



## Once Upon an Awakening

### *Metaphors as Vehicles for Realisation*

#### I. Once Upon a Time...

“Once upon a time...” and “A long time ago...” we began to make sense of the world by telling stories.

We told them around fires when nights were truly dark, in whispered prayers on our knees as children, in bedtime rituals with storybooks. And as we grew up, we continued them in silent inner commentary. We told them to help us find our place in the cosmos—to comfort, to connect, to remember, to warn, to inspire, to wonder. Over time, we came to live within them, finding meaning where maybe none was to be found. Our stories became the maps we used to navigate the vast, ungraspable terrain of life—to keep the unknown at a safe remove and generate a bubble of illusion that wraps us in a cocoon of conformity.



We are so wrapped up in our stories we’ve forgotten that we’re constantly writing them. And we’ve forgotten that the way we speak about something shapes the way we see it—even before we’ve had a chance to think.

This became startlingly clear during a conversation with my dear friend Anne Michaud about the title of my book *The Space Between Us*. As a French speaker, she feels more at home in the relational and expressive flavour of her native tongue, and finds the more transactional nature of English somewhat aggressive. Her reflections on the title opened a rich inquiry into how language can both connect and obscure. She found *The Space Between Us* somewhat misleading. From her perspective, there is no space, no boundary—we *are* the space we meet in. When she translated the title into French, it became *Ce qui nous relie*—“that which connects us.”

And yet, I chose not to change the title. In English, the phrase *The Space Between Us* carries a kind of ambiguity: it can imply a gap, a separation, but it also gestures toward the very medium of connection.

That insight stayed with me. I saw how words shape concepts that are invisible but frame the way we see. They don’t just describe—they colour. I began to sense how language functions like stained glass: light still gets through, but it’s tinted. And we rarely notice the glass itself—we think we’re seeing directly, when in fact we’re looking through layers.

So, I found myself one morning, sitting on my meditation cushion, eyes and mind open, reflecting on the metaphors I’ve used over the last year of writing poems to describe spiritual awakening. I’ve spoken of *transcendence*, *dissolution*, and *transparency*. But each of these carries its own emotional tone, its own directional pull. And I began to wonder—are these words quietly shaping the kind of awakening I’m pointing to? Are they telling a story, even when I think I’m pointing to truth?

This essay is a kind of noticing.

A looking at the frame rather than just through it.



It's a story about the stories we tell when we try to speak the unspeakable.  
When we try to say what it means to *wake up*.

## II. Metaphor as Myth-Maker

Metaphors are such powerful shapers of perception that we are largely unaware of the role they play in constructing the world we respond to in every moment. We tend to think of them as poetic decoration—something used to add colour or mood to a sentence. But in truth, they are fundamental to how we experience reality. They shape our very sense of what's real. They're not just how we talk about things—they're often how we see them, how we come to understand them.

Cognitive linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson—particularly in their groundbreaking book *Metaphors We Live By*—argue that metaphor is not merely a feature of language, but a foundation of thought itself. We grasp the abstract through the concrete. We say “I fell into depression,” or “I'm carrying emotional baggage,” or “She's moved on.” Each phrase maps physical experience—falling, carrying, moving—onto inner life. In doing so, it quietly frames how we interpret what we feel. You're not just sad—you're *falling*. You're not just healing—you're *moving forward*. Without noticing it, metaphor becomes the scaffolding of the world received in our perception.

Spiritual language is no different. In fact, it may be more dependent on metaphor than any other domain—because it attempts to gesture toward the ineffable, the ungraspable, the unnameable. When we speak of *the path*, *the journey*, *the ground of being*, or *waking up*, we're already in the realm of metaphor. We're offering a shape, a movement, a narrative.

This matters deeply. Because the metaphors we choose don't simply reflect our experiences—they generate them. They invite certain kinds of seeing, and obscure others. A metaphor of *climbing a mountain* conjures effort, elevation, and a peak to strive for. A metaphor of *melting into ocean* invites surrender, dissolution, maybe even alarm. And the one who says “*It's like waking from a dream*” is pointing to something sudden, internal, and strangely familiar.

Each of these is a story. And stories are never neutral.

Which metaphor we choose—or which one chooses us—frames not just what awakening means to us, but how we imagine getting there (and even *getting there* is another story—one that may postpone the immediacy). What kind of self must be developed or renounced? What is left behind, and what lies ahead? And perhaps more importantly: what deeper truth do we subtly deflect when we adopt one story over another?

But there's another layer to consider. Metaphors don't always work on first contact. There may be a resonance but little impact—until something in us is ready to receive. As Lee Lozowick once put it, we must “*build the matrix to be able to hold the realization*.” Without some degree of inner preparation—emotional maturity, psychological resilience, a grounded sense of self—even the most radiant metaphor can confuse or destabilize.

Metaphors, in this way, are not just conceptual tools. They are initiatory vessels. They don't merely describe awakening—they call it forth. But only when we're ready to receive what they reveal.

Each metaphor also reflects a particular stance—an implicit relationship between the **content of experience** and the **source of awareness**. Awareness itself is effortless, choiceless, beyond form. What shifts is how we perceive and respond to the arising world of thought, feeling, body, and action. Each metaphor gestures toward a different kind of integration:



- *Transcendence* moves beyond fragmentation toward the unchanging whole.
- *Dissolution* lets the parts melt into that wholeness.
- *Transparency* reveals the content of experience as already lit by clarity.
- *Transfiguration* sees the world itself as an expression of divine fullness.
- *Waking up* is the recognition that the sense of separation was imagined.
- *Being Available* is the felt emergence of action from the source itself—no longer ego-driven, but aligned, responsive, and whole.

These are not just metaphors for awakening. They are subtle cartographies of how form and formlessness meet—how the seen relates to the seer. Through them, we begin to live (or limit) what is always already the case.

The next sections explore six of these archetypal metaphors: transcendence, dissolution, transparency, transfiguration, waking up, and living from source—not to declare one “right,” but to notice how each one shapes the spiritual imagination. To see the stained glass before we take it for clear light.

### III. The Story of Transcendence

One of the most enduring metaphors for spiritual awakening is **transcendence**. It speaks of rising above—of perspective, of clarity gained from higher ground, of ascending beyond confusion, form, or suffering. We hear it in phrases like *higher consciousness, rising above the ego, elevated states, going beyond*. It’s a vertical metaphor, deeply rooted in language, and equally embedded in many spiritual traditions.

In Advaita Vedanta, the path is one of discriminating between the real and the unreal—what is not-self is slowly negated until only the unchanging witness remains. *Neti neti*—*not this, not this*—is the language of transcendence, of going beyond.

In Neoplatonism, there’s a movement away from the many toward The One. Even in mystic Christianity, God is imagined as “above,” and awakening as a journey of ascent through the layers of self to union with the Divine.

In Mahayana Buddhism, the impulse toward transcendence is encoded in the famous mantra from the Heart Sutra:

*Gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā*  
*Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone completely beyond—Awakening, so be it.*

It evokes a movement beyond limitation, beyond conceptual grasping. But even here, we must ask: *Beyond what? And to where?* The metaphor still carries the flavour of departure, of ascent—even when the teachings themselves emphasize that what is sought has never been absent.

There is a beauty and clarity to this imagery. It invokes wonder. It carries the sense of the mystery—the unknowable beyond the known. Transcendence implies refinement, stillness, purity. It offers a sense of liberation—from chaos, confusion, entanglement. It draws the practitioner upward, toward a higher vantage point where things make more sense. From above, we imagine the storm no longer touches us. Spirit is higher than body. Heaven is higher than Earth. The self is better left behind.



This vertical metaphor has not disappeared in modern thought. In fact, it has been incorporated into new, more systematized forms. **Spiral Dynamics** presents human development as an ascending spiral—each stage transcending and including the previous, moving toward increasing complexity, integration, and capacity. **Integral Theory**, especially as articulated by Ken Wilber, builds on this with elaborate models of “altitude,” levels of consciousness, and unfolding stages of spiritual evolution. These frameworks are sophisticated, inclusive, and often deeply insightful—but they still carry the signature shape of transcendence: *upward movement, hierarchical complexity, higher is clearer*.

Even when these systems insist on the value of early stages, the gravitational pull is toward ascent—towards evolution. Earlier phases are seen as less integrated, more limited—important but ultimately *provisional*. The ultimate human is always further along, further up, just around the next evolutionary bend—and it implies we are not there yet, and may never arrive. This sense of perpetual ascent is echoed in traditions that speak of awakening as the work of many lifetimes.

This can affect the practitioner in unconscious ways. It can foster striving, idealism, and a tendency to ignore the messy, embodied, relational dimensions of life. The metaphor of transcendence can become a kind of spiritual escape hatch—an imagined ladder out of the human condition. At its most extreme, it can lead to what’s often called spiritual bypassing: using spiritual language or states to avoid unprocessed emotion, trauma, or ethical entanglement. It can also quietly inflate the ego, which seizes on the language of ascent to feel superior or more advanced—ironically reinforcing the very identity structure the metaphor seeks to dissolve.

And yet, transcendence is not wrong. It names something real: the loosening of identification, the spaciousness that comes when we are no longer so attached to every thought, the shift in perspective that opens a wider, clearer view.

But it’s only one story.

And if we tell only this one, we may begin to believe that what we’re seeking lies elsewhere, higher, above. We may miss what’s right here—closer than close, already fully present, if only we stop reaching for it.

#### IV. The Story of Dissolution: Melting Back into the Ground

If transcendence moves upward, then **dissolution** moves inward and downward—it’s a falling back in deep trust toward intimacy, merging, and the softening of the self. This metaphor does not aim to rise above, but to gently sink into something more fundamental. It evokes the simplicity of surrender, the dissolving of boundaries, the quiet return to what always is.

Where transcendence often frames awakening as an achievement or higher state, dissolution points toward disappearance—not into nothingness, but into the unimaginable fullness of being. It speaks of the ego recognising its place within the whole, like a river returning to the sea, or a wave sensing it is both the ocean and a wave.

This metaphor forms a core element in the teachings of many traditions. In Dzogchen and Mahamudra, the instruction is to recognise and then rest in the natural state—to stop doing anything, to stop even trying to awaken. There is no path, no progress, only recognition of what is already the case. The self is not defeated or transcended—it simply ceases to take precedence.



In Zen, one finds similar tones. The teaching is not to ascend but to let go—of concepts, of striving, of self. Enlightenment isn't something reached; it's what remains when all clinging dissolves. The metaphor is often one of emptiness, but not as void. Rather, it's openness, space, form stripped of solidity.

Sufism gives us the term *fanā*—the annihilation of the self in the Beloved. Here, dissolution is not abstract, but passionately devotional. The self does not ascend to the Divine; it falls into it. The metaphor is one of ecstatic melting—love so total that the boundaries of self dissolve entirely.

In Taoism, the ideal is not refinement or conquest, but alignment. The sage follows the way of water—yielding, flowing, making no effort, eroding the hard edges of identity. The Tao is not a place to get to, but the deep order already moving through all things. The practice is not control, but surrender. This is *wu wei*—non-doing, effortless action. To awaken is not to rise or disappear, but to act in harmony with what is. Identity becomes porous. The need to defend or assert the self fades. One simply flows.

These metaphors share a language of *immanence*. They don't imagine a distant reality above or beyond—they speak of what's here, now, just beneath the surface noise of selfhood. Dissolution is not about becoming something else. It is the recognition that we never were what we thought we were. Even surrender becomes a moment of deep recognition not an action to be taken.

Psychologically, these metaphors invite humility, gentleness, and a willingness to become small. They soften the sharpness of self-importance. They foster tenderness and ease.

But like all powerful metaphors, dissolution carries its own risks. When approached from a grounded, psychologically stable place, it can soften identity and deepen connection. But if taken too literally—or pursued as a kind of escape—it can become a metaphor for inner collapse. The self may not dissolve into wholeness, but into confusion. Agency can blur. Boundaries can become so porous that clarity is lost. For those carrying unprocessed trauma or deep unmet longing, the yearning to disappear can even slide into a quiet form of despair.

I remember once, during a moment of unexpected spiritual opening, a terrifying thing happened. Past and future collapsed into an unbearable present—so complete, so absolute, that there was no room for *me* to exist. It was as if time had squeezed me out of existence. What might be understood as union felt, in that moment, like annihilation. An instantaneous existential fear rushed in—a sense that if I let go, even for a breath, *I* would cease to be.

This isn't a flaw in the metaphor itself, but a reminder of preparation and context: **dissolution asks for inner readiness.** It is not the erasure of self, but the gentle loosening of the self's grip. Presence replaces control and that can only happen when there is enough ground to fall back into.

Still, dissolution, like transcendence, names something true. There are moments when we do, in some sense, *disappear*—when the boundary between self and world thins, when we fall into a silence so complete it seems no one remains. These are not escapes, but openings. They are dissolutions into presence.

As Richard Rohr writes:

*“Once we know we are in God, and God is in us, we don't have to puff ourselves up. We can be small. God's greatness becomes enough, and we can finally be free.”*





In this view, dissolution isn't loss—it's release. A falling not into nothing, but into belonging.

But again, it's only one story.

If we hold only this one, we may miss the fullness of being *as* a self, *in* a body, *with* others, living in the world. We may forget that the ground we dissolve into is also the ground we stand on—and that sometimes, awakening includes reappearing.

## V. The Story of Transparency: Seeing Through the Self

If transcendence is about rising above, and dissolution about falling back, then **transparency** is about *seeing through*—not movement in any direction, but a shift in how we perceive. It's not about going anywhere, but recognising what's already here, once the filters fall away.

This metaphor draws on images of clarity, glass, light, mirrors, and openness. Awakening in this view is not an escape or a merger, but a kind of unclouding. A lifting of the veil. A sudden lucidity. There is immediacy and intimacy. The world remains unchanged—but the one seeing it is no longer entangled in interpretation and orientation. There is no need to transcend the dream or dissolve the dreamer. The dream is seen *as* a dream, and in that seeing, freedom arises.

In Dzogchen, the metaphor of the mirror is central. The awakened mind is said to be like a mirror: perfectly clear, reflecting all phenomena without clinging or resisting. Nothing sticks. Nothing stains. Whatever appears is simply seen and allowed to pass. The mirror does not need to be improved—it only needs to be recognised.

In Zen, too, the emphasis is on seeing clearly. The instruction is to sit, to be with what is, allowing thoughts, sensations, and identities to arise and fall away. Enlightenment here is not a state to attain, but a perception freed from distortion. The metaphor is one of *suchness*—things exactly as they are, unclouded by concept.

In contemporary nondual and direct path teachings, transparency often replaces the more dramatic metaphors. There is no journey, no loss, no ascent. Just the simple shift from identification to observation. The personal self is seen not as an obstacle to be overcome, but as a transparent appearance within awareness—real enough to function but no longer mistaken for the whole.

Psychologically, this metaphor can be both liberating and disorienting. It reveals that much of what we take to be “self” is merely patterned perception and conditioned behaviour. The ego's drama softens. But in early stages, this can feel destabilising. Without a story to stand on, the self reflexively grasps for something solid. With time, however, transparency fosters equanimity, gentleness, and a quiet confidence that no longer needs to assert or defend an identity.

There is a kind of ordinariness to this view of awakening. Nothing is heightened or melted or transcended. It is all just *this*—seen clearly, without agenda. Not beyond. Not beneath. Just seen.

Still, the essence of this metaphor is radical simplicity. Nothing is added. Nothing is removed. Just the quiet miracle of perception, freed from projection.

But it's worth remembering: *clarity alone can be a cold mistress*. In some traditions, clarity is equated with wisdom—seeing things as they are. But wisdom without compassion can harden into cruelty. The clean precision of insight must be



tempered by the warmth of the heart. In many schools of Buddhism, wisdom and compassion are considered two wings of awakening—one sees clearly, the other holds tenderly.

Transparency shows us the emptiness of form. Compassion lets us feel its fullness.

You don't transcend the world.

You don't dissolve into it.

You simply see—

and in that seeing, the world reveals itself.

## VI. The Story of Transfiguration: When the World Glows

There is a fourth metaphor of awakening—not upward like transcendence, not inward like dissolution, not clear-eyed like transparency—but **luminous**. A kind of seeing in which the world is **transfigured**. Not escaped, not seen through, not surrendered to—but revealed, lit from within.

In this metaphor, everything remains just as it is, and yet nothing is the same. What was once ordinary becomes radiant. What was once seen as separate now glows with intimacy and presence. The divine is not found beyond the veil or beneath appearances—it shines *through* them. This is not awakening as departure, but as *illumination*.

In Celtic mysticism, this sense of transfiguration runs deep. John O'Donohue speaks of beauty not as prettiness, but as revelation—the moment when something breaks open the ordinary and lets the eternal pour through. He writes:

*“Beauty is the illumination at the heart of the soul.”*

And in those moments of true beauty—inner or outer—the world seems to hum with something more. Not more than real, but more *fully* real.

The biblical story of the Transfiguration echoes this. On the mountaintop, Jesus does not become someone else—he is simply seen differently. His divine nature radiates through his human form. The story doesn't teach escape from the world, but the *recognition of God in it*. His face shines. His robes blaze. The light is not elsewhere—it is *through*.

In this metaphor, awakening is not about loss or stripping away. It is not a movement of subtraction. It is a *full-bodied illumination*, a fullness that is felt. The self is not negated but seen in its sacred dimension. The body is not transcended but blessed. The world is not background—it is the altar.

This is not to say transfiguration replaces the other metaphors. Rather, it integrates them. It arises after clarity, after surrender, after the illusion of separation has softened. It is not a different path—it is what becomes visible when the veils have fallen. It's not what we arrive at, but what's revealed *when we've stopped trying to get anywhere at all*.

Psychologically, this metaphor nourishes joy, presence, and gratitude. It reconnects us with beauty, with the sacredness of form. It honours embodiment. It invites us not to escape the world, but to live in it as if it really mattered—because it does.

As I wrote in a poem titled ***Windows***:



*“And in the flash of recognition  
we also see  
that as we look out,  
we also radiate  
through.*

*The fire burning in our heart  
is the source of light  
we shine out  
into the world,  
and the world  
we see  
is the reflection back  
of our own light.” [\(link here\)](#)*

Transfiguration offers a vision of awakening that is both immanent and exalted. It is the flowering of the human, not the erasure of it. Not flight, not fade, not withdrawal—but a radiant participation in the mystery of here and now.

The mountain doesn’t vanish.  
The wave doesn’t melt.  
The glass doesn’t shatter.  
*The world simply begins to glow.*

## VII. Waking Up as Meta-Narrative

There’s another metaphor—one we’ve touched but not yet named fully. It’s not about rising above, or melting back, or seeing through, or glowing with radiance.

It’s simply this: **waking up**.

Not awakening to something else, but from something—a shift in perception so immediate it collapses the story altogether. A kind of lucid awareness that dawns when we realise we’ve been dreaming. The metaphors drop. The effort stops. And what remains is just *this*.

This isn’t a new metaphor to replace the others. It’s a disruption of metaphor itself.

In Zen, this is the sound of one hand clapping, the sudden *katsu!* of the teacher’s shout. In Dzogchen, it’s the self-liberation of thoughts the moment they arise. In **nondual traditions**, waking up is not about achieving a special state—it’s the *recognition of what has always been the case*. That awareness was never absent. That the separation we’ve been trying to overcome was imagined from the start.

Waking up doesn’t resolve the story.  
It reveals the one who’s been telling it.

And in that moment, the whole narrative loosens—without needing to disappear.





## VIII. The Danger and Grace of Storytelling

We began with stories—gathered around fires, whispered at bedtime, shaped into selfhood without even knowing we were doing it. And now, even here, we’ve woven another.

A story about awakening.

Transcendence.

Dissolution.

Transparency.

Transfiguration.

Waking up.

Each one offers a window into the ineffable. Each one reveals something true. But like a magician’s hand, even the most luminous metaphor can also misdirect—drawing our attention to the finger, rather than what it points to.

We must be careful.

Not because stories are dangerous, but because they’re so seductive. They comfort, guide, inspire—but they also frame. They carve shape into the formless. And if we forget they are stories, we start taking the map for the territory.

As I wrote earlier: *we do love a good story.*

And that’s okay.

The invitation is not to abandon storytelling—but to see it clearly. To know when a metaphor is opening something—and when it’s closing it down. To speak with care. To listen with curiosity. To notice, again and again, that even this—this very essay—is just another tale we’re telling, one more dream within the dream.

And maybe that’s the grace of it all:

That the very story which veils the truth might also be the one that wakes us from it.

## IX. The Next Movement: Living the Real

If the earlier metaphors pointed to the moment of awakening, what follows is the unfolding of that insight into the full texture of life. Not another metaphor, but a return—into body, time, relationship, the world. Into *availability*.

We’re beginning to see a shift in the spiritual landscape. A new language is forming—not about ascent, or surrender, or even seeing through—but about embodiment, participation, and grounded expression.

Anne Sweet speaks of **Everyday Enlightened Living**—a life not led by seeking, but by *trusting one’s own direct knowing*, and living it now. She points toward authenticity not as an outcome, but as a foundation: an expression of the wholeness already here, underneath the layers we’ve learned to perform.

Jeff Carreira writes about **Spiritual Embodiment**—a call not just to experience subtle awareness, but to live as its instrument. To bring all of oneself—body, emotion, energy, and soul—into the moment, again and again. He speaks of



an evolutionary movement that reaches toward the Divine, and an involutionary grace that pours through us in return. This is not escape—it is saturation.

And I find myself drawn to a language of **Being Available**—not simply dwelling in meditative peace, but sinking beneath it, into the creative maelstrom at the heart of being. It is not a retreat from life, but a deeper entry into it. It is a commitment to remain open to whatever is arising—without flinching, without turning away, and being available to life wherever it calls you.

This stage isn't about refining the metaphor.  
It's about dissolving even the distance between metaphor and action.

To live, now, what has been glimpsed.  
To offer no more commentary, and instead become the poem.

## X. Coda – Once Upon Right Now

Once upon a time, we began to make sense of the world by telling stories.  
And maybe we still are.

The metaphors we live by—transcendence, dissolution, transparency, transfiguration, waking up, being available—are not wrong. They are ways of meeting the mystery. Each one reflects a different way of relating to the whole—how we meet the moment, how we hold what is.

They are myths we use to sketch what can't be drawn. To name what won't be named. They are stained glass through which light passes—coloured, but still light.

But something happens when we see that. When we notice the shimmer of the metaphor itself. The story doesn't end. It just becomes transparent. Alive. Aware of itself.

To live as poetry.  
To speak with care.  
To meet each moment as if it matters—because it does.  
To tell the story not to escape life, but to enter it fully.

The tale keeps unfolding.  
And if we're quiet, we might just hear it begin again:

*Once upon a time...*

Back to [\*Heart of the Diamond\*](#)