

How to Recognize an Enlightened Being

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Pamela: Dear Ram, I hope you remember me. I met you in India seven years ago at Tiruvannamalai. I met you in that restaurant across from the Ramanashram. If you will recall, I was with X and I didn't like what you had to say about him. I thought you were very unfair and judgmental and I was happy that our conversation ended. I never expected to see you again, to be honest. Then the other day I was on the internet and I came across your website. It is a beautiful website and it was such a relief to find it. I read several things and then I became interested to know who put up this wonderful site and I discovered that it was you. I was amazed because, as I said, I didn't think much of you.

I won't bother you with the details, but I want you to know that you were right to warn me about X. I was completely in love and was not thinking clearly. I really thought he could set me free. But he turned out to be a monster, greedy and sexually depraved. I left him two years ago, but I still feel betrayed and used by him. I'm still trying to get my life together after him. It has been awful. Maybe I don't want to believe that I could have been so silly. Others told me about him too and told me about the websites of people who had the same experience, but I wouldn't believe it until it happened to me. At the same time I am starting to see that I put myself in this situation and wonder how I could have avoided it. I wish I had listened to you when you warned me but that is water under the bridge. Even though it hurts, it is a good lesson, I think. However, I don't know if I will be able to trust a teacher again and this makes me sad. Perhaps you will reply and give me some words about advice how to deal with this.

~ Sincerely, Pamela

Ram: Dear Pamela, I'm sorry, I don't recall our conversation, but I'm obviously not surprised that this happened. X is notorious in the spiritual world. It is a wonder that people still fall for him. No offense, but most Western people are quite naive about spirituality. They wrongly assume that because someone is "spiritual" they are together and practice what they preach. Some are okay, but there are many self-deluded "enlightened" people out there who can't wait to be *gurus* and there are some downright scoundrels, as you discovered. Yes, it's a good lesson. This happened to me with my first *guru*. It wasn't on the same level as yours, but he wasn't what he said he was and I figured it out soon enough to escape unharmed – by the grace of God.

It's probably best that you don't "trust" a teacher. My *guru* used to say that the more spiritual a person was the more suspicious you should be. If you want to trust anything, trust the scripture. It will not try to get you into bed and take your money. And the problem wasn't really about trusting the teacher, it was about trusting your feelings for the teacher. Feelings are notoriously unreliable – sometimes they are right on and sometimes they are completely wrong, so you need to not base your actions on your feelings. There should be a higher standard. And once you do act you should be ready to take any consequence as a gift from the self. You seem to be coming around to this point of view when you say that you think it was a good lesson.

What is the higher standard? It is knowledge of what enlightenment is. And what is that knowledge? That you are whole and complete as you are. This is the truth. So when a *guru* tries to tell you to do something or sets things up to make it easy for you to fall under his or her influence, ask yourself, "Will this make me complete? After all, what I'm looking for is completeness, wholeness. Can this person give me that?" The answer is always no. A *guru* has a very limited job and that is to point out that you are already enlightened with the help of proven teachings and encourage you to investigate to see if it is true or not. Nobody can give you what you already have. If you are immature you will have unfulfilled worldly needs – like the need to love or be loved – and this is exactly what unscrupulous *gurus* are looking for. Once you are convinced that the teacher can fill this emptiness, you are in trouble. Not all of them want sex and money. There are those who are so narcissistic that they only want to feel loved by many people. They are like politicians. They won't hurt you directly but they will waste your precious time because they will exert a hold over you – get you to "surrender" and the like – which will keep you from moving on. I'll quit now because I'm probably preaching to the choir – it seems you have learned your lesson, painful as it was.

In any case, I recently wrote an article which I entitled *How to Recognize an Enlightened Being* that might be useful. There is no use crying over spilled milk. You obviously have a desire for the truth and you shouldn't let what happened hold you back. There are good teachers out there and perhaps this experience plus some thought about the ideas in this article might help. All the best.

~ Ram

How to Recognize an Enlightened Being

If reality is non-dual – which it is – and the nature of reality is awareness, everyone and everything is enlightened by default, light being a symbol of awareness. In other words, everyone and everything exists by virtue of awareness and exists in awareness as awareness. Without awareness nothing can be known, because objects are not self-aware. A few individuals understand that they are non-separate from awareness, the knowing principle. It is their primary identity. In spite of the non-dual nature of reality there is a power in it that prevents most from appreciating their enlightenment. So the word "enlightenment" has a secondary meaning: the awakening of an individual to this fact. This awakening is also called self-realization because the self is awareness. Although we are enlightened all along, at some point in our journeys we become aware of it.

Although there are very rare exceptions, the self-realization of most people happens when several factors converge. The first is a burning desire for enlightenment. One is fed up with one's suffering and wants out. This desire is extremely important, but it is not enough. One also needs a discriminating, dispassionate mind and other qualities like faith and determination to succeed. Second, because self-ignorance is so difficult to remove one needs help. This help is available in the form of teachings that dispel one's ignorance. But not any teachings will do. Many claim enlightenment, interpret their experience of it and call this a teaching but it is not enough, because the experience of enlightenment is not enlightenment. Enlightenment is self-realization and the self is not available for experience, because it is beyond all our available means of knowledge. So you need a teaching that reveals the self for any qualified person. You need a universal, valid means of self-knowledge. Vedanta is such a teaching because it has removed the self-ignorance of

many over a long period of time – several thousands of years.

A third factor is as important as the eligibility of the seeker and the proven reliability of the teaching: the teacher. One should associate with someone who is self-realized. This is a problem because if you don't know what enlightenment is – and you wouldn't if you were seeking it – how do you tell if someone else is enlightened? And another issue compounds this problem. Someone can have an experience that awakens them to their real nature but fall again under the spell of self-ignorance when the experience stops – which it inevitably does insofar as experience is impermanent. So experiential enlightenment is no enlightenment. If during an experience of non-duality one understands that one is the self and that understanding survives the experience and one sees that whatever one is experiencing is the self and abandons the attempt to get that experience back, then that person is “permanently” enlightened, meaning their self-knowledge is unshakable. This is a subtle but important distinction because most “enlightened” teachers are not enlightened according to this definition. They have had an experience of non-duality which may have lasted long enough to convince them that the experience was “permanent” and on the basis of this experience they declare themselves enlightened, only to have their minds – the instrument of experience and knowledge – pulled away from the self by strong subconscious tendencies and returned to endarkenment.

One of the greatest human weaknesses is the desire for approval. So if experiential enlightenment happens outside a traditional lineage and one does not have the good sense to sit in a cave for some years – like Ramana Maharshi – to see what it is all about, one is so excited about one's enlightenment that one feels immediately compelled to tell everyone one meets of this incredible discovery, rather like a child that has just discovered that water is wet. It's an understandable reaction, but it has a downside insofar as once you make yourself attractive to others and excite their expectations of permanent freedom you had better be able to deliver the goods. Or you will have to hope that they will be satisfied with some kind of enlightenment experiences, which they may or may not get in your presence. Unfortunately, no experience is permanently satisfying, including the experience of absolute bliss – because it is only experiential. Not only will you disappoint others, but when your epiphany wears off and you fall again under the spell of your worldly tendencies, you will feel like a fraud. And it will be hard to get out from under your enlightenment because of the expectations of others. Most would-be teachers of enlightenment realize their mistake and slowly fade away, but some are so enthralled with their new identity – “I'm an enlightened being, ain't I great!” – that they keep perpetuating the myth of experiential enlightenment and convince their disciples that it is the disciple's fault that he or she isn't “getting it.” Usually it is, insofar as someone who is actually ready for enlightenment will not be attracted to a fraud. But it is not the whole truth, because even a well-qualified person who has a teacher selling experiential enlightenment will not realize the self. People are easily seduced by promises of a wonderful experience.

When you realize that you are non-dual awareness and not the body-mind/ego entity you realize that you are whole and complete. If the realization is genuine it will have an effect on your behavior. It will change the way you live because you will stop chasing things in the dream of *maya*. You will not stop acting; in fact self-realization releases a lot of pent-up energy and you may act more dynamically. But your actions will not be motivated by grasping, greed and fear. You will not try to create situations that will enhance your pleasure or your security or your reputation. Why? Because you know that anything you might do and the results that it might bring

can in no way add to your sense of fullness and completeness. You know that you are the supreme pleasure. You know that you are the support of the whole universe. So there is nothing for you to get or to protect.

The only way to tell if someone's enlightenment is genuine is to get into his or her life and carefully observe them over a long period of time. It is not possible to fake fullness, completeness, in the long run. If you feel incomplete that incompleteness will come out in many ways over and over again. But it is easy to fake incompleteness for a short time in public situations. You can speak wonderfully inspiring words on the stage and curse your wife when you get home. You can sit in silence with a silly grin on your face and everyone will think you are fully enlightened, but when you open your mouth the duality will gush out. People want to believe, they want to think the best. They do not want to think that they are fools. Their intuition is important to them even though intuition is remarkably fickle because it is tied intimately to one's fears and desires.

It is easy to be fooled – if you give the benefit of the doubt to someone claiming to be enlightened. This is why you should not treat an enlightened person as if they were special. You should never lose your discrimination and “surrender” to anyone. Surrender to the proven scriptural teachings but not to a person, no matter how holy. A person whose enlightenment is genuine will act like a regular person and not expect special treatment. He or she will be an embodiment of *dharma*. This means that they will consider your needs to be as important as their own, perhaps more so. There is a Sanskrit saying that embodies this truth: “*bhakta bhaktiman*.” It means that the self is the devotee of the devotee. So you will get the feeling from this person that they are there to serve you, not the other way around. They will not ask for your money and they may or may not take it when you offer. They will not ask for anything. When they are given things they will not be happier. When someone or something is lost they will not be sad.

It is also easy to be fooled because the spiritual world, like the “real” world, is also prone to superstition and fear. When you want something from someone you immediately become afraid that you will not get what you want. You put them on a pedestal and grovel at their feet. When you get a group of people with the same desire – to get enlightened – your fears and superstitions are magnified by the group energy and this creates a huge barrier between you and the *guru*. The history of spiritual culture is not only the history of great triumphs, it is the history of the wretched excesses of fools who turned ordinary people into capricious gods and then suffered at the hands of their self-created deities.

Enlightenment may be a big deal to someone suffering the disease of ignorance, but it is not a big deal to someone who knows the truth of their nature. When a person loses three hundred pounds they are hailed as a hero, given TV interviews and offered big bucks to sponsor diet products. People speak of their determination and courage and everyone is inspired and happy. But what is forgotten in all the hoopla is the sad fact that the person was so degenerate that he or she allowed himself or herself to deteriorate to such a degree. When you “get enlightened” you are not getting something you didn't already have. So are you great because you found what was lost? You are not; you are a fool for losing it. You should keep your mouth shut because to say “I'm enlightened” only calls attention to a long stay in ignorance.

“Residual *karmas*” further complicate the problem of how to tell if a person is enlightened.

“Residual *karmas*” are the tendencies in a self-realized person’s subconscious that were formed before self-realization. In this case you have somebody who knows who they are but there are still traces of selfish behavior in them. Only a mature, non-attached person can learn from this kind of realized soul. I know several self-realized people who had this kind of *guru* – and I know many who were “burned” by their association with someone in this situation. The difference was that the former were mature individuals and the latter immature. This is why the scriptures insist that someone seeking enlightenment have good discrimination and deep dispassion. This is also why the scriptures recommend that one “sit in a cave” for ten years after enlightenment like Ramana – until all the residual tendencies exhaust. If the enlightenment is genuine they will burn out because they will not be reinforced. If a person claiming enlightenment uses their enlightenment to develop *vasanas* for fame, power and wealth, how are they different from any *samsari*? People say Osho was enlightened. At the same time he wasn’t happy with only ninety-three Rolls Royces. He needed a different one for every day of the year. He didn’t like the shortness of his body, so he wore elevator shoes. What kind of completeness is that? I’ve seen pictures of *satsangs* where he was flanked by men with machine guns facing the devotees. How fearless is that?

People should go to *gurus* because they have had enough of the world. They do not need to associate with people who are full of desire. They have been doing this all along. They are full of desire themselves – and it does not feel good. People have had enough of doing things. If a *guru* tells you that you have to do a lot of work to get enlightened, how is this any different from what you have been doing all along? You may think that you are doing something “spiritual” and this may make you feel better, but you are not getting rid of the doer. You are just reinforcing the *vasanas* for doership. The realization of the self is the realization “I am the self.” The self is not a doer. So how does it help you to do a lot of “spiritual” practices in service of the *guru* or at the behest of a *guru*? A *guru* should show you the truth. Period. It will do the rest.

There are many signs of enlightenment. Almost all the Vedanta texts have sections describing enlightenment in terms of human beings, *Panchadasji*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, Shankara’s and many others. Of course in reality we know that there are no human beings, no ignorance and no liberation. There is only one non-dual, self-luminous, self-revealing awareness. If you want to know if someone is enlightened ask them. If they say “yes” then ask what they mean by enlightenment and ask if you can hang out with them to see if their words and their actions correspond. If they say “no” ask if you can hang out and see how they behave. You may find that they live such impeccable lives and have such healthy minds that it doesn’t matter whether or not they are enlightened. After all, enlightenment is only useful insofar as it makes life here on earth easy and joyful. If they say, “I can’t say I’m enlightened nor can I say I’m unenlightened,” ask if you can be their disciple. You might figure it out.