

## Take Enlightenment off the “To-Do” List

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I was fourteen, bored, and fasting for the first time in my short life. I hadn't eaten for 24 hours, a long enough time for a skinny teenager to be in an “altered state.” I turned off the lights and looked out the window of my suburban house at the night sky. For a just a moment, a long and magical moment, I let it all in, the infinite vastness of the universe. I fully felt the reality that each star was a sun, and each sun had its own planets and moons all spinning within a solar system, within a galaxy, with other galaxies, on and on until my mind just gave up trying to grasp the vastness of it all. So this is the mystery and the wonder that all the great religions talk about, I thought.

That was when it all started...a longing that led me on a lifelong search, from one spiritual path to another. I vaguely thought it was enlightenment that I was looking for but I didn't have a clue what that meant, much less how to “get” there. In high school, I did a thorough, comparative study of all the major religions. The answer certainly wasn't there. I read the book “Be Here Now” in my first year of college and decided that maybe the eastern traditions had the key. So I started studying Yogananda's teachings and I started meditating, regularly attending week-long Vipassna retreats. That approach seemed too detached so I turned to the Native American traditions, building a medicine wheel on my land, going on a 10-day vision quest. I read lots of spiritual and metaphysical books, attended all kinds of workshops, always looking, hoping to attain some peace of mind, some feeling of wholeness and completion. Maybe even a glimpse of God.

At some point in mid-life I put the search on the backburner and focused on more attainable goals, like building a house and a good career. But the longing continued to simmer. Until the death of my husband rekindled my search. It was not longer after my encounter with mortality that I stumbled upon the *direct path of awakening*. At the heart of this approach is the profound and simple truth: you are that which you seek. That takes the wind right out of your sails if you're a lifelong seeker.

When I discovered the *direct path*, I also discovered that each teacher I met had a completely different story about their own experience of awakening. This intrigued me—so much so, that I began a project of interviewing spiritual teachers about the nature of enlightenment. Because I was also interested in how this transcendent perspective is lived on a practical, everyday basis, I focused on women who seem to naturally lean towards the embodiment of spiritual wisdom. Though from different traditions, the women I spoke with all shared the same awake presence. Nothing blocked their full expression of love and wisdom, their essential being. They emphasized our sameness, that there was no separation between us, awakened or not, teacher or student (teacher is a term they preferred to avoid because of the hierarchy it sets up).

I knew on an intellectual level that the fascination with enlightenment was a distraction but I had a hard time letting go of the idea that enlightenment was something to possess, a goal to obtain, a kind of reward for our efforts. So it helped my own process to understand that there is “no one way”. Awakening can be a big bang kind of moment—the most seductive of all stories—but it can just as often be a gradual unfoldment over time. Sometimes a person isn’t even interested in spiritual matters; others have been on a life-long search. The fact that there is no one way is frustrating for the mind. The mind is most comfortable when there is a formula, a how-to program to follow. This frustration leads to stopping the mind, which, I believe, is a prerequisite to awakening. The mind’s job is to categorize and separate—an important job but not particularly helpful when it comes to waking up out of the separate self.

An example of the “big bang” kind of story is Dorothy Hunt’s moment of recognition. She was asked to teach by Adyashanti (a longtime student of Zen who now is one of the more articulate teachers of the *direct path*). After three years of the inquiry “Who am I?”, Dorothy was looking up in a circle of trees when “there was an overwhelming sense of recognition of who I am and who I had always been. There was no doubt whatsoever that I was what I was looking for, and I was everything else as well—the trees, the earth, the sky, all of life, nature in its fullness—which isn’t all good and bliss. It is everything, dark and light, every set of opposites. It was one of those experiences filled with tears and laughter and dancing and laying on the ground for such gratitude for the moment, feeling like if I died the next day, I would die complete. What it clearly, clearly showed is there was no separate one to enlighten. There was no one to awaken.”

Though sometimes a blissful experience, it’s not uncommon for awakening to be a response to utter despair. This is Annette Knopp’s story, a young German woman who left behind her career, her partner, and her friends in hopes of finally understanding the essence of life. “I had this sense that if I would stretch myself enough, know all the extremes within and without, I would find the common denominator, the answer to the riddle of life.” But after three years of extensive travel and seeking, she came to a point where she felt like she had lost her mind. “I’ve done this and that, and it seems like dresses I wear and then leave behind. This is Annette scene one, scene two, and it’s all changing. If this is all changing, who am I? I couldn’t find the “I” that was me.”

Feeling like all her efforts were a failure, she was ready to commit suicide. “It wasn’t out of a feeling that my life was all terrible, but I was really tired.” At 2 a.m., she was on her way to a 24-hour store to buy some razors. She thought about calling a friend with her cell phone but she knew they wouldn’t have the answer. She thought, “If there’s anything that could help me, it must be *That* I have always trusted. So if *That* wouldn’t want me to die, it would stop me.” Just as she reached the store, the phone rang. The fact that a friend called at that moment in the middle of the night helped her stop trying to control life, to reach

outside of herself for something. “If *That* made this happen, then *That* shall take care of me now.”

A few weeks later through a series of “coincidences”, Annette ended up in Byron Bay, Australia. There she wandered into a satsang gathering (a Sanskrit word for meeting in truth). The teacher (Isaac Shapiro) gave her the microphone. She felt embarrassed, but said, “I have this very simple yet complex question, ‘what is all this pain about?’” He responded, “Well, if you have a lot of pain and you have a nightmare, then you want to wake up. My experience is that when people come and they have pain or suffering, it all has to do with who they think they are. So I want you to just be open and forget everything you have ever read or heard that you’re a soul, that you’re this body, that you’re anything. Just for a moment, allow yourself to directly experience...who are you?”

The whole world stopped in that moment. “It was just complete stillness. Then suddenly the first sound I heard was the ocean crashing against the beach and I knew immediately that I am this ocean out there! ‘I am the ocean.’ I looked at the room which was me as well. ‘I am the people, I am the chairs, I am the microphone, I am this body.’” When Annette was again asked by the teacher, “Who are you?”, she responded, “I am everything and nothing.” He started to laugh and said, “Yes! That’s it. That’s it. Wow. That didn’t take very long.” Annette explained that “what happened in that moment was the knowing I am outside of manifestation, prior to the universe and galaxies, never born. Yet I was at the center of everything in creation. This is what I had always been looking for. I was at home. I had never left.”

Annette emphasized that she doesn’t tell this story very often because “when people hear certain stories, there is the fascination with the different experiences of someone else, a belief that it should be this or that way. The person is made special. But it’s not about the person or one particular way. The most important thing is to ask, ‘Where do these experiences arise from? What is present already prior to all experiences and is unchanging?’”

In contrast to a single moment of tremendous power and insight, are the stories of a gradual series of openings. Marlies Cocheret de la Moriniere (also a student of Adyashanti’s) couldn’t remember any one particular moment in time that this shift occurred. She was having breakfast one morning with one of her girlfriends who made a comment that something had changed in her. Marlies acknowledged that that was true. “I’m happy for you,” said her friend. “I’m happy for me, too,” laughed Marlies. “I feel I just slipped in. I don’t have spiritual experiences, no big highs, no blissed-out feelings. My experience has been mostly silence. That’s my experience of awakening. Feel silence, see silence, be silence, eternal silence. For me, it was going to the different teachers, doing a lot of therapy, and this sense of being emptied out. It was one step at a time.”

Catherine Ingram also cautions against making the awakening event into something dramatic. A teacher in the lineage of Ramana Maharshi, she was with Papaji when she had what she calls a sense of freedom. “People think freedom is going to be some esoteric, unusual thing that descends on you in some magical way when, in fact, it is only the letting go of the apparent bondage. The word awakening is often used in a synonymous way with this feeling of freedom that can occur in a moment in time. The irony is when it does occur, you realize there was really nothing blocking it in the first place. Papaji used to say you will laugh when you see this because you’ll realize there were no chains on you all this time. It was all imagination...There’s no attainment. None at all.”

Though the teachers I spoke with did not make a big deal out of their stories of awakening, I continued to struggle, still longing for that same experience. I confessed that I was getting stuck when I interviewed Neelam (whose teacher was also Papaji in the lineage of Ramana Maharshi). Her response was clear: “You don’t need to wake up, you don’t need to be enlightened, you don’t need to be anything because you already *are*. If you are still chasing something, if you are still wanting awakening, that means you’re suffering. That means something is not OK just the way it is, and just the way it is—is perfect. Nothing has to be different. Not before, not after, not ever. The moment you can be here, nothing else is necessary...because you instantly transcend everything.”

Neelam’s words of wisdom reminded me that much of my desire for that transcendent experience is about getting away from some present, painful condition in the here-and-now (called life!). The paradox is that when we accept what is, we actually transcend what is.

Awakening is really just the beginning, not an end in and of itself. Dorothy Hunt calls the moment of realization the beginning of the “embodiment process.” After awakening, there is a movement back into life, into the manifested world. Dorothy explains that “the way this embodiment process works is we’re invited to actually just *be* this presence, this love, this acceptance that liberates everything, but not because we’re trying to fix something. When we’re present to life as it is in ourselves, our bodies, our minds, our emotions, our partners, our children—when we’re actually able to simply be here with what’s here, transformation begins to happen.”

Whether we’re awake or not, the task is exactly the same: to embrace what life presents us. That’s essentially Adyashanti’s definition of enlightenment. And it seems to be the mantra of many teachers now, as diverse as Pema Chodron, Byron Katie, and Eckhart Tolle. Chogyam Trungpa also warns that the fascination with enlightenment and nirvana has the potential to become a dangerous distraction from our present condition. Hopelessness is required. The very act of seeking keeps you from finding. Sharon Landrith (asked by Adyashanti to teach) talks about this paradox. “You realize that to own it, to feel special about it or to grasp it, that’s the very split that’s going to obscure it. So the

way is to totally surrender and then Source does it's thing. There's this deep knowing that it's in the very absence that presence appears."

Though it may sound like giving up, it's quite the opposite. Through this genuine hopelessness or surrender comes a realization that nothing external will save you. From that knowing comes a natural turning-within. And then a dedication, a commitment to your own love, your own wisdom, the truth of who you are. The rest is grace.

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