



Chapter 3, Awakening Never Ends

Q: Robert, as an apparently awake person who is willing to answer questions, what would you say is the most important question to ask?

A: The “I” who is replying to questions here is not a “person” at all, which is really only a legal and social designation, but an indefinable, unrestrained flow of perceptions, feelings, and thoughts. That flow is not happening *to* me. That flow *is* me. In the eyes of the world Robert may be a person, but to myself I am not a person, but a happening, a stream of consciousness over which I have no control.

We are all like that, but not all of us know it. Most of us were put into a trance state long ago, beginning in early childhood—a kind of stupor in which the emptiness, impermanence, and co-dependency of “myself” goes unseen. We are lost in a fantasy of separation in which I am “in here” while the world I see—the ten thousand things—is “out there.” It is from that confusion that one awakens.

I did nothing to awaken. An older friend had been pointing out to me various ways in which I was wrapped up in egotism, so that may have loosened the lacings a bit, but awakening came as an out-and-out surprise—a profound shock actually. I was not expecting it, and awakening from the trance of personhood was nothing I did willfully or ever could have done. It was not even anything I could have imagined.

Quite suddenly there was a shift of focus. It was seen that the endless stream of consciousness I had been *calling* “myself,” was not a *myself* at all and never had been, but constant motion, an endless stream of feelings, thoughts, memories, originating I knew not where, beyond judgment, and beyond regulation.

That stream, including the frequent bubbling up of thoughts *about* “myself,” was not mine, at all, I noticed. I certainly wasn’t making it, and seemed to have no influence over it either. In that moment of abruption, the feeling of an abiding “myself,” separate from everything else, just disappeared.

At first, I felt stunned. What? All of this, including the apparent “myself,” is flowing like water, beyond control, ephemeral and entirely fleeting? But as I became accustomed to the strangeness of it, I saw the freedom in it. Each moment arrives freshly in its uniqueness. Nothing *ever* repeats. The perceived myself of *this* moment cannot and will not last into the next. As a social construction, yes; as a memory, perhaps; but as a genuine happening, no.

Words cannot describe how radical and revolutionary that vision really felt. The totality of beliefs and opinions that had seemed so important, so essential, so worth defending, lost significance entirely—a bunch of nonsense that could matter only to the “person” I had considered myself to be. Those beliefs and opinions had been my mooring. Being without them was like falling through empty space where everything is *always* changing, *including* myself, regardless of what myself believes or disbelieves, wants or doesn’t want, likes or doesn’t like. As Kurt Vonnegut observed in *Cat’s Cradle*, “Likes and dislikes have nothing to do with it.”

We find ourselves alive as apparent features of an unimaginable immensity. No one knows the boundaries or even if there are any. No one knows how all this got here, or if it was always here. Astronomers, cosmologists, mathematicians, and other experts enjoy powerful tools of investigation these days. They theorize and opine, slicing what they call “reality” finer and finer, but they have no final answers. Only the self-deluded have final answers.

No one knows *what* “myself” is. No one. Assertions are made, but an assertion is not a fact. So-called “spirituality” is comprised almost entirely of assertions on the subject of “myself.” But no one *knows* the first thing about that.

No one knows how electrochemical changes in the brain become sights, sounds, flavors, odors, textures, and the rest of what we see and feel. Those *qualia* somehow exist and are perceived, but no one knows where they are located, what perceives them, how they are perceived, or what they *really* are. No one knows the wellsprings of feelings, thoughts, emotions, and memories either.

No one knows if self-awareness is a by-product of sufficiently complex nervous systems, or if the entire material world, *including* nervous systems, is only a so-called “appearance”—a non-material apparition in an overarching universal consciousness which exists prior to physical manifestation entirely. Millions upon millions of words in “spirituality” have been uttered on that very subject, many of them professing to be absolute “Truth,” but no one *knows*.

When I am shown words I wrote in the past, it feels to me as if someone else had written them. Yes, a “person” called Robert once typed those words or wrote them with a pen, but that writing doesn’t feel like *mine*. Those words were a kind of self-expression at the time of their writing, but *that* myself is not around any longer to express itself or anything else. Certainly I’d write something different now. I don’t know *what* I would write. I would find that out only as it was being written. From that perspective, it feels strange to be asked for advice about how to awaken, because awakening never ends.

Like everything else, “myself” is always changing, and so the understandings of *this* moment may be outshone in the next by a clearer vision, or may even appear to have been only a *misunderstanding*. I have said words once that I would not say now. In fact, if someone else said them to me now, I might disagree entirely. So, suppose I gave you some advice today, and you followed it, and then, a couple of years hence, we met again and I said, “Hey. You know that advice I gave you a couple of years ago? Well, awakening never ends, and, ah, well, forget that advice because I’m seeing things differently now.”

Replying a few years ago to a question about what “myself” is, I said, “Everything that arises is known as an impression in or upon *awareness*, and I *am* that awareness.” That’s OK as far as it goes I suppose, but to my present ear it sounds formulaic, simplistic, and a bit sophomoric. And “I” said it. But the “me” I am *now* is not the *same* me who spoke those words *then*. Nothing is *ever* the same. The me of the next second is not the me of this second. Everything in flux. “This too shall pass,” is not a lofty philosophical approach or a calming mantra, but a plain fact.

Presently, I’d say that without awareness there *are* no objects, but without objects there *is* no awareness. So, it is not that objects arise in or upon awareness, as I said back then, but that objects *are* awareness, and awareness *is* objects. The container and the contained, it appears from my present vantage, are one and the same, and reliance on the traditional notion of a permanent self or “presence” existing apart from and prior to phenomena, I’d say now, is part of what one awakens *from*.

After hearing all that contradiction, you may have lost interest in any advice from me. After all, what if next year I told you I had it all wrong, and the empty container actually *does* exist?

Two monks happen to meet in the road. In the customary mode of Zen combat, the first asks, “Where are you, brother?”

“Oh me? I’m in the place where nothing ever changes.”

“But I thought everything was *always* changing.”

“Yes, *that* never changes either.”

28 So, in case you are still wanting my advice about the “most important question to ask” that’s it, and you ask it not of me, but of yourself: “Where are you, brother?”

Not what do I know about religion and spirituality. Not what do I imagine it would be like to be “awake.” Set all of that aside, and, with no reference to any of it, just ask yourself, “Where am I *right now*?” Sooner or later it will come down to right now. If not now, when?