

The Unfolding Now: Realizing Your True Nature Through the Practice of Presence

by A.H. Almaas

*The keys to self-knowledge and deep contentment are right here before us in this very moment – if we can simply learn to live with open awareness. In *The Unfolding Now*, A. H. Almaas presents a marvelously effective practice for developing the transformative quality of presence. Through a particular method of self-observation and contemplative exploration that he calls inquiry, we learn to live in the relaxed condition of simply “being ourselves,” without interference from feelings of inadequacy, drivenness toward goals, struggling to figure things out, and rejecting experiences we don’t want. Almaas explores the many obstacles that keep us from being present – including defensiveness, ignorance, desire, aggression, and self-hatred – and shows us how to welcome with curiosity and compassion whatever we are experiencing.*

It is easy to use the word presence and not know what it really means, and this word has become common these days just as the word now has become. To know in one’s own experience the now of presence is a profound recognition of our spiritual nature and its implications for experience. It is the very stuff of spiritual enlightenment. To recognize one’s consciousness as presence is the same as recognizing how the now is not simply the present moment between past and present time, but the portal to the timeless ground of reality. But how to access this presence, and how to practice being in the now in a way that makes enlightenment accessible?

The Unfolding Now is a kind of manual, similar to *The Lazy Man’s Guide to Enlightenment*, but it is definitely not for the lazy. It is for the ordinary person, not the almost saintly or almost a Buddha, but the contemporary individual living an ordinary life in the world. It is a simply written book about a simple practice that still embodies the deepest principles of spirituality. It presents in an accessible language a particular practice of presence that is at once very Western and yet expresses some of the most ancient and profound teachings of the East. Most of the Eastern teachings on nonduality prescribe spiritual approaches that are either presented as appropriate for the most intelligent and advanced souls or as the last practice or yoga of a long path. In either case, the practices are not accessible to the ordinary individual living an ordinary life. Nonduality is usually understood by these great teachings as the final condition of enlightenment, as the most subtle yet ever present primordial truth. These teachings consider everyday normal experience as quite distant from this condition of nondual truth and usually not related to it in any meaningful way. When a relationship is attributed to this normal experience it is as obstacles to nondual awareness. Some teachings go as far as seeing the forms of normal experience as stepping stones to the nondual condition but usually only in the most advanced stages of the path.

The Unfolding Now takes the insight that the nondual truth is the primordial and ever present natural condition seriously and all the way. It recognizes how nonduality manifests not just in the experience of nondual awareness but also in our ordinary everyday experience. All of our experience, regardless on whatever level of realization it happens to be, always reflects nonduality. The practice presented is one that makes it possible to access presence by using this comprehensive insight into nondual truth. *The Unfolding Now* refers to this practice as that of being where we are. The point is that we are always someplace in the experiential universe; something is always manifesting in our conscious experience of the now, whether it is a difficult emotion like anger or fear, or a sublime perception like clarity, love or emptiness. And such experience, whether it is a thought in the mind, an emotion in the heart, or recognition of translucent light, is always connected to nondual presence and reflects it in some way or another. It is always a manifestation of the nondual truth, displaying it as ordinary experience. The practice is to recognize where we are, abide in it in the now as completely and fully as possible, and invite it to reveal its meaning.

The essence of this practice is the ancient wisdom of nondoing or nonmeditation, the core principle of the ancient nondual teachings, usually viewed by them as the last stage of the path. The practice of being where we are applies this principle of nondoing to all experience, whether on the ordinary level or the sublime one. It applies it, hence, to all stages of the path, from the beginning. It is basically recognizing where we are in the experiential continuum, and letting it be, not interfering with it, but with a curious open attitude that is interested in understanding it and fathoming its meaning and significance. Understanding our experience moment to moment, instead of attempting to improve it or hold onto it, becomes the illumination that reflects the underlying nondual truth. Western style inquiry

reveals the truth of our experience as we simply remain where we are in the now, and as we become aware of our meddling with our experience the revelation of truth becomes an increasingly luminous thread of understanding. This practice, which combines being where we are and inquiry into its meaning without doing anything to it, utilizes the many significant findings about the mind in modern and post modern Western schools of psychology with the ancient insights about our True Nature available from direct contact with it. As an example, finding out that we feel sad can lead to experiencing a grief connected to a friend moving to a different country, that in turn becomes connected emotionally with a sense of abandonment by one’s mother, which inquiry reveals to be meaningful because it signifies loss of our heart of love. And when we experience this loss and the emptiness and lack in it, and when we remain in this condition without interfering with it, inner spaciousness is usually revealed, which then invites presence to arise as the sweet nectar of love. Being where we are with inquiry into the nectary love can reveal it as presence inseparable from sweetness. Continuing to inquire into where we are then can reveal that this presence is not only the nature of all phenomena but that it is inseparable from emptiness. We see that the sadness, which is an ordinary experience, is connected to the nondual truth of True Nature through the luminous thread of understanding. All the while, we simply find where we are, not interfering with it, but inquiring into it in a nonintrusive and effortless manner.

The book goes through the various stages of spiritual opening, and the various challenges we encounter when we contemplate being where we are without meddling with it. We are ordinarily constantly interfering with our experience, compulsively trying to change it, improve it, direct it, comment on it, criticize it, reject it, hold on to it, and many other ways we interfere with the simplicity of what we experience. After discussing the initial gross manners we use to meddle with our experience like resistance, judgment, rejection, attachment and so on, the book goes on to show the subtle ways that our mind interferes with the simplicity of experience. It also highlights the roles of love of truth, compassion and kindness towards our selves, gentleness and openness to whatever our experience happens to be, and the contribution of many other spiritual qualities.

The discussion then turns to the meddling of the subtle operations of our mind, where it constructs and patterns our ongoing experience, like identification with content, reification of percepts, labeling and conceptualization of experience. This highlights the importance of both true spiritual knowing and nonconceptual awareness beyond knowing. The discussion of the nondistinction between being and nonbeing, presence and absence, culminates in seeing the preciousness of every moment of the now, the value of every form in manifestation. Each chapter ends with an experiential exploration session.

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