

This book explores the possibility of spiritual practice not as a means to a goal but as an endlessly unfolding exploration of a life of beauty—a life worth living.

A Life of Paradox

When we are willing to exchange our life of preoccupation with “me” and “my needs” for a life given in the service of love itself, of that presence itself, we are faced with an interesting paradox.

On one side of the paradox, we recognize that everything is perfect just as it is. When the chatter of the mind recedes just a little bit, when the smells, colors, and textures of the world become more immediately felt, we recognize the grace running through it all. Even in conflict, or in the midst of what we call suffering, if we are really in touch with the pulse of life itself, we can feel the beauty of it all.

On the other side of the paradox, we realize that everything is continuously evolving. Our human condition, as it is now, is flawed with unconscious habits, addictions, and compulsions. In seeing the gap between who we are today and who we could be, seeing the trickle of gifting that’s coming through us relative to the latent torrent that we intuit, we bow in humility. When we look down from our resting point on the mountain, we may marvel at how far we have come from the valley below, but when we look up, the peaks are still lofty and daunting, and we know there is still much more to discover.

Between these two poles of paradox, that everything is perfect as it is on one side and everything is evolving and imperfect on the other side, lies the art of translucent spiritual practice—the art of practice with no goal. I borrowed the word “translucent,”

usually used to describe the physical universe, in my 2005 book *The Translucent Revolution*. Translucence describes a medium that is neither opaque nor transparent. A wall, for example, is completely opaque—light cannot pass through it. A sheet of glass, if it's really clean, is transparent—you could walk right up to it and bang your nose, because you might not even see that it's there. A translucent medium, on the other hand, is neither opaque nor transparent: a sheet of frosted glass, a colored crystal, or a sculpture made of colored glass. Translucent objects maintain their form, color, and texture, yet they allow light to pass through them. When you shine light on a translucent object, it appears to glow from within. Translucent people are neither opaque nor transparent. They are no longer glued to their own separate agenda and allegiance to beliefs held in the mind, and in that sense they are not opaque. But they also have the honesty and humility to recognize that the habits of the personality remain, and could never perfectly reflect presence. They are lit up by their deepest nature, yet they remain fully engaged in their daily personal lives. Translucent people also appear to glow as if from within themselves.

Any kind of translucent practice, like the many invitations in this book, will allow you to be lit up by a radical awakening to who you really are, to be lit up by an awakening to the silence underneath the noise, the spaciousness underneath the movement. But you will also retain the humility, the sanity, and the honesty to face your human condition, just as it is, and to allow this human monkey to be nothing more than that, a monkey without much hair.

Translucent spiritual practice walks along the razor's edge. We practice not to attain a future goal but in respect for the sacredness

of this very moment. We practice so that whatever has been realized, whatever is the deepest recognition of the heart, can be given as an offering, an expression of gratitude for the beauty of this moment. When we are no longer obsessed with trying to attain something in the future, we are practicing for now, for this moment. All that is left is to make this moment now a more beautiful moment, a work of art rather than a striving for something more.

As we walk this razor's edge, there is always the danger of falling to one side or to the other. If we fall to one side, we fall into self-congratulation, the delusion that our human condition is somehow perfected or enlightened. Then we become unwilling to face our humanity and be honest about what we find. We want to grab on to the perch of lofty spiritual states with both our taloned feet, and can't wait to tell our friends just how impressed we are with ourselves. I'm sure you've met people who've become obsessed with their own attainment. Maybe at some point you have even met someone like that when you've looked in the mirror; I know that I have. When we fall to that side of the edge, evolution stops, because we are no longer willing to look, be honest, and feel. We cling to the thought: *I am enlightened. I have made it. I have got it. I've had the insight, haven't you?* Not only does evolution stop, but so do most of our friendships.

On the other hand, we can also fall to the other side of the razor's edge, into the endless treadmill of self-improvement. There, we become fixated on all of the things that are still wrong with us, all of the things that need to be fixed. Then, we start to worry. "Maybe the reason that I'm not more open and loving and accepting is because of that thing that happened with my mother when I

was four. I'd better go back to my therapist and work on that some more. And maybe that's not enough? Maybe I also need to involve the body and perhaps release tension from the solar plexus." We start to worry that perhaps the way we are eating or exercising is not correct. We try to manifest all kinds of things and qualities to make life conform to our ideas of how it should be. Our attempts to make this poor human monkey into an improved human monkey become endless. In our obsession with self-improvement, we are so busy focusing on what could be that we overlook the perfection of now. We become so busy with how we could be better that we no longer smell the scent of the evening jasmine. We no longer feel the mystery behind the eyes of our beloved. We no longer taste the food we eat. Everything becomes about tomorrow: "When I've finally fixed myself, then I can live."

Of course, we will inevitably fall from the razor's edge again and again. From time to time, all of us slip into marveling at our attainment or into convincing ourselves that we must fix everything before we can really enjoy life. But there's a beauty once we see this process, once we recognize the paradox itself. A translucent life is self-regulating. When we stray too far into self-congratulation, something begins to dry up, like a plant that's no longer receiving water. We can talk about the presence, but it is no longer living us, as a shimmering mystery. Life becomes repetitive, a reenactment of the same state over and over again. As soon as we start cherishing ourselves, the very richness of the realization that brought us to do so disappears.

Similarly, if we stray too far into self-improvement and get too busy, something deep within us calls out for that perfume of the divine, the knowing that everything is blessed in this moment.

Something within us intuitively knows that there is no need to work for what is already here, and demands that we snap our fingers and be free.

And so it is that we stray and return and stray and return to the middle way, where everything is perfect and imperfect in the same breath.

Recycling What Is Old

Right down the middle lies the art of translucent spiritual practice, where we simultaneously feel the perfection of this moment and at the same time recognize the endless possibilities for improving our human condition. To live in a way that embraces this paradox cannot be done in the mind, because they are mutually exclusive. You can't *understand* your way into this, you can only live it as an art form. Then, in each moment of this love affair with love itself, each moment at the feet of the imminence of what can be given, we use all that is available. We use the broken, absurd, and somewhat dysfunctional habits of the personality to make art. We use all that we've got, all the habits of this separate individual, in the service of something much deeper—the heart's deepest recognition.

Where I live, in Nevada County, California, there is a recycling yard where you are invited to bring all the things you no longer need. They are separated into metal, plastic, and paper, and reused for other purposes. This recycling yard is set in a very beautiful rural valley surrounded by rolling hills. Although it's full of broken stuff, it has a unique charm. At the entrance of the recycling yard, someone has created a magnificent sculpture of a man panning for gold; this was once a gold mining area. The entire statue, all thirty