

Variety - the Spice of Enlightenment

After reading your never-a-dull-moment last issue (What is Enlightenment), I found myself repeating the famous words of Omar Khayam:

Myself when young did eagerly frequent
Doctor and saint, and heard great argument
About it and about, but evermore
Came out by that same door wherein I went.

Thus the Advaitists tell us that:

Enlightenment means realizing that. “ you are not the doer. “
Enlightenment means realizing that the Absolute is the only doer.
Enlightenment means realizing that your *are* THAT .
So - enlightenment leaves you back as the doer after all!

Then Peter Masefield tells us that in the original Buddhist teaching:

The Noble Eightfold Path leads to enlightenment.
The first step of that path is a right view of Reality
A right view of Reality is possible only after enlightenment.
So - the path to enlightenment can't start until it's completed.

And much more in the same circular vein.

But don't get me wrong, to me this isn't depressing at all. On the contrary, it strikes me as possibly pointing towards a new line of enquiry in your journal's very welcome search for “evidence-based enlightenment.” I've always found that when circularity occurs; I am using words which have no meaning in my *lived* experience.

In this particular case, terms like Absolute, non-dual, spiritual “attainment, “ Emptiness, Unity, etc., and of course Enlightenment itself, will continue to fall back on themselves so long as they are used in the abstract to describe generalities, because then *no one* “really knows what they're talking about.”

To break this cycle, we need to get more specific . This is why my partner Ann Faraday and I make backbreaking efforts to follow the advice of Alan Watts to “eff the ineffable” whenever we attempt to describe our “enlightenment” experiences. For example when I describe mine in terms of knowing myself as Eternity Johning (see WIE, Vol 4, Number 2, Summer 1995), is it the same as Ann's experience of what she calls “no self”? Both of us are trying to express the *feeling* of the experience instead of talking in abstractions. Mine feels very much like a sense of the Absolute as loving *Fullness*, while Ann's terminology seems to be expressing a felt sense of its *Emptiness* of selfhood. Could it be that enlightenment reflects differing *aspects* of the Absolute, rather than a monolithic Reality which has to be either one thing or the other?

And if we sometimes behave in less than perfect ways, not always completely selfless, compassionate or dignified, does this mean that we are not Really Enlightened or does it mean that we have just “slipped out” for a moment or two? Or longer? Does it bother us? Or do we feel that Absolutely everything is Absolutely OK to the Absolute?

These are the kind of specific and personal questions that need to be asked of anyone claiming “enlightenment.” And if, as it seems to me, variety is not only the spice of life but also its very

purpose and delight, then surely the Absolute, Eternity or whatever revels in differences and rough edges rather than any kind of standardized perfection.

Which may be why the Eternity-experience, as I prefer to call it, has different effects on different people's lives - leading some to the dharma, some to minister to the dying, some to sail around the world, some to write a novel, and others perhaps simply to become better parents or children (though I've yet to hear of an Enlightened One taking up stockbroking or real estate.) And if Omar Khayyam is moved to retreat peacefully with his book of verse beneath a bough, with a loaf of bread, a jug of wine, and Thou beside him singing in the wilderness - well I'm sure that's just fine with Eternity!

(Prof) John Wren Lewis, School of Studies in religion, University of Sydney

P.S. Ann would probably have written this letter quite differently!

The above letter first appeared in the current edition of "What is Enlightenment" magazine and is reprinted here with the author's permission.