

Sudden Awakening

By John Tarrant in *Shambhala Sun*, July 2007

Awakening can come gradually, almost imperceptibly, or in a sudden, life-altering flash. But however it happens, what's important is that awakening is real and possible. Like life itself, Zen's enigmatic koans offer us a path to surprising, unpredictable transformation. When will it happen to you and what—donkey, broom, or morning star—will trigger it?

Here begins the new life

—Dante Alighieri

At the heart of Zen, and of all Buddhism, is a story. One night in secret, a prince departed from the palace and from everything he knew and loved—his wife, his newborn child, his wealth, his power. His charioteer brought him his white horse, the hooves muffled with grass. The earth spirits supported their steps so that they made no sound and the guards did not wake as they passed. After the first stage of the journey, the prince exchanged clothes with a beggar and sent his companion and the horse home. This was the beginning of a long road out of the self that the prince had been.

Years of mental and spiritual exercises followed. The journey culminated one night when, while meditating, he looked up and saw the morning star. He was overwhelmed by the delight, freedom, and love that came with being human. After this he was known as the Buddha, and for the rest of his life tried to convey to people how they could have that same awakening. In terms of consciousness, what happened to him might be called an extreme makeover.

In even the simplest life, pain and disappointment accumulate, and at some moment everyone longs to walk through a gate and leave the past behind, perhaps for an earlier time when the colors were bright and the heart carried no weight. The quest for a fresh start is so fundamental that it defines the shape of the stories we tell each other.

A Jane Austen heroine shakes off the weight of the past and walks out the gate into a favorable marriage; a Dostoyevsky hero has a good dream in his prison cell and the next morning he is ready to confess; the Ancient Mariner blesses the sea snakes and begins to care about humanity. Most novels depend on such a possibility waiting in the wings for the main character, and the story of the Buddha is a novel in this sense. But

do these transformations occur in stories because they are unlikely things that the mind needs to imagine—like escaping from pirates or having a prince offer you a glass slipper—or are they possibilities that wait inside every life?

Generally, we doubt that people change very much or quickly. It's a mark of sophistication not to expect New Year's resolutions to stick. Religion and psychotherapy are interested in changing people, but whether they succeed depends on what you mean by change. An Olympic swimmer, unusually strong-willed and with a number of gold medals to his name, once told me that even he needed six months of training to achieve the very smallest change in performance. Nobody actually thinks that they will get the key to happiness from "thinking positively," any more than they believe that they will get "thin thighs in thirty days." People read the fantasy the way they read romance novels—because they like to dream, not because they think the reality it presents is within their reach.

On the other hand, altering consciousness has proven an abiding human passion, whether through martinis, peyote, rituals, music, or meditation. So whether consciousness can be transformed in a fairly permanent and benign way seems an important thing to investigate.

And what has Zen got to do with this? Zen takes the story of the Buddha seriously. It offers a kind of journey that we might follow if we wish and dare, a journey that is a natural path for a human being to take. Zen offers some tips, in case they might be useful on the journey, an account of a few things noticed about the mind. These observations are simple but have profound consequences for what it means to be human. Here are some of them.

1. Buddha's Story Is What's Happening To You Now. The journey of the Buddha isn't a literal journey that happened long ago. And it's not what your life will become. It's here now, and paying attention helps you to notice that. If you look into the life you have, your looking will lead you into a new life. What you meet on the way is part of the way.

2. Longing To Be Somewhere Else Is A Virtue. The longing for a fresh start is an ancient and basic feature of consciousness. All art and work of the imagination is touched by it and depends on it. Taking it seriously is a step to finding a new way of being.

3. **Mind Is Your Friend.** Skepticism is real too, and you might as well embrace it. Doubt seems to have an element of longing mixed with disillusionment. However, if you look into doubt closely, it might be your friend. It might lead you to disbelieve the thoughts that keep your reality in place, which might be a good thing.

4. **Go Ahead, Get Enlightened.** It really is possible for people to make fresh starts, complete turnovers in their way of being. This is not a delusional event and has nothing to do with believing in something. It is a natural human capacity for transforming consciousness.

5. **More Uncertainty Is Usually Better.** Awakening depends on the richness of uncertainty and not knowing. It depends on not being certain that you are confused, suffering, or the wrong person in the wrong place.

6. **You Can Learn It.** This reorganization of consciousness can happen spontaneously, but it can also be learned or acquired.

7. **Try This Method Today.** You can achieve awakening through immersion in the koan—a story or dialogue that you keep company with day and night. It can't be addressed rationally, and yet it might transform your consciousness. Zen can be a lot of other things as well, but transformation is at the core.

8. **Love Is Real.** When the beliefs have fallen away, love and delight show up as basic features of consciousness.

When you set out on the Buddha's journey, you have no real assurance that any awakening is possible. People might urge you on, but they could be deluded, or they could be right about themselves but not about you. "Maybe I'm just not good at this," you might think. You could watch Buddhist teachers closely to see if they seem to be enlightened, but the more closely you look at anyone the more mysterious they become. Close observation doesn't necessarily prove much. The Zen solution is to expose you to endless koans. It's a try it and see approach.

Koans are little stories from the point of view of awakening—a life in which you are unfaithful to your sorrows. There are also longer, novelistic stories too, which act as doorways to the koans. The classic Zen accounts from East Asia all have the same plot: The student doubts the value and purpose of life, connects with a master, though this might be for a very short time—even as little as a night, or even in a dream, or just

through reading a koan—and usually works hard at meditation. Then she achieves, often in unlikely circumstances or even through some ridiculous error in practice, a breakthrough followed by a lasting joy and compassion for others.

Here's a classic account of awakening from Hakuin Ekaku, a Japanese teacher who lived at a station village on the Tokaido Road under Mt. Fuji about three hundred years ago. He used koans as a method to encourage enlightenment experiences, and all the koan lines of Japanese Zen today descend from him. The nice feature of his accounts is the dramatic story he tells. He is modern in that sense, a highly self-aware consciousness who records the human experience in loving detail, insisting on its unconventional aspects. He has the romantic single-mindedness of a Victorian heroine, windswept on the moors. This sampling of his stories begins, as Hakuin tends to, in the middle of things, when he was pretty sure his meditation practice and his whole spiritual journey was going badly:

Still deeply dejected, I took up my begging bowl early the next morning and went into the village below Iyama Castle. My mind was hard at work on my koans. It never left them. I stood before the gate of a house, my bowl in hand, lost in a kind of trance.

A voice within yelled, "Go on! Go somewhere else!" But I was so preoccupied I didn't even notice it. This must have angered the resident of the house, because she suddenly appeared, flourishing a broom upside down in her hand. She flew at me flailing out wildly, whacking away at my head as if she was bent on dashing my brains out. My sedge hat lay in tatters. I was knocked down and ended heels-up on the ground. I lost consciousness and lay there like a dead man.

As I regained consciousness, my eyes opened, and as they did, I found that the unsolvable and impenetrable koans I had been working on—all those pointed cat's paws—were completely penetrated. Right to the root. They had suddenly ceased to exist. I clapped my hands and laughed great shouts of laughter, frightening the people who had gathered around me.

—From *Wild Ivy: The Spiritual Autobiography of Zen Master Hakuin*, translated by Norman Waddell (Shambhala Publications)

Hakuin takes a close interest in the texture of experience and the interactions between people. He is aware that motives and consequences are wide apart in human affairs, so he just reports what happens—someone chases him with a broomstick while he is lost in meditation—and he allows us to imagine the motives. He waves toward the consequences of his awakening, but doesn't really tell us much about how things changed for him, and this might be important. If enlightenment is unique then the exact

consequences of someone else's experience are not going to be much like yours anyway. The story isn't meant to be a close map of a journey you might take, but rather news that such events happen, and that they might come from any direction at any moment.

There seems to be a lot of individual variance in how awakening happens. Some people have grand experiences that transform them overnight, and others have smaller glimpses of freedom that seem to run together over time and change their lives. There's a lot of tradition about awakening, and plenty of terms are floating around to name transformative experiences. Here are a few:

Aha!

Epiphany

Enlightenment

Awakening

Conversion

Satori

Breakthrough

Second order change

Kensho

Realization

Metanoia

Shift

These words describe a discovery that changes the discoverer, a change in direction of at least 180 degrees. They also indicate that this sort of change can happen suddenly, overnight. I've come to think that the overnight, life-changing epiphany is actually not rare. You can escape from pirates, and princes will offer you a glass slipper. Here is one of the basic Western stories:

St. Paul had a revelation that knocked him off his donkey on the way to Damascus, an occasion commemorated in the church calendar by the Feast of the Epiphany. St. Paul had a harsh, intemperate streak both before and after his conversion to Christianity. But his experience touched him with a deeper vision that made him able to write the words on love that are still used in wedding ceremonies all over the world. When I Googled them, I was happy to find that the first hit (with a misspelling) was on a website called Weddings Vegas Style:

Love is patient, love is kind.
It does not envy, it does not boast,
It is not proud.
It is not rude, it is not self-seeking,
It is not easily angered,
It keeps no record of wrongs.
Love does not delight in evil
But rejoices with the truth.
It always protects, always trusts,
Always hopes, always perseveres.

—1 Corinthians: 13

These words melt even a hard heart a little; they offer a generous view of being human. Falling off that donkey now seems to have been a good move.

An awakening can happen in the most mundane of circumstances. Here is an account of a Chinese woman that occurred before Zen even established itself in Japan:

Yu was from Jinling and worked as a donut-maker. She used to visit Langya Chi, the Zen Master, and ask him questions along with everyone else. The Zen Master gave her Linji's saying, "The true person has no rank," and she kept it with her while she worked.

One day a beggar passed by singing "The Delights of Lotus Flowers": "If you haven't heard the song, how can you find the Lake?" Just hearing these words, she had a great awakening.

She threw her donut pan onto the ground.

"Have you gone crazy?" asked her husband.

"This isn't your business," she said and went off to see Langya. From a distance, it was obvious to him that she had found realization.

"What is the true person of no rank?" he asked.

Straight away she said, "The person of no rank has six arms and three heads, and is working furiously, smashing Flower Mountain into two with one blow. For ten thousand years the flowing water doesn't know the spring."

Yu the donut-maker became famous after this.

—From Pacific Zen Institute, Miscellaneous Koans

Yu was with her koan no matter where she was. The song, like the broomstick that hit Hakuin, doesn't have anything to do with the content of the awakening, and actually she doesn't mention any particular thoughts that describe what she has discovered. Instead, she herself starts to talk in the language of koans. (It may be worth mentioning that more than one woman's awakening story has involved disparaging treatment of

domestic implements.)

Epiphanies, usually meaning an experience that conveys significance and depth and a fresh view, occur outside of the spiritual context too. Here is García Márquez on how he began writing fiction:

One night [at college] a friend lent me a book of short stories by Franz Kafka. I went back to the pension where I was staying and began to read *The Metamorphosis*. The first line almost knocked me off the bed, I was so surprised. The first line reads, “As Gregor Samsa awoke that morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect.” When I read the line I thought to myself that I didn’t know anyone was allowed to write things like that. If I had known I would have started writing long ago. So I immediately started writing short stories.

—From *The Writer’s Chapbook*, edited by George Plimpton (Viking)

At first this might seem different from what happens in a spiritual discovery, but perhaps it’s not. Garcia Marquez was tripped up by Kafka’s opening line the way Hakuin was tripped up by the old woman with the broom. Everything Garcia Marquez thought to be true was reset to zero in a moment and a new life became possible. He found a capacity that he was unaware of and, after that moment, stories began to pour out of him like rivers. It turns out that there is a huge range of ways to begin a new life overnight.

Arthur Koestler, a robust and skeptical intellectual, reported an experience when he was in a prison during the Spanish Civil War, facing execution.

I must have stood there for some minutes, entranced, with a wordless awareness that “this is perfect—perfect.”...Then I was floating on my back in a river of peace, under bridges of silence. It came from nowhere and flowed nowhere. Then there was no river and no I. The I had ceased to exist ... when I say “the I had ceased to exist,” I refer to a concrete experience that is verbally as incommunicable as the feeling aroused by a piano concerto, yet just as real—only much more real. In fact its primary mark is the sensation that this state is more real than any other that has been experienced before.

—From *The Invisible Writing* by Arthur Koestler (Macmillan)

This is an example of the fresh start under extreme adversity, a popular subcategory among awakening stories. There is the Zen teacher who awakened at the moment he broke his leg. There’s the story of a Jewish captive of the Nazis who, about to be

executed, was overwhelmed with love for the world, including the man who was about to execute him. “Ich du liebe,” he said, embracing his captor, and the embrace was returned and the execution forgotten. There’s the one about the mountaineer who fell from a cliff toward his death, awakened on the way down and, full of joy even about his fall, was saved by a lucky bounce into a tree. I like these stories because they indicate that there are no conditions under which it is wise to refuse life. From the koan point of view, this is one of the consequences of awakening—life is always here and it’s always for our benefit.

There’s also a modern Japanese story that follows the Hakuin model, and because its hero eventually became a koan teacher for many Westerners, his story became in turn a model for us. Koun Yamada lived in Kamakura after the Second World War and ran a hospital and health system in Tokyo. His wife was one of the first women to get an MD in Japan. He struggled to get his fresh start by meditating on koans during his two-hour commute to Tokyo each day. One day, on the train home after a Zen retreat, he came across the line, “The mountains rivers and the great earth, the sun, the moon and the stars, are none other than the heart-mind.” He was impressed by this koan and it kept repeating itself in his thoughts. He woke at midnight and it filled his mind:

Then all at once I was struck as though by lightning, and the next instant heaven and earth crumbled and disappeared. Instantaneously, like surging waves, a tremendous delight welled up in me, a veritable hurricane of delight, as I laughed loudly and wildly: “Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! There’s no reasoning here, no reasoning at all! Ha, ha, ha!” The empty sky split into two, then opened its enormous mouth and began to laugh uproariously: “Ha, ha, ha!”...

I was now lying on my back. Suddenly I sat up and struck the bed with all my might and beat the floor with my feet, as if trying to smash it, all the while laughing riotously. My wife and youngest son, sleeping near me, were now awake and frightened. Covering my mouth with her hand, my wife exclaimed, “What’s the matter with you? What’s the matter with you?” But I wasn’t aware of this till told about it afterwards. My son told me later he thought I had gone mad.

“I’ve come to enlightenment! Shakyamuni and the ancestors haven’t deceived me! They haven’t deceived me!” I remember crying out. When I calmed down I apologized to the rest of the family who had come downstairs, frightened by the commotion.

—From *The Three Pillars of Zen*, edited by Phillip Kapleau (Beacon)

Like Hakuin’s story, or Yu the donut-maker’s, this is an example of an awakening sought within a tradition in which it is a desired and expected outcome of training. It’s different

in approach from the just-hit-you-over-the-head-for-no-apparent-reason fresh start that Koestler reported. But if these various awakenings have something in common, how are we to understand them and what it is they all share?

There's not really a language for a fresh start, so we might start by using terms intended for other purposes. It's common to think that painful events can mark you for life. Childhood horrors, according to psychoanalysis, drive all sorts of adult pathology—creating an unhappiness impervious to good fortune. A genuine fresh start would correct the errors that build up in consciousness. It would ease the pain of wanting what you can't get, or the absurdity of getting what you wanted and finding that it didn't make you happy. A fresh start would be the opposite of trauma: it would mark you with a delight in life that also seemed irrevocable. This is one way to look at what happens to us in awakening.

In some ways, St. Paul's very interesting epiphany led Christianity and much of European culture off on the wrong foot, because people formed the idea that an awakening changes what you believe. That was wonderful for him, but changing what you believe is probably irrelevant in terms of awakening. Awakening undermines the stories you live by, as well as the way you make stories—or what you call a story. Switching your thoughts is like switching rooms in what is essentially a prison the mind has made. But in awakening you can't find any walls or bars. Changing your beliefs about what's bad and what's good could even be an indicator that a more fundamental change has not taken effect.

Zen people talk about emptiness because when you awaken, the maps that hold your beliefs are suddenly gone. You also notice that new maps appear in the mind, even without encouragement from you. And as the new maps appear, you can take them as provisional.

In my own path of discovery, when the maps that had been given me ran out, I found that the obvious solution was to listen to the koans. That helped, though it didn't really give me another map. The koans aren't maps; they immerse you in the life that appears when you have stepped past your maps into the vast dark. Each one has something slightly different to offer; it's a way of being in conversation with old masters.

And it's also helpful to be in conversation with each other. During the Dark Ages, the scholars gathered at places like the University of Paris and began to discuss everything together. From time to time, people tried to stop them but they persisted. Discussing

everything led by hard roads to paying better attention to the mind and the world, and eventually to the rise of science and learning, the fuzzy logic in your toaster, an analysis of the shrinkage in glaciers, and the neuroscience underneath the convenient gadget that we call a self.

From time to time, I wonder why I teach. The meditation is nice but then there's all the fundraising and administration. To the amusement of his audience, one of the modern Japanese koan masters used to say that he taught because of bad karma accumulated in a previous life. Although, being Tasmanian, bad karma may be a plausible explanation for why I teach, I think I do it because consciousness, koan work, and enlightenment are all social events. And as an artist of the koan world, I like to collect enlightenment stories. It's interesting to see how other people come to awakening. It's an important conversation to have with each other.

The nature of consciousness is the great human question, and a fresh start tells us something valuable about our capacities. It's well known that the mind makes errors, because its maps get out of date. Consciousness mistakes friends for enemies, confuses its thoughts and reality, starts wars that harm itself. It can miss what is good for itself; it can miss what is good for everyone. Noticing the provisional nature of our mental maps and purposes might be one of the kindest things we could do for each other and for the planet.

The Zen task is to open the gates of the world beyond our prejudices. Like the Buddha, we can step away from everything we are certain about. I think that this possibility is the best contribution we can make to healing the flaws in consciousness and helping the world. Unkindness comes out of certainty; when we throw out certainty, we have the bare reality of consciousness, and another name for that is love.

NOTE

I was asked to write about Zen and have written about the path of transformation. It's fair to mention that there is another flavor of Zen in which people don't seek transformation. Their position is a subtle one, and it goes like this: if you have the nature of awakening intrinsically, then anything you might do to change yourself is unnecessary. If you set off to get awakened, well, you are making trouble for yourself. They have a point: the paradox in trying to transform your own consciousness is that the effort to change prevents change. It's like thinking about not falling when you are on a tightrope—it's just going to confuse matters. So that school, which is called Soto, doesn't really use koans and favors simple sitting meditation and ceremonies as the

embodiment of the perfection that already exists. That approach has its own virtues and Shunryu Suzuki, probably the greatest of the modern masters in America, held it. The two schools, the koan school and the nonkoan one, get mixed up of course, because awakening can strike you when you are not looking for it.

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