

Enlightenment Myths

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We are going to examine a number of popular enlightenment teachings from the non-dual perspective. If they come up short as means of enlightenment, it does not mean that they have no value. Indeed some may be useful as practices to prepare the mind for self-knowledge. If you find yourself attached to one or more of these beliefs, this article will help you consider them from the non-dual perspective. Ultimately, you will have to determine the nature of reality through your own investigation, but if your inquiry is disinterested, you can only come to the conclusion: "I am and have always been ever-free, actionless, ordinary, non-dual, self-revealing awareness."

No-Mind, Blank Mind, Empty Mind, Stopped Mind

As the self is always enlightened, the idea that "no-mind" is enlightenment implies a duality between the awareness and thought. To say that the self is not experienceable when the mind is functioning means that the mind and the self enjoy the same order of reality, like a table and a chair. But experience shows that this is untrue. Do you cease to exist when you are thinking? Is there thought without awareness? In fact thoughts come from you, but you are much more than a thought. They depend on you, but you do not depend on them.

Does the mind hide the "I" and prevent you from experiencing it? For you to know that the mind is empty or thinking, you have to be aware. In both cases, with and without thought, I, awareness, am present. If I am aware at both times, I am not hidden by thought nor am I revealed by no-thought. Whether they are present or absent, I, the ever-free, ever-present self, is always directly experienced.

Awareness is always present. There is nothing you can do about it except know what it is and what it means to be awareness. It is ignorance of my nature as awareness that causes me to believe I can gain my self by stopping my mind or getting into a state of emptiness.

No Ego, Ego-Death

This popular so-called teaching vies with the no-thought teaching for top spot in the list of enlightenment myths.

Ego is the "I" notion, the idea we have about who we are. The list of identities that humans concoct in ignorance of their true identity is virtually limitless. Aside from the fact that there is no evidence that such an "I" exists apart from the thought that it exists, the absence of a limited identity does not equal enlightenment. If it did, plants and animals would be enlightened. And you would be enlightened in deep sleep because you have no identity there.

The teaching that the ego stands in the way of enlightenment is unworkable because the ego is the part of the self that wants to enjoy the results of its actions. If it killed itself it would not be there to enjoy the result, i.e. enlightenment. And if the ego is not conscious, it can only be a thought and no thought prevents the self from being and knowing itself.

If you believe this myth you are a sucker for the spiritual version of the Hollywood ending: the ego kills itself, somehow gets the permanent enlightenment experience and enjoys endless experiential bliss. If you accept the fact that there is only one self and it is already enlightened and effortlessly and eternally enjoying itself, then understanding, not ego-death, is enlightenment.

Nirvana

This idea is another negative formulation of enlightenment. *Nirvana* is a desireless state of mind. This view is based on the idea that desire is suffering, which it is. To say that you want something means that you are not happy with what you have. This teaching is unworkable because a desireless mind is a contradiction in terms. When, except during sleep, do you not want something? Even at the end of life you want to continue living if life is still good or you want to die if it is not.

On the surface the logic makes sense, but what is the cause of desire? Is it self-caused or is it the result of something else? If it is self-caused, then eliminating desire should eliminate suffering. But what if desire is an effect of self-ignorance? It is an effect of self-ignorance because there is only one self and it is a partless whole. It wants nothing. Will removing the effect remove the cause? Ignorance will not collapse when it is no longer supported by desire. It will just keep manufacturing more desires.

It also remains to be seen whether desire is always suffering. Desire is just awareness functioning as the creator, sustainer and destroyer of the world. As long as my desires do not cause me to violate the physical and moral laws operating in the creation, why should I remove them? I am free to fulfill them. Enlightenment is the hard and fast knowledge that “I am awareness and as such I am already free of desires, so their presence or absence has nothing to do with me.” Realize your nature and let desire be desire.

And finally, if I accept the contention that desire is suffering, how will I remove my desires without the desire to remove them? Once they are removed, who is doing to remove the desirer?

The Now

Not to put too fine a point on it, the basic idea of the “now” teachings is “I am enlightened when I am present. Living in the past and the future means I am unenlightened.” Aside from the fact that there is no time in a non-dual reality, let us inquire into this idea.

Does the word “now” refer to a period of time, which it certainly seems to, or is “now” a symbol for something else? If it refers to time, is there such a thing as objective time?

It is impossible to determine the nature of time, because time is relative to the desires and fears of individuals and to the relative intervals between experiences. If my desires are being met and I am enjoying, time passes quickly. If I am suffering terribly, time passes slowly.

Are the past, present and future actual divisions in consciousness or only conceptual divisions? If time is objective, then everyone would be able to determine just when the past ends and the now begins. Furthermore, when I am in the “now,” how long does the “now” remain the “now”? Is it one second? Two? One minute? More?

Assuming I am in the “now” and want to remain enlightened, I should know when the “now” begins and ends. I need to avoid falling back into the past and traveling into the future. Perhaps I should hop up out of the time continuum just before the end of the “now” and jump back into it just before the past appears, keeping in mind how much time passes until I have to hop out again. Even if I am sitting still in the “now,” I need to worry about the past and the future creeping into it.

Let’s assume that there is only now. Am I ever out of it? Experience only takes place in the present. How can you experience the past if it is not here? You can experience a memory, but the experience of memory does not take you to the past. The memory appears in awareness and is experienced now. The experience takes as long as it takes and means whatever it is interpreted to mean. The same logic applies to the future. Nothing is ever experienced in the future. You may think about something that you imagine will take place at another time, but if it happens, it only happens in the present when it appears in awareness.

Time is not linear. Objects appear in you, consciousness, last as long as they last with reference to how your desires and fears interpret them and then disappear back into consciousness. When they appear in that part of awareness called the mind, they seem to change, but in reality it is only the mind that changes.

If this is true, maybe “now” is a code word for the self, awareness. It is the humble opinion of the author that “now” is a misleading and inaccurate term for the self and should be banned from the spiritual debate because it is not helpful to refer to something that is eternal and out of time with a word that conveys a sense of time.

Experience of Oneness

To refute this idea let us try to pinpoint the location of objects. Do you experience them out there in the world or do you experience them in your mind? I experience them in my mind. How far is the object from your mind? Is it floating off the surface of the mind? No, it is not. Where is it then? It has merged into the mind and the mind has taken the shape of the object. The mind is formless, like water or air, and can take any form, just as gold can become any kind of object: a ring, a bracelet or a necklace. How far are you from your mind? Is your mind floating above the surface of your awareness? Is there a gap between you and your mind? Do you need a bridge to travel over the gap?

I do not. Why? Because my mind is me. It is awareness. If this is true, then what you experience is not only in awareness but it actually is awareness. The objects in awareness and the subject – awareness – are one. If this is true, then why do I need to experience oneness? I am already experiencing oneness with everything.

I want to experience oneness with everything when I am already experiencing oneness because I have identified with the thought of separation, which causes suffering. Instead of trying to remove the want by gaining the experience of a particular object, I should inquire into the thought of separation. Is it true? Am I really separate from my self? Or am I already the bliss that the object is meant to deliver?

Transcendental State, Fourth State

This myth asks us to experience enlightenment as a state beyond the mind. The mind is an interface through which awareness interacts with itself in the form of the gross elements. It is awareness in a form called *chitta*. The *chitta* makes it possible for awareness to apparently think, will, feel and remember. The mind is capable of a wide range of states, from the gross feelings associated with the physical body up to the most mystical and sublime *samadhis* of Yoga. All states are in the mind and all change because they are in the dream of duality.

The self is non-dual and therefore it is out of time. It does not, nor can it, change. It is that because of which the mind's many states are known. It is conscious, but states of mind are not conscious. They are subtle material energies only capable of reflecting consciousness. The subtler the mind, the more ethereal and luminous the states become. When you get to the interface between the self and the mind, the mind-stuff is so refined and the self so close that radiant "light" and intense bliss is experienced. It is very easy to mistake these higher states of mind for the self and think enlightenment is an amazing heavenly state or a state of endless experiential bliss. Experience belongs neither to the self nor to the mind. It occurs when awareness shines on the mind. Awareness and mind is the most fundamental duality.

Enlightenment is the nature of simple, unchanging awareness. It cannot be directly experienced as an object, because it is subtler than the mind, the instrument of experience. A subtle object can illumine a gross object, but a gross object cannot illumine a subtle object, so how is the ego/mind going to experience something that it is incapable of experiencing?

Enlightenment as Eternal Bliss

When someone accustomed to identifying with the ever-changing content of the mind wakes up to non-duality, the awakening is interpreted as a very positive event. When the mind reasserts itself, agitation and dullness reappear; when agitation and dullness are no longer acceptable, the mind becomes a seeker. The feeling of peace and bliss, which is an interpretation of non-duality by the mind, is brought on by the absence of suffering and not because awareness feels good. If you have been suffering a toothache for days and the tooth is extracted, it is the absence of pain that feels good, not the bliss of the extraction. You have actually just gone back to normal, not attained an exceptional state. Enlightenment does not feel like anything. It is simply the hard and fast knowledge that "I am limitless, partless awareness." When this knowledge is firm, it has a very positive effect on the mind, but it does not convert the mind into an endless-bliss machine.

However, it infuses the mind with a sense of authenticity, wholeness and rock-solid confidence. Henceforth the individual knows that it can weather any existential storm. When you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you are awareness, you no longer desire to feel good, because you know you are the source of goodness.

Enlightenment Is a Special Status

Enlightenment is not a special status. It is the default, the nature of the self. You are not getting something you do not have; you simply realize that what you sought so frantically you had all along. Enlightenment should be cause for embarrassment, not jubilation. When an obscenely obese person goes back to normal, he or she is lauded as a courageous super-being for overcoming long odds. Is not condemnation more appropriate because he or she allowed himself or herself to get into such a miserable condition in the first place?

The Myth Behind the Myths

Behind these and most enlightenment myths is the grand myth: enlightenment is a unique experiential state to be obtained through various methods. But enlightenment is not experiential, because reality is non-dual awareness. Furthermore, insofar as experience is a reality, each and every experience is only awareness/consciousness, the self, experiencing itself. Therefore enlightenment can only be hard and fast self-knowledge, only gained by the removal of self-ignorance.

All these myths are based on the seemingly justifiable assertion that the division between the subject, the experiencing entity, and the objects of experience are actually different. But the subject and the objects it experiences are not different. Reality is not the duality it seems. It is you, non-dual awareness.

This is a truncated article based on the “Enlightenment Myths” section in my book *How to Attain Enlightenment*, written for a Dutch publication.