

Foreword by Adyashanti

THE DEEP HEART

OUR PORTAL TO PRESENCE

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BOOK EXCERPT

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~ One ~

THE PILGRIMAGE FROM HEAD TO HEART

*In the room of lovers
I can see with closed eyes
the beauty that dances.*

RUMI, "My Burning Heart,"
translated by Deepak Chopra and Fereydoun Kia

THERE IS A LIGHT in the core of our being that calls us home—one that can only be seen with closed eyes. We can feel it as a radiance in the center of our chest. This light of loving awareness is always here, regardless of our conditioning. It does not matter how many dark paths we have traveled or how many wounds we have inflicted or sustained as we have unknowingly stumbled toward this inner radiance. It does not matter how long we have sleepwalked, seduced by our desires and fears. This call persists until it is answered, until we surrender to who we really are. When we do, we feel ourselves at home wherever we are. A hidden beauty reveals itself in our ordinary life. As the true nature of our Deep Heart is unveiled, we feel increasingly grateful for no reason—grateful to simply be.

Rumi discovered this truth eight hundred years ago, as have ordinary people like you and me. It is the call from the depths of every human heart. It is the call from your heart as you read these words and something within you stirs in recognition. Rightly understood, everything that happens invites us to recognize this heart-oriented way of being, knowing, and feeling.

The Inner Pilgrimage

You have heard of pilgrimages and perhaps been on one yourself, such as the famed Camino de Santiago that winds through Europe and ends at a Catholic

cathedral near the Atlantic coast in Spain. For millennia, people have walked long distances in India to visit holy shrines or sacred mountains, such as Mount Kailash in the Himalayas or Arunachala in the south where the renowned twentieth-century sage Ramana Maharshi was drawn when he was sixteen and where he spent the rest of his life. Devout Muslims try to visit Mecca at least once in their lives. There are secular versions, as well, such as the pristine John Muir Trail in the high Sierras in California or the Appalachian Trail on the East Coast of the United States.

Whether our pilgrimages are religious or secular, they spring from the same source and ultimately have the same destination. They are archetypal in nature, arising from the depths of the human psyche. These journeys are attempts to return to wholeness—to recover our innocence, openheartedness, and inherent knowing. They are journeys toward the Deep Heart.

What is the most important thing in this brief life? What is most real and true?

As powerful as these outer pilgrimages may be, the essential pilgrimage is inner. Rather than taking place over long distances and difficult terrain, *the inner pilgrimage is the abiding shift of attention from the forehead to the heart area.* Our attention is usually caught in the judging mind and identified with imprisoning stories and images. As a result, we feel vaguely located in our forehead or behind our eyes. Yet our true home is the Deep Heart—loving

awareness, the very center of our being. The direction of our journey is not forward but backward, a falling back and letting go. This inner pilgrimage is a profound surrender into a different way of knowing, feeling, and being. It requires an attunement to and trust in something in the core of our being that is as compelling as it is invisible.

This inner pilgrimage almost always involves both understanding and some effort, at least at first. Spurred by suffering and drawn by an inner sense that there is something truer within us, we begin an inner search. We start to examine our direct experience more carefully and to question our commonsense assumptions about reality. Existential questions arise: *Who or what am I, really? What do I most value and care about? What is the most important thing in this brief life? What is most real and true?*

Along the way, we begin to realize that what we have thought was true is not. Increasingly we see that we *don't* really know who we are. The familiar scaffolding of personal identity becomes shaky. Our metaphoric nametags—who we thought we were—become scuffed and faded. Am I only this identity that I have constructed or this role that I play? What if these beliefs that I have clung to so tenaciously are not true? Perhaps I am not this unworthy person, essentially lacking or flawed, that I have subconsciously believed and felt myself to be? What if I am not actually a separate-self, cut off and alienated from everyone and everything (as most people seem to think and feel)? What if *all* of these identities are illusory, no more real than the characters in last night's dream?

We begin to realize that we are suffering from a case of mistaken identity. In other words, we see that we have taken ourselves to be something that we are not. It is as if we are actors in a movie who have forgotten who we are and instead believe that we are the character we are playing. Fine actors immerse themselves in their roles without becoming lost in them. Yes, we do need to play our roles, most of which are natural and useful, yet we are neither defined by nor confined to them. For example, we may play the role of being a woman or a man, mother or father, American or Netherlander, Christian or Buddhist,

conservative or progressive, worthy or unworthy, yet these social and psychological roles come and go. Who are we prior to our various social roles and psychological identities?

I recently offered an online session for hundreds of personal coaches who were interested in working from presence—that is, the conscious awareness of their being. After leading a guided meditation and giving a short talk, I had them break into twosomes with partners they had never met and to take turns posing the following question to one another: *Who are you, really?* I invited them to innocently listen to the question, take their time, not go to their mind for an answer, and then spontaneously respond. They broke away to work with this question and came together a few minutes later. As we debriefed, many were astonished at what this simple inquiry led to. They experienced their familiar identities quickly falling away and the emergence of a heart-felt clarity and joy.

Equally interesting, even though these coaches were scattered across the globe, the whole group shared a palpable sense of intimacy. They only needed to be willing to honestly explore, pose the right question, and enter into a different way of listening. As a result, a profound inner dialogue quickly unfolded that was followed by a contagious sense of well-being. It was striking to see and feel how resonant this discovery was for so many people who had never met before. They had quickly tapped into their shared ground by sincerely questioning their commonsense identities. Rather than being unnerved, they were delighted by what they discovered within themselves and between themselves and others—a vibrant communion.

It is a huge relief to see and feel that we are not who, where, or when we have taken our self to be.

There is so much that we take for granted that isn't really true. For example, we think that we are a separate-inside-self living within a separate-outside-world. In other words, we think we are inside this body somewhere, although when we carefully look, we can't locate exactly where. How often have you actually questioned this assumption? Alan Watts, the self-described philosophical entertainer, wrote,

“The prevalent sensation of oneself as a separate ego enclosed in a bag of skin is a hallucination.” Are we really separate and divided from the whole of life?

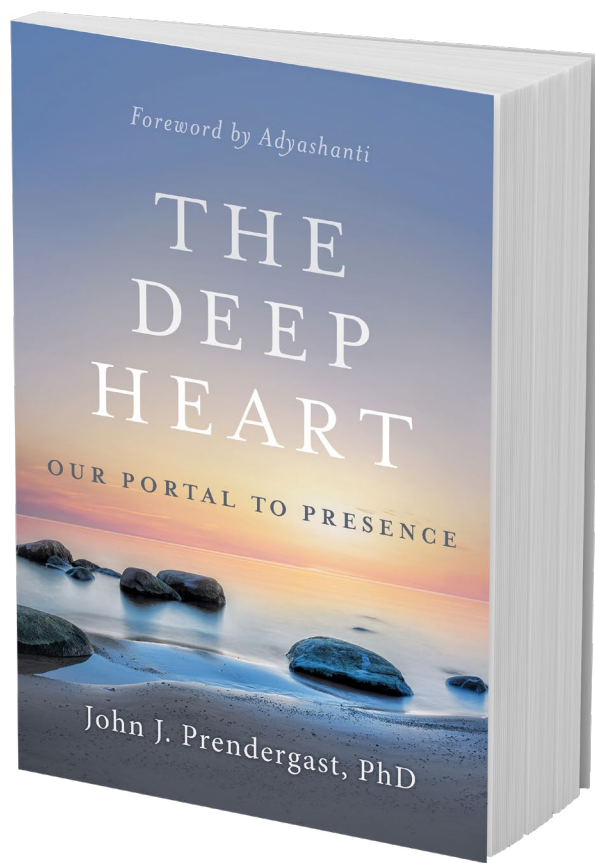
This particular question is a variation of a classic form of self-inquiry. *Where* exactly are you? If you sit with this question with an open mind, you will be surprised by what you discover. If you are honest and quietly observant, it becomes increasingly difficult to find the boundary between an inner self and an outer world. Indeed, you may discover that rather than being in the world, the world is in you—as open, infinite awareness, not as the little *me*.

For that matter: *When* exactly are you? We usually take for granted that we are moving on a timeline from the past to the future, like an inchworm working its way along a marked ruler. Yet if we reflect on our actual experience, we realize that we have never experienced the past other than in our thinking. The so-called past is always a memory in present time. Nor have we experienced the future other than in our imagination—again only in present time. When we consult our direct experience, we realize that the past and future are only concepts. Even more surprisingly, when we try to find the so-called now, we can't. Now,

in fact, is timeless. So when are we? It is hard to say, isn't it? Is it okay to know that we are essentially a timeless being? Can we still pay the bills on time with the revelation that we are, in truth, free from time?

If we are scrupulously honest, we discover that we actually don't know what we are, where we are, or when we are. This discovery is unsettling and profoundly liberating. Once we get over the initial shock, it is a huge relief to see and feel that *we are not who, where, or when we have taken our self to be*. The truth is that we don't know and can't know any of this—at least not with our ordinary strategic, goal-oriented mind.

We discover that we can rest in not knowing. This is not the same as being ignorant. We are not ignoring anything. In fact, we are facing an important truth—the limits of the conditioned mind. There is a great deal in life that we don't know, can't know, and perhaps most importantly, don't need to know. This insight frees attention to move from its temporary residence in the forehead to the depths of the heart area. Acknowledging that we *don't know* opens us to a different type of knowing.



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