

Conversations with the Down-Under Mystic: An informal interview with John Wren-Lewis by Dan Sutura Originally published by The Self-Knowledge Symposium Foundation based on the three universities of North Carolina, USA.

In a recent issue of *What is Enlightenment? Magazine* (<http://www.moksha.org>), Ken Wilber described enlightenment as the “radical realization of the ever-present condition of all conditions, a radical freedom in its radical fullness, an infinite Release in the midst of misery, a tacit realization that you are utterly one with all that is arising moment to moment in any and all domains, high or low, sacred or profane.” To which the Enlightened John Wren-Lewis replied, “Well, yes, except on Thursdays! What in the *hell* does that mean!?”

My curiosity about the seventy-seven year old author and skeptic-turned-mystic was sparked at a Self Knowledge Symposium (SKS) meeting at Duke University in the fall of 1998, when Aug Turak brought “The Dazzling Dark,” an article John had written for *What Is Enlightenment?* (Volume 4, No.2). The article recounted his near-death experience and subsequent immersion in “eternity consciousness” or what is more commonly called spiritual Enlightenment. Raised Roman Catholic, I’ve always been uneasy dealing with the idea of “Enlightenment” and some of the more esoteric things talked about at the SKS. When I went to Australia for a semester abroad last spring, a few other SKSers suggested that I find John Wren-Lewis and ask him about his experiences in person. Why not? I thought. In Sydney, I found his number in the phone book. I called him up to ask him if he would like to meet for coffee, but ended up in a more than three-hour phone conversation with him. In his insightful, kind, rambling, rational, and witty manner, John did the best he could to answer all my questions about his experience and Enlightenment in general.

Once an outspoken skeptic of mysticism, John was thrust unexpectedly into enlightenment in 1983 as a result of a near death experience. On a long-distance bus in Thailand, he ate a piece of poisoned candy from a would-be thief. Though he didn’t have an out-of-body experience, didn’t see any bright white lights or meet any spirits, John woke up in a hospital bed in a new state of consciousness, which he would later come to call “the Dazzling Dark.” John had been a long-time spiritual skeptic, and was a strong proponent of the “Death of God” movement in the 1960s. Although realizing after his experience that the mystics had been right all along, John has stayed true to his scientific roots and has been working hard to make Enlightenment understandable to the average person. Bringing Enlightenment “down to earth” is the main theme of his upcoming book, *The 9:15 to Nirvana*, in which he tries to explain simple things, such as how Enlightenment makes your corn flakes taste different.

After our initial conversation over the phone, we met in the city, where my friend Colin and I helped him carry a second-hand MacIntosh back to his place so he could finish his book. He lived in a picturesque location; it was on the coast, overlooking the Sydney harbor bridge. And John looked just like I thought he would energetic and alert, especially considering his age. As we spoke in his one-bedroom apartment, cluttered with spiritual research and notes for his book, John enthusiastically offered insights into the truth of existence. This time I came armed with a tape-recorder so as not to miss a word.

“My first realization after the accident was that nature did not involve suffering at all, it was only the human mind that was out of step with natural consciousness,” explained John. “Human consciousness is unaware of the unconditional love of the universe!” John is now aware of that love, but says that he spends only about 50% of his day in eternity consciousness, since concentration of any kind causes the eternal, or the “Dazzling Dark,” to temporarily recede. He is working towards perpetual eternity consciousness, and though some gurus have been claimed to have reached it, he doubts if it is possible. John experiences two types of regressions into normal consciousness; the first he calls a “slip-out,” which happens once or twice a week, the second he calls “screening.” When John needs to concentrate on something, the Dazzling Dark is pushed to the background, and the “role” of John Wren-Lewis takes the attention on the forefront of his mind. He used the metaphor of a camera shutter closing briefly then re-opening so he can see the world “correctly” (in eternity consciousness) again. Occasionally, the camera shutter gets “stuck,” and this results in the slip-out. But he falls back into Enlightenment as soon as he remembers the Dazzling Dark, and no harm is done.

The other kind of regression is a more extreme slip-out, the shutter closes, and John cannot relocate the Dark. This has happened to him only a couple of times, and it has always been associated with severe physical or emotional pain. John describes the time when he is apart from eternity as his own “dark night of the soul.”

One thing about the prospect of Enlightenment has always bothered me: the notion of the complete loss of self and identity. I asked John about this-is it true? Do you really cease being who you are?

In his enlightened state, John says it is as though nothing has changed and yet everything has changed. He has retained his personality, needs, and desires, but now is aware that the entirety of his existence is simply one of the infinite ways the universe is expressing itself moment by moment when I asked him if it was worth it, he says definitively that "Yes, this is the best thing that's ever happened to me and it's the natural birthright of everyone and I haven't got a clue how to reach it!" In fact, he feels that most methods people practice to try to reach enlightenment are counter-productive in that they concentrate on self-effort and think along the lines of time and causality. Although the acausality of enlightenment may sound like bad news at first, John says that it is also good news in a sense because there is no need to kill yourself with spiritual practices or worry about making irreversible mistakes on the spiritual path. In the sixteen years since his experience, he has sought out other people who have permanent Enlightenment experiences. He has thus far found fifteen, and only two had previous spiritual backgrounds. Just as we are all different people, John told me, there is an infinite variety in the types of Enlightenment experiences that people have. John says the eternity/God/Dazzling Dark loves the variety. The best you can do in the meantime is be aware and to 'travel hopefully.'

"And besides," says John, "Death takes you straight there anyway!"

Now he really had my attention. I realized more acutely than ever before that the primary motivation behind my interest in spirituality was my fear and fascination with death and the prospect of life after death. So I popped the question: "what happens to you after you die?"

"I don't know. I haven't died yet!" John said with a laugh what he really meant was that he didn't know specifics about what part of a person survived death or what exactly happens to it, but he could tell me that some sort of "personal essence" returns to the unconditional love of the Dazzling Dark. Partly this knowledge derives from a real sense of closeness that John feels with family and friends that have passed away, a feeling that what was "good" in them is still contained in the Dark somehow. However, John is quick to point out that it is more than just a "sense" that there is "life" after death, he *knows*.

"The Dark," he says, "is constantly there, producing everything at every moment, from the big bang to the final whimper. when you die, the Dark in you lives on." John likens the whole space-time universe to a theatre in which eternity is playing out the "time game." The only place to go when your personal "time game" is over is offstage, and back to the Dazzling Dark. No judgement, no hellfire and brimstone, simply a return home to eternal love. "The entire concept of a fallen angel is ridiculous." says John, "I can't imagine anyone choosing not to have Enlightenment!" However, the fact that there is no hell is not to say that there is no universal morality. John clarified, "Although there is no sin that goes unforgiven, as Christ taught, that which is not in accord with unconditional love is immoral."

As a great sigh of relief echoed through my soul; I felt a new sense of vitality and freedom. But at the same time, I felt an overwhelming aimlessness due to the fact that there no longer seemed to be a huge "agenda" for life. So I asked John, "If you were in my shoes, twenty-one years old and unenlightened, with a world of opportunities before you, what would you do?"

Characteristically, the playful John Wren-Lewis quoted Shakespeare, saying, "There is nothing serious in mortality.' Live mindful of the fact that life is nothing but a grand play," he advised, "and become more settled day by day in the knowledge that death is but a return home. Remember that happiness is in the moment and its value is itself."

And with that, I was at peace, maybe for the first time ever. After years of mental turmoil and anguish over parting with constrictive Roman Catholic beliefs, and subsequently moving into a more worldly, open-minded, and rational spirituality, my feet had finally found some stable ground. In retrospect, John told me little that I hadn't already theorized or suspected, but being an extreme skeptic (just as he had been), I needed to see it to believe it. It is truly transforming to look with trust into a man's eyes as he sincerely tells you, "I know God." John Wren-Lewis did not bring my spiritual journey to an end, but to a new beginning. He replanted in me a mustard seed of faith that had long been uprooted. And for that, I thank him.

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