

Living Life as a Question

Note to the Reader:

This is a compilation of talks given in satsang by Nirmala from 2002-2004 throughout North America. They have been edited and arranged to read in sequence. Satsang is a Sanskrit word meaning “gathering for the truth.” This truth does not refer to any particular dogma but rather to the truth of who you are, the truth of your Being.

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Living Life as a Question

Many of the questions and concerns in satsang come in a similar form: How do I get or keep a particular experience? How do I get or keep a sense of awakesness or expansion or openness or freedom or loving kindness or Presence? Or if worldly concerns are the issue, the question is the same: How do I get or keep more health, more wealth, more comfort, more security, more romance? Another form these questions take is: How do I avoid falling asleep or feeling stuck or being contracted or being sick or losing love? They’re good questions. There’s nothing wrong with them. They’re real for the person who’s asking them.

Within each of these questions is the assumption that you need to do something—you need to get or keep or avoid something. Right there, in that assumption, is our suffering. The effort to get or keep or avoid any experience is what makes life miserable, difficult, dis-easeful.

In satsang, another possibility is pointed to, a way of touching your experience without either trying to hold on to it or push it away. It’s a way of reaching out

to your experience and really seeing what's it's like. In doing this, the questions become: How open or stuck am I right now? How open or closed is my Heart right now? How happy or sad am I right now?

And when the answer comes, the question becomes What's that like? What's it like to be expanded or contracted or whatever it is you are experiencing? What's it like to have an open Heart or to not be in touch with your Heart at all in a particular moment? What's it like to be filled with love? What's it like to feel a lack of love? This is reaching out and touching the experience as it is and as it naturally changes. It's not a static question, but an alive one; you're never done with that question.

In doing this, rather than trying to change life, you're living life *as* a question. What's this like? And what's it like now that I've noticed what this is like? And what's it like now? And now that it's changed again, what's it like? Even your noticing something changes it, so by the time you've found an answer, it's time to ask the question again.

We've been so conditioned to think that the point of questions is to get answers, that we overlook that the point of answers is that they get us to more questions. The questions are as valid and rich as any answer because every answer is full of questions. You can even begin to enjoy the questions, even trust the questions, as much as any answer that comes.

When you value the questions themselves, you just naturally hold the answers more lightly because they aren't the goal. If the question is just as rich as the answer, then it's fine if the answer comes and goes. Have you ever noticed that you've forgotten everything you once understood? Every insight you've ever had has faded, and that's great because then you're back in the question. You're back in this really alive place where you're getting to find out what you know now, what's happening now, what's moving, what's changing, what it's like now. What is it like now? You'll never be done with that question. What's happening now? You could say that answers are just a temporary side effect of having questions.

This is a gentler, more respectful way of being with your experience. It's a more intimate way of being with your experience every moment to ask what it's like instead of How can I fix it? How can I get more? How can I get less? How can I improve it? How can I change it? How can I avoid it? How can I hang onto it? Do you see how all of these questions have an effort to them? They have a sense of violence to them—a sense of being in battle with or in opposition to your life. It's hard to be intimate with someone when you're pushing them out the door or trying to keep them from leaving. There's no intimacy in that kind of interaction. How much possibility is there for real, deep contact? The same thing is true for other dimensions of our Being. The opportunity is to intimately experience the expansions and contractions, the openings and the closings, the freedom and the stuckness, the wonder and the confusion, the understanding and the lack of understanding.

So, what question is moving in you right now? No matter what that is, that's the place to start because that's what's moving in you right now. If a desire is moving in you right now, what's it like to want something? Or if it's a fear, what's it like to fear something? There are no wrong questions; they're all entry points, places where this inquiry can open up and become soft and intimate. So, what's moving in you right now?

Self-Inquiry

Beyond focusing on the content of our experience and even beyond noticing whether we're expanded or contracted, a wonderful question is: Who or what is experiencing this? This is a variation of the classic self-inquiry question, Who am I?

As I was going through my email the other day, I ran across a quote from *Course of Miracles* that essentially said that you'll never find satisfaction in the world. This assertion is at the core of most spiritual teachings. Spiritual teachings and practices attempt to turn us in another direction, away from the usual places we look for satisfaction. They're designed to shift our focus from the world of form to Beingness. Self-inquiry is one technique for doing that. In self-inquiry, we simply ask, Who am I? or What am I? or, a variation on that, Who is having this experience?

When you look to see who is having this experience, you don't find anyone. There's nothing there. The Experiencer can't be experienced, just as the eye can't see itself. You don't find any *thing*, nothing you can touch or see or hear.

When *nothing* is discovered, people often keep looking instead for *something* they think they're supposed to find. It's only natural to look somewhere else when you don't find anything. We don't expect that *nothing* is the answer. So we go back to our mind for the answer—we think about it, check in our memory, or imagine a good answer—instead of just staying with the question. But inquiry done only with the mind is dry—it lacks juice. After a while, because this experience is not very rich, the mind often gets bored and quits. There isn't much in it for the mind.

Another way to ask the question is with your whole Heart. You ask it with everything you've got, as if your life depended on it. If you ask the question with this kind of passion and intensity, it will bring you beyond what the mind is able to figure out. When you ask it with your whole Heart and you don't find an answer, you just stay there, not knowing. You just let yourself not know. There's nothing but that space, and you just stay present to that space, to that sense of there being nothing behind your eyes, nothing behind your thoughts, nothing behind your feelings. Instead of turning back to thing-ness when you don't find anything, you just stay there in the no-thing-ness and get curious about it. Nothing—what's that like?

In looking and finding nothing, what you discover is even more space. Staying with the question Who am I? opens up space. Nothingness is very spacious; there's a lot of room in it. When you stay in that nothingness, you discover that

there's a lot of stuff in that space, stuff that is real in a way that the stuff in the world has never been real. What moves in that space are true qualities of Being, such as Love, Compassion, Insight, and Strength.

Every time you turn towards Beingness, a different quality shows up. Being has an infinite number of qualities, which show up fresh and different in every moment. These qualities can seem to exist in another dimension, as they have a depth and solidity about them that is more real than physical objects.

These qualities have been there in the nothingness all along, and as you stay with the nothingness, they begin to be apparent. One way of staying with the inward focus is by repeatedly asking the question, Who Am I? Stay with the question even when you experience nothing and have no idea who you are. Just ask, Who or what doesn't know?

The Sense of Me

Nothingness with all of its qualities is present throughout every experience, no matter how beautiful or painful. Also throughout nearly the entire spectrum of experience, is a sense of *me*, of someone who is having an experience, although when you ask, Who is that? you can't find anything. Still, there is almost always a sense of identity, a sense of being, of existing. When you're contracted, there's still a sense of being, but it's a contracted sense of being. And when you're expanded, there's still a sense of being, but it's an expanded sense of being. When you're sad, it seems like *me* that is sad. When you're enlightened, it seems like *me* that is enlightened. When you drop a rock on your foot, it seems like *me* that is hurting. There's always a sense of a *me*.

Because there is so clearly a sense of *me* no matter what you're experiencing, there can be a tendency to try to manage or control that experience. This makes sense because it feels like your experience: *I* am having this experience, so *I* should be able to fix it or make it better. That is our suffering. Our suffering isn't really caused by this sense of *me* that is always present. That actually makes sense—everything that you experience is you. It's all you. Rather, our suffering is caused by the effort to try to change whatever we're experiencing. When *I* am having a painful experience, it seems like *I* need to do something about it. Even if *I* am having a good experience, *I* have the problem of figuring out how to keep it.

There are two ways to get out of this suffering. One is by asking the question, Who is having this experience? and realizing that you are nothing. Every time you ask this, the sense of *me* lessens and the sense of nothingness increases. There's still a sense of *me*, but there's less *me* and more nothing. This realization reduces suffering because there's less *you* that you have to manage and more nothingness, which doesn't require any management. Nothingness is low maintenance.

The other way out of suffering is the opposite realization: to realize that you are everything. You just notice that everything is *you*: That ceiling fan is *me*, that painting is *me*, and on and on. Just as there's no limit to how little *you* can

become in the face of nothingness, there's no limit to how big *you* can become—to how much you can realize is *you*. When you are all the happiness and all the sadness in the world and all the money and all the poverty in the world, very little management is required. There's very little to do about it. And so, this realization eliminates suffering.

We could think of the first way of overcoming suffering as Inquiry and the second as Bhakti, the devotional path, in which you merge with everything. With Bhakti, rather than realizing you are nothing, as in Inquiry, you give your sense of identity to everything: I am that, I am that, and that too.

As beautiful as the realizations of nothingness and everythingness are, they don't necessarily touch the human. That's why when you wake up the next morning, there's still the sense of a limited *me* again. Because suffering happens in the arena of our humanness, many would like to know how to be done with the humanness. The point is not to fix or eliminate your humanness but to *realize* your humanness. This is done by asking, What is the humanness like today? What has the sense of *me* landed on today? The only way to liberate your humanness is to find out what's really true about the human experience.

The good news in all of this is that there's nothing you should avoid realizing. If right now you're experiencing something very human, that's exactly right. And if you're experiencing something transcendent, that's exactly right too. Your life has really been one long realization. Has there ever been a moment when you haven't been realizing something? Even when your sense of *me* is very small, you're realizing your *me*-ness. Sometimes our realizations are very human, very mundane. You don't have to wait for a particular realization to be realizing something.

Am I?

Inquiry is the practice that's offered in the tradition I come from. Inquiry is a way of exploring our experience and our Being. There are many possible questions. The granddaddy of them all is the question Who am I? One thing that has always bothered me about that question is the presupposition that I am a who—I am a somebody. The question *What* am I? is a little more open to other possibilities, but there's still a presupposition that I am some *thing*.

So, lately, I've been playing with stripping that question down to the question Am I? and noticing what that's like, what discovery that allows. This question not only eliminates presuppositions but brings the questioning down to something very fundamental, which is the simple fact of our existence. And yet in exploring this, it turns out that this is not such a simple fact; our existence is a profound mystery. The question also could be rephrased as Do I exist? If the question is kept this simple, then the answer is always in the affirmative—there is existence here. I am. But it gets dicey if you start adding anything to it.

This question Am I? points to the simple fact that you *are*, regardless of what you are experiencing. Beneath everything that's going on, is a sense of existing. This question points to a dimension other than experience.

Once that sense of existence is in your field of awareness, then it's possible to find out what's true about your existence, to explore that. What's it like right now to just be? Is it enough right now to just exist? Or is there a sense that it's not enough? All our lives we've been told it's not enough: You have to be smarter, richer, prettier, more enlightened, more compassionate, more loving, and on and on. You have to be some *thing*.

We have the sense that if we could just be what we're supposed to be, then we could just *be*. Take a fantasy about being richer, for instance: What's great about being richer is that you think it will finally allow you to just *be* because you no longer have to become richer. We think that being richer or smarter will finally allow just *being* to be enough. Wherever this inquiry takes you, it's amazing to discover both the extent to which our existence is enough and the extent to which we think it isn't.

For most, this sense of existing is associated with the body. Existing seems to happen there. However, does your sense of existence stop where your body stops? Discover for yourself where your experience of *I am* is right now. Is it in the body or is the body in it? Would it be more accurate to say "I exist in the body" or "the body exists in me"? Be willing to hold the possibility that who you are goes beyond the body even if you aren't experiencing that directly right now. The experience of the body never goes away, but the link between the *me* and the body can soften or dissolve when "I am the body" is seen as only part of the truth. If you experience the *me* outside the body even a little, then the body can't be the whole truth of who you are.

Where does your sense of *me* stop? Right now, for instance, allow more of your experience of the room in. When you include in your awareness the energy and information that's flowing in and out of the body, is there a greater or lesser sense of *me*? What is more true, to say, "I exist in this room" or "this room exists in me"? When you include the totality of the room and beyond, are you more in contact with your *me* or less in contact with it? Most people find that the more they include in their experience, the larger their sense of *me*. When you ask these questions, you discover there's not such a clear-cut boundary to *me*.

Of course, this exploration doesn't have to stop with your body or with this room. Try sensing the reality of the surrounding city. Is there a greater or lesser sense of *me* when you do this? You can also ask the question: Do I exist in space or does all of space exist in me? Which feels truer?

Shifting Your Reference Point

Your reference point—the *I* or the *me*—naturally expands and contracts. Sometimes it includes much more than our usual reference point—the body. We were taught to refer to what's happening in the body as *me*, but sometimes it also includes the room, the state, the country, the world, the whole universe.

You've probably had many experiences when the boundary of who you thought you were expanded and included more. Everyone has had such experiences, even if only as the result of something like a gorgeous sunset. These experiences bring a sense of just being able to hang loose—being able to let everything come and let everything go.

It's interesting to notice how variable this container called *me* is. Sometimes it's the body and sometimes it's even smaller than the body. Sometimes it's just your thoughts and ideas. What if it's totally arbitrary where this container of *me* ends? Does it have to end at the body? Does it have to be my body or my thoughts or my feelings or my desires that are *me*? Does that have to be the boundary?

There's a great exercise from speed reading that can give you a sense of what I'm talking about: Imagine holding a tangerine on top of your head and make that the point you're looking from. Then gradually let the tangerine float up three feet above and behind your head and imagine looking out from that point. You can even go farther out, as far as you can imagine. It's not that your senses will follow, but your perspective can shift to where you're sensing this moment from outside the universe. It's not that hard to do. And then you can bring it back down inside the body or down into your Heart. What's it like right now to look out from your Heart? Even that much of a shift, from the head down to the Heart, can profoundly alter your experience.

The point of this exercise isn't to show you the endless variety of states that are possible but to illustrate that what you usually think of as *me* has no real boundary. What does it mean if the boundary of the *me* is not so solid and defined? What if the container called *me* were bigger than this room or bigger than anything you can conceive? What would that change in your experience? You can see how it would take the edge off of everything: What sense would it make to struggle to move anything in or out of this particular location if that's not you?

If there is such a thing as a container for *me*, it's a very leaky one. No matter how narrow your reference point gets, it still won't hold still. No matter how deeply identified with your experience you are, your experience keeps changing. Have you ever noticed how love comes and love goes? Money comes and money goes? Experience comes and experience goes? Insight comes and insight goes? They move through this space, but they pay no attention to your ideas of *me* as the container, so you never successfully contain any of them. You never successfully hang onto anything. Everything just comes and goes. Everything just passes through.

The invitation is to get really curious about the truth of this container we call *me*. Does it contain anything? Can you find a definite place to put that reference point or does the reference point just naturally shift from moment to moment?

Self-Image vs. Reality

Accompanying our *experience* of existing, our sense of *I* or *me*, are lots of ideas about it. These ideas form into an image of who we are, commonly called a self-image. One way of exploring this experience of having a self-image is by asking: Am I happening in my image of myself or is my image of myself happening in me?

When faced with the greater truth of who we are, our more limited self-image and the ideas connected to it lose their power and significance because a lesser truth loses its sense of truth and impact in light of a greater truth. A simple example is Santa Claus: When you discovered the greater truth that Santa Claus is a myth, the experience of Santa Claus didn't go away, but the idea of Santa Claus had less power and significance to you. The point of this exploration is not to get rid of your self-image but to create the space for directly experiencing it or, moreover, for being what you truly are and allowing that to affect your image in whatever way it will.

Our self-images or identities aren't bad, and sometimes they're functional. For instance, to communicate "I'm a teacher" can be functional; it transmits some information. But in comparison to just being what you are in this moment, these more limited identities don't have much juice, much aliveness. To get your identity from a self-image is a dry and unsatisfying experience.

Another quality we assign to the *me* is stability. We're conditioned to think of ourselves as static images. Whenever we speak the words "I am," we are assuming a static reality. For example, "I am a doctor" or "I am a mother" implies a fixed reality, but of course, even these things change. Our self-images are attempts to create a stable, continuous idea of the self. And yet, in your actual experience, you find that your *me* is never the same way twice. It arises in every moment as something new and different. When you look, you discover that your *me* is more like a flow than a static object.

This ongoing flow is actually who we are. We are an ongoing flow of experience. Who we are isn't static, although our self-images are, and these images are either shaken by what's happening or reinforced by what's happening. We love it when our self-image is reinforced by what's happening; it's somehow reassuring, even if it's a negative self-image, because it allows us to pretend a little longer that the truth of who we are can be contained in a self-image.

Even so, it's only a matter of time before our self-image gets challenged. What we usually do then is switch to another one. We keep the illusion going of a static reality of ourselves by quickly changing self-images. Life has flowed into a new experience, and for a moment we're confused until we pull out a new image. Then we relax because we know who we are again.

Just try to notice both the ongoing flow that is present right now *and* this tendency to hold a self-image. It's one thing to become aware of the boundlessness and timelessness of existence and to lose awareness of the self-

image, and it's another thing to bring awareness to both of these at the same time.

Does the sense of your self actually fit into any of your concepts about yourself? Can any of your ideas about yourself really capture this moment? How about the idea "I'm a spiritual seeker"? Can that really capture your experience right now? Or how about "I'm enlightened" or "I'm not enlightened"? Does that have any actual relevance to the experience you're having right now? Can any idea ever be a truer container for who you are than this ungraspable moment that's right here right now?

What does this mean if our existence is happening both inside and outside of all our ideas and images of ourselves? What happens when you simply allow both your images and your existence? Which one is the elephant and which one is the flea? It just makes sense that if you're in the presence of an elephant and a flea that you would pay more attention to the elephant. They're both present and they're both real, but if you're too distracted by the flea, you might miss what the elephant is doing.

Death

"Death" most often refers to the death of the form, but the experience of dying doesn't just happen when the body dies. Every experience you've ever had has died, and everything you're experiencing now is in its death throws. Of course, in every moment, there's also a birth—a new moment is being born. It's tricky to see this in the moment, but if you reflect back, you can see that everything that has come before is now dead and something new has taken its place.

This is a profoundly different view of how things happen than we're used to. Our concept of change is a misunderstanding: Reality isn't actually capable of change. Nothing ever changes; it can't. All it can do is die and be reborn. We think that something changes into something else. So, we go back and look at what happened before something changed to try to find the cause.

But that's not the way it happens. What really happens is that an old experience dies and a new one is born. There's no connection between what was and what is now, no cause and effect. In every instant, the universe that you know dies and a new one is born. Once you see this, time doesn't make sense anymore. There is no past that causes the present that causes the future. Life comes fresh each moment, completely unlimited by what came before. There's no telling what will be born in the next moment.

We can't see, for instance, how sadness changes into allowing because it never does. Sadness never becomes anything; it just comes to the end of its natural life. At some point it finally dies and something else unpredictable takes its place.

The question is, How willing are you to see that what is happening now in this moment has no relationship to the past? It's a little weird, and yet a lot of things suddenly make sense, such as why it rarely works out the way we expect

when we try to change something. One way saying it is Being doesn't need to recycle. Being is limitless, so it just throws out the old and tries something new.

There's a powerful sense of a flow of time. It seems like the present is affected by the past, and the future is affected by what you do now. That illusion is really convincing. That's how good Being is at this game. But every now and then it throws out a whole new universe that doesn't at all correspond to what just was, and then we're left confused.

One of the ways this illusion gets maintained is through memory. Memory is the attempt to keep a dead moment alive. One way you see this is in a traumatic experience. In that moment, the experience seems to be too much, so rather than experiencing it fully, consciousness contracts and the experience goes into a memory or pattern of tension in the body. Because we weren't ready to be there completely with that experience, we put it aside, where it remained undigested. This strategy makes sense when you're a child and you don't have the resources to be with an experience.

Experiences like these need to be digested. Once you see that whatever traumatized you is no longer here and that you aren't a child anymore, you can handle looking at it. When you do this, you feel lighter. Anytime you let one of those dead corpses from the past go, you feel lighter. It doesn't need care and feeding anymore. What a relief. Trying to keep anything alive that's dead is a lot of work. No one has ever succeeded, even though we've all tried to keep some experience, some state, some perspective, some identity alive.

Every *me* that we've ever thought ourselves to be is like a zombie—the student *me* the adolescent *me*, the little boy/girl *me*. They're just corpses; there's no life in them. They're totally imaginary. So, how do you change or heal the child or adolescent *me*? The healing comes when you see that this *me* doesn't exist anymore; it's an imaginary corpse you were trying to animate and fix or an imaginary experience you were trying to animate and re-write. But when you check, you can't change it; it's dead—and naturally so.

This simple realization is the end of the problem. When you get up close enough to an experience, you see that it doesn't exist anymore. You see the truth of it—that it's no longer here, and that frees you from that particular illusion of cause and effect.

There are two ways to go about this. One way is to go directly to this moment, where nothing from the past exists. Meditation and inquiry are both designed to bring you to this place where nothing exists. Nothing exists because it's already dying by the time you notice that it's been born. That's how quick life is happening. When you come to that place, you realize that nothing's around long enough for it to exist and that nothing that ever happened still exists. That's the direct route, and it can dissolve all limitations in an instant.

The other approach is taking it bite by bite: You digest all that undigested experience. You work on your issues by bringing up those experiences. When you do this, it often feels like a burning. You experience an intensity, but now

the experience doesn't exist, so no matter how intense it is, you can handle it. And then something weird happens, and the experience is no longer an issue. That something weird is that you realize that the experience doesn't even exist: You bit into something and found out that there's nothing there.

When you digest one of those experiences, you do feel lighter and something flows and your life gets better and your relationships get better because now there's room for that; you're not relating to the dead parent or the old spouse that was around yesterday but to whatever is being born in this moment.

The problem with this approach is that it fosters the illusion that all of this work on ourselves is going to do away with our problems. It can easily turn into an attempt to create a better *me*, one who never has a difficult experience, and that's not realistic. Besides, there's an endless supply of dead problems; new ones are being created every moment. So with this approach, you'll never be done. It's not that there's no place for this approach, but the point isn't to create a better *me* but to become free by arriving fully in this moment.

Shrinking Your Awareness Through Judgment

Spiritual practices and inquiry are means of opening up your awareness, of including more of the truth in your awareness. Even the simple practice of paying attention to your breath or to your body can expand your awareness and move your attention from the content of your thoughts to a larger context. Spiritual inquiry brings your awareness to the biggest context of all—what is awareness itself? What is it that is aware of whatever is going on?

Judgments, on the other hand, are a means of narrowing or closing down your consciousness or awareness. You could say they're the muscle we flex to contract our consciousness. When a judgment arises, you lose touch with your Beingness and suddenly feel very small. Judgments contract the sense of who you are, the sense of your self.

Most of us are very familiar with the many forms judgment takes: all the would-haves, could-haves, should-haves, and all the hopes, wishes, dreams, doubts, fears, and worries. We're all painfully familiar with the ongoing mental commentary about how things could have been better or could be better or should be better or will be better—or worse.

A judgment shrinks our attention onto the content of the judgment. We get caught up in the content and keep ourselves busy (at least mentally if not actually) trying to make life fit these judgments. Rather than being present to things the way they are, we're busy trying to make life be different than it is. When we're judging, our attention becomes narrowly focused on that, and we leave out much of the truth of the moment.

Contraction is really just another capacity of consciousness. The problem isn't with the narrowing of attention, which can be functional, but with keeping it there longer than necessary. At times it's useful to narrow your consciousness onto something like balancing your checkbook. But if, for example, there's a

judgment about the figure you come up, you can spend a lot more time looking at your checkbook than is functional. Once you know there's only \$.37 in your checking account, it's not useful to keep your attention focused on that. But it was functional to find out.

It is as natural for consciousness to contract as it is to expand. Whenever something appears in your awareness, consciousness naturally contracts onto it for a moment. For example, a bird flies in front of you and you naturally focus on it for a moment. If there's no judgment attached to that, then consciousness expands again and begins to take in more. However, any judgment or opinion about the bird, either positive or negative, will keep your attention narrowly focused on it. This may then spin off into a full-blown story about a bird or birds or other thoughts, which further keep your attention focused on a small portion of what's occurring in this moment.

We work very hard at our judgments. When a judgment hooks us, our minds spin around and around on that one thought. We give our judgments this much energy because we're convinced that they'll help us change our reality. We believe they have the power to change what is, but they only keep us discontent with what is.

Isometric exercises are a good metaphor for this: You contract your muscles against a wall but the wall doesn't move. You make a lot of effort, but it results in no movement, no change. That's what we experience in judgment—lots of ideas and struggle but no change in what is. Just having an idea about what's supposed to happen or not, doesn't change what's happening. In the midst of all of our struggling against it, life just happens the way it happens. All this struggling against life is futile. We suffer, but our suffering doesn't change what is.

Judgment takes a lot of effort. Keeping our attention this small takes a lot of effort because it goes against the nature of consciousness, which is to expand as well as contract. Because consciousness naturally expands, when we stop our effort and involvement with the content of our thoughts, we usually experience an expansion—a natural relaxation and broadening of our awareness. Some of us spend so much time in this effortful contraction of consciousness, called judgment, that even a slight relaxation of this effort can result in a profound sense of expanded consciousness.

This struggle against the natural flow of consciousness is our suffering. The good news is that there's no harm done to consciousness when it contracts. No matter how contracted you've been, consciousness never loses its capacity to expand. Once you realize that it's natural for consciousness to alternate between expansion and contraction, you can just allow it to move freely and enjoy the wonder of whatever state you're in.

It can be useful to distinguish between judgments and observations. A simple thought like "it's dark out" can be just an observation, and our awareness can for that moment include the fact that it's dark out and then go on to whatever else is happening. But if you're lost in the woods without a flashlight, this

thought may take on the quality of a judgment, like “Oh no, this is dangerous,” and your awareness contracts and suddenly you’re less present to the situation.

Anything—the color of someone’s pants, the electrical outlet, the temperature in the room—can be experienced as a simple observation or can trigger a judgment. Most of our experience passes as observation. We’re actually only capable of having one judgment at a time. Most of what’s in your experience right now is not a problem for you at all. Many more things register in your Being as neutral than as judgments.

Judgment has a payoff or we might not bother with it. Its real purpose is to narrow attention or awareness. When awareness becomes contracted or narrowed, unconsciousness expands. As our awareness gets smaller, what we’re not aware of gets larger.

What is arising can be either good or bad, but it may be too intense, too threatening to your comfort or security, too uncomfortable to others who are present, or contrary to cherished beliefs. When that is the case, a judgment may arise to narrow your consciousness so that what you don’t want to be aware of becomes unconscious.

Check this out for yourself: The next time a judgment arises, ask yourself what was coming up just before that. You will often find something that seems uncomfortable, and the judgment serves to temporarily contract your awareness off of the discomfort.

But there’s a price: The price is a sense of restless unease, of never being at peace, because the natural tendency of awareness is to open and be aware of more. It takes effort to keep your consciousness in a narrow range. You can’t completely relax, because the second you do, you notice all kinds of things that your judgments were keeping out of awareness.

This also happens with positive judgments. An example is when something profound shows up and you react with a positive judgment, such as “I’m having an incredible spiritual experience.” This positive judgment narrows your attention onto a limited aspect of that experience, like how good it feels or how it might impress others, so that now most of what’s going on is no longer in your awareness. When we feel an expansion of awareness, judgment often narrows the experience this way into something we can handle. Through your judgment you have shrunk it into a nice small manageable experience.

Judgment also serves the function of maintaining the sense of a separate *me* by shrinking the sense of who we are. Judgment keeps the sense of your self very small and manageable. The *me* only exists in the mind, and judgments are a way the mind maintains the idea of a *me*: I am someone who is good, who is bad, who is smart, who is dumb, who has a problem, who doesn’t have a problem (fill in the blanks for yourself). These are the stories we tell ourselves, which create our identity and the sense of a separate self.

Judgment also creates a *me* by focusing the mind on a problem (i.e. an uncomfortable feeling or experience), which it then goes about trying to fix. So, judgment either serves to block out what is uncomfortable by narrowing our awareness or as a springboard for trying to fix whatever is uncomfortable. All of our curiosity becomes focused on changing our experience rather than simply allowing it and being curious about it. Our attention becomes focused on a fraction of what's going on.

We actually create problems (which stem from our judgments) because they give us an identity. They give our mind something to do. Our problems structure our lives. Now you know who you are and what you're going to do: I'm someone who has a problem and who has to solve that problem. That's who I am and what I'm going to do with my life. Now you have a story.

We think that judgment is about fixing our reality, but it's really about not experiencing our Being because our Being—in addition to being beautiful, profound, and satisfying—is a pretty wild thing. It doesn't always show up in a comfortable, safe, easy form.

This tendency to judge is not your fault. We learned to use judgment when we were very small. The judgments we received as children were attempts to manage the size and range of our Being. Early on, we were subject to a lot of judgments that were relatively effective at keeping our Being in check. We quickly learned what range of Being was acceptable. Every time we stepped outside that range, we got hit with a judgment from parents, teachers, siblings, or other figures in our life. Over time, we incorporated this strategy for managing this unruly thing called Being: You keep it under control and make it better by flooding it with judgments, both good and bad. Judgments were used by others and eventually by ourselves to shape and fit us into what was comfortable for those around us.

This function of judgment has sometimes served us very well. When you're little and you experience something abusive or tragic, it can be very functional to be able to narrow your attention so that you're not aware of your body anymore. However, because no one can keep this up indefinitely, painful memories that were once unconscious pop into consciousness. Everyone experiences this to some extent. Other things that we try to hold at bay with judgments are boredom, emptiness, and a sense of the ordinariness of life.

So you see, the experience of judgment is not really about the content of the judgment. That's why we often come up with the most ridiculous judgments. They can be very silly, and the absurdity of their content sometimes wakes you up out of them. Then usually the mind comes up with another judgment, one that you won't question. Unfortunately, unless we're really aware of what's going on with our judgments, once we see through the ridiculousness of one, we often come up with another to take its place until that one has worn us out.

The good news is that there's a limit to our capacity to judge. No one has ever managed to keep it up continuously. It's too much work to keep consciousness focused on a particular problem. Some of us get so good at it that it becomes

habitual, but it's still a lot of work. When we finally do stop this effort, awareness naturally expands. When you're no longer concerned about the content of your judgments, your awareness opens up and includes more of what's going on. Suddenly, you notice that there's a lot more going on in the room, in your sensations, in your experience than what you had been focused on.

We might think that the antidote to judgment is some kind of spiritual technique that causes consciousness to expand, but since there is a built-in limit to how long we can stay focused on a judgment, the real antidote is simply to notice how often judgment fails. The default position of consciousness is actually to include more and more. Consciousness only contracts when there's a reason, whether it's to balance a checkbook or keep something unconscious.

Once we see the truth about judgments, the tendency is to want to rid ourselves of them, but that's just layering more judgment onto judgment. We can't keep judgments from arising. Another possibility is to really *experience* your judgment rather than focusing on its content. Just notice: What's it like when there's a thought about how things could be different or better or happier or less painful? You come to see how much effort judging is and how futile it is.

When you finally just stay with what you've been trying to avoid, you discover that what you've been avoiding is not really so bad. Consciousness can withstand the anger, boredom, sadness, fear, doubt, worry, and even a traumatic memory or experience—as well as bliss. You learn that you have a greater capacity than you thought for these things.

Once you experience how tiring resistance is and just allow yourself to experience whatever you're experiencing, then awareness naturally expands. When that happens, the experience you're having takes on a richness: You may feel sad, for instance, but it feels so good to feel the sadness that's here—because it's real. It's like discovering another dimension of experience, like being engrossed in a book and then suddenly noticing the birdsong that was there all along. So, the invitation is just to get to know your experience as it is.

Our fear is that if we experience these things, they'll overwhelm us. But when you just rest in the experience and don't go back to some surefire way of narrowing your consciousness, guess what happens? The sense of emptiness or anger or whatever becomes filled in with something truer, something with more depth to it. You discover how alive and dynamic consciousness is.

One thing that can help you stay with whatever you're experiencing is to realize that none of it is yours. The sadness and anger and pain are not yours; they're more like your inheritance from the world. The question is, Are you willing to meet this inheritance of pain so that you don't pass it on? If you never meet it, it goes looking for another place to be set free, either by those around you who you've dumped it on or even by a future reincarnational self (this is an idea I hold lightly as a possibility). Is it really better to escape back into judgment than to feel the sadness or whatever? Is it really so bad? It's not so bad because

it's real. Just get curious about it. What's it like before you label it pain or sadness or anger?

The invitation is to get curious about the range of consciousness you experience each day. As you get curious about that, you might also notice that sometimes consciousness contracts and sometimes expands. Ultimately, the suffering doesn't come from where your consciousness is but from the effort to hold it in one place or make it open when it's closed. Just be curious about wherever you are.

It's not up to you where your consciousness flows or whether it expands or contracts. Neither is right or wrong. Get curious about both of these possibilities. Expansion and contraction is just the nature of consciousness, like breathing in and breathing out.

It turns out that this flow towards what is, is what you are. You can't shut it off. So, if it really doesn't matter whether your consciousness is expanded or contracted, then you don't need to make an effort to either expand or contract it. If there's no effort, then there's no suffering. Discover what isn't harmed by being contracted. This flow is having a blast either way. Liberation is giving everything you've got to whatever you're experiencing.

The Life You Are Given

Our suffering doesn't come from any experience but from our resistance to the experience. Likewise, our joy doesn't come from any experience; it comes from our deeper nature. It is an innate quality of our Being.

There's a book out there with a great title: *The Life We Are Given* by George Leonard and Michael Murphy. So much of the time we don't show up for the life we're given but for the life we think we should have been given. This effort to have a different life is actually the cause of our suffering. It turns out that our joy doesn't stem from circumstances either. It comes from just being with the life we're given.

In hearing this, we naturally conclude that the way to end our suffering is to stop resisting. However, trying to do anything about your resistance is just another attempt to change the way things are. The only thing to do about this dilemma is to simply be willing to experience it.

A good metaphor for being with your experience in this way is trying to grow something. If you're trying to grow a plant, you don't go out in the yard every day and tug on it to get it to grow faster. Instead, you're just present to the plant, to its natural unfolding. You provide the environment for that growth to take place. You water the plant and fertilize it, but you don't actually do anything to the plant. Doing something to the plant itself could actually harm it.

The flow of conditioning is not a mistake. Part of this conditioning is the feeling that something is wrong with an experience and it needs fixing. As a result, it's

counterintuitive to approach the cause of our suffering with other than the attitude of trying to fix it. We have to learn to let it have its natural rhythm and evolution and yet be very much in contact with it.

So, I'm inviting you to do some inquiry—to inquire into everything that's in the life you are given and not to change it in anyway. Because the suffering in our lives is caused by our attempts to change things, the inquiry I'm suggesting is an inquiry into whether or not that is happening, without doing anything about it. Inquiry into what is here right now is like picking the fruit that's ripe: Instead of going to the apple tree in the spring and being disappointed because there are no apples, you go to the strawberry patch and enjoy the strawberries—because strawberries are what is here.

All of our suffering is just our conditioning, and that's part of the life we are given. No one grows up without conditioning. The surprise is that there's just as much joy in being with conditioning as in being with a transcendent experience or profound realization. Because this joy is more obvious in a spiritual experience, we often make the mistake of thinking that it comes from a spiritual experience, when actually it comes from just meeting that experience, which is easy to do in the case of a spiritual experience. There can be just as much joy in meeting our conditioning, but we have to be willing to do this even if our conditioning doesn't change. We have to be willing to let it change in its own season. Some fruit ripens in the spring and some in the fall.

Regardless of what is arising, liberation is here right now. The invitation is to inquire into what is arising—just because it's here and not for any other reason. If conditioning is arising in you right now, even if there's conditioning to try to fix or change things, that's the life you are given right now. There is no better life. There is no better service than to fully experience your life and find out the truth of it. Inquire into it without trying to get rid of any part of it; it may not be the season for that part of life to ripen and be done. And yet, even when it's not the season for apples, you still water the apple tree. So, even if it is not the time for your conditioning to end, you can still give it this gift of simply seeing it, truly looking at what's here. That will help it ripen.

Where is Your Attention?

We usually think that suffering is caused by bad experiences, but it's actually caused by our attention flowing towards something that's not really there—towards something that's not very true in that moment, such as an idea or a fantasy, which are very small truths. Suffering ends when our attention is flowing towards what's actually happening, what's true in the moment. Suffering is the distance—the gap—between what you're oriented towards and what is. However large the gap is between what's actually happening and what you're putting your attention on is how much you will suffer. If there's no gap, then there's no suffering.

That gap can be present regardless of whether something good or bad is happening. For example, if someone close to you is dying, your awareness may be so fully focused on what's happening in that moment that the experience

lacks the suffering you would expect, although suffering may appear later if thoughts creep in about how things should have or could have been. In contrast, there are times when things are going really well and you're suffering, often because you're afraid of things changing. If this truth is understood—that it doesn't matter what happens—it can change your life. It may or may not change what's happening, but it will change your experience of what's happening.

Some of the things we might be oriented towards in the moment are very small truth such as hopes, dreams, desires, fears, doubts, and worries. When we give our attention to something that isn't actually happening, such as these things, we suffer. When our attention is focused on these things, we never feel satisfied because they don't nourish us. But when we give our passion and curiosity to more of what's true in the moment, we don't suffer. What are you giving your awareness, your passion, your curiosity to?

It's very simple: Our suffering is a matter of how much of our attention is flowing towards what's not actually present, such as hopes, dreams, desires, fears, doubts, worries, ideals, and fantasies. What we're desiring isn't present or we wouldn't be desiring it. Nor is what we fear. Our fears are just as much of a figment of our imaginations as our dreams. None of these things are real, and turning our attention towards the unreal brings us out of contact with the real, where the aliveness of Being can be experienced.

Rejection and Desire

Rejection and desire are the mechanisms with which we resist what is, which results in our suffering. The nature of rejection and desire is that either they're both operating at the same time (because if we're thinking about how great things would be if they were different, we're essentially rejecting things the way they are) or they're operating in a cycle: We go back and forth from rejection to desire. We think: This isn't good. Maybe if I got this or maybe if I meditated more or if only I had a better lover or more money or more freedom, it could be better. Then we go about trying to fulfill that desire and, regardless of whether we succeed or not, we come back to the point where we still reject whatever is present now. Even when we get what we think we want, we may find that it's not that great, so we dream up something else we believe will make things better.

This activity of desiring what isn't present and rejecting what is, is what creates and sustains the sense of a small self. If things are lousy, they're lousy for whom? For *me*. And if things could be better, better for whom? Better for *me*. We're often not even conscious of rejecting and desiring because we're caught up in the content of our desires and fantasies. We get so hypnotized by our fantasies that we're not even aware they're contracting our sense of self and making us feel very small, incomplete, deficient, and unsatisfied.

Nevertheless, that sense of incompleteness can be trusted. It's telling you how true it is that your fantasy will make you feel better. The sense of incompleteness and smallness in the experience of fantasizing shows you just

how little truth there is in your fantasy. Fantasies aren't very true. They only exist in our minds. There isn't much substance or reality to them.

Self-Consciousness

One of our favorite ways of taking attention off of what's true in the moment is by putting it on the *me*, which is a very convincing figment of our imagination. We're constantly checking, How is it going for me? You've undoubtedly had many experiences of being so involved in something that, for a moment, you forgot to check to see how it's going for the *me*, how the *me* is doing, or how the *me* looks. You forgot to be self-conscious. We've all had moments of pure consciousness, when we were totally involved in whatever was happening. Athletes talk about "being in the flow" or "being in the zone." They don't really know how they do what they do because there's no self-consciousness, only consciousness—just what is.

You've also undoubtedly had many experiences of being painfully self-conscious—even when things were going well. A wedding is a great example: It's supposed to be one of the best moments of your life, but because it's so full of self-consciousness, it often falls short. We constantly evaluate our experience, and when we do this, we split ourselves off from it.

The problem with putting attention on the *me* is that the *me* is just a thought; it doesn't actually exist. If you just stop for a moment and look, you won't be able to find this thing called *me*. Whenever you look, there's something different there. It turns out that the *me* has no substance; it's just an ever-changing set of ideas. It's made up of thoughts about *me*. So, when you check to see how *I* am doing, essentially, you're checking to see how a thought is doing. No thought has ever had a thought. This flow of consciousness is rampantly having thoughts, but the *me* within that flow has never had a thought. The *me* is just one of the thoughts appearing in that flow. And yet, all day long, we're checking: How's it going for *me*?

All that is real is experience; there's no container for experience called *me*. So, as long as your attention is flowing towards this *me*, no matter how many good experiences you have, you'll suffer because this is a place of contraction, a place that doesn't include the full breadth of your Being.

When you hear this, it's natural to try to be less self-conscious. But the only way you could do that is by becoming more self-conscious. As long as you're referring to how it's going for *me*, you never get to rest. The antidote is not something you can do. It's what you *are*, and it's right here, right now. You are pure consciousness, and this is the one thing you can never become conscious of. It's the one thing that consciousness itself can't flow to. That's why we put all these substitutes in its place, like the idea *me*. When you actually go looking for consciousness, it's like trying to look into your own eyes without a mirror. You know there are eyes there, but you can't see them. They're not hidden, but you can't see them. We know there's consciousness, but we can't see it or taste or touch it or hear it.

There's nothing else but pure consciousness that is having the illusion of suffering. When you see that, then that is the end of your suffering because that's the end of the *me*. All the *me* has ever been is your suffering. It's not such a great deal, is it? You get to exist but at the cost of suffering. All the *me* is, is this effort. Without the effort, all that's left is the wonderful play of pure consciousness called life, no one to experience it and no one to suffer from it; and yet it dances beautifully.

Noticing and Allowing

There are two simple instructions, or invitations, in satsang. The first is to notice your experience: Really notice what's happening right now. The second is to know that it's the right experience. Whatever you notice, whatever you find, that's the right experience. You thought you had to fix it or improve it, but it turns out that whatever you are experiencing right now is the right experience. A friend of mine has a friend who answers every question about how things are going with "Right on schedule!"

You don't have to wait to do these steps. You can start right now. Notice your experience—what's happening? Bring your awareness, your attention, your curiosity to bear on your experience right now. Secondly, just allow that experience to be the way it is. Stop the endless effort to try to change it, to make it better or different or more or less. Just let it be the way it is.

To the extent that you're doing those two things, there will an absence of suffering. And, of course, the opposite is true: You will suffer to whatever extent your attention and curiosity are focused on what is not or to whatever extent you are trying to fix, change, resist, or avoid this moment.

Actually you can't do either of these completely unless you're doing the other, so these two instructions are really only one. You can't fully notice your experience if you're already trying to change it or get rid of it. And you can't fully allow and embrace your experience if you're not paying attention to it.

One thing that's not required is seeking the right experience. The instructions are not to notice a particular experience or to notice an experience you've heard about or read about or once had that you want to have again. It's simply to notice the experience that you're having right now. There's no need to seek or search for a better experience than the one you're having.

If, however, in this moment, you are desperately trying to get a better experience or resisting the one you're having or paying attention to some idea about how things should be instead of how they are, then that's your experience. You don't even have to go to battle with that. Just notice what that's like.

What is it like when you're lost in a juicy fantasy about how great life will be if only this or that would happen? Or a juicy fear about how terrible life will be if this or that happens? The invitation is to notice what that's like rather than resisting that fantasy. Just notice what it's like to fantasize. Include the

experience of being lost in longing and searching and fantasizing as well as the content of your fantasy. What is the *experience* of being lost in an idea? The point isn't to stop having ideas, which isn't even possible, but to simply notice what that's like. When you stop and notice, you find a lot of fantasizing going on. Most of us have an ongoing mental commentary going on about how our lives could be better or worse. What's that like when your attention is involved with these ideas?

We're always noticing something. I challenge you to not pay attention to anything for the next ten seconds. You can't do it. Noticing just happens. It turns out that these two simple steps are qualities of your Being, not something extra you have to do. Noticing is always happening, even if all we're noticing is the content of an idea. The invitation is to let that noticing take in more—take in the actual *experience* moment to moment. It may seem like a doing at first, but in the doing of it, it's more like you're being done, like you're being noticed along with everything else.

The same is true with allowing your experience: It is also natural to your Being. Right in this moment, your predominant experience is allowing. In this moment, the vast majority of what's happening in this room is okay with you. You're allowing the walls of this room to be the way they are. You're allowing the furniture to be the way it is. You're allowing your breath to breathe the way it is. In fact, you can reject only one aspect of your experience at a time; the rest is naturally allowed. You can only resist one thing at a time.

These two simple instructions are not something you need to do. The point in speaking about them is to get you to notice that noticing and allowing are already happening. This space of allowing is already present. It's so present that it even allows us to be in battle with what is. That's something you can get curious about. How much am I allowing what is and how much am I struggling against what is? What is it like if you just allow yourself even to not allow?

The Myth of Better

We are conditioned to believe something that has very little truth to it, so little truth that it's more accurate to call it a myth: We believe that things could be better. We deeply believe that we can have a better experience or a better life or become a better person. And, of course, the flip side of this is that we believe that things could be worse.

One clue that this belief is a myth is that not everyone agrees on what's better or worse. There's always someone who thinks the exact opposite of what you think. You don't even have to look to others for such contradictions: What you think is better or worse is always changing. What you once felt was good often becomes bad and visa versa: One day you think it would be better to be in a relationship, and then when you're in one, you think it would be better to be alone. The fact that your ideas about better and worse are so variable is another clue that this is a myth. *Better* or *worse* are just ideas with no substance or final definition.

The effort to try to make things better or to avoid something worse is our suffering. In order to hold the idea that something would be better, you have to narrow your awareness. Take the example of a relationship: In the beginning, we're all masters at narrowing our awareness onto all the good qualities of the other person. This narrowing of awareness is effortful, and it causes us to suffer. This struggle is not natural, so awareness doesn't stay contracted. Just naturally, our awareness expands, and we see not only the advantages to being in a relationship but the disadvantages.

Or visa versa, for example, if we've been avoiding something we consider bad and then it happens, with time, our awareness naturally expands to realize that it's not all bad. Those who've experienced something like cancer often speak about the advantages, the tremendous blessings in their life, from having cancer, even when they may be dying from it.

No one can keep the illusion of better going constantly because of the effort it takes to keep awareness narrowed; so it naturally eventually expands. When this happens, it often feels like waking up because the experience is so different. You wake up out of your particular dream of better, and it's often a huge relief. You wake up, for instance, to the fact that you're in a relationship with a real person, and it's both good and bad. Then, if you still choose to move forward with that person, you're doing it with more truth, with your eyes wide open.

We're so used to operating from this conditioning that even when we wake up from one dream of better, we usually latch onto another, although the next illusion may be subtler. For instance, you may now see that a million dollars won't make your life better, but you still believe that enlightenment will, so now you suffer over that idea. Or you might think that life will be better if your internal state were different—if you felt this way or if you didn't feel that way.

What would it be like to be here without referring to any ideas about what would be better or worse? What would it be like to be here without moving towards something "good" or away from something "bad"? It's possible that just as much would happen in life. Life wouldn't stop. What would it be like without any extra effort and struggle?

When we stop creating the division between good and bad, we begin to experience all of what is instead of just half of it. Our perspective is more complete because we're no longer denying half of it. Having ideas about better is like having blinders on. What you see with blinders on is only a part of the truth. If you're aware of the blinders, then there's no problem if, for a moment, you step into just a part of the truth. At times, it's even functional, like when you're balancing your checkbook: It's better to add up the numbers correctly. If you're willing to explore and question the underlying assumption of better, then you can hold this idea more lightly, with more flexibility. Then, if the numbers don't add up right, it's not a big deal.

The other question to ask is, Who is it better or worse for? Not only does the idea of better or worse make our experience very narrow, it makes the sense of

our self very small. In order to even hold the idea of better or worse, there has to be a *me* that it will be better or worse for. Whenever you take on the idea of better, you feel very small.

You also have to watch out for the idea that it would be better to never think in terms of *better* or *worse*. The myth of better is so much at the heart of our struggle and suffering that even when it's pointed out to us, our tendency is to turn that into a struggle as well. This myth is functioning all the time. It won't go away and it doesn't have to. Just become aware of it and learn to be flexible about it. Sometimes it's necessary to step into the idea of better for a moment, like when you're at a restaurant and you're handed a menu. But if the idea of better starts to be believed or becomes fixed, the sense of your self becomes very small and you suffer.

What is it like when you do have an idea of something being better? By the way, none of these ideas are yours or your fault. They're just what you've been told all your life, which is why there are so many opposite ideas within each of us. What's it like when you take on a small self? That small self is just as mysterious as a larger experience of your Being. The experience of this small self, this contracted state, is not any better or worse than the experience of more of your Being; it's just different.

How many different small selves we all have! Every one of your ideas of better is related to an idea of who you are: If you think it's better to get drunk and bust up a bar, there's an identity that goes with that. And if you think it's better to sit in meditation and be in touch with Peace and Being, then there's an identity that goes with that—an idea about who you are.

What's it like when you just give up your ideas about how things might be better and your concern about how things are going? Things are always different, but they're never better or worse. That anything could ever be better or worse than the way it is, is an illusion.

It's all a question of what you are devoted to in this moment. Are you devoted to things being better or to what's real, what's true, what's really going on? There's no judgment here because there's a richness to the experience of having an idea of better and striving towards that. However, the possibility exists for that striving to release and to realize that striving isn't very relevant—you've been devoted to better your whole life, and you still haven't gotten there. You've been devoted to avoiding worse, and it still comes around. Even when you do reach something better, it's never enough.

When this is seen, it's possible to get in touch with a deeper drive, or longing—the longing to know what is really true. Rather than getting rid of any of the ideas about better, just let your devotion get bigger. It's still fine to try to make your life better in practical ways. The important thing is where your devotion lies. What are you really devoted to in your life right now? Is it the biggest truth?

Besides, do you really know what is better? You've taken it all on faith. You've believed what others said was better, but right now do you really know what is better? You don't really know what would make your life better or worse. So, now what? You don't know. What's it like to not know? Life doesn't grind to a halt. In fact, there's something very alive about this place of not knowing. When you don't know, you look around a little more. You're more present to what's really going on.

Without the idea of better, you can know things just for the joy of knowing things. You can know, for instance, the difference between one shade of green and another. They're different, but one isn't better or worse. When you're not narrowing your perception onto an idea of what's better, you're free to experience the richness of life and take in the differences. You can start to really enjoy whatever you're experiencing without the added layers of your ideas about good or bad. When there's no idea of better, there's no relationship to the world; there's just the world.

Am I Willing?

A great way to get in touch with your resistance to what is, is asking the following questions: Am I willing to have the experience I am having right now? and Am I willing to not have the experience I am having right now? If the answer is even slightly no to either of those questions, then suffering is present. This is a very high standard because it means that you have to say yes to every experience you're having right now and yes to every experience you're not having right now. One of our favorite ways of saying no to our current experience is fantasizing about all the other experiences we're not actually having. We often think we should be having some other experience than what we're having.

Fantasizing about the past is another way we keep ourselves outside of our present experience. The truth is that every experience you've had you've managed to lose. You're already losing the experience you're having right now, and a new one is taking its place. Are you also willing to lose every experience you have?

These questions help to broaden our focus so that we're not just noticing what's happening but also our relationship to what's happening. They broaden your focus to also include what's moving in you in response to whatever is happening—is it willingness or unwillingness? Is it a yes to this moment or a no?

When you ask these questions, what you quickly discover is that basically the answer is almost always no. Either grossly or subtly, there is usually a no there. For example, you might be willing to have a lot of money, but you aren't willing to lose it. Or you might be willing to have an experience end, such as an illness, but you're not willing to have it.

If you pay attention, you'll discover that trying to manage your experience is what your life is about. We are always trying to have the right experience by

saying yes to the right ones and no to the wrong ones. When you practice this inquiry, you begin to see how much of the activity of your mind is caught up in resistance, in saying no to something. Even wanting something is a form of saying no to the way things are. When you are wanting something to be different, are you willing to have it be the way it is? No.

Nevertheless, there are moments when we experience an aspect of our Being that says a big yes to it all, to whatever is happening. In those moments, willingness is present, but it doesn't feel like *you* had anything to do with that. The suffering goes away, but we didn't do it. In hearing this, we may get excited: "I get it—I just have to stop resisting." But this is just another way of saying no—this time to resistance—and this will cause you to suffer as much as ever.

What I'm pointing to with the inquiry question "Am I Willing?" is not so much this dilemma (which you can't do anything about, because anything you try to do would just be more resistance) but another way of being with your resistance. Can you ask this question simply to see what's there? We're not very familiar with being with our experience in this way. Most of the time, our questions are in service to trying to get something to be better. What about asking this question just to find out what's there? Just touch your experience without any added push or pull, without a sense of trying to change your experience. This isn't a denial of your experience or an attempt to transcend it so that you don't have to experience your suffering. You're bringing your experience into focus but not doing anything about it. You're just experiencing it with an openhearted curiosity about it as it is.

What's it like to have the experience of resistance? In the space that this inquiry opens up, it's possible to discover a surprising thing: This big yes even shows up for our resistance. There is a place in our Being that is perfectly willing to have any experience and perfectly willing to resist and therefore suffer. In touching our resistance this gently, just letting it be the way it is, it's possible to touch more of our experience. To whatever extent we can touch our resistance, it's possible to see what else is present. Space is given to our *whole* experience, beyond the struggle and dissatisfaction created by our various strategies and ideas about what we should and shouldn't resist, what we should and shouldn't allow.

This question, Am I willing? illuminates the endless flow of unwillingness that is our conditioning. This is what we were all taught to do. We've all been programmed to say no to this and yes to that.

It can be helpful to realize that none of your conditioning is your fault. All of it is inherited. Our parents, our teachers, our spiritual teachers, our friends, TV, and the books we've read have all contributed to the ways we resist. They've all been telling us what to say no to. The beauty is, if you've been around long enough, you've been taught to say no to everything, to opposite things: Don't be poor and don't be rich, don't be proud and don't be self-effacing, and on and on. If you get to know your own conditioning, you discover how contradictory it is. That's why you never got it right—because when everything is wrong, nothing is right.

In the midst of this conditioning is the big yes that you can't make happen. There's no technique or process for bringing you to a place of that wholehearted yes. And yet, just by being willing to experience your suffering and struggle in this moment, you can discover that this big yes is also present. Nothing has been gotten rid of: Your conditioning is still present, but the view has broadened to include this Presence that has no problem with any experience nor with the resistance to it. Paradoxically, you discover that being willing to see all the ways you say no, opens the door to experiencing what is always saying yes.

This open-handed, openhearted gentle way of touching our experience and our suffering is counter to how we've been taught to respond to things. We've been taught to see everything as an opportunity to decide if something is good or bad for *me*. For example, you notice the weather, and immediately you decide if that's good or bad. Everything from the most personal to the most impersonal event in our lives is put to the question: Is that good or is that bad for me?

Spiritual inquiry is about another possibility, which is to just touch your experience without any push or pull. If what happens when you do that is resistance, then you just touch *that* experience. You never run out of opportunities to just be curious about your experience as it is.

Liberation from suffering isn't dependent on our resistance being gone but on the recognition of this big yes, this willingness to allow whatever is. Liberation isn't the absence of resistance but a meeting of that resistance and a recognition of the underlying big yes present in every experience, including resistance. For that, you don't have to do anything, you don't have to add anything, you don't have to get rid of anything.

Of course, the part of you that has been conditioned to try to make your life different is going to take these words and try to make them into something you have to work on, something you have to learn to do right. But guess what? Being has no problem with you taking these words and using them to suffer. Can you open yourself to the devastating truth that Being has no problem with any of your suffering?

Are you willing to find out what is here and to touch it, to touch your own experience? Are you willing to touch your conditioned resistance? With the discovery of this big yes, our conditioning shrinks back down to its actual size, which allows us to see it more clearly. This seeing shortens its lifespan, while resistance doesn't. Touching your conditioning without any expectation speeds up its dissolving, while resistance keeps it intact. Our conditioning needs this gentle, curious touch in order to be seen in perspective.

This bigger yes is not something we do or practice or accomplish. It doesn't come out of our doing. It's an aspect of our Being. It's really a description of Being itself, whose nature is *yes*. Its nature is love. Its nature is acceptance. This *yes* is not something it does; it just is that *yes*.

The nature of this bigger yes is all-inclusive, it has no opposite, and it's fundamental. It's a fundamental aspect of what you are. It's already here. You don't have to do anything to have it be here.

In contrast, let's look at the experience of *no*. What's the experience of rejection like—not wanting something, not liking something, thinking something is bad? This *no* is something you have to assert: You have to speak up or act to get rid of what you're rejecting.

Worrying is one example of how we say *no* to experience. It's like *no-ing* preemptively or preventively. All this rejection is simply a mental activity. As a result, it doesn't have a lot of effect. Our worry doesn't prevent anything from happening. We try to get rid of a lot more things than we have ever succeeded at getting rid of. We have all kinds of strategies for how to prevent something, and then it can happen anyway.

The same is true of our *yes-ing*. We spend a lot of time idly wishing and hoping, saying yes to things that aren't even here. But this is just more mental activity. Sometimes those desires are strong enough that they spill over into activity, and we work real hard to get what we want—a new lover, more money, a spiritual experience. Most of the activity is still in our thoughts, though, and the world doesn't always comply with what we want.

Life doesn't refer to your ideas about life. Life has a much bigger playbook than the one in your mind. A lot happens that you do want and a lot happens that you don't want, and yet there is all this mental yes-ing and no-ing and trying to figure out what you should be wanting and what you shouldn't be wanting. Why so much effort for so little results?

Contrast all this effort to the innate yes, which is the nature of that which is aware. Just like water is wet and fluid, the nature of this space around experience is that it's aware and loving, and it says yes to everything; it's embracing of everything. It even permeates all of this activity of mind. Right there in the midst of all of our drama and struggle and effort, there's something saying "yes—okay let's worry now." This *yes* gives life to whatever is there. If a worrying thought is there, it enlivens even that. That's why our mental constructs are so entertaining—because even they are imbued with this aliveness of Being.

This *yes* is present in everything; it's more prevalent than air and more intimate than your own skin. It gets into every nook and cranny, and it is every nook and cranny. It's already there. It's already here. It's inherent in every expression, whether it's a mental expression, a physical activity, or an act of nature. Every desperate longing and fear is actually imbued with awareness, this overarching embrace, this *yes*, which is your nature.

This is quite a contrast to the usual way we say yes to things. It's much more fundamental.

Be Here Now

“Be here now” is a classic spiritual instruction, which essentially means to be in the present moment. It points towards something that is already true, towards something that is unavoidable. It’s like me telling you to sit the way you’re sitting. You’re already doing it. You’re already being here now. No one has ever successfully left the now. If I told you to be somewhere else now or to be here some other time, you can’t do it. It’s too late to be somewhere else than *here*. When you just stop and look, you see how ridiculous it is that you could be anywhere else than here or that you have to do anything to be present in the now. Then, why do we even talk about it?

We talk about it because there are two kinds of nows: There’s the real now, the now that is happening, and what you could call a fake now, a made-up now, one that doesn’t really exist. Instead of experiencing the real now, we’re often experiencing our fantasies about the now. We experience something that’s not really happening. It’s like we go to sleep and have a little dream in the now, an experience of a non-existent now. Anytime thought is occurring, you’re experiencing something that’s not really happening. Even if I talk about something wonderful, like Liberation, what happens is you go inside and have a fantasy about Liberation, which is not what’s happening right now. It’s a made-up now.

We narrow our attention onto an idea about something that’s not here in an attempt to make it be here. We think that if we fantasize enough about something, it will happen; as if, for instance, fantasizing about a spouse or roommate picking up after him or herself will actually make that happen. We live in an internal, magical world, like the world of a young child, where we believe our wishes have the power to change reality.

Our capacity to fantasize is like having a machine that prints counterfeit money. We’ve all been desperately printing off counterfeit realities, and they don’t do us any good. Our fantasies never work, we can never buy anything with this fake money—it’s got Mickey Mouse on it instead of George Washington. It doesn’t do us any good.

Even when the instructions “Be here now” are given, the mind can turn it into something to do. It then creates a fantasy of what being here now would be like, and we experience that fantasy. That’s what happens when we *try* to be here now.

At other times, we either forget to generate a fantasy or we’re just so exhausted from the effort to maintain our fantasies, dreams, illusions, preferences, and ideas that for a moment we collapse from that effort and land in the real now.

Rather than turning this instruction into something you have to do—you have to stop fantasizing—the invitation is to experience whatever you’re experiencing now, even if what you’re experiencing is a fantasy. The point is not to shift what you’re experiencing now but to actually experience it. If what you’re experiencing now is the veil of illusion being ripped aside, exposing the real now

in all of its glory—great. And if what you're experiencing now is a thick veil of fantasy, conceptualization, and desire—separation from the real now—great. Then, *that's* your experience. The invitation is to really experience that because that's the experience you're having, so it's the only one you can have. The alternative is just not available right now.

When we're desperately trying to experience the reality of these unreal things, there's never any satisfaction, only dissatisfaction. Trying to make your fantasies real is never satisfying. Paradoxically, when we fully experience the inherent dissatisfaction of our hopes and fantasies, that's satisfying. It's so satisfying to be real, even if that means being real about the fact that you're lost in an unreal thought. Satisfaction lies in what is happening. By being willing to show up for whatever experience you're having, you begin to experience the real now. Only when you show up for the emptiness of your dreams do you get to experience the fullness of what is happening in that moment—the sound of the birds, the light in the room . . .

When you begin to include more in your awareness than the content of your thoughts and fantasies, you realize the fullness of now. Now is ridiculously full; it contains everything, including your fantasies. It's not only there in your fantasy; it's also here in reality. The now has no limits, both in terms of space and time. It includes everything that is. *Now* already is everything that was and everything that ever will be. So, what do you want to give your attention to—an empty fantasy or this bursting reality?

This isn't meant to suggest that you should try to change the fact that you have dreams and fantasies and hopes. This ability to imagine other possibilities is a great gift. Practically speaking, it's very useful to be able to generate an image of something that's not present. For example, if someone says to you, "Meet me at my house at noon," this ability to imagine gets you to the right place on time. However, the value of this ability is limited.

In addition, this capacity to experience a fake now also serves us by allowing us to experience the fullness of the real now through contrast with the emptiness of a fake now. If there weren't this capacity to live in illusion, then it would be meaningless to talk about living in reality. There is no way to distinguish the experience of reality unless you also can experience unreality. This is the reason we create illusion: It eventually makes us connoisseurs of reality.

Hopelessness

One thing that happens when you orient towards the present moment, towards what is really happening instead of what isn't, is that hope is destroyed. Life also destroys our hope as it reveals the truth. Have you ever noticed how life doesn't seem to refer to your hopes and dreams? When you live long enough, every hope, dream, desire, and ideal you've ever had gets dashed. They get dashed even when they come true and you find out your dream wasn't the answer either: You get a million dollars, and you're still miserable. You get a wonderful relationship, and you're still restless. The truth about your hopes, wishes, and dreams is that they don't get you anywhere.

Seeing this would be simple if we never got anything we hoped for because we'd quickly lose interest in hoping and desiring. The problem is that occasionally we get what we hope for, and that is powerfully reinforcing, powerfully addicting. We become addicted to our hopes and dreams. We desperately struggle for a few intermittent rewards. The complete reality of hoping is that it's mostly a horrible experience.

There are lots of lies behind our hopes. For one, we assume that if we get what we hope for it will be forever. That's the whole fairytale ending: "and they lived happily ever after." We never look at the whole truth, which is that everything is always changing, and everything that comes is going to go.

Another lie is that we believe that life will be a certain way once our dream is realized. But, of course, everything in life has both a good and bad side: We get a million dollars and it only messes up our lives. Life is never as simple as our hopes lead us to believe.

A third lie is that we think that hoping, dreaming, and wishing will make us more active and productive, but does it? It actually takes up a tremendous amount of time and energy. We think that hoping is what makes our life go somewhere. Without it, we think we will be passive and do nothing. We don't see that life happens regardless of our hopes and dreams.

The biggest lie is that we believe we'll be happy when our hopes are realized. But our hopes are like ordering a dessert from one of those dessert trays: It looks really good, but when you bite into it, it's often stale and flavorless. When you actually bite into all those hopes, dreams, and desires that have driven you for so long, you find out they don't satisfy or if they do, it's the kind of satisfaction that's never enough. A friend of mine used to say: "You can never get enough of what doesn't really satisfy." Hoping and desiring are like a hunger that can't fully be satisfied.

We tend to follow our hopes and desires away from what's real. We keep trying to satisfy them, but each time we try, we move farther away from what's real, and what is real is the only thing that can satisfy us. This is a description of every addiction. Every time you get a fix, it satisfies less, so the next time, you need a higher dose. When you go in that direction, the connection to what's real gets thinner and thinner, and the suffering gets worse and worse. It gets to the point where you're not experiencing any satisfaction, just a temporary relief from the pain and suffering of hoping.

It's not a mistake that we get so addicted to our hopes. Strangely enough, that's the path to our salvation. Ramana Maharshi used to say that no one ever wakes up from a good dream—you wake up from your bad dreams. Sometimes there's no other way to find out the truth of your hopes and dreams than to bet all your money on them and discover that, win or lose, they still don't satisfy.

Another possibility is to be willing to look at your hopes and see what is really true about them: Are they satisfying? Are they bringing something real and

fulfilling into your life or are they taking you farther away from what's real? What are you choosing right now? Are you choosing something that will lead you to the truth or something that will fuel that underlying dissatisfaction? In this moment, one of those things is happening: you're orienting towards what is real and true or you're orienting towards a hope or a dream.

When you show up for the experience of hoping, you realize that what you're hoping for is not real, it's not here, it's not happening. This dissolves the hope because once something is exposed as having little truth, it becomes uninteresting, irrelevant. If I say, for instance, that there's a hungry tiger in this room, you aren't affected because it's obviously not true. When you actually show up for one of your hopes and discover that it's as unreal as this tiger, the juice goes out of it. Nothing is driving it anymore. Your hopes turn out to be empty. Once the truth is seen about your hopes, you can't delude yourself anymore.

Even though, it's a big relief to lose all your hopes, that is, to see that there's no point to them, there's often tremendous resistance to letting go of each and every one. The reason this is so is that we don't really see how it's possible to be without them. Instead, we sometimes replace them with despair, which is really just a negative hope. Rather than hoping for something wonderful, despair is like hoping for something terrible. We fantasize something terrible happening in the future. So, for most of us, the experience of being without hope is the experience of despair.

Why do we do that? One reason is we think that that will motivate either ourselves or others: If we're afraid, we expect that to motivate us to do something about it or to get someone to take care of it for us. This pattern became established because occasionally it worked, especially when we were little. When we were afraid, we discovered that sometimes we got taken care of. Another reason we do this is that it gives us a sense of knowing what's going to happen, which often seems better than not knowing, even if what we think is going to happen is negative. We also do this because it adds drama to our lives. Without hope and despair, what is there to struggle for or against? Like hope, despair is just another strategy for managing the future.

The good news is that being present to whatever is happening not only deconstructs your hopes but also your fears. And life, of course, does that too. Often from sheer exhaustion from so much hoping and despairing, you come to a place where you are hope-less and despair-less. You've lost all your hopes, and you're not replacing them with despair. You're not filling in this moment with hope for a better moment or fear of a worse moment. You're just experiencing the absence of hopes and the absence of despair.

That experience is an experience of emptiness. When you begin to pay attention to the content of your mind, you notice how much of it is a hope or fear. Imagine if you saw that all of your hopes and fears have no relevance, no reality, no truth. Because that's been the focus of so much of your attention, when your hopes and fears become uninteresting and irrelevant, life can seem empty initially. Now what? What's left? What's left is reality, which is always

rich and satisfying. All striving and dissatisfaction disappear in the now, and what appears is completely satisfying.

When you finally stay in the emptiness, then it's possible to see what's beyond your hopes and desires, and you notice that there's a lot more going on than your grasping. There's much more to the now than what's arising in the mind. Life is and always has been unfolding in incredible ways, and our desires and hopes have had very little to do with that.

Telling the Whole Truth

There is power in speaking the truth. Speaking the truth is often what therapy is about. Some have suggested that speaking the truth is the therapeutic process, that the actual speaking of what is happening is therapeutic in and of itself. There is an assumption in therapeutic processes, however, that what needs to be admitted to or confessed is what's wrong, what's not working, what's not comfortable, what's not easy in your life. In satsang, we suggest you talk not only about what's wrong or even what's right in your life but also about the most subtle and profound truths of your experience. Satsang is a place where you can confess the full extent of your Beingness.

There are also times when the only way you can truly express the breadth and depth of your Being is without words. Silence is the only thing big enough. So, silence gets included as part of the confession that can happen in satsang.

There is great power in admitting the whole truth, even if words are not needed. What would it mean to admit to things that are complete? What about the sunshine? Is the sunshine complete? We can admit to the sunshine. We can confess the glory of the light coming into this room, every shade of color and shape and form that our eyes are taking in right now are a blessing of that sunshine.

If you just take it as it is, is your body or anything else a problem in this moment? There may be lots of sensations and things happening right now in your body, but right now what a miracle it is just to have arms and legs and hair and toenails. What an amazing thing to have toenails! And ears. And teeth. What an amazing thing! How much of the experience of your body right now is like the sunshine?

And what about the more subtle parts of your experience? What would it mean to confess the content of your Heart right now? How rich to have the capacity to be touched so deeply by the joys and sorrows of life! What an amazing thing just to be here and have this capacity to be affected by words, by sounds, by the sunlight, by the experience of having a body—to have something that registers all of that. What a miracle! Are you willing to confess that?

In this moment, can you also admit what an amazing development it is to have problems? It seems fairly unique to humans. What an amazing thing to have an experience and then have an idea of how it should be, to actually create that tension or that split. What richness! There's no particular drama to the sunlight

in this room, for instance, but you could have a drama about it, such as wishing you were outside in it instead of in this room.

One of the things we humans are touched by is this conditioned capacity to struggle—to have an idea of how things should be in the midst of this amazing wonder of Being as it is. You can be in the middle of a room with this much sunlight and what's really going on is you're struggling with the question of do I have enough love or do I have enough money or whatever, even though in this moment we are all fabulously wealthy with sunlight. We have sunlight to burn. We have so much we could waste it! In the midst of all that richness, we can also have the rich experience of lacking something. The invitation is to include this in the confession of what's happening.

What power there is in speaking about all of it! It puts everything in perspective. When you speak your problems, all of sudden they are actual size. For example, no matter how annoying something someone does is, the truth is that it's only annoying while they're doing it. That problem is really only so big. Seeing a problem in perspective makes room for discovering other ways of being with it.

It's a demanding practice to speak the truth. It demands being willing to admit our humanness and how in the human dimension we are limited and evolve gradually. It also demands being willing to admit that our humanness is not the whole truth. Speaking this out loud often allows that admission to take on depth and breadth. How much of the range of what's here right now are you willing to admit? To admit any of it is an amazingly courageous thing.

Love is Always Here

To admit the whole truth means recognizing that love is always present. Much of our suffering comes from one simple misunderstanding: that love is limited, that it is here only some of the time. This is a misunderstanding about the true nature of love. Love is actually the container for everything else. It's always present. Love is that aware, allowing space in which everything happens, so it's present no matter what happens. It's so completely loving that it allows everything, even painful emotions and negative thoughts.

Realizing this truth ends all striving and struggle and, consequently, all suffering. We no longer need to strive to create circumstances where love will be present. It's already here. You just notice the space of allowing that has always been here.

Once you realize that love is already here and never goes away, it no longer makes sense to strive to make things be other than they are, no matter what happens, no matter what comes and what goes. Something can come into that space or leave that space and the space is still there. The love hasn't been added to or diminished by either the coming or the going.

What is it that you're really looking for in getting love from another person? You're looking for space. The perfect lover is someone who allows you to be whatever way you are. If you're in a good mood, the perfect lover would allow

that. If you're in a bad mood, the perfect lover would allow that too. And yet, that perfect lover—that perfect love—is already here. It is already allowing everything.

What really nourishes us is simply recognizing this love—the endless giving of space to everything that happens. That allowing, or accepting, is the nature of our Being; and when we simply notice that, we can experience this limitless love.

Everything is Perfect

The truth is that everything is perfect just the way it is. Right here, right now. That's pretty simple. You don't have to go searching for perfection. You don't have to do anything for it. It's already here. Nothing is missing in this moment. But there's more to it than this: This perfection is always changing; it never stays the same. It's never even the same way twice. It reinvents itself every moment as a new perfection. It's very alive.

Given this, you can see why it can be so challenging to keep recognizing that everything is perfect. You finally see the perfection of a particular moment, and when you look again, everything has changed and it may not seem so perfect anymore. Somebody rear-ends your car—this is perfection? You get a letter from the IRS—this is perfection? You become depressed—this is perfection? Even when something better than we imagined happens, it can be challenging because it messes with our idea of perfection. Perfection turns out to be much wilder and crazier than your idea of perfection. It goes off in all kinds of directions that you wouldn't necessarily include in perfection if it were up to you.

For many, the recognition of perfection comes when their awareness is expanded and they step outside themselves for a moment. Then, perfection is obvious. As a result, spiritual techniques have been designed to do this in order to help us realize core truths, such as the perfection of everything.

You can imagine how misconceptions develop from this: The sense of perfection becomes associated with expanded states, and we begin to think it lies only there. So, we get busy seeking these states in order to get our dose of perfection. But, like everything else, these states come and go. Rarely does someone stay in an expanded state when, for instance, they get a flat tire.

Fortunately, the recognition of perfection is not dependent on your state. There's nothing wrong with expanded states, but the effort necessary to try to maintain them is exhausting and can interfere with experiencing perfection in very simple moments, even in a contracted moment. When you're busy trying to hang on to a state, you're not seeing that perfection is in every state and every experience. If there's perfection in the Whole, then why wouldn't it be true of every part of the Whole? What if it's possible to realize the perfection in everything that happens and in every state that comes along? What would that mean? How would you approach your experiences?

Think about the way you approach your spiritual practice now. You probably approach it with a degree of sacredness—you create an altar with pictures and flowers, light a candle, sit in a particular posture, and close your eyes. All of that is done in honor of the perfection—the truth—that is revealed through that practice. What if everything is revealing truth to you? What if everything is revealing the perfection? Wouldn't it make sense to approach everything with the same sense of sacredness, with the sense that every moment is worthy of your full, undivided attention?

If all your experiences are facets of this perfection, why would you leave any of them out? Every experience that comes along, even losing track of perfection, can be experienced as perfect. You can approach the experience of expansion and the experience of contraction with the same sacredness. Every experience is not only imbued with perfection but made of it.

You're never done recognizing this perfection because the perfection shows up in a new and completely different way every moment. The recognition of perfection is more about cultivating a sense of wonder than experiencing an expanded state. Without the willingness to meet everything with wonder and curiosity, you miss many parts of the perfection of this wild, strange, and mysterious thing called life. The perfection is much, much bigger than anything that can be contained in our ideas about life. Even if we've experienced a lot of this thing called life, life always manages to surprise us. Are you willing to be surprised again and again?