



LION'S ROAR

Deep
Dive into
Enlightenment



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Everything Is Enlightenment

Enlightenment is everywhere we look, says Joan Sutherland — we can choose to notice it, but at the same time, we can also trust that it will find us, wherever we are. From the *Winter 2020 Buddhadharmā*.

At the very heart of Buddhism is the promise of enlightenment. It's the bright flame illuminating the dharma, and the rich variety of practices developed in the traditions that make up Buddhism are all in some essential way in the service of that promise. For millennia, in response to the struggles and sorrows of life on this planet, and in honor of the breathtaking beauty of life on this planet, people have passed this flame from hand to hand, encouraging one another to take part in the agonizingly slow but impossibly tender awakening of our world as a whole.

In the West the idea of enlightenment has gotten a little bruised, in part because the intensity of our longings has made us so vulnerable to disappointment, and in part because we have reason to feel disappointed by the actions of some claiming to be enlightened. Some of us don't believe in it anymore or think it's the province of only a few special people. Some of us have misunderstood it as a self-actualization project, and so have missed its power not just to improve but to transform. What happens when we let our projections about

enlightenment fall away? Can we find the place where wisdom born of generations of experience meets us where we, each of us, actually live? Is it possible to take on a day-to-day practice of enlightenment?

Here is the story passed on with the flame: enlightenment is our true nature and our home, but the complexities of human life cause us to forget. That forgetting feels like exile, and we make elaborate structures of habit, conviction, and strategy to defend against its desolation. But this condition isn't hopeless; it's possible to dismantle those structures so we can return from an exile that was always illusory to a home that was always right under our feet.

For many of us, there's something pushing us and something pulling us toward homecoming. We're pushed by our own pain and the pain we see in the world around us; we're pulled by intimations of something larger and truer than our ordinary self-oriented ways of experiencing life. Here's a tradition that says, yes, we understand that, and there are ways to make those intimations not simply a matter of random chance but readily and consistently present. It's possible to make ourselves available, in all the hours of our days, to the grace we so long to be touched by, and to spread that grace to the world around us.

So we should pause to talk a little about what we're talking about. The term "enlightenment" is used to translate a variety of words in various Asian languages that, while closely related, aren't exactly identical. Most fundamentally, enlightenment refers to the Pali and Sanskrit word *bodhi*, which is more literally "awakening."

“Enlightenment” has an absolute quality about it, as though it describes a steady state, something not subject to time and space or the vagaries of human life. We imagine that once over that threshold, there’s no going back. But it’s far from static. In Buddhist terms, the way things really are is enlightenment, and our experience of the way things really are is also (the same) enlightenment. It is the vast and awe-inspiring nature of the universe itself, and it is the way each of us thinks, feels, and acts when we’re aware of and participating in that vast enlightenment manifesting as us. It’s not transcendent of our ordinary way of being; it’s more like we’ve been living in two dimensions, and now there are three. Strawberries still taste like strawberries and harsh words are still harsh, but now we’re aware of how everything interpermeates everything else, and that even the most difficult things are lit from within by the same undivided light.

For one woman, this revelation began with what she called the dark side of the moon, when she saw the light in the most broken places inside us, the places from which we’re capable of causing great harm; as someone in a helping profession dealing with the effects of that harm, she found this painful to accept. Then the bright side of the moon appeared, illuminating the great joys of her life. Finally, she saw that it was “all moon,” with nothing left out, a realization both shattering and healing.

A thousand years ago, a Japanese woman wrote:

Watching the moon
at dawn,

solitary, mid-sky,
I knew myself completely:
no part left out.

—Izumi Shikibu, translated by Jane Hirshfield and Mariko
Aratani

How large is the self softly illuminated by the moon of enlightenment? Tolstoy and Chekhov were on a walk in the spring woods when they encountered a horse. Tolstoy began to describe how the horse would experience the clouds, trees, smell of wet earth, flowers, sun. Chekhov exclaimed that Tolstoy must have been a horse in a previous life to know in such detail what the horse would feel. Tolstoy laughed and said, “No, but the day I came across my own inside, I came across everybody’s inside.”

There is something else to discover. Great Ancestor Ma of China assured his students that “for countless aeons not a single being has fallen out of the deep meditation of the universe.” No matter what happens, even in the times that feel like irredeemable exile, we and everything we encounter are the inhale and exhale of the universe’s meditation. Each of us is all of us, and all of us are one vast thing.

The revelations of enlightenment are part of the process of awakening, the times when the path we’re walking seems to fall out from under our feet. Awakening is that path unfurling around us over time, a path we’re walking from first breath to last, and probably before and after that, too. It has stages and aspects, sudden leaps forward and

devastating stumbles. Because it's so dynamic, our ways of referring to it have differentiated and proliferated: liberation, seeing one's true nature, being purified and perfected, attaining the Way, opening the wisdom eye, undergoing the Great Death, and becoming intimate, to name just a few. While what we awaken to is the same for all of us, how we awaken and express that awakening in our lives is endlessly idiosyncratic and gives the world its texture and delight.

Which isn't to say that enlightenment and awakening are different things; they're just different aspects of the same thing. The poet Anna Akhmatova spoke of the wave that rises in us to meet the great wave of fate coming toward us. Perhaps enlightenment is that which comes toward us, a previously unimaginable grace, while awakening is that which arises inside us, to prepare for and meet the grace, and to hold it once it's come. In that moment of meeting, we know the two waves as rising from the same ocean.

Awakening is something different from the projects of self-improvement and self-actualization many Westerners are used to; it's not about being a better self but about discovering our true self, which is another thing entirely. One of the puzzlements of the Way is that some people can seem to have substantial, even operatic, openings and still behave like jerks. This speaks to the nature of awakening: having an enlightening revelation isn't the same thing as being enlightened. It's possible to retreat into the revelation, a condition referred to as inhabiting a ghost cave or being frozen in ice, because it

stops the process of awakening. The revelation has to stain and dye us completely, in the midst of our everyday lives. We let life teach us how to embody the revelation.

Post-revelation, some people may believe that enlightenment is about them, when in fact it's the least about-you thing that's ever happened. And it's simultaneously the truest thing about you that's ever happened. Discovering how both could be so is what the paths of awakening are for, and those paths lead away from ghost caves and back into the heart of our lives.

Awakening isn't something that can be obtained, like the ultimate killer app. Neither can it be attained, like a skill or an understanding to be harnessed to the purposes of the self. In some Buddhist traditions, it's seen as a fundamental property of the universe, a unifying principle that appears as the almost infinite variety of forms that make up the universe. Awakening is autonomous, existing before there were humans, or anything else, to experience it.

Nagarjuna, the great Indian philosopher of the second and third centuries, expressed it this way:

When buddhas don't appear
And their followers are gone,
The wisdom of awakening
Bursts forth by itself.

—From Verses from the Center, translated by Stephen Batchelor

This is personified in Prajnaparamita, mother of buddhas, who holds the universe's awakening, regardless of whether there are buddhas or Buddhist teachings in a particular era. We might play with the thought that this has some relationship to the contemporary theory that consciousness, or its ancestor, proto-consciousness, was from the beginning a fundamental feature of the universe, existing at the subatomic level and eventually emerging into matter as the universe became more complex.

From this perspective, the process of awakening is less a matter of actualization and more a matter of "truing," of becoming aware of the way things already are. Rather than developing an enhanced and therefore more solidified self, we become aware of the permeability of the self and the way we are continuous with awakening, and the universe itself.

This has been called our original face, what we "look" like when we step back into the moment before the world of our thoughts and feelings comes into existence. While Westerners generally speak of *having* a dream, in some South Asian cultures you're *seen* by a dream. It's a bit like that: we become aware that the universe has always perceived us in our truest form, and now we're aware of what that is.

Trying to describe all this is pretty much a fool's errand, which is why people have offered poems and paintings and cups of tea as invitations to see the original face of something, anything, before our judgments and opinions about it kick in. To see the original face of one something is to see the original face of all somethings.

Rilke once said with appreciation that Cezanne painted not “I like this” but “Here it is.” The enlightening revelation is “Here it is” writ large and complete, but it happens by way of the most commonplace moments. In the old stories it was the *tok* of a stone hitting bamboo or the sudden appearance of cherry blossoms across a ravine; today it might be hearing an ad on the radio or seeing a crumpled beer can on a forest path. “There is another world,” Paul Eluard said, “and it is inside this one.” The key to seeing that other world seems to be letting something, anything, speak to us without interrupting it with our habits of exile.

Awakening is an arc made up of path, revelation, and embodiment. Things tend to go generally in that progression, but these are all aspects of one thing, and they weave in and out of each other. Though enlightenment isn’t an absolute threshold, some changes do tend to stay changed. For one thing, we can’t quite believe in our delusions as we once did. They still arise, because it’s part of the nature of the human heart–mind to generate them, but we more easily recognize them for what they are, and can more often let them rise and fall or explore them without becoming hopelessly tangled in them.

The teachings speak of a single enlightened thought as being the whole of enlightenment, and a single deluded thought as the whole of delusion. This acknowledges that we’re capable of both, but however seductive the desire to sort our thoughts into separate piles of enlightenment and delusion and then choose one over the other, that isn’t the offer. Instead, it’s to get underneath the self-oriented, operational realm of sorting and choosing and to sink back into the place from

which all thoughts arise—sometimes appearing as distorted thoughts, sometimes as clarifying ones. It's a truer place to rest, and a humbler one.

We still have bodies that break down in all sorts of amazing ways. We still face injustice and conflict. Awakening isn't a waiver from the shared circumstances of human life. But it can transform how we take part in them. We are no longer beleaguered exiles but people who can find home even in difficult times, people who are aware of the unlikely presence of awakening even in difficult moments, people who are willing to feel our way in the dark to help bring it forth.

A lot has been said about walking the path of awakening, so I'll mention just one thing that relates to taking on a day-to-day practice of enlightenment. Especially early on, most of us still have a lot of self-centeredness, by which I mean belief in the absolute reality of the self and the primacy of its concerns and reactions. One of the bemusing results is that here we are, hoping for an event that by its nature is unprecedented in our lives, and we think we know best about how to make it happen. We try to exert control over the process, believing we can find our way to enlightenment through acts of will.

There is mad discipline and insane persistence on this path, but they're in the service of something more fruitful than certainty, control, and will. They're in the service of availability. Just keep showing up. Sit the meditation, attend the retreat, absorb the teachings, face the fear, feel the sorrow, endure the boredom, explore the doubt, stay open to the disturbing and also the knee-bucklingly beautiful in your life.

That being said, if resistance rises in you, sit with it until you can tell whether it's a habit of exile or a warning that something really isn't right. The path of awakening involves a lot of deconstruction of the self, which can be difficult, even shattering at times. But it should not involve harm. We awaken together, and the greatest gift we give to each other's awakening is to make a field where it is safe to take risks.

When revelation begins to walk toward you, have the courtesy to walk out to meet it. You know the tricks of distraction you play on yourself, so stay alert to them, but don't allow the practice of hyper-vigilance to cause you to miss the moments when the world comes to call you home. There's an old story about a man who vowed to meditate until Krishna appeared to him. Moved by his commitment, Krishna walked up behind the man and put his hand on his shoulder. Without turning around, the man cried, "Go away! I'm waiting for Krishna!"

Expect that awakening will come in unexpected ways. Make yourself available, and trust that enlightenment will find you.

The metaphors we use can powerfully shape what we imagine awakening to be. My own Zen tradition has lots of descriptions, like wielding the sword and penetrating the mystery, that we'd be forgiven for confusing with exercises of will. Enlightenment is likened to a lightning bolt or a sudden flash of sparks, something instantaneous and bright. But what happens when we listen to other voices speaking in different images? Here is Qiyuan Xinggang, a seventeenth-century Chinese nun:

When Qiyuan Xinggang awakened, her teacher asked her,
“What was it like as you gestated the spiritual embryo?”
She replied, “It solidified, deep and solitary.”
“When you gave birth, what was that like?”
“Being stripped completely naked.”
“What about when you met the Ancestor?”
“I met the Ancestor face to face.”

In these spare, quiet words is a sense of enlightenment growing in the dark, both autonomous and contained within us—something not in our control but asking our full attention. And then we’re stripped of everything we’ve depended on, including self-will, so we can meet the real with nothing intervening. This evocation of awakening as a kind of pregnancy that allows us to “become intimate” is something many people, women and men alike, recognize in their own experience.

Still, the language of light and illumination is everywhere. “Mind is not mind,” the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* says. “The nature of mind is clear light.” In moments of revelation, what are the qualities of light that are so powerful? There’s the sense that everything is unified and equal in this radiance. At the same time, each thing is so particular and alive in the way it shines with its own light; we feel the almost overwhelming sentience of things. And we become aware of what begins to pour out of us like light from an opened window: awe, gratitude, humility, and a suddenly bottomless love.

This light is a way we experience the empty aspect of reality, which is all-pervasive, without conditions, eternal, and undivided. Once, during a retreat, a woman lay down for a nap in a cottage at the end of a remote road. She awoke to a life-changing awareness of the light reaching everywhere, never blinking and never failing to hold even the smallest particle of existence. This was her way of experiencing Ma's promise that no one had ever fallen out of the deep meditation of the universe.

Buddhism is nondualistic, so this isn't light as opposed to darkness but something that includes both. It goes both ways; the Daoist idea of the Great Mysterious as the dark source of everything was incorporated into the dharma. The Chinese teacher Shitou wrote of branches of light streaming from the dark, where the dark is the undifferentiated unity and the light is the manifest world. Without these balancing images, we run into the atom bomb problem, in which the purely bright can tip into something blinding and annihilating. The Japanese koan genius Hakuin offered an image of radiance that contains both the light and the dark: the purple-golden light illuminating the landscape at twilight.

After the Buddha's own revelation in the dark of night, he had a time of doubt, when he wondered how he'd ever be able to communicate what he'd come to understand. He only stepped out from under the tree when his companions requested that he teach them. This is the question of embodiment each of us faces: if the nature of the revelation is universal, the way each individual expresses it is particular. In our family, community, work, and creative lives we learn to live

our enlightenment, each in our own way. But it's not as though our enlightenment ends with revelation and then we figure out what to do with it; it's actually through embodiment that enlightenment completes itself in us.

This is one of the great mysteries of the Way—that enlightenment not only illuminates ordinary life but submits to its discipline. We give ourselves to the daylit world to learn how to turn revelation into matter—and in this way our awakening continues. As with practice, this can't be accomplished by an act of self-will, which is why the Mahayana tradition offers the bodhisattva vow instead. The vow is usually described as an intention toward awakening, for ourselves and for all. This is what has to happen for enlightenment to complete itself. We don't see the world as it is and then withdraw from it; we see the world as it is so we can most truly live as part of it. Our freedom isn't *from* the world; it's *in* the world.

In some Mahayana traditions, the luminous totality of the universe, called the dharmakaya, is fulfilling a vow that all things should come into existence and grow toward awakening. The bodhisattva vow harmonizes in microcosm with the dharmakaya's macrocosmic vow: we welcome our embodiment and dedicate ourselves to awakening so that we might help everything that exists awaken, too. To take this vow is to allow ourselves to be pulled to that place where our enlightenment is continuous with the universe's—our vow continuous with the dharmakaya's vow—so that there is no rub between our intention and its.

And so we enter a phase of awakening that includes, perhaps surprisingly, endarkenment as well as enlightenment. Awakening is a marriage of wisdom and compassion, and both wisdom and compassion are made up of enlightening and endarkening. The enlightening aspect of wisdom is a growing clarity of insight that puts doubts to rest and creates confidence. It's about what we come to understand. The endarkening aspect of wisdom is our profound acceptance of the great mystery at the heart of things, which we can never understand in our ordinary ways but can come to rest in. This is about knowing what we can't know, and it's sometimes called "not-knowing mind."

The enlightening aspect of compassion includes our shining commitment to everyone's freedom from suffering. The endarkening aspect of compassion is our willingness to have our hearts broken by the world, so our hearts remain open and not defensive. As we endarken, we see that we are not only continuous with the luminous nature of the universe but also continuous with the great broken heart of the world; we and the world share a tenderness that is both poignant beauty and wound.

It's as though revelation happens at the speed of electrical impulses in the brain, while embodiment happens at the speed of the heart, which is a slow-beating muscle. The Sutra that Vimalakirti Speaks contains a long dialogue between Manjushri, the bodhisattva of wisdom, and *Vimalakirti*, a greatly awakened householder. In some ways, Manjushri speaks for the mind and Vimalakirti for the heart. Vimalakirti is ill, and he says that he's sick because the whole world is sick. The Chinese term for nonduality is "not two," and

Vimalakirti rests on his couch in deep not-twoness with the world. Manjushri, wielding his sword of insight and clarity, asks Vimalakirti how the illness can be extinguished; from Manjushri's perspective, this is a problem to be fixed as quickly as possible. Vimalakirti responds with a long and detailed talk on how the human heart can be healed with time. His is a perspective from deep within embodied life, valuing its greatest challenges as exactly what the bodhisattva needs to give birth to herself.

The Sutra that Vimalakirti Speaks also contains a lovely passage naming the individual bodhisattvas in a large assembly. There's Unblinking Bodhisattva, Wonderful Arm Bodhisattva, Jewel Hand Bodhisattva, Lion Mind Bodhisattva, Root of Joy Bodhisattva, Delights in the Real Bodhisattva, and, one of my favorites, Universal Maintenance Bodhisattva. The deep meaning of this list is that each of us discovers the particular bodhisattva we are; there isn't a monolithic template for our lives.

In the day-to-day practice of enlightenment, sometimes we're going to be the Pretty Close Bodhisattva, Fingers Crossed Bodhisattva, Flying by the Seat of My Pants Bodhisattva, and a hundred others, too. After all, if awakening is the way things really are, it's already here, in large ways and small. We can see it in our companions in this amazing shared project of awakening, as the particular enlightenment of each person becomes apparent: insightful, heartfelt, or brave; wise about people or about working with material objects; brilliant in language or paint or song; unaware of how much she already understands, growing in confidence, resting in not knowing; becoming a

person he never could have imagined. Even if, in that most poignantly human way, someone isn't completely aware of their own enlightenment yet. How wonderful when we can hold up the mirror so they can see themselves for themselves. And all of it in service to our common awakening—paying greater care to the challenges of human life, being more encouraging of its kindnesses, each of us in our turn helping pass the bright flame from warm hand to warm hand.

Joan Sutherland, Roshi, is a founder of the Pacific Zen School (a contemporary koan school), as well as the founding teacher of The Open Source, a network that includes sanghas in Colorado, Arizona, and the Bay Area. Now retired from working directly with students, her teachings continue through Cloud Dragon, an online source for her writings and talks. She is the author of *Vimalakirti & the Awakened Heart* and *Acequias and Gates: Miscellaneous Writings on Miscellaneous Koans*.

The Bearable Lightness of Being

When we honor life but don't make it a big deal, we lighten up, open up, and become more joyous. The fancy name for that, says Pema Chödrön, is enlightenment.

Meditation teaches us how to let go. It's actually a very important aspect of friendliness, which is that you train again and again in not making things such a big deal. When you have pain in your body, when all sorts of thoughts are going through your mind, you train again and again in acknowledging them openheartedly and open-mindedly, but not making them such a big deal.

Generally speaking, the human species does make things a very big deal. Our problems are a big deal for us. So we need to make space for an attitude of honoring things completely and at the same time not making them a big deal. It's a paradoxical idea, but holding these two attitudes simultaneously is the source of enormous joy: we hold a sense of respect toward all things, along with the ability to let go. So it's about not belittling things, but on the other hand not fanning the fire until you have your own private World War III.

Keeping these ideas in balance allows us to feel less crowded and claustrophobic. In Buddhist terms, the space that opens here is referred to as *shunyata*, or "emptiness." But there's nothing nihilistic

about this emptiness. It's basically just a feeling of lightness. There is a movie entitled *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, but I prefer to see life from the view of the Bearable Lightness of Being.

When you begin to see life from the point of view that everything is spontaneously arising and that things aren't "coming at you" or "trying to attack you," in any given moment you will likely experience more space and more room to relax into. Your stomach, which is in a knot, can just relax. The back of your neck, which is all tensed up, can just relax. Your mind, which is spinning and spinning like one of those little bears that you wind up so it walks across the floor, can just relax. So shunyata refers to the fact that we actually have a seed of spaciousness, of freshness, openness, relaxation, in us.

Sometimes the word shunyata has been translated as the "open dimension of our being." The most popular definition is "emptiness," which sounds like a big hole that somebody pushes you into, kicking and screaming: "No, no! Not emptiness!" Sometimes people experience this openness as boredom. Sometimes it's experienced as stillness. Sometimes it's experienced as a gap in your thinking and your worrying and your all-caught-up-ness.

I experiment with shunyata a lot. When I'm by myself and no one's talking to me, when I'm simply going for a walk or looking out the window or meditating, I experiment with letting the thoughts go and just seeing what's there when they go. This is actually the essence of mindfulness practice. You keep coming back to the immediacy of your experience, and then when the thoughts start coming up—thoughts like bad, good, should, shouldn't, me, jerk, you, jerk—you let

those thoughts go, and you come back again to the immediacy of your experience. This is how we can experiment with shunyata, how we can experiment with the open, boundless dimension of being.

Enlightenment—full enlightenment—is perceiving reality with an open, unfixated mind, even in the most difficult circumstances. It’s nothing more than that, actually. You and I have had experiences of this open, unfixated mind. Think of a time when you have felt shock or surprise; at a time of awe or wonder we experience it. It’s usually in small moments, and we might not even notice it, but everyone experiences this open, so-called enlightened mind. If we were completely awake, this would be our constant perception of reality. It’s helpful to realize that this open, unfettered mind has many names, but let’s use the term “buddhanature.”

You could say it’s as if we are in a box with a tiny little slit. We perceive reality out of that little slit, and we think that’s how life is. And then as we meditate—particularly if we train in the way that I’m suggesting—if we train in gentleness, and if we train in letting go, if we bring relaxation as well as faithfulness to the technique into the equation; if we work with open eyes and with being awake and present, and if we train that way moment after moment in our life—what begins to happen is that the crack begins to get bigger. It’s as if we perceive more. We develop a wider and more tolerant perspective.

It might just be that we notice that we’re sometimes awake and we’re sometimes asleep; or we notice that our mind goes off, and our mind comes back. We begin to notice—the first big discovery, of course—that we think so, so much. We begin to develop what’s called

prajna, or “clear wisdom.” With this clear wisdom, we are likely to feel a growing sense of confidence that we can handle more, that we can even love more.

Perhaps there are times when we are able to climb out of the box altogether. But believe me, if that happened too soon, we would freak out. Usually we’re not ready to perceive out of the box right away. But we move in that direction. We are becoming more and more relaxed with uncertainty, more and more relaxed with groundlessness, more and more relaxed with not having walls around us to keep us protected in a little box or cocoon.

Enlightenment isn’t about going someplace else or attaining something that we don’t have right now. Enlightenment is when the blinders start to come off. We are uncovering the true state, or uncovering buddhanature. This is important because each day when you sit down, you can recognize that it’s a process of gradually uncovering something that’s already here. That’s why relaxation and letting go are so important. You can’t uncover something by harshness or uptightness because those things cover our buddhanature. Stabilizing the mind, bringing out the sharp clarity of mind, needs to be accompanied by relaxation and openness.

You could say that this box we’re in doesn’t really exist. But from our point of view, there is a box, which is built from all the obstructions, all the habitual patterns and conditioning that we have created in our life. The box feels very, very real to us. But when we begin

to see through it, to see past it, this box has less and less power to obstruct us. Our buddhanature is always here, and if we could be relaxed enough and awake enough, we would experience just that.

So trust this gradualness and welcome in a quality of patience and a sense of humor, because if the walls came down too fast we wouldn't be ready for it. It would be like a drug trip where you have this mind-blowing experience but then you can't integrate the new way of seeing and understanding into your life.

The path of meditation isn't always a linear path. It's not like you begin to open, and you open more and more and you settle more and more, and then all of a sudden the confining box is gone forever. There are setbacks. I often see with students a kind of "honeymoon period" when they experience a time of great openness and growth in their practice, and then they have a kind of contraction or regression. And this is often terribly frightening or discouraging for many students. A regression in your practice can create crippling doubt and a lot of emotional setback. Students wonder if they've lost their connection to meditation forever because the "honeymoon period" felt so invigorating, so true.

But change happens, even in our practice. This is a fundamental truth. Everything is always changing because it's alive and dynamic. All of us will reach a very interesting point in our practice when we hit the brick wall. It's inevitable. Change is inevitable with relationships, with careers, with anything. I love to talk to people on the meditation path when they're at the point of the brick wall: they think they're

ready to quit, but I feel they're just beginning. If they could work with the unpleasantness, the insult to ego, the lack of certainty, then they're getting closer to the fluid, changing, real nature of life.

Hitting the brick wall is just a stage. It means you've reached a point where you're asked to go even further into open acceptance of life as it is, even into the unpleasant feelings of life. The real inspiration comes when you finally join in with that fluidity, that openness. Before, you were cruising with your practice, feeling certain about it, and that feeling can be "the best" in many ways. And then wham! You're given a chance to go further.

With her powerful teachings, bestselling books, and retreats attended by thousands, Pema Chödrön is today's most popular American-born teacher of Buddhism. In *The Wisdom of No Escape*, *The Places that Scare You*, and other important books, she has helped us discover how difficulty and uncertainty can be opportunities for awakening. She serves as resident teacher at Gampo Abbey Monastery in Nova Scotia and is a student of Dzigar Kongtrul, Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, and the late Chögyam Trungpa. For more, visit pemachodronfoundation.org.

Everything's Made of Mind

All that we are and experience is mind, explains Zen teacher Norman Fischer. That mind is original enlightenment itself.

The teachings about mind are perhaps the most precious, profound, and foundational in Buddhism. Without some understanding of the expansive concept of mind described in these teachings, it's hard to appreciate the full context of Buddhist meditation practice and the enlightenment promised as its ultimate goal.

The Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana, an important text in Far East Asian Buddhism, begins by saying that mind—not only mind in the abstract but the actual minds of sentient beings—“includes within itself all states of being of the phenomenal world and the transcendent world.”

In other words, mind isn't just mental. It isn't, as we understand it in the West, exclusively intellectual and psychological. Mind includes all the material world. It also includes the “transcendent world,” which sounds odd. Isn't it commonplace to think of Buddhism as having, refreshingly, no idea of the transcendent, which sounds like God? We are told that Buddhism is practical and down-to-earth, a human teaching for human beings. It's about calming and understanding the mind in order to put an end to suffering.

This is certainly true, and is the dominant theme of early Buddhism. But in contemplating what mind is, later Mahayana Buddhist pundits teased out huge and astounding implications embedded in the early teachings.

They began by distinguishing two aspects of mind—an absolute aspect and a relative, phenomenal aspect. These, they said, are both identical and not identical. So mind (not only in the abstract, but also my mind, your mind, the mind of all sentient beings) is at the same time both transcendent and not.

This means that the transcendence isn't a place or state of being elsewhere or otherwise: it is here and now. Mind and matter, space and time, animate and inanimate, imaginative and real—all are mind. Mind can be both absolute and phenomenal because it is empty of any hard and fast characteristics that could distinguish one thing from another. It is fluid. It neither exists nor doesn't exist. So, strictly speaking, it isn't impermanent. It is eternal.

In effect, mind equals reality equals impermanence equals eternity. All of which is contained in the workings of my own mind and that of all sentient beings. So this little human life of mine, with all its petty dramas, as well as this seemingly limited and painful world, is in reality the playing out of something ineffably larger and grander. As Vasubhandu, the Indian *Yogachara* (Mind-Only) sage, writes in his famous *Thirty Verses*, reality is simply the transformations of mind.

This is staggering, baffling, and heady. What does it have to do with the inescapable fact that I definitely feel as if I am suffering? My mind may be empty, eternal, transcendent, and vast, but I still experience my life unhappily. What to do?

We could pose the question like this: If my mind is mind, and mind is reality, what is the relationship of my unenlightened mind, the cause of my suffering, to the enlightened mind that puts suffering to an end?

From a psychological and logical point of view, enlightenment and unenlightenment are opposites. I am either enlightened and not suffering, or unenlightened and suffering, and these certainly feel to me like vastly different states. But the teachings on mind assert that enlightenment and unenlightenment are in actuality not different. They are, fundamentally suchness (and the word “fundamentally”—meaning “at bottom,” at their core”—is important here). “Suchness” is a word coined in the Mahayana to connote the mind’s perfect appearance as phenomena. When we receive phenomena as suchness, we don’t experience what we call suffering—even if we suffer!

What we call suffering, and experience as suffering, isn’t actually suffering. It is confusion, illusion, misperception, like seeing a snake that turns out to be merely a crooked stick. Suchness is the only thing we ever really experience. But since we mistake it for something painful and dangerous, we stand apart from it. We see ourselves as its victim, and so are pushed around by it, although in truth there is nothing

that pushes, nothing that can be pushed, and no reason in the first place to feel pushed. Reality is not, as we imagine it to be, difficult and painful. It is always only just as it is: suchness.

But lest we project suchness to be something we can reach for or depend on, something other than what we are and see all the time in front of us, we are reminded that suchness isn't anything. It is a mere word, and the limit, so to speak, of verbalization. It is a word proposed for the purpose of putting an end to words and concepts whose mesmerizing effect on us is the real source of our initial mistaken perception. Since all things are equally and fundamentally suchness, there is literally nothing to be said. Even calling it suchness.

So my suffering, as real as it seems to me, is delusional. But it's a powerful delusion! Its very structure is built into mind, and therefore my personal consciousness. Since its shape and location (these words are metaphorical: mind has no shape or location) is the same as that of enlightenment, to which it is identical, and since both are empty of any grounding reality, my delusion can't be gotten rid of. How can you get rid of something that doesn't exist? Trying to get rid of it will only make matters worse. Besides, to get rid of my delusion is to get rid of my enlightenment, which is my only hope!

In a famous metaphor, Mahayana teachings liken the relationship of delusion to enlightenment to that of a wave and the ocean. The wave is delusion, full of motion and drama. It rises up, crests, breaks, dissipates, and gathers strength to drive again. With my eyes on the wave, I see it as real.

But the wave isn't anything. There is no such entity as "wave." There is only water, in motion or not. Wind acts on water to make what we call a wave. If the wind stops, the movement ceases and the water remains quiet. Whether there are waves or no waves, water remains always water, salty and wet. Without wind, the water is quiet and deep. But even when wind activity is strong on the surface, deep below water remains quiet.

Mind is like this. It is deep, pure, and silent. But when the winds of delusion blow, its surface stirs and what we call suffering results. But the waves of my suffering are nothing more or less than mind. And even as I rage, the depths below remain quiet. Life is the wind. Life is the water. As long as life appears as phenomena there will be the stirrings of delusion. Delusion is in fact the movement, the stirring, of awakening. My ocean mind is inherently pure and serene, always. When I know this, I can navigate the waves with grace.

The Awakening of Faith, the text I referred to above, offers an even better analogy. A man is lost. He is confused about which way is north and which way south. He has a place he is trying to go but because of his confusion he can't get there. He feels disoriented and deeply uncomfortable. He has that sinking feeling of being lost, of not being in the place he wants and ought to be. But then he suddenly realizes there actually is no north or south—that these are just names people give to this way or that way, and that, no matter where he is, he is in fact here, where he has always been and will always be. Immediately, that man no longer has a feeling of being lost.

Likewise we are lost when we don't settle our lives in suchness. Misperceiving the wholeness of our mind, we see confusion and lack, which naturally gives rise to desire. We desire a destination, a state, that will bring us peace. But we don't know how to get there. We feel lost, ungrounded, desperate for road signs.

“Delusion” is the place we are fleeing. “Enlightenment” is the destination we seek. But it is a false destination. The path and all its teachings are like north and south, names for various directions that have some provisional value but in the end only confuse us if we take them as real in a way they are not.

Since people need maps and directions when they feel lost, enlightenment is proposed as a destination some distance from delusion. The teachings are serviceable, if provisional, navigation aids to point us in what we believe to be the right direction. But after we have gone on long enough to have calmed down a bit, we see the truth: there is nowhere to go and no way to get there. We have been there all along. In Mahayana Buddhism this is called original enlightenment, or *tathagatagarbha*—the Womb of Suchness.

This same point is made in a famous parable in the *Lotus Sutra*, an important text of Chinese Buddhism. People are lost. They hire a caravan leader who takes them to what turns out to be an illusory city, where they find some respite. Somewhat refreshed, they are then told by the caravan leader that this is not and has never really been their destination. The destination is endlessly far ahead. In effect there is no destination; they have always been where they wanted to go. But if the caravan leader had told them this at the outset they would never have believed him.

Now let's get practical. Given all this, what does what we think of as enlightenment actually amount to? Are these teachings proposing, as they seem to be, that we give up practice altogether and somehow suddenly leap out of what we experience as suffering, by some kind of mental magic trick? That we somehow will or think ourselves into enlightenment?

No. The entire culture of practice (including meditation but also study, dharma relationships, ritual, and much more) is necessary. But not in the way we thought it was, not as a way to make things different. Rather, we practice to shift our understanding of our lives. In effect, as *The Awakening of Faith* puts it, "The process of actualization of enlightenment is none other than the process of integrating the identity with the original enlightenment."

Practice, then, is both a sudden (we have flashes of insight) and a gradual (it develops over a lifetime) identity shift. We stop seeing ourselves as the child of our parents, a poor lonely soul in a difficult world, with various conditioned imperfections, drawbacks, desires, and hopes, most of which remain unfulfilled. Instead we have confidence in our original enlightenment, which is and has always been at the center of our lives, despite our limitations and pain. *The Awakening of Faith*: "The state of enlightenment is not something that is to be acquired by practice or to be created. In the end, it is unobtainable, because it has been there from the very beginning."

This teaching about mind reminds me of a conversation I had with my mother toward the end of her life. She was dying. I knew it, everyone in our family knew it, but we didn't talk about it because my

mother didn't like to think about it. But once, when we were having bagels and lox at a little deli near where she lived, she said to me, casually, as if it were a matter of mere curiosity, "What do Buddhists think happens after you die?"

"Well," I said to her, "it depends on who you think you are. If you think you are just this body and mind, just these memories and experiences and relationships and thoughts, then death is very bad news. Because when you die you will lose all that. But if you think you are also more than this, something you don't understand but somehow feel and have confidence in, then when you die that something—which was never born and so can't die—never goes away. And that would make it easier and happier to die."

I am not sure my mother got any comfort from those words. As I recall now, she looked more bewildered than comforted. But perhaps what I said did help toward the end, when her consciousness faded and her mind was quiet.

Certainly, the intention of the great Buddhist teachers who over the centuries have detailed these teachings on mind is not only to comfort us. They offer us these teachings on what mind really is to give us a sound basis for a way of practice that can transform our lives, and the world.

Norman Fischer is a poet, essayist, and Soto Zen Buddhist priest who has published more than thirty volumes of poetry and prose, including last year's *When You Greet Me I Bow*. He is the founder of *Everyday Zen*, a community based in the San Francisco Bay area, as well as a former abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center. He and his wife, Kathie Fischer, also a Soto Zen priest, have two children and three grandchildren and live in Muir Beach, California.

What If Our Delusions Aren't a Barrier to Enlightenment?

“What if our deluded minds aren't a barrier to enlightenment at all?” asks Zenju Earthlyn Manuel. “What if they are the very path to it?”

If your inability to cut off ceaseless thought has ever left you feeling hopeless or inadequate, you're not alone. Anyone who has practiced earnestly for any length of time has likely wrestled with the thinking mind, motivated by a desire to evolve away from delusion and toward awakening or enlightenment. We may wonder what we're missing, always searching for the secret code we believe will unlock the door to enlightenment. We read endless dharma books, which might lead us to that door but ultimately leave us standing outside, desperate to get in. Perhaps we even take our deluded selves to a Buddhist teacher or center to receive guidance, hoping to fix whatever it is that prevents us from seeing the light.

But what if our deluded minds aren't a barrier to enlightenment at all? What if they are the very path to it? Several years ago, I stumbled upon the term *shinzo*, or “ever-intimate,” used by Dogen Zenji. Perhaps due to the lack of intimacy I so often felt in my personal life, I felt an immediate connection with the phrase in my own practice. So, I made an effort to learn more about Dogen's teachings on *shinzo*. In his book *Dogen on Meditation and Thinking: A Reflection on His*

View of Zen, Buddhist scholar Hee-Jin Kim wrote that Dogen used the term to address the intimate and dynamic relationship between enlightenment and delusion:

The ultimate paradox of Zen liberation is said to lie in the fact that one attains enlightenment only in and through delusion itself, never apart from it... Enlightenment consists not so much in replacing as in dealing with or “negotiating” delusion.

In essence, Dogen was saying that mind—or body-mind, as he referred to it—must be brought into the inherent intimacy between what is illuminated in our lives and what is darkened, that we must fully participate in the dance of these two, continually twirling together and trading places.

I was already well acquainted with this dance, in which two parts of a whole each strive to overcome the other until, eventually, companionship develops and the struggle resolves. There is mutuality, and the gifts each brings are acknowledged.

But isn't the whole point of Buddhist practice to overcome delusion? Why would we ever want to entertain delusion as a guest? Most of us view enlightenment as a superior way of being. This view comes from ancient Vedic traditions, in which the goal was to negate the deluded mind, to negate thinking, but that is not the goal of Zen practice as taught by Dogen. And this is what I love about Dogen's radical teachings. With respect to thinking and non-thinking, he taught that it doesn't matter if we have discriminating, deluded thoughts. What matters is how we use those thoughts.

In *Hotsu Mujoshin* (“On Giving Rise to the Unsurpassed Mind”), Dogen wrote, “Thinking is the mystery of the practice by which we become intimate with ourselves and the universe.” In other words, when we become intimate with our own thinking, delusions become the earth upon which the moon of enlightenment shines. We may long to be the light itself, the moon glowing upon the earth, yet we feel tethered to our emotions and the thoughts that bring them to the surface. In Dogen’s vision, the relationship between delusion and enlightenment within our lives is necessary. Whether we are angry, even enraged, aggrieved, or content, we are right where we should be. No part of our humanity needs to be tossed away. We need all that we were born with to navigate life, and that includes delusions.

This tension is apparent in the second of the four bodhisattva vows, which Soto Zen practitioners regularly chant: “Delusions are inexhaustible. I vow to end them.” Many a Zen student has chuckled at the absurdity of vowing to end something that is inexhaustible. How could we ever meet this vow? Instead of declaring endless war on our delusions, though, we can simply stop trying to banish them from the path of enlightenment. We can end the separation and lack of intimacy with our thinking minds, and through that encounter with delusion we can come to know the enlightenment that previously seemed as distant as the morning star.

We may fear, deny, ignore, or refuse to accept this marriage of enlightenment and delusion, longing to hold company with our favorite friend, enlightenment. After all, the intimacy of delusion with enlightenment can be difficult to fathom. Enlightenment doesn’t

negate delusion, yet a willingness to experience intimacy with our thoughts is crucial to attending to the suffering of our times. As the fires of suffering burn in our country and in the world, it is high time we fully examine our collective thinking in order to move toward a humanity that can truly see itself and can therefore transform its greatest ills.

Like so many others on the Buddhist path, I was waiting for my life to be the way I wanted it to be and wasn't fully engaging with the way it actually was. Over time, through the practice of zazen, I began to see how this mixed-up dream had separated me from the life I was living every day, every moment.

I saw this dance in action one day, when an aspirant who had been practicing with me for some time opened up and shared memories of being abused as a child. As she spoke, I noticed both her feet were moving, tapping, shaking. Several times she sat upright, then fell back into her seat. Her head moved up and down as she described the trauma. Seeing her agitation, I asked, "You have been learning so much. What could you teach that child right now from your practice of zazen and yoga?"

It took her a moment reply. Her eyes darted around as she considered the question. "To breathe," she finally said.

"Then let's do that right now," I instructed.

We sat quietly together and breathed. After five minutes, her feet stopped shaking, her hands sat still on her lap. Suddenly, she jerked her head back and began to moan and cry. Her body stiffened. She had been using the movements, which were momentarily absent, to

fend off the pain from so long ago that was still lodged in her body-mind. I asked her to continue breathing, as she had been practicing for five years.

“Show the child how the breathing is done,” I told her.

I breathed in and out with her, holding her in my heart as she dove into herself, developing the capacity to overcome her limitations by seeing the thoughts she lives with. We were not breathing into calmness but creating the inner environment through which the work of just seeing can occur. (Please keep in mind this practice may not be appropriate for everyone. Consult an experienced Buddhist teacher or a therapist when working with trauma.)

Her direct experience of her body-mind moving and settling, moving and settling, allowed her to see and know herself directly, without someone else telling her what she needed to know. Once her breathing had slowed, I asked her to bring that same earnestness to her zazen practice, to enter each path that she follows—yoga, Buddhist retreats, therapy—with the somberness of her suffering and not to see them as escapes from home or from the world. I asked her to enter the zendo from now on as if coming into a dark cave with her thoughts. As the thoughts arise, I told her, surrender to them and come to know the process as illumination taking place.

The deeper our life is illuminated within delusion, the more clearly we can see our own limitations, struggles, and suffering. This is the true intimacy of Zen practice and the mystical nature of zazen.

In Mahayana Buddhism, there is a notion that once the Buddha became enlightened, we all did. This teaching points us in the direction of not trying to acquire or gain enlightenment but rather allowing it to meet us along the way. Enlightenment is neither given nor gained, so we are bound to tango with the deluded body-mind. And what a dance it is!

In *Sokushin Zebutsu* (“The Very Mind is Buddha”), Dogen wrote, “Thinking is said to be exerted by the mind of the entire great earth, the mind of the trees and stones, of mountains and rivers, the sun, moon and stars and by the one mind of all dharmas...” Thinking, then, is malleable; it’s adaptable and resilient. The intimacy between the self, the universe, and our thinking is indelibly part and parcel of Dogen’s Zen. Enlightenment is “ever intimate” with, and transparent to, delusion.

When we dive deeply into the tension between enlightenment and delusion, we go beyond our mere ideas of them. Dogen wrote that, if we even think of enlightenment, there will be an aspiration for it. Thought is not an enemy to our endeavors for enlightenment. In fact, it’s impossible to dance with enlightenment without the intimate knowing that comes from opening fully to our deluded, thinking minds.

Zenju Earthlyn Manuel is a Soto Zen priest, author, and poet. A dharma heir of the late Zenkei Blanche Hartman in the Shunryu Suzuki Roshi lineage, her practice is also influenced by Native American and African indigenous traditions. Her most recent book is *The Shamanic Bones of Zen: Revealing the Ancestral Spirit and Mystical Heart of a Sacred Tradition*.

The Enlightenment Project

Rob Preece shares why the Buddhist path isn't about trying to become spiritually evolved, but about being authentic, open, and compassionate.

In my early twenties, when I first became involved in the Tibetan tradition, I would often hear fellow practitioners say, “I must achieve enlightenment, for the sake of all sentient beings.” When I think back on this sentiment, I can almost hear Chögyam Trungpa chuckling to himself. He once wrote that the ego will never see itself become enlightened; he said we spend our time striving to achieve enlightenment only to realize that striving itself is our biggest obstacle.

For me, bodhicitta, or the intention to achieve enlightenment for the welfare of sentient beings, has been hugely significant in my Buddhist journey. But even with this selfless goal, I found my intention bound up in a kind of ego aspiration, like setting my sights on running a half marathon. I spent hours in intensive practice trying to accumulate vast numbers of mantras, prostrations, and other rituals in order to gain the “merit” to attain enlightenment. Over time, I began to wonder if the goal of enlightenment was really to achieve a final state of being, or if perhaps it pointed to a process instead.

As my practice evolved, I began to recognize that what was more critical in my day-to-day life was how I woke up—or how I didn't—to all the psychological issues I needed to transform. Simply striving

for enlightenment wasn't going to make them go away. Whatever moments of awakening might emerge had to be brought into the present, not solidified into some distant future goal.

It wasn't until I found myself trying to achieve "realizations" during a long retreat—and despairing—that something in me finally gave up on my enlightenment project. When I spoke to one of my teachers about this, he said, "Perhaps knowing who you are is realization."

As I work with others, I consistently find this comment fitting. Most people aren't preoccupied with enlightenment; rather, they're moving in their practice toward individuation and a sense of wholeness. Recognizing our innate buddhanature can be significant in this process; the dharma calls us to be true to ourselves—not to the ego and its foibles and fantasies but to a deeper inner nature. When we consider our contemporary Western lives, I feel practicing the dharma means living authentically and in alignment with our true nature in each moment rather than striving to attain some ideal state. Once we understand this, we can also begin to let go of ego ambitions and allow our buddhanature to guide us as a kind of inner guru.

I have always considered bodhicitta to be a deeply felt quality of intention that, once we surrender to its unfolding, is like the flow of a river that runs through our life as a constant undercurrent. We do not need to keep thinking "I must get enlightened for the sake of others" because that river is running toward the ocean of enlightenment whether we think about it or not. This does not mean a passive

surrender, however, but a willingness to wake up and engage our lives with compassion, courage, and a sense of responsibility. As the saying goes, “Put your trust in God, but tether your camel.”

We all have buddhanature. It is the gift we inherit as sentient beings. By giving attention and care to clearing and healing those aspects of our psychological makeup that obscure buddhanature, we can live in a way that gradually allows it to reveal itself. In this way, we naturally awaken and begin to live in ways that express support and care for the welfare of others, as a natural outflow of the love and compassion we feel. The Buddhist path is not about trying to achieve some ideal or becoming spiritually evolved. It is about being authentic, free from reactivity, open, and compassionate. As my teacher once said, “This is good enough, dear.”

Rob Preece is a psychotherapist and meditation teacher living in England. He is the author of *The Wisdom of Imperfection* (Snow Lion) and *Feeling Wisdom* (Shambhala).

Not Enlightened Yet?

As part of our #MeditationHacks series, author and musician Miguel Chen comforts a practitioner who doesn't seem to be getting any closer to enlightenment.

I thought the goal of spiritual practice was to attain some sort of enlightenment or wisdom, but I don't seem to be anywhere near that. What am I doing wrong?

Miguel Chen: Perhaps you are overthinking it. Let's consider "enlightenment" or "wisdom" to simply mean seeing things as they really are. If you're setting a goal for things to be different than they are, you have already missed the point.

The truth is right in front of us at all times. We're not trying to change it; we're simply trying to connect to it. This is much less about attaining something, and much more about removing obstacles.

In fact, setting lofty goals can create extra obstacles. Having a goal like "enlightenment" brings with it expectations about what that might look like. Expectations carry a lot of weight. Let that weight go. With this simple step, you will have removed some obstacles, and this will surely help you connect to the truth.

When in doubt, simplify. Perhaps the goal can be better understood as a moment of silence. It doesn't sound as fancy as "enlightenment," but even one moment of true silence can have a profound impact. When you are truly silent, there are no obstacles between you and the truth. In the space of that moment, what you seek can reveal

itself. Just be careful not to attach to that idea either, for the moment you realize you have reached that moment is the moment that you have fallen out of it.

Miguel Chen is the bass player for long-running punk rock band Teenage Bottlerocket. He is a meditation practitioner, a yoga instructor, and the owner of Blossom Yoga Studio in Laramie, Wyoming. In addition to appearing in countless Teenage Bottlerocket press pieces, Miguel has been featured by Lion's Roar, PunkNews, Full Contact Enlightenment, LionsRoar.com, Modern Vinyl, Chris Grosso's MindPod podcast, and more.

Ask the Teachers: Is Buddhism About Ethics or Enlightenment?

Bhante Sumano, Jisho Sara Siebert, and Gaylon Ferguson explore the meaning of ethics and enlightenment on the Buddhist path.

Q: I have zero interest in enlightenment. To me, Buddhism is about ethics—it's a path to reduce harm and hopefully provide benefit to others. Is that enough, or am I missing the point?

BHANTE SUMANO: For you at this moment, Buddhism as ethics will have to be enough. Practicing morality, virtue, ethics—being of benefit to oneself and others—these are activities the Buddha always applauded. It just so happens he also said there was something greater: the possibility of enlightenment.

Buddhist traditions offer various perspectives on bodhi—enlightenment or awakening. Here, I offer one of the simplest descriptions from the Pali texts: enlightenment is the end of greed, hatred, and delusion. No more grasping, no more hating, no more ignorance. Freedom.

You'll find a litany of synonyms and metaphors for enlightenment. Some call it a refuge, a sanctuary, the far shore, or the sublime. Essentially, enlightenment is the attainment of true peace, one born of seeing reality clearly.

Enlightenment, then, doesn't preclude ethics, or *sila*. It couldn't. True peace can never be based on harming oneself or others. Awakening must involve ethics. In fact, if you're practicing ethics, you're practicing for enlightenment. What is enlightenment if not the pinnacle of ethical conduct?

But this pinnacle can only be reached by developing the mind. After all, it is the mind from which all action—virtuous or not—springs, and its workings are profoundly subtle.

Transforming such a mind requires more than ethical conduct. It requires concentration and wisdom, completing the trifecta of *sila*, *samadhi*, and *pañña*, wisdom. All these qualities build on and support each other. So when you're practicing ethics, you're also developing your powers of awareness and insight—qualities that lead to awakening.

The Buddha was not interested in coercing anyone to practice in a particular way, though. Instead, he invited people to see the benefits of whatever path of action they chose. Of course, as a teacher he gave guidance based on his deep wisdom and experience, but it was up to the individual to do as they saw fit.

You can't fake interest, nor should you. No need to feel guilty, either. You don't need to "believe in" or care about enlightenment to develop the heart. Besides, if you change your mind, the potential for awakening will still be there.

So yes, Buddhism is about ethics and reducing harm. But it's also about so much more: it is about the vast potential of the mind to be released from distress, about unlocking immense generosity, kindness, and understanding. Such a mind would surely benefit the world.

Still, don't take my word for it. Practice deeply and sincerely, and see for yourself how shedding greed, hatred, and delusion feels. The relief of a joyful, mindful walk or a serene sitting session is but a taste of the peace of a mind released. And when we have even a little bit of peace, it can only spread to others as well.

JISHO SARA SIEBERT: Your question is wonderful, because many of us practice Buddhism out of a wish to relieve our own suffering, and you have already expanded your viewpoint beyond your small self. True expansion or dissolution of view is what we mean by enlightenment—it is not some altered state. From the viewpoint of enlightenment, unethical action doesn't make any sense; there is a natural flow of ethical action from an awakened viewpoint. But can ethical action exist without awakening?

I was born to an atheist mother, who is one of the most ethical and caring people I know. I have seen her up close, as she watched her mother die slowly and now, as she watches my father's struggles with Alzheimer's. Ethics without any cultivation of, or desire for, a spiritual path seems to be working for her.

For me, ethics without the mind of enlightenment did not work. All around, I see the pitfalls of seeking to do compassionate things without grounding in awakened mind. I have spent about twenty-five years as a bit of a reluctant nomad, seeking to prevent and respond to sexual and domestic violence in such places as Liberia, Uganda, Haiti, Papua New Guinea, and Iowa, and at times, the suffering has been intense and all-consuming. In each community, there have been

many compassionate beings, listening and acting out of a beautiful and awakened mind. But there have also been peacekeepers who sexually abuse little girls, decadent parties by expats working in refugee camps, and racism, egotism, and callousness in the face of need. In these cases, people were led to their positions by a sense of ethics, yet their work brought suffering.

One day in Haiti, I walked along a dusty street lined with little turquoise, pink, and grey houses, feeling weak and off-center and on the way to a day of “ethical” service. It smelled like a mix of flowers, the sewer, and burning trash. People along the path, drawing on centuries of legitimate grievances, shouted slurs at me as I passed while others stared, stone-faced. This was not so different from most mornings in that particular community, but that day I felt unable to continue.

I stopped and closed my eyes for a moment, wishing for a patch of sun in which to lie down. I thought only briefly of Buddha. Suddenly, I sensed an energy in the top of my head open; I felt light flow in through the top of my head and out my feet. I looked around again at the same scene, smiled widely at those shouting at me, said hello, and kept walking. Stone faces cracked open, radiating warm smiles.

How can we best live in a way that benefits others? The koan is yours, so I bow and hand it back to you. Please sit with it with your whole heart.

GAYLON FERGUSON: This is one of those questions that has several important insights built right into it. Yes, the path of buddhadharma is about ethics or right conduct (sila)—and it’s also

about right mindfulness and meditative engagement (samadhi), as well as knowing the true nature of reality (prajna). These traditional “three wheels of training” are elaborated in the earliest teachings of the Buddha on the noble eightfold path, where we are encouraged to study the view, practice meditation, and manifest our understanding in right speech, right action, and right livelihood.

This question beautifully leaves open the possibility that there is more to the path of awakening than ethics, more than we have already understood about the Buddhist path altogether. This is an admirable sign of humility, an absence of the arrogance that is certain that “this is all there is to know, and that’s that.” This and many other genuine questions arise in what Suzuki Roshi praised as our “beginner’s mind.”

When we engage meditation, study, and action, we allow our experiences in practice and everyday life to change us. This path of experiential transformation may gradually shift our interest in enlightenment. This isn’t a matter of forcing ourselves to agree with previous dogma, to believe something just because it’s ancient. Instead, we find ourselves opening and letting go of fixations, feeling wider empathy and deeper compassion, connecting with others in community and solidarity amidst the turbulent changes and challenges of our world. This means that we may—nothing is certain or guaranteed here—come to a different understanding of who we are (and are not), who those around us are (and are not), and how we might move away from causing harm and toward being of greater

benefit. Attaining what is called “unexcelled, complete perfect enlightenment” is said to be a wise, skillful, and powerful way of caring for all beings—the ultimate ethical realization. Enlightenment and ethics are not the same thing, nor are they different.

The path also invites us into the deeper meanings of “enlightened being.” Those who have realized their true nature are called “buddhas,” meaning “awakened, enlightened ones.” Originally, a singular historical person was “the enlightened one”; however, later practitioners came to understand “buddha” as the true nature of everything. We might call this larger dimension of wakefulness “Cosmic Buddha.” The historical person known as Shakyamuni was, of course, part of this primordial wisdom display, but so are we and everyone and everything around us. This is the vastness that is the inner meaning of the small word “buddha.” So your question about not being interested in enlightenment opens up a new question: What is enlightenment?

Bhante Sumano is a Jamaican American Theravada Buddhist monk. He currently lives in the United States as a wandering contemplative, traveling and practicing with his dharma brother Bhante Tanakaro.

Jisho Sara Siebert is a Soto Zen Buddhist priest and teacher at Zen Fields in Ames, Iowa. Led to Buddhism by the suffering she saw in her work to prevent domestic and sexual violence, she found her way to Los Angeles, where she first met her teacher, then to Papua New Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Uganda, monasteries in Japan, and Haiti. She now works for Beyond Borders, an organization committed to preventing violence against girls and women and ending child slavery.

ASK THE TEACHERS: IS BUDDHISM ABOUT ETHICS OR ENLIGHTENMENT?

BHANTE SUMANO, JISHO SARA SIEBERT, AND GAYLON FERGUSON

Gaylon Ferguson is an acharya (senior teacher) in the Shambhala Buddhist community. He has a doctorate in cultural anthropology from Stanford and is a faculty member in religious studies and interdisciplinary studies at Naropa University. He is the author of *Natural Wakefulness: Discovering the Wisdom We Were Born With*.