# Enlightenment Reduction

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First, a few caveats:

1. This is a summation/distillation of the core concepts I’ve learned about over the last few years as I’ve gone deep down the Enlightenment Zen Non-Duality rabbit hole. I’ve hunted far and wide, across religion, mythology, mysticism, philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, and quantum physics to try and understand what’s really going on here (waves hands at everything).

2. I still have no clue if Enlightenment as traditionally presented is truly a thing. As I’ve written [here](https://screwthezoo.com/the-nature-of-reality/), there’s a very real possibility that non-duality is just a non-technical way to say simulation hypothesis, that we exist in a virtual construct of some sort. But both non-duality and the simulation hypothesis mean essentially the same thing, so I’m reserving judgment in that regard. It’s also possible that Enlightenment is nothing but an unusual flavor of dissociative disorder, so be careful where you go poking. What I \*can\* Say for sure that the concept of Enlightenment can be found (sometimes plainly presented, though often disguised) in every religion and mythology throughout human history. It appears to be the oldest, most consistent concept humanity has passed down.

3. I do not claim to be Enlightened…but I seem to be, as the character [Jed McKenna](https://www.wisefoolpress.com/) might say, Awake in the Dream. The first step has been taken (and quite a few more after that), and I can actively feel desires and attachments dropping away. It’s very strange.

At this point, if Enlightenment truly is a thing, it feels like an inevitability, though I (the me I think of as me) won’t survive the metamorphosis. Wheeee!

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But hey, for now I’m just a caterpillar talking about butterfly shit over here, so do with this as you will

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# What is Enlightenment?

Depends on who you ask…that word has more baggage and bullshit attached to it than any religion or belief system out there. But what is it really, bullshit aside?

A word.

An abstraction if you will, our attempt to give a label to something that apparently can’t be understood through abstraction.

The only way to understand what Enlightenment actually means is to \*\*be\*\* Enlightened…which isn’t a particularly satisfying answer, but it’s the only possible answer if you really think about it. It is experiential only.

And it’s not that those who are Enlightened don’t want to explain it (though some feel no such inclination), but rather it boils down to an inherent problem with language itself. Zen is not abstract and couched in mysteries and riddled with koans out of a need for secrecy, but because the Truth can’t be reduced to words without ceasing to be Truth.

I hear you over there saying, “Huh?”

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Are you familiar with the phrase “\*\*The map is not the territory\*\*“? It is a way of saying that human language deals entirely in abstractions, in caricatures or representations of truth, but not directly with the truth.

A map represents a physical space, but it does so by necessity at greatly reduced detail. No matter how detailed the map, it can never fully and accurately show the territory without \*\*being\*\* the territory itself…this is [the trouble with language](https://screwthezoo.com/the-words-that-divide-us/), and why no Enlightened person can ever possibly explain it to you accurately.

Let me give you a brief example.

Let’s say you are holding a spoon. I call it a spoon, and you call it a spoon. We appear to be on the same page. But what do we mean by spoon? Most likely a kitchen utensil for scooping, with a generally recognized and semi-consistent shape…but spoon is an abstraction. It is useful at one level of reality (much like a desktop icon on a computer), but it only gets you so far.

It’s useful, but incomplete.

We call all spoons Spoon, but they are not all the same spoon, and the name does not remotely encapsulate all the information tied to the individual object. For example, each spoon has been used by different people (probably many), for different foods, in different places. They were manufactured in different places, from different materials. Those materials came from different mines, were mined by different people and different machines. The raw material may have originated from different parts of the universe.

Do you get the point?

We use the same name, but each thing is unique, with a unique history that is SO much more complex than the simple label implies.

How about another example?

In Robert Jordan’s first Wheel of Time book, The Eye of the World, a character named Elyas says the following, speaking of a wolf named Dapple (long story…great books though!):

> “It isn’t exactly talking,” Elyas replied slowly. “The words don’t matter, and they aren’t exactly right, either. Her name isn’t Dapple. It’s something that means the way shadows play on a forest pool at a midwinter dawn, with the breeze rippling the surface, and the tang of ice when the water touches the tongue, and a hint of snow before nightfall in the air. But that isn’t quite it, either. You can’t say it in words. It’s more of a feeling. That’s the way wolves talk.”

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This is what it means to try to speak of Enlightenment. It’s a thing experienced directly, and simply cannot be conveyed in words without losing an essential part of what it is, thus reducing it to something false.

It seems, as far as I can tell, that the best that can be done is to explain what Enlightenment is not…much like an artist using negative space, you allow what is not there to do the work of showing or suggesting.

If you read through the writings or records of those who claimed (or whom others claimed) to be Enlightened, you’ll come across stories, analogies, metaphors, parables, and every manner of literary device attempting to (inadequately) describe the Enlightened state. Explaining color to a blind person, music or speech to a deaf person, comparing maps to territories, talking animals and silly stories and on and on and on.

Your thinking mind deals only with abstraction, which is why koans and meditation are so commonly tied to this concept; they’re tools to lull the thinking mind in the hopes of landing you a glimpse of reality. But though these tools can work for a moment, they DO NOT result in permanent Enlightenment any more than eating a single meal results in a lifetime of satisfaction.

Unless and until you complete the work of detachment, you’re not done.

Counterintuitively, you must go backwards to make progress. This quote, from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s book The Little Prince, sums it up nicely:

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And this I think is the key, not only to understanding what Enlightenment is, but to actually becoming Enlightened.

\*\*Subtraction.\*\*

The removal of all that is false.

Enlightenment is not a destination. It’s not an altered state of consciousness. It is not “arrived” at by the addition of knowledge or experience. No amount of study or prayer or meditation or service or loving kindness or gratitude will “get you there”, as if there was even some “there” to get to.

If you want to be precise, one could say that you’re technically already enlightened…you’ve just forgotten, and that memory is buried under a pile of giant piles of crap.

Everything I’ve found, from Buddha to Lao Tzu to ~~Jesus~~ Joshua of Nazareth to Anthony de Mello to “Jed McKenna” and countless others besides, \*\*clearly\*\* indicates that Enlightenment is “arrived at” solely by removing the beliefs that obscure it.

Have you ever seen the movie [Labyrinth](https://twitter.com/sams\_antics/status/1230415127360528384?s=21)? (If not, you should, it has heavy Zen/Enlightenment themes.)

For those who haven’t seen it, meet Agnes:

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Agnes, aka Junk Lady, is a character in the movie Labyrinth, a hoarder of junk, that represents the main character Sarah’s attachments. She tries, aggressively, to get Sarah even further attached to both physical objects and memories of her past, and it’s only when Sarah realizes all the supposedly precious memories and important things Agnes is pushing on her and reminding her of are really just useless junk that she begins to wake from her dream state.

Metaphorically speaking, Agnes and her Junk are The Gateless Gate spoken of in Zen lore.

The Gateless Gate only appears to be a gate from “this side”, but in fact it’s our own false construct composed of all our junk (identity, beliefs, attachments…aka Ego), and when you discard all the junk the “gate” that wasn’t really a gate is gone and the real you is “there”…that’s it, that’s the great, grand secret.

Enlightenment is a junk removal business…best call 1-800-Got-Ego

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One of my favorite images, and one which perfectly encapsulates the unenlightened state, is this one:

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WHO you think you are—name, origin story, experiences, memories, beliefs, attachments—that’s a fiction.

We love to celebrate a baby’s first word, but what we’re celebrating in that moment is in fact The Fall, the consumption of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

The birth of duality.

Prior to the moment when you began to think in words, before you thought of yourself as you, there was nothing but observation, awareness—no labels, no individual self—just presence.

As infants we lived in Mushin, no-mind, right up until the moment that we didn’t.

Emotions came and went. Desires came and went. No labels, no attachments, truly living in the now. If you’ve seen a child go from calm to screaming and crying to laughing in the blink of an eye, you know what I mean.

That state, no-mind, is the truth of WHAT you are.

\*\*Awareness.\*\*

And the you you think of as you is just a character the real “you” is playing, a cosmic finger puppet. Surprise!

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Again, this isn’t exactly right, and it’s definitely somewhat tongue in cheek, but it’s about as close as it gets on “this side” of the Gateless Gate.

As Shakespeare said:

> “All the world’s a stage,

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> And all the men and women merely players;

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> They have their exits and their entrances;

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> And one man in his time plays many parts…”

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Again, the you you think of as you does not actually exist existentially speaking, it’s a character being played, and thus everything that’s been attached to that character is just a part of the play.

You’re method acting and you don’t even know it.

The image at the top of this page, an ax in a stump, represents the famous Zen saying “Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.”

This may be confusing to some, but it is meant to convey that the “state” we call Enlightenment isn’t some constant carefree blissed out nirvana—the body formerly known as ~~Prince~~ You continues to exist in the dream, continues to need food, water, rest, continues to feel emotions, continues to have meaning to others who have history with it—the only difference is that “you” are no longer attached to the character being played.

You’ve remembered that you’re the finger, not the puppet.

You know/are your true nature, are fully aware that you’re just going for a ride in a Edgar Suit, that it’s all a bunch of rides in a grand cosmic daydream/amusement park, that nothing is wrong, nothing could ever possibly be wrong…and now you can just kick back and enjoy the ride.

This is why some who claim to be Enlightened say there is nothing really to recommend this “state”, that Enlightenment has nothing to offer “you”, brings “you” no benefits or boons, and that “you” can’t actually seek it of “your” volition. It’s also why “you” can’t be Enlightened…when the last of your baggage is gone, there is no YOU left.

If you’re looking for bliss or cosmic consciousness or some other glorious altered state, those are something entirely different—non-permanent states of consciousness, plenty of fun, not that hard to attain (easier with psychedelics if I do say so myself)—but they are just somewhat more obscure rides in the amusement park.

Exciting dreams, but still dreams.

Enlightenment is a horse of a different color. It’s permanent, a one-way street. There is no emergency exit, no blue pill, no juicy steak, no getting reinserted into the Matrix as if you were never unplugged. Like Cypher, “you” are now shit out of luck.

If you’re coming at this from a religious background, be aware that Heaven (Enlightenment aka Non-Duality) or Hell (Duality, the “fallen” state) are here and now, and always have been. Not elsewhere, not later.

Original Sin (going astray) was simply “falling” from a Non-Dual to a Dual state. The fruit of the tree was “knowledge” aka belief in the untrue.

Repent never meant sorrow or regret for sins; it derives from the Hebrew word Shuv, To Return/Turning, and just means to turn back or return to your non-dual, Enlightened state

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The truth always gets twisted and buried in falsehoods in the name of power and profit, so wherever you find an individual or organization claiming to be the sole guardian or purveyor of truth, thar be bullshit matey

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And that, folks, is that.

WAKE UP!

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There’s really nothing else to it.

You won’t find a simpler explanation than this, and the only “process” is one of subtraction, detaching piece-by-piece from every belief and attachment tied to you like ballast to a hot air balloon. You’d be free, flying, right now, if only you weren’t weighed down by bags of egoic sand, so cut that shit loose and fly away.

You’re done (free, Awake, Enlightened) when there’s nothing left, when everything false has been discarded.

The reason nobody can tell you more \*precisely\* how to do it is because everybody has a different set of baggage to discard. There is no one path other than questioning absolutely everything, and discarding all attachments and any belief that isn’t true (which is basically everything).

This does not mean every preference or physical need will go away. They will not. Remember, chop wood, carry water.

If you feel so compelled, there are a few books by people who strike me as genuinely Enlightened that could perhaps shine light in a few corners I’ve missed, and it can be useful to look at this space from multiple angles, but just know they all effectively say the same thing:

[The Enlightenment Trilogy](https://www.wisefoolpress.com/e3/) by Jed McKenna (no frills, no bullshit, just harsh truths)

[Awareness](https://www.amazon.com/Awareness-Conversations-SJ-Anthony-Mello-ebook/dp/B005GFBP6W/) by Anthony de Mello (a kinder, gentler Jed)

[Liberation IS](https://www.amazon.com/Liberation-Spiritual-Path-Salvadore-Poe-ebook/dp/B019W4KNFG/) by Salvadore Poe (about as close to a step-by-step guide as you’re likely to find)

[The Experience of No-Self](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08XN3P55C/) by Bernadette Roberts (a very detailed experience of the Enlightenment transition and initial experience/adjustment phase…fascinating and kind of terrifying to be honest)

You can read more if you want—there’s also crystal clear material from Jiddu Krishnamurti, Eckhart Tolle, Alan Watts, and many others—but again, the message is the same, always the same, just served in different flavors, and many of the folks claiming to be Enlightened are no such thing.

If you’re more of a visual learner, go watch [The Matrix](https://twitter.com/sams\_antics/status/1307263562511978496?s=21), [Fight Club](https://twitter.com/sams\_antics/status/1304013241333547008?s=21), and [The Truman Show](https://twitter.com/sams\_antics/status/1307973896596054017?s=21), as each contain the same core message. (Each of these links goes to a Twitter thread where I explore the philosophy of those movies, and are worth exploring.)

Again, these may be useful, but they are lanterns only, fingers pointing to the moon…don’t be distracted by fingers, focus on the moon.

You don’t need a guru to wake up. Most of them are bogus anyway, just traps to keep you you…by their fruits (how many Enlightened people they turn out) ye shall know them, and all that

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Anywho, that’s it, the end.

Wake the fuck up…or don’t. Makes no difference either way.