A lot of people have good ideas. For instance, it was a good idea to buy this book and help me live in the lifestyle which suits me.

Oops! Did I say that out loud?

Ok, ignore the second part and concentrate on the first part. Very few people get through life without having good ideas. Some people, upon creation of a good idea, pick up that ball and run with it, making good ideas tangible or usable. A truly good idea that helps to define what is good about humanity is what we have here and there referred to as enlightenment. Millions of people have put a lot of thought into enlightenment, and out of those thoughts, some great ones have bubbled to the top.

Enlightenment takes place against the backdrop of civilization and its various aspects. For instance, even though the ancient Greek philosophers often said what we would think of as rather ignorant things, like that everything is made of water or air, they were enlightened people, in a world where people had barely evolved beyond the stone age. We still, 2 500 years later, think of them as enlightened, because they gave us the belief that the world was a place worth examining in an intellectual light.

The Catholic world of 15th Century Italy was a violent and greed-ridden place, yet the revolution in thinking that they began is still called The Enlightenment, because it gave us the notion that humans were not simply tools and toys of God, but beings capable of investigation and logic.

I can give you many examples: the pharaoh Akhenaten in ancient Egypt, who revolutionized, for a short time, Egyptian religion; the Emperor Ch’in in China, who saw the value of unity among the various Chinese peoples; the Sumerians, who found a way to record their thoughts by inventing the alphabet.

And of course, the heavy hitters of enlightenment – Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, Lao Tzu, the anonymous writers of the Mahabharata, René Descartes, Karl Marx, Virginia Woolf, Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein and my dad. Some of you may object to the addition of Karl Marx to this list, but the fact that his thinking was perverted by psychopaths has nothing to do with his original message of liberation from the world of aristocratic greed. There are a lot of others who could be added to this list, but space forbids. And by the way, I’m sorry I only put one woman on the list, but women’s enlightenment was not even recognized until the 20th century, and still isn’t in a lot of less enlightened places. Please don’t send me angry letters.

The point is that enlightenment is relative to societal modes of thinking. What is enlightenment in one time and place may be ordinary thought in another. Enlightenment is also cumulative through history. Those among us who study the enlightenment of Jesus may be enlightened compared to those who don’t.

Notice the “may” in that sentence. It is a very big “may.”

When a good idea becomes dogma, it begins to exclude other ways of thinking, and its proponents begin to say things like “there is no other way to enlightenment.” It begins to suggest that enlightenment is a club, with a membership and an admissions committee. It begins to suggest that YOU, being different from ME, are not enlightened, even if you hold as true the most enlightened of thoughts.

Think of enlightenment not as a sudden blooming of light, like turning on the power in a Wal-Mart store. Think of it as an intense eco-light on a dimmer switch. When you’ve been in the dark for a long time, five percent of the light’s potential is enlightenment. When you’ve been at five percent for a long time, eleven percent seems bright.

Now imagine that, as far as you can tell, there is no upper limit to the intensity of the dimmer. No matter how bright the light is, it can always get brighter. It can get so bright that when you stare at it, it makes little green dots on your retina, and you begin to imagine Martians are walking the earth. Perhaps only a god can stand the brightest of lights – human enlightenment may just end where your retinas begin to burn, and it may stay that way for several more generations, until we invent karmic sunglasses.

My method of enlightenment, Fun and its Aspects, is, in my humble opinion, as good as things get these days. Living in a permanent state of joy while maintaining responsibility for the world around you is my idea of enlightenment, and a lot of people agree with me. The problem is with methodology. Let me say to you in capitals: anyone who tells you that there is one way to enlightenment, one mode of enlightenment or one result of enlightenment is a thief and a charlatan, and should be punched on the ear and thrown in the river.

As soon as I read the words “all enlightenment begins this way” or any such phrase, the author has lost me already, and the book gets closed. Whatever benefit of enlightenment that particular human monkey wished to impart is lost to me, because frankly, anyone who tells me that I have to do as I’m told in order to achieve enlightenment is already less enlightened than me, and he/she/they ought to be reading my book, not the other way around. I don’t know everything about what enlightenment is or could be, but I know what it isn’t, and that ain’t it, people. Enlightenment takes place in your head, and has to fit your hardware, programming, environment and software, and therefore is as unique as the individual who wished to achieve it.

Let me reiterate my own position: Enlightenment is Fun. You can read that several different ways:

Enlightenment is fun.

enlightenment is Fun.

enlightenment = fun.

Enlightenment = Fun.

And my personal favourite:

ENLIGHTENMENT IS FUN!!!!!

I think all these variants are true. Enlightenment is/equals Fun. Fun, as we have elsewhere observed, is an inclusive concept that means joy, compassion, justice and plain old fun. There is no point in enlightenment if it makes the world a less well-lit place. Misery and violence are not enlightened. Greed and shallowness are not enlightened.

Now the especially perspicacious among you will be rolling up a newspaper to smack me on the nose with. “Bad Grand Wazoo, bad, bad!” you will say. I have just committed the cardinal sin of enlightenment, by telling you that certain belief systems are not paths to enlightenment. In my defense I can only say that I don’t care. I dislike greed and violence and people who practice them are not invited into the Temple of Fun. I think that there is, in fact, one thing about enlightenment upon which we can all agree: enlightenment makes life better for everybody. If this requires a slight redefinition of the word to exclude certain belief systems, too bad. Sue me.

So now, in a very self-serving way, I have managed to imply that enlightenment is what I say it is, and that all the real smart people have to agree with me. I get around this problem by pointing out that one of the things I have said it is in individualism – the spiritual, emotional and intellectual respect accorded the singular member of a society, and that there are many methods to achieve it. Now you try to find one that isn’t Fun. I double-dare ya.

Some paths to enlightenment are difficult and fraught with emotional pitfalls. They are Fun, but not fun. I recommend that you not attempt these: they will accord you no more joy than our path to Fun does. If you have decided to embark on the rigorous path of Zen, try to enjoy the journey, and I’ll see you when you get here, mint julep in hand. And meanwhile, I will defend to the death your right and reason to choose your own path.