

The Path of Transformation

by Richard Young for *Pathways*

Pathways: John, could you begin by talking about your own spiritual quest and about those teachings and individuals who have nurtured and mentored you?

John Welwood: Sure. Early in my life I was influenced by the writings of Alan Watts and D.T. Suzuki, along with existentialists such as Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Rollo May. Their books were responsible for stimulating my initial interest in Buddhism and existentialism. I was also drawn to existential psychology, especially as found in the work of Eugene Gendlin, whom I met while doing my doctoral work at the University of Chicago. He became one of my most important mentors, and his exploration of the dynamic unfolding of felt experience has had a tremendous influence on my life and work.

At first, my interest in Buddhism was mainly theoretical— just reading books, really. Then I came out to California and connected with the San Francisco Zen Center. I didn't have a personal connection with Suzuki Roshi but his influence was certainly around. One summer I went up to Tassajara and saw a letter on the bulletin board about this incredible Tibetan teacher that somebody had met by the name of Chögyam Trungpa. He sounded very interesting, and I had already read some of his material that had just been published. I went to a few of his talks in San Francisco and then to a seminar he gave in Vermont. I found him highly colorful, provocative, and intriguing. First of all, he was dressed in Western clothes, smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol. He seemed like a regular guy.

Pathways: (laughing) Yeah, exactly. All he needed was a Harley and he would have been perfect.

Welwood: (laughing) Right. He probably had one of those too. And he would wear these really interesting outfits like shorts with suspenders and things like that.

Pathways: Oh my God.

Welwood: (laughing) And turtlenecks. But at the same time his consciousness was like nothing else I'd ever encountered. I had some interviews with Trungpa and I found the quality of space in his presence was just remarkable, both vast and intimate, unlike anything I had ever experienced before. It was like he was there and not there at the same time. It's pretty hard to describe.

Trungpa insisted that meditation was the way to go if you wanted to really be sane and wake up. So, I finally shifted my focus from just studying Buddhism to actually practicing it, although I was very resistant at first.

He became my main Tibetan teacher, and he provided his students with an excellent overview of the whole Tibetan Buddhist path, always described in his own idiosyncratic, impressionistic way. I'm sure I never would have gotten into the Tibetan tradition on my own without his influence. In a way, it's like the Catholic Church. It is enormously elaborate and ornate, which wasn't really my style. I was much more spare but ...

Pathways: The rituals are very exacting?

Welwood: Yes, they are. But Trungpa didn't introduce those at first, thank goodness, or I would never have gone very far.

Pathways: It would have scared you off.

Welwood: Yeah. He was really interested in sitting meditation. He was also a good friend of Suzuki Roshi, so he adopted a lot of the Zen style and approach to sitting meditation—which the majority of Tibetans don't do. So for years all I did was meditation. Only later did I become introduced to other Tibetan practices.

Over the years, I've studied with many other teachers and I've studied most of the great traditions on my own. I currently study with a Dzogchen teacher.

Pathways: Do you see that as your main spiritual path now?

Welwood: I do, yes.

Pathways: Okay, let's talk about your book, *Toward a Psychology of Awakening*. How did you come to write it?

Welwood: My main interest has been to bring together Eastern psychology and Western psychology, meditation and psychotherapy, in a practical and phenomenological way. I've written a lot about that intersection over the past twenty-five years, mostly in articles that I published in various journals. My main books have been in the area of conscious relationship, which is an off-shoot of my primary interest in East/West psychology. But even though I consider conscious relationship a very important part of the spiritual path, it wasn't my primary area of interest. Except for an earlier anthology, I hadn't published a book on my central interest, which I now call the "psychology of awakening." So I decided I finally needed to get this work out there.

I went back and looked at all of the writing I'd done over the years—some thirty or forty articles on various aspects of Buddhism and Western psychology. Then I pulled out the best writing and not only dusted it off, but reworked it extensively. Some of the writing had been done in academic language and I wanted to present it in a more accessible style. I also wanted to weave all this material together in a coherent whole, which took a lot of work. I think it worked out well.

Pathways: I think you succeeded really well, John.

Welwood: Thank you. It turned out to be a lot more work than I had bargained for, but I was excited about finally getting all this work in one place.

Pathways: How long did it take you?

Welwood: It took me about two years, even though most of the material was already there.

Pathways: And you've got one new chapter in there about embodying your realization.

Welwood: Right. That was a major piece of work. That piece alone took me three years. That chapter should really be a whole book. I just wasn't ready to write the whole book at this time.

Pathways: John, this book is specifically about Buddhism and psychology. But there is also a psychology of transformation within

Christianity and the other monotheistic religions. Do you see this as identical with Buddhist awakening or do we need a book on the Christian psychology of awakening?

Welwood: That probably needs a separate book. What would you say is the essence of the Christian path of transformation?

Pathways: Hey, I'll ask the questions here. But if you must know, I think the essence of that path is awakening to the nondual.

Welwood: But where do you find that in the Christian tradition?

Pathways: Well, you don't find it much except in the work of Meister Eckhart.

Welwood: Yeah, and he was kind of banned, so . . .

Pathways: Or at least some of his works were banned by the Inquisition.

Welwood: It seems to me if you're really going for the nondual, with all due respect to Christianity, that the Eastern traditions have explored that area so much more thoroughly.

I grew up in the Christian church, as an Episcopal actually, and I still love a lot of the things that go along with that tradition—the stories, the music, and the language. But what I really love in the Christian tradition is the emphasis on incarnation. It recognizes human incarnation as being very important and meaningful.

Pathways: Christ come to earth.

Welwood: Yes. You don't find that kind of emphasis as much in the Eastern traditions. But I don't feel like I've just totally adopted an Eastern viewpoint. I tried to do that at first but it didn't work, so I had to come back to my Western roots in a lot of ways. I think you can see that in chapter fourteen on realization and embodiment, where I also address the question, "What is a person?" That is a very Christian notion—the sacred idea of the person, beyond the conventional person.

I've gone back and studied Martin Buber and others over the last few years, looking for ways to bring together the nondual, or what I call the transhuman, with the human level. I'm very interested in that crossroads.

Pathways: Now as I understand it, there's a bit of a controversy going on in transpersonal psychology between those who say that nondual is the highest level of awakening, or the highest level of being, and those who say that union with God, as spoken of in the Christian tradition, is the highest level. There's some conversation going back and forth between the Christians and the Buddhists about which should be the model for transpersonal psychology.

Welwood: *Union* with God or *communion* with God?

Pathways: They call it union with God.

Welwood: If they really mean union with God, then it is nondual. How could union be dual?

Pathways: Yes, that's right, how could it be dual? So they're probably talking about communion.

Welwood: Okay, that's more like Buber's "I-Thou" relationship, with God as the ultimate Thou, the absolute Thou.

Pathways: Yeah, there's still some dualism in that.

Welwood: I would distinguish between dualism, duality, and nonduality. Nonduality is the recognition that our consciousness and our being are not separate from all of reality. Dualism is a fixed state of separation between subject and object. Duality is more of a dynamic flow, a play between self and other.

Pathways: More of a dance.

Welwood: That's right. It's a dance between lover and beloved. In a way you can see it as a kind of a play, a display, a lila, a kind of . . .

Pathways: The Manifest having a good time.

Welwood: Yes, it's beautiful. You wouldn't just want to hang out in the nondual all your life. You can't, really.

Pathways: It wouldn't be a life.

Welwood: Exactly. You couldn't really do it anyway. See, we're always coming back into duality. Duality is where we live, at least if we are householders living in the world. The nondual is the ultimate ground. In that sense, it's the highest, the most ultimate. You can make a distinction between what's an *ultimate* realization and what's a *complete* life for human beings. The ultimate is the nondual, because it's the essence of consciousness.

But it's not complete, in terms of a full human life. This is part of the problem with Westerners who try make the nondual the only focus of their life. They often focus on nondual realization, while neglecting their human embodiment. As a result, their lives can be rather colorless; they're not interested in being colorful human beings. They see the human realm as uninteresting somehow.

I would say that the complete fruition of the nondual is to come back and play in duality. This is the Tantric idea—that we must engage with the manifest realm. If we were only here to dissolve into the absolute, what then would be the purpose of incarnation? To me, the interesting journey involves exploring how the absolute takes shape in human form.

Pathways: That would be like the ten ox-herding pictures: you return to the village with grace-bestowing hands.

Welwood: Yes, that's that idea. But Tantra goes a little further. You don't just return to the marketplace with grace-bestowing hands, but you come back as a totally radiant and colorful expression of life.

Pathways: But it seems to me that unless you are able to commune with the nondual and experience that understanding, you can't feel life as a play.

Welwood: That is exactly right.

Pathways: You can't see life as something to enjoy because you're just stuck in it and it is deadly serious.

Welwood: Yes, you're still stuck in your self.

I think that's the key point. Without nondual realization, you're still stuck in some kind of identification with the self, with form, with separation. Even if that self is the lover of the beloved, or whatever. For me, the ultimate freedom and release lies in nondual practice and nondual awareness.

In the East— in Tibet and in India, among other places— there was a rich human soulfulness out of which the nondual traditions grew. The nondual teachings grew like a rare flower out of this rich human soil.

Pathways: That's a beautiful image.

Welwood: And in modern Western culture, we don't have that rich human soil, that soulful soil, in the same way. Our soil is pretty depleted from the soul's point of view. So when these nondual teachings come over from Asia, it's like a rich flower being planted in barren soil.

So what you often find among Westerners who become interested in nondual teachings is that they haven't been able to develop a rich human life and they are disconnected from community. Not being able to have good relationships with people, they use the nondual teachings as a kind of consolation, or escape, or remedy for their developmental deficiencies. I think that's a perversion and it becomes a form of spiritual bypassing.

Pathways: Right. There's another side to this as well. In our romance with Eastern religions, we have forgotten what our own traditions have had to offer to the conversation about awakening and living a meaningful life.

Welwood: I would agree.

Pathways: You talk a lot about the roles of both psychotherapy and spiritual practice in the journey of awakening. How would you respond to those who say that psychotherapy simply reinforces an illusory process—the ego—and is, therefore, indirect at best and a hindrance to liberation at worst?

Welwood: Well, I'd say this can be true, although not necessarily so. Conventional psychotherapy is about shoring up the ego. Which is not necessarily a bad thing. I think it's important to reemphasize that the ego is an early stage of human development. There is so much ego bashing that goes on in the spiritual traditions . . .

Pathways: Yeah, like the ego is the ultimate enemy.

Welwood: That's right. We see it as the enemy instead of seeing it as a child. The ego is a child version of the self.

A child's mind developed that self. So it is a child self. Just as we don't criticize children for being children, so we shouldn't bash the ego for being an ego. Most conventional psychotherapy is about strengthening the basic structure of the ego—that child self that never developed in a healthy way.

Pathways: But it shouldn't be seen as a life-long structure, should it?

Welwood: That's right. The ego is not meant to be the final stage of development, but in our culture it usually is. Since conventional psychotherapy doesn't recognize anything beyond the ego, it can only work on strengthening or repairing that structure. You replace the individual's maladaptive defenses with adaptive ones and that's about the best you can do. That's the classic Freudian approach.

I don't do that kind of psychotherapy myself. I think we need a much larger understanding of psychological work that goes beyond the medical model and the focus on psychopathology. Of course, many people do need conventional therapy: basic ego strengthening, reparenting, and symptom relief. But not everybody needs that kind of repair work. What everyone in this culture can use, however, is what I call "psychological work in a spiritual context," as part of a path of spiritual development. This is a guided inquiry with another human person who can help us delve into and deconstruct our conditioned patterns.

Pathways: This is how I work with people who are looking to enhance their spiritual journey. The process you describe can help them free up energy that has been locked away for various reasons and then utilize it for their continued growth.

Welwood: Exactly. The blocked patterns show us where we're actually disconnected from our being. So the work involves reconnecting with our being and working with all the obstacles in the way of that. This kind of work, especially for Westerners, is extraordinarily useful. I have found that almost anybody in the West can benefit from this kind of work. We don't have to call it psychotherapy anymore. In fact, I don't think we should. We could call it psychospiritual work.

Pathways: Yeah, but it's more like guidance or guided conversation.

Welwood: It's a guided inquiry, which also involves working with felt experience and emotional patterns.

Pathways: I recently interviewed Steven Harrison for this same issue. He says that the spiritual journey that you and I have been talking about is really just an invention of ego that keeps us from having to awaken right now. How do you feel about that?

Welwood: Well, that goes back to the old argument about whether enlightenment is gradual or sudden. Yes, we can wake up at any moment. As one Advaita master used to say, "Don't postpone your realization for the sake of your practice."

Pathways: (laughing) Exactly.

Welwood: (laughing) So the ultimate point of view is that we can wake up at any moment—right now, in fact. From this perspective, then, all of the emphasis on healing your past, doing spiritual practices, or purifying yourself morally would be seen as an unnecessary distraction. But I don't think this is a complete view. It's an ultimate view, but not a complete one.

A complete view has to take karma or conditioning into account. The nature of karmic conditioning is like this: when a river flows down a mountain in a certain pattern, and it flows that way year after year, decade after decade, century after century, it etches a groove into the earth. That's the way karma works—our habitual patterns have been going on for so long that they etch grooves in our minds.

It's fine to tell people to wake up in this moment, and if they can really do that, great.

Pathways: (laughing) Yeah, don't let me stop you.

Welwood: (laughing) Hey, if you can be awake twenty-four hours a day and not let your karmic patterns fall back into the old grooves, more power to you. You don't need a spiritual path. You're the Buddha. (The Buddha took six or eight years, actually.) So if you're a Ramana Maharshi and everything just falls away, that's great. But that's a very, very rare phenomenon.

There needs to be a recognition of the fact that these patterns are very deeply ingrained. So teach an ultimate practice, a nondual practice, if you wish. But realize that a lot of people are not going to be able to hang out in that nondual place very much and they're not going to be able to integrate it into their lives on a daily basis. You may still have to deal with preliminary practices such as purification, or working with your psychological issues, or deconstructing your karmic patterns.

Pathways: What happens if you don't do that? I mean, what happens if you do the nondual practices without paying attention to the lower level requirements?

Welwood: Then I think you start to live a fantasy, what I call "spiritual bypassing." I see that a lot among certain students of the nondual traditions. They can access nondual awareness, but they haven't dealt with their human, relational issues. They seem to be living, as James Joyce wrote, "a few feet from their body." They're living a few feet from full embodiment, a few feet from their relationships, and a few feet from their humanity.

Pathways: It's like the Christian saying that some people are so heavenly-minded that they're no earthly good.

In your book, you write that you don't think Western psychology has yet arrived at an accurate understanding of the unconscious mind? How would you describe the unconscious?

Welwood: The unconscious is the background. It is the way the body/mind organism, or the body/mind/spirit totality, operates in the background, outside of focal awareness. I don't see it as a separate "unconscious mind" or region containing its own mechanisms and drives.

Pathways: In what ways does that body/mind/spirit totality operate in the background?

Welwood: There are several levels to the unconscious. The most immediate level or layer is the preconscious or "situational ground." For instance, even now as you and I are talking, we are holding all kinds of understandings in the background—our sense of things, why we're saying the things we are, and what our purpose is in saying them. That's not in consciousness at the moment, but it's all in the background. That's the most immediate level of the unconscious.

Pathways: So it's not a separate structure or a separate process. It's an interacting process.

Welwood: Yes. I see it as a living, interactive process that is dynamic, alive, and constantly fluctuating. The figure of what we are conscious of and the ground of what we are not immediately conscious of is continually shifting. When you ask me a question, I don't just look into my conceptual mind for the answer. I also sense into the felt background to access impressions and intuitions about what you are asking—my felt sense of the question and possible answers. It happens very quickly, extraordinarily fast.

Pathways: In some sense, it's a defocusing process. You just relax the searchlight mentality of the conscious mind and go blank for a second so that something deeper and more holistic can emerge.

Welwood: Yes, definitely. That's why I make a distinction between focal attention and diffuse attention. Diffuse attention is what enables us to access the wider background layers of the unconscious.

Below the immediate situational ground we just spoke of is the karmic level or the "personal ground," which consists of all of our habitual patterns of thought and behavior, our personal history, and our object-relational structures. These patterns are the unconscious conditioning that so often determines our present perceptions. This level is more difficult to access, so psychotherapy or some other intensive inquiry process is helpful for gaining awareness of these deeper patterns.

The next level — what I call the "transpersonal ground" —involves the more universal structures and patterns of consciousness.

Pathways: You mean like archetypes?

Welwood: Archetypes, archetypal patterns, universal qualities of our human nature.

Pathways: Are these the patterns of thought and perception that Jung identified and that we hold in common with everyone else?

Welwood: Yes. For example, I think compassion is a universal archetypal human quality even though it may not be accessible to a human person at a given moment.

Finally, the ultimate level of unconscious background is what I call the "open ground." This is traditionally called nondual awareness. This is the ground of impersonal spacious awareness, a total openness to reality as it is, which underlies all our thoughts, perceptions, and feelings. This level is very difficult for most people to access and often requires specialized training in meditation.

This open or nondual ground is the foundation from which all the other levels arise. And they are all operating at the same time, constantly providing information, impressions, and essence. The levels of unconscious process are like fields within fields. We are just not normally aware of the incredibly complex and subtle processes involved.

Pathways: What is the value, John, of being able to shift focal awareness from one of these grounds to another and becoming aware of them in a conscious way?

Welwood: Because we gain greater access to what's running us. And there is also great value in being aware of our deeper nature, in seeing what is underneath the whole display.

Pathways: And with awareness comes choice.

Welwood: Choice, yes. And freedom.

Pathways: Yes, freedom to choose differently if I want.

Welwood: Exactly. That's the therapeutic benefit. Our awareness can actually have an effect on the patterns of the personal ground. It can help us work to change our own automatic and self-destructive patterns of thought and behavior.

At the deeper levels of the unconscious ground, awareness also allows us to access more profound qualities of our nature and to eventually open ourselves to the ultimate ground of being.

Pathways: How do these different levels of being relate to your understanding of soul?

Welwood: I see soul as a process.

Pathways: Not as an entity riding around in the body?

Welwood: Not as a structure, not as an entity, but as a process. An individuating consciousness, you could say.

Pathways: What is that?

Welwood: Metaphorically speaking, everyone has the seed of soul in them. That seed has the potential to grow in certain ways, although it may or may not develop.

Pathways: So there are people walking around who don't have soul, like Lawrence Welk doing an evening of Aretha Franklin?

Welwood: (laughing) Yeah, exactly. Soul is not something we are given, it's something we have to forge. The seed potential for soul is there in all of us, it's part of the transpersonal ground. It comes with the human being, but we choose whether or not we water and cultivate that seed.

Soul develops through individuation—through the process of growing, developing, and casting off the ego shell. Individuation is the process of developing in our own particular direction, so that we become what we were meant to become.

Pathways: Are you saying that the ego or the conscious personality is operating on soul to develop, nurture, and allow its unfolding?

Welwood: Say that again.

Pathways: (laughing) Pay attention here, John. I'm only going to say this one more time! I heard you saying that we have to consciously do something to nurture soul, that the ego has to reach out and do things or not do things that help nourish the development of soul, or soulfulness. How does soul then operate on ego?

Welwood: I wouldn't say ego has to do this. The soul is actually a seed potential that wants to grow. It wants to grow anyway. It is the soul's own force that is going to actually help us in this unfolding. Ego is like an early, incomplete version of soul. Ego is the shell around the seed. It protects the seed until the seed can burst forth into maturity.

Pathways: So how does soul affect our lives? How does soulfulness affect the embodiment of our realization?

Welwood: I would say that soul is the inner side of the person and the person is the outer side of soul. So "person" is how soul relates to other human beings.

We have both these capacities— to become a richly expressive individual, through developing our unique inner potentials, and to become a genuine person who is capable of a rich relational life. These are two sides of one whole potential.

Unfortunately, these terms are not well-defined in our culture. One way we could characterize a genuine person is through the capacity to have "I-Thou" relationships. This requires developing the capacity for communion and dialogue, mutual respect and understanding, and the appreciation of differences. This is what my work with conscious relationships is all about—seeing how the soul develops through relationship.

Relationships are an essential part of the human journey that have not traditionally been emphasized in the Eastern teachings. Therefore, the path of conscious relationship has never been integrated with nondual realization. In my work I am trying to bring those two concerns together, which is somewhat unusual. As it stands now, you usually have to choose one or the other. You can study the nondual traditions and not care about human fulfillment in the world and, you know . . .

Pathways: (laughing) . . . crawl into a cave for twelve years, eat bugs, and realize that the world is an illusion.

Welwood: (laughing) Or else you can study people like Buber, whom I greatly appreciate, but who says that relationship is the only thing that's real and that the search for mystical realization is just escape. I found that I couldn't live with that dichotomy.

Pathways: You couldn't live on either side of it?

Welwood: Exactly! I felt that I would not have a full life without both sides. As I said earlier, nondual realization is the ultimate, but it's not complete in terms of how to live a full human life. The most complete life involves coming back into the realm of relationship and embodying your realization.

Pathways: I think we're at an important threshold in human history, because this dialogue between Eastern teachings on nondual realization and Western investigations of human development and relationships couldn't have taken place before.

Welwood: That's absolutely right.

Pathways: East and West weren't even aware of one another's teachings fifty years ago. Besides that, psychology was only in its infancy then. So we developed separate specialties, like the right and left hemispheres of the brain.

Welwood: Exactly.

Pathways: And now it's time to integrate them.

Welwood: Yes, wouldn't that be great? To tell you the truth, I think that's the coming religion. There will be great avatars and gurus of this teaching, but they haven't arrived yet. They will show us how to honor the best in the Christian tradition and the best in the Buddhist tradition.

Pathways: And the best in every tradition.

Welwood: That's right.

Pathways: Who knows, maybe we'll be around to see it.

Alright, John, let's move on. What is "unconditional presence" and how does it act as an agent of healing in the therapeutic relationship?

Welwood: What I call unconditional presence is a blend of Focusing, as I learned it from Eugene Gendlin, and Dzogchen or nondual awareness. Unconditional presence is the capacity to be fully present with whatever is going on in one's felt experience, without any agenda or separation from it.

Pathways: Just letting it emerge as it will.

Welwood: That's right. The first step is to simply feel and acknowledge what's there. Then we just allow it to be there, just as it is; we give it space to be there totally as it is. Then we open to it, almost entering into it, not remaining separate from it. And then we notice what becomes available to us through this kind of presence.

Pathways: The insights that might arise from that process.

Welwood: And the deeper qualities of our being that become available, such as peacefulness, groundedness, acceptance, compassion, or strength. Unconditional presence is the essence of healing because it resolves the basic flaw or split in the human being—the split between me and my experience. When we allow and open to whatever we're feeling—let's say our anger or our grief—then we're not trying to do something about it. We're not trying to get rid of it, change it, or get insights out of it. We're just letting ourselves meet it, totally openly.

When we do this, we leave behind the surface level of simply talking about our experience or trying to act on it. Unfortunately, this surface level is where most psychotherapeutic work is focused.

Pathways: Yes, exactly.

Welwood: So we move deeper into *having* the experience, then *being with* the experience, and then finally *being* the experience itself. When we're totally connecting with what's there, then we actually drop down into being. I call this a "vertical shift." We actually start to heal the split in our own being.

As a child, we had to reject certain kinds of emotional experiences that were too much for our nervous system. Our nervous system wasn't developed enough to be able to process and digest certain experiences. So we had to shut down and push the pain away. And that became part of our ego development— developing defenses. Unconditional presence actually heals this. It heals that primal shutdown and split from our experience.

As we start to be with the experiences we had difficulty with in the past— inquiring into them, honoring and welcoming them—the basic split in our own being starts to heal and dissolve. As that split starts to dissolve, we begin to drop into our being in the moment. This kind of vertical shift makes certain qualities of our being more available to us.

Pathways: It begins to inform our actions and our feelings.

Welwood: Right. We get in touch with a certain kind of strength, or compassion, or truth.

Pathways: I see a parallel in my own psychological work with people. When I'm in session with an individual or a couple or a family, I imagine that they are a part of my felt experiencing, that I can somehow encounter their thoughts and feelings in the same way I encounter my own.

Welwood: Right, exactly.

Pathways: And when I do this, there is a process that goes on between us that is quite remarkable. Instead of sitting there imagining what I'm going to say next, or analyzing how this fits my therapeutic hypothesis about them, I just let what they're expressing be part of my experiencing.

Welwood: Which it is anyway. It's like two people treading water in the same pool. Whatever the client is feeling makes waves in the water in which both of us are swimming. Which means the therapist is going to feel those waves, right?

Pathways: Exactly. Okay, let's switch topics again, John. You have written widely on conscious relationships as a spiritual path. What is a conscious relationship as you define it and how does it work to awaken the individuals within it?

Welwood: (laughing) I give up. You're really grilling me this morning. It's taken me three books to answer that question.

Pathways: (laughing) I'm hoisting you by your own petard. By the way, what exactly is a petard?

Welwood: (laughing) I have no idea. Okay, I'd say a conscious relationship occurs when two people willingly enter into a process where they regard their relationship itself as a vehicle for their mutual awakening.

Pathways: So they are consciously choosing that? They are defining spiritual awakening as an agenda of the relationship?

Welwood: Yes, it has to be a choice, a conscious intention. And I think it grows out of a soul connection, a spark between them that lets them recognize that they have this kind of work to do together. They consciously recognize that they can serve as a spiritual catalyst for one another.

Conscious relationship requires an awareness that we're not together just for security or pleasure or the usual gratifications. We're here to help each other grow on a soul level, to wake up and become more fully who we are. This is soul work. I tried to lay out this vision and this path in *Journey of the Heart* and *Love and Awakening*.

Pathways: I think we have the concept of helping each other grow as people on the personal level, but to experience it on the soul level is a new idea.

Welwood: Yes, and it's also much more challenging. Two partners will go through dark nights of the soul and places where the whole personal structure of the relationship gets shattered every so often. When that personal level gets shattered, people generally break up.

So every time this happens, we have to ask ourselves and our partner, "What is our connection and what are we doing together?" If we have a conscious relationship dedicated to spiritual awakening, then the answer comes back, "Oh, right, that's what we're doing here. All right, I can handle this." In this way a couple can recontextualize their relationship and keep renewing their commitment to one another.

Pathways: Reframing it in a positive way.

Welwood: Right. This enables us to contain whatever comes up. And between two conscious human beings, everything *will* come up. I mean everything in the universe. (laughing)

Pathways: (laughing) And it'll bite you both in the butt if it gets the chance.

Welwood: (laughing) Which is exactly why relationships have been unconscious for all these years. We haven't had the tools to be able to handle all the stuff that comes up between two human beings. So naturally, relationships were always governed by roles . . .

Pathways: We had prescribed forms.

Welwood: Prescribed roles. In traditional Asian culture, for example, couples generally don't have a personal relationship as we know it. Conscious relationship is very difficult and challenging.

Pathways: It's also a unique opportunity at this point in human history. In the past, conscious relationship wasn't even possible.

Welwood: No, it wasn't. It wasn't possible until Western psychology helped us understand the dynamics that go on within and between two people. And that's a recent development. Our parents' generation didn't even have these tools. But we do.

Pathways: And it remains to be seen how well we use them. I've often told my wife Nancy, to whom I've been married for twenty-eight long, long... wonderful years, that if the spiritual journey is about thinning the ego, then she's a certified Zen master. (laughing)

Welwood: (laughing) Well, that's great for you. You've got your guru right there at home.

Pathways: I think I've got one more question, John. What advice would you give to people who are looking for either a spiritually-oriented guide or a spiritual teacher?

Welwood: The first thing is to ask yourself the question, "What is it that I'm really looking for?" Clarify that on the inside because the first calling is always internal. People have gotten into bad situations with spiritual teachers because their motivation was not clear, or pure, or because they got into it for the wrong reasons. Be sure that something genuine inside you is really calling you in that direction.

Pathways: What are the wrong reasons, John?

Welwood: There are a lot of wrong reasons. One is to get re-parented.

Pathways: That's the main wrong reason.

Welwood: (laughing) Yeah, you're probably right. Another one is the desire to be affirmed or to feel really special.

Pathways: So once we're sure of our motivation, how do we go about looking for a teacher?

Welwood: The first place to start is to read books and to explore different teachings to find out what calls to you. Then it's important, once you meet a teacher, that you spend time really evaluating him or her. In the Tibetan tradition, you are encouraged to spend several years mercilessly checking, evaluating, and scrutinizing the teacher.

Don't be too concerned with the externals of the teacher, like how they dress, or how well they perform the rituals of their tradition. Rather, pay attention to what kind of effect they have on you. Does their influence seem to encourage your own awakening and soul development, or not?

Pathways: Their influence on you shouldn't always be comfortable, either.

Welwood: That's right. A good teacher constantly challenges you to stretch and grow, and to contact yourself on a deeper level. That is often a painful and disquieting process.

Pathways: In the Zen tradition, the teacher is often seen as a projection of the wisdom within yourself. So when you're done with that stage of development, get rid of them and move on. (laughing) It's really coming from within you anyway.

I think the mistake that many students make is over-idealizing the teacher. Then they are just being blown away when the teacher makes a mistake or reveals some human side of themselves.

Welwood: Exactly. That comes out of our attempt to make them a good parent or even the perfect parent we never had. It's important not to idealize the teacher on the personal level. In the Tibetan tradition, devotion to the teacher is a really important part of the path. That can become very tricky because a lot of people do wind up idealizing the teacher. Our devotion should be to the wisdom, to the wisdom nature of the teacher. And we should remember that our teacher may not always embody that wisdom perfectly. Embodiment is always imperfect.

Pathways: I think the question should be, "Is my teacher a fairly good channel of wisdom?"

Welwood: Right. I have had teachers who lived in ways I would not choose for myself. But they still served as an incredible channel for me.

Pathways: Well, John, thank you so much. I've thoroughly enjoyed our conversation.

Welwood: Thank you, Richard. So have I.