

The Most Important Thing

Discovering truth at the heart of life (a summary by Pat Evert)

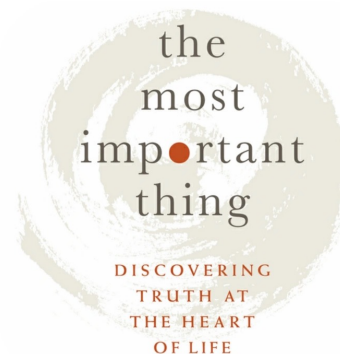
- Introduction

Our inner lives are every bit as astonishing, baffling, and mysterious as the infinite vastness of the cosmos.

- What is the most important thing?

What is the most important thing to you? Is it awakening? Is it love? I am talking about meaning as that which gives us a sense of vitality, aliveness, inspiration, calm, and joy. To copy what somebody else did is one of the mistakes we make. There is a clarity that comes from finding out what the most important thing is to you. Midlife is when we reexamine and begin to ask questions: Is that what I want? What is the most important thing for me? **No**

spiritual teacher, no matter how wise, and no teaching, no matter how profound, can be a substitute for discovering what is important to you. Action is the second part of this process—doing something about the most important thing, not just thinking about and hoping for it. Everything that I excelled in throughout my life came about because it was my most important thing. When you dig down, when you impose a mental discipline and do not settle for the quick, easy answer that you may well have learned from somebody else, you will find what nobody can give you and what belongs to you alone. Until you do, your life does not even belong to you.



- The Power of a good question

What is the most important thing in my spiritual life? What is my entire spiritual life oriented around? What is my friendship or romance all about? What is the most important thing about that person to me? When it comes to what we contribute to this precious and brief life, repeating other people's answers doesn't help us answer the big questions: What do you want to contribute? What are you contributing? What is important to you? We should question consensus reality, like the Buddha or Jesus or so many others. **The place where revelation occurs within us is in the unknown.**

Although they may have a belief system, they continue to reach **beyond dogma and beyond mere ideas.** It is our answers that blind us, that we hide behind, and that we use to protect ourselves from the great insecurity of facing our confusion and our doubt and plunging into our consciousness in a profound way. When we find that most important thing, it comes to us with a great intensity that makes us feel insecure, because it calls everything into question. This is what important questions do. They open a space within us, **clearing away the preconceived debris so that something new and transformative can arise.**

- What are you in service to?

When service is done from a sense of wholeness, when it comes from an overflow and a sharing of an inner abundance, it is enriching and life affirming—for all involved. In the present moment, we are all serving in our own way. Whether we want to or not, we are all passing something on, and we are all affecting one another, consciously or unconsciously. It is the acknowledgment that we are taking part in one another's lives; we are affecting the world and the beings around us. **We find what is important when we look at what we devote our time and attention to.** But, we must be on the lookout for our mind turning service into obligation. How can I participate in what I love? How can I be a living expression of what I love? Start your day thinking, Today I am going to undertake one act of service for somebody or something as an expression of what I value in my heart and of what I love. I am going to make a gesture in that direction, even if it is only a small one.

- The doorway of difficulty

Staying with whatever arose for me despite being flooded with adrenaline, sitting with it in a raw way through all those hours of meditation instead of running away, was profound. I was in a place where I could not go anywhere, where I could not turn on the TV or listen to the radio or grab a book or enter a discussion — so meaningful, vital, and important that it opened my heart. One of the most amazing things that daily meditation has taught me over many years is to have the wisdom and grace **to quietly and silently be with whatever presents itself**, whatever is there, without looking for a solution or an explanation. **To see yourself is the heart of what a spiritual discipline like meditation is all about.** If you are not using your meditation to hide from your experience or to transcend it or to concentrate your way out of it, if you are being quietly present, meditation forces honesty. We realize that it is in feeling lost that our true nature finds itself. You could boil all of spirituality down to the art and practice of listening to nothing and trusting in the difficulty. If they can sink into themselves, their own nobody-ness, and allow difficulty to strip them of their somebody-ness, then they can do away with the masks of their persona. Spiritually speaking, this is exactly what we want: to remove the masks. It is a matter of authenticity and of the capacity **to trust life, even if life has been tremendously tough.** We must find that capacity to trust ourselves and to trust our life—all of it, whatever it is. That is where you will find your most important thing.

- The intersection of love and grace

The average person looks at everything through a lens of their own conditioning, yet my grandfather—who also had his own conditioning—was led by his heart. He showed me the impact a single human being can have on the lives of people around them. He was not going to let anyone's opinion get in the way of his expression of love and joy. That was a profound lesson: to be with **somebody who was who he was and who accepted everybody else as they were.** When you were with him, you had no doubt he accepted and loved you. Spirituality in its deepest sense awakens us to who we are and frees our natural human way of being beneficial, loving, and kind presences in the world.

- Willingness to trust the unknown

Grace comes in many packages—some of them easy, like a gift, and some difficult. What opens us to grace is the movement of grace. We take the biggest leaps in our development and understanding during difficult times—when we experience the loss of a loved one, friend, job, relationship, or health, when we are on the edge of the unknown and do not know where to go. What is our individual response that opens us to grace? It is a willingness to embrace the unknowability of a new way of being and a new way of relating to what is happening. That is why **the greatest leaps in our personal and human evolution often happen through some of the most difficult experiences in life**. That is when we can begin to listen instead of reasserting our confusion; we can open to not knowing, which is its own quietness and its own stillness.

- An element of surprise

Grace has an element of surprise. I have found when something does not go the way you imagined it would or wanted it to, if you are truly available to what is happening and to the way something is going, **you can open and respond to grace**. The trajectory will begin to improve, and you will turn a corner and find something you had never dreamed of. You can know that everything is okay. There are endless opportunities to bring forth that grace and offer it to the world around us. In that way, bit by bit, we all become more sane, free, and happy.

- The Fundamental realization

Everything in all of existence is interconnected. Any moment that we are experiencing anything, including this moment right now, is a manifestation of spirit. What we experience with a deep awakening is that everything participates in the happening of everything else. The reality that I had been seeking had always been here. And not only had it always been here, but I was it. I do not mean “I” as an ego or personality, but “I” as the reality itself that woke up. One of the most surprising parts about it all is that **here we are seeking something we already were, awareness is itself the infinite being aware**. Then you come to see that everything else is in a constant state of change and you, whatever you are, are always there. So everything is the display of spirit, and everything is the display of awareness. All seeking is in the future—it is yearning for something that is not present.

- Challenged by the great sorrow of the world

At the root of experience, at the root of the tree of life— be still. It is not an easy teaching, but it is a great teaching: be still amid difficulty, making yourself available to whatever is occurring in that moment. Even though Jesus asked God if he could somehow get out of his situation, right after he spoke those words he reestablished his inner equilibrium and said, “Thy will be done.” If we can say yes to those experiences, if we do not try to avoid them or explain them away, something deeper will arise in that space where we open to our limitation. **The things we are trying to avoid are what lead to awakening** and to new and broader ways of seeing and experiencing life—of experiencing ourselves.

- Vital moments

When the Buddha had his vitality moment, or turning point, he recognized some fundamental aspects of the human experience: that everything is changing and that nothing lasts forever. He dove into that great mystery of the unavoidable and inevitable aspect of life, which is suffering. Divine guidance always arises like a whisper. It does not yell, and it does not insist. It is a quiet thing. Sometimes we will need to redefine our whole identity. This does not just happen to spiritually advanced beings—this is human stuff. **Do you relate to life as an unfolding mystery and an adventure of discovery?** An encounter with your immense capacity for wisdom, love, and experiencing life with intimacy and vitality? We have extraordinary abilities as human beings when we begin to recognize the vitality of certain moments and we bring a consciousness to them. We must repeatedly embrace the insecurity of these moments and by doing so come to trust them and so ourselves. Paradoxically, the knowing of what the next step is arises when we have the capacity to rest in not knowing what the next step is and to recognize this is an intimate part of the process of transformation.

• Deep wisdom in uncertainty

We all find ourselves in situations in which we say, “I cannot seem to go forward. I do not know the move to make.” Then fear comes in, and it is easy to become immobilized. I accessed something deeper within myself, but only when I absolutely had to access it because I had run out of choices. The only one left was to let go and move. In those moments when we must act, we are transcending the self. There is a resource of great wisdom and love, this faith, is rooted within our being. **Open to a new vision, to something that is not a repeat of the same old way you have done things**, which never worked. You must be open and listen.

• Life is a series of unknown moments

I am interested in exploring the fear of the unknown, because it is one of those fears that lurks, especially for spiritual seekers. I am often asked, “How do I get rid of fear?” “If you are going to endeavor into a deep form of spirituality, you should count on visiting a lot of unknown psychological and spiritual terrain.” Right before people have meaningful spiritual shifts, we become afraid because the whole landscape of awakening is such a different way of seeing and experiencing life that the intuition of it arising is concurrently thrilling and terrifying. In becoming profoundly conscious we start to recognize the overwhelming amount of unknown in our lives. We need to learn that fear does not always mean actual danger. **Embrace the unknown aspects of life, which is just one unknown after another.** The best way to deal with fear is to face it, if you are running from fear, you become more afraid of whatever you are running from, because whatever you are running from takes on more significance the longer you run from it. We do not stop, we do not meet the situation as it is, and instead we go into imagination.

Imagination is where fear thrives. The key is not to think through all the imagined scenarios; the key is to meet the fear itself. As we gain experience with meeting fear, it stops feeling so intimidating, and gradually our mind and body realize that fear is not dangerous. First, I recognize how they are scaring themselves with what they are projecting onto the unknown. Then I show them that to clear that fear, they must stop

entering imaginary scenarios that may or may not happen. Instead they should **face the fear without any story**, what might happen. Your true nature is the unknown. One of the greatest blessings of facing our fears is we realize that in running from them we have been running from our true nature, fear does not always mean danger. As I mentioned, fear can be a sign of something new or **something unknown - we are the unknown**.

- **Meeting the Buddha on the road**

I had broken my ability to find in a group a spiritual identity, religious identity, or anything else, and that was such a transformative moment. This was not about reaching something, but about spiritual or religious identity falling away. No matter how we construct our identity, whatever we construct it around will eventually be taken away from us when we breathe our last breath on this earth. A big part of the spiritual path is seeing through identities. How tricky it is the way the egoic mind, the egoic instinct, will take anything and quietly start to weave an identity and a sense of self around it. We define ourselves through family, friends, being husbands or wives or parents, whatever our title might be at work, and whatever roles we might play in life. We do tend to like our new identities, whatever they are, until we see through them all and begin to realize we do not need to be grasping them anymore. Life has no respect for whatever we identify ourselves with. We can always check in and ask: Is it necessary to resist this? Is it necessary to resist when someone says they do not agree with us? Is it necessary to resist life when it goes a way that is different than what we had in mind? When we do resist it, what sense of self or what identity are we keeping intact and holding together? Is that necessary? Is that what we want to do? Can I experience a greater freedom by letting go of all the ways I construct identity around my affiliations and the roles that I play in life?

- **The dirty little secret of spiritual practice**

The dirty little secret of spiritual practice is that confronting the true nature of our self can be terrifying. What happens if we unclench the fist of the ego and the self? Some people are afraid they will go crazy—it is a dread of loss of control. **The only thing that will be annihilated is our clinging to the self**, we learn to access the deeper place, and it feels good to let go. We understand ego was not a thing to begin with; it was a nightmare of consciousness generated by our mind. They may be easier to deal with when we see ourselves as outside them and as not being defined by them. It's the fear of annihilation which might include going through existential terror or facing annihilation.

- **Willingness to encounter silence**

Coming to see the nature of our mind is the aim of meditation, we sit down to face ourselves in silence. In its deepest sense, meditation is an encounter with the silence of your being. **This is the heart of meditation: it is a willingness to be with silence**. Meditation has nothing whatsoever to do with controlling your mind. Meditation is a **deep state of listening**. It is the relinquishing of control, not the perfecting of control. Meditation is the relinquishing of agenda. So first acknowledge any desire to control. As you watch your mind, you start to see that trying to control it tends to add conflict, and being too rigid about it sets up an even deeper groove of rigidity in your mind and in

your body. Meditation is the art of letting go of doing. Meditation is letting consciousness, awareness, sink into the unknown and into that which is not speaking.

- **The heart of contemplation**

Thomas Merton says, “Contemplation is precisely the awareness that this ‘I’ is really ‘not I’ and the awakening of the unknown ‘I’ that is beyond observation and reflection and is incapable of commenting upon itself.” Contemplation is exactly the awareness that this I, the old familiar self that you may have defined yourself as for most of your life, is not your real self at all. It is thoughts that are referring to more thoughts. The true I—what Merton called “the unknown ‘I’” (if we want to call it an “I” or “self” at all)—is unknown because it is not a thought, it is not a feeling, it is not an image you could make in your mind, and it is not constructed out of memory. In other words, it is not known in the usual way that we come to know things. **The unknown you, unknown because the true you can never be made into an object of observation—it is the observer.** The true self cannot be known by labels or definition. All our evaluating defines is the false self, and all our self-judgment defines is the false self, so the false self is nothing but those judgments and evaluations. The known “I” is an illusion, the unknown “I” is the I that cannot be made into an object. When we come to true nature, it is not one thing as opposed to others: **it is that all-inclusive expanse of being that transcends all the content of consciousness.**

- **Always already meditating**

Meditation in the way I use it is for waking up—“waking up” meaning the revelation of our true nature of what we are. **We must stop looking for these things as if they are absent from our current experience.** I was trying to acquire from the outside, but little did I know I already had it. The sacred and the timeless are always and already present. All we need to do is take a moment to notice, and that is what meditation is.

- **When the universe contemplates itself**

When we are contemplating the universe, we are the universe contemplating itself, and that may be the most wondrous and extraordinarily profound aspect of our whole life.

- **Conscious of consciousness**

When we start to explore the nature of our consciousness, consciousness is already there. Consciousness cannot make itself into an object of perception, because it is always **the ultimate subject**. We start out with an acknowledgment: Whether I understand it or not, consciousness is present right now at this moment. Consciousness is present, and awareness is present. Consciousness or awareness is like that; **I liken it to space because you cannot grasp it**, as there is nothing there. **What you are transcends all thoughts and feelings.** If you could not think about yourself, you would lose your entire sense of self. You as you are would not disappear, but you as you imagine you are would. I might be something different from who I imagined myself to be. This is a space that starts to expand when we look closely. We sense a great possibility that we could be free of the person we imagined ourselves to be and are something entirely different. The reason we can miss it is because **it is omnipresent and it is part of every experience.** It is as if consciousness says, “Aha! I have been lost in thought,

and I have been lost in feeling, and I have been lost in the past, and I have been lost in my ideas of the future and all that I thought I was—and none of it defines who I am.” What a revelation! What a great freedom to realize. Waking up is not a self-centered act—in the end it is what frees us up from self-centeredness if we do it correctly. Hopefully it frees us up to have a joyful and benevolent presence in the world, which speaks to our deepest sense of being.

- **Know thyself**

As the great spiritual teacher Nisargadatta Maharaj memorably said, “When I look within and see that I am nothing, that is wisdom. When I look without and see that I am everything, that is love. Between these two, my life turns.” To “know thyself” **by looking inside is to see beyond thoughts**, sensations, memories, imagination, and self-centered thinking, because none of that is you. When we look inward, we discover we are nothing and realize that nothingness is full, it is profound, and it is what we are. When we look outward, we see that everything is connected to everything else. Whether you choose to look outward or inward, you will find your true nature.

- **You are the total environment**

Everything exists as a coherent whole: “I am the whole thing; in no way am I separate or other than the whole thing.” Your body, the thoughts in your head, your feelings, the blood coursing through your veins, your heartbeat, your breath—everything that makes you what we call “human” depends upon the whole environment.

- **Experience prior to thought**

Awakening is when we finally experience our being without the interface of any conceptual understanding. What we wake up from is the conceptual world. Your sense of reality is no longer held hostage to these concepts. This is how spiritual teachings guide us into the unknown. The unknown is a way of describing the direct experience of each instant instead of through the indirect, distorting mechanism of thought. Then and only then do we experience absolute unity and absolute oneness—**the whole world is one’s own being and all of existence is God**, including the one who recognizes that. The reality of anything is not the idea we have of anything. Well, I am awakened; therefore what I think is true. That is a truly ridiculous statement. Thoughts can never be big enough to capture the reality of anything. The thought is not the thing that it represents.

- **The simple joy of being**

There is no negotiation; you must let go of this comfort principle that can so easily start to dominate your life. You realize you are in an environment that you must adapt to; the environment is not going to adapt itself to you. It is a relief to let all that comfort seeking go and enter something else. A change of orientation, a turning of the heart, a letting go. What makes you happy? What contributes to your happiness? What takes away from your happiness? We can notice that we are happiest when we are contributing to the welfare of someone else; **being a positive or benevolent presence in someone else’s life is a great contributor to happiness**. I find satisfaction in actions like contributing to the welfare of others, loving well, and connecting with nature. **We need**

to be quiet and contemplate what nourishes happiness.

• **Pristine Buddha mind**

No matter how conditioned you are, the most essential aspect of consciousness is unconditioned and will always remain pristine. Put simply, the consciousness that is aware of the conditioned nature of your mind, body, and even the conditioned nature of consciousness is itself unconditioned. The ground of consciousness is itself unconditioned, not the thinking mind, not the conceptualizing mind. The consciousness that is aware of the conditioning is not itself conditioned. This unconditioned, pristine Buddha mind exists within everyone. **The unconditioned nature of consciousness is like the nature of the sky**—clouds come, clouds go, snow comes and goes, but the sky has its own purity and its own way of being unobstructed. This is why the sky is used as a metaphor for the unconditioned nature of consciousness, because it is already there and because no matter what is going on within the sky—or within consciousness—it still remains as pure as it ever was. Clouds and snow are things that exist within the space of the sky, not truly obscuring the sky at all.

• **Being still**

Even speaking the words leads one to experience a stillness. We are not trying to be still, and we are not taking the words as an instruction or something we must do. Notice being still, it already exists. Every time we meet each other, we meet being. I do not mean it always feels good, as sometimes being feels terrible, but the pure experience of being itself is freedom. **Nothing is required for you to be.** The profound sense of “all is well.” When we are connected to this, we have a new foundation from which to live life and meet challenges.

• **Exploring birth, life and death**

If you had no memory whatsoever, you would not experience yourself as your everyday ideas and feelings about yourself; you would have nothing with which to generate a self. **The ego is only derived through thoughts and memory** and whatever the current feeling state is. That is how it constructs itself from moment to moment; it is created every instant through memory, the act of self-talk, and the feelings that self-talk and memory generate. The boundaries names give to things are illusions; there are not boundaries, because everything runs into everything else, just like birth, life, and death, a boundaryless experience of being. This brings an extraordinary sense of freedom and well-being and intimacy with the total environment and with our oneness with all things. The ego self does not survive death and the transformation of form. We do not somehow show up from nothing and become someone only to disappear into nothing again—that is an impossibility. The habit of naming things seems to cut them off from their environment, although **whatever you are naming never exists independent of an environment.**

• **You are the Buddha**

Remember: do not mistake the menu for the meal. The description of something has almost nothing to do with whatever we are describing. Life is movement, it is change, it is like a burning flame, and it is not static. Birth, life, and death are ways of describing

change or transmutation: one thing becoming another thing. We know that life does not disappear as the form disappears. To believe something is not the same as experiencing it, to wake up from living an abstract life—from liking what your mind tells you to like, disliking what your mind tells you to dislike. We are all Buddhas; there is only the Buddha, and there is only the self. Christ is everywhere you look.