

AM I AWAKE?

Alan Zundel at the HeartAwake Center, May 2nd 2007

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I have been talking here week after week for about six months about awakening, about being awake, which to my mind is synonymous with what the Buddhists call enlightenment or what the Christian mystics have called union with God. I prefer the term awakening because I think it has a lot in common with our literal awakening each morning, which I'll talk a little bit more about in a moment.

But my subject tonight really is the question, "am I awake?" Have you ever asked yourself, "am I awake?" I can imagine different types of responses to this question. One would be, "no, I've never thought about it." [laughs] Or, going a little bit further, someone could say, "if I did ask myself the question, the answer would be 'no, I'm not awake because I know I'm pretty messed up, I'm still confused, I still have problems, I still find myself going into states of mind of anger towards people, or resentments or anxieties or whatever it might be, and that to me does not seem like an awake state, so no, if I ask myself if I'm awake the answer has to be 'no.'"

Or yet another alternative answer could be, "Well, if I ask myself 'am I awake?', maybe yes I am; maybe I sense that I am awake, that I feel this sense of stillness within me, and I feel like I've gotten my life fairly well together, I feel like I understand when people speak about spiritual matters—it becomes pretty clear to me what they're talking about—so maybe I *am* awake, but I'm not certain. I'm not certain that this is what they're talking about, and I've always heard that you're not supposed to say that you're enlightened if you *are* enlightened, so if I'm even thinking about it, maybe I'm not." [laughs] Or, "maybe if someone would acknowledge it for me, somebody who is an expert to come and tell me in a convincing way, I would know that I'm awake then instead of being uncertain about it but I feel that maybe the answer is 'yes' but I just don't know for sure."

What I want to say first of all is that it's good to ask yourself that question, "am I awake?" It's a good question to ask. And here's where I want to make a comparison with our ordinary waking up, like getting out of bed in the morning. Usually we think dichotomously, where you're either asleep or awake. And if you ask yourself that question, meaning in the more literal sense "am I awake?", it wouldn't make any sense to ask that question if you were deeply asleep. It wouldn't occur to you; you wouldn't be asking, right? So it makes no sense when you're asleep. And it wouldn't—it doesn't make a lot of sense to ask yourself that if you're wide awake and you know it. You don't have to ask yourself, because when you are wide awake you know you're awake.

But there is a transitional state being sleeping and waking that we go through, sometimes quickly, sometimes it takes longer. In the earliest stages you can imagine yourself dreaming as you're asleep, and in that dream something happens and you say, "am I awake?" Maybe something strange is happening in the dream and you're thinking, "well am I dreaming or am I

awake?” But as soon as you ask that question in your dream, that means something in you is rousing. Something in you is coming toward the borderline of being awake and being asleep, and if you dwell on that question you’ll start to wake up, right? It’s surfacing. That question comes from the part of your mind that wakes up, that’s conscious.

Now if you do start to awaken, to the point where you can sit up or open your eyes and look around, on some mornings when you are particularly tired it can take a while to get fully awake. You might even lie in bed and daydream, then lapse back into sleep. The transition from daydreaming to sleeping and dreaming is sometimes a real subtle one. So you can lapse in and out of sleep, you can get up and be groggy, you can even go, get dressed, have a cup of coffee, go into work and feel like you’re awake, but then when you sit down to do your job you might start to nod off a little bit, to feel like you’re not quite as alert as you should be and maybe ask yourself, “Am I awake? Come on, wake up!”

So when this question “am I awake?” makes sense is in this transitional state between being asleep and being awake. The question helps you to rouse out of your sleepiness. From the earliest stages where you can ask the question to the later stages, the point of that question is to rouse the part of yourself that is awakening, and to bring it more fully into that awakensness. To shake off the sleepiness, and find yourself more alert, more attentive—more awake.

This process of spiritual awakening is similar to waking up from sleep in that there are transitional states. For some people they’re longer, for some people they’re shorter, but there are transitional states. It’s not simply dichotomous in the sense that you’re either spiritually asleep or fully awake. Sometimes you hear stories about people who have a sudden experience of awakening, but often if you read further in their life then they go through another stage of trying to ground that awakening and clear up a lot of business in their mind, and that’s transitional. It means you’re not fully awake. You’re nodding off a little bit; you’re having some throwbacks from sleepiness come back and overtake you.

If you in your day to day life ask yourself, “am I awake?”, meaning “am I spiritually awake?”, that question itself is going to throw you into a more awake state. Now the difference between the awake state and the asleep state—think back to asking the question “am I awake?” and saying, “well, I couldn’t be awake because I still have these confusions and these states of mind that are anxious or angry” or one thing or another. When you’re in that state of mind and you remember to ask yourself “am I awake?”, that question helps bring out the part of you that’s awake and dissipate that state of mind. In other words, it counters that state of mind. It may be more effective or less effective depending on how strong that state of mind is, but it can help bring you more into that state of awakensness.

So if you ask that question at any point in your life, it’s helping to rouse that part of yourself. If you ask it when you’re feeling confused, when you’re feeling anxious, when you’re feeling resentful, when you’re feeling like your life is not making sense, that’s a reminder that those things are just hangovers of sleepiness that you’re trying to shake off. Because the awakensness is there, it just is a matter of shaking off these things and moving through them, becoming more and more fully awake. You can be awake for a while and then a state of mind overcomes you,

but then you move on from that and you get awake again. So it's not either/or; you can move from states of mind that don't feel very awake, to those that do feel awake.

What about this question of, "How could I be uncertain about being awake? If I were awake or enlightened, doesn't that mean I shouldn't have to ask that question?" This is another state of mind that's easy to identify with, and it's the whole problem when your awakesness is drawn into these states of mind, these emotional states or these thoughts that trap you and get you preoccupied so that you're not as aware of your awakesness and all the attention goes into the state of mind. Those kinds of thoughts, "what does it mean to be enlightened? Am I really enlightened?" are the same as other states of mind like anxiety or anger or resentment or any other identifications in your life with who you are and who you've been and who you think you're becoming and things like this. When these thoughts become preoccupations and you become sucked into them to the point where you lose that sense of inner peace, then it's something that's blocking the awakesness. You could be very awake, but then the question comes up and bothers you, "is this real? Am I truly awake, am I enlightened?", that question is yet another trap. It's another way of keeping your mind in charge of what's going on, and drawing you away from that awakesness into more of these turbulent, changeable states of mind. It feels unsettled because you've allowed yourself to be pulled into that unsettled state and allowed that question to bother you.

When you're awake the question won't bother you, because it won't be a concern. As I said, very similar to when you actually wake up from a real sleep, rather than this metaphoric spiritual sleep, once you're fully awake you know it and the question becomes rather meaningless to you. "Am I awake or not?" doesn't occur to you; if someone asks you, you feel like "why are you even asking me, because I'm obviously awake." It's not something that you feel you have to dwell on. It's only in that groggy state, in that state where you allow something to come between you and your awakesness that the uncertainty arises.

So the question "am I awake?" is a good question to ask yourself periodically when you remember to. It actually helps rouse you out of these other states of mind that may be clouding you and bring you into a more fully awake state. It can help you get through these transitional states, get through these bumps in the road to become more and more fully awake.

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