

## Awakening, Selfhood, and Other Minor Matters

I will have nothing new to say here.

The matter of awakening has been addressed ad nauseum in the spiritual literature. There are too many traditions to even begin to name but which include some forms of Buddhism and Hinduism; mystical Christianity, Sufism, and Kabala; most legitimate traditions of Shamanism; Taoism, and many more. All of these traditions have libraries of literature associated with them. On the modern English speaking scene, in no particular order, Loch Kelley, Judith Blackstone, Adyashanti, Rupert Spira, Sam Harris, Jack Kornfield and many, many, many others seem to be legitimately and stably grounded in a non-dual perspective to one degree or another. All have many books and Youtube videos pointing out direct entry points to awakening and explaining in various ways the awakened perspective.

Meanwhile, the term “self”, used variably in spiritual traditions and also with no agreed upon definition in western philosophy or science that I am aware of, is about as slippery a term as “consciousness”, another word that causes havoc. How to usefully enter such a minefield of terminology and why bother?

As usual for me, I have in mind as my audience the sort of people I have wound up speaking to as a psychologist or coach or meditation teacher. These folks, if they are at all interested in their own experience, often take up practices that then lead to questions about awakening and selfhood. I think it is useful to have a framework for thinking and feeling through questions that arise, and for determining what questions are not so legitimate, and so I offer here the way of framing things that I have come to. While I am sure it is not original, it seems to have been helpful to some. I offer it here in hopes it may be a useful synthesis for you. Although I should also point out that overthinking about metaphysical issues is one of the most common blocks to progress for many meditators, so think with caution and please don't spend too much time in your head.

Here's a thought:

*“Ninety percent of debate could be avoided if the participants bothered to define their terms at the outset.”*

I have seen this quote attributed to a variety of people but I believe it comes from the minor philosopher Alfred North Whitehead. In any case, it seems like good advice if we want to communicate clearly.

So what is “self” and “awakening”? Let us ponder a few ideas together slowly.

I will use “self” to mean the self I subjectively sense myself to be.

I will use “self” to mean...the self...I subjectively...sense myself...to be.

There can be many components of myself, a body based sense of self, a narrative self, a social self...There can also be self-states that shift...

Don't skip over the words. Ponder what these words might mean in your own experience of the world.

Myself angry and myself sad, myself with my mother and myself with my friend, these are often quite different selves that only feel the same in retrospect because our narrative self keeps making explanations for or ignoring all the inconsistencies, thus giving a sense of continuity...that was a pro-tip just there...Meanwhile, there is a non-dual sense of self that seems to transcend, though not deny the existence of, all the other senses of self. This non-dual sense of self seems to exist outside of time and space but not to deny time and space...to include many aspects of the personality but not be governed or hooked into the personality construct...to give access to qualities and sensibilities of reality, like bliss, love, clarity, luminosity, and suchness for examples, that are delightful, but which do not deny the horror of human suffering, planetary suffering, or the frighteningly inane and ultimately insane realities of modern political and social life in the modern world.

Whatever my sense of self currently is, dual or non-dual, I can always carefully investigate that very sense and find that it is more profoundly subtle and broad than I had previously noticed. Repeatedly investigating this sense of self, it's apparent qualities and boundaries and finding them to be always dissolvable, or never discoverable as things, or never permanent but always shifting, is one of the main meditation techniques found cross-culturally in non-dual traditions. Followers or admirers of Ramana Maharshi would call this enquiry. A Zen student would be given the Koan, "what is your original face, the one you had before your parents were born?" Many traditions ask the question, what is hearing these sounds? Or simply, what is it? All of these techniques are pointing in the same direction. The self is not what it appears to be and investigating it carefully leads to noticing your Self, or non-dual self as I am calling it here.

"Awakening" is the experiential realization, emphasis on experiential, of the non-dual self. It is seen directly that the conventional sense of self is a fiction. This experiential knowledge can come gradually or suddenly, and seems to have a variety of flavors of qualia that can occur, as well as a variety of sticking points for people to get caught up in, but is in essence either the experience of the made up quality of the self-concept, or a sense of underlying unity with everything, or both. Awakening feels like a kind of a watershed moment in the sense that one's previous sense of self can no longer be believed in. One cannot go back to the small self way of seeing things if one is truly awakened and therefore in the non-dual self perspective. However, it does appear that many people who have crossed the watershed nevertheless do sometimes get caught up in personality based garbage that was not removed by the process of awakening. It also appears that some people experience awakening and then fall back into the small self perspective, so the watershed metaphor breaks down, but still there is awakening as an experience and as a sensibility and people do seem to achieve it at times and also to lose it at times. People who are awake seem to be able to recognize each other...sometimes. There seems to be intersubjective agreement in other words...sometimes. There also seems to be a spectrum

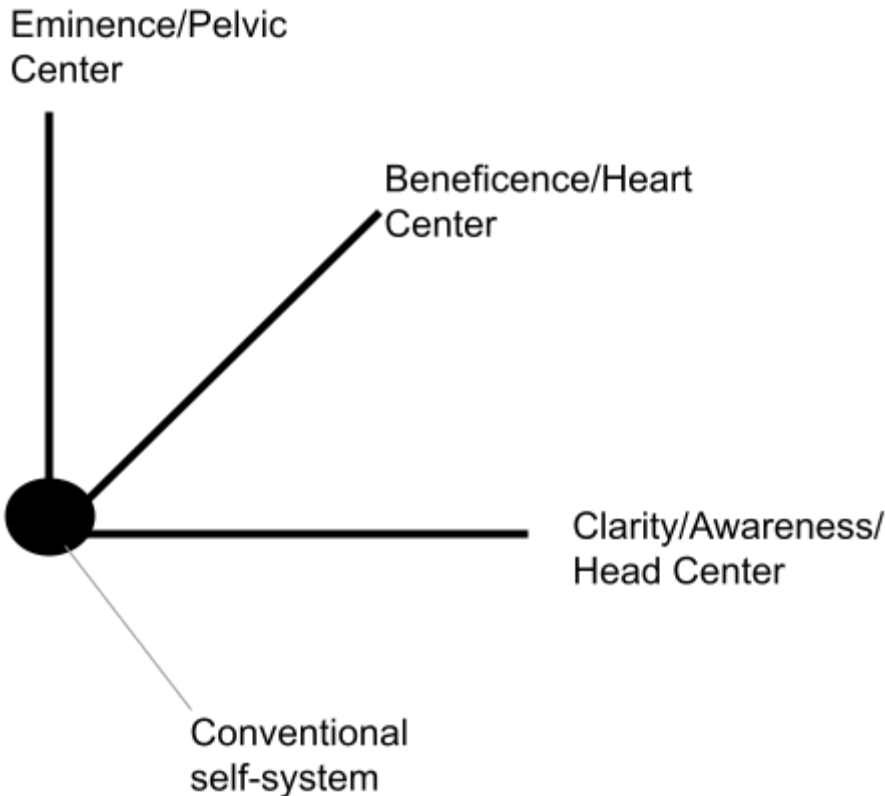
of awakening. Some people seem more awake than others in other words (this also implies there is more to do after awakening).

At least as yet there is no objective measure for awakening that I am aware of, but let me give a shout out to Dr. Zoran Josipovic of NYU, and the Burlington, VT based teacher Shinzen Young for their various contributions to spiritual and neurophysical explorations which may lead to objective criteria for understanding awakening and enlightenment. There may well be signatures, such as aspects of the gamma frequency, or locations in the brain such as the precuneus network, that actually signify awakening. If this turns out to be true we could develop bio-feedback methods of training the mind towards awakening. What a thought!

Okay, back to the essay. Hardly complete definitions, I don't want to attempt some logically unassailable philosophical discourse here, but I've given a sense of what I mean by awakening and self as a starting point. Please know that awakening and self are meant as defined above and not any of the other myriad ways the terms are used.

"Consciousness" I think I can avoid for now. Consciousness is a word that is sometimes used the way I am using the term self, sometimes used to signify the aspect of self currently in the apparent driver's seat, sometimes to signify an underlying and pervasive fundamental reality, and a whole myriad of other possible meanings. I think we can use the term if we define it carefully, but there seems to be no agreement on how best to define it, and I don't need it here, so I'm avoiding it for now.

Sometimes pictures and diagrams can be more effective than words. I came up with the following. See if they make any sense to you.



This is meant to be like the graphs you saw in your algebra classes, three axes of infinite length creating a three-dimensional space. Here I am suggesting imagining non-duality as a three dimensional space the axes of which can be thought of as having qualities of eminence, beneficence, and clarity that can be explored. The further out along each axes and the more balanced the person is in terms of the axes, the more “awakened” they seem.

Other qualities certainly might be proposed, or alternate words that resonate for the individual, but try this on experientially if you can. You can either just try to feel your way into the qualities as best you can experience them in the moment in and through your body. Or, you can do as Judith Blackstone suggests in *Realization Process*, practice locating yourself (feel yourself to be aware in, rather than aware of) certain centers in the “central channel”, the subtle energetic channel that multiple traditions claim runs from the crown of the head to the area of the perineum. Judith offers the pointers that by being in the head center, the sixth chakra in some traditions, a person can cultivate the experience and exploration of clarity or awareness; that by being in the heart center we can cultivate bliss or beneficence; and that by being in the pelvic center a person can cultivate a sense of the suchness of experience (this is a center just above the usual second chakra at about the level of your iliac crest, or an inch beneath your navel is another reference point). As with any technique you will have to give it a fair try for yourself and some guidance might be helpful, but it is up to you to do the experiential exploration. However you do it, try embodying each quality separately and then in combination and see what you notice.

Conceptually speaking I am proposing an infinite “space” that can be felt into that seems to have a non-dual character while containing certain subtle qualia. This character and these qualia become increasingly self evident as the interference of the conventional self dissipates.

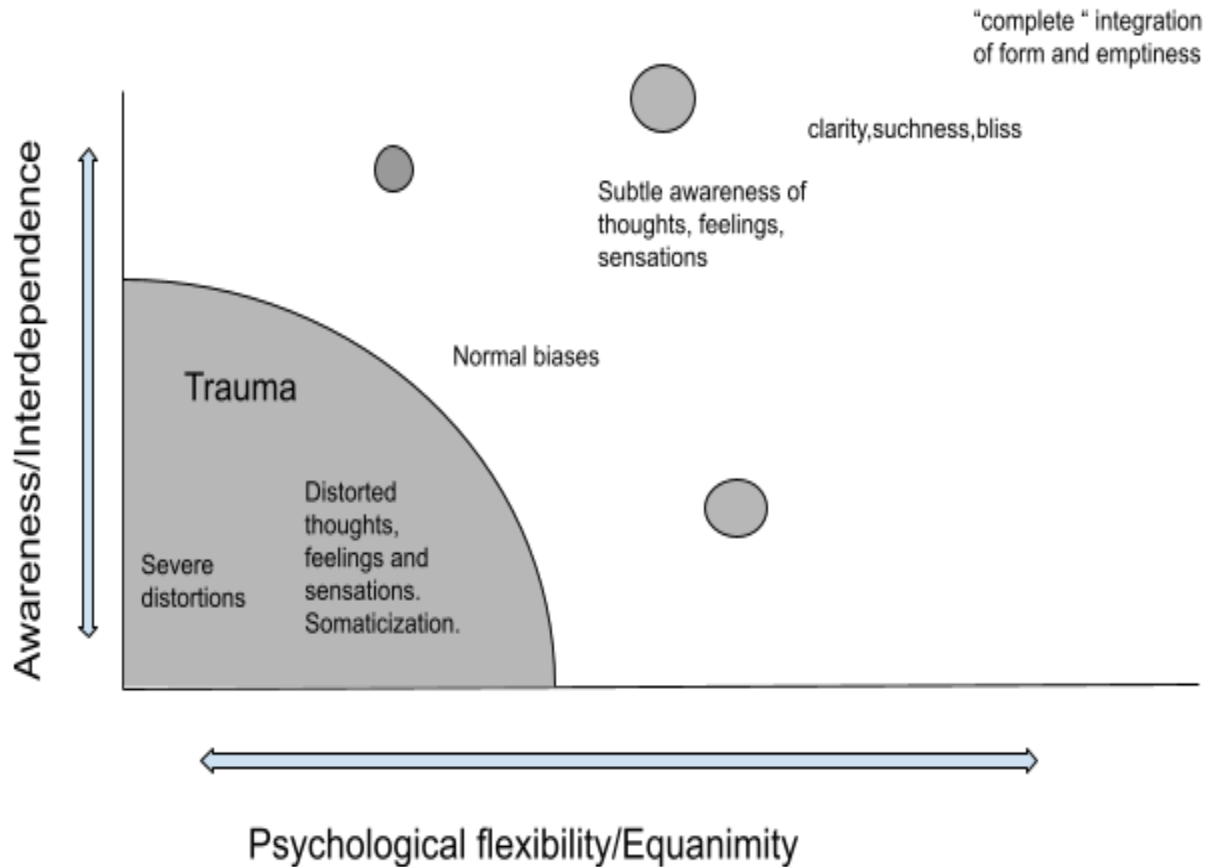
The black area labeled the conventional self-system is what most people would call an ego or a personality. It is the position from which most people seem to be operating most of the time. Their particular idiosyncratic perspective. It is thought that by slipping into a non-dual perspective that the personality is often changed, though not obliterated. As in the drawing, the person’s perspective broadens to include, but not take as the sole reference point, the personal self. Given that the potential “space” of awakening is infinite, the self-system can quickly become a relative pinpoint. However, the self system has a sort of “gravity” for most people. They meditate and move out of the narrative self somewhat, maybe even to a significant extent at times, but they haven't achieved escape velocity as it were, and they fall back.

Before awakening we generally feel located in the conventional self with few exceptions of relatively little importance, flow states for example (flow states *are* a shift out of the conventional self system but rarely lead to any significant easing of that system, and in fact are often taken as some kind of accomplishment, thus reinforcing the self-centered self system).

As we practice we either have moments of translocation to a different point in this space as a new center of reference, or we feel the centrality of the conventional self become less and less dense, or both, but we are still stuck in the hall of mirrors, looking for the looker.

After the watershed moment of awakening, from which perspective it appears that everything is awakening and therefore there are no watershed moments...or even moments at all...we see that there is no center to this space, but rather that space can simply appear to have a variety of centers, and that the conventional self is one of the least appealing possible centers to operate from if you have choices.

Well enough, but given the preponderance of stories of teachers from almost every tradition mistreating students in some way, we should take a closer look at the transition from the personal to the non-dual, because it does not appear to be a binary. Here’s another diagram.



Again, just an idea that I hope is useful, not a proposition for a new metaphysique. As with the other diagram we could certainly think of other labels for axes. We might play with two-dimensional spaces like Emptiness/Suchness, Emptiness/Love, Interoception/Exteroception, etc. And again it is the experiential exploration we are looking for here, not the conceptual.

As many of us can attest from everyday experience, we can slide along spectrums of awareness and equanimity and other spectrums we can think of, and can find ourselves feeling quite open at times, and can also find ourselves rather inflexible and upset at times. With any luck and some practice I hope that you can attest to more periods of peaceful expansiveness and perhaps even deep insights as time goes on. Nevertheless, there do seem to be pockets of distortion in most personalities. Borrowing the idea of dissociation used in a broad sense to mean the capacity of humans to automatically keep certain thoughts, feelings, perceptions, memories and the like out of awareness, we can imagine possible minefields of dissociated experience. Then, in the two dimensional space created by our diagram we can imagine many possible points along many possible paths of awakening. We can further imagine that these paths are not linear, even though we wish they were, and that there can be dissociated minefields of bad juju (the grey areas on the diagram, which could be many or few) from our past or undeveloped aspects of our conventional self that we cross into in various ways or under certain circumstances. Sticking with the gravity metaphor we can have achieved escape velocity from the conventional self

system as a whole, but still get sucked into these dissociated areas, like uncharted planets out in our metaphoric space.

Maybe we can play with these two diagrams. Try to place yourself on them.

If I am in the “seeking” position, the position of someone who is locked in to their egocentric perspective but has accepted the proposition that there is a better alternative called non-duality, maybe I now have a way to understand what I am aiming for. I am trying to be the centerless center, and I have to let go of my sense of center, or investigate very closely my sense of center, in order to find it centerless. The more I try to will myself out of my current center, the more I reinforce it at some level. Yet, I cannot really do not doing either, so I have to will myself to practice in some way in order to have the chance to become a non-willing self later on...jeez, did that make any sense to you? Borrowing one of the many pithy sayings from Zen as another way of saying the same thing, awakening is an accident but practice makes you accident prone. So practice, but maybe orient your way of practicing based on where you chart yourself. Maybe you need more work on concentration for awhile, or on loving-kindness.

Or, going back to the term self, the main self we are concerned with if we are a beginning meditator is the narrative self. The body based sense of self is also a bit of a problem at first, but it turns out to be one of our most powerful tools as we will talk about later, so it is the narrative self that is the “problem.” My narrative self is the part of myself associated with the Default Mode Network in my brain. The part of the brain a normal individual usually “idles” at. The part of myself and brain that, when I am not so occupied with a task that I have free bandwidth, fills that bandwidth with stories. Stories about the day, what happened, what this person or that person did or didn’t do, said or didn’t say, should have said or shouldn’t have said. What will I eat? What will I buy? What portion of my income will I shift towards retirement planning this year? What did my partner mean when they said....blah, blah, blah.....blah, blah....etc.

This is the thought stream. It is endless but for brief respite during some forms of Samadhi, anesthesia, and maybe deep sleep. Otherwise the brain is constantly trying to do what it evolved to do, figure out how to maximize pleasure and minimize displeasure into a projected future. The constant biological drive to seek advantage in some way, combined with the biological reality that humans evolved in social groups, make us entirely egocentric the vast majority of the time. People can be individually more or less reasoned, disciplined, etc. about how they project into the future, and how they understand the intentions of other people in the world, but even the best projections and understandings are based on our pathetically limited amount of information, and are generally entirely biased around what the little me, that narrative self, has convinced itself it “needs” (thinks it wants based on it’s entirely egocentric view of the world...please also look up “fundamental attribution error” for your edification).

When we first sit to meditate we almost immediately encounter this narrative self because it keeps wanting to take over our meditation session and tell us important things about how to feel better in the short term. Sometimes these are thoughts worth listening to. Approximately 1% of the time. Most thoughts are just flotsam on the tide of your mood.

So we have to learn how to work with the mind stream. One very effective way for many people is to “enquire” into the space of the body in a more and more subtle way. You find instructions for how to do this in various traditions, but my current favorite is the modern synthesis, Realization Process. However we do it, at least for western students, enquiry generally quickly leads to a sense that “I” am not my body... but am maybe in the front of my head somewhere. Further enquiry generally, eventually, leads to the conclusion that “I” don’t seem to be anywhere in particular at all. Students will often be able to settle into very pleasant states as they then enquire in more holistic and subtle ways of feeling themselves, and eventually this further enquiry generally leads to awakening.

On our charts, the beginning meditator is almost certainly right at the vertices. Sometimes they move towards the positive ends of the continuum and sometimes towards the negative, but always within the constrictions of a delusional system. He or she must figure out how to either step outside the conventional self system (direct path lineage techniques), or to gradually clear the opacity of the conventional self system (gradual path lineages).

The charts also offer orientation for those who have been at the practice for a while and have had some glimpses that faded again (as is the norm, and/or I started with a glimpse but now can’t get it back...also common). Maybe I am following some kind of direct pointing technique that puts me directly in touch with a non-dual sensibility, but it has not stabilized, and now I have a way to think about what I am doing in my practice and why it is not a permanent transition...until it is. In other words I can imagine in one of these imaginary spaces expansions and contractions along one or several of the various spectrums. I have to keep stretching myself out of my usual narrative self perspective and occasionally I succeed beautifully, but I have not quite crossed the threshold of the watershed and I fall back into the old perspective again. Or as with the gravity metaphor, I have gotten above the clouds and it is all clear sky for a while, but I haven't achieved orbit so things cloud up again and the clarity becomes a memory. If it then becomes a sought after memory then we have found ourselves in a conventional self-system trap.

And for those past the artificial but real boundary of awakening, we have a convenient way to see why we might often feel like there is no more to see while there is simultaneously an infinite amount to see, far beyond any human capacity to fully take in.

Likewise, those who are curious about their own idiosyncrasies or worried about the apparent idiosyncrasies of a teacher might now have some food for thought. We can be genuine but uneven in our awakening. Or genuine but also still conflicted in certain areas. Or, thinking of the well documented case of Chogyam Trungpa as an example, genuinely and profoundly awakened but also in a relationship of addiction to alcohol and power.

Let’s use some examples on this point because I think this aspect of awakening is under-represented. Stephen Bodian has written on post awakening practice and post awakening practice is implied in many traditions, but it is not spelled out very often.

So let’s say you seem to be awake and really are. So what?



If you knew how to play chess before awakening, are you now a better chess player? Well maybe, but you don't see chess on any of the axes right? Maybe with more clarity with which to enjoy your game you improve, but then again maybe with greater compassion you throw more games. Even more likely, maybe you discover that a great deal of your motivation for chess has disappeared. Perhaps it was ego based in other words and now you are free(er) of that garbage and you drop the game to take up something more genuinely interesting to you.

If you did not know chess before, by awakening will you have gained mystical knowledge that will advance your chess game at surprising rates? No. Or, I mean it's possible because everything is possible, but highly unlikely because there is nothing to the awakening I am talking about that has anything to do with that sort of knowledge. Again, no knowledge or thinking on the important axes you notice. Psionic abilities like sudden knowledge of previously unknown topics, and mystical powers generally, are only loosely related to awakening and usually more of a trap than an aid anyway. Go elsewhere for that stuff.

If you are a parent, or in a long term relationship, or learning music, or getting your doctorate in physics, or travelling the world and encountering unexpected situations, will any of that be different? Well, yes and no. If you are firmly established in the awakened sensibility then, by the way I am defining the term you are not experiencing those events from an ego based perspective and therefore are far less likely to react based on ego delusion, but you still have various selves and various needs, as do those around you. The plane delay may not lead to a bunch of huffing and puffing, but that doesn't mean you're not annoyed, tired, hungry, disappointed, or who knows what else. Maybe you were trying to make it to a friend's bedside before they died and now you're extremely upset at the thought that you may not make it in time. There are, after all, still circumstances in the world of objects and relationships that will have effects and affects, and to not feel what must be felt is spiritual bypassing at its most basic.

Awakened people still die, get sick, get angry, go through tough times and fun times, etc. Just not from the limited perspective of an ego.

Going back to Chogyam Trungpa and his antics (I have a great deal of admiration for Trungpa by the way, but he is a public figure and he most certainly was publicly drunk and publicly forced his will upon students, though often in the name of shaking them out of their egoic states of delusion). He appears to have come from a culture where there was relatively little access to or support for overuse of either alcohol or erotization, to a culture that is all about overuse of alcohol and erotization...and maybe he got addicted? He did have a body. There are physiological components to alcohol and sex. There can often be deep attachment issues implicated in addiction (and sex obviously) as well, and while I would expect an awakened person to have less ego stuff to fuel the addiction, perhaps there were hidden pockets of personal self that were never worked through for Trungpa because they never came up until he entered his life in the US?

Anyway, I have no personal axe to grind here, just using Trungpa as a public example to show that the devil is in the details after all, and that these charts might be useful. I hope these charts and ideas can help you see your little devils before they get away from you.

Good luck. Give me a call if I can help.