



A Quiet Revolution: An Interview with Adyashanti

by **Steve Donoso**

Photography by *Diane Kaye and Gary Wolf*

Adyashanti is one of a number of teachers today speaking and writing with clarity about the personal and collective awakening of consciousness. Born Steven Gray in 1962, he had what he calls a “fairly normal” upbringing. He never considered the spiritual experiences and dreams he had as a child as anything unusual; they were “just part of life.” As a young man, he studied with a local Zen teacher, Arvis Justi, for fourteen years. At 25, he experienced an initial awakening. During the next six years, he worked as a machinist and married, while his initial awakening deepened. At 31, he experienced “a living awakens,” a second awakening that has stayed with him. In 1995, Justi gave him the name “Adyashanti,” which means “primordial peace,” and asked him to begin teaching.

Adyashanti’s spontaneous, nondual teachings are not bound to any particular tradition, although they have been compared to those of the early Chinese Zen masters and India’s Advaita Vedanta sages. He is the author of

The Impact of Awakening, Emptiness Dancing, True Meditation, a book of poems titled My Secret Is Silence, and the recently released The End of Your World.

I first heard him speak at a gathering in California. At the end of his opening talk, a deep, vibrantly alive silence filled the auditorium, which those present steeped in for a time before the question-and-answer session began. When Adyashanti took questions from the audience, what struck me was his ability to deeply and authentically meet each person. Whereas some of us might sometimes judge other people and their questions as foolish or worse, Adyashanti met every person with respect. He peeled back each question to reveal that what began as a personal query was, in its essence, a universal exploration. When I interviewed Adya, I found him to be sincere and joyful, and our conversation was frequently punctuated with laughter.



Donoso: Many of us believe that awakening is only for a chosen few or that awakening is “a place I’ll reach down the road, after I get my life together.” How do you respond to these beliefs?

Adyashanti: The most powerful impediments to awakening are our beliefs about it. These beliefs have no validity because spiritual awakening is awakening to what we really are—which means what we’ve always been and are now. By its very definition, awakening isn’t restricted by our station in life, nor is awakening in any way a retirement from our life as we know it. A great example of this was my own teacher, who was involved in her spiritual search as she was raising five kids. She was a living example of somebody who was able to answer the call of the inner life right in the midst of an incredibly rich family life. And she ended up realizing the truth of her being. Although she was a wonderful person, she wasn’t a special person; she was simply an awake person. Being with her was a very good teaching.

Donoso: Why can it be so challenging to become self-aware?

Adyashanti: One of the things that happens with “coming into existence,” into manifestation, is that existence itself *entrances* us. Existence pulls consciousness into a trance in the same way as when we go to sleep at night and forget that the dream isn’t reality, that we’re actually lying in bed and having this dream. So, the nature of manifestation is that there is a tendency for consciousness to identify with its creation.

My teacher used to say, “Look, waking up and spirituality and the whole thing are just a natural part of the maturation of the human being.” I found this to be very true. There’s infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and then there’s awakening to true nature—not that they have to be linear, because our true nature can be realized at any point along the way. It’s important to see all this as the natural development of a human

being. You see this in a child’s growth. After about six to eight months, you see this self-awareness starting in its embryonic form, and in this self-awareness, awareness itself seems to go through a process of evolution. First, it fixates and becomes “me awareness.” There’s a beauty to that, and there’s also something painful because the “me” starts to feel separate from the world around it. A “me consciousness” allows us to distinguish ourselves from others, which comes in handy. If we can’t distinguish ourselves from others, we can’t break away from mom and dad. So, there is a healthy part to this development of consciousness, but “me awareness” also has its trance side. We lose the sense that we are not only connected

to the whole but that we actually *are* the whole. Still, this is not a mistake. It’s just a natural developmental process.

Once the “me consciousness” has been established to some extent, we feel consciousness wanting to break free of those limitations. That’s the next phase. Consciousness is still trying to become self-aware, but now it’s moving from “me consciousness,” personal consciousness, to become truly self in the sense of the “one self.” For spirit, or consciousness, to become conscious of its

entirety, it’s as though the world is waking up, not just the “me.” When we see this in an evolutionary context, no particular point of this evolutionary movement is a mistake. Even ego consciousness isn’t a mistake, any more than adolescence is a mistake or infancy is a mistake. We move beyond them.

Donoso: What is helpful to us in beginning to wake up?

Adyashanti: “What am I?” That question itself can stop the mind because the mind can realize that it doesn’t know, that “I don’t know who I am when I get beyond my thoughts about myself, my opinions, judgments, and self-image.” What’s really been wearing this mask called “me”? Our whole lives, we say “me.” We say:

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“I was 6 years old; I was 15, 30, 60; now I’m 80”—as if something is continuous. But our opinions have changed over that time. Our bodies have changed. Our personalities, to some extent, have changed. And yet there’s a sense throughout this movement of time that there is something singular to which we are always referring whenever we say “I.” So what people can do to awaken is to just turn their attention to what they’ve always been. It’s almost as simple as turning awareness back on itself to realize what it is that’s looking through this mask right now. It’s the part of you that’s been watching you your whole life. So, turn your attention to that which is awake right now and realize that what’s awake right now isn’t the same as your personality. What’s awake is

was something I was making up, something I believed, which wasn’t really true. It was a little shocking but also freeing to see that this belief was untrue. Right on the heels of this came the realization that if this thought, which I believed deeply, isn’t true, what if everything else that I believe is true really isn’t? Suddenly I was at the edge of an abyss, and fear and terror came up. What do we do when we encounter what feels like Infinite terror?

Adyashanti: Well, they often come hand in hand, don’t they? We have these ideas that we’ll come face to face with the Infinite and it’s always going to be wonderful, right? And it may be, but also it may be absolutely terrifying. We’re encountering the Infinite, something that the mind cannot touch. We’re peering into that



GARY WOLF

Meetings with Adyashanti begin with a period of silence, followed by a talk, and then a dialogue with the audience.

awakeness. That’s the beauty of it! What’s conscious is consciousness. There isn’t some little entity who is conscious; there’s just consciousness, behind it all and within it all. I like to say it’s more important to feel it, to sense it, than to think about it—because there’s a presence to that awareness, and sensing it takes you beyond feeling, into what is always awake.

Donoso: Many people have glimpses of the Infinite. In my own case, I went through a divorce and blamed my ex for the fact that we didn’t spend time together. Then one day I was looking at this thought, this belief that “It’s your fault that we don’t spend time together,” and I took away the piece about “it’s your fault that.” What was left was simply “we don’t spend time together”—not her fault, not mine, no blame. And I saw that this blaming

place where our story about everything and everyone is threatened to be taken away from us forever and shown to be what it is—just a story, of no significance. To peer into that is liberating and thrilling because all of a sudden everything becomes possible. Love and freedom become possible—freedom from blame, judgment, the limitations of the personal self. Simultaneously, what also often presents itself is this sort of terror, because that world—to be that way—is completely unknown to the mind. The mind has no idea how it would function there—how you would look, how the world would look, what you would do, how you would move. As egos, we’re defined by our stories—our little arguments with what is, the ways we blame and shame, all the little concepts, personal philosophies, and belief systems. These all come

together to give this illusion of a solid personal identity. And if all these are suddenly shown to be empty of any reality or significance, at that moment, if it's authentic, you see that the Infinite means "without limitation." That sounds wonderful, but "without limitation" means we have no fixed position to stand in. What we do have is the capacity to be extremely fluid inside, to have a wisdom that can move in the moment, from a place that's not divided. It's important for people to understand that fear does not mean that everything is going wrong or that they have made some mistake. Very often, just the opposite is true; you've come into close, intimate contact with the Infinite. You are at the doorway. You just didn't expect it to be terror. And when there's a willingness to go through it, that's the doorway to your own salvation.

Donoso: Once we have glimpsed the Infinite, then certain ways of doing, of going about our lives, may not work for us anymore. How do we begin to navigate?

Adyashanti: It's a very pertinent question, because even a little taste of the Infinite is very powerful and will shake you up. What starts to fall away are the old ways in which we operated, the duality of good or bad, right or wrong. The Infinite, by its nature, makes operating from those perspectives irrelevant. You even start to see that they are destructive. Then, of course, the mind wants to know what to use next to operate in the world. The interesting thing about starting to wake up to the Infinite is that you don't necessarily have an obvious instinct of how to move. When you come out of your mother's womb, there's an obvious instinct. When the mother holds her baby, the child goes toward the breast for food. But when we wake up, the instinct isn't that obvious initially. It's subtle, and so it's very easy to miss. It takes time to get used to

operating from a whole different perspective. You have a decision to make, and your mind wants to know what the right decision is. But you realize that that isn't a relevant concern anymore because your framework for decision making has been conditioned. A "right decision" according to whom? One person's "right" is another person's "wrong." If you're not going to make decisions based on right and wrong or should and shouldn't—which only exist in thought—then how do you move?

What you start to get used to, very subtly at first, is almost like an inward leaning. There's an inward leaning, one way or the other. You just feel that the

Infinite is inclining toward one direction. Then your mind wants to know, "I feel it is going in that direction. Is that the right direction? Is that true? Is it all going to work out for me?" The interesting thing about the way the Infinite moves is it never answers those questions, does it? [Laughing] It never says, "Yes, my son, this is the right way to move. I guarantee that everything will be okay. You're on the right track!" [Laughing]

The Infinite is, in a literal sense, the movement of silence. When silence moves, and you ask silence to justify why it is inclined in one direction, it can't tell you because it's not operating from words and

dualistic points of view. An egoic point of view will always justify itself; that's how you know it's egoic. It's a mental construction. With the Infinite, all of that is absent. It doesn't justify itself or insist. It's like an invitation. As you get used to moving from this inclination, your mind stops asking it to justify itself. At first it's shaky, because you haven't done it; you don't know how it will turn out. And you don't have to listen. You don't have to go that way. But over time,

The Nature of Inquiry

True inquiry is experiential.

We aren't seeking to stop something from happening, for true inquiry has no goal other than truth itself. It's not trying to heal us or stop us from feeling unpleasant feelings. Inquiry can't be motivated solely by a desire not to suffer. The impulse not to suffer is understandable, but there is something else that must accompany genuine inquiry, which is the desire and the willingness to see what is true.

—Excerpted from *The End of Your World*
by Adyashanti (*Sounds True*, 2008)

you find that when you're moving with this subtle inclination, you're actually moving in a direction that is quite magical, that has tremendous power, making things unfold within yourself and the environment around you that your mind could have never planned in a hundred lifetimes. Over time, a deep intimacy and trust develop with this subtle inclination. But you have to be quiet enough, and you have to let your mind stop seeking the "right answer," the "should," so that you can feel what's underneath.

Donoso: What can we do to help stop the insanity of the world?

Adyashanti: In no way can I deny the insanity of the human condition. And yet, because there's so much insanity, so much unconsciousness, it's possible that there's also the other side of it. Life is always balancing itself out. So, while all of this is happening, there's also this undercurrent of people all over the place who have a deep and profound interest in the ultimate nature of reality in themselves—and they are realizing it! Not only is that now happening among a wider variety and number of human beings, it's also happening more and more outside of hierarchical institutions.

I think there's something within all of this, something very authentic, that's breaking down the barriers between every person and our ideas of what a spiritual person is. It's sort of a silent, quiet revolution that's happening. But even though there's a lot of awakening, I don't know if that means we're at the dawn of some beautiful renaissance age or that the human species will totally self-destruct. I can see it going either way. I do think that in our deepest heart we don't actually want to contribute to the insanity around us. Our nature is, if anything, to be a contributor to sanity and wholeness, to bringing that into manifestation.

When I was 19 and 20, part of what drove my urge to awaken was that we were still in the midst of the Cold War, and it looked as though we might imminently drop bombs on each other. I saw the insanity and violence, and it occurred to me that we were all waiting for someone to solve this problem for us—waiting for our politics to change, for our leaders to change, for some grand leader to inspire us. And somehow I just intuitively sensed that there must be a change of perspective, something much more radical inside. This mantra came to my mind, and it fed my awakening: "If not me, then who? If not now, then

when?" And this brought all of the energy back to me. I started to see, from the standpoint of oneness, that when we look at the world around us and our leaders, it's important to see them as our own self. And that can be shocking. If it's all one, then the leaders we don't like are our own self, our shadow side, which society is denying. Instead of owning these forces of division and violence within ourselves, we project them onto somebody else. We get angry. It's sort of a noble anger, a noble hatred, a noble division, and it's easy to justify. "I am right because I'm a peace activist or an environmental activist." We miss that this anger, no matter how justified, is still inside the movement of division—and it's only contributing to division.

If the cause is wholeness or the cause is peace, then the cause is good—but the ends do not justify the means. Hate is hate; it doesn't matter why we hate. Anger is anger; it doesn't really matter why you're dividing yourself against somebody. In the universe, it registers as division. When we start to see that, we can see that we are not justified in our divisions. If we are harboring division, we are violent, and that violence will manifest sooner or later. It's sobering to see this, but when you do, it takes away the justification for being divided.

That's what I started to see at a young age. My concern drove me to a deeper place, this place that we're called to when we speak of spiritual awakening. Now from that place, we can have a very active response to the world rather than a reaction against it. A response is inherently positive; a reaction is inherently negative and divisive. A great thing about coming to our own wholeness is that it's not as though we just sit on our couch and see that everything is perfect. We do see that everything is perfect—but from that sense of perfection arise great love, great compassion, and a great response to the life around us. It's a response that is undivided. As a whole, as a world culture, if there is going to be a salvation, it's going to have to come from the human heart being undivided. And to get there, we all have to wake up. 🌱



STEVE DONOSO lives in Maine, where he presents programs that awaken awareness and inspire self-inquiry, including the International Film Festival of the Spirit (www.filmspirit.org). He can be reached at stevedonos@yahoo.com.