

## CHAPTER 10

### NEELAM

*You don't need to wake up,  
you don't need to be enlightened,  
you don't need to be anything,  
because you already are!*

It was with Neelam that Pamela had her recognition. I was happily surprised to learn that Neelam had recently moved to western Colorado—right in my backyard. So I have attended several of her Satsang intensives. Neelam's message is simple: to really be here. She often asks, "What is *really* going on? What is it that you are not wanting to be with?" She explains that it's our "story" that keeps us from being here, the way we interpret the circumstances of our life.

At my first Satsang with Neelam, I did an exercise with a partner. Neelam asked us to talk about something that was causing us pain, something that was bothering us. I talked about my frustration with the conditions at the nursing home where I was volunteering. I told my partner how the staff didn't speak much English, so they couldn't communicate clearly with the elderly woman I was taking care of.

The next step was to ask, "What is under the story?" I noticed a tightness in my belly, and I realized it was fear. What kind of fear? Fear of my own ageing process and how I would be treated when I get old. Neelam asked, "Are you willing to sit with that, just make room for it?" I did. The minute I turned towards the real feeling, something softened. There was a sense of relief, a few tears. The fear didn't go away, but it was less intense.

If you wander off track in Satsang, Neelam firmly but gently brings you back: "Let's not go there, sweetheart." This is not an empty term of endearment. She is sincerely inviting you to be tender with yourself, to end the self-criticism. Sometimes she rests her hand on her heart when she

speaks. Neelam meets you where you are. If you need emotional support, she goes there. If you need clarification for the mind, she provides that. In her retreats, she includes dancing and movement, too.

There's a way that Neelam is more reserved than some of the other women I interviewed. It helps remind me that it's not about personalities. This awareness-that-we-are comes in all different flavors. We did the interview at a friend's house in Telluride the day after Neelam offered Satsang to our community. Neelam's presence has a kind of calming effect on me, whether in a group or alone. I feel seen, like she can look right into my soul. Presence meeting presence.



*What is it like for you now to talk about your childhood, your “story”?*

It is something that I remember, but it's not something that I relate to. I don't have that real sense of engagement with it. When telling the story of the past, some of it is more emotional or alive, but it doesn't have the same hold.

*Knowing that, can you think of what stands out that led you to where you are now?*

I had a rather normal childhood. There wasn't anything dramatic about it. I do remember experiences of being aware of consciousness. When I was about nine years old, I was away from my parents for the first time on a vacation camp. I got really sick, and I had what I call now an awakening experience where the mind stopped, and there was just a simple connection with what is. That stayed with me for awhile, but it eventually faded. There was no reference point for me to connect it with nor was there anybody I could talk to about it in any way. Yet there was a sense since that things were not the way they seemed. Things were different.

*Was there any kind of a turning point when you made a commitment to be on a spiritual search?*

As I look back on it, everything was part of that search. There wasn't anything other than that. But there was this time when I moved to Germany, I was studying t'ai chi, and I was reading some of the writings of the old masters that struck a chord of recognition. That's what I really wanted. Still it wasn't really so clear until I came to the States, and I started to study t'ai chi with my Chinese master. While I was doing that, I suddenly went to this place of awakening, and I started to realize what was going on. There was a more conscious search to really undo suffering, to look and say, "There's something going on in me. I don't understand it, but it's very powerful, and I want to find some answers."

*It seems like a lot of your motivation was to end suffering.*

It was a recognition of how painful it is to be here. It wasn't about anything in particular, but there was a series of awakenings and insights into the nature of reality. Some part of me was really terrified, not knowing what it was. At the same time, I was feeling very acute suffering.

*At some point you made a decision to go to India.*

I was a devotee of Mother Meera for a couple of years. I read Ramana Maharshi and that really resonated with me, but it seemed like I had to have a teacher in the body. Mother Meera didn't speak, but she was available in that very subtle way providing guidance from inside. I spent this intense time sitting in bliss for hours.

At the same time, the moment I would stop meditating, stop sitting, there was tremendous suffering. So I would go back and forth between this very blissful state and this very painful state of being here. I remember lying down at some point, and a thought arose in me that said, "I want to

find someone who can show me out of this because I know there has to be something beyond this.”

Soon after that I found myself in Satsang. I didn't know anything about it. Someone brought Gangaji's flyer to our house, and I thought, “That sounds interesting. It's a Western woman. She didn't spend years in a monastery.” So I went to Satsang, and that was really powerful and amazing... to drop out of the mind, drop out of the story, and really start to rest. As I was sitting in Satsang with Gangaji, I realized I needed to go see Papaji in India.

At that time, a lot of past desire for things arose, starting a family or maybe doing something else. Then Papaji came to me in a dream, and he gave me a yellow rose and said, “Cut through the dream.” So it's hard to say that a decision was made. It was just very, very obvious that I needed to be there.

*Tell us about your experience with Papaji.*

It's really difficult to describe because the silence is so powerful, to meet someone who actually is that which you are seeking. It's very rare, and the knowing of it is instantaneous. It doesn't happen in the mind. You just know. It was really powerful to sit in his presence. It was amazing to have that grace of Satsang. He was so clear, so direct, and at the same time, so available. There was no doubt in my mind that what he spoke was the truth. Once that happens in consciousness, something changes inside. There's no more of that questioning... is it true or not true. [She is silent.] It's really hard to speak about it.

*What do you think is important to share about your experience of so-called awakening?*

First of all, there is this level of trust that happens. Over time, you start to trust the teaching as it is. Once that happened for me, then there was this

recognition. In one of the Satsang, I asked Papaji if I could come and sit close to him, and when I sat there I realized that everything he was saying was true. In that moment something let go. Something wasn't searching anymore.

I remember going out to dinner that night with my husband at the time and before we left I had this tremendous fear arise, a fear of dying. Nevertheless, we decided to go out and have dinner. As we were walking back to our home, there were these three young Indian girls who came up to me, and they each had a flower. Without saying anything, they each gave me this little flower. That really broke my heart, something opened. I went back home, and I just sat. I decided to allow that fear to be present.

What happened—it was very quick, it took maybe a second, but it takes a long time to describe. There was this fear of dying, and there was this desire to run to Papaji and just sit at his feet. And there was this willingness to surrender. I could feel it just coming over. The room disappeared. Everything I could see with my eyes just disappeared in that moment. And there was this tremendous resting I can't even describe. I can't use words for that.

I don't know how long it lasted. There's no recollection of time. I can only remember the coming back from that experience, the awareness of this body, the awareness of this place where I was sitting. There was tremendous bliss, just incredible bliss and joy, which is only an after-effect; it has nothing to do with true reality, and the deep recognition that everything was OK just the way it is. Everything is taken care of. Everything is just perfectly OK the way it is.

That experience changed my life. There's nothing I can say on the surface that became different, but everything was different inside. There was no more a point of reference, what I used to identify myself with, which is this body, what I used to refer to as myself. That point of reference got shifted into awareness or consciousness. There was no longer anywhere or anything or anybody who was that person.

That's a tremendous change. Nothing was really different on the outside

other than knowing everything was “me.” There is nothing separate; everything is just here. Coming back to Satsang with Papaji after that, there was this recognition of coming home. Nothing is separate from that and just resting in that.

*Some people have described similar experiences that don't last.*

That has never changed. What changes is the outer experience. The blissfulness eventually passes. It's just another experience that arises in consciousness. But the simplicity and the clarity of resting as consciousness; that doesn't change.

*I remember you saying in our last interview that your husband had a similar awakening, but it didn't last. I'm curious why it lasts for some and doesn't for others.*

I would say there are different degrees of readiness for this recognition. What I found in my own experience is that there were many times I would taste this recognition, but I would still go back to the identification with the body. I spent hours sitting in bliss without anything moving inside, and yet the moment I would move out of that there would be suffering because there was still identification with this body.

It also depends on the karma or the destiny of the individual. There's nothing wrong with anything. Our perception is very small, our understanding of time is so limited, and we don't see the perspective of consciousness where everything is arising as it is. Everything is going where it's supposed to be going in its own time.

*So there's nothing to “get.”*

Everything you “get” is going to go. If you want to get something, you can get it if you're lucky, and then eventually it will go, right? Yet there's this

very pure desire for freedom that is really the movement and the motion of consciousness itself. Because consciousness, all it wants is to return back to its natural state, you see. That's the whole movement, that's what's happening. There's nothing else going on, so there's a very pure desire for that.

*I'm touched by that [I have a few tears].*

Just take a moment with that.

*Yes, there's this kind of ache here in my heart... [We pause.] I like what you said about time... that the way we look at it is so limited. You used the words destiny and karma which we probably have a lot of misunderstanding around.*

The way we understand time is based on this body. That's why it's limited because it's limited to its form, and that form is limited. That has nothing to do with consciousness, with reality. That is ongoing, and it has its own time and momentum and reason, its own motion.

Karma and destiny, there's much confusion and a lot of drama as well. All it means is that it's a momentum of things. Whatever has been set in motion needs to come to fruition. That's what it means in this realm of cause and effect because that's the only place karma exists. That's what destiny also means: whatever has been set in motion must come to fulfillment. If there has been a deep longing for freedom, if there has been good karma from the past... that is going to eventually come to fulfillment which is realization or enlightenment. It doesn't depend on anything or anybody. Once it is set in motion, there is nothing we can do about that. We can only be here.

*Is there an individual soul? The way you describe it, it sounds like there is, though I know that's probably not true. Could you clarify what is setting*

*this in motion?*

It is complicated. I don't know if you want to include this.

*That's what other people I have interviewed have said.*

It's going to bring people into a lot of misunderstanding. Karma is not unique or personal to an individual. It's a certain stream of consciousness that carries a certain momentum. It's not individual-based. Yet in this reality here, it appears as a particular person who is going through certain things. But it's not personal. Consciousness does it all.

We can talk about the karma of an individual, the karma of a particular group of individuals, the karma of a country, a race—whatever gets set in motion by a certain movement in consciousness, that's what is going to have to come to fulfillment. All the time we are experiencing the results of that past. Most of the time, we believe those circumstances have something to do with something else. We don't realize it's a motion that's been set up in consciousness, and now it's coming to fulfillment which makes it really, really simple if we can see it like that.

*I have this image. This particular body-mind has clothed or wrapped itself around some set of circumstances, an energy stream, but it's not personal. Is that accurate?*

Yes. Once this motion is set in consciousness, it has to come to fulfillment. That means there's nothing we can do about the circumstances that arise. But we could *be here* just the way we are. In that *being here*, something stops. It doesn't go on anymore because that's what's going on in this karma field—constant perpetuation of suffering. Something gets set in motion, and sets something else in motion, “your” reactivity creates another involvement with that, and sets in motion something else. It goes on and on like that.

The tremendous power of Satsang is *being here*. The moment you are willing to be here, something stops. You are actually resting here as you are. Everything is attracted to that freedom, that space, because now there is some place to rest. It doesn't perpetuate. It comes and stops right here in that quiet willingness.

*It's like there's space created when you stop. Openness attracts things to come in like a vacuum.*

That's who you are. That's your nature, spaciousness. Once you're out of the illusion you're something else, everything can come and rest in that. Because that's what consciousness ultimately wants; it wants to rest here. Once that is available, anywhere in the universe, everything is going to come towards that because that's the place to end suffering. That's called Satsang.

*Last night, one woman asked if there was a spiritual path you can suggest. You invited her to just be with what is. Is there any other ingredient other than this acceptance?*

It's really tricky because there's nothing you can really do. Yet you can be honest about what arises in consciousness and take absolute total responsibility for what it is, no matter how much or how little you know about it. Let's say your recognition is very small, where you can vaguely taste that sense of freedom. Now you ask, "Am I willing to really embody that? Am I willing to follow that truth?" That's what I would call a willingness or a path, not to fall back to sleep, not to say, "Oh yeah, that was nice sitting in Satsang. Oh that was beautiful. Now let's just go back to the story." How about taking that truth and really allowing that to be your life, to be present in your life, to really take you out of that denial.

*So being with whatever small or big awareness that comes up and being*

*responsible to it.*

Responsibility is such a charged word. Responsibility often means you're doing something wrong, and you have to do something better. You didn't take care. That's not how I mean it. I mean a total openness towards everything as it is, not denying that, not trying for anything to be different, not creating another story. To recognize that "as it is" is totally perfect, and you allow yourself to be here. Because our tendency is to blame, judge, move away from that to say, "Oh, it's happening because... he/she/him/them/it." The truth is that it's happening. Can I be here? That's what I call responsibility, being in response to what arises.

*How did you get started teaching Satsang? But first, do you call yourself a teacher?*

No. I don't refer to myself as anything. I started in 1995 or 1996. And how did I move into it? It arose in consciousness, this deep desire to share that with everybody. We can also say predestined; it was there to move in that way. It was very powerful. Once it started happening, at some point I realized, "Oh. Here I am sitting in Satsang and what about my guru, what about Papaji?" I remember having this conflict.

Then I had a dream Papaji came, and Ramana came, and we just walked together. Ramana said, "I have never seen such a sincere disciple." I realized I have to write to my guru and just ask him what he thinks about it. I wrote him a letter and told him there's this sharing happening since I came back, and said, "I only want to continue if you want me to continue because I don't want to do that without the sense that this is what you want also." He sent me a letter back and said, "Why do you want to give Satsang?" I sent an answer to him, and he sent a letter back and said, "OK."

*I want to ask you about something you said last night about the top ten*

*themes in Satsang.*

Mostly what I see is a misidentification. That misidentification takes different forms. One of them is the story. There's a tendency to get involved with a particular story, we can call it personality. The involvement with a particular story will determine the different type of personality or the other way around. The basic core is the misidentification. Out of that, all these different stories arise.

*There's a common theme of "not good enough," but what I become aware of as you speak is the one that I tend to identify with—the opposite, "being better than."*

Yes, there's "I'm not good enough," and then there's "I am really good... I am better than anybody else," and any variation of those two themes. The bottom line is that there's a "not-OKness" in consciousness. Underneath all that is some unrest.

*Part of the focus of the writing is about your individual, more personal life and how you are able to live in the world.*

How to live this in the world... It's a tremendous experience to actually be here, to be available for everything that is happening and at the same time rest in that recognition; I consider it a blessing, actually. What I notice is there's a greater and greater willingness to align with what is true and really to rest in that. It's the willingness to bring all the parts of your experience, your life into that alignment.

*So give us an example.*

The voice of conditioning always has its own agenda about what needs to be done—not only *what* needs to be done but *how* it needs to be done. At

the same time, there's an inner knowing of how things are, what could be happening, or how things could be taken care of. There's a willingness to come from what we know rather than from the conditioning itself because whenever we do that, the conditioning is going to create some trouble. We can only see things in a very limited perspective when we come from conditioning.

Same with relationship; we can enter relationship for different reasons. When you enter a relationship for the reason of truth and being, that's what is going to be the guiding force. Most of the time, we enter the relationship for other reasons—physical or emotional comfort or sexual attraction. We enter relationships for those reasons, we get entangled in it, and we don't understand why things are happening the way they're happening.

In relationship we have a lot of expectation and our conditioning very dramatically comes up because the relationship pressures you into looking at things. Conditioning always wants things to be a certain way. That's the limitation of it; that things can only work if they happen a certain way. What is needed is the willingness to align ourselves with what is true, really let go of expectation, and not follow the force of conditioning which arises so automatically. [She snaps her fingers.]

That's why I talk so much about willingness because you can start anywhere. It's the willingness to be here, to examine when conditioning is present, the willingness to see if it is really true or is it just coming from the past. The coming from the past is what creates suffering.

*It seems like a relationship supports a kind of habitual behavior making it more challenging to be present.*

Of course, and when I do talks on relationship, I say that all conditioning is going to arise in relationship—your past conditioning, his past conditioning. That's what we call the force of habit. We want certain things from each other and when that is not provided, we go into conflict or a power struggle. Yet it is possible to come from a different place, to come to rest in

your self, to be really honest about what truly arises rather than what we think or want or who's right, who's wrong. The willingness to step out of that is powerful. Back into full responsibility: no one is out there doing anything to you.

*How did you meet your partner, Life?*

I met him maybe five years ago. He came to Satsang. It was obvious. There was this very strong pull to be together. It was so powerful that there wasn't anything that either he or I could do about that. It was very simple, very clear.

*Do you feel like you entered in that relationship for the reason of truth and being?*

Yes, but it doesn't mean that we don't have our dance, our habits, and it doesn't mean that we don't have ways that are habituated that come from the past and convenience. Yet there's tremendous willingness from both of us to talk very openly and honestly, to examine things, to just be here.

*You and Life probably have conflict about something. Can you be specific about how it looks, what happens, how does it get resolved?*

We are rarely in conflict, that's the first thing. When we are in conflict, it's because one of us has an idea about what needs to be done, one of us has an agenda. It becomes very apparent because that spaciousness of being that we usually experience in our relating is not available. So we become aware of that, and we are willing to point the other towards that as well. "Hey, sounds like something I have heard you say before many times... sounds like a story." [She laughs.] We are able to be very open and honest about it. There's an ongoing communication and investigation to look at things. The basic thing is we don't stay in the power struggle, not that we

don't go there... we don't stay there. Neither one of us is willing to perpetuate that.

*Is there something different about the way you see death now?*

The interesting thing is that death happens all the time. We think it's this one-time event, and yes, there is a one-time event for this body. That's when the elements dissolve and come back to resting in whatever they are. They just dissolve at some point. I see it more as a transition, from one form, one state of being to another. Consciousness doesn't move, the physical elements just dissolve.

We are constantly faced with that everywhere. You look at nature; it's a constant cycle of creation and destruction, resting, and creation again. That's more my understanding of death right now and noticing that there is nothing here that is permanent. There is nothing you can hold onto. There's no place you can rest other than consciousness. It's an ongoing death and dying of any form or illusion or identity or understanding. There's nothing here really, no real permanence in anything.

*You said last night that a teacher's role is to support your own Self-inquiry.*

Yes, that's the role of the teacher, to stop that outgoing tendency, to let it rest in itself, its Source. That's why sometimes we meet a teacher externally who can actually speak the words of the inner teacher, the Self we all are. The Self speaks the words on the inside. Often we are not able to listen to that, so we need external form that would support and provide a level of inquiry until we are ready to rest in ourselves.

*I know the message is really the same whether it's a male or female teacher, but there is a different flavor.*

I don't know if it's different. What I see is consciousness teaching, not a

teacher teaching; it's consciousness. It comes in a different form, different language, different conditioning, a different way it shares itself. Maybe for the sake of appearance, it's really helpful that it comes in the female body. There may also be a quality of tenderness which is more a mother kind of quality.

*You use the word tenderness a lot in your teaching. Why is that so important?*

Tenderness is important because there is so much self-judgment, criticism, and hardness in our conditioning. Often, even Self-inquiry can become a very judgmental place. What I find is that Self-inquiry requires discrimination which is very powerful and important. Without discrimination, we just go on with the story, but if discrimination is not grounded in tenderness, there is a danger of that becoming yet another place of self-loathing, judgment, and criticism.

That's what is coming forth right now in the world, the quality of the feminine, as you call it. Again, it has nothing to do with gender. It calls forth that tenderness, the allowing of everything to be here as it is, the real integration that is happening right now in consciousness. The purpose of teaching in this time is to bring everything to that real resting which is so grounded in being here. It seems like that's what the world needs right now; it needs to integrate in that way.

*Is there anything more you would like to share?*

If we can be here, everything is taken care of because that's who we are. Anything that supports you in resting, that's the most important right now. Being quiet, reading, sitting in Satsang, or doing service—whatever you do, if that's what supports you in being here. Everything else comes from that.

*I know I am getting a little stuck in this idea that I have to have this kind of*

*awakening experience. In your ten years of teaching experience, I'm wondering how you've seen this move in others.*

Awakeness happens, that's for sure, there's no question about that. But you don't have to teach awakening because it happens. There's nothing to be done about that. That's why I always say that being here is so important because you instantly transcend everything. The moment you can be here, nothing else is necessary. You don't need to wake up, you don't need to be enlightened, you don't need to be anything because you already *are*. [She laughs.] It is very direct in that way.

If you are still chasing something, if you are still wanting awakening—that means you're suffering. That means something is not OK just the way it is, and just the way it is—which is perfect. Nothing has to be different. Not before, not after, not ever. That's really the message, to let go of that and just be here.



When I walked outside, I found myself smiling for no good reason. I could feel the perfection of it all. I drove home from the interview with the windows down, singing one of my favorite Girl Scout songs. I found Chris working in the garden. I joined him pulling weeds; no need to try and share about the interview, just content to hum a tune and work side by side in the bright sunshine.



As the summer gave way to autumn, my contentment gradually faded. It was Adyashanti's retreat in December that the familiar longing was stirred awake. It was a physical ache in my chest whenever I took a moment to contact the feeling. "What do you want?" Adya asked at the retreat. In a small voice I said something about silence. He did not respond, and I knew

I wasn't being authentic. "It's deeper than that," I said. "It's hard to describe in words." "I thought it was deeper than that," he said. It was my fear of standing in front of a crowd that kept me from claiming in a clear, strong voice what I really wanted. "I want who I am. I want my Self."

He suggested I really feel what it's like to live with an ache in my heart, with that deep longing. "Be it," he said. "Don't just think about it. Let it lead you inside. No one else can do that for you." I followed his suggestion:

*I am afraid to want, to really want something because in the past, my wanting led to disappointment. It started with wanting my Mom and Dad to stop drinking. I thought if they really loved me, they would listen to me. And when they didn't, I gave up. When you really want something, you open yourself to not getting it. And that's suffering. Better not to want anything too much—whether it's a more intimate relationship with Chris or a more intimate relationship with myself.*

But the longing only kept growing stronger as the days grew shorter. It was uncomfortable and confusing. I started to focus the longing more and more on Chris and a desire for a deeper connection. I wanted Chris to read these interviews, to understand their words of wisdom, to share in a profound, deep way. That was not happening. Though he finally read the interviews, he refused to talk about them for fear I would not be happy with his response.

I finally scheduled a private session with Neelam to explore this because I was too much in the stew of it to see clearly. She gently guided me into my chest where the longing was the most obvious, and I let it have me. I cried and cried feeling the pain without resistance. Neelam asked me what it was like in my family growing up. It was the same pain then as now, wanting it to be different. As a child, it was my parents; now it is Chris. I felt this overwhelming sense of helplessness. That was at the core of the longing.

"Is helplessness OK?" she asked, "Not to *be* helpless but to *feel*

helpless?" I let myself feel the helplessness, really feel the pain of wanting what I can't control. In that surrender arose a natural tenderness, an understanding and acceptance of myself.

Neelam explained that getting in touch with this soft, honest place is the foundation. From there, I can communicate what I want with Chris. First, I need to be totally honest with myself. I need to meet myself, and that means being willing to sit with the discomfort of helplessness and the not-knowing. I can't make someone love me just as it is not in my power to satisfy the longing for the truth of who I am. This helplessness can only be met with honesty and tenderness.

After that session, nothing outside me changed. But on the inside, something had shifted. One night I told Chris about this longing that has haunted me my whole life. I had no need for any particular response. I had no expectations he would even understand what I was talking about. I paused, and he reached out for my hand and gently kissed it. He looked in my eyes and said, "Oh Rita dear, I hope you find what you are looking for." I knew he was sincere.

In that moment, I saw him just as he is, someone doing the very best he can to love and support me. I smiled and thanked him for his love and understanding. It was as if the spell was broken. I was seeing the truth, and from that came contentment and acceptance. It set me free to turn my attention within, to the source of the longing, the wanting of who I am.