

## The 'Dark Night of the Soul'

If we imagine enlightenment to be a permanently happy state of mind that we might one day achieve in which negative thoughts and feelings can never arise, this is a misunderstanding about the nature of enlightenment. Here is a very clear statement from Rupert about what enlightenment is and what it is not:

To know oneself as we truly are *is* happiness itself. When most people hear this, they join a spiritual organisation or attach themselves to a guru or they learn some meditative technique, and they embark on another great search – the search for themselves, the search for what they now conceive to be enlightenment. ...

Many people spend years searching for enlightenment, just as they previously spent years searching for happiness in objects. But sooner or later, even *that* search frustrates them. The reason why the search for enlightenment frustrates us is because we conceive of enlightenment as being the ultimate experience that we might one day attain if we practise hard enough and long enough, that will finally deliver the happiness that we failed to find in objective experience.

Enlightenment is not an experience. It is not the ultimate experience. Enlightenment is simply the recognition of ourselves, not as we might be if we practise hard enough and long enough, but as we are now if we see ourselves clearly. Any experience that comes to us at a certain point in the future will, by definition, leave us. ... If you are seeking enlightenment in some future experience, you are destined for misery. Make no mistake about that. If you are seeking enlightenment in some element of experience that is not present now, you will be forever disappointed.

Enlightenment is one of the most misunderstood terms in the entire spiritual repertoire. Enlightenment is simply the recognition of ourselves as we truly are now. Not how we might become. It has absolutely nothing to do with the quality or content of your thoughts and feelings. Changing your thoughts and feelings from negative to positive won't take you any closer to enlightenment. [\[20<sup>th</sup> August 2017. Meditation: 'I Am That I Am' is the Highest Truth\]](#)

It seems to be common for those on a spiritual path who have had a glimpse of their true nature, to experience uncomfortable, negative feelings that appear to come out of the blue and to have no obvious cause. Extreme feelings of this type are sometimes referred to as 'the dark night of the soul', from the title given to a poem by 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish poet and mystic, St John of the Cross. At a Colet House meeting, a questioner described experiencing extreme fluctuations of emotion ranging from divine love to deep depression. This was Rupert's response:

RS: One of the purposes of these kinds of intense fluctuations of experience from positive to negative, desirable to undesirable, is to wean us off our preferences for a particular type of experience. To wean us off our prejudices that the experiences of divine love are the real spiritual experiences and the experiences of deep depression are the really unspiritual experience. So the value of this kind of fluctuation is to push us a little bit deeper than just the relative pleasure or pain of the experience. What is common to both experiences? Because if this divine love is temporary, it is not what you really want. It may be very pleasant when it's present, but do you want odd moments of divine love or do you want lasting peace and contentment? You want lasting peace and contentment. So if we are looking for lasting peace and contentment in an intermittent or temporary experience, even if that experience is divine love, we're looking for it in the wrong place. We're looking for it in some temporary form of the mind. ...

You are aware of these ecstatic moments, you are aware of deep depressions, you are aware of the taste of your lunch. The experience of being aware – is it more present in one of those experiences than another? It's like asking: Is the screen more present in a love story than in a thriller? The screen is equally present. Is the screen conditioned either positively or negatively by the quality of the drama that plays on it? ... It's not modified in any way by the movie. The experience of being aware is like that. It's not qualified by experience. It's not conditioned by experience. It's absolutely stable. In fact it is the *only* stable element of experience. And therefore it is the only place to look for stability, for peace. If we look for peace or fulfilment in any other place – in other words in our thoughts, our feelings, our relationships, our activities – we are by definition, going to be disappointed.

So this fluctuation – it betrays an investment that you still have in certain types of positive experience, rather than certain types of negative experience. And the reason that they are fluctuating is to wean you off this preference, and to encourage you, in this rather intense way, to find out that element of experience that is common to all experience. *That* is the place to invest your identity, your security, and your happiness.

[5<sup>th</sup> September 2015: *Holding the Understanding in our Heart Pt 1*]

Here is Rupert's advice to another questioner who had attended many retreats and had a clear understanding of the teaching but now felt worried that she was regressing because intense, negative feelings were arising:

Those of us who have been brought up in the vedantic tradition think that the appearance of intense feelings is somehow a failure. No. We should think of it as the success of our meditation or our investigation. These feelings have been buried in the body successfully, more or less successfully repressed by thinking, activities, substances, relationships etc. So they've remained dormant for the most part in the body, dictating our thoughts and feelings, and subsequent activities and relationships from behind the scene, but never really being fully exposed to the light of awareness. So the fact that these feelings are coming up now is a sign that there is less of a lid on your experience. You, consciousness, no longer feel that you are going to be destroyed or diminished by these feelings and therefore there's less resistance to them, so they're beginning to come up.

Let me give you a metaphor that some of you have heard before that I borrowed from Da Free John. It's the image of a well. And for most of the day only the creatures at the surface of the well are alive and moving. The vast majority of the creatures can't see the light, so they're dormant. For a certain period every day at midday, the sun shines directly down the shaft of the well and all the creatures at the bottom of the well begin to wake up and bubble up towards the surface. The sun passes over and the creatures fall asleep and go back down to the bottom again. So the well is the well of feelings. The sun in this case is the sun of awareness, the light of pure knowing, the open, empty space of awareness. So when we stand as that, we are as it were, like the sun shining above the well of feelings and this is like an invitation to our deepest, most painful, buried feelings that we haven't dared fully feel or face since early childhood to begin to bubble up. And we no longer feel 'I'm going to be overwhelmed by these feelings, I'm going to be destroyed by these feelings', because we have discovered: 'I, Awareness, am like an open, empty space; I cannot be overwhelmed, I cannot be destroyed, I cannot be changed or altered or stained'.

So just sitting as the presence of awareness, even without the yoga meditations that I was speaking of before, just sitting as the presence of awareness and allowing experience to be exactly as it is, without trying to change it or get rid of it in any way, is already a very powerful

meditation. Because it is like an invitation. It's like the sun above the well. It is an invitation to all these buried layers of feeling to come to the surface. And at the root of these feelings are the two core feelings of the separate self: 'there is something missing', and 'I am afraid of dying'. These are the two core feelings that define the separate self – a sense of lack and the fear of death. So as these feelings come up, these two core feelings are exposed. Because awareness itself – its own experience of itself – lacks nothing. Awareness has never experienced itself disappearing so for awareness there is no death or disappearance.

[5<sup>th</sup> September 2015: *Holding the Understanding in our Heart Pt 2*]

Francis Lucille explains the importance of not trying to get rid of uncomfortable feelings. He suggests tracing our way from the feeling to its source in awareness. By not having any agenda with the feeling, not judging it or even naming it, we discover that it is just another bodily sensation, a part of the rich tapestry of experience:

We have to be careful of any approach in which we feel that we have to get rid of something. Every time that we feel that we get rid of something, we remain as the 'feeler' getting rid of something. In this case we get rid of one contraction but create another subtler entity, the one who has eliminated the problem. The one who has eliminated the problem is the continuation of the problem. ...

*What do you mean by "going upstream to the source"?*

It means going from the uncomfortable feeling, whatever it is, to the source in which it appears and out of which it is ultimately made. First of all, the feeling is divested of its psychological content, the 'I' element, around which it revolves and upon which it depends. This is accomplished simply by understanding that this 'I' element is in fact non-existent. This understanding is the accomplishing agent. We simply return to this understanding, and the 'I' element is naturally dropped as a result. In this way, the uncomfortable feeling is downgraded to the status of a bodily sensation rather than a feeling. It is simply experienced as a sensation appearing in our benevolent, indifferent presence. We have no agenda with the sensation, positive or negative. It is just experienced for what it is, a neutral sensation. Because it is no longer coveted or rejected, the sensation is free to evolve, remain, or vanish in its own time and we are free to remain as we are, the freedom in which it appears, the source.

See that it is your experience that everything is free-floating in awareness, no matter how delightful, painful, or neutral the situation. It is always so. When that is understood, the situation is always neutral and awareness always delightful. ...

*Why is it so difficult to remain as this open space of consciousness?*

It is actually impossible *not* to remain as this open space of consciousness. However, to be it knowingly is a different matter. The reason is that once the I-thought has disappeared as a result of understanding, new layers of feeling come to the surface. Unlike the thoughts of the small 'I', which seem to hold some promise of happiness, of fulfilment, these feelings are uncomfortable and we therefore try to escape from them into thinking. Thus the process of avoidance through thinking and subsequent activity is again generated. It requires great courage, love, and patience to face these feelings without wanting to escape from them. ...

It is important not to reject the body without welcoming it. Don't escape from it into thinking. Experience deeply the richness of the body, like the intricacy of an ancient carpet. It is not something you can explore in one moment. Therefore, first discover the truth as this neutral

space of openness, of welcoming, and later on, you will discover that it manifests as love, happiness, and joy.

The truth is that which *is*, the facts without any preferences, the facts unfolding in your benevolent presence. Observe the facts as a scientist would observe a new species of bacterium. They have a life of their own. We are the welcoming presence in which they appear. At some point the perfume of this presence will become manifest.

However, for the time being, your body is largely unknown territory. You have to welcome it, explore it, make acquaintance with the richness of this web of subtle contractions, tensions, and dynamics, without naming it, without calling it fear, desire, or boredom. If you want to name it, call it 'interesting stuff', but don't meddle with it. The scientist doesn't want to kill the bugs. He wants to see how they live, reproduce, move, and eat. In the same way, we don't want to kill these sensations, these feelings. We want to understand them. We want to see the richness and the diversity of what we call 'me', because we usually avoid it. The moment we see our desire to change things, we are free from it. [*The Perfume of Silence*: There is No There]

## Contemplation

*Non-duality is not an immunization against feeling. In fact, it is the opposite: it is unconditional openness, sensitivity, vulnerability and possibility.* [Rupert Spira]