Enlightenment In Our Time – A Personal View

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Experiences and thoughts on, and personal questions about, enlightenment in our time[1]: a path without submission to a lineage, a dogma or a teacher. And a short introduction to one possibility to be on that path – the Enlightenment Intensive.

Introduction

This is a very personal text. It is about a few questions I have had ever since I became aware of my drive to break through to another realm. I was around 16 and I realized that what I was experiencing as a human being was real but wasn't the ultimate thing to experience. For me this turns out to be true.[2]

This text is for those who have the feeling that there is more to life than what we experience in the physical world. And for those who want to find out for themselves.

Now, maybe you, like me, grew up in an almost purely rational collective that focused only on this "physical realm". And maybe you always suspected, and still suspect, that this isn't all. Then this is for you. Not as just another explanation of spirituality (a word I don't particularly like). I really don't want to explain anything to anyone. Rather, I want to raise a few questions. I have asked them myself, and I ask others these questions when they choose me to hold their space in horizontal or vertical growth processes. And yes, I might answer some of them. But these are my answers.

Please see this text as an offer. I am sharing a couple of thoughts, experiences and questions, and I will introduce a contemplation-technique and retreat-format that has helped me. I am not claiming that any of it will help you, too. But I know this: 40 years ago, I would have wished for someone to share a bit of their experience and their path as an independent seeker. Then I wouldn't have had to "discover" it all on my own. Or at least I would have had the reassuring knowledge that I am not alone with this.

And here is another thing: I had to find every step of this path on my own. That had, and still has, one big advantage. It comes without the load of lineages, teachers and dogmata. And it comes without all the this-worldly knowledge and presentation that those before us gathered over the centuries. They have done all the hard work of

[1] And somehow an approach to being "spiritual but not religious" – a term used quite often by people in the "western world" who seek truth but have lost touch with, or trust in, their "spiritual" lineages. For whatever reason – but that's another topic. To learn more about this topic, read Ken Wilber's "The Religion of Tomorrow".

[2] And even though that turns out to be true, I still to this day have to work for a living, get sick every once in a while, go through all the so-called comfortable and uncomfortable emotions that everybody has, and after all, I have to go through a growth-process as the individual I am in this world. This growth process as a human being in this world might include different things: therapy or something similar, which addresses my shadows and emotional injuries. Physical practice to take care of my physical body. Study and a lot of problem solving to keep my mind and my brain on a level where they perform. And so on. See Ken Wilber's book "Integral Life Practice" for one such approach.

exploring, enquiring, failing and still not giving up. I know that I heavily rely on every piece of “land” won by those who came before us. And I deeply honour that. But we are living in a time where a path of “seeking ultimate truth” is possible without submitting to teachers, gurus, masters, religions or dogmata. All of these are just the vessels of the truth everybody is going for. And like every vessel, they have their own “form”. So, the ways they present the truth differ wildly. But what they present is the same. We are living in a place and a time where we aren’t killed and don’t have to suffer for following an individual path to truth. So why fall for the form of presentation? Why not go for the thing itself, without distractions? Yet I am fully aware that this freedom still doesn’t apply to all of us. But isn’t that even more of a reason to try this way?

Each of the following sections has a set of questions. Some I will simply raise, others I will answer from my experience. I hope you find this approach helpful. And wherever I draw from others and am aware of it, I will give a hint where to start reading.

Ultimate truth. Union. Another realm.

You might have tried out things that seem to point in the direction of another realm. If you’ve been successful in your own eyes? Great. Yet here are two questions that I always ask myself and that might be helpful:

What exactly is it that you have experienced? Was there still someone present in the experience who made the experience?

Here is what I take from my own experiences and from working with people on their question of whether it was “the ultimate” that they experienced. I also take it from scriptures and from the accounts of all those before us who went into the unknown, longing to break through to another realm. Look at any experience that you or anyone else has had. If there was still an “I” experiencing whatever there was to experience, it was almost certainly not an experience of union or of the ultimate truth. It’s quite simple. In my world, as long as there is an “experiencer” and “the experienced”, you are still in duality-land. And the one thing I can say for sure: that is not the end.

Very important for me – even more so as I am supporting others on their path: nobody has to go to the ultimate. I am just saying: if you have that longing in you, don’t let anything stop you that is not the ultimate. That includes insights, phenomena and deep experiences, whether of this reality or of other realms. Enjoy them. By all means. They often are great, life-changing and rewarding, but they are not the ultimate truth.

Why go for the ultimate?

If you go for other realms, why not go for the ultimate? And if it’s only to check if the truth you already have “gained” holds.

I have met many people who started the adventure and then stopped. They found something so good that they were a hundred percent happy with it, and they really wanted to stay there. That is wonderful! It might have been the bliss of a direct

experience of love. Or it might have been the feeling of being a hundred percent free of any worries, cares and fears. It might have been the deep and unbreakable connection to a horizontal lineage such as your ancestors, to mother earth, to the field you belong to. It might have been the experience of archetypes or goddesses. Great! Now, say you have experienced such a thing. If you have even the slightest doubt that this is all there is, please continue the quest. Whenever you are ready.

Also: please don't rush over experiences that are dear to you. And yet: you won't lose anything you have already "gained" – that's something I can promise. Just as you won't lose your life as a physical, social human being in this world, with all its pain, pleasures, duties and freedom.[3] And if you have no doubt whatsoever that what you have experienced is exactly what you wanted? Well, then stay with it. Savour it to the last. Explore it! And then share it with others, so it can grow in the world.

Here is one aspect I still want to share: if what you have experienced is the ultimate truth for you, it wouldn't hurt to give it another chance. Let go of it temporarily, start fresh and see if the same experience comes "back". If so: good, now you know. If something else occurs that "takes" away from what you have experienced before? Well, then you know that there is more. A simple test, nothing more.

What to do with enlightenment?

A short excursus on enlightenment: what do I mean when I use the word "enlightenment" in this text? It was Barry McGuiness[4] who broke it down in a very understandable way for me. He distinguished "three" different "classes" of meaning that the word enlightenment might have when used in the "western world". The word "enlightenment" has been used for many very different things. The great contemplative and mystical traditions of the East have their own concepts and words for each of them. Barry McGuiness describes these three very different classes of "ideas" that might be referenced by the term "enlightenment" as follows:

1. **Sudden Enlightenment**: a sudden and temporary breakthrough experience in which the experienced and the experiencer are one. Various lineages call it Kensho, Rigpa, Jnana or Atma-jnana.
2. **Gradual Enlightenment**: a path completely dedicated to having such experiences and steadying them in this existence. Barry McGuiness also calls it the "process of cultivation". It is a constant practice, called for example Xiuji, Bhavana or Wu-Wei.
3. **Final Enlightenment**: a steady state of being present in and with all realms, at the same time and all the time. Barry McGuiness also calls it the "state of permanent liberation". Other names are Moksha, Nirvana or Buddhatva.

[3] No one ever has disappeared into non-existence after a direct experience of the absolute truth. You yourself might want to change things in this life after such an experience, but then it is you as a physical human being in this world who does that. No god or guru or "higher force" demanding that you do it. You always will have a choice. At least, that is true if part of your practice in this realm strengthens you as the vessel that holds truth: the very real physical and socio-emotional human you are.

[4] Barry McGuiness: "The Three Meanings of Enlightenment". A short article that I highly recommend. https://www.enlightenment-intensives.org.uk/magazine-articles/the-three-meanings-of-enlightenment

In this text, I am referring mainly to the first meaning. Going for breakthrough experiences of unity and the ultimate truth; going for an experience in another realm, also sometimes referred to as a peak experience.[5]

Coming back to the topic at hand: what to do with an enlightenment experience? Say you had a "breakthrough" or an experience of another realm. The questions that help me and might or might not be interesting for you are:

How has that changed your fundamental view of life? How has it changed your perception of yourself? And most important: how did it change your relationship to others?

Ken Wilber[6] was one of the first to point this out: whatever the experience in another realm may be, once the ego is "back", it will "make something out of" it. And not only that. It will do anything to fit it into the world it knows. With the best intent ever: to ensure your survival as a human being. This means that you, as a human being, have to deal with the experience here, in this realm, the physical world. This applies to whatever experience and whatever realm you touched. With everything I have experienced, I agree with this. Read Jack Kornfield[7] for more about this part of the journey: the integration, the "bringing it into life", the "living from that truth".

So, what to do with enlightenment-experiences? First of all: I personally don't "do" anything with an enlightenment-experience. Not in the sense of "acting out" in this physical realm. Why should I? The experience might change me or my perception of the world. But it doesn't change anything in the physical outside world. I was the one having the experience, not the world itself[8]. Yet, my now different inside-world might have consequences for how I get into contact with the outside world. And this then might "change" my doing in the world. A "doing" that happens through me all the time.

Hazards on the way

Here is the most dangerous part of this whole truth-business. I know it from my own experience and from many before me who were brave enough to share these rather unpleasant parts of their journey. Your ego, or rather you as a human being in this world, takes the "secret knowledge" you now seem to have and "applies" it to achieve something. And that comes in various forms.

You might feel that you now are further evolved than others, hence being the "better" person. You might feel you want to use this new "knowledge", and the insights that may come with it, to become more successful than before in the physical realm. Or even worse: you might want to use it to "rescue" others. In the end all of these are forms of feeling superior to others because you now know and they don't. Well, that

[5] Although, in the end, that might lead to a modern way of the second meaning, which is dedicating one's life to the quest for the ultimate, and for a few of us it might end up being the third one. Eckhart Tolle is one of the more famous examples who might have reached that state. Yet, who knows?
[6] For example: Ken Wilber's books "Integral Spirituality" and "The Religion of Tomorrow".
[7] Read for example Jack Kornfield's books "After the Ecstasy, the Laundry" and "A Path with Heart".
[8] You might argue that the "world" had the experience through me, and I would agree, if you refer to "everything" by using the term "world". As a part of this "everything", I have changed. So the world as "everything" has already changed, too. Yet, for the outside physical world visible to others, so far nothing has changed.

has nothing to do with whatever you experienced; this is the ego trying to support you in social, psychological and physical survival in this world – the world of things.

The most subtle variant is to "bring others the light" when they are not asking for it. Wars have been and are still fought about it. The German coach and therapist Gunther Schmidt has put it into the proverb: "You can either be right or be in contact." And Rumi has put the experience into one of his fabulously short and telling poems: "Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. There we will meet."[9] Truth doesn't know wrong or right. Perhaps an experience of the ultimate truth leads you to think that something in this world needs to be put right, even in the most subtle way. Then it might not be truth itself. It might be you, as a human being in this world, using the experience of truth to avoid your own shadows and to avoid standing up for what you think is right or wrong.[10]

Personal and spiritual growth

Again, there is nothing wrong with the ego interpreting and "using" an experience from another realm. There actually is no way around it. But what might become clear is that spiritual growth and personal growth as a human being are interdependent and should go hand in hand. The idea is to be a vessel in this world that can hold the truth without abusing it. However deep the experience in another realm is or was, it's your personality that in the end has to "implement" the experience in this world. So, within the quest of breaking through to the ultimate truth, keep in mind that you as a "vessel" will have to hold that experience. Any kind of growth practice as a human being helps you become a more mature "bearer" of truth from another realm.[11] And if, on your quest for absolute truth, the tiniest voice in you says, "don't go there", then listen to this voice and don't go there. Listen to your own intuition about your limits. You, as a grown-up human being in this world, always have a choice.

Unfortunately, here is another aspect of all of this: maybe you are pursuing the ultimate truth or another realm because you don't like what you see in this realm, or what you see in yourself. That most likely won't work. There are two possible outcomes. Either you have the experience of another realm, come back, as you inevitably will, and find the same chaos as before. Or something in you decides never to fully come back. Ron Smothermon has described all of this very accurately[12]. And in personal growth Welwood has given it the most self-explanatory name of "spiritual bypassing"[13].

So, how do I find out why I am going for truth?

Maybe you want to find out whether you have tacit or hidden motives for going for the

[9] Jelaluddin Rumi. From "The Essential Rumi", translated from the Persian by Coleman Barks and John Moyne.
[10] And maybe you are lucky and find no shadow at all and still want to change the world according to your experience. Then at least be aware that it is you who wants the change, not a "higher being" or a "higher necessity". Thinking this might mean you are not "owning" the experience of truth, and you are not taking full responsibility for it as a human being in this world.
[11] See Ken Wilber's book "Integral Life Practice" for one such example.
[12] Ron Smothermon's book "Winning Through Enlightenment".
[13] John Welwood in his book "Toward a Psychology of Awakening".

ultimate truth (or even just for more truth), other than the quest itself. Here is a quick check for you:[14]

Do you want to keep the newly gained insights to yourself? Do you feel superior to anyone because you had a breakthrough or an experience of truth or do you hope to achieve superiority by following this path? Do you want to use it to address your own fears or to gain more in this world, such as safety, success, power, …? When you look at others: do you think they are not ready for the truth or wouldn't be able to stand it? Do you think the world is not ready for it? Do you think something along the lines of "if only everybody were enlightened, the world would be a better place"? Do you think the contemplation-technique/retreat/approach that has brought you to the truth you experienced is THE one that everyone should use?

If you have the slightest hint that you might truthfully answer even one of these questions with a "yes", then there is work to be done within your personality in this world. You can only bear as much truth as you are able to hold as a human being in this world. But you can't "use" whatever you obtain through a direct experience of truth in this world, other than adapting or transforming yourself.[15] Everything else is a consequence of this.

Now, look at how you are after the experience. Do you see others as having exactly the same (or even more) potential as you? Do you want to make the truth you experienced visible, without imposing it on anyone, even if it costs you? Do you feel more humble, yet more at home in yourself? Do you look at your life differently, without wanting it to be different? Do you see the beauty in other approaches to truth, even if they don't work for you? And can you be with people whose worldview is more "limited" than yours, with empathy and with trust that they are going their own way and will find it? If so: good. Nothing else to do but be with who and what you are right now and live from it.

Enlightenment in this time

The question is:

Why would you be born into this time with a longing for truth and not go for it as directly as possible?

The truth is nothing that is exclusive to some chosen people. And even less to any lineage, institution, guru or religion. They are all going for the same "thing" in the end. Here is the good news, though it might not be new to you (it was to me when I realized it): the main work has already been done. It has been done by all those before us. So, why not rely on that, start at the point of "wisdom" already available, and go for it yourself? Isn't that the least we can do to honour those who quite literally risked their life for the quest or at least dedicated their life 100 percent to it? That doesn't mean that you have to do it alone. But you don't have to sacrifice your life or

[14] Which I use on myself regularly as well as for others on their path, if they ask for a check like this.
[15] Unless you want to risk betraying truth itself, yourself or others. Read Kylea Taylor's book "The Ethics of Caring" for some of the ethical aspects of this. And this doesn't mean that you can't charge people for supporting them in their growth processes. There is nothing wrong with charging money for services you provide.

yourself or submit to one exclusive “bearer” of the truth. It still might be hard work, but you are putting your energy and time into seeking the truth instead of investing it into understanding the paths that others have taken. And even the comparison of the “old” approaches and lineages has been done already. If you are interested, read for example Daniel P. Brown, Ken Wilber or Dustin DiPerna[16].

For me all of this is one more reason not to repeat what has already been done. Rather, rely on it and start from there. That way, you honour the people who have already paved the way.

I had the chance to experience some of the things that saints, sages, gurus and wise women and men have written about over the centuries. I deeply honour all of those who have contributed in any way, and I feel heartfelt, deep gratitude towards them and their dedication. I even think that it was necessary at times to keep “the knowledge” about all of this a secret and only hand it on to “initiated” people. But all of this is already done. Let’s celebrate all these sacrifices by not repeating them but rather going on.

Yet, with this freedom comes more self-responsibility for one’s own path. As mentioned before, please listen to any sign that tells you that your horizontal personality is not ready to contain a certain depth of truth. If necessary, do growth work on that horizontal level first, if you can.

Obstacles to enlightenment

Maybe you long for the ultimate truth, or for breaking through to another realm, but haven’t gone for it yet. What keeps you from it?

I find this a tricky question. I can share what held me back and still holds me back at times. There are many very real fears around all of this. Here are some examples from my path[17]:

The fear of being pushed out of my comfort zone in this existence: I have mastered survival, have found a place in society and have decided “who I want to be”, along with all the other major efforts to be part of this world. What if I then discovered a whole new realm in which all of this doesn’t apply and seems worth nothing? Quite a real fear. Of course, in the end that wasn’t the case. Whatever my experiences were and are, I always remained “me” in this world. Perhaps with the urge to adjust things. But certainly not being forced to do so.

The fear that this will literally cost my life: What if it turns out I am another Jesus? What if I must sacrifice my life for truth? Well, there was only one way to find out: going for it. At least then I knew. And: no, I am not another Jesus;-)

The fear of losing my social life. What if people thought I was strange, crazy or even mentally ill? What if, all of a sudden, my view of the world no longer was compatible with theirs, or my own former one? Well, again, I had to go for it and find out. And

[16] For example, Dustin DiPerna “Streams of Wisdom” or various articles in Ken Wilber, Jack Engler, Daniel P. Brown “Transformations of Consciousness”.

[17] Charles Berner has a quite comprehensive list of “obstacles to enlightenment” in his master’s manual for Enlightenment Intensives. For me: really worth reading and using it as a mirror.

what I found out was twofold: it's still me who oversees what I am presenting to others. And yes, things change. But what good does a deeper truth do you if you don't at least live from it? And doing so will change you. Which will change your way of being in the world. Which will change things in the outside world consequently.

The fear of losing customers and hence my basis of survival in this world. Well, same thing again. Had to find out. And yes, I have lost conventional customers. But that made space for new ones who were closer to who and what I am.

There were other seemingly good reasons not to go for it. They all came down to the same thing. A fear of losing the "safety" that I had built up over the years. Looking back, every time I went for truth, this "safety" turned out to be me holding on to something. Something I hadn't tested myself, and that wasn't alive.

There is always a choice in it, as you will always be there as a human being in this world. And, as mentioned before: the more mature I got as a human being in this world, the easier it was to take the risks of going for the ultimate. But I do have to admit, every fresh instance of going at it took all the courage I had. And that's still the case.

I think deep inside I always knew I would be going for the ultimate truth. And I really want to encourage everyone who has even the slightest impulse to go for more, or for a deeper truth: do it. And if possible, look for an approach that doesn't hand you someone else's description of the truth, but sends you on your own quest for it. As the ultimate truth presents itself differently to every one of us. Plus: it presents itself differently to the same person any time she or he goes looking for it. All you have to do is go for it, set aside any idea of it and mean it[18].

Obstacles when "coming back from truth"

If you have gone for it, have had direct experiences or deep insights and you are not visible with it in this world: what is holding you back?

This for me is a very similar question to the one before. The reassuring thing for me always is that there is no obligation to act on anything that has occurred to me. Any experience of truth that I have had was there to stay anyway. In me. There never was any pressure to bring it out, to present it, to change my life or to do anything with it. The only thing that has happened to me is that my life felt pretty empty after a while, when I didn't own what I had experienced. And owning only ever meant letting it unfold in me and being in a truthful contact with the "outside world". Be visible with it.

Can I still do my job as a group facilitator with conventional organizations? Sure, why not? It's a job that needs one skill set and I have it. I am doing this as a fellow human being in this form of existence. Truth doesn't change anything about that. Will I still be truthful when asked if I am following a "spiritual" path? Yes. But I won't bring it up on my own. And I won't tell others anything about truth except: "If you are interested, go

[18] Now, this wisdom did not come into the world through me. Thousands of seekers within the last centuries have come to the same conclusion. Take the Buddhists' "beginner's mind", or Jesus saying "Allow the children to come to me" and "… for the kingdom of God is within you". These are just two more renowned examples, and it doesn't matter which one you take. Again, the difference here lies in the form of the presentation. What is presented is the same.

and find out for yourself"[19]. And, when asked while in the role of a group facilitator, I will say something along the lines of "This is not part of this situation; let's talk about it in another setting". The whole truth-business usually is not part of my job description.

So maybe your obstacles are rather about being truthful in the world and living from what you have experienced. Then this might have nothing to do with enlightenment itself. It might need focus on this side of the world instead. On your growth as the person you are in this world. Perhaps it might even include the question of why you went for a deeper truth in the first place.

Some more topics on the whole "getting enlightened business"

This all sounds like only the absolute and ultimate truth counts. So:

What's wrong with going for truth even if it is not the ultimate one?

Honestly: nothing. In my world I look at others and see potential as well as complete uniqueness. I am not judging whatever someone shares with me about the deeper truth they have found. Quite the opposite. I will listen as curiously as I can to learn how truth presents itself through another. Yet my own endeavour always was to really go for the ultimate, the non-duality of it. That is what my uniqueness is asking for. So, when I offer retreats or support others on their journey, they will always be going for their own truth. But I also will always be there to check if there might be more, if they want to.

What's there to gain from going for the truth?

Again, quite honestly: nothing. And everything. Nothing, if you are hoping for a change in this world. As soon as you are going for truth as a means to an end, for example changing your life for good, it's likely that you will be disappointed. But who knows?

And: everything. Such experiences change everything, as they will change you and the way you see or experience the world. Unfortunately: no guarantees and no promises of salvation. But if you have the impulse: please go for it.

The Enlightenment Intensive as one practice of "modern spirituality"

Why introduce a contemplation technique and a retreat format, the Enlightenment Intensive, when it is only "one" of many?

Well, to be honest: I want to let you know that there is a technique and a retreat format that go for exactly what this text is about: your individual experience of the absolute truth.

The Enlightenment Intensive is the only format that I have found which sends the participant on the quest for their own experience of truth. No dogma, no religion, no guru, no nothing. Whatever you believe in – you might or might not "rediscover" it in this kind of retreat. Yet, if you do "rediscover" something by yourself, you then can own it and don't have to trust others. Or you might find something completely

[19] And I might give them a hint where to start. But only if they ask for it.

different. But the thing that won't happen in an Enlightenment Intensive is that someone else tells you what truth is. You find out yourself or you don't. Again: no guarantee. All you have to bring along is the honest intent to go for truth and the openness for it to be whatever it is.

The format is hard. The technique has a simple form, yet it can be quite demanding. But a well-trained staff will do everything to help you stay in the format and apply the technique. They will be on your side, whatever you encounter.

Three days to go for your own direct experience of a deeper truth. For three days you let go of everything that your ego[20] has created to do its job. No watches, no electronic devices, no nicotine, alcohol or caffeine, no social communication, actually, no communication outside the contemplation-periods at all. Everything will be taken care of, so you can focus solely on contemplating and on your process. For three days you practice a technique that catches the essence of many contemplation-techniques from various lineages and schools. Pure Self-inquiry.

You start at the actuality of the moment and intend to directly experience this. Then open up to whatever occurs as a result of your contemplation. Whatever occurs as a result, you communicate to a partner. That is the basic form. And you are pretty much doing that for three days without having to take care of anything else.

Enlightenment in three days?

Well, yes and no. Again: no guarantee that you will have a direct experience of truth. Yet, the contemplation combined with the communication-part seems to speed up the process to "empty your mind". An empty mind and the intention to experience a deeper truth seem to be the two main ingredients in pretty much every contemplation and meditation technique on this planet. And even if you don't receive the "grace" of experiencing truth[21], you will have a reference of the states underlying these experiences. If you do have an enlightenment-experience,[22] you have a reference in you that might serve as a beacon for further practice.

What I want to say is this: if you are looking for a setting and a technique that let you find out for yourself instead of relying on others, this is one of them. And I simply wanted to let you know. Everything else is up to you.

[20] Or "everyday-self" or "survival-self" or "social-self". And by all means: please worship your ego, it saves your life constantly.
[21] Which always will be a grace, as for most of us there is nothing we can do to achieve an enlightenment-experience. All we can do is get into an internal state where an enlightenment-experience can happen and maintain the intention to have such an experience.
[22] Again, I am talking about a peak experience, Kensho, or whatever you want to call it. A stable state of having all realms present in oneself all the time usually takes a "bit" more than three days. But then again: who knows?