

The Nature of Awakening Part I

Part I: The Nature of First Awakening

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Printed in *Paradigm Shift*, Issue 43, July 2009, UK

There are all kinds of misconceptions about awakening. These usually take the form of the *pre*-conceptions of the ego, created as it projects what it would like to get out of awakening. Some common preconceptions are: instant freedom from all suffering, eternal bliss, eternal peace, omniscience, psychic powers, unconditional love, transcendence, ascension, expansion and all-pervading oneness.

If any of these pre-conceptions are examined, they are easily seen to be nothing but disguised desires of the ego, which hopes to finally get what it desires when it awakens. The problem with this is that the ego will never awaken. The ego cannot awaken—it can *never* awaken. Awakening, by definition, only happens as some core sense of the ego actually *disappears*. It is not the ego that awakens; the ego is the *barrier* to awakening.

So, if the ego does not awaken, who does? Imagine you are having a dream that you are a cow, and suddenly you wake up and you are back in your bed as yourself. You would not say that the cow woke up and realized it was you. You didn't turn into a wise cow. You would say that you were always yourself but were lost in the dream of being a cow, and that you *awoke out of that dream of being a cow*. The moment you stopped pretending/dreaming you were a cow, you were back in your normal experience of yourself. *The dream character didn't wake up; the dreamer did.*

It is like this with awakening. The human person, the separate human ego that you take yourself to be, is like the cow in the dream. As long as you are dreaming that particular dream of separateness, you experience yourself to be that human person. Awakening does not mean that the human ego wakes up; it means *you wake out of the dream of being that ego*. It was a false identity. And although as that false identity you may have had all kinds of experiences of bliss, or peace, or knowingness, or transcendence, or expansion and or even oneness, these were all different possible *states* that you could go into *as that identity*. There was always a particular *someone* that had bliss or peace or that became expanded or experienced itself as one with everything. And these are lovely experiences, very WOW experiences, but WOW experiences are expanded ego-states; they have nothing to do with awakening. WOW experiences are like the high of a big inhalation, filled with excitement; awakening is more like a quiet exhalation that relaxes you back into your inner self.

When awakening first happens, surprisingly, the first experience is often confusion or loss, although there are lots of other possibilities. Let's go back to the cow dream but make the dream deeper. Imagine you have dreamed this cow dream in an ongoing way for a few million or so years. And just before you woke up you

were being chased by a mountain lion, so your cow-heart was pounding, all your thoughts were on survival, every nerve was striving to escape the mountain lion and, in the middle of all that, you suddenly awaken from your dream and find yourself in a bed. Imagine the confusion and loss. There is the realization that you are not really a cow—you *are not who you thought you were*—but your head is still filled with all your cow memories (millions of years of them) and with all the energy and movement of the dream. There is so much going on that you hardly know who you are, you just know that you are not the cow and there is a feeling of loss at having lost the dream and all the identity that was invested in it. Initial awakening is often like that.

But there are other possibilities. I have had students awaken in classes who are simply moved into a place of deep peacefulness. Others have been moved into a place of quiet happiness. And others just start laughing hysterically. Their experience is of how funny it is to suddenly realize they are not really a cow, in spite of how long they have experienced themselves as that. One woman, a few moments after awakening, when she realized that awakening was not what she was expecting, insisted that I ‘put it back’—essentially meaning that I should restore her to her dream of being a cow. But the common thread in all these initial awakenings is that the core sense of ‘I’, which sits in the heart, has disappeared. Some initially find this confusing, some find it peaceful, some experience it as loss, and some find it funny, but in all cases, it is gone.

The nature of the confusion that can arise from initial awakening needs to be explained in more detail. Unlike the dreams we have at night, which are very fleeting, our dream of being an ‘I’, an ego, is very ancient. And as an ‘I’ we have had eons of experience incarnating through the ages—as all kinds of different life forms, culminating in this particular human life—but always as an ‘I’. Our local consciousness is so fully and densely conditioned by this memory that there is little room for anything else—except more conditioning. And we do have more conditioning—we have all the eons of accumulated ancestral experience, passed down to the current body-mind through the genetic memory in the DNA. And all of this also richly and deeply conditions our local consciousness. And there is more yet—there are higher dimensional blueprints, expressly designed to help hold us in particular identities, there are mind fixations, aversions and attachments, fears and longings, and all kinds of karmic structures that I won’t detail here. It is a huge web of conditioning, and when awakening initially happens and there is the realization that you are not the spider, the ego, in the center of that web, the spider disappears—but not the web. And this is what creates the confusion.

When the spider/ego disappears, you know that you are not ‘I’. And yet the web of conditioning is still thinking about ‘I’ just as if this realization had never occurred. This leftover web of conditioning functions as a storehouse of ego-memory that we are still heavily identified with. So, the ‘story’ of who you are, as well as your issues, still continue in this web of ego-imprinted consciousness (whether you are noticing it or not), and the emotional reactivity you had when you believed you were ‘I’ continues on just as if your realization of the illusion of this

had never occurred—*except that there is more inner space now*. The good news is that this inner space creates more detachment and enables you to see your drama and conditioning for what it is. You now have the space to be with your conditioning without being as engaged in it, giving you space to release it. And this space and the background beingness that arises in it completely changes your relationship to your life and your reality. The bad news is that the new space acts like a clean mirror that enables you to see your stuff much more clearly, so it is more in your face, which can make you feel more overwhelmed and can even make it harder, because of your habitual identification with the stuff (and with anything moving in your consciousness) to stay in that space. This leftover ego consciousness is extraordinarily deep and dense, and you still tend to get lost in it—even though the core of its reality is gone, even though you have more space.

And all of this is amplified in the industrialized world, because the more industrialized the culture, the more we tend to live in our heads, in our minds and our ‘story’, where the web of conditioning is most dense. This tends to make initial awakening rather schizoid. On the one hand, you are stuck in our heads in your old conditioning and reactivity, but in the middle of this, you somehow know that it is all wrong, that it is not who you are—the space keeps reminding you of that. Even living in your head, you almost can’t help but sense, in an ongoing way, the peaceful ‘space’ that has emerged in your heart, where ‘I’ used to be. You know that this space is the awakening that has occurred, but from your head you can’t quite touch it to really know what it means. And if you let go out of your head and drop into that space, your mind and story disappear for a moment, and then you are back in your head wondering what happened, because there isn’t a mind-memory to tell you. It’s as if there are two completely separate realities going on in the one body-mind—and there are. From your point of view in your mind and head, it is clear that *everything has changed*, that there is something always there in the background now that is being, that is free, that has changed your relationship to everything; and yet, at the same time, because the thinking and story and emotional reactivity are the same, it is as if *nothing has changed at all*. In addition, you will continually forget that you know that you are not ‘I’ and you will continually remember again. All of this is quite confusing. And the mind, of course, keeps trying to figure out what is going on, but it can’t, which perpetuates the confusion and amplifies it. The confusion doesn’t end until, at some point in time, your mind gives up the struggle to understand what has happened to you, which enables you to relax into the new state, accepting it for what it is.

I’m sure that much of this information comes as a surprise. It was a surprise for me as well, due to my own preconceptions and fantasies about the nature of awakening! For some people, this surprise will even manifest as disappointment. If you have invested a lot of time and effort into your spiritual path, secretly fantasizing about becoming the king or queen of the castle at the end of the road, and then you get to what you thought was the end of the road and not only isn’t there a castle but there is no king or queen—in fact you are still standing on the

same endless road, except your relationship to it has changed—you are liable to feel some disappointment.

It is often said that there is nothing in awakening for the ego. This is true but can be misunderstood, because the leftover ego-conditioning may well try to claim the awakening and use it to generate status and position for itself—even though it is not the ego that is awake (and the ego knows it is not awake). It would then seem as if the ego did get something out of awakening. So, it might be more accurate to say ‘there is no place in awakening for the ego’. Wherever there is awakening is, there is no ego; wherever there is ego, there is no awakening.

The ego is the familiar ‘you’—all the emotions and attitudes and positions and identities with these and with the body that are part of a particular unique sense of separate self. This is your dream. What wakes up from that dream is the subtle, silent ‘you’, the awareness-you, the you without name or form or image or concept. This is the you that is left when all the identities you have formed in consciousness stop. This is the you that has nothing to do with the movement of consciousness, or even with consciousness itself. It is not even the soul, which is just another identity. What wakes up is what you are without any ‘I’ or me or thought or anything personal or any self-reflection. There is no place for ego in this kind of awareness.

But with initial awakening, you do not realize your true nature so much as realize what you are not: you are not ‘I’. Initial awakening happens in a moment, after many lifetimes of ‘ripening’, and it marks the end of a very long incarnational road. Life is never the same. But in spite of the finality of that ending, it is simultaneously just the beginning of a new process of deepening and widening the awakening so that more and more of what that awakens is shines through the local human consciousness. Eventually, if this process goes deep enough, awakening starts to look more and more like the ego’s early preconceptions of it. Except that in the ego’s preconception, the ego was always there in the middle of its projection of awakening. For instance, in its preconception of awakening as bliss, it imagined itself as feeling eternally blissful. But the reality is that there is no ego experiencing that bliss in the end—it is just the nature of what is, experiencing Itself. It is the formless you that you truly are—awareness itself—experiencing yourself as you have always been, and so it is simply natural, natural being. When this process has gone deep enough, there may still be pain, but there is no one left generating a drama that is creating *suffering*. So there can finally be an end to suffering, it’s just that there will be no one there to enjoy it or claim it, no ‘I’ to say ‘I am finally free of suffering’. It will just be the nature of what you truly are, being yourself, without image or self-reference.

Of course, the question naturally arises: what can be done to accelerate this initial awakening? The most basic answer is to spend time with beings that are already awake. A footnote to that answer is that some awake beings are better at facilitating awakening than others, and the ones that are best at facilitating awakening may or may not be more awake than others who do not facilitate this so well. Many awaketeachers operate from within an awake lineage, and in those

situations there is also the power of the lineage at work. In my lineage, for instance, which is the Merlin lineage of VortexHealing®, the divine source of the lineage seems to have awakened its students as part of its ‘plan’ for the manifested lineage on earth. That source creates all the ripening that is needed for students, as they take a progression of healing classes, so by the time they get to our Core Veil class, I know that they have been sufficiently ripened that they can all be awakened in that class. (The Core Veil is the energetic/consciousness structure that maintains the dream of ‘I’.) I don’t have to think about this or do anything special, because the source of the lineage is taking care of this—*intends* to take care of this. With other teachers, the vehicle for ripening is typically the simple activity of the student spending as much time meditating with the teacher as they can, aligning their consciousness to the consciousness of the awake teacher. The teachers who are better at facilitating awakening naturally align back, speeding up the process. We are lucky today in that there are many awake teachers available for someone who is interested in awakening. (In the next issue of Paradigm Shift you can read ***Part 2: Exercises to Ripen Towards Awakening.***)

Often, I will get an email from a student who has had a powerful spiritual experience and the student wants to know if this is awakening. The answer is found by looking at whether there is still a sense of ‘I’ residing in the heart. In fact, this is the only true test of awakening—not external behavior, not symptoms, not subjective experiences of peace or bliss or oneness. The only test of this initial awakening is whether or not the ‘I’ has disappeared from the heart. A student may have a *taste* of awakening (different from mystical experiences), where they feel they have disappeared, but if I can see that the ‘I’ is still there in the heart, awakening hasn’t happened. Sometimes, as a student gets close to awakening, enough of that sense of ‘I’ has broken down that it is hard for them to sense it. But no matter how subtle it is, if it is still there, awakening has not happened. The other ‘false positive’ that can happen, especially with students of neo-advaita teachers, is that the student truly has gotten that there is no ‘I’, but they have gotten this in their head only, and it has not penetrated to their heart. Getting it in their head does create a change in their consciousness, but it still is not true awakening. It is more like a taste of awakening in the mind, and sometimes neo-advaita students get stuck in that place.

Ironically, even though all the spiritual texts have said that fully awakening totally destroys the ego, the human ego cannot help but desire awakening. It is like the moth going towards the flame. Even if the moth knew what was to happen, it has been programmed to go towards the flame and would therefore go. You won’t seek awakening until you are called to by that which you are, but when you are called to awakening, you will go, whether you know where you are going or not, whether you know why you are going or not, whether that is to a VortexHealing class, to an awake teacher in a different lineage, or to one sitting in a cave in the Himalayas. Or perhaps you will awaken without a teacher. Perhaps you are already ripe enough that it will just happen by grace, or you will feel compelled to sit and meditate in your own bedroom for hours and weeks on end. You will go wherever

you are called to go, at exactly the 'right time', to your bedroom or to the Himalayas or to a particular teacher or teaching. Your path will always arise in front of you, as that which you eternally are calls to that which you seem to be, so that which you truly are can be awake, here and now, in midst of this human experience.

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