What is spirituality? Are there actual signs or symptoms of spiritual awakening? Of all the topics we cover here, spiritual awakening is perhaps the most misunderstood. Let’s resolve that confusion now and ensure that we’re on the path to authentic spiritual awakening.

Let’s Start with a Few Definitions: Spirituality and Enlightenment

One of the reasons there’s so much misunderstanding around the topic of spiritual awakening is that we often fail to define relevant terms. In *A Sociable God*, for example, Ken Wilber provides nine valid definitions of spirit and spirituality.

We often link "spirituality" to the context of religion, but in my experience (as we’ll see below), this is problematic. For now, let’s define the spiritual as a quality of being beyond the physical or material domain of existence.

*Enlightenment*, too, can mean many different things, but it’s most often associated with cognition. You can have an “enlightened mind” through disciplined study of higher spiritual principles. But this enlightenment doesn’t mean you’re spiritually awake or psychologically aware.

What is Spiritual Awakening?

*Spiritual awakening*, then, is an awakening of a dimension of reality beyond the confines of the ego. The ego is our exclusive sense of self or "I." This awakening
occurs when, for whatever reason, the ego somehow let’s go so that a Higher Self or Spirit can arise within.

The average individual is more archetype than human. That is, the ego is mostly a collection of archetypes, programs, or set patterns of behavior. The Taoists call this series of programs the acquired mind—a set of mundane conditioning we collect since birth. Spiritual awakening implies the return of what the Taoists call the Original Spirit, or what Jung called the Self. And it’s this return of Spirit that makes us truly human.

**Spiritual Awakening versus Psychic Awakening**

Another common confusion is between the terms spiritual awakening and psychic awakening. Psychic awakening relates to the activation of the pineal gland. With it, you open up to other dimensions of reality beyond this limited three-dimensional realm of space and time.

Spiritual awakening, in contrast, involves opening the heart center. It’s a process more closely associated with one’s psychology, the emotional body, and the soul.

**What is the Ego and the Spirit?**

The ego, or what the Taoists call the lower soul, believes it’s in charge. This ego is our sense of self or “I.” When you say things like:

- “I am [your name].”
- "I have a [job, house, car, mother, father, spouse, child, headache]."
- “I think [insert a thought].”

That’s the ego. It’s possessive because it experiences itself as separate from everything else. This lower soul is driven by base pleasures, negative emotions, and trying to meet Maslow’s basic human needs. The appetite of the lower soul is insatiable and, if left unchecked, it goes on for eons.
When Maslow said, “Man is a perpetually wanting animal,” he was referring to his ego. Thankfully, there's also a Spirit, Higher Self, or higher soul. And this divine spark isn’t driven by these basic needs. Instead, this Spirit is calm, neutral, compassionate, understanding, and intuitive.

While the ego accumulates knowledge through learning, the Spirit intuits reality by virtue of what it is. The ego thinks. The Spirit knows. While the ego is always doing, the Spirit remains eternally in a state of being.

**Here's What Happens During Spiritual Awakening**

We tend to identify exclusively with the ego. As the process of spiritual awakening unfolds, the ego begins to sublimate to the Spirit. In the language of Taoism, the lower soul gets refined into the higher soul. Arriving at this Spirit, or psychic wholeness, was the goal of Jung's individuation process.

But despite popular belief, this doesn't generally happen in a single “moment of awakening.” While we can have “peak experiences” that open us up to Self-transcendent reality, these experiences tend to be fleeting. Instead, the developmental literature explains that there are stages of psycho-spiritual growth. And these permanent stages tend to develop over time.

This is part of the reason many people are confused about spiritual awakening. Walking in nature or on a psychedelic substance, they may have a beautiful experience of oneness, for example, but this experience is momentary. The individual's structure of consciousness hasn't changed yet.

**Spiritual Traps: False Signs of Spiritual Awakening**

So before we go into authentic symptoms of spiritual awakening, let's review common false signs.
Trap #1: Thinking You're “Good” and Others Are “Evil”

This belief is deeply rooted in most of us as it's a typical program taught in all Western religions. To uproot this belief requires shadow work. You'll know you've undone this limiting belief when you stop judging others and instead see yourself in everyone you meet.

Trap #2: Identifying Yourself as a “Spiritual Person”

This false identification is universal in both religious and new age circles. You are neither spiritual or material. You transcend and include them both. Identifying yourself as being spiritual is a sign of a spiritual ego or inflation (discussed below). Again, shadow work will help you see that you're no different or better than anyone else.

Trap #3: Seeking “Love and Light”

Pursuing “love and light” or “goodness” is another deep-rooted program in religious and new age teachings that block authentic spiritual development. Acting “spiritual” creates a persona or social mask that gives others the impression that we’re “good people.” While this persona might elevate our status and increase our self-esteem, it does not promote psychological or spiritual growth. In truth, spiritual awakening comes from the opposite direction where we face the fear, anger, guilt, and grief stored in us since childhood. Coming to terms with these experiences paves the way for authentic spiritual development.

Trap #4: Acting Nice

Acting nice and being innocent isn't a spiritual awakening sign but an indication of psychological immaturity. We are told by our parents and various institutions (school, religion, etc.) to “be nice” and behave ourselves. And we comply with this demand, to varying degrees, thereby reinforcing the shadow side. If you're acting nice, it's a sure sign that someone is manipulating you. (The original manipulator or Trickster is usually a parent, but now it's in you.) In contrast, a mature adult acts assertively without seeking the approval of others.

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Trap #5: Secretly Believing You’re Better Than Others

Perhaps you see a pattern here: all of these traps points to an ego inflation. Spiritual awakening grounds us in our humanity, and yet, more often, spirituality becomes another tool for disassociation, judgmentalism, and grandiosity. This trap often occurs when you:

● Read a lot of spiritual texts
● Join a spiritual or religious group
● Start a spiritual practice
● Find a spiritual teacher

Specialness is yet another ego game. When you think you’ve “found it,” be on high alert. This belief is a symptom of a specific early stage of psychological development, not a spiritual awakening sign.

Beware of the Spiritual Bypass

Perhaps the biggest trap in the spirituality game is called the “spiritual bypass.” Here, we use spiritual ideas and practices to avoid unresolved emotional or psychological wounds. These wounds must be addressed to proceed in our psycho-spiritual development.

We often resist this process because addressing these wounds requires going through the discomfort they represent. These wounds are mainly childhood traumas. In fact, virtually every emotional trigger you have in your present environment is likely from your past.

As Heidegger puts it, "The Dreadful has already happened." A great many individuals in various Eastern and Western religions fall into the spiritual bypass trap. I did too for most of my 30s.
Ten Spiritual Awakening Signs

Now that we've looked at some of the false signs of spiritual awakening, let's review some of the authentic indications.

**Sign #1: A Noticeable Change in Your Behavior**

Perhaps the most essential and authentic signs of spiritual awakening can be observed in your daily behavior. Compulsive, neurotic, and addictive behaviors are symptoms of the ego or lower soul. The Spirit or Higher Self has no such tendencies. The Spirit isn't driven to meet basic needs because it's already whole and complete right now. So when you feel this completeness or okayness, moment to moment, it's a good sign of spiritual awakening. And as a consequence of this okayness, you may be genuinely kinder (and less reactive) toward others without trying to be.

**Sign #2: A Deepening in Your Emotional Wellbeing**

Disruption in our emotional body is perhaps the main thing that blocks spiritual awakening. The Jungians call it a wounded feeling function. In resolving emotional trauma from childhood, we undo this wound, enabling us to feel more deeply and genuinely. Re-engaging this emotional flow influences every area of our lives. Now, instead of being possessed by a host of archetypes, we become more authentically human. As such, there's less resistance to feel (even negative emotions we resisted before). Instead of sedating yourself and running from your feelings, there's a growing willingness to confront emotions like fear, anger, and guilt.

**Sign #3: A Tendency to Slow Down and Reflect Back**

For the above signs to unfold, self-reflection is necessary where you turn back to understand the present. This reflecting back is challenging in modern times due to the fast pace we tend to run. The drive for achievement, productivity, and peak performance have their place, but they quickly become signs of neurosis. For spiritual awakening, laziness can become our friend. So another spiritual awakening symptom is that you begin to slow down more often and reflect back. An impulse
comes alive in you to more clearly understand yourself and your behavior. The Buddhists call this Stopping and Seeing.

Reflecting helps us access repressed memories in our unconscious that cause irrational behavior in the present. But this self-reflective drive doesn't judge, blame, or criticize, as the Spirit is neutral yet curious.

Sign #4: A Shift in Priorities and Values
Locating authority within ourselves changes our values. Religion provides a moral code based on a system of rules. "Don't do this; don't do that." But now we can develop our personal ethical framework where we evaluate what's best in the context of the moment. The ego is unable to do this because basic needs drive it; only the Higher Self can. This shift toward higher spiritual values is why our behavior changes during spiritual awakening. Maslow called these spiritual values “being values” or B-values, and they include wholeness, perfection, completion, justice, aliveness, beauty, truth, and self-sufficiency.

Sign #5: A Transformation of the Inner World
In the average person's waking state, an individual’s ego is almost exclusively focused on their outer world. Work, money, achievement, family, friends, and social life are all elements of the external environment. Another spiritual awakening sign is a profound shift from this external world to one’s inner realm of thoughts, feelings, dreams, and imagination. In Buddhism, this dimension is called the subtle realm, and it's considered more real than the gross dimension of our waking state.

Sign #6: Holding the Opposites Together
Most of us have a rather rigid, fundamentalist mind that sees things in black and white. Red and Blue, Democrat and Republican, Male and Female, Good and Bad, Left and Right ... you get the idea. To avoid the ambiguity inherent in mature adulthood, we cut off one pair of opposite and identify exclusively with the other. For example, as parents, we might think we unconditionally love our children without acknowledging the wellspring of hate and resentment we have toward them. And while dissociating from one pair of the opposite seems to resolve our
ego's tension, in truth, it only re-enforces our shadow. With our spiritual awakening, we begin to hold the tension of opposites within us, putting us on the road to psychic wholeness.

**Sign #7: An Experience of Okayness and Inner Freedom**

The ego is our source of fears, desires, and constant tension. When the ego is no longer in control, there's an inherent sense of okayness—regardless of what's happening in our lives (good or bad). When the Spirit is at the helm, we naturally relax into ourselves, providing a sense of inner freedom we once sought in the external world. In Hinduism, they call this moksha or self-liberation.

**Sign #8: A Deeping Sense of Self-Honesty and Personal Responsibility**

As you begin to locate more authority within, there's a willingness to be radically honest with yourself. You simply can't tolerate the Magic's shadow game of self-deception anymore. Now, you feel a growing sense of responsibility and accountability for your thoughts, emotions, and actions. It's for this reason that psychotherapist David Richo says the last gateway to mature adulthood is guilt. When we're unconscious to our behavior, there's no accountability. And when there's no accountability, there's nothing to feel guilty about. But the guilt that comes from spiritual awakening isn't from someone else shaming you; it's from your conscience, driven by a desire to correct your way of being.

**Sign #9: A Massive Change in Lifestyle Choices**

Another noticeable sign of spiritual awakening is that you become highly conscious of your lifestyle choices. Most notably, there arises a complete aversion to eating meat or any animal products. If you've developed sensitivity to your body and you avoid eating meat for a period of 90 days and then eat it again, you'll likely be amazed at your experience. You can feel the consciousness of the animal you're consuming. Usually, the feeling is fear—the last emotion the animal felt before being slaughtered. With your spiritual awakening comes the understanding that eating meat is a form of cannibalism, an act you wouldn't have chosen if given the choice when you were a child.
And in case you believe you need meat protein to thrive, watch this interview with a vegan strongman who only eats one meal a day. Or, as Nikola Tesla wrote, “Many races living almost exclusively on vegetables are of superior physique and strength. There is no doubt that some plant food, such as oatmeal, is more economical than meat, and superior to it in regard to both mechanical and mental performance.”

**Sign #10: A Sense of Interconnectivity or Oneness**

The ego, or as Alan Watts calls it, the superficial self, feels separate and alone. It fears for its safety, clinging to life while fearing death. The Original Spirit has no such fear or sense of separation. It doesn't play the ego’s game of "us versus them." The Spirit doesn't identify itself with gender, race, nationality, religion, or a species. It simply is. And it exists outside of space and time, so death isn't a relevant concept for it. I’ll leave it to philosopher Alan Watts to drive this point home.

**The Role of Religion of Spiritual Awakening**

In reading the works of thinkers like Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell, and Ken Wilber, you begin to see a clear distinction between being religious and being spiritual. While I won’t say that you can’t be both religious and spiritual, I will say that they are VERY different ideas. Perhaps in its purest form religion could help individuals develop spiritually. However, observing around the world, the opposite is more often the case.

That is, religion (both East and West) more often inhibits one’s natural spiritual progression as it tends to keep us fixated at a low level of psychological development. Many individuals must transcend their religious upbringing to begin their psychological and spiritual development.
Inflation, Deflation and The Center

Psychological development and spiritual growth are so closely tied together that developmental literature uses the term *psycho-spiritual development*. We just can't separate psychology from spirituality.

The primary block to spiritual awakening is the ego's tendency to be inflated or deflated. Inflation means grandiosity. Many spiritual teachers and their students fall into this trap. Feeling of superiority—or god-like qualities—are signs of *ego inflation*. And this grandiosity triggers the active shadow archetypes Moore and Gilette discuss in King Warrior Magician Lover:

- The Tyrant
- The Sadist
- The Detached Manipulator
- The Addicted Lover

And the other end of the spectrum is *ego deflation*. Here, the ego feels small, less than, and inferior. Ego deflation leads to depression, anxiety, envy, and hate. Deflation activates the passive shadow archetypes:

- The Weakling
- The Masochist
- The Denying “Innocent” One
- The Impotent Lover

The ego tends to toggle between these active and passive shadow archetypes. The Spirit, however, is in the Center. And it’s this Spirit or Higher Self that brings organization to the psyche so that these shadow archetypes no longer run the show.
How to Approach Spiritual Awakening

From my experience, a practical approach to spiritual awakening works on multiple levels: physical, emotional, and energetic. While those pursuing spiritual awakening often meditate, it's a means, not an end.

What do I mean?

**Sitting meditation practice** is a *tool* to calm and quiet the mind, but in itself, it doesn't foster spirituality or psychological development. (In fact, more often, meditation is used to promote inflation for the spiritual ego that feels superior because it meditates while others do not.)

Meditation is important, however, if your mind is always distracted or if you're anxious. Being calm and quiet allows us to reflect—one of the signs of spiritual awakening.

And this reflective mind supports **shadow work**, which from my perspective (and transpersonal research), is one of the most essential practices for those of us on a spiritual path interested in realizing mature adulthood.

The barriers to spiritual awakening are very simple: fear, anger, guilt, and grief. **Cultivating self-leadership** and building emotional intelligence is the natural path toward authentic spirituality. (See [How To Be An Adult](#) by David Richo for more instruction.)

Spiritual awakening comes down to **self-awareness** and consciousness. With this increasing awareness, we're able to shift beyond **self-actualization** into the realm of self-transcendence. Your identification begins shifting away from your ego because there's less internal tensions and self-identification. And this process happens naturally without "trying" to make it happen.
Learning to abide in our Center, without succumbing to inflation or deflation, we can support the process of our natural spiritual development. And to access this Center instinctively, it's most helpful to reforge your connection to your body.

Recap: Spiritual Awakening Signs

The false spiritual awakening signs all have to do with ego inflation. They are symptoms of grandiosity and self-delusion. Authentic spiritual awakening signs are similar to characteristics of mature psychological development and what we can call humanness.

Here are some positive signs:

- One locates authority within themselves. (See this guide on psychological projection.)
- There’s a growing sense of responsibility for one’s thoughts, feelings, and behavior.
- Spiritual values begin to supersede (but not replace) the values of this material world.
- Things slow down, allowing you to reflect back and understand your past.
- As a consequence, your mind is calmer and you have a deeper connection to your emotional state.
- You begin to focus more on your inner experience than your outer environment (but the outer is still important too).
- When the Self is at the wheel, there’s a feeling okayness and inner freedom. You feel light and free.

As they explain in the wisdom traditions, the primary key to accelerating spiritual awakening is to hold to your Center, again and again.

From the ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi: “Flow with whatever may happen, and let your mind be free: Stay centered by accepting whatever you are doing. This is the ultimate.”

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