Enlightenment

Ton Haarmans · Wide Open Windows



“Enlightenment” is one of those words that refuses to stay put. It behaves like a magnet. It pulls people into practices, communities, doctrines, and counter-doctrines. It promises an end. It produces teachers. It produces cynics. It produces bliss, disappointment, and sometimes something quieter: the end of desperation.

In the language of Configurations of Appearance, the interesting question is not whether enlightenment is real or unreal. The interesting question is: what does this word do? What kind of world does it create? What kind of problem does it define? And what kind of “me” does it require in order to remain convincing?

Below are fourteen lenses. Not fourteen truths. Each lens selects a different aspect of experience and then treats that selection as central. That is how worlds stabilize: by selecting, naming, and repeating.

To make the differences clearer, I grouped the lenses into three clusters that roughly mirror the three books:

- **This Is It**: what shifts in what is noticed, felt, or seen
- **Mindsets**: how a spiritual world stabilizes into paths, identities, and authority
- **Origins**: what a tradition treats as the underlying condition, ground, or non-ground

Cluster 1 - This Is It: shifts in what appears

1. Enlightenment as presence and acceptance
   Source: Eckhart Tolle, John Astin
   A shift into the immediacy of the present. Less metaphysics, more attention. The “problem” is resistance, and the move is letting go.

2. Enlightenment as the natural state Source: Dzogchen and Zen What is sought is already here. The drama is created by effort. Stop grasping and the “natural” becomes obvious again.
3. Enlightenment as seeing with no head Source: Douglas Harding (The Headless Way) A direct perceptual pivot: no face looking out, only openness and the world arising. A practical experiment rather than a metaphysical claim.
4. Enlightenment as ecstatic awareness and celebration Source: Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (Osho) A paradoxical blend: witness consciousness without renunciation. “Zorba the Buddha”. Dancing and silence, intensity and space.

Cluster 2 - Mindsets: how a spiritual world stabilizes

1. Enlightenment as liberation from suffering Source: Classical Buddhism A release from craving and aversion. Not transcendence, but a clear seeing of impermanence and the fragility of the self-story. The aim is not a cosmic explanation, but an end to dukkha.
2. Enlightenment as deconditioning Source: J. Krishnamurti Freedom from the known. An ending of psychological time, authority, and belief as shelter. No method that hardens into a method.

3. Enlightenment as lucid participation in the world-dream Source: Carlos Castaneda “Stopping the world”, interrupting perceptual routines, shifting to what the lineage calls nagual. Not waking up from the dream, but becoming lucid in it.
4. Enlightenment as collapse of belief structures Source: Robert Saltzman, UG Krishnamurti Not an attainment, but the collapse of spiritual striving itself. Not necessarily blissful. Often blunt, bodily, unromantic. The project is exposed as a project.
5. Enlightenment as ending the search Source: Miranda Warren, Joan Tollifson, Shiv Sengupta No arrival, no final state. The “problem” was the assumption that something is wrong and must be fixed. The search ends by being seen through.

Cluster 3 - Origins: what is treated as ground, condition, or non-ground

1. Enlightenment as unity with the absolute Source: Advaita Vedānta The recognition that Atman and Brahman are not two. Not an achievement, but the removal of avidyā, the assumption of separation.
2. Enlightenment as emptiness (Śūnyatā) Source: Mahāyāna Buddhism (Nāgārjuna) No thing has inherent existence, including “enlightenment”. This lens does not point to a hidden essence, but to interdependence and groundlessness.

3. Enlightenment as radical non-duality Source: Contemporary non-duality (Tony Parsons, Miranda Warren) There is no person to become enlightened. Seeking is part of the dream of individuality. This lens cuts away the whole project by denying the seeker.
4. Enlightenment as transformation of identity Source: Western mysticism (Meister Eckhart, Plotinus) Union with God or the One. The personal self becomes transparent to something larger. This lens treats the divine as the real ground.
5. Enlightenment as inhabiting paradox Source: Taoism Aligning with what cannot be defined. Not-knowing as sanity. A subtle yielding that cannot be turned into a program.

These clusters are not clean compartments. They overlap. That is the point. The word “enlightenment” is not a single referent but a bundle of different operations. Each operation generates a different kind of world, and a different kind of seeker.

Here is my own thread, briefly. Not as proof of anything, just as an example of how a word can steer a life.

After reading Carlos Castaneda in the early 80s, and after some mindbending experiments with cannabis, I became convinced that there must be another way of experiencing myself and the world. Other than my

normal way. That conviction created a horizon. It also created a lack: if there is something else, then what I have now is not enough.

I wanted someone who was already “there”. I thought I found that in the form of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. I travelled that path, neo-sannyas, for more than ten years.

In January 1990 Rajneesh (then called Osho) died and I, like many other sannyasins, drifted into the satsang scene of Advaita and neo-Advaita teachers.

During those gatherings it happened a few times that I felt I “got it”. Bliss and laughter. Then of course nothing lasted. On to the next one. The next video. The next book. Believing that maybe this time it would stay, and I would be done.

And that phase also passed.

And now?

I just started the air conditioner and I am listening to the sound of it. Outside it is getting hot again. A little bird is sitting on the edge of the pool. I should water the plants and clean up the dead leaves from the terrace. And bake a cake for tomorrow’s friends coming over.

I hate mosquitoes.

Yes, ending like this is a rhetorical trick: present experience as a final punchline, as if I am really over it. But something did change. Not certainty. Not an answer. Mostly the desperation is gone. I still do not know what enlightenment is. I only have the words of others describing what their experience seems to be. And since I cannot really know what their experience is, it is pointless to treat their words as a map of my life. What remains is simple: noticing what happens, giving up false beliefs when they show themselves, and letting the day be the day.