



# THE OPEN PATH

*Recognizing Nondual Awareness*

ELIAS AMIDON



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# PREFACE

This book is a guide for awakening to the spontaneous presence of awareness that is our most intimate nature and the silent ground of all being. It is meant for anyone committed to realizing this awakening now, and for learning to sustain and express it in the diverse conditions of one's daily life.

I originally wrote this book as a manual to accompany the nine-month Open Path trainings that are currently held in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Germany, and the United States. During the trainings, these written teachings are supplemented by three residential seminars, frequent telephone conferencing, and individual guidance. While such personal and small-group contact is ideal for this work, many Open Path students encouraged me to publish this course material on its own for a wider audience. The result of their encouragement is the book you now hold in your hands.

I have kept the style of this book close to the original course manual, trusting that those who are drawn to it would want to engage this subject as whole-heartedly as the students of the nine-month trainings. One of the best ways to do this may be to read this book with a friend or a group of friends, discussing passages that are of mutual interest and sharing the exercises. Otherwise, if you are reading this book on your own you may find it helpful to read through the text slowly, even rereading portions of it several times. It may also help for you to become familiar with a number of the books suggested



in the bibliography, reading them with the same attention as you do this book. It is good to explore the direct recognition of nondual awareness from a number of traditions and styles of expression.

In addition, many of the chapters here include exercises and practices. It is easy to skim over these thinking you'll get to them later, or that by simply reading them you get their point and don't need to explore them more deeply. Sometimes this may be so, but more often you may find that by taking the time to do an exercise — and by maintaining a daily practice of calming your mind and simplifying your activities — a sense of equanimity and natural insight will arise.

However, I encourage you not to make studying the material in this book and engaging with these practices a pressure or something that you must discipline yourself to do. The gentle fact that you now hold this book in your hands is evidence that awakening to the spontaneous presence of awareness is already welcoming itself in your life. You don't have to do anything with effort here; just open to it as it naturally arises in you. Do as little or as much study and practice as you feel to do. Of course, the more you open to it in your life the more it will welcome you. But don't worry about outcomes. Direct recognition of timeless awareness is not something you attain through striving for it. It is already present and is the very nature of your being now.

My hope is that at least some of the teachings and practices here will help make possible for you a synchronistic recognition of the clear light of timeless awareness. I use the word "synchronistic" because in actuality recognition of the spontaneous presence of nondual awareness is not transmittable *from* someone *to* someone. The transparent light of awareness that is the ever-present ground of being can only be pointed to, although in truth there is no direction toward which one may reliably point. Even to describe it as "transparent light," or "presence," or "nondual awareness," or "it," misses



the mark. Nothing that can be said can adequately represent this that is simultaneously present and absent, immanent and transcendent, and in fact beyond any dimension in which these kinds of polarities make sense. It does not yield to conceptualization. And even more to the point, no guaranteed formula leads to its recognition. In the end, recognition is a matter of synchronistic grace. Yet it *is* possible to “put yourself in the way of it,” as the Sufi mystic Ibn al’Arabi remarked. That is the purpose of this book.

#### A NOTE ABOUT THE SOURCES OF THE OPEN PATH

The approach of the Open Path as represented in this book has been profoundly shaped by my forty years of Sufi training, along with extensive study of other mystical traditions. An acknowledgement of these sources can be found at the back of this book.

Consequently, the methods and practices of the Open Path have been drawn from many different sources: classical and modern Sufi practices and teachings; contemporary psychological methods for releasing mental and emotional fixations; meditation practices from various traditions; forms of inquiry from Zen, Advaita Vedanta, and Tibetan Dzogchen and Mahamudra traditions; and from the teachings of many historic and contemporary Western nondual teachers.

The approach of the Open Path is inclusive. It does not claim to be original, and it borrows freely from many other traditions and teachers. I acknowledge these here with profound gratitude for their priceless gifts.



• 1 •

# OPEN AWARENESS

*Awareness is primordial; it is the original state, beginningless, endless, uncaused, unsupported, without parts, without change...It is the common matrix of every experience.<sup>1</sup>*

SRI NISARGADATTA MAHARAJ (C.1960)

One of the most joyful moments in the life of the spiritual seeker is when seeking finally ends: when we recognize that the long sought-for goal of the spiritual quest is already present within us as our natural awareness. We recognize that *what we seek, we are* — this transparent, pure awareness at the center of our being is a clear window into oneness. With this recognition comes the realization that nothing more needs to be done. Nothing needs to change. We don't have to improve ourselves. Each one of us is already worthy of illumined awareness because it is our innate nature. This realization opens in us an indescribable sense of relief and freedom from self-judgment. We understand in these moments of realization that we are completely one with all of reality and have always been so, and that this natural state is utterly safe, free, kind, and radiant with a





supernal beauty. We don't have to do anything to make this be true. It does it all by itself.

The central purpose of the Open Path is simply to become familiar with opening into this fundamental realization of what is already true — learning how to relax into and stabilize this recognition of our innate nature, what I often call “open awareness” or simply “awareness.”

### WHAT IS OPEN AWARENESS?

This question is at the heart of our work together. We will use many words and exercises to focus on this question, so that, again and again, we can look directly into what it asks. But the answer that comes will not have anything to do with words. Each of us must leave behind words and thoughts to allow space for the answer to arise. It will appear intuitively to us, from the inside out. In fact, it will not even “appear” like an image or thought appears in our awareness, because here we are asking awareness to be aware of itself.

This is asking the impossible: awareness can no more be aware of itself than our eye can see itself. Why? First of all, awareness is not a thing or an object of any kind. It has no shape or color. It is completely transparent and invisible. What is more, it cannot be felt or sensed in any way that would reveal awareness to us as something knowable *out there*. And yet we know we are aware, we know awareness *is*. Awareness is the foundation of everything we have ever experienced or will experience. Every object, every thought, every emotion, every sensation, every memory is known because it appears in awareness. *Otherwise it could not be known*. Awareness is the root of our entire sense of existence, and yet where is it? What is it? How can it be apprehended? We know it *is*, but whenever we try to look directly into awareness we see...*nothing*!



This is a clue. Awareness is not a thing. We might say it is nothing, but is it simply nothing? It is awareness! Whatever it is, it never takes substantial form. It is, as Buddhists might say, empty of substantiality. It is open. It has no edges. It is spaciousness itself. It is boundless, yet somehow utterly present. What is more, it is lucid: completely clear and at the same time light-bearing, i.e., “the light of awareness.”

Throughout this book we will return repeatedly to this question of what open awareness is — and we will invite ourselves to investigate the question originally, for ourselves, not in the abstract but directly and experientially. In fact, you are encouraged to do that right now. Notice, as you read this, that you are aware of the words being used, the thoughts they evoke, the shape of the letters, the white of the paper or screen on which they are written, a few things seen peripherally in the room where you read this, the sense of your body sitting where it is. These are all perceptions appearing in “your” awareness. They can be seen, felt, or sensed.

But what can you say about the awareness that is aware of them? Look as deeply and as steadily as you can. Become familiar with that looking, as if you were turning 180 degrees around from looking out of your eyes and now are looking inwardly at what is looking. What do you “see?” Explore this on your own, as often as you can. Here’s a hint: if you look *for* something, you will be disappointed. Instead, simply allow yourself to relax from all “looking” and simply “see” without trying to uncover some discovery. Relax. While awareness cannot be aware of awareness, it can *be* it. It *is* it, naturally.

Some say it is helpful at this point to shift your sense of looking *for* something with your eyes or your intellect and allow your heart to *open to* the question “What is awareness?” By “heart” I mean the whole presence of awareness in which intellect, sensations, and emotions appear. This is what Sufis call *al ‘ayn al qalb* — “the eye





of the heart.” It is the whole of awareness as it is experienced through your body. Open to the presence of awareness with your whole heart.

### A NOTE ABOUT THE WORDS USED HERE

In these pages I will use many names to signify this indescribable, but definitely recognizable, reality that is the sublime ground of all being. These diverse names, drawn from spiritual traditions throughout the world, indicate both this primal reality and our capacity to recognize it: *nondual awareness, pure awareness, open awareness, presence-awareness, unconditioned mind, rigpa, primordial experience, This, the basic state, the sublime, buddha nature, original nature, spontaneous presence, the oneness of being, the ground of being, the Real, clarity, God-consciousness, divine light, the clear light, illumination, realization, and enlightenment.*

These terms refer to the reality that countless seekers throughout history have inquired into, meditated on, experienced, and spoken about. However it is expressed, these labels point to the ultimate goal of all human desire for fulfillment, happiness, and belonging, and the goal of all spiritual searching: the recognition that we are essentially indivisible from what Sufis call the “shoreless ocean” of unconditioned awareness and love.

In this chapter, and often throughout the book, I refer simply to “open awareness” and “awareness” as a name for this fresh, ever-present reality, because these words are relatively free of religious connotations and point to a more directly experienced reality than, say, the words “enlightenment” or “realization.” In this way, our ordinary, intimate sense of being aware gives us an entry into experiencing timeless being, free from concepts. The modifier “open” indicates that this is boundless awareness itself, utterly contentless, empty, and



unaffected by whatever phenomena show up in it, just as what is reflected in a mirror does not affect the mirror.

But the phrase “open awareness” is not perfect. By calling something “open” — or by using almost any adjective — its opposite is implied, while what we are referring to has no opposite. In addition, for many people the phrase “open awareness” — or simply “awareness” — does not carry a sufficient resonance of the divine, however that may be interpreted. However, rather than getting caught up in these objections, my hope is that throughout this book you will become skillful at going beyond the limits of the various words used, and allow what they signify to open in your heart.

The problem is that language is fundamentally dualistic. It is continually affirming, denying, or comparing the worth of one thing against another. In addition, its subject-predicate structure can't help but reinforce the subject-object polarity that situates us as separate entities negotiating our way through a world of separate objects. The use of pronouns is another good example of the dualistic nature of our language. However convenient they are, the pronouns “I,” “you,” “he,” “she,” “me,” “mine,” etc., imply discrete things or identities that actually exist. Another linguistic problem is how we use prepositions. For example, when we say *rest in natural great peace*, there is an implied topography: something rests *in* something else; once again we are locating discrete somethings in space in relation to each other, while what is seeking expression has nothing to do with either location or “thingness.”

However, if we tried to avoid all language that could be interpreted dualistically, we would end up with a poor tool for the job at hand. So in the pages that follow I do not try to stay away from pronouns, or prepositions, or words that can be interpreted dualistically. I do, however, often modify or redefine words, or put them in quotation marks, or point out their limitations while still using them,



trusting that you will let them do their work — however provisionally they manage to do so. In any case, if we are lucky, the words — and methods — used in this book will finally fall away as the natural truth becomes clear.

One final point about language: when we use descriptive words and phrases to refer to a reality that is the “ultimate goal of human desire,” it is very easy to make this goal seem unattainable to mere mortals like us. Most religions and mystical traditions throughout history have reinforced this notion of a gap between ordinary humans and sublime wisdom. To some extent each of us has inherited the view that enlightenment is far from us. One of the central aims of the Open Path is to free ourselves from this fixation, since it is nothing more than an idea. Pure awareness, enlightenment, awakening, realization, is our birthright — in fact we already *are* it. We don’t have to do anything to achieve it. The truth is, we are already doing way too much, both outwardly and inwardly, and that very “doing” is what stands in the way of our recognizing this present, spacious, invisibly radiant nature imminent in our very being, and in the existence of everything.

## THE UNCONDITIONED AND THE CONDITIONED

As you may have already noticed, we have begun to make a distinction between open awareness, which is *contentless*, and the diverse phenomena which are the ordinary *contents* of awareness. This is identical to the distinction between what is called “the unconditioned” and “the conditioned.” In later chapters we will address how to recognize and release the limitations of our conditioned mind so that we may open to unconditioned pure awareness. In effect, we will point to what may at first sound like an “absolute realm” of open awareness that is different from the “relative realm” of conditioned



life. This distinction is a pedagogical device that is essential in the early stages of our work. While it could be argued that emphasizing a polarity like this is antithetical to the very essence of nondual awareness, I believe it can be helpful to make the distinction to begin with — to pull these two aspects of our experience apart so we can be freed from confusion about them. In the later phases of our work together we will see how everyday conditioned experience and pure, unconditioned, open awareness are inseparable.

This apparent polarity between the unconditioned and the conditioned is famous throughout all religious and spiritual traditions. We see it in the archetypes of God and Lucifer, the sacred and the profane, the absolute and the relative, heaven and earth, nirvana and samsara, the infinite and the finite, the one and the many, the eternal and the mortal, and so on. An important rationale for “pulling these two apart” is to challenge our habitual assumptions about the singular reality of our conditioned, everyday experience and recognize the transparent ground in which all experience arises.

We are all appearing as human beings whose body-minds are the result of an infinite history of apparent conditions leading to our physical existence in this moment. We cannot escape this conditionality. We cannot escape the karma that produced our body-minds in time and space. This vast field of apparent conditions is so complex and unknowable we can only stand in awe that we are here in this form at all.

However, attaching oneself to a particular identity as a personal “I” in the infinite sea of conditions is the source of enormous suffering. Imagine, for example, a fifteen year-old girl who hates herself because she thinks she isn’t as pretty or as popular as her classmates. This belief about her identity exists because of many conditions — her culture and social status, her genetic inheritance, her religion, her particular education, her family life, etc. Seeking to know who she is, she sees her reflection in all these conditions and believes her



interpretation of them is accurate. This is “self-referencing awareness” or conditioned mind.

The conditioned mind believes in an entity, a *me*, that needs to get what it wants and avoid what it doesn’t want to be happy. A complex field of likes and dislikes, of hopes and fears, swarms around the idea of a *me*, making the *me* seem substantial and existent. Our identification with this *me* is at the root of our discontent and suffering.

Throughout this book we will be working in many ways to see through the constructions — the conditioning — we hold about our identity, those formations which, like those of the fifteen year-old girl, keep us thinking we are what we are not. Deconstructing our long-established assumptions and mental and emotional conditioning is not always comfortable, but it is entirely possible, and not as difficult as we might think. We tend to consider our various personal fixations as having a concrete reality when in fact they have no substance at all. When faced clearly and steadily they vanish like snow falling on water.

This “vanishing,” so to speak, is the spontaneous presence of the unconditioned in the midst of the conditioned. Everything we believe to be true is conditioned. Releasing our grasp on our beliefs, we open to the clarity of unconditioned, self-occurring awareness.

## PARADOX

I also want to point to the use of frequent paradoxical expressions in our work together. “Paradox” in this context is a collision of language that helps break the dualistic, subject-object arrangement of thought and language that defines our everyday world and our assumptions about it. Paradox appears when two opposing statements both assert to be true. Their collision momentarily short-circuits the usual assumptions of thought, and in that gap a flash of the Real may be experienced.

For example, as I mentioned earlier, we may find ourselves “experiencing” the openness of awareness as nothing. And indeed, open awareness *is* nothing. But it is also awareness. How can it be “nothing” and “aware” at the same time? Since open awareness is seemingly a “state” we have named and can think about, it is easy to treat it as one more thing. But it is not a thing, or a state. In fact, it is empty of any conditions or attributes. The spontaneous presence of unconditioned, open awareness has no limits or boundaries. It is not personal to us, though it is the essence of our being. One analogy is that awareness can be imagined to be like space itself — unlimited, without beginning or end, empty by nature yet allowing all phenomena to arise within it. And like space, awareness is wide open — meaning that it is without content, free of structure, free of conditions, free of the personal self. Its openness pervades all things. *It is not a thing but it pervades all things.* When descriptions approach this kind of paradox they begin to break the confines of language and point to a different order of understanding.

We find the same attempt at expressing the paradoxical co-arising of “the one and the all” in the work of the great Sufi master Ibn ‘Arabi:<sup>2</sup>

How can I know This when It is the inwardly Hidden that is  
not known?

How can I not know This when It is the outwardly Manifest  
that makes Itself known to me in every thing?

How can I realize Its Unity when in Uniqueness I have no ex-  
istence?

How can I not realize Its Unity when Union is the very secret  
of servanthood?

Glory be to This! There is nothing but This!  
Nothing else than This can realize Its Unity, since It is as It is  
in pre-eternity without beginning and in post-eternity





without end. In reality, nothing other than This can realize  
Its Unity, and in sum, none knows This except This.

It hides and It manifests — yet It does not hide from Itself  
nor does It manifest to other than Itself, for This is This,  
there is nothing but This.

How is this paradox to be resolved, when the First is Last and  
the Last is First?

Because of the paradoxical nature of reality — its simultaneous  
*thingness* and *no-thingness* — it will sometimes be useful in our work  
to use conflicting statements, or to correct a previous statement with  
a qualifier that may seem to contradict the first. This mental ping-  
pong can sometimes help to tire the mind into relaxing its insistence  
on seeing things logically. When that happens our obsession with  
meaning falls away and we begin to see in a new light.

Although paradox may best describe the experience of open  
awareness, it is, nevertheless, an unmistakable experience. It is pre-  
cise, yet at the same time this “experience” is free of all structures  
and attributes. At first we may catch only the quickest glimpse of  
this “it” we are speaking of. Though the spontaneous presence of  
open awareness is omnipresent, our capacity to rest in it is limited  
by our mental reflexes that want to resist its voiding of our sense of  
self. But through the reminders and practices you will engage in  
throughout this work, you will be encouraged to return again and  
again to this glimpse. Gradually the glimpses will get longer and we  
will develop more comfort to rest in unconfined, uncontrived, pure  
awareness.

As one Tibetan teacher described this process, it is like ringing a  
bell. We touch for a moment the experience of empty awareness and  
it is like striking a little bell. It resonates in us and if we do nothing,  
the sound continues until it naturally vanishes. But if we strike the



*Open Awareness*

I I

bell of empty awareness and then react sharply, saying “Oh! That’s it! Oh, where is it?” it is like trying to hit the bell again and again, which only muffles the tone.

In our recognition, we learn to strike the bell and let the tone continue for as long as it naturally does. When it vanishes, then we strike it again — which means we welcome it without effort on our part — and let it be. Gradually the tone increases in duration and we learn to rest naturally in its openness, silence, and ease.





## *Exercises: Open Awareness*

Find a place where you can be alone and undisturbed for at least twenty minutes. Sit comfortably with your back relatively vertical without being stiff. Breathe naturally. Your eyes may be open or closed; you may wish to explore these exercises sometimes with your eyes open, sometimes closed.

### ***1. Gravity and Awareness***

Rest in your natural, lucid, alert yet relaxed state of mind. When thoughts, feelings, or sensations arise in your awareness, just let them be without resisting them or following them.

Now notice the sensations of gravity on your body. Allow your attention to notice the pressure of your body on your chair or cushion, the weight of your feet on the floor, your hands in your lap, etc. Now center your attention on one of these sensations.

Next, very gently, ask yourself: what is it that is aware of this sensation? Try to ask this in a way that is not looking for a verbal answer, but rather for a felt sense of the answer. Feel the answer directly. Open to the first-hand experience of “what is aware,” rather than an idea about it.

You will find it is helpful not to be aggressive about this inquiry — opening yourself to “what is aware” rather than peering into the unknown looking for something to show itself.



## ***2. Attributes of Awareness***

Proceeding from the above exercise, or at a different time, center again on one of the steady sensations in your body that is a sign of gravity — for example, the pressure of your body on your chair or cushion.

Ask again gently: what is it that is aware of this sensation? Once you find that you have a direct intuition of “this that is aware,” ask the following questions, giving time to explore the felt sense of your “answers.” Go very slowly, take all the time you need.

- Does this awareness have an outer edge or boundary by which I can tell what it is?
- Does this awareness have a color by which I can tell what it is?
- Does this awareness have a texture by which I can tell what it is?
- Does it have a front and a back? A top or a bottom?
- Does this awareness have a center, a “point” of origination by which it can be distinguished?
- Can you find somewhere where the awareness isn’t, someplace beyond it?
- Can you find any difference between this that is aware of the sensation of gravity and “you?” If so, what is that difference?

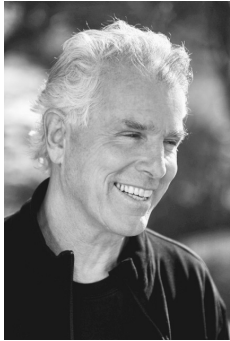
In exploring this inquiry on your own, you may find that you cannot find an edge, a color, a texture, a front and back, a center, someplace beyond, or some difference between you and “it.” If this is what occurs for you, simply rest in that unfindability.

If you *can* find an edge, a color, a texture, a front and back, a center, someplace beyond, or some difference between you and “it,”



then look carefully at that which you find and ask: what is it that is carefully looking? Does it have an edge, a color, a texture, a front or back, a center, someplace beyond, and is there some difference between “you” and “it?”





## *About the Author*

Elias Amidon is the spiritual director (Pir) of the Sufi Way International, a non-sectarian mystical order in the lineage of Sufi Inayat Khan. An initiate of the Sufi Way for the past forty-three years, Pir Elias has studied with Qadiri Sufis in Morocco, Theravadan Buddhist teachers in Thailand, Native American teachers of the Assemblies of the Morning Star, Christian monks in Syria, Zen teachers of the White Plum Sangha, and contemporary teachers in the Dzogchen tradition.

Elias has lived a multifaceted, engaged life, working as a schoolteacher, carpenter, architect, writer, environmental educator, peace activist, and wilderness rites-of-passage guide. He helped develop several schools, including the Boulder Institute for Nature and the Human Spirit, the Institute for Deep Ecology, the graduate program in Environmental Leadership at Naropa University, and the Open Path. Co-editor of the books *Earth Prayers*, *Life Prayers*, and *Prayers for a Thousand Years*, he has worked for many years with his wife, Elizabeth Rabia Roberts, as a citizen activist for peace and interfaith understanding in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and Israel/Palestine, and with indigenous tribes in Thailand and Burma on issues of cultural continuity and land rights (see: [www.pathofthefriend.org](http://www.pathofthefriend.org)). He was instrumental in founding the *Masdar Ibrahim Al Khalil* (Abraham's Path), an international project dedicated to helping Middle Eastern countries open a network of cultural routes and walking trails throughout the region.

Pir Elias has been leading programs in Sufism for over three decades, and Open Path programs since 2005. Nine-month Open Path Trainings are offered frequently in the United States, England, Holland, and Germany. These trainings give participants a chance to work directly with Elias over an extended period, learning to recognize and sustain the freshness of nondual awareness in their lives. Week-long solitary Open Path retreats are also held frequently at Nada Hermitage in Crestone, Colorado.

Information about current Open Path programs can be found at [www.open-path.org](http://www.open-path.org) and at [www.sufiway.org](http://www.sufiway.org).





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