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INTRODUCTION

UNCONDITIONED AWARENESS
The Ultimate Goal of All Human Endeavors

*As the darkness of the night,
even were it to last a thousand years,
could not conceal the rising sun,
so countless ages of conflict and suffering
cannot conceal the innate radiance of Mind.*

TILOPA (10TH CENTURY), SONG TO NAROPA¹

R*adiant Mind* is designed to teach you how to access and deepen the highest possible spiritual experience—and how to share this experience with others. This state—which I am calling “unconditioned awareness”—has been known by many terms in many different traditions over the ages, including enlightenment, egolessness, pure awareness, and perfect wisdom. Most people have enjoyed spiritual experiences of one kind or another, either in the context of a particular practice or arising spontaneously without any apparent cause, including experiences that can arise through meditation and in the presence of powerful spiritual teachers; but the experience of unconditioned awareness is quite unique and identifiable—it is a level of consciousness that hundreds of thousands of practitioners in various spiritual traditions over the centuries have contemplated, meditated on, inquired into, and experienced. In fact, Eastern efforts to develop expertise in accessing this liberating state of awareness have paralleled the pursuit of scientific expertise in the West, and the inner knowledge and experience they have accumulated over the centuries parallels the more obvious accomplishments of the outer sciences.

Radiant Mind focuses on unconditioned awareness because it's the ultimate goal of all human endeavors. Everything we do in every field of activity—religious, scientific, political, economic, and artistic—aims at achieving a state where all needs and desires are realized. As the Dalai Lama often says, all beings are seeking the same happiness and fulfillment. But if all our needs haven't been fulfilled, we haven't reached our final goal. Conditioned mind tells us we still have further to go!

As humans, we explore myriad ways of achieving this fulfillment, but the only experience that can satisfy all our needs is unconditioned awareness. Why? Because when we rest in unconditioned awareness, we don't need anything. We're complete and fulfilled exactly as we are. We don't have to get rid of certain thoughts or emotions or change our circumstances in any way. Thoughts, feelings, and perceptions arise, but they no longer condition us. As extraordinary as unconditioned awareness may sound, it isn't distant from our everyday life; it's always readily available to us. Through the experience of unconditioned awareness, we can discover total fulfillment in the midst of our conditioned existence.

In this book, we're approaching our concern for deep fulfillment from a nondual perspective. What does this mean? It means that freedom or liberation isn't a state that exists in contrast to feeling stuck or in any way imprisoned in our life. In fact, it doesn't exist in contrast to anything. It's a level of experience that coexists with everything. The nondual state of unconditioned awareness can't exclude thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, because it includes all that is, and so isn't separate from our everyday dualistic existence. But it's not here in the same way that sensory objects or feelings in a body are, nor is it somewhere else.

The material presented in this book is firmly based on the wisdom contained in nondual traditions, such as the Perfect Wisdom (Prajnaparamita), Zen, Middle Way (Madhyamaka), Universal Embrace (Mahamudra), and Complete Fulfillment (Dzogchen), yet with a fresh and contemporary flavor. From time to time, I may make some connections between what we're "doing" and these traditions, but such comparisons are of secondary importance. Our central task is to gain easier and easier access to unconditioned awareness, and learn how to integrate this experience into the totality of our life. Our aim is to produce and integrate a transformation of our minds so

that we are less susceptible to suffering and more confident in living the joy, love, and freedom that can make every moment of our existence meaningful and precious.

Radiant Mind will take you inside your own mind and the minds of teachers whose work is inspired by unconditioned awareness. To a certain extent, it will also take you inside the minds of nondual spiritual masters: Zen roshis, Advaita gurus, Dzogchen lamas. By entering their being-state, you'll discover what it's like inside them, how they experience others, and how you might experience the inner structure of nondual work as they experience it. These practices are available to anyone who wants to take charge of their own psychological and spiritual evolution.

The nondual work presented in this book is open and at the same time precise. This book introduces you to the experience of unconditioned awareness with as much economy of effort and time as possible. In order to do this, we need to be equipped with a set of skills.

The practices taught in *Radiant Mind* include:

- Developing and expanding your contemplative practice
- Gaining skills in observing and dissolving fixations
- Exploring living in the here and now and finding a foundation for being and action that transcends your desires and preferences
- Learning how to listen and speak from a space of pure openness
- Learning how to communicate more effectively so you can be complete, moment by moment
- Increasing your capacity for nonaction, for not needing to know who or even where you are
- Refining your ability to act with precision and clarity in the world while still being rooted in the experiences of noncompulsive action and not knowing
- Learning how to produce deep and conscious transformation during the periods of silence that can arise in nondual teaching
- The capacity to accept and integrate the experience of discomfort and heightened pleasure
- The capacity to rest comfortably in unconditioned awareness when relating with others

- The ability to observe people’s predispositions and biases and share them in such a way that people can recognize them
- Discovering how to bring your attention to what is happening in the here and now
- Using deconstructive conversations to dismantle fixed ideas and rigid interpretations
- Learning how to manage silent conversations
- Learning how to use natural koans to enter unconditioned awareness
- Learning how to dance in the paradoxes of nondual awareness

THE INSPIRATION BEHIND THIS APPROACH TO UNCONDITIONED AWARENESS

From an evolutionary point of view, the most remarkable event in the history of humanity is the phenomenon of people dissolving their identifications with the prevailing systems of thought, beliefs, rituals, and practices, and entering an experience of unconditioned awareness, which is identical for everyone. Here, we transcend space and time and become participants in the shared birthright of all conscious beings. In centuries to come, when humans are living on the farther reaches of our galaxy—at which time they may look quite unlike humans of the 21st century—there will no doubt be individuals who, through their sincere inquiry into questions such as “Who am I?” and “What is this?” will break through to the very same experience.

As I’ve already mentioned, the nondual approach has been inspired by the examples of masters and sages from the nondual spiritual traditions of Asia. The most illustrious of these masters include Buddha, Lao Tzu, Garab Dorje, Nagarjuna, Bodhidharma, Hui-neng, Saraha, Tilopa, Padmasambhava, Atisha, Shankara, Milarepa, Longchenpa, and many others. But there are also tens of thousands of masters about whom we know nothing, some of whom spent their lives as “realized governors,” “enlightened mothers,” “illuminated farmers,” and “awakened artists.” Though they differ enormously in their personalities and influence, these masters all share an identical experience of unconditioned awareness.

Nondual traditions have applied various terms to the experience that marks the full evolution of consciousness: self-knowledge, witness consciousness, no-mind, primordial mind, reality, openness, pure awareness,

buddha-nature. The great Dzogchen master Longchenpa listed an extensive set of terms that refer to this unconditioned reality (Thurman 1996):

*This reality has names of many different kinds.
It is “the realm” that transcends life and liberation.
The primally present “natural spontaneity.”
The “essential realm” obscured by defilement.
The “ultimate truth,” the condition of reality.
The originally pure “stainless translucency.”
The “central reality” that dispels extremisms.
The “transcendent wisdom” beyond fabrications.
The “indivisible reality” clear-void-purity.
And the “Suchness” reality free of death transitions.
Such names are accepted by the clear-seeing wise.²*

I will generally use the term “unconditioned awareness” in this book, but I could just as well use any of the other terms listed above.

THE AIM OF NONDUAL TEACHING

The primary intention of nondual teaching is to introduce people to the unconditioned dimension of their existence, and then to deepen and stabilize the experience. This simple intention is identical with Garab Dorje’s quintessential summation of the nondual Dzogchen tradition. According to Garab Dorje (Reynolds 1996), the function of Dzogchen can be described through three key aspects:

- Direct introduction to one’s own real nature
- Clearly recognizing this unique state
- Continuing to abide confidently in this state of freedom³

Following Garab Dorje’s model, the material in this book has three key functions:

- To introduce you to a space of contentless awareness in which nothing needs to be done and nothing needs to be thought about or understood

- To help you identify this state when it's present by demonstrating that there is nothing to do or to know, nothing that can be enhanced or degraded, and so forth. The authenticity of this state can be determined through questions that reveal whether you're resting in a structured or unstructured state
- To assist you in remaining in this experience by observing how you move out of it by making it into "something"—anything—which can then be lost and gained. This "making it into something" can occur in a number of ways, for example, by trying to figure out what it is or by wondering how to maintain or discover it in future situations

More simply, the aim of nondual work is to:

- Eliminate the fixations and habitual patterns that cause suffering
- Gradually transform our life into a source of joy and inspiration for ourselves and others
- Ultimately, saturate our existence with the bliss and clarity of unconditioned awareness

This final aim may sound ambitious or excessive, but why not! As one of my main teachers, Lama Thubten Yeshe, often said, "Think big, act big, without getting caught in the magical, superstitious mind." That is, don't get caught in the mind that fantasizes about our spiritual progress and anticipates our imminent enlightenment!

Radiant Mind focuses on giving you access to unconditioned awareness in the midst of your conditioned existence, without needing to drastically change your personality or lifestyle. Through a variety of exercises and techniques, this book will help you to make the transition from being preoccupied with getting what you want and avoiding what you don't want, to experiencing life free from the constraints of habitual behaviors and limited preferences.

My presentation of this material dispenses with the doctrines and complex rituals that can attach to spiritual traditions, and goes to the heart of their liberating intention. In this way, it mirrors the direct and unencumbered teachings of the greatest masters and sages, including the historical Buddha, who transcended the religious structures in which they were immersed,

and spoke directly to the hearts and minds of their disciples. You don't have to adopt a foreign set of beliefs, customs, or practices to benefit from this work or to learn to rest in unconditioned awareness. The nondual state of consciousness is your natural state, your birthright, and each of us has the opportunity to cultivate direct access to it.

In this book, we will focus solely on the result of these practices—the experience of the unconditioned. Our ideal is to do nothing more and nothing less than what is needed to awaken the experience in the here and now. And when this experience is not possible for us in the present moment, then we will at least be preparing our minds for future moments when we will be able to have this experience.

The Paradoxical Nature of Unconditioned Awareness

Unconditioned awareness is a state of consciousness that contains, yet goes beyond, all forms or structures of experience. It's sometimes also called the "source consciousness" because it's *that* which everything appears to arise from and return to. When we rest in unconditioned awareness, we don't need anything; there's nowhere further to go. In unconditioned awareness, there are no problems or solutions because nothing is missing. It can't get any better because there's no better or worse. There's no attachment nor aversion—nor our natural tendency to grasp on to pleasure and resist pain—because we are no longer attached to or repelled from whatever arises in our experience.

To provide a clearer description of unconditioned awareness, it can be helpful to contrast it with conditioned mind. Of course, in identifying unconditioned awareness in this way, we also need to realize that we aren't identifying unconditioned awareness as any thing. Contrasts and comparisons exist only in conditioned mind. Unconditioned awareness can't be compared with anything, which is what makes it unique. If you can accept how an attempt to come to know unconditioned awareness in this way doesn't make logical sense, then you have a sense of unconditioned awareness.

Most of us operate from our conditioned minds most, if not all, of the time. It's the mind that feels that something is missing and seeks solutions, remedies, and strategies to solve its problems. Conditioned mind operates entirely on the basis of preferences, likes, and dislikes; it seeks to avoid pain and maximize pleasure. Conditioned mind tries to hold on to experiences we judge as "good" and reject experiences we judge as "bad," and believes that happiness is a product of aligning our experiences with our preferences. When our experiences and preferences are misaligned, we experience it as a

problem, which conditioned mind tries to solve by formulating a strategy to solve the problem. This usually involves changing our situation, our way of thinking, our feelings, our relationships, or our material circumstances. We then experience a period of relief from the problem, but the practice of judging our experiences according to our preferences is so habitual that we soon find ourselves with another problem to solve. In this way, what I've just written and what you're reading are products of conditioned mind! In fact, it is conditioned mind that led you to buy this book.

Unconditioned awareness is a nondual state of consciousness, which means that it includes all phenomena and experiences, with nothing left out. If any experiences are excluded or resisted in any way, the state is, by definition, dualistic rather than nondual. This nondual quality inevitably embraces paradox—that is, the possibility that something can be both true and false, good and bad, present and absent. Contrary to the experience of conditioned mind, unconditioned awareness allows us to remain peaceful and undisturbed in the midst of paradox and ambiguity. Our usual preferences for order, structure, categories, and concepts don't exist when we rest in this nondual awareness.

In the West, if we find that our thoughts contradict themselves, we become embarrassed or concerned that we lack clarity or rationality. In the East, paradox is welcomed because it shows the mind its own limits, which opens us to the possibility of experience that lies beyond our conventional mind-stream. The Eastern mystical paths move fluidly in this paradoxical domain without any embarrassment or distress. Experience tells them that unconditioned awareness can be described only through paradox and contradiction, so you can expect to encounter paradox again and again in any discussion about unconditioned awareness. (For more on paradox, see Chapter Two.)

When we're resting in unconditioned awareness, our conditioning—our age, sex, history, education, physical condition, and financial situation—no longer limits us. We find ourselves intimately connected with everything within and around us, yet we're beyond being disturbed in any way. We transcend suffering, not because our problems are solved, but because we experience a level of consciousness in which nothing is missing, a way of being that doesn't depend on the conditions of our mind, body, and life situation.

The experience of unconditioned awareness takes us outside the cycle of reactive responses and emotions by connecting us with the nature of our mind

as pure, contentless, unstructured awareness. We're at home with ourselves in a totally natural and uncontrived way. In the Vajrayana tradition of Buddhism, this experience is called invincibility or indestructibility. While fully accepting our finite and conditioned existence, we rest in a level of consciousness that can't be damaged or degraded by the presence of any thought, feeling, or sensation.

Just as the experience of unconditioned awareness is the ultimate goal of all human endeavors, it's also the ultimate fruition of the spiritual path. When there's nothing further to realize or attain, nothing missing from our experience right now, no attachment or aversion, no desire for circumstances to be different from the way they are, we have achieved the fulfillment described by the great masters and sages when they talk about self-knowledge, egolessness, pure awareness, or perfect wisdom. Our experience is identical with theirs—and we can know this with absolute certainty because the experience is precise and identifiable. It's the only experience that's completely open, unstructured, and without content, which is why it's sometimes called “contentless wisdom.”

For me, perhaps the most remarkable thing about this experience is the certainty with which we can identify it. While transcending culture or location, it also links people across time and space and from one generation to another. It's the whispered lineage of Dzogchen, the special transmission beyond texts of Zen, and the contentless transmission of the Prajnaparamita in Mahayana Buddhism. What's unique about all these forms of transmission is that they have no content. They are the direct transmission or transfer of the experience of unconditioned awareness from one mind-stream to another.

Many times I'll use the term “experience” or “state” when I'm talking about unconditioned awareness. I'm using these terms in the same way that others talk about the experience of nirvana or enlightenment, or the experience of no-mind. But please don't get hung up on these terms. Unconditioned awareness isn't an experience that happens to someone. It's also not a state of consciousness, because it's not something that can be contrasted with anything else. It's not a biological state. This is why I will often return to saying it's “nothing.” But, of course, it's not nothing either.

UNCONDITIONED AWARENESS AND RADIANT MIND

Radiant mind arises when we rest in unconditioned awareness and allow it to radiate through the totality of our conditioned existence, bringing peace,

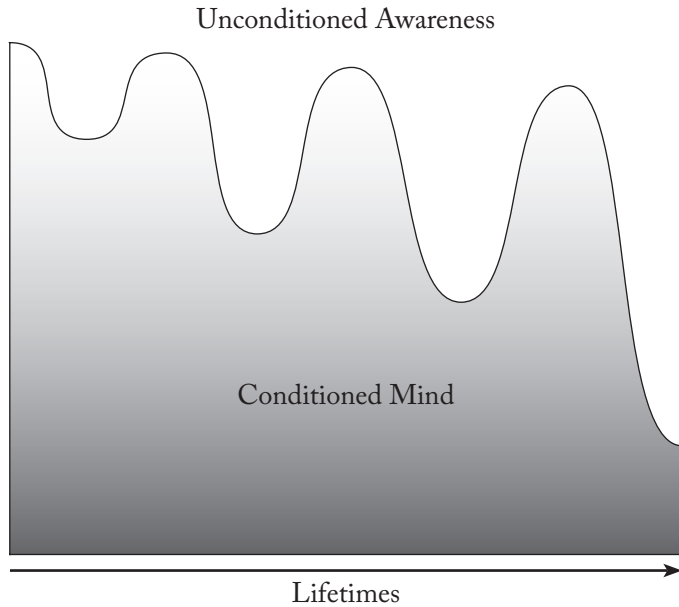
wisdom, and love to everything we experience. Radiant mind is the integration of unconditioned awareness into the conditioned body-mind, gradually transforming the body-mind in the process. When the unconditioned refracts through and perfumes the flavor and quality of our everyday existence, we experience radiant mind. In the Dzogchen tradition, the experience of radiance is likened to transparent light (the unconditioned) refracting through a prism (the radiant mind), bringing forth and illuminating the infinite richness and diversity of the conditioned or manifest universe. When you live in radiant mind, you experience yourself as a unique human being, and at the same time you rest in a unified expanse of unconditioned-bliss-awareness.

DEEPENING AND EXPANDING THE EXPERIENCE OF UNCONDITIONED AWARENESS

The nondual experience can be spoken about in terms of three parameters: purity, depth, and duration. By purity, I mean the absence of conditioned structures of understanding and interpretation. By depth, I mean the extent to which the unconditioned pervades or infuses our conditioned existence. By duration, I mean the length of time we can rest in this state.

Paradoxically, when we're actually resting in the experience of unconditioned awareness, none of these parameters make any sense. In fact, they simply don't apply. The experience of unconditioned awareness can't be pure or impure, because it has no structure. It can't be deep or shallow, because it isn't like the ocean—it's more like pure space, without a reference point. And it can't be spoken of in terms of duration, because it doesn't arise or dissipate. Since it isn't a thing, it can't come into being, nor can it be said to exist or not exist.

But at the level where it seems there's something we need to do—which is the level where most of us find ourselves most of the time—we can sensibly talk about purifying, deepening, and expanding the experience of unconditioned awareness. The path to full enlightenment generally proceeds from a heavily conditioned state of consciousness, in which attachment and aversion rule our behavior, through an initial glimpse of unconditioned awareness, to repeated peak experiences of unconditioned awareness that increasingly infuse our conditioned existence. This path ultimately culminates in complete freedom from conditioned patterns and an unbroken resting in the nondual state of consciousness.



The graph above illustrates this progression. The white scalloped dips at the top represent the experience of unconditioned awareness becoming longer and penetrating more deeply into our conditioned experience.

PURITY

Purity signifies the extent to which our experience is free of structures, by which I mean feelings, thoughts, cognitions, and interpretations. Most ordinary states of mind are heavily structured, bearing a thick overlay of ideas, beliefs, and emotions that obscure a clear, direct experience of what's occurring from moment to moment. Other states of mind are more lightly structured, in the sense that the overlay or veil is subtler and more translucent. Most spiritual experiences belong in this category: they're generally lightly structured by feelings of calm or bliss, ideas of transcendence, or insights into the nature of reality. But they're structured nonetheless.

By contrast, unconditioned awareness has no structure—it's pure, unfabricated, unmanipulated, contentless awareness within which everything arises just as it does. In our work, we need to be able to distinguish between structured and unstructured experience. Otherwise, we may think we're