



Enlightenment Out of Time: beyond states and stages

“Nothing is implied except the joys of dharma and the love of inquiry.”

— from an email by Patrick Bryson

Encounter One: Stages, Rhythm, and a Subtle Mismatch

My essays and other writings often arrive as surprises. I can be sitting at my laptop, engaged in some ordinary activity, when something appears—a post, a line, a phrase—and there is an immediate inner response that asks for attention and investigation. Since my life has recently changed so radically (thank goodness for retirement), priorities now feel more like shifting bubbles, with attention led where it is needed rather than where I insist it should go. This essay began in exactly that way.



One morning I read a piece circulating online that described awakening in terms of *four stages of the gap*. Framed in sophisticated Hindu philosophy and terminology, the language was evocative and the insight invited a deeper engagement: contraction and expansion, letting go and taking hold, a rhythmic breathing of consciousness through time and a place for ego, recognising its functional aspect when not the centre of attention. There was something recognisable in it—a sense that awakening is not static, not a final arrival, but an ongoing movement. That much rang true.

And yet, as I sat with it, I felt a quiet sense of dis-ease—as if there were indeed *a gap* between the conceptual unfolding being described and my lived experience. That kind of friction is familiar to me. It is often the grain of grit from which a pearl of understanding eventually forms.

The model was offered as a sequence. However fluid the language, it still implied a procession: this, then that, then the next thing. Collapse gives way to gap; gap gives way to emergence; emergence eventually folds back into collapse. A cycle, yes—but still a cycle that moves through stages.

When I turned back toward my own experience, that sequencing began to feel imposed.

What I actually recognise is not a movement from one condition into another, but a simultaneity. Letting go, openness, re-engagement, identity, not-knowing—all of these seem to be present at once, though not with equal intensity, and with a fluid quality that is impossible to grasp. One may come into the foreground while another



recedes, but none fully disappears. Nothing really waits its turn. What comes forward often depends on circumstance and what the moment is asking for.

The language that came closest, unexpectedly, was not spiritual but scientific: **superposition**. In quantum terms, states do not line up politely in time; they coexist. What appears depends on context, interaction, and attention. Something similar seems to be happening here. What we call “stages” may be no more than shifts in emphasis within a field that is already whole.

This does not negate the felt rhythm. There *is* a breathing quality to experience—a pulsing, a sway between boundlessness and form. But rhythm does not require sequence. Breath itself contains inhale and exhale in every moment and the pauses hold both.

Seen this way, the gap is not something entered and exited. It is already present—even when action is happening, even when identity is functioning. What changes is not where we are, but what we are orienting toward.

I do not experience awakening as moving along a path. It is not a moment in linear time; it is a shift into instantaneity and radical intimacy with this present moment (although the clock keeps ticking). I experience it more as learning to recognise a living context—one without boundaries, yet full of flow—in which dissolution and participation, emptiness and form, are superimposed rather than opposed.

That recognition did not resolve anything. It did not offer a better map. But it did loosen my grip on the need for one and deepened my understanding that any ‘formulation’ of truth though useful, can never catch the essence, only reflect it from a particular stance. Even this essay.

Encounter Two: The Many and the Seduction of the One

As I began to formulate an essay around sequence versus simultaneity, an email landed in my inbox directing me to a new essay by a close friend. (synchronicity, maybe?) The resonance was immediate and unmistakable — not because it led me to a different conclusion, but because it echoed what I already sensed, while gradually clarifying something else that still needed to be named. At its heart was a reflection on awakening that held beginning and fulfilment together — not as moments in time, but as realities that are always already present, each implicit in the other, without any fixed trajectory.

What struck me most was not the language of awakening itself, but the care with which he addressed what can go wrong in its wake. Beneath the metaphors and references, I sensed a deep concern for discernment and the quality of interpretation of experience— for how easily truth can be distorted when it is abstracted from lived context, or when it is allowed to harden into something fixed.

As I sat with the essay, another recognition arose, quietly but insistently. Even the most relational ways of speaking about awakening carry a subtle risk. In moving beyond the isolated individual, we can too easily replace it with another abstraction — the Whole, the Field, the One — and in doing so lose something essential.

The danger is not only in over-emphasising the individual, but also in dissolving it too quickly.



Relational intelligence does not emerge from sameness. It arises *between* distinct beings. Relation requires differentiation; without it there is no meeting, only fusion. Experience may be shared but shared does not mean merged. It simply means more than one.

This felt important to name. The corrective to an overly individualised spirituality is not the erasure of individuality, but its proper contextualisation. Each awakening is irreducibly particular — shaped by a specific life, body, history, and set of relationships — even as it participates in something that exceeds it. Relational intelligence doesn't replace individual transformation — it depends on it and then exceeds it.

Here an ancient image returned with fresh relevance: **Indra's Net**. In this vision, reality is imagined as an infinite web of jewels, each one reflecting all others. No jewel contains the whole on its own, yet nothing is excluded. Crucially, each jewel remains itself. Its capacity to reflect the whole depends precisely on its distinct position in the net.

This image helps guard against a common slippage. The Whole does not replace the Many; it appears *through* them. The field does not swallow the individual; it holds it in relation. Awakening, seen this way, is neither a private possession nor a collective blur, but a distributed event — lived here, now, from this place, while subtly reshaping the whole network.

Holding the Many as the lens through which the Whole is recognised feels essential.

What my friend's essay helped me see was not a contradiction to my own sense of simultaneity, but a necessary complement. If awakening is out of time, it must also be out of hierarchy. There is no final vantage point from which everything resolves into unity. There is only this ongoing play of distinction and connection, uniqueness and participation, a dance of creation. Even science is naming the void as a seething quantum maelstrom of creation/destruction containing all possibilities.

When difference is preserved, responsibility remains possible. When uniqueness is honoured, relationship can deepen and the universal appear with infinite depth. And when awakening is understood as something that happens *between* us as much as within us, the temptation to settle into a final “we” loosens its grip.

What remains is not a resting place, but a living tension — held in relationship, renewed through inquiry, and encountered again and again from different angles, each articulation pointing beyond itself, a creative fluidity that cannot be caught only lived within.

Encounter Three: Identity, Not-Knowing, and the Void as Container of Action

As these reflections continued to unfold, another strand began to make itself felt — not through a particular article or idea, but through something more intimate and persistent: the question of identity. Or rather, the way identity behaves once awakening is no longer understood as a departure from life, but as a deepening participation in it.

Much of the spiritual language I encountered on the path framed identity as a problem to be overcome. The “ego” was something to be dismantled, transcended, or left behind. And while I could recognise the truth such language was pointing toward — the loosening of rigid self-structures — it never quite matched my lived experience. Something essential was being lost in the telling.



What became clearer over time is that identity itself is not the obstacle. In the words of my dharma colleague, it is an evolutionary necessity — an adaptive structure that enables participation in the world. Without it, there is no orientation, no responsibility, no way for life to take form through a particular body and history. The difficulty arises only when identity forgets its provisional nature — when it fixes, hardens, and begins to claim a solidity it does not possess. At that point, it can become a block in the stream of being, seeming to force the flow of life into narrow, tightly controlled channels.

In my experience, identity works best when it remains fluid: able to form, dissolve, and reform in response to the moment. This does not feel like ego death, but like ego *relaxation* — a softening of grip rather than an annihilation. Identity becomes a function rather than a fortress.

What makes this possible is not clarity, but **not-knowing**.

Not-knowing, as I experience it, is not confusion or absence. It is a living context — a spaciousness in which action can arise without being prematurely closed down by certainty. When not-knowing is foregrounded, identity can operate without pretending to be the ground of reality. It becomes an instrument rather than an authority.

This is where something subtle but important shifts. Action no longer needs to be justified by fixed conclusions or final views. It is held instead by a deeper openness — by what might be called the void, not as a negation of form, but as the container in which form moves.

Seen this way, the void is not opposed to action. It is what allows action to remain responsive. Decisions are still made. Commitments are still honoured. Roles are still inhabited. But they are held lightly, with an awareness that no single perspective exhausts what is real.

This changes the texture of responsibility. Responsibility no longer means defending a position at all costs, but staying available to correction, a living learning, a willingness for change to be the constant as dialogues and interactions alter the perspective. It means acting fully while remaining open to being re-oriented by what emerges next. Identity, grounded in not-knowing, becomes capable of participation without possession.

What this points toward is not a loss of self, but a different way of inhabiting it — one in which identity is nested within openness, and action arises from a depth that cannot be fully named. The self does not disappear; it becomes transparent to the context that holds it.

In this light, awakening is not a withdrawal into formlessness, nor a mastery of form. It is the ongoing practice of allowing form to arise from what cannot be fixed — again and again — without mistaking any particular articulation for the whole.

Coda: A Poised Moment

This essay began from a single stimulus — an encounter with a way of speaking about awakening that carried something true yet did not quite align with my lived experience. What followed was not an argument to be won or a position to be defended, but a process of attention. Each statement, once examined, opened onto further



implications. Each clarification drew other, related questions into view, circling back in a spiral that returns with a new perspective.

This is perhaps inevitable. Experience does not arrive in isolated fragments. Everything is connected, and to illuminate one aspect is to bring others into the equation. Sequence touches simultaneity. Identity touches ethics. Relationship touches responsibility. No single insight can be lifted out without subtly reshaping the whole.

Nothing here was planned in advance. The essay unfolded by staying with what each encounter revealed, rather than forcing it toward a predetermined conclusion. In that sense, the form mirrors the inquiry itself — responsive, relational, and provisional.

What has emerged does not feel like an ending. It feels more like a moment of rest — not a settling, but a poise. A temporary coherence held lightly, aware of its own incompleteness. The kind of stillness that carries energy, ready to move again when the next encounter calls it forward.

If there is any resolution here, it lies only in recognising that understanding does not culminate in final statements. What can be said points beyond itself, back into the depth from which it arose. The inquiry remains alive, not because it lacks answers, but because reality continues to exceed them.

And so the conversation does not close.

It pauses — attentive, relational, and ready.

“The world is not a collection of things, it is a collection of events.”

— Carlo Rovelli