

THE  
WAY  
OF  
GRACE

*The  
Transforming  
Power of  
Ego Relaxation*

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sounds true  
BOULDER, COLORADO

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# INTRODUCTION

Grace is always present. You imagine it is something somewhere high in the sky, far away, and has to descend. It is really inside you, in your Heart, and the moment you merge the mind into its Source, Grace rushes forth, sprouting as from a spring from within you.

RAMANA MAHARSHI, *The Essential Teachings of Ramana Maharshi*  
(by Matthew Greenblatt)

Perhaps you hunger to finally end the struggle of living from the consciousness of fear and separation. Perhaps you yearn for a saner, wiser, more spiritually elegant way to move through our world that is so painfully lacking in Grace. You might have tasted luminous moments of freedom. Yet often the distance between what you have glimpsed and how you actually live can seem like an unbridgeable chasm. Perhaps you are weary of the dizzying pace of a culture that drives us ever further from our true nature. If you are disillusioned by the spiritual struggle to triumph over your ego, I have good news for you. There is another way: a way of Grace. This book is a hand of spiritual friendship to help you close the gap and come to abide in the living presence that you are and always were. At home within, you can find a radiant new way of being, extending love, clarity, and peace deeper into our troubled world.

It is usually when you are not trying so hard that Grace emerges. Just before my thirty-sixth birthday, I traveled to Arunachala, a sacred mountain in South India that was home to the revered sage Sri Ramana Maharshi. One impossibly hot and airless day, I sat down on a threadbare cushion in a dark musty cave and settled into meditation. For once, I was not trying to get anywhere. A thunderous silence emerged, reverberating with this transmission:

Be nothing.  
Do nothing.  
Get nothing.  
Become nothing.  
Seek for nothing.  
Relinquish nothing.  
Be as you are.  
Rest in God.

It was complete stillness—alive with an unshakable presence. Prior to this, I was intimate with the Divine as a scintillating ocean of light, boundless love. But this was an entirely new dimension of Grace. Like merging into the velvety blackness of the infinite night sky, it was beyond any concept or definition I had ever known. Any sense of “I,” other, world, and even God disappeared. All commentary dropped, all thought stopped, all effort disappeared. No-thing-ness—not a deficient story but liberated pure beingness—was shining, and I was that.

I remained in this state for approximately three weeks. Everything was the same and yet totally different. It was profoundly easeful and direct. There was no need to fix anything. No need to get anything. No need for anything to happen or not happen. Nothing I had to do. Even a growing pile of rubbish on the street was fine. The impetus to control and manipulate the universe to fit some ideal had disappeared. I had landed in the sweet state that I now call “ego relaxation.” I felt utterly natural, settled in the primordial condition, and part of the mystery that animates this world. It took me years to fully understand the significance of this transmission, let alone fully digest it. Over time, it birthed a map for a holistic approach to nondual realization and a potent body of teachings and practices that I am so happy to share with you in this book.

## TRANSMISSION OF GRACE

Grace has a way of stopping you in your tracks. It often comes with a transmission, an energetic communication from a higher state than our linear mind can understand. Grace always requires some kind of

surrender, what Indian traditions call “dropping the mind into the heart.” This can feel unnerving, or even downright insulting to our familiar way of navigating through life. When I shared this transmission in London for the first time, a red-haired woman with a thick, cockney accent protested, saying: “Be nothing, do nothing, get nothing, become nothing: What good can that do me? I do not want to live a dull, colorless, boring life.”

Our ego presumes that surrender will be the end of the color, the juice, and the fun. Paradoxically, the opposite is true. The more I learned to rest in the open, empty spaces, the more Grace came alive inside—literally, as Ramana says, “sprouting as a spring from within.” It can for you too.

## WHAT IS GRACE?

Grace is way more than a beautiful state that fills your heart with gratitude. Rumi described it when he said, “Something opens our wings. Something makes boredom and hurt disappear. Someone fills the cup in front of us.”<sup>1</sup> Grace is the living presence that brings online the qualities of your true nature, such as love, peace, joy, strength, clarity, inherent intelligence, and so much more. These divine qualities are sewn into the very fabric of your being, so they are always present. However, they are covered by many adaptive layers that must be addressed if you are to gain access. Grace brings forth precisely what you need to heal, evolve, and thrive so that your noble qualities can flow deeper into our world. Grace also brings blessings from celestial realms, whether or not you have “faith” in anything particular.

Grace has four primary dimensions, or ways that it comes alive. These dimensions form the structure of this book. Briefly, Grace is simultaneously the unchanging *ground* of your being; the *blessings* that refine, uplift, and nourish you; the *transforming power* that lifts your veils; and ultimately, a more easeful, spiritually elegant *way of being in this world* from a consciousness way beyond it. But every dimension of Grace needs space. It needs you to empty out your fixed positions and presumptions, sometimes even your cherished spiritual ones. Would you be willing to hold on to nothing?

## WHATEVER YOU LEAVE EMPTY, GRACE CAN FILL

The transmission that emerged in Ramana's cave was the beginning of a quantum shift in identity. The two years that followed were a powerful period of undoing all that prevented its embodiment. It was the deep spiritual winter of my life, where I was pruned back to the root. Like learning to appreciate the starker landscape of winter, the more I emptied out, the more it revealed its own kind of beauty. Many structures of my familiar identity started falling away. This included a marriage of thirteen years, my role as the spiritual director of a groundbreaking interfaith seminary in London, the city I called home, and all but a few friends. Even practices that had been my well of spiritual nourishment for years no longer fed me. It felt as though a giant hand was sweeping over the chessboard of my life, knocking all the pieces to the floor. I was standing on the edge of the void, being invited to voluntarily drop in completely, with no idea of what might be on the other side.

Sometimes we are brought to a pivotal crossroads in life. You might even be at one right now. Navigating change gracefully all hinges on your capacity to say *yes* to what's happening, rather than *no*. Thankfully, twenty years of prior spiritual practice had developed my inner musculature enough to say yes. This period of fierce Grace was not easy, but ultimately it was very helpful. Miraculously, the strength and guidance as to what to say and do emerged, even though I had to adapt to a level of vulnerability that felt like having no outer skin. The more I surrendered in and through what was, the more I came alive like never before. I felt so vividly in touch with the primordial pulse that birthed us all into being. Best of all was a new fearlessness.

## REALIZATION HAPPENS IN AN INSTANT; INTEGRATION TAKES TIME

Too often, spiritual awakening is presented as some gigantic spiritual orgasm, after which you are "done" with the muck and mess of being human. I will not do you such a disservice. Awakening can happen in a split second, but integrating its wisdom is a lengthier, nuanced

process. It requires ongoing practice even though you are not aiming to fix yourself. Spiritual openings inevitably dislodge hidden corners of our psyche we did not know existed; therefore, authentic embodiment demands psychological unpacking and usually the support of an elder on the path. You might hear some teachers say that including the psychological keeps you in your “story,” but I have seen more seekers getting stuck in their story by refusing to face what needs to be faced.

## A HOLISTIC, FEMININE APPROACH TO AWAKENING

Just as nature does not reject anything but integrates and includes all that has come before in her evolution, so we must learn to include all that arises as we walk the way of Grace. The practice of ego relaxation, which we will be working with throughout this book, not only makes you receptive to all dimensions of Grace, but also powerfully heals the parts of the ego that cannot let go without sufficient love. This is especially the case for westerners, whose ego has formed amidst greater cultural complexity compared to thousands of years ago, when ancient traditions were unfolding.

There were times, especially in that first year after receiving the transmission, when I was just like any other woman going through the difficulties of divorce, losing everything familiar, and at times feeling like a raw traumatized animal shivering on the floor. All of the models of spiritual realization I had worked with previously, which had been delivered through the masculine lens only, might have viewed my process as a failure to remain in the no-self state. However, the transmission of ego relaxation revealed a much more integrated, feminine approach to walking the path—to surrender *in and through* all that we encounter, including our animal humanity and all of our emotions. When I say “feminine” I do not mean that this is just for those with a vagina. The way of Grace is for humanity. Its objective is to love everyone back into the full embodiment of who we really are. This is a lot more effective than beating yourself into spiritual shape, which is not the compassionate response our world needs.



## A COSMIC DANCE OF EMPTINESS AND FULLNESS

As an interfaith minister, I had always revered the great wisdom traditions as distinct streams but ultimately not separate from the one ocean of Truth. I have loved studying their scriptures and engaging many of their practices. I even spent a decade ushering mature seekers through a powerful curriculum based on the spiritual technologies each tradition offers to liberate our true nature.

If you have explored some of the Eastern traditions of Buddhism, Vedanta, and Taoism, you will have noticed that true nature is emphasized as emptiness, spaciousness, and witnessing awareness. Thus their practices focus on dissolving the self, emptying into the void of pure mystery, and abiding in spaciousness. If you have studied the Western traditions, perhaps mystical Christianity, Kabbalah, or Sufism, you will have noticed quite a different emphasis on the relationship between God and the human soul and that their practices focus on cultivating the virtues that refine and elevate our consciousness. I am not sure we can ever separate a tradition from the culture from which it arose. Eastern cultures in general are way more collectivist, and Western cultures cherish the individual.

I come out of a Christian culture and have always been devotional by nature, with a Sufi heart and a Hindu soul . . . for reasons I cannot explain other than reincarnation. Embracing “no-thing and no-one” led to the integration of all that I had studied for so many years. No-thingness (emptiness) and living presence (full of every divine attribute) began to feel like a cosmic union at my core and the core of all things. This divine lovemaking is constantly taking place in the paradoxes we regard as heaven and earth, body and spirit, form and formlessness. This synthesis came alive within through an inner teacher that had no face or name. That same inner teacher lives inside you too.

## ALREADY WITHIN THE LIVING WATER

Even if you have years of sincere spiritual study and practice under your belt, it is easy to get caught up in what I call the “thirsty fish syndrome,” seeking the living water that can truly quench your thirst, while not recognizing that you are already in and part of it. You might have

heard of the term *nonduality*, which literally means “not two.” Nondual awakening is important because it dissolves separation, ending the search for love, peace, and freedom. It restores awareness that you are and have always been in and part of everything you always wanted. Nondual awakening means not only tasting Grace but also recognizing that you *are* Grace. Yet you can’t talk yourself into this. You cannot intellectualize or theorize. You must enter more deeply into your own direct experience and surrender. Then the mystery that has been living through you all this time has space to come freshly alive.

Wherever you find yourself right now on the path, the transmission that reverberates through this whole book says: Be as you are. Rest in God. Right here, right now—with this. There is nowhere else you need to go. Not even to a cave in India. The Grace that came alive in that cave, and the transforming wisdom that emerged in the years since, has come to you.

May this book make that walk across the shore in your consciousness easier, kinder, and more potent. May it bring infinite richness and meaning to your life and deeper peace to our troubled world. May Grace become our *way*.

### *About the Practices*

Each of the following chapters contains powerful practices to facilitate you into direct experience. There are reflections, inquiries, and meditation practices. With the inquiry questions, I recommend reflecting or journaling into them, letting your response be detailed and unedited. Better still would be to invite a friend to offer these questions to you for at least ten minutes, with no commentary—only the question, a little space, and a thank you for whatever you share. Then switch roles. It is *crucial* that your partner does not offer solutions to address your “issues.” That will pull you out of inquiry into ego fixing!

Holistic self-inquiry is not thinking, but journeying. Let the questions enter into your *body*, noticing the sensations and energy that arise; your *heart*, noticing the feelings; and your *mind*, letting the insights come. The more detailed and dimensional you are as you work with these questions, the more they will open you.

# PART I



## RELAXING INTO THE GROUND OF GRACE

When you are not, the whole of existence comes into you.  
When the drop disappears, it becomes the ocean.

*OSHO, Tantra: The Supreme Understanding*

**T**here is way more support to help you surrender beyond your struggle into a life of authentic beauty and meaning than you can imagine. Let me introduce you to what I call the ground of Grace. The primary reason most people struggle to gain real traction on the path, even after years of dedication, is that it has not occurred to them that there could be some true ground to relax into.

When you identify with your personality as who you are, it feels as if you have to somehow create the support and strategize to keep safe. You believe that you are the one who has to make it happen. These presumptions feel so normal that you might not even stop to question them. Your body braces, your breath becomes shallow, your heart pulls back, and then your mind gets busy thinking and commentating. It is all a reaction from a felt sense of disconnection from Grace as your natural foundation. Until you recognize what you are always in and supported by, the mind just cannot quiet down, let alone surrender.

Yet consider this: Each day the sun rises and sets, and seeds turn into all kinds of plants that produce shelter, beauty, food, and oxygen to sustain your life. Something causes your heart to beat and is causing you to draw breath right now. Notice how this all happens without the need for any effort on your part.

Consider how you emerged into this world, how anyone came to be here, and what makes you interested in reading this book. Something primordial and beneficent is pulsing through us all. You cannot see it with your physical eyes, yet the evidence is everywhere, animating all things. This is the underlying ground of Grace. It is the cause of your being and all being. This is what you can let all of your concerns and fears relax down into. Your ego defenses and all of your complicated history can melt into a mountainous presence that gives you true support to be as you truly are.

Turning more substantially within, you will inevitably meet the dense forces of ego fear, control, and judgment that everyone meets on the way home. It does not serve to deny or bypass them, for even after significant openings, these defenses can easily reemerge. The next four chapters provide a map to gracefully allow true surrender, opening beyond fear, control, and judgment. First, let me introduce you to the practice of ego relaxation, which makes this all possible.

# 1 SURRENDER

## *The Practice of Ego Relaxation*

Just sit there right now.  
Don't do a thing.  
Just rest.

For your separation from God  
Is the hardest work in this world.

Let me bring you trays of food  
And something  
That you like to drink.

You can use my soft words  
As a cushion  
For your  
Head.

HAFIZ, *The Subject Tonight Is Love*  
(translated by Daniel Ladinsky)

Surrender is the heart of all spiritual paths. It is what brings all four dimensions of Grace alive. Yet our culture equates surrender with defeat, losing, giving up to another ego will: “Okay, I surrender! You win!” Perhaps you are willing to surrender, sincerely desiring transformation from entrenched ego patterns and reactions. Yet surrender is often misunderstood as trying to amputate the frustrating habits of your personality that you think should not be there.

Surrender is the great conundrum of the spiritual path because the self who is trying to surrender is the one blocking the way. How then can we authentically yield into the ground of Grace?

## EGO RELAXATION, NOT EGO ANNIHILATION

To live into the promises of awakening, we must somehow turn the hard chunk of ice that is our ego fixation back into the fluid state of its origin. Up until very recently, most spiritual teachings, in both the East and the West, have been given from a masculine perspective. This has often lent itself to a macho approach of hacking away at our ego tendencies, like taking an axe to the ice. While this might break the ego down, it is hard work and can easily turn into aggression toward our humanity in the name of awakening. Ego annihilation engenders fear, creates unnecessary resistance, and can even build a more spiritualized ego, strengthening the delusion you are in charge of the show. While dedication, rigor, and discipline are important, so too are compassion, mercy, kindness, and, most of all, love.

Consider how the fundamental substance of ice is still water, even though it may be hard, opaque, and dense. So too at the deepest level is your ego still part of the divine fabric of God—just frozen in fixed patterns and ignorant of its holiness. Understanding this nondual principle helps you recognize there is no enemy and thus nothing that needs to be hacked away. Rumi explained it when he said, “Be melting snow. Wash yourself of yourself.”<sup>1</sup> True surrender is really a process of melting, yielding back into our primordial condition.

Just as the warmth of the sun will naturally transform the hard block of ice back to its original fluid state of water, exposing your dense, fixated patterns to the presence of loving awareness will melt the distortions. You don’t do the melting; Grace does that. Your part is learning to just be here, right where you are, relaxing the usual attempts to do something, get somewhere, become different, seek for something other, and relinquish what you believe should not be there. Your job is to be present and undefended, facing everything, while ceasing and desisting your efforts to rearrange yourself. This is the practice of ego relaxation.