

Chapter 1 The Awakened Path

Life as a free and fortunate human being is precious because it gives us the opportunity to cultivate the awakened mind. His Holiness, the Dalai Lama

I have traveled to Asia several times and in one trip had the opportunity to travel in Nepal. One of the excursions was to the Royal Chitwan National Park, a former hunting ground for the king. It is open to the public for walks, jeep rides or elephant rides to see the wildlife in its preserved state. The national government allows a limited number of people to enter the park with a guide, which entails crossing a crocodile-filled river in a wooden canoe.

On an early morning walk we came across a couple of rhinos bathing in a small pool. Our guide told us to lay low since the rhino will charge if it senses danger. Our guide also explained that rhinos have very poor eyesight, and so if it sees something move, it will charge regardless of what the animal is. Rhinos have even attacked jeeps. Our guide seemed to take delight in calling to the rhinos to get their attention and then had us back off when the rhinos looked around or moved. The rhino is a good metaphor for those who are living their lives without a fully awakened mind. Many people sense danger and attack, even if they don't fully understand what they are attacking. And because they can't see clearly, they feel in a state of anxiety or danger most of the time. You may know such people. They could be co-workers, neighbors, community leaders, friends or family members.

The fight or flight instinct is very strong in us. Fight or flight, along with feeding and mating, are the four basic human instincts. When stressed we react out of instinct or deeply learned patterns. We react without thinking through what may be happening, or as the rhino, without seeing what's really going on. Luckily we humans can stop from instinctive, knee jerk reactions. We can reflect on the situation and see it from various viewpoints. Staying open and aware you needn't simply react. You can choose how you respond. You can attack or flee or you can negotiate, cajole, charm, or surrender. As we move from childhood to adulthood we learn to see situations beyond what is immediately happening and to consider various options for dealing with life events.

A spiritually awakened mind not only determines what is going on in the material physical plane, but also sees beyond what is happening in the immediate moment. You learn to look for and eventually understand the spiritual lesson or spiritual drama being played out. Everyone can cultivate this spiritual way of seeing to become more centered and grounded in the turbulence of daily life.

It is too easy to get beaten down by the daily tasks in our lives, to let our small self, our ego, our fears run the show. The question is- what game do you want to play? Do you want to play the game of life that feeds your small ego-self or do you want to play the game that expands yourself? The bigger game involves seeing where your growing edge is, moving beyond your comfort zone and staying there long enough to learn the lesson involved. If you get the lesson, you'll find more solid ground. This lets you tap into power much larger than

your small self and achieve possibilities beyond your wildest dreams. Sound like a game worth playing? If so, welcome to the world of the awakened mind.

The awakened mind entails seeing your physical, material world in addition to another world where you see life events metaphorically or metaphysically. Life events to the awakened mind are opportunities to grow, learn and experience joy. With an awakened mind you'll learn to love more deeply, forgive more, offer compassion at every opportunity, be joyful, and find peace in any given moment.

If you aren't ready to live with an awakened mind, then stop reading now. Just put the book down and walk away. If you aren't sure, keep reading. For, to paraphrase Alice in Wonderland (and it was such a good line in the movie "The Matrix"), once you go down this rabbit hole, you'll never look at the world the same way again.

Great mystical traditions through the ages have described the magnificence and wonder of beholding the Divine Beloved, even if for a fleeting moment. Great reformers, spiritual teachers, and avatars through the ages have tapped into this powerful force, moving past earthly illusions. If you are reading this book you probably have consciously and intentionally sought this path. Congratulations to you. Welcome home!

Cultivating your awakened mind and using it as a daily spiritual practice takes commitment. You'll likely experience obstacles and hardships as part of your life journey. These challenges can scare you back into your sleeping state if you are not paying attention. Your smaller self, scared ego, complacency all can easily carry sway in your journey. It helps to have a good support network or supportive loved one to stay on the awakened path. If you want to expand your world and your life beyond measure, the awakened path provides many rewards.

In this book I will review ways to progress on this awakened path. It all starts with answering the stirrings of your soul, saying, "Yes!" to the magical mystery tour of life.

The awakened path allows you to live your life more fully integrated and to accept all the life events you experience. You can surrender your worry and anxiety, moving through your fear and grief to new levels of peace and vitality. For centuries mystics and sages have described the experience of awakening, transcendence, and enlightenment. There are many images for the awakened path - piercing the veil of illusion of this physical world. Plato's allegory of the cave teaches that there's more to life than watching shadows on the wall - greater understanding comes from stepping behind the shadow. Buddha became enlightened by sitting under the Bodhi Tree, emptying himself of all his previously held desires and beliefs.

The search for deeper understanding and the meaning of life has been part of human experience since before the written word. Staying grounded in shifting sand requires that we look beyond what is happening, and see the spiritual process that is unfolding. In essence, staying grounded requires playing the game of life following spiritual rules as well as the well-trodden earthly material path, with its rules for living and dying.

Too many in our society are caught up in scarcity consciousness or superiority mentality rather than an abundance and interdependence consciousness. Unfortunately the mass consciousness hasn't fully learned the lesson of how to live by the basic tenets of Love. We all need to learn, practice, or refine our "awakened mind" to make such a world possible. We're seeing the ramifications of our not learning in dramatic ways globally, from deforestation and global warming to sweatshops and exploitation during times of enormous wealth and advances in science and medicine. The global economic meltdown of 2008-09 is the result of greed and corruption on a global scale. It demonstrates that we are all interconnected and that our solutions will be found not through legislation but with a change of heart and soul.

I began writing this book in the early stages of the US war against Iraq. It was a time of great anxiety, confusion and uncertainty in our country and around the world. The economic crisis of 2008 only amplified this global uncertainty. The title of this book fits these times perfectly. How are we to stay centered and balanced in the midst of confusion, chaos and uncertainty? Even if our own life is going fairly smoothly, we will encounter others who are feeling anxious or angry, and we will have to deal with their pain or troubled emotional state. Finding ways to not only achieve your own inner peace but to offer support and guidance to others so that they too may find some peace is important work for these times. Indeed one of the most important spiritual rules is that we create our world from the inside out- how we respond to others (fear vs. love), how we hold on to ego or call in Divine Guidance all determine what world we create.

A friend of mine wrote me an email during the first months of the Iraq war about learning the core lesson of peace. He wrote, "This war has taught me much about peace. I'm seeing that my anger over the war is no better than the anger of those waging it. When it comes right down to it, everyone is doing the best he or she can do. I have come to rest in that awareness and now I am the peace around which I had been dancing." What a beautiful insight!

This new perspective of my friend is precisely what we need to learn, not just for our own inner peace but truly to help transform the world. Bullies and terrorists exist, not just on a global or national scale but also in people's work lives and in their own homes. September 11th 2001 was a dramatic global wake up call. The economic meltdown of 2008 similarly hit people where they could feel the pain. These events are cosmic two-by-four planks smacking us across the face to wake up and live differently. Will we continue to slumber or use this wake-up call to make lasting transformation for the planet? In his book, "*Creating a Meaningful Life*," Bo Lozoff urges us to get off the fast lane and into the vast lane. The vast lane awaits those of us ready to move into it. The game of expanded consciousness and awakened mind is there if we accept the call to play the game.

I've been fortunate that my book tours have allowed me to meet incredible people who are taking their awakened path seriously. They are committed not just to doing the same old same old. They are courageous enough to examine their own past programming and unhealthy patterns in order to release themselves and move forward. My journey the last few years has been likewise. As a result of my divorce shortly before my first book was published, I went into the depths of previous pain that I didn't know was there. I doubt I would have

'voluntarily' created the situations to address my deeper wounds. But life gives us those opportunities to do our most important work; indeed that is the essence of our soul journey. And this is the basic condition of the spiritual game of life- you will always get what you need for greater spiritual growth. It may not come in the way you want or expect or in the time you desire, but you get experiences to heal your wounds and face your fears. You always have opportunities to move to greater love, compassion and forgiveness. The work you're here to do is to clean up your own house so that you can be more present and loving to those as they try to clean up their inner house.

Following the awakened path you develop a sense of lightness and openness that you've never experienced before. It also will require that you face your fears and self-limiting beliefs and clear them out. This can be scary work but ultimately leaves you much freer and easeful since you won't spend as much energy reacting from a place of woundedness or fear. Learning to be present to the pain and joy in life requires that you learn how to take it all in as it arises without guarantees, attachments, or judgments. If you are a Type A, High Need Achiever person (as I was), this can be a challenging task.

To follow the awakened path you must have courage and faith. A spiritually grounded friend of mine offered me this definition of faith that I like – "Faith is the substance of hope and the demonstration of things not yet seen." Through faith you know you are never dealt more than you can handle. Faith helps you accept that your lessons come to you as you need them and that your experiences are opportunities for growth for your highest good. The opportunities for such learning come when you are ready to experience them, even if you aren't so sure you can handle what is happening. As much as you might like to skip certain lessons, either because they are too painful or you want to jump ahead a level, the steps happen in the right progression for our highest learning. It is also important to remember that you each have your own particular soul progression. You cannot know for another person what lesson they need to learn or the sequence of their lessons.

When you see events happening from a spiritual perspective, you can dig deeper to find the greater lesson of what is going on. Indeed you can give up judgments of "right" or "fair" about things happening in our life. You can see that all that is unfolding is for your greater healing and growth. All that flows around us comes in perfect timing, even if you can't see the bigger picture at the time. Once you give up attachments and your judgments of right and wrong, you can accept more freely what flows through your life. From this place of detachment you can give and receive Love more freely. Releasing attachments to how you think things "should be," frees up an enormous amount of energy that otherwise would be used to fight off an enemy, prove you are right or worthy, or cover our wounds.

Another handy tool for the path of awakening is courage. It is difficult to step out into the unknown, to change beliefs or patterns of behavior. Many people don't want to give up the comfort or convenience of life as they know it. There is safety in the familiar, even if it is unhealthy or not leading to the life you want. People stay stuck in their view of themselves as victims to life's events. They don't know how to or don't have the courage to make those changes. It really helps to have a guide or mentor who can help.

It's tempting during these trials to feel like a victim or even abandoned by God. Being a victim provides opportunities for gaining sympathy and attention. Staying the victim is familiar and less scary than making fundamental changes. While being a victim may work in the short term, you never face the root issues that are required to change for your soul progression. You have to get through the trials to go to the next level in the game. You're likely to experience not just physical changes but shifting beliefs about your core identity. Surrender is another helpful tool for this game. The quicker you learn to surrender and accept what is happening, the easier you move towards wholeness.

Many simply haven't experienced self-acceptance, personal joy, or the trust of others and thus move through the world in fear. Those who continually live in fear bring their struggles, woundedness, and confusion to the world. It is all too easy to ricochet off each other's unbalanced energy. You feel the effects of it in your daily life. The key to stopping the wobbly ways of living is to find the tools and anchors to keep grounded. If you are tired of this wobbly way of living, there is another path.

Those who choose the awakened path often bump up against the status quo. If you have always known you were "a little bit different" perhaps it is because the awakened path called you at an early age. For others who have lived in the mainstream and yet shifted somewhere along the way, it is really scary. All of a sudden you don't connect with others around you, you begin to question long standing accepted "truths" or challenge others in their ways of thinking. You find yourself wanting something more, something different, something more rich and meaningful and substantive. Following the awakened path doesn't necessarily preclude physical comfort, security, or material wealth. It does require that you look at all those things you stay attached to. You will come to understand that following your soul's progression means being more conscious and intentional with your daily decisions.

One cautionary note: *This journey is not for the weak hearted.* It entails going into depths of uncertainty and darkness that many people simply don't want to experience. Yet sometimes you find yourself in that place of wandering or suffering and don't know how to stop it. Often the awakened journey begins with a trauma or major jolt to your system. If approached with an awakened mind, such a life event provides an opportunity for you to re-examine your life.

Following the awakened path often entails releasing your attachments to those things and beliefs that have anchored you in the past. Perhaps this release will be voluntary or perhaps you will experience an involuntary release that you are trying to make sense of. If you are questioning basic beliefs about your life or have to rebuild your life after a major loss, find comfort in knowing it is all part of awakening. It's all part of being more aware of and tending to your soul's journey.

A very dear friend lost her home in New Orleans from Hurricane Katrina. Four months later she moved her family back to a rental apartment to try to rebuild their life. A week after she moved back she found out she had breast cancer. She could have given up or gone into deep depression or despair. Instead she faced what she had to do with her usual spark and determination. Simply by facing her ordeal, she created more positive encouragement for her family and friends to not fall into despair.

When you follow the awakened path you will find that you aren't rocked as hard when tough times occur. As an awakened being you will respond to challenges with greater clarity and strength. You will be able to embrace the times of doubt and darkness rather than fight them. As you learn to be more aware you won't need such dramatic or intense wake up calls to get you to pay attention. A few years ago, as I began to really live the awakened path, I developed a new prayer- '*May my lessons come more gently*'. I've found on the whole that they have, or at least that I've been able to learn the lesson more quickly so I can return to a more balanced and grounded life.

Part of the game is realizing that your life won't be all bliss once you learn an important lesson. You get continual opportunities to practice this lesson. On this journey you can return to our inner anchors and remain grounded much quicker when you get rattled. The awakened path often puts us more in touch with deeper emotions that have been buried for so long. You may feel even more intense pain or sadness. You may be even more sensitive to the suffering of others. But as you do your own healing and growing, you are more able to live with the pain and move through it more quickly. Like the bobo doll that rocks back to center when hit squarely, you come back to balance and wholeness more fluidly when you learn the way of the awakened path.

There's a fabulous story of a group of Englishmen who had moved to India in the early part of the 20th century. They were homesick after many years in India and so decided to build a golf course there. They talked with other Englishmen to lay out the course and were able to get some clubs and balls shipped to them.

Of course these Brits hadn't taken into account the different terrain and animals in India so converting the sport of golf was quite challenging. Frequently monkeys would wreck havoc on their game by scrambling down nearby trees and running off with their golf balls. After weeks of trying to scare away the monkeys, throw their golf clubs at the monkeys, trap them, and bribe them with other food, the monkeys still made the game impossible.

The monkeys in turned loved this new game of golf. They most loved to pick up the balls and throw them down the course and chase after them. This only made matters worse for the golfers.

Finally after many months of trials and tribulations with the monkeys, the Englishmen decided to just accept that the game of golf would be different in India than back home. So to accommodate the monkeys, they realized they needed new rules for playing the game. Over time they created new rules and learned to love the game. Golf now had lots of new twists and possibilities. The rule that helped them find comfort and enjoy the game was this – “Play the ball where the monkey drops it.”

You'll find much greater peace, comfort and perhaps even joy, if you too learn to play the game of life as life happens. Accepting life on life's terms is an essential ingredient to Staying Grounded in Shifting Sand.

To Start the Game- Sign the Learning Agreement

There is a learning agreement that is part of this earthly journey. You may have just an inkling of what that is at this moment, or you may have known it for some time, even your whole life. You all have certain lessons you have to learn in this lifetime. For some it may be harder to learn about forgiveness, for others it may be harder to learn generosity. The toughest lesson for us is offering unconditional love and releasing judgments of others or ourselves. The opportunities for these lessons to be learned occur every day. In some cases they will appear in periods of significant life transitions. You never know from one roll of the die to the next which opportunity is around the corner. The best way to determine what your lessons are is to look at recurring events that seem to trigger similar emotional responses. Look at those life situations and the outcomes that have touched you deeply, whether it is pain or joy. Those tend to give clues to one's soul journey.

Too many of us have learned to discount our intuition. Our society puts so much emphasis on external validation of truth that you dismiss your own inner knowing. Worse yet, we rarely teach children or learned as children how to trust our inner wisdom. While schools spend time in science classes teaching methods of empirical examination to learn objectively verifiable aspects of the physical world, we don't have good methods of learning how to discern inner truths. Much of that is left to trial and error, and at certain times, we meet someone who teaches us how to discern our inner knowing from temporal feelings or impulses.

At the end of this chapter you'll find a set of questions to help you uncover what your learning agreement may entail. I recommend you take some time to go within, be quiet, and open your heart as you complete the learning agreement. You might want to do a meditation or visualization first to get your mind open to reviewing your life. Another option is to put on some music that helps you clear your mind and just sit with each question without writing anything at first. Work through them as often as you need to discover what your soul journey entails.

I spent more than a decade trying to discern my path and had only glimpses of what lay ahead. Yet similar patterns of my soul's journey and purpose kept emerging. As Spirit works, when the time was right for me to become more aware of my soul journey the next important life experience occurred. If you are experiencing some major emotional or physical shifts in your life, such as a job, health, or relationship transition, you are being given the opportunity to gain insights into your learning contract. Stay open to what is being revealed in what you are experiencing now in your life.

Staying grounded in shifting sand involves paying attention to your daily life experiences and seeing them with new awareness. The awakened path is a continuous process of intentional daily living. I used to think that after I made one transition to a new level of awareness I'd be set. Now I recognize the spiraling dimension of life, moving to greater levels of awareness and growth yet circling back to similar issues. With each pass of the spiral I gain new insights and humility, and find new ways of being connected to others to share and experience Love. Such is this spiritual game of life.

I invite you to pay particular attention to the types of people you seem to draw into your life. They are here as your guides and teachers. They may have helped you through joyful and loving experiences or through painful and difficult ones. The people brought into your life in significant ways are there not only for your growth and learning, and on a soul level, you've agreed to do important healing or transformative work together. Enjoy life as it unfolds and keep your heart open. It is all part of your awakening process.

End of Chapter exercises

Discovering your Learning Agreement:

To Start the Game, discover your learning agreement and then open up to it, step fully into it. The journey awaits you.

1. What thoughts continue to trouble you (block you from experiencing inner peace)?
List out as many as you can (e.g., anxiety about money, fears about safety, worry about what others will do to you, concerns of others' judgments etc.)

2. What life events have triggered the most change in your life? List them in as much detail as you can so that you can see them their fullest. How did you feel? Who were the people involved? What roles did they play? How were you involved in shaping or creating the life events? What decisions did you make as a result of the event?

3. When someone really pushes your hot buttons what thoughts and emotions arise?
When you experience great joy, what image of yourself or beliefs about yourself do you have?

