

the
Intimate
Life

AWAKENING TO
THE SPIRITUAL ESSENCE IN
YOURSELF AND OTHERS

Judith Blackstone, PhD

Sounds True
Boulder CO 80306

© 2011 Judith Blackstone

Sounds True is a trademark of Sounds True, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form without written permission of the author and publisher.

Published 2011

Cover and book design by Karen Polaski
Cover image © Erena.Wilson/Shutterstock

Printed in Canada

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Blackstone, Judith, 1947–

The intimate life : awakening to the spiritual essence in
yourself and others / Judith Blackstone.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-60407-562-5 (alk. paper)

1. Spiritual life. 2. Love—Religious aspects. 3. Intimacy
(Psychology)—Religious aspects. I. Title.

BL204'.4—DC22

2011014095

eBook ISBN 978-1-60407-647-9

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Introduction	
<i>The Essential Unity of Self and Other . . .</i>	I
I The Relational Field	
<i>Attuning to Unified Consciousness . . .</i>	II
II Oneness and Separateness	
<i>Overcoming Boundary Problems . . .</i>	33
III Dancing Core-to-Core	
<i>Relating from the Subtle Core of the Body . . .</i>	49
IV Mutual Contact	
<i>The True Meeting of I and Thou . . .</i>	73
V Bare Perception	
<i>How Unified Consciousness Transforms the Senses . . .</i>	99
VI Compassion	
<i>How Relationships Can Heal Old Wounds . . .</i>	121
VII Sexual Intimacy	
<i>The Spiritual Essence of Sexuality . . .</i>	139
VIII Miller Road	
<i>Love and the Spiritual Path . . .</i>	159
Acknowledgments . . .	165
Notes . . .	167
About the Author . . .	169

INTRODUCTION

The Essential Unity of Self and Other

TO LOVE LIFE, and in particular, to love other human beings, is one of the central ideals of every spiritual tradition. It is also one of life's greatest challenges. It requires the ability for true contact. And contact requires us to be authentic and deeply in touch with ourselves.

Every aspect of ourselves is capable of contact. We can contact another human being with our touch, gaze, and voice—and even with the subtle vibrations of our emotions, physical sensations, and awareness. We all crave this contact instinctively, for everything that it reaches becomes awake, alive.

The question addressed in this book is how we can deepen this capacity for contact, how we can become more adept at love. By love, I do not just mean love between intimate partners, but the warm, dynamic response of our heart to the world around us. The spiritual traditions teach that love is a basic component of the spiritual dimension. In the dualistic religions of the West, God is love. In the nondual traditions of the East, love is inherent in the spiritual essence that we can realize as our own being. Love is part of our own essential nature, somehow hidden or enfolded within us. Our desire and our efforts to love uncover our mysterious wound of separation from this authentic core of life. For this

reason, our relationships can become spiritual pathways; they can help us realize the spiritual essence of ourselves.

For many people, the word “spiritual” suggests an intangible, inaccessible, and perhaps improbable realm of existence. As spirituality is understood in this book, however, the spiritual refers to our true and basic nature, beneath the fantasies, artifices, and constraints that distort our usual experience. It is our most subtle and most clear attunement to ourselves and the world around us. When we enter the spiritual path, we are becoming real.

Although it cannot be detected by the ordinary range of our senses, the subtle essence of our being does become tangible as we attune to it. It becomes an actual experience, a quality of being that is felt in our whole body and that can then be discerned in all of life. As we realize this essence of ourselves, our senses themselves become more subtle and begin to reveal the radiance, fluidity, and a spacious stillness that suffuses the material world. The most radical transformation that occurs with this subtle attunement is that instead of experiencing ourselves as separate from our environment, we find that our own being is continuous with everything around us. This book describes how the realization of this unified, spiritual dimension of life transforms all of our relationships.

The understanding that I present in this book is most closely aligned with the Hindu system of Advaita (nondual) Vedanta and the Tibetan Buddhist schools of Mahamudra and Dzog-chen. These Asian traditions have in common the recognition of a fundamental dimension of consciousness that encompasses and pervades all of our experience. Some of these traditions consider this dimension to be the nature of the mind, and some the nature of the universe. Some consider it to be the foundation of our individual minds, and others regard it as a unified dimension, as one mind at the root of all life. But they all agree that this dimension

of pure consciousness is “uncreated.” It spontaneously appears. It reveals itself to us as a transparency of our own being and everything around us.

My views are also informed by the accumulated knowledge of Western psychology and by old and new methods of body/mind healing. But the primary sources of the ideas and practices offered here are my own experience of spiritual practice, the necessities of my own healing, the challenges and gifts of my relationships, and the spontaneous emergence of guidance in response to the needs of my students and clients in my practice as a psychotherapist and spiritual teacher over the past three decades. I am not concerned with arguing for a particular philosophy, for I do not believe we can know for certain which explanation of ultimate reality is true. I do know that the experience of spiritual oneness is the innate potential of our human organism, and that it involves a transformation of every aspect of ourselves, including our physical body and our psychological maturity.

Spiritual realization is not a matter of constructing something new; it is always a clearing away, a letting go of the holding patterns and beliefs that obscure our true nature. If oneness is our true nature, it is also the natural potential, the underlying reality, of our relationships with other people. This book looks at how relationships can help both partners in a relationship release their barriers to spiritual oneness. This is presented as a dual process of resolving our resistances to contact with our partner and attuning directly to the subtle dimension of spiritual unity.

The spiritual essence of life is our most subtle, fundamental dimension of consciousness. The Asian literature describes fundamental consciousness as all-pervasive. It is experienced (or experiences itself) as vast space, pervading our own form and everything else that we experience, even physical space itself. It is therefore the basis of unity within our own being, our internal wholeness. And it is the

basis of the unity of our own being with everything around us. It is an unbroken dimension, a dimension of wholeness and stillness that, when we attune to it, is coexistent with the movement of life. Spiritual realization is not just a matter of uplifting our mood or changing our behaviors and beliefs. It means that we enter into and experience ourselves as the spiritual foundation of existence.

Although the traditional teachings do not speak of it in this way, fundamental consciousness is the basis of contact: our deepest contact with ourselves, with other people, and with all of nature. It touches and knows everything that it pervades. Although our fundamental dimension of consciousness is referred to in spiritual teachings, it is just beginning to gain recognition in the psychological field. Up until recently, it was thought, in the more adventurous schools of psychology, physics, and medicine, that energy was the basic stratum of life. Energy, which is movement, such as flow, pulsation, or vibration, is easier to perceive and to feel than consciousness. The energy dimension is a spectrum in itself, from denser to subtler vibrations. When we realize ourselves as fundamental consciousness, we also reach the most subtle aspect of the energy spectrum. But we can experience the movement of energy without accessing the pervasive stillness of fundamental consciousness. Therefore, the application of fundamental consciousness to psychological and physical healing represents the cutting edge of the human growth movement.

There is also a growing recognition in contemporary psychology of the mutuality, or interconnectedness, of existence. The psychoanalytic theorist Robert D. Stolorow describes human interaction as an “intersubjective field” of mutual influence. Interestingly, in his book *Nonduality*, the Buddhist philosopher David Loy refers to the unified, spiritual dimension as a “pre-subjective ground,” because it exists beyond, or deeper than, our subjective

distortion of reality. In this book, I describe how the intersubjective field can gradually transform into the “pre-subjective” field of spiritual oneness. I also show how this shift brings compassion and insight to relationships, and helps both partners disentangle themselves from the defenses and projections that obstruct the flow of exchange between them.

Human development can be seen as a gradual realization of the oneness of self and other. As we evolve in this way, we develop inward contact and the capacity for contact with other people at the same time. It begins in infancy, as the rudimentary distinction between self-awareness and awareness of our mother (or primary caretaker), and culminates in the simultaneous self-knowledge and oneness with others that defines spiritual maturity. This book looks at the difficulties that thwart this developmental process and how they can lead to the boundary problems of merging (loss of self-contact) and distancing from others. It also shows how the realization of fundamental consciousness resolves these difficulties, so that our development toward spiritual oneness can proceed.

One of the main barriers to contact in intimate relationships is the fear that we will become submerged in another person. Attunement to fundamental consciousness can alleviate this fear because it pervades both our internal being and our environment as a unified whole. When we live in this dimension, we have a felt sense of both our internal experience and our oneness with the life around us. We can therefore experience oneness with another person while remaining attuned to our own internal being. Spiritual oneness is not a loss of self in the other, not the merging of identities that is so often a problem for people in relationships. It is the unity and continuity of two individual people. In the dimension of our spiritual essence, we grow simultaneously toward wholeness within our own body and oneness with other people.

In this book, I present several ways that couples can enter into the oneness of fundamental consciousness together. One of the ways is through a subtle channel that runs through the vertical core of the body. This channel is the center of the chakra system in Hindu Yoga and is called *sushumna*. In Buddhism, it is called “the central channel.”

To find this subtle core of the body, you can focus inward toward your spine from the front of your body, as deeply as you can without strain. Finding the subtle core of the body requires not just depth of focus, but also subtlety. It is a subtle inward attunement to ourselves. The *sushumna* forms a straight line from the top of your head to the center of the bottom of your torso. It cannot be neatly equated with any part of our physical anatomy, such as the spine, for a normal spine is not a straight line. Instead, it needs to be located through the “feel” of it. It has an electrical quality, a subtle vibratory “buzz.” The subtle core of our body is both our deepest connection with ourselves and the basis of our oneness with other people. In the dimension of spiritual oneness, partners can relate with each other “core-to-core.” This releases a flow of subtle energies between them, which provides a nonverbal foundation for communication.

Another way that couples can enter into fundamental consciousness together is by attuning to the essential qualities of this dimension. Fundamental consciousness can be experienced as emptiness, as the clear-through transparency of our own body and of everything that we experience in our environment. When two people attune to this pervasive emptiness together, they experience a mutual transparency of themselves and each other.

But fundamental consciousness can also be attuned to as presence. This presence aspect of fundamental consciousness is not simply empty; it is rich with the essential qualities of being. In this book,

I divide the presence aspect of fundamental consciousness into three qualities: awareness, emotion, and physical sensation. These are ongoing, unchanging qualities; they make up the unchanging stillness of our spiritual dimension. Specific and constantly changing awarenesses, emotions, and physical sensations arise and end within this unchanging ground of our being.

Awareness, emotion, and physical sensation are also the three major pathways of our contact with other people. As we realize the spiritual foundation of life, we experience contact with other people as a continuity of these three essential qualities. Most people have more access to some of these qualities than others. For example, they may be able to experience emotional contact with another human being, but physical sensation is more difficult. When two people feel out of contact with each other, or when they reach an impasse in their communication, it is often because they are each open to different aspects of contact. But fundamental consciousness is a dimension of wholeness. When we realize this subtle ground, we can connect with other people through all three pathways at once. Also, the process of two people opening to each other in the realms of sensation, emotion, and awareness can facilitate the realization of spiritual oneness for both of them.

The realization of fundamental consciousness gradually transforms the functioning of our senses. It is as if our senses are washed clean of our habitual ways of focusing on the world, and stripped of the mental elaborations that usually accompany our perceptions. If we look at a flower, for example, we do not get caught up in naming the kind of flower it is, or in our particular preference for this kind or another, but rather we experience fully this particular flower in this particular moment: its texture, its color and shape, its fragrance, its “floweriness.” The traditional spiritual literature of the East calls this “direct” or “bare” perception. We

feel that, for the first time, we are perceiving the world as it really is. Our senses also become more refined, and, as I have said, they reveal a more subtle world. Everything that we perceive appears to be made of energy and consciousness.

The experience of bare perception is part of our oneness with other people. Usually, we see and touch only from the surface of ourselves to the surface of other people. But in fundamental consciousness, we are able to see, hear, and touch beneath the surface to the feelings and qualities within. We are able to hear the qualities of a person's whole being in the sound of their voice and to feel these qualities in the sensation of their touch. Bare perception can provide the basis of deep understanding and attunement.

Spiritual oneness also brings a deepened perspective and compassion to one of the main challenges of intimacy—coping with childhood wounds and defenses, our own and those of our partner, that become activated by intimate relationships. In the clear, pervasive space of fundamental consciousness, it becomes easier to recognize and release the defenses, beliefs, and behaviors that prevent us from experiencing contact with another person.

Our psychological defenses are not just mental; they are ways that we constricted our bodies when we were children in order to lessen the impact of painful experience. They are ways that we shaped ourselves—body, heart, and mind—in order to be loved and to feel safe within our childhood families. The defensive constrictions in our body prevent us from fully embodying ourselves, from fully contacting the internal space of our bodies. Wherever we cannot contact our own internal being, we are not available for contact with other people. As we become more in contact with ourselves and others, we also become more open to the spiritual dimension of life.

Attunement to fundamental consciousness also helps release the psychological constrictions that diminish sexual pleasure. Physical

sensation is an inseparable part of the essence of our being and of our spiritual oneness with other life. The limitation that many people experience in their capacity for sexual pleasure is also a barrier to the realization of spiritual oneness.

In some Tantric traditions, partners use the energy of sexual release to “fuel” the rise of energy through their bodies. These exercises usually involve ways that partners can circulate their breath and energy systems. In chapter 7, this book describes how partners can include fundamental consciousness in their sexual practice to reach an even deeper level of contact with each other and to facilitate the most profound level of spiritual realization.

There are exercises at the end of each chapter that will help you practice relating with other people in the dimension of spiritual oneness. They include ways for partners to directly experience the clear, unified space of fundamental consciousness, to contact each other from the core of their bodies, to experience the continuity of love, awareness, and physical sensation, and to refine their senses so that they can see, hear, and touch each other on a more subtle level. There are also exercises that combine traditional Tantric energy exercises with attunement to fundamental consciousness during sexual union.

These exercises are from the Realization Process, a method that I have developed over the past thirty years. Unlike most traditional spiritual techniques, the Realization Process focuses directly both on awakening spiritual essence in our whole body and on relating with other people while remaining in this essence.

Traditionally, spiritual transformation has been taught as a solitary practice, even requiring the avoidance of social attachments and commitments. This book views the true meaning of spiritual detachment as the ability to allow life to flow without manipulation or defense. This means that we need to be fully open and available in our reception and response to life. Since our defensive

strategies and rigidities were formed in relationship to other people, relationships are the ideal context for releasing those defenses.

If we do not include relationships in our spiritual practice, we often lose our realization as soon as we encounter another human being. But if we have practiced relating with other people in fundamental consciousness, we can maintain our spiritual realization in our daily lives, so that it is not a temporary peak experience, but a lasting transformation of consciousness.

Fundamental consciousness is a relational field, a unity of self and other. When we attempt to shut out either our environment or our internal life, we fragment our own consciousness, and this conceals our essence. Spiritual oneness is the absolute balance of inward and outward contact. It is the deepest contact we can have with our own self and with everyone and everything that we encounter. It means that we are able to see through the surface of people and things to their essence. When we touch a plant or an animal or another human being, we can feel the streaming of the life force and the responsiveness of the subtle intelligence and love within them. We can experience that our own essence of sensation, love, and awareness resonates with the same essential qualities of everything around us.

In the dimension of fundamental consciousness, intimate partners begin to know each other, to experience each other, through the whole internal depth of their being. This is immensely satisfying, because it is the goal of our driving hunger for contact with other life. This contact—the ability to feel genuine love for another person, to experience the mental excitement of two minds meeting and the pleasure of unguarded physical sensation—is among the greatest rewards of spiritual awakening.

I

the RELATIONAL FIELD Attuning to Unified Consciousness

*It is one and the same Self that shines as one's
own self as well as the selves of others.*

VIJNANABHAIRAVA

THE ONENESS of the spiritual dimension is the underlying reality of all relationships. It can be described as a relational field, a fundamental continuity of self and other. In the spaciousness and stillness of our spiritual essence, we are truly in contact, truly intimate, with ourselves and with all of life.

The idea that people are interconnected in a relational field is in agreement with the contemporary view of the world as an open “system” in which all parts influence the others. In the field of psychology, the theory of “intersubjectivity” describes relationships as interactions of differently organized subjective worlds.¹ The relational field described in this book, however, is more subtle than the field of interacting subjectivities. It is experienced as a fundamental, unified dimension of consciousness.