

#UNHARMABLE

Module 3: The Way Out of Core False Beliefs

From Chapter 5 of Conscious Recovery

It's time to come back from the world of illusion, the world of lies, and return to your own truth, to your own authenticity. It's time to unlearn the lies and become the real you. And in order to do that, you need to come back to life, which is truth. Awareness is the key to coming back to life...where you rebel against all the lies that are ruling your head. You rebel, and the whole dream starts changing.

—Don Miguel Ruiz & Don Jose Ruiz, *The Fifth Agreement*

In this module, we'll continue the conversation about breaking free from the cycle of addiction, which is the continual search for an outside solution to remedy or numb something that feels broken internally. This module will offer you tools for uncovering and unlearning your core false beliefs, a process that involves the practice of self-parenting and the process of integrating the shadow. Through these spiritual practices, in an ongoing process of integration and wholeness, we can come to experience conscious awareness, what's called "witness consciousness," and a return to our essential selves.

Living Beyond Your Stories

It goes without saying that learning is important. The value we place on education is evident all around us: from educational leaders hailing it as the cornerstone of society, to politicians calling themselves “the education candidate” and business leaders saying we need a more sophisticated workforce. Yes, learning is empowering. When I was first introduced to spiritual teaching, I tried to learn as much as I possibly could about spiritual principles, about spiritual practices, about metaphysical laws and truths. All this was very valuable for me; I needed to learn in order to grow in consciousness. So why am I talking about the importance of unlearning? And, what are the stories we might need to live beyond?

When I was in my 20s and in early recovery, I was examining painful incidents of my past in order to resolve what still seemed unhealed. I remember calling my two sisters to have them corroborate the details of certain childhood happenings. To my surprise, they both recounted different versions of the same events, which seemed equally correct for each of them. It occurred to me that the three of us had three different yet equally real experiences of the same occurrences. We all had different experiences of our childhoods, and therefore we have created different stories about ourselves and the world at large. Because of this experience, I now realize that it is an important part of our spiritual development and recovery to question and live beyond the stories we have been carrying around about ourselves and the world, sometimes for years, maybe even decades.

With clear vision, we see that it no longer serves us to cling to any story that keeps us feeling stuck and limited. What would be the benefit of continuing to perpetuate stories that are not in alignment with the truth that we are all

essentially whole? The fact that most of us are still living in a state of forgetfulness of that fundamental truth doesn't change that reality. As we shift our perspective about who and what we truly are, that in turn shifts the nature of the world we inhabit and our experience of others. The world becomes a more loving place because we have become more loving, openhearted human beings. And all we did was come into alignment with what was already true. This is what it means to live beyond our stories—about ourselves, others, and the world.

Evidence or Conclusion?

Most of us are taught that we come to a conclusion by gathering evidence. If we look at the “facts” of a situation, we will be able to determine the correct conclusion. Our entire legal system is based on this, and many in the scientific community adhere to this structure of knowing as well. I invite you to turn that concept on its head and begin to question this assumption. Is it possible that the reverse of this formula is actually true? Perhaps we come to a conclusion and then go about finding evidence to support that conclusion. This is often the case in our legal system, and quantum physics is now revealing this reality in the scientific field as well. The observer has an effect. In our personal lives, we may encounter situations which repeat themselves over and over. We can look to evidence to support our position. Or, we can pause and examine our conclusions and see what happens when we focus on changing them instead. Miraculous changes occur simply by looking at our assumptions and making the inner shift to a different way of seeing the world.

If we decide that some things in life are “good,” and some are “bad,” then we find ourselves living in a dualistic world where we need to be careful and keep ourselves safe. In this reality, things can go wrong, people can be hurtful, and we need to protect ourselves from those who want to harm us and from the evils of life. We can find plenty of evidence to confirm this reality. We don’t necessarily need to ignore the world around us. In the end though, it is up to each of us to decide what kind of world we live in. We don’t need to wait for anything to change on the outside before we can inhabit the world of our choice. What kind of world are you choosing to see today?

We can choose to recognize that everything that happens is useful for our recovery, and that it contributes to our well-being and our wholeness. We can step into a world where nothing is actually against us. In this reality, there are no enemies. It is safe to befriend the here and now, and we can trust that whatever is happening in this moment can serve our highest spiritual development. Whatever happened in our past also served our highest spiritual awareness. In this way, we can have a daily living experience of being at one with the rest of life. We can know ourselves as part of the seamless fabric of existence. In fact, this is the only way we can experience our oneness with all that is, and tap into the profound sense of peace and harmony that already exists deep within us. Letting go of our stories is the shortcut to living in a peaceful world.

Relative Reality or Ultimate Reality?

Many metaphysical and mystical traditions make a distinction between relative reality and ultimate reality. Relative reality is everything we

experience through our senses; it is anything that depends on something else; it is anything that changes. It's what we tend to call "the real world." Relative reality on the level of our individual personality is all our inner infrastructure—the structures of the ego; our ideas, beliefs, and points of view about ourselves and about life. It is what makes sense to us and works for us at any given point in our life journey. As we grow and learn, our relative reality changes. We let go of old things that no longer serve us and gravitate to new things that now seem more solid and more true. In other words, as we grow up, we develop new ways of seeing ourselves and the world. We adopt new perspectives.

Ultimate reality, on the other hand, does not change. It is beyond ego, personality, and experience. Ultimate reality, as revealed to us in spiritual traditions and practices, is just that; ultimate. Within ultimate reality lies the truth that we are born whole and perfect and absolutely one with Source. That deep perfection is the fundamental truth of who and what we are. We might call this God consciousness or our spiritual selves. Let me reiterate something here that we have discussed in earlier modules: Within ultimate reality, we are ultimately and fundamentally whole and perfect. But this perfection does not mean that we are free from limitation (in relative reality) and it doesn't mean that we don't make what seems like mistakes. Our essential and fundamental wholeness does not mean we never will feel broken, or never feel hurt. Our mistakes and limitations may feel real, but they are only part of relative reality. Our brokenness, hurts, and wounded selves might feel real too. But they are only real at the level of relative reality.

This description of ultimate reality as something greater than our day-to-day lives might seem too abstract, so I'll delve more deeply into this concept. Many of us don't have the tools to recognize this oneness with the eternal,

and even if we do glimpse it from time to time, we might not know what to do with it. Think about it: Have you ever had a spiritual experience? Have you ever felt one with nature, or with all humankind, or with all existence? Probably you have. That's not an anomaly—it's a connection with ultimate reality.

Many people, grounded as they are in the material, tangible world, might look at this sort of experience as a random event, as the result of some phenomenon in the brain. Or, they might dismiss it altogether. That doesn't mean it doesn't exist; it just means they didn't recognize it. But when we evolve spiritually, when we have undertaken spiritual practices that open our eyes to this ultimate reality, then we can be ready for it when it presents itself. That's what happened to me on that small boat on the Ganges, in the experience I described in the preface. Because I was open to and more or less prepared for that experience, it initiated a profound shift in my perception instead of passing by me unnoticed. In a way, it was a free gift, but I had also prepared myself to receive it in some way.

Of the two, relative reality and ultimate reality, most of us are primarily aware of relative reality—it's where we live our lives. But we are created in and strive to return to the unchanging dimension within ourselves. As we become more grounded in ultimate reality, we come to see more clearly that the truths of relative reality are fleeting. They change. When we are children, we seem to have an innate sense of ultimate reality, but then we begin to forget. And, quite literally, we get it "taught out" of us. So, for me, the spiritual journey and recovery are about unlearning.

There comes a point when it's time for us to unlearn the stories, the beliefs, the ideas that we have collected and internalized—stories that at one point

may have seemed true but that are no longer fitting our lives. As we begin to awaken to a deeper reality, we begin to recognize that although we might call those stories “true,” that truth lies only in relative reality. The key to living in peace and wholeness is moving beyond our stories. So, what are the truths, the stories, that once served you but are now keeping you stuck in a limited way of being?

Moving Beyond Limitation

I’m not asking you what you can do or what you can acquire that will make things OK. That’s an old habit for many of us with addictions and addictive behaviors. Many of us believe that if we just look a certain way or act a certain way, if we can just get a certain person to respond to us in a certain way, all will be fine. This is different. Instead of looking for something outside ourselves to make things better, here we’re looking inward and taking an honest look at the stories that keep us feeling stuck. What do I mean by “stuck?” Well, if you’ve been in recovery for any length of time you’ve probably spent some time looking at your life: your relationships, your attitudes, your patterns. Where do you seem to experience the same kinds of situations in your life, the same types of relationships over and over again, the same frustrations? Have you noticed a repetitive pattern?

Here’s a story that represents this well: In the 1960s, a rare white Bengal tiger arrived at the National Zoo in Washington, D.C. The tiger, named Mohini, was a special gift to President Eisenhower and the people of America from the government of India. Mohini was placed in a temporary 12 x 12-foot cage, while the zoo discussed plans to build her a magnificent enclosure. The enclosure was to resemble her natural habitat, with lush

forests, rolling hills, and everything a tiger could possibly need or want. During the construction period, Mohini paced around her cramped cage, in a figure-8 pattern, day after day. Unexpected delays in building the new habitat turned months into years, as the young tiger continued to pace around her small cage.

Finally, Mohini's new, spacious enclosure was completed and a large crowd gathered to witness the big event. At long last, she would be able to experience her freedom. To the crowd's great surprise, however, on entering her new home, Mohini headed straight to the far corner and started pacing around in the same figure-8 pattern, just as she had been forced to do for several years. Sadly, she spent the rest of her life in the small far corner of her enclosure, moving in the same figure-8, 12 x 12 pattern, completely oblivious to the paradise surrounding her. This story illustrates what happens when we allow our earlier programming to dictate the limits of our awareness and of our experience of life. My question to you is: What is your self-imposed, 12 x 12, figure-8 pattern? How are you living within the confines of an inherited belief system that still appears to be "real" for you? The truth is that you have the capacity to experience infinite freedom from within. You live in an infinitely abundant universe. It is only the limitations of your thinking, and the stories you tell yourself, that keep you tightly contained in a life that might feel smaller than you would like it to be.

So again, my question for you is, what self-imposed corners are you squeezed into in right now, what crazy-eight pattern are you stuck in? That pattern may have originally been a brilliant strategy that worked to support or protect you, but maybe now you're beginning to feel that something about it is just not adequate. What would it be like to expand your consciousness and open to the possibility of a different perspective? You've

looked at these stories and beliefs before, in working through previous modules; they are your core false beliefs. They are the fundamental beliefs about yourself that are getting in your way. When you uncover these beliefs, you may find that they are usually some variation on “I am ...” or “I am not ...”—for example, “I am unlovable,” “I am stupid,” “I am a disaster,” or “I am not worthy,” “I am not creative.” And as we’ve seen in part 1, if you believe there's something fundamentally wrong with you, then that is the lens through which you will perceive life. You will then become attracted to relationships and situations, and you attract situations and relationships, that seem to confirm your belief. It’s self-fulfilling.

The great news is that you don’t have to force yourself to unlearn your core false beliefs. You don’t even necessarily have to learn a new set of beliefs (although this can be one powerful way to work with these negative beliefs). The first step is simply recognizing that these are beliefs set in relative reality, not ultimate reality. They are changeable, not set in stone. Once you recognize that, you can begin to question them and, ultimately, let them go. As a wise teacher once said, the first step is awareness, the second step is awareness, and the third step is awareness.

Self-Parenting

One way to look at your core false beliefs is to pay attention to the messages you’ve received from the world throughout your life. For we are all walking around with an inner dialogue, a specific, personal, unique way of looking at the world that started when we were born, maybe even before. One of the ways that we express our unique perspective is through what’s called “self-talk.” It is the way that we communicate with ourselves internally,

especially the way we talk with the parts of ourselves that feel wounded. I imagine some of your self-talk is kind and loving, and some of it is less so. Perhaps much of your self-talk is grounded in your core false beliefs.

One valuable tool in unlearning self-talk that no longer serves us is through the beneficial practice of self-parenting. In self-parenting, we learn to talk, in a loving and supportive way, to those parts of ourselves that feel wounded. We learn to parent the small inner child that may have experienced trauma or that may be sitting in toxic shame, the self that feels disconnected and broken. This is the kind of parenting that maybe we didn't get as small children, and fortunately, we can provide it to ourselves as adults. Many of us were not raised with the type of communication, in either words or actions, that helped us to grow and thrive. And it was this lack of conscious parenting, in part, that gave us our core false beliefs. When there's abuse early in life or an experience of abandonment, the core false beliefs that often result include things like, "Life is not safe," "I can't feel this right now," and "You're going to leave me."

Some of us got the message that it isn't OK to make mistakes or it isn't OK to feel what some might refer to as negative emotions. Some of us got the message that there is a right way and a wrong way: if I'm a good child, I get rewarded (or at least I don't get hurt); if I'm a bad child, I get punished. If we hold these limiting beliefs as adults, we will most likely never learn how to enrich our emotional lives, how to question things, even how to comfort ourselves.

Self-parenting is another way of unlearning ideas and constructs that no longer serve us. We do this by replacing the negative self-talk with supportive and loving self-talk to create a place of safety internally. In

assisting people with self-parenting, I have found three key phrases to be incredibly simple and powerful. These are things we say to ourselves in self-parenting: (1) You're safe now, (2) It's OK to feel this way now, and (3) I'm here for you now. So, let's go through these and see how they can help in the unlearning process.

You're safe now.

Part of conscious parenting is keeping our children safe. This is not about keeping them insulated from anything and everything that might harm them; it's about teaching them to be independent and resilient in whatever circumstances they find themselves. This involves creating or finding safe places for them, places of psychological safety as well as physical safety. Unfortunately, not all of us had that kind of parenting. Early in our lives, many of us were taught—either consciously or unconsciously, sometimes covertly and sometimes very overtly—that it's not safe for us to be who and what we are. This sense of insecurity can cause a profound separation from our essential nature. We've worked with this earlier, especially in module 1 where we explored unresolved trauma. So, part of self-parenting is being able to talk to ourselves as we would to our child, reassuring ourselves that all is well. When we self-parent, we can say to ourselves in times of crisis or difficulty, "You're safe. It's safe to be you right now. It's safe to be exactly as you are."

It's OK to feel this way now.

Very simply said, addiction can be framed as a response to the fear of feeling, the fear of being right here, right now. Addictive behavior is what we do to avoid being in the present. So at first, telling ourselves "It's OK to

feel this way right now” might feel quite foreign. If we have a core belief that we are unsafe, then the idea that it's safe to get in touch with what we're feeling on an emotional level might seem very challenging or untrue. But emotional awareness is very important for those of us in recovery, and so it helps to literally give ourselves the message that it's safe to look within: “It's OK to feel this way right now.” As we come further into our spiritual practice and our recovery, we begin to thaw out, to start feeling things we had been ignoring or avoiding or not allowing ourselves to feel, and this deepening becomes more comfortable and less threatening. If you are finding yourself challenged by these feelings, you might want to start by saying “something in me feels...” rather than “I feel...” as this can assist you in getting in touch with the emotion without getting flooded or overwhelmed.

I'm here for you now.

At the core of a lot of our anxiety is the belief that “If I let you truly see me, you will leave.” The root of this core false belief may have been a result of parenting that was judgmental, abusive, emotionally distant, or love that was conditional on our behavior. With this self-parenting phrase, “I'm here for you now,” we're genuinely giving ourselves the parenting that maybe we didn't get growing up. We're dedicating ourselves to ourselves, committing ourselves to being there for ourselves as we would hope to be there for a child, or a life partner. As Tracy McMillan put it in her TEDx talk, “You enter a relationship with yourself, and then you put a ring on it. In other words, you commit to yourself fully.... Loving myself exactly where I am, is the only way to get where I'm going.”

Again, here are the three phrases you can start saying to yourself to begin a healthy inner dialogue: “You're safe now,” “It's OK to feel this way now,”

and “I’m here for you now.” If you can practice these three things and begin to use them any time you feel anxious, sad, etc. you’ll find a new way of being with yourself.

Recognizing the Shadow

In psychological terms, the shadow is the unconscious aspect of yourself, that you keep hidden due to a desire to repress the seemingly negative attributes of your personality. An important element of your recovery work is looking at and integrating the shadow: those parts of yourself that you have buried beneath the surface, beneath your conscious awareness, those parts of yourself that you may not want to see or express. The shadow is what you hold shame about—your unresolved trauma, your fragmented self. You conceal those parts in the shadow, and because they’re repressed and not integrated, they tend to surface in ways that make you feel out of control. Renowned psychologist, Carl Jung stated this so simply when he said: “Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate.” And, once you bring the shadow into conscious awareness, you recognize you can begin choosing, rather than being run by your unconscious programming.

Let’s take an example. Nadia holds a core belief that others will not value her if she does anything that she considers to be wrong. We can look to her childhood for the roots of this belief, but I think you can imagine where it comes from. This belief leads her to bury in the shadow her true fear: that she is deeply imperfect and wholly unlovable. Whenever this thought or the feelings associated with it come up, Nadia panics and does whatever she can to shove them back down. Sometimes this results in behavior that is

damaging to her relationships. Say Nadia's husband points out something she's doing that irritates him. Quite often this will cause her, without thinking, to turn the tables on him in a way that's aggressive and unfair. So, if he says something like, "Honey, would you mind not turning the light on when you come to bed after I'm asleep?" she might respond, lightning quick, with something like, "What? How do you expect me to find things in the dark? Why do you go to bed so early anyway? It's like you don't want to be around me. I so don't need this when I'm tired and trying to get ready to finally relax!"

Nadia inevitably regrets her reaction, explaining it by saying that she has no control over her temper. That is one way to look at it, and Nadia might address her problem with anger management therapy or medication. If we look at it from a spiritual perspective, however, we will see that her expressions of anger result from a cascade of consequences stemming from her spiritual disconnection. Early in life, Nadia became disconnected from the truth of who she is and she bought into some core false beliefs about herself as broken and unlovable. Because this perspective of herself brings with it feelings that are too terrible to bear, she buries and represses her sense of worthlessness, which in turn tends to come out in unexpected and damaging ways, erupting in these explosions of anger and projections of worthlessness onto those around her.

So, Nadia is trapped in the corner of her own worthlessness, and she projects that, unconsciously, onto others. If she holds onto that story, that core false belief in her own worthlessness, her ability to move freely will be limited. The shadow will seem to be controlling her life, directing her actions and determining what feels fundamentally true to her (like the idea that she cannot control her temper). So, in addition to working with her doctor and

her therapist on ways to manage her anger, Nadia can also grow spiritually by examining, in a safe place, what lies in her shadow, bringing it to the surface and working to integrate that into the light of day.

Stuck in the Shadow

When we bring what's in the shadow into conscious awareness, we start to recognize that we have a choice, that the shadow does not have to run our lives. Again, a shift in awareness is key here. If we believe that our perspective of the world is the ultimate truth, that there's no additional way of seeing things, then life is going to be something that's happening to us. But once we commence to recognize that everything we see outside of ourselves is merely a projection of our inner reality, things will begin to shift. When we reframe our stories, things change.

In your previously held stories, the things in your shadow—your perceived flaws and imperfections, your secret sorrows, your triggers—look like ultimate reality and so they seem to have control; you believe you are their victim. You hold the beliefs that underlie your shadow as if they were absolute truths. But if you acknowledge that these viewpoints are not the fundamental truth, you can bring the story into the realm of conscious awareness. Then you can start to see your shadow as something other than a dictator and to recognize your own power. But, you might ask: “If my shadow resides in my unconscious, how do I make the unconscious, conscious?”

Integrating the Shadow

If you've committed yourself to working through this course, I trust that by now you've come a long way. You've started to genuinely internalize the fact that your story is only one way of looking at things, that life is not what's happening to you but what you're calling it. You've begun to make that shift in awareness, to see that everything that's happening in the outer realm is actually a reflection of your inner consciousness rather than reality.

I trust that you've started to examine where your stories came from, where you got those core false beliefs that are no longer working for you. You've begun to question the source of where you developed your ideas and assumptions about what you call life. And you're on your way to recognizing and integrating the shadow. If you feel like you're not there yet, I invite you to put that doubt aside for now and simply sit in gratitude for the growth that's already occurred and that is continuing to occur.

As you begin to work with your shadow, it's important to appreciate the need for safety. Because the shadow can sometimes be painful. Again, renowned psychologist Carl Jung stated it so beautifully when he said: "There is no coming to consciousness without pain. People will do anything, no matter how absurd, in order to avoid facing their own Soul. One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious." Illuminating and integrating your shadow material requires a sense of inner security and trust. Certainly, your inner work of self-love and acceptance, as well as any work you do with a therapist or spiritual counselor, can help in nurturing safety and recognizing what's happening in the shadow. Meditation and other awareness practices are also useful tools.

Once you are open to them, insights will come up while you're journaling, walking, or even singing in the shower.

These are relatively solitary practices, and it can be tempting to keep our shadow work to ourselves. But keep in mind that creating safety also involves community. We keep our shadow selves hidden in part because we think no one else would understand, because we're ashamed to admit them to others. But the fact is, everyone has "stuff" in their shadow. And chances are, your shadow looks a lot like your neighbor's shadow. So once you've recognized what's in the shadow, community can help you integrate that shadow fully into your conscious awareness. This, of course, is not always a linear process. Part of the strategy of creating community is nurturing relationships in which it's safe to speak genuinely. For example, "I always say I'm fine because I'm afraid to admit I'm not," "I'm secretly sitting on a huge pile of rage," or "I'm afraid I don't know what love is." Every time you say such things out loud in a safe place, with people you trust and in a spirit of self-love and acceptance, they hold less power over you.

Another way to shift things so they lose their power over you, is to play with your shadow. Try, for instance, to imagine your shadow as something other than menacing. Can you see your shadow as a teacher? What can you learn from it? If your shadow holds anger, can that anger teach you something about what lies beneath it? Can you see your shadow as a beloved child? How can you show it love and concern? If your shadow holds your innermost sorrow, can you comfort it? I know that being in the presence of these "shadowy" things can seem daunting. But you have more courage than you may realize. You might just need a little encouragement, and the shadow realm is a good place to put it into practice.

Raising Your Conscious Awareness

Here is a wonderful quote from Deepak Chopra: "I've worked all my life on the subject of awareness, whether it's awareness of the body, awareness of the mind, awareness of your emotions, awareness of your relationships, or awareness of your environment. I think the key to transforming your life is to be aware of who you are."

There is a great story about how we can shift our awareness and therefore change how we experience what we call reality. It is a story about two different dogs. Both, at separate times, walk into the same room. One comes out wagging her tail. The other one comes out growling. A woman watching this goes into the room to see what could possibly make one dog so happy and the other one so mad. To her surprise, she finds a room filled with the mirrors. The happy dog found a thousand happy dogs looking back at her while the angry dog saw only angry dogs growling back at him. What you see in the world around you is a reflection of who you are and the feeling tone you are holding. Once we know that, we can begin to shift the "stories" we are telling about ourselves and the world and therefore begin to change our life experiences.

Awareness is a marvelous gift of healing that has many levels. As we begin to raise our conscious awareness, we give ourselves permission to feel and create a safe space where our wounding can see the light of day. We become aware of the lens through which we're looking at the world, we become aware of our core false beliefs. We become aware of our thoughts, our inner dialogue. We become aware of what's in the shadow, all the unconscious self-talk and the shaming and shameful patterning that has been influencing our conscious decisions. We become aware of the level of

consciousness from which we are operating, and we begin to return to our original perfection. And from this space of recognizing our oneness with the essential self, we can witness even more fully our ego, our shadow, our humanity. And, there are always deeper levels of awareness.

Activating Intentionality

In part, conscious awareness is about becoming attentive to our thoughts and intentions. But awareness can go beyond our thoughts and our intentions, to an understanding of the deeper energy that we are holding about ourselves and the world. That feeling tone is what actually creates reality, because it holds a particular frequency. This is not to say that awareness of our thoughts and our intentions is unnecessary. After all, what I'm calling our feeling tone is created in part by our inner dialogue—the language of our thoughts, what we say to ourselves and others about the world. As we've seen, if we have unresolved trauma, if we carry toxic shame, if we are disconnected spiritually, then our inner dialogue may be negative and unconscious.

If that's the case, then growing in awareness means becoming more conscious of that language and the stories we live by, recognizing how we are caught in a way of seeing the world that is based on some fundamental lies we have about ourselves. That's the level of awareness that I've been focusing on so far in this course. The process of deepening awareness on the level of language and intentionality involves changing how we think about ourselves and the world. As we become aware at this level, we pay attention to how our intentionality affects our outer life. "This self-critical language blocks me," or "If I hold this thought it's going to manifest in my

world.” This level of awareness helps free us from a victim consciousness, as you may have experienced.

When I was first introduced to metaphysical teachings, I needed to focus on deepening this level of awareness. And I thought that was all there was to it. It seemed to me that spiritual development was only about changing my mind and therefore changing my reality. As I learned and grew, I was able to identify my negative inner dialogue and consciously choose my thoughts, to be more aware on that level. In other words, I focused on growing in awareness of my intentionality, without realizing I could go deeper. But, that awareness wasn't enough to change my reality because I was still carrying a negative feeling tone about myself. In my mind, I believed in my essential wholeness, but I wasn't convinced of it in my heart and body. I still held the core false beliefs at the level of my being. And this feeling tone about myself was more powerful than my thoughts; it was actually creating the vibration at which I was living and it was forming what we call reality. Yes, I did need to become aware of my thoughts and intentions, but I needed to go deeper as well. Thoughts do play a great role in recovery because if we're having negative inner dialogue, our feeling tone isn't going to change. But the process of unlearning and letting go also involves resting in a deeper level of beingness, and transforming our feeling tone.

Sometimes this shift comes to us all at once or in a great leap, as in a profound spiritual experience or in a dream. As you might remember from my personal story in the preface, I had such an experience on the Ganges—in which my ego seemed to be stripped away and I experienced only love and oneness. This experience created a real shift in my feeling tone, in my deepest awareness. Of course, that experience ended, and I returned to my “regular” life. I left India and came home, to work, finances, relationships,

etc. And on the surface, nothing seemed to have changed. There was no miracle cure to all my day-to-day life. Spiritual experiences do not suddenly make everything miraculously shift in the outer world, at least not right away.

But that doesn't mean that what happened wasn't real. That doesn't mean that my experience was simply the result of a chemical reaction. Something powerful had happened; there had been a profound change. Even though I still experienced all the "stuff" I had left behind when I went to India, even though my ego still crept back, that experience had initiated a permanent shift in the way I related to ego, the way I framed my story, the way I interpreted what you might call my wounding. And what I comprehend now, or what I'm understanding now at a deeper level, is this: These profound experiences, grounded in our inner work and spiritual practice, can bring us to a level where we can witness all our old stories, difficulties, and ego from an awareness of ultimate reality. Spiritual experiences like the one I had in India can help us experience our essential selves, unharmed and unharmable. This is what we call "witness consciousness."

Becoming the Observer

As we come to remember and to know the highest truth of who we are, we experience ourselves as the ultimate observer of all things. In meditation, we no longer identify with or try to control our mind. Rather we simply bring our awareness to that truest part of ourselves, the energy field of our inner essence. We witness all things in our life through the eyes of compassion and understanding. Knowing ourselves as those qualities allows us to be that in the world. We no longer need to wait or expect somebody else to demonstrate those qualities in our lives. We become the model of it,

demonstrating to others the possibility of living in peace and harmony, here and now. No waiting is required. We become a living example to others that it is safe to live openheartedly in this world.

At this mystical level of living, there is no longer any desire or need to blame, judge, or to make others wrong. And if we do momentarily forget who we are, we can easily find our way back to being love. We understand and have compassion for the human condition. We see that the vast majority of people are still trapped in a limited, separate identity. They have forgotten their true nature. They are a potential danger to themselves and to others. Coming from a place of separation and fear, they believe they live in a dangerous world. When their safety feels threatened, they are convinced there is no alternative but to attack others in order to preserve their well-being. This way of being currently plagues humanity. The phrase—“Forgive them, for they know not what they have done”—comes to mind. We might add to this by saying “Forgive them, for they know not who they are.” How could they know, when they have assumed a false identity?

The Joy of Beingness

Conscious Recovery is about who you are being in addition to what you are doing. What we’re talking about is tapping into a new way of being, and that involves creating a safe space, that involves unlearning, that involves deepening our awareness to come ever closer to that space within us that is absolutely whole and perfect and one with the universe. As Michael Beckwith said, “Energy doesn’t get created, we just find a new way of moving it.” So, we’re really talking about tapping into essential energy.

Let's say we're unhappy with "what's happening in our life." If we are unaware of our inner dialogue, we might put these events into the story that fits our core false beliefs: "This is just like everything else in my life because nothing good ever happens to me," or "This happened because I'm a failure," or whatever. As we become more aware of our inner dialogue, we may get better at recognizing our stories and we may start to let go of them. But we may still tend to judge what's happening, to assign blame and try to identify what needs to be "fixed." Even if we are aware on an intentional level, judgment can creep in: "I can't believe I manifested this. What's wrong with me that I haven't been able to change this pattern?" And as we've seen, judgment solidifies the old way of being. If we're unhappy with what we're seeing in the manifest realm, what helps more than judgment is an awareness that's without judgment. Self-love and self-acceptance can help move our awareness from the level of thought to the level of beingness.

When you're faced with illness or loss or some other difficulty, I invite you to look within and ask not only, "What am I saying about this? What am I thinking about this?" but also, "What am I feeling about this? At what vibration or frequency am I holding about this?" Do this from a place of self-love and acceptance. Judgment of anything that you discover when you ask these questions only blocks your growth and your awareness. As Krishnamurti said, "The highest form of human intelligence is the ability to see ourselves without evaluating, without judgment." By being willing to look within and ask what thoughts, what beliefs, what energy we are holding about ourselves and the world, we can move to a deeper level of conscious awareness.

The tendency to slip back into our stories and to judge may not immediately disappear with deepening awareness. What does shift is that these things

become less habitual. As our awareness deepens, we're more likely to recognize our inner dialogue and our judgment as signs that we need to look more deeply at something. As we become more aware, we're able to see what's truly happening. For most of us, this is an ever-evolving process. We are always expanding. I don't think we grow spiritually so much as we grow in awareness of our spiritual self. It's not a linear process, from A to Z. Nor is it a circular process, simply repeating stages of growth over and over. It's more of a spiral process because we move through levels of consciousness, from A to B to C in an ever upward movement. As we grow in awareness, we inevitably return to similar situations in our lives, not in mere repetition, but in a new way of considering them from a higher level of consciousness that we have attained. And this changes everything.

Through our awareness we transform how we experience what happens. So, our reality is created by our response to what happens; how we describe what happens, how we interpret what happens, the stories we tell about what happens, and how we feel internally about what happens. As we become more aware on all these levels, we experience deeper transformation. The more we let go, the more we return to our essential selves. And the more we dismantle our core false beliefs, the more we come to a feeling tone of our essential nature. As we tap into that ultimate vibration of who we genuinely are, life cannot help but manifest all around us in accordance with that vibration, in accordance with our beingness. And that's very different than holding thoughts and believing that thoughts alone create manifestation in the outer realm.

I remember a conversation I heard at Agape Bay Area, our spiritual center in Oakland, some time ago. Someone had asked the question: "Is the intention to heal our wounds?" It is such a great question, because on one

level of consciousness, we could say, "Of course it's about doing the work of healing. Of course, it's about recognizing and attending to our losses, brokenness, and wounding." And then there's this other level, this witness consciousness, from where we recognize that our essential self is unharmed and unharmable. It's a self that knows no wounding, and thus requires no healing.

When we tap into that consciousness, we create a connection with our essential selves, we deepen that oneness with the Source that we are, and the question about healing becomes almost irrelevant. I want to be careful here because I'm not saying that there's either healing or no healing. It's not either/or—it's both/and. So, of course, we do the work of healing the wounds; that work seems necessary. Without that inner work, we might not truly recognize and benefit from the spiritual experiences when they happen. That inner work helps us get to the place of witness consciousness; it leads us to the recognition that nothing needs to change for us to be complete or lovable or happy. Nothing at all needs to change in the outer realm because we have connected with and recognized, our oneness with Source.