

# Integral Jewish Meditation

*Three Portals of Presence for  
Spiritual Awakening*

Brian Yosef Schachter-Brooks

Copyright © 2017 by Brian Yosef Schachter-Brooks

Schachter-Brooks, Brian Yosef  
Integral Jewish Meditation: Three Portals of Presence for Spiritual Awakening

Tucson, Arizona

This book may not be used in whole or in part for commercial purposes, nor posted or otherwise shared on the internet in any form whether for free or commercial purposes, without prior express written consent from the author. 2017 all rights reserved.

## **Forward**

by Steve Sheinkin

Brian and I like to joke that we were friends even *before* we were born. That's hard to prove, I guess, but our mothers were close while they were pregnant with us, and our fathers were young doctors who bonded over a mutual interest in "alternative" ideas, like healthy food and meditation.

As kids, Brian and I spent countless hours inventing games and making up stories and trying to figure out how to use the mysterious powers of holistic medicine to beat each other in wrestling.

This was a time when my father was becoming deeply involved with the study of Jewish mysticism. I've since read his work on the Kabbalah (and understood at least some of it) but what's really amazing is the huge impact it had on Brian.

As teenagers, we used to work at the medical office our fathers shared, and one day he was making photocopies of transcripts of my father's Kabbalah class. He kept stopping to read— and that was the spark.

In the years since, I've watched Brian become an accomplished scholar and teacher. He has a truly special gift for sharing knowledge with a smile, for making you feel there's no intimidating secret, nothing you can't understand yourself. That warmth shines through in these pages.

Even before I finished reading I found myself saying, “I’m going to try that!” And I think you will, too.

## **Preface – Waking Up**

by Reb Brian Yosef

There's a story that before Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoy became a *rebbe* (Hassidic Master), he was somewhat of a recluse with a bad temper. One day, he went out to attend a *bris* (ritual circumcision of a baby boy). This was annoying to him, for although it is considered an obligation and a *mitzvah* to attend a *bris*, he hated social gatherings and preferred to study and pray alone.

As he opened the door to set out, he was dismayed to see that it was pouring rain. Even more annoyed, he went back in to put on his long coat and boots, and set out into the storm. When he arrived, he was again dismayed to see that he was the ninth man (you need a *minyan* of ten to do the ceremony), and that perhaps his effort would be in vain anyway.

Determined to get it over with as quickly as possible, he went and stood outside, waiting for someone to walk by that he could ask to come in and make the *minyan*. But, no one was walking by, because it was raining!

Finally, an old beggar came along. "Please, can you come in and make a minyan?"

"So be it" said the beggar.

After the ceremony was completed, the host offered the beggar a *l'hayim*, a drink. "So be it" said the beggar. Later,

they offered him some food for the festive meal. “So be it” he said again.

Rabbi Yaakov Yosef was perplexed and annoyed even more. “What’s wrong with you? Don’t you know how to say anything else?”

“The psalm says,” answered the beggar, “*Ashrei yoshvei veitekha – happy are those who dwell in Your House...*”

“So??” replied the rabbi.

“The next verse says, *Ashrei Ha’am Shekakha lo...*”

The literal meaning of this phrase is, “Happy are the people for whom this is so” but the beggar translated it a little differently for the rabbi: “Happy are those who *accept* that which is so!”

When Rabbi Yaakov Yosef heard these words, they resonated like a gong in his soul: *Ashrei Ha’am Shekakha lo – Happy are those who accept that which is so...*

And when he looked again, the beggar was gone.

The rabbi repeated these words over and over on his way home – *Ashrei Ha’am Shekakha lo, Ashrei Ha’am Shekakha lo – Happy are those who accept that which is so – and*

something began to change inside him. For the first time, he could see that his relationship with life had been one of resistance, of negativity, and for the first time he began to see a way out. He began to awaken.

When he went to bed that night, he continued to repeat the words, and he thought to himself that the beggar must have been *Eliyahu Hanavi* – Elijah the prophet, come to instruct him. That was the beginning of his becoming a *rebbe*.

We have all felt that sense of constrictedness and resistance to life. For some, the burden of that angst, frustration, or fear leads one to the threshold of freedom; it is then that we need a beggar to come along and point the way. My hope is that this book can serve as that beggar for you, reminding you of this deep, yet plain and simple secret: “So be it.”



# Introduction

## Three Portals

**The Hidden Treasure**

Once there was a poor man named Reb Aizik, son of Reb Yekele, of Cracow.

One night while he slept, he dreamt that there was a great treasure buried under a certain bridge in Prague. At first, he thought nothing of it. But when the dream recurred the next night, he wondered whether it was trying to tell him something. When it recurred a third time, Reb Aizik decided to pack his things and set out for Prague.

When he found the bridge, he was dismayed to see that it was constantly under guard. Still, Reb Aizik waited day and night for an opportunity to dig. After many days of this routine, the captain of the guard approached Reb Aizik and demanded to know what he was doing. Resigned to failure, he revealed his dream and the reason for his journey.

The guard looked at him in amazement, then began to laugh and said:

“And because of this dream, you wore out your shoes trying to get rich! If I had such faith in dreams, I should have traveled to Cracow when a dream told me that there is a treasure buried under the stove of a Jew- Aizik son of Yekele was the name! Imagine how absurd that would be- I would

have to go door to door, when half the Jews are named Aizik and the other half Yekele!”

Reb Aizik bowed and went back home, dug up the treasure from under his own stove, and built a House of Prayer with the money.

This story was told by Rabbi Simchah Bunam, who would add:

“Take this story to heart and make what it says your own. There’s a treasure you cannot find by seeking it in the world— not even the *Tzaddik* (Hassidic Master) can give it to you. But there is, nevertheless, a place where you can find it. As it is written: כִּי־קָרוֹב אֵלַיךָ הַדְבָר מְאֹד – *Ki karov elekha hadavar me’od- For this thing is very close to you!*” (Deuteronomy 30:14)

### **Seeking the Treasure**

The spiritual path often begins with a dream of something better, an intuition that there must be a way that leads beyond the pain and incompleteness that most people feel to some degree.

Many years ago, a friend invited me to be part of a Jewish men’s group he was starting. I wasn’t much of a joiner, but I wanted to support him, so I agreed to come. I even invited some of my other friends.

At our first meeting, we went around the room to “check in” and talk about our relationship with being Jewish. When it came around to one of the friends I had invited, he suddenly became visibly upset. He ranted on about how other people judged him as being “not Jewish enough,” and how he felt that he never really “fit in.” I knew exactly what he meant, because I had once felt that way too, though I had never heard him open up and talk that way before.

Years later, after I had begun to do spiritual teaching, I came to see that *most people* have feelings like that – feelings of not being good enough, of being judged by others, or of judging oneself. Sometimes it is about one’s group identity (like being Jewish), often it is about other things, but always it is that gnawing sense of being “not enough,” of being somehow incomplete. For many, this experience of incompleteness sprouts into other types of pain as well, such as worry or even dread of the future, or wishing things had “turned out differently” in the past.

For me, as perhaps for you, it was this painful burden of incompleteness that led me to a spiritual path– a path that has not only freed me from that burden but has also led me to discover a treasure so much more vast and profound than I could have imagined. My hope is that through this book, you too will find the freedom that you seek, without having to go through the years of trial and error that I went through. Let me tell you how it happened for me.

~

I was kind of a misfit when I was young. I wasn't good at sports, and I didn't do so well in school. I loved performing—singing, dancing, acting, and playing music. And though I enjoyed some success at those things, my successes were short lived— little bursts of triumph amidst an otherwise heavy and burdensome existence.

When it came to being Jewish, it was the same— I was a total outsider. The most Judaism we had in our home was lighting Hanukkah candles, though I had an annual dose of something deeper when we visited my cousins for Passover. I was enthralled by those Passover *seders* and I wanted more, but Judaism was a foreign language to me.

Later, when most of my friends were learning to chant Hebrew in preparation for their *bar mitzvahs*, I longed to be initiated as well. It didn't matter that most of my friends hated Hebrew school— I wanted to be part of it. I don't know why I was so drawn to Judaism, but I guess it represented everything I didn't have— a strong bond with community, a common language of spirit, an ancient identity grounded in devotion to the Eternal. In short, *connection*.

Of course, I wouldn't have described it that way at the time, but I knew that something vital was missing from my life. I longed for something deeper— something that would heal the lack I felt. I sensed the light of those Hanukkah candles calling me— but calling me to *what* I didn't know. So, I asked my parents if I could have a *bar mitzvah* too. They said no. They felt that I should wait until I was older to make decisions about religion.

But, I was determined— so I snuck Hebrew lessons!

I had a tutor that helped me with homework — a nice old lady named Sarah Rosenberg who would give me chocolate and chicken soup when I would come to her house for tutoring. But secretly, she spent about half the time teaching me Hebrew.

Around that same time, I worked at my father's medical clinic for extra money. My father, Dr. Michael Schachter, had originally founded the practice with his best friend, Dr. David Sheinkin (father of author Steve Sheinkin, who wrote the forward to this book). When Dr. Sheinkin was tragically killed in a plane crash in 1983, my father continued the practice on his own.

Dr. Sheinkin had studied Kabbalah with the famous Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan. At some point, Dr. Sheinkin had given a series of lectures on Kabbalah, which were recorded and transcribed. Part of my job at the medical clinic was to copy those transcripts. I stood there in the Xerox room, copying

one page at a time for hours. (In those days, you couldn't put a whole stack of papers in at one time.) At some point, I paused for a moment to look at what I was copying – and I couldn't stop reading! I was hooked on Kabbalah.

As I got older, I was drawn to anything I could find on mysticism, both Jewish and not. It was the eighties, and many books on Kabbalah were just starting to come out. I devoured them. In addition, my father was impressed with the health benefits of “Transcendental Meditation,” so he paid for the whole family to learn it. I also practiced all kinds of other mystical techniques I learned from books, and whatever teachers I could find. More than once my parents were called into school to talk about my obsession with the occult! I had become a spiritual nerd. Then, when I was eighteen, something happened that changed my life forever.

*The First Portal: Open Heart*

It was a hot August day in New York, the summer of 1987. I had just graduated from high school. I was talking heatedly with a friend in my cool basement bedroom about an ethical problem that was bothering me: a mutual friend was working at my father's medical clinic, and she had stolen a test tube to use as a container for little items in her purse.

The dilemma was this: the test tube was probably worth a few cents. No one would miss it, no one was hurt by her thievery. So, what was wrong with stealing it? On any other day, I probably wouldn't have given it a second thought. But on that

day, I became obsessed with the problem. If you steal something and no one is hurt or even notices, *what's wrong with that?*

Clearly, there would be no negative outer consequences. But what about inner consequences? If you're stealing something, what does that say about your motivation? Where does the act of stealing come from within yourself? What are you actually *living for* when you steal?

As we delved deeper and deeper into the problem, we were delving deeper and deeper into ourselves— *what were we living for?* That became the question. At some point, our conversation stumbled onto the story of Moses and the Burning Bush.

(Remember that story? Moses was shepherding sheep, when he noticed a bush that was on fire, yet it wasn't getting burned. When he went to investigate, God spoke from the bush and told him to leave his pastoral life as a shepherd and lead his Israelite brethren to freedom.)

As we talked about Moses and the Burning Bush, the story seemed to pull us in and resonate with our question: *What were we living for?*

We reflected: first, Moses was just living a simple, pastoral life, basically concerned with his own life. Not in a bad way, but just in an ordinary way. Then, the Divine speaks to him from the fire and gives him a bigger mission— *tell*

*Pharaoh to “let My people go!”* This wasn’t really new information; he already knew that his people were enslaved and that maybe he should do something about it. But he was living for himself. Now that God was telling him to leave his comfortable life and fulfill his mission, he began to live for something bigger; he began to *live for God*.

As we came to this point in our conversation, something incredible happened to both of us at the same time. It was as if we had both accidentally caught fire from the Burning Bush itself.

*“You’ve got to live for God!”* we cried.

Something inside me broke open. That sense of incompleteness, of not being enough, of not fitting in, it all dropped away. In its place, there was light pouring through me, and everything seemed to glow with the same light. I was suddenly free— completely free— and I was on fire to simply *“Live for God”* alone. We called it, *The Experience*.

For several days, that state of fiery freedom remained. But then, it began to fade. After all, we had stumbled into *The Experience* totally by accident, and I had no idea how to stay connected with it. And besides, unlike Moses, I didn’t have a mission; I just went back to my regular life. Within a few weeks, *The Experience* was totally gone. *Nooooooooo!!!*

I no longer knew how to “Live for God” or even what that meant. *But I knew I wanted it back.*

That was the first time I went to see Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (may his memory be for a blessing). We sat in his living room and I explained to him everything that had happened. He was silent for a moment, and then he said:

“Ask me what you have come to ask me.”

“Well, I guess I want to know what I should do now,” I replied.

He paused, then answered, “Here’s what you should do: learn everything you can about traditional Judaism. Continue also with your meditation, only you should meditate with *tallit* and *tefillin* (Jewish ritual objects worn on the body during prayer and meditation.) When you do, open yourself and allow them to teach you what they are about. You should also visit my friend who is *Roshi* (Head) of the Zen Center in Rochester (where I was in music school at the time.) He can help you as well.” He then gave me some books and sent me on my way.

Okay, I had a mission!

Back at college, away from my secular family, I began to really practice Judaism for the first time, learning mostly with the *Chabad* rabbi on campus. I also would visit the garden at

the Zen Center, but I rarely sat with the other practitioners. Formal Zen just felt weird to me.

After college I moved to the San Francisco Bay Area and taught piano for a living. For the next eleven years, I continued practicing and learning Judaism— eating kosher, keeping Shabbat, praying and so on— in an attempt to somehow reawaken that sense of freedom, that sense of “living for God.” Sometimes I had a little glimmer, but for the most part, it didn’t work. Something crucial was missing.

***The Second Portal: Present Moment***

Then one Sunday afternoon on October 4<sup>th</sup> 1998, I came to the end of my rope. I had been trying for years to get back to “The Experience” through learning Torah and practicing Judaism, but I didn’t feel any closer.

*What was it that Reb Zalman had said about Zen?*

I immediately got up and went to the local bookstore (bookstores still existed back then). I thought maybe I should get a book by Ram Dass since he had written “Be Here Now,” but instead a little book caught my eye called Buddhism Plain and Simple by Roshi Steve Hagen. I bought it, went home, sat in my room and read. I was ready. At some point, this sentence jumped out at me:

*“You are already enlightened. All you’ve got to do is stop blocking yourself and get serious about attending to what’s going on.”*

I asked myself, what *is* going on?

*The movement of my breathing and feeling in my body ~ The chirp of a little bird outside the window ~ the sound of the grandmother next door speaking Cantonese and chopping vegetables for her family ~ the light and shadows playing around the room...*

As I became present, my awareness seemed to glow with a simple inner brightness, and in that brightness the whole world seemed to glow with the same simple light. Could this be it? Could it be this simple? Was the problem that my thinking mind had *made* it into a problem, *and all I had to do was stop thinking so much and pay attention?*

Although I had been meditating for many years with many different techniques, I had never fully realized the power of Presence until that moment. For the first time, I understood why Reb Zalman had instructed me to learn Zen along with Judaism. All those years I had been trying to “get back” to The Experience, but now I saw that the approach of trying to “get back” could never ever work. The experience I longed for wasn’t about *getting* somewhere or *getting* anything for myself at all; it was about *giving* my attention to what was present.

Now, as I began to offer my awareness to what was actually happening in the present moment without trying to “get” anything out of it, my heart began to open spontaneously, and

I was “living for God” once again. The burning bush was calling, and its message was simply this: “Pay attention!”

At this point in the story, you may be wondering if I am advocating mixing together Judaism and Zen Buddhism. Not at all. At that time in the eighties, there were really no institutions for exploring meditation in a Jewish context. Eastern teachers, on the other hand, had been importing and adjusting their teachings and practices for western audiences for nearly a hundred years. Reb Zalman knew that I couldn’t get the meditation piece from Judaism at that time, but that I could find it in Zen. I believe that when I told him my story and he saw how important meditation was for me, he saw an opportunity to further the cause of renewing meditation in Judaism, and that’s why he pointed me toward his Zen teacher friend whom he knew and trusted.

For the next few days, life went on as usual, only there was this brightness to everything— a kind of spiritual “light” that shone from within me and from everything around me. Everything I did flowed from a simple love and affinity for everyone and everything. All negativity simply dropped away. All my Judaism and meditation also dropped away. What need did I have for all that Jewish stuff when I’d already found what I was searching for? Life was bliss. But

then came a challenge that knocked me out of the bliss completely.

***The Third Portal: Transformation***

I was driving along in my car, when suddenly another car came out of nowhere and cut me off. Instantly I was filled with rage. Of course, there's nothing so unusual about road rage— it happens all the time. But from the state of Divine bliss I was in, there was nothing more painful. In an instant, I had become a demon. I wanted to get out of the car and kill the guy.

But then I realized: This is it! This is the test!

Somehow, I knew in that moment that if I couldn't also be present with the rage I was feeling, then the whole thing meant nothing. Being present was suddenly no longer an option, it was an imperative. Now the burning bush was *commanding*.

I didn't curse. I didn't punch anyone. Instead, I brought my awareness deep into the feeling of the anger. It was extremely painful, but then something started to happen: the anger seemed to move like smoke up through my body and out the top of my head. It was like a dense cloud of darkness was leaving me.

As the last of it left my body, everything looked completely different; my perspective on the whole situation had

completely shifted. I saw that the guy who cut me off was actually doing me a favor; he was actually helping me to get free. And more than that, I could see that *everything* I perceived was part of the awareness that was perceiving it. Everything that was happening— the caw of a crow soaring through the sky, the road glistening with moisture from a recent rain, the bustling traffic— all of it was arising within and not separate from my awareness. I realized: *I am this awareness.*

Over the next week, I felt as if all the elements of “me”— all my memories, hopes, desires, fears— were coming up out of my body and burning away in the fire of awareness. I had started on a path that I now couldn’t stop, even if I wanted to. And I didn’t want to, because there was no longer any sense of “me” to want anything; there was just being present with this process that now had its own life.

It went on and on for several days. Sometimes it was extremely painful, and other times incredibly blissful. During some of the painful times I became completely non-functional, and friends had to help me do simple things.

The following Saturday evening, it suddenly all stopped— like turning off a fan and noticing the silence for the first time. It was like being reborn. It was a simple feeling, evoking the memory of being a small child – innocent, bright, and inherently good.

But, I soon realized that the “awakening,” as I called it, had come with a price. It had stripped so much of me away, that regular life left me often feeling fragile and raw.

One day, when I was feeling particularly beaten up, it occurred to me that maybe some *davening* (praying) might help. I flashed on Reb Zalman’s enigmatic advice he had given me eleven years earlier– that I should meditate with *tallit* and *tefillin*, be present with them, and allow them to teach me. At that moment I realized for the first time what he was talking about, because all of life had become like that, and everything had something to teach.

I got out my old *tallit* and *tefillin*, put them on and began to chant some Hebrew prayers. Like magic, my body was flooded with blissful, healing energy. I soon realized that I had to pray and meditate every day– not to “reach enlightenment,” but to recover from it!

### *A Jewish Path of Presence*

I called Reb Zalman and left him a message, thanking him for the advice he gave me fifteen years earlier, though I was sure

he wouldn’t remember me. Later I found a message from him on my answering machine that filled me with gratitude:

*“Brian Lebn- I am glad to hear your practice has come to fruit– you have reached the borderlands of our country.”*

I had only reached the borderlands!

I was grateful for his message, for reminding me that the “awakening” wasn’t some big achievement or endpoint. He then urged me to continue my learning and he gave me names of specific people to connect with, which I did.

From that point on, I began to receive Judaism back into my life, but in a completely different way. The old me had died; I had found the Light I had sought, but I also discovered how Judaism was really a vessel for that Light, a channel through which the deeply transformative power of Presence could be safely integrated into ordinary life, bringing “heaven down to earth,” so to speak.

But, it wasn’t enough for me to just enjoy this discovery for myself – I wanted to share it with others. So, in 2003, I became certified as a Jewish meditation teacher through a program at a local synagogue, and in 2006, I was invited to take over the Monday night meditation gatherings at that synagogue when the previous teacher left. I started calling those Monday nights *Torah of Awakening*, and over the next ten years, those *Torah of Awakening* gatherings became the laboratory within which the teachings and practices in this book evolved.

Today, there are many wonderful books, teachers and programs on Jewish spirituality and meditation, but many of them are somewhat academic rather than experiential and

transformative. My hope is that these discoveries will help you move from pain to freedom, and also how to *live* from that freedom, connected to the fertile soil of the Jewish spiritual lineage.

This is nothing new; the journey of awakening has always been present within Judaism. For example, we can see it metaphorically in the journey of the Israelites' liberation from Egypt. The word for Egypt, *Mitzrayim*, comes from the root which means narrow, or constricted – probably because Egypt is geographically narrow, constructed along the Nile river. But according to a Hassidic teaching, this hints that “freedom from Egypt” means freedom from a constricted, narrow state of being. In this book, we will explore many other ways that the journey of awakening is expressed in Jewish teaching.

And yet, Judaism is rarely taught that way. My hope is that you will find this book and other Torah of Awakening teachings to be useful guides for waking up and getting free from whatever narrow, limiting thoughts and patterns are keeping you stuck. The key, in my experience, lies in the *Three Portals of Presence* I discovered. Let's look again briefly at each of these Three Portals:

The first is the Portal of the Heart. That's the sense of living for something bigger than yourself, what I had called “living for God.” When you're motivated to serve something greater than yourself, you transcend yourself. Your personal problems and feelings lose their sting in the presence of

devotion to something infinitely larger than the “me.” You don’t have to use the word “God” if that doesn’t work for you. The important part is that sense of reverence and devotion to That which is beyond yourself.

The second is the Portal of the Body. This is the practice of being present now, of drawing your awareness into whatever is actually going on. I call it the Portal of the Body because the easiest and most direct way to become present is to notice your own body— your breathing, your senses, and your feelings.

This is so important because without Presence in the body, any devotion to something bigger than yourself tends to solidify into a mere conceptual idea. It becomes part of your ego, and the idea of freedom becomes just another prison. “God” turns out to be just another version of “me.” The only

way to *truly* go beyond yourself is to open to Reality as it is, and that means opening to your *actual* present moment experience, rather than be stuck in your *thoughts about* your experience.

The third is what I call the Portal of Awareness Itself. This portal opens when you notice that everything you perceive—from sensory awareness, to emotions, to the coming and going of thoughts— *lives within your own awareness*. At this level, that basic sense of yourself being “inside your body looking out” opens into a vast and borderless spaciousness, an open field of awareness within which your body and

everything else is perceived, and *you are that vast field of awareness*. Furthermore, even though you are awareness, it isn't *your* awareness; rather, there is One Reality, One Existence, and *It* is conscious right now *as you*. This is the deepest level of Jewish spirituality, the understanding that *Hashem Ekhad*, that the Divine is the Oneness of All Being, manifesting as all that exists.

But, don't take my word for it, try it yourself!

This book will take you through the Three Portals experientially, through a simple practice I call *Integral Jewish Meditation*. I call it "integral" because it integrates the Three Portals through several different traditional modalities such as chanting, visualization, contemplation, movement and silence. These modalities actually all come from Jewish prayer. For example, awakening the Three Portals in the body (heart, belly and head) correspond to the *tzitzit* and *tefillin* (ritual objects worn on the body during prayer) and the traditional practices associated them. The affirmation of Divine Oneness through chanting the *Sh'ma*, which we will learn more about in Part III, corresponds to the contemplations of Third Portal. These are just a few examples, and in this book, you will learn more about how Presence relates to the deepest teachings and practices within the tradition.

Unfortunately, it is rare for even practicing Jews to take full advantage of the incredible transformative potential within Judaism; more often, traditional Jewish practices are done in

a superficial, mechanical way. My hope is that this book, along with other *Torah of Awakening* materials, will help in the great work of curing this trend.

However, this is not at all just for practicing Jews. In fact, the purpose of *Integral Jewish Meditation* is to make the transformative potential of Jewish prayer accessible to everyone, regardless of background. You don't have to be Jewish or even know much about Judaism or Hebrew before you begin, and you'll even learn a little Hebrew along the way. But, if you are already experienced with Judaism, this book will help you tap the great transformational power that lies within the practices you may already be doing.

Either way, I bless you that you should find what you seek within these pages. Let's begin.



Part I  
Offering

**Kavanah**

Once, a great metallurgist trained an apprentice in all the complexities of the craft. When the training was finished, however, the apprentice was unable to do even the simplest of tasks. Then the master realized: the apprentice had learned everything except the first and most important thing – how to light the fire!

In metallurgy, you can't begin the work of refining the metals without first lighting the fire. Similarly, if you want to awaken, you also need a "fire." This essential fire, without which spirituality is useless and even potentially dangerous, is the right *intention*. As we know from history as well as current events, violence sometimes comes in the name of religion. The essence of the problem is not religion itself, but the *intention* that is brought to it.

So, how do we bring the right intention?

First, it is important to understand that the right intention, or *kavanah*, is not different from the intention that arises naturally when you are spiritually awake; they are the same thing. So then how can you *begin* with an awakened intention if you're not yet awake? It seems like a contradiction.

In order to understand the answer, let's take the example of lifting weights. You lift weights in order to build physical strength. However, you cannot begin to lift weights unless you have at least a *little* physical strength to begin with. With

your little bit of strength, you can lift a small weight. Through lifting something light, you build strength, and you can move on to heavier weights. Over time, you get stronger and stronger.

It's the same with any endeavor. If you want to learn to play an instrument, you must first be able to move your hands on the instrument in a simple way. To learn something intellectual, you must have a mind that can think to some degree. Whatever you seek to develop, you have to have a little ability to start with, or you cannot even begin.

With spirituality, it is exactly the same. The ability to live from awakened intention comes from the fact that you *already have* awakened intention; you just need to remember it and choose it. But to do this, you need to have a grasp of what it is; you need to experience it within yourself so that you can bring it forth. Let's begin to get a sense of the power of intention by exploring what the early sages had to say about it.

**Contemplation: “For Its Own Sake”**

The ancient Rabbis thought *kavanah* to be so important that it is among the first subjects in the classic wisdom text *Pirkei Avot— Chapters of the Sages*. In the third *mishna*, the sage Antignous says,

*“Don't be like the servant who serves the Rav to receive a reward; rather, be like the servant who serves the Rav not to*

*receive a reward.”*

In other words, you should serve for its own sake, not for some future result. But how is this even possible? Why would you work for someone unless you were going to get paid for your efforts? Let's look at a hypothetical example to get a sense of what it means to “serve” for its own sake:

Suppose you saw a baby crawl over to an open hot oven. What would you do? Probably you would leap up to save the baby from getting burned. I imagine that's what I would do.

Now if we look at this situation, what do we find?

First, there is the quality of immediacy; there is no decision-making process. The instant you perceive the situation, you know what you *must* do; there is no choice. When I say there is no choice, I don't mean that there is no free will. Of course, theoretically you could choose not to help the baby. What I mean is that there would likely be no consideration of choice – no sense of “What should I do now?” – just the situation and the immediate response.

So, we might say that the situation “commands” the response, and that actually the situation and the response are not separate at all. One leads to the other with no space for “me” to consider what to do.

The second quality we find is that there is no conflict between “my interests” and “the baby's interests.” The act is

one of total service, but without any sense that “*I am doing something to serve.*” If someone came up to you afterward and said, “You saved the baby! What a heroic, saintly person you are!” – that would be embarrassing; there is nothing saintly about it. There was no choice, no sense of sacrifice – there was just doing the obvious, without thought.

Finally, in the moments after preventing the baby from getting burned, I imagine there would be a sense of gratitude and relief. “Thank God the baby is safe!” After that, of course, there would probably be a host of other things: “Who left the hot oven door open with an unattended baby crawling around?” The “me” would return with its judgments, opinions and commentary. But before that, just “Thank God!” for the blessing of helping the baby.

The only problem with this example is that it has an urgent, stressful quality to it, and serving for its own sake doesn’t have to be like that at all; it could be completely calm. Here’s another thought experiment: imagine that, instead of a baby crawling toward an oven, a small adorable child comes to show you a picture she drew for you. Take a moment to see how you feel when you imagine that scenario.

When I give this example in workshops I teach, most people immediately smile warmly. For many of us, we know what this feels like; we would be delighted to look at the picture and give the child our warmth and attention, without any ulterior motive, without any sense of trying to get anything

out of the interaction. It would simply be a moment of Presence.

Now we can begin to see what Antiginous meant. Saving the baby or looking at a child's drawing is its *own* reward, aimed not at the future but at the present. In Hebrew this is called doing something *lishma*- for its own sake.

### **Practice**

When we do spiritual practice, we are often motivated by trying to achieve a certain kind of state. Perhaps we want less stress, or we want a feeling of bliss, an experience of the Divine, or any number of things. On the deepest level, we want a cure for the pain we feel, for that fundamental feeling of incompleteness. For most of us, that's what brings us to a spiritual path in the first place, and this is totally valid. But the problem is, this motivation is rooted in the experience of "me" wanting to get "something."

As we've seen, awakened intention isn't like that. Rather, it springs from your connection with the moment. It's not about achieving something or getting somewhere; it is simply an expression of your own inherent goodness, for its own sake. In other words, it is an act of love.

This crucial piece is just as important as being motivated and disciplined; without the right *kavanah*, the practice won't bear lasting fruit. We can see this expressed in the opening story when Reb Aizik dug up the Treasure from under his

own stove. Did he use the treasure to buy a new fancy car? No – he gave it away to build a house of prayer. This isn't just an afterthought; it's a crucial part of the story. The nature of the Treasure – the nature of the profound inner peace, joy, and freedom that lies buried beneath our thoughts and feelings – is that you can't hold on to It. It arises spontaneously when we adopt an attitude of open heartedness and acceptance of however this moment unfolds.

Therefore, when we begin meditation (or anything for that matter), it is helpful to first evoke this fundamental *kavanah* so that your motive isn't contradicting your goal. Again, this is not difficult, as love is an essential part of your own being.

Take a moment now to connect with this simple quality.

Place your right hand on your heart, and take the attitude of offering your presence to this moment, just as it is. Give your attention as a gift to whatever is arising in your field of awareness – to the sounds, sensations, feelings, and anything else that is present. Notice that all the elements of your experience right now are all part of *one experience*, and that this *one experience* is how Reality is appearing to you. As you offer yourself, try expressing this verbally with the words, “For You.”

Can you feel a shift when you do that?

Now let's try using the Hebrew word that means “For You” – *L'kha*. This word comes from a scriptural prayer that begins,

*“L’kha Hashem Hagedulah- For you, Divine Being, are the Greatness...”* (Chronicles 29:11). In Kabbalah, the word *Gedulah*, or “Greatness,” refers to *Hesed*, the great Divine quality of loving-kindness. So, when we chant *L’kha*, we offer our presence lovingly to the Divine, to Reality, to the present moment – all basically meaning the same thing.

But, you might be wondering, how are the Divine and Reality and the Present Moment the same thing?

For many people, the word “Divine” or “God” means a male deity – the God of the Bible stories. But the esoteric, or inner tradition, teaches differently. As the Zohar puts it, “Woe to those who say that the Torah contains no more than stories; they’re looking at the outer garment and no more...”

The most sacred Hebrew Name of God consists of three Hebrew letters- *Yod*, *Heh*, and *Vav*, with the *Heh* repeated at the end. These letters come from the Hebrew verb “to be,” so the inner meaning of the Divine Name is actually Existence, Being, or Reality. This Name is considered so sacred that traditionally it is forbidden to pronounce the Name, or even to pronounce the names of the letters consecutively. This also hints at its inner meaning; Reality cannot be grasped by words or ideas. And yet, here It Is.

So, on this inner level, God is not an entity or a character in a story. God is Reality Itself. God does not merely exist, *God is Existence*. And, right now, there’s nothing but God. Everything you perceive, everything you feel, everything you

think, and your consciousness itself is nothing but God. And your access point to God, of course, is always this moment.

But, you may ask, if the Divine Name actually means “Being” or “Existence,” why use the word “God” at all? Why not just say Being or Existence? Why confuse the issue with a word that implies belief in some kind of divine person?

One way to look at it is to understand “God” as a *relational* word. When we call someone a friend, mother or daughter, we are describing a relationship; a person is a friend or mother only in relation to another person. It is the same with God. The word God describes something that is supreme, ultimate, above and beyond oneself.

Ordinarily, the mind tends to make its own ideas into gods. That is, we give supreme importance to our own thoughts, mistaking our *ideas* about reality for Reality. We elevate an image of the truth above Truth. We do this not because we are idolatrous sinners, but because that is how the mind works.

The main function of the mind is to navigate the next moment. Without the mind’s constant envisioning of the future through its memories of the past, we would not know what to do, or even remember how to speak. Without past and future, we could not think at all; thought and time are interdependent and inseparable.

The price we pay for the constant movement of the mind, however, is that the present moment becomes insignificant. The past and future, which really means our own *thoughts about* the past and future, become our ultimate concern. But important as thoughts are, their content is not real; thoughts only form an *image* of the real. They are the map, not the territory; they are the menu, not the food. Reality is always already here; only the present moment actually exists. But to enter the present, we must cease giving so much importance to the activity of thought and open to Reality as it is.

Can you remember a time when you were so alive with awe that the present moment filled you entirely? Perhaps it was a moment of witnessing something inspiring in nature, or perhaps it was being in the presence of someone for whom you had great respect or love. In such moments, there is a sense of arrival, a sense of fulfillment, a sense of “This is IT.” The dominance of time and thought temporarily subsides, and you enter the fullness of the present.

And yet, it is *always this moment* in which we can encounter the Real, not just the occasional extraordinary moments. This, then, is the reason for using the word “God.” By calling Reality “God,” we bow to What Is, prayerfully opening to Reality as the One, Living Presence that is always present.

Let’s try the practice again, invoking this attitude of prayerfulness with the word *L’kha*.

Place your right hand on your heart, imagining a light shining from your heart center. Offer yourself – your attention and presence – lovingly to this moment, to Existence *as* this moment. Take a nice deep in-breath, and chant “*L’kha\_\_\_\_\_*” with a long out-breath.

This practice of simply opening to this moment as it is, offering your attention as a gift from the heart, is the beginning of meditation.

~

In the example mentioned above of saving the baby from getting burned, the situation itself has the power to bring you into the present. You wouldn’t be daydreaming or thinking of something else while leaping up to save the baby! The situation itself commands your attention.

But the power of attentiveness is always already within you. Evoke this *intention of attention* and you can awaken, at any moment, into the fullness of *this* moment. With practice, this open quality of loving-kindness, of *Hesed*, is gradually uncovered as your natural state.

~

The classic Hassidic text by Rabbi Sheur Zalman of Liady, called the *Tanya*, talks about this through a different extraordinary example – that of Jewish martyrdom. The

author points out that, throughout Jewish history, even the most unspiritual individuals were willing to suffer martyrdom rather than betray their people and sense of what is right. The reason, says the *Tanya*, is that it often takes an extraordinary situation to awaken this potential.

But if we know this, we can choose to awaken it within ourselves, even without an extraordinary situation.

Right now, in this moment, the baby is reaching for the hot oven. A child is showing you a picture she made for you. The “baby” and the “child” actually *are* this moment; our task is to give our attention lovingly to whatever is present. This moment is “asking” something of us, in a sense – but we can truly respond only if we are present, if we open ourselves to it.

When should we open ourselves to it?

The answer, of course, is always “now.” The time for practice is always this moment, in every moment that we are able. However, if you take this invitation to practice constantly, you will probably notice that it’s not so easy. At some point, something will come along – a thought, a feeling, a memory, an experience or even just tiredness – that will topple you from this high place.

If having the right intention is so natural and simple, why is it so difficult to maintain? There appears to be a counter force, an opposite tendency that is also operating. So, if we are to

practice right intention, we need to understand the source of wrong intention. That source is sometimes called “ego.”



Part II  
Knowing

**Ego**

There's a story about a rabbi who was leading services for *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. *Yom Kippur* services are very long and intense, filled with language of remorse and repentance for one's sins. *Yom Kippur* is also a twenty-five hour fast, so the effect is to really bring one to a state of *bitul*—a deflating of ego and purification from arrogance.

As this rabbi was *davening* (praying) with great intensity toward the climax of the service, he suddenly became overwhelmed with the realization of his own insignificance. He experienced, in that moment, a total dropping away of his self-centeredness, and realized with embarrassment how deluded he had become.

Before he knew what he was doing, he spontaneously cried out, "*Ribono Shel Olam!* Master of the universe! I am nothing! I am nothing!"

When the cantor saw him do this, he too became inspired. The sincerity of the rabbi's cry combined with the intensity of the holy day shot through him, and he suddenly realized the same thing. "*Ribono Shel Olam!* I am nothing! I am nothing!" cried the cantor.

The truth was infectious. Suddenly, a poor congregant, Shmully the shoemaker, also became deeply moved and cried out as well: "*Ribono Shel Olam!* I am nothing! I am nothing!" When the cantor saw Shmully's enthusiasm, he turned to the rabbi with incredulity: "Look who thinks he's nothing!"

The irony of this story, of course, is that the cantor becomes arrogant about being humble! And this is the great trick of the ego— the ego can turn anything into itself, even the idea of being egoless. That’s why it’s so important to understand what the ego is if we wish to uncover our awakened intention, which is really egoless intention.

~

When I speak of ego, I’m talking about the natural, felt sense of self.

Our natural sense of self is like a psychological version of a creature. Just as an animal wants to survive, protect and perpetuate itself, so does our ego, only on a psychological level. Just as an animal is basically concerned with its physical body, ego is concerned with *identity*; ego is made not out of flesh and blood but out of thoughts and feelings.

Have you ever gotten angry about being “right,” or felt insulted by someone else’s opinions?

Words and thoughts that go against what we believe are a threat to the ego; they threaten the thoughts and feelings that form our identity. For this reason, the *Tanya* calls the ego the *Nefesh Behamit*, or “Animal Soul,” and then outlines the qualities of the ego in terms of the “four mystical elements” – fire, water, air and earth. These four “elements,” which take their names from physical phenomena, are really inner qualities of consciousness that have egoic manifestations. If you can understand and remember these qualities in real life situations, you can learn to identify the qualities of ego within yourself and not be controlled by them. Once you free yourself from the control of the ego, what’s left is egoless

intention. This deeper intention, or *kavanah*, springs naturally from who you *are*, beneath the psychological process of the ego, as we saw in the example of the baby and the oven.

Let's look at each of the four elements and how they relate to ego, according to the *Tanya*.

### **Fire**

The egoic quality of fire is arrogance and anger. The *Tanya* points out that arrogance is actually the cause of anger, because anger results from things not going how we'd like them to go. It is only because we arrogantly believe that things *should* go the way we want that we feel conflict, and from that conflict anger is born.

So, fire represents negativity and conflict with "what is." It's related to the slang term "hot head," and is the most aggressive and nasty face of ego.

### **Water**

The egoic quality of water is desire and craving for gratification. While fire is about what you *don't* want, water is about what you *do* want. Craving for sensual pleasures, wealth, fame, success – these are all examples of water. The *Tanya* points out that water is the symbol for craving because it is the nature of craving to continuously grow, just as water causes living things to grow. When we get something we want, we may feel satisfied temporarily, but sooner or later there is always something else to want. And, the more we satisfy a particular desire, the more we crave. The extreme example of this is addiction. While fire keeps us in conflict with what we *don't* want, water keeps us running after what we *do* want. These two negative forces are the flipside of

each other, keeping a person trapped in a state of restless discontent.

### **Earth**

The egoic qualities of earth are fear, anxiety, sloth and ultimately depression. While fire and water keep a person dissatisfied and restless, at least the person is active and functional. With earth, a person's mind becomes polluted with constant thoughts about how bad everything is. Instead of getting angry, a person becomes anxious, fearful and unmotivated. If something bad is always bound to happen, what's the point? Why even try? This is the egoic energy of earth. If a person gets taken over by this energy, one can become psychologically paralyzed and non-functional, God forbid.

### **Air**

The egoic quality of air is meaningless activity. It is the tendency to always be busy with something, to not know how to relax. Externally, this could manifest as constant chattiness or jokiness, gossip, boasting and general discomfort with silence. Internally, it manifests as a busy mind, always churning with thoughts about this and that. It is related to the slang term "air head," because it is the craving for superficiality, for constant entertainment. Imagine someone talking incessantly with the television on in the background – that is air.

This air quality is unique among the four elements. On one hand, it doesn't carry much of an emotional charge with it, as the other three do. In this sense, it is easier to experience a taste of freedom from a busy mind than it is to rid yourself of an emotion once it has manifested. If you are angry, craving

something or experiencing depression, it usually takes time for these feelings to subside.

A busy mind, however, can often be cleared almost completely by taking a few deep, conscious breaths – at least for a few seconds. While the cultivation of a quiet mind over time certainly takes more practice, clearing the mind for a brief time is almost effortless. In this sense, freedom from the air quality is easier to experience right away.

Easier, however, does not mean less important. In fact, mastering the egoic air quality has profound consequences for all four elements. In a sense, it is the gateway to mastering them. This is because all of the qualities are fed by thought; thought is the “food” which causes them to grow. If you can free yourself from thought, you have the master switch to create some space from all four egoic qualities. In the *Tanya*, this is expressed in the phrase, “The mind controls the heart.” When you direct your mind to *watch* your own thoughts, to *watch* your own feelings and to *watch* everything that your senses perceive, the energies of the ego are powerless to seduce you.

### **Mastering the Elements**

Different people tend toward one or more of the egoic qualities; you may notice that some of these qualities are stronger in your personality while others are weaker. However, all of these qualities are actually expressions of the same root: *resistance to what is*.

It’s easy to see this in the case of anger – something happens that you don’t like, so you become angry. The anger is a direct expression of resistance. But desire and craving are

also resistance to what is: rather than be satisfied with what you have now, you want something more. Similarly, anxiety and depression are resistance to one's lack of control; rather than simply accepting how things are, the mind comments with negative and judgmental stories about it – more resistance to what is. This resistance, in turn, gives the ego its feeling of identity; *without resistance, the ego cannot perceive itself as separate.*

As we've seen, the ego is like a psychological version of an animal, which is why the *Tanya* calls it the "Animal Soul." Just as a creature naturally wants to preserve itself and will do almost anything to stay alive, so too the ego wishes to stay alive. If your mind is calm, your thoughts no longer resist, and the ego dies – at least temporarily. So, the tendency of the mind to be incessantly thinking is also an expression of resistance to what is. The noise of the mind keeps the ego and its resistance alive.

Freedom, in the spiritual sense, means freedom from the ego, from these four egoic qualities and their root, which is resistance to what is. Awakening to this freedom is to realize that *the ego is not who you really are.* Yes, these qualities may be very strong at times, seemingly irresistible. They are part of you, but they are not *essentially* you.

What is the difference between being *part* of you versus *essentially* you?

Let's look at the example of your physical body. Your hands are part of you. But what happens if you were to lose your hands? Would you cease to be you? Of course not– you are still essentially yourself, even without your hands. What if you lost your arms? Your legs? The truth is, your body is not

essentially who you are. As long as there is enough body to keep you alive, you remain yourself.

Analogously, when we speak of the ego, we are talking about particular qualities in your personality. Just like the physical body, these qualities are not the essential you. The proof of this is that they come and go. Another proof is that you can perceive them; you can notice, “Oh, there is a feeling of anger,” or “There is a desire for something.” If you can perceive it, it is external to you.

So, what is the real you?

*The real you is the one perceiving everything else; the real you is awareness itself.* Through the awakening of awareness as your true self, the ego’s sense of separateness melts away, and a totally different experience of being can unfold. It is

impossible to fully describe this experience in words, other than that it is freedom from the ordinary, ego-based experience.

### **Contemplation: “The Mind Rules the Heart”**

The *Tanya* describes the process by which the ego takes over:

*“The animal soul (nefesh habahamit) ... all lusts and boasting and anger and similar passions ... spread throughout the whole body, rising also to the brain in the head, so as to think and meditate about them and become cunning in them...”* (*Tanya*, chapter 9)

In other words, the egoic emotions that arise as feelings in the body tend to “move upward” into the brain, where they can

take over your thinking. Once your thinking has been coopted, the ego has taken control.

But you can reverse this process and “dethrone” your “Animal Soul” by waking up your “Divine Soul” (awareness). You do this by bringing your awareness down into your body, becoming conscious of your feelings and sensations. As you learn to sustain Presence, your egoic impulses lose their seductive power and are ultimately transmuted into spiritual qualities such as gratitude, loving-kindness, and joy.

You might wonder, why do we need to have the ego in the first place?

But when you begin to experience the transmutation of ego through the power of Presence, you’ll see that the ego does have a purpose – to help you become more conscious. Just as your muscles can’t become stronger without tension, so too you can’t awaken without the ego. Seen in this way, ego is not really the enemy. It’s actually a gift– *if* you remember how to work with it.

### **Practice**

In the last chapter, we used the scriptural word *L’kha (for You)* to invoke the *kavanah* of offering your awareness lovingly to this moment. In this chapter we will use another scriptural word, *Na’aseh*, for increasing Presence in your body. Here’s the scriptural context for *Na’aseh*: The Israelites are about to receive the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai. They all stand together in rapt awe, while the mountain smokes and quakes, engulfed in cloud and fire:

וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָּל אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר יְהוָה נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע

*And the people said, “Everything that the Divine speaks, na’aseh v’nishmah, we will do and we will hear.”*  
(Exodus, 24:7)

The ordering of the words in this verse, *na’aseh v’nishma*, is strange. You would think that the words should be the opposite – first you would *hear*, then you would *do*. But the fact that the words are reversed – “we will do” and *then* “we will hear,” teaches a key insight: If you want to *know yourself as the hearing*, that is, if you want to know yourself as the vast spaciousness of awareness – you must first become *conscious of the doing*; you must bring your awareness deep into your own body. In connecting with your body and your breathing, your consciousness is drawn out from its narrow identification with thinking.

Let’s begin our practice as we learned in the last chapter, placing your right hand on your heart. Offer your attention as a gift to this moment, to the Divine *as* this moment. Take a nice deep in-breath, and chant “*L’kha \_\_\_\_\_*” (*for You*) with a long out-breath.

Now, with your right hand still on your heart, bring your left hand to your belly. Bring your awareness into your belly, into your organs, opening to whatever feelings might be felt there.

Now, let your awareness flow downward into your thighs, your knees, your calves, your feet and toes.

Let your awareness shine upward from your belly, into your chest, your heart, your lungs, and upward into your neck and shoulders. Let your awareness flow downward

into your arms, your hands, your fingers. Let your awareness fill your skull, your brain, your face. Bring a little smile to your lips, so that your whole body is alive with Presence.

Now, take a nice deep in-breath, and chant “*Na’aseh \_\_\_*” (*we will do*) with a long out-breath. Stay for some time in silent presence with your body, with your breathing, with whatever sensations and perceptions arise.

When you notice your mind wandering into thought, simply accept the thoughts and gently bring your attention back to your breathing, allowing your thoughts to dissipate.

~

The more you meditate in this way, relaxing the impulses of your thinking mind and simply dwelling with your body in the present, the more you will get a sense of who you are *beneath your thinking mind*.

Ordinarily, we tend to experience ourselves as the thinking entity that inhabits the body. But, paradoxically, the more we *consciously* inhabit our bodies, the more we can realize that the body is actually arising *within* awareness. And even more, it’s not *your* awareness, but rather *you are* awareness.

You are not *in* your body, but rather everything you experience, including your body, arises within the vast and borderless field of the awareness that you are.

This field of awareness is not itself a thing, but rather it is the space within which all things appear – thoughts, feelings, sensations, people, situations- *everything*.

And so, as we meditate in this way, becoming aware of *all things* arising within the field of awareness, so we become aware of the awareness itself– we awaken to the *nothing* that we are.

*“Ribono Shel Olam! I am nothing! I am nothing!”*

# Part III

## Being

**The No-Thing**

Calling a person “nothing” is usually meant either as an insult – implying that the person is worthless – or as an expression of humility, as in- “*Oh, Hashem! I am nothing!*” It is obvious that putting someone down is an expression of ego, as it aims to enhance one’s own self-image by degrading someone else’s image. But as we’ve seen, claiming to be “nothing” can also be an expression of ego, when humility is seen as a kind of spiritual attainment to wear like a badge.

But the realization that you are not limited to the identity formed by your thoughts and feelings is literally the realization of *no-thing*. Meaning, you are not any particular thing, because awareness is the space within which *all things* are perceived, and *you are that awareness*. You’re not a special somebody, nor are you a worthless nobody; you are the space of this moment – you are *no-thing*. Furthermore, being *no-thing* is no special attainment; it’s just a basic fact.

If this seems difficult to grasp, don’t worry. The more you do the practice, the more you’ll naturally get a sense of what these words are pointing to, rather than trying to understand it through thinking. In fact, the experience of *no-thing* that’s inherent within your awareness blossoms naturally from practicing Presence; you don’t have to force it. Let’s review once again the first two Portals of Presence:

In Part One, we began with *awakening* Presence through the portal of the heart. In offering our Presence to the fullness of *what is* in this moment, we invoke that fundamental openness of awareness, rather than reaching for a particular experience.

In this way, we don't practice for the sake of reaching a goal, but rather *we begin with the goal*. We can do this because the "goal" is already present – it was and is the natural state of our awareness all along, beneath our thoughts and feelings.

In Part Two, we learned about *sustaining* Presence through the portal of the body. Unlike the thinking mind, which tends to seduce us into the imaginary worlds of past, future and fantasy, body awareness provides an anchor to our present moment experience. And while awakening Presence in the heart is almost effortless, the sustaining of Presence in the body takes some practice.

In working with these first two portals, you may still feel a basic duality between yourself, on one hand, and the object of your awareness, on the other. If you're aware of your breathing, for example, there's that sense that "I" am aware of "my breathing" – two separate things. We might call this the experience of *duality*. Another example of duality might be the experience of "me," on one hand, and "my awareness," on the other. In this duality, there's the sense that awareness is something you *have* rather than something you *are*.

But as you deepen in Presence, a new experience of Oneness begins to emerge as you learn to know yourself *not* as your thoughts and feelings, but as the *awareness behind* your thoughts and feelings. This experience doesn't erase the sense of duality; on the level of thought and feeling, duality is natural and necessary. But on the level of awareness, there emerges a complementary experience of Oneness in which all things are part of the Whole. From this point of view, the ego sense of the separate "me" drops away, and a new sense of simply Being, of *no-thing*, naturally emerges.

There's a kind of paradox here. On one hand, knowing yourself *as* awareness involves a radical separation, as you dis-identify from your thoughts, feelings, and everything else that arises within your experience. In a sense, this is the ultimate duality – the duality between your awareness, on one hand, and everything that you perceive, on the other.

And yet, the more you know yourself as pure awareness, separate from the content of your awareness, the more you will sense that your awareness and the content of your awareness make up a single Reality, a unified Whole. In this final chapter, we will discover why this is so, as we explore the third portal – the Portal of Awareness itself.

**Contemplation: “*Filling All Worlds and Surrounding All Worlds*”**

Before we get into the paradox, let's look at some traditional sources that offer methods for connecting with this underlying unity of Being. The very first paragraph of the first chapter of the *Shulkhan Arukh*, the classic guide to Jewish practice, begins by quoting Psalm 16:

שׁוֹיִתִּי יְהוָה לְנֶגְדִי תָמִיד

*I set the Divine before me constantly – Sh'viti Hashem l'negdi tamid.”*

It then goes on to explain (paraphrased):

*“... for there is no comparison between one who is amongst family or relatives and one who is in the presence of a king. How much more so when you contemplate (that you are in the presence of) the Holy One whose glory fills all creation ...*

*as it is said 'Do I not fill the heavens and earth?' (Jeremiah 23:24) Bearing this in mind, one will acquire a sense of reverence and surrender before the awesomeness of the Divine... ”*

Similarly, in chapter 3 of the *Tanya*, it says:

*“...When the intellect deeply contemplates and immerses itself in the greatness of the Divine, how It fills all worlds and encompasses all worlds, and that in Its Presence nothing separate exists, there will be born and aroused in the mind and thought a feeling of awe before the Divine majesty – to be humbled before the Blessed Greatness, which is without end or limit, and the awe of God will be born in the heart. Next, the heart will glow with intense love, like the burning of coals, with a passion, desire, longing and yearning towards the greatness of the blessed Infinite (Ayn Sof). ”*

Although these two pieces use different language, their essence is the same: they are aimed at shifting our focus from a world of separate beings and things into an underlying Oneness. It achieves this through cultivating “radical amazement” – a term introduced by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Behind our usual, mundane and fairly comprehensible experience of things, there is an “awesomeness” and a “blessed greatness” of Existence Itself that “fills all worlds and encompasses all worlds, and that in Its Presence nothing separate exists.”

Today, the metaphor of the Divine as a “king” may not work so well for everyone, but you can arrive at the same place simply by noting the supreme Mystery of everything. You may understand how to brush your teeth or wash the dishes, but the mind can never fully understand *why* there are teeth, *why* there are dishes, or *why there is anything at all* for that

matter. If you try to solve this question of existence with your mind, you may end up just feeling contracted, frustrated or worse. The great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber said that when he was young, the question of existence almost led him to suicide, God forbid.

The message here is, don't get stuck in your thinking mind!

Don't try to understand the Mystery of Being, *behold the Mystery of Being*. Because in the beholding, in the *awareness of Reality* rather than the *thinking about* reality, you will naturally transcend out of identification with your mind and feelings and into the spaciousness of awareness, separate from the content of your awareness.

This brings us back to the paradox mentioned above. Once you begin to know yourself *as* awareness, separate from any particular content that you're perceiving, you can also begin to notice something remarkable about the content as well: When you see the sky or hear a bird, you tend to think that you're perceiving something external to you. And on one level, that's perfectly reasonable.

But at the same time, whatever you perceive, whatever is part of your experience, is literally *made* out of consciousness. That's not to say that the *actual* sky or bird is made out of *your* consciousness, but only to say that *your experience* of the sky and the bird is made out of your consciousness. This means that *you're never really experiencing anything except different forms of consciousness*, because all experience is, by definition, made out of consciousness.

So, in this sense, your awareness is literally filling everything within the world of your experience, because everything within the world of your experience is literally made out of

your awareness. This is hinted at in the expression of the Zohar quoted above in the Tanya: *mimalei kol almin- fills all worlds*.

At the same time, when you stop perceiving the sky or the bird or whatever, the awareness remains. Your awareness is never limited to whatever you perceive, because it's the open and borderless field within which you perceive everything. So, your awareness is also *soveiv kol almin – encompassing or surrounding all worlds*.

This is why the act of separating your awareness from all forms – from your thoughts, feelings and sensations – actually leads to the realization of the unity behind everything. As long as you're identified with your mind and thinking, you tend to see things in a dualistic way, in which there's a separation between you and everything else. But when you know yourself *as* awareness, you can also see that everything arising in your awareness is literally made out of awareness, and a sense of non-duality emerges. There is One Experience, happening right now, within the awareness that you are.

Furthermore: the awareness that you are isn't really *yours*. Rather, it is Reality becoming aware through you, as you. Just as your awareness includes everything you are aware of in this moment, so too the Divine – meaning all of Reality – includes you and perceives Itself through you. There is One Experience of One Reality right now, and you're not separate from the One at all.

**Listen**

According to the *Tanya*, a particularly auspicious time for opening to this realization is during the recitation of the *Sh'ma*:

*Sh'ma Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Ekhad!*

The *Sh'ma* is a piece of text from the Torah that is often translated, “Hear O Israel, The Lord is our God, the Lord is One.” This line is taken to be the credo of Judaism, declaring the monotheistic tenet of one God. But if we look at the words more deeply, we can begin to see how this short verse is not merely an intellectual idea or belief, but is actually an invitation to awaken and experience this Reality for yourself.

First is the word *Sh'ma* – “listen” or “hear.” This is the instruction to become aware – listening not only with our ears, but with all our senses – becoming attentive to the fullness of everything arising in this moment.

The second word, *Yisrael* – “Israel” – is actually composed of two words. The first is *sarita*, which means “strives for.” The second word is *El*, which is the generic word for “God”. Together, they mean something like “strives for God.” There is also a teaching that connects it with the word *yishar*, which means “straight.” To be *Yisrael*, then, is to *strive for the Divine*, or to see *straight through* the dualistic screen of the mind to the underlying Divine Oneness.

Another way of seeing this word connects it not with “straight” or “strive” but with “wrestle,” as in the story of Jacob wrestling with the mysterious being who gives him the name *Yisrael*. Seen this way, *Yisrael* is one who wrestles with God; that is, a seeker. When these two meanings are put

together, we have the totality of the spiritual path. First, one is a seeker. Like Reb Aizik in the opening story, a seeker is driven by the desire to find that Oneness. The seeker is wrestling, trying to find something externally. Eventually, the seeker comes to see that God can't be found by seeking, because seeking comes from the mind that imagines the Oneness to be elsewhere. To notice this, the wrestling of the mind must relax and see that all things are forms of One Reality. That brings us to the next two words.

The third word, the Divine Name, is actually never pronounced as written. During prayer, this Name is traditionally vocalized as *Adonai*, which means "My Lord." But the word that's actually written is the four-letter Name described in the first chapter that we translated as "Being," "Existence," or "Reality." The fourth word, *Eloheinu*, literally means "Our God." But a deeper way to understand *Eloheinu* is not as an external entity, but rather as *our inner Godliness*— meaning, our awareness.

When we understand it this way, these two words *Adonai Eloheinu* point to the realization that all things arising within our experience – not just our thoughts, feelings and sensations, but the entire world around us and every being we meet – are not separate from our perception of them. *Adonai*- all Existence- is not separate from *Eloheinu*- our own awareness.

This brings us to the last two words. The fifth and sixth words are, *Adonai Ekhad*- "Being is One." Not only is your awareness one with that of which you are aware, but the Divine – meaning, all of Reality – is aware *as* your own awareness; it is all One.

So, if everything you perceive is part of your own awareness, and you are your awareness, and your awareness is really God's awareness, stop! Relax resistance! After all, why would you resist yourself? Why would you be in conflict with yourself? That would be insane, right?

And yet, that is the normal condition created by the mind – to be in conflict with oneself. These six words of the *Sh'ma* are a reminder to let go of this conflict and return to sanity. With this understanding, we can now translate the *Sh'ma* thus:

*Be Aware- Existence is not separate from Awareness- Existence is One.*

### **Practice**

In the first chapter, we awakened Presence through the *kavanah* of offering our awareness from the heart. In the second chapter, we learned about sustaining Presence in the body using the first word of the scriptural phrase, "*Na'aseh v'nishmah- we will do and we will hear*" (Exodus, 24:7). *Na'aseh* is an action word, reminding us to embody awareness in our senses and the movement of our breathing.

Now, let's bring in the second word of this phrase, *V'nishma*. You may notice that this is a different form of the word, *Sh'ma*. In this form it means, "We will hear." After we enter the first and second portals of the heart and the body, we will use *v'nishma* to invoke the third and final portal– the portal of awareness itself. Let's try it.

Begin by placing your right hand on your heart. Offer your attention to whatever is arising in your field of experience, giving permission for everything to be just as it is. Take a

nice deep in-breath, and chant *L'kha* \_\_\_\_\_ (for You) with a long out-breath.

Now, with your right hand still on your heart, bring your left hand to your belly. Bring awareness down into all your organs, opening to any feelings and emotions. Let your awareness flow downward into your hips, into your thighs, your knees, your calves, your feet and toes. Let your awareness shine upward from your belly, into your chest, your heart, your lungs, and upward into your neck and shoulders, moving downward into your arms, your hands, your fingers. Feel upward into your skull, your brain, and your face, bringing a little smile to your lips, filling your whole body with Presence, and resting your awareness on the flow of your breathing. Take a nice deep in-breath, and chant *Na'aseh* \_\_\_\_\_ (We will do) with a long out-breath, and rest your awareness on the flow of your breathing.

Now, keeping your left hand on your belly, bring your right hand up from your heart and touch your fingers lightly to your forehead. Notice the borderless space of your awareness, within which everything is now arising – every perception, every feeling, every thought. Now bring to mind that everything you are perceiving is also nothing but your awareness; everything in your experience – all different forms of the one consciousness that you are. Take a nice deep breath and chant, *V'nishma* \_\_\_\_\_ (We will hear).

### **Presence**

You can use these Three Portals any time you wish to return to Presence. With practice, you will be able to return almost instantaneously, wherever you are and

whatever you are doing. But to really tap more and more deeply into its transformative power, it's helpful to spend some extended time in meditation daily.

After using these three portals to open your meditation, kiss your fingers and relax your hands in your lap. Let your body be still in a comfortable position, such as seated, standing, or lying on your back. As you rest your attention on the flow of your breathing, begin mentally repeating the sacred phrase, *Atah Hu*.

The word *Atah* means, "You." But spelled a little differently, with an *ayin* instead of an *aleph*, *atah* means, "Now."

*Hu* means "It," or "He," but it's also a Divine Name in its own right. The first letter, *Heh*, with its breathy *H* sound, symbolizes the breath of life. The second letter, *Vav*, means "and." This hints that our experience during meditation must be *actively* inclusive. One moment you may be in harmony, then a car alarm goes off nearby, and you may feel some resistance in the form of annoyance. At that point it's vital to remember: the car alarm is arising within your awareness, *and* the feeling of resistance is also arising in awareness. The idea is to relax and open yourself to whatever appears in your consciousness – even feelings of resistance. The third letter, *aleph*, is also the number one, reminding us that our consciousness and everything arising within consciousness are always One.

When you put all these meanings together, *Hu* is a powerful code, reminding us to connect with our breathing, open to what is, and know that you are having only one experience of the One Reality.

When you put both words together, *Atah Hu* can mean, “You are It, Now is Divine.”

The purpose of repeating *Atah Hu* in your mind is to sustain Presence as you meditate, guiding your mind again and again out from the activity of thinking. When your mind wanders from the words, just gently bring your mind back to *Atah Hu*, without judgment. At any point, if you want to let go of the words all together, you can just rest your attention on the flow of your breathing. But if at any point you notice yourself getting involved with thinking, you can always bring yourself back by simply returning to *Atah Hu*.

Some prefer to use a feminine version of this phrase: *At Yah Hi*. The meaning and practice are essentially the same. The word *Hi* (pronounced HEE), which means “She” or “It,” is actually spelled exactly the same as *Hu* in Biblical Hebrew. *At* (rhymes with “got” and “pot”) is “You” in the feminine, and *Yah* is one of the Divine Names that can be understood as feminine.

### **Daily Practice**

This entire practice, the Three Portals of Presence together with silent meditation on *Atah Hu* or *At Yah Hi*, is the first level of Integral Jewish Meditation. It is simple, but also profoundly transformative, if you take it deeply into your life. To receive maximum benefit, I recommend

meditating every day at least once, more if you can. Begin with the Three Portals, chanting *L'kha, Na'aseh V'nishma*, using the hand motions we learned to connect with each portal. Then, spend some time in meditation, silently repeating *Atah Hu* or *At Yah Hi*, or you can combine them: *At Yah Hu*. When your mind wanders, simply but firmly bring it

back, without judgment. That's all. After your meditation, you can again do the Three Portals to invoke Presence as you move back into your activities. Then, as you go through your day, you can use the Three Portals many times to bring yourself back to Presence in whatever you're doing, as often as you like.

How long should your meditation be?

There is no universal rule. The most important thing is that you do it, so if three minutes is all you can absolutely commit to, then do that. If you can sit for forty minutes, you'll reap more benefit. It all depends on your individual situation. But remember – even if you can't practice for very long, you can probably do many short returns to Presence with the Three Portals throughout your day.

The more you immerse yourself in Presence, the more you will be able to live from Presence. At first, your dips into Presence may be only a series of pleasant experiences, between which the ordinary dualistic way of seeing will reassert itself. But over time, if you persist in your goal, you will come to discover a whole new way of being.

# Living Presence

Presence is something very simple. It is a willingness to be with this moment as it is, to honor Reality as it appears, and to respond to whatever the moment brings from this simple openness. As the great 11<sup>th</sup> century Torah commentator Rashi said:

כל מה שיבא עליך קבל בתמימות

*Receive whatever happens to you with simplicity...*  
(Rashi's commentary on Deuteronomy 18:13)

In chapter one, we looked at Presence through the lens of an unusual example – the baby reaching for the hot oven. In such a case, we are likely to be pulled into a heightened awareness very quickly; Presence wouldn't be a choice, it would be an imperative.

Such urgency, however, is usually not our common experience. Most of the time, life provides a space within which we can either be taken over by ego, or we can consciously choose to be awake. And, within that space, there often arises an opposite kind of urgency – strong unconscious impulses such as anger, craving, fear – the “Four Elements” of the *Tanya* mentioned in Part Two. If we are to have any hope in overcoming those strong forces and using them to become *more* awake, rather than be taken over by them, it is very important to remember to *practice when we are at ease*. That way, when powerful emotions are triggered, we will already be equipped with Presence as a habit. Then, we will have a far better chance of staying present no matter what feelings arise.

This can often be the greatest challenge for people: remembering to practice constantly in the flow of every-day life, with its familiar, mundane patterns and habits. This is

why meditation retreats can be so powerful for people. Retreats remove us from our ingrained patterns so that practicing Presence becomes much easier.

But, there is a way to access this potential even without going on retreat. The key is to create the urgency of the “baby and the oven” for yourself. Just as that situation “commands” a response, so too you can take on Presence as a “commandment.” This is actually the principle through which traditional Judaism works. Unlike how we tend to approach the endless choices we encounter in life, Judaism views life as an arena of commandments – *mitzvot* – commitments and obligations, rather than mere options.

But regardless of whether or not you subscribe to traditional Jewish belief, the *principle* of the *mitzvot* is still true:

Right now, and always – we have a supreme choice before us. This world, with its unimaginable suffering and cruelty along with its endless potential for beauty and goodness, is nothing but the emergent effect of our collective consciousness – of every thought, word and action of every person. If we want to “bring heaven down to earth” so to speak, if we want to make a real difference, we’ve got to take this choice seriously, all of the time, as much as we can. More important than who gets elected, more important than any policies or ideologies, is the crucial issue of how we live in this moment. This is the ultimate commandment, the ultimate *mitzvah*, if we choose to accept it:

וְיָדַעְתָּ הַיּוֹם וְהִשְׁבַּתְתָּ אֶל לִבְכָדְךָ כִּי יְהוָה הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים בְּשָׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וְעַל הָאָרֶץ  
מִתַּחַת אֵין עוֹד

*Know today (be present) and return to your heart (offer your awareness), that Hashem Hu HaElohim – Existence Itself is the Divine – in the heavens above and on the earth below, Ayn Od – there is nothing else.*  
(Deuteronomy 4:39)

In other words, the Divine needs us to awaken within the world. It's not just about our own awakening, but God's awakening, within us, as us.

וַעֲשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְתוֹכְכֶם

*V'asu li mikdash v'shakhanti mitokham – Make for me a sanctuary, and I will dwell within them...*  
(Exodus 25:8)

There is a sanctuary that needs to be built, but this sanctuary doesn't require anything that's not already present; it is something we can and must do now:

כִּי קָרוֹב אֵלֶיךָ הַדָּבָר מְאֹד

*Ki karov elekha hadavar me'od – for this thing is very close to you!*  
(Deuteronomy 30:14)

This is the “treasure under our own stove” – the fulfilment of our existence, the true meaning of life: to awaken fully into this moment. Like Reb Aizik in the opening story, we may

imagine that the treasure is “out there” somewhere. Or, we may think the world would be better if only others would change. But, there’s only one place the treasure can be found, and that’s where we are. We can’t force anyone else to wake up, but we can choose to wake up ourselves. And though we may not see the ultimate fruits of our spiritual labors in our lifetimes, still – with each moment we make the choice to be present, we bring the world one step closer to its fulfillment. This is our task, our treasure, our birthright.

Yes, it may seem daunting, but remember – you’re not alone! While it’s true that you can only do this work yourself, you don’t have to do it *by yourself*. That’s what teachers are for, and that’s what spiritual community is for: to support you in this great work and walk with you on this great path.

Torah of Awakening is a way that you can access this kind of support. Our international meditation community meets both live and online to learn, practice, and accompany each other on this great journey through regular meditation sessions, courses, retreats and more. If the practice we explored in this book has been helpful and you would like to go deeper, you are invited to continue the journey at:

TorahOfAwakening.com

I wish you blessings for continually unfolding success on this path!

Love and all blessings,  
Reb Brian Yosef