



# Enlightenment Ain't What It's Cracked Up to Be

Robert Forman

*This article encapsulates the author's four decades of meditative experience and will surely resonate with the spiritual journey of many readers. The book is reviewed later in this issue.*

Recently I had the privilege of giving a talk to the Scientific and Medical Network gathering at Claudia Nielsen's lovely house in London. While I understood that the typical talk is somewhat abstract, even academic sometimes, I told them of a shift in the structure of consciousness that happened to me some 30 years ago and that has persisted ever since. I offered it as a kind of first hand report, data for further reflection on the spiritual life or enlightenment. Since the talk was very well received—one listener recently wrote to me that “your talk ... spoke to me, though it took its time to seep in”—I would like to share even more data about permanent shifts with you here. (I will not explore what is traditionally known as “enlightenment;” I refer you to *Enlightenment Ain't What It's Cracked Up To Be*, where that question is discussed in more detail than I have room for here.)

Rather than describing the onset, which was quite unusual I now know, I want to share the main features of a permanent shift that began in January, 1972. My experience, indeed my life, became noticeably different than had been before that date: behind everything I am and do now came to be a sense of silence, a bottomless emptiness, so open as to be without end. This silence bears a sense of spaciousness, or vastness, which extends in every direction. This silent expanse is not something I have to remember to be; it takes absolutely no effort to maintain it. It is as effortless to be this as it is to have a right hand. Though it rapidly became too normal or everyday to seem amazing or ecstatic, it is quite pleasant and peaceful. Since that day, it has been what I am: not the me that does dishes, that worries when I have to write an article, or the me that feels alone or scared or happy. But vast silence has been the me that watches and lives and holds it all. I am, strange to say, infinite. But, unlike what I used to imagine, the old nervous or happy or scared or proud me is here as well. I am closed and afraid. And I am as vast as the colorless air.

I'd like to tease out the qualities of this new vast silence with 4 main features:

## (1) Background thoughts disappear

Before that January day, behind every moment of thinking, seeing or hearing, there had always been other, fainter thoughts, odd snatches of music, hints of feelings, errands I shouldn't forget, half-formed sentences. This is what many call the “monkey mind.” This chattering brain-hubbub was constant.

Until it wasn't. With the onset of permanent silence, they just vanished. The burbling background chatter simply disappeared.

Unlike what I had expected, my mind did not become entirely silent. I had understood from my guru, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, that in such shifts our minds would come to be without any thoughts at all. This wasn't that. I continued to think. What did stop however was the endless half-clear thoughts *beneath* my thinking mind.

It was as if behind the movie of my mind had been scrim behind scrim: each with a dimmer movie I could barely make out. But that afternoon it was as if the light suddenly shifted so that the front scrim became opaque and I suddenly was watching just one movie, thinking only one thought at a time.

Not perfect quiescence, but much more focused. Whereas before I would struggle to keep my attention where I wanted, I suddenly was able to put my consciousness on something and have it pretty much stay there. It was like getting eye glasses for the mind.

Though I wouldn't realize it for many years, however, there was a promise in that moment. I only recognised it perhaps 20 years later, when I was a professor at Hunter College. A student asked me a question to which I didn't have a ready answer. I paused, naturally. And while I and the class waited, I realised—with not a little astonishment—that at that moment I was not thinking any thoughts at all. My mind was completely silent. Some sort of planning about what I would say seemed to be going on. But wherever that was taking place, it wasn't conscious. I was aware only of a richly pregnant silence.

After a pause—of normal length, was my sense—the answer came out. I had no idea ahead of time what I was going to say, for my mind had been silent. I heard my answer only when they did. And it wasn't half bad! I've often caught myself scoping out something with this strange way of not thinking, and not knowing ahead of time what I'm going to say: thoughtless thinking.

## (2) Shift in Who or What I am

If you had asked me before that afternoon who or what I, Robert Forman, was, I probably would have pointed to somewhere on my mid-chest and said, “I'm here, me, Robert!” I'd be trying to get at some vaguely localised sense of a *personal* self that I suspect we all have. I, me, Robert, was in there—somewhere.

But once silence dawned, my sense of who or what I was instantly changed with it. I was (and am) the bottomlessness. Or rather it, the vast openness, was now *me*.

Strangely enough, there was nothing Robert-ish in this new sense of myself. The bottomlessness had no *personal* particularity. It had nothing to do with this particular guy, Robert. My sense of who I am became more like an “it.” “It,” the consciousness that beheld whatever I saw, felt or spoke, was now me (this is hard to express!). Everything I did, thought about, ate or felt were now encountered by or from within this strangely endless translucence. “I” was now “it.”

Our sense of a self is something we carry for all our lives, without really knowing very much about it. We all share some such vague and unlocalised sense of what or who we are, I think, though we can't quite grasp what that is. But that day my ineffable sense of who or what I am shifted into this strangely non-personal yet infinite openness.

Ever since that January day, if someone were to ask me, “who are you, really?” I would now answer quite differently. My sense of who I am actually become much more specific, even precise. No more do I have to point inside to some “vaguely non-localised sense” of a self. What or who I am is now spacious emptiness. Period. I’d touched it occasionally in silent moments in meditation or on walks. But from that day on it became the very me that was wondering about it. I became, and have remained, “It.”

### (3) Witness consciousness

A few days after the shift, I was standing on the triangular porch off my hotel room, looking through the mist at the white caps dotting the Mediterranean. Something about the scene was very different. The sea seemed particularly vibrant, the fog vivid. The drizzle against my bare arms felt unusually cool and crisp.

Then I realised that it wasn’t the scene that was different, it was *me*. The Mediterranean was so alive, the mist so cool because I was now more alive to them!

Standing on that porch, feeling the chilly January air on my cheeks, I was no longer *in* the scene. Rather I was *holding* it, conscious *of* it, attending *to* it.

I had heard about this experience that Hinduism calls *sak in* or *witnessing*. In it, silent consciousness

*is experienced as wholly separate from activity...i*

*When the mind is experiencing objects through the senses, he is awake in the awareness of his self as separate from the field of experience and action. ... He is awake in the world and awake in himself.<sup>i</sup>*

I had always imagined this *sak in*, witnessing, to be some sort of doubled-up consciousness, as if you’d stand back, arms folded, and imagine what it might look from another’s point of view. The few times something like this had happened before, I was both looking at something and as if watching myself look. While I was reading, for example, I’d also imagine myself as if from a few feet away, sensing myself sitting in the chair reading. It sounds, and was, pretty grueling.

But leaning against that cool porch railing, feeling the drizzle on my forearms, was just the opposite. There was no extra work in this experience. Witnessing was utterly effortless. I was simply conscious *that* I was looking, feeling, thinking. I was at once a seeing and a separate, silent awakens. And being so terribly conscious at that moment, *witnessing* myself seeing, was astonishingly fresh! I was more conscious of being there than I ever had been, looking at the sea and simultaneously conscious of doing so. It was at once utterly normal and utterly new!

I was not trying to witness, not even a little. I just was watching it all. And doing so took as little additional effort, again, as it takes to have a right hand. I was just present to the white caps, present to the cool of the porch rail, present to the mist. Conscious and conscious of being conscious, that’s all.

What I’ve just written might sound *dualistic*: seeing and at the same time *aware of* the seeing. Silent consciousness *plus* active in the world, absolute *and* relative.

Yet my *experience* didn’t become dual. The moment itself—conscious of those whitecaps and of awareness itself—was quite natural and integrated.

But this was a newly *dual structure*. Before that time, I experienced all my thoughts, feelings, excitements and whatnot as jumbled together with who or what I was. I had always been a single changing, moving, intermixed *heap of processes*.<sup>iii</sup>

But starting that month, that heap has no longer been heaped. Seeing and consciousness of seeing it—two distinct kinds of things—have been in my every moment. I live as a moving, thinking, feeling, embodied thing, a Robert if you like. And an unmoving, witnessing, unchanging conscious thing, an “It.” The seer and the seen, silence and activity, absolute and relative, became structurally distinct. I am dual. And I am effortlessly one.

### (4) Sleep pattern change

About two weeks later, I woke up one morning with the realisation that, although I’d clearly been asleep, all of me actually hadn’t been. Some odd bit of awareness had persisted through the night, awake. I had been fully asleep, for sure, but not quite, not all of me.

Maharishi often told us that one of the marks of enlightenment would be what he called “wakefulness in sleep.” Even though you’re asleep, something inside remains conscious.

*“the transcendent state continues to maintain itself at all times, in a natural manner, irrespective of the different states of waking, dreaming or sleeping.”<sup>iv</sup>*

You or “it” remains aware of your own consciousness even while sleeping: “Even when it is night for all others,” as the Gita put it, you remain wakeful.”<sup>v</sup>

Frankly wakefulness in sleep had always sounded pretty awful. Sometimes I had lain half awake all night, worrying about how tired I was going to feel the next day, wondering what I had eaten that had caused such insomnia and thinking maybe I should get up and open the window and ... But in the morning I’d get up and feel surprisingly refreshed. The idea that I’d have to go through this every night for the rest of my life sounded positively grueling!

But witnessed sleep that night, and every night since, actually seemed quite natural. I was awake inside, sure, but the wakeful part was so understated, so unobtrusive and natural that there was nothing at all traumatic about it. Even today, I hardly bother to notice whether I was awake inside, unless like last night (when I was preparing this article) I have some reason to notice. But it’s there. It’s just how I sleep.

Sometimes it’s hard to tell if I’ve actually slept. Here is another peculiar side effect of all this. Since waking and sleeping are so continuous, to know if I’ve been asleep I have to check the clock to see how long I’ve “not been asleep.” Weird, but you get used to it.

Strangely enough, this new sleep pattern has turned out to be one of the more useful aspects of the shift. Before that time I used to wake up bleary eyed and fogged over. I’d hit the snooze alarm, wake up, fall asleep and hit the snooze button again. Finally I’d wake up, all groggy and grumpy. But ever since that morning, when it’s time to wake up, I’m just awake. There’s no blarney, no snooze button. I’m just awake. I suppose it’s because consciousness doesn’t have to switch states, since I was never totally out.

If the phone rings in the middle of the night I can just pick it up and talk. This is not to say I necessarily *want* to answer some midnight call. But I can if I choose, for my faculties haven’t entirely shut down like they used to. They’ve gone on something like “pause.”

### Enlightenment: A definition

“Enlightenment,” *mok a*, Eckhart’s *geburt* (the birth of the son in the soul), *nirvana*, the “no self”—are all lionised in glorious and poetic prose. *Mok a* is “perfection,” it is “absolute.” It is “eternal joy,” “the immovable,” “the end of all suffering” and “such a joy, joy, joy.” For the Christians it is to witness something of God being born in the soul. But once I had read my way through the “glorious gloriousnesses” and the “resplendent resplendents,” “enlightenment” came to point not to some perfect life, but rather to a specific psycho-physiological transformation.

Enlightenment, as I have come to understand from texts from every major tradition, is a *shift in the relationship between consciousness and its objects*. Enlightenment is the *unmingling of a commingled reality*.

Before the great unmingling, we know only the structure within which we all begin (at least I *think* we all do). We see objects, think thoughts, feel feelings, etc. and in the midst of it all we may be able to sense some vague or “unlocalised” sense of our selves, as Bernadette Roberts puts it. We all begin with consciousness and its objects co-mingled.

This is how it had always been for me until that January afternoon. I suppose I would have pointed to it somewhere in my chest, but I couldn't have picked out consciousness itself. Who or what I was was part of the jumble of experience, and in itself largely inaccessible.

Oh, in peak meditation experiences or in odd moments just before I'd fall asleep, perhaps, I could sense myself as nothing other than consciousness. But these were at best fleeting. Hinduism calls such short lived moments "*sam dhi*." Yogacara Buddhist texts speak of them as *nirodha samapatti*, the "cessation of perception and feeling." Sufism calls them '*fana*, "the annihilation of thoughts." Meister Eckhart uses the biblical term *gezucket*, rapture, or being without sensory content.<sup>vi</sup> In *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*, I've called such moments "pure consciousness events."<sup>vii</sup>

In these brief moments, one is aware of no particular content for awareness, yet still remains awake inside. Not thinking of anything, aware of no feelings or perceptions, consciousness is left, very simply, alone. And because one is aware of no objects, we might describe the "structure" of experience at those moments as consciousness having *no* relationship between itself and its objects: consciousness alone, no content.

But the second structure is both more complex and more interesting. For this is the first *permanent* shift, what I have come to understand as the first stage of enlightenment. (For an account of another, see *Enlightenment Ain't What It's Cracked Up To Be*, p. 164 ff.) In it consciousness now perceives itself in itself, and as *distinct from* and *witness to* everything one sees and does.

To Buddhism this is *Nirvana*, the "blowing out" of the separate self. For Eckhart it is the *geburt*, the birth of the son in the soul. For Hinduism and Jainism it's *mok a*, *release*. For Ramana Maharshi it's *sahaja samadhi*, "all time *samadhi*."

In it there are, according to an Upanishadic image, "two birds", separate and different in kind. One bird is the spacious, bottomless, open witness. It is sensed as separate from everything one sees or thinks. This expanded consciousness is that "for which" there are thoughts and objects. The knower is now the steady, waveless, unchanging and silent witness to the parade of life.

The mystic, for that is what one has now become, may not understand the great unmingling, even for many years. But a shift of this depth cannot be missed. It is *that* different.

Life doesn't become perfect though. The great unmingling does not grant one eternal joy (except, perhaps, in a very narrow sense). Life as a whole does not become endless bliss. One's marriage doesn't become perfect. And it doesn't cure baldness.

Expecting such a pot of gold was my mistake, and the mistake of many I suspect. A change in the structure of consciousness, no doubt has, in the long run, implications for how one feels, talks and acts. It may come to involve letting go of that which holds us psychologically, greater happiness or a new attitude towards one's ego, which is how many spiritual modern self-help teachers tend to present it. But such psychological changes were not what I was seeing again and again in the classical texts or in my life. There is a difference between an insight that breaks through and a breakthrough into a different experiential structure. The shift I was seeing in the classics was a shift in experiential structure.

This a structural shift in who or what we are—more modest, understated and peculiar than most spiritual adepts expect—this shift in the fundamental way we encounter ourselves and the world is hardly the stuff of inspiring mythology. But it is not at all nothing. Held aright, such a gift may make possible a life well beyond anything we can imagine beforehand. It is an unexpected gift of grace.

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<sup>i</sup> Gita, p. 349.

<sup>ii</sup> Gita, p. 365.

<sup>iii</sup> Buddhism describes the process of experience and of having a sense of self as made up of *skandas*, generally translated "heaps." All experiences are comprised of these five processes, which constantly churn and change. And our sense of our self as a discrete thing (an I) is so comprised as well. A nice introduction can be found in Robinson and Johnson *The Buddhist Religion*, second edition (Encino CA: Dickenson Publishing, 1977, p. 43 ff.

<sup>iv</sup> Gita, p. 428.

<sup>v</sup> Gita 2.69, trans. Ramanada Prasad

<sup>vi</sup> See my *Meister Eckhart*, pp. 95-125.

<sup>vii</sup> See my *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, (NY: OUP, 1990), and my *Mysticism, Mind Consciousness* (Albany: Suny Press, 1999).