

Why there are no perfect teachers

Essay by Jerry Freeman

As long as we are on earth, the love that unites us will bring us suffering by our very contact with one another, because this love is the resetting of a body of broken bones. Even saints cannot live with saints on this earth without some anguish.

~ Thomas Merton

I am just a human being like you brothers and sisters. You have problems and so do I. You find yourself having to deal with emotions like anger and jealousy; me too. And just as I pay attention to inner values to try to generate inner peace, you can do the same to be happier in yourself, in your family and community. We are all fundamentally the same as human beings.

~ Tenzin Gyatso, 14th Dalai Lama

Deep inside every seeker of Truth resonates a primordial archetype: The Enlightened One.

To find an enlightened preceptor. To *be* enlightened. To bring enlightenment to all. These are among the highest aspirations a human soul can cherish.

But then, in time, sooner or later, the cherished ideal clashes against the hard rocks of practical reality.

All teachers are human. All teachers are fallible. All teachers are flawed. Those who come closest to a true, mature enlightenment do not hide their humanity. They do not cover themselves with an “enlightened” persona. They are at peace with themselves exactly as they are. They present themselves exactly as they are: human, fallible, flawed and still a work in progress even though some of them, the best of them, may already be deeply enlightened.

(You may ask, “*Deeply* enlightened? Can you be a *little* enlightened? Isn’t a person either enlightened or not enlightened?” Thank you for asking, and please bear with me for a little while. These are the very questions we are about to explore.)

Yes, there are enlightened teachers, but there are no *perfect* teachers. Contradictory though it may seem, enlightenment does not confer perfection.

This is hard to take. When seekers of Truth discover the truth about teachers, it can shake them. It can leave them discouraged, angry, cynical. They’ve been sold a bill of goods, it seems, and there will be hell to pay. The reality does not match the expectation.

Why is that? To understand, we must examine our ideas about enlightenment itself. Whatever we think enlightenment is, we project that preconception onto our teachers, our guides, our preceptors. They themselves have likely carried the same preconceptions, leading them to role play, to present themselves as they believe enlightened ones are supposed to be.

It is a hard pattern to break.

Every teacher, no matter how experienced, how wise, how enlightened, knows in his or her deepest heart, “I am not perfect.” They know they do not match the ideal. Many try to display an idealized *version* of themselves, presenting the parts that do match the ideal and concealing the parts that do not.

Others know it is the ideal itself that is wrong. They don’t trouble themselves over the fact that they do not, cannot match it.

But the pattern persists. And that is understandable, because there is so much to lose.

Students, followers, critics expect a teacher to be a certain way, to display a certain kind of enlightenment. If they were allowed to see the aspects of the teacher that are ordinary, that are contradictory, that may even be problematic and troubling, wouldn't they abandon that teacher? Wouldn't that discredit the teaching? Wouldn't that dishonor the teacher's lineage? Wouldn't that deprive innocent seekers of the precious knowledge that is offered? It's too much to risk.

And so the pattern continues. The idealized persona, the posturing, the posing, the filtering, all persist. The curating of the teacher's public image to match the unattainable paradigm of a perfect enlightenment persists, across generations, across centuries, across millennia.

If the ideal is wrong, *how* is it wrong? What are we getting wrong about enlightenment? How must we adjust our understanding, our expectations, to match what enlightenment really is, to match what real enlightenment is?

That's a lot to unpack:

- Some of it has to do with the little "me," with ego, with psychology, with patterns of thinking and behavior that continue to operate, that persist, even after major shifts in consciousness.
- Some of it has to do with the ways different people receive and process the world, through different nervous systems, through machinery of perception that is different for each. Different antennae pick up different wavelengths. Each person looks from a different vantage point, sees a different vista, and will not see the blind spots and shadows that vista doesn't reach.
- And some of it has to do with the way enlightenment itself operates. Paradoxically, enlightenment is both all at once and incremental. Enlightenment is simultaneously infinite but ever expanding, complete but never finished, an accomplished reality but simultaneously an endless work in progress. Each enlightened person commands a different landscape of accomplished realization. But outside the scope of that command, some terrain inevitably remains unexplored, some business unfinished.

So, how to untangle all that?

In all the spiritual literature I've seen, a single verse in the *Brahma Sutra* stands out as a master key, a Rosetta Stone to unlock, to decipher, to solve the question, to explain the paradox. The *Brahma Sutra* is one of the foundational texts of Vedanta. Every word of it is about unity consciousness, which in the language of that tradition is called Brahman. The *Brahma Sutra* is about enlightenment.

Better than any explanation of enlightenment I've found in any text or from any teacher, that single verse in the *Brahma Sutra*, along with Shankara's exposition in his commentary (*Brahma Sutra Bhasya*), matches what we find in the real world. It matches exactly and in detail. It answers the contradictions. It solves the mystery.

Regardless of lineage or tradition, regardless of teachers or books, regardless of what you have figured out yourself, I hope you'll set aside doctrines, dogmas, assumptions, preconceptions and expectations and take a fresh look.

Shankara's explanation

To set the stage, I'll start with a different verse. This is not the master key/Rosetta Stone verse. This is a verse leading up to it.

On the attainment of this (Brahman) (there take place) the non-clinging and the destruction of later and earlier sins; this being declared (by scripture). ~ Brahma Sutra 4.1.13

Shankara concludes his commentary on this verse with the statement, "It therefore is an established conclusion that on attaining Brahman there results the extinction of all sin."

So there it is. The *Brahma Sutra* says enlightenment destroys sins. Shankara says enlightenment extinguishes all sins. That fits with the widely held belief that enlightenment confers a kind of perfection, raises a person beyond human failings, makes a person incapable of doing wrong. Isn't it correct?

Well no, it is not correct. The *Brahma Sutra* itself explains two verses later ...

But only those former (karmas) whose effects have not yet begun (are destroyed by knowledge); because (scripture states) that (i.e. the death of the body) to be the term (of the effects).

~ *Brahma Sutra* 4.1.15

Shankara has a lot to say about this verse. In my opinion, his statements match, with amazing precision, what we actually see in the lives of awakened/enlightened people. Shankara explains, clearly and directly, why enlightened people retain human shortcomings. He explains how enlightened people can act wrongly, how enlightened people can (dare I even say it?) commit sin.

This is why I use phrases like "mature enlightenment," "well-integrated enlightenment," "deeply enlightened," etc. There's a range on the awakening continuum we can broadly call "enlightenment." However, there is no threshold that precisely marks at what point the idealized, perfectionist definition starts to apply. At some point in the awakening journey, you get enlightened. Then you keep on getting more enlightened. Paradoxical perhaps, but so be it.

Shankara wrote:

In the two preceding adhikaranas (verses) it has been proved that virtuous as well as sinful actions (karmas) are annihilated through knowledge. We now have to consider the question whether this annihilation extends, without distinction, to those karmas whose effects have already begun to operate as well as to those whose effects have not yet begun; or only to karmas of the latter kind. ...

Former karmas, i.e. actions, whether virtuous or sinful, which have been accumulated in previous forms of existence as well as in the current form of existence before the origination of knowledge, are destroyed by the attainment of knowledge only if their fruit has not yet begun to operate.

Those actions, on the other hand, whose effects have begun and whose results have been half enjoyed are not destroyed by that knowledge. They are those very karmas to which there is due the present state of existence in which the knowledge of Brahman arises. ...

But, one might argue, the knowledge of the Self (the silent, eternal, unchanging, absolute ground of Being), which is essentially non-active, does by its intrinsic power destroy all actions. How then should it destroy some only and leave others unaffected? ...

The origination of knowledge, we reply, cannot take place without dependence on an aggregate of karmas/actions whose effects have already begun to operate. When this dependence has once been entered into, we must – as in the case of the potter's wheel – wait until the motion of that which once has begun to move comes to an end, there being nothing to obstruct it in the interim.

The knowledge of our Self being essentially non-active destroys all actions by means of refuting wrong knowledge. But wrong knowledge – comparable to the appearance of a double moon (after the eye disease has been cured) – lasts for some time (until the fall of the body) even after it has been refuted, owing to the impression it has made. Moreover there is no dispute whether the body of him who knows Brahman continues to exist for some time

The final decision therefore is that knowledge effects the destruction of those karmas only –

whether virtuous or sinful – whose effects have not yet begun to operate.

One Sanskrit term sums it all up: “avidya lesha” or “lesha avidya,” (the faint remains of ignorance).

Shankara wrote, “But wrong knowledge – comparable to the appearance of a double moon (after the eye disease has been cured) – lasts for some time (until the fall of the body) even after it has been refuted, owing to the impression it has made.”

A revered commentary (the *Bhasya Ratna-Prabha*) states:

The avidya lesha (faint remains of ignorance) that projects what is false is alone that impression.

Maharishi Mahesh Yogi*, himself a disciple of one of the great acharyas in Shankara’s lineage (Swami Brahmananda Saraswati) said:

What leshavidya (sic) does is create a separation in the state of Unity, and it is this separation that is responsible for the emergence of Brahman – Brahman being the whole which is more than the collection of parts. So, unless Unity is in parts, that wholeness of Brahman will not be created.

Therefore Brahman is born of leshavidya. It is cruel to say that Brahman is born of leshavidya, but in the analysis of the situation that gives rise to the situation in which Brahman can grow [we have to admit that] this whole [that is, Brahman] will not be without the collecting together of the parts.

So parts there must be and they must come together [if Brahman is to be born]. There must be unity and unity – the breaking up of unity is the only way to live Unity in life because life must be a kind of relative [existence]. Leshavidya does that and therefore brahmi-sthiti [the state of Brahman] is based on lesha avidya.

~ *Conversations with Maharishi, Vol. 1*
Vernon Katz, PhD

Enlightenment and “me”

No matter how enlightened a person may be, there must remain a kernel of individuality. The universal consciousness manifesting as that enlightened person must somehow remain embodied. It must somehow see from those eyes, from that vantage point. It must appear as that individual person.

As long as one retains a human body, there must remain some sense of the little “me.” Without the little “me,” there would only be non-localized, abstract consciousness. There would be no enlightened one because there would be no individual human being to live the enlightenment.

The shift to an awakened reality happens when one truly sees that the little “me” is not the real identity. It is only an operational function, with no separate existence of its own. It is only a manifestation of universal consciousness; universal consciousness functioning within itself so it can behave as an enlightened individual in the world.

The sense of a *separate* self dissolves. But still there remains operating somewhere inside that great Unity a sense of individual identity. Now however, it is abstract, and it is no longer experienced to be one’s center of being. It may seem to be almost nothing, just a lingering fragrance so insubstantial it’s hardly there at all. That is why it’s called “lesha avidya.”

Lasha: A small bit or portion, a particle, an atom, a very small quantity.

Avidya: Ignorance

Lasha avidya: The faint remains of ignorance

Lasha avidya maintains just enough of the illusion of individuality for an enlightened human life to continue.

The enlightened one still answers to a particular name. The enlightened one still feels hunger in a particular body. The enlightened one still feels pain in a particular thumb should a hammer happen to strike it because lesa avidya maintains the sense, however faded and subtle, that there is a little “me” amid that enlightened boundlessness.

Despite popular ideas about “no-self” the fact is, the enlightened person still retains an ego. The ego will have changed, to be sure, and one’s relation to it will have been transformed, but as long as there is a human body, no matter how enlightened its inhabitant, there will remain that residue of individuality.

There is no exact quantity of ignorance that qualifies as “faint remains.” According to how one was at the first instant of awakening into the infinite, unbounded wholeness, that is how much lesa avidya one brings into the enlightenment.

Experience and observation have revealed, there may be quite a lot of lesa avidya in the beginning. There may be a lot of work still to do. In Zen there’s a tradition that says one recently awakened to the ultimate Reality “stinks of enlightenment” and must wait ten years to mature before they are fit to teach others.

But wrong knowledge – comparable to the appearance of a double moon (after the eye disease has been cured) – lasts for some time (until the fall of the body) even after it has been refuted, owing to the impression it has made.

The lingering double vision will be strongest right after the cure is obtained, before it has had time to resolve.

Depending on the concepts and expectations one brings into their awakening, the thinning down of lesa avidya may proceed apace, or it may not. The maturing, the deepening, the integration of the enlightenment may progress, or not. The enlightenment may grow and deepen, or it may stagnate.

The double vision may resolve, or it may not change much at all.

If a person assumes enlightenment is finished and done in a single awakening instant, they may remain oblivious to everything within themselves they’ve not begun to examine. They may retain all kinds of unresolved emotional material and persist in attitudes and habits that are truly, not enlightened at all.

They may seek refuge from personal difficulties by clinging to the idea that enlightenment automatically exempts a person from ever having to address them. They may don the elevated persona of an enlightened teacher as cover from being called out to deal with their “stuff.”

If a person assumes that because they are awakened there is no longer any ego left, what ego remains will be able to hide in the shadows.

That ego may even succeed in hijacking the awakening, claiming the enlightenment for itself. If a person has attached to the idea that they’ve gone beyond ego, they will not examine themselves deeply. They will not do the difficult inner work. They will not endeavor to bring all of themselves into accord with the higher reality they have awakened to. Even though awakened, even though (slightly) enlightened, they will continue to see the double moon.

(Such people can be the most dangerous teachers. Here one encounters the teachers who think themselves infallible, are arrogant, controlling, manipulative, exploitative, who demand adoration and treat their followers as beneath themselves.)

That’s a lot to deal with and some of it isn’t pretty. How do we put it in perspective?

The important thing to understand is, we are all human. We all have some matters still to be attended to, some issues still unresolved. All of us do, including some of the greatest teachers who have ever graced this Earth. That is necessarily so; it is the definition of lesa avidya.

Knowing this can protect us from getting carried away. It can protect us from becoming disappointed, angry, cynical. Teachers are human. If we understand that fact going in, from each teacher we encounter we can take whatever is helpful, whatever is valuable, and we can set aside whatever is not.

If what is not helpful outweighs what is helpful and valuable, we can move on from that teacher. And we can do it without becoming disillusioned, because we have understood that by its very nature enlightenment does not confer perfection.

Spiritual gifts, bandwidth and blind spots

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ~ 1 Corinthians 13

When the celestial beings beckon, we should not respond with pleasure or pride, because this will obstruct progress, and it is always possible to fall. ~ Patanjali Yoga Sutra 3.51

Some commune with angels; some observe the processes of creation; some interact with hidden realms; some know the past and future; some have extraordinary powers.

And some don't.

I've seen people claim because they've seen angels or devatas or subtle bodies or the structure of creation, they should be taken more seriously when they talk about enlightenment or the nature of consciousness. Even if no special status has been claimed, people tend to be impressed with perceptions or abilities in others that they themselves have not received. They put such people on a pedestal. They take what such people say more seriously.

This is a trap, in my opinion, and in Saint Paul's, and in Patanjali's.

These are sensory experiences, however subtle. They are not the transcendent Being. They are not pure consciousness. They are not the infinite, deathless vastness beyond time and causation.

These experiences are in the material realm. Because they are sensory in nature, they tend to be alluring, flashy. The truth about them is, they are not better or higher than what many people experience who don't see angels, etc. In fact, I will posit that many people who don't see angels, etc. do have experiences that are actually *more* significant, *more* profound. But they don't value them as highly because they aren't as rare, and they are not flashy.

Let me try to explain how this works.

There's a musical instrument, the tin whistle, which is a kind of flute. A whistle will play two octaves. Depending on how the whistle maker sets up the instrument, it will favor the lower notes or the higher notes, or it may be balanced more in the middle. The maker can set them up with different voicings depending on how he or she manages the balance between high and low response.

But here's the thing.

If you move the voicing too far to favor the high notes, the lowest notes will not play. If you move the voicing too far to favor the low notes, the highest notes will not play. The way we experience the world works something like that. It seems, because of differences in the way each human nervous system is set up, for each person there will be a specific range of subtle experience.

For some, the range will be more toward seeing or hearing, like a whistle voiced to favor the higher notes. They may see and hear things others don't, like angels, etc.

For others, the range will be more toward feeling, like a whistle voiced to favor the lower notes. They may be more empathic and sympathetic, able to deeply sense the feelings of people in ways others don't.

No one, it seems, covers the total spectrum of possible subtle experience. No one is without blind spots. People can be highly attuned to the things that fall in their own range of perception but completely miss something that does not. What is accessible to one may be invisible to another.

The machinery of perception, each individual human nervous system, is set up to receive a particular, individual and unique spectrum of frequencies. And it is geared to process them through its own particular, individual and unique setup of mind, intellect and feeling.

One may assume, "Now I'm getting everything" because a range of perception has opened that was not experienced before. (No, you are not getting everything.) One may assume "That person is a reliable guide because that person perceives levels I don't." (That person may or may not be a reliable guide.)

In another way, beyond the senses one may find one has opened into an all-inclusive wholeness. That is different. That is valid; it is a hallmark of unity consciousness. But not every *detail* will be picked up by the senses and feelings, even when the broad experience encompasses everything.

Brahman includes everything and excludes nothing.

With all our variations in perception, our different bandwidths and our different blind spots, each individual is unique. No one is better or higher than another. All teachers, all humans, will be attuned to some things and blind to others.

Knowing this can protect us from getting carried away. It can protect us from becoming disappointed, angry, cynical. Teachers are human.

Ever-expanding, never-finished enlightenment

Brahman, the eater of everything ~ Brahma Sutra

Brahman accepts everything and rejects nothing ~ source unknown

We must be clear about this. "Brahman" is the term Shankara's tradition uses to refer to all-inclusive unity consciousness. It is not a doctrine or belief. All-inclusive unity consciousness is a lived reality shared by awakened people from every culture and tradition. It is universal. Traditions point to it with different words ("One Mind," "no-self," "Christ consciousness," "Buddha nature," etc.) but the reality is the same.

The word "Brahman" is said to come from the root "brih," which means "to grow." This itself is a great clue to the nature of awakening, of enlightenment. People may think enlightenment is a kind of endpoint, a flat finality after which everything remains static. It is not.

The Reality, as soon as one awakens to it, is infinite and complete, and paradoxically, it continues to expand endlessly, both at the same time. It remains always the same, infinite and *complete* Reality, and it is simultaneously always expanding, always growing, always becoming bigger and bigger, somehow, impossibly, without ever changing at all.

NOTE: Matthew 5:48 is typically rendered: "Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect." That, however, is not a faithful translation. The Greek word translated as "perfect" is "teleioi," which means "complete." A true rendering will read: "Therefore you shall be *complete*, just as your Father in heaven is complete."

In that completeness there is silence, to be sure. But there is dynamism too. The silence is not quiescent; it is one with the dynamism and it does not withdraw from life. It does not reject the world.

All this (universe) is Brahman. ~ Chandogya Upanishad

This whole world is nothing but Brahman. ~ Mundaka Upanishad

People may think enlightenment removes all difficulties, expecting pleasure, gain and joy without pain, loss or sorrow. It doesn't happen like that. The pairs of opposites persist: pleasure *and* pain, gain *and* loss, joy *and* sorrow. What changes is one's relation to the pairs of opposites. And what changes is the infinite silence and boundlessness that come to abide with them.

Enlightenment flows through crest and trough and back to crest again, in waves within the infinite, eternal ocean of consciousness.

Life moves through time. Consciousness flows. It cycles through all the fluctuations of mind, body and emotions, circumstances and events. If we hold on, if we fight the flow, difficulties persist. They intensify. And they will persist until we let go, until we merge with the flow, until we allow all of life's experience to cycle through us and do its transforming work.

That is true whether we are awakened or not, but it is especially significant in unity consciousness. It is how Brahman keeps on growing bigger.

It is *all* Brahman. Brahman rejects nothing. Brahman includes everything.

According to how one was at the first instant of awakening into the infinite, unbounded wholeness, that is how much *lesha avidya*, how much "faint remains of ignorance" one brings into the awakening. As a potter's wheel continues to spin after the potter has let it go, that unfinished business continues to operate after awakening has dawned.

How that unfinished business operates depends on how each awakened person approaches their enlightenment. Depending on the concepts and expectations a person brings into their awakening, they may embrace, cooperate with and facilitate whatever transforming is left to be done, or they may not.

In unity consciousness there is a strange paradox. One experiences, one knows, "This is all-inclusive. Nothing is left out." At the same time, there are shadows, blind spots, unexplored terrain, unfinished business, *within* the wholeness. *Lesha avidya* is there, the remains of ignorance are there *within* Brahman. It is all Brahman, and there are areas still unexplored, still unknown *within* Brahman.

What happens to those unexplored, unattended-to areas within Brahman? What happens to *lesha avidya*?

That depends on the attitudes and expectations of each individual who awakens to unity consciousness. If that person believes their enlightenment is a once-and-done attainment, those hidden, shadow areas within Brahman may remain forever unexplored.

If they believe that because they have awakened, the little "me" is no more, those shadow areas may never come to light. If they believe that because they are enlightened they have no ego, those lingering remnants of their old ignorance may remain forever unexamined.

That is why I use phrases like "well-integrated enlightenment," "mature awakening," etc.

Regardless of one's attitude toward them, on the individual level there will always remain those lingering, slow to change, perhaps mostly unconscious, unresolved beliefs and feelings that are a residue of the path travelled before awakening.

A deeply reflective person will notice them, bring them to the light and examine them. One by one as they are seen and understood, they resolve. One by one as they are felt and accepted, they fall into place. One by one as they are comprehended, they come out of darkness and are woven into the fabric of Brahman consciousness. In this process, one observes, engages and addresses one's own *lesha avidya*.

As each item of unfinished business is brought to light, attended to and absorbed into wholeness, the lived Reality gets bigger. Brahman, “the eater of everything,” expands.

And *always*, as each lingering, slow to change, perhaps mostly unconscious attitude or belief resolves, the next one comes into play. If the person chooses to bring it into light and engage with it, that next item of lesya avidya is resolved. Then, in its turn, it merges into the ever-expanding wholeness.

That is how awakening matures. That is how enlightenment deepens. At least, that is how it happens when a person is willing to engage with the process. That is how it happens when one allows Brahman to do its transforming work within themselves.

Those items of unfinished business, those “parts of Brahman” that must be collected together, are inexhaustible as long as life continues to be lived. As they resolve, what remains of them becomes more and more subtle. Eventually, they may mainly reflect attitudes and beliefs about awakening itself, about who or what we are in the context of our own enlightenment.

Far from being merely the toxic residue of a great, accidental failing of discernment, lesya avidya, the “faint remains of ignorance,” is part and parcel of the structure and process of awakening itself. Like the fusion reaction inside the sun, it releases tremendous power from a tiny amount of fuel. As each particle of lesya avidya is metabolized and absorbed into wholeness, it generates huge, ongoing waves of expansion, wave after wave with every stroke of unification.

There was never anything wrong. There was no accidental fall. There is nothing to atone for. There is nothing to do but flow on and on. There is nothing to do but acquiesce in that never ending, ongoing process of transformation. It will go on forever.

A person should not strive to eliminate one's complexes, but rather, to come into accord with them. They are legitimately what motivates one's conduct in the world. ~ Sigmund Freud

They are those very karmas to which there is due the present state of existence in which the knowledge of Brahman arises. ~ Shankara

It was necessary that there should be sin. But all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well. ~ Julian of Norwich

What motivates a teacher?

It could be different things: the good of humanity, the teacher's culture or lineage, the teacher's personal benefit or gain. It tends to be a mixture, I think, some of which likely will be unconscious.

People strive toward enlightenment for different reasons. Many genuinely seek Truth, but some are trying to escape from themselves. Perhaps, in varying degrees, most are trying to do both. Some look to awakening for a way to bypass difficulties without addressing them: a “get out of jail free” card.

In my opinion, that strategy motivates a significant share of teachers. Think about it. If you don't want to question yourself, what better way than to set yourself up as the one with all the answers, the one who is beyond question? I believe for most teachers that's not the only, or even the main, motivation but for a great many it is one of the factors at work.

What is it then, that makes a teacher great?

There could be many answers, but high on the list I would put: *all-embracing compassion*.

... but the greatest of these is love. ~ 1 Corinthians 13

Compassion is grounded in connection. Whatever a teacher does that separates themselves from the rest

of humanity sabotages their own capacity for compassion. The most enlightened see no one as bigger than they are, no one as smaller than they are. They see everyone exactly as themselves.

All teachers are human. All teachers are fallible. All teachers are flawed. It's in the very structure of enlightenment itself. To live as an embodied, enlightened human being there *must* remain a residue of human imperfection.

Idealized expectations hold teachers in a trap. Idealized expectations keep teachers role-playing, hiding their humanity, withholding anything about themselves that doesn't match the ideal. That separates teachers, isolates them, keeps them from connection. And it steers them away from self examination.

Truly, if we drop our misplaced ideas about perfect enlightenment, we will help our teachers be more perfectly enlightened.

What happens to the ego then? What happens to *lesha avidya* as an awakened person attends to the unfinished business that inevitably followed them into their awakening?

To be clear, the ego doesn't die. Or rather, it doesn't die once and for all. Many have experienced ego death at different times, and many have assumed the ego will eventually die forever. But ego, in some perhaps ever more thinned-out version of itself, keeps coming back.

First, it becomes clear the ego isn't the center. It isn't really "who I am." It's just a function within a much greater Reality. Ego continues its function so enlightenment can be lived; so the enlightened one can remain embodied in a human form.

The ego thins out. It becomes more and more abstract. Its borders become porous, indefinite. It becomes more a lingering fragrance and less an actual "thing."

The ego loses its egotism, sheds its pridefulness. It learns it can let go. It learns to cooperate in its functions of taking up and letting go as each detail of life moves through never-ending transformation, as each detail is processed and woven ever more deeply into the fabric of unity consciousness. Ego cooperates, participates as Brahman devours *lesha avidya*, as Brahman absorbs the remnants of illusion and grows endlessly ever bigger.

The ego thins out. *Lesha avidya* winds down, like the potter's wheel after the potter takes away his hand. What remains of ego, what remains of *lesha avidya* eventually becomes very thin, very light, very clean and pure, very simple. In Sanskrit it would be said, "only the *sattvik* (wholesome) *ahamkara* (ego) remains" when enlightenment is mature.

The most deeply enlightened will not claim to be above ego. That would be egotistical. They know they are human. But in them the ego is light as a feather, and it troubles no one. It has aligned with its ultimate purpose; it only functions now in service to the greater whole.

So it seems there is an enlightenment that does approach the ideal. It seems there is a way perfection can be lived. But the key point is, human imperfection persists. It thins down. It becomes less troublesome. But it remains nonetheless; enlightenment does not make the human perfect.

Rather, enlightenment *reveals* a perfection that was always there, that even can accommodate the inevitable lingering imperfections of an embodied human life. Enlightenment – true, mature enlightenment – reveals a perfection that *makes sense* of imperfection, that *uses* imperfection to facilitate a *perfectly imperfect* outcome.

Bringing all of oneself, human and imperfect, into alignment with that deeper, all-accepting perfection, that is how enlightenment matures. It is the only way perfection can be lived, and it is why no one, no matter how enlightened, is ever perfect.

Shankara himself wrote:

*In this ocean of worldly existence which is endless, I am full of sorrow and very much afraid,
I am full of sins, lustful, greedy and intoxicated ...*

*I have always done bad deeds, been with bad people, held bad intentions, been a bad servant ...
I have always had bad thoughts, spoken bad words ...*

*During dispute and quarrel, despair and dejection, intoxication and insanity ...
You alone are my refuge, oh Mother Bhavani (the divine Mother Goddess).*

This reveals that Shankara knew himself as capable of sin, even at his advanced level of realization. That is consistent with his statement that those karmas (which will include habits of thinking and behavior) that have already begun in motion, *whether virtuous or sinful*, will continue after the onset of enlightenment.

I suspect at his stage of awakening Shankara would have been extremely sensitive to any sinful tendency at all in himself and would have reported even the slightest inclination as though it were the fully committed sinful act. But we can't know for certain. It is possible Shankara did actually have some significant sinful habits that he continued to struggle with after his enlightenment.

In any case, the lingering sinful tendencies were evident to himself and he did not try to downplay or conceal them. It would appear, Shankara maintained a candidness about himself that is absent in the personalities of most guru figures nowadays.

The "Perfect Guru" stereotype is an aberration, regardless of how pervasive it is in various traditions and cultures. The Perfect Guru stereotype is not true to what enlightenment/awakening/higher states of consciousness really are.

Enlightenment does not confer infallibility or even necessarily ethical soundness. If the human element is glossed over, bypassed, suppressed to prop up a persona of enlightened perfection, the shadow material/lesha avidya/continuing habits of sinful karma do not resolve and in fact, gain power because they are able to operate beyond conscious control, as the "Perfect Guru" has intentionally sidestepped any significant examination of and responsibility for those behaviors.

Realization by itself does not necessarily transform the being as a whole. One may have some light of realization at the spiritual summit of consciousness but the parts below remain what they were.

~ Sri Aurobindu

It is very important that these dynamics become well known and understood by the next generations of spiritually awakening people.

*From the age of 18, I immersed myself in the teachings of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and participated in his programs at the highest levels (e.g., his "Thousand Headed Purusha" program). I gained tremendous benefit from that immersion, but I also was challenged by inconsistencies and shortcomings I encountered in aspects of the teachings, in Maharishi's own performance and in the performance of people he entrusted with power.

Some of these were serious enough to call into question the entire concept of enlightenment as a guarantor of ethical, morally appropriate behavior, a concept Maharishi himself espoused in his teachings about "spontaneous right action."

Remarkably, of all the teachers and teachings I've encountered, it was Maharishi alone who brought out Shankara's very clear exposition of *lesha avidya*, which is a master key to understanding how enlightenment really works.

Lesha avidya and "spontaneous right action" are contradictory teachings. In his public teachings, Maharishi promoted the idea that higher states of consciousness automatically confer "total attunement to natural law." In private, however, he (occasionally) spoke with more nuance about those remnants of ignorance that persist after awakening. In my opinion, it would have been better if he had been more straightforward in telling the truth about enlightenment. His message might have been less alluring, but the world would have been better off.

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