

# Ordinary Freedom

## *About the Author*

JON BERNIE is a contemporary spiritual teacher in the lineage of Adyashanti, leading regular classes, retreats and intensives in the San Francisco Bay Area and beyond. As a counselor in private practice, Jon also works with individuals directly to facilitate consciousness development and deep emotional healing. A lifelong resident of the Bay Area, Jon has been at various times a Zero Balancing practitioner, a teacher of the Alexander Technique, a concert violinist and an ordained Zen Buddhist monk.

Jon's spiritual journey began with a spontaneous awakening experience at age sixteen, which led him to spend many years practicing in the Zen and Theravada Buddhist traditions, first as a monk in the lineage of Shunryu Suzuki-roshi, and later as an early student of Jack Kornfield. In the late 1980s, Jon's spiritual trajectory was profoundly altered when he met Advaita master Jean Klein, with whom he studied intensively for an extended period. Jon subsequently spent time with H.W.L. Poonja and Robert Adams, both direct disciples of Ramana Maharshi. Jon's spiritual development was also greatly aided by Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk who studied with several well-known Zen masters and has since been instrumental in building interfaith networks worldwide. After Jon met Adyashanti in 2002, his journey came to fruition, and subsequently Adya asked Jon to teach.

### CLEAR WATER SANGHA

Clear Water Sangha, a non-profit organization, was established to support the teachings of Jon Bernie. The board of directors and dedicated volunteers help coordinate a variety of activities including the production of written publications, management of satsangs, retreats and other events, and ongoing maintenance of Jon's website.

For further information, please visit:

[www.sf-satsang.org](http://www.sf-satsang.org)

## *Praise for Ordinary Freedom*

*TO FIND AN ACCOMPLISHED SPIRITUAL TEACHER IS A RARE GIFT. To find a book that puts you in a most lively way in the presence of such a teacher is even more rare. But here it is! Jon Bernie's Ordinary Freedom has all the power of the spoken word and vibrates with the overtones of that teacher's caring, compassionate nearness. Deep, yet always simple; simple, yet never simplistic; clear, eloquent, and always to the point, Ordinary Freedom is not an ordinary book. It springs from freedom and breathes freedom. Caution: This book may be hazardous to your current level of consciousness!*

**BROTHER DAVID STEINDL-RAST, OSB**, author, lecturer, co-founder of [www.gratefulness.org](http://www.gratefulness.org)

*WHAT A BEAUTIFUL, SIMPLE, HEARTFELT MESSAGE! The end of seeking is not something to be found in the future—it is right here, present at the very heart of experience, just waiting to be discovered by those who are ready and willing to come face-to-face with life.*

*Jon Bernie expresses the timeless truth of non-duality (non-separation) in such a warm, authentically human voice. He meets you as a wise, loving friend—rather than as spiritual master or guru—and gently points out the various ways in which you are currently at war with your own experience. His message is rare and precious in that it does not attempt to deny or transcend our humanity, or dismiss it as an aberration, but rather embraces it fully as part of an infinitely bigger picture. Jon honours your embodied experience, whilst at the same time clearly and directly pointing you far beyond the personal, to a wordless freedom that belongs to no-one, and therefore is available to everyone.*

*Read Ordinary Freedom and rediscover something that you have always known—that this seemingly ordinary life is already the miracle you've been seeking, and that here and now is forever saturated with wonder. This is mature, grounded spirituality for grown-ups, and I thoroughly recommend it.*

**JEFF FOSTER**, author of *The Wonder of Being* and *An Extraordinary Absence*.

# Ordinary Freedom

Jon Bernie

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ORDINARY FREEDOM

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Cover photo taken by Jon Bernie at his former retreat in Bolinas.

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## *Dedication*

I want to dedicate this book to my Mom, who taught me to trust my feelings and question everything; and to my Dad, who was my first Zen Master.

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## Foreword

We do not usually think of ordinariness and spirituality as existing together, and in one sense they do not belong together. If we think that spiritual freedom is something that can fit nicely into our ordinary way of viewing life, with all its division and conflict, we are sorely mistaken. Spiritual freedom comes about through a deep reorientation of the way we perceive, not only ourselves, but all of life. However, if we view ordinary as referring to a change of perception available to anyone, right here and now, then spiritual freedom is indeed ordinary. Freedom is also ordinary in the sense of being permeated by a state of openness, naturalness and ease; and it is these qualities that characterize Jon Bernie's teachings.

This wonderful collection of Jon's teachings really captures his ability to point us back to our own innate freedom. What makes Jon's teachings so powerful and relevant, though, is that no part of the human experience is denied. Indeed, there is an open encouragement for all of our human experience to be included and embraced as a means of discovering the infinite ground of being within which all of our experience unfolds. This in itself is a great gift to any spiritual seeker looking to find out what freedom is really all about. But if you read through these teachings with all of your senses open and alert you will begin to intuit something more.

You will begin to notice a deep silence taking form within you. Not a relative silence that is simply the absence of sound, but a silence that is a deep and welcoming presence. This silent presence is like discovering a radiant thread of truth running inside of you. It has always been there of course, but you may not have noticed it or given it your full attention. Because giving our full attention to something other than our wandering minds is not something we are encouraged to do very often. But if you are

alert with every part of your being not only may you be given the gift of a truly wise and compassionate spiritual teaching but you may be drawn into the heart of a perfect stillness where Jon's words will pierce you, and like two arrows meeting in mid-air, your world will stop. And in a single breathless instant radiance may find you and eternity will be yours.

Adyashanti  
*San Francisco, May 2010*

## Introduction

I remember being four years old, looking up at the stars, and wondering, "What's going on here?" At the age of eleven, I found myself arguing with my Sunday school teacher about the existence of God. I wasn't buying it. I came home and declared to my mother, "I'm not going to Sunday school anymore, I'm too busy practicing the violin!" "Okay, honey", she replied. I became an agnostic, saying at the time, "When I see God, I'll believe it." I assumed then that most of my friends, in their various religions, were being brainwashed.

During my teenage years, struggling with the meaning of existence, I began an inner search that led to a spiritual awakening around the age of sixteen. At the time, I did not know what had happened to me, and it would be quite a while before I found out. I had unknowingly tapped into the mystery of existence, and that encounter not only changed the course of my life, but ultimately led to the end of my struggle with "what is." It led to the end of seeking, the end of fear, and the end of self-identification, all of which are ways of saying that it led to the discovery and realization that what we fundamentally are is conscious energy and space, or awareness itself. This realization is called Freedom.

This book is about Freedom. It's not about a special state or condition called "Freedom," some idea or concept to be believed in; rather, it is about the recognition and realization of our essential nature. When we arrive in this moment and awaken to the truth of our existence, we discover that Freedom is completely ordinary. Ordinary, yet awesome.

The recognition and realization of our essential nature is for many a gradual transition. The challenge of our generation is to find out how to support this transformation in the midst of our ordinary lives.

*Jon Bernie*

*Your every step  
leads not away from it.*

Dōgen

# Being Here

Awakening in its essence is simply *being here*. It's not the thought, "being here," or a story you tell yourself internally: "I'm being here." There is no thinker or storyteller. There is no *one* who is being here.

Awakening is not about belief, or even about understanding, at least not in the way we usually think of understanding. It's tricky to talk about. It's easy to understand why practitioners in many monastic traditions remain in silence most of the time. With talking removed from the equation, you can just do what you have to do—chop wood, carry water, plant seeds, pick vegetables—in that kind of environment, things can become very, very simple.

But even out here in the world, in the midst of our busy lives, that simplicity is still available. You can simply attend to your immediate experience in this moment. You don't need to understand it, or believe anything about it. Just be here with what is, as it is. And as your experience becomes increasingly simple, you drop even that story, the story of it being simple. You freefall into openness, into emptiness.



Awakening is about letting go of all control. That's why meditation practice can be useful for our physical bodies, which are conditioned to control, and defend, and hold on. Meditation can help you notice where the *holding on* is. You just sit, and stop, and notice what's going on physically, emotionally, energetically. The physical body is a wonderful mirror.

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*Editor's Note:* These talks and dialogs were adapted from transcripts of Jon's public meetings (usually referred to as satsang — literally, "meeting in truth") and retreats from 2006 to 2009.

So just be here. Notice what's going on. You don't need to analyze it, fix it, figure it out or explain it. Awakening is what's left when all that falls away. It is literally dropping everything, and just being here. Conceptually, it's tremendously simple. It is simplicity itself: just being. Now you're no longer trying to get anywhere; you no longer experience that compulsion. You're like the sun—grounded in radiant presence, connected to everything.

As you drop further into the awakening process, you begin to realize that everything—everything!—is simultaneously transmitting and receiving awakening. And as you give your attention to *that*, to that amazing process, there's a sense of deepening, and an awareness of a kind of power or energy that's present everywhere; and gradually you become that energy.



It's not necessary, however, to believe any of this. All that's required is attention, and the willingness to let go of control. Whatever your experience is, that's what's happening—*let it*. Whatever you're facing right now—whether you're feeling open or shut down, whether you're at peace or struggling—*that* is the doorway. You have the opportunity to open to what is being given *right now*, what is arising *right now* in the mirror of your attention. The experience of life is always a reflection, and that itself is the ultimate teaching, if you're ready to receive it.

## Walking the Path

When we gather together in satsang, the true teaching is really the silence. It's not about the teacher's personality, or the student's. As Jean Klein used to say, it's when there's no one taking themselves to be a teacher and no one taking themselves to be a student that true teaching takes place.

The truth is, we're not separate at all. We're the same. When we're caught in our personal struggles, it does feel like we're separate, it does feel like we're different; and of course in the human, physical sense, we are. But in our essence, in the fundamental reality of that which we are, we are not separate. The silence is an opportunity to open to that.

It's not about belief, thank goodness. We'd be in real trouble if it were. Our beliefs are the cause of all the grief! The more tightly we hold on to our beliefs, the more we hurt. That's what suffering is, that holding on. That's all the illusion of separateness is, too. But that holding on is really just self-protection—it's the human organism trying to survive and be comfortable. As you know if you're familiar with psychology, humans develop a variety of strategies for surviving. We call those strategies ego, or personality, and it's easy to be fooled into thinking that our personality is who we are. But who we *truly* are is no one. We're just openness; just freedom.

There's nothing I need to teach you, actually. Just pay attention to what's present. If you simply allow what's coming up to come up, and you don't resist it, then it's not a problem—it can move through the organism and be fully experienced. And if you do experience it as a problem, then open to *that* experience: the tension, the struggle, the resistance. Allow yourself to feel that discomfort. Allow it to be fully encountered so it can move

through you without sticking.

Amazingly, all you need to learn is simply to be available to what is. That's all that's required. But instead we often tend to go, "I want this, but not that. I want the bliss, the oneness, the joy; but I don't want the pain, the fear, the grief, the anger." Ironically, a lot of so-called teaching is just pointing out that *not wanting*.

It's not the experience itself—pain, fear, whatever—that's the problem. It's the resistance to that experience: the trying to get rid of it, the trying to fix it, the trying to understand it. I call that the *primary resistance*. That resistance is usually unconscious, but it can come to the surface if you're willing to really stay with your experience. That's actually all that's required, just hanging in there. Of course that can sometimes be more challenging than it sounds, because it can often be a very bumpy ride.

But as you gradually become more and more available to the truth of who you are, you'll find that "hanging in there" is just what naturally happens. At first, allowing what is may seem to require effort; but as you become established in awareness you'll find that what *really* takes effort is resisting, struggling with what is. When you can finally let go of *that* effort, then being with what is, whatever it is, becomes truly effortless.

I've often suggested that the most helpful attitudes to cultivate are those of the explorer and the scientist. The explorer wanders boldly in the unknown, always in new territory, never knowing what will be encountered next. The scientist observes what arises without any preconceived ideas about what's happening or what it means, and *questions everything*.

If you're identified with your beliefs, then questioning them is essential. Your beliefs are not true or false, or even good or bad; beliefs are just mental constructs. In the short run they're either useful or not useful, but ultimately they become irrelevant as you reach that stepping-off point when you're finally *just here*. Then belief is no longer what's going on. Your perspective has shifted. And gradually you learn to open to that shift and allow

it to deepen, and eventually it's permanent. That's all. It happens by itself, really. No one does it for you. You don't even do it for yourself. If you could, you'd have done it already.

The path is really about honesty, too, about just telling it like it is, however it is. No shame, no blame. All that's required is that you honestly express the truth of where you're at in this moment. It doesn't matter whether it looks good or bad, or whether it feels good or bad. What's important is just putting it into the light, so to speak. The truth really will set you free — even the limited truth!

Often people are afraid of not being “spiritual” enough. You may, for instance, go through a period where a lot of difficult psychological material is emerging, where you're in what seems like a perpetually negative headspace, but find you're reluctant to acknowledge how you're feeling. Because it's not supposed to be like that, right? It's supposed to be like in the spiritual sales pitch, the shining oasis of light we're supposed to get to, et cetera. So you don't want to admit, maybe even to yourself, that what you're actually experiencing is enormous suffering.

But *who* is suffering? Who's angry? Who's afraid? Who's sad? Do you really have an answer for that? Ask yourself the question — and then stop, just sit there. Open to the question. Don't just ask the question; *be* the question.

Can you allow yourself to sit in the discomfort of your question, without having to have the answer? Can you *not know*? Can you open to *not knowing*? Of course! *Not knowing* is your nature. It's totally natural, like a flower emanating its fragrance. The flower doesn't try, that's just its nature. That's why nature is so beautiful; it's not trying to be beautiful, it just is. And that's really the beauty of that which we are, if we *just are*. It's enough.

## Aliveness

Our true nature is to be fully alive. This aliveness is not something that one person has and another doesn't. It's not something one has to be worthy of. Aliveness is our essence, our true being. We may be oblivious to it; our aliveness may be obscured and heavily fortified over. We may be in the mode of just surviving and getting by, which is important for humans, obviously, and is often difficult.

But at some point we find we have the space to begin to let the unfolding and the transformation happen. And it does happen! Sometimes things shift suddenly and dramatically, but usually the change unfolds gradually, in stages, the way an acorn gradually becomes an oak tree.

There's really no end to this transformation. How could there be? The mystery keeps revealing itself. We never stop learning—if anything, we become more skilled at learning. We become better students, you might say. Ultimately there are no teachers, only students.

As we deepen in the mystery, our minds become open and available. We have fewer and fewer preconceived ideas about what's happening. We find the willingness in each moment to learn, to not be the knower. When we're truly open to this presence, we find we naturally open to it even more deeply. We enter into it and we receive it, profoundly. That's what transmission is. That's the mystery and magic and power of satsang.

## Energy and Spirit

If you take some time to sit silently, in stillness, you'll perceive a range of different things. You may feel tired, sleepy; you may experience some physical discomfort; or you may find yourself restless, distracted. Maybe you'll discover you're going through something emotionally, something you might not otherwise have noticed. You'd think that sitting quietly would be a fairly easy thing to do, but actually, to sit consciously can be difficult or even overwhelming. And yet there's a power in the stillness. There's the possibility of opening to our fundamentally energetic nature.

In these kinds of discussions, I often prefer to use the word "energetic" rather than "spiritual." It's less encumbered with beliefs and concepts. Energy is practical—you flip the switch and the light goes on. We don't necessarily understand every detail of how it works, but we don't need to. We live with it, we accept it. It's part of our reality.

So from the perspective of awareness, whatever's being perceived, whether it's thought or feeling, sensation or emotion, is fundamentally a movement of energy. When we really awaken, we realize we're not separate from that energy. We begin to live *as* that movement, as that energy, and then we've transitioned into the unknown, into the mystery—into true aliveness.

At a certain point we don't even think about it any more; thinking about it falls away, and we're simply this presence, this awakens, this ease of being. Awakening then shows us how to take care of the next moment. In Zen they say it doesn't matter how big your garden is, as long as you can take care of it. So you find out how to take care of it. You just do the next thing.

The next thing is what's right in front of us, right now. So often our attention is elsewhere — on something we're worrying about, or some set of future plans. To be able continually to bring ourselves back — *that* is the opportunity our practice offers. So we simply feel, we simply open to this presence, this energy that we fundamentally are, right now. We give our attention to the unknown, the unspeakable.

There are so many names for this mystery that we are: presence, spaciousness, emptiness, God, love, the Tao—it goes on and on and on. But once you've opened to it, once you've realized that you *are* that, forget all the names; just *be* that.

That doesn't mean you become spaced out on the divine and nonfunctional — that you can't drive a car, hammer a nail, install software, or whatever. Rather, you're able to do those things, to function in reality, much more richly and completely than ever before. There's no longer any separation between "me" and "my experience." So-called "my experience" is a mirage, a projection. When you're fully alive there is no more projection; there's only aliveness.

## Dissolving Into Light

To awaken is to dissolve in one place and simultaneously appear everywhere. Awakening can also be called *being presence*, being energy. Karmic arisings, whatever their nature, are fuel for dissolving. So rather than resisting, or fighting, or arguing with what is—instead of all that, simply *accept* what is. Receive what is, allow what is. *Become* what is.

Now there's no separation between perceiver and perceived—there's just *being* perception. There's just listening, just observing, just feeling, just thinking. And you allow this gestation to happen, you allow this growth, as painful—or ecstatic!—as it might be.

Satsang can sometimes feel like being in a pressure cooker. It just gets hotter and hotter! So you let it get hotter, you let it get more amplified. That may be unsettling physically; you might even start shaking, or find you want to run out the door. As Robert Adams once said, if you've come here to hear a lecture you've come to the wrong place!

The good news is you don't have to understand how it works for it to work. Being here is enough. All you have to do is learn to allow yourself to cook. To be dissolved into light. To appear everywhere simultaneously. That is freedom.



*Q. I'm feeling this intense heat lately. I'm very aware of this intense sense of trying, but I don't know what the trying is directed at.*

How do you know you're trying? Is it a physical sensation, like a pressure or a pushing? Or is it a mental or emotional experience?

*Q. It's more of an association I have. I don't even know what I'm trying to do anymore. I've been struggling to awaken for so long, and this tension is just cumulative. It doesn't even seem to have a direction anymore, it's just a buildup. And the more I look at it, the more the sensation seems to intensify.*

That intensification may actually be the beginning of an expansion. See if you can just let it be for a while. Just sit with that pressure, but without expectation—that's the tricky part. Don't get in there with expectations or conclusions about how or why you're sitting with it. Put all that aside.

Like I said, it really is like cooking. And as with cooking, you also need to know when to take the lid off and let the pressure out. If you're steaming broccoli, you want to take it off the heat while it's still bright green, when it's softened, but before the heat has turned it completely limp. When I was a monk I used to sit these killer schedules—we never took the lid off!—and it was really too much. I found that out later when I left the monastery. Once I was living on my own, I could follow my own inner need to sit and be, and I found I'd go much deeper, and discover much more, when I wasn't pushing myself so hard.

*Q. Just hearing you say that I get a little tense, because I've been wanting to know when to let the steam out, when to take the top off and when not to take the top off. What if I get it wrong? There's this uncomfortable sense that I don't know.*

That's right, you don't know. So find out. Give yourself permission to experiment. Try more, try less. See what happens. Gradually you'll become sensitized to what best facilitates opening. Openness of the heart is our natural condition. It's love, and it's joy, and it's living life fully. It's what everyone wants, truly, and it's what we can have, each moment, once we allow ourselves to discover it. It just takes some time to find out how to let it blossom. So it's okay not to know. You're on the right track.

## Being the Feeling

When you find yourself facing some difficult or unpleasant feeling, let yourself *be* that feeling. Don't be *with* the feeling, as a passive observer; rather, *be* the feeling itself. When you're being the feeling, there's no thinking. If you're being *with* the feeling there's still separation—there's "you," and there's "your feeling," which "you" are being with. There's still ego functioning, there's still someone having the feeling. But freedom is not for someone; freedom is for *no one*.

As long as there's someone having feelings, you're still identified. Identification is the source of suffering; it is the very definition of suffering. But when you're *being feeling*, there's no more identification. Once you drop the ego—that is, once you allow yourself to be fully present in this moment—there's no more somebody, no more identity, and no more suffering.



*Q. I don't get this idea of being the feeling. I know how to receive feeling, and how to deny feeling, but I don't know what you mean by being it.*

There's a merging that happens, if you will, of awareness with feeling, so that there's no longer "me" and "my feelings." The separation between them vanishes. That's also what I mean by being awareness. Same thing. Then emotion is no longer about the story we tell ourselves, it's just a movement, just this rush of energy moving through.

*Q. The story fuels the emotion. And your advice is to let go of the story, or to somehow get underneath it?*

The story is the surface; go to the source. The story may point to

or help you access what's actually being felt, but it may have little to do with the true source of the feeling, except in some very limited sense. The movement of emotion can be all kinds of things, but it's very much a part of the human function. By itself it's not a problem. We make it into a problem when we block it, prevent it from fully moving. That causes all kinds of difficulties—mental, psychological, even physical.

Many people have to relearn how to feel, because during their lives they've learned to cope by separating from feeling, making it something "over there" that can be analyzed or dismissed. There's so much denial expertise out there. We're experts in maintaining unconsciousness! So how do we return to wholeness? Well, that's why people developed things like meditation, a way of getting into the body and really developing reflection; and conscious communication, sharing, expressing. There are so many methods to facilitate the healing.

But our focus here is awareness, so that's the perspective I want to speak from. People can develop a great deal of awareness and still maintain a certain degree of denial. This is a tricky area. The initial experience of awareness can be so pleasurable that it can itself become something you cling to as a defense against other, less pleasant kinds of experiences. I've sometimes called this "hiding in the light," and it can be one of the greatest detours on the spiritual journey.

People can also get very good at maintaining a certain high from being in spiritual environments where there's a lot of consciousness, or a lot of shakti. It can become a kind of habit—mainline a little shakti, right? Eventually, though, that no longer satisfies. You reach a certain spiritual maturity, where you're able to step up fully and take responsibility for following the truth itself, however it makes you feel.

As I've often said, the hardest part of getting to understanding is basically just hanging in there. But you learn to hang in there anyway, and at some point the question, "When am I going to get there?" isn't given much energy anymore. Instead of won-

dering when you'll arrive in some future moment, the question becomes, "How can I arrive fully in *this* moment?" That's all. In order to really transform, you have to enter the timeless, the now; the vastness of being; simple awareness itself.

Time is part of the illusion of separateness. When we're *being awareness*, our experience is timeless, seamless. And when separation dissolves—when *being awareness* is no longer something special, but just the way things are—then we're one with the truth, the divine, whatever you want to call it. That is the integration of the realization of who we truly are. When we're at peace, when we're in oneness, then nothing is lacking.