



Chapter 1, Awakening And Behavior

Question: Hi, Robert. From a psychological point of view, how does awakening impact personal behavior? I remember a conversation in which you discussed a “six-year hangover” that seemed to revolve around the continuance of narcissistic behaviors by “Robert,” despite the sudden awakening experience you had.

I have listened to people describe similar experiences. One of my favorite descriptions is by an Englishman called Rupert Spira. He says that the old habits of thinking, feeling and perceiving as a separate self can go on for a lifetime, even after realizing a separate self is an illusion.

Shinzen Young, an American-born meditation teacher who has been a great influence in my thinking, awakened after living as a monk in Japan, but continued to battle with marijuana addiction and procrastination even 35 years after his shift in identity.

I would never expect any sudden experience to result in instant behavior changes, but do you feel your experience may have changed your behavior in any positive ways?

Q2: Robert, you seem to be a harsh critic of religion and spirituality, including not just the ancient book religions, but also new age spirituality, neo-Advaita, and the like. Is this something you felt before awakening, or did the awakening experience result in this skepticism?

Robert: The word “awake” can be problematic even beyond the usual uncertainty about what one word or another *really* means. In the first place, “awakened”

might seem to denote a kind of unchanging condition—a fixed state in which some *person*, the awakened one, remains or abides—but that is not my experience. In the second place, words like “awakened,” and “enlightened” sound rather grandiose for a perspective that seems quite natural—as natural, I’d say, as being roused from an afternoon nap and finding oneself alive and aware. So, before getting to the questions, I should clarify my usage of the word “awake.”

Whenever I think about it or notice it, I find myself *here*. When I say “here,” I mean at the visual center of an apparent world of sights; at the auditory center of an apparent world of sounds; at the tactile center of an apparent world of texture, etc. The entirety of that sensory information, most of which usually passes unnoticed, is assembled moment by moment into an experience of “the world.” I cannot *do* that assembling any more than I can digest food or circulate blood. I have no choice in the matter. When I awaken from sleep, the world is there, a seamless confection that is not my doing. Nor do I know what that world “really” is or from whence my experience of it comes.

Inasmuch as I neither *make* the world nor, despite the dogmas of religion and spirituality, know anything at all about its *source*, I do not know and cannot know what “I”—a *feature* of that world—am either.

So for me, awakening means the *end* of “spirituality” in the face of the undeniable understanding that all conjecture on the subject of “myself” falls short—must fall short—of actually *explaining* anything. In each moment, I find myself *here* as an apparent focus of awareness without ever having chosen to be here, without knowing what I “really” am, and without needing to know. I am well aware that what I see and feel is a concoction of some sort or another, but this world is the world I have, and so I, an apparent constituent of this world of mine, live *in* it and *with* it—not in a world of conjecture, supposition, and mysticism about ultimate matters, but *here and now*. That is what I mean by “awake.”

I heard Rupert Spira on the radio once. He seemed to speak both factually and humbly about his experience of awakening—both good signs in my book. As you know, I underwent an abrupt shift of focus that left me speechless for a time, able only to sit on the floor naked, laughing. I laughed on seeing that the joke was on me: “This is obvious. This has always been here. How could I have missed this?” I laughed too, I suppose, with relief at the sudden liberation.

I have discussed the aftermath of that happening, which involved the difficulty of reconciling the split between the mysterious, unknown “myself,” and the ordinary, conventional *person* whose self-centered point of view and normally neurotic personality seemed just about par for the course. That split *had* to be reconciled because both figures were living in the same body and using the same mouth to speak with.

I don’t recall mentioning a six-year hangover, but I suppose that refers to a serious illness I contracted in 1990, just around six years after the initial breakthrough about which you are asking. That illness struck hard just on the eve of the opening of an exhibition and book signing about which I had been feeling inflated and self-important. In the event, I was too ill to make it to the opening. Missed the whole enchilada.

During the ensuing months of anguish and recovery, I came to see that despite the abrupt experience of awakening, which felt entirely real and undeniable, I still harbored an out-and-out egotism about my work as an artist, as if I were the *doer* of that work, although I knew quite well that “ego-I” was not a doer of anything. So there it was in stark clarity—the *split*.

As I assume Rupert and Shinzen were saying, one can be aware of the limitations of the ordinary “myself,” and yet somehow—as if pulling the wool over one’s own eyes on the emotional level—forget, and so fall back into imagining at times that one has control of faculties such as willing and deciding—faculties that one

has already seen are nonexistent. It is not enough, apparently, to “awaken.” The awakening then must be absorbed by sectors of personality that might be slow to catch on, isolated as they are by the habits and demands of self-interest. Seekers of enlightenment seem often to imagine that awakening will mean the sudden and absolute annihilation of the “personal self,” but that is not my experience. Awakening, I say, never ends, and neither does personality.

Personality! No one gets to choose the one she or he must live with, any more than we get to choose our bodies, the circumstances of our birth and upbringing, or the rest. Personality comes upon us like fate, and is expressed and lived out naturally. In my understanding, the only modifications to this automatic expression arrive via outside influences. Changes happen along with the “doings” of the entire universe, not in obedience to the wishes of an apparent “*decider*.” What, after all, makes the supposed decider *want* to change in the first place? Where does *that* wish come from?

For me, an apparent personal self is still present, but has lost the authority of its judgments, certainties and pet beliefs. Gone too is the usual intense identification with personal history and autobiography as if one *owned* the past, or at least one’s little piece of it. I don’t mean that I cannot remember erstwhile experiences, but that they have lost their power to affect and condition the present. If I speak of bygones, it feels as if speaking about someone else entirely.

Without its certainties and habitual attachment to self-fulfillment, and self-justification, the personal self has nowhere very solid to perch. If there is anger, it lasts only a moment. If there is lust, it lasts only for a moment. Such feelings are neither rationalized and explained by reference to the past, nor sustained by weaving them into a story one imagines will continue onward into a visualized future. For me, feelings are not connected up in that way. One really does live at all times only here and now, not by choice, but just because that’s the way it is.

No one has found words adequate to explain this, or at least I have never come across any. D.T. Suzuki said that, “enlightenment is like everyday consciousness but two inches off the ground.” As I said earlier, the word “enlightenment” seems too cut and dried for my taste. Nevertheless, Suzuki’s is not too bad an image, capturing as it does both the ordinariness of the entire business as well as the feeling of treading lightly in this world of quotidian matters, which just are what they are, when they are, no matter what anybody thinks about it.

Regarding reconciliation of the split between the socially constructed *person* and moment-by-moment awakens, those with a religious background sometimes approach that matter by means of reference to tradition. For an awakening Christian, for example, the experience I call *choicelessness* (things are *as* they are and cannot, in this moment, be different) might be exemplified by the words, “Forgive them Lord for they know not what they do” (forgive them because *they have no choice*).

However, *understanding* awakening in terms of the jargon and symbology of one’s traditional upbringing is one thing, but *emulating* a supposedly holy or saintly attitude, or taking up some religious idea with expectations that such imitation will *lead* to awakening, is quite another. The latter is, I say, a vain hope indeed. Following others will *not* lead to seeing myself and the world as the mystery they are. Quite the opposite. Awakening is when you *don’t* follow.

I know that some seekers, both East and West, aspire to find salvation or liberation by attempting to *self-realize* according to their existing concepts of a supreme being—a kind of *Imitatio Dei*—but to me that kind of “salvation” looks like self-hypnosis, not awakening.

From my perspective, deciding and choosing operate, if at all, only within a limited area that is more fictional than real. If one sees that nothing like free will *actually* exists, the capacity to accuse, blame, and reproach just disappears. No

choice *implies* no blame. *That* is forgiveness. Not that anyone *chooses* to forgive, or *decides* to forgive.

Skepticism is not the right word for my apathy toward religion and spirituality. Having seen the emptiness of supposed answers to ultimate questions, I view those answers as elements in the domain of unsubstantiated magical thinking. Magical thinking holds no interest for me—none. I don't know if a conscious, overarching principle or so-called "supreme being" exists or not, and I don't care. I know what I know *right now* from this present perspective, and that is precious little.

I know *nothing* about ultimate matters: nothing about submission to the will of God, as in Christianity and Islam; nothing about realizing one's identity with *Brahman*, as in Hinduism; nothing about what happens when you die, and nothing about how all of this got here—none of it. All I know is the constantly changing flow of perceptions, feelings, and thoughts in *this* stream of consciousness, *including* the habitual, recurrent thought called "myself." And I know that the perceived myself is neither *making* that stream, nor standing apart from it.

Spiritual believers of many stripes assert, with unwarranted certainty, that a supreme being does stand apart from that stream. That supposedly conscious being, whether the *Brahman* of Hinduism, or the God of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, is claimed to be *permanent, eternal, and boundless*. But in my own heart I do not know if *anything* is permanent, or even what "permanent" would mean in the vastness of this universe—even that small part of it of which we are actually aware. I have no reason to believe in *anything* permanent. Nor do I doubt it. I simply do not know, and that "not-knowing" is part and parcel of what I consider "awake."

6 To put this in simplest terms, so far as any of us *knows*, no one is *making* this stream of consciousness—the river of perceptions, feelings, and thoughts

that in each moment is “myself.” You can *tell* yourself that “God” is making that stream, but hanging a name on the incomprehensible does nothing to explicate or illuminate the actual, front-and-center mystery of *aliveness*—the astounding fact of being at all, *prior* to concepts about the supposed *source* of this aliveness.

Whether a supreme being exists or not is beside the point anyway. Regardless of what you believe or disbelieve, undeniably, here you are. Each moment is unique in its *suchness*—its essential character—come and gone like a lightning flash. Who knows what, if anything, is *creating* that suchness? We are here *without* knowing. Each moment is *what* it is *when* it is, isn’t it?

The uncritical embrace of ideas found in supposedly numinous scripture, gleaned from presumably expert testimony, or born of the marriage between psychological need and conjecture, is called “faith.” I am way down the road from anything like that. From my perspective, faith is just another word—a better sounding one—for credulity. In awakening, one sees that concepts about ultimate matters are only passing thoughts in changeable human minds, not “Truth.”

The stream of consciousness isn’t called a *stream* for nothing; it never stops flowing. You may wish to keep on believing what you believe right now, but clinging to ideas—including ideas about who and what you are—does not mean that you get to keep them. That’s what Heraclitus meant when he famously said, “everything changes and nothing remains still, and you cannot step twice into the same stream.”

Conjecture and supposition may cut some ice in day-to-day affairs, but cannot be applied usefully to ultimate matters. Who cares what someone claims *might be*, *could be*, or even *is* the “substrate” of reality or the “first cause” of all we see? All of that can be debated and denied, but one cannot deny *this* moment and all it contains. Perhaps there *is* no “first cause.” Must there be a first cause for *this* to be here?

If someone finds enjoyment or meaning in religious practice, fine by me. I don't walk through this world criticizing. But since you are asking about *my* experience, I must reply that "spirituality" has nothing to do with it, and the embrace of unsubstantiated spiritual beliefs, far from providing a path to comprehension, more often seems to impede it.

When a famous guru tells you that, "you are not the mind," what could that possibly mean? Why should you believe such a statement? If the guru is charismatic, or has many followers, does that make the statement true? If the statement just appeals to you in some way, does *that* make it true? Is there *really* a "you" that is *not* mind, but can somehow understand words, judge them to be true and deem the speaker of them to be "enlightened," and consequently an infallible horse's mouth? Or is "you are not the mind" just another idea *in* mind that you take on faith or because you like the way it sounds?

I have not a flyspeck of interest in beliefs, conjectures, or faith of any stripe, not because one belief or another has been proven wrong or because I am an atheist or a materialist, but because *this* moment is sufficient unto itself without my needing to believe anything.

Sometime during my slow recovery from the illness that showed me the split between the undefinable mystery-self and the conventional ego-self, I lost the desire to continue my career in the art world. I was tired of the vanity and the overblown self-promotion on all sides, was put off by the company of all but a very few artists, and often had to drink to excess before being able to attend the openings of my exhibitions. Now I was done. I went back to school, obtained a doctorate in psychology, and began my work as a psychotherapist. So I suppose that is a change in behavior, if that is what you meant.

Nowadays, I would say, none of this presents even the slightest difficulty. Like any other person I have a story and a personality, not chosen, but imposed

by nature and nurture. It is what it is. No one is to blame, and I'm not judging.