



After Awareness

The End of the Path

GREG GOODE

Distributed in Canada by Raincoast Books
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Non-Duality Press
An imprint of New Harbinger Publications, Inc.
5674 Shattuck Avenue
Oakland, CA 94609
www.newharbinger.com
Cover design by Amy Shoup
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data on file

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Introduction

You may already be familiar with the term “direct path.” It has been used by different spiritual teachers. But in this book I use the term to refer to the teachings inspired by Shri Atmananda Krishna Menon (1883–1959). Shri Atmananda’s direct path provides a strikingly modern way to experience peace and happiness that are unruffled by circumstances.

If you’re not, or if you would like a refresher, in chapter 1, “What Is the Direct Path?” I give a condensed version of the path. I describe the student’s progress from beginning to end and discuss the fruits of successful inquiry. I point out how the direct path is able to disappear without a trace. I discuss various critiques of the direct path and consider the question of which path is the “highest.”

This book could have been called *Secrets of the Direct Path—Revealed!* Because in it you’ll read about aspects of the direct path that are rarely, if ever, written down. In this book—unlike my previous books on the subject—I’m not giving pointers or exercises to assist you in non-dual realization (apart from the condensed version mentioned above). Rather, I wish to provide you with a look at the inner workings of the direct path, to show you how the machinery does its work. My sympathetic deconstruction is written from a mixed standpoint, as though I had one foot inside the path and one foot outside. Seeing both sides of the path will allow you to look around without having to become converted, without having to believe in the truth of the path’s concepts.

Why I Wrote This Book

What’s so great about looking around the path in this way? Isn’t it better to just stop talking and call off the search for liberation? Just rest in awareness? My answer is that many other resources can help you rest in awareness. I’ve written some of them myself. This particular book, however, has different purposes. Communication is a unifying theme among these purposes.

Communication

One purpose of this book is to help us find a way to talk about awareness in the twenty-first century. In fact, the topics in this book arose from twenty-first-century confrontations among different spiritual paths. What do Buddhists and physicists say about such a path, which places so much emphasis on concepts such as global awareness? These days, people from different backgrounds converse much more than they did ten or twenty years ago. In fact, most people looking for a spiritual home will shop around before settling down. They'll spend some time with a variety of offerings, such as traditional Vedanta, yoga, Western mysticism, Zen, Theravada, Tibetan Buddhism, and independent non-duality teachings. There are even online discussion groups for these kinds of inter-path interchanges.

So, how does the direct path represent itself in an open forum of that kind? How can the direct path be communicated to someone who has been around the block and seen a lot of different worldviews? If someone announces, "You and the world are awareness—this can be experienced at any time," it'll fall flat in these postmodern polyglot contexts. Some paths don't agree. Some paths don't even have any notion of global awareness. If proponents of these paths hear someone say, "You are awareness," they may feel it's a dogmatic message. How can someone discuss the direct path in a mixed context without dogmatism, without coming across as if the path's concepts are supposed to be true for everyone everywhere? This seemingly specialized issue often comes up because of the mixed contexts in contemporary online forums and other arenas of discussion and inquiry. Many people use the Internet as their spiritual guide, and few people pick a path without sampling lots of other ones.

To foster open, non-dogmatic communication is one of the main purposes of this book.

Another purpose is to help clarify some issues around the direct path's "awareness" idea. Here are two real-life examples where clarification is needed.

Awareness or Consciousness?

In the direct path, the terms "awareness" and "consciousness" are synonymous. In terms of the direct path as a form of spirituality, awareness is a teaching tool shared by various Vedantic paths. It assists in the process of self-inquiry. In the context of the direct path itself, awareness is taught as the nature of the self. It's the essence of being, knowledge, and love. It's the sum and substance of all things. It doesn't stand apart and

cognize things that are different from itself. For this reason, there's ultimately no duality between subject and object. Awareness is also whole. It doesn't exist in separate compartments, pools, or pockets. For this reason, there's no duality within awareness itself.

Experientially, awareness is said to have a “witnessing aspect” when your experience seems to consist of thoughts, feelings, and sensations that come and go. In this case, awareness witnesses the coming and going of objects. Awareness is that to which objects appear.

When your experience isn't characterized by comings and goings, awareness has no witnessing aspect. This is referred to as “pure consciousness,” or “consciousness without objects.” Through deep, experiential inquiry, the witnessing aspect becomes more and more salient and then becomes more and more subtle. Finally, the witnessing aspect collapses or fades away. This point is sometimes referred to as “non-dual realization” or “self-realization.” I discuss the witnessing aspect of awareness in more detail in chapter 6, “Witnessing Awareness—Introduction.”

Beyond Awareness?

In the direct path, awareness is the non-dual nature of all things. In other non-dual teachings, awareness has a less final status.

For example, several years ago, a small wave of non-dual teachers began teaching from a “beyond awareness” platform. These teachers—whose teachings were suspiciously similar, and whose new campaigns hit the Internet in the same two-week period—were promising a deep, radical truth that promised to take students further than any awareness teaching had ever gone. Within a week, I received several e-mails and even a frantic telephone call: “Greg! What is this teaching? What do they mean, ‘beyond awareness’? There can't be anything beyond awareness as taught in the direct path, can there? *Can there?!*” My caller was worried about another teaching being higher than his! He asked me to look into it, as though giving me a non-dual detective assignment. I found that each of the teachers in question was using ideas and quotes from Nisargadatta's book *Prior to Consciousness*. No problem! The issue turned out to be semantic only. This is because “consciousness” for Nisargadatta is very different from “consciousness” or “awareness” for Shri Atmananda and the direct path. In fact, a fair equivalent would be

Prior to consciousness (Nisargadatta)

=

Pure consciousness (Atmananda).

My caller felt very relieved to hear this. He hadn't invested in a suboptimal teaching after all!

Another example that repeatedly calls for clarity happens when the direct path meets Buddhism. A few years ago, a Buddhist friend of mine became interested in the direct path. But he felt alienated by the path's heavy emphasis on awareness. It seemed to him that the emphasis on awareness represented a form of clinging, which in Buddhism represents suffering at a subtle level. So how could the direct path address this issue with the Buddhist student? I cover this point more thoroughly in the next chapter and in chapter 10, "After Awareness: The End of the Path." But my short answer to my friend was that ultimately, the direct path doesn't make any metaphysical assertions about awareness. The direct path is "eco-friendly." It cleans up after itself. It doesn't soil the environment with attachments or metaphysical clutter. Not even awareness is a lasting commitment.

Who Would Benefit from Reading This Book?

If you're a student of the direct path and feel stuck somewhere, then the open, pragmatic, and deconstructive approach taken here could loosen things up. If you find yourself in a position of communicating about awareness in a mixed forum, the set of less doctrinaire terms and pointers in this book might help.

If you aren't a student but feel interested in the direct path's methods of accomplishing its goal of freedom, then this book might help. It may give you a non-dogmatic glimpse into how a person can begin with an everyday perspective and come to find freedom from perspectives.

Overview of the Chapters

This book doesn't assume familiarity with the direct path. You can find out more about the direct path in chapter 1, "What Is the Direct Path?"

In non-dual paths, the truth is often described as love. But how do truth and love come together? My own experience is that education and teaching are essential parts of our progress toward freedom and a loving way of life, and the time-tested traditional paths agree on this. In chapter 2, “The Path and the Heart,” I urge teachers, presenters, and students of non-dual paths to include some sort of ethical approach with whatever else they do to promulgate the teachings.

Very few non-dual teachings treat the issue of language head-on. Sometimes they tell us that words are pointers or fingers pointing to the moon. But the direct path takes a more sophisticated nonreferential approach that cuts through the dualisms implied by these pointers. This is the subject of chapter 3, “The Language of Joyful Irony.”

In Shri Atmananda’s dialogues, there’s considerable emphasis on the guru. Atmananda often said that a living guru is indispensable for self-knowledge. But what if a student can’t travel to see the guru—is there any hope for this student? In chapter 4, “The Guru Doctrine,” I discuss this issue in a way that may provide hope for such a student.

The direct path is often associated with one particular method of investigation—self-inquiry. As important as this method is, it’s not everyone’s cup of tea. There are several other approaches to non-dual realization in the direct path. They include standing as awareness, guided meditations, reminders, and working with the body. Although used in retreats, they’re not well-covered in the direct path’s written sources. I discuss these and other alternative methods in chapter 5, “Alternatives to Inquiry.”

Along with the idea of direct experience, the witness is the direct path’s most prominent tool of inquiry. Over the past decade or so, I’ve received hundreds of questions about witnessing awareness:

“What is it? Can I see it?”

“Why don’t all paths use this notion?”

“Is it like my mind?”

“Can I follow the direct path without it?”

“Is witnessing awareness a metaphysical assumption that I’m saddled with forever? And, exactly how does it dissolve at the end? Can I skip to that part now?”

I discuss these issues in great detail in chapters 8, 9, and 10.

Chapter 6, “Witnessing Awareness—Introduction,” sets forth the basic notion of “witnessing awareness” used by the direct path. This chapter discusses how the direct path uses the witness notion as a liberating tool. In chapter 7, “The Opaque Witness,” witnessing awareness is defined in a non-metaphysical way, which I hope makes some sense even for readers who don’t resonate with the idea of global awareness of universal proportions. I explain why the witness isn’t the same as the mind, as well as why there aren’t two or more witnesses. Chapter 8, “The Transparent Witness,” and chapter 9, “Non-dual Realization and the End of the Witness,” cover the entire progression of the witness in considerable detail. In those chapters, I trace the growth of clarity, love, and happiness as they progress from the witness’s grosser opaque phase, to its more subtle transparent phase, all the way through its eventual dissolution. When witnessing awareness dissolves, this is considered non-dual realization, or *sahaja samadhi*.

And then what? When the witness dissolves, the immediate feeling is that it dissolves into pure consciousness. In fact, this is the direct path’s official teaching. But something more profound happens, which relates to freedom from the path itself. A deeply thrilling part of non-dual realization is freedom from the teaching that brought you freedom. It seems like a paradox. I refer to this freedom as “joyful irony.” It bears the sweetness of openhearted love and a zest for life. In joyful irony, you find it impossible to attach or cling to the idea that what’s really here is awareness. Not even Shri Atmananda proclaims that in the end it’s all consciousness. This freedom from attachment, especially attachment to our own most cherished vocabulary, is what I mean by “after awareness” and “the end of the path.”

Chapter 1

What Is the Direct Path?

If you're already familiar with the direct path, you can skip this chapter, although you might find it a useful refresher.

In this book, “the direct path” refers to the teachings inspired by Shri Atmananda Krishna Menon. I've written two books on the direct path: *Standing as Awareness: The Direct Path* (Non-Duality Press, 2009) and *The Direct Path: A User Guide* (Non-Duality Press, 2012). These books present the path in a patient, experiential way. With *Standing as Awareness: The Direct Path*, you get a bird's-eye view of the direct path and the liberation that is its goal. On the other hand, *The Direct Path: A User Guide* unfolds the teachings in a logical sequence. It also contains guided investigations, which allow you to experience the insights leading to non-dual realization.

The direct path places much emphasis on inquiry and investigation, but there are also other methods employed by the direct path, such as reminders, the Heart Opener, and the Yoga of Awareness. In chapter 5, “Alternatives to Inquiry,” I discuss these methods in greater detail than you'll find in either Shri Atmananda's published material or my previous books.

Background

The term “direct path” was used by Ramana Maharshi as early as the 1920s.¹ In fact, in the teachings of both Ramana Maharshi and Shri Atmananda, the direct path is a form of inquiry derived from traditional Vedanta that doesn't take the long-established road of good works, religious rituals, devotion to deities, ascetic purification, and belief in cosmological theories. But over the years, in the West, the term “direct path” has come to be associated more with Shri Atmananda than with Ramana Maharshi. Besides Shri Atmananda, well-known expositors of the direct path include Jean Klein, John Levy, Wolter Keers, Ananda Wood, Francis Lucille, Philip Renard, and Rupert Spira.

The primary method of investigation used in the direct path is *atma vichara*, or self-inquiry, in which you look at aspects of the world, the body, and the mind, trying to find any location where

the self could possibly reside. You also try to find anything truly separate from yourself as witnessing awareness.

We normally feel separate from things in the world, from people and things we love. We even feel separate from aspects of our own body and mind! The sense of separation makes us feel lonely and vulnerable. We feel subject to finitude, suffering, and death. But when you deeply realize that nothing finite is the self, and that there's no experiential basis for separation, you discover your natural wholeness. You discover clarity, sweetness, and joy—all of which become your living experience.

Awareness

In the direct path, awareness refers to an open, global clarity. If we add the function of “being appeared to” as an overlay on top of awareness, the result would be “witnessing awareness.” Witnessing awareness, as I discuss in chapters 7, 8, and 9, is characterized as “that to which appearances appear” or “the unseen seer.”

Awareness isn't mental or physical. It's that to which the body and the mind appear. In the direct path, you can come to see how the body and the mind *appear to* awareness, rather than being *perceived by* awareness. This seeing is crucial in the direct path, and there are many experiments that facilitate it.

Of course, we normally attribute such seeing to the individual person. We think the person is the seer. We think that whatever appears, appears to that person. We think that physical objects are perceived by the senses and that abstract objects are cognized by the mind. Normally we aren't so interested in what sees the senses or how the mind itself is perceived. But in the direct path, you examine the full range of experience, including what seems to be the very equipment that conveys experience to you.

As you inquire about the body and the mind, you feel your perspective broadening, as though you're zooming out further and further. It's not that you're becoming omniscient but that your perspective is loosening. The “I” seems less and less associated with the body. The “I” seems more and more like awareness itself.

As you continue with your inquiry, you realize that awareness isn't the same thing as biological sentience. Sentience is usually defined as an organism's capacity to perceive, feel, and respond to conditions. It's a biological function. It depends on the health of the organism, and it may come and go in various states of

wakefulness, sleep, trance, and coma. Awareness, on the other hand, transcends the organism. It's that to which these states appear. According to the direct path, sentience is an object—as are, for instance, color or sound.

Some spiritual paths distinguish between awareness and consciousness. Although the direct path distinguishes awareness from sentience, it considers awareness and consciousness the same thing. For a more detailed treatment of awareness and similar concepts, see “How the Direct Path Sees Witnessing Awareness” in chapter 6, “Witnessing Awareness—Introduction.”

About Self-Inquiry

In the direct path, self-inquiry is your main tool for investigating the world, the body, and the mind. *What's the true nature of the mind? Is my body my self? Is the world separate from the seeing of the world?*

Your investigation encompasses the entire range of experience, including thoughts, feelings, beliefs, sensations, emotions, intuitions, and states of mind. Are they separate and objectively existing things? They certainly seem to be. In our everyday ways of thinking, feeling, and speaking, we certainly treat the world, the body, and the mind as separate. There are even philosophies and sciences that argue that they truly are separate.

But if you look very closely for these supposedly separate things, can you actually find them? Does your experience verify separateness? With self-inquiry, you find just the opposite. You never confirm true separateness, no matter what you examine. Whatever you inquire into is confirmed to be your self, the “Self” of awareness.

Self-inquiry uses two investigative tools: witnessing awareness and direct experience.

Witnessing Awareness

Witnessing awareness is awareness in its aspect of being the subject of appearing objects. Whatever you examine—whether it be a piece of fruit, your lower back, or your most sublime mental state—appears to witnessing awareness. Your thoughts, feelings, and sensations appear to witnessing awareness. Yet witnessing awareness doesn't appear to anything. It isn't an object. It has no

color, size, shape, or duration. Unlike the mind, witnessing awareness doesn't come and go. It doesn't grow sluggish when you're tired. It doesn't become active when you drink coffee. It doesn't shut off if you go into a coma. It doesn't suffer. Witnessing awareness is that to which the coming and going of sentience appears. This idea takes some getting used to, and there are many methods in the direct path to help you attune to it. You grow to be able to see witnessing awareness as the home of direct experience.

Direct Experience

Direct experience is the other principal investigative tool in the direct path. What is direct experience? It's a kind of experience that's not the result of inference or interpretation.

In the direct path, if you examine a table to discover its true nature, you don't begin by assuming that the table exists in front of you. You examine your experience to ascertain what does appear. In your visual experience of the table, if it seems that "the table's brown color" appears, then this experience is the result of an inference. Really, there's no evidence that the brown color belongs to a table. In your visual experience, nothing establishes that the color comes from a table. A *thought* may make such a claim (and thoughts are examined later on in this book), but in the visual data itself, there's nothing that proves that a table caused the evidence. If your experience seems to be something raw and non-conceptual, something preverbal and simpler than a belief, then this is closer to a direct, non-inferential experience. A more direct rendition of your experience in this example would be "brown" or "color." Even though these are still labels, they don't make existential claims that something exists in front of you.

The direct path's emphasis on direct experience is a way to give more attention to the senses and bodily sensations, which are often overlooked in non-dual paths. But direct experience is also used when looking at the mind and conceptuality. Let's say you believe that thoughts come from the subconscious mind. When you experience a thought, what's actually showing up in your direct experience? Perhaps a quietness, followed by a thought, followed by quietness. Do you at any time directly experience an actual subconscious mind giving rise to the thought? If not, then you can't conclude that you're directly experiencing such a thing as the subconscious mind. With that insight, you suddenly begin to feel more whole and integrated.

An Example of Inquiry

Here's an example of self-inquiry that you can do in the early stages of the direct path. There are many similar inquiries in *The Direct Path: A User Guide*. The goal of doing such inquiries is to discover whether your everyday view of the world as objective and separate is validated by your direct experience.

Our sense of feeling separate from things is based on our beliefs that these things exist in a separate and independent way. We feel that we ourselves exist like this too. This usually manifests in the feeling that things are *out there* and we are *in here*. We feel the need to reach out and make contact with some things and avoid contact with other things. Because we feel separate, we feel that we need the right sorts of contact with things or people "out there" in order to support and defend ourselves. Our many failures along these lines cause us to experience a great deal of suffering.

But are these feelings of separation verified by direct experience? In this inquiry, you test for the truth of these beliefs of separation by examining a physical object: a clock.

If this clock really exists in the independent, objective way that most people feel it does, then your inquiry should be able to verify this independence. So you take a close look. What if you find wholeness instead of separation? Then perhaps you can glimpse another way of experiencing the world. You may discover that we don't need to believe in the separation that we so often assume exists. You may discover that we don't need to suffer.

The inquiry proceeds in stages, having you look closer and closer. Following your best sensory evidence, you look for anything that might independently establish that the clock exists apart from awareness. Begin by positioning yourself comfortably near a clock with a pendulum or an audible second hand. Relax so that you feel at ease. Notice that you can tune in to the simple sense of being present. Dwell on that sense for a few minutes.

Inquiry Part 1—Do you find a clock in the sound?

Allow your eyes to close gently.

Listen to the sound. "Tick tock tick tock tick tock tick tock."

Focus on the tick tock. Attune to the sound itself. Ignore any explanatory thoughts about what must be creating the sound.

Try to find the clock. Going just by the *tick-tock* sound, do you find a clock present? Is there any direct experience of a clock in the sound? Does the sound come self-labeled as originating from a clock? Do you find a clock *hidden* in the sound? Do you find a clock *beyond* the sound? In your direct experience of the sound, do you find any evidence that the sound is caused by a clock?

Allow your eyes to open.

These steps establish that in your direct experience of the *tick-tock* sound, there's no clock to be found. You'll never be able to find an objectively existent clock, no matter how you try. It turns out that what you experience is nothing other than witnessing awareness.

Inquiry Part 2—Do you actually hear a sound?

This part of the inquiry is more subtle. It asks the same question about the sound that part 1 asked about the clock. If you go by your sense of hearing, do you find the sound to be something that's objectively present? Normally we think of sounds as being picked up by our sense of hearing. We theorize that these sounds are the same thing as vibrations in the air that travel from objects to organisms. That is, we think of sounds as existing objectively, whether we hear them or not. When we hear the sounds, we think that they were already there, only now they've come into the "range" of our hearing. But is this true? Can we verify it through direct experience?

Allow your eyes to close gently.

Focus on the experience of the tick-tock sound. Set aside ideas or theories about what must be going on. Attune to the sounds themselves.

Try to find a sound. Going by auditory evidence alone, do you directly experience a sound apart from your sense of hearing? Do you experience a sound getting closer to your range of hearing before you actually hear it? Do

you experience a sound after you hear it? Do you experience an unheard sound of any kind? Going by auditory evidence alone, do you experience a sound being the same thing as vibrating molecules? Do you experience sound appearing with a label that says, “Hi, I’m really a vibration”?

Allow your eyes to open.

These steps establish something that seems completely bizarre! You discover that in your direct experience of hearing, you don’t really find a sound that enters into your sense of hearing.

In our everyday way of thinking, we visualize sound as something preexisting that moves closer to our auditory range. It exists before and after we hear it. As it gets closer, it gets louder. As it gets more distant, it gets smaller, quieter. But what we’re doing with this kind of visualization is confusing the sound with a physical object that *causes* the sound. Or we visualize the sound as a set of moving sound waves.

But going by our sense of hearing, we don’t experience moving objects or waves. We don’t observe anything that’s not heard, then partially heard, then fully heard. That’s what to “hear a sound” would truly mean. We don’t have any non-auditory evidence that establishes that a sound is about to be heard. Our sense of hearing isn’t meeting a sound. A sound isn’t coming into contact with our sense of hearing. We have no experience of the objective existence of the sound. It’s not like kicking a ball, which in the everyday sense we say exists before our foot comes into contact with it. This objectivist way of thinking isn’t supported by our direct experience of hearing.

Inquiry Part 3—Do you find the sense of hearing?

In this part of the inquiry, you zero in even closer. In part 1, you discovered that there’s no clock to be found in the sound. The clock is nothing other than sound. In part 2, you found that there’s no sound to be found in the experience of hearing. Sound is nothing other than hearing. And now we ask, “Do we even find the sense of hearing?” You’ll discover that there’s no hearing without witnessing awareness.

Tune in to your direct experience.

Allow your eyes to close gently, or keep them open if

you wish.

Tune in to your sense of hearing. Notice how hearing is something that seems available to you. (In this part of the inquiry, it doesn't matter what the particular sounds are. Try to notice hearing itself.)

Try to find your sense of hearing. Can you find hearing apart from its appearance to witnessing awareness? Is "hearing" something that exists objectively the way you think of a table or a chair? Do you experience unexperienced hearing, which then emerges into experience? Does your sense of hearing appear with an announcement that says, "I am here, whether or not I appear to awareness"?

It's simply not our direct experience that hearing hears sounds. It's more accurate to say that what we call "hearing" is just the appearance of sound. Sound and hearing come to be the same thing. It's not the case that one of them operates on the other. We never experience sound to be separate and apart from the sense of hearing.

What the Inquiries Establish

The direct path starts with inquiry into what seem to be physical objects because they serve as our paradigm for objectivity, truth, and separation. We even tend to think that we ourselves are a physical object: the body. We also think of the mind along similar physicalist lines, as if it were a subtle container for thoughts, feelings, and memories. So if you can begin to see that physical objects can't be found in the separate, objective way we imagine, then you'll be granted the beginnings of a vaster, more liberating experience of things. You'll see that you can't possibly be the body. You can't be *in* the body or limited *by* the body. These insights will be easier and more powerful when you inquire further into the mind, into feelings, and into conceptuality.

The inquiry above used hearing, but in the direct path you do inquiries for all the senses, as well as for thought, feeling, and intuition. You can inquire into anything and everything from the world of experience. In the direct path, this includes the body, the mind, and conceptual objects as well. Just as you discovered with the clock, direct experience never verifies the separate existence of any part of the experiential world. (If you think *So what? Do*

these inquiries prove that things don't exist outside of experience? you can examine that notion as well.2) What you discover instead of any kind of separate existence is the wholeness of witnessing awareness—the unity of experienced and experienter.

The Fruits of Inquiry

You become happier, freer, and more loving as you continue to expand the range of your self-inquiry. It becomes ever clearer that you're being held in the arms of love. Your identity isn't in danger. You're not perishable. Your home isn't the body or the mind. All of your experience begins to take on a lighter, sweeter, and more expansive feeling.

Every possible candidate for your “self,” you discover, is a coming-and-going object that appears to you as witnessing awareness. Your sense of identification with those passing physical or mental objects diminishes. You discover that there's no permanence, safety, or certainty in mere beliefs. You begin to realize in a deep and non-conceptual way that there's nothing else you can be but the clarity to which all this has appeared. There's earth-shattering relief, heart-rending love, and even giddy happiness in this discovery.

Self-Inquiry Isn't Performed by the Mind

Just what is it that's conducting the self-inquiry? According to the direct path, self-inquiry isn't a function of the mind. It's done from a transcendent perspective, a form of witnessing inquiry called “higher reasoning.” Higher reasoning happens at the level of awareness itself, which is beyond the mind. This is why it has the ability to inquire into the mind and other objects.

There are two reasons why the mind can't inquire into the mind. One is the familiar non-dual insight that we can't see the ground we're standing on. A knife can't cut itself. An eye can't see itself. The other reason why the mind can't inquire into the mind is that it can't inquire into *anything*. This is because the mind is an arising object, and an object doesn't have the ability to investigate. Rather, investigation is attributed to the mind by a thought. In other words, it's only a thought that claims that the mind is doing things. In our direct experience, we don't observe the mind actually performing any actions or conducting any investigation. We find thoughts that *say* so, but we don't find any

true referents to these thoughts. Making these discoveries about the mind is partly how we're able to see that we're not the mind. The mind isn't the nature of what we are. We're beyond the mind. Later in this book, I discuss how the direct path's investigation transcends the mind.

From Gross to Subtle to Awareness and Beyond

In the direct path, using self-inquiry, you look into the entire spectrum of experience, from the gross to the subtle. You investigate the world, then the body, then the mind. This process also includes looking into other people. Sometimes other people can seem like part of the world, and sometimes they can feel like part of your own mind. But the inquiry doesn't skip over anything. The body gets special attention. Beginning with the teachings of French spiritual teacher Jean Klein and those influenced by him, the direct path began to give a great deal of attention to the body. The body receives its own inquiry, as well as exploration through various kinds of yoga and visualization.

There are several pragmatic reasons for beginning with the gross aspects of experience and ending with the subtle. I examine these reasons in detail in chapter 6, "Witnessing Awareness—Introduction." The particular order of investigation was laid down by Shri Atmananda and called *tattvopadesha* ("teaching on reality"), the logically connected exposition of the truth.³

Shri Atmananda's most profound texts, *Atma Darshan* and *Atma Nirvriti*,⁴ contain several passages that discuss realizing all aspects of experience and finding it to be nothing other than awareness. The general sequence goes like this:

We never experience an object apart from its appearance to us.

We never experience an appearance apart from the awareness to which appearance appears.

Our only experience is experience itself, which is awareness, our very self.⁵

These are abstract statements, but they form the core of the direct path's results when it looks into objects. They're like generalizations of your discoveries when you inquired into the ticking clock.

As you continue with your direct-path investigation, your perspective shifts. Your understanding clarifies. At the beginning, your sense of identity may have been linked to the body. As your investigation proceeds, you come to see how awareness is your identity. You may still think that awareness has memories, goals, and intentions, but at least it's no longer so personal. As you continue even further, your understanding clarifies even more. You come to see that the mental and psychological properties you were attributing to awareness are actually not built *into* it as properties; they're only objects that appear *to* awareness. This is referred to as moving from the opaque witness to the transparent witness.

When it no longer seems that any objects reside on their own—either inside of or outside of awareness—the witness is transparent. The witness then begins to dissolve. This happens on its own and may be preceded by increased peace, sweetness, love, and freedom.

After that point, you can remind yourself of the insights and discoveries if you wish, but there's nothing more you need to do. Your head is in the tiger's mouth. When it no longer seems that things are objects appearing to awareness at all, the witness has dissolved. This is what the direct path considers non-dual realization.

Non-dual realization is the end of the gestalt in which you experience arising/falling, coming/going, subject/object, or separation of any kind. Even though the transparent witness phase was like smoothly flowing sweet water, the dissolution of the witness is unimaginably sweeter and more indescribable. I discuss the progress of the witness in much greater detail in chapter 7, "The Opaque Witness," and chapter 8, "The Transparent Witness." The freedom involved in this non-dual realization includes freedom from attachment to the direct path, its vocabulary, its concepts, and its teaching tools. You may still value and honor these tools, but you don't regard them as objectively real or true. Their status is no more elevated than that of the elements of any other path.

I haven't seen much discussion in other direct-path works about this freedom from conceptual views. But I've written about it several times and given it the name "joyful irony." Joyful irony can be found in many systems in addition to the direct path. In my experience, even this freedom by itself is heart opening, mind-expanding, thrilling, and exhilarating. I discuss joyful irony further in chapter 3, "The Language of Joyful Irony," and chapter 10, "After Awareness: The End of the Path."

The Direct Path's Unmentioned Irony

The word “direct” gains meaning from comparison with “progressive.” Direct paths and progressive paths are two different kinds of spiritual undertakings. With progressive paths, the goal is to change the body, the mind, the emotions, or the quality of experience through spiritual practices. Practices may include good works and selfless service, chanting, singing and prayers, hatha yoga, visualizations, and mental stabilization exercises. The criteria for success may include the disappearance or absorption of the separate self, as well as the diminution of mental and spiritual afflictions. Afflictions may include selfishness, aversion, anger, attachment, and indignation.

On the other hand, direct paths don't require you to change any of these subjective qualities. Direct paths focus on something else: a deep, intuitive insight into the illusory nature of the personal self to whom these qualities supposedly belong. In the direct path as taught by Shri Atmananda (and thus in this book), recognition is global: when you recognize the nature of the self, you thereby recognize the nature of the world, the body, the mind, and the mind's qualities.

The difference between progressive and direct paths can be illustrated by the famous stanzas from Zen's Platform Sutra. According to the sutra, when the Fifth Zen Patriarch was looking for a successor, he sponsored a writing contest. Monks were invited to submit verses displaying their highest understanding of dharma. The best verse would win successorship for its author. The head monk was favored to win. He wrote,⁶

*The body is the Bodhi tree,
The mind is like a clear mirror.
At all times we must strive to polish it,
And must not let the dust collect.*

While all this was going on, Hui-neng was working as a laborer at the monastery. He was an uneducated man, but he had already awakened spontaneously after hearing the Diamond Sutra. While working, he happened to hear the head monk's verse being recited. He knew that the author hadn't discovered his own nature. So Hui-neng composed a verse in reply:

*Bodhi originally has no tree,
The mirror also has no stand.
Buddha nature is always clean and pure;
Where is there room for dust?*

The Fifth Patriarch recognized Hui-neng's deep wisdom from this verse. And so Hui-neng eventually became the Sixth Patriarch.

These verses relate to the difference between progressive and direct paths. The work in a progressive path can be likened to polishing a mirror. The mind does become more peaceful, but the process requires endless monitoring and vigilance. The criterion of success is mind based—it's a matter of having more peaceful mental contents.

Direct paths, on the other hand, can be likened to inquiring into the nature of the mirror. The peace that comes from discovering the non-reality of the mirror is effortless and requires no vigilance or maintenance. The criterion of success is a radical change in perspective. The self and its mind become a non-issue.

Even in the direct path as taught by Shri Atmananda, there is an oft-unreported irony. That is, sometimes practices recommended in progressive paths actually make it easier to do the self-inquiry of the direct path! This is because self-inquiry requires a certain amount of concentration, patience, and peace of mind. These are the exact qualities produced by progressive-path practices! So, even though you don't need to meditate and calm the mind in order to become enlightened from the perspective of the direct path, you may find it helps you go deeper with self-inquiry!

The Tools Are Not Forever

The tools of the direct path include self-inquiry, witnessing awareness, direct experience, and higher reasoning. These are only conveniences that help you proceed along the direct path. You don't grasp or cling to them, and eventually you realize that they too are passing objects. In fact, by the time you come to the end of the direct path, even awareness ends up not being a lasting commitment or a true reality. I discuss the self-deconstruction of the path's tools in chapter 9, "Non-dual Realization and the End of the Witness," and chapter 10, "After Awareness: The End of the Path."

Critiques of the Direct Path

In my years of teaching and talking about the direct path, I've encountered two main critiques. One critique objects to the

emphasis on global awareness. I'll call this the "anti-awareness" critique. Some people simply have no intuition of a greater luminous wholeness that lies beneath the surface of things. Or if they do, they don't think of it as awareness. Critics often regard the direct path's emphasis on awareness as a metaphysical attachment to something for which there's no evidence.

The other critique says that the direct path overlooks the possibility that there still might be an objective world. I'll call this the "realist" critique. This critique says: "Maybe there is an objective world beyond awareness and maybe there isn't. We just don't know." In other words, it says that the direct path's conclusions based on direct experience claim too much. The direct path gives us no right to conclude that there's no objective world. In a nutshell, this critique says, "Just because there's nothing objective in our direct experience doesn't mean that nothing objective actually exists."

Responding to these critiques is one of my main reasons for writing this book. As a joyful ironist, I can't disagree with the spirit of the anti-awareness critique. Not everyone resonates with the idea of awareness or thinks it makes sense, and resonance and intuitive affinity with the concepts can be more important than metaphysical arguments when selecting a spiritual path. I don't regard the direct path as an empirical theory that tries to report accurately what's going on with the world. Rather, I regard it as a sound, practical method that works for people whose intuitions match its guiding vision. There are many other teachings that resonate with people of different intuitions.

I disagree, however, with the anti-awareness critique's charge that the emphasis the direct path places on awareness is an attachment. I don't find it to be an attachment. At a certain point in the direct path, any metaphysical commitment to the teaching dissolves. When you investigate the world of experience deeply, your metaphysical yearning for a path-independent truth about what's "really" going on with reality becomes pacified. This metaphysical yearning is a kind of impulse that pressures us to see things as being a certain way and can cause attachment to the idea of awareness. This metaphysical impulse dissolves at the end of the teaching. For more insight into how this happens, see chapter 10, "After Awareness: The End of the Path."

The realist critique is more serious. It accuses the direct path of brushing aside the possibility of an objective world. The idea behind this critique is that awareness is its own arena, with only a limited range. Certain phenomena might appear within this range. But there might be phenomena outside this range too. What

happens on the inside can't provide us with a conclusive statement about what exists on the outside. This is similar to what we say about the mind. We say that the mind can't know for sure what happens outside of itself. The best it can do is create hypotheses from appearances that happen within the mind. But it can never prove these hypotheses conclusively.

This critique goes to the heart of the direct path's teachings. It accuses the direct path of overreaching, perhaps of being mistaken at a very deep level. It's saying that students of the direct path could be deluding themselves and claiming that nothing exists. But the realist critique suffers from two misunderstandings about the direct path.

One misunderstanding assumes that the direct path conceptualizes awareness as if it were a mind, only bigger. But the direct path doesn't have you think about awareness in that way. Sure, there are some similarities: for example, both the everyday view of the mind upon which the realist critique relies and the direct path's notion of witnessing awareness are the seat of the "I" in their respective systems. They're both what appearances appear to.

But the similarities between the mind and awareness end there. The mind is limited in several ways that don't apply to awareness as taught in the direct path. For example, the mind is usually associated with a brain or a body of some sort. But in the direct path, awareness isn't tied to any phenomenon at all. The direct path doesn't take the kind of materialist approach that says that the mind is the brain, or that awareness is produced by brain activity. According to the direct path, the brain and the mind are conceptual objects that appear to awareness. The mind is said to be one of many minds that exist. But awareness is non-dual, not multiple.

The realist critique also depends on a notion of awareness as a container of content. This kind of idea about awareness has been termed "the container metaphor."⁷ Being a container is fine for a can of soup, but it's not a helpful analogy for awareness. Awareness isn't a physical object and has no border between an inside and an outside. In fact, the container metaphor gets special attention in the direct path. You investigate it and find that it doesn't make any sense. You discover that there's no experiential basis for a belief in ideas such as objective existence beyond awareness.

The realist critique's other misunderstanding is based in the goals it attributes to the direct path. The direct path doesn't have those goals. The direct path doesn't attempt to make empirical,

objective claims about the existence of objects. It's not saying, "I have searched the entire region outside of awareness, and I can assure you there's nothing out there."

Instead, the direct path says that if we go by experience, there's no basis for the various dualisms and separations, such as inside of awareness versus outside of awareness, self versus other, subject versus object, existence versus non-existence, separation versus togetherness, and happiness versus unhappiness. These dualisms seem convincing from the perspective of being a person, and they make us suffer. The direct path shows us that if we follow experience, we don't need to believe these dualities. We don't need to suffer. The realist critique is further discussed in chapter 6, "Witnessing Awareness—Introduction."

The direct path doesn't seek to devalue the vocabulary of the mind or the body. If you're a psychotherapist or neurologist, the direct path doesn't ask you to find different employment or require you to abandon conceptual vocabularies that speak of minds, brains, or perceptual objects. As you study the direct path, however, you may come to think of those professional vocabularies differently. You may even come up with creative new approaches in your field!

The Direct Path Is Flexible

Sometimes teachers of the direct path speak in different ways about the same things. In books, meetings, or videos, sometimes you'll hear "The world is seen through," but then you'll hear "There is no world." Or you'll hear a lot of talk about the witness, but then you'll hear that the witness dissolves. Or, as part of an experiment (as in chapter 6), you'll be told to place an orange on the table. And then you'll be invited to discover that no orange can be found!

What's going on? Do these things exist or not? Why the inconsistencies? Is there a stable language that we can rely on to be consistently true across all these situations?

The direct path, like other paths, isn't trying to create a mirror image of the world and report on things using accurate labels. Instead, it's designed to be in affinity with the student. It works with the student's own concepts and perspectives in order to provide freedom from attachment. The student's concepts and perspectives change over time, and so does the direct-path language that addresses it. The direct path isn't alone in this

regard. Other paths of inquiry, such as traditional Advaita Vedanta and Prasangka Madhyamika, employ flexibility in a similar way.

For example, in the beginning, you think that the orange really exists. It really seems to be out there, separate from you. You also feel as if you're "in here," perhaps inside the body. You feel separate from the orange and the rest of the world.

But this changes as you investigate. At some point, it doesn't feel as if the orange is separate anymore. But other things feel separate, such as the power of choice or attention, or the standard of excellence for judging spiritual paths. And then at some point it doesn't feel as if these are separate. It may feel as if only arisings are separate. Things get more subtle, and your sense of separation diminishes accordingly. The language of the direct path is sensitive to these changes. It's sensitive to the way you think and communicate as a student. It tries to meet you where you are, not where it's trying to push you. One of the benefits of this sensitivity is that the direct path doesn't prescribe an official "non-dual" way of talking. This gives you a great deal of freedom as a student and communicator.

Sometimes teachers of non-dual paths talk about the "relative level" and the "absolute level." The direct path takes a considerably more nuanced approach to communication. Although it occasionally speaks in terms of these levels of reality, it speaks more often about perspectives. And there are many more than two perspectives. It's helpful to see the path as a developmental, temporal process, always in flux. As a student, you change as you go. Each time your understanding becomes clearer, your perspective shifts, even if just a little. In these shifts, also called "sublations," your previous model of the world is deconstructed into a simpler, more non-dual model. These sublations continue until you've reached freedom from models altogether. Some of the shifting language in the direct path has to do with meeting you where you are in terms of these sublations.

Another part of the shifting language in the direct path has to do with the rhetorical flexibility that all languages have. Let's say a book about the direct path tells you to begin an experiment by placing an orange on the table. So you go get an orange. You place it on the table so that you can do the experiment. Then the steps in the experiment lead you through several stages. With the help of these steps, you see that in your direct experience, no orange can be found and that the only thing in evidence is awareness itself. The author of the experiment didn't have to believe the orange truly exists in order to be able to write the

experiment. The steps of the experiment aren't trying to contradict or falsify the setup instructions. It's just that they use language in different ways.

You could see this as a rhetorical register shift. The setup instructions are communicating in the rhetoric of an instructor who deals in the vocabulary of everyday objects such as tables, chairs, and the student's bodily position. The instructions aren't meant to imply that any of these items truly exist. As you read a bit further, a register shift happens. The steps in the experiment use a different vocabulary, one that helps you attune to your direct experience.

These register shifts are a natural part of language itself. Also, the direct path takes a self-aware, nonreferential approach to language. In the direct path, language is used in a way that doesn't entail the truly separate existence of anything. In fact, I wrote this entire book in the mode of joyful irony. For more about these topics, see chapter 3, "The Language of Joyful Irony," and chapter 10, "After Awareness: The End of the Path."

Which Path Is the "Highest"?

As a student inquiring into the direct path, you may want to know which is the best and highest path. You may feel sure that there *is* a best and highest. You don't want to follow the wrong path and end up in the wrong place. You don't even want to end up in a second-best place. Thus you may feel as though you should perform your due diligence and settle this issue before you get started.

The direct path doesn't argue that it's the best or quickest or truest path. It doesn't critique other paths. It doesn't say that they're wrong if they disagree about the idea of witnessing awareness. Instead, the direct path leaves it up to you, the student. If you feel an intuitive connection to the idea of a brilliant, loving clarity that unifies things, then this may attract you to the direct path. But if you don't feel this intuitive connection, you'll most likely encounter other paths that resonate more deeply with your experience, and the direct path won't consider you wrong or misguided for going a different way. If you ask in all seriousness about the highest path, a teacher of the direct path may say that paths are tools, and the most effective path is the one you resonate with the most. The same teacher might say that paths are nothing more than arisings in awareness.

But these responses probably won't hit the spot if there's a

deep yearning behind your question. You may feel *sure* that there's a best path. Reality must have an optimal description, mustn't it? You may want someone to direct you to the optimal path, not to give you lukewarm, evasive, or relativistic answers. If there's a best path, you want to know about it, whether you resonate with it or not. You want the highest, maximal enlightenment.

The question about which path is best gets its force from various objectivist assumptions people already have about experience and reality. They assume that spiritual attainment is a fixed quantity that can be measured as if it were a vertical distance (the "highest" path). They also assume that there's an independent standard of preeminent excellence that would decide in favor of one path over all others.

These objectivist assumptions aren't about rocks and trees but about subtle objects such as language, states, and standards of truth. As objectivist assumptions, they're perfectly analogous to broad assumptions about the existence of the world, the body, and the mind. The direct path doesn't grant the truth of these assumptions and point out the objectively best path. Instead, it invites you to look at the assumptions behind the question. The assumptions presume that things truly exist outside of awareness. The direct path helps you look into this presumption and discover that it makes no sense.

Another way to look at this is as a play of concepts. The idea of a best path is a concept. When you discover that concepts and their purported referents are unfindable in your direct experience, then any questions you have about the best path subside into peace, harmony, and contentment.

Chapter 2

The Path and the Heart

King: Venerable teacher, I have summoned you here to teach me non-dualism.

Teacher: Very well, Your Majesty. But first, please allow me to teach you compassion.

King: I want to learn non-dualism first, then compassion.

Teacher: Your Majesty, I heard that you weren't happy with your previous teacher and that you had him put to death. If I teach you non-dualism first, you might do the same to me. And then you wouldn't have the opportunity to learn compassion. But if I am able to teach you compassion first, you will learn both.

How should we treat others? Non-dual teachings, particularly Western versions, haven't said much about the matter. In this chapter, I explore ethics, altruism, and compassion in the context of the direct path. But this is an exploration only—I have no final answers or prescriptions. The topic is rich enough to fill a small library, and I'd simply like to open lines of discussion so that we all may further integrate ethics into our lives. As I said, this is only an exploration.

I believe that non-dual teachings should say more about some sort of kindness, respect, and love. Some of my reflections are highly personal, because engagement with ethics is an individual matter. This chapter is based on my experiences around ethics that I've found helpful with non-dual inquiry. I explore several reasons in favor of including such ethical topics in non-dual teachings. I also examine the strongest popular arguments *against* the inclusion of ethics in non-dual teachings.

It's not too soon to talk seriously about ethics and non-duality. The non-dual community is more mature and experienced with non-dual teachings than it was in the late 1980s, when the teachings were new and exotic in the West. Even though the question of ethics comes up easily enough when we hear of scandals involving gurus, there's wide disagreement about whether ethics should be integrated into non-dual teachings and, if so, how. I'm voting yes on "whether," but I have no

general answer on “how.” I just feel as though it’s time to talk about it.

How Can There Be Conduct Toward Others When There Are No Others?

I consider the question of *how to treat others* a different issue from the typical non-dual question “Are there others?” (I investigate this in chapter 7, “The Opaque Witness.”) I’m in favor of embracing kindness toward others, even if non-dual investigation reveals that there are no separate others and no personal self. There are several reasons why. One reason is that the no-separate-existence question is global, and it isn’t restricted to persons. In the beginning of the non-dual path, everything—persons, tables, chairs, homes, and monthly bills—seems to exist in an independent, separate way. But as you proceed, this global sense of separation diminishes. Even though non-dual investigation reveals that there are no truly existent others, it also reveals that there are no tables, chairs, homes, or monthly bills. Everything is on a par in this way. Realizing the truth of things, you can continue to treat tables, chairs, homes, and monthly bills as if they exist, but in a joyfully ironic way (see chapter 3). There’s just as much reason to treat others well.

Another reason I consider the question of how to treat others to be separate from the question about the actual existence of others is this: at the beginning and middle stages of the direct path, it certainly *seems* as though there are others, even if you want to believe that there aren’t. I’ve even heard non-dualist students claim that there are no others and yet sooner or later complain about the poor treatment they received from another person. So why not bring a bit of Golden Rule insight into your non-dual approach and treat so-called others as you (also so-called) would like to be treated?

There’s one more clarification I’d like to make before getting started. In thinking about this chapter, I wanted a term that I could use to talk about this entire issue. *What should I call the kind of teachings that I’m advocating?* In Buddhism, these teachings are about compassion. In Vedanta, they’re sometimes referred to as dharmic living, and sometimes love. Western monotheistic traditions speak of *caritas*: loving your neighbor or acting as God would have you act. Ancient Greek philosophers spoke of civic virtue.

Philosophers and scholars of comparative religion use the

sensitivities that most people grow up with. It's not that I stayed at home and had no friends. I had lots of friends and was always out and about. And I always went to very good schools. I received a great education. It's just that I had no ideas about how to treat other people. Occasionally I would witness my high-school friends operate with a degree of skill or polish in social situations. I would wonder: *How did he know to say that? To do that? It was perfect!*

For much of my life, I've been sort of oblivious to other people. In a very important way, I just didn't "see" people or their needs. They didn't register. To this day I'm much more an introvert than an extrovert.

When I was in the army (in my early twenties), my insularity acquired a sort of official doctrine. I was reading a lot of egoistic philosophy. My first inspiration was Ayn Rand and her theory of rational selfishness called "Objectivism." Later on, I progressed to something much more radical. It was a brand of hypertrophied selfishness based on the philosophy of Max Stirner. His book *The Ego and His Own: The Case of the Individual Against Authority* (Dover Publications, 2005) is an extreme example of egoism, amorality, and irrationalism. Stirner's argument amounted to this: there's no reason for me to put any kind of normative authority above my current interests.

I developed a rebellious, argumentative, nihilistic streak. Even though I was doing my military duties at the time, I didn't accept any obligation to do so. My revolution was mostly internal. Still, that did nothing to increase my care for other people!

As a Stirnerite, I would take any opportunity to challenge proponents of ethics to answer a simple question: "Why should I be moral?" Since most of my contacts were proponents of dogmatic ethics, most of the answers boiled down to "You should because you should." Even the sociobiological approaches or answers ("It's good for the species") could never convince me. This is because they all depended upon my capitulating to something other than my current interests. All these arguments failed to move me.

In my Stirnerite way of thinking, I rejected any argument to accept authority of any kind because it asked me to put something over and above my current self. So I categorically rejected all "shoulds," including political, ethical, religious, social, contractual, and logical shoulds. No line of argument could convince me that any authority over me was justified.

I continued to feel this way for almost a decade. I even wrote

graduate philosophy papers based on these ideas. And I got very good grades. But, needless to say, I wasn't becoming any more ethically sensitive to others.

Over time, I began to feel lonely and alienated. The loneliness wasn't a case of having no friends; it was a more cosmic, soulful feeling of separation. I felt cut off from what was inspiring and nourishing. I was still in graduate school and working full-time as well. One day, a Christian coworker who liked to proselytize invited me to a gospel concert. She promised that if I didn't like it, she would never bring up the subject of religion again. So I went.

I loved it! The performance was at a local church, given by a local choir personally taught by the great Edwin Hawkins of "Oh Happy Day" fame. I was deeply moved. On the surface, it was a great performance. The songs were catchy and melodic. The music had a sort of jazzy rhythm-and-blues style that appealed to me in a way that didn't require faith. And the singing was done with great heart and gusto. This was effusive gospel music of the Pentecostal type. I was clapping and swaying back and forth with the rest of the audience. But something more profound was happening too. I felt a kind of opening. I felt as if a kind of light was addressing the dark loneliness that had been creeping up on me for several years.

The next day at work, I unashamedly asked my coworker to suggest more of these events. Over the next few weeks, she kept me well informed of upcoming musical performances, all the while with a kindly and understanding gleam in her eye.

One evening at a gospel concert, I felt an earth-shattering change come over me. I felt shivers run up and down my spine. A sizzle erupted out of the top of my head and shot down the backs of my legs. Afterward, I felt like orienting myself more toward this light. Quite suddenly, even as a movie buff, I lost interest in horror movies. I stopped cursing, a habit I'd picked up in the army. I listened to more gospel music. I felt a yearning to be around its message. Nobody was telling me to do this. I totally lost interest in Max Stirner's teachings. I joined a church very much like the one where I had attended that first concert.

For the first time in my life, starting in 1986, I began to value other people. In the church, I encountered a Christian vocabulary and a Christian set of teachings for all the experiences I was having. And as an active member of the church, I encountered ethical teachings. Looking back now, I would designate those teachings as the heart-centered ethics type, not the dogmatic ethics type.

warm, expansive joy. I only hope that, as a result of these changes in me, people found me more pleasant to be around!

Ethics as Preparation for Non-dual Realization

Both Advaita Vedanta and Madhyamika Buddhism teach that cultivating an ethical outlook in life is preparation for the deep insights required for what they consider non-dual realization. These paths also define realization in a holistic way that incorporates an ethical orientation toward others. According to these paths, if a person has had deep insights and yet treats others poorly, that person hasn't yet reached the highest possible realization. Both of these paths are heavy with formal inquiry (called *jnana yoga* in Vedanta and "emptiness meditation" in Madhyamika). Both of these paths teach a form of heart-centered ethics and relate it intimately with inquiry. There are traces of this ethical approach in the direct path as well.

As these paths see it, an ethical orientation is needed for two reasons. First, living life in accordance with ethics makes life more pleasant for everyone. As I mentioned above, my experience agrees with this reason to embrace ethics.

The other reason is spiritually pragmatic and bears more directly on inquiry: living life in accordance with ethics prepares the mind to be more open and subtle. This openness helps enable the deep insights required for non-dual insight. There's even what one might call an official ethical gatekeeping moment, in which students are urged to internalize the ethical teachings before proceeding with the radical, penetrating non-dual investigations. In a manner of speaking, ethics are a prerequisite to the highest forms of realization these paths teach.

Traditional Advaita Vedanta

Advaita Vedanta speaks of prerequisites as qualifications for one's suitability to study Vedanta. Adi Shankaracharya's *Tattva Bodha* lays out what are called the *Sadhana Chatushtaya*, or fourfold qualifications, to be a suitable student of Advaita Vedanta.⁸ The four qualifications (which involve ethics as well as character traits) are as follows:

Discrimination (*viveka*)—the capacity to tell apart the real and the unreal, or the permanent (Brahman, awareness) and the impermanent (everything else)

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