

Awakening from the Self

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If you ask a Buddhist what awakening or enlightenment is, they might tell you that it is the cessation of suffering. So if the Dalai Lama forgets his glasses and steps in front of a truck, would he get up afterward and say, 'Don't worry! No suffering'? No, physical pain will always be there; the kind of suffering that is being referred to is more of a mental suffering. Even if your body is physically suffering, the mental component of suffering can be at least reduced and perhaps even eliminated.

An interesting parallel is that if you ask a Christian what salvation is, a likely answer would be to go to heaven instead of hell when you die. Of course the reason to avoid hell is that you suffer there, but if you are dead your body is not present so what kind of suffering is it? The answer could be very similar, some kind of mental or spiritual suffering. What people are usually seeking in spirituality, whether they name it awakening, enlightenment, salvation, transcendence, or whatever, is at root this desire to escape from an internal sense of suffering.

There is a further parallel in how each religion describes the way to escape this suffering. The Buddhist would say the cause of suffering is craving, also called desire or attachment. The Christian would say you escape this suffering by surrendering to God, which entails letting go of all that which is not God—again letting go of attachments. Both point to attachments as the cause of this suffering. We suffer—something makes us uneasy, unhappy, unfulfilled—the suffering is somehow related to the mental condition of trying to hold on to things that are not worth holding on to, and we find relief from suffering in letting go.

Letting go is not as difficult as people might at first fear it is, as most everyone lets go of attachments at least momentarily. When you are absorbed in some creative work or feeling deep love toward someone, you let go of your usually mental preoccupations and enjoy a moment of freedom from holding on to attachments. Letting go is not hard, the hard thing is that there are one hundred and one ways that we hold on!

Attachments are based on both attractions and repulsions, attractions to things that bolster a sense of identity and repulsion from things that threaten that sense of identity. The process is similar from person to person but the identity we each hold and defend is unique. We are attracted to thoughts, emotions, and imaginings that define our role in the world, and repulsed by thoughts, emotions, and imaginings that conflict with that role.

In our mind the role becomes who we are, but there is much more to who we actually are that cannot be captured by our minds. The attempt to cling to that limited sense of self reduces our awareness of who we actually are to such cramped proportions that we feel trapped by it and thus suffer.

You can see this process clearly in politics. People take on an identity as liberal or conservative and then try to push away any sense of sharing something with the opposite identity. The sense of self becomes limited to certain thoughts, feelings, and views and those that are excluded are projected on to enemies, so you cannot acknowledge that part of you that is capable of understanding and sympathizing with the “enemy’s” point of view.

We do this not only in politics, but in religious, philosophical, national, family, professional, gender or any of a hundred other forms of identity. The sense of self becomes limited to such identities, and that is the prison. Our mind clings to the mental forms that define our identities and is repulsed by the mental forms that threaten them, and that is the root of our mental suffering.

So the spiritual path becomes a matter of letting go, letting go finally and forever, of the attachments that define our identity. That is where meditation, mindfulness, and self-examination come in—to calm to mind, pay deliberate attention, and unravel the mind’s tendency to follow the myriad attractions and repulsions that both define and limit our sense of self. This unraveling is awakening, awakening from the dream of self to what can never be so limited.

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