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Before, During & After

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A GURU'S TALE

ENLIGHTENMENT: BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER

*The enlightenment experience is one of bliss and oneness,
but the enlightened life is something quite different.
What I found is that to reach higher peaks, we need to pass
through different valleys.*

BY RANI WILLEMS



Here's my story.

By the mid-nineties it appeared from the outside that I had made it. I lived in India in a very beautiful area outside of town. The house we had built was splendid; we had several servants, cats, dogs, fishponds, etc. I was a respected member of an ashram; I loved the work I did as a therapist. The relationship I was in was wonderful, rewarding, and fun. We lived the successful life of the *neo-sannyasin* (Sanskrit for devotee). In my daily meditation, I knew how to leave the mind behind and experience bliss. I had found a good refuge from pain. What more could I ask for?

I told myself that I was fulfilled, denying that I felt inferior to my lover because I brought in less money, denying that I felt deeply insecure about my capacities as a therapist, and denying so many other little facts. In fact, denial was my way of life and, in retrospect, I can see that I vaguely knew it. But compensation was an art that I had mastered in early childhood.

Then one day my lover left. The hole I fell in was profound. Determined to deal with my pain once and for all (ego always thinks in terms of permanent elimination), I dove into it for about a year and did some intense therapy, until I rediscovered an Awareness Intensive group where you ask yourself the koan “Who am I?” from early morning until late at night. For the next year, I participated in every one of these three- or seven-day groups. Usually it took 24 hours of struggle before I’d pop into another dimension — the realm of oneness, clarity, and peace — and I became addicted to the highs. They lifted me out of all my unresolved pain; “popping koans” became my specialty.

At first I would come down as soon as the group was over, but eventually the highs would not go away. The clarity stayed, and peace was more or less permanent. I had accumulated a lot of energy (*shakti*), and greater breakthroughs and revelations followed. I was free from suffering! I had found a way out!!

There were, however, some thoughts that I was unable to dismiss, ego traps like:

“Now I never have to worry about money anymore; I have what everyone wants.”

“Now I never have to bother with sex and relating anymore because I am beyond them.”

I told myself that I was staying clear of the ego because I was aware of it, but I was uneasy. I looked in my teacher Osho’s writings for a context to understand my precise situation but didn’t find much. Maybe, because I thought that I was already enlightened, I didn’t know how to formulate the question. I felt very alone, but I decided that this is what my teacher meant when he said that “in the end, you are alone.”

For a while, I met with a woman who had declared herself enlightened and she gave me confirmation: yes, I was enlightened! My most dominant experience was joy and peace, and I wanted to share it immediately with whoever wanted to hear it. There was a very genuine and naive sense of wanting to help others out of their suffering. The intention was clean and innocent, as far as I could see.

Someone later described people who declare their enlightenment prematurely as little girls who dress up in their mothers’ clothes and wear high heels pretending they are adults. It was a bit like that, now that I look back. I felt like a kid with a bag of candy that I wanted to share.

My friends avoided me like the plague, but eventually people who wanted to hear what I had to say appeared. Many seekers (like I had been myself) want only to be lifted out of their pain with a shortcut, and shortcuts I had! I was generating a lot of cosmic energy; everyone in the room could feel it, and whomever I talked to or looked at shifted into a state beyond the mind. Of course they were in awe. I was blown away by it as well.

I felt loved, revered, and finally worthy of that love. Pride began to slip in. After all, this person who had been humiliated so often (me) was *someone*. I saw the pride but told myself that because I was seeing it, it did not matter. My fame grew. More and more people attended my *satsangs* (gatherings of people sharing Truth) and had great awakening experiences

— proof of my “rightness.” My ego swelled more.

From time to time the old insecurity knocked on my door, but I would not open to it. I wouldn’t acknowledge that it was there.

It was a delicate situation: I felt like I had transcended suffering, which had been the motive for my search all along, but at some level I knew this wasn’t true. At first, we all want freedom from suffering. Only after years of seeking is our intention pure and clean enough for us to only want what is, however painful or uncomfortable it may be. Though I didn’t realize it, I was a long way from the latter.

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Enlightenment

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I felt expanded and I could channel huge amounts of energy. And my ego, too, was expanding beyond its wildest fantasies, without me being very aware of it. Because I kept sharing every pitfall I saw with my students, I thought that I was free of ego. But the ego was just lying low. Freeing oneself from ego requires absolute dedication and a willingness to stay vigilant. It requires a surgeon's scalpel of awareness all the time. The thing is, through my sharing, I believed that I was being honest and vigilant.

Looking back, I believe that my enlightenment experience was a mixture of clear and honest intention and a power-hungry ego. If we do not have a living teacher at the time of awakening, we are in great trouble. We simply cannot travel alone at this point, precisely because we can hardly see the ego by ourselves. But I didn't realize that then. Instead, as my fame grew, I traveled the planet tirelessly,

thinking I was doing something very good for humanity, ignorant of my underlying belief that if I didn't help everyone who was in pain, I had no right to exist.

After two years, my body collapsed and I was directed to rest. I was shocked by my first thought: "Who will love me now?"

The Beginning of the Fall

Honest as I was, I shared all my misgivings with the students in satsang — exposing how much ego was accompanying this awakening experience. I shared my pain and errors. Many people come to this type of satsang because they want to hear that there are shortcuts and often because they want to adore someone. Not many want to hear about the grueling work of purifying our minds and healing our pains.

The beauty as well as the difficulty of our time is that spiritual knowledge and secrets are available at the click of a mouse. All the scriptures are public. In the past, information was given only in relation to the student-disciple's advancing in practice and experience. Now we do not have

to practice meditation or do any hard work to receive the teaching, so the danger is that we absorb the teaching only in a mental way; we learn to say all the right things rather than fully embody them.

I entered into a relationship and this provided another reality check. I was not as evolved as I thought. Learning to love and be loved provides endless lessons.

I took a year off work and met with a lot of old childhood pain and present loneliness. First, only my old friends had despised me; now, the satsang community had thrown me out as well. I was not supposed to feel and be honest about pain.

Finally, though, I was welcoming and feeling it without self-manipulation. I was silent for some months and began to feel the need to meditate. And I still enjoyed the bliss and peace of being at one most of the time.

Then my best friend and working partner was diagnosed with cancer. For some months we said it was okay, that we felt no fear or pain, that dying was as good

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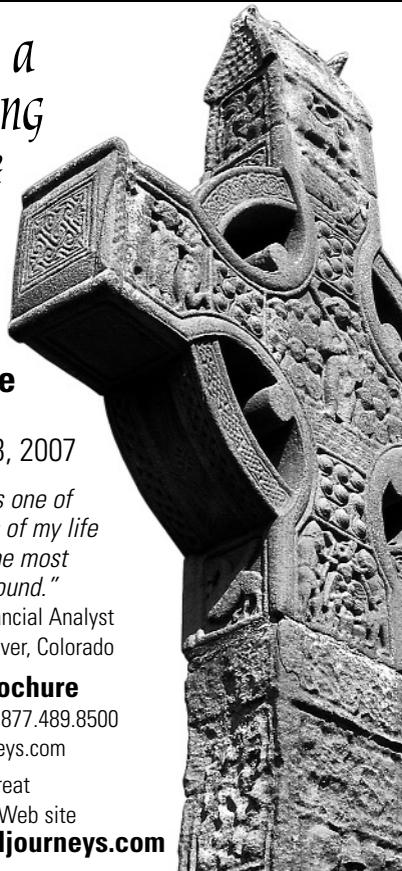
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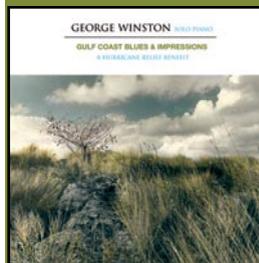


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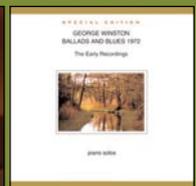
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Enlightenment

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as living, and that everything that comes must also go. But then we cracked. For my friend's last weeks, I was at her side, nursing her until she died in my arms.

I split in two. Too much pain. I was overwhelmed, consumed, helpless, and bewildered by the fact that I was feeling all of this again. Again, my sharing became more honest. I no longer pretended anything or offered miracles and shortcuts. Of course, people came to me less and less, until all that was left was a handful of sincere seekers to whom I could offer only my friendship, limited wisdom, and experience.

Longing for Guidance

I looked left and right in old and new teachings until I found what I was looking for — my new teacher Aziz. His Zen “thwacks” were painful and not always welcomed, but over time I understood more and, for the first time, received a

map of reality that resonated with me. Aziz guided me in my practice and taught me a completely new way of meditation. He also told me to stop teaching. But I was afraid to stop — it was my only source of income.

I believed that I needed the money, I needed the recognition, and I needed the position. But above all, I needed to not let myself know that it was over. I'd had an amazing opening that had lasted for years, but bit by bit it had slipped away.

Slowly, I have come to understand that corruption lives in all of us and that it is not entirely possible to not be corrupt. After all, most everything we do is for ourselves. By keeping my satsangs going, I could continue to dream and tell myself that things would pick up again. Or I could blame the slowdown on the seekers' low quality of motivation.

But life is generous when the intention is honest. I prayed daily for truth, and sincere prayers are always heard. They just take time. I had much more to learn.

I moved to the West, to the country I

was born in, and found it extremely difficult to adjust to that culture after 16 years in India. Eventually, when there was no more money, friends and family kept me afloat, and then I truly crashed.

I thought that I had met my shadow a long time ago but shadow exists in relation to light: the more light, the bigger the shadow. Except for the hours that I was meditating, I emotionally identified with almost every thought I had. I meditated and prayed and moved my body to ward off depression until it could no longer be warded off. I was in hell and realized that the healing had to happen right there in hell.

Broke, I took a cleaning job, still dreaming that after all this was over, I would be magically lifted out of it and life would be forever good. But truth does not live in the presence of hope. Giving up our hopes is one of the many prices we have to pay for the priceless pearl.

The ego screamed and screamed. It simply did not want to part with the hopes. I felt suicidal at times. Without the



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support of my partner, some dear friends, family, and a good healer, it would have been even worse. Nevertheless, I was lost and only partly grasped what was going on. I needed more help. There was no way out, only a way through. I strove only to stay present in the pain and whatever emotion presented itself. I was lower than I had ever been, and it was then that I first glimpsed that to go down is to go up.

I was grateful that Aziz came to the West for another silent retreat. However, at the end of that week, he announced that he was going to into seclusion and would no longer be available as a guide and teacher! Once again on my own, and not fully realizing what was happening, I prayed for help.

And it was my great luck that a book fell into my lap: *Halfway Up the Mountain* by Mariana Caplan; it brought the missing pieces. This book was about me. It was my story in detail. I read about every pit I had fallen into. The book gave me a positive context and information about the process I was going through.

It was like being in retreat, where I was reminded that there is healing power in crisis. I began to understand that my upset was a mechanical response of the mind, not a personal failure. My suffering became more dignified.

I learned that disillusionment is not only necessary on the path, but a true gift of God's grace — you are being weaned off God's breast and allowed to walk. Of course you fall, like any toddler does, but eventually you find balance and walk. In truth, the fall from paradise seems an integral part of the enlightenment process. Some teachers say that you have to earn it to deserve it.

When we first realize that the path we are on is not at all what we thought it would be, that reality is something completely different than what we've imagined, we are shocked. It's like being skinned alive. And yet this pain magically opens us deeper to what and who we are. Enlightenment comes to life when we embrace our "endarkenment" in the very same way.

We realize deeply that our human reality and pain will always be here, that suffering is an integral part of human life. And we can either suffer unconsciously or consciously. We realize that the freedom we thought we had found in the bliss and joy of the enlightenment high is not real freedom at all. Real freedom is much deeper; it is truly accepting what is.

By the time I had finished reading the book, my release was complete. I stopped all teaching activities, cancelled my ticket to India, and was ready for a new chapter in this adventure called life. This time it can happen right here where I am. And I truly do not know anything about where this is going. No hope and no plan.

Om shanti.

Rani ❖

Rani Willems currently works with the elderly and the dying.

Rani's website (ranimu.org) has a message: "Dear Friends. This website is closed. I no longer share satsang. Thank you for walking the path with me. In love, Rani"



ARIZONA

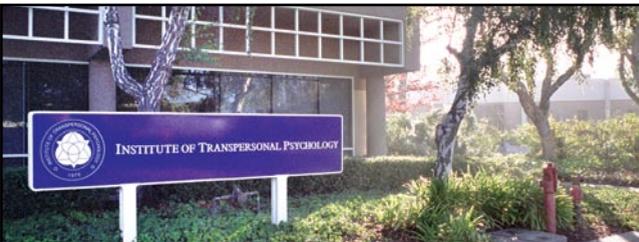
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