

# Introduction

**T**he *Fire of the Heart* is a distillation of all that I have learned about the Awakening Process up to this point in time. And, as inspired as I am by the task of sharing what I have learned, I have to begin by saying that all my explanations will inevitably fall short, because only an infinite explanation could possibly capture the mystery of Awakening. You will not find that infinite explanation in this book but if my words succeed in igniting a spark of the Infinite within you, and if that spark finds fertile ground to take root in your Heart, then my intent in writing this book will have been more than fulfilled. If you are new to meditation and the idea of Spiritual Awakening it is my hope that this book will inspire you to set sail upon the wide sunlit seas of the Great Way. And if you are well on your Way, it is my hope that *The Fire of the Heart* will further enrich and deepen your journey.

I decided to call this book *The Fire of the Heart* because when I contemplate that mysterious, captivating Presence that has always been the consistent thread guiding me further and deeper, I envisage it as a Sacred Fire of purifying Heat and liberating Light. As I am sure you will appreciate as you read, *The Fire of the Heart* is a perfect metaphor for the purifying alchemy of the Awakening Process that I am going to share with you.

Those of you who know me personally know that I am a rebel at

heart and have never craved the trappings of the world. My journey of Awakening began in my early teenage years when I found no resonance with the Catholic Christianity of my upbringing and only boredom in the mundane routines of school. Besides immersing myself every evening after school in learning how to play guitar by listening to and emulating the music of my rock heroes, the only other outlet for my adolescent rebellion and growing sense of aloneness was when I took long walks every Sunday into the countryside surrounding the town where I grew up in Hertfordshire, England. On these walks, as I rambled amongst the fields, hills and woods, I immediately felt an enormous sense of relief and all my frustrations would be washed away. Then, at some point on my walk, I would find a peaceful, secluded spot with a tree branch or rusty piece of farming equipment to sit down on and then it would happen.

The “it” that would happen is much of what this book is about. I had no idea what it was back then, but now I would call it “spontaneous meditation”. I would simply sit, at first with my eyes open, gazing vacantly at whatever scene was before me, and gradually my inner subjective sense of “I” would dissolve. By that I mean that the usual continuous activity of thinking slowed down and fell away from the foreground of my experience. Sometimes it would disappear altogether. I would find myself immersed in an utterly captivating depth and silence. Sitting like this, there was no labeling or interpretation of what I was seeing or experiencing. Sometimes everything appeared to be shining with a translucent light and I would momentarily lose all

sense of boundaries and merge into my surroundings. Then, eventually my eyes would close and I would have the sensation of falling into a bottomless well of black nothingness and deep peace. At times the peace would become so profound that I could not move and I would lose track of time completely. I had no idea what was happening. All I knew was that I was being spontaneously magnetized by a Mystery that I could not understand.

As I mentioned I found no resonance with the Catholic Christianity of my upbringing. I already found going to Mass interminably boring and was simply going through the motions. I would silently endure the ordeal, sitting in the last pew at the back of the church. I could not bring myself to recite any longer, "I believe in One God, the Father, the Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth..." The idea of a Creator God who was some kind of distant Parental Deity that could be contacted through unquestioning belief and prayer seemed a very dubious presumption to my adolescent mind.

The last Mass I ever attended was on a Saturday evening when I was fourteen years old. The bells signifying the end of the silent period of prayer after Holy Communion had not been rung after what seemed like an unusually long time. When I looked up to see why I saw that the priest had dozed off in his chair! At first I found this amusing as I could see one of my friends, who was the altar boy, surreptitiously trying to nudge him awake, but then a flash of rebellion suddenly overwhelmed me. All of my submerged frustration at having been inoculated all my life into what I perceived to be an empty farce of

religiosity exploded within me. I knew in that moment that it was all over.

I got up abruptly and walked out of the church. I vividly remember the moment I opened and walked through the huge heavy wooden door. It was a decisive moment of Pure Freedom. I felt as if I was throwing off a huge weight that I had not even known that I was carrying. I walked home at a brisk pace through the drizzling rain possessed by a concentrated determination.

The following Sunday morning I went out for my regular walk. I sat down upon a hill overlooking my hometown and, as I gazed down at the array of houses, roads, cars and gardens below, the silence and depth descended upon me once more. Overcome by a profound peace and sense of liberating detachment from everything that appeared before me, I had a tacit recognition that I did not belong to this world as it was commonly conceived, that what people generally valued and were living for held no interest for me whatsoever. Immersed in this powerful Presence that seemed to be lifting me out of the world, I remember a very clear thought arising spontaneously that had the force of an inner declaration: "I will never live a mediocre life. I would rather die." That moment made a very deep impression on me. When I finally got up to walk back home for lunch, I had absolutely no idea what it meant or what I would do or wanted to do, I simply felt a deep sense of conviction and a light bubbling joy.

Reflecting back on it now, I can see that what occurred during that weekend was really the beginning of my spiritual path. A movement

of surrender had occurred, but it was not fully conscious yet. Somehow a shift was catalyzed by that decisive moment when I walked out of church. That shift was both a pivotal step in my individuation, a growth into a greater sense of freethinking autonomy, and the next morning on the hill I was opened to a Mystery that completely transcended my individuality. For the first time I became intuitively aware that the Presence that had been engulfing me when I sat down alone in nature was not something “other” than me that was somehow “descending” from outside myself. Rather that Presence that was beyond my comprehension was the deepest essence of my Being and was therefore what I could trust more deeply than anything or anyone else. And here I am typing these words forty years later still captivated by that Presence that is beyond my comprehension.

Later in my twenties I discovered Buddhism and was immediately drawn to the idea of a Spiritual Enlightenment that was not based on belief but on meditation and inquiry. From that point on the practice of meditation provided me with an ongoing thread of connection to this Presence. While traveling in Thailand I did my first silent meditation retreat that lasted for ten days and was held in a Buddhist forest monastery. This experience changed the orientation of my life forever. Meditating eighteen hours a day I was quickly drawn into profound depths of peace and bliss. Toward the end of the retreat I got up from my meditation cushion and walked out into the surrounding forest and a radical shift in my perception occurred. Overwhelmed by wonder and ecstasy, I was literally liberated from any sense of sepa-

ration from my surroundings. The jungle was teeming with life; birds were cackling in the towering trees, long processions of enormous ants were crawling past my feet, the buzzing of all kinds of insects filled the air, and it was all “Me”. Whoever “I” was had somehow become untethered from my usual experience of being a body and mind called Peter. I now experienced myself to be a vast, limitless expanse that was non-separate from everything and yet was radically free from everything. From that day until the end of the retreat I would dissolve into deep bliss during the meditations and walk ecstatically along the forest paths during the breaks, overwhelmed by this thrilling luminous recognition that I had no words for.

Looking back in the light of my current understanding it is clear that what occurred in the forest monastery in Thailand was my first Awakening to the radical, inconceivable Truth of Non-Duality (or in Buddhist terminology a glimpse of Nirvana or Enlightenment), in which the apparent division of experience into subject and object, the perceiver and the perceived was dissolved. That penetrating clarity and tremendous liberation soon faded, but from then on I was haunted by it and I could never forget it and my life became more and more oriented around seeking for the rediscovery of that Awakening. Whenever I was alone I was drawn into what felt like a silent, magnetic Fire that had ignited deep within my Heart in that forest in Thailand. And so I continued to meditate and my longing to merge with that mysterious, captivating Fire continued to grow and to overwhelm all my other desires and interests.

Through surrendering to that longing of *The Fire of the Heart* I discovered a source of guidance that has since led me on a miraculous journey – to Masters and Teachers whose profound wisdom, blazing Light and Grace has illumined the Way and into meditation retreats and communities of spiritual fellowship and practice that have been invaluable crucibles of learning, purification and Realization.

Because meditation has been at the very core of my own odyssey of Awakening, at first unconsciously and then consciously, I have felt immensely inspired to share what I have discovered about meditation in a way that frees the practice from many common misunderstandings and traditional cultural baggage. And so ten years ago I began to teach meditation retreats as part of the offering of The Awakened Life Project, an initiative that I co-founded with my wife, Cynthia, in the mountains of Central Portugal in 2007.

Since that time many people have asked me if I had a book available that would guide them further in deepening their practice. Also over the years The Awakened Life Project has developed into a vibrant and thriving spiritual network of committed participants and I have increasingly felt the necessity to write a book that could be a “source text” for people involved in our shared experiment in creating a culture based on the Non-Dual Truth of our Prior Unity. So I began writing this book in 2014 and finished a trial version that I self-published for the benefit of people involved with our Project in mid 2016. I was far from happy with it though and so I continued writing on and off until the process hit a yearlong hiatus after we suffered a devastating

fire in 2017 at Quinta da Mizarela, our home and the ashram of The Awakened Life Project.

The nagging voice to continue the book haunted me until I surrendered and I began working on the book again during the winter of 2018-2019 in a rented cottage outside Tiruvannamalai, South India. This was not only an important focused time to write the book but I also found myself on an ever-deepening journey of Awakening in doing so. While in India I was joyfully immersed in the “blessing field” of the sacred ancient mountain of Arunachala, regarded as a literal manifestation of Lord Shiva in Hindu Vedanta, and the ashram and caves of the greatest Indian sage of the twentieth century, Ramana Maharshi, where I would usually meditate for several hours in the mornings. And so, carried on the wings of the palpable Grace of Arunachala and Ramana Maharshi I experienced a flow of writing like never before. So much more poured out of me than I had originally envisaged and as this was happening it became clear that I was also writing for a potentially wider audience and so I have decided to publish this book.

As you read this book I encourage you to open yourself to wonder, to mystery, to new possibilities. If there is one thing I have learned it is that a mind filled with prejudices, concepts, theories and scriptures is not capable of genuine learning. To learn we have to be willing to unlearn first and the Awakening Process is primarily a process of unlearning, of letting go of all that we have accumulated. So I encourage you to suspend your habitual presumptions about the nature of Life and Consciousness, even if you have been on the Path for many years,



and stay open and receptive to whatever resonates with your deepest intuition as you read. My intent is not to convince you of anything but to invite you into an open-ended journey of Self-Discovery.

To facilitate this process I have interspersed the text with the symbol \*\*\*\*\*. When you come upon this symbol I encourage you to pause for a few minutes or more to absorb and quietly consider what you have just read. Resist the temptation to read too quickly in an effort to acquire knowledge and take the time to allow whatever resonates intuitively to percolate through your being.

I hope this book will be of some help to you on your journey and that it will inspire you to dive ever deeper into your True Self, to the point that any other idea of “self” organically falls away.

Peter Bampton

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