



Awakening Versus Liberation

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There is a well-known personality on Facebook named Tony O'Clery. Tony is the bane of all Facebook gurus. He prides himself as being absolutely honest and straightforward with his critical assessments, stating none of these gurus are Muktis, those who are completely liberated, completely empty. He said no one should listen to Facebook gurus because the "true teachings" of fully liberated Muktis are always available in the writings of Ramana Maharishi and Nisargadatta Maharaj. For O'Clery, no teacher is valuable unless he is a Mukti, and the two Muktis he advocates are dead, therefore nothing more be said, and O'Clery appoints himself as their living spokesperson and virtual attack dog.

But what is O'Clery pointing to? For him there is no half measure. There is no value in any guru unless he or she has the supreme awakening that he attributes to Ramana or Nisargadatta. Everything and everyone else falls far short of his divine measuring stick.

When I first started practicing Zen at Mount Baldy Zen Center, we would have four or five groups of sitting sessions a day, in groups of two or three, 25 minute sessions. We would have chanting twice a day, and a talk once a day by Sasaki Roshi. After just a few days of intense sitting, I would go into Samadhi. First, my

brain would become hard like a rock and no thinking could penetrate my brain. Then it felt as if my mind were sinking into my chest, and I was going unconscious. Briefly for a moment I would feel as if I lost consciousness, then all of a sudden the mind would drop like a rock and dissipate entirely, revealing an entirely new world of oneness, intense clarity, with no thought, and no separation between me and any objects. I had literally become everything in my consciousness: the sound of an airplane passing in the sky, the call of a crow, the sound of the wind; my body had disappeared, and there was absolutely stillness everywhere. Every perception was intense and vivid. I had become the entire universe of my perception. My entire manifest world was now me, and I no longer had a body or mind. I had become everything.

This is Nirvakalpa Samadhi, a temporary unicity state of mind where the thinking mind does not function, and no longer imposes an artificial order on the perceived universe. Instead, I became one with consciousness. In a sense, this is an awakening experience, this shows you what life is like without the mind, without the network of thought that shapes your perception. Nirvakalpa Samadhi is the world as perceived by an infant, filled with awe and beauty, and newness.

It is said that one must practice Nirvakalpa Samadhis many, many years until the state becomes permanent, the so-called Sahaja Samadhi, which supposedly was the final state that one achieves which identifies you as liberated, or a Mukti.

However, after experiencing this state literally thousands of times over the next few years, I was deeply disappointed that I was still the same person after meditation was over. I was not transformed. I did not have any great knowledge. I did not feel any smarter. I did not feel enlightened. In fact, I felt like a failure because I had experienced all these Samadhis, but they have not convinced me that the world that they revealed was any more real than the everyday world I lived in.

Then in 1995 I had two awakening experiences described on my website www.wearesentience.com.

One day, looking within for the 'I' for the millionth time, I found there was no "I" anywhere. There was no me! There was no subjective entity inside that the word

'I' pointed to, or that the two words "Ed Muzika" pointed to. In fact there was no one home to watch the store so to speak. It was quite scary. All that there was, was emptiness inside; and without an I inside, there was no opposing "thou" outside. Again the distinction between inner and outer disappeared, and there was only one consciousness, and all the objects in my consciousness were actually formed by my mind, which covered over that subjective reality I had perceived in Nirvakalpa Samadhis. Yet this, this awakening was different. It was not just an experience, it was also a knowledge, a knowing that I, as a person, did not exist AS AN OBJECT of any sort, even in my own subjectivity! That is, I was not in this world. I was not out of this world. I was the world! This time, the experience gave me a knowing.

This again was a unicity experience of the disappearance of me, and the identification this time was not with the manifestation as before, but with the emptiness that contained all the manifestations.

Two weeks later I had a second experience where I suddenly witnessed that the states of consciousness come and go through me, and I felt that I existed separate from them and they did not touch me, whatever I was, and I had no idea what was. That is, I realized that everything, everything in life, all the objects in the drama of the waking state, and the dream state, as well as the absolute dissolution of consciousness in the deep sleep state, were like clouds that pass through me or by me, and with which I temporarily identified, but my real identity had nothing to do with them. That is, I now found I was not "of" this world; I was something entirely beyond this existence which flashed and changed so much. I was apart, solid, permanent and real. This was another self-realization. ^[1]

Robert accepted the second of these experiences as enlightenment. As he said, you're either awake or you're not. I was now awakened to the nature of mind and consciousness and the real me from which the world sprang, and I could now witness as "other."

Yet, later, I was grabbed by a great depression after that awakening caused by Robert's death and the death of my favorite cat. That depression lasted for three

years. You might also say my “self” was also dying, and that too caused a depression. So here I was, awakened but depressed. So what is the story here?

As you know, for the last six months or so, instead of talking straight Advaita, I started talking about Bhakta, and the need for love to complete the journey back into humanity, the marketplace.

I talked about enlightenment like reaching first and second base as in baseball, and the journey back as going home, filled with the drama of being human, facing your own vulnerability and brokenness, and this was essential for completion of the path.

A few days ago Janet Beier sent me the quote as follows by Ramana Maharshi. She had found confirmation of the spiritual path I am now teaching in Ramana’s own writings!

Question: What are kevala nirvikalpa samadhi and sahaja nirvikalpa samadhi?

Ramana Maharshi: The immersion of the mind in the Self, but without its destruction, is kevala nirvikalpa samadhi. In this state one is not free from vasanas^[2] and so one does not therefore attain mukti. Only after the vasanas have been destroyed can one attain liberation.

Question: When can one practice sahaja samadhi?

Ramana Maharshi: Even from the beginning. Even though one practices kevala nirvikalpa samadhi for years together, if one has not rooted out the vasanas one will not attain liberation.

Janet was quite excited by what she had found; it was a key! I listened and too saw the elegance with which Ramana laid out the path with utter simplicity and clarity. Ramana had pointed out that there was a difference between someone who attained all of those Samadhis I had experienced at Mount Baldy which were temporary and did not touch me in the sense of transforming me into happiness and peace, and liberation.

But can we not take this even further? Even though Robert said you are either awake or are not, you are either enlightened or not, that does not mean there is

no movement after awakening. To be truly liberated, to entered the state of Mukti, and to be considered a Mukti, one must personally become completely empty, **as empty as those states empty of self-reflection, self-awareness, that Nirvakalpa samadhi had revealed.**

In other words, the Mount Baldy Samadhis, and the collapse of the conceptual self, the collapse of and seeing through the "I-thought" which collapses the external conceptual world around us, leaving once again unicity, were still just awakening experiences, and not final liberation.

Remember, after Robert had his awakening experiences and studied under several teachers including Ramana, he spent 17 years wandering through India, visiting many masters and teachers. As he stated, he wanted to make sure he missed nothing. Also in his life he got married and raised a family, raised many foster children. He worked as a handyman, and also as a spiritual teacher at various times in his life. But when I knew him, he had become completely empty, entirely done with the world. But he had not been through with the world for many, many years, otherwise he never would've become a householder, or ceaselessly sought after other masters to see if there was something left he had not mastered himself.

Awakening experiences collapse the world of concepts and of "egoic" self, revealing various kinds of emptiness. In a sense this turns on the light that shows us the rest of our path. The rest of our path is to empty ourselves of all of our vasanas, our ego needs, our imperfections, our brokenness, our tendencies, our dispositions, our memories, and reactivity to external events.

Awakening is not just experiencing special states, or having a revelation of the nature of consciousness. These states and revelations really just show us the path to become empty of our personal selves, empty of all expectation, no longer reactive to external events, slights, personal injuries, hatreds, jealousies or hurts of thousand of sorts. That is, most Advaita people who through self inquiry attain an awakening such as did I, or the Nirvakalpa experiences of Zen, still had a very long way to go to become liberated. This distinction is between awakening and liberation.

Janet had nailed it! The implications are enormous. The neo-Advaitins that fill Facebook and our current scourge on the religious landscape advise only look into yourself, find that there is no I anywhere. There's nothing more to do. No more seeking. No more effort. Everything is revealed. You are complete, perfect as you are.

No you are not. If you are lucky, very lucky, you had a real awakening experience that will change your life, and not just a conceptual understanding of no-self, because it is so easy to accept an understanding as awakening or liberation, when it is not, it is only another set of concepts, a new belief system which must be later dropped by a true experience of emptiness and unicity.

The reality of spiritual paths are they are more difficult than most people want to deal with. It is so easy to quit once the full difficulty is understood, and accept nonduality as our reality as a belief with no further effort necessary.

I think that most people that follow the neo-Advaita credo, accept the concept that they are complete as is, and they stop seeking, they stop doing spiritual effort, and believe there is nothing more to be said.

Yet, all the psychopathology is still there. All the buried hurts are still there. All the vulnerabilities are still there. All the neediness is still there. Very few of the neo-Advaitins talk about the effort to perfect one's emptiness through effort and confrontation, whether in psychotherapy, whether in relationships, or in further spiritual practices after that initial "awakening," which may not be an awakening. One may find out only years later that the supposed awakening was only a deeply accepted belief system.

I believe that what is revealed in various awakenings are different levels of Void or emptiness, both personal and transcendental, and the ontological place of those things that fill those differing voids, such as consciousness, one's sense of presence, the I am, as well as the entire manifest world. Our effort then is to expose and work through everything in our personality, consciousness and unconscious existence until we, as personalities, are as empty as the voids and purity of presence revealed in our various Samadhis and ecstasies.

Let us say we've obtained an awakening. We attained identification with a certain kind of unicity, such as identification with the manifest world without the interference of mind, Nirvakalpa Samadhi, what then?

Well, it is really obvious: a world, a reality we did not know, the world of the child was revealed to us in Nirvakalpa Samadhi, and it is a world without the interference of thinking. Our "identity" sinks into a deeper level of self where the mind is no longer predominant. In a sense we have transcended the mind by going deeper than the mind, going deeper into ourselves, into a level of self that yogis call the subtle and causal bodies. Our task then is to bring this deeper level of self back into the marketplace, into our day-to-day lives in interactions with other people, and to have that child-nakedness confront the demons of the unconscious as they arise in interactions.

The very great Zen master Joshu was asked how many Satoris or awakenings had he had. Joshu responded that he had 17 great awakenings and thousands of minor awakenings. Joshu spent 60 years between the time of his first awakening and when he first accepted students. He spent 60 years after the first awakening, expanding and deepening it, and then bringing it into his personal life and returning to the world.

Take the example of Nisargadatta. He met his teacher in 1933 and had his awakening in 1936. He then traveled as a wandering monk for two years visiting many shrines, temples, and teachers across India, until he recognized there was no difference in his beingness no matter where he was. So he returned home to his wife and business in 1938. Apparently he spend many years discussing all aspects of consciousness and the absolute with another disciple of his teacher, wherein they both worked out the concepts he put forward in the book "I Am That." He did not accept students for another 13 years, in 1951. You see, he was still maturing, learning, changing, even though he already had a firm grasp on the absolute.

So all of the great ones had a post awakening sadhana, including Ramana Maharishi, who spent many years sitting alone in Samadhi before he ever accepted his first student.

Yet on Facebook we find teachers who have awakened months or a year before, and are already teaching everyone, without a word about post-enlightenment sadhana, one's post awakening struggles and the need to expose and dissolve unconscious tendencies, developmental impasses, and all kinds of relationship issues which come out because of love for the other.

There is yet another key, as stated by Janet and with which I fully agree: the work on one's personal self, the working through the vasanas, all the anger, hurt, vulnerabilities, greediness, jealousies, tendencies, habits, that are rooted in our persona, is for most of us motivated solely by love, our love for beingness, whether in ourselves or in others. The more empty we become, the more we can see and "meet" ourselves in others; we see our own beingness in the eyes of the "other," whether that other be a person, an animal, or God. That same sentience, the sense of subject, the Absolute, runs through all of us. We are One, one sentience with 100 billion sets of eyes.

That love for sentience, whether for ourselves or for others, is a liberating force that leads one both to find final liberation, and depending on the path, also to the initial awakening.

Bhaktis, such as the Sufis, from beginning to end, work with love and devotion to surrender themselves, to become more and more empty. They may have awakening experiences along the way which reveal to them how much more deeply they have to humble and empty themselves. It becomes clear to them, when they see the pristine clarity of what I call the breath of God in and around themselves and others, what they must do next to purify themselves, to become ever more empty of selfishness, and to become of service to others.

Love is the divine energy that ultimately propels most of us to liberation, as much as the love for knowledge drives others to Zen and Advaita-like awakenings.

O'Clery is absolutely wrong. Yes, one can get great teachings, great insights and great methods from Ramana and Nisargadatta, but the value of a living guru cannot be denied. Every moment I was around Robert, I was feeling his emptiness, which penetrated my bones. It was an example of how I could and should be. And as Robert admitted, he was always working on me, cooking me,

putting me in situations where I felt uncomfortable, got angry or jealous, and exposed my "issues" to deal with them so they would not arise again. He was working on me to become personally more empty, more humble, more modest, more surrendered to him and life.

Yes, Robert was a Mukti, and it is solely God that operated through him, so to speak, but that does not mean you need to be in the presence of a Mukti to awaken. One might say, as with parenting, a good-enough guru will do, one whose life reflects honor, integrity and truth. In fact, a deep and loving relationship with another, where both are willing and able to go deep, and who share a deep bond of love and deep trust, can do wonders in both cooking each other, and burning through vasanas in relatively short order. If one is open, honest, and courageous, almost every situation can help us become more pure, more like the breath of the divine.

Thus the love of a good enough guru, or of a "soulmate" is essential to galvanize one's spiritual efforts and travel along one's own path to completion. Rarely is one's love of a dead guru found in books, or for God, enough to keep us going, while a relationship with a guru or lover can take you all the way.

Using this model of the distinction between awakening and liberation, and rooting out the personal "issues" in our lives, we destroy the idea of the separation of Bhaki and Jnana. One can be doing both, both the apparently preparatory work of purification, which is identical to the post-awakening work of rooting out vasanas. This means that the methods of jnanis and bhaktis can be complementary, and not contradictory or mutually exclusive, or necessarily sequential. A person can do meditation, chant ecstatic sacred chants, be a devotee of a guru or lover, have a family and children, seek God and knowledge all in the same breath. One can seek and experience various Samadhis and transcendental states, even awaken, and still be engaged in clearing up vasanas either through meditation, burning at the feet of a guru or lover, or raising children and working a 9 to 5 job.

However, I highly, highly recommend that when it comes to spirituality, you select one guru and one method as your focus, and all the rest will fall into place. Otherwise, visiting many gurus, reading many books, and trying many practices

will ONLY LEAD TO confusion and the dissipation of spiritual energy, Samadhi-power, will rob your endeavors of the energy necessary for liberation.

[1] It is clear that all spiritual paths are about “opening” our awareness to new experiences, which allow us to change that with which we identify. That is, I was able to identify myself, not just with my ordinary, pre-awakening everyday world, but also as the totality of manifestation and Oneness, and later as the totality of the emptiness that contained everything. Awakening allows us the options of changing that with which we identify as self. The pre and post awakening paths also reveal, when love and ecstasy become strong enough, that we are not humans, we are love itself, God and Knowledge, not a body, not a mind.

[2] Definition of Vasanas: karmic residues, unconscious propensities, disposition, habit energy, thought, habit formation, habitual pattern, impression, imprint, inclination, inherent tendency, karmic impression, predispositions; mental imprint, negative psychic imprint, potentiality, predisposition, propensity. We should include here all the qualities and tendencies of the unconscious mind, developmental failures, childhood psychic injuries, etc.

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