

## **What is enlightenment, no, I mean really, like what is it?** **by Steven Norquist**

Many friends and family have been after me for some time to write about my experience and understanding of this topic. I have hesitated to write about it not because enlightenment itself is so hard to describe, but because enlightenment tends to make one quite lazy. Before my change I was a busy beaver, reading and writing and playing music and sports and really actively getting out there. But after “the change” as I call it, there was a clear vision of how silly all this activity was and how much incredible effort is required to perform it.

But before I get ahead of myself let me lay out one basic fact, I am awake. I woke up about a year ago. I know what I am, what I have always been and what it is impossible to stop being. Some call this enlightenment or ultimate truth, unity consciousness, infinite mind and so on. But all those names don't tell the non-awake what it is. Even I calling it “the change” is not really accurate because nothing really changed, yet paradoxically, huge change took place. In simple terms I was once Steve living his life but now I am the experience of Steve living his life. It is a shift in perspective. Before this perspective shift occurred I had practiced about three years of medium intensity meditation consisting of some breath watching, a little mantra repetition and some light self inquiry Ramana Maharshi style. These techniques were coupled with an intense desire to find and know the truth. I read everything on enlightenment I could get my hands on.

After about three years of this I had my first experience of “nonduality” as it is called. I had just read a passage in Ken Wilber's “The Spectrum of Consciousness” where he points out that ordinary awareness is ultimate awareness. This struck a chord in me, I set the book down and stared at a paper that was sitting on the table in front of me, after about a minute or two an exciting and frightening thing happened, I disappeared! By that I mean the middle fell right out of the equation. Normally there would be Steve over here looking at the paper on the desk over there, now there was only the experience, “paper” but no Steve over here seeing it. It was clear that the middle that normally separated the paper from Steve did not really exist, there was only the experience, “paper.”

Now let me try to make this more clear by giving an illustration.

Imagine as clearly as you can that you enter a large house that you have never been in before. You feel strange and kind of scared, there is furniture and drapes but no people. You wander around feeling the creepiness of being alone in this big house. You go from room to room not knowing what you will find. You start to get nervous and a little fearful being alone in this big house. You wonder how long it has been empty like this. In time the sense of the bigness and emptiness of the house starts to weigh heavily on your nerves. Finally, when you can not stand it any longer a shocking realization occurs to you, your not there either! Only the experience, “house” exists.

This is how nonduality feels and is the real truth of existence. Remember the question, “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” Now you know the answer.

You see, with enlightenment comes the knowledge that even though there is much activity in the world, there are no doers. The universe is in a sense, lifeless. There is no one, only happenings

and the experience of happenings. Enlightenment reveals that the universe emerges spontaneously. It's emergence and pattern are perfect in mathematics and symmetry and involve no chance. Nothing is random, everything emerges exactly as it has to. There is no random chance, or evolution based on chance. The universe is perfect, nothing is wrong or could be. There seems to be chance or unpredictability from a human perspective but that is only because our time frame reference can not see the universe emerge through its whole life span in a matter of minutes. If we could see that, then we would clearly see how every event was not only perfect and necessary but even predictable.

Now let's summarize so far, the universe is perfect, no one exists, yet the experience "universe" persists. How can this be? Consciousness. Consciousness is aware. If it were not, then there would be no universe. The very nature of existence implies consciousness. One can not exist without the other.

There can never be a universe that does not involve consciousness. There are no universes or dimensions where there is no consciousness. Matter and form would never arise without consciousness. Universe/Consciousness, Mind/Matter, Wave/Particle, call it what you will, the reality is that the manifestation, the very appearance we call the universe, is consciousness.

Now don't mistake me here, there is no observer. There are no persons in existence experiencing the universe, but more than that there is no Ultimate Person, God, Mind, or anything else observing the universe. There is only the experience of the universe being there with no experiencer.

This seems like a paradox but who cares, this is the way it is. Experience "is," that is all, that is the way the universe is, an experience by no one. The universe spontaneously arises out of consciousness yet at the same time is itself consciousness. We must lose the idea of matter being observed by something we call consciousness, that is not true. Some teachers talk of the Witness, the ultimate passive mind that observes all things moment to moment. This implies some level of separation, a witness over here watching the universe over there. It's not like this, there is only the experience, universe. There is no observer. Even if there were no manifestation the feeling would be the same. Once again let me make this clear: consciousness is not aware "of" the universe, consciousness is aware "as" the universe.

Now don't mistake that last sentence. Don't think, "Oh yeah Steve, I get it now, consciousness is not aware of the universe from a vantage point separate from it, like a disembodied soul, consciousness is instead aware of the universe as one of the billions of beings in it, like man, or dog, or fish." No! Such thoughts are false. When I say consciousness is aware "as" the universe I mean the very act of existence is consciousness. A carrot is itself consciousness, is itself awareness. There is not carrot aware of itself as carrot nor disembodied invisible consciousness aware of carrot as carrot, there is only the experience "carrot" and that is consciousness and that is enlightenment. There is no observer.

Let's talk now about how this fits in with human life. All people who do not know what's going on believe that they are the people that they are, an individual with thoughts and desires and hopes and dreams, a body and a house, a wife and a child. The list goes on but you get it.

Now the truth. Even though the above is happening, it is an automatic machine like emergence out of Universe/Consciousness and is following a strict nonchance pattern. More importantly, no one is performing any of the above and Universe/Consciousness is what is going on.

To make it more clear, stuff is happening but no one is doing it. Emergence proceeds and consciousness is aware. The unawake person, the person that doesn't know what's going on believes that they are acting, that the human them exists. The reality is, the body exists, the thoughts exist, the memories exist and that is consciousness and that is all.

Someone might say consciousness has temporarily mistaken it's experience of the body and the body's memories as a person. But even though that answer may seem to explain the why, really there is no mistake at all. Universe/Consciousness has never been confused. The person can fall away at any moment restoring the original state of matter and consciousness which has never actually been obscured. This happened to me, but in that happening nothing was lost because there never was a me to lose, only a confusion to correct that never existed.

Knowing this, I mean really knowing this, not intellectually, but as a direct experience of everyday life is enlightenment. Now once this is known it is impossible to go back. Once you have drawn the curtain and seen who Oz really is you can't cover him back up and pretend not to know the truth.

So how do we proceed once we know? We let experience manifest unmolested. As has been said, "The universe is perfect, intervene at your peril." The enlightened person never acts. This is the riddle of karma solved, there is no karma, never was, never could be. There is no reincarnation, how could there be? Who is there to reincarnate? There are no persons, there is no birth or death, there is ultimately nothing except Manifestation/Awareness.

99.999% of the spiritual books and teachers out there are completely wrong. They are wrong for one simple reason, they are not enlightened, they don't know what's going on. So in order to keep the illusion of personality, of the idea that there is something or someone, they invent stories, or theories, or ideas, wear special clothes, perform certain rituals and so on. They teach this stuff. But the truth is so simple, it is laughable.

Now let me make a clear distinction on one point, mystical experience is not enlightenment. You may have mystical experience, see God, get abducted by aliens, receive messages from an angel, contact your spirit guides, the list could go on. But always and forever, no matter what is going on the truth is, every experience, mystical or ordinary is a happening of Universe/Consciousness.

If I could teach the world a lesson it would be, no matter what you experience always remind yourself, "There is no experiencer, there is no observer." If you do this long enough and often enough you will one day know what's going on. When that day comes you will realize nothing has changed, yet everything has changed. It is a feeling and a knowing. An inescapable falling away of untruth. If you think you know it then you don't. When you know it, you do. And when you do know it, no one can take it away from you.

Some points to clear up. When I said the enlightened person never acts I did not mean such people sit in a cave and die of starvation and exposure. I mean the body can be quite active and manifest all manner of good and bad behavior, the mind can be racing with thoughts and

feelings, but consciousness, now enlightened, knows no one is acting. It is only the universe blossoming forth spontaneously and perfectly.

As consciousness you are more aware of the feelings of the body, physically and emotionally. You don't feel these things but you are aware of them because there is no division between them and consciousness. The Universe and Consciousness are equivalent, remember the formula,  $U=C$ . Also the thing we call personality or ego does not totally vanish. It can remain intact along with the body. It behaves and interacts and changes over time like any person would but the enlightened one knows they are not that ego.

Some schools emphasize the destruction of the ego as the only means of liberation. All that is really required is the realization that you are not that ego. That the ego really doesn't exist, is an illusion of sorts that can be left to it's own designs. It's not really there, but it appears to be there and that is just fine, don't worry. If the ego begins to fade that's ok. Remember, there is no experiencer.

Let me talk briefly about practice. Meditation and book study are useful and can ripen an individual towards awakening, but the most important thing is to change your perspective. You must learn to see what is really going on. Understand, in reality everyone is enlightened, but not everyone knows how to perceive this. The reason is, enlightenment is so natural, so obvious, that from birth we have become accustomed to ignoring it in preference to anything else that manifests. Meditation can train you to still the mind and gain concentration but it will not give you enlightenment. A radical shift in perspective must occur, the habitual focus of your awareness and your way of perceiving must be changed.

Study of books will not get you there, you need a shock. The easiest way I know is for an enlightened person to talk you into this perspective shift. The best books I have read were the ones that talked you into enlightenment. Feeling experiments such as the house scenario above are good to help evoke the feeling of enlightenment. Feel what it is like to not be there. The real breakthrough will come when you "feel" the truth.

It's creepy, not blissful or ecstatic. It should scare you, the body should react defensively, or there could be uncontrolled laughter at how stupid you have been for so long. It's like one of those 3D dot pictures, you stare and stare at those dots until bingo the picture emerges! After that, you can always see it, you can't unlearn it. The same with enlightenment.

Basically any practice that can shock you into seeing what is really going on is acceptable. But understand, you want to know what's really going on, to feel it, to contact reality. It shouldn't take long, a few years at most, less for some. If a practice or a teacher tells you it will take 10 or 20 years, find a new practice or teacher. Remember you are your own salvation, ultimately it is you who will wake you up. Any method that can shock you into seeing what is really going on is acceptable but the perspective shift must occur.

Let me try to bring some clarity to the subject of enlightenment and morality. It has been said that enlightenment produces compassion and love and that many enlightened ones forgo release into Nirvana and reincarnate again and again until all souls have obtained enlightenment, the Bodhisattva vow and such. None of this is enlightenment. Enlightenment is not about morality or vows, it is simply existence in the truth, that is all.

Enlightenment carries no requirements and expects nothing, the universe manifests and just that is enlightenment. We don't seek enlightenment to be happy or to give our lives meaning or to feel bliss or ecstasy. Loyalty to a flag is not enlightenment, love is not enlightenment, hate is not enlightenment. If you see these as the fruit of enlightenment then you are wrong. Instead each of these are enlightenment themselves. Each of these are spontaneous emergences out of and as consciousness. Action, feeling, creation, performance, love, hate, murder, salvation, compassion, each is enlightenment itself. There is no doer, no experiencer, only manifestation. This is the truth, this is enlightenment.

I want you to understand that while nothing ultimately changes, in human terms much change takes place. This happens because once you recognize what's going on the main motivations of life begin to drop away. The level of dropping away is no doubt unique to the individual but is directly proportional to how much you desire to resolve into reality. What I mean is that it is possible to be enlightened and still try to retain a level of unconsciousness in order to interact in human affairs. As time passes this state will be harder to maintain.

It is similar to suspending your belief when watching a movie. You pretend to believe the reality of what is going on. You cry with the characters, you laugh with them, you hope with them etc. You do this for the entertainment, to get your moneys worth. This is the way real life is with enlightenment. You know there really is no one. You know that it is just a display, a machine like emergence out of and as consciousness. Yet you must believe it at some level or you will simply lose the ability to interact in the world.

I can see why some enlightened ones have isolated themselves or become hermits. For the last year this has been an issue I personally have struggled with. How to know the truth and continue to interact with the world as if you believe it? You basically have to employ a little Orwellian 1984 doublethink. You have to pretend to believe while always knowing the truth. Some things are unavoidable of course, I was an avid reader but now can barely open up a book. I loved and played the guitar for years but now have zero interest in picking one up. Even writing these few words is a colossal effort. The reason is that deliberate effort is an affront to reality where nothing is deliberate, everything is spontaneous, and nothing at all is going on.

Don't mistake me here, I have not invented a rule of behavior where I have decided I must act less because to do otherwise would be an affront to reality, rather the natural outcome of enlightenment is less and less action, less and less thought. This is a natural development within the enlightened person. Eventually all action will be spontaneous and the person will not be acting.

Of course to say this is not ultimately true, because in reality no one ever acts. But from the human vantage point this is how it plays out. Memory is also a tricky thing, the memories of your life are still there and can be jogged into awareness but as time progresses and enlightenment begins to dissolve you, your access to them becomes more difficult. Your awareness becomes centered in the events of the present as they manifest, this is natural since these are the only events that actually exist. The person and the ego are simply dissolving. They don't really exist but the illusion that they do becomes less a part of awareness. You don't remember and you don't care.

Let me make a point about Zen breath watching. Most people just don't get it and most Zen schools don't make it any easier for students to get it. There are all kinds of books on Zen meditation, catalogs where you can buy all the cool silk clothes, cushions, gongs, incense and a host of other aids to Zen breath watching. But once you have all that stuff and finally sit your butt down, close your eyes and start watching your breath what exactly are you doing? Why are you doing that? I ask people this all the time and really piss them off, "Why do you meditate? What are you trying to accomplish? Why do you watch your breath?" I have never met anyone [who] has given me the correct answer.

The reason they don't know is because they are not enlightened. If they were, then they might not even meditate anymore, or they might, it would make no difference. You see, the simple truth that is missed by almost every meditator is this, the act of sitting there watching your breath is enlightenment. That is all. You are not doing something to gain something, just sitting there is enlightenment. That still state with calmed mind, just that is enlightenment, yet that annoying gossip over there interrupting your meditation, just that is enlightenment and that guy flipping you off in commuter traffic, just that is enlightenment. There is no doer, no experimenter, no one who acts. Manifestation emerges, actless, mindless and just that is enlightenment.

People meditate today because it is popular or because they want to have a mystical experience or just relax. The latter reason may actually be the most legitimate for the average person. But no one I know says they meditate because they are deliberately engaging in an actless act, or attempting to resolve a false sense of being into a beingless existence. And of the many meditators out there, I suspect that the majority would be shocked if I told them the guy flipping them off in traffic is more enlightened than they.

The point I'm trying to make and have been trying to make is that enlightenment is so natural and so easy that any attempt at deliberate practice towards it will get you farther from it, yet paradoxically, you have never once not been enlightened and no matter how strained and deliberate your efforts towards it, you never once acted!

So in closing, Enlightenment can be talked about, it can be understood, it is not mysterious nor does it need to be cloaked in a secret "Boy's Only" club language. Enlightenment is the feeling/knowing that no one exists including you and that everything that happens does so spontaneously and perfectly. Enlightenment is the feeling/knowing that what exists is Universe/Consciousness, they are the same, U=C. Existence is itself consciousness and that is why there is something rather than nothing. This is the real state of things and because it is so natural, so simple and so obvious, we miss it daily.



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