

On Enlightenment – An Interview with Shinzen Young

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Har-Prakash Khalsa – Given that, in your own words, “enlightenment is a multi-faceted jewel”, is there a description of enlightenment that you like?

Shinzen Young – In this regard I tend to go towards my Buddhist background. Scholastic Theravada Buddhism says that three things go away at the initial experience of enlightenment. It's very significant that it's put in terms of an elimination process; something goes away, rather than an attainment, a “getting” of something. So enlightenment is not yet another thing that you have to get. And meditation as a path to enlightenment could be described as merely setting the stage for Nature/Grace to eliminate from you what needs to be eliminated.

The technical terms in Pali for the three things that go away are “sakkaya-ditthi”, “vicikiccha”, and “silabbata-paramasa”. Sakkaya-ditthi is the most important. Sakkaya-ditthi is the perception that there is an entity, a thing inside us called a self. That goes away.

HPK – When you say “the perception that a thing inside us called a self” goes away, do you mean completely away?

SZY - The ambiguity is the word perception. The actual word is ditti in Pali, or drishti in Sanskrit, which I think you know means “view”, literally. In this context ditti or drishti refers to a fundamental paradigm, or concept about something. So in this case perception is perhaps not the best word. It's more like the fundamental conviction that there is a thing inside us called a self disappears. According to the traditional formulation after enlightenment that never comes back. However, if by perception of self we mean momentarily being caught in one's sense of self, that happens to enlightened people over and over again, but less and less as enlightenment deepens and matures.

According to the traditional formulation between the initial enlightenment experience where you see there is no “thing” called a self in me or in anyone else and the full unfolding of that, there are four stages you pass through. As you go through those stages you get caught in the self a gazillion times, in a sense just like anyone else, but not like anyone else. Because even while you're caught in it, the fundamental paradigm that this is a real thing that I'm caught in is gone.

So if we take “self” to mean “the perception self-is-a-thing in me”, that is gone forever. But if we take “self” to mean: A) mental image, internal talk and emotional feeling arising within, and B) one's clarity and equanimity around them are not sufficient in that moment, then even a somewhat enlightened person may get caught in self, for awhile. Certainly that is going to happen over and over again.

I like to analyze subjective experience into three sensory elements: feel (emotional-type body sensations), image (visual-thinking) and talk (auditory-thinking). Those sensory elements continue to arise for an enlightened person forever. Sometimes when the feel-image-talk arises the enlightened person is momentarily caught in them but even though they're caught in that, some part of them still knows it's not a thing called self. That knowing never goes away. The frequency, duration and intensity of identifying with feel-image-talk diminishes as the months and years go on as you go through deeper and deeper levels of enlightenment. There are exceptions, but typically it takes months, years, indeed decades learning how not to get caught in feel-image-talk when it arises. So, even an enlightened person will have moments of, in a sense “non-enlightenment”, but those become fewer and shorter and less intense as time passes.

You can have a “no-self experience” even when there is the arising of feel-image-talk as long as there is so much clarity and equanimity that you’re not caught in them. Furthermore, as the process of enlightenment deepens you find you experience longer and longer durations during which little or no subjective activity needs to arise. So enlightened people have three kinds of no-self experiences. In the first subjective elements of self simply don’t arise. Subjective space vanishes. In the second emotion in the body and visual thinking and verbal thinking all arise, perhaps even intensely, but you don’t get caught in them because they never tangle or coagulate. In the third the subjective elements arise and you do get caught in them but some part of you still knows this experience is a wave called body-mind, not a particle called self. So to sum it up, what disappears at enlightenment is a viewpoint or perception that there is a thing inside this body-mind process called self.

So the main characteristic of enlightenment according to the earliest of the Buddhist formulations centers around seeing through sakkaya-ditthi, “self as thingness”. But the tradition also talks about two additional factors.

First there’s the vicikiccha, which means fundamental confusion or doubt. After you’ve had the experience of enlightenment you see how confused most people are about how their sense of self arises, and what the nature of suffering is. A lot of that fundamental confusion goes away for you.

Then there’s silabbata-paramasa. Silabbata-paramasa means ascribing more to morality and religious observances than they can really deliver. We can see silabbata-paramasa as a kind of self-limiting mechanism occurring in people all around the world. A person’s spiritual development can evolve into strong ethics and morality, which is good, but there it stops. Or a person’s spiritual development includes participating in rituals and ceremonies such as going to church, making vows, and keeping the ritual observances. Again, all this is good. A person can evolve to that point, but they often get caught in “I’m keeping my nose clean and I’m going to church, so that’s it.” Thinking that’s all there is to spiritual life is a cul-de-sac in religion.

At enlightenment a person sees very clearly that although ethics and religious observances have their place and can certainly be important, there are aspects of the spiritual path that don’t get delivered by ethics and observances alone. Something else is possible, indeed required for true spiritual maturity. That something else is seeing through the sakkaya-ditthi.

We’re always talking about “I” as though it’s a substantive, a noun, a thing inside me. The conventions of language (subject versus object, and so forth) constantly reinforce a perception that there’s a solid thing called a self that’s fundamentally separate from others. That sense that there is a solid particle or entity called self goes away at enlightenment. Your fundamental confusion about things goes away. The ascribing of more to ethics and ceremonies than they can really deliver goes away. That’s the traditional Buddhist formulation of the three things that go away at enlightenment.

HPK – Just to clarify, by “at enlightenment” you’re referring to the first stage of enlightenment?

SZY – Yes. In traditional Buddhist formulation there are four stages of enlightenment. The first stage that I just talked about is called “stream-entry”, or “sotapanna”. Then there’s “once-returner” (sakadagami), “non-returner” (anagami), and “worthy” (arahant). The process that starts at stream-entry broadens, deepens and affects more and more of your being.

You see that your subjective experience is just feel, plus image, plus talk. When they get tangled together, that creates the illusion that there’s a thing called “self”. So the first time they get completely untangled with sufficient clarity and equanimity that illusion goes away. They can still get tangled and you can get momentarily caught in them, but some part of you still knows it’s really not a thing.

Every person has brief moments during the day when feel-image-talk doesn't arise. At those moments there's no sense of self. The only difference between an enlightened person and a non-enlightened person is that when the feel-image-talk self doesn't arise during the day, the enlightened person notices that and knows that to be a clear experience of no-self. The non-enlightened person actually has that experience hundreds of times a day, when they're briefly pulled to a physical-type touch or an external sight or sound. For just a moment there is just the world of touch-sight-sound. For just a moment there is no self inside that person but they don't notice it! But just because they don't notice it doesn't mean it hasn't happened.

An enlightened person sees everyone as constantly experiencing brief moments of enlightenment during the day. So paradoxically being an enlightened person doesn't make you that special. Enlightenment contains within it its own medicine for the "I am special disease". Enlightenment allows you to see, as opposed to merely believe, that everyone is enlightened. Now you can say, "Well but they don't realize it", that's one way to look at it, but it's also undeniable that they are. From that perspective it's very misleading to separate enlightened people from non-enlightened people.

You'll remember I said that it's the sakkaya-ditti that's the most important of the three things that go away. Broadly that is true for enlightenment around the world. Regardless of what tradition a person is working in the perception of I-amness is affected once one's practice has become sufficiently deep.

The salient feature that is characteristic of enlightenment that's independent of the tradition, whether it's Christian, Buddhist, Moslem, Hindu, Sikh, Native, Atheist, etc. --- the common denominator is that "shift in perception of I-amness". However, depending on a person's background, and also how a person interprets the experience, the language that's used to describe what is realized may be very different.

Buddhists formulate the "shift in perception of I-amness" as "there truly is no self". Within a lot of Hinduism the very same experience is described as discovering the True Self in a way that implies it's a thing - the Witness, the True Observer, Pure Consciousness, etc., etc. You might think just based on the language that the Buddhist formulation and what many of the Hindu's talk about are unrelated or perhaps even opposite experiences.

It can get even more confusing when you read the classical texts in the original language they were written in. The Buddhists say enlightenment is to realize there is no Atma, which is interpreted as self-as-thing. Most Hindu teachers say enlightenment is to find the Atma, which is interpreted as the True Perceiver, or the Nature of consciousness that's in some way behind all the appearances. So one says find the true Atma and the other says there truly is no Atma. You might think they're talking about completely different experiences but as far as I can see they're using different descriptions in talking about the same thing.

When you meet the Hindu babas and the Buddhists masters and you talk and interact with them, you get the same body language and you get the same vibe. It seems the same re-engineering of the human has taken place in both cases, but the language they use to describe this sounds antithetical.

The Christian mystics will often talk about the soul merging with God. Based on the words alone you might think that what they're describing is quite different from the Hindu or Buddhist adepts. As far as I can see it's part of the same re-engineering of the human. For example when St. Theresa of Avila talks about merging with God she says "it's like water and water". But then she also says "the self-forgetting is so profound it seems as though the soul no longer exists". When a Roman Catholic in the sixteenth century says, "when you merge with God it seems like your soul doesn't exist anymore", is an extraordinary statement.

St. Theresa's description of the contemplative path not only passed the test of orthodoxy, it has become orthodoxy! It is the standard map in the Roman Catholic tradition of the Christian meditative and contemplative path. So we can see that the Buddhist no-self model can be interpreted as akin to some of the things that St. Theresa says.

So a dramatic and permanent shift in the perception of identity is what to look for if you want to spot enlightenment across various spiritual traditions worldwide. Somehow it shakes the normal identity either in the sense of seeing there's no thing called a self, or in the sense of identifying with a Pure Consciousness that is other than one's mind and body, or in the sense of merging with one's Source.

The Jewish formulation of enlightenment involves both the notion of merging with the Source (d'vekut) and the notion of annihilating the somethingness of self (bitul hayesh). It is said that a person who has seen beyond the somethingness of self experiences how moment by moment God continuously creates the self and it's surrounding scene from nothing (bri'a yesh me-ayn).

Of course there are other things that can affect identity but they do so in a way very different from enlightenment. For one thing there's insanity, where you think you're Napoleon or Jesus etc. Then there's mediumship. You're dissociated, and for a period of time a god speaks through you, like in Caribbean voodoo. Enlightenment has a functional and liberating impact on identity that's quite different and in a sense diametrically opposed to things like insanity or mediumship.

The multi-faceted nature of enlightenment is important to emphasize because that's the basis for a lot of misunderstanding. Teachers will emphasize different facets because that's been their experience or because they're reacting to what others have or have not said, and that can be confusing. When a teacher talks about one or even several of the facets but leaves other facets out - implied but not overtly mentioned - that can be very misleading. It's very difficult for one teacher to cover all of those facets and typically they don't.

A person who experiences enlightenment will usually evolve over time. One of my favorite quotes is from Zheng Wuguang, a teacher whom I lived with in Taiwan. "Today's enlightenment is tomorrow's mistake" (in translation). Meaning don't fixate how you look at enlightenment because there are other things that can unfold.

My teacher Sasaki Roshi has never written a book and neither have I, not yet anyway. Sasaki Roshi says that it's easy to write a book that lots of people will want to read now, but it's hard to write a book that people will read hundreds of years from now. When I first met Sasaki Roshi he was already a master's master. He's 100 now, so he would have been in his 70s and over the two decades plus that I've been with him, I've seen him change in terms of his formulation. So that tells me that even when you're a master's master it continues to unfold, and that's also an important point to keep in mind.

HPK – During the last retreat here you mentioned that many of your students are more enlightened than they think they are. After 30 years of working in the field, what have you observed that's common, and what's different about your student's experiences of enlightenment? How do their experiences compare to, for instance, those found in Kapleau's "Three Pillars of Zen", or Buddhagosa's "Vissuddhimagga"? How common is that dramatic, sudden experience of enlightenment as compared to the more gradual and even integration.

SZY – The sudden epiphany that's described in many books about enlightenment, that has definitely happened to some of my students. And when it happens, it's similar to what is described in those books. How frequently does it happen? I don't know. I don't keep statistics, but maybe a couple times a year.

When someone comes to me after that's happened I can smell it. They walk into the room and before they've even finished their first sentence I know what they're going to say.

Laughter

You remember right...? in your own case. When it happens suddenly and dramatically you're in seventh heaven, like the first experience of love you'll never be the same again. However, for most people who've studied with me it doesn't happen that way. Not suddenly. What does happen is that the person gradually works through the things that get in the way of enlightenment, but so gradually that they might not notice.

You remember that I said in traditional Buddhism it's very significant that it's formulated that something passes away and it's not something that you get? So what typically happens is that over a period of years, and indeed decades, within that person the craving, aversion and unconsciousness - the mula kleshas (the fundamental "impurities"), get worked through. Because it's gradual, they may not realize how much they've changed. As the mula kleshas get worked through they suffer less and the fundamental alienation between inside and outside diminishes. But because all this is happening gradually they're acclimatizing as it's occurring.

In acclimatizing they may not realize how far they've come. However, they often do notice it when "the doo doo hits the fan". Like a major bereavement, a major illness like cancer, a serious injury, or their life is somehow threatened. Then they notice how everyone around them is freaking out and how much less they're freaking out. Then the contrast becomes suddenly very evident. That's when they would tend to notice it. That's why I like telling the story about the samurai.

"This samurai went to the Zen temple on the mountain and lived there for many years. He didn't seem to be getting anything out of the practice. So he said to the Master, 'I think I need to leave. Nothing's happening as a result of this practice'. So the master said 'Okay. Go.'"

As he was coming down the hill one of his former comrades, a fellow samurai, saw him in the tattered robes of a Buddhist monk - which is equivalent to a glorified beggar from a samurai's point of view - and he said 'how could you be so undignified to join the counter-culture of Buddhist beggars?' and he spit on him. Now in the old days the samurais were extremely proud. Any insult to their personal dignity meant a fight to the death. So the monk who had formerly been a samurai just walked on and after he'd walked a certain distance, it occurred to him that not only did he not need to kill this guy, he wasn't even angry.

As the story goes he turned around and bowed towards the mountain three times where he had practiced. He bowed in his recognition of all that he had worked through. He recognized he no longer needed to kill someone that had offended his dignity. He noticed how fundamentally he had changed as a human being."

Of course, it's not just samurai in 16th century Japan. The same things apply to 21st century North Americans. Maybe they've been practicing for 10, 20, or 30 years and it doesn't seem that much has changed. And then something big happens and then they realize how different they've become compared to ordinary people. I'll give you an example that happened just a few weeks ago. Someone who has been coming to retreats for quite a while went to have a biopsy to determine whether they had a serious cancer or not. While waiting for the results this person noticed they weren't worried. Anyway, it turned out that the biopsy was negative. So all the unnecessary suffering that would've happened but didn't, that was the effect of that person's years and years of practice. It's my

impression that many more people have that gradual unfolding than have the sudden, but the sudden definitely takes place.

No one has kept careful statistics on this yet. We will some day when Buddhism becomes really westernized. Just like businesses, we will keep statistics and details on what practices work, what doesn't work, what actually happens with people. No teachers have anything more than anecdotal data at this point.

HPK – No spread sheets yet?

SZY – But there will be, and there should be. It shouldn't just be a teacher's impression of how things were. We need to gather objective, careful data to get a picture of what really works and what doesn't. That's the way in which the modern scientific perspective can help improve the teaching of meditation.

An enlightened teacher becomes very important when the sudden version of enlightenment occurs. If you happen to have one of those sudden enlightenment experiences it's very useful to have someone to talk to that knows exactly what you're talking about.

HPK – Yep!

Laughter

SZY – It saves you a lot of time. That's what's interesting in the Zen tradition. You can't be a Rinzai Zen Roshi until you've experienced some degree of enlightenment. That's a kind of quality control of the teachers in that tradition. In Vipassana anybody can teach. A person could literally take a couple weekend seminars and go out and teach mindfulness. And that's good. Why not? But if somebody happened to have classical enlightenment – laughter – the two-weekend mindfulness teacher probably wouldn't know what to tell them. They literally wouldn't know what the student was talking about. Hopefully they would know enough to refer that student to someone who does. So anybody can teach mindfulness, but not anybody knows what's important to say to a person who has had a sudden and dramatic enlightenment experience.

Another interesting thing is that some of those sudden and dramatic enlightenment experiences are not the result of practice. They happen spontaneously to people, and these people especially need someone to contextualize it. They need to know that they're not the only one, that they're not alone. They might not know that what they're experiencing links to a worldwide phenomenon, that there are many people all over the world, all throughout the ages, and from very, very different points of view who have had this experience.

It only takes an hour or so to tell a person the few important things they need to know about their experience of enlightenment and what they should be doing, whether that experience is the uncultivated sudden enlightenment or whether it's the result of practice. After that they're off and running if they listen carefully and they take it to heart.

If you don't have somebody to contextualize things you could become confused and not quite know what to do. In the worst case you could become an arrogant enlightened person, although that might seem like an oxymoron. Like, how could that be since enlightenment is seeing that there is no self? But what if you don't have someone point out to you that what you've experienced is just initial enlightenment? The window has opened but it's a crack, and that you've got another few decades of deepening and integration. If somebody doesn't point that out you might think you're more enlightened than you really are. Then you can be an arrogant person that has no self.

HPK – Well you said it to me in five words “You can still screw up!”

Laughter

SZY – Oh it should have been six words. I forgot the adverb “big-time”!

Laughter

SZY – Yes. And you will.

HPK – Absolutely! I have many times.

SZY – The no-self makes mistakes just like the self-self does. But then it learns.

HPK – How do you view your role in the teacher-student relationship before, during, and after someone’s experience of enlightenment?

SZY – If it’s sudden or gradual?

HPK - Both

SZY – I always think of myself as a coach. A coach can show you how to do things and give you tips. You know, you should hold the ball a little different. You’re raising your knees a little bit too high as you’re running, etc. A coach knows a gazillion minute specifics that taken together create a quality performance. So I know numerous little trim-tab things that a person needs to adjust so they can become a powerful psycho-spiritual athlete so to speak. In addition to that I need to be able to interpret things. If a person comes to me and says, “What does this mean, why is this happening?” I need to give them a clear and cogent answer.

A coach listens carefully. A mistake some teachers make is that when someone shares a really significant experience they’ll say “Oh well, that’s okay, but go back to the breath”, because they don’t recognize the significance. All they know how to do is say, “Get back to the technique, get back to the technique”. There are times when you don’t say, “Get back to your technique”. There are times when you say “The wisdom function is arising within you, go with it!” If you can’t recognize when Nature/Grace is opening a window of opportunity for your student, you may end up making an error of omission.

A coach also cheers you on, encourages you. There are really two sides to encouragement. One is superficial. The other is deep. The superficial is the actual encouragement that the student hears. The deep subtle side is a deep conviction that I have, the conviction that everyone is capable of classical enlightenment. Either in the sudden dramatic form or in a more gradual form.

To sum it up, my role as a teacher is to provide the student with two basic services. Inspiration and instruction. The inspiration comes from my deep conviction that anyone is capable of success on the meditative path as long as they have four things.

- 1) They understand the concepts and terminology needed for the practice.
- 2) They have at least one solid meditation technique that they know how to do.
- 3) They’re willing to apply that technique to the nitty gritty issues in daily life.
- 4) They establish a rhythm of a daily practice combined with periodic intensive retreats.

The goal of instruction is to help the student establish those four elements. Beyond that Nature/Grace/time will do the bulk of the work for us. Those four elements catalyze a natural process, a process that’s just waiting to happen --- enlightenment. I can’t guarantee that it will necessarily be a sudden epiphany. But I do say that if a person establishes and maintains those four elements in their life there’s a very high probability that they won’t be disappointed with the results.

HPK – Right.

SZY – So my role up to enlightenment – understanding that enlightenment can be smeared over many decades – is three things. That huge bag of subtle little tricks of the trade that a good coach knows - that constitutes the skill. I can adjust this, and this, and you can think about that this way, which is similar, but not the same. So there are those many, many, specific trim-tab things that I do. Then there's the ability to clearly answer people's questions. "What does this mean, why am I experiencing this?" Then there's encouraging on the surface and encouragement from the depths. That's are how I conceive of my role.

HPK – Right.

SZY - After an initial breakthrough the first thing a person often needs to hear is that they're not deceiving themselves. A lot of times they can't believe it's actually happening to them.

"What, you mean this is really happening to me? You mean this is the same experience as in the books describing enlightenment?"

"Well, does it seem the same?" I say.

"Yah, it sure does."

"Well it is!"

Laughter

I'll often say something like, "Okay you've read the book, now you're going to live the movie." Or "Welcome to my world."

Then they might say: "It can't be this simple."

So I say, "Isn't that what everyone says in those books, 'It can't be this simple?'"

Laughter

HPK – Does that disbelief come up often?

SZY – Yes that's fairly common. My first big breakthrough happened on a Saturday evening, and I thought, "I'm going to wake up tomorrow and find that it has worn off. It's just like a drug high or something." But when I woke up the next day - "No! It hadn't worn off!"

Laughter

SZY – It will never wear off.

HPK – I remember your story.

SZY – For better or for worse, unlike many teachers, I'm willing to talk about this stuff in explicit terms.

So to get back to your original question one of the first things I often end up doing is laughingly reassuring them that " Yes you, little old you is actually getting at least a taste of THE REAL THING. The next thing I point out is "It's really happening but this is just the beginning. You can still screw up, and will."

Laughter

HPK – Big-time!

SZY – Yes! So you have to continue to work with it and grow with it. More facets, more sides will be revealed. It's going to be an ongoing thing. You need to continue formal practice. You need to continue contact with someone like me - not necessarily me, but someone equally confident and competent who can continue guiding you for the next years and decades. That's why I myself, even after all these years, still have my own teacher I go to who is vastly senior to me in terms of experience. So I always want to make sure they are going to keep contact with someone who is vastly senior to them so that they don't go off on some tangent or think that they're more enlightened than they are.

HPK – Quality control.

SZY – Yes. I want to make sure they know that they need to have some sort of regular contact with someone who can give them input and keep them on track. So those are the main points. Isn't that pretty much the things I said to you when you had your initial period of breaking through?

HPK – Yes. Over and over.

SZY – Right. I've got a standard rap that I give people and that's an important job. Anyone can give people the practice that will lead them to enlightenment, but the number of teachers that can confidently guide people at initial enlightenment in an hour, there are less of those. Of course there's still many, many who can do that. That is what was done with me after I had my experience. Now I didn't know Sasaki Roshi at that time, but I knew another Roshi in Los Angeles. I didn't know him that well, but I knew him somewhat socially and I knew I had to talk to somebody about my experience.

So here I am a guy coming in off the street, and here's this senior Zen Master and I'm saying, "I think I've had enlightenment", which on the surface sounds like quite an arrogant thing to claim. Remember I talked about "being able to smell it?" He didn't bat an eyelash. He didn't say, "Hey kid, you're full of shit". His job is to know when it's enlightenment and when it isn't. And when it is enlightenment to affirm it big-time. He said, "Yeah, you've had a good experience. That's it. But now, this, this, this, this, and this..." The same things that I said to you. So I'm just passing it on.

