

Advanced Meditation, Or the Problem of Post-Awakening Practice

At some point the practitioner gets the knack of relaxing *into* wholeness rather than trying to find wholeness, resting *as* silence rather than trying to quiet the mind. That doesn't mean there isn't still plenty of growing to be done, and growth will still often include working with aspects of the personal self, but the main hurdle of starting out in the hall of mirrors that is a personality trying to see through itself has been passed somehow. By grace, by effort, by luck, by past karma, suddenly or gradually or in between, every individual seems to be on a somewhat unique path of development, but people do wake up from the illusion of the personal self into something more fundamental. When that experiential insight becomes the central perspective, when the person can at least call upon that insight at will and not lose the perspective to the egoic perspective over time, then I say they are awake.

This is just a functional definition of awakening for convenience of explication and discussion, I do not claim some ultimate knowledge of what awakening or enlightenment is or isn't, but thinking in developmental continuums is a useful habit from psychology. If we define awakening as I suggest then we can understand that there are glimpses that do not create permanent change, as in non-abiding awakenings, and we can understand that there might be a permanent change, but only to a degree or in certain parts of the personality. I don't know the exact mechanics, but in my own experience many years ago, and in the experience of quite a few people that I work with, awakening is an uneven process, but is nevertheless distinct from seeking for awakening from the perspective of a personality. One can quickly see the usefulness of this sort of developmental model for guiding oneself, and for understanding some of the odd behavior out in the spiritual world. Awakening is both a watershed moment, and a process. As far as I can tell from my own experience, from observing my revered teachers, and even from reading such luminaries as Dogen or Ramana Maharshi, the awakening process continues towards an infinite regress of subtlety. In other words, it is never done, at least while in the human form.

One of the many great stanzas of Dogen's Genjokoan (translation by Paul Jaffe):

If the dharma has not yet fully come into one's mind and body one feels it is sufficient. On the other hand, if the dharma fills one's body and mind, there is a sense of insufficiency. It is like going out in a boat in the middle of an ocean with no mountains. Looking in the four directions there is only a circle; no distinguishing forms are seen. Nevertheless this great ocean is neither a circle, nor has directions. The wondrous features of this ocean that remain beyond our vision are inexhaustible...It is just that, as far as my vision reaches for the time being, it appears to be a circle. The myriad dharmas are also just like that. Though they include all forms within and beyond the dusty world, clear seeing and understanding only reach as far as the power of our penetrating insight.

Having crossed this watershed, Ken Wilbur's proposition that there are multiple lines of development becomes important to pay attention to. At this point, having a community, a code

of ethical behavior, a family, or a job can be a protective factor. It is, in other words, very important to keep practicing purposefully, although one's way of practicing might transform, because at this point people often get a bit loopy. For example, the person may have the perspective that time doesn't really exist, which is True, but they still have to balance this Truth with the relative truth of appointments. The person may have the perspective that the manifest universe rests in, or emerges from, some fundamental consciousness, which is also True, but does not actually imply that they can fly, stand in front of an oncoming bus, or astral project themselves at will. In some cases, all too notorious cases, the person may lose track of common morality and feel that money, or sexual favors, or just anything you can think of that might happen in this relative world is simply there to be enjoyed if it presents itself. They feel the relative has no real substance, it is all play. There is a kind of amoral space the person can get stuck in for a period of time, and to them it feels like freedom, but what it actually is is a form of ultimate dualism. They are stuck in an aspect of transcendence. They feel the tremendous freedom and relief of having shed the constructed self, but have lost their ground. To go back to the old but still useful water and wave metaphor, they are focused on being water, they are thrilled and relieved to find that they are essentially water, but they have lost track of also being a wave who must responsibly interact with other waves. It is in this kind of dualism that charismatic parts of the personality get inflated, blind spots get glossed over, and risk of bad behavior skyrockets.

With some luck the loopiness passes or gets appropriately attended to, or never even occurs because the awakening is so gradual, but then the person is still in the post awakened position and must figure out what to do next. For people who have awakened very gradually or who have followed a graduated practice similar to what I have recommended in this series of essays on practice (concentration meditations to mindfulness meditation, to heart centered and somatic meditations, to direct non-dual glimpse practices and inquiry) the answer is simple. As you were. Keep up the good work. For folks who stumbled into this space and are convinced of their enlightenment, there is nothing to do. Something regrettable will happen at some point and hopefully that alerts them to what I am pointing to about the unconscious and wounded aspects of the personality, or it will be a series of regrettable events, or they never learn in this life and we have to hope there are further chances down the road. If the person does have a glimmer of concern when the regrettable thing happens, then we are back to therapy, other practices that help address early wounds, community, ethics codes, etc. Like a lot of things, it isn't really that complicated to have good discernment...as long as it is about someone else. When it is us, by the very nature of what it means to be human and have unconscious processes, we are not aware of the problem. Tight knit groups also have unconscious group dynamics to consider. This is why I advocate for community and sensibly structured relationships. We have plenty of good models in our culture, mentor/mentee, therapist/client, doctor/patient, legal counsel/client, coach/student, minister/parishioner, I don't see the need to borrow the guru/disciple relationship from a foreign culture we don't really understand.

But anyway, this essay is about practice, so let's get back to that topic. Ramana Maharshi is purported to have always recommended inquiry when asked how best to practice. He is also

purported to have always graciously supported the individual's proclivities, such that if they expressed an interest in service as a path rather than inquiry he supported them in their inclination, but he always answered inquiry when asked directly how to practice. Given Ramana's stature, it might be worth giving serious consideration to why he would answer that way.

Inquiry, as described by Ramana Maharshi, is the process of trying to precisely find the self. It works whether you feel yourself to be the body, the mind, or even if you feel yourself to be the non-dual field. By honestly and scrupulously searching for the self, you fail to find any distinct self, and in that failure the Self expands a bit further. One of my favorite teachers, Judith Blackstone, also offers many practices that are equally good in the seeking or awakened perspectives. I consider her practices to essentially be precisely focused, special cases, of inquiry. Regardless of exactly how we practice, it is critical to stay mindful and not be satisfied with current attainments. Steady on.