

Can we awaken in this very life?

By [Andrew Olendzki](#)



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I believe that awakening is possible in this very lifetime. I know this is one of the ideas we, as modern secular Buddhists, are invited to discard, along with belief in rebirth, heavenly beings, and miraculous powers. I prefer to suspend judgment and remain [agnostic](#) regarding the latter three, saying neither “If the Buddha said so, it must be so” nor “It can’t be, therefore it isn’t.” But awakening is another story. I think it can be possible for a person, even a rather ordinary person, to awaken. Furthermore, I think it is a goal to which we can all aspire.

Awakening (aka enlightenment, but this latter term is not a good translation of *bodhi*) is understood in the early discourses as a process of gradual mental purification culminating in a profound psychological transformation. This happened to the Buddha while he was seated under the Bodhi tree in Uruvela (now Bodhgaya), and it is important to

distinguish this event from what happened to him 45 years later as he lay on his right side between two sal trees in Kusinara.

I have no idea how to understand the Buddha's *parinirvana*, his final passing away after 80 years as a human being. Lots of people asked him beforehand what happens to a Tathagata (Buddha) beyond death, and he refused to answer. When pressed to say why he would not answer, he gave explanations ranging from "You wouldn't understand" to "There is no way of expressing it" to "You don't need to know" to (loosely paraphrased) "You have your hands full understanding what is happening in your own experience here and now—so get back to work meditating and stop asking irrelevant questions."

I am actually fine with his silent response and am happy to leave the matter of "what happened to him" to the Buddhist theologians who tackled it in the centuries after his last days. But getting some handle on what happened to the Buddha under the Bodhi tree is more accessible, particularly since he talked about it quite a lot in language both empirical and psychological. In the earliest strata of Buddhist discourse, awakening is not about transcending this life as much as it is about accessing the deepest levels of inherent well-being, here and now.

Simply put, there are emotional and behavioural habits within us, many deeply embedded, which are toxic and cause suffering. Greed, hatred, and delusion, along with the emotions they engender, may sometimes be gratifying and even useful in the short term, but they invariably cause harm to oneself or others (or both). Think of common chemical toxins such as caffeine, sugar, nicotine, or alcohol, which can have pleasurable immediate effects but cause damage to our biological health over time. Psychological health is not unlike physical health, which can be diminished or augmented by behaviorally adjusting the levels of pollutants and nutrients in the system.

The Buddha showed us through his example that it is possible to become radically healthy and then live out one's life in this world. His awakening consisted of so transforming his mind that toxic states rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion no longer occurred, while a full range of healthy emotions and other cognitive capabilities remained active and were even enhanced. Is this such an impossible act to follow? Many of his followers

apparently succeeded in freeing their minds by following his instructions, leaving us in their own words compelling images of a person deeply at peace. Why should we not aspire to the same thing?

We know we are all capable of [generous actions](#), compassionate words, and insightful thoughts. We also know that when we commit a selfish act, speak a hurtful word, or indulge the wishful thinking of a deluded thought, we are not entirely *compelled* to do so. We have *some* influence on what we choose to experience from moment to moment, and can, through conscious intervention, make a healthier choice even in the presence of a toxic tendency. Is it such a stretch to think that this modest fulcrum point might be made to move the world, given a lever of sufficient length? If we can somehow manage to be kind instead of cruel in this moment, why not the next?

There are many good-hearted people in this world. There are many who are truthful and trustworthy, who do what is right more often than not, who sacrifice for the sake of others, who spontaneously feel kindness and compassion. There are some who understand that everything is moving and flowing around them, and that one thrives by letting go rather than holding on. There are those at peace, who are deeply well, even in challenging circumstances. We may not be able to point to any one person and say they are perfectly awakened, their minds free forever from the three poisons, but surely we can recognise moments of awakened behaviour when we see them.

Though the Buddha woke up suddenly and unshakeably, I don't think we need to regard awakening in such an all-or-nothing way. Life is a series of mind moments, each one a new creation. Every moment we inherit something from our past, transform it in our present experience, and thereby seed the consequences of our future. At each moment the toxins we encounter may be either compounded or abandoned. A moment without greed, hatred, or delusion is an awakened moment. A *person* may not be considered awakened unless the toxins are thoroughly eliminated, but even an unawakened person can have an awakened *moment*. As the Buddha says,

If one shows kindness with a clear mind—
Even once!—for living creatures
By that one becomes wholesome.
([Itivuttaka 1.27](#))

My suggestion is simply this: As we walk the path, let us not look up so much at the destination, high above in the mist, but carefully place one foot in front of the other. A path keeps us centred, guiding us from veering right or left into dangerous territory. It may also deliver us to the summit, but only if each step is well taken. Every mindful moment in which generosity displaces greed, compassion takes the place of hatred, and insight dislodges delusion, is a moment in which we are awake. If we can manage one moment of wisdom, why not another?

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