

# MYSTICISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS:

## Does Spiritual Illumination Create its own Intrinsic Blindness?

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Abuses of power by spiritual leaders claiming enlightenment or mystical awakening are often explained in one of three ways:

- a. They had a genuine spiritual attainment or realization but fell prey to corruption or human weakness. After all, power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.
- b. They were self-deluded and couldn't possibly have attained a genuine awakening.
- c. They were frauds, taking advantage of people for their own narcissistic ends.

In some cases, any of these may be true, or perhaps multiple ones at the same time. These three explanations may well account for many of the problems and abuses of power that arise in alternative spiritual communities that developed around a teacher or their teaching. However, there are examples where these common explanations fail to fully explain the paradox experienced by participants in such groups or communities featuring charismatic leaders: on one hand, the empowering insights and awakenings, and on the other, the disempowering abuses and confusion. These are not frauds (c) nor simply deluded teachers (b). And while they may be weak or corrupt to some degree (a), there is problem with this

interpretation as well. Generally, authentic awakening and some aspect of corruption or abuse of power are seen as entirely separate elements. The idea is that these are teachers who have a beneficial realization or transmission but then fall prey to the temptation of power—or so the story goes. This good-but-became-corrupt narrative may explain some cases, but I don't think it adequately accounts for many of the situations we find historically where the great strengths and fatal weaknesses of a teacher are more intrinsically connected.

In this paper, I want to propose a fourth possibility: that the blind spots that lead to abuse in some cases are in fact dangers inherent in the “awakened” state—that they may be an intrinsic feature of certain types of awakening. In other words, the bug and the feature are inextricably connected. If we could begin to appreciate this truth, and even anticipate or expect this to be the case, it could transform how we approach and engage in our spiritual pursuits both as teachers and students. Such a perspective not only shields us from some of the problems that may arise with uses of power in alternative spiritualities, but it will also allow us to avoid the whiplash that seekers often experience around their expectations and experiences of spiritual authorities, especially authorities who seem to have authentic access to, and some ability to transmit, higher states of consciousness.

Can we hold two real and enduring truths at the same time? Spiritual awakening both illuminates and blinds and it may very well do both simultaneously, even inevitably. By stating this, I do not mean to impugn the flawless and timeless nature of nondual consciousness. But that consciousness, when it awakens through human cognition, results in what the great Indian sage Sri Aurobindo has written to be, “one of the most powerful and convincing experiences of which the human mind is capable.” That experience or revelation is immensely powerful and potentially destabilizing to the self, and the way in which “that which lies beyond” interacts with and relates to “that which lies all around us and within us”, is a much more complex and delicate equation than most spiritual practitioners truly appreciate.

There is a tendency to put mystical experiences up high on a pedestal, to pursue them passionately perhaps, but often uncritically. Too often, we pursue the water of mystical insight like a dying man drowning of thirst, as the saying goes, but without questioning what will be the short and/or long-term impacts of drinking from that holy and ancient fountain, uncurious as to source, context, or the nuances of result. In other words, there can be an assumption that the experience of this water is inherently and intrinsically pure and good, and its impact upon our minds and hearts must inevitably result in only positive effects for one and all concerned. We take for granted that touching something so deep and profound must spread illumination and positivity without scar or complication or unintended consequence.

In this paper, I want to walk a delicate line, to directly question and analyze this almost universal assumption, but to do so without questioning the immense value of mystical insight and realization itself. Can we start an inquiry that helps explain some forms of unenlightened behavior without explaining away enlightenment? Indeed, I want to see if we can begin to glean some truths about “enlightenment,” for lack of a better word, that may help us and future generations walk the “path of fire” without receiving, or inflicting, the types of burns that cause long-term or unnecessary damage to ourselves and to people we love and care about.

As I write these words, I should also say I fully understand that the distinct types of mystical awakening make up a long list of different experiences and pursuits. Such a varied history is impossible to adequately sum up briefly and any attempt to talk about mysticism as a whole, as if it was one thing, is inevitably limited and inaccurate. Nevertheless, I think there is value in the effort, and for the purposes of this paper, I will be mostly focusing on that mystical pathway generally known as the realization of “enlightenment” and/or the revelation of nonduality.

## The Three Questions

This paper will explore three essential questions and conundrums that confront us as we consider the way in which mystical illumination is presented in many new religious movements or alternative spiritualities, and by the charismatic teachers that often lead them. It will suggest that by more fully exploring the answers to these three questions, we can better ameliorate the imbalances of power and the potential for confusion, missteps, and abuse that often follow in the wake of alternative spiritual movements. This may also help people navigate the complex waters of non-traditional spirituality with more tools to effectuate better outcomes.

1. *Is mystical attainment seen as an end state?*
2. *How does mystical awakening blind as well as illuminate?*
3. *Does enlightenment select for psychological instability?*

### **Question 1. Is mystical attainment seen as an end state?**

In many respects the idea of enlightenment as an end-state goal, or a pinnacle of realization, comes from at least two different streams of thought in the modern and postmodern era—the powerful influence of the perennial philosophy, and the exploding popularity of nondual traditions. Both streams of thought posit that there is an important mystical experience or realization that involves a type of union with the “ground of being” or with Godhead, or an abiding recognition of the truth of an ever-present nondual reality. This realization frees us from the mundane concerns of the ego, releases us from the prisons of our every-day psychology, and liberates us into a deeper current of existence. The innumerable confirming experiences that spiritual practitioners have had of this attainment or state of being points to

the enduring and profound reality behind these teachings, which proliferate in the contemporary “spiritual but not religious” subculture.

As Aldous Huxley, the father of perennial philosophy put it, “The Perennial Philosophy is expressed most succinctly in the Sanskrit formula, *tat tvam asi* (‘That thou art’); the Atman, or immanent eternal Self, is one with Brahman, the Absolute Principle of all existence; and the last end of every human being, is to discover the fact for himself, to find out who he really is.” Indeed, every tradition has elements that are congruent with this general story of spiritual attainment. Of course, every tradition also has its peculiarities, but it is nevertheless an idea that has proved remarkably potent in both traditional teachings and more contemporary East meets West alternative spiritual cultures.

It should be said that historically, many of the traditional teachings have another distinct element in their focus. In those mystical teachings, this goal of the spiritual path was seen as a sort of escape—an “up and out” approach to liberation—breaking free of the cycle of rebirth, or *maya*, or *samsara*, or the “fallen” world. In more contemporary, postmodern spiritual cultures, such realizations are more likely to be seen, as Huxley describes them, as the pinnacle of spiritual achievement, even a fulfillment of the next stage of human evolution. We hear phrases like an “enlightened human,” a “new man,” a “new being,” or other such designations that capture the idea of a fulfillment of the upward thrust of human evolution. These may represent a particularly exalted step in that process or even an end state or final attainment in this ladder of becoming. Becoming one with the Godhead, or achieving unity with the ground of being, or recognizing and realizing the nature of one’s own true Self, is often seen as the ultimate goal of human existence.

Religious scholar Scott Appleby has pointed out that fundamentalism is best understood as a modern phenomenon, a reaction to modernity, rather than an expression of religious practice in its native form. I would suggest that similarly, the notion of liberation or spiritual enlightenment as the end goal of human evolution is probably also a modern

phenomenon. It's taking a modern notion of progress and evolution and mapping it on to an ancient mystical experience.

As an aside, I would say that the manner in which spiritual truths and realizations might contribute to or further our individual and cultural evolution is itself a worthy question, and one I've addressed at some length in my 2012 book *Evolutionaries*. I'm not going to deeply analyze the veracity of that idea in this paper. Suffice to say, I think that there is a lot we can learn from these experiences and realizations, and I do agree with many broad elements of this narrative, if not all of the specific claims. However, what I want to explore in this paper is ways in which today's spiritual subcultures might be tempted to embrace several false or partial conclusions that are naturally derived from this contemporary worldview. And that brings us back to our question. Is mystical attainment seen as an end state?

The mystical revelation itself, whether experienced temporarily or in an ongoing, permanent, or semi-permanent way, often represents an experience of a completeness, a fullness, a nothing-missing-ness. It has, we might say, a fragrance of finality. And the great temptation to conflate that experience with the actual state of individual psychology is understandable. Indeed, there is a natural desire to conflate the completeness of that which lies beyond, deep within, or at the core of our being, with the completeness of one's own self. Because after all, *I Am That*. And yes, you may be *That*... but you are also *This*. This world. This self. This ego. This psyche. And neither *your* evolution nor human evolution is so easily fulfilled. I want to suggest that the evolution of consciousness, in all its aspects, cannot and should not be reduced to one particular orientation of consciousness, or revelation, no matter how profound or fundamental.

What I mean is that the temptation to *turn the ground of being into the goal of becoming* can be overwhelming. Acknowledging this tendency in no way diminishes the majesty of such a realization. There are few things so deeply core to the human experience as true, nondual mystical experience. I would even go as far as to say that it may, arguably,

represent a particular type of culmination of seeking. It may be some form of an “end”, but it is not THE end. And it may very well be a generator of personal evolution in a multitude of ways, and a wind in the sails of human evolution. It may even irrevocably transform the experiencer. But there is so much more to our development, individual and collective, than any single experience, insight or realization, and if we give into the temptation to turn the truth and beauty of nonduality into an end state of our personal becoming we will be in danger of losing, complicating, or distorting the immense potential goodness contained therein.

Mystical insight can liberate the soul and delight the self. It can even bring the grace of God into our hearts and minds. But that doesn't mean it's the be all and end all of your evolution, or my evolution, or of our evolution. And if you as a student, or you as a teacher, believe that it is, then you are in danger of generating a problematic hierarchy based upon a partial truth overlaying a real truth. Such conflation and confusions are difficult to dislodge. Interpreting enlightenment as an end state, or otherwise turning the ground of being into the goal of becoming, is a pernicious error with significant implications. It will distort even the most well-meaning teacher/student relationships, reifying and entrenching false balances of power. And while some form of hierarchy may be necessary and beneficial in any student/teacher relationship, this error will harden, constrain, and entrench a hierarchy that is better left open, flexible, and fluid.

## **Question 2. How does mystical awakening both illuminate and blind?**

There are several ways in which spiritual realization might both illuminate and simultaneously obscure our perceptions and conclusions about our experience, other people, and life. Let me explore four examples.

First, if we start with the presumption that we have a limited awareness or capacity for attention in our individual psyches, then we might think of spiritual illumination as a

light or spotlight that brings the background of an always-already-present consciousness into the foreground. Such an awakening, as so many visionaries and mystics have pointed out, may free us from many of our normal self-preoccupations, increasing our overall capacity for attention and awareness. Indeed, it might bring our attention more fully and powerfully into the present, alerting us to the extraordinary “power of now” as Eckhart Tolle famously described it. It might even break down some of our normal ego defense mechanisms so that we become less defended and more vulnerable as a human personality. All of those are potentially very positive developments, and in some respects, part of the purpose of spiritual growth. But they may also come with a price tag attached.

Such an increased awareness of this ground of being might lead us to draw conclusions about the world of becoming that are clouded by the former perspective. Questions about life and the world that cry out for complex, ethical considerations might seem unimportant, irrelevant, and already resolved when seen through the eyes of the fullness at the core of Self. The difficult convolutions of money, work, family, and relationships may seem to fade to nothing in the revelations that flow from nondual insight. That may initially seem like a positive thing, until one genuinely tries to negotiate the complexities of psychological and cultural life by invoking the simplicities of core spiritual truths. Quickly one comes to the realization that the former does not so easily collapse into the latter. Pretending that it does can and will result in all types of problems and ethical pile-ups. Ultimately, we come upon the stark realization that the fathomless depths of the Self, for all of its wondrous and liberating attributes, is not by itself sufficient for confronting or solving the dilemmas that challenge us in the world of individual and cultural becoming. Here, again, we can recognize that both the positive and negative developments that arise from of deep spiritual attainment are intrinsically related. They point is not to embrace one and reject the other—which may not even be possible—but for all parties concerned to understand the dynamics at work so as to maximize the overall upsides and minimize the downsides in the resulting engagements.



A second potential point of illumination and obscuration is that the liberation of our attention into the immediacy and authenticity of the present may increase and release our natural gifts and talents from being trapped and constrained by the fears and doubts of the ego structure. This is a welcome development. But again, those changes may also produce unaccounted-for psychological impacts. Such liberation of our awareness may result in new preferences and constraints. It may make us less inclined to pursue perspectives that are foreign to this new awakening, that are involved with the past or future, or that seem to re-engage doubts that have been left behind. This can be subtle but still have dramatic impacts. We may be much less inclined to look at ourselves and our own conclusions with the critical eye of an outsider. In other words, *this awakening may liberate us from unhealthy self-doubt even while diminishing our ability for healthy self-criticism.*

The result would be a potent mix of powerful psychological freedom and unseen constraint. This result might also be amplified if there is any significant narcissism in the character of the realizer. Again, none of this is inherently problematic, but we need to stop pretending there are states of consciousness where we can have it all—absorption in the One or in nonduality without any cost or change in our ability to productively and insightfully take other important and useful perspectives. *There is always an opportunity cost in the finite world of time and space, even when we are dealing with gateways to the infinite.*

Being somewhat undistracted by one's own problems and neurosis, and aware of consciousness as the foundation of being, is a powerful, wonderful quality. But even a hint of that quality can be like a moth to the flame for anyone with significant narcissistic tendencies, or anyone troubled by neurotically low self-esteem. The freedom to not worry about oneself; to be released, to a large degree, from self-doubt; to be unburdened, at least partially, from the inner critic of the superego; and to have others affirm you as such; can prove a difficult prize to handle-with-care for those who deeply crave the freedom of self-confidence, either because they have too much of it already or because they deeply lack it.

And this leads us to a third problem that haunts the modern history of spiritual teachers and teachings: Domain creep. There is a unique human confidence that is derived from mystical realization. It goes deeper than confidence in a particular subject or arena of expertise. It's a form of confidence in the consciousness at the foundation of all things. That form of confidence can be incredibly attractive. The person who carries themselves with such an air of confidence conveys a sense of life-positivity and an undivided presence that can be highly desirable. As the 20th century American mystic known as Jae Jah Noh once wrote, "the validity of the experience and of the knowledge, its absolute authenticity and authority, is beyond any doubt. It conveys a sense of absoluteness which defies questioning." Such a "beyond any doubt" confidence can create a unique charisma in a spiritual teacher or mystic.

Unfortunately, confidence is a quality that easily overflows the boundaries of its source arena and spreads into other areas of life. That is not always or inevitably bad. Authentic spiritual illumination, when it's real and powerful, leaves the realizer partially unburdened, as we have noted, from some of the normal fears and desires of the self. And when that resulting light of awareness, refracted through an awakened human being, is turned to other areas of life, it can illuminate real issues and provide genuine insight. But it cannot always know, and perhaps cannot perceive, its own limits. Maybe that is because a confidence that flows from "no-thing" as opposed to an specific thing or area of expertise, is naturally hard to contain or constrain. Its boundaries seem more porous and its power more general. When insights and illumination seem to easily flow, so does over-confidence.

Humility is a hard hill to climb for anyone and becomes near impossible when the confidence of an ever-bubbling internal spring is continually overflowing its inner banks. There are many kinds of humility, but it takes a special form of humility to not let the confidence and freedom derived from a nondual state of consciousness cross inappropriately into other domains of life, much less to be willing to accept appropriate criticism and feedback about the same. And once again, this becomes even more difficult if there is some degree of narcissism that overshadows the picture. Unfortunately, it's often assumed that

when someone has experienced powerful spiritual illumination this affords them wisdom that can be directly translated into other domains of human life, including psychology, relationships, values, etc. Such assumptions can lead to all kinds of problems in the apportioning of expertise and power within a practice community.

It should be noted that domain creep can also come from taking the insights of spiritual and mystical illumination and directly applying them to other, unrelated areas. Spiritual truths are not without their own biases and partial perspectives, as deep and unique as they can be. In fact, mystical illumination can reveal insights and perspectives on life and the world of time and space that are highly inappropriate for those not pursuing such a perspective, and which are delicate even for those who are. To just give one example: a deep dive into the reality of consciousness-without-an-object, or nonduality, might bring one face to face with profound revelations about the illusory or ultimately empty nature of all phenomena. That does not mean such perspectives are categorically true, in all times and in all places.

I would argue that the history of mysticism is filled with some of the most powerful truths one can uncover, but that does not mean they are beyond partiality. Again, it's easy to be overconfident that such insights are complete, and began to teach about the world and about life in ways that betray a half-baked or partial truth, stoked by the intensity of one's subjective illumination, but un-tempered by a more integral perspective. In the Buddhist tradition, the Two Truths Doctrine speaks to this issue. Relative truths do not always conform to absolute truths. But even this framing subtly privileges the latter over the former, which may still contribute to the problem. We need to stop treating mystical truths, even the most beautiful and sublime, as beyond the scope of well-intentioned and respectful analysis. It does not deny or denude their glory to look at their revealed wisdom with a careful, critical eye.

Finally, a fourth way in which mystical awakening can both illuminate and blind has to do with the quality of presence we often associate with realizers. There is powerful

presence and even a type of “innocence” that is a characteristic of awakening, which is often celebrated in spiritual circles, understandably so. That sweetness, innocence, and loving presence is a powerful and delightful quality that may naturally arise as we inhabit a less distracted inner universe and as our consciousness becomes more transparent to the underlying depths of being. The quality of attention and the ability to focus that attention on the immediate content of consciousness, internal or external, is liberated as we become less fixated or caught by any one aspect of that content.

This ability to freely inhabit higher states and other perspectives presented to us can be powerfully energized by awakening, and the insights that flow from that ability can be profound, but that awe-inspiring vulnerability, free of many of the normal ego barriers and boundaries, can also be double-edged. It can make us more convinced of the reality and relevance of the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions that arise in the presence of that heightened awareness. It can make us doubly attached to those thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. It can make us less able to disengage from the content of our own heightened insight. It can make us more susceptible to the “myth of the given”—the idea that what arises in or is given to our immediate consciousness is inherently real and true. Indeed, *even as we become less attached to the passing of thoughts and feelings in our mind’s eye, we may become more attached to the perceived relevance of the insights that flow from our inner intuitions.* Therefore, we become less able to detach from those insights and conclusions, or see them with healthy distance and perspective, much less to appreciate another person’s questioning of their relevance.

These are just a few of the ways in which powerful awakening and problematic personality developments can co-arise in an individual psyche. There is little question that individuals do exist who have a unique capacity to communicate or transmit heightened states of consciousness to those who would engage their teachings. They may teach through language and direct insight or through more energetic means, or in some other non-cognitive manner. Whatever the method, if we start with the presumption that we are all

imperfect purveyors of whatever perfection lies beyond, and if we replace the high and precarious pedestals of personal devotion with the attributes of awareness, curiosity, and collective self-knowledge, we may help future communities of practice better negotiate this delicate territory.

### **Question 3. To what extent does mystical awakening select for psychological instability?**

This is one of the most interesting and open questions, I believe, regarding spiritual awakening. I have observed—and I'm certainly not the only one—that trauma and some forms of abuse, including sexual abuse, can be a catalyst or set the stage for a personality or psyche to have a propensity for spiritual, mystical, and paranormal experiences. I'm not familiar with any serious study of the mechanisms that cause this, but we can imagine how it might work. It seems that when the normal ego or self-structures become dislodged or some type of trauma forces the self to protect itself by retreating into other parts of the internal universe, a doorway might open into another type of reality. Such disassociations can be catalytic for unconventional experiences. Some people survive a lightning strike and wake up to find a paranormal doorway open. Some have near-death experiences and find that they are more prone to spiritual states or other forms of unconventional experiences.

These same mechanisms, I suspect, may be at work when it comes to mystical or nondual experiences. In my own research, I have seen that at least some of the individuals more prone to powerful mystical experiences are also those with less stable, less integrated ego structures, as if the ability to readily shift between various states of self has left that person more vulnerable to higher states of consciousness. Of course, this is a generalization, and I'm not in any way suggesting that the beauty and mystery of seeking for higher states of consciousness, deeper spiritual growth, or transcendent experiences can be reduced to or fully explained by an appeal to neurosis, trauma, or any particular psychological condition.

These are deep universal, human aspirations that could never be captured by any such limited frame. I only want to raise the possibility of a relationship between some psychological make-ups and enlightenment experiences that could be activated in certain circumstances. It is worth noting that for two of the most popular spiritual teachers alive today, Eckhart Tolle and Byron Katie, a significant part of the catalyst or context for their awakening was a struggle with suicidal ideation. That is in no way to discredit the authenticity of their realization or their teaching work. But neither is it an irrelevant detail. We should consider the possibility that certain types of psychological personality might be more prone to slipping into mystical states of consciousness, and perhaps most relevant—more prone to those states becoming permanent, or semi-permanent.

Indeed, let's examine more closely the idea of enlightenment. People often talk about charismatic enlightened teachers of the last decades as if we've just had an unlucky run of unstable narcissists. But what if psychological instability, particular forms of trauma, or a rupture in the conventional self-structure are factors in the personality that help enable a particular mystical state of consciousness arise to flip over into becoming a more permanent or semi-permanent feature of the self. *What if what some call "enlightenment" naturally selects for an unstable self-structure?* Not in every case, or every situation, but enough to be important. Enlightenment, if this is true, may not be so much the apotheosis of the spiritual and evolutionary path, but a particular destination on the mystical highway that reveals what happens when a certain type of psychological self-structure encounters a particular type of mystical experience.

The result may be powerful and revelatory; it may even be impactful to hundreds or thousands. It may even result in a unique form of spiritual genius, a contribution that might compare to mathematical prodigy or musical talent, albeit in an area more directly intrinsic to human nature. But that does not make it the pinnacle of some broad, evolutionary ladder of development. Let's not turn an otherwise promising mystical realization into a recipe for confusion, false aspiration, cynicism, and abuse.

### **An Inquiry Worth Pursuing . . .**

Each of these three questions point to avenues of inquiry. The accompanying thought and concerns that I have shared need more study and explication, but my hope is that pursuing them can help teachers and practitioners begin to examine their own experience in a fruitful manner. Armed with such perspectives, we may better walk the path of mysticism, spiritual community, and teacher/student relationships with a new recognition of the problems and pitfalls that require our attention. These are the *hard* problems of the mystical journey, the ones that hide *within* the realizations we love and seek, and that may surprise us with their subtlety. Again, traditional religions may have largely mitigated or protected against the negative consequences of the ways in which spiritual illumination creates its own blindness. But those lessons, to the extent that they were ever fully intelligible, were largely implicit and may be less effective in the modern and postmodern worlds in which we are engaging these mystical modalities. Today, we need to freshly examine these distinctions in a new context, and with decades of new data, if we are to walk the spiritual path with wisdom and care.

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