(Opposite) *Le Bouddha*, 1906–1907
by Odilon Redon

What Is Enlightenment?

For many of us, enlightenment is an inspiring but distant goal. **Joan Sutherland** explores what enlightenment is and isn't and how we can actually experience it in our everyday lives.

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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.

For many of us, there is something that pushes us and something that pulls us. We're pushed by our own pain and the pain we see in the world around us; we're pulled by intimations that there's something larger and more true 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,

(OPPOSITE) [RF 34 555] PARIS, MUSÉE D'ORSAY

Yeshe Tsogyal
by Drolkar Tsekyi

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. 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.

This experience of nothing being left out applies to ourselves as well. 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

The sense of exile falls away as we experience how everything interpermeates everything else. Great Ancestor Ma of China assured his students that "for countless eons not a single being has fallen out of the deep meditation of the universe." The self that once seemed so inevitable and so separate becomes fluid, able to participate in the constant flow of circumstances.

In contrast to enlightenment, awakening feels more like an unfolding process, which might explain why over time the ways of referring to it 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. There's a sense of a path of awakening 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. 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 ways of looking at 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. In that moment of meeting, we know the two waves as rising from the same ocean.

Enlightenment is transpersonal. For Westerners especially, it's important to keep remembering that awakening is something different from the projects of self-improvement and self-actualization we're 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 is important because it speaks to the nature of awakening: having an enlightening revelation isn't the same thing as being enlightened; we have to let the revelation stain and dye us completely, in the exact midst of our everyday lives. We have to let life teach us how to *embody* the revelation.

Post-revelation, some people may believe that awakening 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 these things could be so, and their implications for the way we live our lives, are what the paths of awakening are for.

Because it's transpersonal, enlightenment 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, enlightenment is seen as a kind of fundamental property of the universe, a vast unifying principle

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that appears in an almost infinite variety of forms. Enlightenment 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 view of enlightenment was 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 could 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 dissolve into something that existed before we did. We become aware of our continuity with enlightenment, which is none other than 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

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always seen 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 always enlisted poems and paintings and offers of cups of tea as invitations to see the original face of something before our judgments and opinions about it kick in. 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.

The Chinese have an image for how enlightening revelation is inextricable from the things of this earth: one heart-mind with two gates. The first gate opens to the vastness, while the second opens toward compassionate engagement with the world. We walk through the second gate when we dedicate our lives to concern for others.

The arc of awakening that leads toward this kind of life is 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. I mentioned that we can imagine enlightenment as an absolute threshold, and this is true in the sense that we can't believe in our delusions as we did before; they're no longer capable of binding us to their limited view of reality. But they still arise, because it's part of the nature of the human heart-mind to generate them. The difference is that we see them for what they are, and can even feel a warm compassion for 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-centered, 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 does radically transform how we experience them. We are no longer beleaguered exiles but now people at home even in the most difficult times, searching for ways to respond that encourage the bursting forth of the enlightenment that is present always and everywhere.

There's a story about Tolstoy that speaks to this fundamental shift from self-centeredness to all-centeredness, when we see the self as infinitely large, taking in all others. 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."

A great deal has been said about walking the path of awakening, including practices that show us our habits of exile and how our allegiance can turn away from them toward more spacious and generous lives. So I'll just mention 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 which by its nature is unprecedented,

and we think we know best about how to make it happen. We try to exert control over the process, and we believe we can find our way to enlightenment through acts of will.

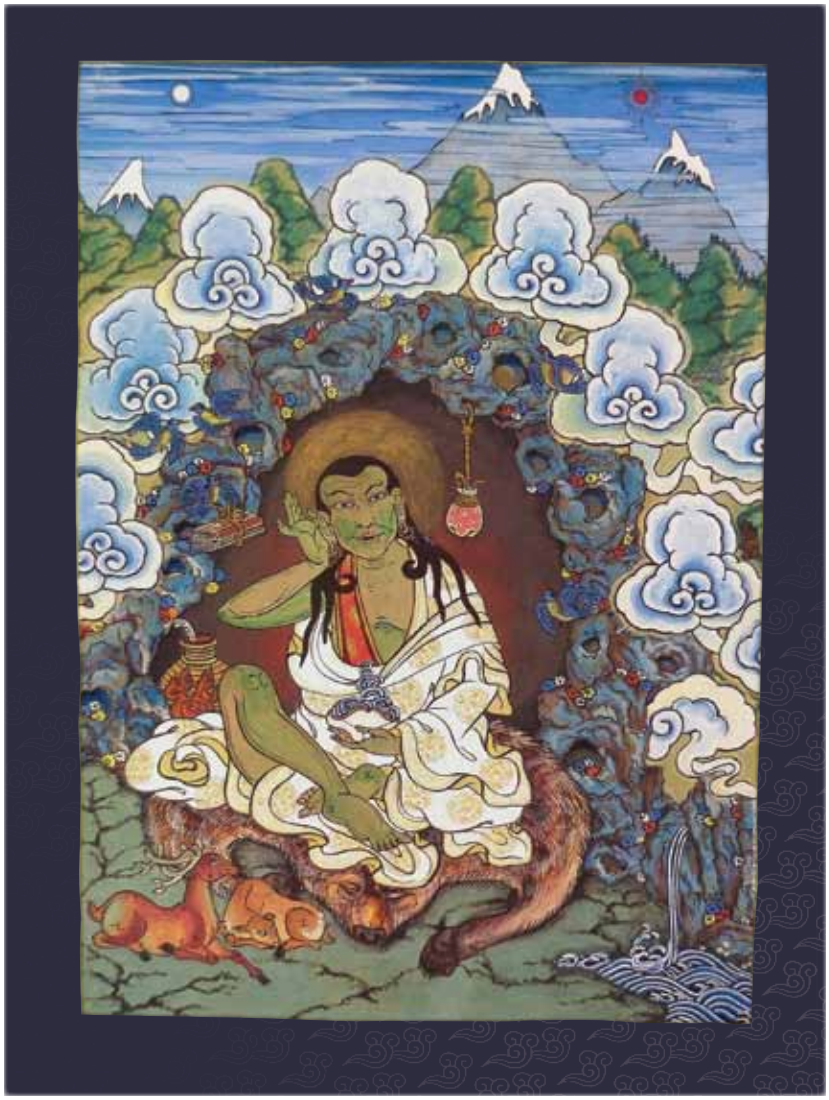
There *is* mad discipline and insane persistence on this path, but they're in the service of something more fruitful than certainty, control, and will. They're in the service of availability. Whatever happens, you have to just keep showing up. Sit the meditation, attend the retreat, absorb the teachings,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

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 hypervigilance to blind you to 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!"

Just keep showing up, no matter what, with an open mind and a whole heart. Allow your allegiance to be turned from the habits of exile to the promise of home, naturally. Make yourself unconditionally 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 with very different ways of describing the same thing? Here is Qiyuan Xinggang, a seventeenth-century Chinese nun, being questioned by her teacher:

> 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."



Milarepa
by Otgonbayar Ershuu

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 from 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 so alive in the way it's

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lit from within; we feel the almost-overwhelming sentience of all things. And we become aware of what is expressed through us, inseparable from the light itself: awe, gratitude, humility, and a suddenly bottomless love.

Yet we're not enlightened because we experience this light; the light is a way we experience the empty aspect of reality, which is all-pervasive, unconditioned, 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.

Buddhism is nondualistic, so this isn't light as opposed to darkness but something that includes both. The Taoist idea of the Great Mysterious as the dark source of everything was incorporated into the dharma as images such as branches of light streaming from the dark, where the dark is the undifferentiated unity and the light is the manifest world. Without these balancing metaphors, we run into the atom bomb problem, in which pure radiance can tip to something blinding and annihilating. We might find a lovely antidote in the purple-golden light illuminating the landscape that the Japanese koan master Hakuin evoked.

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. It was only when his companions requested that he teach them that he stepped out from under the tree. 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. We won't all become age-defining teachers of the dharma, but in our family, community, work, and creative lives we learn to live our enlightenment, each in our own way. However, it's not as though our awakening 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 have to 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 the commitment to delay one's own departure from the wheel of birth and death in order to remain in the world, working toward the awakening of all. It's natural to see this as the most noble of sacrifices, but it's also a description of 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, fulfills 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 will continue to exist, and we will 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 we might, perhaps surprisingly, call endarkenment. Awakening is a marriage of wisdom and compassion, and each has an aspect that is enlightening and one that is 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 rest in and be nourished by. This is sometimes called not-knowing mind.

The enlightening aspect of compassion includes our bright 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 undefensive. 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 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 Spoke* 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 Spoke 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 must discover the particular bodhisattva we are; there isn't a single template for our spiritual lives. Otherwise how could there be a Viewing Equality Bodhisattva, a Viewing Inequality Bodhisattva, and a Viewing Equality and Inequality Bodhisattva?

In the day-to-day practice of enlightenment, sometimes we're also going to be the Kinda Getting It Bodhisattva, Had Just About Enough Bodhisattva, Flying by the Seat of Her Pants Bodhisattva, and a hundred others, too. After all, if enlightenment 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. And all of it in service to our common awakening—becoming more attentive to the complexities of human life, more encouraging of its kindnesses, each of us in our turn helping pass the bright flame from warm hand to warm hand. BD

The Moon Through a Crumbling Window, 1886 by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi