

# What Is Enlightenment?

By Dr.Nitin Trasi, MD,

(Presentation based on the book "The Science of Enlightenment" at **The International Conference of Knowledge and East-West Transitions**, 11 to 14<sup>th</sup> Dec 2000, The National Institute of Advanced Studies The Indian Institute of Science Campus, Bangalore 560012).

## ABSTRACT

Enlightenment is a condition completely unknown to modern science. It covers the psychology of the supra-normal or trans-personal, a realm which has been completely overlooked by modern psychology. The Eastern religions define Enlightenment as the loss of 'ego' or the loss of the delusion of the 'me.' The average person believes in and identifies with a separate ego or 'me' residing in the body. This belief gives rise to me-based conditioning, which is the root cause of me-based or psychological suffering, which is avoidable. When a person sees through this me-delusion, he is said to be Enlightened. Enlightenment initiates a process of reversal of the me-based conditioning, and this process of deconditioning is the process of Liberation. The end-point, Final Liberation, is a state completely free of me-based suffering, a state of absolute, causeless compassion.

The year is 1928. The place, a village in the South of India, not very far from here. English author and Orientalist Paul Brunton is visiting the hermitage of Ramana Maharshi, an enlightened sage. This is his description of that first encounter from his book "A Search in Secret India."

There is something in this man which holds my attention as steel filings are held by a magnet. I cannot turn my gaze away from him. [-] a steady river of quietness seems to be flowing near me, ... a great peace is penetrating the inner reaches of my being [-]  
"Does this man ... emanate the perfume of spiritual peace as the flower emanates fragrance from its petals?"

What manner of individual can cause such a profound psychological effect upon another, by his mere presence and proximity? Who is a sage, and what exactly is this condition called Enlightenment? Is it not exceedingly strange that nearly three quarters of a century after this event, despite our many and incredible scientific advances, we are still asking ourselves this very basic question – what is Enlightenment?

## Introduction

Enlightenment is a condition well known to the religions of the East, but it is completely unknown to modern science. This may be because modern science and technology draw inspiration predominantly from the West. And yet, the ancient religions of the East are a treasure house of spiritual thought, seeking the deepest meaning of life. These spiritual ideas really form an in depth basic research in human psychology. There is no doubt that such ideas can enrich modern science. Famous trans-personal psychologist Ken Wilber has pointed out, that whereas modern psychology deals primarily with the normal and abnormal, the Eastern psychology of spirituality covers the large and important blind spot in modern psychology, which is – the further psychological evolution of man beyond the normal, to the supra-normal or the trans-personal.

## Enlightenment and Liberation

(Enlightenment: Awakening, realisation, self-realisation, *jnana*, *satori*. Liberation: *moksha*, *mukti*, *nirvana*)

The basic core of the Eastern spiritual traditions is really the idea of **spiritual knowledge**, **spiritual truth**, and the related conditions of **Enlightenment** and **Liberation**. The West is not a complete stranger to Enlightenment. Christianity has the concepts of Salvation and the Kingdom of Heaven.

And there has been no dearth of mystics in the West, St. Augustine and Meister Eckhart to name just two. But it is the Eastern religions that explicitly talk about Enlightenment and Liberation, and insist that these two conditions are the most supreme goal of human life. These traditions also make the fascinating claim that Liberation leads to the end of human suffering. Very few scientists have subjected these ideas to scientific scrutiny, and with a few notable exceptions, there has not been much speculation about what exactly Enlightenment and Liberation mean in modern psychological terms.

A large part of the world has probably not even heard of the term Enlightenment. Most people who have heard of it, think of it as some magical, mysterious state with supernatural powers. It is confused with states of transcendental meditation and states of trance. This is not very strange. Even in the Eastern religious world, where everyone is agreed that Enlightenment is the ultimate spiritual goal, there is much confusion about what it really is, and how one is to go about realising it. The religious literature on this subject contains many conflicting statements and apparent contradictions. To relate this condition to modern science and psychology therefore, we must do two things. One, we must first state very clearly what exactly we mean by Enlightenment, and say how it could lead to the end of suffering. Secondly, we must say this in the language of modern psychology.

### **Enlightenment – the loss of the illusion of the `me`**

How does our spiritual tradition define Enlightenment? Very simply, Enlightenment is defined as the loss of *ahamkaar*. *Ahamkaar* is loosely translated as `ego.` This has caused immense confusion! How can one live without the ego? How can normal life go on? Is such an ego-less state at all possible, and is it desirable? Is it not a psychologically abnormal state? Therefore it is important to point out at the outset that the ego in philosophy is not exactly the ego of psychology. It corresponds rather more closely to the self-image in psychology. It can be described more accurately as the mental image which a person has of himself, and with which the person identifies himself – a self-image so crystallized in thought and belief that it is mistakenly considered to be an independent self-entity, a `me,' residing in the body, a homunculus (the little man inside), a definite individual `self' which passes through the different stages of life. Religious people further believe that this `me' will survive after the death of the body and refer to it as the individual soul. But even if the person does not believe in the soul or afterlife, there is the conscious or unconscious belief in (and identification with) a me which exists **during** life, and which passes through the different stages of life – from birth to youth to old age to death. There is the belief in the continuity of a me which is seen as going through time in a linear fashion. At the risk of oversimplification, we could say that this me is a sophisticated version of the little child's belief in the man inside the radio set. (Slide 5) Therefore the ego of philosophy is the same as the so called individual self, `soul' – or the `me'.

### **The birth of the me**

Let us now see how this ego develops. It is in the nature of living things that when a sentient organism evolves, and develops in consciousness to the point of self-awareness, it reaches a dramatic evolutionary milestone. It acquires a self-image! With language, this self-image is refined and re-defined to great precision. It crystallizes into a detailed verbalised image of the `self' or the `me.' In the individual case, the average person is not born with this image, but acquires it as he grows up. As the self-awareness becomes more refined with the learning of language, the image of the me becomes stronger, clearer and more elaborate. Family and society contribute to the building up of this image of the me. By the time the child is an adult, this me-image is fully formed.

As the me-image develops, it appears more and more real. It soon becomes the centre and the focus of all thought. Everything, every event in life, is viewed from the restricted, limited, subjective viewpoint of the me. The rest of the world is now seen as the `other,' in competition with the me, and generally in opposition to it. Life now becomes a zero-sum game. "You win" becomes equivalent to "I lose." Even if the person does not believe in the soul or afterlife, there is the conscious or unconscious belief in (and identification with) a me which exists **during** life, and which passes through the different stages of life. There is the belief in the continuity of a me which is seen as going through time in a linear fashion, from birth to youth to old age to death – and this `me' is seen to exist in opposition to the `other' which is the rest of the world.

All this builds up a deep conditioning in the individual, which I call me-based conditioning. Me-based conditioning constructs strict, narrow, stringent criteria – in short, difficult conditions for happiness – it builds up a picture of the ‘what should be.’ And the slightest deviation of actual events (the ‘what is’) from this desired picture can then cause immense misery, which may be completely out of proportion to the actual importance of the events. This is most typically seen in the sensitive adolescent, in whom the me-image is almost fully formed, but in whom the adult maturity is lacking. Such conditioning is therefore extremely demanding and allows a person to be happy only when it is satisfied. If not, there is me-based suffering or psychological suffering, distinct from physical suffering. Such suffering is unique to the human race. So we see how the unconscious belief in the me or the self is the cause of much of human misery – quite literally self-created misery! Further, we can also see that if the me does not really exist as a separate real entity, then the me-based conditioning and in turn me-based suffering which it causes, is entirely unnecessary and avoidable. And this was precisely the key point stressed upon by the Buddha.

Beyond this point, most human beings do continue to evolve further in psychological maturity, but to varying degrees. When an occasional such person reaches a point where he (or she) can actually, intuitively see the me for what it really is, as just an appearance, then *this realisation is Enlightenment*. Enlightenment is thus the irrevocable loss of the delusion of the me. And spiritual knowledge (*atma-jnana*) is the term used to indicate this insight into the true nature of the me.

### **The me is not an illusion (Believing the me to be real is the illusion)**

To be precise, Enlightenment is the loss of the **delusion** of the me, not the me itself. Let us be clear about this. The me is an appearance – like the circle produced by a whirling torch. *It is not a total illusion* (like a hallucination) because the appearance does exist. But it is a relative reality – transient and ever-changing. The delusion consists in believing it to be more real than it is –believing it to be an entity by itself, a homunculus, or even a ‘soul’ inhabiting the body – and **identifying** with it.

The truth is, that like a corporation or a nation, the me is a useful working concept – but that’s all it is. The Buddhist monk Nagasena explained the same idea to his king by his classic example of the chariot. He dismantled the chariot part by part to demonstrate that it was simply the name given to a particular assemblage of things. Beyond this, there existed no chariot. Similarly, we touch, taste, see, hear, feel, sense, act. This is real. But the ‘me’ that is doing all of these things is an executive ‘me,’ a working reality – not a real, permanent ‘me’ that will survive the death of the body. The me is thus an abstract concept, and not a physical, nor an ectoplasmic reality.

Upon his Awakening, a person sees all this very clearly. In a brilliant, blinding flash of intuition, the me is seen for all that it really is – an ephemeral, ever-changing mirage. And life is never the same after that.

### **Formula of a sage**

We must understand that Enlightenment is not some esoteric, magical process. It does not give a man magical powers, or make him a superman. Enlightenment is simply the disappearance of an illusion which made him see everything from the point of view of a ‘me.’ It does not make a person all-knowing. The spiritual ‘knowledge’ that occurs upon Enlightenment is not a form of verbal, temporal knowledge which could be learnt or developed in time. The word knowledge here refers to the true intuitive insight into the way things are in their totality. Enlightenment is thus a change in perspective, a change of focus, a paradigm shift. It is a shift from the constricting, individual focus of a ‘me’ to a view of life in its totality. It is a shift from being a circle with the illusory ‘me’ as center, to a circle "whose circumference is everywhere and whose center is nowhere."

### **RESULT: The Process of Liberation**

Once Enlightenment has occurred, the whole world, and life itself, is seen in an altogether different light. This results in a complete transformation of the individual. Indian philosophy calls it *paraavritti*, the West has called it *metanoia*. It is a complete ‘transcendence of personality,’ a total, ‘inside-out’ transformation. Let us see how this happens.

The average man's thoughts are usually me-centred or me-based. After Enlightenment, once the person sees the me for what it is, a mere appearance, the me-based conditionings slowly begin to wear themselves out. This is a process of what psychology calls deconditioning. Behaviour therapy uses it. But after Enlightenment, it happens on its own. The Enlightened person does not have to act upon the fact of his Enlightenment to change himself. The change is a spontaneous result of the Awakening. And this spontaneous process of deconditioning is the process of Liberation or *mukti*.

This is not to say that the person becomes incapable of living his daily life, or following his chosen profession, whatever that may be. In all probability he will continue to do both. And there will be no lapse in efficiency either. Rather, when the false is seen as false, work becomes more efficient. Because now there is not the overlay of undue me-related anxiety over the results. Work is done with the full attention that it deserves, with what Zen Buddhism calls a "whole mind" – work done for its own sake. It is important to understand that the Enlightened person can very well continue to be goal oriented, but unlike the average person he is no longer result-obsessed to the point of anxiety. This is incidentally the *karma yoga* taught by the Bhagavad Gita, the famous Hindu scripture. And today's management experts also observe that an excessive obsession with results detracts from the work at hand and affects its efficiency.

Secondly, as the 'me' weakens during the process of Liberation, so does the feeling or concept of the 'other.' This is because, the me is inextricably linked to the concept of the 'other' – they are the two inter-linked opposites, two sides of the same coin. Without the me, there can be no other. Thus finally, a stage comes when the Enlightened person no longer sees the rest of the world as a competitive 'other.' The natural result of not seeing the rest of humanity as 'other' is a spontaneous outflow of deep, causeless, motiveless compassion. Life, for the Liberated One, is no longer a 'zero-sum game.'

### Final Liberation

The theoretical endpoint of the entire process of Liberation is a condition totally devoid of me-based conditioning, in which (as Sri Ramana Maharshi said) no one is seen as other, a condition of absolute compassion, and total absence of unnecessary psychological suffering. This is the condition of Final Liberation (*jivan-mukti, pari-nirvana*).

And it is this compassion, we can now understand, that is responsible for the "river of peace" effect described by Paul Brunton.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, we see that much of the mystery and occultism paraded in the name of mysticism has really nothing to do with true mysticism. True mysticism, as Zen would say, is *wu-shih*, "nothing special." It just involves a different perspective of viewing the same everyday world, which is then seen in a different light only because the earlier water-tight distinction between 'me' and the 'other' is seen to dissolve. Using the words in their broadest sense, one could say that the average man's me-based perspective is a sort of a Newtonian view of the world which sees the world divided into discrete objects and isolated individuals with separate, conflicting self-interests. The Enlightened person's holistic view, on the other hand, can be likened to an Einsteinian or quantum view where everything is relative, even time, and everything is interconnected. The Enlightened one thus gains the insight with which to see the Newtonian world from the Einsteinian (or quantum) view. What's more, this happens *without his losing* the everyday Newtonian perspective, so that the sage is perfectly capable of living his daily life with utmost efficiency.

Albert Einstein said, "Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler." I believe the explanation given here is sufficiently simple to satisfy both Occam's razor and Hume's dictum. We do not postulate a soul, or an afterlife. We do not speak of a personal, anthropomorphic God. We do not admit magic and miracles. Sages like J. Krishnamurti and Ramana Maharshi are not hazy mythological figures – they are men of flesh and blood from this century. The simplicity of what we have just said is captured by this short summary of the essence of Buddhism.

## The essence of Buddhism

1. There is no ultimate, unchanging essence like soul (*atman*), no separate, real 'me,' in anyone.
2. When people realise this truth, they become selfless persons. They then experience a mental state of loving kindness (*metta*), compassion, sympathetic joy and calmness of mind.

It couldn't be simpler than this. The first statement agrees with science. The second does not clash with it – only, science has never ventured this far. And today, I believe, we have taken the first small step towards the scientific recognition of this simple but great truth. It is my fond hope that the proper understanding of the condition of Enlightenment may eventually lead to more people getting a taste of this "river of peace," and the world will perhaps be a step closer to achieving a famous singer's utopian dream – the brotherhood of man

Imagine all the people  
Livin' life in peace . . .  
Imagine all the people  
Sharing all the world . . .  
You may say I'm a dreamer  
But I'm not the only one  
I hope some day you'll join us  
And the world will be one!

from "*Imagine*"  
by John Lennon  
(The Beatles)

-----

### Notes and Ref:

1. *A Search in Secret India*, Paul Brunton, p.141, B.I.Pub.,1970, reprint 1994.
2. *The Spectrum of Consciousness*, Ken Wilber, The Theosophical Publishing House, Wheaton, Illinois, USA; 1977, reprint 1985.
3. *The Atman Project*, Ken Wilber, The Theosophical Publishing House, Wheaton, U.S.A., 1989.
4. *Atmabodha – Self-Knowledge of Sri Sankaracarya*, (ahamkaar, p.73, v.5, v.46, etc), by Swami Nikhilananda, Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madras, India, 1997.
5. *Occam's razor: William of Ockham (1284?-1347?)*, English philosopher and theologian. In philosophy, according to Ockham's Razor, a problem should be stated in its basic and simplest terms. In science, the simplest theory that fits the facts of a problem is the one that should be selected.
6. *Hume's dictum: a preference for less "miraculous" explanations*. Hume, David (1711-1776), Scottish philosopher.
7. *Zero-sum game: From Nonzero: The Logic Of Human Destiny*, by Robert Wright, pub. Vintage Books. He argues that in general the evolution of nature, and in particular the evolution of human culture, are largely shaped by win-win processes which he examines with the help of Game Theory. Evolution has a non-zero-sum logic which leads to increasing complexity. He writes that "the directionality in these two evolutionary processes suggests that maybe the processes are themselves subordinate to a larger purpose."