

Susan Moon
WILL I EVER WAKE UP?

I've been on the Zen path for a good 40 years now, and I still haven't had a Great Awakening during *zazen*. I *have* had moments of Great Sleeping during *zazen*, however, and I'm somewhat comforted by the remark of Master Bush Wak, who said, "How can you awaken, if you are not asleep?" Still, *when* will I awaken?

When I first came to Zen, I hoped I would get enlightened. I thought that if I sat hard enough (Sit harder! Sit harder!), a moment would come when I would be flooded with love and I would understand the meaning of life, particularly the meaning of *my* life. That didn't happen. I learned over the years not to grasp for enlightenment in *zazen*, but sometimes I would think: now that I'm not grasping for it, don't I deserve to get it?

I have had moments of insight, yes, when a light bulb has suddenly switched on in my head, like in the comics, and I've seen that I'm connected to the entire universe. But it hasn't happened on the cushion, and when it has happened, it hasn't had much to do with Zen. Do those moments count? Or is there something wrong with me?

I worry about this, because I'm a "lay Zen teacher," and so I should have some experience of this important part of our practice. I was drawn to Zen partly because I love the literature—the sutras, the koans, the poetry—and this literature is full of references to awakenings.

Satori and *kensho* are Japanese words for the Zen enlightenment experience. English translations, necessarily imprecise, include *enlightenment*, *realization*, *illumination* and *awakening*—words for something that cannot be put into words.

Satori generally refers to a greater, longer-lasting awakening and *kensho* to a smaller awakening, though I can't help wondering how one awakening experience could be smaller than another one. Isn't immeasurability the point?

There are two schools of Zen--Rinzai and Soto. I'm fortunate that the kind of Zen I practice is Soto, because enlightenment is not emphasized in our school, and, in fact, the subject is somewhat taboo. Nobody has ever put me on the spot by asking, "Have you had *satori* yet?"

In the Rinzai tradition, your teacher gives you a koan, which is a nonlinear story or question that helps you to go beyond the boundaries of your habitual thinking, and you meditate on it until you have a breakthrough, an experience of kensho. You go to your teacher to have your kensho confirmed, and then you get another koan. I have great respect for this tradition, and for the Rinzai teachers and practitioners I know. Whether Rinzai or Soto, we're dharma sisters and brothers.

In our Soto family, we study koans informally, and we talk about them together. These old stories are full of sudden illuminations. And yet, in our school, it is said that everyone is already enlightened, whether we realize it or not. Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, whose lineage I'm a part of, famously said to his students, "You are all perfect, exactly as you are, *and* you could use a little improvement."

Dogen Zenji, the 13th-century founder of the Soto school, emphasized that practice and awakening are one continuous activity, a verb, not a noun. Everyday life and life as an enlightened buddha are the same life. You don't have to go somewhere special or do something special. "Here is the place. Here the way unfolds," Dogen says.

Over the years, these teachings have helped me relax about not having experienced a Great Awakening. But the question lurks in the shadows: Can I truly wake up? And how will I know if I do?

I'm in a study group of longtime Zen practitioners, and not long ago we were recently studying Keizan's *Transmission of Light*, an 11th-century Chinese text. Thomas Cleary, the translator, says in his introduction, "This is a book of instruction in the art of satori—Zen enlightenment....Satori is said to be the key to inner freedom and independence, the door to higher knowledge, realized by all enlightened people."

Uh-oh. The key to the door? Cleary's words brought back my insecurity, and the stories in the book, wonderful as they are, added to my worries, as each one tells of the sudden awakening of an ancient Zen master. There must be something to it. Where's my satori?

I trust my dharma brothers and sisters, with whom I've been practicing for years, and so I found the courage to break the taboo, and I blurted out this question to the group: "Have *you* experienced enlightenment?" Everyone seemed both relieved and shy to talk about it. I noticed that people blushed a lot. great! The mood was almost like a junior high pajama party, and as the subject was aired, it was normalized. We went around the room, and everyone said, modestly, "I

am not enlightened.” As we talked, we led each other to the shared understanding that there’s no such thing as being in a permanent state of enlightenment. It’s not a place you get to, where you can rest on your laurels from that day forward. We told each other stories, with verbs, not nouns. Everyone *had* had moments of waking up, moments of going beyond the separate self, some during zazen, and some outside of the zendo, and they were just that—moments. When we included awakenings outside the zendo, I, too, had had my moments.

Maybe satori wasn’t such a big deal after all. I saw that I had turned “enlightenment” into a THING, a thing I didn’t *have*, a thing that hadn’t happened to me. But it’s not an either/or matter. It’s not a line you cross, becoming different from everyone else who hasn’t crossed that line.

I turn now to the people in the old Zen stories who had sudden awakenings. How different are they from me? Here are a couple of my favorites.

First, a story about a young woman in 17th-century Japan who became a prostitute in order to support her family. (That’s pretty different, for starters.)

Ohashi was terrified by lightning. One day, during a violent thunderstorm, she sat zazen on the veranda of the brothel in order to face her fear. A bolt of lightning struck the ground in front of her. She fainted, and when she awoke, she saw the world in an entirely new way. Hakuin certified her enlightenment.

What a brave young woman! I wonder if I could be that brave.

Here’s another enlightenment experience from 9th-century China:

Asan was a laywoman who studied Zen with Master Tetsumon and was unremitting in her devotion to practice.

One day during her morning sitting she heard the crow of the rooster and her mind suddenly opened. She spoke a verse in response:

The fields, the mountains, the flowers and my body too are the voice of the bird—
what is left that can be said to hear?

Master Tetsumon recognized her enlightenment.

Both of these women experienced enlightenment while sitting zazen. Both of them went to their teachers, who certified their enlightenment. (As a side issue, why does enlightenment need to be certified? Isn’t the person who sees the light the exact person who *knows* she has seen the light?)

Now I'm getting worried again. I can't help wondering why I haven't had such an experience. Is it because I haven't tried hard enough? Is it because I've tried too hard? It's supposed to just happen. You're not supposed to try to *make* it happen.

Well, I *have* had experiences of opening. I *have* had moments of realizing I was interconnected with all beings. So, with the idea that these actual experiences might be worth considering, I mention some of them:

- I had laughing gas at the dentist, when I was about eight, and I floated out of my body to the ceiling, beyond all pain and fear, and looked down at the little girl who was having a cavity filled, as if it was something that had happened eons ago. I knew that all was well.
- When I first heard my newborn baby cry, I realized that everything in the universe was born at the same time.
- While hiking in a wilderness area of the Mojave Desert, I paused to mop my brow and looked up to see an endangered Bighorn Sheep, standing stock still on a rock ledge six feet above my head. For a silent instant, we looked directly into each other's eyes and recognized each other as one being.
- When I stood in the garden at Tassajara Zen Mountain Monastery, waiting to strike the wooden board called the *han* with a mallet, to call the monks to zazen, I watched the drops of water from the sprinkler catch the last sunlight and spread it over the garden. The mallet in my raised hand was ready, free from time, for a second, and the second lasted forever.
- When I woke up in the recovery room after a colonoscopy, I felt that I had just landed on a planet where everyone was the embodiment of kindness, and they were dancing around my bed attending to my every need—another blanket, a sip of water—whatever I needed before I knew I needed it.
- When my bag—containing my laptop, ID's and credit cards, phone, calendar, address book, cash—was stolen at San Francisco Airport, I was unable to fly to Tucson where I was scheduled

to lead a retreat because I had no ID. I wasn't anybody. I had only a subway pass in my pocket, and so I took the train back again to Berkeley. Looking out the window at the hills of San Bruno, I understood in a flash of joy that I still had my body and my life and the people I loved. I touched my knees in amazement, and shouted to myself, silently: "I'm alive! I'm alive!"

At first glance these moments do not particularly resemble the moments in the old koans. I don't know whether Hakuin (Ohashi's teacher) would certify a moment of enlightenment that was due to a colonoscopy. But wait—I think he would! Yes, he would! I'm remembering this story:

An old woman went to hear Master Hakuin give a lecture. He said, "Your mind is the Pure Land, and your body is Amida Buddha. When Amida Buddha appears, mountains, rivers, forests, and fields all radiate a great light. If you want to understand, look into your own heart."

The old woman pondered Hakuin's words day and night, waking and sleeping. One day, as she was washing a pot after breakfast, a great light flashed through her mind. She dropped the pot and ran to tell Hakuin. "Amida Buddha filled my whole body. Mountains, rivers, forests, and fields are all shining with light. How wonderful!" She danced for joy.

"What are you talking about?" Hakuin asked. "Does the light shine up your asshole?"

Small as she was, she gave him a big push, saying, "I can see you're not enlightened yet!" They both burst out laughing.

And how different was my moment of eye contact with the Bighorn-sheep from Asan's moment of feeling that her body was the same as the rooster's voice?

Come to think of it, plenty of the Great Awakenings in the old stories happen *outside* of zazen. In fact most of them do. A person awakens while sweeping, or drinking tea, or tripping and falling to the ground. What if my AHA!'s are just as valid as the awakenings in the koans?

After all, these experiences have changed my view of my life. They have stayed with me and given me faith that "I" am not separate. I forget about them as I go about the business of the day, of course, but a kind of faith remains, in my bones. And I can come back to the memories. When I think there's not enough time, I can remember the timeless garden at Tassajara. When I feel my life is incomplete, I can think of the joy of being alive on the subway train.

It's as if you are living in a room that you think is the whole world. You don't even know that there are walls around you until suddenly a window opens, the blinds are drawn aside and you see a vast mountain range beyond. When the blinds are closed again and you can no longer see out, you don't return to your former limited view, because now you know that the mountains are there. You know that you live among them.

The moments I have described are not typical of everyday life; they are exceptional moments. But you don't have to give birth or be the victim of theft in order to glimpse the infinite. Zen teacher Norman Fischer says there's no need to make a big deal about satori. He says that enlightenment comes frequently, in little glimpses, and you hardly notice it before it quickly fades away again. It can happen many times in an ordinary day. It's nothing more than knowing, for a moment, that you are *alive*. I appreciate this reminder. I don't need to wait for a peak experience; I need only to be fully present in my life.

For me, these little slippages into vastness are often connected to light, like walking through the dining room at the exact moment when the sun is backlighting the purple tulips in the middle of the table. (Maybe this is why I love the practice of photography, because of the way the light gives itself away, illuminating whatever it meets with no distinctions.) Or pausing on a walk at the Berkeley Marina in the early morning to sit on a bench and look at the bay, while the light of the sun lands on my jacket and magically turns itself into heat and warms me up, and I realize that this warmth is coming to me from 93 million miles away.

Everyday interactions with others can also be openings for me, reminding me of our infinite subatomic connections. Someone passes me a napkin at the deli counter before I ask for it. Later the same day, I watch a very little girl sliding around on her stomach on a slippery marble bench in the post office while her mother waits in line. She sees me looking at her, sees my pleasure. "I'm swimming!" she declares.

Even if I don't have satori during zazen, I believe my practice makes me more open to waking up outside the zendo. That time of exchanging my breath with the breath of the universe makes me porous. I continue to discover that I am not separate after all, not from the toddler on the bench, not from the Bighorn Sheep on the rock.

Nothing's missing after all. I've seen the light! If I can see it you can see it. The sunlight falls on everyone it meets, without picking and choosing. We can all be lit up.

Wake up, take a nap, wake up again. As easy as falling off a log.

I follow the path of Zen because it makes me more likely to appreciate being alive while I *am* alive. On a family camping trip in the Sierra, my 9-year-old granddaughter and I lay next to each other on our backs in our sleeping bags, surrounded by lodgepole pines, and looked up at

the night sky. “Isn’t it amazing,” she said, “the way the trees make a big circle in the sky and point up to the stars?” Yes, it was amazing, I agreed.