

Already Enlightened

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Margot: Dear Sundari, thank you again for your very long and thorough email. You truly are very kind and generous. Sundari, I am wondering if it is something that you could possibly consider – that a person who had never heard about awakening and enlightenment, had never heard about Vedanta or any other enlightenment teaching and also never had a teacher – had nonetheless the awareness that “enlightenment” brings with it about the self, directly revealed. And that possibly such a person also is self-actualized by having the many *vasanas* burned out in the process of many years and truly lives all the various aspects that you have described in all your emails without having needed to have known anything about Vedanta. I’m just wondering because that is my case. Yet for some reason you keep presuming that I do not know anything about self-actualization and that I am in need of Vedanta to help me get there.

Sundari: Anything is possible, although the likelihood of all ignorance being removed without any teaching at all is very small. In all the 45 years James has been teaching he has never come across this, although he has met many highly-qualified people who needed almost no teaching. It could be that you fall into that range.

Margot: That is the “basis” I was describing. As long as you assume I am not “self-actualized” we cannot communicate from the same “basis,” because you will continue to take everything I say and give me explanations to make me understand things that I am already living. If you knew I am self-actualized (living from self with a tiny *vasana* load only operating minimally in my life, with the “doer” having burned out in 2006 and living life since then no longer from the awareness of the personal self existing) then I could begin to ask you questions that you would be able to answer at the level I would love to get some feedback from.

Sundari: I have no idea if you are self-actualised or not. It is not for me to say. And as I have previously said, unless you are one of those exceptionally rare beings who never needed any teaching at all, this is unlikely. I see you as the self, non-different from me, whether you are self-actualised or not; it makes no difference to awareness. I replied to you the way I did because of the terminology you used in your last emails to me, statements you made and the question you asked, which indicated that ignorance was present and you do not understand what self-knowledge is nor what non-dual vision is.

If I am incorrect and you don’t need any teaching, feel confident you know it all already, then there really is no need to write to us. What could there be to communicate about? We are not here to argue with you. I laid out the teaching for you and answered your question about what it means to be the self “as a woman.”

Margot: Words... again... are so tricky. How about you give me some practical samples of what life is like from a self-actualized perspective? The daily ins and outs of living life. That way I can

look to see if you are talking about something else when you talk about self-actualization. Would that be okay? Thanks. I look forward to that description.

~ Warm greetings, Margot

Sundari: This is the last chapter of James' latest book on the subject:

The Essence of Enlightenment, Chapter XIV: The Enlightened Person

If you are a humble inquirer who wants to know what you will be when you are enlightened, this chapter is for you. If you have a lot of energy invested in the idea that you are enlightened, you should read this chapter – or maybe you shouldn't, insofar as it may call your identity into question.

What is an "enlightened" person? Obviously, if reality is non-dual consciousness there are no enlightened persons. Enlightened people, like ordinary people, are nothing more than limitless awareness appearing as human beings. Or if you prefer a slightly less radical notion, can't accept that "people" is only an idea in awareness and want to think of it differently, you could say that everyone is enlightened, meaning each of us is illumined by awareness, "in the light," so to speak. In fact every living organism is enlightened according to this definition because without awareness nothing exists. You might even successfully argue that insentient objects are enlightened according to this definition because insentient objects only have meaning if they are known to exist and they can only be known to exist if consciousness illumines the knowing faculty, the subtle body.

Though true, these definitions of enlightenment are understood by very few indeed. In addition, they are certainly unpopular with those in the spiritual world who would use their idea of enlightenment as a special status or those who need a more liberal definition, one that allows them to impress, manipulate, intimidate, exploit and hoodwink unsuspecting seekers. You may believe that all spiritual people are somehow – well, "spiritual" – but you would be wrong. Spiritual people are just worldly people dressed up in special clothing. While they have a *vasana* for otherworldly intangibles, they are not necessarily immune to the assortment of everyday attractions favored by their worldly brothers and sisters: the pull of security, pleasure, power and fame.

The first definition denies the existence of the individual and the second voids the idea of enlightenment altogether. Enlightenment as the non-existence of an individual is not a workable idea. In addition to our nature as limitless awareness, we all enjoy a limited existence as ordinary human beings. As a normal person seeking freedom I need to know what enlightenment is and why I should seek it. So the question, "What is an enlightened person?" is relevant. How will my life look when I know who I really am? Remember, Vedanta is not concerned with the details of your personhood. These you know full well. You have lived with yourself for a long time and are quite familiar with your narrative. We do not denigrate, dismiss or diminish that person at all. We only say that that you have a much more spacious identity and that knowledge of that identity will make your life wonderful indeed.

Enlightenment is losing ignorance of that spacious, ever-free identity. Our teaching strips away the beliefs and opinions we have about ourselves, leaving us naked and free as we really are. In

our tradition we shy away from the word “enlightenment,” even though I have used it shamelessly in this chapter and in the title to make my book appealing because it is a popular word. Enlightenment is similar to the word “God” in that it can mean what you want it to mean. But generally we don’t endorse it, because it gives the impression that it is a special event that confers a special status, whereas it is much more simple and profound than that.

So far we have explained Vedanta’s view of reality and unfolded the tools needed to understand it. If you have been seeking for some time, and nearly everyone who is reading this book probably has, you will understand that, compared to the meager fare dished up in the modern spiritual soup kitchen, Vedanta is a classy joint that serves red meat: a time-tested, complete, seriously nutritious means of self-knowledge you can sink your spiritual teeth into.

Now we need to explain what freedom looks like to make your way easier as you wend your way through the spiritual marketplace and to guide you once you have realized who you are. You may think you have a choice but you have no choice about seeking; you are driven by a self whose powerful need for freedom will not be denied. We need to explain what it means to be free so you can avoid enlightenment sickness, bad teachings and bad teachers. Bad teachings are vague and incomplete teachings based on the personal experience of the teacher or cobbled together from books, that have no methodology and no epistemology. Bad teachings tend to deny the apparent reality and ignore any one or all of the obviously essential topics: the need for qualifications, *dharma*, values, the relationship between the apparent and the real, the relationship between experience and knowledge, the need for spiritual practice, the downside of action, the lack of a complete and dispassionate analysis of consciousness, the psyche and the material world, and finally, *Isvara* and the necessity of devotion to *Isvara*.

Enlightenment Sickness

Bad teachers are those who have not worked on themselves because they have been seduced by the idea that an epiphany or a series of epiphanies means that they are enlightened and are therefore qualified to teach. It so happens that epiphanies happen to individuals at every stage of evolution. They do not happen exclusively to saints. Bad teachers are rarely bad people. They are often charismatic and well-meaning, but unpurified individuals who have prematurely hung out a shingle advertising themselves as world saviors or they are ambitious people who would like to accomplish in enlightenment what they failed to accomplish in the “real” world. Rarely do they realize that spirituality is a *samsara* like none other, that enlightenment does not make them special nor does it lend gravitas to their words. It is quite amazing how utterly banal are the vices that have brought so many modern *gurus* down. Because of limited space, I will refrain from naming names.

A Fallen Yogi

Recently I received an email with a link to a blog by a reasonably famous teacher in the Neo-Advaita world. He said he was renouncing *guru*-dom to work on himself and become a “better person.” It was a surprising event because arrogant people invariably live in an ironclad state of denial, the better to project their emotional problems onto others. Evidently the chorus of angry voices that followed him for twenty-seven years swelled to such a din that it became too loud to ignore. His statement will undoubtedly be seen by some as a courageous act of contrition, the uplifting resolve of a newly-minted reprobate taking the first halting steps on the road to

redemption and by others as a disingenuous attempt to make the public believe that he was not forced to step down by his organization.

The real lesson, however, is not his personal story but what it says about his view of enlightenment, since it was behind this view that he perpetrated so much misery. Had he been taught by a proper teacher in a proper tradition he might have known what enlightenment is and hundreds, perhaps thousands, would have been spared much heartache.

He was obviously not enlightened by even the most liberal definition. What he called enlightenment was merely an epiphany that had a profound effect on his ego and convinced him that there was something “more” than his way of seeing at the time. It convinced him wrongly that “he” was “enlightened.” In fact enlightenment, as it is popularly conceived, is not something that happens, because there is only one eternal you – nothing ever happens from your point of view – and you are, have always been, and ever will be the light of awareness and the light alone. As such you are unborn and never die. Experiences are born and die. They do not change you and make you into something other than what you are. If you take yourself to be an experiencing entity, an ego, you will be apparently, but never actually, modified by what happens, spiritual or otherwise.

If I am awareness there is no way to conclude that I am special or unique. Or perhaps there is: since there is only one of me, I am unique. However, this fact is not helpful if you are looking for a way to distinguish yourself either, since there are no others to appreciate it. The understanding of my nature illumines the ego because the ego is just a notion of specialness and uniqueness. If I see my ego, it cannot be me. Vedanta does not want it to disappear or for it to transcend the world. It simply views it as an object, an idea of separateness. It should be noted once more that most of the mischief in the spiritual world over the centuries can be laid squarely at the feet of the idea of ego death and transcendence, two signature features of the experiential view of enlightenment.

What actually happened to our *yogi*? He imagined he had transcended himself, came to believe that he now inhabited a special experiential niche reserved only for the few and convinced himself that his epiphany empowered him to enlighten others. Along with it came the companion belief that the end justifies the means, opening the door to a remarkably abusive “teaching.” The craving for power, born of his sense of smallness and inadequacy, there from childhood, survived the epiphany – as such things do – and immediately outpictured in his environment with predictable results, blinding him to life’s number-one moral value, non-injury.

Although he spoke non-duality, his version of enlightenment is pure duality. It amounts to splitting the ego into a transcendental self and a self to be transcended. To make this idea work, the ego needs to be in a state of complete denial. It must imagine that the non-transcendent part of itself doesn’t exist. It didn’t exist for him, at least not officially, although it must have troubled him all along, but sadly it existed for his “devotees” – some say fools – until they put a stop to it – after twenty-seven years! To keep the myth of transcendence alive and transfer his or her emotional problems elsewhere, the enlightened one is forced to lay them at the feet of the devotees, usually immature sycophants who, for reasons related to their own self-esteem issues, believe in the myth of transcendence. Nobody is transcendent, because reality is non-dual. There is only one self. Ironically, the myth of ego death, aided by the *guru’s* attacks on the ego, is counterproductive insofar as it reinforces the belief that the seeker is the ego.

You are awareness and awareness is apparently other than what it perceives, meaning that what

it perceives is itself. During “awakening” moments you are actually experiencing yourself as you are, but ignorance survives these moments and projects the experience on the ego. Vedanta calls this phenomenon superimposition (*adyaropa*). I call it “enlightenment sickness.” It is a state of delusion. You think that what belongs to you, awareness, belongs to the ego. When the transcendent experience wears off you go back to the ego level, but now somehow believe you are something other than your ego. You declare yourself “enlightened” and imagine that you are qualified to teach others.

The Blades of a Fan

Although *karma* is one, it is described in three ways with reference to a *jiva*. The *karma* that will take place in the future as a result of actions you are doing now is called *agami karma*. The total store of *karma* that is standing in your account waiting to fructify is called *sanchita karma*, and the *karma* that is manifesting now is called *prarabdha karma*. It is a hot day and the fan in my room is on. It suddenly cools down and I switch off the fan two seconds before you enter the room. You remark that the fan is on, but I say it is off. Who is right?

The fan is on but it is off. An epiphany is just *karma*, an experience. It arises in the long queue of your experiences and subsides back into the queue to become a part of your story and perhaps a *vasana* that may or may not fructify again. This *vasana* does not obliterate the *sanchita karma* you have accumulated. The *sanchita*, all the tendencies that make up your apparent person from birth onwards – let’s leave reincarnation out of it – and manifest as the apparent person’s behavior in the world, has to work out. There is no logic to the idea that an epiphany, which is just a peculiar kind of short-lived *karma*, suddenly erases all the other *karmas* stored in your account, leaving you as a *karma*-less “enlightened” person, whatever that is. You are *karma*-less and beyond the world already – but not as a person.

The person stays. He or she chops wood and carries water just as before. If he or she suddenly jettisons jeans, t-shirts and a day job, dons flowing robes, puts up a website informing the world of his or her new status, refers to his or her former self in the third person, speaks unintelligible mumbo jumbo slowly in low tones and generally puts on airs, you will know that you have a poseur on your hands, not an enlightened person.

But when firm self-knowledge removes the last vestiges of ignorance there is a subtle shift from the point of view of the *jiva* to the point of view of awareness. You can’t say it is an experience and you can’t say it isn’t. It bears repeating that this shift does not change the *jiva* and its *karma*, at least not immediately. The knowledge destroys the notion that you are a *jiva* and changes the way you regard the *jiva*. When this happens the fan is off, meaning that while the body and mind continue to function as they did before the shift awareness does not identify with them. It seems they belong to another person. It is like watching yourself in a dream.

Once this shift is no longer shiftable you become very happy and there is a natural tendency to want to share your happiness with others. However, how you share it reveals whether you are enlightened or enlightenment-sick. Happiness attracts people. You needn’t say or do anything extraordinary to share it. It is a very subtle energy that shares itself. If you put a lit candle close to an unlit candle, the flame jumps from one to the other as if by magic. The idea that you need to “teach” enlightenment needs to be considered in light of this fact. The bliss of self-realization is different from the happiness that comes from happenings. Happenings unhappen. The bliss of self-realization doesn’t unhappen. It is constant, steady, and deepens as the subtle body is

purified by the knowledge.

This bliss is *Isvara* teaching through you. If you take credit for it and make people dependent on you without acknowledging the source, you are violating *dharma*. If you open your mouth and speak about enlightenment and your experience of it, you need to be very careful to speak the truth, not your idea of it, or you will mislead people, regardless of how happy they feel in your presence. Enlightenment without knowledge of *Isvara* is no enlightenment, because knowledge of *Isvara* makes you humble. Truth spoken by a humble teacher invariably clarifies, uplifts and upholds *dharma*. Truth coming from an unpurified mind only serves to confuse and leads to *adharma*.

Self-Realization/Self-Actualization

We make a distinction between realization and actualization because *dharma* trumps enlightenment. Or to express the issue differently, enlightenment is as enlightenment does. The idea that enlightenment somehow justifies *adharmic* behavior – popularly known as “crazy wisdom” – is one of the most pernicious and longstanding beliefs in the spiritual world. Fortunately, as the Western spiritual world matures, crazy wisdom does not seem to enjoy as much traction as it once did. However, there are still many *vasana*-laden individuals with low self-esteem who are susceptible to it. It probably happens because *jivas*, continually bedeviled by desires and fears too numerous to mention, find inhibiting rules inconvenient at best and threatening at worst, therefore they are inclined to cut corners. Depending on how you view it, the *dharma* field is a stifling matrix of laws designed to thwart the need to be free, a necessary evil insofar as it keeps life from sliding into the abyss at the hands of the wicked, or a benign structure that makes success possible. The alternative is chaos, which does not bode well for purposeful work and happiness.

To many, enlightenment seems to promise relief from *Isvara*'s myriad tyrannies. Without putting too fine a point on it, the *jiva* is often prone to feel that once it is enlightened it is free to do what it wants and reap no untoward consequences. It soon learns otherwise, although many transgressors are slow learners, like the teacher mentioned above, the power of the *vasanas* being what they are. However, until it learns its lesson it inflicts misery on itself and others. If you come by your enlightenment through an experiential teaching that ignores the qualifications, *dharma* and *Isvara*, and does not encourage a purification *sadhana*, you will be susceptible to the crazy wisdom disease or some variation thereof.

Essentially, all problems centered around enlightenment are a result of superimposition, confusing the self with the *jiva*. Since we are looking at enlightenment from the *jiva*'s perspective it is important to know that in all matters transformational *tamas* rules! Enlightenment – the hard and fast knowledge “I am limitless, non-dual, ordinary, awareness” – leaves the eternal *jiva* alone, but it does change the apparent *jiva*, the specific individual. If it doesn't, the knowledge is only intellectual. It changes the *jiva* because it renders binding *vasanas* non-binding and destroys the doer's sense of doership. How does it change the individual and how soon do the changes manifest?

Recently, in the first case of its kind in our lineage that I know of, a self-realized teacher lost his *ashrams*, money, power and – most significantly, his reputation – for sexually abusing his students. He got away with it for years, but eventually *Isvara* brought him down. I met him years ago, was impressed by his teaching and more or less endorsed him in spite of one small

inconsistency in his appearance. In our tradition teachers usually let their hair grow naturally and when it gets too unwieldy they shave it off and let it grow again. They are not unkempt, but they do not make an attempt to draw attention to their bodies. But this teacher was different. He put a little too much attention into his hair. He had a hairdo. Hair is fine, but a “do” is a little fishy in the context of the Vedanta *sampradaya*. Our tradition is definitely unlike the Neo-Advaita world where some *gurus* coif their hair, wear designer outfits and have facelifts! In any case, I did not think much about him over the intervening years, but whenever I did I was always amused by this peculiarity. When I heard about his self-imposed misfortune, it all made sense. He was insecure and vain and wanted to make himself attractive to women. He may have been self-realized but he was not self-actualized, because he was not attractive to himself. When you really know who you are, you are so attracted to yourself that you don’t care what people think.

Self-actualization means that your life reflects the teaching. You cannot wall off a particular *vasana*, refuse to apply the knowledge to it and claim to be self-actualized. The two most obvious *vasanas* that self-realized people are loath to examine in light of the knowledge are money and sex or, to quote a long-deceased teacher, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, “women and gold.”

Individuals, worldly or spiritual, who chase money are insecure. Money makes them feel secure. People who chase sex don’t feel good about themselves. Sex is the ultimate worldly pleasure and obsession with it is an attempt to compensate for low self-esteem. A self-actualized person is in a state of perpetual pleasure (*paramasukka*) because the self’s nature is bliss. Small blips of sexual bliss do not enthrall, coming as they do with an obvious downside.

There are other tendencies that often bedevil self-realized people, three of which deserve mention: power, love and respect. The first *guru* mentioned above was addicted to power, hence the psychological and physical abuse. Power-hungry *gurus* have low self-esteem born of a feeling of impotency and inadequacy. To compensate, they seek power. *Guru*-dom is an easy route to power insofar as the *guru* is dealing with a gullible public with its own self-esteem issues. A person who does not feel his or her own spiritual power will be attracted to and surrender to a powerful person, hoping one day to exercise such power. The sense of power that accompanies self-knowledge has nothing to do with power over people. It springs from the sense of mastery over the *vasanas* that comes with the firm knowledge that you are whole and complete. Knowing beyond a doubt that you are whole destroys the network of desires that render *jivas* powerless and dependent.

Guru-dom is also an easy route to respect. In most societies people respect intelligence and knowledge. Although it was obviously an irrational response by my elders, when I was young I was a bit of a devil and got myself into trouble here and there, but when it came to suffering the consequences I often got a pass because “James is such a bright boy. He does so well in school.” A *jiva* that does not respect itself will seek the approval and respect of others. Although it is a more benign impurity, teachers who are otherwise disinterested in money or sex may expect constant acts of devotion, indicating low self-esteem. When you go to a *guru* you are already primed with the idea that he or she knows more than you do, so you respect him or her. Of course you should respect your teacher, but not because he or she demands it.

The least intuitive and perhaps most benign impurity that bedevils the self-realized is the desire for love. If the desire to be loved motivated your search and you have figured out ways to get people to love you, you will feel you hit the jackpot when you realize who you are. Combined with your previous skill, you may use your newfound attractiveness to get a lot of people to love

you. Before you know it, a cult of personality will be centered on you. It is very hard to tell if the attraction is coming from the purity of the teacher's mind – like Ramana Maharshi – or a skillful manipulation of love-starved devotees by a cunning, needy *guru*. This kind of love is very needy. One sign is a total lack of appreciation of the need for boundaries. If you have this *vasana*, you will have people hanging on you day and night, sucking the love out of you. You will find yourself completely exhausted because you will be unable to say no. And you will not understand that you asked for it. Seeking or giving anything creates a *vasana* for more seeking and more giving because the doer has not been neutralized. All that is required to help the world understand is a pure mind, one that, like a prism, effortlessly reflects the great wisdom of *Isvara*.

The idea behind the self-actualization teaching is based on the understanding that life is very conservative. There are no radical changes, although it may seem so at times. Things do change, but they change incrementally. The body that was there when you realized who you are is the same body that you inhabit after you realize who you are. The basic structure of your personality, your *svadharma*, remains the same. Although in the euphoria of the rediscovery of your limitless nature, it seems like everything has changed, nothing has actually happened. One small doubt, the last uncertainty about your nature, dies – and life goes on. So self-actualization is a commitment to continue to apply the knowledge to your mind after you have realized who you are. If you worked out all your binding *vasanas* before you realized, you are self-actualized when you become self-realized and nothing needs to be done. The *sattvic* lifestyle and habits of mind that purified you will continue to serve once you know who you are. If self-realization destroyed the remaining binding *vasanas*, you are self-actualized when you realize. If you realize and still have binding *vasanas* – it is the norm in Western societies where seekers tend to have *rajasic/tamasic* lifestyles – you are only self-actualized when the last binding *vasana* bites the dust as a result of continued inquiry.

The Self-Actualized Person

So what do these enlightened people look like? The first thing to know is that you cannot tell by looking at them. They don't walk funny or float a few inches off the ground. They don't wear special clothing or sport halos. They can be found in every country and in all manner of occupations. They speak normally.

So what distinguishes them?

The most comprehensive definition of a self-actualized person is found in one of Vedanta's most important scriptures, the *Bhagavad Gita*. In it the perennial seeker asks his enlightened teacher to describe a person of "steady wisdom, one whose mind is not disturbed by anything and abides in the self."

The teacher replies, "When a person gives up desires as they appear in the mind and remains happy with only his or her self, he or she is a discriminating person."

The question itself removes the experiential idea and defines enlightenment as "steady wisdom." We have harped on this point sufficiently but the word "wisdom" needs a comment. Why the word "wisdom" and not the word "knowledge"? It does not use it, because knowledge is just knowledge. It is only useful when it has an impact on the mind. Wisdom is applied self-knowledge. It transforms the mind from a reactive instrument to a clear reflector of awareness.

What kind of mind does this person enjoy? A mind that is not disturbed by anything. Why is it not disturbed? It knows that nothing in this world is worthy of agitation, because nothing here is real. Earlier in the conversation, in response to the seeker's existential grief brought on by his contemplation of death, the teacher said, "The wise grieve neither for the dead nor for the living." If you go to a movie and a character loses all his money, you do not suffer grief, because his grief is only movie-grief. A self-actualized person always feels that what he or she experiences, including the experiencer, is just a play of consciousness cooked up by *maya*.

What makes the mind free of suffering? It "abides in the self." The mind is an interesting object. Its nature is that it has no nature of its own. It becomes whatever it is paying attention to. If it is paying attention to an emotion, for instance, it becomes emotional and moves here and there. If it pays attention to the self it becomes an abiding mind. An abiding mind stays put. Why does it remain with the self? Because the self is beautiful. It is love. It is peace.

In other verses on this topic the person of steady wisdom is referred to as a "discriminating" person. This person's mind abides in the self because the person – who is actually the self – knows the difference between the self and the objects appearing in the mind. He or she knows that objects disturb and the self fills the mind with bliss, so he keeps the mind on the self and it abides in bliss. It abides because the bliss of the self is always present, unlike objects, which come and go.

This person "doesn't yearn for pleasure and is free from longing, fear and anger."

Fools yearn for pleasure because they do not know that the self is *paramasukka*, limitless well-being. Because they feel incomplete, *jivas* don't feel good about themselves. But when a *jiva* realizes the self, he or she experiences the completeness and wholeness of the self. The self-actualized are free from fear and anger. Why are they free? For the same reason they don't long for things: they don't need anything to make themselves feel complete, so their desires dry up. Desire is painful and anger is painful. If your desires are neutralized, your angers are also neutralized by self-knowledge because fear and anger are just thwarted desire.

This person is "unattached to the outcome of all situations, does not rejoice in pleasant circumstances, nor is he or she uncomfortable in unpleasant situations."

The statement does not say that a self-actualized person experiences only pleasant circumstances. Uninformed seekers imagine that once they get enlightened their lives will become a bed of roses. These individuals do not understand *Isvara*. The self-actualized person's understanding takes *Isvara* into account. *Isvara* is the *dharma* field which delivers the enlightened person's situation at any moment, his or her *karma*. There is no escape from pleasant and unpleasant circumstances, because the enlightened person lives in the *dharma* field. But circumstances have no effect, because they belong to the field, not to the self.

"And if a person is able to withdraw his or her sense organs from the sense objects like a turtle withdraws its limbs, his or her knowledge is steady."

Because we live in the world, our senses are always active. But because sense contact with objects produces pleasure and pleasure creates *vasanas* for more pleasure, *jivas* can easily become prisoners of their senses. A self-actualized person is not averse to pleasure. The verse implies that his or her sense organs will be connected to objects. But self-knowledge saves the day because a self-realized person knows that the pleasure that comes from objects is actually a

faint, reflected, transient blip of the eternal bliss of awareness that is the self of all. Experiencing his or her self as the source of that bliss neutralizes the bliss *vasanas*, but not the bliss. Therefore a self-actualized person can step back from any experience and protect his or her apparent self.

“For one who does not feed the senses, the senses come back to the self, leaving the longing behind. When the self is known to be one’s self, even the longing goes away. When the mind no longer tries to connect the sense organs with their respective objects, it becomes permanently fulfilled. Pleasure arising from the contact of the organs and their objects is a source of pain because it begins and ends. The wise do not celebrate it.”

A self-actualized person knows that the senses are driven by the insatiable need for wholeness. If they are denied the objects they turn inward and center on the reflection of the bliss of awareness.

“Even for a person who practices *yoga* and whose goal is clear the senses can pull the mind away from the self. Keep your senses under control and contemplate Me (awareness) with a discriminating mind. Self-knowledge becomes established in a discriminating, controlled mind.”

You can take the word “*yoga*” in this statement to mean *jnana yoga*, self-inquiry. Although the verse is addressed to someone striving for liberation, the statement applies to self-realized individuals insofar as discrimination is also the means for self-actualization. Once you have realized who you are, it is still possible to lose your discrimination when binding *vasanas* arise, so you need to continue to apply the knowledge if you want the knowledge – and therefore the bliss – to be steady.

Recently a well-respected “enlightened” teacher declared himself unenlightened shortly after his wife left him for another man. His enlightenment, it seems, occurred in the context of a marriage, the basis of which had never been subjected to inquiry. He must have assumed that his wife would always love him. When he realized his assumption was untrue, his self-knowledge deserted him and he became emotional. Had he been a self-actualized person he would never have assumed that a worldly situation was not subject to change. Furthermore, a self-actualized person knows that the love for the object is actually love for the self in the object and would have been happy to see her pursue happiness according to her nature. Finally, non-duality means that the wife is none other than the self, as he is, and therefore that the wife could never part from him. A self-actualized person knows that “my wife” is only ignorance, claiming for *jiva* what actually belongs to *Isvara*.

Liberation is more than the knowledge “I am awareness.” It includes clear knowledge of the apparent reality which modifies the *jiva*’s life in the world. Here is the well-assimilated, self-actualized knowledge that is freedom. Again, the *Bhagavad Gita*: “When you dwell on objects attachment arises. Attachment causes desire and when desire is obstructed anger arises. An angry mind is easily deluded and delusion leads to the loss of memory. When memory goes the mind is incapacitated. And when the mind no longer functions properly one’s life is destroyed. Even when you move in the world of objects it is possible to attain tranquility if the sense organs are controlled and you stand apart from your likes and dislikes. Self-knowledge, easily established in a tranquil mind, destroys existential sorrow. But for the agitated mind there is no self-knowledge. Contemplation does not take place, and without contemplation on the self there is no peace. Without peace how can there be happiness? Self-knowledge will not stick in a mind distracted by changing sensations. They carry it away just as a strong wind carries a small boat

across the water, therefore the self-knowledge of one whose senses are free of their respective objects is steady. In that dark daylight world in which all beings sleep, the wise person who has mastered the senses is awake. Just as water flows into an ocean leaving the ocean unchanged, objects arising in the mind of a self-realized person leave it unchanged. But the desirer of objects is never peaceful. The one who abandons the belief in “I” and “mine” and moves through life without longing is peaceful. This is steadiness in the self. The self-realized are not deluded appearances.”

Self-realization takes place in the subtle body, but unless the knowledge impacts positively the emotions and one’s actions in the world as outlined in these verses is not actualized. The proof of the pudding is in the eating.

“The one who sees actionlessness in action and action in actionlessness is wise and has done everything that is to be done.”

A self-actualized person knows that when something is happening in the apparent reality, nothing is happening to the self. A person sitting in a stationary train that has been traveling in one direction will feel as if the train is moving when a train on an adjacent track moves in the opposite direction. Self-actualization is identifying with the unchanging station, not with the trains coming and going. From the station’s point of view, nothing is happening. The feeling “I am doing” is caused by ignorance. The “I” is always free of action.

“Actionlessness in action.” For example, a boat on the horizon rapidly moving out to sea will seem to be unmoving to a person standing on the seashore. Although apparently there is nothing happening, something is happening. A lot of people think that the knowledge “I am not the doer,” which is tantamount to self-realization, means that the doer does nothing. In India many people believe that a person who sits in one spot for years on end is enlightened because he or she is free of action. But sitting is an action, just like walking. It may give the appearance of inactivity, but it is an action nonetheless. The doer cannot help but act. It is always acting. Self-actualization is the understanding that freedom from action cannot be attained by doing nothing.

Understanding this, the self-actualized person is apparently engaged in the world like everyone else. “I am not the doer” means “I am limitless, non-dual, actionless awareness.” It is not a statement about the *jiva*.

“The sages say that a person is wise if his or her actions have been burned in the fire of self-knowledge. Such people act without desire for the results of their actions. Consequently they are content because they do not depend on results to make them happy. They are free of doership even when they act. Those who are free of expectations, whose bodies, minds and senses are well disciplined, who are free of attachment to possessions and act only to sustain the body, are happy with what comes by chance, unaffected by the opposites, without envy, even-minded in success and failure and free of the need to act while acting are free. The *karma* of those who are free from attachment, whose minds have been liberated by self-knowledge and who perform action as an offering is completely cleared.”

A self-actualized person is a *karma yogi* who does not practice *karma yoga* to purify the mind. The attitude is natural, effortless. *Karma yoga* is just a description of how the actionless self, appearing as a *jiva* empowered to act by the power of *Isvara/maya*, relates to action and its results.

This apparent person is actually the self. This person lives differently in the body from the rest of

us. While it seems as if this person is a he or a she, there is no feeling of gender for it. It doesn't think that it owns anything. It only acts to maintain the body because it doesn't need anything from the world. It is only here to enjoy. It waits for what it needs to come to it. It has complete faith in *Isvara* to take care of it. It doesn't want to be like anyone else – “free of envy.” It can act, but it need not act when subjective or objective situations demand a response. It sees its actions as contributing to, not extracting value from, its environment.

“Those who see no difference between a humble Brahmin endowed with knowledge and a cow, an elephant, a dog or a dog-eater are wise.”

Of course these people would not confuse a cow with an elephant, nor a dog and a dog-eater. They know that cow, elephant, dog and dog-eater are only thoughts in the mind, the essence of which is consciousness. A verse from the Yoga scriptures says, “A *yogi* in *samadhi* sees no difference between a lump of gold and the excreta of a crow.” This does not mean that such a person will try to deposit crow poop in the bank. It means that the essence of everything is consciousness. *Samadhi* is a compound word. *Sama* means “equal” and *dhi* is a contracted form of *buddhi*, which means “knowledge.” So the word means someone who “values everything equally.” If he or she sees other selves, he or she values them as much as he or she values his or her self. The obvious utility of this vision in terms of happiness is obvious insofar as people who see differences are continually conflicted.

“If you are awake to the self, revel in the self and are satisfied with the self alone, you are free.”

The self-actualized person is completely free of dependence on objects for happiness. Insofar as the absence of an object causes a sense of loss or the presence of an object is required to make you feel good, you are not self-actualized.

“You have attained liberation when you are no longer attached to the sense objects or to action and you have removed the cause of desire.”

Non-attachment to sense objects and action is not enough. You need to be free of ignorance of the wholeness of the self, insofar as it is the cause of desire. This is not to say that enlightened people do not have desires. It means that they don't take them to be commands or, as the verse above says, they “(can) give up desires as they appear in the mind.” It does not mean that they cannot act on the basis of desire. If reality is non-dual and desire exists it has to be the self – although the self is not desire. It is “the desire that is not opposed to *dharma*,” to use the *Gita's* words. In other words, a self-actualized person only does actions that are in harmony with *dharma*, the cosmic order. In the seeking phase and in the self-realization phase desires that spring from incompleteness and inadequacy are to be renounced. A self-actualized person has no desires that spring from a sense of inadequacy. His or her desires are *Isvara's* desires. Since *Isvara* is the source of *dharma*, there is no danger that such a person will act selfishly insofar as all of *Isvara's* desires relate to the maintenance of the cosmic order. You will only be attached to your own *vasanas*, not the *vasanas* of others.

A self-actualized person is not, however, required to act out *Isvara's* desires. To restrict him or her in this way would limit his or her freedom because the self is beyond *dharma* and *adharma*. Sometimes the interests of *dharma* are sustained by *adharmic* acts, so you may observe a self-actualized person occasionally breaking the rules. The question concerning action, which takes place in the *dharmic* order, is always about knowledge. What does a person know when he or she is acting? A self-realized person knows that *Isvara* is the doer but still has self-centered

vasanas left over from his or her stay in ignorance. He or she will not develop new *vasanas* because the ignorance is gone but he or she still has to put up with the effects of ignorance for some time. So discrimination is necessary for the self-realized until the effects of ignorance are reduced to ashes in the fire of self-knowledge. The self-actualized person knows that *Isvara* is the doer but does not need to discriminate, because his or her actions are automatically aligned with *Isvara's* desires, and because the effects of ignorance have been burned by self-knowledge. So selfish desire and action are no longer an issue. This is why scripture says that the self-actualized person is *Isvara*. He or she does not have the capacity to create, sustain or destroy the macrocosmic gross, subtle and causal bodies, but he or she is one up on *Isvara* and on *jiva* because he or she is actually the self and the self is unaffected by *jiva* and *Isvara*.

“The one from whom the world does not shrink, nor who shrinks from the world, who is self-reliant and stable, not inclined to initiate self-centered actions, who is not carried away by joy, anger or fear...”

One of the biggest problems for self-realized people is how to deal with the doer when it is clear that action and its results cannot complete them. They often feel disillusioned and adrift and seem to think that life is meaningless when they discover that it is a dream – “emptiness” is the most common word used to describe it. Most expected the doer to disappear and solve the problem of action. But the doer remains insofar as it *Isvara's* creation and is a necessary factor in the *karmic* stimulus-response mechanism. The doer is active as long as you are embodied. Because you are identified with the doer, you feel you have to cook up something new. One of the most obvious knee-jerk reactions to this problem is to hang out a shingle and “teach.” But this verse says that a self-actualized person does not “initiate self-centered actions,” because he or she is satisfied with the bliss of the self alone. The solution is to continue inquiry until you understand the difference between the doer and doership. Doership is the notion that you are the doer. When you truly understand the nature of the *gunas* the problem disappears because the *gunas* generate action without the doer's permission. In the euphoria of realization, the seeker realizes that there is nothing to do and gives up inquiry. But the scripture's statement that there is nothing to do for the self-realized does not mean that action is no longer required for successful living, only that actions centered around solving the identity issue are no longer necessary. So during this stage, you keep contemplating the teachings on action until the doubt is cleared. Self-inquiry is noble work. Once you know who you are your vision of your self expands to include the whole world. So the endless needs of others for freedom become your needs and you contribute in whatever way you can to helping them.

“The one who treats enemies and friends alike sees success and failure in the same light, remains unchanged when honored or disgraced, views pleasure and pain, heat and cold equally, stands free of objects, is disciplined in speech, has no place to call his own,” is self-explanatory. And finally, “Such people are not averse to any state of mind – even *tamas* – when it predominates. Nor do they long for any state of mind when it is gone.”

Finally, our definition of enlightenment includes how the self-actualized their states of mind. They are not bothered by bad feelings – *tamas* and *rajas* – so they don't expect the mind to feel good, because they know that their moods are controlled by the *gunas*.

The modern spiritual world, dominated by Neo-Advaita in the last twenty years, is not unlike the culture in which it has taken root. No blame. It took the Vedanta teaching, which is truly a science of consciousness, a couple of thousand years to develop into a refined comprehensive and

proven means of knowledge, so we cannot compare the two. Modern spirituality is a lazy, fast-food culture. It seeks the easy way, a quick fix. "There is nothing to do, no qualifications required; you can just get it," the hucksters claim. Because people are eager to distinguish themselves, they are susceptible to this message. They can't wait to be respected and loved, to gain an identity has real meaning, unlike the vast but insubstantial offerings to be plucked from the endless shelves of the supermarket of identities that is modern life. So a third-rate epiphany will suffice as a flimsy structure on which to construct a spiritual identity. "Eureka! I found gold. I'm enlightened!!!"

Vedanta's daunting list of the signs of enlightenment unfolded in this chapter separates the enlightened men from the boys. If you are tempted to think you are enlightened, particularly if your enlightenment involves informing others, you should carefully contemplate this chapter. It is a checklist. It will tell you where you stand. Has your self-knowledge transformed you into a truly cultivated human being or is your enlightenment simply a baseless claim? If you appreciate the comment of the thirteenth Zen master Dogen, the founder of Soto Zen, "Next to good manners enlightenment is the most important thing in the world," you are a great soul. If not, not.