has still been happening. There was something mysterious that was aware of

the sensations and thoughts that I asked you to be aware of. There was something checking your present experience or your memories to see if what I was saying was true for you. Even if that wasn't happening, there was something that was paying attention to something else. It turns out that it is not "you" who is noticing these sensations or noticing this poorly produced movie called "me." It's not "you" that is watching the movie called "me," and yet watching is happening.

This mysterious something is like a flashlight. I call it that because there is a quality of brightness to it. Whatever you bring your attention to becomes lit up by this Awareness. If you become aware of your hands, a brightness comes to your hands. But this brightness is not yours; it's not "you." There is something that is either hearing my words or ignoring my words. What is present even when you are distracted by some irrelevant thought? What is noticing the distracting thoughts? What is this mysterious brightness that is experiencing the endless variations of thought and sensation? What is present in all of these experiences?

If you assign a "me" to it, you create a middleman. This "me" is never the experiencer; it can only be an added layer of experience in the form of a thought about "me." The experiencer doesn't go away; it just experiences this moment with an extra layer called "me." In some ways this truth is very humbling. It's a big demotion for the "me" to discover that it is just an additional, poorly formed layer of thought, which can never be made to be consistent or reliable. No idea you have ever had about yourself has ever lasted.

No matter how elaborate your fantasy of being someone is, you have never succeeded in completely hiding that which does not come and go *and* you have never done any harm to it. "You" can't mess this life up because "you" aren't living it. We think that if there isn't this "me" taking care of life, it's going to fall apart, but it never has been "you" that has been taking care of your life. So, what will you trust? Will you trust this fantasy that has never accomplished anything or this Mystery that has actually been living every moment of life?

But thought is powerful.

Thought is powerful in the realm of thought. Thought can do serious damage to your self-image. So what? Just take your self-image right now and dress it in tattered clothes. Now you have a self-image of a homeless person. The thought, itself, is not the problem but how caught you are in it. If you are caught in it, it doesn't matter if it is a thought of heaven or hell. People suffer just as much over their thoughts about how wonderful things might be as they do over their thoughts about what might go wrong.

If you mistake your thoughts for something that doesn't come and go, they can be very convincing. The story called "me" is like a record you play over and over again. We think, "that must be me because that's what I think of when I think of me." We get lulled by the habitual nature of thought. But if you are honest, you'll see that there are moments when you forget the story—you forget that particular train of thought called "me"—and Awareness is still here, even when "you" are not.

* * *

I feel tense because I feel like I always need to plan.

The simplest way to address this is for you to check: can you find this someone who has to have a plan? Can you find her right now?

No.

So, if she isn't here and has never been here, then there is this mystery: who has done all that planning? Where did all that come from?

It came from fear.

But who experienced this fear? If this "you" doesn't really exist, then what we are calling fear is not something you did either. That also is something that just happened. This is really good news: you are not to

blame even for the “you” that is afraid. This is a big relief. You’re off the hook.

Beyond that, there is also the possibility of getting curious: who or what is hearing these words right now? It’s obviously not “you” but something much bigger. *That* has always been the one deciding when to plan and when not to, and it will decide if you will plan tomorrow or not. Just get curious about *that*.

* * *

What about free will and choice?

Once you recognize that there is no “me,” then there can’t be something called “my” will. But there is will—it’s just not “yours.”

You mean, I’m not making any choices?

What you think you are has never made a choice, and yet choices are being made all the time.

Who’s making them?

This is a good question! This is a huge mystery, which has been going on every day of your life. Choices have happened without your having anything to do with it. This raises the question, who or what is living your life?

The Truth About Thought

Let’s take a look at thought. Do you have a choice about what thoughts come? Do you decide to have a thought and then it shows up, or does it just show up? If you have never decided to have even a single thought, can you still call them “your” thoughts? How can they be your responsibility if they aren’t yours? They just showed up. Just notice the nature of thoughts and where they come from. Then look even closer: how many of your thoughts are even true? How reliable are they?

Once you realize that most of your thoughts are lies and not worthy guides, you lose interest in them. Some thoughts and words are useful, such as “please pass the butter,” but most do not refer to anything real or serve any purpose. Once you see this, you can’t be bothered with them anymore. They can’t compete with the richness of the present moment. The difference between thoughts and the present moment is like the difference between fantasy and reality. As nice as a fantasy might be, it never has the aliveness, vividness, or dimensionality of reality. Thoughts actually cloud reality, forming a layer of illusion between ourselves and the present moment. Thoughts—even pleasant fantasies and dreams—are like a veil, hiding the true beauty of this moment.

Thought is just a sliver of the now, so if you are too focused on that, you miss everything else that is arising in the now.

* * *

You say it is important to be present to everything. So, should you be present even to this illusion called thought?

Yes. Then, it becomes possible to consider who is having these thoughts. It is just being honest to admit that they aren’t “your” thoughts. When you actually look in this moment, you can’t find such a thing as “you.”

When you are fully present to your thoughts, they don’t change, but you are more able to be present to everything else—to the rest of the Mystery. When thoughts are finally recognized as just one aspect of experience, they naturally get relegated to a minor, supporting role. Thought can be a handy tool, but it has never been the whole story. Of course, the mind will put up a fuss over this demotion. Find out what happens if you just stay present even to this. Then it is possible to realize that thought, itself, is an incredible mystery.

Mind Games

The source of suffering is the discrepancy between our thoughts (including the thought “me”) and the truth of here and now. You would think that we wouldn’t be that interested in something that causes so much suffering, and yet we spend a great deal of time sprucing up our thoughts and fantasies.

Just as we are entranced by television, we are entranced by the mind. Have you ever noticed how similar television is to the mind? Just like in the mind, on television, something new is always appearing to grab our attention. Because the mind’s job is to scan the environment and notice anything new and different, it is no wonder the mind finds the constant change on the television screen engrossing.

In the real world, on the other hand, life unfolds slowly and organically. If you took a video camera with you on a 30-minute walk and left it on, you’d have a really bad movie. Can you imagine renting that at Blockbuster video?—“Life at Normal Speed.” Just notice how attracted the mind is to special effects, drama, and speeded-up versions of life. Even though our thoughts and fantasies are the basis of our suffering, we become engaged with them because, like television and movies, they are entertaining.

Eventually, as with any other addiction, we come to see that our thoughts and fantasies are not very satisfying or fulfilling. Like watching television for hours on end, they leave us feeling empty. Fortunately, there is a handy alternative to the emptiness of thought: here and now. All that is required is to show up in your life. If you go for a walk, show up for the walk; if it is time to brush your teeth, show up for that. To show up in your life, you just have to pay attention to it. Just notice *what is* right now, without referring to some memory of it. Showing up is very simple—no preparation is needed and you can’t get it wrong.

Spiritual practices are the opposite of MTV. They help you tune down the noise and distractions. The mind is like a galloping horse, always off after the next enticing fantasy or memory. It is endlessly

grasping after something that isn't real. Spiritual practices rein in that galloping horse, and that helps you show up in your life. What's so surprising is how satisfying that is. It's like the difference between eating a dozen cookies and eating a nourishing meal. As one of my teachers, Richard Clarke, once said, "You can never get enough of what does not satisfy."

Nothing the mind presents is satisfying or nourishing. There is nothing in the mind to compare to this moment as long as you take in all of the moment and not just some highly-edited version of it. That is where you will find real nourishment and aliveness. The joy of what is here right now far surpasses any memory or fantasy.

* * *

Is the mind always confused, and why do we listen to it?

Let me ask you, is your mind always confused?

More and more.

When you start yearning for the Truth—yearning to know who you really are—then the mind spends a lot of time in confusion. Why do *you* keep going back to it?

Habit.

Yes. That is really the truth. Is the Heart present right now?

It must be.

The mind can figure that much out. Tell me, what do you want?

Freedom, but I'm afraid of the giving up, the letting go, the change.

How badly do you want it? Is it worth feeling confused much of the time? What if that was just the nature of the mind's experience of Truth. What if the confusion never gets resolved in the sense that there is finally a knowing? What if the not-knowing just gets bigger and bigger?

That's scary.

To the mind, that is very scary because it has less of a role. It means letting go of dreams and hopes and desires too. Is it worth it? Do you want Freedom that bad?

My heart does.

That's the truth. The one thing I can do is reassure you that it is very normal to feel confused and afraid.

That makes sense. There's so much to let go of. I guess there is a part of me that doesn't want to.

So, let's make it simpler: everything that you are talking about letting go of—have you ever really *bad* any of it?

I've never bad any of it!

Did you have to let go of believing in Santa Claus?

No.

But there was a certain point when the truth about Santa Claus was seen. Did you lose anything really? You had a fantasy of Santa Claus, but what did you have really? Letting go makes it sound like a big struggle, but what is it you have to let go of? Just a lot of ideas.

* * *

It's funny that we think the mind is going to help us figure out how to become happier or enlightened, when the opposite is true. We're so busy listening to it that we miss what's here in the moment, which is the only place where life can be experienced. And the mind is so clever at convincing us that the moment is not "where it's at" but in some fantasy or idea. It is so ironic. What a funny Mystery this is!

It's easy to make the mind into the bad guy. The mind is not the problem but rather the mistaken idea that it can free us by figuring things out. If you make the mind the bad guy, then you are just beating up the mind with your mind, and you're still not in the moment!

Embracing the moment—diving into it with your whole being and saying yes to everything that shows up in it can be done even with the mind. When you find the mind frantically trying to figure things out, you just get curious about that: "Wow, look at that. What an amazing thing!" The mind goes a thousand miles a minute through a million variations of this moment. What is this expression of the Mystery we call the mind? It's like the Mystery on speed!

The point I want to make is that the mind doesn't have to be left out. It doesn't have to be stopped or obliterated—and it can't be. If you are no longer fighting the mind and its hyperactive, obsessive behaviors, then it is possible to become curious about what is aware of the mind. What are we referring to when we say "my mind"? What does *my* refer to? Or when we say "I have a mind"? Who or what is this I? And what is the mind, itself, this thing so like Curious George the monkey in the children's story, which never seems to rest and is always poking its nose into things and causing trouble?

The trouble is we think that the mind is who we are and that it has something important to tell us.

It's good to be clear that that is the only problem. The mind, itself, is not a problem. Monkeys are cute! Although you still might want to keep an eye on them so that they don't get into too much trouble.

And once in a while, it comes up with something useful.

And a lot of useless entertainment! The mind will never give you the whole picture, though. So who or what is this that has a mind?

The Self, that which is aware of all of it.

And what is that?

I don't know! The mind doesn't know.

You don't know, and yet it is here. Everyone has a sense of this, so it's not something that is hidden. *Who* has a mind?

The mind can't speak about it.

* * *

Do judgments and thoughts of better-than/worse-than still appear after awakening?

Those conditioned thoughts still appear, and they are recognized as just thoughts. When that happens, there is the possibility of meeting them with the same gratitude that you would thoughts of love. When you meet judgments with gratitude, they can become a doorway to the Mystery, to something not yet seen, rather than a sticky trap. When judgment is met with passion and gratitude, the judgment, itself, becomes an opening. I have no idea how that works—it's a complete mystery to me—but it never fails.

However, it doesn't work to do it half-heartedly—accepting the judgment in the hope that it will go away. You have to fall in love with it. Instead of wanting it to go away, you have to want it to stay because you are curious about it. How does it do that sticky thing? How does it create contraction? Of course, as soon as you bring curiosity to it, it loses its stickiness and instead becomes a doorway to the Mystery. Curiosity makes it possible for you to see beyond the disguise called “judgment” that the Mystery has temporarily taken on, and suddenly there you are in the Mystery.

Nothing Personal

What if even your strongest emotions aren't personal? Is anything personal? What if this experience we are having as a body and mind is more like a radio that receives things rather than creates or generates them? You need a radio to play the songs that are passing through this room now, right? All this experience is floating around, and this radio called "you" is playing these songs called desire, fear, love, envy. Even resistance is just one more song called "I want to turn off the radio." What if your internal experiences are not personal but more like something a musician recorded years ago that is being played now?

Even the love songs aren't personal. Even the very dramatic, very sad, very happy, or very romantic ones aren't personal. There is nothing wrong with them; they just aren't yours. You can still pay attention to them, but there is no reason to get invested in trying to change them or get them to stay around. Every song on the radio eventually ends—even "Bye-Bye Miss American Pie," which was 17 minutes long. It would go on and on, but eventually there would be another commercial.

A radio is a great metaphor because a radio isn't like a CD player, which you can program to play what you want it to play. What plays on the radio is not up to you. Sometimes, it is a happy song, sometimes it is a sad one, sometimes it is an inspiring one. The Mystery is so wise that it knows exactly what song to put on in this moment. It decides what song gets played, and once it has been played, you can't hang on to it. Just being present while it is being played is the best you can do. That is all you *can* do. Paradoxically, this recognition that everything that arises on this radio called "you" is impersonal makes it easier to pay attention to what is arising because, if it's not personal, there is no reason to hold back from it.

Another huge mystery is: What is aware of what's playing on this radio? Then, you can ask an even stranger question: Is there a boundary between what is aware of what's playing on the radio and what's playing on the radio? Is what is hearing the radio and experiencing all of the experiences actually separate from the experiences themselves? It turns out that the listener who is hearing these tunes is not separate from this

Mystery. Rather, the songs are streaming forth out of the Mystery, and the listening is streaming forth out of the same Mystery. There is a huge ground, or Presence, in which everything happens. The surprise is that this ground is not a place of knowing but rather a place of open-eyed discovery. There is no knowing ahead of time what will be played; you just discover in the moment the next song comes on.

Knowing and Not Knowing

There are two kinds of knowing. One kind is the knowing from the past, which includes everything we have read or been told. We have all invested a lot of time and energy into trying to collect enough knowledge so that we will feel safe. We want such a solid knowing that no matter what life throws at us we will feel like we know what to do. That is the kind of knowing that I'm suggesting is often useless because life is always throwing something at you that is beyond your knowing.

There is another kind of knowing, which is much simpler and wiser, and that is the knowing of the moment—the Heart's knowing. There is a part of you that just knows. This knowing in the moment is present to what is actually coming at you from life. It's not a knowing beforehand but a knowing that arises to *meet* what is actually happening in the moment. It is just present to whatever is happening without the rigidity or preconceptions of the other kind of knowing. As soon as something new arises, it is present to that, and the past knowing becomes irrelevant. Whatever you knew a moment ago is no longer any good in *this* new moment. For example, anyone you think you know—you don't know them *now*. You might have many memories and ideas of what they are like, but to know them now you have to be really present to them now and have noticed that they have changed—because they have.

Being this present, rather than making you foolish, makes you wide awake and intelligent. You are present enough to know what is happening right now because you aren't holding on to a preconceived idea of what *is* happening. Another way of saying this is that you trust the *source* of knowing more than what you know. If you trust what you already know, it will endlessly lead you astray. That's when you find

yourself walking into furniture because you didn't notice that someone moved it since you were last there.

The source of knowing is giving you everything you need to know right now. It may or may not be what you want to know or be similar to what you knew yesterday, but everything you need to know for *this* moment is right here. I'm not suggesting that the other kind of knowing is bad and that the best spiritual practice of all is a frontal lobotomy. I'm only suggesting that you trust this fresh, alive knowing that shows up in each moment more than what you know from the past. The only thing you can really know is what is true right now in this moment.

Most moments are pretty ordinary; so this wonderful, alive knowing is often very ordinary and not always profound. Sometimes it is profound, but that doesn't do you any good when, in the next moment, you have to balance your checkbook. Then, you have to surrender again to what is true in *this* moment, which may be that three plus four equals seven. If you're busy thinking "it's all One anyway, so I'll just put down one," you'll get in trouble with the bank.

The truth is that 99% of the time, you act out of this innate knowing: your body breathes out of this innate knowing. This innate wisdom doesn't ignore your memories and other knowledge; it just doesn't give them validity when the truth of the moment is in contradiction to them. When they are applicable, like the memory of how to get home when you are driving home, this innate wisdom draws on them.

One reason we turn away from this deeper knowing is that it feels like not knowing. When you are just *here* without any preconceptions or pre-conclusions, the experience feels like not knowing. In every moment, you step back into *now*, which is a place of not knowing, and then the knowing rises up to meet it. Right now, this innate wisdom is keeping you breathing, it is keeping the blood circulating throughout your whole body, it is keeping every cell in your body doing what it needs to do. These are simple knowings, but they are actually very profound. How does our body know how to do all of this?

So, which will you trust? Will you put your trust in all of your ideas and what you think you know or in that which has been running your

life all along, which has always been enlightened—so enlightened that it blinks your eyes when they need to blink? Your wisest moments have been when you have been present to what was happening. When you are present to what is true, what to do becomes obvious. However, this requires trust because knowing doesn't show up until the moment, itself, shows up—they arrive together. You trust by just giving your attention to *what is* rather than to your ideas about what should be or what you would like to have happen or to trying to figure out what you will say and do ahead of time, which we do in hopes that there won't be any surprises.

The good news is that even before you trust this deeper knowing, it has been working perfectly all along. The difference is that when you trust it, when you surrender to it, you don't suffer anymore. When, instead, you pay attention to your ideas about how things should be or how you want things to happen, this innate wisdom still gets you where you need to be, but because you are so busy with your ideas about it, you suffer. The good news is that this innate wisdom is not something you add or something you do or something you need to master, it is who you are.

How do I know what to do?

When there is no interest in thoughts, then knowing appears mysteriously from somewhere other than the mind. Test this out yourself: find out what it is like to be present without all your investments, desires, and agendas. When you are present without those, knowing shows up, although you never know ahead of time what that knowing will be and where it will take you.

It's strange to discover what happens when you are just present to life without your personal agendas and investments. When there is no longer any investment in things being a certain way, then you are totally free; you are free of suffering. Every moment feels like you are stepping off a cliff—you are endlessly falling into the mysterious present. This place is very alive and real, and it is actually what's been happening your whole life. However, this might not be what your mind thinks Freedom

looks like. If your mind thinks Freedom means getting to do whatever you want, you will be pleasantly surprised to discover how much freer it is to let everything happen the way it does naturally, whether that is the way “you” want it to be or not.

* * *

There are times when my mind says one thing and my feelings say another and my feet just go ahead and do something else. When I go with my feet, there's a feeling of “yes.”

If you are on to the fact that someone is a pathological liar, you just stop paying attention to him. Your thoughts and feelings are pathological liars. Once you see this, you just stop paying attention to them, and then they aren't a problem anymore. This pulls the rug out from under the way you've run most of your life. We keep thinking that someday we will find a true feeling or understanding, and then we will be done; but there has never been a true feeling or understanding. There is nothing wrong with feelings and understandings; they just aren't big enough to contain the whole truth, and because of this, they are lies. One very artful form of lying is not telling the whole truth. Feelings and understandings are very artful ways of lying because they don't tell the whole truth.

So do you just stop worrying about it and follow your feet? How do you do that?

Any answer I give you is one of these understandings, and it will fall short. It might work the first time or the first ten times, but there will come a time when that understanding will be useless. The problem comes in trying to use an understanding as a formula for life because an understanding is never the whole truth.

It's uncomfortable for the mind to not have any understanding. At some point, however, you just stop caring about this being uncomfortable because the mind has never been comfortable. Understanding is like any other addictive substance: you get a little bit

and it makes you suffer even more—you become that much more hooked on it. Like any good alcoholic or junkie, you have to hit bottom—you have to have spent your last penny on understanding and found that, even then, it doesn't take away the suffering.

When you finally admit that you don't know anything, that's when you start paying attention. If you have no idea what is going on, you had better pay attention, right? Rather than trying to find the right idea or understanding, you are just *here* in the moment as all thoughts and understandings come and go. You just stay in this compassionate Presence that allows all of it and is curious about all of it.

* * *

I want to know why the Mystery is doing all of this. Understanding gives me a feeling of silence and vastness.

If I gave you a good answer for why all of this happens, and you experienced one of those feelings of vast silence, you'd probably try to go back to that answer again tomorrow. There is no problem with understanding or with these feelings, but the invitation is to go deeper—to find the *source* of these feelings. Is understanding the source or is it just something you have used to give yourself permission to feel the vast, silent spaciousness that is always here? We think this feeling of spaciousness comes from understanding or knowing, but I invite you to find out what happens when you just let yourself not know.

I don't exist anymore. There's just space.

Isn't that simpler than trying to understand it? Just go directly to the vast space.

So, why don't we all just space out if that is the point?

I would never suggest you stop there—that's what spacing out is. Spacing out is trying to stay permanently in the spaciousness, which you

will never be able to do. If you try, in a couple of weeks, someone will come knocking on your door demanding the rent! Or you will go to the refrigerator and it will be empty.

Instead of trying to figure it all out or hang on to these good feelings, get curious: who or what is feeling spacious? What is present when you are feeling spacious *and* when you are feeling contracted? What is present when you understand something really clearly *and* when you are totally confused? What is present in both?

It is the same awareness, but one is clogged up.

Just check. Is there really any less awareness in this state you are calling “clogged up”? Ideas or feelings of being clogged up may be present, but there is still awareness of those, isn’t there?

What’s the big deal about awareness? It’s a mystery, it’s not visible, it’s nothing.

This is just the surface of it. Is awareness here right now?

But what is here? Nothing. I don’t know what awareness is.

That is a truthful answer. That is as far as your mind can take you. Instead of stopping at the blankness of the mind, try looking even deeper into this Mystery. What is this that is present in every state? What is even aware of the blankness of the mind in response to this question?

It’s like a trickster, having a ball at my expense.

It’s definitely at your expense. The joke is totally on “you.”

It’s like a jokester that is playing with form, but I’m not aware of it.

You say you are not aware of it, but if that were so, how could you be speaking about it now? Is there really a boundary between what you call “I,” the one who is the butt of the joke, and the one who is playing

the joke? Can you find this boundary in Awareness or is Awareness present in both?

No. There is no boundary.

We've all been on this spiritual path looking for answers, and the joke is that answers are not the point at all; the point is to have a blast with the questions. The point is not to hold back from the Mystery just because there is no final understanding. Along the way, incredible understandings come out of the Mystery, but the Mystery, itself, will remain a mystery.

So, it will always remain out of reach?

I wouldn't say that it is out of reach, but the mind can't grasp it. In the end, you have to be willing to go beyond recognizing it and even beyond experiencing it to *being* it. There is no little "me" separate from the Mystery. If you sincerely engage in this inquiry, you will discover that it all turns out to be Mystery.

* * *

So, understanding that we don't understand is true understanding?

By the time anything registers in your brain, it is old news. That is just the nature of knowing—it's about the past. So, that is not the place to go to for this aliveness. Not-knowing is the place where life happens. Not-knowing is here right now, isn't it? It's easy to circle around it, but every time you rest *here*, there it is. So, what is always present?

I don't know.

Yes, and when the mind touches this place of not-knowing, it concludes that that can't be enlightenment or the Truth; so we turn away

from that and look, instead, for something we *can* know. What happens right now if you just don't know?

It's hard for me to accept.

Yes. When we come up against this, we want to do anything but admit or welcome this seemingly bottomless not-knowing.

Since it is always here, I just invite you to get familiar and curious about this "I don't know." It is much quieter to keep looking into "I don't know" than trying to figure it out with your mind. It's restful isn't it? It's restful to admit that you don't know. Just rest here for a while. Just notice how rich this "I don't know is," how mysterious it is, how much is falling away right now and how much is arising to take its place. But don't forget to rest; you don't have to go back to trying to figure it out.

Oneness and Many-ness

The reason we spend so much time in spiritual circles pointing to Oneness is that differences are so obvious, while Oneness is not. The fact that there is both Oneness and many-ness may seem like a paradox. The way beyond this paradox is to recognize that differences do not necessarily mean separateness. Two things can be different but not separate. An obvious example is your fingers. When you look at your fingers, you see that they are different and they even look separate if you don't look farther down to your palm. When you do look farther down, however, you realize your fingers are part of the same thing—your hand—and even beyond that, they are part of one body.

One of the illusions that traps us is that these bodies seem so separate; but this, too, is just a case of not having looked deeply enough. The trick is not to look with the mind because the mind is not the correct tool for this. The mind is really good at noticing differences—between this finger and that, between this body and that. You could say

that this is part of its job description. It is perfectly designed for noticing differences, and it serves consciousness very well in that capacity.

Once that is seen, there is no problem because there is something else that does recognize the Oneness, and that is the Heart. Notice I didn't say "your" heart but "the" Heart. That's why it has no problem seeing the connectedness—because there is only one Heart. It *is* the Oneness. So, now there is no longer any contradiction. The differences are not a problem when their *source* is recognized as well.

Even though the mind can't get it, check to see if something else is present that innately knows the Truth. This is the Heart, that which already knows the Oneness. It is not hidden. It is here right now, this Oneness, this Heart—the source of the differences, the source of all the states, all the emotions, all the thoughts. What a surprise to find it right here!

* * *

What is the cause of separation? I went down to the beach yesterday and had the feeling of Oneness, but the minute I talked to someone, a wall went up and I felt separate.

What if neither the feeling of separateness nor the feeling of Oneness is a reliable indicator? What if these feelings are the wrong measuring device for whether or not separation is present? What if feelings are not that accurate? Right now, your leg feels separate from the floor. Feeling is an accurate tool for experiencing differences like this, but then we jump to the conclusion that this feeling means that your leg and the floor are separate.

Where I experience separation is when judgment comes in.

Now we're talking about a thought. What if thoughts are not a reliable indicator either? You started off by asking, What is the source of separation? What if the source of separation is just the mistaken idea that thoughts and feelings mean something?

What I'm doing is having a judgment about the judgment.

Yes. Those are just more thoughts. What if even those don't disturb the Oneness? Then, your thoughts and feelings are free to do what they do best—indicate differences. Distinctions can be useful, but if differences are interpreted as an absence of Oneness, that is a misunderstanding.

Once a thought is recognized as a thought, it doesn't have to go away because it doesn't touch that which is and always has been One. Separation is just a thought, and that is all it has ever been. When you realize that, then there is no problem even with that thought. Notice how very conditioned we are to focus on the thoughts, feelings, and sensations arising in the body/mind. That is where we check when someone asks us how we are. We scan either current thoughts and feelings and sensations or how they have been for the last three months or three days or whatever and report on them—they are our reference for how we are (who we are).

There is nothing wrong with thoughts, feelings, and sensations, but they are only partial truths. A feeling can never be a complete truth: you can't feel everything at once with one hand, for example. Feeling is not an adequate tool for taking in Oneness, and thought is not an adequate tool for knowing Oneness. Thoughts and feelings are only useful for what they are good at. Once you realize this, then they are no longer so important. That Oneness that we are speaking of, is it here right now, without referring to thoughts or feelings?

Well. I know what I'm supposed to say.

Yes. We all know what we are supposed to say! The thought that you know the right answer—what is that appearing in? You can't really know that, like you know the right answer, and yet it is here. You can't feel it completely, and yet it is here. Once it has been recognized that there is this huge Mystery within which everything is happening, then there is no problem with feeling only a part of it. You are no longer

seeing this couch as separate from the Mystery but feeling the Mystery in its couch appearance or in this animated form as another human being or as a feeling or as a thought or judgment.

How does this Oneness show up in so many different forms? Not one of them is separate from it, no matter how different it is—and there are some pretty wild things in this ever-unfolding Mystery. They can even end up living next door! The Mystery seems to delight in differences. It extends itself outward into countless forms and doesn't even make two snowflakes alike. That is how into differences it is. Yet, when you look with your heart at any aspect of the Mystery rather than with your thoughts and feelings, you will discover the Oneness underlying all the differences. There is something more simple and direct than thoughts and feelings that knows the Oneness—without knowing it.

Let the Heart Be Your Guide

If you stop and notice, it is obvious that the mind is not such a reliable guide for what to do and how to run your life. If you have followed your thoughts at all, you will have discovered that they are a very poor compass. They spin you around and take you on all sorts of wild goose chases.

Feelings are a little deeper place to check and a little truer than thoughts, but if you are honest, you'll recognize that feelings are not very reliable guides either. There is nothing wrong with them; they just aren't a good compass because feelings point in all directions.

Even deeper than thoughts and feelings are desires. This is moving in the right direction. When you are honest about your desires, you are being more complete. But if you reflect on your experience, you will probably find that following your desires has not led to great results either. So, I invite you to look even deeper for a guide. Look even deeper than your thoughts, feelings, and desires.

What is being pointed at is that which cannot be known through the mind. In looking deeper than your thoughts, feelings, and desires, you leave behind any sense of knowing in the usual sense. The mind doesn't

register what lies deeper, and yet it is possible to recognize a place of deeper knowing that can be called the Heart. This is a very vulnerable place, which is probably why we speak of it as Heart. It feels vulnerable because there is a sense of not knowing in advance what is coming; things happen spontaneously in surprising ways.

This not-knowing and sense of things not being fixed or static, is an indicator that you are in the Heart. Being in the Heart has a quality of being fresh and new in every moment. The invitation is to keep diving into this place that is more honest and true and where you know less and less. As you surrender to not-knowing, you allow more space for this wise and knowing guide called the Heart to speak to you. It can show you more clearly than your thoughts, feelings, and desires what is really happening and what is true about your situation.

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ABOUT NIRMALA:

Who are you really? Are you your body, mind, and personality? Or are you the spacious awareness in which they appear? Questions like these point us to the infinite Presence that is the true source of peace, happiness, and fulfillment. Nirmala is a spiritual teacher in the Advaita tradition of nondual wisdom and the author of several engaging and practical books about our spiritual nature, including *Nothing Personal*, *Living from the Heart*, *Meeting the Mystery*, *That Is That*, and *Gifts with No Giver*. Nirmala offers a unique vision and a gentle, compassionate approach, which adds to the rich tradition of nondual inquiry into the truth. He also offers Nondual Spiritual Mentoring, or spiritual guidance, in one-on-one sessions in person or over the phone. More information is available on his website at:

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every sensation
every possible pleasure
is already present
in the timeless
awareness
that is beating my heart
what use
in chasing dreams
that have already
come true*

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