

Chapter 2

What Is Enlightenment?

The Path of Experience

Existence is consciousness. From the human point of view it is experienced as three states: waking, dream and deep sleep. Sleep is the absence of differentiated experience. Dream is similar to waking in that the subject-object distinction obtains. Waking state consciousness can be divided into two sub-states: *samsara* and *nirvana*, to use two Sanskrit terms.¹ Samsara describes the experience of life as we know it. It is conceived of as a whirlpool or a wheel, a state of mind that goes around and around more or less forever. A whirlpool is difficult, if not impossible, to escape. Desires and fears emerge from an unknown source, disturb the mind for a while and disappear, only to reappear and disturb it again. We do actions intended to remove them but the actions only serve to reinforce them. As the wheel of life goes around and around we go up and down, elated one minute and depressed the next. Samsara is an entropic perpetual motion machine that never takes us anywhere, slowly wears us out and eventually sends us on.

Sometimes, however, we are granted a reprieve and lifted out of the samsaric state of mind. One is never sure how or why it happens. *Grace* is the only word that seems applicable. During these episodes we feel open, expansive and free. Typically, we observe our minds and bodies as objects. Perhaps we feel connected to everything. Maybe we melt into the world or experience a radiant inner light or the peace that passes understanding. It may feel as if we are not there because the ego has temporarily dissolved. Fear and desire, our more or less constant companions, are conspicuous by their absence. Hence, this transcendent otherworldly state is called *nirvana*. Nirvana literally means *without flame* or *extinct* and symbolizes a desireless, fearless state of mind or the extinction of the sense of separateness. This state is invariably accompanied by wonder and bliss. These epiphanies vary from a few seconds to minutes, days and occasionally weeks or even months. Eventually we come back to samsara, the everyday state of mind.

When we get back we long to return because a vacation from the monotonous uncertainties of life is a great relief. A few serious epiphanies and we are tempted to drop out and head for India. Epiphanies are the basis of all religions and give their doctrines of divinity an experiential foundation. They are sometimes called visions of God or revelations and are highly valued. Many ardent prayers are offered to invoke them.

These experiences, large and small, happen infrequently but are so compelling they cannot be discounted. At a certain point in an individual's evolution they become intense and frequent. Over the course of human history they have been catalogued, discussed and analyzed and these studies constitute a large body of literature. In due course a science of meditation evolved from them.² Meditation makes it possible to experience nirvana, the transcendental state or God consciousness, with enough certainty to give it a scientific basis.

¹ I am sorry to introduce Sanskrit terms but it is virtually impossible to dispassionately discuss the self and the inner world exclusively in English. And even though Western poets, mystics, and religious figures investigated the inner world in a personal and happenstance way, no science of self knowledge developed. Consequently, there is no established terminology. Sanskrit, the native language of self inquiry, arose out of the need to communicate about the nature of consciousness as a result of the investigations of untold numbers of subjective scientists over several thousand years. It is a particularly elegant and precise language which divorces the investigation into consciousness-awareness from mysticism and religion and makes it straightforward and easy to understand. The Science of Self Inquiry is discussed in detail in chapter 3.

² Chapter 12 discusses meditation in detail.

Meditation is often conceived of as a flight, a journey to the beyond. It takes considerable practice to master, but eventually the meditator is able to transcend the mind more or less at will. As the practice becomes routine, the meditator spends increasingly longer periods in nirvana, where there is no suffering, and less time in the samsaric state where there is. Eventually the state is meant to become effortless and continuous so that the individual can even go about daily life in nirvanic consciousness, i.e., fulfilled and happy.

The last word in terms of freedom from samsara is called *nirvikalpa samadhi*, a state of absorption that erases duality.³ The subject and the objects merge into one experience that lasts for some time. It is the opposite of deep sleep because the mind is awake. In deep sleep duality is erased because the knower-known-knowledge division is gone. When the duality of subject and object does not obtain, freedom obtains. This state does not destroy the ignorance that causes the samsaric state of mind, because the one who has the ignorance has been absorbed into awareness where no duality obtains. If you achieve this samadhi it indicates a high degree of mastery of the mind, which may be useful once you are back in samsara.

It comes up short in terms of lasting freedom, however, because when you leave the samadhi and enter samsaric consciousness the inbuilt dualistic orientation, the subject-object distinction, returns. Unconscious tendencies begin interpreting experience and the same old problems resurface. And one important fact needs to be taken into account when we are considering the pursuit of this kind of enlightenment: all experiences are in time so nirvana or samadhi can never become a permanent or continuous experience.

The theory of experiential enlightenment does not explain why we are caught up in samsara. It takes for granted that the solution to samsara is exclusively experiential and offers to convert samsara into nirvana. The Bible for the proponents of this view of enlightenment is the Patanjali *Yoga Sutras*, written a few hundred years before the Christian era. It informs us that our conditioning stands in the way of the experience of nirvana and instructs us how to remove it so that we can experience freedom. It is a dualistic doctrine based on the apparent reality of subject and object. I, the subject, am limited by my state of mind. Because limitation is not acceptable to me I would like to free myself of it. I practice some form of meditation and gain mastery of my mind by removing the thoughts that obstruct the experience of limitlessness. My experience of limitlessness is the object. Buddha's Eightfold Path and Ashtanga Yoga are the traditional methods for gaining experiential freedom. Buddha did not bring God into it but Patanjali did, saying that surrender to God is an indirect aid for attaining freedom.

Success in meditation does not destroy duality. I am still me, the subject, but I now experience freedom. Patanjali does not put it exactly this way. He says that once the mind is brought under control, "the seer dwells in its own nature" and "the indweller shines forth as pure consciousness," words that amount to freedom but do not take into account the fact that the seer, awareness, dwells in his own nature and shines forth irrespective of the condition of the mind. Nor does it take into account the fact that the meditator is consciousness, i.e., free already. In any case, enlightened or not, a mind free of desire is certainly not undesirable for anyone seeking happiness. The Eightfold Path is also an experiential journey that is said to end with enlightenment. This view is fairly reasonable and would not have endured for two thousand years if there was not some truth to it, but it is a very arduous path requiring an austere lifestyle and many years of rigorous practice.

When passion is king and instant gratification is queen, the mind becomes agitated if more than a few minutes are required to satisfy its desires. Fortunately, the samsaric state of mind is its own worst enemy, and sensitive individuals seek a way out. Invariably, the first enlightenment view that presents itself to them is the experiential view. From womb to tomb, life is one long series of experiences, so it is natural to become attached to experience and define ourselves by our experiences. Who would I be without them? The idea that we do not need experience to be happy never occurs to us. Although it is a natural and inevitable experience, death terrifies us as it seemingly spells the end of experience.

³ This and other states are discussed in detail in Chapter 14.

Connie Shaw 10/31/09 9:58 PM

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Experience obviously takes place in time. It is clear that experienced objects change, but what about the experiencer—me? I change too. Can I honestly say that I have not changed since the day I was born? Absolutely everything about me changes: my body, my feelings, my thoughts and ideas. I am never the same from one day to the next. Time is having its way with me and there is nothing I can do about it. If experience did not modify me, what would be the point of experience? And because experience is dualistic it is sometimes positive and sometimes negative. Positive is fine, but negative is not fine, so I am open to suggestions that might free me of the negative and generate the positive. In fact, a significant fraction of my energy goes into calculating which course of action will make me feel good and which will make me feel bad. As I cannot know for sure what the results of my actions will be, I often find myself hopelessly confused and unable to do anything at all.

If somebody says that there is a special kind of experience that feels good and never ends, I am ready to sign up. If I have an experience of uncaused bliss, one that is not dependent on an outside event, I may be even more inclined to accept the idea of experiential enlightenment. Perhaps I reason that I can make the experience permanent, even though every time it happens, it ends. When the great sage Patanjali says that all I have to do to make it permanent is to remove my thoughts, I am ready to become a yogi. How hard can it be?

This is wishful thinking because samsara, the world of experience, is change. There is no special experience in samsara that does not change. The experiencer, me, is in time, and the objects of experience are in time, including all states of mind. How is it possible for two things that are constantly changing to produce a state of mind that does not change?

The experiencer changes because he or she is limited. Even deep sleep changes the experiencer because he or she wakes up rested. The experience of oneness also changes the experiencer because he or she wants to experience it again when the effects wear off. If it had no effect, the desire to regain it would not occur. To experience changelessness, there would have to be an unchanging experiencer outside of samsara that could experience it, assuming there is something beyond samsara. But where there is no change there is no experience, so what is the point of trying to become another experiencer even if it is possible?

If you believe that through a yogic technique or willpower or some other way, the experience of limitless freedom could be made permanent, who would make it permanent? The experiencer could not do it, because he or she does not even know what his or her next state of mind will be. No state of mind is under the conscious control of the experiencer. Even if the experiencer could control its state of mind or the thoughts in it, what happens when he or she loses control? To maintain control, concentration is necessary. What happens to the experience of limitlessness when I get sick and lose my concentration? It seems that my enlightenment is going to disappear along with my health.

Furthermore, the experiencer would have to be limitless to keep the mind permanently under control. But I am definitely limited. If I were limitless I would not be concerned about enlightenment as I would not be limited by suffering. It is precisely because I feel limited that I am interested in freedom. How can an action—concentration, meditation or any other action—by a limited entity produce a limitless result? Freedom is limitless and cannot be the result of any action.

Finally, the idea that I can obtain the experience of enlightenment means that I am not experiencing the self—the light of awareness—now. It so happens that the non-experience of the self is impossible because consciousness is eternal and omnipresent and non-dual. It is everything that is. How can I get what I already have by doing anything? If I am going to get what I already have, I am going to have to lose my ignorance of who I am. This is not to say that meditation, epiphanies, or other spiritual practices are not valuable. We will later argue that epiphanies are very helpful as they give us an idea of what we are seeking. And we will also argue that spiritual practice is essential, not because it produces enlightenment, but because it prepares the mind for enlightenment. Without a prepared, qualified mind, enlightenment will not happen.

The Path of Knowledge

To attain enlightenment I need to know what it is. The experiential view of enlightenment is based on the idea that reality is a duality. I am here, the world is there. I am here, enlightenment is there. But what if reality is not a duality? What if it is actually non-dual consciousness?⁴ Would I try to experience the self through meditation or some other method?

If I have a mystic experience like a non-dual epiphany, it is unlikely that I will think about its meaning as it unfolds. The experience itself will be so strange, welcome and exhilarating that I will just get into it and enjoy. As it happened unexpectedly—perhaps I was just walking to the post office with many mundane things in my mind—the cause is unknown to me. If I take LSD and my mind is blown, the cause is obvious. But non-dual experiences, melting into everything in love for example, come unsolicited. They can only be chalked up to the grace of God. And in the absence of the knowledge of the nature of reality, I have no way to evaluate their overall meaning. Even if they tend to come with regularity, each one is unique, making it difficult to divine the meaning. Experience usually needs to repeat over and over, in the presence of an inquiring mind, before its secrets are revealed. Epiphanies may temporarily motivate me to change, which oddly enough is not desirable, or they may make me think I am quite exceptional, perhaps enlightened, but usually they simply produce a strong craving for more. The attempt to re-experience the self is futile because the experiencer thinks the self is not presently experienced. But ironically it is present when I want it because it exists prior to the experiencer. It is not prior to the experiencer in time, in which case it would not be present. It is prior in terms of understanding. It is present and apparently hidden.

Experience, worldly or spiritual, is only raw information that has no meaning apart from the way it is interpreted. What if the purpose of experience is not experience but knowledge? What if experience is just an envelope containing messages from consciousness about our identity? What if experiences are not telling us what to want or to avoid in samsara? What if they are telling us who we are?

Just as there are scriptures that tout experiential enlightenment, there are scriptures that tout enlightenment as self knowledge. If you find yourself suddenly disinterested when you hear the word *knowledge*, keep reading. Please do not succumb to the strong anti-intellectual bias that pervades the spiritual world. If you think enlightenment is all about heart or a special experience and that knowledge is merely intellectual, keep reading. Knowledge is not opposed to sensations or emotions or any experience. In fact, what you feel is enhanced by understanding. What is about to unfold could very well move you along on your path. If you react unfavorably to the word *knowledge*, substitute the word *understanding*.

Knowledge cannot be dismissed or negated. For example, when scientists want to send a spaceship to Mars, they do not aim it at Mars but send it toward another planet in the opposite direction. You say, “Hey, Mars is over there!” But they do not listen. When it arrives it circles around planet X, picks up momentum and is shot off into the depths of space where there is nothing for a zillion light years. You cannot believe what they are doing because Mars is presently a bit to the left of planet X. You politely mention it but they do not care. A few months later it enters the orbit of planet Y, picks up more momentum and is again shot off in a direction that has nothing to do with the present position of Mars. After a year or two it meets up with Mars right on schedule. You cannot count on personal experience as it is conditional and can be dismissed. If you relied on personal experience you would never get to Mars. The odds of stumbling upon enlightenment are a million to one if you rely solely on your personal experience and the knowledge you extract from it.

Knowledge is object-dependent, not subject-dependent. Two plus two is four, no matter how you personally see it. Objects drop at thirty-two feet per second whether you are a Christian, Muslim or an Australian Aborigine. It has nothing to do with you. It is like sleep; a king sleeping on his silk sheets in the palace has the same experience as a drunk sleeping in his vomit in the gutter. When you realize the

⁴ The Science of Self Inquiry uses the word ‘non-dual’ and not the word ‘one’ because one implies duality and multiplicity.

truth, you realize what everyone else realized. The idea that there is my truth and your truth does not work, because knowledge is object-dependent and there is only one self. Knowledge is valuable because nothing in this world is what it seems to be. The world of time, experience, is a world of appearances. If you take it to be real you will suffer. It does not exist apart from awareness. It seems to be real because you do not know who you are.

Awareness, you, is always here. You are always the same. You are what is real. You are the truth. Without you the world of appearances does not exist. Self knowledge—I am awareness—is always good because the self is always free, and it is most desirable because freedom is our most cherished value. You can count on it because it never changes. You cannot dismiss it, because you, the object of knowledge, are always present and cannot dismiss yourself. If this knowledge “stands under” you, you are free. Hence, the path of understanding.

The scriptures that tout enlightenment as self realization or self knowledge are based on the contention that reality is non-dual, unlike the scriptures that tout experiential enlightenment. Non-dual reality means that there is only one principle operating in reality, not two or more, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding. It means that the subject and the objects are actually non-different, although they seem to be different. Unlike experiential enlightenment, self realization is a hard sell because experience seems to completely refute it. We cannot be faulted for unthinkingly interpreting the information we get from our senses to mean that the subject is different from the objects. We are born into a world where everyone has unwittingly made this assumption. We are conditioned by it every minute of our lives because we accept our senses as our only means of knowledge.

Just as the scriptures on Yoga offer methods for experiencing the self, the scriptures on knowledge use a sophisticated methodology to reveal the self. This method, which will be unfolded throughout this text, is called self inquiry. We inquire because we want to know something. There is no contradiction between these two methods. Experience is not good and knowledge is not bad. Nor is experience bad and knowledge good. If the relationship between them is clearly understood, a great obstacle to enlightenment has been dismissed.

From the point of view of consciousness there is no difference between knowledge and experience. Knowledge is experience and experience is knowledge. What you see you know and what you know you see, because consciousness is all there is. But from the point of view of an individual seeking freedom, experience and knowledge are quite different. This is so because the individual experiences objects through the mind, which makes them seem to be something other than the mind, and the mind, based on past experiences, interprets what it sees as knowledge whether or not the knowledge is actually true to the object.

If we look at the claim of the proponents of the experiential view of enlightenment from the non-dual point of view, the attempt to gain the experience of consciousness, however I formulate it, is unnecessary. Why? Because, if there is only one self and it is everything that is, then everything I experience at any time or place can only be the self including me, the experiencer. In short, I am experiencing awareness because I am awareness. And because awareness is limitless it is always free. And because there is only awareness, I am already free. I do not need an experience to set me free. Therefore, the attempt to get a discrete experience of the self is gratuitous, like going out for a hamburger when you have a filet mignon in the refrigerator.

This may sound like the negative teachings of the instant enlightenment schools—there is nothing to do, no path, no teacher, no scripture, no this, no that, you are already enlightened—that have muddied the spiritual waters since time immemorial. The view from the self does negate everything, but negation is only the preliminary portion of the self inquiry story, as we will see. Neo-Advaita,⁵ the latest iteration of the instant enlightenment idea, makes it the whole story because the teachers, all Westerners, never actually exposed their minds to the teaching tradition of the science of self inquiry⁶ in a disciplined way. They kept a Western orientation and picked the easiest self serving teaching—not this, not this—from a

⁵ Chapter 15 discusses Neo-Advaita in depth.

⁶ The teaching tradition of the Science of Self Inquiry is explained in detail in Chapter 3.

guru who neglected to teach the complete science of consciousness, if he knew it at all, passing it off as the whole loaf. In fact the guru explicitly stated that he did not give the whole teaching as his disciples were not qualified.

In any case, one of the most important functions of the statement that reality is non-dual awareness and that if you exist, which you do, you can only be awareness, is to convince you that you do not have an experience problem as far as enlightenment is concerned. In fact, you cannot actually experience awareness as an object, because you are awareness. The best you can do is to experience its reflection in a pure mind. This can be a help or a hindrance, depending on what you make of it.⁷ What use is it to try to experience awareness, if in fact everything that you experience within yourself and beyond the body is it?

If I am experiencing awareness all the time because it is me, then I have a knowledge problem, not an experience problem. If you do not realize that you have a knowledge problem, then unfortunately you will have to keep groping around in the experiential wilderness until you do realize it. "By knowledge alone is the self realized," says Ramana Maharshi and innumerable texts of the science of self inquiry. When this fact has been properly assimilated, you are qualified for self inquiry.

So what is the knowledge that constitutes enlightenment? It is the hard and fast conviction based on direct observation that I am ever free awareness and not the body-mind. It is the understanding that I am everything that is. It is the rock solid conviction that no matter what happens, good or bad, I am completely OK. This knowledge frees the self from the belief that it is an individual, limited being and destroys its attachment to objects as defined in chapter 1.

The words *hard* and *fast* mean that binding fears and desires have been neutralized by the knowledge and that the pursuit of security, pleasure and virtue is no longer active. If you say you are enlightened but continue to chase and cling to objects in samsara, you are not enlightened. You may know who you are intellectually but you do not actually know who you are.

Enlightenment is the unassailable understanding that because you are eternal, you are completely secure. Wealth cannot make you more secure. It is the bedrock knowledge that the pleasures available in the world of appearances are but dim reflections of the pleasure that you are. It means that you need not strive to be virtuous, because you are goodness itself.

The Value of a Means of Knowledge

If you are in the middle of a non-dual epiphany, the self⁸ does not suddenly appear and say, "Yo! Seeker! Pay attention. What you are experiencing is you, although it seems to be an object. I am telling you this so you will not try to repeat this experience once it ends. If you are wondering what to make of this experience I will tell you now. It means that you are whole and complete actionless awareness, just like me. It means that henceforth you will not desire or fear anything, because nothing can be added to you or taken away from you. If, when this experience wears off, you set out to get it back or do something with it, you have not properly assimilated the meaning of my words. Good luck."

The self will not say this, because it sees you as whole and complete consciousness. The beliefs and opinions you picked up in life will not help interpret your epiphanies either, because you picked them up when you were ignorant of whom you are. You will see them as you want to see them, not as they are. Knowledge is seeing things as they are, not as how they appear to you. So to gain enlightenment you need to shed self ignorance and to do that, you need a proven means of self knowledge. It will help you make sense of what happens to you spiritually and otherwise.

⁷ Chapter 6, Inquiry into Practice, will discuss the value of spiritual practice.

⁸ In Western spiritual literature about the topic of self realization it has been a habit for many years to capitalize the word *self* to distinguish it from the ego, the "lower" self. It is a useful convention on one hand but on the other it encourages us to think in a two self paradigm, which feeds our sense of duality. Because reality is non-dual there is actually only one self. The ego, the individual, is not actually a separate self. It is a "self" created out of ignorance of the nature of consciousness. I have elected to refer to this self as the apparent self, therefore, I have not capitalized the word *self*.

Epiphanies are useful if they are accompanied by self inquiry. Self inquiry does not mean asking “Who am I?,” because the answer is known. If you have a doubt, a glance at scripture will set your mind at rest. You are awareness, not the person you have been led to believe you are. Self inquiry is a systematic body of proven knowledge that looks at experience and knowledge, from the point of view of consciousness and from all the basic samsaric reference points. It does not summarily dismiss experience and knowledge as illusion. It shows you that you are the big picture and if you cannot see yourself that way, it shows you how you fit into the big picture. You need an impartial guide, not your own interpretation of experience, because ignorance can make what is false seem to be real. You are the last person who should be an expert on who you are.

Enlightenment Myths

If you can see that the question of freedom is due to a lack understanding, you will be open to a means of self knowledge. A means of self knowledge does not actually give you self knowledge, because everyone actually does know who they are, as will become apparent as we proceed. Unfortunately, there is usually a lack of clarity about the nature of the self, which impedes the full appreciation of it. This lack of clarity manifests as ill considered beliefs and opinions, particularly the belief that the self is limited. If you expose your mind to a time tested, experienced based means of self knowledge, it will patiently strip away these beliefs and clarity will return. When the last vestige of ignorance is removed, you will realize that you knew who you were all along. You will find it amusing that you went through so much seeking to find out what you already knew.

We are going to accept the contention that reality is non-dual and examine a number of popular enlightenment teachings from the non-dual perspective. If they come up short as means of enlightenment, it does not mean that they have no value. Indeed, there is some truth to all of them and they may be useful in some form as practices that prepare the mind for self knowledge. If you find yourself attached to one or more of these beliefs, it will benefit you to consider them from the non-dual perspective. Ultimately, you will have to determine the nature of reality through your own investigation, but if your inquiry is disinterested, you can only come to one conclusion: “I am ever free awareness.”

No Mind, Blank Mind, Empty Mind, Stopped Mind

The experience of deep sleep and waking state epiphanies, characterized by an arrested mind, are probably responsible for the no-mind theory of enlightenment. In both cases no objects are present, or have been neutralized, so the mind—which is only capable of experiencing objects—is not there to own the experience. When the mind is reconstituted, it has no memory of the experience.

Because reality is non-dual the mind is actually the self, awareness, under the spell of ignorance. On the absolute level awareness knows that it experiences itself when the mind is both present and absent, but when it tries to express this at the mental level, all it can do is represent the experience as an empty or blank mind. This causes a problem because a blank mind is an object, albeit a subtle one. Therefore, to get back the experience of itself, the experience that it never lost, it thinks it needs to get a blank mind to experience what it is!

A simpler explanation for the idea that liberation is the elimination of all thoughts is the fact that that the scriptures that comprise the science of self inquiry describe the self as thought free. But between two thoughts there is a tiny gap, an absence of thought. If the absence of thought for a split second is not enlightenment, the absence of thought for an hour or two will not amount to the liberating knowledge “I am whole and complete actionless awareness.”

The most obvious defect of this theory is the fact that all enlightened beings think. As long as the mind is awake, it thinks. If you cannot accept this, the way around it would be to simply go to sleep as the mind is non-existent in sleep. But this kind of enlightenment is not terribly useful, because you always wake up.

As the self is always enlightened, the idea that “no mind” is enlightenment implies a duality between the awareness and thought. To say that the self is not experienceable when the mind is functioning means that the mind and the self enjoy the same order of reality, like a table and a chair. But

experience shows that this is untrue. Do you cease to exist when you are thinking? Is there thought without awareness? In fact, thoughts come from you but you are much more than a thought. They depend on you but you do not depend on them.

Or, let us put it in a slightly different way. Let us say that you are awake and the mind is stopped. For you to know that it is stopped, you would have to be aware. Now, let us say that the mind is thinking. You would also have to be aware to know that it is thinking. In both cases, with and without thought I, awareness, am present. If I am aware when it is stopped and when it is thinking, I am not hidden by thought nor am I revealed by no thought. Whether they are present or absent, you, the ever-free, ever-present self, can always be directly known.

However, if I define enlightenment as an experience that is different from my waking, dream or deep sleep state experience, it can easily be hidden because it is not always present. Experience is always present because experience is the self even though the self is not experience, but the subsequent or next experience, mystic or otherwise, will always be hidden when the present experience is taking place.

Awareness, the self, is always present. It is self evident. It reveals itself. It is self experiencing. There is nothing you can do about it except know what it is and look for it. If your mind does not want to cooperate with your investigation, you may have to do some work to get control of it and direct it to the self. Nothing hides you from you, except ignorance. Action, removing thoughts, will not remove ignorance because action is not opposed to ignorance. It is ignorance of who I am that causes me to believe that I am hidden from myself and attempt the actions that I believe will stop my mind.

Ignorance exists as beliefs and opinions in the mind. It can only be destroyed by knowledge. Knowledge only takes place in the mind because the mind is the instrument of knowledge. So the mind needs to make an investigation to get rid of its ignorance. Just because awareness is subtler than the mind does not mean that the mind cannot, with the help of scripture, investigate it. In fact, scripture is the result of the disinterested and successful investigations of untold numbers of minds over thousands of years. If you deny the existence of the mind, then how can you even say that enlightenment is no mind? However, using the logic of its own experience, the mind can discover its inherent limitations and no longer support them. When ignorance is no longer supported by beliefs and opinions, it collapses under its own weight.

Thought is not the devil; it can reveal the truth. Self inquiry does not ask you to kill your mind and destroy your thoughts. It gives you the right self thought, and shows you how to use it, assuming you are seeking freedom. The right thought is *I am awareness*. The *I am awareness* thought is as good as awareness because when you think a thought, the mind goes to the object of the thought. The object of the *I am awareness* thought, the "I," is awareness and it has to be present or thought cannot happen. So when you think *I am awareness* it turns the mind away from other thoughts, the mind goes to awareness and awareness is revealed. Try it.

It certainly makes sense to eliminate thoughts that are not in harmony with the nature of reality as such thoughts cause suffering. But it remains to be considered whether all thoughts are a problem. Must I get rid of kind, positive, compassionate, happy thoughts too? The thoughts that cause happiness do not stand in the way of enlightenment because a happy mind is perfectly suited for self inquiry.

The upside of this teaching: a modified version of the no-thought idea is very useful and will be discussed in detail later, but it is not enlightenment.

No Ego, Ego Death

This popular so-called teaching vies with the no-thought teaching for top spot on the list of enlightenment myths. Before considering its value, we will be well served by exploring three definitions of the word *ego*.

The first definition is *that which identifies with any activity*. It is called the doer and its relationship to the self and enlightenment is explained in detail in chapter 7, "Inquiry into Karma."

The second definition is *embodied consciousness*, a conscious being with a body. Animals, insects, microbes and humans are embodied beings. You can even make a case that plants are embodied beings. Embodied beings are sometimes conceived as rays or emanations of formless consciousness, man cast in the image of God, and they seem to be separate from their source, consciousness. They seem to be

separate if they are viewed from the point of view of their bodies, but viewed from the self's point of view, they are non-separate. They do not stand in the way of consciousness because they are consciousness in form, just as waves do not stand in the way of the ocean. Humans are the only egos that think, although certain members of the animal kingdom seem to be evolving the capacity to think.

All embodied beings are the self, but an embodied human being can be enlightened or unenlightened. An enlightened being is one that knows, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, that it is not separate from consciousness, assuming as always that this knowledge has neutralized its binding likes and dislikes. An unenlightened being is someone who takes the appearance of separation to be real and is at the mercy of his or her binding likes and dislikes.

The third definition of ego, the "I" notion, relates exclusively to human beings because they are the only embodied beings that think. Dogs do not know they are dogs. They do not think they are better or worse than other dogs or any other embodied beings. Human beings, on the other hand, entertain all sorts of ideas about who they are. "I am rich, poor, gay, straight, intelligent, stupid, good, bad, Republican, Democrat," etc. The list of identities that humans are capable of concocting is virtually limitless. All these identities are limited and fall under two categories: I am a knower or I am a doer/enjoyer. The doer is someone who identifies with an activity and thinks it is solely responsible for its actions, gross and subtle. The doer is a doer for the sake of the results of its actions—which it wishes to enjoy. When a doer enjoys the result of its actions, it becomes an enjoyer. The knower is the one who identifies with what it experiences and knows.

Aside from the fact that there is no evidence that such an "I" exists, the destruction of the notion that the "I" is limited is a restricted formulation of enlightenment because the absence of a limited identity does not equal enlightenment. If it did, plants and animals, even microbes, would be enlightened. And you would be enlightened in deep sleep because you are not an ego there. For enlightenment you need the hard and fast knowledge of who you are in the waking state. If you conflate ego death with enlightenment, you may very well find yourself a void. The life of a void is not particularly pleasant.

Assuming there is an ego that is standing in the way of enlightenment, the ego death teaching is still unworkable because it asks the ego to kill itself. If the ego is the embodied being, it would only kill itself if it thought that it would derive a benefit—such is the nature of egos—but most egos are smart enough to realize that if they do not exist, no benefits will accrue.

Also if ego is the "I" notion, it cannot kill itself, because it is not conscious. So on both counts, the idea comes up short. This leaves the Hollywood ending: the ego remains, gets the permanent enlightenment experience and enjoys endless experiential bliss.

In actuality, enlightenment is freedom from the "I" notion, not the embodied being. The embodied being is actually limitless consciousness with an incorrect understanding of its nature. For it to free itself from erroneous self notions, it should expose itself to the means of self knowledge and contemplate the teachings dispassionately. The death of the "I" notion happens as a result of self knowledge, not something you do.

What is self knowledge with reference to the ego? It is the knowledge that the embodied being is me but I am not the embodied being. This is tantamount to ego death because it shifts the ego from the center of consciousness to the periphery where it belongs, not that consciousness has a periphery. Self knowledge is the best of both worlds, not that there are two worlds, as it allows you to live freely as embodied consciousness, without suffering the results of actions.

Pride, the final definition of ego, does not relate directly to the question of enlightenment but bears mention nonetheless. Pride is willful ignorance of the fact that everything you take to be yours is actually borrowed from the world. If you are proud of your good looks, you need to realize that you had nothing to do with it. If you have a particularly brilliant mind, it was not created by you. If you are proud because you accomplished something, it was only because the world provided the opportunity. Pride is a problem for seekers because it supports the ego's notion of specialness, uniqueness and duality. Its absence, however, is not enlightenment. Many humble people have no idea who they are.

Nirvana

This idea, explained above, is another negative formulation of enlightenment. *Nir* means *not* or *without* and *vana* means *a flame*. Fire is a common symbol of passion or desire so nirvana, which is meant to be enlightenment, is said to be a desireless state. Desire makes samsara go around and around. Desire includes fear, its kissing cousin. Fear that I won't get X equals desire for X. Desire to keep X equals fear of losing X.

This view is based on the idea that desire is suffering. It may take a while for the ego to completely assimilate this truth but it is obvious: if you want something, it means that you are not happy with what you have. If you are happy not being happy, fine, but normally people are not happy with unhappiness.

The same criticism raised against the no thought mind applies to the desireless mind. Desireless mind is an oxymoron. When, except during sleep, do you not want something? Even at the end of life you want to continue living, if life is still good, or to die if it is not.

On the surface the logic makes sense, but what is the cause of desire? Is it self-caused or is it the result of something else? If it is self-caused, then eliminating desire should eliminate suffering. But what if desire is an effect of self ignorance? Will removing the effect remove the cause? Will ignorance collapse when it is no longer supported by desire? Or will it just keep manufacturing more desires? In mythological literature there are many examples of the difficulty of removing desire, the Hydra for example. Cut off one head and another grows back, sometimes more than one. However, unreasonable it is as a definition of enlightenment, the upside of this idea is discussed in chapter 8.

It remains to be seen whether desire is only suffering. It is possible to entertain a desire and not be agitated by it. In fact, if desire disappeared altogether, the world as we know it would disappear, not that that is necessarily a worst case scenario. It seems desire is the cause of much good and much evil. If I desire to develop a cure for cancer and enjoy my work, is this desire a problem? If I am building a bridge across a river and fear that it may collapse and take extra care to see that it is properly reinforced, is it a bad fear? Desire is just awareness functioning as the creator, sustainer and destroyer of the world. As long as my desires do not cause me to violate the physical and moral laws operating in the creation, why should I remove them? And finally, if I accept the contention that desire is suffering, how will I remove my desires without the desire to remove them? Why should the desire to remove them be less painful than the desires themselves?

You need not get rid of your desires to realize the self. You will have to get rid of the gratuitous desires that prevent you from making a dispassionate inquiry, but without a burning desire to know who you are, you will not have the perseverance necessary to overcome the many obstacles to self realization. When you realize who you are, you know that objects cannot complete you.

The Now

Not to put too fine a point on it, the basic idea of the "now" teachings is: I am enlightened when I am present. Living in the past and the future means I am unenlightened. Aside from the fact that there is no time in our non-dual reality, let us inquire into this idea.

Does the word *now* refer to a period of time, which it certainly seems to, or is now a symbol for something else? If it refers to time, is there such a thing as objective time? If now is a period of time sandwiched between the past and the future, when does the past end and the now begin? When does the now end and the future begin? It is impossible to determine because time is relative to the desires and fears of individuals and to the relative intervals between experiences. If my desires are being met and I am enjoying, time passes quickly. If I am suffering terribly, time passes slowly. If different experiences occur in a rapid sequence, time passes quickly with reference to the observer. If the distance between two experiences is great, time passes slowly.

Are the past, present and future actual divisions in consciousness or only conceptual divisions? If time is objective, then everyone would be able to determine just when the past ends and the now begins. Furthermore, when I am in the now, how long does the now remain the now? Is it one second? Two? One minute? More? Assuming I am in the now and want to remain enlightened, I should have this information

because when it ends, I need to avoid travelling into the future. Perhaps I need to hop up out of the time continuum just before the end of the now and jump back into it just before the past appears, keeping in mind how much time passes until I have to hop out again. Even if I am sitting still in the now I need to worry about the past and the future creeping into it. It doesn't take an advanced degree to understand that in reality the past, present and future are just concepts that help individuals who are caught up in their desires and fears navigate through an apparently changing world.

Let's assume that there is only now. Am I ever out of it? Experience only takes place in the present. How can you experience the past if it is not here? You can experience a memory but the experience of memory does not take you to the past. The memory appears in awareness and is experienced now. The experience takes as long as it takes and means whatever it is interpreted to mean. The same logic applies to the future. Nothing is ever experienced in the future. You may think about something that you imagine will take place at another time but if it happens, it only happens in the present, when it appears in awareness.

Time is not linear. Objects appear in consciousness, last as long as they last with reference to your desires and then disappear back into consciousness. When they appear in that part of awareness called the mind, they seem to change, but in reality it is only the mind that changes.

If this is true, maybe *now* is a code word for the self, awareness. It is the humble opinion of the author that *now* is a misleading and inaccurate term for the self and should be banned from the spiritual debate because it is not helpful to refer to something that is eternal and out of time with a word that conveys a sense of time.

However, if now is a synonym for awareness, you still cannot be in the now because you are the now. Aside from the obvious duality of "in" and "out," to say that you are not in the now means that you are paying attention to a present thought that represents either of these two fictitious time periods and not to the one to whom these thoughts appear. And to say that you are not in the now, means that you take yourself to be something other than the awareness that you are. When I am "out" and want to be "in" effort is required, but awareness cannot be gained by action, so being in the now is not enlightenment or a valid means of enlightenment.

To complete this inquiry we need to ask what the word *in* means. To say that I am in or out of my self means that there are two selves, me and myself or, if you insist, the now. Experience shows that reality is non-dual, so there cannot be two selves. So who exactly is going into and out of the self? By taking reality to be a duality and using inaccurate words, we are simply confusing ourselves.

We need not dismiss this teaching completely because it has value as a practice for someone who thinks he or she is caught up in time, takes his or herself to be a doer, and is trying to gain a certain degree of mastery of the mind.

Experience of Oneness

This idea suffers the problems of other experienced based teachings. The science of self inquiry uses the location of objects inquiry to show that there is no need to experience oneness with yourself or anything else—if you see otherness—because you are already experiencing oneness with yourself and everything.

How so? You are already experiencing oneness with everything because reality is non-dual. You are awareness and the objects are awareness. It is all you. If it seems that there is something other than you, consider this: how far is a wave from the ocean? How far is a gold ring from gold or a clay pot from clay? Every object is just awareness-consciousness in a particular name and form. A name and form cannot be separated from its substrate. How can you separate the pot from the clay?

There is no need, however, to take scripture and the author's contention about the non-dual nature of reality. Investigate on your own. Ask yourself where you experience objects. Do you experience them out there in the world or do you experience them in your mind? I experience them in my mind. How far is the object from your mind? Is it floating off the surface of the mind? No, it is not. Where is it then? It has merged into the mind and the mind has taken the shape of the object. The mind is formless, like water or air, and can take any form, just as gold can become any kind of object, a ring a bracelet or a necklace.

How far are you from your mind? Is your mind floating above the surface of your awareness? Is there a gap between you and your mind? Do you need a bridge to travel over the gap? Catch a flight, perhaps?

I do not. Why? Because my mind is me. It is awareness. If this is true, then what you experience is not only in awareness but it actually *is* awareness. The objects in awareness and the subject awareness are one. If this is true, then why do I need to experience oneness? I am already experiencing oneness with everything.

I want to experience oneness with everything when I am already experiencing oneness because I have identified with the thought of separation, which causes suffering. Instead of trying to remove the want by experiencing a particular situation, I should inquire into the thought of separation. Is it true? Am I really separate from my self? Or do I already have the bliss that the object is meant to deliver?

Transcendental State

The mind is sandwiched between pure awareness and the material world. It is an interface or buffer through which awareness interacts with itself in the form of the gross elements.⁹ It is awareness but awareness in a form called *chitta*. The chitta makes it possible for awareness to think, will, feel and remember. The mind is capable of a wide range of states, from the gross feelings associated with the physical body up to the most mystical and sublime samadhis of Yoga. All states are in the mind and all change because they are in the dream of duality.

The self is non-dual and therefore it is out of time. It does not, nor can it, change. It is that because of which the mind's many states are known. It is conscious but states of mind are not conscious. They are subtle material energies capable of reflecting consciousness but they are incapable of thought or action. The higher you go in the mind, the more ethereal and luminous the states become because they are further removed from the gross level. When you get to the interface between the self and the mind, the mind stuff is so refined and the self so close, that radiant light and intense bliss is experienced. It is very easy to mistake these higher states of mind for the self and think enlightenment is an amazing heavenly state or a state of endless experiential bliss. Experience belongs neither to the self nor to the mind. It occurs when awareness shines on the mind. Awareness and mind is the most fundamental duality.

It may seem like splitting hairs to distinguish these pure states of mind from the self but if you are chasing freedom, you can easily get sidetracked in the blissful mystic states because you become attached to them. Attachment to bliss is a problem because the mind, the instrument of experience, changes. Just when you are settling in for a nice long blissful experience, it morphs into another state. Nothing can be done about it because the states are governed by factors beyond human control.

So, enlightenment is not a transcendental state, a higher state, an altered state, the fourth state beyond waking, dream and deep sleep or any other kind of state. It is simple, unchanging awareness and cannot be directly experienced as an object as it is subtler than the mind, the instrument of experience. A subtle object can illumine a gross object but a gross object cannot illumine a subtle object, a fact that seems lost on the proponents of the experiential view. However, the self can be experienced indirectly as a reflection in a pure mind. It is possible to gain knowledge of the self through indirect experience with inquiry. This topic is discussed in detail in chapter 7.

Enlightenment as Eternal Bliss

When someone accustomed to identifying with the ever changing content of the mind wakes up to non-duality, the awakening is interpreted as a very positive event. When the mind reasserts itself, agitation and dullness reappear; when agitation and dullness are no longer acceptable, the mind becomes a seeker. The feeling of peace and bliss, which is an interpretation of non-duality by the mind, is brought on by the absence of suffering and not because awareness feels good. If you have been suffering a toothache for days and the tooth is extracted, it is the absence of pain that feels good, not the bliss of the extraction. You have actually just gone back to normal, not attained an exceptional state.

⁹ How the body and the mind evolve from non-dual awareness is explained in Chapter 6.

Enlightenment does not feel like anything. It is simply the hard and fast knowledge that I am limitless, partless awareness. When this knowledge is firm, it has a very positive effect on the mind but it does not convert the mind into an endless bliss machine. However, it infuses the mind with a sense of authenticity, wholeness and rock solid confidence. Henceforth the individual knows that it can weather any existential storm. When you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you are awareness, you no longer desire to feel good because you know you are the source of goodness. This is not to say that a more or less constant feel good happiness is not possible. It can be attained by the consistent application of self knowledge to the mind or by the practice of the yogas discussed in subsequent chapters.

When enlightenment or self realization is touted as the experience of limitless bliss, it is usually believed that the bliss of the self is superior to the transitory bliss encountered in daily life. But all experiences of bliss, whether they are born of sensory experience, the discovery of some unknown object or spiritual practice like meditation, are the fullness and limitlessness of the self reflecting in the body-mind. The bliss belongs neither to the self nor to the body-mind. It belongs to the relationship between them.

Levels of Enlightenment

If the problem of happiness is ignorance of my nature, and enlightenment is the hard and fast understanding that I am limitless, whole and complete, actionless, ever-free awareness, to say that there are stages of enlightenment is like saying that a woman can be a little bit pregnant. Everything is the light and the light falls equally on everything, so there is no standard for comparison.

Duality provides a basis for judgment, evaluation and comparison. When you are in duality you do not know who you are, so you are forced to evaluate yourself with reference to objects. You can compare yourself to an idea of what you want to be, to what you were yesterday, to other people or to absolutely anything. Seekers, worldly people dressed in spiritual clothing, evaluate themselves with reference to their idea of enlightenment as they perceive it to be embodied in themselves or in others.

An enlightened being is just the self functioning through a mind whose self ignorance has been removed. But the removal of self ignorance does not automatically remove the tendencies in the mind, although it eventually renders them non-binding, since they bind only because of self ignorance. Because all the mind's tendencies are equal from the self's point of view, it has no preference concerning the type of tendency it illumines. Therefore, it expresses through the existing tendencies. If you view clear water through a colored glass, it appears to be colored. If you view the self through the mind, it appears to be a person with various tendencies. If the individual has been blessed with a very pure mind from birth, has had many epiphanies, is particularly single pointed in his or her pursuits or lives an austere and disciplined life, he or she will have radiance or charisma.

Radiance is awareness reflected on a pure mind. It so happens that many enlightened people do not have radiance, although many do. It is also a fact that many unenlightened people have radiance and many do not. Additionally, the quality of radiance is in time and is conditioned by two other qualities that render the mind less than radiant.¹⁰ Therefore, because an individual is radiant, brilliant, powerful or compassionate, does not mean that he or she is enlightened. So while it is natural to associate radiance with enlightenment and try to correlate relative degrees of enlightenment with relative degrees of radiance, it is not a sign of enlightenment. Enlightenment is just the hard and fast experience-based knowledge "I am awareness." Knowledge does not show and is therefore impossible to evaluate directly.

Endarkenment

To say that there are no levels of enlightenment is not to say that in samsara there are no stages of enlightenment. The first stage might well be called endarkenment. We come into this life experiencing limitlessness and oneness with everything but, because the intellect has yet to develop, we do not understand the nature of what we experience. When the intellect does develop it is trained to think of the self as a limited, incomplete, inadequate creature and encouraged to solve the problem of inadequacy by

¹⁰ The topic of radiance and how to attain it is discussed in Chapter 10.

picking up experience in life. At a certain point, the individual comes to realize that no matter how much experience he or she can garner, the experienced objects and activities do not solve the happiness issue. This is usually an unpleasant realization and often results in profound disillusionment. It is frequently referred to as the dark night of the soul in religious literature or hitting bottom in popular culture.

Most react to this existential crisis by sinking into distracting habits, ingesting mind numbing substances or pursuing frivolous entertainments. But for unknown reasons, a few are blessed with a variety of peculiar and invariably confusing religious or spiritual experiences that lead them to the idea of God or the pursuit of the inner light or a higher state. At some point during this period the person becomes convinced that he or she can find happiness within or in a relationship with God.

Self Realization/Self Inquiry

The second stage could be termed the seeking or questing phase, which heads off in two apparently different directions. The religious path leads to the development of a personal relationship with God, who is usually conceived as a pure and perfect someone other than one's self. The idea of the self as inadequate, incomplete and separate is retained and the self is thought to be corrupted by sin. Salvation is meant to lie in invoking the grace of God through prayer and the study of scripture as well as working hard here on earth for a place in an afterlife far from this vale of tears. The religious life offers a positive, if somewhat intellectually challenged, alternative to the belief in the world as a source of meaning.

The other branch of the road leads in a less doctrinaire and belief-laden direction to the experience of the inner world and an investigation of the self. In its worldly form, it may incline one to the study of psychology but it can as well lead to various epiphanies that give rise to the conviction that the truth dwells within, as the higher or inner self or as a transcendental state of consciousness. The changes that take place in an individual's world view during this phase are often referred to as awakening.

Although the experience of the inner self is invariably uplifting and intensifies the quest, it is always confusing because the knowledge gained from these experiences challenges the view of oneself as a needy, incomplete, inadequate isolated creature. Many of these experiences can accurately be described as the experience of oneness with all things, limitlessness, and transcendent bliss.

During this stage, which might also be called the meditation stage, the mind, formerly riveted on happenings in the outer world, turns inward and fixes itself on the self, the light within, and at some point, usually after intense investigation, realizes the self. This realization is invariably formulated in experiential terms and is thought by many to be the end of the search, the ultimate state. But the science of self inquiry says that while this is a welcome and enjoyable state, it is not the end, because there is still a sense of separation between the experiencer and the object of experience, the self. When there is separation there is doubt, and the doubt is always that this state, like all states, will end, plunging the experiencer back into darkness. This fear is invariably fulfilled as the experience is not the direct experience of the self, which is impossible for reasons already discussed, but a reflection of the self in a still mind. No blame. However, the mind is subject to change, so the experience inevitably ends.

This doubt is due to the failure of the experiencer to understand that what is experienced is just his or her own self, in which case it could never be lost, because when do you not exist? The failure to convert the experience to knowledge is usually caused by the twin beliefs that knowledge is merely intellectual and that there is such a thing as a permanent experience. Experience is permanent in samsara but discrete experiences are not. So when the experience happens, the intellect is submerged in the bliss, peace and radiance, switches off, as it does in most intense sensuous experiences, and stops inquiring.

To enter the final stage, which is not a stage, inquiry must continue during the experience of the self. In ordinary perception, a thought wave arises in the mind corresponding to the nature of the perceived object. You see a tree and you know it is a tree because the self, awareness, illumines the tree thought as it arises in the intellect. Similarly, when the ego experiences the reflection of the self in a pure mind, a thought corresponding to the nature of the self, an unbroken "I" thought, arises, and this thought needs to be owned. When it is taken as one's own, the "I" thought, backed by experience, destroys the notion in the mind that it is limited, incomplete and separate.

Enlightenment

At this point, due to inquiry, everything stops and there is a subtle shift. The ego and the self switch places. The self, which heretofore had mistakenly been seen as the object of inquiry, “becomes” the subject, and the ego, which had mistakenly been taken to be the subject, “becomes” the object. This knowledge/experience never changes, because it was obtained through the realization that although what I experience is me, I am always free of what I experience. In other words, I “become” the self. Unlike a discrete experience of the self, self knowledge can never be lost, because it is not separate from me, awareness, the basis of everything. In fact, there is no actual transformation of the ego into the self because the ego cannot be transformed in so far as it is only a belief that the self is limited. The becoming is in terms of understanding and the understanding transforms your understanding of the relationship between the subject and the objects. It confirms the actual truth of experience by destroying the false belief that the self is an object. You see that there are no objects, that there is only the self.

But we said that reality is non-dual. If it is non-dual and enlightenment is non-dual wisdom, how do we account for the subject-object distinction when one is enlightened? We said that the object becomes the subject and the subject becomes the object and this never changes. There should be no subject and no objects.

When you view water on the surface of the desert you know that it is not water. It is experienced as water but you will not try to drink it because you know it is apparent water. When you realize who you are, subject and object remain but they are known to be apparently real. It is only when you take the subject-object distinction to be real that you pursue happiness in samsara and suffer accordingly.

Seven Stages of Enlightenment

Within this general outline seven stages can be delineated: ignorance, obscuration, superimposition, indirect knowledge, direct knowledge, the cessation of grief and the rise of perfect satisfaction.

Ignorance of the self causes obscuration and superimposition. Obscuration is the self identified with the belief that there is no self and revealed by the fact that the individual pursues happiness solely in the world of objects, even though the self itself is the actual source of happiness. It is followed by identification with the body-mind, which results in the belief that the self is a doer and enjoyer that experiences pleasure and pain. This is called superimposition. At some point, it momentarily experiences itself or hears of the self from scripture or an enlightened teacher. This is the stage of indirect knowledge. It says “the self exists,” not knowing that it is talking about itself. Then by means of discrimination born of inquiry, it realizes “I am the self.” This is direct knowledge. Direct knowledge cancels the doer/enjoyer idea, and reveals the self and suffering stops. It appears as the realization in the intellect that the self is self evident. Finally, the self realizes that it has accomplished everything that needs to be accomplished and experiences lasting objectless satisfaction.

Enlightenment Is a Special Status

Humans are fascinated by status and spiritual types are no exception. The belief that enlightenment is a special status accounts for the fawning, sycophantic, self abnegating behavior toward the enlightened that is common in the spiritual world. Enlightenment is not a special status. It is the default, the nature of the self. You are not getting something you do not have; you simply realize that what you sought so frantically you had all along. Enlightenment should be cause for embarrassment, not jubilation. When an obscenely obese person goes back to normal, he or she is lauded as a courageous super being, someone who has overcome long odds in the brutal game of survival. Would not it be equally realistic to condemn the person for allowing his or her self to get into such a miserable condition in the first place?

Enlightenment as Energy¹¹

A major misconception brought on by the fascination with and craving for experience is the belief that enlightened beings have a special kind of energy and that energy is a sign of enlightenment. But experience confirms and scripture states that the self is free of energy, so if I am the self I have no energy. Then how does it appear as if enlightenment is energy?

Energy does not happen until the self illumines a given mind. The mind is just the subconscious tendencies of a given individual entity. The subconscious tendencies are subtle matter. Matter is inert. But when it is illumined by the self it becomes dynamic, just as a seed will remain dormant until it gets water and sunlight. The subconscious tendencies are conditioned by three types of energy: sattva, rajas, and tamas.

Tamasic energy is heavy, dull and sleepy. Rajasic energy is passionate, dynamic, outgoing and unsettling. And sattva is the state when the mind is luminous, clear, still and aware. When the self illumines tamasic tendencies, the person appears to be ignorant and sleepy and lacks motivation. When the self illumines rajasic tendencies, the person is exceptionally dynamic, powerful and highly motivated. When the self illumines sattva, the person is clear, bright, knowledgeable and loving. The state of one's energy, therefore, is a consequence of the nature of the tendencies of the mind, not self knowledge. Because it is impossible to rid oneself of these three energies completely, even the greatest sage will occasionally manifest dull or passionate energy.

Sometimes an individual can transmit powerful energy into receptive minds and awaken them to the self. Conventional wisdom has it that such people are enlightened. They may be if the knowledge "I am limitless awareness" is firm and the mind is particularly pure, but there is another way to account for this phenomenon that has nothing to do with enlightenment.

There is an ancient yogic practice that accumulates energy. It is based on the fact that energy flows from the subtlest layer of reality, the unconscious mind, into the conscious mind and out through the senses into the world at large. If the energy is not allowed to flow into activities that dissipate it, it will accumulate in the mind. The practice involves considerable will power because the subconscious tendencies are dynamic and need to express themselves, so when they are restrained, they transform into heat. The purpose of this practice is to eradicate subconscious tendencies to prepare the mind for enlightenment. When enough heat accumulates it produces a kind of radiant light. This kind of energy is like water behind a dam. It appears still and luminous but it has a tremendous potential. So when it is transmitted, it produces an epiphany. If the yogi is unclear about his or her goal, he or she may be tempted to capitalize on this power and tout it as enlightenment, but extraordinary energy is not a sign of enlightenment. If the person has purified the mind before enlightenment, he or she will have strong energy. If not, not.

Fulfillment of All Desires

Many who are unsuccessful in life take to the spiritual path believing that enlightenment will make it possible for them to fulfill their unfulfilled desires. If this is your motivation, you need to know that enlightenment is not the fulfillment of all your desires. If this is not acceptable, remain in samsara and keep trying to get what you want.

The understanding that enlightenment is not an experience and that experience does not necessarily lead to enlightenment is not meant to take the wind out of the sails of your seeking. If it did, it would be unfortunate. There is no actual contradiction between experience and the path of understanding. Unexamined experience only leads to perpetual rounds in samsara, but experience backed by inquiry can lead out of samsara, assuming the inquiry is guided by proven knowledge. Self inquiry is a proven means of self knowledge, the distilled essence of the experience of countless enlightened beings.

¹¹ We touched on this topic above in the discussion on levels of enlightenment. A technical explanation of the three energies is discussed in Chapters 10 and 11.

Finally, although enlightenment is not experiential, it has tremendous implications in terms of experience. It is true that what you experience after you have realized that you are awareness is not different from what you experienced before, because karma does not care if you are enlightened. It continues as always. But since the essence of experience is interpretation, self realization represents an experiential sea change because non-duality, not likes and dislikes, is now the basis for interpreting what happens. Interpreting experience from the self makes it possible to assimilate and appreciate any and all experiences. It does not hinder the appreciation of pleasant experiences and makes it possible to appreciate unpleasant experiences.

