

SPIRITUAL ENLIGHTENMENT: THE DAMNEDEST THING

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The Damnedest Thing

Jed McKenna

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To Lulu, with love.

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Vitam inpendere vero.
Stake life upon truth.
— Juvenal —

1

That which cannot be simpler.

Stop this day and night with me
and you shall possess the origin of all poems.

— Walt Whitman —

She has just finished enumerating for me the many facets of her spiritual journey and is now looking to me for a response; hopefully approval, perhaps even praise. I don't really take pleasure in dashing the hopes of pretty young ladies, but that's my job. I'm the enlightened guy.

"So, the reason you're doing all these things," I count them off on my fingers, "meditating; praying; chanting; yoga; vegetarianism; attending darshan and satsang with realized beings; donating money to Greenpeace, Amnesty International and Free Tibet; reading classical spiritual literature; purifying yourself; abstaining from sex and so on. The reason for all this is what?"

She just stares back at me mutely as if the answer is too obvious to need stating, but it *does* need stating. I want it out here in front of us where we can examine it and poke at it with our pointy little brains.

"Well, you know," she begins, still not quite believing I actually want her to state something so obvious. "Spiritual growth, I guess. I want to, uh, you know, be a better person and be able to love more deeply and, you know, raise my vibrational... you know."

I'm hanging on every word. "Your vibrational what?"

"Uh, frequency? I want to, you know, raise my level of consciousness, to be more in touch with, you know, my inner self, my higher

self. I want to open myself up to the divine energy that's, you know, everywhere."

"Oh, okay. Why?"

"Huh?"

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why everything you just said. Why do you want to raise your levels and be in touch and open yourself up and all that?"

"Well, you know... spiritual, uh, enlightenment."

Ahhh—

"Okay, is that it? You want to be enlightened?"

She looks at me like it's a trick question, but it's not—it's the first question. What are you doing? Why are you doing it? Where's this going? If you know, you'll succeed. If you don't, you won't. That's not just pretty talk, that's the law.

"Yeah, I guess so."

I smile reassuringly. "Good. So, the reason you do all this stuff is to become enlightened—to achieve spiritual enlightenment. Does that sound about right?"

A pause. "Yeah... I guess."

"Well, let's just spend a few minutes talking about it and see if we can make it any clearer. What do you think spiritual enlightenment is?"

She's giving me the big eyes again, but now a bit of perplexity seeps in. It was so obvious a moment ago that it hardly needed asking. Now it's becoming a little fuzzy.

"Uh, like God... God mind... unity, you know, unity consciousness?"

It's always like this with new students. They do the student thing, I do the teacher thing. I'm never quite sure why they came or when they'll go. The whole process is equal parts fulfillment and frustration. I talk, they listen. They ask, I answer. I speak, they... who knows? They something.

How my words are received or what becomes of them after they leave my lips is beyond my ability to control. I speak, that's all. The words flow like song and soothe me. That's my thing. Nodding and maintaining a facial expression that conveys interest and receptiveness is her thing. I'm into the speaking—into my words and how well they represent the underlying ideas. It would be nice to believe that my words were clicking in her mind like the beads of an abacus, but I know they're not and I'm comfortable with that. "Act, but don't reflect on the fruit of the act," said Krishna to Arjuna. Sign me up.

"It's very simple," I tell her. "Enlightenment is truth-realization. Not only is truth simple, it's that which cannot be simpler—cannot be further reduced."

I can see from her expression that that got us nowhere. My bad. I have a copy of the Gita on the table between us. I open it at random with the intention of finding a passage well-suited to the subject I'm discussing.

Works every time. Gratitude permeates me as I read her this statement by Krishna:

"I am come as Time, the ultimate waster of people, ready for the hour that ripens to their doom. The warriors, arrayed in hostile armies facing each other, shall not live, whether you strike or stay your hand."

I fall silent as layers of meaning wash through me one after another and my appreciation causes a swelling in my chest. "Wonderful," I think. "Wonderful, wonderful, wonderful."

The young girl before me nods, understanding the words at whatever level she is able. She knows that the words are spoken by Krishna and that he is speaking to Arjuna, the mighty warrior who has thrown down his arms rather than signal the beginning of a war that will surely scorch the earth and his own family to ash. She knows that Krishna is revealing to Arjuna the truth of how the world unfolds, and she knows that at the end of this conversation—the

Bhagavad Gita—Arjuna's delusion will be dispelled and he will launch the battle.

But that's probably as far as her knowledge goes. I doubt she identifies herself with Arjuna, paralyzed by confusion at the start of the Gita. I doubt she equates enlightenment with the direct experience of reality in its infinite form. I doubt she knows that in her own life war is coming and that she is a breath away from giving the signal that will spark the conflagration that will incinerate her world. I look at this young girl and I know she has no idea where this road really leads.

I smile.

"Unity consciousness is great," I say, and she looks relieved. "Mystical union, being at one with the universe, the direct experience of the infinite. Bliss, ecstasy—a taste of heaven. Beyond time, beyond space, beyond the ability of any words to describe. The peace that surpasseth all understanding."

"Wow," she says, aptly. Her name is Sarah. She's young, early twenties, and I've just pushed all of her spirituality buttons. If I were a guru, that would be my full time job. I shudder at the thought.

"Yeah," she rides on it, "that's exactly..."

"But that's not enlightenment."

"Oh."

"Enlightenment isn't when you go there, it's when there comes here. It's not a place you visit and then remember wistfully and try to return to. It's not a visit to the truth, it's the awakening of truth within you. It's not a fleeting state of consciousness, it's permanent truth-realization—abiding non-dual awareness. It's not a place you visit from here, this is a place you visit from there. For instance, I myself am enlightened, right here, right now. I am free of delusion and unbound by ego, and although I have had the great fortune of experiencing mystical union on several occasions, I am not presently in that state and I have no plans to return to it. Nobody resides in a state of permanent bliss, Sarah, that's just something out of a sales

pitch.”

“Whoa...” she manages.

“What I’m trying to do here, Sarah, is get you back to square one. You’ve started off—just like everyone does—in one direction, but enlightenment is in another. What you have to do now is figure out what you really want. Do you want to dedicate your life to the pursuit of the experience of mystical consciousness? Or do you want to wake up to the truth of your being?”

She spends a few moments thinking about it, and then impresses me with her answer.

“I guess it makes more sense to figure out what’s true first, or else what does it matter?” she says. “First things first, right? I mean, once I figure out what’s true I can still try to achieve unity consciousness, right?”

“Wow,” I laugh appreciatively, “good answer. Yes, figure out what’s true and then you can do whatever you want.”

Good answers aside, Sarah has not really made the decision she thinks she has. One doesn’t select truth-realization over mystical union the way one chooses soup over salad. In fact, one doesn’t choose enlightenment at all. If anything, one is more likely to be the victim of it, like getting hit by a bus. Arjuna didn’t get out of bed that morning hoping to see Krishna’s universal form, he was just having a bad day at the office when the universe flashed him.

Time to pop the ball back into Sarah’s court.

“So, you’re doing all this spiritual stuff because you want to go in a certain direction, right?”

She nods.

“You want to develop spiritually, or grow closer to God, or go to heaven, or become enlightened, something along those general lines?”

She nods again, looking somewhat bewildered.

“In short, you’re moving—progressing—right? You’re heading toward one point and away from another?”

Another nod.

“That’s pretty much what everybody is doing in the larger sense, wouldn’t you say? Moving toward something, away from something else?”

Another cautious nod, wary, as if I’m setting her up, which, of course, I am.

“The thing I’d like you to do, Sarah, is tell me specifically what it is you’re moving away from and what you’re moving toward. Take your time with it, there’s no hurry. Treat it like you’re writing your own personal mission statement using those two elements—what you’re moving toward and what you’re moving away from. Okay?”

She looks a little panicked by the idea.

“Hey,” I reassure her, “no worries, mon. All we’re doing is taking a closer look at where you’re going and what you’re getting away from. It’s not astrophysics. Just file your flight plan in the most economical terms. That doesn’t sound so hard, does it?”

“I guess not.”

“It’s not a race, it’s just life. There is no finish line, no winners or losers. Give that some thought, too. It all ties in together. Come see me in the next few days and let me know what you come up with.”

Sarah labors under the same misconception everyone does. She believes, in the broadest sense, that something is wrong and that she can make it right. What that something is, what’s wrong with it, and how it can be fixed all differ from person to person, but the general pattern is always the same: The truth, though, is that nothing is really wrong. Nothing is *ever* wrong and nothing can *be* wrong. It’s not even wrong to believe that something is wrong. Wrong is simply not possible. As Alexander Pope wrote, *One truth is clear, whatever is, is right*. Wrongness is in the eye of the beholder and nowhere else.

The perception of wrongness, however, is absolutely critical to the perpetuation of the human drama, right up there with the illusion of separateness and the certainty of free will. Drama requires conflict. No conflict, no drama. If something isn’t wrong, then noth-

ing needs to be made right, which would mean that nothing needs to be done. Heights need not be scaled nor depths plumbed. Wealth and power need not be acquired. Future generations need not be spawned. Art need not be created, nor skyscrapers erected. Wars need not be fought. Religions and philosophies need not be devised. Teeth need not be flossed.

“The belief that something is wrong is the fire under the ass of humanity,” is how I explain it to Sarah.

Of course, wrongness isn’t entirely imagined. A certain amount of rightness and wrongness is hardwired into the human machine. Hunger is wrong, eating is right; celibacy is wrong, seed-sowing is right; pain is wrong, pleasure is right, and so on. But those are all biological directives, enforceable only within the context of the physical organism, violations resulting in progressively worsening discomfort and possibly death.

Where, then, does wrongness reside outside of our physical organism? And the obvious answer is—nowhere. But if this whole existence thing is to have any dramatic element to keep it interesting, it needs conflict, and so an artificial wrongness must be inserted into the mix:

Fear.

Fear of the hollow core. Fear of the black hole within. Fear of non-being.

Fear of no-self.

The fear of no-self is the mother of all fears, the one upon which all others are based. No fear is so small or petty that the fear of no-self isn’t at its heart. All fear is ultimately fear of no-self.

“And what is enlightenment,” I ask Sarah, “but a swan dive into the abyss of no-self?”

She doesn’t answer.

Fear, regardless of what face it wears, is the engine that drives humans as individuals and humanity as a species. Simply put, humans are fear-based creatures. It may be tempting to say that we

are equal parts rational and emotional, balanced between left and right brain, but it's not true. We are primarily emotional and our ruling emotion is fear.

"Fun, huh?" I ask Sarah, who's looking a bit woozy by this point.

When I ask students to define the thing they're heading away from and the thing they're moving toward, it's not because I have any need for those details, or even because I want students to clarify it for themselves. I really just want them to review their present heading, because if fate or providence has put them in front of me to hear the things I say, then a sharp course change is likely imminent, and that begins with a calling out of the present heading.

Sarah gets the lite version of this fear and wrongness monologue, partly for her benefit, partly for my own. I don't know how much of it she'll really grasp, but it won't hurt her to hear it. For my part, this is how I figure stuff out—by expressing it. That's how I learn what to say and how to say it. I didn't pick up the Total Knowledge Package with this enlightenment deal so if I want to understand something so I can teach it, I pretty much have to figure it out for myself.

"Should I keep meditating?" she asks, a little desperate for something familiar she can cling to.

"Oh, yeah, absolutely," I say, and she seems relieved to hear it. In terms of enlightenment it doesn't matter much if she meditates or not, or whether she eats meat or not, or whether she gives to charities or steals from them. I know, though, that she has already been destabilized enough for one conversation. The objective of today's lesson is to open her up to a new way of thinking about what enlightenment means. If I start trying to dismantle her false preconceptions too quickly she'll simply scurry back into whatever Hindu-Christian-Buddhist-New Age *mélange* she emerged from to find her way here.

We're sitting on the front porch of my house amid the endless farmland of America's heartland. It used to be my house, anyway.

Now it's more like a rural American ashram project that belongs to everyone who takes part. I used to be the one who cleaned it and maintained it and made improvements and did all the chores, but these days I'm like a prince in his palace. I haven't swung a hammer or emptied a wastebasket in years. I never decided to be a prince, it just happened when I wasn't looking and it's not the sort of thing you can really bitch about.

Sarah is not especially unique in terms of the type of people who find their way here. She doesn't arrive with a clean slate, so the first order of business is getting her to loosen her grip on, well, everything—her opinions, her morality, her most cherished and deeply held beliefs. In short, her ego structure, her false self. Nobody shows up on our doorstep like an empty cup just waiting to be filled with knowledge, and since the knowledge that gets dished out around here is almost certain to be in sharp conflict with the knowledge they arrived with, job one is always prepping them for a major rewrite.

At any given time there seem to be fifteen or twenty students living in the house. They stay here for awhile, they talk with me, they take care of things. They come. They go. There's another hundred or so who are like day-students as opposed to boarders. They don't live here, they just come when they can or when they feel like it. They may come and go without my even knowing they were here. They show up, tend the gardens for a few hours, rewire the basement, prepare meals, build additions, gab with each other, paint things, drop off a gift, eat, whatever. That's how it is around here. It all just flows and everyone seems pretty comfortable with it.

It's a beautiful spring day, late in the afternoon. The sun is dropping and the heat of the day has softened. A gentle breeze caresses the grass in waves. It's a time to sit in contentment. I am quiet, dwelling in the sweet perfection of the moment, and I'm impressed that Sarah has the sense to do the same, or, at least, not to spoil it with chatter.

Eventually, time swallows the moment and I observe its passing

with gratitude. One of the guys sticks his head out to let us know there's food available for those who want it. I can smell it. The vegetarians have been at it again. Someone brings me a tray with a bowl of rice and dahl and some garam masala and a set of chopsticks. As soon as the odor meets me I know that Sonaya has done the cooking and I am eager for the food.

I eat and watch as the sunset displays more shades of pink than anyone could have suspected. Gradually the pinks become reds and golds and the clouds pick up every nuance and light up the sky in a resplendence that promises heaven. I wouldn't mind dying now, I think, as the day dies. But then I remember—I've got a book to write.