

What is Enlightenment?

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*Before Enlightenment
chop wood carry water,
after Enlightenment,
chop wood carry water.*

This is not a comprehensive article about what enlightenment is. I actually question what the enlightened state might be, and might not be, or in what context one might view it. For too long we have accepted a general definition of enlightenment as it was traditionally passed on. When one starts to ask questions, it becomes much more complicated, but also more interesting. I think it is high time to start a discussion of what enlightenment really is.

What is enlightenment? I often wondered what it really meant. It is said to be the goal of the spiritual path, but what does it mean? What happens when you reach enlightenment, liberation, realization? A lot of people talk about it, but they don't define it. When I started to get interested in spiritual things, I had all kinds of ideas what it might be. As I started reading up about it, I discovered I had it all wrong. I had to adjust my concepts many times. I also found that a lot of people are confused too about what enlightenment is.

My brother once had a friend over for couple of days. She was involved with some spiritual path. She was constantly telling my brother and his wife what they should and should not do. My brother was getting really annoyed, and when she then told him "I am enlightened", he threw her out. How do we trust people who say they are enlightened? Are people of whom it is said that they are enlightened truly enlightened? I have always wondered why so many gurus of whom it is said that they are enlightened (and with some it is clearly the case) have peculiar characteristics that seem in contrast with what we understand by the term enlightenment.

It is generally believed that one needs to meditate long and hard to get enlightened, not to mention the supposed requirements of finding a guru, an isolated spot, certain spiritual practices, certain diets, etc. But when you look around you find some strange contradictions to all this. Ramana Maharshi, for example, attained liberation at age 16. After devotional visits to the nearby Meenakshi Temple in Madurai, and associated with this bhakti, he later reported fever like sensations. Soon after, on July 17, 1896, at age 16, he had a life changing experience. He spontaneously initiated a process of self-enquiry that culminated, within a few minutes, in his own permanent awakening. As he was totally absorbed in meditation, he stayed in a temple refusing food, and neglecting his body for some time. I always wondered why enlightened beings sometimes neglect their physical bodies. I understand the concept of being unattached to the physical, but why not partake of it? Ramana also hardly spoke, he preferred to "teach in silence", that is by the energy of his presence. This is

another characteristic often present in some of those that are enlightened; the lack of actively teaching people about spiritual matters and the path to enlightenment. I do have to mention that Ramana did have valuable teachings. Ramana Maharshi described his enlightenment as: "From that moment onwards, the I or Self focused attention on itself by a powerful fascination. Fear of death vanished once and for all. The ego was lost in the flood of Self-awareness. Absorption in the Self continued unbroken from that time. Other thought might come and go like the various notes of music, but the I continued like the fundamental sruti [that which is heard] note which underlies and blends with all other notes."

Is the state of enlightenment difficult to reach? Does it take an entire life of mediation to finally reach that ultimate goal? Some people do indeed meditate or do spiritual practices their entire lives and never reach the state of enlightenment. On the other hand, some get enlightenment at a very young age, and with little or no mediation. Just merely being in the presence of an enlightened being, can bring on a permanent state of enlightenment. Arunachala Ramana achieved enlightenment just through looking at a picture of Ramana Maharshi, although he didn't even know Ramana at the time. Sri Aurobindo also spent three days in constant meditation (using a Samkhyan-type technique taught to him by a yogi called Lele, about whom little is known) , after which he had attained the state of Brahman, the realization of the silent Self.

Enlightenment is often described as having complete awareness of the self, that is, the divine center we all have, what we actually are. When one becomes aware of this Self, it is felt as an infinite existence, as silence, freedom and peace. It is felt as universal but centered in oneself. Enlightenment happens when one can stay and live in this Self-awareness all the time.

The description given when the state of enlightenment is reached are not always the same. It seems to be a very individual matter, although there is common ground. The enlightened beings themselves are also very different from each other. Some enlightened ones can remember their past lives, and others can't. Some of them have psychic skills, and others don't. Some can give 'shaktipat', the transference of their enlightened energy and can help their disciples reach the enlightened state, while others can't. Some give teachings, while others don't say a word. Some of them can transform matter. Some of them live in perfect, unending bliss, and others are beyond all emotions, even the positive ones. Some see the futility of the consciousness in which almost everyone lives. They just go off and die somewhere. Others are said to practically become immortal. For some, the sensation of having a self is changed, now somehow 'perfect'. For others, it dissolves and become 'at one' with 'the father' or 'the one'. In Buddhism, it's said to have ceased to exist altogether. The only thing that all of these traditions all agree on is that to get there is to end a discomfort intrinsic to being alive. The more you look into it, the more it looks that the enlightened state is actually a whole range of possible states, with an underlying common state of consciousness.

When you look at those enlightened beings who forget to eat and drink, don't pay any attention to the health of their body, just don't move from that one spot for

years, or are not interested anymore in other people, one wonders if the enlightened state can be unhealthy for a person. After all, we humans beings value not only the individualized state of being, but also our creative potentials, and a healthy balance in all our affairs.

But it doesn't make you perfect. Here is the catch, and the reason why certain enlightened gurus show unexpected characteristics or even engage in acts that can lead to their downfall. Sri Aurobindo tells us that the awareness of the Self as we just described, is only the first stage of realization of the Divine. There are further transformations that need to take place. With enlightenment there is a gradually awareness of a cosmic vastness which is filled by a cosmic spirit. The limits of the ego, personal mind and body disappear, as these are felt only as a small part of oneself. Herein lies the danger because one has to be on guard against the play of a magnified ego that easily can take place; and also against attacks of hostile forces that want to prevent the growth of the soul into the cosmic Truth. It might be less known by the average meditation practitioner, but there are cosmic beings who appear to the practitioner as deities or even in the form of certain masters, bestowing knowledge, bliss or other good feeling upon the person. Such a person might believe that he has really advanced upon the spiritual path, even that he is close to or has attained enlightenment, but in reality these cosmic beings are just out for their own benefit, and steal spiritual energy from the practitioner to prolong their own lives. Visions and the appearance of "spiritual beings" are best avoided. If one avoids these dangers there is an initial ascent through the layers of the mind, and subsequently a descent of the higher consciousness into the the mind, vital body and the physical body which are transformed into the higher. There is both a psychic transformation and a spiritual transformation. The psychic transformation happens, undetected ego-knots come to the foreground which are then loosened or burned up in the psychic fire. The spiritual transformation happens when the Divine consciousness enters the mind, vital body, and physical body, and replaces their consciousness with its own.

It seems that some gurus having attained the first step of enlightenment, being in the constant awareness of the Self, accompanied by the vastness of the inner self, immense peace or bliss, just remain in that state and do not undergo further transformation. Thus they are still vulnerable to the imperfections of their personality. This explains why some gurus have become wrapped up in scandals. The most common: power, money, absurd statements, giving misleading spiritual information out of self interest, sometimes predictions, and most often sexual relationships with their devotees while officially claiming celibacy. Not that sex is bad, but hypocrisy and lies are. Sex with underage children is also not that uncommon. A well known enlightened guru was hooked on laughing gas and valium If you want names, you can find them on the internet, it is all well documented.

It has become clear that the common understanding of enlightenment is too simple. The initial state of enlightenment is still full of pitfalls. Only after a thorough transformation of the entire human being is one truly liberated from any Maya or Illusion.

I mentioned earlier that Ramana Maharshi got enlightened at age 16. How can a person get enlightened at that young an age? Is one not supposed to meditate for a life time, and practice special spiritual disciplines? Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh got enlightened at age 21. Sri Aurobindo became enlightened in a prison cell. Arunachala Ramana achieved enlightenment just through looking at a picture of Ramana Maharshi, although he didn't even know Ramana at the time. Why is it that India seems to have so many enlightened people, while Tibet produced only a few, and the West even less? Could it be genetics that makes it easier for particular races to achieve the enlightened state? Over the last decades a lot of brain research has been done, and it has been found that the activation or deactivation of certain brain regions result in experiences very much like those encountered in religious and mystical experiences. It has been suggested that the state of enlightenment is a restructuring of certain brain activities. This does not devalue enlightenment itself, but it shed a different light on what it is in relation to the human being. The restructuring of the brain can be done by meditation, but maybe one day it can be applied by external influence. It is also interesting to note that there maybe other approaches to enlightenment. At the Tracker School of Tom Brown, Jr., the world's leading expert in wilderness skills, a neuroscientist examined the effects of spending time in a pure wilderness. His findings were truly stunning: While it takes a novice usually well over a year of dedicated meditation practice to sustain an alpha state for a few hours, people who never meditated in their lives could sustain deep alpha for hours after only 48 hours in pure wilderness. It seems that the brain resonates with a field in nature that is more effective than the constant struggle in meditation. By the way, some spiritual teachers have always said to use very little effort in meditation. Who knows, maybe one day, we might genetically alter the human being, giving it a brain structure and activity that allow for easy access to the enlightened state. For many centuries we took for granted that enlightenment is the goal of human life, and because enlightened persons were showing such a blissful state, it looked like something we definitely wanted. But could it be that enlightenment has more to do with the functioning of the brain? Jill Bolte Taylor experienced a stroke and was able to analyze what was happening. Being a neuroanatomist she was also able to interpret her experience in the light of science. Taylor's February 2008 TED Conference talk about her memory of the stroke became an Internet sensation, resulting in widespread attention and interest around the world. You can find her video on YouTube. She explains that the left brain thinks linearly and methodically. It is all about the past and future. It looks for details, categorizes and organizes the information it receives. It thinks in language, and is responsible for the ongoing brain chatter that connects your inner world to your outer world. It feels itself as a single individual, separate from the energy flow around us, and from other individuals. The right brain on the other hand, is only concerned with the present moment, the here and now. It thinks in pictures. It connects to everything around us, and does not see a boundary between inner and outer. It sees itself as part of one human family. In this moment, we are perfect and we are whole.

Well, that made me think. As long as we are in the physical body, we have a brain

that allows us to experience the cosmos in a very particular way. All the areas of the brain are abilities to experience a part of the cosmos. When a part of the brain shuts down, because of injury for example, a particular part of our experience disappears, like not being able to distinguish left from right, or recognize movement of an object. On the other hand, research has shown that stimulation of certain parts of the brain brings on full blown spiritual experiences. Before going into this, it is interesting to note that normal human beings are primarily left brain, that is, they function most of the time with their left brain activated. With meditation this activity slows down and the right hemisphere becomes more active. The description of the enlightened state corresponds remarkably well with what people experience, from brain trauma or meditation, when the right hemisphere becomes active. In the enlightened state one experiences the inner world and the outer world as the same, the sense of individuality diminishes, one experiences a tremendous vastness of consciousness, a unity with the environment and the cosmos, and the merging of the individual self with the cosmic self. Is this really the end goal of human life, or of the spiritual path? well, I wonder about this. maybe it is not a goal in itself. I think we human beings have the ability for two dual, opposite or complementary states of consciousness. One one hand there is the individualized consciousness, what we usually associate with ego. this consciousness is very much projected onto the outer world. It allows us the experience the physical reality of the cosmos in a very personal way. This corresponds with the Shakti aspect in Tantra. Shakti is (both on a cosmic and a human scale) energetic expression of the Divine. It is active, dynamic force or energy that moves throughout the cosmos. It creates and individualizes. It is left brain activity. At the other hand, there is universal consciousness, a deep peace and bliss, that sees the world and cosmos as a totality, non-individualized. It allows us to experience the unity in the cosmos. This corresponds with Shiva in Tantra. Shiva is the passive consciousness, the observer which is eternally in rest. It is pure, clear consciousness, unmoved, uncreated.

The Tantric teachings tell us that Shiva and Shakti are never separate, although we view them as such. There is always one and the same divine essence, that can be experienced as dual, and in different states of consciousness. There are like two poles of a magnet. One cannot be without the other. One can experience the cosmos from the Shakti point of view, what we all commonly do, in an active, dynamic, individualized way. Or we can experience the cosmos from the Shiva point of view, that is one of unity, and in rest, what people call enlightenment. The Shakti experience, brings about desire, fear, illusion (Maya), suffering. The Shiva experience becomes unattached from all this because it sees the larger perspective, and rises beyond all illusion. The Shiva experience is of course a very pleasant experience. depending on the person, enlightenment can bring a deep profound sense of peace, or a continuous blissful state, or other pleasant states. We naturally crave for pleasant experiences, so who would not want to stay in that enlightened state?

What bothered me for a long time was that enlightened gurus tend to just sit there experiencing their blissful state, sometimes they would give some

teachings. But why do they not actively engage in helping their fellow human being in becoming aware of their divine center and how to improve their state of being, and to develop their full human potentials? I think the answer lies in the Tantric teachings that tell us that as long as we are human we have both the Shiva and Shakti awareness all the time. We are both rooted in the Shiva consciousness of in rest, observing awareness and in the Shakti consciousness of dynamic, observed awareness. or, both in the divine center and in the movement of the cosmic creation. Working towards enlightenment is indeed a necessary spiritual practice that will not only improve our own state of being by eliminating the illusions that are part of creation, and eliminating the self provoked suffering, and giving us the overall understanding of what creation is all about, but staying purely in this state alone is in my opinion not advisable. As we humans cannot be without a brain to experience reality, living solely with an activated right brain and an almost inactive left brain, is the same mistake as being solely left brained as most people are. Again, this is the mistake of certain gurus. They stay in their right brain. Although they might think that they don't have any ego anymore, the ego, or individualized state is still there. And if their personality is not purified, they are going to fall into its traps. There are of course those enlightened beings who are aware that before or after their enlightenment they have to pay attention to purify their personality from all imbalances. Those are the ones that keep their left brain active too, that use their individualized consciousness or ego in the service of their divine Self, thus keeping a equilibrium between left and right brain, between their Shiva and Shakti. They don't sit in a cave their entire lives, nor do they create an entourage of adorning disciples or build luxurious temples. To return to the activation of brain areas... Dr. Michael Persinger, working at Laurentian University, in Sudbury, Ontario, Canada, has pioneered a method for inducing the religious and spiritual experiences. Using an ordinary striped yellow motorcycle helmet purchased at a sporting goods store, which he has modified with electromagnetic coils, he can place the helmet on your head, connect the wires to a device he has constructed that generates the proper signals, and when the magnetic fields produced by the coils penetrate the skull and into the temporal lobes of the brain, the result is the stimulation of those lobes and a religious experience results.

How does Dr. Persinger's helmet work? It works by inducing very small electrical signals with tiny magnetically induced mechanical vibrations in the brain cells of the temporal lobes and other selected areas of the brain, located in the skull just above and forward of the ears. These lobes are the portions of the brain that produce the "Forty Hertz Component" of the brainwaves detected in electroencephalograms. These mysterious "forty hertz components" are present whenever you are awake or when you are in REM sleep. They are absent during deep, dreamless sleep. What the "forty hertz component" does is not well understood, but we know that it is always present during the experience of "self." We cannot have a "me" experience without the forty hertz component being present. What this means is that the forty hertz component is essential to our experience of self. We cannot experience our sense of individuality without it. It stands to reason, then, that if the forty hertz component could somehow be

suppressed, the sense of individuality would be suppressed with it, and indeed, this is what Dr. Persinger's helmet does. It turns off the forty hertz component and with it the sense of individuality which your brain uses to define "self" as opposed to "rest of the world." when the forty hertz component is deeply attenuated or entirely absent from, say, the left side, and there's no "self" experience occurring, the feeling of unity with infinity is occurring with a sense of an overwhelming presence resulting from the continued operation of the right hand side, there is no way to describe it other than feeling that one has experienced the "infinite presence."

Two researchers, Andrew Newberg and Eugene D'Aquili, have taken a particular interest in these experiences. Through the use of a brain-scanning technique called SPECT (Single Photon Emission Computed Tomography), have produced images of the brains of Tibetan Buddhists who undergo deep, profound meditative experiences as the result of years of practice. They have done the same with a Catholic Franciscan nun, who, after 45 minutes of deep prayer, had her brain scanned to determine what centers were active and what centers were not. The results show that in both cases, the pre-frontal cortex, which controls attention, is highly stimulated. Meditation requires a great deal of concentration. The subjects are clearly deeply attentive to their task. But the superior parietal lobe, the center that processes information about space, time and the orientation of the body in space, is suppressed, and is almost totally quiet. The result is that any sense of time, space or being in the world is suppressed along with the activity in the superior parietal lobe. Persinger has been able to reproduce this by electrically suppressing activity in the superior parietal lobe using his helmet - and when he performs this experiment on Tibetan monks and the Franciscan nun, they all report that the experience is identical to what they experience in their own meditative practice.

Some people take this scientific research as proof that all spiritual experiences are solely brain states, and that there is no spiritual realm. In a sense they are right. Religious teachers and mystics have always told us that the spiritual realms are created by our states of consciousness. They do not independently exist by themselves. But a human being is more than its brain. But our present science is not developed enough to look into the higher energetic aspects of the human being. We are just discovering the science to measure the acupuncture meridians, and the subtle energetic electromagnetic aura of a human body. When the human body is left behind at death, the human being still exists as consciousness and is clothed with other more subtle bodies or energy-structures. The physical brain allows us to experience the world in particular ways while we are on the physical plane, but in essence we are pure awareness that is beyond matter and other creational levels of existence.

There have been people who, because of an abnormality, had little or almost no brain matter in their skull. British neurologist John Lorber has documented over 600 scans of people with hydrocephalus (abnormal build up of cerebrospinal fluid). Only half of those with more than 90 % of the cranium filled with cerebrospinal fluid) were severely retarded. All the rest (50 to 90% of the cranium filled with cerebrospinal fluid) had a normal IQ. Some of those people

have led a normal life, and never knew their condition until they developed a problem that led to a brain scan.

Now that you have read about all these issues regarding enlightenment, is it worth to meditate? Well, ask yourself this: why did you get onto the spiritual path in the first place? Most people become spiritual or want to become enlightened because one didn't feel at home in this physical world, or in this society, or of a lingering unhappiness about something. It is only when one's mind is perturbed that one looks for improvement, and one starts a spiritual quest. There is nothing wrong with it. We all want to be happy and improve our lives. Meditation and the strive for the natural state of being will bring this about. However if you want to be enlightened you will never be, because the very wanting is a hindrance to get enlightened. Anything you want, or anything you think you are, creates an illusion that blocks you from your natural state of awareness. Thus somewhere on your spiritual path you have to give up all your wanting, all your desires, and let your natural state of being happen by itself. This is well known in Buddhism. Buddhism also says that there is no meditation, there is only a changing of habits. We grow up habituated to a consciousness that is tuned to a lot of illusions about life. All we have to do is to change this habit into a habit of being in a very clear state of awareness of Self.

Here are some quotes about enlightenment, just to give an idea how people experience it.

Swami Chinmayananda in *Self-Unfoldment*: "The ultimate ideal is to divert our attention from the body-mind-intellect to the Life principle supporting them all, the unchanging factor of all life. The enlightened being is one who has chosen this highest principle as his ideal and has dedicated all his activities to it. Such a person lives a life of total independence and is free from the influence of all changes, within and without." ... "An enlightened being is one who has gained mastery over his own mind, who is always at peace no matter what changes may be taking place in the world around him. At times, others mistake such a person for being indifferent and disinterested in the world. The truth is, however, that the enlightened person experiences emotions, but he does not let them overpower him. Such a person 'has' an emotion, but does not 'become' the emotion; he does not become emotional."

Mark S.G. Dyczkowski in *The Doctrine of Vibration*: "The liberating knowledge of reality thus corresponds to our regaining possession of ourselves. We must lay hold of ourselves and abide in our authentic nature. Reality coincides with our own most fundamental state of being, free of all contrast and contradictions. Once we have overcome the negative forces that arise from our ignorance and prevent us from abiding in ourselves, we are liberated. To do this, we must penetrate through the pulsing fluctuations of objectively experienced states and perceptions at the surface level of consciousness and gain insight into the timeless rhythm of our own nature manifest in the universal arising and falling away of all things."

Sri Aurobindo: "My mind became silent as a windless air on a high mountain summit and then I saw one thought and then another coming in a concrete way from outside. I flung them away before they could enter and take hold of the

brain and in three days I was free." His mind soared into the vision of the universe as Brahman. "There was no real world - only when one looked through the immobile senses, something perceived or bore upon its sheer silence a world of empty forms, materialized shadows without true substance. There was no One or many even, only just absolutely That, featureless, relationless, sheer indescribable, unthinkable, absolute, yet supremely real and solely real."

"Ramana Maharshi: ""It was in 1896, about 6 weeks before I left Madurai for good (to go to Tiruvannamalai - Arunachala) that this great change in my life took place. I was sitting alone in a room on the first floor of my uncle's house. I seldom had any sickness and on that day there was nothing wrong with my health, but a sudden violent fear of death overtook me. There was nothing in my state of health to account for it nor was there any urge in me to find out whether there was any account for the fear. I just felt I was going to die and began thinking what to do about it. It did not occur to me to consult a doctor or any elders or friends. I felt I had to solve the problem myself then and there. The shock of the fear of death drove my mind inwards and I said to myself mentally, without actually framing the words: 'Now death has come; what does it mean? What is it that is dying? This body dies.' And at once I dramatized the occurrence of death. I lay with my limbs stretched out still as though rigor mortis has set in, and imitated a corpse so as to give greater reality to the enquiry. I held my breath and kept my lips tightly closed so that no sound could escape, and that neither the word 'I' nor any word could be uttered. 'Well then,' I said to myself, 'this body is dead. It will be carried stiff to the burning ground and there burn and reduced to ashes. But with the death of the body, am I dead? Is the body I? It is silent and inert, but I feel the full force of my personality and even the voice of I within me, apart from it. So I am the Spirit transcending the body. The body dies but the spirit transcending it cannot be touched by death. That means I am the deathless Spirit.' All this was not dull thought; it flashed through me vividly as living truths which I perceived directly almost without thought process. I was something real, the only real thing about my present state, and all the conscious activity connected with the body was centered on that I. From that moment onwards, the I or Self focused attention on itself by a powerful fascination. Fear of death vanished once and for all. The ego was lost in the flood of Self-awareness. Absorption in the Self continued unbroken from that time. Other thought might come and go like the various notes of music, but the I continued like the fundamental sruti [that which is heard] note which underlies and blends with all other notes."