

Waking Up

A GUIDE TO SPIRITUALITY WITHOUT RELIGION

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Chapter 1

Spirituality

I once participated in a twenty-three-day wilderness program in the mountains of Colorado. If the purpose of this course was to expose students to dangerous lightning and half the world's mosquitoes, it was fulfilled on the first day. What was in essence a forced march through hundreds of miles of backcountry culminated in a ritual known as "the solo," where we were finally permitted to rest—alone, on the outskirts of a gorgeous alpine lake—for three days of fasting and contemplation.

I had just turned sixteen, and this was my first taste of true solitude since exiting my mother's womb. It proved a sufficient provocation. After a long nap and a glance at the icy waters of the lake, the promising young man I imagined myself to be was quickly cut down by loneliness and boredom. I filled the pages of my journal not with the insights of a budding naturalist, philosopher, or mystic but with a list of the foods on which I intended to gorge myself the instant I returned to civilization. Judging from the state of my consciousness at the time, millions of years of hominid evolution had produced nothing more transcendent than a craving for a cheeseburger and a chocolate milkshake.

I found the experience of sitting undisturbed for three days amid pristine breezes and starlight, with nothing to do but contemplate the mystery of my existence, to be a source of perfect misery—for which I could see not so much as a glimmer of my own contribution. My letters home, in their plaintiveness and self-pity, rivaled any written at Shiloh or Gallipoli.

So I was more than a little surprised when several members of our party, most of whom were a decade older than I, described their days and nights of solitude in positive, even transformational terms. I simply didn't know what to make of their claims to happiness. How could someone's happiness *increase* when all the material sources of pleasure and distraction had been removed? At that age, the nature of my own mind did not interest me—only my life did. And I was utterly oblivious to how different life would be if the quality of my mind were to change.

Our minds are all we have. They are all we have ever had. And they are all we can offer others. This might not be obvious, especially when there are aspects of your life that seem in need of improvement—when your goals are unrealized, or you are struggling to find a career, or you have relationships that need repairing. But it's the truth. Every experience you have ever had has been shaped by your mind. Every relationship is as good or as bad as it is because of the minds involved. If you are perpetually angry, depressed, confused, and unloving, or your attention is elsewhere, it won't matter how successful you become or who is in your life—you won't enjoy any of it.

Most of us could easily compile a list of goals we want to achieve or personal problems that need to be solved. But what is the real significance of every item on such a list? Everything we want to

accomplish—to paint the house, learn a new language, find a better job—is something that promises that, if done, it would allow us to finally relax and enjoy our lives in the present. Generally speaking, this is a false hope. I'm not denying the importance of achieving one's goals, maintaining one's health, or keeping one's children clothed and fed—but most of us spend our time seeking happiness and security without acknowledging the underlying purpose of our search. Each of us is looking for a path back to the present: We are trying to find good enough reasons to be satisfied *now*.

Acknowledging that this is the structure of the game we are playing allows us to play it differently. How we pay attention to the present moment largely determines the character of our experience and, therefore, the quality of our lives. Mystics and contemplatives have made this claim for ages—but a growing body of scientific research now bears it out.

A few years after my first painful encounter with solitude, in the winter of 1987, I took the drug 3,4-methylenedioxy-N-methylamphetamine (MDMA), commonly known as Ecstasy, and my sense of the human mind's potential shifted profoundly. Although MDMA would become ubiquitous at dance clubs and “raves” in the 1990s, at that time I didn't know anyone of my generation who had tried it. One evening, a few months before my twentieth birthday, a close friend and I decided to take the drug.

The setting of our experiment bore little resemblance to the conditions of Dionysian abandon under which MDMA is now often consumed. We were alone in a house, seated across from each other on opposite ends of a couch, and engaged in quiet conversation as the chemical worked its way into our heads. Unlike other drugs with which we were by then familiar (marijuana and alcohol), MDMA produced no feeling of distortion in our senses. Our minds seemed completely clear.

In the midst of this ordinariness, however, I was suddenly struck by the knowledge that I loved my friend. This shouldn't have surprised me—he was, after all, one of my best friends. However, at that age I was not in the habit of dwelling on how much I loved the men in my life. Now I could *feel* that I loved him, and this feeling had ethical implications that suddenly seemed as profound as they now sound pedestrian on the page: *I wanted him to be happy.*

That conviction came crashing down with such force that something seemed to give way inside me. In fact, the insight appeared to restructure my mind. My capacity for envy, for instance—the sense of being diminished by the happiness or success of another person—seemed like a symptom of mental illness that had vanished without a trace. I could no more have felt envy at that moment than I could have wanted to poke out my own eyes. What did I care if my friend was better looking or a better athlete than I was? If I could have bestowed those gifts on him, I would have. *Truly* wanting him to be happy made his happiness my own.

A certain euphoria was creeping into these reflections, perhaps, but the general feeling remained one of absolute sobriety—and of moral and emotional clarity unlike any I had ever known. It would not be too strong to say that I felt sane for the first time in my life. And yet the change in my consciousness seemed entirely straightforward. I was simply talking to my friend—about what, I don't recall—and realized that I had ceased to be concerned about myself. I was no longer anxious, self-critical, guarded by irony, in competition, avoiding embarrassment, ruminating about the past and future, or making any other gesture of thought or attention that separated me from him. I was no longer watching myself through another person's eyes.

And then came the insight that irrevocably transformed my sense of how good human life could be. I was feeling *boundless*

love for one of my best friends, and I suddenly realized that if a stranger had walked through the door at that moment, he or she would have been fully included in this love. Love was at bottom impersonal—and deeper than any personal history could justify. Indeed, a transactional form of love—I love you *because* . . . —now made no sense at all.

The interesting thing about this final shift in perspective was that it was not driven by any change in the way I felt. I was not overwhelmed by a new feeling of love. The insight had more the character of a geometric proof: It was as if, having glimpsed the properties of one set of parallel lines, I suddenly understood what must be common to them all.

The moment I could find a voice with which to speak, I discovered that this epiphany about the universality of love could be readily communicated. My friend got the point at once: All I had to do was ask him how he would feel in the presence of a total stranger at that moment, and the same door opened in his mind. It was simply obvious that love, compassion, and joy in the joy of others extended without limit. The experience was not of love growing but of its being no longer obscured. Love was—as advertised by mystics and crackpots through the ages—a state of being. How had we not seen this before? And how could we overlook it ever again?

It would take me many years to put this experience into context. Until that moment, I had viewed organized religion as merely a monument to the ignorance and superstition of our ancestors. But I now knew that Jesus, the Buddha, Lao Tzu, and the other saints and sages of history had not all been epileptics, schizophrenics, or frauds. I still considered the world's religions to be mere intellectual ruins, maintained at enormous economic and social cost, but I now understood that important psychological truths could be found in the rubble.

Twenty percent of Americans describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” Although the claim seems to annoy believers and atheists equally, separating spirituality from religion is a perfectly reasonable thing to do. It is to assert two important truths simultaneously: Our world is dangerously riven by religious doctrines that all educated people should condemn, and yet there is more to understanding the human condition than science and secular culture generally admit. One purpose of this book is to give both these convictions intellectual and empirical support.

Before going any further, I should address the animosity that many readers feel toward the term *spiritual*. Whenever I use the word, as in referring to meditation as a “spiritual practice,” I hear from fellow skeptics and atheists who think that I have committed a grievous error.

The word *spirit* comes from the Latin *spiritus*, which is a translation of the Greek *pneuma*, meaning “breath.” Around the thirteenth century, the term became entangled with beliefs about immaterial souls, supernatural beings, ghosts, and so forth. It acquired other meanings as well: We speak of the *spirit* of a thing as its most essential principle or of certain volatile substances and liquors as *spirits*. Nevertheless, many nonbelievers now consider all things “spiritual” to be contaminated by medieval superstition.

I do not share their semantic concerns.¹ Yes, to walk the aisles of any “spiritual” bookstore is to confront the yearning and credulity of our species by the yard, but there is no other term—apart from the even more problematic *mystical* or the more restrictive *contemplative*—with which to discuss the efforts people make, through meditation, psychedelics, or other means, to fully bring their minds into the present or to induce nonordinary states of

consciousness. And no other word links this spectrum of experience to our ethical lives.

Throughout this book, I discuss certain classically spiritual phenomena, concepts, and practices in the context of our modern understanding of the human mind—and I cannot do this while restricting myself to the terminology of ordinary experience. So I will use *spiritual*, *mystical*, *contemplative*, and *transcendent* without further apology. However, I will be precise in describing the experiences and methods that merit these terms.

For many years, I have been a vocal critic of religion, and I won't ride the same hobbyhorse here. I hope that I have been sufficiently energetic on this front that even my most skeptical readers will trust that my bullshit detector remains well calibrated as we advance over this new terrain. Perhaps the following assurance can suffice for the moment: Nothing in this book needs to be accepted on faith. Although my focus is on human subjectivity—I am, after all, talking about the nature of experience itself—all my assertions can be tested in the laboratory of your own life. In fact, my goal is to encourage you to do just that.

Authors who attempt to build a bridge between science and spirituality tend to make one of two mistakes: Scientists generally start with an impoverished view of spiritual experience, assuming that it must be a grandiose way of describing ordinary states of mind—parental love, artistic inspiration, awe at the beauty of the night sky. In this vein, one finds Einstein's amazement at the intelligibility of Nature's laws described as though it were a kind of mystical insight.

New Age thinkers usually enter the ditch on the other side of the road: They idealize altered states of consciousness and draw spe-

cious connections between subjective experience and the spookier theories at the frontiers of physics. Here we are told that the Buddha and other contemplatives anticipated modern cosmology or quantum mechanics and that by transcending the sense of self, a person can realize his identity with the One Mind that gave birth to the cosmos.

In the end, we are left to choose between pseudo-spirituality and pseudo-science.

Few scientists and philosophers have developed strong skills of introspection—in fact, most doubt that such abilities even exist. Conversely, many of the greatest contemplatives know nothing about science. But there is a connection between scientific fact and spiritual wisdom, and it is more direct than most people suppose. Although the insights we can have in meditation tell us nothing about the origins of the universe, they do confirm some well-established truths about the human mind: Our conventional sense of self is an illusion; positive emotions, such as compassion and patience, are teachable skills; and the way we think directly influences our experience of the world.

There is now a large literature on the psychological benefits of meditation. Different techniques produce long-lasting changes in attention, emotion, cognition, and pain perception, and these correlate with both structural and functional changes in the brain. This field of research is quickly growing, as is our understanding of self-awareness and related mental phenomena. Given recent advances in neuroimaging technology, we no longer face a practical impediment to investigating spiritual insights in the context of science.

Spirituality *must* be distinguished from religion—because people of every faith, and of none, have had the same sorts of spiritual experiences. While these states of mind are usually interpreted

through the lens of one or another religious doctrine, we know that this is a mistake. Nothing that a Christian, a Muslim, and a Hindu can experience—self-transcending love, ecstasy, bliss, inner light—constitutes evidence in support of their traditional beliefs, because their beliefs are logically incompatible with one another. A deeper principle must be at work.

That principle is the subject of this book: The feeling that we call “I” is an illusion. There is no discrete self or ego living like a Minotaur in the labyrinth of the brain. And the feeling that there is—the sense of being perched somewhere behind your eyes, looking out at a world that is separate from yourself—can be altered or entirely extinguished. Although such experiences of “self-transcendence” are generally thought about in religious terms, there is nothing, in principle, irrational about them. From both a scientific and a philosophical point of view, they represent a clearer understanding of the way things are. Deepening that understanding, and repeatedly cutting through the illusion of the self, is what is meant by “spirituality” in the context of this book.

Confusion and suffering may be our birthright, but wisdom and happiness are available. The landscape of human experience includes deeply transformative insights about the nature of one’s own consciousness, and yet it is obvious that these psychological states must be understood in the context of neuroscience, psychology, and related fields.

I am often asked what will replace organized religion. The answer, I believe, is nothing and everything. Nothing need replace its ludicrous and divisive doctrines—such as the idea that Jesus will return to earth and hurl unbelievers into a lake of fire, or that death in defense of Islam is the highest good. These are terrifying and debasing fictions. But what about love, compassion, moral goodness, and self-transcendence? Many people still imagine that

religion is the true repository of these virtues. To change this, we must talk about the full range of human experience in a way that is as free of dogma as the best science already is.

This book is by turns a seeker's memoir, an introduction to the brain, a manual of contemplative instruction, and a philosophical unraveling of what most people consider to be the center of their inner lives: the feeling of self we call "I." I have not set out to describe all the traditional approaches to spirituality and to weigh their strengths and weaknesses. Rather, my goal is to pluck the diamond from the dunghill of esoteric religion. There is a diamond there, and I have devoted a fair amount of my life to contemplating it, but getting it in hand requires that we remain true to the deepest principles of scientific skepticism and make no obeisance to tradition. Where I do discuss specific teachings, such as those of Buddhism or Advaita Vedanta, it isn't my purpose to provide anything like a comprehensive account. Readers who are loyal to any one spiritual tradition or who specialize in the academic study of religion, may view my approach as the quintessence of arrogance. I consider it, rather, a symptom of impatience. There is barely time enough in a book—or in a life—to get to the point. Just as a modern treatise on weaponry would omit the casting of spells and would very likely ignore the slingshot and the boomerang, I will focus on what I consider the most promising lines of spiritual inquiry.

My hope is that my personal experience will help readers to see the nature of their own minds in a new light. A rational approach to spirituality seems to be what is missing from secularism and from the lives of most of the people I meet. The purpose of this book is to offer readers a clear view of the problem, along with some tools to help them solve it for themselves.

Conclusion

Sometime around her third birthday, my daughter asked, “Where does gravity come from?” After talking about how objects attract each other—and wisely ignoring the curvature of space-time—my wife and I arrived at our deepest and most honest answer: “We don’t know. Gravity is a mystery. People are still trying to figure it out.”

This type of answer continues to divide humanity. We could have said, as billions of people would have, “Gravity comes from God.” But this would have merely stifled our daughter’s intelligence—and taught her to stifle it. We could have told her, “Gravity might be God’s way of dragging people to hell, where they burn in fire. And you will burn there *forever* if you doubt that God exists.” No Christian or Muslim can offer a compelling reason why we shouldn’t have said such a thing—or the moral equivalent—and yet that would have been nothing less than the emotional and intellectual abuse of a child. I have now heard from many thousands of people who were oppressed in this way, from the moment they could speak, by the terrifying ignorance and fanaticism of their parents. The reason for this widespread mistreatment of children is clear: Most people still believe that religion provides something essential that cannot be had any other way.

Twelve years have now passed since I first realized how high the stakes are in this war of ideas. I remember feeling the jolt of history when the second plane crashed into the World Trade Center. For many of us, that was the moment we understood that things can go terribly wrong in our world—not because life is unfair or moral progress impossible but because we have failed, generation after generation, to abolish the delusions and animosities of our ignorant ancestors. The worst ideas continue to thrive—and are still imparted, in their purest form, to children.

What is the meaning of life? What is our purpose on earth? These are some of the great, false questions of religion. We need not answer them, for they are badly posed, but we can live our answers all the same. At a minimum, we can create the conditions for human flourishing in this life—the only life of which any of us can be certain. That means we should not terrify our children with thoughts of hell or poison them with hatred for infidels. We should not teach our sons to consider women their future property or convince our daughters that they are property even now. And we must decline to tell our children that human history began with bloody magic and will end with bloody magic in a glorious war between the righteous and the rest.

Such sins against reason and compassion do not represent the totality of religion, but they lie at its core. As for the rest—charity, community, ritual, and the contemplative life—we need not take anything on faith to embrace those goods. It is one of the most damaging lies of religion—whether liberal, moderate, or extreme—to insist that we must.

Spirituality remains the great hole in secularism, humanism, rationalism, atheism, and all the other defensive postures that reasonable men and women strike in the presence of unreasonable faith. People on both sides of this divide imagine that vision-

ary experience has no place within the context of science—apart from the corridors of a mental hospital. Until we can talk about spirituality in rational terms—acknowledging the validity of self-transcendence—our world will remain shattered by dogmatism. This book has been my attempt to begin such a conversation.

There is experience, and then there are the stories we tell about it. At its best, religion is a set of stories that recount the ethical and contemplative insights of our wisest ancestors. But these stories come to us bundled with ancient confusion and perennial lies. And they invariably harden into doctrines that defy revision, generation after generation. The great pressure of accumulating knowledge—in science, medicine, history—has begun to scour our culture of many of these ideas. With the force of a glacier, perhaps, but at a similar pace. The exponential increase in the power of technology brings with it a commensurate increase in the consequences of human ignorance. We do not have centuries to wait for our neighbors to come to their senses.

Religious stories may bring meaning to people's lives, but some meanings are patently false and divisive. What does a spiritual experience mean? If you are a Christian sitting in church, it might mean that Jesus Christ survived his death and has taken a personal interest in the fate of your soul. If you are a Hindu praying to Shiva, you will have a very different story to tell. Altered states of consciousness are empirical facts, and human beings experience them under a wide range of conditions. To understand this, and to seek to live a spiritual life without deluding ourselves, we must view these experiences in universal and secular terms.

Happiness and suffering, however extreme, are mental events. The mind depends upon the body, and the body upon the world, but everything good or bad that happens in your life must appear in consciousness to matter. This fact offers ample opportunity to make the best of bad situations—changing your perception of the world is often as good as changing the world—but it also allows a person to be miserable even when all the material and social conditions for happiness have been met. During the normal course of events, your mind will determine the quality of your life.

Of course, the mind is as contingent as the body—and the limits of the body are obvious: I am precisely as tall as I am, and not an inch taller. I can jump as high as I can, and no higher. I can't see what is behind my head. My knee hurts. The boundaries of my mind are just as clear: I cannot speak a word of Korean. I don't remember what I did on this date in 2011, or the last words I read of Dante, or even the first words I spoke to my wife this morning. Although I can alter my mood and states of attention, I can do so only within a narrow range. If I am tired, I can open my eyes a little wider and try to perk myself up, but I cannot completely banish the feeling of fatigue. If I am slightly depressed, I can brighten my mood with happy thoughts. I can even access a feeling of happiness directly by simply recalling what it is like to be happy—deliberately putting a smile in my mind—but I cannot reproduce the greatest joy I have ever felt. Everything about my mind and body seems to feel the weight of the past. I am just as I am.

But consciousness is different. It appears to have no form at all, because anything that would give it form must arise *within* the field of consciousness. Consciousness is simply the light by which the contours of mind and body are known. It is that which is aware of feelings such as joy, regret, amusement, and despair. It

can seem to take their shape for a time, but it is possible to recognize that it never quite does. In fact, we can directly experience that consciousness is never improved or harmed by what it knows. Making this discovery, again and again, is the basis of spiritual life.

As we have seen, there is no compelling reason to believe that the mind is independent of the brain. And yet the deflationary attitude toward consciousness taken by many scientists—wherein reality is considered only from the outside, in third-person terms—is also unwarranted. A middle path exists between making religion out of spiritual life and having no spiritual life at all.

We have long known that how things seem in the world can be misleading, and this is no less true of the mind itself. And yet many people have found that through sustained introspection, how things seem can be brought into closer register with how they are. In one sense, the science that underlies this claim is in its infancy—but in another, it is complete. Although we are only beginning to understand the human mind at the level of the brain, and we know nothing about how consciousness itself comes into being, it isn't too soon to say that the conventional self is an illusion. There is no place for a soul inside your head. Consciousness itself is divisible—as we saw in the case of split-brain patients—and even in an intact brain consciousness is blind to most of what the mind is doing. Everything we take ourselves to be at the level of our subjectivity—our memories and emotions, our capacity for language, the very thoughts and impulses that give rise to our behavior—depends upon distinct processes that are spread out over the whole of the brain. Many of these can be independently interrupted or extinguished. The sense, therefore, that we are unified subjects—the unchanging thinkers of thoughts

and experiencers of experience—is an illusion. The conventional self is a transitory appearance among transitory appearances, and it vanishes when looked for. We need not await any data from the lab to say that self-transcendence is possible. And we need not become masters of meditation to realize its benefits. It is within our capacity to recognize the nature of thoughts, to awaken from the dream of being merely ourselves and, in this way, to become better able to contribute to the well-being of others.

Spirituality begins with a reverence for the ordinary that can lead us to insights and experiences that are anything but ordinary. And the conventional opposition between humility and hubris has no place here. Yes, the cosmos is vast and appears indifferent to our mortal schemes, but every present moment of consciousness is profound. In subjective terms, each of us is identical to the very principle that brings value to the universe. Experiencing this directly—not merely thinking about it—is the true beginning of spiritual life.

We are always and everywhere in the presence of reality. Indeed, the human mind is the most complex and subtle expression of reality we have thus far encountered. This should grant profundity to the humble project of noticing what it is like to be you in the present. However numerous your faults, something in you at this moment is pristine—and only you can recognize it.

Open your eyes and see.