

An Interview With Adyashanti

Dive deep into consciousness, awareness and enlightenment in this fascinating conversation between Kevin and Adyashanti.

Words by Kevin Ellerton. Photos by Steve Kurtz.

When we considered who to interview for The Awakening Issue, Adyashanti was at the top of our list.

There are many spiritual teachers in the world today, but there are few who radiate the energy of awakened consciousness.

That energy – that you can feel emanating from those beings who are deeply immersed in Presence and Oneness, as they allow beautiful words to flow from stillness/Source rather than from ego/mind – is electrifying. It can pull your mind from thinking to presence, from ego to Source, in a split second, far more powerfully than the most meticulously crafted string of words or ideas.

In my early spiritual explorations, I spent a lot of time watching YouTube videos from teachers and guides who radiated the energy of awakened consciousness. Alan Watts, Ram Dass, and Adyashanti were among my favorites.

So, I was very excited to hear that Adyashanti (or “Adya,” as he is known to his students around the world) was available for an interview. I always jump at the opportunity to meet the people who have most powerfully influenced my own spiritual journey, and Adya did not disappoint.

We spoke for over two hours, got super deep into the nature of Awakening, Enlightenment, Self, and Reality, and had a lot of fun along the way.



Why it's important to define our terms



Kevin: There are a lot of spiritual teachers who don't get precise in definitions. One of the things that I like about your teaching is that you tend to be precise about things.

I think that's really important in our day and age, because things move into this Western world that we're living in through the gates of Science, and there's nothing that scientists hate more than an ill-defined term, right?

Adya: Right! It's important. That's why I make an attempt to be as clear as I can. Because there's a lot of confusion in spirituality, and a lot of terms that are used

in very different ways.

And even though I'm often talking about getting underneath the conceptual mind and all that, I'm a huge fan of clear thinking.

If your mind understands what you're doing, why you're doing it, and how you're going about it, I found that it can kind of go... [Adya exhales deeply]... "Ahhh. Ok."

We do have these western minds that want to understand, that probably aren't going to accept everything on faith. Nor should they!

It's important to understand what we're doing, so then we can let that go, and move on. But that's such an important base to start from.

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The difference between consciousness & awareness

Don't go for wild states of consciousness. The real Enlightenment, that has to do more with awareness.

K: So Consciousness would be more directional, and Awareness would be omnidirectional?

A: Right. [Another way to look at it is that consciousness] is having a specific experience.

You've probably heard "Enlightenment is not an experience," even though we are always talking about experience. The reason they're saying that is because it's not necessarily a higher or lower Consciousness thing... it's the awareness of all that.

Like right now, your awareness, my awareness, everybody that might be listening to this now or anytime in the future, the awareness that's just here... it's constant, isn't it? It's like the sun.

And within that – even right now: you, me, anybody listening – our state of consciousness inside of ourselves is mercurial. It's always changing.

And yet awareness is just shining the light on all of that. Both of them are very important.

K: So aside from being directional versus omnidirectional, it seems like consciousness is also more of a limited kind of thing, like an "Atman" (individual soul), whereas "awareness" is more Universal, underlying everything, like the "Brahman" (Universal Consciousness).

A: Yes, yes. And since you're using the terminology, like Brahman and Atman, one of my favorite old spiritual teachers who's no longer with us, Nisargadatta, had a wonderful way of putting this. He said:

[Adya paraphrases]: "When you die, everything associated with Consciousness stops. It's the Awareness that's continuing."

This has a lot to do with our instinctual fear about death. To the extent that we are identified with our consciousness, it's terrifying, because we have an intuition, we know, that's coming to an end. And that's scary, right? And yet there's the awareness of that.

You know, there's lots of ways to think about it. If you go to India, and they start talking about "Pure Consciousness"... they're kind of using that term in the way that I'm using the word "awareness." They distinguish "Consciousness" and "Pure Consciousness." "Pure Consciousness" is consciousness without a subject or object.

That's great, but I think it's a little philosophical for where most people are. I'm trying to go at this a little more experientially than philosophically.

Kevin: What's the difference between Consciousness and Awareness?

Adya: I will use them synonymously until I'm at a certain depth. Then I start to distinguish them.

If I'm really getting specific, down in the weeds into deeper experience – and this is just the way I use these terms...

Consciousness is almost always upon contact. We think of "states of consciousness." Our consciousness can change from happiness to sadness, connectedness to disconnectedness. These are all states of Consciousness, right? Consciousness is moldable, changeable, never really standing still.

This is just the way that I am using these words. That's always an important qualifier, because other people might use them differently.

Awareness, in the way I use it, is not changing. It doesn't go through different states. It's not a high state or a low state or a blissful state or any other state. It's the awareness of those states.

We're experiencing this awareness continually. For all the searching we do for it! [Adya chuckles]

I often say to people "It's not a special thing. Go towards your garden variety awareness. Let's crack that open. Don't go for wild states of consciousness. Those are out there, but the real Enlightenment part, that has to do more with awareness."

You could think of awareness as like the sun shining. It's just there. It's always there.

Consciousness is more like a flashlight. We can shine it at different things, do different things with it, but the whole time we're fiddling around with our flashlight... there's the Sun just illuminating the whole thing.

So when I'm being precise, that's how I'll distinguish Consciousness and Awareness.

Even when we are lost in thought... we are still one.

Kevin: Sometimes we have to get a little philosophical to be able to define terms precisely. Thank you for engaging in that analytical stuff with me. I know that's not so much fun sometimes.

Adya: I don't mind at all, my friend.

K: I think we both prefer just diving into that deep sea of Oneness, so we'll get to that in a second...

A: But we're doing that, by the way. We're doing both! You can have a philosophical exploration, but you can do so from an experiential basis. You can use your mind, but you really have it connected, and referring back to that connection, so it just doesn't start to get lost in its own little abstraction.

K: Yeah! I think that's so powerful and important for us to remember. And even when we are thinking and distracted, even when we forget that we are the Oneness, we still are it.

A: Absolutely! Right! If it's all One, it's all One. Period. No matter what. It's not "One" when these [specific] conditions are met. Even when your mind's going a little nutty and you're having a tough day, and nothing's going right, and you feel about as enlightened as a stone, you know, at the end of the day, that's as much life, existence, suchness, as anything else. As human beings, we don't prefer to be in that state [of distraction and separation], but we never get away from Reality. But boy, we can really feel like we do.

Even when your mind's going a little nutty and you're having a tough day, and nothing's going right, and you feel about as enlightened as a stone... at the end of the day, that's as much Life, Existence, Suchness, as anything else.

What does awakening feel like?

K: What does Awakening feel like?

A: It does feel like waking up – like literally from sort of a dream – because it is! We're waking up from the dream that we've constructed of ourselves.

It doesn't mean that we don't exist or something, it just means we don't exist as the construct in our mind. And boy, when awareness or consciousness wakes up out of that, it really feels like when you wake up in the morning.

It also feels like an immense relief. I remember for me, it felt like I just put down a 150-pound backpack that I didn't even know I was carrying all my life. [Carrying around the ego] becomes so habituated. That's a lot of psychological and emotional weight.

So there's a sense of lightness, of expansion, of appreciation for life.

Spirituality can sometimes seem almost life-denying, because we're letting go of thought and attachment and grasping and all

this stuff. But if it goes right, it's not pointing us into a life-denying place, it's actually almost the opposite: a profound intimacy and connection with life.

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Who are “you?”

Hindu mystics claim that Awakening lies in the realization that “You” are not separate from the Universe... “You” *are* the Universe, experiencing itself.

Buddhists, on the other hand, claim that the ultimate Awakening is realizing “anatman” -- “no self.” Far from being *everything*, “you” don’t even exist.

Are these Awakenings compatible? Or contradictory?

Many meditators interpret the Buddha’s teaching of “no self” to mean that the individualized, egoic self does not exist as a separate entity from the rest of the Universe. This interpretation is compatible with the Hindu view; if there is no “self” that is separate from The Universe, then You *are* The Universe.

But the Buddha was more of a psychologist than a metaphysician, so it would be inconsistent for him to make an ontological statement about the non-existence of “self.” A psychological interpretation of “no self” (that would be more on-brand for The Buddha) may be that we should “stop engaging in the psychological process of self-identification.”

Letting go of the sense of self completely, simply experiencing the flow of Existence, without holding onto any concept of “me” or “I,” means we are not identifying with anything at all... not even The Universe.



Kevin: Many people interpret “anatman” to mean “there is no separate self.” But lately I’ve been thinking that maybe the Buddha meant that we should just STOP the whole process of identification completely. Not just to stop identifying as the ego self, but even to stop identifying as what the Hindus call “The True Self,” or “Brahman.” Like, even when you get to that most Ultimate level of Reality, don’t even identify with that. What do you think about that interpretation of “anatman?”

Adya: Right! That’s the deeper realization of no self. It’s just: you’re not identifying.

That which is compelled endlessly [to identify itself] – even after deep Spiritual Awakening experiences, often – that thing is still trying to identify itself. It’s just going Cosmic now. Which is fine, that’s part of the path, that’s part of our unfolding. And then, at some point, that which is compelled to define – even if it’s in the highest spiritual state – that just drops off.

Then, I go, “Okay, this is the core of the self: the thing that’s always endlessly trying to find the right identity for itself.”

And we use that, right? We can’t just dismiss it and try to do an end run around it. We’re utilizing that: “What are you? What are you? What are you?”

Nisargadatta's whole entire teaching was just: “Dwell in the sense of ‘I

Am,’ and that'll get you to Universal Consciousness and connection.” And every once in a while, he just sort of did the microphone drop. Like, at the end of that teaching, he'd say... “and what we're aiming for is beyond that. That's only going to be there as long as you're breathing.”

But that’s the path. And if we go [along the path, the need to identify will eventually] just fall off. It’s not important to me whatsoever to say that I’m conveying “The Buddhist Teaching” or whatever. Teachings are dualistic by nature, because language is dualistic by nature. I’m all for what works in peoples’ experience.

K: I remember hearing in your interview with Sounds True, that you talked about an awakening experience you had, where you were looking around, and you realized that “everything is I.” Even the toilet you looked at was “I.” Everything was “I.”

A: [Laughing] I tested it. I specifically looked at the toilet, saying, “Hmm, let’s see how well this works.” Sure enough... [both laughing]

K: That is a very powerful, beautiful way of experiencing.

When we look around and see that everything is “I,” it feels like Unity and Bliss. And also, there’s a personal aspect to it, because, if everything is “I,” there’s still a “self” there.

But sometimes, when I play with this perspective, I drop that sense of self that comes with the “I” at the end of “everything is I” ... and then, it’s just: “everything is.” It feels different to me, when I do that. The difference is... when it loses that “I,” and the personal aspect goes away, an identification falls away. It’s a thought, an idea, a belief that falls away... the belief that there is something called “I.” And when that falls away, the “I” falls off of the “Experiencer,” and it’s just “Experience.”

A: Yes! It’s just Experience!

K: So I wanted to get your perspective on these two states. Because they’re very similar, but they’re two slightly different ways of experiencing the same Reality. So I want to get your take: is one of those states “Awakening” while the other is not?

A: Nope. I would put them both in the category of Awakening.

If part of awakening is waking up to unity... just because a unity experience has a little bit of “I” in it, we can’t just discount the unity experience, right? It’s real and it’s legitimate. And, you know, the thing is... there is development after awakening. There’s a lot after awakening. But we’re not going somewhere that we don’t know. It’s like you’re just getting more and more used to the territory that you’re in, or that you are. But we do see more, and get more and more clear, and this goes on without end.

But I do get the “I” thing. It is different. Because when that little [impulse toward identification] stops, even if it stops briefly, at that point, you just realize... “Oh! That was just unnecessary.”

But it’s not like you’ll never [experience the “everything is I” perspective] again, you know what I mean? If you go back, and go, “Hmm, what if that ‘I’ is the universal suchness of everything?” You’ll find that, “Oh yeah! That’s still there to be experienced... and I also realize that there’s something just a little click deeper than that.”

K: I guess the reason I’m asking these questions is that – if you look

at the history of these two states of consciousness...

The Hindus seem to have gone toward that “I” as “the best” state. And there are reasons that I can sometimes prefer that “I” over the “no self” as well. It feels more warm, personal, embodied, and it feels more like love and bliss. Those are things that I feel more when I am playing with the “I” of “Being Brahman.”

But when I drop the “I,” and it’s just experience, there’s more peace, more rest, more clarity, more relaxation, because I don’t have to hold onto a sense of identity at all. And if you look at the Buddha, it seems like he was saying: “This is better. No self! No self!” But the Hindus were saying “Yes Self. Self is good!” [both laughing]

What do you think? Do you think one of these states (True Self vs no self) is better than the other, or higher, or truer, or anything like that?

A: No. No. I get where your question is coming from, but the way that I look at it now is: it’s “map-making.” A teaching is map-making. As soon as you open your mouth, it’s map-making. The Buddha made a map that really corresponded to his experience, and the Hindus made a map that corresponded to their experience. But it kind of gets tricky, because the maps can start to inform our experience. If we had a map in our consciousness for thirty years and we have an experience, there’s a great likelihood that the map is going to be influencing that experience too.

But they’re all just part of the greater human psyche.

I have never come upon a path that I think just has something really profound to offer everybody in whatever state they might be in. There are so many paths because there are so many different ways of coming about this, for different people and the way they’re hooked up. I don’t want to shove every single person into the same box.

Let’s say somebody has had a lot of trauma in their life. I see this all the time. Somebody has some trust issues, or intimacy issues, and they’re terrified to let their guard down. If I’m going to meet

someone in that state, I’m probably going to be going like, “Let’s have more orientation to that ‘I,’ to the best version of that.”

For now. Because it’s all about timing. It’s medicine, right?

If someone’s despondent, they’ve just lost somebody in their life, life looks bleak and hopeless – you’re not necessarily going to hit that person with, “Well, let’s just tear apart every belief you have today.”

But if somebody came to me and said, “Adya, I just want the truth, man... whether it’s good, bad, or indifferent, I don’t know why, but I just gotta know it. There’s nothing I can do about it.” Okay, then we’re in a different arena now. You’re doing okay, we’re not having to stabilize you as a human being. So we can start taking the deep dives.

I’m trying to give you a sense of why I have, I think, a big view of teachings and approaches. Because at the end of the day, it’s a particular person, in a particular room, with themselves, trying to utilize a particular teaching. What is the right teaching, for that person, at that moment? If a Hindu-oriented teaching works, by God, I’m going to use that. And if the more Buddhist-oriented teaching, if that’s where somebody is, let’s use that.

Let’s not limit ourselves from what the world has given us, this immense variety of perspective and experience, even on the experience of Oneness. Let’s utilize all that. It’s all medicine. Why would we keep most of our medicine cabinets closed and locked because they have a different name on them? Because it’s not me, it’s you. You’re the one that’s going to be feeling: “Is this working? How’s the medicine going down?” And if it’s not going down well, just remember: there are other medicines out there in the spiritual toolkit.

I can’t tell you, Kevin, how many hundreds of people I meet that have just banged away at something that hasn’t really worked for them. But they just think, “Well, an enlightened master said this is the way.” And so... it was the way for [that particular enlightened master], and maybe for some other people, but what’s it for you? You’re the one that gets to make that decision, not somebody else. Don’t put that in somebody else’s hands. Your life is yours.