

# Spiritual Enlightenment: What Is It

By Stephen Knapp

There are many explanations of what is enlightenment, and many are rather unclear or even misleading, often appearing to come from someone who is not truly or deeply experienced. So, I wanted to try and offer something that is more apparent and direct. After all, enlightenment is a goal of yoga and meditation, and we should know something of what we are trying to attain.

First of all, the thing we need to understand is there are different levels of enlightenment. There is the enlightenment concerning our spiritual position or identity known as the *jiva* or spirit soul. That is enlightenment of our higher self. Then there is the more developed enlightenment of God, of which there are three aspects. There is enlightenment of the all-pervading spiritual force, or the effulgence known as the Brahman. This is also the spiritual atmosphere or dimension that is beyond all material influence.

Then there is the realization or enlightenment of the Paramatma or Supersoul within all beings. Most forms of yoga focus on the eventual or ultimate realization of the soul and Supersoul and their connection. Then the third aspect is enlightenment of Bhagavan, the ultimate Supreme Personality who displays His real characteristics, qualities, and pastimes to His most confidential devotees.

Great sages have explained that for one to be completely enlightened, he or she must be realized in all three of these aspects of God; namely the Brahman, Paramatma, and Bhagavan if their enlightenment is to be complete. However, before reaching this stage, a spiritual *sadhaka* or practitioner is likely to go through other preliminary stages of understanding and realization that, without proper experience or training, may lead one to think they are fully realized or enlightened.

This leads us to understand that there are different levels of enlightenment, such as realization on the mental level. For example, the mental level of enlightenment is when something makes sense or resonates with you, and makes you want to know more. You can relate with it or feel a connection. It may even be something that you somehow recall from a previous existence. It is like peaking through the door and seeing something attractive, and then realizing that this may be something you have been looking and waiting for over the course of many years, or even lifetimes. But this realization is of the importance of something and your connection with it, it is not spiritual enlightenment.

Then there is enlightenment on the intellectual level with the use of cultivated knowledge, known as *jnana*. The intellectual level of realization is

based on collected information when you study and gather facts and details so you understand the subject better, or comprehend it and even explain it to others. You may develop full faith and accept the reality of its existence, but have not quite seen it directly yet.

Then there is realization of that collected knowledge when *jnana* is called *vijnana*. In other words, it is like seeing through the spectacles of knowledge, you can actually see what the *shastra* or spiritual texts have been talking about. Actual realization is beyond theory or cultivated information alone, but is when you actually perceive the knowledge in action. It is when you can begin to see how the concepts of spiritual knowledge work around you. You recognize the effects of karma, or how the modes of nature are pushing people to do various things. You begin to see what others cannot when they have no spiritual insights or training. However, even such realizations can be on various levels. For example, you may have the realization of how temporary everything is in this material world by recognizing direct evidence of this fact. You may realize the need to learn the process for attaining freedom from this world. You may realize the need to regain your spiritual position and identity. Then, on a higher level you may realize how you are not this temporary body and how you are a spirit soul, and how everyone is essentially spiritual in nature. Then you may go on to realize or recognize the Supersoul or Paramatma within all beings. These are certainly steps toward full spiritual enlightenment.

Higher than this kind of realization is the direct perception or experience. This is when life is no longer a mystery to solve but it becomes a reality to experience. This experience, however, must be as clear as when you see the sun rise in the east. Someone may tell you the sun rises in the east, but until you see it clearly yourself, it is still only theory, or knowledge from someone else's experience. But direct perception takes place after what can be years of spiritual practice. Then you may begin to see the different aspects of the spiritual dimension. It is by constant and serious practice that your consciousness becomes purified or spiritualized so that the spiritual strata begins to reveal itself to you, or you begin to attain direct access to the spiritual dimension.

Perception or experience is like eating a nice meal after being hungry and experiencing the relief from hunger. You can analyze how to cure your hunger in so many ways, but the experience is in eating a nice meal. And that experience is universal. You may use different types of food, such as Italian, Mexican, Chinese, Indian, or whatever, but the experience of feeling the relief from hunger, or the satisfaction of a full stomach, is the same for everyone, after which there are no more arguments about what it takes to relieve one's hunger. This is similar to spiritual enlightenment.

One has to proceed through all of the steps or one's progress may become encumbered by misjudgment and a lack of understanding and proper

training. Otherwise, a person may think they are fully enlightened when they actually have a long way to go.

Enlightenment is also the freedom from our karma, or the reactions of one's past deeds. Being forced to deal with our karma and undergo the consequences from past actions can be an obstacle and hinders our ability to reach self-realization. It can keep one motivated toward areas of past familiarity and desires. Yet, the more spiritual you become, the more you become free from the base tendencies or sensual addictions that often linger because of one's karma. How this happens is explained in the *Bhagavad-gita*. With freedom from one's past karma, one can reach enlightenment. But it also works both ways. In other words, the purification one acquires by spiritual practice which gradually paves the way to enlightenment also slowly nullifies a person's past karma. The practice of the yoga system, particularly bhakti yoga, purifies one's consciousness, which also evaporates one's subtle body of mind, intelligence, and false ego. These are all considered material elements according to the Vedic philosophy, and where one's material desires reside. Freedom from such material desires is also a part of becoming free from one's past karma, which tends to lock us into those desires. And such freedom paves the way to complete spiritual enlightenment.

Therefore, if one is truly becoming enlightened, that person will also become free from the sensual desires that are widespread amongst materialists or common men. However, if someone who poses as a spiritual authority, teacher, or guru continues to exhibit the same desires for sensual pleasures that should have been surpassed, then it is obvious that he has not attained enlightenment or mastered the art of spiritual practice.

We need to remember that the *yamas* and *niyamas*, or the dos and don'ts and the regulative principles of the yoga system are not rules to stifle our style or limit our activities from those things we would otherwise like to do. Nor are they meant to force us to adopt habits or restrictions that are artificial or abnormal to us. But they are actually a natural state of being for those who are spiritually realized. Why should one not follow *ahimsa* or nonviolence, or be content, peaceful, materially detached, etc., if he or she is truly enlightened? Once a person becomes enlightened, he or she will rise to the level of awareness in which these qualities, or the regulative principles, automatically manifest in the content of one's character. If these qualities are not evident, then it shows the degree to which that person has remained attached to sensual pleasure or absorbed in materialistic consciousness. Thus, such a person is not spiritually enlightened and cannot become so as long as this is the case.

Spiritual awakening means to awaken from the illusion of temporary material existence, and to see the spiritual essence and the Absolute or Supreme Creator within and behind every aspect of the creation. It is not that this material world is unreal, but it is like an ephemeral dream we have. The dream is real,

and it may indeed affect us, but it has influence over us only as long as we do not wake up. Once we wake up from the dream, we realize what is genuinely real and then we remember our actual situation and what we are meant to do. Spiritual awakening is the same thing in which we awaken from our materialistic dream to our real spiritual identity and become free from the influence of temporary material existence, and then we remember who we really are.

In such a consciousness and full awareness of spiritual reality, there is no time when we forget God. That is the essence of Krishna or God consciousness. Thus, you see everything as a display of the energy of God. You recognize the Creator behind all created things. This is when you become one with the universal Self, and you see your self as one or the same as all others. In this unity, we find peace, calmness, acceptance, and the highest bliss.

In this way, spiritual enlightenment is perceiving and honoring the inner sacredness of ourselves and all other beings, in fact all of creation. It is knowing we are all divine emanations from the same source. It is through this perception that allows us to undergo the challenge of constant changes in this material existence, or to weather the storm so to speak, with balance, equilibrium, and grace, knowing that all problems or reversals in life are but temporary illusions.

At the spiritual level, the soul has no evil. The soul only wants what it ought to want, or desires what it ought to desire, and does not undergo extremes of unnecessary happiness, exuberance, or sadness, or depression. When we have regained our natural spiritual position and are free of the influence from the externals around us, along with the various changing emotions or dualities that are seen and engaged in on the mental state in our material existence, then we are eternally balanced in *sudha sattva*, ultimate pure goodness. This is our natural state of being that becomes clear and is perceived in the state of complete self-realization or actual enlightenment. And this flows from us on a continual basis to the degree in which we are spiritually awakened.

Self-realization or enlightenment is also surrendering our false identity, our material conceptions and attachments into the ocean of nectar that is our devotion and love for God. This *rasa* or taste in the relationship we have with the Supreme can outweigh all other desires or cravings, and is that for which we all are ultimately searching. That is our home, and the basis for all our other longings. Once you attain that awakening, you are complete and whole in your self because you have established your connection with the Complete, as explained in the *Sri Isopanishad*.

So, how do we get there? How do we attain this level of enlightenment and spiritual awakening? Through *sadhana*, regulated spiritual practice, which is part of and the purpose of the yoga system. To purify our consciousness starts with purifying or spiritualizing our activities. For example, if we have a cup and we want to fill it with nectar, but it is filled with dirt, we first have to start taking out

the dirt. The more dirt we take out, the more nectar we can put into it. Similarly, the more nectar or bliss we want to put into our life, the more we have to start changing our activities to those which are based on or conducive to spiritual progress. This changes our consciousness. When our activities are purified, then our mind becomes purified or spiritualized. Thus, our desires are purified. When that happens, our consciousness becomes spiritualized. When that happens, material existence has nothing more to offer us. It is neither attractive nor repulsive to us—we are simply indifferent, or no longer interested.

In this way, spiritual realization, awakening, or enlightenment is the aim, goal, and success of human life. Only human existence offers the facility for the living entity to become spiritually enlightened. Therefore, we should not waste this life on mere animal or trivial base pursuits.

Actual enlightenment is the stage when one's realizations have matured into a way of life, not glimpses of the truth, but a constant reality that directs one's every action. This is when you know exactly what is to be done, the purpose of life, and can do nothing else but what takes you toward that goal. Others may or may not always understand such actions, but an enlightened person has complete singleness of purpose in all of his or her endeavors.

Spiritual enlightenment does not mean that you are always in a state of being blissed-out, and otherwise dysfunctional to being able to do anything else. But it means you now clearly see what is to be done in this life and can joyfully do it. When you have such clarity and you sincerely try to arrange your life to do what is essential, then the universe or even the Divine will give you the opportunity to act in such a way, or give you the means to perform such activities. In such a state, when there is unity between one's soul and the Supreme within, then the Divine may even work through such a person for the benefit of others.

With this kind of clarity you will know your true purpose and what you are meant to give to the world. Then you will also know there is no time to waste and will want to work diligently to accomplish what you are meant to do in this life.

Death is not the experience that automatically gives enlightenment or provides all the answers, as some people think. The experience of death will certainly provide additional insights and understanding. But, for the most part, the consciousness you develop in this life is carried over into the next, and from there you continue your development, and, ultimately, your search or quest for spiritual awakening. It is your state of mind and consciousness which attracts you to the situation in your next life that best accommodates you. That is why it is important to attain the highest level of enlightenment now, in this life, to attain the best possible situation in your next existence.

Once you have attained pure spiritual consciousness, either in this or some future existence, there will be no need for further births in the cycle of *samsara*, or life and death in this material world. You achieve the ultimate success by entering directly into the spiritual dimension and eternal life. This is real freedom and the attainment of real life, our natural spiritual state, which is above and beyond the emotional, mental, intellectual, or even subtle realms of this temporary material existence. Such a *jivanmukta* or liberated soul will have attained his or her status of enlightenment through the process of steady *sadhana* or spiritual practice, then realization, illumination, direct perception, and then full transcendental freedom. That is enlightenment.