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Enlightenment, Meaning, and the Religion Versus Science-Academia Divide: Waking Up versus Waking Up

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Abstract

The unfolding problems with science's materialist understanding of life are obviously noteworthy in and of themselves, but the associated potential support for dualistic/religious beliefs is particularly significant. Beyond a number of behavioral conundrums, the general problem facing the scientific molecular-only vision is the unfolding missing heritability (or DNA origins) - problem. Given our innate dualistic/religious understanding of life and its presumed - but increasingly questionable - DNA basis, it is argued here that this combination offers a straightforward preliminary argument supporting the basic dualism common to religions. With this as a backdrop a focus herein will be placed on experiences of transcendence (or unified consciousness or enlightenment) associated with religious/mystical practices. With such real life transformations there is the possibility of glimpsing the ultimate goal associated with religious practices. An introduction will be provided via the independent Unity experience given in Jacque Lusseyran's *And There Was Light*. Next, a sequence of similar experiences associated with Buddhist practices are given. A suggested framework then connects such experiences to the religious/dualistic element, a soul, and with this a potential new avenue for discussions on meaning. A modern framing of these discussions is found in comparisons between traditional Buddhism, and its contemporary science-influenced, Western peer. Sam Harris' *Waking Up* is utilized in part as a guide to the latter. It is not unlikely that other spiritual or religious traditions are facing analogous detours in our science-led, meaning-deprived, and increasingly superficial era.

Keywords: Enlightenment, Religions, Science, Meaning, Soul, Materialism, Reincarnation.

1. Introduction - Materialism's Problems, Meaning's Vacuum, and Our Innate Religious Beliefs

Before pursuing the transformational topic, brief consideration is given here to the relevant scientific backdrop. That backdrop or framework was expressed by the psychologist Steven Pinker when he wrote, "[t]he processes of life, for example, used to be attributed to a mysterious *elan vital*; now we know they are powered by chemical and physical reactions among complex molecules" and further that science's "understanding consists not in a mere listing of facts, but

in deep and elegant principles, like the insight that life depends on a molecule that carries information, directs metabolism, and replicates itself" [Pinker, 2013]. That DNA/genetic framework is believed to have provided a physical foundation for the historical dynamics (or evolution) of life. And the confidence in the DNA-based evolutionary model was captured in the well known claim by the evolutionary biologist Theodosius Dobzhansky that "Nothing in Biology Makes Sense Except in the Light of Evolution" [Dobzhansky, 1973].

This molecular-only model provides more than a historical description, it is of course believed to define the ongoing heritable dynamics of life. Thus the pioneering geneticist Craig Venter answered the question "What is life?" with the expression, "DNA-driven biological machines" [Venter, 2014: p.6]. The associated implications are of course rather stark, beginning with eliminating any physical basis for dualistic/religious beliefs and with this possible deeper meaning. This was succinctly captured by the biologist Ursula Goodenough:

[A]ll of us, and scientists are no exception, are vulnerable to the existential shudder that leaves us wishing that the foundations of life were something other than just so much biochemistry and biophysics. The shudder, for me at least, is different from the encounters with nihilism that have beset my contemplation of the universe. There I can steep myself in cosmic Mystery. But the workings of life are not mysterious at all. They are obvious, explainable, and thermodynamically inevitable. And relentlessly mechanical. And bluntly deterministic. My body is some 10 trillion cells. Period. My thoughts are a lot of electricity flowing along a lot of membrane. My emotions are the result of neurotransmitters squirting on my brain cells. I look in the mirror and see the mortality and I find myself fearful, yearning for less knowledge, yearning to believe that I have a soul that will go to heaven and soar with the angels [Goodenough, 1998: pp.46-7].

Of some additional note is that the above quote was given in Goodenough's 1998 inspirational book, *The Sacred Depths of Nature*. The idea that such molecular-only dynamics constitute something sacred or meaningful is certainly debatable. In a similar vein earlier work questioned the presumed sacred nature of black hole dynamics [Christopher 2022c]. Furthermore, earlier work presented some particular and also general problems facing that scientific vision of life [Christopher, 2020a; Sheldrake, 2012; Christopher, 2022a]. With all due respect to the works of Dobzhansky et al, it is trivial to find serious behavioral challenges to the evolutionary vision, but the gross challenge is the unfolding inability to find the DNA origins for numerous heritable conditions and tendencies [Christopher, 2020a; Sheldrake, 2012].

Particularly noteworthy to spiritual or religious points of view is that investigations of young children has determined that we show up with gross dualistic beliefs [Barrett, 2012; Christopher, 2022c]. As one researcher, Justin Barrett, put it "[c]hildren are prone to believe in supernatural beings such as spirits, ghosts, angels, devils, and gods during the first four years of life" [Barrett, p.3]. Barrett also added:

Exactly why believing in souls or spirits that survive death is so natural for children (and adults) is an area of active research and debate. A consensus has emerged that children are born believers in some kind of afterlife, but not why this is so [Barrett, p.120].

This situation was also considered in a popular news site's article. Therein it was stated:

Olivera Petrovich, an Oxford University psychologist, surveyed several international studies of children aged 4 to 7 and found that the belief in God as a "creator" is "hardwired" in children and that "atheism is definitely an acquired position."

Paul Bloom, a professor of psychology and director of the Mind and Development Lab at Yale University, writes, "The universal themes of religion are not learned... They are part of human nature... Creationism – and belief in God – is bred in the bone" [Wallace, 2021].

That such beliefs are innate implies they should be encoded by DNA and behind that had evolutionary origins. Such a connection is *anything* but straightforward or as Barrett wrote "almost inevitable". I suggest here that no one really has a clue how this could have fallen out of evolution and this conundrum is clearly multiplied in light of the "beyond belief" inability to find the expected DNA origins for many individual characteristics [Christopher, 2020a]. Furthermore, I have seen no evidence that this significant finding is for science "an area of active research and debate". Dualism/religion-consistent phenomena - and an alternative door to meaning - appear to be essentially out of bounds for academics.

Additionally, for those looking for discrete phenomena supportive of the existence of a soul a possible standout example is terminal lucidity. That phenomenon involves the transient return to mental coherence of seemingly long gone individuals as they approach death [Nahm et al, 2012]. It also tends to elicit a spiritualized or elated demeanor which might be consistent with our innate or natural religion [Christopher, 2022d]. Some other stunning mysteries include those consistent with the concurrent residency of multiple souls, such as those implied by the experiences of some heart transplant recipients and also the very difficult and puzzling multiple personality disorder [Christopher, 2024a].

Introduction to Experiences of Unity or Transcendence

This work focuses on profound transformational spiritual/religious experiences. These are a significant aspect of many religious and certainly mystical traditions. For purposes herein such experiences appear to involve a release from our ordinary ego-based and strife-oriented orientation. As a result of such experiences an individual's self-understanding and psychological disposition tends to be shifted in a helpful way. In some traditions this shift is also purported to be helpful with regard to subsequent rebirths and also in helping others with their sequential life journeys [Thondup; Fremantle and Trungpa].

Note here that this represents a shift away from the idea of a place or realm as a final goal. Instead I am focusing on a state of understanding as being a possible religious/spiritual goal, although conceivably such a state might follow from residency in some divine location. Additionally, the religion that I am familiar with, Mahayana Buddhism, has its own somewhat heaven-like rebirth goals [Thondup]. A basic point herein is that with real life transformations there is the possibility of getting a glimpse of the deeper goal associated with religions and their practices.

I go on to suggest here that such remarkable transformations might reflect a grasping of the perspective of an underlying soul. With such an interpretation such phenomena could offer some support for the dualistic views of religions or simply dualism. A related point here is that it appears that finding phenomena that seem consistent with the presence of a soul is not difficult. On the other hand, arguing for the top-down or God-oriented aspect, appears quite challenging. I thus tend to think of these two as constituting the easy and not-easy aspects associated with religions.

Another possible shift in perspective considered here is that within a reincarnation framework (as discussed in previous works), it could be argued that eternal life is a given. The challenge would be what to do with such a life? Furthermore, this chapter will also in some detail critique the transcendence phenomenon via its depiction in what might be termed Western/Scientific Buddhism. I will largely utilize Sam Harris' book, *Waking Up*, for that detailed critique. A basic point made herein, that Western Buddhism has become distorted and not realistic, might also apply to the contemporary states of other religions.

Finally, there are of course many other religions and spiritual perspectives available, but I try here to focus where I have a little familiarity. For those looking for broad coverage of major religions I believe that Huston Smith's *The World Religions* is outstanding [Smith, 1991]. I also add that Smith's opening chapter on Hinduism seems particularly noteworthy. Hinduism therein is reported to offer 4 different approaches to transcendence (or what could be termed as encountering a divine consciousness). The first two are termed *Jnana yoga* and *Bhakti yoga* and they reflect internal searches (often meditative) and focusing one's love on God, respectively. Smith also used the expressions "The Way to God through Knowledge" and "The Way to God through Love", respectively, in describing these two paths. The Buddhist experiences reported on herein appear to be consistent with *Jnana yoga*, while other religions - including Christianity and parts of Buddhism - appear more consistent with the *Bhakti yoga*. Smith's vast knowledge on religions supported discussions on how these (and other approaches) might lead to similar transformations.

And There Was Light

The start here will try to minimize connections to established religions or spiritual traditions. Any such connection might taint an individual's descriptions as well as perhaps elicit an ego contribution. I will do this by turning to the remarkable "Memoir of a Blind Hero of the French Resistance in World War II", a memoir of young Jacques Lusseyran in *And There Was Light* [Lusseyran, 2014]. In addition to the cover's subtitle (in which "Hero" was presumably the publisher's contribution and not Lusseyran's), I also take an apt description from the back cover. Therein it is written, "one of the most powerful and insightful descriptions of living and thriving with blindness, or indeed any challenge, ever published". It is a remarkable book.

I continue with a quote from the opening setoff page:

When you said to me: "Tell me the story of your life," I was not eager to begin. But when you added, "What I care most about is learning your reasons for loving life," then I became eager, for that was a real subject.

All the more since I have maintained this love of life through everything: through infirmity, the terrors of war, and even in Nazi prisons. Never did it fail me, not in misfortune nor in good times, which may seem much easier but is not.

Now, it is no longer a child who is going to tell this story and that is regrettable. It is a man. Worse yet, it is the university professor I have become. I will have to guard myself very carefully from trying to expound and demonstrate - those two illusions. I will have to return to the simplicity of a child ...

As evident above, Lusseyran in addition to trying to communicate some profound inner dynamics, also included some welcome sober commentary on the pitfalls of adulthood. After an accident at school left him blind at age 7, Lusseyran then somehow came upon an inner light which transformed his life and even somehow left him with a simple form of vision. He wrote that this realization got started as he “began to look more closely, not at things but at a world closer to myself, looking from an inner place to one further within”. Perhaps this was indirectly facilitated by circumstances as he “instead of clinging to the movement of sight toward the world outside” became considerably more aware inwardly [Lusseyran, 2014: p.11].

As this happened his perception shifted and he came upon an inner “light”. He found this to be an:

indescribable relief, and happiness so great it almost made me laugh. Confidence and gratitude came as if a prayer had been answered. I found light and joy at the same moment, and can say without hesitation that from that time on light and joy have never been separated in my experience. I have had them or lost them together [Lusseyran, 2014: p.11].

Somehow he seemed to have crossed a threshold and henceforth was able to experiment and extend this novel inner connection. He interpreted this development at times as an unearned gift from God and for years he considered it to be his secret.

Amidst a description of some of his wide-ranging conversations with his close friend, Jean, Lusseyran described the shift in his perspective that came with his inner light revelation. In another long quote:

I explained to him that it was a preconceived idea which made the process [rebounding from introversion] hard for him - an idea, by the way, which almost everyone shares - that there are two worlds - one without, the other within. I kept having to explain all over again because Jean wanted to believe me but couldn't. The preconceived idea always stood in the way.

We talked about this at least once a week in the frame of mind of people going to Mass on Sunday. After all, it was a religious subject. The reality - the oneness of the world - left me in the lurch, incapable of explaining it, because it seemed obvious. I could only repeat: 'there is only one world. Things outside only exist if you go to meet them with everything you carry in yourself. As to the things inside, you will never see them well unless you allow those

outside to enter in.”

To pass from the inner light to the light of the sun was not the work of the senses. A click sufficed, a slight change in point of view, like turning one’s head a hundredth part of a circle. It was enough in the end to believe. The rest came by itself.

To convince Jean (which mattered terribly to me) I assembled all my arguments. If he wanted to be completely happy, there must be only one world, for this was the indispensable condition.

This joy was well known to me. It was the Grace of my state of being. When I read in the gospels that the Word was made Flesh, I told myself that this was indeed true. At the same time I was aware that I had done nothing to deserve it. It had simply been given to me, and I prayed God that Jean, too, should receive it [Lusseyran, 2014: pp.76-7].

It seems that somehow Lusseyran, although unschooled in mystical/religious ways, had stumbled onto what might be termed a Unity state. His encounter wasn’t a transient event, instead he somehow got a foothold and in fact quite a bit of the book chronicled his efforts at integrating this new perspective into his daily life.

I suggest a possible physical analogy to Lusseyran’s light connection. Anyone who rides a bicycle maintains a subtle but tangible connection to their sense of balance. Cyclists might have numerous conscious decisions to make (safety demands this), but conscious effort with regards to balance is somehow not required. As a beginner you pick this up and then allow it to function as per the dynamic requirements of subsequent cycling. On the other hand, if a cyclist consciously tried to control their balance I suspect it would be dangerous. It is somehow a subtle but vital process or connection. Lusseyran’s inner light (or state of grace) connection might have been a little analogous to this.

Lusseyran also communicated the fragile character of his inner connection. Any strong contrary focuses - such as impatience, jealousy, anger, or fear - faded his connection and the transcendent vision was then replaced by “fog or smoke” [Lusseyran, 2014: p.15]. (Thankfully a cyclist’s balance is not as sensitive to mental commotion.) This visual dynamic “took the place of red and green [moral] lights” and left him loving “friendship and harmony” [Lusseyran, 2014: p.15]. His ongoing maintenance of morality then could have relied on feedback from his inner light connection.

The main messages conveyed in his book were of both a subtle inward possibility and more tangibly, its apparent big impact on Lusseyran’s life. He accomplished extraordinary things including during his stay in Buchenwald concentration camp. The book’s final paragraph summarized his revelations with two general claims:

The first of these is that joy does not come from outside, for whatever happens to us is within. The second truth is that light does not come to us from without. Light is in us, even if we have no eyes [Lusseyran, 2014: p.280].

I go on here to suggest that Lusseyran’s light and revelations could offer corroborating evidence for the existence of the kind of transformations that some traditions emphasize. From my knowledge of Buddhism, Lusseyran’s revelations

appear to have been roughly consistent with the goal of an enlightenment experience. Along those lines it is perhaps noteworthy that in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* it is suggested that this “mind of yours is inseparable luminosity and emptiness in the form of a great mass of light, it has no birth or death” [Fremantle and Trungpa, 1992: p.87]. That *Tibetan Book of the Dead* description might then also offer an elemental description of the soul. The far-reaching discussions in the book *I AM THAT* also regularly mention an underlying vital presence of light [Nisargadatta, 1973].

Lusseyran's experience might then be viewed as an encounter with the soul, or at least a subtle grasping of its perspective. His experience also pointed to our latent potential for deeper joy and with it meaning in our lives. Lusseyran's revelation was ultimately important due to the resulting transformation, as opposed to some kind of novel psychological experience (which we all have) which then sometimes beget some spiritualized intellectualizations [Lightman, 2023]. Additionally, Lusseyran used some Christian terms to describe his breakthrough. He also had had some exposure to his father's role in the Anthroposophical Society and with it their interest in the mystic Rudolph Steiner whose teachings included reincarnation. In all, these may have contributed to Lusseyran's particular take on his revelation. But the way this occurred and Lusseyran's subsequent matter-of-factness about his life appear to leave his experience as well characterized. Even Oliver Sacks was quoted on the book as “[m]ost beautiful”.

Introducing Buddhism, Enlightenment, and Sam Harris' *Waking Up*

I transition here to commentary with regard to Sam Harris' book, *Waking Up*, and with it the modern makeover of the religion Buddhism. Such a makeover might have contemporary parallels with other religions. In his book Harris attempted to strip out the “metaphysical ideas ... [of] ignorant and isolated people of the past” [Harris, 2014: p.33] and to offer a science-kosher guide to studying your consciousness via meditation, with a particular goal of “self-transcendence” or enlightenment. I also suggest that the commentary here is indirectly relevant to the contemporary hegemony of science. Furthermore, it might be relevant to the search for meaning and making sense of some religious practices.

As an introductory synopsis, Harris missed many essentials. The secularization efforts of the book were neither novel nor necessary. In the West, Buddhist practice has for decades been pushed in a largely areligious fashion, along with notable efforts to tie the practice to scientific and intellectual perspectives. Additionally, significant enlightenment experiences/transformations are very rare and thus the rigors of traditional monastic practice. I suggest that if Harris' points about the efficacy of meditation and also drugs for personal transformation were accurate then they would have been self-evident given the extensive involvement with both in the West. Also the scientific certainty with which he built his materialist arguments did not exist at the time of publication (2014), or now.

Continuing, I provide a little of my own relevant background. I have been involved with daily meditational and Buddhist's practices for over 40 years. Unlike Sam Harris, I am not a philosophically inclined. My ongoing interests in dealing with the challenges of life (for myself and others) has reinforced that tendency.

Towards the end of the book Harris' stated his basic objective with *Waking Up*:

[u]ntil 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 [Harris, 2014: p.203].

This quote is a good place to begin to see the level of nonsense going on in this popular science-framed book. First off, dogmatism is symptomatic of human rigidity and it is ubiquitous and regularly divisive. One of the appealing messages coming out of what might be termed scientism is that you can simply shun religion and embrace (or nod your head to) science and you are good to go in a largely unencumbered intellectual/conceptual sense. Apparently in some quarters religion ruins everything and followers of science on the other hand are freethinkers (despite the lack of support for free will). In fact as humans we can get rigidly hung up anywhere. For a gross example consider the super-rigid nature of political discourse.

At no point in his book did Harris acknowledge the work of the neurologist and longtime Zen practitioner, James H. Austin. Austin had written a series of books trying to make neural/materialist sense out of the practices of Zen and enlightenment (including his own experience, apparently an introductory or kensho experience). His writings are extensive and were published via MIT Press. Amongst the wide range of topics in his first book, *Zen and the Brain: Toward an Understanding of Meditation and Consciousness*, Austin included a critical look at drug experiences [Austin]. In total, as of my earlier page-counting effort it appears that Austin had published 2,140 pages prior to the publication of *Waking Up*.

Harris might be excused for having omitted this extensive earlier work, since James Austin was not a celebrity author. This apparent oversight, though, was the tip of the problem here. At no point in my previous scouring of Austin's writings have I seen any evidence that Austin acknowledged the underlying religious/metaphysical framework (specifically life-after-life) of Buddhist's practice including Zen. But for someone who has followed the Western Buddhist - or for the most part, Buddhist-derivative - contemporary scene, this oversight was not surprising. For as long as I have been involved with Buddhist practice the overwhelming tendency has been to pretend around its religious beliefs. Thus Buddhism in the West did not need Harris (or anyone else) to introduce the conversation because the secularization tendency has largely been the default process for decades. In a everyday sense it appears that many involved Westerners have treated the marginally incorporated religious aspects of Buddhism like people in general treat gift wrapping. You pull it off, throw it out (or attempt to recycle it), and then forget it.

I introduce another point from Austin's work before moving on. James Austin was strongly motivated by a big question - how is it that a short term internal experience can apparently have longterm positive consequences? From a materialist perspective that is the big question surrounding experiences like enlightenment. Somehow such brief events appear capable of engendering significant positive psyche shifts (as with Lusseyran). For historical support here I suggest that the extensive record of serious meditational efforts in part reflects this phenomenon. People have observed such changes in others and pursue meditation hoping for their own transformations. Austin opened his *Zen and the Brain* with his "straightforward thesis" that "[deep] awakening, enlightenment occurs only because the human brain undergoes substantial changes" which were suggested to "both profoundly enhance yet simplify, the working of the brain" [Austin, 1998: p.xix]. Austin's book stepped up and attempted to provide a brain-based answer which was the materialist thing to

do, although obviously not an easy task. The brain is of course susceptible to transient events inflicting serious setbacks (like the rest of the body), but the plausibility of short term lasting enhancement is difficult to grasp. *Waking Up* should have also addressed this question.

I will now turn to some observations about traditional Buddhism as a counterpoint to the modernized and materialist version. I do this by presenting some points from the academics, Robert E. Buswell, Jr. and Donald S. Lopez, Jr., in their article “10 Misconceptions about Buddhism” [Buswell and Lopez, 2014]. The first of these misconceptions is that “All Buddhists meditate” which the authors rebutted in part with “[m]editation has traditionally been considered a monastic practice, and even then, a speciality only of certain monks”. The effectiveness of meditation again tends to be markedly overstated in the West and Harris stayed consistent with this.

Buswell and Lopez’s next three misconceptions were somewhat minor - “[t]he primary form of Buddhist meditation is mindfulness”, all “Buddhists are vegetarians”, and all “Buddhists are pacifists”. The fifth misconception was quite significant, though, “Buddhism is a philosophy and not a religion”. In its entirety this entry read:

Buddhism has many philosophical schools, with a sophistication equal to that of any philosophical school that developed in Europe. However, Buddhism is a religion, by any definition of that indefinable term, unless one defines religion as a belief in a creator God. The great majority of Buddhist practice over history, for both monks and laypeople, has been focused on obtaining a good rebirth in the next lifetime, whether for oneself, one’s family, or for all beings in the universe.

This is a common misconception about Buddhism as it is interpreted in the West and Harris should have stated this. The religious framework of Buddhism could well have been inherited in part from premodern life-after-life visions. Buddhist practices including meditation were ultimately designed to help people better deal with the challenges associated with serial living.

The sixth misconception was, “[t]he Buddha was a human being, not a god, and the religion he founded has no place for the worship of gods”. This is where secular followers would perhaps like it. Here Buswell and Lopez’s entry was:

Buddhism has an elaborate pantheon of celestial beings (devas, etymologically related to the English word “divinity”) and advanced spiritual beings (bodhisattvas and buddhas), who occupy various heavens and pure lands and who respond to the prayers of the devout.

Religions are probably considerably more alike than commonly thought.

Next, on the sometimes presumed anti-religious form of Buddhism, Zen, the authors had an entry titled, “Zen rejects conventional Buddhism. Zen masters burn statues of the Buddha, scorn the sutras [teaching of the Buddha], and regularly frequent bars and brothels”. Harris made a few derogatory comments about Zen but missed its minimalistic appeal. If you really want a this-life-only oriented practice, then Zen - certainly as it is been commonly practiced in the West - appears

quite optimal. Here the professors' entry was:

Zen monks follow a strict set of regulations, called "pure rules," which are based on the monastic discipline imported from India. Most Zen monks have engaged in extensive study of Buddhist scriptures before beginning their training in the meditation hall. And although one of the Four Phrases of Zen is "not relying on words and letters," Zen has the largest body of written literature of any tradition within East Asian Buddhism.

A point minimized in *Waking Up* is that discipline and morality tends to be a vital contributor to the potential helpfulness of meditational practices. The "quality of one's mind" and with it one's meditation practice is significantly impacted by the quality of one's actions. This general point about the effects of discipline and morality should be self-evident to any adult. Another basic goal of Buddhist practice is to try to build a helpful or compassionate inclination towards other sentient beings. Within Mahayana Buddhism that desired inclination is sometimes termed bodhicitta and it is purported to be an important aid to meaningful transformation.

The ninth misconception also happened to be dedicated to Zen and in its entirety was (with the opening line here being the title-misconception):

Zen is dedicated to the experience of "sudden enlightenment," which frees its followers from the extended regimens of training in ethics, meditation, and wisdom found in conventional forms of Buddhism. Zen monks routinely expect to spend decades in full-time practice before they will be able to make real progress in their meditation.

The last point here is a rebut to the prevalent contemporary optimism about the ease of meditational progress and thus the likeliness of *Waking Up's* goal. This point also highlights the apparent uniqueness of Jacque Lusseyran's experience.

I transition to enlightenment experiences here. Harris should have provided an example of a meditation-based enlightenment experience as this is the central focus of *Waking Up*. Here I provide an account of an enlightenment (or Self-realization) experience as given in a modern introduction to Zen practice, *Three Pillars of Zen* [Kapleau, 1980: pp.215-9] (a book which appears to quite unique in containing several accounts of enlightenment). The following excerpts were written in the 1950's by a Japanese executive. In an initial note to his Zen teacher the executive had written:

You remember the discussion which arose about Self-realization centering around that American. At that time I hardly imagined that in a few days I would be reporting to you my own experience.

The executive went on to describe that during the train ride home from the monastery with his wife, he had been deeply struck whilst reading a passage from Zen literature. The particular passage read was "I came to realize clearly that Mind is no other than mountains and rivers and the great wide earth, the sun and the moon and the stars".

This passage somehow deeply resonated with this man and his meditational experiences. During the subsequent days it triggered an enlightenment experience (in the awkward company of his family and also brother and sister-in-law). During his first night home he wrote that:

[a] t midnight I abruptly awakened. At first my mind was foggy, then suddenly that quotation flashed into my consciousness: "I came to realize that Mind is no other than mountains, rivers, and the great wide earth, the sun and the moon and the stars". And I repeated it. Then all at once I was struck as though by lightening, and the next instant heaven and earth crumbled and disappeared. Instantly, like surging waves, a tremendous delight welled up in me, a veritable hurricane of delight, as I laughed wildly and loudly: "Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! There's no reasoning here, no reasoning at all! Ha, ha, ha!" The empty sky split in two, then opened its mouth and began to laugh uproariously: "Ha, ha, ha!"

The executive then went on to exclaim, "I've come to enlightenment! Shakyamuni [i.e., the Buddha] and the patriarchs have not deceived me!" This revelatory experience then got a bit awkward as his family was clueless about his inner experiences so the executive downshifted and apologized for his outbursts.

The next day the executive went to visit a Zen teacher and was simply overcome with joy and wept. That teacher commented, "it is rare indeed to experience to such a wonderful degree. It is termed 'Attainment of the emptiness of Mind'. You are to be congratulated." As a possible very crude explanation here, somehow his extensive meditation practice plus the triggering of the quote allowed him to break through the very deeply-entrenched, me-and-the-world story that we operate within. And as a result perhaps then he could begin to grasp the underlying, unfettered perspective of the soul. Of additional note here is that the conceptual nature of his revelation seems roughly consistent with Lusseyran's assertion that "the world is one".

His enlightenment breakthrough continued across the next few days and left him "laughing and weeping" extensively. The executive then contacted his original teacher in hopes of offering some inspiration to his monks and also in hopes of helping the novice American. To the latter he suggested letting him know that "even I, who am unworthy and lacking in spirit, can grasp such a wonderful experience when time matures". He further suggested telling that American - who not surprisingly was hoping for enlightenment within a week - that, "don't say days, weeks, or even lifetimes. Don't say millions of billions of kalpa. Tell him to vow to attain enlightenment though it takes the infinite, the boundless, the incalculable future". A kalpa is an extremely long period of time.

The executive's subsequent diary entries included, "Am totally at peace at peace at peace", "Am supremely free free free free free", and "The substance of Mind - this is now luminously clear to me". And finally in a concluding paragraph he wrote that:

The ancients said the enlightened mind is comparable to a fish swimming. That's exactly how it is - there's no stagnation. I feel no hinderance. Everything flows smoothly, freely. Everything goes naturally. This limitless freedom is beyond all

expression. What a wonderful world.

The executive finally stated simply, “I am grateful, so grateful.”

Of note here is that such an enlightenment or transformational experience is simply not on the radar screen of science. Along those lines, years ago in talking with a highly educated physicist they simply categorized such revelations as episodes of schizophrenia or craziness. They certainly don’t make equation-sense. A further note is that such an experience might tend to be a bigger breakthrough for an adult than for a child. I doubt Lusseyran’s grasping of an underlying unity state was accompanied by the seeming excesses of this businessman. As adults we are probably much much more grooved into our mental me-ruts or -perspectives. For additional perspective here, young children could be relatively close to our innate dualistic state [Barrett, 2012; Christopher, 2022c] from which a shift to the enlightened perspective might be a modest one.

Additionally, for further perspective on enlightenment (and perhaps other profound religious or mystical breakthroughs) one could consider that the underlying soul relinquishes identification with the brain’s activities. Such a release might then be characterized as liberation from entanglement with the material aspects of consciousness. Perhaps along these lines the coauthor of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chogyam Trungpa mentioned in his commentary that “[w]hen energy becomes independent, complete energy, it begins to look at itself, which transcends the ordinary idea of perception” [Fremantle and Trungpa, 1992: p.29].

Continuing, some of the most lucid descriptions of the enlightened state or terrain that I have encountered are in the far-reaching conversations with the Indian Advaita Vedanta (Hindu-connected) teacher, Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, found in the appropriately titled book *I AM THAT* [Nisargadatta, 1973]. One of Nisargadatta’s basic points is that once you can clearly observe ordinary consciousness at work that perception opens the door to a deeper experience of life and self. That experience could represent enlightenment. In one succinct exchange with a student Nisargadatta suggests that by reigning in excessive imagination and attachment we are then simply able to “see [reality] as it is, not through the screen of desire and fear” [Nisargadatta, 1973: p.286].

Of note here is that significant transformational experiences are very rare and almost inevitably come after long dedicated practice. Sam Harris claimed that the Dzogchen teacher he visited, Tulko Urgyen Rinpoche, matter of factly brought him to enlightenment and moreover could do so for others. But if anything like this was true then Harris’ description of that experience would likely have been profound; there should have been a mile-long line at Tulku Urgyen’s door; and the actual training associated with (Tibetan Buddhisms’) Dzogchen practice would not be such a long, rigorous, and largely monastic affair. This common tendency to trivialize Dzogchen in the West in fact got one of Harris’ former teachers, the westerner Lama Surya Das, denounced by their former Tibetan teacher.

Continuing here with some enlightenment commentary, I have been around some serious practitioners, including monastic figures, my sense is that such transformations really are profound and potentially have lasting impacts (as with Lusseyran). In everyday physical terms it is as though the default condition as human beings were to walk around with pebbles in our shoes. Spiritual liberation or enlightenment in that analogy is when a person finds a way to shed those

pebbles. Thus, I have sensed in others that via significant meditational practice and an enlightenment experience, they are somehow considerably more at ease with life and themselves.

Two more related references here that might be of interest. The first is of an even deeper enlightenment experience that also happened in Japan. That experience happened to a very sick young Japanese woman, Yaeko Iwasaki, in the 1930's and is also described in the sixth chapter of *The Three Pillars of Zen* (which again uniquely offers several enlightenment accounts). The inherent sense of responsibility, humility, and deeper perspective on life and death seemingly beget by Yaeko's liberation experience are noteworthy. Additionally, after amazingly marching through a sequence of breakthroughs in a week, Iwasaki came to appreciate the significance of deep enlightenment experiences and accept her pending death (which she sensed approaching).

A second reference that could be of interest relates the story of a contemporary Japanese man, Ittetsu Nemoto, who plunged into traditional monastic Rinzai Zen training (a contemporary rarity) and then subsequently dedicated himself to helping with suicide prevention efforts in Japan. A fine article on this, *The Last Call*, by Larissa MacFarquhar was published in *New Yorker* magazine [MacFarquhar, 2013]. Nemoto's journey is of note for a number of reasons. He managed in his very intense journey to minimize two meditational pitfalls - the first is withdrawing too much and the second veering towards intellectualizing (Nemoto is apparently no Sam Harris). But MacFarquhar's article nicely portrays Nemoto's extremely rigorous training; then his miraculous Self-realization or enlightenment experience; subsequent serious dedication to helping in the outside world; and finally his sober conclusion that we learn and are potentially transformed through suffering - and likely intense suffering at that.

Continuing, I will attempt here to further convey the rarity of significant enlightenment experiences which Harris even went so far as to attribute to drug usage. My own nerd-ish background for years had me frustrated the common tendency to oversell the availability of enlightenment experiences in Western Buddhism.

From a possibly parallel perspective a Western meditation teacher, A. H. Almaas, wrote:

[a] realized teacher might have thousands of students but it is rare if even a handful of them actually attain liberation [Almaas, p.4].

A. H. Almaas had been a physics graduate student when he decided to exit that science scene and instead pursue meditative inquiry. Also the noteworthy and neglected physicist David Bohm, after spending years in sort of a part-time role as a supremely-intellectual sidekick to the spiritual teacher, Jiddu Krishnamurti, made the same point about the rarity of significant enlightenment experiences and suggested this rarity had a long history [Bohm and Peat].

Another very well-grounded assessment of the likelihood of enlightenment was given at the end of the Zen classic *Zen Teaching of Huang Po*, by John Blofeld. In it the famous Zen teacher Huang Po commented that:

Ah be diligent. Be diligent! Of a thousand or ten thousand attempting to enter by this [Zen enlightenment] Gate, only three or perhaps five pass through. If you are heedless of my warnings, calamity is sure to follow. Therefore it

is written, “Exert your strength in *THIS* life to attain! Or else incur long aeons of further [karmic] gain!” [Blafeld, 1994: p.132].

Even in a much less distraction-bent era, with a practice very much focused on this life, in a likely very rigorous monastery saw limited success. By comparison, how many modern Western meditational outfits - nominally Buddhist or otherwise - do not grossly oversell the return on meditation and in particular the likelihood of enlightenment?

Further Huang Po was coming from the traditional monastic Zen (in China, Chan) perspective. In it you want to very seriously pursue having a deep enlightenment experience so that you can end your gross dissatisfaction with life (and thus share in something akin to Lusseyran’s grace). That experience is also purported to free up an individual from the ignorance which begets the compulsions (or grasping) which are believed to lead to rebirth. This latter goal would seem to conflict, though, with the oft-stated commitment to help others with their journeys and thus returning to help out. Alternatively, there are other traditional Buddhist practices that are considerably more modest in their ambitions and use simple practices to try to improve your life and also - this is the religious part - your post-death trajectory including possibly facilitating an enlightenment breakthrough in the disembodied (or bardo) state. Whereas Huang Po above expressed dismay over the possibility of reincarnating, other Buddhists (certainly some Mahayana ones) appear committed to coming back to help out and also to learn more lessons.

I add a related parallel point. Years ago when I regularly attended meetings for a group concerned about the over-abundance of nuclear weapons there was another attendee that drew my attention. That attendee was an older man who seemed remarkably at ease with life and himself. Eventually I spoke to him after one of the meetings and asked him about his background. With my own background and biases I assumed he had been involved with meditation (and probably for many years at that). But the man reported that he had been involved with a small Christian church. I think, though, that whatever the vehicle, such apparent transformations are quite rare. I also feel, though, that based on my observations people seem to be able to find some basic benefit as a result of their religious or spiritual practices.

I add here that I doubt the accuracy of Sam Harris’ presentation of his enlightenment. His teacher-facilitated awakening in fact sounds similar to the woman’s awakening that he playfully critiqued in his book. He should have pointed out that there is a lot of pressure on teachers to convey some sense of success if only to have students stick around. If awakenings were as commonly available as suggested in *Waking Up* then we should know this since largely secular meditation practices have been pretty widely available for at least 4 decades now. The same situation might be said of drug usage. From my own observations, though, there can again some basic net benefits to sustained meditational practice, but with drugs I have not seen it (although for some therapeutic usage it has garnered some positive media).

Neuroscience, Religion, and Materialist’s Explanations

Sam Harris presented a split brain experiment-based argument for a brain-only vision of our mind or self. He confidently pointed out that such patients can appear in some experiments to have two selves and thus our sense of a unified self

(and potentially with it a soul) is a neural-concocted illusion. But he doesn't mention challenges to this reasoning. First, in an everyday way we can all experience the presence of apparent multiple selves when confronted with our competing desires. Additionally, in a neural sense the work of John Lorber provides some counterexamples [Lewin, 1980]. When there is good evidence that people can function normally - and even have a high IQ - yet have gross deficiencies in neural volume that certainly challenges neuroscience's basic assumptions. With only about 5 percent of normal brain volume how do you neurally support a regular sense of self, let alone the possibility of fragmenting it? Furthermore, in Lorber's work the brain-body symmetry assumption of neuroscience was also challenged.

Two other established phenomena are quite suggestive of the presence or influence of additional souls. First, there is the multiple personality disorder. With people experiencing several largely segregated selves and this occurring without any splitting interventions, how would Harris or neuroscience explain that? In a *Scientific American* article the therapist, Rebecca J. Lester, chronicled her four and half years of working with such a patient that the patient appeared to somehow contain 12 separate selves [Lester, 2023]! With this condition her patient:

regularly missed pockets of time. She 'spaced out' unexpectedly, 'waking up' wearing different clothes. She experienced intense thoughts, motions and urges that felt like were coming from someone other than herself.

The different selves also portrayed "distinctive speech patterns, mannerisms, and handwriting". And this very difficult condition as Lester pointed out has a global prevalence of perhaps "1 to 1.5 percent of the population."

The second condition suggestive of multiple souls is the remarkable psychological impacts seen in some heart transplant recipients. This phenomenon includes the "transfer of personality characteristics from one person to another" (i.e., from donor to recipient) in the aftermath of such surgeries and it has been noted for over 50 years [Leister, 2020; Lunde, 1967]. Relevant reports suggest that this transference process involves four phenomena: "(1) changes in preferences, (2) alterations in emotions/temperament, (3) modifications of identity, and (4) memories from the donor's life" [Leister]. For interested readers I recommend seeing the article "Organ Transplants and Cellular Memories" which was published in *Nexus Magazine* [Pearsall et al, 2005]. Along with multiple personality disorder this stunning phenomenon appears to be largely removed from serious academic consideration, and given the extraordinary challenges to materialism that these such reports present perhaps this is not surprising [Christopher, 2024].

Harris' ultimate point with his arguments was to rebut the possibility of dualism and thus possible support for religious perspectives. But perhaps the simplest unacknowledged straightforward challenge to Harris' brain-only push is the phenomenon of terminal lucidity. The German biologist Michael Nahm described this as:

The (re-) emergence of normal or unusually enhanced mental abilities in dull, unconscious, or mentally ill patients shortly before death, including considerable elevation of mood and spiritual affectation, or the ability to speak in a previously unusual spiritualized and elated manner [Nahm, 2009].

In some cases such recoveries have been observed in individuals who have mentally incapacitated for years. This

stunning phenomenon was considered in a fine clinical review found in the *Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics* “Terminal lucidity: A review and a case collection” [Nahm et al, 2012]. In that paper’s opening sentence it was suggested that this phenomenon, “has been reported over the past 250 years, but has received little attention”. Some reports suggest that it occurs regularly in nursing homes facilities. If terminal lucidity draws significant public attention then perhaps neuroscience will consider it. Some issues and a possible explanation are discussed in [Christopher, 2022d].

And a final unacknowledged challenge to Harris’ brain-only point is the dualistic spiritual perspectives we appear to be born with. That framework or package, termed our “natural religion” in Barrett, was previously discussed here. That such a belief package - and general rebut to Harris’ anti-religious hypothesis - showed up stored in DNA as some kind of fallout from evolution is quite difficult to imagine [Christopher, 2022c].

Moving along with *Waking Up*, in the book it claimed that:

[t] here 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 phenomena. Given recent advances in neuroimaging technology, we no longer face a practical impediment to investigating spiritual insights in the context of science [Harris, 2014: p.8].

Similar claims purporting to neurally (and thus materially) validate transformations associated with religious practices were made in a 2014 *Scientific American* article, “mind of the meditator”, by Matthieu Ricard, Antoine Lutz, and Richard J. Davidson [Ricard et al, 2014]. That article considered neural imaging changes believed to be correlated with three meditational techniques - focused attention, mindfulness, and compassion and loving kindness. The authors made claims analogous to those of Harris’ with regard to the efficacy of meditational training including:

[a] bout 15 years of research have done more than show that meditation produces significant changes in both the function and structure of the brains of experienced practitioners. These studies are now starting to demonstrate that contemplative practices may have a substantive impact on biological processes critical for physical health.

Of note here is that “experienced practitioners” implies people with over 10,000 hours of meditation experience. At a rate of an hour a day that translates to over 27 years of daily meditation.

The article then added:

[t] he ability to cultivate compassion and other positive qualities lays the foundation for an ethical framework unattached to any philosophy or religion, which could have a profoundly beneficial effect on all aspects of human societies.

But the “mind of the meditator” article seemed loosely quantitative and the one graph attempting to show neural enhancements derived from meditation seemed to show small effects with significant overlap found between experienced meditators’ measurements and those of controls. The authors then failed to respond to a published follow-up letter from a meditator regarding the possibility that their results could have been distorted due to selection bias. How many lay people really have a chance of joining the 10,000 hour club (and thus the possibility of selection bias)?

More seriously, though, why didn’t Sam Harris and Matthieu Ricard *et al* acknowledge that secularly-packaged meditation has been quite widely available in the West for at least 40 years? If such meditation was as productive as suggested by these authors then why didn’t the results of that meditation sell itself - like an effective dieting routine would have - without the need for scientific promotion? I mentioned that to an older very experienced American meditator and she simply nodded her head in agreement.

Underlying those neuro-meditation claims are presumptions about the state of neuroscience as well as accuracy of neural imaging. In the period in which Harris and Richard *et al* were writing there were some neuroscientists who wrote soberly about that state. In another 2014 issue of *Scientific American* there was an article by Rafael Yuste and George M. Church on the status of neuroscience [Yuste and Church, 2014]. Following an optimistic title of “The New Century of the Brain - Big Science lights the way to an understanding of how the world’s most complex machine gives rise to our thoughts and emotions”, the two authors gave a very sobering presentation on how little was currently known and how much in the way of technical developments and work appeared to be needed. Such developments would be focused on controlling and recording the activity of the brain’s labyrinth of circuits. That article opened with a simple example:

*[d] espite a century of sustained research, brain scientists remain ignorant of the workings of the three-pound organ that is the seat of all conscious activity. Many have tried to attack this problem by examining the nervous systems of simpler organisms. In fact, almost 30 years have passed since investigators mapped the connections among each of the 302 nerve cells in the round worm *Caenorhabditis elegans*. Yet the worm-wiring diagram did not yield an understanding of how these connections give rise to even rudimentary behaviors such as feeding and sex. What was missing were data relating the activity of neurons to specific behaviors.*

The article went on to point how superficial and deceptive many popular presentations of human brain experiments are. Commenting on one such story, the authors wrote:

*A noteworthy example of the mismatch is a much publicized study identifying single brain cells that fired an electrical impulse in response to the face of actor Jennifer Aniston. Despite the hoopla, the discovery of a “Jennifer Aniston neuron” was something like a message from aliens, a sign of intelligent life in the universe but without any indication about the meaning of the transmission. We are still completely ignorant of how the pulsing electrical activity of that neuron influences our ability to recognize Aniston’s face and then relate it to a clip from the television show **Friends**. For the brain to recognize the star, it probably has to activate a large ensemble of neurons, all communicating using neural code that we have yet to decipher.*

Overall, Yuste and Church suggested that for neuroscience to fundamentally advance it:

needs a new set of technologies that will enable investigators to monitor and also alter the electrical activity of thousands or even millions of neurons - techniques capable of deciphering what the Spanish neuroanatomist Santiago Ramon y Cajal called 'the impenetrable jungles where many investigators have lost themselves'.

Penetrating those jungles, though, as outlined in their article would seem to be a monumental task. Along the way researchers will need to create the requisite technologies and then scale up the brains examined. Even with a mouse's brain, though, those efforts "could generate 300 terabytes of compressed data in an hour". The pending enormous challenges led the authors to a somewhat plea-ful conclusion:

We need collaboration among academic disciplines. Building instruments to image voltage in millions of neurons simultaneously throughout entire brain regions may be achieved only by a sustained effort of a large interdisciplinary team of researchers. The technology could then be made available at a large-scale, observatory-like facility shared by the neuroscience community. We are passionate about retaining a focus on new technology to record, control and decode the patterns of electrical spikes that are the language of the brain. We believe that without these new tools, neuroscience will remain bottlenecked and fail to detect the brain's emergent properties that underlie a virtually infinite range of behaviors. Enhancing the ability to understand and use the language of spikes and neurons is the most productive way to derive a grand theory of how nature's most complex machine functions.

Additional complexity appears to have been neglected, though. In the end whatever is recorded with regards to an individual's brain activity will likely have to be compared against that individual's limited recollection and description of their concurrent subjective experience. And their physical experience would necessarily be a static one within an "observatory-like facility".

An alternative route to appreciating the limits of brain science's position might be to consider some discrete conditions. Three profound conditions stand out for the scientific and public attention they have received - autism, schizophrenia, and Alzheimers. For autism and schizophrenia their origins are in large part believed to be genetic, and of additional note is their physical or neural bases. That is respectively, what causes the conditions and also what the conditions themselves physically entail. For the presumed genetically driven conditions, schizophrenia and autism, as discussed in previous works the genetic searches appear to have failed; and for all three, perhaps even more remarkably - neuroscience still seems to be grasping at models in order to describe what is going on in the brain with these conditions [Moshbergen, 2022; Kosik, 2020; Christopher, 2022c].

Finally, I suggest here that a relevant practical question is - has the mindfulness/meditation *et al* movement, even dented the formidable tsunami of electronic distraction underway? That context was not even mentioned in either *Waking Up* or

Ricard *et al*'s article. I think if it were possible to regulate cellphones in such a way as to reduce their usage by a factor of two, that would likely do more to help society's state of mindfulness than whatever goes on within the official mindfulness business. Gross dis-attention appears to be a big and growing problem. I add that I think of screen-time as tending to be the opposite of sincere time spent meditating, praying, or simply working.

Closing Discussions on Meditation

I windup here with some personal observations and then some quotes on meditation. I am focusing here on meditation but these points could also relate to other religious practices. The aforementioned Nisargadatta suggested that transformation ultimately doesn't come down to technique or cleverness, it appears to come down to sustained commitment or "earnestness". Perhaps what he means is that if we are really serious about transformation, we will ultimately find our way to it.

Probably the most basic reason to try some meditation is to explore paying attention in a fuller sense. Indirectly we all pay attention but this appears to involve externally-directed, focused efforts. To safely drive a vehicle it requires a certain amount of focussed attention. Likewise many work activities require focused attention. On this point I wonder if one of the big contributors to the satisfaction that can come from working comes simply from a focused state.

If you are interested you can find some meditation classes or programs to attend. I recommend trying to find something that is low-key and un-hyped (don't look for charisma). One of my most memorable experiences as a student was in some sessions with a man simply teaching attention. Although highly trained via Tibetan monastics, his teachings involved simple awareness (or paying attention) exercises. Nothing extra, just the exercises at hand along with his sincere commentary. Enlightenment was not mentioned. Trying to pay attention turns out to be very challenging; in its own mundane way enlightening; and can also be rewarding. Additionally some of the classes I have attended with older Tibetan teachers - which naturally included some religious context - were likewise sincere and involved minimal hype.

Simple introductory practices typically involve paying attention to some internal process. This might entail silently counting your breath or just paying attention to (or following) your breath. My first meditation practice involved silently repeating a short word phrase or mantra. The idea is to try to patiently and persistently stay with your meditational focus. It is sounds easy but isn't. Our minds are inclined towards wandering and our attention is easily detoured into the wandering. To facilitate the process it is typically recommended that you sit up relatively straight and have a quiet bland setting. I usually sit on a meditation cushion and stare downward towards an adjacent blank wall. Although I have done this for years, the basic recurrence of catching my mind wandering and then starting again with a focus continues to this day.

Another kind of meditation involves walking while staying focused on a practice. In this way I regularly pace back and forth in my living room in quiet fashion. Occasionally I might check to see if I can feel my legs and feet. When we get locked into our head trips we tend to loose connections elsewhere. More generally, you can of course try to integrate the paying attention or a awareness effort into other parts of your life.

An initial breakthrough aspect of the process is that you can come to vividly realize that our default mind state is self-sustained and repetitive distraction (i.e., in various forms 'blah-blah-blah-me, blah-blah-blah-me, ...'). As a result I am regularly amazed when modern intellectuals express grand views of the mind and thinking.

Additionally, I suggest meditators - even experienced ones - not abandon a simple daily focused practice. Maybe for lay practice that is the best way to go. The contemporary trends seem to emphasize unfocused or open meditation but I think that is unrealistic and comes at a cost. A simple focus - such as trying to follow your breath or counting your breath (up to 10 and then starting over) - offers a practical exercise in simple awareness and also some sober feedback. You might think of this as a simple daily mind calisthenic. The alternative open style, perhaps akin to multitasking, can easily be a distracted experience. I saw recently that the American meditation teacher Adyashanti commented that many of the experienced meditators he was encountering had difficulty simply focusing or concentrating. Without a daily focused practice this can easily happen as I have observed with myself. Perhaps the ultimate challenge with any meditation practice - or other spiritual practices - is to try to balance the need for focusing with the complementary need for openness. They are both vital aspects of healthy living and their balancing seems like an important art.

Moving along here to comment on a particular potential challenge with meditation practice. If you are seriously committed to meditation efforts then you may want to see the book, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*, by Jack Kornfeld. That book sheds some light on the fact that with sustained meditation efforts there can be significant sub-enlightenment breakthroughs (sometimes termed openings) but that in the subsequent lay realm they can be upended in a big way. There really are challenges with regards to serious meditation practice which might be consistent with the traditional low-key emphasis on lay meditation.

For those considering sustained meditation it appears to be best to find an experienced person and/or group for some ongoing feedback. This probably holds for other religious/spiritual efforts too.

Within the current largely secular meditation scene it might be a challenge to find some experienced practical and longterm-oriented help. Living a sane life is not easy and it is probably a good idea to be pleased with whatever help you can get. In addition to my meditation/spiritual practice I also try to get outside regularly. I find that outdoor walks can be therapeutic and also somewhat of a meditative experience.

There are some good books attempting to help people with meditation. On the other hand there are plenty of superficial ones, too. One common tendency is to sell meditation/enlightenment in an effortless and/or cliché-oriented way. Another unhelpful approach is to pander to science. *Waking Up* has plenty of company in that regard. The popular book by Robert Wright entitled *Why Buddhism is True: The Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment* appears to be based on the author's need to make sure that Buddhist meditation is scientifically kosher. I have to admit to being embarrassed that something that I am involved with is home to so much intellectual wannabe-ism.

One notable book is Shunryu Suzuki's *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. A simple but also subtle book derived from talks given during Zen meditation periods or retreats (and "enlightenment" only shows up in passing). Suzuki opened his Prologue with:

People say that practicing Zen is difficult, but there is a misunderstanding as to why. It is not difficult because it is hard to sit in the cross-legged position, or to attain enlightenment. It is difficult because it is hard to keep your mind pure and our practice pure in its fundamental sense [Suzuki, 2020: p.1].

First, his opening two “not difficult” assertions are in fact difficult, but perhaps this was done to emphasize the third one. The “cross-legged position” that he refers to is later identified as being the full lotus posture! I have already commented about the difficulty of encountering enlightenment experiences. But the emphasized latter point is a good one and Suzuki closed his Prologue with an elaboration on what “pure” implies:

So, the most difficult thing is always to keep your beginner's mind. There is no need to have a deep understanding of Zen. Even though you read much Zen literature, you must read each sentence with a fresh mind. You should not say, “I know what Zen is,” or “I have attained enlightenment.” This is also the secret of the arts: always be a beginner. Be very very careful about this point. If you start to practice zazen, you will begin to appreciate your beginner's mind. It is the secret of Zen practice [Suzuki, 2020: pp.2-3].

People at the talks he gave were already doing some meditation (although many were likely not sitting in full lotus). His point here (and repeated elsewhere) is that the big picture goal is trying to stay with life closely and attentively, analogous to what a beginner might do. That is the goal and it is a very challenging one given our the default mental trajectories. His Zen center was a different kind than where the aforementioned Ittetsu Nemoto trained at, it emphasized meditation focused on following the breath (and was likely much less intense). I also have to wonder if similar centers are still functioning in the West.

Of additional note here is that as Suzuki pointed out, following the breath (or other internal meditation focuses), shouldn't be an exclusive process. It is a subtle point but he suggested that the purpose of Zen:

practice is to open your small mind. So concentrating is just an aid to help you realize “big mind”, or the mind that is everything. If you want to discover the true meaning of Zen in your everyday life, you have to understand the meaning of keeping your mind on your breathing and your body in the right posture [while meditating] [p.16].

In this commentary if you would like you might generalize (as I'm inclined to) and go beyond “Zen”, and some of the associated specifics. Concentrating or focusing in an internal sense - as is present in many religious/spiritual practices - can somehow allow us to perceive in a more steady way our big picture realities (including external challenges). Finally, although Suzuki's commentary was somewhat language-limited, it nicely covered some aspects of engaged living.

Another very helpful book is the aforementioned *I AM THAT* involving an extraordinary range of conversations with Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj. Nisargadatta seems to have plumbed the depths of meditation and with it gotten a close view of the inner psyche and associated difficulties. Nisargadatta, although without a formal education, somehow seemed to be remarkably lucid with his descriptions. Choosing from among the many insightful passages in the book was difficult. Below

is an extended and somewhat challenging selection (which came from a discussion that took place at his meditation abode, located upstairs from his modest small store). Of note here is that the references to “pain” might be motivated in part by the discomfort sitters often face in extended meditation efforts. Sitting may look boring but that is rarely the case. Continuing, “Q” designates the questioner and “M” designates Nisargadatta (the Maharaj). Here goes:

Q: Do you advise shunning pleasure and pursuing pain?

M: No, nor pursuing pleasure and shunning pain. Accept both as they come, enjoy both while they last, let them go, as they must.

Q: How can I possibly enjoy pain? Physical pain calls for action.

M: Of course. And so does mental. The bliss is in the awareness of it, in not shrinking, or in any way turning away from it. All happiness comes from awareness. The more we are conscious, the deeper the joy. Acceptance of pain, non-resistance, courage and endurance - these open deep and perennial sources of real happiness, true bliss.

Q: Why should pain be more effective than pleasure?

M: Pleasure is readily accepted, while all the powers of the self reject pain. As acceptance of pain is the denial of the self, and self stands in the way of true happiness, the wholehearted acceptance of pain releases the springs of happiness.

Q: Does the acceptance of suffering act the same way?

M: The fact of pain is easily brought within the focus of awareness. With suffering it is not that simple. To focus [on] suffering is not enough, for mental life, as we know it, is one continuous stream of suffering. To reach the deeper layers of suffering you must go to its roots and uncover their vast underground network, where fear and desire are closely interwoven and the currents of life's energy oppose, obstruct and destroy each other.

Q: How can I set right a tangle which is entirely below the level of my consciousness?

M: My being with yourself, the 'I am'; by watching yourself in your daily life with alert interest, with the intention to understand rather than judge, in full acceptance of whatever may emerge, because it is there, you encourage the deep to come to the surface and enrich your life and consciousness with its captive energies. This is the great work of awareness; it removes obstacles and releases energies by understanding the nature of life and mind. Intelligence is the door to freedom and alert attention is the mother of intelligence [Nisargadatta, 1973: p.278].

This passage captures a decent chunk of the spirit of meditative and also perhaps contemplative inquiry. You try to stay present (whilst formally sitting or otherwise), and then stay attentive come what may. Note that along with the suggestion, “encourag[ing] of the deep to come to the surface”, is an implied (but stated elsewhere) point that one doesn’t act out impulsively in harmful or distracting ways. Also elsewhere he talked about appropriate limits to the endurance of pain.

But in a simple sense I think as adults we all know some of this routine with regard to difficulties. Sometimes in committed efforts involving stuff we can not turn back from, as for example being a friend or parent in a difficult situation, we find ourselves “all in” with the challenge. Another example might be in dealing with a health challenge. These are rarely easy and of course superficially anything but desirable, but paradoxically such experiences can be liberating and ultimately rewarding. The routine advice in such circumstances is to “hang in there”. I suggest here that a possible key to moving towards a deeper experience of life (and meaning) is to try and expand our “hanging in there” or “all in” commitment, whether in easy or not-easy situations.

Continuing with this everyday parallel, in Andrew Solomon's *Far From the Tree* there is one episode that dealt with a woman who had been seriously tested by her Down syndrome child. In asking about her observations from her work with other parents in similar circumstances, and in particular did they share her energetic engagement, she commented, “[t]hey all do. That’s the wild thing about special needs parents. This comes raging out of you. I feel such strength and courage in these women” [Solomon, 2012b: p.198]. Likewise when people stay committed to meditation (or other forms of engaged living) it can facilitate hanging in there and meeting life’s inevitable challenges. One of the miracles that such work can help uncover, is that painful situations can somehow transform themselves and you can come to appreciate a little of Nisargadatta’s final characterization above. On this point it is worth noting that the Japanese man, Ittetsu Nemoto, in the aforementioned *New Yorker* article had his seemingly miraculous energetic awakening experience following a profound hanging-in-there episode.

I go on here to somewhat contradict another basic assertion of Nisargadatta’s (whose work was both challenging and contradictory at times) that “[y]ou must find your own way”. There really were practices to follow at Nisargadatta’s establishment (including traditional ones such as repeating God’s name [in an Indian language]). Somehow those practices were supposed to facilitate what might be termed spiritual progress. In any case, at a later point in *I AM THAT* a description was given of what needs to ultimately transpire to have a breakthrough or have an enlightenment experience. A student with some apparent frustration asks Nisargadatta about the apparent crazy meditational practices. Essentially ‘what gives with these difficult practices (or sadhanas)?!’. And Nisargadatta responded:

M: Unless you make tremendous efforts, you will not be convinced that effort will take you nowhere. The self is so self-confident, that unless it is totally discouraged, it will not give up. Mere verbal conviction is not enough. Hard facts alone can show the absolute nothingness of the self-image.

My take here is that derailing the immense Me-freight-train, in order to facilitate a deeper life-connection and with it meaning, is a huge project and that some religions/spiritual traditions have tried to tackle this with various practices. And whatever practice is undertaken it is earnestness that will ultimately “take you through”.

Conclusions

Making sense of religions ultimately begins with questioning scientific materialism. It turns out this is not difficult both in

little ways (with behavioral conundrums) and also in big ways (with the unfolding DNA deficit situation). While such efforts may draw little if any academic interest, by simply combining our innate religious beliefs; some soul-suggestive phenomena like terminal lucidity; together with the broad missing heritability problem - you can get a good start on support for a religious/dualistic framework [Christopher, 2022c]. Early work suggested the traditional reincarnation model as a vehicle for some explanations (for an introduction see [Christopher, 2017a]). I additionally suggest critically looking at the modern alternative paths, which at minimum tend to exaggerate their efficacies.

A key point suggested herein is that for glimpses or insights into the potential import of religions and their practices you might look to profound religious or mystical experiences. These may be relatively rare, and certainly not easily obtained as commonly presented in the West; but nonetheless these appear to represent profound insights into a possible Unity state. I suggest there are a number of excellent books dealing with this topic, with a few cited herein. Additionally, for a dry but truly remarkable overview of the collision between a traditional religion - in this case Buddhism - and the modern materialist, intellectually oriented realm readers might look to *Mind over Matter; Reflections on Buddhism in the West* by Tarthang Turku. Perhaps symptomatic of its quality is the apparent very small size of its readership.

The traditional framing of meditation practices within a religion like Buddhism is largely within a life-after-life perspective. One finds workable practices so that one can further appreciate the lessons of life, facilitate helping others, and grow some - in what could be described as a spiritual or religious sense. I think traditionally people involved in such practices didn't expect a final breakthrough in the current lifetime and certainly not in easy fashion. Sages are rare. From a Buddhist perspective books like Thondup's *Peaceful Death, Joyful Rebirth* discuss the potential for improvement or even a breakthrough following death. Sages are rare.

With some patience and persistence, though, perhaps we can begin to appreciate the points made by Lusseyran that in fact the really important and meaningful aspects of life, which he characterized as "light" and "joy", do "not come from outside", they simply have a home within us. From such a personal perspective, religious practices might then help us to appreciate those deeper elements and the associated opportunities. Interested individuals might then find practices and faiths that fit their life (and there are of course many options) and attempt integrating them. Furthermore, if there are forms of life beyond death then perhaps the lessons we uncover in our everyday lives can help us to find some grace in our subsequent existence.

Statements and Declarations

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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