

6.7 Enlightenment Is Always Now

Enlightenment isn't a goal to pursue; it exists in the present.

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People often embark on their spiritual path after seeking various material goals, such as money or power. After a while, they realize these goals are empty and don't lead to happiness, and they begin to seek spiritual goals, especially perpetual enlightenment. They often think that enlightenment is a goal to pursue, and once they reach it, they will be permanently enlightened from that point onward. This point of view usually only adds to their suffering by generating new goals, along with more dissatisfaction with the way things are and with what's missing from the present moment.

Some people have peak experiences, in which they feel complete bliss and total satisfaction within the present moment, which can feel like heaven, nirvana, or enlightenment. Then, after a few hours, days, or weeks, the realities of life come back to them, and they lose this state of mind. When this happens, they usually crave a permanent return to that blissful mindset, which only increases their suffering.

If you can learn to accept that enlightenment is neither a permanent state to attain nor a goal to pursue, this realization can diminish your suffering and help you stay present in the current world.

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- Acknowledging that perpetual enlightenment is a story can help you be more present and aware.
- Not being tied to a rigid goal frees us up to explore life and spirituality with greater flexibility and openness.

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- People who've had peak spiritual experiences tend to develop a craving for perpetual enlightenment.
- Gurus and historical figures like Jesus and Buddha may inspire people to believe that enlightenment is a goal to be achieved, and this belief (true or false) can be an obstacle to being in the here and now.

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There is a paradox inherent in pursuing the idea that enlightenment isn't a goal. Nonetheless, there are different approaches to reaching this realization.

For some, meditation (see Tools 6.1 and 6.8) can do the trick. Meditation helps you see through your thoughts and stories, bring you to the present, and experience the realization that there is no "you" inside your mind that needs to be enlightened. For others, psychedelic experiences can offer this insight. Still, others can reach that state simply by taking a walk in nature or through repeated sessions with a teacher or meditation group (called a sangha).

A better way to view enlightenment might be as a trait we always possess but of which we aren't always aware. There is no one path to access enlightenment. Once you do, sooner or later you are

likely to forget this realization and return to your usual goal-oriented mind, with enlightenment as one of your goals. However, once you have had the experience that all goals in life are made up, it will be easier for you to remember and re-experience this in the future.

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1. Jack Kornfield, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry* (Bantam, 2001).
 2. Sam Harris, *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion* (Simon & Schuster, 2015).
 3. Waking Up app: <https://wakingup.com/>
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