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The Encouragement of Light #2– Revised 2017

Almost ten years ago, I wrote the majority of this article, this is a revised, expanded version. It is long, if you find it interesting, I recommend printing it out for further study. Enjoy!

“It Felt Love” by Hafiz

How did the Rose
Ever Open its Heart
And Give to This World
All its Beauty?

*It felt the Encouragement of Light
Toward its Being-
Otherwise
We all remain
Too frightened.....*

The Light of Awareness

Hafiz’s phrase “encouragement of light” resonates deeply for me. What is this light?

*We are alive,
Right Now,
AND
When we are aware!
We know, sense, feel, intuit this unique moment...
Love Arises
In the Light -
In THIS very moment!*

How amazing it is that we are alive and that we know we are alive!
Life knows Life THROUGH human beings like you and me. From an evolutionary perspective – 1) inert matter became alive, capable of reproducing itself, 2) life became sentient, capable of feeling, 3) sentient life became conscious with beginning capacities for caring and planning, then

“suddenly”, after 14 billion years, 4) conscious animals became capable of awareness and self-reflection.

Meaningfulness and Love – the essence of what makes this often-painful journey of life worth it – blossoms with this capacity. Like a fish experiencing water, it is easy to miss this essential reality. *We are Life experiencing itself. Life needs Beings like us, brains like ours, to have a conscious, living, self-reflective, experience of itself.*

I use the term “Light of Awareness” in a specific way. The light has two qualities – clarity and warmth. By clarity, I mean a sense of objectivity, seeing “what is”, this is called “Knowing”. By warmth, I mean unconditional, non-judgmental, caring. This quality is also called Love, when stripped of the personal and romantic notions.

Perhaps unexpectedly, Awareness, in this sense, is inseparable from the transcendent life-energy called Love. This life force lives both within and beyond the human being. Awakening to this consciousness that is both latent within the human heart and emanates from beyond is the direction of evolving consciousness. This is the “I”, the “We” and the “All” functioning in harmony. Awareness and Love are ultimately inseparable, awareness makes authentic love possible. In this writing, I will explore my learning about specific steps toward connecting to this light more often.

In Buddhist tradition, this light of awareness is the integration of wisdom and compassion. Wisdom is seeing “what is” and compassion is the warm heart of caring. Christian traditions speak of a loving, “guardian angel” who is lovingly devoted to you for lifetime upon lifetime and sees you clearly, yet cannot directly change your behavior. In more recent metaphor, think of Yoda from “Star Wars”, the wise elder who never judges young Luke yet always sees him clearly and cares deeply for him. In each of these images, one can sense “the encouragement of light” - warm-hearted yet objective caring. This capacity lives within each of us and through practice, we can develop it further.

Freedom and Authentic Love Begin with Self-Awareness

Turning the light around is that important inner move of shining warm-hearted attention on what is alive in our inner life. Rather than looking outward, we allow awareness to orient in an inward direction. For bringing

more love into our relationships and to be an effective voice for justice in the world, this step is essential. This **non-judgmental, inclusive, warm yet objective** light is an expression of our True nature. Buddhists call this “Basic Goodness”. This light of awareness is the sun for our blossoming, encouragement for our soul. **This is how both the rose and we open our hearts.** As this capacity deepens, caring toward other people naturally emerges. Kindness comes forth in the light of compassionate awareness.

Often meditation students ask me “what do I do with all these negative, even hostile, thoughts that keep coming up?” The short answer is “love them”. After a confused look, I hear two genuine questions: “what do you mean and how can I do that”?

By ‘love them’, I do not mean to “like” them, approve of them or agree with them. Love simply means extending the non-judgmental, warm, clear light of awareness toward them. Said another way, “accept them” with kindness, even the one’s we label negative. We can cultivate a more neutral, objective yet curious relationship toward unpleasant feelings and bodily sensations. Even our anger and hatred can be met with care, not denied or acted upon in destructive ways. Shining this inner light is practice for developing warm-hearted awareness in all our relationships. Although this compassionate awareness can arise spontaneously, a few steps can encourage this light to shine.

Step 1- Radical Pause – Presencing through the Physical Body

One might ask, “If this kind of awareness lives within human beings and is natural to us, how do we get separated from it”? In brief, we get lost in our fear-based, learned, Identity Systems. This narrow self-identity is sustained by our internal dialogue, stories about self and world that become habitual and fixated. These stories are validated by our patterns of attention so that what we experience confirms our worldviews. This is a closed, self-confirming system. How can we be free from this closed loop?

Stepping back from our ordinary internal dialogue - the chatter and our unexamined stories and coming into **presence** is the first step. This is **the radical pause** in which we connect to the present moment through bodily experience. Maintaining our historic self-identity requires an “absencing” from the present moment, “**presencing**” is the antidote.

In *The Embodied Life*, we emphasize bodily experience because physical sensations, especially the more neutral ones, are doorways to presence. While any sensation can be helpful, I suggest orienting around three dominant, relatively neutral experiences (perhaps pause with each suggestion and take a few moments for experiencing this as you read).

Start with the **ground** sensations of weight, substantiality and contact with your support surface. In sitting, sense your bottom on the chair, in standing notice your feet on the floor, etc. At every moment of your life, you are in relation to this gravitational pull - the unconditional support of the earth. Being conscious of this support has the surprisingly powerful effect of “grounding” you. Grounding balances the top heavy, disconnected thoughts, images and feelings that often arise when we are lost in our stories.

Add to this grounded-ness, your sense of the space around you. Embodied experience is not just “in” the physical body but also, always, in the larger space in which you are living. We are always in a physical and social environment and these must be included for wholeness to emerge. Our brain constantly maps the spaces that we are living in and we can, even without using vision, sense into these spaces. The **sounds** that surround you are particularly helpful. Do not be selective; be like a tape recorder taking in all the sounds. The bird chirping and the refrigerator humming are equally welcome. Sense the space around you, as you still connect to the ground sensations. This process is additive and eventually effortless.

Finally, at every moment, you are in some part of a **breathing** cycle. You are inhaling, exhaling or pausing. Tuning into this ever-present process is restorative.

Through the radical pause - through ground, space-sound, and breath - we connect intimately with the moment, just as it is, before our beliefs and reactions. This is the experience of “I am Here” or “I am”. Our physical body is a doorway to “**presencing**”.

Step 2- Acknowledging and Felt-Sensing

Now that you are present in the moment, turn your attention toward the specific thoughts and feelings that are alive in that moment - **from “I am”, to “how am I”?** Label the thoughts and feelings as precisely and objectively

as possible, “name them to tame them”. Thoughts include the stories, the narratives that you are telling yourself about yourself, life and other people.

Once you are grounded in the present moment through your physical body and after acknowledging the thoughts and feeling, you can turn toward the whole sense of that moment - the “**felt-sense**”.

Felt-sense is a term created by Eugene Gendlin, the originator of a method of self-inquiry called Focusing, for a holistic way of attending to one’s experience. This way of being with one’s self reliably creates a sense of meaningfulness and inner shifting. Through the study of many people in therapeutic settings, Gendlin found that attending in this way transforms how problems are experienced and deepens an appreciation of being alive.

A felt-sense is more than just one feeling or emotion. It is the way the entire situation, including the thoughts, concerns, sensations, hopes, images, and emotions are experienced all together. It is both subtle and profound. Through this way of attending, we learn to say “hello” to this dynamic state. Awareness welcomes each voice, each feeling, and each sensation like a gracious host with a guest or a parent with a child.

If the felt-sense is contracted, stuck or painful, acknowledge it without trying to fix or change it. In a challenging moment, even the voice that just wants it all to be different is seen as one of the guests to whom you are the host. Rather than trying to change, you are letting the light of awareness work on your inner life. **You are the welcoming ‘space’ in which all the inner voices can be accepted (remember not “liked” but accepted).**

Meeting the moment with awareness, as a warm-hearted, curious, caring observer, creates a surprisingly potent environment for organic change. Welcoming the moment does not imply being passive or inauthentic. All voices are welcome including those that are struggling, hating or resigned.

Shining the light in this way reveals what is living, what is true in heart, body, mind and environment in a given moment. For example:
Sitting here, writing, I notice a background of discomfort in my belly. What is that..... a kind of tightness, something unsettled, perhaps something about the seminar I am teaching. Pausing in typing, I take a few moments ground in my body and to acknowledge the presence of this tight place, letting “it” know that I know its there- like giving a child or a pet a gentle

moment of care. Just that acknowledgment creates a subtle releasing, a sense of “being on the same page” with my inner life. Amazingly, this happens without working on or trying to change it - such is the power of acknowledging.

Step 3- Being With

Learning to ‘**be with**’ all inner states is remarkably empowering, creating a radically different relationship. I call this quality, in which the “I” is keeping company with whatever is alive in our experience, “presencing”. Surprisingly, this kind of ‘being with’ often leads toward a helpful action or a decision when such is needed.

Keeping intimate, non-judgmental company with the inner state probably feels strange and awkward at first. Addressing it, “it” being that inner place that is carrying this painful experience, affectionately with something like “dear one, tell me what so difficult” and listening to the response, often creates a powerful inner movement. Resting a hand on the place that hurts can be healing. **Always, you are listening to the response of the inner/feeling body.** The keys are: 1) not identifying with the state and 2) not controlling the inner life with ordinary, thought-based consciousness. This integrated listening requires slowing down, returning to the “radical pause”, recovering a sense of neutral through the physical body and waiting for the inner world to lead you.

As I am with the remnants of that tightness in my belly, images of the one student that I am concerned about come to mind. Asking my inner body if the tightness is connected to my concern that the seminar is too demanding for her, I receive an inner “yes”- a bodily confirmation that the contraction is connected to this situation. Even without a solution, my body let’s go further, just knowing that I am listening and hearing the concern. I can now spend some time inviting solutions to the situation. Interestingly, the majority of the relief comes before a solution is found!

Step 4- Inquiry

After welcoming the inner place with the warm light of awareness, we enter the final step called **inquiry**. These steps are not always sequential and might overlap. Grounded in our bodies, maintaining non-judgmental contact

with our inner life, begin to gently ask: “what is the most important thought/belief that is living in me right now”? Or “what makes this so hard”?

My experience is that there is usually an **unexamined, unquestioned “untruth”** that is at work, often under the surface. By untruth, I mean **unverifiable, exaggerated** assertions such as: “no one will ever love me”, “I am a failure”, “I am always so stupid”, “this will never get better”, or “there is no way out”. These old stories have remarkable power when unacknowledged.

Holding attention in the present moment, grounded in the physical body, we can turn our light toward any untrue thoughts. Simply naming these thoughts **in presence** will usually result in a letting go and often a smile. Shining this light of awareness, keep returning with non-judgmental curiosity to the dark place of the ‘untruth’. It cannot survive for long in this light.

For my situation in this seminar, a small part of the contraction remains. As I maintain contact with embodied presence and the subtle tightness, which has moved to my chest, I inquire into any thoughts that are living in the background. Sure enough, I discover a small voice saying something like, “it is my job that everyone get value from and enjoy the seminar. If she is not satisfied I am a failure”. While I love people to get value and joy from my teaching, clearly this is not my job. I am here to do the best I can at presenting this material and I cannot control others people’s experience. With that awareness, my body gets totally light and free.

This “turning toward” has the feeling of acknowledging what is true in the moment without fighting, ignoring or resigning. How is it possible not to fight undesirable moments? Imagine an infant waking you up in the middle of the night with loud cries, a snotty face and a full, smelly diaper. While you prefer life to be different, your natural choice is to put your reactions in the background and take care of the baby. Can you imagine a similar response to your own painful thoughts, feelings and even bodily sensations?

The encouragement of light is the sun-like energy of awareness that allows our inherent wisdom to come forward. Connecting with what is alive in our bodies, hearts and minds, even in difficult moments, invites an opening, a letting go. Feeling connected with Self feels more spacious and truer because these are expressions of our True nature. The tight, pressured, dark places are departures from our deepest connection to Life and, when

approached through ‘presencing’, can lead us ‘home’. Even painful moments of loss, grief, injustice, etc. are felt differently. It is not that we try to feel happy, rather, we feel authentically connected to wholeness, to essence.

Similarly, in pleasant or neutral moments, presencing deepens our appreciation of being alive. Most moments are not either wonderful or terrible. When in presence, even ordinary moments become more fulfilling. This is one of the great gifts of blossoming awareness.

The encouragement of Light toward your own inner world is an accelerator of our unfolding toward freedom and love. Meeting the moment with a warm, objective, curiosity and care opens our inner knowing. Even our inner critical voices unwind in this presence. We can learn to hear the sometimes helpful messages that these hostile voices are trying to bring, without all the struggle. This presencing is the basis for growing loving relationships. This atmosphere allows an authentic, mature, grounded voice for social justice. To be truly alive and aware in this Light is the greatest gift we can receive from and then give back to our precious Life. What is more important than this? As poet Mary Oliver says at the end of her poem “The Summer Day”:

*Tell me, what is it you plan to do
With your one wild and precious life?*