

[Enlightenment Is No Big Thing](#)

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Enlightenment Is No Big Thing

Palani, Sivasiva

One of the fascinations of fourteen years of reporting on the global dharma experience in HINDUISM TODAY is the vantage point gained by witnessing so many thousands of individuals and groups involved in the enlightenment process. What an intriguing, inspiring, chaotic kaleidoscope of paths we Hindus have created! It's wonderful to descry the diversity (long-time readers know how much we value the strengths of diversity), and it's tricky to keep track of all the systems, all the practices, all the teachers. Now and again, usually a few days or hours before the deadline, the staff humorously retranslates the famous Vedic verse: "Truth is one; paths are too many!"

It has been rewarding and revealing to watch institutions go through the maturing process - cycles of growth and retrenchment, of faddish popularity and public indifference. This has brought many insights. One among them is that enlightenment is no big thing.

I can hear the philosophical among you thinking, "That's an easy one, and nothing new. To think of enlightenment as an object, a goal achieved, is to miss the unifying state altogether. If it's another place in consciousness, a thing other than what is right now, a projected 'something else,' then there is two-ness and the perfect oneness of the illumined mind is eluded."

Actually, that's another editorial which needs writing in the months ahead, in which we'll explore the little-known fact that enlightenment is more a Buddhist concept than a Hindu one. But since the Academy Awards are coming up soon, let me digress for a moment and tell you about a wide-spread misconception which we have for years called the Cecil B. deMille Syndrome.

Cecil (1881-1959), an American film producer and director, made movies - Big Movies. He is, in a very real sense, the antithesis of Satyajit Ray, whose Oscar honors are reported on page one by our London-based correspondent, Rakesh Mathur. Ray is intimate, soulful and spare. He is a miser, and deMille is the fast of the big-time spenders.

If you ever saw *The Ten Commandments* or *The King of Kings*, you know Cecil B. deMille's style. He's the man who made *The Greatest Show on Earth*. His movies were epic in proportion. Fifty thousand Roman soldiers would march on the enemy, seas would part and angels would descend from the heavens amid a chorus of triumphant trumpets. You never forgot Cecil's films. They were too big to forget. Ray's are too good.

In the early years on the path of enlightenment, seekers want inner experiences. They want to hear the inner sounds spoken of by mystics. They want to step outside of their body, to travel astrally or to dream lucidly. They want to feel their kundalini rise to the crown chakra, to have visions of the Gods, to find blue pearls of great price and be swept away in a sea of clear white light. At this stage, seekers assume that since enlightenment is the goal of all human experience, since it is the highest attainment on the earth, that it must be, well, Big. Of all things grand, it must, be cosmically colossal. Of all things beautiful, it is surely supernally splendid. So they wait, sometimes experiencing things, most of the time not. They might even blame themselves for the lack of signs, wondering silently if that implies they are not a pure and worthy aspirant. Somewhere in their hearts they are waiting for the clouds to part, for the celestial devas to descend upon them in an extraordinary, powerful, freedom-granting, illusion-shattering Enlightenment Experience. That is how Cecil B. deMille would have filmed man's realization of God. It would have been glorious. Overwhelming. Awesome, 70-millimeter SurroundSound. But that is not how tradition describes it.

While one is climbing the mountain, it's natural to look for signposts, to want the ratification of spiritual progress they offer. After all, most of the path is experience-based. But to ascend the final summit, experience itself must be left behind. In the mystic Hindu writings, it is clear that enlightenment is not an experience, big or small. Experience requires an experiencer and that which is experienced. The non-dual attainment called Self-Realization or Nirvikalpa Samadhi lies beyond all experience. It is not even blissful, as it is often described. In fact, it could be termed the only realizable nonexperience. That is why enlightenment is no big thing.

Enlightenment in the Eastern perception may be simple, but that does not make it easy, as those on the path for many years will testify. One cannot help but marvel at the way God chose to conceal Himself. He could have hidden in incredible complexity, ala Cecil B. deMille. But instead He opted for the unembellished approach, knowing this would confound the ramified mind of man. His Secret would be safest in simplicity and silence, unadorned and shining everywhere.

That ends our Academy Awards diversion. The real, or at least the original, reason for thinking of enlightenment as no big thing relates to how it is transmitted. As mentioned at the outset, the staff at HINDUISM TODAY has been privileged to see literally hundreds of spiritual groups. The most serious and effective among them always are small. A few dozen close shishyas working under the day-to-day guidance of their master is what works best. In such situations, whether they are in India or Spain, the inevitable challenges are overcome and inner transformations evident. Guides are nearby who have gone before, who know what to do in crisis or quandary and more importantly, what not to do.

When an adept mountain climber earns a little renown, his services are sought after. Many will want to climb with him. But he knows that he cannot take a thousand to the summit. It would not be safe, responsible or even fun. So he accepts the most competent climbers and limits his company so that the success and protection of all may best be assured.

There is a similar law in effect with regard to spiritual groups. When an institution becomes large, it ceases to address the more profound and difficult aspects of the spiritual journey. It may do many things better than a small ashram. Its facilities will be more impressive. Its events may turn heads with their beauty and pageantry. And program prices may be stunning. But if the guru is not in touch with them, part of the magic will be missing. As long as he can stay in touch, personally and regularly (whether by phone or fax or old-fashioned correspondence) with initiated disciples whenever they need him or wish to consult with him, a teacher can have throngs of fulfilled followers.

But there are natural limits. When thousands or tens of thousands of seekers come under the guidance of a single guru, no matter how great he is, they will not be as close to him or benefit from personal, individual training. So much on the path is subtle, unspoken and learned intuitively. This requires the immediate presence of the teacher. It cannot be packaged, recorded, digitized or sent by messenger. It

has to be direct. Several times this year we have heard disciples say they never had a single conversation or personal meeting with their teacher. Worse, they felt it was unnecessary!

For a teacher to say he is guiding us from within is an insufficient covenant for more mature aspirants. No one would be foolish enough to think that their mountaineering mentor was guiding them from it would work for the more solemn and potentially perilous spiritual ascent?

What happens when the natural ratio of shishyas and guru are exceeded? Experience tells us that the institution moves its core teachings away from the highest attainment - which it knows few will achieve - and puts stress on more basic matters. It may even cease to speak of enlightenment and talk instead of health or karma yoga or changing the world. Another thing happens. Seekers begin depending on one another, guiding and advising other seekers. Commitments change, too. Instead of cultivating lifetime spiritual ties, short-term courses and obligations are the norm.

Like an expert mountaineer with a thousand climbers to guide, such groups will be forced to take easier paths and avoid the high ranges. They will have to follow more common routes suited to the large troupe with its diverse skills. While this may be fine for many week-end trekkers, the most ambitious and accomplished climbers will soon become impatient with the pace.

On the inner path there is a beauty, perhaps even a necessity, in smallness.

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