

What Is Spiritual Enlightenment or Spiritual Awakening?

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<http://endless-satsang.com/spiritual-enlightenment-spiritual-awakening.htm> by Nirmala

A definition of [spiritual enlightenment](#) or [spiritual awakening](#) is hard to pin down. This is, in part, because "*spiritual enlightenment*" and "*spiritual awakening*" have been used in so many ways to describe so many things, similar to the way in which "love" is used to describe everything from a preference for ice cream to a merging with everything. And it is also because **spiritual enlightenment** and **spiritual awakening** are such rich and complex experiences that they are innately hard to define.

Some definitions are very specific and narrow. One such definition for spiritual enlightenment is the complete dissolution of one's identity as a separate self with no trace of the egoic mind remaining. This sets the bar very high and means that very few people qualify as enlightened.

The opposite approach is to say that everyone is enlightened, that there is only awake consciousness. In this view, it's only a question of whether this natural awakensness has been recognized or not. Of course, when a word describes everything or everyone, it loses some of its usefulness. If everyone is enlightened, then why even talk about it?

Combining perspectives on spiritual enlightenment

Perhaps there's a definition that includes both of these perspectives, which recognizes that consciousness is always awake and enlightened, but the amount of awakensness, or aware consciousness, that is present in any moment can vary. This definition acknowledges that there's a difference in the amount of awakensness, or enlightened consciousness, that different people

experience or that one person experiences at different times but still suggests that the potential for full awareness or becoming enlightened is the same for everybody. If every apparent individual consciousness is infinite in its potential, then each can also be infinite both in its capacity to expand or awaken and in its capacity to contract or identify with a narrow or limited experience.

If all consciousness is made of the same essential awareness and light, and if everyone has an equal potential for [enlightenment](#), then all expressions of consciousness are equally valid and valuable. Everyone truly is a Buddha or enlightened being, at least in potential. So defining enlightenment in many ways now makes sense, depending on what is being pointed to. One may use the word enlightenment to point to the state of self-realization beyond the ego or to point to the innate potential for this realization in all of us.

As for differentiating between the words enlightenment and awakening, "enlightenment" implies a more finished and constant state of realization, while "awakening" has more of the active quality of a verb and therefore suggests a movement or shift in consciousness. An awakening may be defined as a sudden increase in the overall amount of consciousness an individual is experiencing. There can be small awakenings and bigger awakenings. Not only does consciousness have unlimited potential for the amount of awakesness, but it also has an unlimited potential to shift in any way, at any moment. Consciousness can and sometimes does shift from contracted states of fear, anger, or hurt to expanded states of peace and joy in an instant. Unfortunately, it can also shift in the other direction. Consciousness has no fixed state.

What about the spiritual awakening happening now?

As it is being defined here, a spiritual awakening is a sudden expansion or shift in consciousness, especially a more dramatic one (we don't usually refer to a minor realization as a spiritual awakening). Enlightenment, on the other hand can be used to mark a particular level of realization or awakesness, even if the exact definition varies depending on who is using the word, as it does with every word.

What really matters is what your awareness is doing right now. How is your consciousness appearing or shifting in this moment? Are you realizing more of your experience and Essence right now? Or are you contracting and limiting your awareness with thoughts and identification? Is any shifting happening from reading these words?

Enlightenment or awakening is a profound mystery, and the best definition may be found in the actual experience of your own shifts in consciousness. Just as it's more nourishing to eat an apple than read about one, so it can be more rewarding to explore the movements of your own awareness than to try to understand these things mentally. While definitions of such things can be helpful, it can also be beneficial to not have too many concepts, which could interfere with your actual experience. It's a good thing that language isn't so fixed or defined when it comes to spiritual unfoldment. Maybe the best definition of enlightenment is no definition. Then there is only what is found in your own direct experience of awareness.

(The above is from the free ebook: *That Is That: Essays About True Nature* available [here](#).)

The Flower of Spiritual Awakening (a recent blog post from Nirmala's [blog](#))

What are the causes of [spiritual awakening](#) or enlightenment?

Consider the miracle of a flower. What is it that causes a plant to flower? Does sunshine cause a plant to flower? Does lots of water? Or is it good soil? Maybe all of these together? Or is there really something more subtle in the nature of the flower itself that causes it to flower? Is it something in the DNA of the plant? Does that mean the whole process of evolution over eons of time is involved? What other factors might cause the flowering? Does gravity play a part? The season and the temperature? The quality of the light? (Some plants will not flower under glass or artificial light.) What about animals that eat the fruit and spread the plant? Or the birds or bees that pollinate the flower? Do they cause the subsequent flowering of the newly established plants? Are there even subtler influences? What about presence and love? The intention and attention of a gardener? And is the existence of the world of form itself necessary for a plant to flower? And what about

consciousness? Is there an ultimate force that directs the creation and unfolding of all expressions of form that is behind the appearance of a rose or a daisy?

What if it is a combination of all of the things mentioned? And also what if they have to all be in the right proportion? Is that proportion different for every species of plant? Some plants need lots of water or light to flower. Others will die with too much water or light. There is a unique formula that is involved with the appearance of the simplest apple blossom and the most complex orchid.

When you consider all of these influences and even more that were not mentioned or can't even be known or imagined, then it truly is a miracle when a flower happens. It is impossible to say what causes it to happen with any certainty or completeness. Yet, it's an act of incredible grace whenever all of these diverse, subtle, and gross influences come together in just the right way for an iris or a bird of paradise to open its unique petals to the sky. Ultimately, if you trace all the factors back to all their causes, you find that everything that exists is somehow intimately connected to the cactus flower or dandelion in your front yard. We need a vague and powerful word like "grace" to name this amazing interplay of forces and intelligence. Obviously, to reduce it to a formula doesn't come close to capturing or describing the vast richness of variables and forces at play. There is no formula complex enough to capture the whole mystery of a magnolia blossom...

Spiritual awakening is a kind of flowering of consciousness. When consciousness expands and opens into a new expression, we call that a spiritual awakening. And while there are as many kinds of awakenings as there are flowers, they are all equally mysterious. What is it that causes a child to start to awaken to the nature of words and language? What causes the awakening of sexuality in a teenager? How does one suddenly know they are falling in love? Or even more profoundly, how does one explain the birth of unconditional or divine love?

Finally, what are the causes of the most profound spiritual awakenings, where consciousness suddenly recognizes its ultimate true nature? Why does that type of flowering appear in one consciousness today and another one tomorrow? If the formula for a simple petunia is a vastly complex interplay of earthly, human, and even cosmic forces, then imagine how complex the formula is for the unfolding of a human consciousness into full spiritual enlightenment as one's true nature.

The good news is that we cannot and do not need to know the totality of the formula involved to grow some petunias, and we cannot and do not need to know the formula for spiritual enlightenment. Yet, we can be curious about all of the factors involved and even play with them to see what effects, if any, they may have in our individual experience of consciousness unfolding.

Sometimes the mysteriousness and unpredictability of the whole process of awakening leads us to shrug our shoulders and say it is all up to grace or to God. And, of course, that is true; and yet, does that mean there's no place in this unfolding for our own actions? Is there a place for spiritual practice? What about meditation, self-inquiry, or study of spiritual texts? And how about devotional practices or the transmission of presence from being with a great teacher or master? We can easily become disillusioned with any or all of these activities because the results they produce are so unpredictable and varied, and it can seem simpler to avoid the question of their role altogether. Ask any gardener if it works every time to water and weed and fertilize a plant? Or does a plant sometimes fail to flower no matter how well it is cared for? But does that mean you never water or fertilize your plants?

At other times we can be overly convinced that our practice or inquiry will lead to the desired results, often because it seemed to work at least once for us, or for someone we know. The only problem with spiritual practices is that they occasionally work! Then we think that we have the formula and that every time we sit down to meditate or ask, "Who am I?" we will have that same experience of expansion or awakening again. That is like thinking you will always have a bumper crop of marigolds every time you plant them.

There is a middle way between denying the importance or role of spiritual practice and having unrealistic expectations that self-inquiry, meditation, or devotional practice is going to, by itself, cause an awakening. We can experiment and play with these processes, just as a gardener will experiment with different fertilizers or watering patterns to see what happens. It ultimately is all up to grace, and yet, what if grace works through us as well as on us? What if spiritual practice is as much a part of the mystery of existence as anything else?

Maybe we can hold the question of what role inquiry, devotion, effort, surrender, transmission, meditation, gratitude, intention, silencing the mind, study of spiritual books, involvement with a teacher or master, ripeness of the student, karma, grace, and luck play in our enlightenment with an openness and curiosity, instead of a need to define their roles once and for all. The flowering of consciousness in your own existence is as unique as every flower, and ultimately we are all here to discover how it is going to happen uniquely this time around. What is your consciousness like right now? How open is the flower of your awareness? Is it still budding or has it blossomed? Just as every flower fades and another comes along, what about now? And now? What happens this time when you meditate? What happens now when you inquire "Who am I?" How does it feel right now to open your heart with gratitude even if nothing much is happening? What impact does reading this article or any other piece of writing have on you? Every stage of a plant's existence is valuable and even necessary for its flowering. Your experience is always adding to the richness of the unfolding of consciousness in this moment. May you enjoy the garden of your true nature, including when spiritual awakenings are blooming, and when spiritual enlightenment seems far away.

(From the free ebook: *That Is That: Essays About True Nature* available [here](#).)

About Nirmala:

[Advaita](#) spiritual teacher, Nirmala has been offering satsang and [spiritual mentoring](#) in the U.S. and internationally since 1998. Nirmala offers a unique vision and a gentle, compassionate approach, which adds to the rich tradition of inquiry into our true nature. He is the author of several books, including *Nothing Personal: Seeing Beyond the Illusion of a Separate Self* and *Living from the Heart*. In his books and mentoring sessions, Nirmala points to the wisdom within each of us, and fosters the individual's own potential for spiritual awakening. Free ebook downloads of several of Nirmala's books are available [here](#).