

BEYOND AWAKENING



The End of
The Spiritual Search

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NON-DUALITY PRESS

For my family

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*“This slowly drifting cloud is pitiful!
What dreamwalkers we all are!
Awakened, the one great truth:
Black rain on the temple roof.”*

- Dogen

*“Nothing is left to you at this moment
but to have a good laugh.”*

- Zen Master

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Introduction

“There are no steps to self-realization.”

- Nisargadatta Maharaj

This book is about the utterly obvious. It's about the spiritual search, and the frustrations surrounding it. It's about the tendency of the mind to create and pursue goals. It's about those ultimate goals we set ourselves: *enlightenment, awakening, liberation, permanent happiness*, and how these goals can never really be reached, because – and here's the great discovery – the individual, the one who would reach any goals in the first place, has no more reality than a presently-arising belief. Which is to say, the individual does not really “exist” at all.

This book is about the *seeing-through* of this search for enlightenment, awakening, liberation and permanent happiness, the *seeing-through* of the individual, the *seeing-through* of the human drama in all its beauty and madness. And this seeing-through has nothing to do with a person, and nothing to do with time.

This book is not about picking up any new belief systems, or refining old ones. It's not about discovering any new path or method that will get you to some final destination. It's not about personal effort or lack of it, personal achievement or lack of it; it's not about self-improvement or self-knowledge; it's not about anything that anyone could ever teach you.

This book is about the utterly obvious. In fact, it's so utterly obvious, so painfully obvious, that no more words are really needed. No words can take you to where you already are: here and now. No words in any book could ever help the individual transcend himself.

But still, reading of this book may happen, and that's wonderful. And perhaps these little black squiggles may be of some use to a person looking for answers (but only because the words point back time and time again to the utterly obvious: this, this moment, is the answer of all answers)

Yes, this is really a book about nothing, but still, sometimes a book about nothing can be the most helpful thing, when the search for *something* has only ever led to frustration and bitter disappointment.

But to read these words with a goal in mind – that would be to miss the point entirely.



Now, I don't want to dwell on my past, because really it has nothing to do with this message, and very little to do with this present life. However, a little history may help to put this book into context.

Several years ago I embarked on a full-blown spiritual search, fuelled by the desire to escape the pain and misery of a lifetime.

I did not realise then that the desire to escape my pain and misery was the very thing that was giving life to it. In resisting the present appearance of what I felt to be suffering, that very suffering was being maintained and strengthened.

That which is resisted is given power. This seems to be a universal law.

It was the dissatisfaction with the present life which drove the spiritual search: a search for peace, for freedom, for an end to my miserable existence and all its problems, for an escape into a higher dimension, for liberation, for awakening, for enlightenment, for permanent happiness, permanent pleasure, permanent peace. The spiritual teachers and their beautifully worded books promised so much, and I wanted all of it!

Eventually, after months and months of meditation and self-enquiry, of questioning my thoughts and attempting to see through the ego, I finally came to believe that I was in the state spoken of by the spiritual masters as “enlightenment” or “liberation”. I believed that enlightenment was a state which only a lucky few throughout the ages had ever reached, and that I, through my efforts, had finally done it.

However, what I didn’t realise was that the belief that I was enlightened was just that: *another belief*. It never struck me that a truly enlightened person (and there is no such thing) would never for one moment claim to be enlightened, as the belief “*I am enlightened, others are not*” is just another way to separate human beings

from each other, another act of violence, another way to maintain the very ego which was supposed to be ended in enlightenment.

The belief in personal enlightenment is just another way to maintain a strong sense of self: how very *unenlightened!*

I came to see that “enlightenment” is not a state reserved for the lucky few, attained only by those who have been on the spiritual path for years, and who have carried out all the relevant practices and rituals, but it is something (and it is not really a “thing”) available to all of us, all of the time, and so (and here’s the secret) *no effort, or lack of it, is required*. Indeed, it is the very effort (or non-effort) to reach enlightenment which obscures the enlightenment that is always already present. It is our search for “something more” which apparently obscures the utterly obvious: the present moment, and everything that arises in it, is all there is. Don’t believe this? Check – *it’s always now*. Whatever happens, happens now. Is there ever a time when you cannot say “it is now”? Can anything happen if it is not happening now? Even memory (the story of a past) – is that not just a bundle of thoughts arising *presently*?

It’s so obvious: what I was looking for all those years was not something that could ever be found, because it had never really been lost. Indeed, it is not really an “it” at all, not a thing amongst other things, but the very condition that allows the possibility of “things” in the first place.

Enlightenment is where we always already are, and in searching for it, we apparently lose it. Unfortunately, almost everything we do throughout our lives is part of this search, because almost everything we do implies that our salvation lies in the future, that peace and happiness and freedom are things that can be attained by us at some future time.

These days, the search for enlightenment, for a happiness outside the present happiness, for any sort of “self-improvement” whatsoever, has simply fallen away. And what is left? Is it still possible to live in this world when the desire for something beyond the ordinary has dissolved?

The message of this book is so simple, so obvious, so *present*, that the mind will never be able to grasp it. The message is nothing more or less than this: *There is nothing to “get”* ... and it is only the *idea* that there is something to get that makes it seem like there is something to get! And watch the mind as it tries to work all of this out, as it goes round in circles, comparing and contrasting this message with a billion other messages, as it keeps the search going in a billion different ways.

But here’s the good news: this search only ever arises now as a belief, as thought. It doesn’t need to be ended, because it’s just another *harmless* present appearance. And anyway, the attempt to end the search would simply perpetuate the search

Simple and obvious – awakening is just this, here now. Just life, as it already is. And of course, this seems like a

total paradox to a person hooked on self-improvement,
to a mind trying to work it all out.

But there's nothing to work out, and there never was.
The search is already over.

This book is about the utterly obvious, and nothing
more.

Jeff Foster,
Oxford, UK
April 2007

PART **I**
A WALK IN THE RAIN

“In the gap between subject and object
lies the entire misery of humankind.”

- J. Krishnamurti

As the story goes (and I can barely remember any of it now) I was walking through the rain on a cold autumn evening in Oxford. The sky was getting dark; I was wrapped up warm in my new coat. And suddenly and without warning, the search for *something more* apparently fell away, and with it all separation and loneliness.

And with the death of separation, I *was* everything that arose: I was the darkening sky, I was the middle-aged man walking his golden retriever, I was the little old lady hobbling along in her waterproofs. I was the ducks, the swans, the geese, the funny-looking bird with the red streak on its forehead. I was the trees in all their

autumnal glory, I was the sludge sticking to my feet, I was my body, all of it, arms and legs and torso and face and hands and feet and neck and hair and genitals, the whole damn lot. I was the raindrops falling on my head (although it was not my head, I did not own it, but it was undeniably there, and so to call it “my head” is as good as anything). I was the *splish-splash* of water on the ground, I was the water collecting into puddles, I was the water swelling the pond until it looked fit to burst its banks, I was the trees soaked by water, I was my coat soaked by water, I was the water soaking everything, I was everything being soaked, I was the water soaking itself.

And everything that for so long had seemed so ordinary had suddenly become so *extraordinary*, and I wondered if, in fact, it hadn't been this way all along: that perhaps for my whole life it had been this way, so utterly alive, so clear, so vibrant. Perhaps in my lifelong quest to reach the spectacular and the dramatic, I had missed the ordinary, and with it, and through it, and in it, the utterly extraordinary.

And the utterly extraordinary on this day was awash with rain, and I was not separate from any of it, that is to say, I was not there at all. As the old Zen master had said upon hearing the sound of the bell ringing, “There was no I, and no bell, just the ringing”, so it was on this day: there was no “I” experiencing this clarity, there was only the clarity, only the utterly obvious presenting itself in each and every moment.

Of course, I had no way of knowing any of this at the time. At the time, thought was not there to claim any of

this as an “experience”. There was just what was happening, but no way of knowing it. The words came later.

And there was an all-pervading feeling that everything was *okay* with the world, there was an equanimity and a sense of peace which seemed to underlie everything there was; it was as though everything was simply a manifestation of this peace, as if nothing existed apart from peace, in its infinite guises. And I was the peace, and the duck over there was it too, and the wrinkly old lady still waddling along was the peace, and the peace was all around, everything just vibrated with it, this grace, this presence that was utterly unconditional and free, this overwhelming love that seemed to be the very essence of the world, the very reason for it, the Alpha and the Omega of it all. The word “God” seemed to point to it too, and the word “Tao”, and “Buddha”. This was the self-authenticating experience that all religions seemed to point to in the end. This seemed to be the very essence of faith: death of the self, death of the “little me” with its petty desires and complaints and futile plans, death of everything that separates the individual from God, death of even the idea of God himself (“*If you see the Buddha, kill him*”) and a plunge into Nothingness, the Nothingness that reveals itself as the God beyond God, the Nothingness that all things are in their essence, the Nothingness that gives rise to all form, the Nothingness that is the world itself in all its pain and wonder, the Nothingness that is total Fullness.

And yet this so-called “religious experience” is not really an experience at all, since the one who experiences, the “me”, is the very thing which is no more. No,

this is something beyond, something prior to, all experience. It is the foundation of all experience, the ground of existence itself, and nobody could ever experience that, even if the world lasted another billion years.



That day, there was nobody there, and yet everything was there in its place. Beyond experience or lack of it, there were the ducks flapping their little wings, there were the raindrops trickling down my neck, there were the puddles under my shoes which were now caked in mud, there was the grey sky, there were other bodies, just like mine, splashing through the puddles, some walking their dogs, some alone, some cuddling up to their loved ones, some running frantically to escape the downpour.

And there was a great compassion. Not a sentimental compassion, not a narcissistic compassion, but a compassion that seemed to be part of what it meant to be alive on that day, a compassion which seemed to be the very essence of life, a compassion which seemed to pulsate through all living things, a compassion which said that none of us were separate from each other, that nothing at all was really separate from anything else, that your pain was identical to my pain, that your joy was my joy, not because these were principles we'd read in the Bible or taken on authority from those we held in high esteem, not because these were ideals that we tried to live up to, but because this seemed to be the way of things, this seemed to be the nature of manifestation: that we were all expressions of something infinitely larger than ourselves.

But even the word “ourselves” seemed to imply that we were separate, and therefore this was a compassion which was beyond words, beyond language; indeed this compassion transcended any idea of “compassion”, this compassion arose from the fact that *there actually is no separation at all*, that separation is an illusion, that in fact we *are* each other, that I am you, that you are me, that we cannot be ourselves without others, that I cannot be I without you, and you cannot be you without me, not in some wishy-washy lovey-dovey sentimental way, but really, honestly: we need each other, we are bound to each other, we cannot live without each other, we cannot live without everything else. I cannot live without that tree I’m walking under, without the raindrops that have made their way down my back, without the old woman who’s managed to waddle a little further down the path (she’s being so very careful to avoid the puddles), without the pond, without the ducks, without the swans, without my new coat keeping me warm, without the man with the dog who smiles and says “Hi” as he walks past.

We are bound to each other, all things are bound to all things, which is to say there are not really any separate “things” at all, there is only Oneness, only the whole, only the Buddha, only Christ, only the Tao, only God Himself, and nothing exists apart from anything else.

And so to say that on that day there was no “I” is really to say that there was only God, there was only Christ, there was only the Tao, only Buddha, only Oneness, only Spirit, and Jeff had exploded into it all, Jeff was nowhere to be found, in the sense that he was not separate from everything that arose. Jeff was just a

story spun by a storyteller with a vivid imagination, Jeff was missing from the scene and yet infused into it, Jeff was nothing and he was everything, he was present to his own absence and absent to his presence, he was life itself, in its entirety, and yet he, in all truth, had died.

And yes, there were tears. What else is there to do but cry at such a discovery? A discovery which really wasn't a discovery at all, because nothing had been found, since nothing had really ever been lost. This clarity had always been there, I'd just been looking elsewhere my whole life and ignoring the utterly obvious. God had always been right there, in the present moment, in the midst of things, but I'd spent my life seeking Him in the future. The Buddha Mind had been my own mind, always, but I'd spent years trying to attain it. Christ had been crucified and resurrected and was walking in the midst of us, drenching our lives in unconditional love, but for a lifetime I had assumed he was *elsewhere*, in some other world (or in this world but not in my own life, at least).

No, nothing had been found, because nothing had ever been lost. But perhaps it was the realisation of the utterly obvious that hit me that day, the realisation that there was *nothing to realise*, that everything I ever wanted was always right there in front of me and always would be, that peace and love and joy were always freely available in each and every moment, that love, pure unconditional love, the love of Jesus, the love of Buddha, the love that passes all understanding was the very ground of all things, the very reason for anything being here in the first place. It was there, always there, always waiting patiently for me to return home.

And there, in the rain, on that day, I knew finally that I was home, and what's more, that I would always be home, that I *had always* been home, through it all, through all the tears and the pain, through the dark times and the desperate times and all the times I thought I'd never make it, through all those times and more, the Home of all Homes had been there. The possibility of the Kingdom of Heaven was always present, the grace of God was always an open invitation, through thick and thin, through sickness and through health, through all that, world without end

And there were other times like this, when Jeff melted away and with him all separation and isolation; there were times when tears flowed at the awesomeness of this thing we call life, at the fact that there are "things" at all; there were times when there was a love so fierce that the heart was fit to burst, and there were times when there was simply nothing, no existence, no world, no God, nothing, no-thing.

And these times were attached to and given importance. They were labelled "spiritual experiences" or "awakenings" and there was a great excitement.



These days, all that nonsense has faded away. There is just the living of a very ordinary life. Whether "Jeff" is there or not is of no importance. But through it all, there is a sense of equanimity, an "okayness" with everything that arises, a deep, unshakeable certainty that

everything is happening exactly as it should, and this includes the pain as well as the pleasure, the anger as well as the joy.

Perhaps what has been seen is this: whatever we take ourselves to be, whatever character we have been assigned in the great play of life, this character arises out of something infinitely larger than itself. This character cannot sustain itself by itself: it has no foundations (as the great existentialist philosophers have seen). No, a greater power is at work, an infinitely greater power. Call it God, call it the Tao, call it by a thousand different names, it is That which gives rise to all things, it is That without which there are no things at all. It is not something that can be reached through thinking, as it gives rise to thinking. It is not something that can be found at the end of a long search, for it is that which allows seeking in the first place. In fact, it is not something that can be spoken of, as it is that in which speech arises.

And what is it?

It is this moment, and everything that happens in it.



This moment is the only place where all things arise, indeed nothing can arise if it does not arise now. Any idea of yourself, if it arises, must arise now.

All sounds are present sounds, all feelings are present feelings, all thoughts are present thoughts.

This will never be captured in words, and yet we spend our lives trying to do precisely that. In this moment, you (what you take yourself to be) only exist as thought. Which is to say that right now, in this moment, “you” do not exist at all. This is exactly what was seen (by nobody) on that rainy day: the individual is only an apparent individual, the individual is just a body of thought, arising in the present moment. The individual does not “exist” as this tree exists, or this flower exists. It could never have that solidity, that certainty, that definite shape and form. We are without foundation, we swim in a sea of nothingness. As Sartre would say, we are always fleeing ourselves, always grasping desperately at what we call “self” but ending up with a handful of nothing.

And this gives rise to great anxiety, because somewhere, deep down, we know that we are simply castles in the air, that we have no greater reality than that. And so we try desperately to build foundations, to grow roots, to anchor ourselves, and we cling to things, we attach ourselves to jobs, to other people, to ideas and ideals and ideologies, hoping desperately that these things will save us, that they will provide the foundation that we lack in ourselves. We cling to beliefs, to idols, to man-made gods and religions, but all beliefs exist in the shadow of doubt, and this can only ever give rise to more anxiety, because underneath it all, we are terrified that what we cling to will dissolve. As the Buddhists have always said, all forms are impermanent. And so we cling more tightly. And the vicious circle goes on, round and round, until death.

But what was seen on that autumn day cuts through

all of these feeble attempts to anchor ourselves. What was seen is the secret that is not really a secret at all. What was seen is the utterly obvious: we are always already anchored in something far beyond ourselves. We are always already anchored in the present moment, in the God beyond God, in the divine. And yet virtually everything we do in this life implies that we are not. Everything we do to become more present, everything we do to get closer to God – these are the very things that magnify our alienation from the Source. The secret is that what we are so desperately seeking throughout our lives is *always* right in front of us. The divine is *already* present in the utterly ordinary things of life.

God is always with us. And that is not something that we can “achieve”; it is something that already is. Indeed, it is the essence of life itself.



It was a very ordinary walk on a very ordinary, and very wet, autumn day. And yet, in that ordinariness, the extraordinary revealed itself, shining through the wetness and the darkness and the sludge on the ground, shining so brightly that I was no more, that I dissolved into that brightness and became it.

And yet, that makes it sound way too special. That day, in the rain, nothing really happened at all. It was just a very ordinary walk on a very ordinary day.

I left through the large iron gates, crossed the road

and waited for the bus, huddling in the shelter with several others.

Nothing had changed and everything had changed. I had glimpsed something, something deep and profound and in some ways shocking, and yet something that was utterly ordinary and somewhat unsurprising. Yes, it was *unsurprising* that the very ordinary should turn out to be the only meaning of life, that who I took myself to be should turn out to be just a nice fairy story.

Yes, it was unsurprising, that the divine should be in the utterly ordinary, that God should be one with the world, present in and as each and every thing.

I boarded the bus and as the rain streamed down the dirty windows I smiled to myself. What a gift – to be alive now of all moments, to be in this body of all bodies, to be here, in this place of all places, even though it is all a dream, even though it is all impermanent, even though if we really look, we find nothing but emptiness. But still, out of infinite possibilities, you are here, and it is now. It didn't have to be this way, but it is. It won't be this way forever, but it is now.

This is not the story of “Jeff’s awakening” although undoubtedly that story will arise. Yes, the story “Jeff is awakened” is a good story: it sets up “awakening” as something to get. Something that you want, something that can be found, given time, something that some individuals have apparently “attained”. What a load of bullshit! There is only ever *this*, what is presently arising, and no fictional character (and this includes any so-called

“awakened” fictional character) could ever be anything other than a good story, arising now.

This is the only miracle: that you are here (whoever or whatever you are) and it is now. It doesn't take a walk in the rain to see this, not at all. In fact there are no requirements whatsoever. You don't need to be anyone or anywhere else. You can start from exactly where you are. Indeed, that's the only place you ever start. Here and now.

And yet, “you” cannot start at all. There is no path that could ever take you to where you already are, and even if there was, the person who would follow that path has no more reality than a presently arising story.