

The most profound spiritual autobiography of all time? - a review of "The Knee of Listening" by Adi Da (Franklin Jones) (1995) (review revised 2019)

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ABSTRACT

A brief review of the life and spiritual autobiography of the unique American mystic Adi Da (Franklin Jones). The sticker on the cover of some editions says 'The most profound spiritual autobiography of all time' and this might well be true. I am in my 70's and have read many books by spiritual teachers and on spirituality, and this is one of the greatest. Certainly, it is by far the fullest and clearest account of the process of enlightenment I have ever seen. Even if you have no interest at all in the most fascinating of all human psychological processes, it is an amazing document that reveals a great deal about religion, yoga, and human psychology and probes the depths and limits of human possibilities. I describe it in some detail and compare his teaching with that of the Contemporary Indian mystic Osho.

Those wishing a comprehensive up to date framework for human behavior from the modern two systems view may consult my book 'The Logical Structure of Philosophy, Psychology, Mind and Language in Ludwig Wittgenstein and John Searle' 2nd ed (2019). Those interested in more of my writings may see 'Talking Monkeys--Philosophy, Psychology, Science, Religion and Politics on a Doomed Planet--Articles and Reviews 2006-2019 3rd ed (2019) and Suicidal Utopian Delusions in the 21st Century 4th ed (2019)

There are many editions of the spiritual autobiography of the unique American mystic Adi Da (Franklin Jones). The first edition was 1972 and new editions with more material and much advertising about the group continue to appear. The latest one I have seen (2004) is about 3 times the size and weight of the 1995 edition I prefer, as the hundreds of pages of new material are opaque prose and advertising. So, I recommend one of the earlier paperback editions such as the 1995 one to which my page citations refer.

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most profound spiritual autobiography of all time` and this might well be true. I am in my 70's and have read many books by spiritual teachers and on spirituality, and this is one of the greatest ones. Certainly, it is by far the fullest and clearest account of the process of enlightenment I have ever seen. Even if you have no interest at all in the most fascinating of all human psychological processes, it is an amazing document that reveals a great deal about religion, yoga, and human psychology and probes the depths and limits of human possibilities.

As I have read and experienced alot in various religious traditions, I naturally compare his writings with those of others, particularly with the great Indian mystic Osho. Though they clearly agree on the major points of how to proceed on the path, letting go of the attachment to the spiritual quest etc, their styles are vastly different. Both are highly intelligent and well read (Osho could speed read and read a huge number of books) and were at home in the spiritual literature of the major religious traditions. However, like so much of the spiritual literature, most of Da's books are essentially unreadable as he struggles to express in language the ineffable realms of the enlightened mind. Even in this, by far his most readable book, he often veers off into pages of opacity as he tries to explain the unexplainable. A great pity he seems never to have read Wittgenstein –the greatest natural psychologist of all time – who showed that we must abandon the attempts at explanation and accept descriptions of our innate psychological functions in language, which is the mind.

Osho by contrast is the clearest, most jargon free expositor of the spiritual life who has ever lived. He wrote very little and nearly all of his more than 200 books are transcriptions of spontaneous talks he gave-- with no notes or preparation. They are nonetheless unexcelled masterpieces of spiritual literature. His amazing autobiography` (actually compiled after his death) has been published by St. Martins and the full version, as well as all his books (many also available on DVD), are available online many places. Unfortunately, he has very little to say about the exact details of his spiritual progress.

As Da lived most of his later life in seclusion on an island in Fiji, it was not easy to get to hear him but the Dawn Horse Press sells a few videos on their web page. Da is not a very engaging or facile speaker, unlike Osho who is by turns amusing, shattering and hypnotic. But, as both of them understand, it's what the master is and not he says that is important.

Both of them were utterly honest and uncompromising in their life and teachings and Da omits nothing of relevance, including his youthful adventures with sex and drugs as well as his exposure to LSD, psilocybin and mescaline as a volunteer in

government experiments. However, as with many or perhaps all of those destined to become enlightened, he was different from birth and experienced the Shakti energy (which he calls the Bright) from childhood. And, when he entered college, he said his primary interest was to discover what living beings are and what is living consciousness. Clearly not your typical freshman.

A major problem in describing advanced spiritual states is that no criteria or language for them exists in common discourse so mystics have to try to bend language in mostly vain attempts to capture their experiences. It is far worse than trying to describe seeing to a congenitally blind person since they at least have the cognitive structures and experience of the world. But mystics are quite rare and most of them have left little or no description of their mental states.

Unlike Osho, who rejected miracles, paranormal phenomena and all the other nonsense that commonly accompanies religion, Da seems to lack any science background at all and embraces precognition (p120), reincarnation (p555), `meditating` other persons, living on air (p287) etc., and regards the phenomena that I would say are happening in his brain as being `out there`. From comments included in newer editions it is clear that many of his disciples believe he can perform miracles like stopping a raging forest fire at their California retreat. Nevertheless, most of the time he is amazingly levelheaded, going thru over a decade of stress and psychic terrors that would drive most from the spiritual path. Millions of years of evolution have solidified the ego and it does not leave peacefully.

Interwoven with the spellbinding account of his spiritual progress are the details of the mind's interaction with the body, described in the East in terms of various forms of Yoga (eg., p95-9, 214-21, 249,281-3, 439-40 in the 1995 edition I recommend). These few pages are worth more than a whole shelf of yoga books if you want to get to the heart of the mind/body relation in spirituality.

Unlike most who have become enlightened, he had a thorough grounding in Christian practice and made a major effort to become a protestant, and then Greek Orthodox minister. Even years later, after he was far along the path with Muktananda, he had an amazing and totally unexpected series of visitations from Mary and Jesus that went on for weeks (p 301-3 et seq.).

Regarding drugs, as is nearly universal among spiritual teachers, he notes that although they may remove certain barriers at times, they do not provide a shortcut to understanding. However, nearly everyone is now aware that they put many on the path to higher consciousness throughout human history, especially in the last

few decades.

He describes in detail the many stages in his ego death or self realization (eg, p72-4, 198-200, 219,20, 238-9, 245, 249, 258-9, 281, 355-65, 368-72, 406). Along the way, he realized the ultimate disutility of all practices and all traditions (337-9) including yoga (281-3), which are all attached to seeking and goals, ultimately winding up in the present. He discovered, as have many others, that seeking and meditation became obstacles and gave them up for devotion to his guru Muktananda (p420-22). His detailed accounts of his interactions with the famous Swami Muktananda and his ultimate realization of his limitations are of rare insight and honesty. He constantly encounters his attachment to his ego (Narcissus-- eg, p108-110) and asks himself--`Avoiding Relationship?` by which he seems to mean avoiding the divine or ego death by preoccupation with spiritual seeking.

After enlightenment, he teaches the `only by me revealed and given Way of the heart`, finding all other paths to be `remedial` and `egoic` and merely pursuing God or reality (p359+), but after a careful reading of this and several other books I never got any idea what that way consists in. Undoubtedly being in his presence helps alot but in other places he has complained about the fact that his disciples just won't let it happen and one wonders if even one has been able to follow him. Of course, the same considerations apply to all traditions and teachers and though some of Osho's friends (he disavowed the master/disciple relationship) have claimed enlightenment, nobody of his status has emerged. It looks like you have to have the right genes and the right environment and a very advanced and preferably enlightened guru to stimulate you. I suspect that the time has passed when an enlightened one could start a movement that transforms much of the world. The world desperately needs higher consciousness and I hope that someone comes up with an easier way very soon, but I think it's quite unlikely.