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What Is Enlightenment?

by Joan Sutherland

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. 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? And could we risk taking 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.

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."

The term "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. 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.

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