

THE LIGHT THAT I AM

Notes From the Ground of Being



By J.C. Amberchele

NON-DUALITY PRESS

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Look! Unique tradition
outside all teachings.
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Natural Wisdom only!

—**Bodhidharma**

IN MEMORIAM
Douglas Edison Harding
1909–2007

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INTRODUCTION

This book is a collection of articles based on the insights of the English philosopher and spiritual teacher Douglas Edison Harding. The *Headless Way* of Douglas Harding is a simple, contemporary, Western approach to that which lies at the heart of all the great religions, an approach which denies no others but includes all by clearly illuminating the Ground of Being at our common core. Central to the theme of this book is the question “Who are you?”, and the proposition is that you are not what you think you are, not what you have been told, not what you look like to others. “Look for yourself” is the directive (and the title of one of Harding’s many books), for the answer is to be found not by conceptualizing but by looking to see. What you find may startle you. The implications are certainly world-shattering, and yet, paradoxically, all is seen to be quite ordinary, and the realization occurs that, unborn and undying, you have always been what you are.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Harding developed several exercises designed to bring one’s attention to this ultimate view. These “experiments,” as they are called, are remarkably effective. But they must be done, not merely read about, or very little of this book will make sense, for one’s true nature is not something to be “understood”; rather, it is all at once revealed, unveiled, rediscovered—while the meaning is added in time. For reference, the experiments described in the text can be revisited in the appendix.

Additionally, the chapters in this book were written as separate articles and can be read in any order. Because the chapters stand alone, however, themes are sometimes repeated, as are experiments, but the experience of Oneness is timeless—that is, outside of time—and you may discover, as I do, that each time you return to the luminous Awareness at your core, it is truly the first time.

Terms such as No-thing/Everything, Emptiness/Fullness, Awareness, God, Oneness, Self, Capacity, Who You Really Are, First-Person-Singular, etc., are used freely and interchangeably throughout the book, and refer to This, the unspeakable Mystery that is our Ground, a Mystery that cannot be told but nevertheless can be *seen*. My hope is that this book helps point the way—The Headless Way—to Seeing (and therefore Being) What You Really Are.

FOREWORD

J.C. Amberchele is in prison—but he sees he is not. He sees that prison is in him—that essentially he is free.

You do not have to wait for Freedom. It is available now. All you have to do is pay attention to the place you are looking out of. It is as simple as seeing. If you don't know what I mean, then read this book! Every page points you home to the Freedom at the heart of your life.

Freedom comes from seeing, and being, the Source. In *The Light That I Am: Notes From the Ground of Being*, Amberchele points clearly and directly upstream of all things to the Source—the Source that is nearer to each of us than our breathing.

I know Amberchele—the story of our meeting is the epilogue to this book. I have great respect for him. His true, deep voice inspires me. But essentially, as he himself would insist, this book is not about Amberchele, it is about Who Amberchele really is—which is Who we all really are.

May this book inspire you to take a fresh look at yourself—literally a “look” and not a “think”—and discover the most wonderful thing, that you are not a “thing,” you are the Source, the Ground of Being.

Richard Lang

HARDING'S WAY

Whatever idea I've had about how things work in this world hasn't gotten me far, considering that I've spent more than twenty years in prison. Most of my beliefs I acquired from my father and from John Wayne, and anything that wasn't ultra tough and ultra cool was to me ultra embarrassing. In fact, I lived in a state of near continuous embarrassment, never measuring up to the ridiculous standards I had accepted without question, applied to a framework of expectations I and no one else could meet: how I should act, how others should treat me or otherwise comport themselves in my presence, how the days and months and years should unfold in my favor.

Needless to say, I became the poster boy for control freaks worldwide. And like all control freaks, I carried beneath a facade of polished strength a sense of hollowness and doom, ever waging the war between who I thought I should be and who I thought I was. In a haze, I self-destructed over and over, taking others with me.

And then years ago, already well into this prison sentence, I happened to watch a PBS Bill Moyers interview with Joseph Campbell, and I decided to try meditation. It was difficult at first, what with the crowds and the noise and the routine in the cellblock, but I soon discovered that during meditation I had few expectations, of myself or of others, as if there *were* no others. It was a place of no standards and no embarrassment, a refuge where I no longer had to assert my misguided will. And except for the rare glimpse on

drugs or during moments of life-threatening stress in my long criminal career, it was the first time I had truly noticed myself, that bare attention of “I am” at the center of my awareness that, it was now obvious, had always been there.

The mystery, from then on, became a question of how this “I” had originated and from where it continued to spring. The old way of thinking, that I could be a separate consciousness in a separate mind and body, was far too painful to accept. This was the way I had been taught, the way of my father and of everyone else by whom I had measured myself; this was the way of contraction and confrontation and endless self-torture. There had to be another explanation.

This led to six years of obsessive reading. I wanted to investigate the unspoken hunch I had had since my LSD days in the Sixties, one that had previously manifested as fear, and one that had been resurrected during the Campbell interview: namely, that all the major religions carried at their root an identical message, one so clear and so basic that words were unnecessary for its realization. I suspected that my perception of the world and my so-called place in it were illusory, that reality wasn’t what I and most everyone else had thought. It was as if humankind were the recipient of a hoax the universe had conspired to play on itself. And it was clear that my life thus far had been a fight against the revelation of this knowledge, holding on, as it were, to the lies I had been handed, lashing out to avoid the truth.

I read Buddhist texts. I read Gurdjieff and Ouspensky. I read all I could find on the Christian mystics. I devoured Hafiz and Rumi, then launched myself into the work of the great Indian sages. I found

Wei Wu Wei, then returned to Buddhism and dug in for the long haul. I was determined to sort this out, this mystery at the heart of the matter.

And then one day I read an article by Douglas Harding about his so-called “headlessness,” and something snapped. Seeing Who we are, Harding pointed out, was elementary, so easy we miss it, and in failing to recognize it we erect philosophical and religious structures of monumental proportions, thereby concealing it all the more. And all the while it is right Here, closer than close.

At this point I thought of the old Sufi story of a highly agitated Mullah Nasrudin riding into town shouting that he had lost his donkey, until it was pointed out that indeed he was sitting upon it.

The message was clear: “We can’t see It because we are It,” and the implications were mind-shattering. Illusory—the term I had used to describe my suspect perception of the world—suddenly seemed the ultimate understatement. It was not only illusory, it was one hundred percent backwards! I was no longer in the universe; if anything, the universe was in me, including whatever concept I held of a supposed “self,” body and mind. I was, as Harding had said, “Space” for the world to appear in, Space that actively participated in the creation of that same world! This was astounding!

Staying with it was another matter. Like everyone else, I had been conditioned to think of myself as a separate individual with a separate consciousness, an awareness that mysteriously emanated from the spongy material inside my head. Harding was revealing the opposite—as, I now realized, were all the others, including the founders of the great religions. And like their followers, I was unable to remain open; I

could not prevent myself from returning to the deceptions I had been taught as a child. It was as if I were trapped inside my own head.

No doubt, the struggle was on. It was clear: I could sit with my legs crossed for a lifetime, I could live alone in a mountain cave in Tibet, I could train in every lineage in every tradition, and still come out with the wrong view, still see myself as a separate subject seeing objects. I wanted to drop the lie and return to the truth, now. And the agony was that I kept forgetting. How to make the shift?

I have never answered that question, except to say that perhaps there is no shift. To fight it only seems to strengthen the misunderstanding. The Buddhist idea that nirvana and samsara are identical holds the key, of course, but I wanted to live it, not think about it.

And then something happened during one of our occasional Buddhist meetings here at the prison. There are fifteen hundred men in this facility, and only nine of us who have declared ourselves Buddhists, and of those, a mere half dozen had showed up. Enough, however, for a little magic.

We had finished a short meditation, and one of the men had begun a discussion of the meaning of “emptiness,” which had the effect of opening the proverbial can of worms: bickering ensued, which, since this is a prison, soon morphed into flexing. Better to return to meditation, I thought, follow the breath, but no one was in the mood. The argument continued, and I considered leaving, but then I remembered Harding’s words about this Space Here, Capacity even for argument, and I remembered the exercises.

The exercises are incredibly simple and altogether radical. The fact that they are both simple and radi-

cal is how I know they are right, although when I first encountered them in Harding's books I had to laugh, they were so wacky. But then I caught on, I "got it," as they say, I knew they were pointing in the right direction while the rest of the world was not.

So I stood up, and the others looked at me, and I began a walking meditation around our little circle of chairs, and soon the others joined in. The idea is to keep your mouth shut and your thoughts to a minimum by focusing on the sensations in your feet as you walk, but this time I asked everyone to forget everything they had ever been taught, ever, as if they had just been born in this room and found all to be new and strange. I asked them to bring their attention to Now, and Now, and Now, as though past and future were thoughts they could not think. I remembered Harding's account of riding in a car watching the telephone poles slide by while he was motionless, and so I asked everyone to do the same, to pretend it was the rug moving, not them, to watch the walls and the chairs glide by, the room swing wildly as they turned.

This brought a few chuckles, and after a minute or two, we sat down again and I asked the group to point to the ceiling, to notice their hand and what their finger was pointing at, in this case the ceiling tiles and lamp fixtures. Then we pointed in turn at the wall, the floor, our lap, our chest, noticing each time that it was an object (our hand) pointing at other objects, with their various descriptive qualities. (*Figure.1) But finally we pointed at what we were looking out of, and I repeated questions that Harding had asked: "If you drop your conditioning, drop everything you ever learned and proceed only on present evidence, just what is it you are now pointing at: an opaque, round, separate and

solid object that relates to those things out there, or are you pointing at Space for those things, Capacity?



Fig.1

Isn't this Space boundless, speckless, and totally transparent, and isn't this boundless Capacity in receipt of the room and what you were looking at? Isn't it awake, and will you find Awakeness anywhere else in the world but Here?"

No one said a word. We had no mirrors and no cards with holes in them or paper bags for the other exercises, but before they all jumped on me I figured we could deal with confrontation—something we prisoners are familiar with—by pairing up and sitting in front of one another. Harding's "face to no-face" experiment involves a standard supermarket bag with the bottom cut off, so that both ends are open. One partner places an end over his face, as does the other partner, and the commonly accepted idea is that the partners are confronting one another inside the bag,

face to face. This is our usual way of relating to others. But Harding's questions reveal otherwise: "Forgetting everything you were ever told, and on present evidence only, how many faces are actually given? Are you face to face, or is it face there and Space Here? Are you confronting that person, or is it Capacity here for that person there, and isn't it true that you have nothing here, not a speck, with which to keep that person out? Are you not boundless, transparent, void at this end, and at the same time are you not filled with that person in front of you, so that in a sense you have died at this end and been resurrected as that person there? Aren't we built this way, to die in each other's favor, and isn't this the basis of love?"

Well, you can imagine what I expected from my fellow convicts, but they surprised me. What I heard was "Wow!" and bursts of laughter, and more "Wows." I don't know if they caught on, but something happened in that room, even if only to me, or should I say, to the Space at this end, the Capacity that is always Here and always filled with what is out there. I came away from that meeting knowing with the certainty of experience that Who I Really Am is always available, always just an exercise away.

And so I returned to my cellhouse watching the sidewalks and the fences and the buildings slide by, while I remained motionless, as I have always been. I have only to point my finger to remember to look at what I am looking out of, and need only the image of a face to know that the end of confrontation is Here. And I realized something else leaving that meeting: that everything sliding past was none other than Who I Am; I was, incredibly, walking through Myself, in awe of every step.

So I want to thank Douglas Harding. I am grateful for his wisdom, which of course is my wisdom and everyone's wisdom, whether or not we realize it. I am grateful for everything that turns and passes and presents itself, and for all the faces in whose favor I am built to disappear. Including, even, that curious one out there in the mirror.

THE LIGHT THAT I AM

NOBODY HOME

It seems apparent that the great majority of the six billion people on this planet just aren't at all curious about who or what they are. They have assumed the character roles they learned to assume, and that's that. It's astounding to me that all but a tiny percent of the world's population is living deep within a fundamental lie, and moreover, that most will defend that lie to the death. Are we so comfortable or so afraid that we don't care to inquire?

I used to fly on commercial airliners quite often during my criminal career, and invariably I would be seated next to someone who wanted to know who I was by way of what I did. Usually I heard, "So... what line of work are you in?" Or, "Business trip?" Or occasionally, "Where're you out of?"—as though I'd just left corporate headquarters and was en route to a sales meeting with my subsidiary brethren.

Once, on a flight to Los Angeles, I happened to be in first class and seated next to a man who I noticed was dressed casually, as I was, who wore an expensive watch, as I did, and who generally exuded an air of moneyed leisure, as I did not. My line in those days was that I was a "musician's agent," a profession I knew nothing about, but neither did anyone else, so usually I'd be left alone for the remainder of the trip. (I should mention here that women rarely asked who I was by way of what I did for a living; mostly, if they said anything at all, it was to ask where I was going or where I was from; I dreaded sitting next to curious men in dark suits, especially since they resembled

cops and frequently interrogated me as such.)

Despite the cocktails before dinner and wine during, my casual seating partner said nothing for half the flight. I was grateful. I was off the hook, I figured, and vowed to fly first-class more often. But just when I'd reclined my seat and settled in for a short nap, right out of the blue he said, "So what's your gig?"

I gave him my spiel about being a musician's agent, along with what I hoped was a reasonably unfriendly smile, and he said, "Really!" then reached for his Gucci shoulder-bag and plucked from it a shiny business card. On it was his name, and below it, the names of some very big entertainers indeed. I was sitting next to the musician's agent's musician's agent! "So am I," he said.

I spent the remainder of the trip in the bathroom, feigning illness. My cover was blown. I was nobody—I couldn't say I was a criminal! I knew absolutely zilch about the music business, or for that matter any other legitimate business. If who I was was what I did for a living, well, then, I was better off as nobody.

I don't know how my family put up with it for so long, moving every six or eight months, changing names, schools, states, countries. At my arrest it was reported that I had assumed 26 different aliases over the years, most of which I'd had identification for, including several passports. I mention this because I think it played a part in what later became of me. My resistance was down. I was nobody for so long that it was perhaps easier to shed whatever idea I had of being a somebody. I didn't fit in. I avoided my ever-changing neighbors and had no community or political or national ties. I held no credit cards, no insurance, no real estate in my name, no investments, not even a

bank account (I buried my cash). I was literally off the books, living a life of pretense, through and through.

So much for my poor success at social maturity. There was still the problem of personhood, however. I was, of course, convinced that I was a human being, albeit one that had little in common with other humans.

Thus with my fragile social identity, and coupled with my LSD experiences in the '60s and a growing curiosity about the true nature of things, I was probably a good candidate for awakening. Unfortunately, I resisted with a ferocity that was terribly damaging to myself and others. I was plagued with fear, holding on with whatever semblance of control I could fabricate.

After my arrest, and now with a number to replace my name (further proof of nobodyhood), still it would be several years before I'd begin the search—albeit using the intellect, searching “out there”—for a model of who or what I was and where this thing called a universe came from. When I came upon the Headless Way and actually experienced the Emptiness/Fullness I had been reading about from so many masters of different paths, I thought back to that incident on the plane and wondered how it would have gone had I told the truth. Not the truth about my criminal activity, but the truth about my *real* “gig,” what I really was and really did as Pure Subjectivity. Of course, had I known what I was all those years ago, I might not have been on that plane nor involved in criminal activity. The irony is, I really was nobody. I have never been a somebody. If anyone, I am and have always been everyone (and everything). All that misguided striving, the pretense, the distractions and cover-ups, and for what?

I now know what. Had it all not happened, including the pain I alone am responsible for, I might still be living deep within that so-called fundamental lie, intently living out my character role as one among six billion others, not particularly curious about who or what I am.

It is clear to me that as long as I am deluded, I am continuously in receipt of the divine tap on the shoulder—that is what my “life” is, that is what delusion is for: the call to turn around and look. And when I do, at that instant it is over, the game has ended. Each tap is a gift, and the gifts are endless, and the wonderful part is, each time I accept, surprise and joy are the rewards. Nothing less than the entire universe could have come up with this formula! How else to recognize Oneself but to forget Oneself?