

Before Awakening – The Journey to Awaken

By Don Oakley

What is this journey towards awakening? For many of us, the initial impetus is often deep suffering, tragedy, perhaps loss of our health, finances or relationships, or death of a loved one. And everything that we've been taught from very young children as the key to happiness in this lifetime – being successful, having a good relationship, having a rewarding job – somehow in those moments of crisis, feels like it's just not enough; however good it's been, it's not quite enough.

We've seen famous movie stars that have everything in the world and yet they want a little bit more – more fame, money, relationships, whatever. Life as it is not quite enough. So, this sense of not enough, that something's not quite right, that my life doesn't feel fulfilled, is actually a powerful driving force towards awakening. Without that driving force, we'd probably be quite content with our life. Unfortunately, most of us, when confronted by this feeling do whatever it takes to distract ourselves and make that feeling go away, even temporarily.

But when we look at that feeling as something instructive, we can be grateful, or at least allow the difficult times in our life to be so; and I'd suggest when we look back on our life, and if we're being honest with ourselves, we can see that it's the most difficult times that have been the most transformative for us. This is odd when you think about it because it's exactly those difficult, but transformative, situations that we do our utmost to avoid. We strenuously avoid our own transformation!

I don't mean that we need to seek out suffering. Life is a wonderful teacher. From that perspective we can see situations as events that arise *for* our own benefit rather than something that Life is doing *to* us. We can begin to see difficult situations as life nudging us in the direction of a deeper awareness of our being.

Life's challenges are usually the first impetus towards awakening. And then we often hear that spirituality, meditation, and contemplation will give me peace and joy.

So, we sit down to meditate and remember the directives from millennia past: "know thyself" and "look within." But when we sit down to meditate, there's just this non-stop stream of thoughts going through our mind. Then our meditation teacher tells us that what we should be doing is quieting our mind, so we try to do that and it doesn't work. It seems to energize our mind even more when we try to manipulate and control it. It's almost like two factions in our mind: one doing what it's doing (the stream of consciousness); and then this other thought process saying that that shouldn't be happening. Having this in-house war does not lead to peace.

The fact is that this thought stream is happening. In the awakening game, being honest with ourselves is critical. In this case we can simply acknowledge that thoughts are happening: We can notice that we don't actually control those thoughts; We can't turn them on and off. This is a huge realization: that thoughts happen without our consent and they are not under our control. We might even question whether or not they are even "our" thoughts. We can recognize that we are not defined by those thoughts.

These random annoying thoughts are just some debris that we've picked up along the way.

If you look at a very young baby, they are fully conscious, fully aware of everything that they see in their field of vision. They don't know what it means; they don't have names for it, and they don't have opinions about it; but everything's fully within their vision. They're taking it all in, and they're in awe. But, they have not yet learned the human ability to self-reflect.

We weren't born with the thoughts that now pester us: we have adopted them along the way. The biggest untruth that we have been taught and now believe is that we are separate individuals walking around in a great big world having to look out for ourselves and protect ourselves from all manner of physical and psychological threats.

Meditation is a useful practice because it gives us an up close and personal look at how our minds operate. One of the things that's possible to see is that there are moments of silence: moments when the thought process stops, if even for a split second. We tend not to pay attention to these brief silent pauses. These occur somewhat often in our lives - not only in meditation – but we dismiss their significance.

If we're suddenly surprised by a cat jumping out of the bushes on a dark night, or if we come around the corner and there's some magnificent rainbow, there's a moment of awe before our mind comes in and says, "Oh, what a wonderful rainbow." And during the lovemaking, hopefully we're not thinking.

These are just a few examples of times in our life when thought stops. Noticing that these pauses happen is very instructive because it means that what we are continues to exist in the absence of thought; therefore, what we truly are isn't dependent on thought. If it's not dependent on thought, it's not dependent on having the right set of beliefs; it's not dependent on having the right dogma, the right opinions.

What we are is beyond all concepts; what we are has to be larger than a *concept* about what we are. Those small gaps between thoughts are instructive as to what our deeper nature is. And that silence is still aware, still alive, just without the content of our conditioned minds. That's the doorway to awakening. We can approach it conceptually; we can try to get our heads around it. That's okay – it's maybe helpful. But it's not awakening.

Having a concept about awakening is not the same thing as having a full-body mind-blowing sense of, "Oh, what I am is not limited to this body-mind. It is consciousness: awake, spacious consciousness that is not limited to the body, not subject to birth and death." Having a concept about awakening (or adopting a belief about what it is) and having a full-body recognition of it is the difference between freedom and imprisonment.

We can't manipulate or intuit ourselves to awakening. Our job is to get in the vicinity of it: to get to the point where we're grace-prone for awakening to happen to us. We get in that ballpark by noticing these moments of silence, being grateful when they

come and not being ungrateful when they disappear for a while. Again and again, being grateful when we step back into that awareness.

Mindfulness may help because it provides us with some separation between what we are and our thought stream. Mindfulness is also something to go beyond because it's not "me" watching my thoughts; it's really spacious awareness within which thoughts happen. Another helpful exercise is to take a walk in nature without the compulsion to name, label, and analyse everything we see. It's possible to walk down a path and notice the panorama; to notice the intricacies of nature, of the beauty, without saying, "Oh, how intricate, how beautiful." Just simple perception, without the narrator.

And if we have the opportunity and discipline to have a formal daily practice, in the form of sitting, meditating, that's wonderful. But I would say almost as important, if not more important, is to bring ourselves back to that space of noticing that this awareness is present many times throughout the day. We don't need 45 minutes to do that. We can do it when we're stopped at a stop light; we can do it when we're waiting for a checkout at the grocery store. There are many opportunities to pause during the day.

We can recognize simply, "Oh, yes. I still exist. I'm here. I'm alive. I may not know what 'I' means, but there's this sense of awareness, of aliveness, of being." The more we can sense into that, the more we become attuned to that – the existence of that awareness beyond our thoughts, bodies, and physical sensations – the more we become grace-prone.

These are some of the things we can practice to get ourselves in the vicinity of a moment of vulnerability when we let our guard down and grace rushes in and shows us what we really are. And we could call that awakening. It's not the whole package, it's not the end of the line (there doesn't seem to be an end of the line within the human form); but it is a very, very significant transition where we transcend the belief: "This is the full extent of my existence." It's freeing; it's an unburdening and that unburdening feels so good that it is often experienced as a moment of bliss, joy, belly laughter, or just relief that the burden that we were carrying our whole life to protect this body-mind, to protect our feelings, is no longer necessary.

So, in very brief form, these are some of the practices that can be used to get ourselves in the vicinity of awakening.

I wish you many blessings on *your* own journey.

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