

Love as Our True Nature

By Doug McGill

(A transcript of the first of six talks given at the Rochester Meditation Center as "The One Reality is Love: Six Evenings Exploring a Miracle")

Would it be possible to spend the next 60 minutes as emptiness—emptiness sitting, emptiness feeling, emptiness noticing, emptiness thinking, emptiness being?

There's a famous saying from the Hindu sage Nisargadatta and it goes: "Wisdom tells me I am nothing, love tells me everything. Between these two my life flows."

Meditation is very good at helping us to accomplish both of these steps.

On the one hand, by carefully noticing from moment to moment what is happening in experience, we notice very quickly that nothing is permanent. Everything is always changing, nothing stays the same. Sounds, tastes, smells and sensations are all fleeting and the whole world of sights disappears with the simple act of closing one's eyes.

Likewise, emotions are present for a short while and then disappear or are replaced by another one. Moods shift and thoughts come and go so fast we can hardly catch up. When you really pay attention you notice that everything is disappearing all the time.

Sometimes we know we are thinking but the thoughts are disappearing so fast we don't really know what we are thinking—only that we are overwhelmed by our thoughts.

We discover in meditation that we actually experience life a lot like the way we watch a film movie projected at 36 frames a second. Most of the movie is actually darkness. An illusion of movement is created when those still frames pass in front of a light source quickly. That's what our own human experience is actually like when we take a close look at it. At each one of the five sense doors, intermittent pulses of sensation and information are streaming in front of consciousness. The mind combines these five strings of pulses and from them weaves the illusion of three-dimensional space and time with sounds, images, textures, tastes and smells to create the movie of our life!

After we see how the mind creates an illusion of continuous movement from the series of impermanent moments at each of the five sense doors, we are no longer fooled. We recognize how our actual experience consists mostly of the gaps between the pulses of information coming through the senses, as well as the gap between thoughts.

We see we are made more from the gaps between "things" (usually called "objects" in meditation parlance) than from the "things" themselves!

In other words, what makes up most of what we usually call "me" or "I" (insert your own name here if you'd like) is actually emptiness. Indeed if there is emptiness before and after an object like a thought or a sensation arises, what could the thought or sensation itself be made of? Nothing but emptiness. We finally see that no such things as objects exist and that we are nothing but emptiness in our true nature.

WISDOM TELLS ME 'I AM NOTHING'

Try as we did, having looked again and again, over and over at each part of our lived experience—our thoughts, feelings and perceptions—we never once found anything resembling a permanent and stable "I" or "me." Because it just did not exist.

From meditation we discover we are not the thoughts of our mind, the sensations of our body or the perceptions of the world—all that we'd previously identified as "I" or "me."

With the "I" thus dissolved, we experience a tremendous sense of freedom from the incessant demands of the "I" that we normally spend most of our lives trying to satisfy.

It's like you are a slave who has been freed from a tyrannical master; or like a marionette whose strings to the puppeteer have been cut. From then on the life that had been structured around "I want ...", "I need ...", and "I am ..." is ended, because the "I" has been seen through. Such freedom!

This is the first great discovery of the spiritual path: the "wisdom that knows I am nothing."

So here we arrive, abiding as nothing—a great big, shining, empty, happy nothing. And we can rest for a good long time here, maybe even for our lifetimes. This is where the Buddha was after he was enlightened but before he decided to start teaching. He was walking around with a great big grin on his face, completely happy and fulfilled. He didn't think of teaching what he'd learned at first because he thought what he'd discovered was too subtle and hard to grasp, that other human beings wouldn't understand.

But in time he changed his mind because as wonderful as it was to enjoy the happiness of being nothing—of having dropped the burdensome story of "I"—something further happened and the Buddha was moved to teach what he'd discovered to other beings.

This is a profound and deeply moving story for several reasons, one of which is its simple message that even after enlightenment people continue to grow and change.

Enlightenment—in the sense of knowing "the wisdom that tells me I am nothing"—is not the end of the story. In many respects it is only the beginning.

What moved and changed the Buddha after his enlightenment was love. He felt compassion for other beings who had not yet been liberated from the suffering caused by believing in the permanence, separateness and vulnerability of their supposed "I."

LOVE TELLS ME 'I AM EVERYTHING'

It turns out that emptiness even in its unmanifested state—before it becomes rainfall and snowflakes, animals and flowers, sights and sounds, thoughts and feelings—is a very special kind of emptiness.

This emptiness knows and loves. Which means that knowing and loving are the same.

Loving is knowing; knowing is loving. There is the story of the Buddha who once gave a sermon consisting entirely of holding up a flower in his hand. One monk in the audience that day smiled and was enlightened. This is emptiness knowing, emptiness loving. All of the things of this world are actually made of loving—this is what the monk saw when he saw the flower. And after that, that same monk would have realized that everything that he experienced in life was the same as the flower: it was love manifesting as form.

To know this is to know "the love that tells me that I am everything."

This path of love is the continuation of the spiritual journey that never ends.

It is my hope that over the next six evenings we deeply explore this path of love.

Vipassana and metta (loving-kindness) practices from Buddhism, and Direct Path practices that come from Hinduism, are unmatched in my experience for continuing the spiritual journey with the felt knowledge that "love tells me I am everything."

It's so important that everything that we do and share be practical and useful to each one of us. It shouldn't be theoretical, it should be something we can immediately put to use in our daily lives. That's another reason I was inspired to do these talks, to go to the very most useful practices that point to the actual and practical experience of love.

OUR TRUE NATURE IS LOVE

Because generally in today's society, we don't know what love truly is. Our culture provides a very cheapened understanding of love, as a feeling of bliss that come from finding a person who gives us that feeling, in the same way a delicious dinner satisfies our taste buds, or a pair of shoes satisfies our vanity and aesthetic longings.

It's important for us to know a higher, selfless, reality-based love, and to know how we can work with our lives to live from that place of love most or even all of the time.

There is a good Buddhist story that helps to illustrate this higher love.

In this story, often called "The Girl at the Well," an Indian girl from a low social caste worked at village well, scooping cups of water for people to drink. One day, Ananda, a

monk who was the Buddha's main attendant, went to the well and met the young girl serving water. When the girl saw Ananda approach she said to him, "Teacher, I'm of very lowly caste, please don't accept water from me as it would taint your holiness."

Ananda looked at the girl with a smile and said, "I'm not asking for caste, I'm asking for water." This made the girl's heart melt and she fell in love with Ananda on the spot. She loved him in his resplendent orange robes and with his smile and tenderness.

So she went to the Buddha in a fever and said, "Lord Buddha, would you allow me to be Ananda's attendant?" And the Buddha said her name and then said, "Your heart is full of love but you don't understand your feelings. What you really love is not Ananda, but Ananda's kindness. Know that kindness that Ananda showed to you, and then from your own station and place in life share that same kindness with others who come to you. If you do that you will have the status of a Queen on the Earth." In some versions of this story, the girl later ordained and became a nun in the Buddha's monastic order.

What is it in that story that helps us dive into directly knowing our true nature as human beings? It's that the Buddha was pointing to two different aspects of Ananda, his true nature and his false nature, and he was telling the girl that she was mixing them up. She thought she loved Ananda the man, the body, the personality. She wanted to acquire those things. And the Buddha was telling her that she was confused about her feelings and that what she really loved was Ananda's true nature, which was kindness or love.

LOVE IS UNIVERSAL AND IMPERSONAL

This is the quality that I want to bring out, that what we are doing when we directly explore true nature, is that we are training ourselves to know our own true nature as love. As distinct from our bodies, our names, our gender, our address, our salary, our past history, our personality, our anything. Our thought stream, our brilliance, our stupidity, or any other story you tell yourself about who you are is the false self.

The Buddha was pointing to another, deeper, truer aspect of Ananda and of all of us, which is our true nature as love. When the Buddha told the young girl that what she loved was Ananda's kindness he was saying that what she loved was his love.

This is a universal and impersonal love.

Another place this is underscored is the famous Metta sermon by the Buddha whose most famous passage goes:

As a mother would risk her life

To protect her child, her only child,

So towards all beings should one cultivate

Boundless love.

There's a lot in those lines but can you see how the Buddha is encouraging us to get the felt sense of our true nature as boundless love. This love that doesn't draw distinctions between individual people but rather sees the same true nature in all beings. The way to live the most safely and the most happily is thus to live from a sense of connectedness with all beings. Not in an abstract way but in a very direct and tangible way.

This is what is to be cultivated, the Buddha says, even to the point of risking our lives.

It is quite a radical statement.

So we're here to discover our true nature, to learn who we are in our essence.

The Buddha said, speaking to this point directly, "the natural mind is radiant and pure."

The second part of this famous quote goes: "It is only because of visiting defilements that we suffer." The defilements are those activities of mind that veil or obscure the natural mind such as attachment to pleasant feelings, aversion to unpleasant ones and the root delusion of thinking that everything in life is about "I" and "me."

TRUE NATURE AND THE DEFILEMENTS

Broadly speaking, one can follow a path or practices that are oriented more towards true nature (the "natural mind") on the one hand, or on the defilements on the other.

The Buddha taught in both ways. For example the practices of "Taking Refuge" (in Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha) and loving-kindness (metta) meditation directly manifest true nature; while practices such as the Five Precepts or the Five Hindrances aim to dissolve unhealthy habits of mind that veil the light of true nature.

Ultimately, both orientations have the same goal and their methods employ the same mode of action. Abiding as true nature naturally dissolves defilements; while dissolving defilements (by using none other than the solvent of true nature) naturally reveals true nature to further shine. At some times and in some circumstances one practice orientation seems more suitable; and at other times the reverse seems true.

In very broad strokes, my own practice (and thus the orientation of the Rochester Meditation Center) for the past 15 or so years has been primarily oriented towards directly dissolving defilements. While now, possibly because those very practices have to some degree done just that, I increasingly seem to be drawn (and so am sharing as a spiritual friend at the RMC) practices aimed at directly knowing true nature.

True nature as we've seen goes by many names including Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, compassion, happiness, equanimity, generosity, patience and peace.

What thread unites these understandings of true nature? In what sense do all of these names for our true nature—names being conceptual labels and mental constructions—point to the non-conceptual experience that we directly live?

Most importantly, how can we immediately know this essence of our true nature in our experience and live all or at least most moments of our lives from our true nature?

My idea is for us to use the next six evenings to investigate the possibility that the single best word to encompass all of the experiences denoted by the various common synonyms for true nature—indeed for all of reality itself—is the word “love.”

LOVE IS THE ABSENCE OF SEPARATION

What is love? We will work with this definition drawn from the wisdom traditions of mankind: Love is realizing the absence of separation or otherness. It is knowing no subject and object, but instead only one experience. This is not a difficult feat but rather is what we are already experiencing. *It is only our thoughts that tell us otherwise.* So if there is any trick it's just learning to trust our direct experience by letting go of the thoughts that are telling us we are experiencing something we actually aren't.

Love is knowing the absence of separation, which is the real state of things.

In other words, to love is to know reality.

By this definition, love is the end of loneliness and—we immediately notice—the end of relationship. It's the end of thinking "you and me" and "I'm in here and the world is out there." It's the beginning of actually knowing "there's only one knowing, always." It's therefore the end of the fight that we normally pick with the world. If we act from the belief there's an "I" here and a "world" there, a subject and an object, there's always a battle going on between the two.

By noticing that there is always one and only one experience happening, a person can never find either a logical or an emotional reason to fight with anyone or anything in the world. Because when everything is one, then everything is one's own self. This is love.

The collapse of the apparent subject-object relationship is a good definition of love; one that's testable in our direct and immediate experience of life. Interestingly, if you think about it, it's also a straightforward description of reality. It's a statement about the way things are, in the famous Buddhist phrase. If we check in our experience and find that it is true, then we can say from our direct understanding that love is indeed the best name for reality itself—the most succinct, the most accurate, and the most useful.

This definition of love is foundational. It finds support throughout all the wisdom teachings of mankind. But our purpose over the next six weeks is to repeatedly put this definition to the test in our direct experience of the present moment. Because what we

are seeking is a taste, an experience, a direct knowing; and not to be persuaded by argument or reason, except insofar as these might point us to our direct experience.

LOVE IS NOT A FEELING

Another foundational point, which derives from the definition of love as knowing the reality of non-separation, is that love is not a feeling. Rather, it is a description of reality, of the way things are. This is important to absorb in order to counteract a shallow understanding of love derived from decades of teachings about love from Hollywood, the advertising industry, the educational system and many other cultural sources. These teach that love is a tradable commodity like money, coffee beans or chocolate cake.

Of course, noticing non-separateness and oneness often creates pleasant feelings in the body and the mind. It usually feels good when we are in love or are feeling loved; or are in nature and noticing our thoughts are calm and there's a sense of accepting all things, that everything is okay. Pleasant sensations often arise in these circumstances.

But there is also a movement of love that goes towards suffering and not away from it.

To notice this is to realize that love is not a feeling that one gets or gives, but rather that love is a greater thing that knows all experience whether pleasant or unpleasant.

Check in your experience to see if this is true. In such cases, when love moves towards suffering, notice that the feelings that arise as a result are not necessarily going to be only pleasurable ones. Instead feelings like sorrow and compassion will likely arise.

When love moves towards suffering instead of away from it, it's like how a mother instinctively goes towards a suffering child to console and protect her. Or how a humanitarian worker would give up a big salary and a big house and go off to help Syrian refugees, to live uncomfortably and under the constant threat of death.

CONDUCTING A CLEAN EXPERIMENT

As we move through the next six weeks, we want to develop our ability to recognize what in our own experience we would call "love," that would move equally towards either pain or pleasure. While moving towards pain this love would ease the contractions caused by fear, loneliness, resentment, blame, worry and so on. While moving towards pleasure it would ease the contractions caused by grasping, wanting and addictive tendencies. Overall, this love would be experienced as a kind of clarity of understanding that would bring emotional balance and calm under all conditions.

It's good to explore this new way of understanding love as the testing of an hypothesis.

If the hypothesis doesn't check out in our experience we are free to modify or discard it; if it is verified in experience we may accept it and move to establishing ourselves in it.

To conduct a good clean experiment we'd need to be clear about the hypothesis, the method of the test, and the measures by which the hypothesis would be tested.

Taking the last first—identifying how we'd test our hypothesis of love—we'd obviously need to directly and tangibly experience the absence of separation of all the parts of our daily life experience.

There would have to be the clear dissolution of subject and object, and the clear knowing of the total lack of distance of time between our thoughts, feelings, sensations and perceptions, i.e. the totality of our lived human experience.

Moreover, it would have to be noticed that the experience of love would unfailingly relax the contractions of pain and pleasure and bring an overall sense of clarity, compassion and equanimity to every moment. This love when noticed would also need to be reliably ever-present, i.e. at no time or place could it ever be found to be absent.

THE TEST IS EXPERIENCE NOT EXPLANATION

We can and will work with these investigations over the next six weeks.

As for the means of inquiry, this would be testing for the presence of these qualities in our direct experience, as opposed to in, or by, our thoughts. The test would always be experience itself and not thoughts about experience because “the map is not the territory” and we are exploring the territory and not the map. Thus, we aren't interested in ideas and theories about love, except insofar as they might help lead us—as a map might help to lead us—towards the actual experience of love.

A sentence, a poem or even a logical argument for example that triggered an actual experience of love—a poignant internal experience of non-separation—would be highly valued. But words that built mere mental constructs about love would be of no use.

If we wanted to know the taste of honey, including many varieties of honey and the sweet single essence of all those honeys, we would want to taste many actual honeys—made from the nectars of alfalfa, blueberry, buckwheat, firewood, sage, sourwood, tupelo and so on. We wouldn't want to just read articles and books about honey.

AWARENESS IS LOVE

As for the hypothesis itself, let us use this one to start: Awareness is love.

This definition should afford us a simple and direct means of testing in every moment.

Awareness is easily located at any moment. It is that which knows an object. Thus, if we are knowing a sadness in the present moment, awareness will be that which is knowing the sadness, and we may immediately turn towards that awareness. In other words, we may turn awareness towards awareness and in this way know awareness. Similarly with

any other object that is being known in the present moment such as a sunset, the taste of coffee, a parking lot, a memory, a mood, a tingling in the foot or the sound of a bell.

Having done that, we could immediately test whether the effect of turning awareness upon awareness accomplished the dissolution of otherness; the relaxation of the contractions of pain and pleasure; and established greater clarity, compassion and equanimity in the present moment.

From now on, any time that we want to know the reality of love, we can simply turn our attention away from the objects to which our attention is normally directed, and direct awareness towards awareness itself.

STARTING THE TEST NOW

How might we do that right now?

As we sit here we can look around. As you see me and other people, notice the sound of my voice; notice the sensations in your body; the thoughts in the mind; and any other thoughts, feelings, sensations and perceptions you may have. Notice that as all of these object change from one moment to the next, there remains one single, steady, unwavering, unchanging, ever-present awareness. That very awareness is love.

The fact that there may not arise any special feelings with this understanding, doesn't make the understanding any less powerful or true. Feelings are just another one of those temporary objects that come and go. It makes no sense to hitch your understanding of love to such fickle objects, whereas awareness as love, which shines constantly like the sun on all the objects in your experience, is a reliable love.

We can experience this love more deeply by looking deeper into the present experience. So for example, right now, if I catalog my present moment experience, I see all of you sitting in the meditation hall, and I hear a little coughing, and I feel some emotions and moods, a bit of excitement and a little fear, and I can watch some thoughts going by at a different level from the thoughts that are manifesting as speech.

I notice all these things happening right now. And even though the flower pot across the hall looks like it is 45 feet away, when I pay closer attention I clearly realize that "45 feet away" is just a thought, and that my experience itself says no such thing.

THE ABSOLUTE INTIMACY OF EXPERIENCE

My actual experience is that there is no distance whatever separating my experience of the flower pot, my experience of my voice, my experience of my thoughts, my emotions and my body sensations. All of these are experiences are happening in the same space.

There is an absolute intimacy there in my experience. Although my mind says multiple things are happening—sights, sounds, emotions, feelings, thoughts, sensations—there

is no distance whatever found between any of them. It's the same when I engage in a conversation. For example, when I looking at Andy, we exchange a look and there is a kind of energy that goes with the look, and things come to mind. I remember his fantastic corn bread, and his terrific lentil soup, and there is an energy that comes from what we've shared, and all that is coming up. And in that sense there isn't a me and an Andy. It's like I'm holding Andy, there is an Andy in me, and in that respect Andy is me.

What I'm saying is being heard by Andy. This is speech that is being spoken and heard at the same time. See, it doesn't belong to either one of us, it's just a thing that is. It's created by my speaking and Andy hearing, together. It's neither mine nor Andy's, it's both of ours. It's so beautiful. So beautiful. And that same thing goes with every one of the senses. I see Garret and Garret sees me and what's happening is neither in Garret nor in me, it's just a shared-ness. That's what it is, it's a both-of-us-as-one-happening right now. It's a total shared thing, not two things, just one thing. The same thing goes with sights, sounds, tastes, touch, hearing and thoughts.

Thoughts are shared too, energies are a shared, it's not a me thing or a you thing. It's a single shared thing all the time. So this intimacy is always there to be noticed. To start off, see if you can find just one of these examples that worked for you. For example if noticing that speech is a shared thing, not owned by one or the other person, you can take that to work, you can take that home. The next time you are talking with a friend or a loved one, to yourself you can say, "notice that what is happening right now is something intimately shared between us, co-created by us, not owned by either." Seen in this way, a conversation becomes a one-of-a-kind miracle that is born and lives out its life right in the midst of you-as-awareness, like a blossom blossoming within a blossom.

You can do the same thing with any one of your senses at any time, or your thinking, or your energies, to get that immediate sense of oneness, which is the way things are. You don't have to sit on a cushion. Sitting might help to quiet down the mind a little bit, but these things are all pointing to true nature that can be known right now, at any time, and then we can sink back into that, and use that knowing understanding as our base.

It's so important to test these statements.

For example to say that the best possible word to describe reality as love, you can tussle with that statement a bit, to test it. Other things have been said tonight, such as "love is not a feeling," and "true love is impersonal." Maybe there is something in the mind that is saying "Wait a minute, that doesn't sound right." It's very good to go back at that and keep testing that and to see it until hopefully you can experience the truth it is pointing to. It just occurred to me that the statement, "true love is impersonal," can translate into the statement that we don't have to things personally. We don't have to take anything personally. Wouldn't that be a relief if we could go through life that way? That would be so loving to ourselves, to not take things personally.

There are many things that I am looking forward to over the next few weeks.

Love is infinite and eternal. Can this be known right now? In our direct experience?

QUESTION & ANSWERS

So what questions have come to mind, thoughts or feelings? What do you think about what's been covered so far? Could knowing our true nature directly be useful? Has it been useful? What did you think of the guided meditation?

Q: As you ended the meditation which was beyond outstanding, you said "empty awareness." And I sensed or intuited somehow that empty awareness is love. Empty awareness is love. That was a beautiful moment. Also when you talked about love, that love is not a feeling but we can know love, that was beautiful.

Q: It feels to me lately like I'm just increasingly aware of my defilements. Sometimes it can feel like a tornado, like it takes me over. So then to move from that to love, back to love or back to awareness, how do I do that? It's the consciousness of my choice in the moment, how I act or what I say, you mentioned the direct approach, and I don't know I understand it, but that we can somehow go directly to love. I have to say when it feels like a tornado, that it's taking me over, that all I can bear to do in the moment is to just not do anything but just to ride it out until it passes through, and then get back later.

A: And then get back to what? Why don't you just stay with riding it out for the rest of your life? Maybe it sounds a little too sharp or too harsh to say it that way, but riding it out is what we could do with the rest of our lives, with everything. It's so beautiful for you to see the tornado, to know the tornado and then the thing is, these are direct pointers for love to be present for that, or to anything. Just to do that is the work. And don't let anyone say, or don't let your own mind say, that you are wasting your time to just be with the tornado. You are doing the work of love by doing that. You are not just waiting, you are loving. See? This is it. It is so healing. You are like the person who goes to Syria to help the refugees, you are going to that within yourself, and taking care of what needs to be taken care of, which is that tornado. You are doing humanitarian work for yourself.

A: Our own work is everyone's work, right? That sounds strange but you know what I'm saying?

Q: I do. This is a shared consciousness. Your tornado is my tornado. The more you work at calming your tornado the less chance I'm going to get it. The only thing that will cause the tornado to die down is if you turn towards it and open to it. I'm not saying in every case you need to do that. Sometimes, it's hard for me to say this, but if it's just too hard, go watch a TV show, go out or distract yourself somehow. But you know when you do that you still have to come back to do the work sooner or later. So to the degree that you can, open to your tornado. A place like this is really safe to bring it out and then we all share in the work with each other. Together we can take care of it, because we know what's yours is ours, and we all hold it safely with you. We help each other that way.

A: I think this path is a useful approach. My wife and I for 50 years, we've talked about the oneness of all beings, about fuzzy edges, about we are all brothers and sisters, all in the human species. I think that approach leads to love and empathy and compassion and sympathy. It's very easy as a grounding spot, it comes very naturally. It's a great leap for me to get to where you finished up, that awareness is love. I'm not saying it's not true but it's a leap for me. It'll probably take five or six weeks for it to feel true.

Q: It's there to be tested, it's a hypothesis. I appreciate what you say. I love this path because it offers such concrete things to work with. Like what you just said, there is thing, which isn't a thing, which can nevertheless be known. That's awareness. You can play with it, you can work with it, you can test it within your own experience. The first time that I noticed that my thoughts, and the sensations of my hand resting on my knee, were located in the same placeless place, and were made of the same thing, which is awareness itself, it just blew me away. They were not separate things, they were one. Yet they are miraculously distinct somehow. The mind allows us to separate it all out.

When I was one month old, I was not so good at separating things out. Then as we get older, we are taught language and adults are forever pointing out distinctions and the names of things. So thought comes in at that point and says there's a distance between things, we are taught that separation exists. But our direct experience doesn't tell us that. That's something that I offer for each one of you to test. I don't think our experience says anything about separation. That's my own direct experience. It's been a hard leap for me too, to put the mind aside. But when I do, my experience is that all things are experienced in the same space spaceless, dimensionless, one space.

It's very helpful to examine the qualities of awareness one by one. The allowing quality of awareness, for instance. Or the eternal, always-on quality of awareness. That can lead to some questions. Am I aware when I'm asleep, or anesthetized, or whatever? We can go there. The fact that there is never any place found that is outside of awareness. It's so simple and so profound. Like the only thing we ever experience, is experience. We never actually experience things, objects. I cannot say that this is a bell, what I experience is the *experience* of the bell. That's one truthful thing that I can say, that I actually know for sure. Also I can say, without certainty, there is no "I" that experiences experience, either. That's another place we're going to go in the next five weeks. We can look forever and never find any "I" that is experiencing experience. There is only experience. And so then, if that's true, what is this watch made out of? What is the actual substance of this watch? If experience is all that exists, this watch must be made of pure experience. The only thing that is known of this watch is the knowing of the watch. All that exists is knowing. A lot of the things that were said tonight, as it was for me when I started walking this Direct Path, these things just sound crazy. "There are no objects," for example. "We never experience a thing, we only experience an experience." It even sounds abstract. But it's really not abstract. It's the most direct, intimate, experiential thing we can know.

Q: Why is there such an allure to separateness?

A: The mind creates the thought of an “I” and we grab to it. The “I” is just a thought but we believe it is reality; therefore we say we believe the “I” permanent and stable. Deep down though we notice that thoughts, like the body itself, is impermanent, so we are caught in a permanent state of fear. This fear leads us over and over to find objects to fill our inherent incompleteness and thus make us permanent and whole. That’s the allure, but it’s a doomed mission, of course, since all objects are just as impermanent as thoughts or the body itself. Nevertheless, the “I” keeps going out into the world seeking other impermanent things—activities, relationships, substances and so on—to acquire in order to make itself permanent, stable and independent.

Objects do give us some relief but it’s only temporary. One of the objects the separate self loves is sadness and suffering. Aren’t sadness, sorrow and self-pity sometimes so sweet? We can get stuck on our suffering, we just love our suffering because in some way that’s an object that we feel completes us too, sometimes. It creates an identity for us for example. I’m the suffering person, I’m the wronged person, I’m the depressed person, I’m the ADHD person, the fibromyalgia person, whatever. We could go on and on. The separate self loves to suffer, because the separate self is entirely made of suffering. It is made of fear and a sense of lack. If suffering dies, so does the separate self, so therefore that self does everything it can to keep the suffering going.

So for “homework,” in quotes. There are so many great poets and sages over the millennia, they say things in a certain way, using words which are themselves separate objects which divide the world, these poets nevertheless can use words to point to our own true nature as not-separate. So for example so many times, dear friends, I will sit here on a Sunday or Thursday and I see such longing in the voice and the eyes, and I see and hear it in my own voice too, an intense longing and questioning. I’ll hear these intense questions coming my way, “Who am I? How can I get out this suffering?”

So many times I want to answer, and I try to remember to say to myself, that the intensity that’s behind these questions, that’s where the answer is. Can we rest back in the intensity that is asking the question? That is pure love right there. The intensity that is seeking the answer to suffering, is itself the answer to the suffering. If you can just sink back and realize, “This is where I am right now,” an immense amount of compassion will come up. “I’m the person who desperately wants an answer. This is who I am right now.” If you can really see and open to it, like opening to the tornado, see if an immense amount of compassion doesn’t come up right then for yourself. And it happens because you are able to rest back in your true nature, as opposed to going out to get an answer, to grab another object, this time in the form of an “answer.”

That’s what it is. I don’t have the answer. The person asking the question has the answer, and the answer is found in the beautiful intensity behind the question. This intensity is always so awe-inspiring, and so pure. It’s pure love. Can that person feel the beauty of their own intensity and rest in it and make it their home? Because that’s the truth of them. It’s so beautiful and so powerful. But it’s wasted if it’s always going outward in search of a non-existent answer. Be like a King or a Queen and accept the suffering in your kingdom. Accept the reality, first, fully. Then let wisdom naturally move.

One of these beautiful sayings is from St. Francis: "What you are looking for is what is looking." Do you see how that can point us to knowing that "I'm already home."

So just these few words from St. Francis point to the reality of true nature. If you can feel what St. Francis is talking about, that's knowing your true nature right there. That's true nature, you've touched it. And over time we work at remaining in our true nature, abiding there, taking our stand there, being that—recognizing we are already that.

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