

# What Does It Mean to Be Spiritually Awakened?



The possibility of describing and measuring enlightenment. By Steve Taylor Ph.D. February 9, 2024 [Psychology Today](#)

What comes to mind when you hear "spiritual awakening" or "enlightenment"? You probably picture Buddhist monks with shaven heads or Indian gurus with long beards and flowing robes. You might assume that the state is very rare, only attainable after decades of [meditation](#) and harsh spiritual discipline, away from the ordinary human world.

Awakening is much more common than you might think. It doesn't just happen to monks and mystics but to—seemingly—ordinary people amid everyday life, even those who don't know anything about traditional [spirituality](#). It can also be investigated from a psychological perspective.

## The Characteristics of Wakefulness

Wakefulness is a state of expansive and intensified awareness. In my research, I have found that this state incorporates four different aspects or domains. The first domain is perceptual awareness. When a person awakens, the world around them becomes more real, beautiful, fresher, vivid, and alive. Things considered ordinary become more beautiful and fascinating. It's as if a veil falls away, and suddenly, an extra dimension of reality is added to the world.

The second domain is an intensification of subjective awareness. We become aware of a new depth and richness within our own being. We travel deeper into ourselves, becoming aware of potentials and energies we didn't sense before.

Thirdly, spiritual awakening is an expansion of *intersubjective* awareness. This refers to our connection with other human beings, living beings, and the natural world. In a spiritual awakening, we gain a more intense connection. We feel an intense sense of empathy and an intense sense of compassion for others. This is why awakening is associated with compassion and [altruism](#).

Finally, in awakening, there is an expansion of *conceptual* awareness. We transcend a narrow egocentric perception in which our ambitions and personal interests are paramount. We attain a world-centric awareness in which social and global issues are as important or more important than personal issues. We no longer identify with a particular nation or religious or ethnic group. If we have any sense of [identity](#), it is just with the human race as a whole. We feel a kinship with all other human beings despite differences in nationality, appearance, or [ethnicity](#).

Different traditions emphasize some characteristics more than others and recommend different techniques to cultivate them. But all spiritual traditions explore the same domains of higher human experience. You could compare traditions to walkers or climbers in different locations in a landscape. Since they all have different vantage points, they encounter different aspects of the landscape and describe it in slightly different ways.

However, exploring the landscape outside the context of spiritual traditions is also possible. It can be explored and described in more neutral psychological terms.

## Measuring Wakefulness

A few years ago, a fellow researcher, Kelly Kilrea, and I decided to develop a psychological scale (or questionnaire) that could measure wakefulness or enlightenment. Combining our Ph.D. research, we identified 24 specific characteristics of wakefulness. These included well-being, a sense of connection and wholeness, and intensified perception, reduced identification without thoughts, more authentic relationships, enjoyment of solitude and inactivity, and reduced or disappearance of [fear of death](#). Then, we created statements that described these characteristics and modified them with the help of academic experts.

After two pilot studies, we rigorously tested the scale with 278 participants, then conducted a study that compared an "awakened" group and a "normal" sample. At the end of the testing process—which involved eliminating statements that proved unreliable or unnecessary—we had a 19-item English scale (Wake-19) with good internal reliability.

Next, we worked with a team of German researchers at the Institute for Frontier Areas of Psychology and Mental Health in Freiburg. They translated the scale into German and tested it with 366 participants. Although three English items didn't work well in translation, a 16-item German scale version was found to be reliable. The German scale was compared to other established measures to look for correlations. We found that wakefulness is significantly correlated with [mindfulness](#) and with lower scores on the "Big-Five [neuroticism](#) subscale."

In the language of psychological research, we demonstrated evidence for content validity, construct validity, and reliability of the questionnaires using data from large samples. The results suggest that wakefulness exists on a continuum so that some people may be more or less awakened than others or may develop a greater degree of wakefulness over time.

The inventories appear to effectively measure wakefulness, distinguishing well between the awakened group and the general population. ([Our paper](#) about the scale was recently published in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*).<sup>1</sup>

## Significance of the Scale

Our scale is significant because it emphasizes that wakefulness is a particular state of being, distinct from the usual or ordinary state of adult waking consciousness. It also emphasizes that, as I suggested above, wakefulness is a psychological state that can occur both within and outside the context of spiritual traditions.

Some spiritual seekers might feel that measuring wakefulness removes magic and mystery from their experience. But in my view, that is part of the point. Our scale helps to de-mythologize wakefulness and makes it more accessible. "Enlightenment" has always been a nebulous term.

One consequence is that spiritual seekers are liable to be exploited by [narcissistic](#), manipulative "gurus" who pretend to be awakened or delude themselves into thinking they are "enlightened." If we know what it means to be spiritually awakened, we will be more discerning about spiritual teachers and better able to distinguish the fake from the authentic.

On any journey, it helps to have a clear idea about where you are headed. In my new book, [The Adventure: A Practical Guide to Spiritual Awakening](#), I identify eight essential qualities of wakefulness and offer exercises, meditations, and discussions to develop each quality. The book's basic idea is that by cultivating these qualities, we can cultivate wakefulness itself.

In doing so, we will discover that a state once considered extraordinary and unattainable is within reach.

By Steve Taylor Ph.D.

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