

## After Awakening

Today I'd like to talk about what life looks like after awakening and what that further journey is about. One of the misconceptions about awakening is that it is the final step and then we live happily ever after. That's a false belief propagated by the spiritual marketplace. It's an appealing fairy tale.

Awakening *is* the end of *one* journey: the journey of seeking. Once we've found what we're seeking, then obviously seeking stops. It's one of the ways that we can tell whether our awakening is genuine or not: when that seeking, efforting, and desire for things to be other than they are just drops away. It's the beginning of a whole different journey. Rather than awakening being the endpoint of spirituality, it's really the beginning of a genuine spiritual journey, and that journey is fraught with unfamiliar and more subtle challenges.

One of the first challenges that we may encounter is that we conceptualize what we've seen. So, let me first start by defining what we mean by "awakening." It's really the initial deep, non-conceptual seeing that what we really are is not limited to these bodies, minds, thoughts, beliefs and dogmas. It's seeing that what we are is beyond all that. We can call what's beyond that "spacious awareness" or "consciousness" – the words don't really matter. Awakening is the direct experience of, "Oh, that's what I am." It's something that we can approach conceptually but when it's recognized in our own direct experience there's just a deep knowing: "Yes, this is what I've been looking for."

After having a glimpse of our True Self, it can feel like, "I can't possibly lose this. How did I miss it in the first place? This perspective will never be lost." But, more often than not, it is lost, whether after a few hours (which was true for me and the first awakening I had), days or even months later. With its apparent disappearance, it can feel like, "It's left me. I had it and then I lost it." We can then spend a great deal of time trying to regain our awakening experience because we misinterpret what the awakening actually was. Many people, I would say most people, misinterpret it as being the fireworks, bliss, ecstasy, insight, or the realizations that can happen at the time of awakening. It is not.

Those fireworks will fade. The *experience* of awakening will fade like every other experience in our life – whether mundane or spiritual. We tend to miss the essential point of awakening by trying to hang onto the packaging (aka the bathwater) which will eventually fade. We think we've lost something. And then we try to regain the packaging, a process that can go on for decades if we keep looking for the wrong thing. We need to notice the essence of what was seen at the moment of awakening. We can enjoy the fireworks much more if we are not grasping at the idea of their continuance.

A pitfall of awakening is that we can conceptualize what was seen, what was realized, and package it: "Oh, I've had the experience of awakening; now *I'm* awakened." So, it becomes very much about the ego feeling like it's somehow special and entitled as a result of having had this experience: "It was long sought after, finally achieved, and now *I* can claim it as something that's *mine*." That is a dangerous interpretation – both

to yourself and others. We can call people that have fallen into that trap “enlightened egos,” where the enlightenment, the realization, is being used for personal enhancement, power etc. It is not uncommon.

Another misconception is that life will be perpetually blissful after awakening, that we’ll never again have any difficulties, or that shadow parts of ourselves will never arise. This also isn't true, and it can be quite surprising when challenging parts of ourselves that may have been kept at bay our whole life begin to arise. We see ourselves acting out of this “darker side of ourselves” and it surprises us. The danger here is not that it's arising. The fact that it's arising is necessary; it is our unconscious informing us, “Okay you're ready to face this material; let's get it out in the open; let's get a good look at it and let it be cleansed by the light of day.” But instead, the risk here is saying, “Well now that I'm an awake person, I shouldn't feel this, so I'll just hide it away. I'll pretend it's not there.” That doesn't work for long because the energy to hide it empowers it.

Another myth: we believe that life will get easier because we're awake, but what is actually more true is that the path gets narrower, and when we fall off the path, when we do something that's not in integrity to our own realization, when we act out of a personal need that's not appropriate, when we say something that's not true, the pain of it is far worse than that identical action prior to awakening. So, in that sense, the path gets narrower and the penalties get more severe.

However, to be clear, when we are in alignment with an ever deepening understanding and appreciation of awakening, life does get easier. Not because we always get what we want, but because we become ever happier with whatever life gives us.

Then there's challenges in the form of what could be called testing, but it's really just life that's giving us a chance to deepen our awakesness, despite external circumstances. It is like life saying, “Can you be awake now? How about now?” There can be challenging events in our life and the question is can we stay in consciousness, in integrity, while those exterior events happen which may be very difficult? Examples of these difficult challenges can be serious illness (yourself or loved ones), financial loss, the loss of relationships, etc.

One thing to be clear about life after awakening is that it's not this body-mind that wakes up; the body-mind doesn't wake up to an improved version of itself. It's really awakesness that awakens. The Formless recognizing itself in form.

How that awakesness functions through this conditioned mind and body is brand new territory for us; it feels like we don't know how to act, we don't know what motivates us anymore. It can be a very puzzling time in a sense because there can be this period of bliss and enjoyment where things couldn't be smoother: it feels like you're in the zone and you'll try to stretch that honeymoon out as long as possible, maybe a year or two if you're really good at it. And then there comes a period that's been called in Zen “the wintertime of enlightenment,” in which everything is still fine, everything is good, but it feels dry, stark, empty. It really feels like a time of fully emptying this body-mind. Old motivations and things that used to give us juice in the past don't seem to function anymore. This can be a very puzzling period. Relationships, careers can fall

away. It can be a time of confusion as if wandering aimlessly in the dark. And there's no apparent way out of it other than being willing to let go of our old way of being and to surrender to the draining away of all our old motivations. It's a time to fully empty the cup. And then even after it feels like it couldn't be emptier, there's still a bit of a gap before gradually a new kind of energy begins to flow through us. How that energy flows through us is really an art of listening, being receptive, being willing to be in service to an energy that feels like it's coming from beyond us somehow. Certainly, from the perspective of the body-mind it feels like it's coming from beyond us. We could call this the energy of life itself, or the divine, rather than our old ego-motivated will power.

There's a transition in identity; it can happen at the moment of awakening, but much more common is a gradual shift from, "I'm a person having this awake experience" to the identity actually shifting to the awakeness and noticing from that awakeness: that this body-mind having a human experience. It feels like it's dissociative, that's what it may sound like, but it's not; it's really learning how that energy flows through this body-mind, and the body-mind learning to allow that energy to animate us and function in this world. And because there's a recognition that what I am is beyond this – that spacious awareness, consciousness, is beyond life and death, being hurt, and self-judgment – that spaciousness is then able to act freely in this world because there's no fear. The fear drops away: the fear of death, embarrassment, being judged, etc. All that drops away, so we're actually free to be in the world rather than the very limited, fear-based position of using awakeness to escape from the world.

I'd like to also mention that this period after awakening isn't a single point of transition. Usually, the first awakening is awakening from our mind, awakening from thought, freedom from the tyranny of thought, where we no longer believe everything that runs through our mind. There's also a freedom from the tyranny of our emotions; it doesn't mean that we don't have our full range of emotions, but that we're not functioning at the mercy of whatever emotion happens to flow through our body. And then there's also an even deeper and in some ways more mysterious awakening that has to do with our existential grip on life – the survival instinct taken to the extreme where everything is seen in terms of personal survival. This is when people become fearful as they approach awakening; there is often the sense that this is really what's at stake. Ultimately, this sense of, "I am giving up my insistence on survival." This is not necessarily about physical survival but psychological survival: "me" as an individual existing in this world. That's what's at stake and that's actually what causes the fear when people get close to awakening. Because psychological survival is indeed what is at stake. But it can feel very much like pending physical death.

There is an old Sufi directive "To die before you die." This is psychological death, obviously. What dies is the personal self's will to survive and what opens to our empty center is the One Life, the divine which can flow with less hindrance.

In just these few minutes, I hope that I've explored some of the areas and territory of life beyond awakening. It's a very mysterious process because before awakening it's mostly us at the wheel attempting to drive the vehicle in the direction of greater peace and happiness; after awakening it's everything to do with letting go, allowing and

surrendering to this much vaster aspect of ourselves that's not different from our deepest nature. It includes that and it includes everything else as well. So, that's a very brief outline of some of the features of the journey after awakening.

Enjoy the ride.

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