

Analysis

The Holy Hoax of Final Enlightenment



Pioneer News Service

Published on: 24 Oct 2026, 12:03 am



Follow Us



Author: Acharya Prashant

A woman once told me that she had spent decades seeking enlightenment. She had been living in India since 1989, spending time in Tiruvannamalai, Bodh Gaya and the Himalayas, visiting spiritual teachers and pursuing what she called the spiritual path. She remembered a period of peace and contentment that had come without effort. Then she began searching for that condition again, and the search itself became a source of suffering.

By the time we spoke, she was in Rishikesh, surrounded by spiritual teachers and programmes. Sometimes, she said, she could not sleep because she had still not reached. After so many years, she felt ashamed of her apparent failure. She even feared she was going backwards.

I asked her to consider a businessman who cannot sleep because his profits have not reached the desired target. He pursues more money, imagining that some future achievement will finally bring satisfaction. She



he hoped money would relieve his incompleteness; now he hopes a spiritual experience will do so. The object has acquired a magnificent name, but what has happened to the one who wants it?

Before asking how to become enlightened, should we not ask who wants enlightenment?

The Customer Came Before the Guru

It is easy to blame spiritual teachers for selling enlightenment. There are enough offerings: awakening through meditation, a special initiation, mysterious energies, a promised condition of permanent bliss. But the seller did not manufacture the customer's dissatisfaction. The demand existed before the guru arrived. Practically every shop in the world is selling you some version of liberation, though most do not use that word.

You are unhappy with your job, so you seek another one with a better salary. You buy a new car, move to a bigger house or decide that life will improve once you settle abroad. Someone begins another relationship after being disappointed in the previous one. What is common to these pursuits? I am not all right as I am. Something must change so that I no longer have to remain in my present condition.

There can be excellent reasons to change a job or relationship. A vehicle is useful, and improving one's material circumstances is not a sin. The trouble begins when the vehicle must do more than transport you, when it must also make you feel important. Your salary must certify your worth. Another person must cure your loneliness, not merely share life with you. You have turned a practical object into an imagined instrument of psychological liberation.

When it fails, you generally conclude that the object was inadequate. You need a better car, another partner, more money. Rarely do you question the one who expects these things to cure him.

There are two different directions of change. In one, circumstances change: your income, location, relationships, possessions, knowledge, even your hours of meditation. These changes can be necessary and beneficial. But freedom is another matter: not merely changing what you have, but investigating the one who has it. The shopkeeper counting his profits and the pilgrim counting his austerities can be standing on the same ground.

Eventually, the ego may grow disappointed with worldly achievements and seek something extraordinary. Ordinary successes can be lost. Wealth disappears, relationships break, the body ages. But final enlightenment is advertised as the one achievement that can never be taken away. No more fear, confusion or vulnerability. A destination from which there will be no further journey.

Consider how attractive that promise is to someone exhausted by uncertainty. The ego, which has spent its whole life seeking security, is offered the ultimate security. And because the promise is spiritual, it escapes much of the suspicion we ordinarily direct towards advertisements.

The guru promising final enlightenment finds a customer already eager to believe him.

But dissatisfaction itself is not the problem. Suffering can be the beginning of a genuine inquiry. We feel bound and want to be free. The mistake is to invent a magnificent future condition instead of investigating the bondage already present. What makes you so dependent upon praise, another person's company or a



I call the centre of this dissatisfaction the ego. It means more than arrogance. A proud fellow has an ego, but the one who takes pride in being humble has an ego too. The ego is the claimant who says, "I am this." I am rich, unfortunate, knowledgeable, religious, a husband, a renunciate. It borrows identities and calls them "me."

Once an identification has been accepted, it must be defended. Losing money becomes a threat to the person, not merely his finances. A challenge to a cherished belief feels like an assault upon the believer. Another person's rejection becomes unbearable because the ego had made that person's acceptance part of its own identity. The ego makes a self out of what it calls its own, then spends its energy protecting that self.

Now it encounters the highest of all possible titles: enlightened. The claimant who sought importance through possessions and achievements wishes to acquire a spiritual status supposedly marking the end of the claimant himself.

During a conversation with biologist Rupert Sheldrake in London this July, I called final enlightenment the ego's great fantasy, its final label. I described it as the ego issuing itself a death certificate.

Somebody declares, "I have attained final enlightenment. My ego is no more." Who is making that declaration? Who remembers having attained something? Who wishes the attainment to be recognised? The very fellow whose disappearance is being certified is standing there signing the certificate. And we are expected to accept his signature as evidence that he no longer exists.

Of course, saying "I" in ordinary speech is not a spiritual offence. Someone saying "I will meet you tomorrow" is not necessarily making a psychological claim. The problem is the claimant who converts an insight into a possession and builds a new identity around it: "I have become somebody who is no longer anybody."

The ego has found its finest disguise. It can now demand recognition as one beyond ordinary human limitations, perhaps even beyond correction. If its conduct is questioned, its supposed enlightenment can become its defence. The very claim meant to end the ego protects it from examination.

A subtler version says that the ego has disappeared and a pure witness remains, silently watching body and mind. But if this witness becomes something described, remembered and claimed as one's own, what has changed? Yesterday I identified with possessions. Today I identify with "pure awareness." The claimant may have merely moved into a more sophisticated hiding place.

A moment of witnessing may reveal something important. There is no need to deny that. But why immediately turn it into the discovery of an eternal, infallible inner identity? Terms such as Atma should help us question false identification, not furnish a new title for the one being questioned.

Illumination Is Real. Finality Is the Fantasy.

I am not denying moments of illumination. Something obscure becomes clear. A fear is recognised, an identification loosens, the fog lifts. Sometimes a single insight changes the direction of a person's life.



Perhaps he will stop seeking it from that person. What happens when another source of validation becomes important, or when the memory of his own insight becomes a source of pride?

One can be free of a particular falsehood without being permanently immune to all falsehood.

In its ordinary sense, enlightenment simply means that light has fallen upon something previously dark. I may enlighten you about one matter, and you may enlighten me about another. An illumination can be complete in what it reveals without being the last illumination of one's life. Why must this innocent word imply a supernatural, irreversible condition?

Zen stories sometimes describe a disciple awakening after a master's startling reply or sudden blow. Remember that the disciple may have spent years in inquiry. Think of a ripe mango hanging from a branch. You shake the branch and the mango falls. Did the shaking make it ripe? The ripening had already happened. The shock released what was ready to fall. Nor does that event prove that no new confusion can arise in the future.

The ego begins with bodily existence. The organism has a physical boundary and a basic sense of separateness; society builds upon this through names, memories, fears and ambitions. The body's practical individuality must not be confused with the enormous psychological burden accumulated around it. The body needs food; the ego wants to be admired for its food. The body needs shelter; the ego wants a home that establishes its status. The body feels pain; the ego constructs a lifelong identity out of having been wronged.

That additional burden can become lighter. The ego can become thinner. What cannot responsibly be promised is a permanent guarantee that the living person will never identify falsely again.

The Indian reader may object: does the tradition not speak of the jivanmukta, liberated while living? It does. If this means that bondage can fall away here and now, that is precisely the possibility worth pursuing. But if it means a once-and-for-all certification against every future identification, what establishes the claim? No present understanding can certify every future circumstance.

Sheldrake wondered whether this was pessimistic. If the ego continues, what hope is there? But why confuse its existence with its size? The ego's birth and its expansion are different matters. Its capacity to become swollen with fear, greed and self-importance does not mean it must remain so. It can be violent and possessive, but it is also capable of love, honesty and the intent to become less.

I am not an ego hater. To hate the ego would be to deny the possibility of freedom, because who is going to choose freedom if not this ego? A person less dependent on approval, less frightened of loss and less driven to exploit others has undergone a profound change. Why dismiss that change because it does not end in a certificate?

I also reject the opposite reassurance that you are already free and nothing needs to be done. Tell this to someone consumed by jealousy or possessiveness. His suffering remains, but now he has acquired a doctrine that excuses him from examining it. That is another certificate, issued in advance.

The Unreal Is Already Before You



acknowledgement of the unreal as unreal. That acknowledgement must include both the experienced and the experiencer.

We prefer discussing the Absolute because grand claims about it can be made without examining the claimant. But the unreal is present in the facts of our lives. The person unable to bear criticism, who cannot live without somebody's approval, who is terrified of losing what he calls his own, already has abundant material for inquiry.

It is easy to announce, "I know the Absolute." How will another person verify that? It is harder to admit that one remains ruled by fear or jealousy. The ego prefers grand assertions because they are difficult to test. Ordinary life keeps presenting inconvenient evidence.

I have spoken of the fellow who wants to know the highest truth but cannot maintain a right relationship with the waiter serving his coffee. He discusses permanent peace but is disturbed by a small insult for days. He wants to understand Brahman, yet pays little attention to where his food comes from or what happens to those who produce it.

Why should the Gita or Atma become entertainment for someone refusing to examine his own condition? We are unwell. We need medicine, not another impressive conversation about health.

The Price of Freedom

Even acknowledging falsehood is not the end. Someone recognises that his career is driven by hunger for status. Someone understands that a relationship survives largely because of fear of loneliness. Someone sees that religious belief is protecting social identity rather than expressing understanding.

Fine. What happens next? Is the person willing to stop protecting what has been exposed?

Real change requires seeing and intent. Seeing means honestly observing what is happening, without one's customary justifications. Intent is the willingness to move against the tendencies that preserve bondage. One needs intent even to look without evasion; what one sees can then deepen and correct that intent.

But there is something decisive within both: the willingness to face the price of freedom.

You may understand that you pursue your career mainly to impress people whose judgment you do not respect. You may even deliver a lecture on the foolishness of seeking validation. But are you willing to stop living for it?

A woman may know that a relationship has become bondage and also know that leaving it may bring loneliness, financial difficulty or social criticism. A man who has built a false public image may know that honesty could cost him admiration. Someone questioning inherited beliefs may fear losing family approval.

It is easy to praise truth until truth threatens something you call your own. People want freedom from dependence without surrendering the arrangements on which they depend. They want freedom from fear without risking the apparent security that feeds it.

The ego bargains like a businessman. It will sacrifice an ordinary pleasure if promised extraordinary bliss. It may renounce possessions to acquire the prestige of a great renunciate. It may endure hardship to build a

And the full price cannot always be known beforehand. From within an attachment, losing it may feel unbearable. That cost must not be dismissed cheaply. The dignity lies in facing what honestly appears enormous and nevertheless choosing the right thing. Only after the release may one discover how inflated the price had been. What seemed indispensable begins to look like a burden.

Pay first, and then discover how the price changes.

This is why love is indispensable to liberation. Not possessiveness or emotional excitement, but the ego's willingness to let what is false fall away. Ordinarily it loves what protects and enlarges it. There is another possibility: it can love freedom more than its familiar arrangements. It can choose to become less.

Nor is the price payable to a guru, an institution or a deity. No spiritual authority has a right to collect your surrender as a personal possession. The benefit of dropping a burden lies in the dropping itself.

One sincere prayer expresses this movement: "Hey Raam, mujhe mujhse bacha." O Lord, save me from myself. Not make me superior, not give me special powers. Save me from the one who turns everything, even spirituality, into a means of continuing his bondage.

Who Will Examine the Examiner?

Here comes a difficulty. If the ego is so skilled at deception, how can it examine itself honestly? It can be the accused, advocate and judge in its own case. It can conceal motives and pronounce itself innocent. It can even take pride in its self-examination.

Someone meditates and concludes that he has become less egoistic. Another reads a profound book and looks down upon those who have not read it. Another acquires the vocabulary of awareness and liberation while living exactly as before. New knowledge has become part of the old defence.

Sheldrake asked whether I recommended methods, meditation being an obvious example. I told him that the indispensable requirement is honesty. But honesty is not merely thinking about oneself. Thinking can become the ego's lawyer. A person may spend hours explaining why his dependence is love or why his ambition is duty.

A serious teacher, a scripture or an honest friend can serve as an external mirror, exposing what the person has learned to avoid. The mirror does not create a new face. It reveals the one already there. The student must still be willing to look.

When people ask me for a method, I tell them they already have too many. Acquiring money, gathering knowledge, travelling and accumulating experiences can all become ways of protecting the ego. Meditation too can become a possession: hours counted, progress advertised, detachment displayed. The problem is not the activity but the centre it serves.

The teacher's role is therefore not to confer enlightenment or make students dependent upon his approval. It is to expose bondage and support their willingness to be free. That may require trust and uncomfortable correction, but no teacher's personal importance can be the purpose of the relationship. A mirror is useful because it shows the prison, not because it owns the world outside.

become less dominant.

The Test Is in How You Live

We commonly recognise supposed enlightenment by appearances: robes, long hair, a solemn expression, austere living, a peculiar manner of speaking. Dress an ordinary young man in the expected clothes, alter his gestures and place him before a camera. Some may begin treating him as a holy man. What has changed within him? We do not know. Only the visible packaging has changed.

One person gives away possessions because he has seen through his dependence. Another gives them away because he wants admiration. In families, somebody says, "I sacrificed so much for you," then submits a bill for obedience and gratitude. The sacrifice has become an investment. Under spiritual authority, the same mechanism can demand not just your money but your judgment and independence.

A more meaningful inquiry concerns ordinary conduct. Is the person less dependent upon praise? Can he face criticism? Can he acknowledge a mistake? Is he less possessive in relationships? Has his concern expanded beyond himself and those he considers his own?

Our relationship with animals is revealing. We can speak of their sacredness while participating in systems that exploit them. We know that other living beings suffer, yet convenience often wins. A flattering belief about ourselves is not proof of compassion.

I respect science immensely. Knowledge of nature and society is indispensable, and without it we become vulnerable to superstition. But a person can question every inherited belief and leave one assumption untouched: the "I" doing the questioning. The ego is the first superstition, and it can survive even the demolition of many others.

Science asks, "What is it? How does it work?" I also ask, "For whom?" Who will use this knowledge, and what does he want? We possess extraordinary technological abilities while remaining capable of ecological destruction, industrial cruelty and catastrophic violence. Knowledge has grown. Has the knower become less frightened, greedy or destructive?

Spiritual understanding has to meet the facts of living. Outward conduct cannot infallibly reveal another person's inner condition, but it provides evidence that grand declarations do not. If someone has become less dependent, less exploitative and more willing to face uncomfortable truth, that matters. There is no need to award him a permanent title.

No Final Arrival

At the end of our conversation, the moderator suggested that perhaps humanity needs not instant enlightenment but widespread education of the self. I agreed. We cannot rely upon the supposed enlightenment of a few extraordinary individuals to transform everybody else. One person's clarity cannot mechanically become another person's clarity. A teacher can hold up a mirror to millions, but cannot look on their behalf.

Ordinary education investigates objects: matter, organisms, history, markets, institutions. Spiritual education adds the neglected question: who is the one using all this knowledge, and what does he want?



Does that make liberation an endless burden? Only if freedom is regarded as unpleasant work undertaken for some future reward. When an attachment weakens, there is less to defend. When the need for approval diminishes, there is less anxiety. When possessiveness recedes, relationships are less burdened by demands. The movement towards freedom is itself meaningful.

Return to the woman who had spent decades seeking enlightenment. Her years of inquiry need not be declared worthless. But perhaps she can see that she has created a new bondage: the belief that her life will remain a failure until a final extraordinary condition arrives. Why must she carry that burden? She does not have to attain a special state before examining it. The facts are available now.

Do not make enlightenment the great achievement of your life. We have already sought fulfillment through enough achievements. Do not make freedom another possession. If you see something false within yourself, ask whether you are willing to pay the price of letting it go. If it falls away, do not turn its absence into a new identity.

Let the movement continue.

The desire for liberation is genuine. The hoax begins when the ego turns liberation into its highest personal title. Having spent its life accumulating possessions, it now wants to accumulate freedom itself. It wants to be certified as somebody who is no longer anybody.

If the ego has really become less, why must it announce that it is enlightened? And if it is still eager to make that announcement, what exactly has become less?

Acharya Prashant is a philosopher and author whose work centres on self-examination and its application to contemporary life; Views presented are personal.



Analysis

Cities count residents, but who pays for commuters?

Pioneer News Service



challenges to measure not just where people live, but where the costs of serving them fall—and how these responsibilities should be shared

Read More

Analysis

Jagadguru Shri Kripalu Ji Maharaj: Timeless wisdom

Atul Gupta

Published on: 24 Oct 2026, 12:06 am

The modern world is characterised by continuous struggle and instability. People in every country are suffering from the pressures of cultural change, technological shifts, economic uncertainty and fragile mental health.

In India, our reliance on the timeless wisdom of spirituality is fading, and atheism and scepticism are on the rise. especially amongst our younger generation.

Read More



Analysis

The COP illusion: Why India needs to lead the Global South axis at COP31

VK Bahuguna

Published on: 23 Oct 2026, 2:53 am

As COP31 approaches, the Global South must move beyond rhetoric and demand climate finance without debt, affordable green technology and accountability for historical emissions. India should lead a united front to make climate action equitable, practical and binding

For more than three decades, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate

Read More

Analysis



The Hon'ble President of India's visit to Bastar on 23 October 2026 to participate in the Muriya Darbar and a public programme associated with the 75-day Bastar Dussehra celebrations offers a significant opportunity to bring national attention to the region's extraordinary cultural heritage and the aspirations of its people. It is also

Read More

