

OPENING OUR HEART TO THIS LIFE

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I would like to begin with a quote from Roger Housden from *Ten Poems to Open Your Heart*, “When the heart opens, ...the world pours in; this world and also the invisible world...that sustains everything that was and ever shall be. When the heart opens, everything matters, and this world and the next become one and the same.”

In a day and age when we are reminded daily, many times a day, about the urgency and magnitude of the problems we face in the world – from terrorism, poverty, ecological disasters, climate change and racial tensions, to human trafficking --- it might seem naïve at best to talk about the value or importance of having an open heart. It might even feel even seem indulgent in the face of the depth of pain and suffering going on in the world.

However, I want to suggest to you that having an open heart is actually a fundamental quality that is deeply needed in our world today. As Einstein said “We cannot solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.” Much of the thinking that has gone into creating many of the problems and challenges we face today is based on separation and isolationism, on thinking we’re right and others are wrong, on power over others, on judging and even condemning others who are different from us and fundamentally a lack of caring and compassion for all humans and all life or closing our heart-mind to life.

We need the mindset, the attitude, the skills and the actions that flow from having an open heart. It doesn’t matter whether we are discussing personal issues or the major challenges going on within the world, having an open heart is needed to find solutions and create the conditions for all of life to exist, flourish and be whole.

To further open this discussion of having an open heart – we have to look as well at the myths, biases and preconceived ideas that exist around what it actually means to have an open heart. We have to begin to deconstruct them so we can

see that these ideas are actually a barrier or block to the living experience of having an open heart.

On one side, we have ideas such as having an open heart is to be a type of saint or bodhisattva or Christ or even a modern Mother Theresa who sees the suffering of the world, who takes up a position of constantly giving and is endlessly flowing with loving kindness and peace and offers this in an ongoing way to all of those who are suffering. We might think that having an open heart would mean to be actually in a sense 'above' suffering oneself or so filled with equanimity and wisdom that we don't suffer – but we can see suffering and offer the balms/nutrients that are needed.

However, there are significant biases and difficulties within these ideas. They leave us with the deep feeling that truly being open hearted is only really possible for saints or wanna-be saints and not ordinary folks like you and me. Or we feel we have to work hard to achieve some type of equanimity or inner peace BEFORE we can open our hearts.

There are other false ideas about having an open heart itself. These include the idea that having an open heart is a type of *feeling only* where I am continually flowing with love or perhaps having an open heart means being very wise or filled with faith. These ideas in effect again leave us out of the picture – because who of us is *in every single moment* is only loving and kind in this way? And what happens in those moments when we feel contracted or afraid, where does open heartedness go then?

We often don't let ourselves even know that we have these ideas operating within us and are perhaps we're a little or even significantly embarrassed to realize that these are within us in one form or another.

These ideas show up in us in very subtle ways such as continually striving to be perfect, striving to always get things right and never make mistakes, our inability to handle it when things are not going well, our reactions to tension or conflict or the ways we have free floating guilt and consistently feel bad about what we are feeling or doing vs. how we should be doing and feeling, that we are not good enough or that we are flawed in some fundamental manner.

All of these have within them other ideas that keeps us fighting with ourselves and not being able to trust ourselves or life as it is unfolding. So, in effect, the ideas themselves are not open hearted. They are filled with demands and judgements.

The ego is a wholeness making machine, which means we collect pieces of information from our childhoods, our families, our culture, our institutions and from our own personal histories and challenges we've faced in the world. We put them all together and come up with a view of the world, how reality works, and what is possible or impossible.

All of us learn at some point or sometimes many points in our childhoods that having an open heart is too vulnerable or frightening and that we can be hurt or rejected. From this, we tend to shy away from being open hearted – *unless certain conditions are met* by either an inner feeling of peace or calm or by the outside world, such as when we are with someone who loves and cares for us.

These conditions or our criteria for when it is safe to be open hearted can extend to: We may believe we can only be open hearted when we are in nature or with our beloved companion animals. It's unlikely the trees will hurt us and our animal friends are often beaming unconditional love. Or maybe, we can allow ourselves to feel open hearted when we are with babies and little children. We experience by being with them our own innocent preciousness and we think – okay here it is safe to be open hearted or perhaps we only feel open hearted in meditation or some other spiritual practice where we can feel at peace and connected to everyone and everything.

The challenge is that we relegate having an open heart to something we *are only able to choose when the conditions are just right.*

What is also true is we've also all experienced moments of grief or in dealing with a crisis, when as Marie Lu said when she was dealing with a sudden death, "My heart's been torn wide open, just like I feared it would be and I have no willpower to close it back up." In those

moments, our heart opens, almost in spite of us, or so it seems at the time.

In our daily lives and interactions, even in the midst of suffering, it is actually not easy to change our mind-set or our heart-mind set when it comes to having an open hearted relationship with ourselves and others. We need regular practices to help us awaken to our habitual ways of perceiving reality and further practices to shift these patterns and our defensive strategies. How we think about the world around us is affected by the feelings and thoughts within us and how we feel about ourselves is often shaped and affected by the world around us.

We all have what social scientists call path dependence when it comes to our habitual ways of thinking, feeling and perceiving ourselves and life as a whole. We usually surround ourselves with people we think are 'like us' or who remind us of our family systems, that are familiar that reinforce these patterns.

One of the things most human beings prefer is certainty over uncertainty. Even if the habitual ways of being are painful and confusing, we have more certainty around what is going to happen and more of a feeling that we can deal with what is occurring, even if it includes not dealing – such as collapsing or pushing away or cutting off.

From a nondual perspective, to begin to enter into a true openhearted relationship with ourselves, others and the world also means being willing to enter into uncertainty, ambiguity, mystery and the unknown.

As I am reframing it from a nondual perspective: To have an open heart or to be open hearted begins with an attitude shift in which we are willing to give everything a chance, to invite in *Life As It is*, while also being open to authentic change and movement. Being open hearted is a verb, a choice, an attitude and an action.

The only place we can really practice being open hearted is in the present moment. This moment, no matter how confusing or uncertain actually has the certainty of already existing. It simply is. When I am

open to what is here now, including my reactions and resistances to what is here now – having an open heart allows, encourages and invites me to be more present, more trusting of the built in intelligence of life and also takes me beyond where I think I can go.

Having an open heart is also a skill for it means we are learning to not repeat our historical attitudes and judgements towards our own and others imperfections, confusion and just the plain messiness of being a human being.

This is a daily practice of being willing to give ourselves the benefit of the doubt so to speak, to have an open hearted attitude towards ourselves, recognizing that we are doing the best we can do in this moment, that we have the right to exist exactly as we and “I don’t have to be more than I am right now. I don’t have to beat myself up for not being better, faster, smarter, and more perfect.”

It means accepting our true limitations and accepting them with kindness instead of judgement and rejection.

As our hearts open, we find there is a willingness to discover and explore our resistances, our confusions and our certainties, to give everything a place and to be open to the intelligence that is built into the way things are, while also knowing that change is also intelligent and is included in life.

Having an open heart, in the manner that I am speaking of today, also means being open to our closed-ness, to the places where we resist life, where we are shut down and stuck, where we are lost and cannot see our way out of the dilemmas and challenges we find ourselves in.

Having an open heart involves the actions of being willing to engage with and open to how much of life we cannot bear – to see how we

erect barriers and walls around our heart – because we cannot be with Life As It Is, with all of its confusions and suffering.

We need to see how we limit life.

This is not the work of the young heart who still exists inside of each of us who sees the world with a type of clarity and certainty where we resist our vulnerability while being very impulsive and reactive to many of life's movements. This is the work of the Maturing Open Heart who is willing to enter into the dark places within us and find nourishment and healing within them.

Every culture has its ideals of open hearted men and women. In the west, it is usually the individual who is open hearted before his enemies, who forgives the one who hurt him, like a man who forgives the man who murdered his child or wife. In the East, it is often the one who has gone beyond, who has given up the ego and separateness and who is open hearted like Gandhi was to the British.

Working with having an Open Heart in the stuff of our daily lives is the path of descending to our true humanity with all of its challenges. It is not a fantasy place where all confusion disappears in a flash of light.

We are not idealized selves. Continuing to practice having an open heart is a choice of courage and compassion. It is also a healing choice for it opens us up to depths of beauty and wisdom and possibilities that we could not open up to any other way. Unless our hearts are open to all of who we are, we cannot encourage change in ways that are truly

honoring of all the complex beauty and challenges of being a human being in this time and place in the earth.

To be an awakening human being – which is synonymous with an open hearted human being – does not mean we reach some pinnacle of perfection or purity.

Having an open heart means we are open to the life we are living, as we are living it.

As we continue to practice opening our heart, we realize that each moment is also filled with the Presence of All That Is – this open hearted infinite Presence – that is not personal and we do not fully understand – but is always ready to carry us and support us no matter what the situation. It is there offering support and compassion. It nourishes us through despair and confusion. It teaches and shapes us.

We could say that open heartedness – which is the true nature of Reality – disappears when we think it is not here. In other words, when we think and feel that there is a place which we are standing in where Open Heartedness is and where Open Heartedness is not. We could also frame this deistically and say when we think there is a place where God is and a place where God is not.

This Open Hearted Presence is firmly rooted in the concrete experiences and moments of our lives. It is not abstract. This means, the choice of opening our heart is not abstract either. We have to do real work to open our thinking, along with our hearts and bodies in a new way.

Ultimately, healing and awakening to open heartedness involves *unlearning and unwinding the patterns that block our natural open heartness from shining forth*. We don't need instructions on how to become a better person. We need help to get out of our own way so that we can open to what is here and now.

We have to unlearn our belief that we need something from the outside (some condition set up by our environment) in order to have the right

to exist, to be open hearted and okay exactly as we are. We have to unlearn our belief that we need to be a thing – an idea or image of an open hearted person, a good person, a worthwhile and valuable person – rather than a walking, breathing, process who is continually being and becoming.

Being open hearted from a nondual perspective is both a fullness and an emptiness. We are filled with Life as It is right now, receiving the intelligence of the moment and we are empty, without exception, where nothing is left out. *Everything is allowed to exist exactly as it is and everything is encouraged to authentically change and continually become.* Both are included in the unfolding Wholeness of Life.

The true Open Heart is not personal only. It's something Reality does for some reason. The Infinite Open Heart is inclusive – empty, without concepts and full with all that is.

As Jason Shulman says in his book, Instruction Manual for Receiving God, “The Heart holds All to itself, making no distinction. At the same time, it is perfectly discriminating, because it is not at all entranced. It is not entranced because the origin of the Heart is not personal but transcendent. The Heart is not a product of history, but of Emptiness. Emptiness means ‘without exception’.”

When we really see life as it actually is – we see the world is filled with this AND that, all kinds of opposites such as confusion and clarity, joy and sorrow, as well as many different types of beings.

This is a type of Open Heartedness that is so vast that it is unfathomable to the personal only human being. Everything is allowed to exist, without exception.

This does not mean, however, that we as human beings need to be this infinite. We are finite, personal beings, which also means we have our

likes and dislikes, our resistances and our preferences for what we want to happen in our lives and in the world.

From the point of view of the personal only, being open, without exception can feel just too big and dangerous and again impossible for us and would require us to be the saint we spoke of at the beginning of our conversation. This is not required of us.

What we can do and really need is to heal by entering into the stream of open heartedness – which is always present and available to us– in the current unfolding moment. It begins each time with being open hearted to our imperfect, confused, incomplete and precious self.

The antithesis of having an open heart is not simply being closed or feeling contracted. As I have noted, the open hearted human being is one who is also open to her/his closedness, the ways we resist and defend against life.

The true antithesis of having an open heart is a particular type of closed heart that has become brittle and rigid. This type of closed is actually tied to the type of thinking, referring to Einstein's words that created many of our problems.

Our brittle closed heart is consistent with judgment and rejection. It is the type of brittle thinking that has us rejecting everyone and every idea that is different from our own or different from our preferred ideas. We do this to ourselves and to others. In fact, the more we act this out in our inner life, the more we project it out into the world as well.

It is actually a form of violence against ourselves, others, the earth and all of life. Just like an open heart, it has consequences and effects that we do not even realize. It makes us into static fixed images and objects. It has us thinking it is okay to use another person or being and the earth for our own purposes without taking into account their rights to exist fully as themselves. It normalizes practices and activities of aggression against ourselves and all of life.

It has become so normal that we don't even question it. We have different thoughts and feelings throughout the day and we are always valuing these thoughts as being good, bad, okay or not good enough as an example. We reject the parts of ourselves we don't like from weakness, to fear, to confusion, to

imperfection and on and on it goes. We reject others who are not like us, who don't think the way we think or feel the way we feel. We reject and are constantly worrying about what others are thinking about us and how they might reject us.

Rejection has become so normal that you cannot listen to a show or a movie or anything else without hearing someone rejecting something and either making fun of it or outright being hostile to something that is deemed wrong or a failure or a mistake.

As I stated at the beginning, we don't realize how important having an open heart actually is – in part because we have become so accustomed to rejection. Having an open heart feels so dangerous in part because we reject out of the fear of being rejected.

Rejection always means something is being left out, excluded, exiled and orphaned.

I say these words carefully, please dear friend, not to give us something else to feel bad about and collapse into guilt and shame nor to say discernment is not also needed.

I say these words because the antidote, if you will is always present. In each and every moment we have the opportunity to make the choice to enter into the stream of having an Open Heart – without exclusion – nothing being left out. We have the opportunity to choose to be open to the one in me who has not known any another way, who has only been fed by rejection and find kindness and compassion for our confused self.

In this moment, I can acknowledge that all life has the right to exist, exactly as it is right now – incomplete and imperfect.

I don't have to understand things for them to have a right to exist. Any more than I have to understand the river or the tree. They have a right to exist simply because they already do exist.

I don't even have to like things as they are. This is not a collapse or a resignation into things remaining the same and giving up. Everything is continually in the midst of changing.

Part of what I am opening my heart to then is my resistance, my dislike of things as they are and being willing to come into relationship with the one in me who is upset or angry or afraid or who is determined to be right and have things go my way.

Opening my heart in this way is actually what allows new possibilities for transformation and healing and change to come forth. It allows for new ideas to present themselves that could not present themselves when I was shut down to what is here.

Just as when I shut down to my loved ones and refuse to hear their heart, see the world through their eyes – everything shuts down when I am cut off from relationship and have an attitude of rejection.

Contrasting this, by being in the living stream of Open Heartedness, we open to ourselves, others and life as a whole. We become softened by this stream and become more willing to give everything a place.

Being an open hearted man or woman is an ongoing process which we need to be in to really be in relationship with all of life. This is not passive, it is compassion in action. It does not mean doing nothing, leaving everything alone and just surrendering. It means being a human being, a living breathing process, having desire and longing, being present to life. It also means being able to melt, to soften our hardened barriers and walls of rejection.

We will not do this perfectly nor do we need to do so. It simply means again and again being willing to wake up in the midst of our judgements and our suffering and choose to practice being Open Hearted.

We are always connected by invisible threads to the Heart of all things and, in this way, the world's Infinite Heart calls to us without ceasing. In our humanity, we choose to listen again and again. We choose to consciously align our personal intentions and our heart-mind with the Infinite.

Before I take you into this final piece – a meditative practice/exercise in being in the stream of Open Heartedness – I want to say this to you:

The key to being in this stream is to be honest with yourself, to stay present and awake to where you are moment by moment, and to resist

judging (if only for this moment) where you are or how far you are ready to travel in any given moment.

At each moment of practice being Open Hearted with yourself, trust who and where you are and that this enough for this moment. You don't need to be wiser or more than you are.

Allow yourself to also feel all of the other beings who are in this majestic stream with you. Don't judge or compare but know each one is doing their best in this moment.

THE STREAM OF OPEN HEARTED PRESENCE

Right here and now, in this moment, I choose to enter the stream of Open Hearted Presence. I am making the choice to enter the stream and as I am ready, I am also willing for the stream to carry me, to teach me and help me to heal, and perhaps even to take me beyond where I think I can go.

I begin with having an open heart to myself. This is the only true place to enter into the stream. I have the right to exist exactly as I am here and now. This is not something I need to earn by being good enough or perfect enough. Even if I don't believe this fully, here and now in this moment, I am willing to giving myself a chance by taking on an open hearted attitude to all of who I am, imperfect, wise, loving, confused and afraid. In this moment, even if just a little bit, I am willing to open my heart and not repeat my historical attitudes of judging myself. I am willing to acknowledge that all aspects of who I am have a right to exist. They have a rightful place simply because they already do exist.

Let us pause here a moment and take ourselves in fully. It is important to be honest and allow ourselves to be where we are right now. Perhaps this is enough for today. If so, just allow yourself to rest here in this Open Hearted Infinite Stream. Know that it is enough to be with yourself, to find more kindness and compassion in your heart just for you.