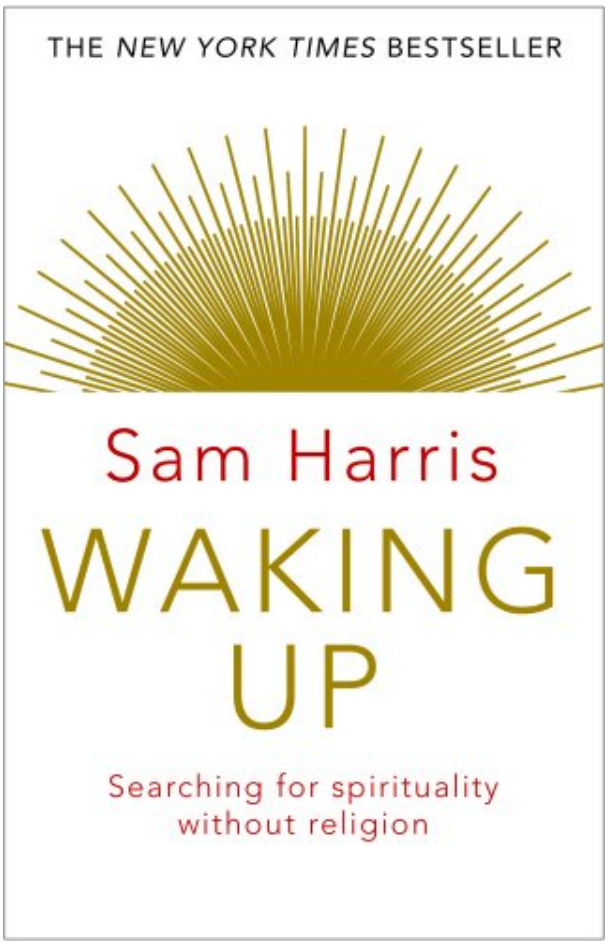
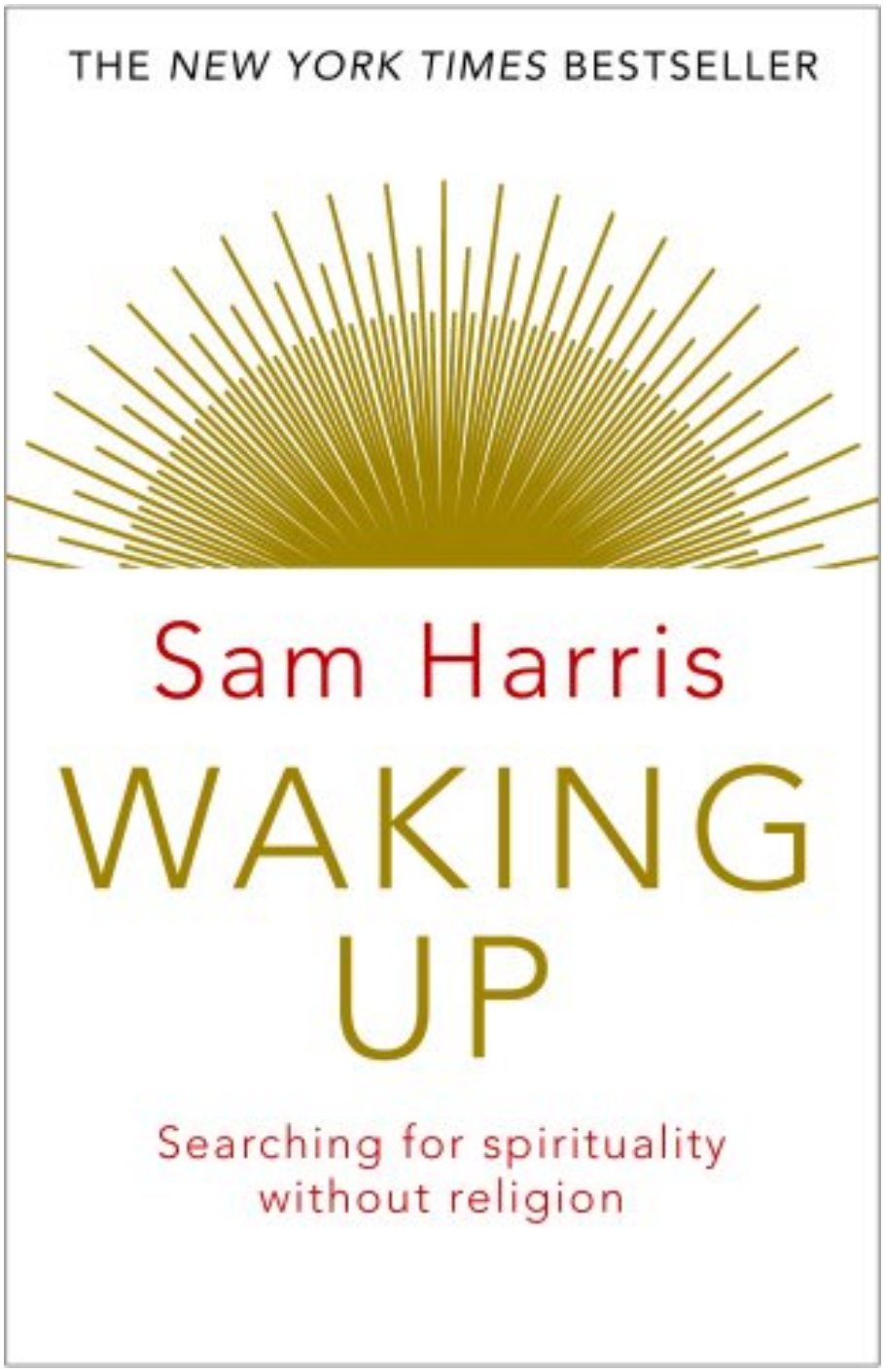
WAKING UP: SEARCHING FOR SPIRITUALITY WITHOUT RELIGION BY SAM HARRIS





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Review

“Harris’s book . . . caught my eye because it’s so entirely of this moment, so keenly in touch with the growing number of Americans who are willing to say that they do not find the succor they crave, or a truth that makes sense to them, in organized religion.” (Frank Bruni, columnist, New York Times)

“The fact is that Waking Up lends a different picture of Harris (at least to me): an intelligent and sensitive person who is willing to undergo the discomfort involved in proposing alternatives to the religions he’s spent years degrading. His new book, whether discussing the poverty of spiritual language, the neurophysiology of consciousness, psychedelic experience, or the quandaries of the self, at the very least acknowledges the potency and importance of the religious impulse—though Harris might name it differently—that fundamental and common instinct to seek not just an answer to life, but a way to live that answer.” (Trevor Quirk, The New Republic)

"[A]n extraordinary and ambitious masterwork. . . . altogether spectacular." (Maria Popova, Brainpickings)

“Uber-atheist Sam Harris is getting all spiritual. In his new book, Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion, the usually outspoken critic of religion describes how spirituality can and must be divorced from religion if the human mind is to reach its full potential. . . . But there is plenty in Waking Up that will delight Harris’ most militant atheist readers.” (Religion News Service)

“The great value and novelty of this book is that Harris, in a simple but rigorous style, takes the middle way between these pseudoscientific and pseudo-spiritual assertions . . . [leading] to a profoundly more salubrious life.” (Publishers Weekly)

"A demanding, illusion-shattering book.” (Kirkus Reviews)

“Don’t read Waking Up . . . if you want to be told that heaven is real. Do read it if you want to explore the nature of consciousness, to learn how just trying to be mindful can free you from anxiety and self-blame.” (MORE Magazine)

“Waking Up is an eye opening, mind expanding book.” (AA Agnostica)

“A seeker’s memoir, a scientific and philosophical exploration of the self, and a how-to guide for transcendence, Waking Up explores the nature of consciousness, explains how to meditate, tells you the best drugs to take, and warns you about lecherous gurus. It will shake up your most fundamental beliefs about everyday experience, and it just might change your life.” (Paul Bloom, Professor of Psychology and Cognitive Science, Yale University and author of "Just Babies: The Origins of Good and Evil")

“Waking Up is a rigorous, kind, clear, and witty book that will point you toward the selflessness that is our original nature.” (Stephen Mitchell)

“Sam Harris points out the rational methodology for exploring the nature of consciousness and for experiencing a transformative understanding of possibilities. Waking Up really does help us wake up.” (Joseph Goldstein, author of "Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening" and "One Dharma")

“As a neuroscientist, Sam Harris shows how our egos are illusions, diffuse products of brain activity, and as a long-term practitioner of meditation, he shows how abandoning this illusion can wake us up to a richer life, more connected to everything around us.” (Jerry Coyne, Professor of Biology at the University of Chicago and author of "Why Evolution is True")

"Sam Harris ranks as my favorite skeptic, bar none. In Waking Up he gives us a clear-headed, no-holds-barred look at the spiritual supermarket, calling out what amounts to junk food and showing us where real nutrition can be found. Anyone who realizes the value of a spiritual life will find much to savor here – and those who see no value in it will find much to reflect on." (Daniel Goleman, author Emotional Intelligence and Focus)

"Sam Harris has written a beautifully rational book about spiritually, consciousness and transcendence. He is the high priest of spirituality without religion. I recommend this book regardless of your belief system. As befits a book called Waking Up, it’s an eye opener." (A.J. Jacobs, bestselling author of The Year of Living Biblically)

Praise for Free Will:

Publishers Weekly Top 10 Science Book of Spring 2012

“A nimble book, amiably and conversationally jumping from point to point. The book’s length is one of its charms: He never belabors any one topic or idea, sticking around exactly as long as he needs to in order to lay out his argument (and tackle the rebuttals that it will inevitably provoke) and not a page longer.” —Washington Post

“A brief and forceful broadside at the conundrum that has nagged at every major thinker from Plato to Slavoj Zizek. Self-avowedly secular, [Harris is] addressing the need for individual growth and social betterment, and [is] doing so with compelling argument and style.” —Los Angeles Times

“Harris skewers the concept of free will — that mainstay of law, policy and politics — in fewer than 100 pages.” —Nature

"Brilliant and witty—and never less than incisive—Free Will shows that Sam Harris can say more in 13,000 words than most people do in 100,000." —Oliver Sacks

Praise for The Moral Landscape:

“The most compelling strand in The Moral Landscape is its unspooling diatribe against relativism.” —New York Times

“This is an inspiring book, holding out as it does the possibility of a rational understanding of how to construct the good life with the aid of science, free from the accretions of religious superstition and cultural coercion.” —Financial Times

“Harris’s is a first-principle argument, backed by copious empirical evidence woven through a tightly reasoned narrative… Harris’s program of a science-based morality is a courageous one that I wholeheartedly endorse.” —Scientific American

“Sam Harris breathes intellectual fire into an ancient debate. Reading this thrilling, audacious book, you feel the ground shifting beneath your feet. Reason has never had a more passionate advocate.”—Ian McEwan

“I was one of those who had unthinkingly bought into the hectoring myth that science can say nothing about morals. To my surprise, The Moral Landscape has changed all that for me. It should change it for philosophers too. Philosophers of mind have already discovered that they can't duck the study of neuroscience, and the best of them have raised their game as a result. Sam Harris shows that the same should be true of moral philosophers, and it will turn their world exhilaratingly upside down. As for religion, and the preposterous idea that we need God to be good, nobody wields a sharper bayonet than Sam Harris.”—Richard Dawkins

“Reading Sam Harris is like drinking water from a cool stream on a hot day. He has the rare ability to frame arguments that are not only stimulating, they are downright nourishing… His discussions will provoke secular liberals and religious conservatives alike, who jointly argue from different perspectives that there always will be an unbridgeable chasm between merely knowing what is and discerning what should be. As was the case with Harris’ previous books, readers are bound to come away with previously firm convictions about the world challenged, and a vital new awareness about the nature and value of science and reason in our lives.” —Lawrence M. Krauss, Foundation Professor and Director of the ASU Origins Project at Arizona State University, author of The Physics of Star Trek, and, Quantum Man: Richard Feynman’s Life in Science

“A lively, provocative, and timely new look at one of the deepest problems in the world of ideas. Harris makes a powerful case for a morality that is based on human flourishing and thoroughly enmeshed with science and rationality. It is a tremendously appealing vision, and one that no thinking person can afford to ignore.” —Steven Pinker, Harvard College Professor of Psychology, Harvard University, and author of How the Mind Works and The Blank Slate

“Expanding upon concepts posited in the End of Faith and Free Will, neuroscientist Harris draws from personal contemplative practice and a growing body of scientific research to argue that the self, the feeling that there is an “I” residing in one’s head, is both an illusion and the primary cause of human suffering…. The great value and novelty of this book is that Harris, in a simple but rigorous style, takes the middle way between… pseudoscientific and pseudospiritual assertions, cogently maintaining that while such contemplative insights provide no evidence for metaphysical claims, they are available, and seeing them for ourselves leads to a profoundly more salubrious life.” (Publishers Weekly)

About the Author
Sam Harris is the author of the bestselling books The End of Faith, Letter to a Christian Nation, The Moral

Landscape, Free Will, and Lying. The End of Faith won the 2005 PEN Award for Nonfiction. His writing has been published in over fifteen languages. Dr. Harris is cofounder and CEO of Project Reason, a nonprofit foundation devoted to spreading scientific knowledge and secular values in society. He received a degree in philosophy from Stanford University and a PhD in neuroscience from UCLA. Please visit his website at SamHarris.org.

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Waking Up 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 specious 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.

THE SEARCH FOR HAPPINESS

One day, you will find yourself outside this world which is like a mother’s womb. You will leave this earth to enter, while you are yet in the body, a vast expanse, and know that the words, “God’s earth is vast,” name this region from which the saints have come.

Jalal-ud-Din Rumi

I share the concern, expressed by many atheists, that the terms spiritual and mystical are often used to make

claims not merely about the quality of certain experiences but about reality at large. Far too often, these words are invoked in support of religious beliefs that are morally and intellectually grotesque. Consequently, many of my fellow atheists consider all talk of spirituality to be a sign of mental illness, conscious imposture, or self-deception. This is a problem, because millions of people have had experiences for which spiritual and mystical seem the only terms available. Many of the beliefs people form on the basis of these experiences are false. But the fact that most atheists will view a statement like Rumi's above as a symptom of the man's derangement grants a kernel of truth to the rantings of even our least rational opponents. The human mind does, in fact, contain vast expanses that few of us ever discover.

And there is something degraded and degrading about many of our habits of attention as we shop, gossip, argue, and ruminate our way to the grave. Perhaps I should speak only for myself here: It seems to me that I spend much of my waking life in a neurotic trance. My experiences in meditation suggest, however, that an alternative exists. It is possible to stand free of the juggernaut of self, if only for moments at a time.

Most cultures have produced men and women who have found that certain deliberate uses of attention—meditation, yoga, prayer—can transform their perception of the world. Their efforts generally begin with the realization that even in the best of circumstances, happiness is elusive. We seek pleasant sights, sounds, tastes, sensations, and moods. We satisfy our intellectual curiosity. We surround ourselves with friends and loved ones. We become connoisseurs of art, music, or food. But our pleasures are, by their very nature, fleeting. If we enjoy some great professional success, our feelings of accomplishment remain vivid and intoxicating for an hour, or perhaps a day, but then they subside. And the search goes on. The effort required to keep boredom and other unpleasantness at bay must continue, moment to moment.

Ceaseless change is an unreliable basis for lasting fulfillment. Realizing this, many people begin to wonder whether a deeper source of well-being exists. Is there a form of happiness beyond the mere repetition of pleasure and avoidance of pain? Is there a happiness that does not depend upon having one's favorite foods available, or friends and loved ones within arm's reach, or good books to read, or something to look forward to on the weekend? Is it possible to be happy before anything happens, before one's desires are gratified, in spite of life's difficulties, in the very midst of physical pain, old age, disease, and death?

We are all, in some sense, living our answer to this question—and most of us are living as though the answer were "no." No, nothing is more profound than repeating one's pleasures and avoiding one's pains; nothing is more profound than seeking satisfaction—sensory, emotional, and intellectual—moment after moment. Just keep your foot on the gas until you run out of road.

Certain people, however, come to suspect that human existence might encompass more than this. Many of them are led to suspect this by religion—by the claims of the Buddha or Jesus or some other celebrated figure. And such people often begin to practice various disciplines of attention as a means of examining their experience closely enough to see whether a deeper source of well-being exists. They may even sequester themselves in caves or monasteries for months or years at a time to facilitate this process. Why would a person do this? No doubt there are many motives for retreating from the world, and some of them are psychologically unhealthy. In its wisest form, however, the exercise amounts to a very simple experiment. Here is its logic: If there exists a source of psychological well-being that does not depend upon merely gratifying one's desires, then it should be present even when all the usual sources of pleasure have been removed. Such happiness should be available to a person who has declined to marry her high school sweetheart, renounced her career and material possessions, and gone off to a cave or some other spot that is inhospitable to ordinary aspirations.

One clue to how daunting most people would find such a project is the fact that solitary confinement—which

is essentially what we are talking about—is considered a punishment inside a maximum-security prison. Even when forced to live among murderers and rapists, most people still prefer the company of others to spending any significant amount of time alone in a room. And yet contemplatives in many traditions claim to experience extraordinary depths of psychological well-being while living in isolation for vast stretches of time. How should we interpret this? Either the contemplative literature is a catalogue of religious delusion, psychopathology, and deliberate fraud, or people have been having liberating insights under the name of "spirituality" and "mysticism" for millennia.

Unlike many atheists, I have spent much of my life seeking experiences of the kind that gave rise to the world's religions. Despite the painful results of my first few days alone in the mountains of Colorado, I later studied with a wide range of monks, lamas, yogis, and other contemplatives, some of whom had lived for decades in seclusion doing nothing but meditating. In the process, I spent two years on silent retreat myself (in increments of one week to three months), practicing various techniques of meditation for twelve to eighteen hours a day.

I can attest that when one goes into silence and meditates for weeks or months at a time, doing nothing else—not speaking, reading, or writing, just making a moment-to-moment effort to observe the contents of consciousness—one has experiences that are generally unavailable to people who have not undertaken a similar practice. I believe that such states of mind have a lot to say about the nature of consciousness and the possibilities of human well-being. Leaving aside the metaphysics, mythology, and sectarian dogma, what contemplatives throughout history have discovered is that there is an alternative to being continuously spellbound by the conversation we are having with ourselves; there is an alternative to simply identifying with the next thought that pops into consciousness. And glimpsing this alternative dispels the conventional illusion of the self.

Most traditions of spirituality also suggest a connection between self-transcendence and living ethically. Not all good feelings have an ethical valence, and pathological forms of ecstasy surely exist. I have no doubt, for instance, that many suicide bombers feel extraordinarily good just before they detonate themselves in a crowd. But there are also forms of mental pleasure that are intrinsically ethical. As I indicated earlier, for some states of consciousness, a phrase like "boundless love" does not seem overblown. It is decidedly inconvenient for the forces of reason and secularism that if someone wakes up tomorrow feeling boundless love for all sentient beings, the only people likely to acknowledge the legitimacy of his experience will be representatives of one or another Iron Age religion or New Age cult.

Most of us are far wiser than we may appear to be. We know how to keep our relationships in order, to use our time well, to improve our health, to lose weight, to learn valuable skills, and to solve many other riddles of existence. But following even the straight and open path to happiness is hard. If your best friend were to ask how she could live a better life, you would probably find many useful things to say, and yet you might not live that way yourself. On one level, wisdom is nothing more profound than an ability to follow one's own advice. However, there are deeper insights to be had about the nature of our minds. Unfortunately, they have been discussed entirely in the context of religion and, therefore, have been shrouded in fallacy and superstition for all of human history.

The problem of finding happiness in this world arrives with our first breath—and our needs and desires seem to multiply by the hour. To spend any time in the presence of a young child is to witness a mind ceaselessly buffeted by joy and sorrow. As we grow older, our laughter and tears become less gratuitous, perhaps, but the same process of change continues: One roiling complex of thought and emotion is followed by the next, like waves in the ocean.

Seeking, finding, maintaining, and safeguarding our well-being is the great project to which we all are devoted, whether or not we choose to think in these terms. This is not to say that we want mere pleasure or the easiest possible life. Many things require extraordinary effort to accomplish, and some of us learn to enjoy the struggle. Any athlete knows that certain kinds of pain can be exquisitely pleasurable. The burn of lifting weights, for instance, would be excruciating if it were a symptom of terminal illness. But because it is associated with health and fitness, most people find it enjoyable. Here we see that cognition and emotion are not separate. The way we think about experience can completely determine how we feel about it.

And we always face tensions and trade-offs. In some moments we crave excitement and in others rest. We might love the taste of wine and chocolate, but rarely for breakfast. Whatever the context, our minds are perpetually moving—generally toward pleasure (or its imagined source) and away from pain. I am not the first person to have noticed this.

Our struggle to navigate the space of possible pains and pleasures produces most of human culture. Medical science attempts to prolong our health and to reduce the suffering associated with illness, aging, and death. All forms of media cater to our thirst for information and entertainment. Political and economic institutions seek to ensure our peaceful collaboration with one another—and the police or the military is summoned when they fail. Beyond ensuring our survival, civilization is a vast machine invented by the human mind to regulate its states. We are ever in the process of creating and repairing a world that our minds want to be in. And wherever we look, we see the evidence of our successes and our failures. Unfortunately, failure enjoys a natural advantage. Wrong answers to any problem outnumber right ones by a wide margin, and it seems that it will always be easier to break things than to fix them.

Despite the beauty of our world and the scope of human accomplishment, it is hard not to worry that the forces of chaos will triumph—not merely in the end but in every moment. Our pleasures, however refined or easily acquired, are by their very nature fleeting. They begin to subside the instant they arise, only to be replaced by fresh desires or feelings of discomfort. You can't get enough of your favorite meal until, in the next moment, you find you are so stuffed as to nearly require the attention of a surgeon—and yet, by some quirk of physics, you still have room for dessert. The pleasure of dessert lasts a few seconds, and then the lingering taste in your mouth must be banished by a drink of water. The warmth of the sun feels wonderful on your skin, but soon it becomes too much of a good thing. A move to the shade brings immediate relief, but after a minute or two, the breeze is just a little too cold. Do you have a sweater in the car? Let's take a look. Yes, there it is. You're warm now, but you notice that your sweater has seen better days. Does it make you look carefree or disheveled? Perhaps it is time to go shopping for something new. And so it goes.

We seem to do little more than lurch between wanting and not wanting. Thus, the question naturally arises: Is there more to life than this? Might it be possible to feel much better (in every sense of better) than one tends to feel? Is it possible to find lasting fulfillment despite the inevitability of change?

Spiritual life begins with a suspicion that the answer to such questions could well be "yes." And a true spiritual practitioner is someone who has discovered that it is possible to be at ease in the world for no reason, if only for a few moments at a time, and that such ease is synonymous with transcending the apparent boundaries of the self. Those who have never tasted such peace of mind might view these assertions as highly suspect. Nevertheless, it is a fact that a condition of selfless well-being is there to be glimpsed in each moment. Of course, I'm not claiming to have experienced all such states, but I meet many people who appear to have experienced none of them—and these people often profess to have no interest in spiritual life.

This is not surprising. The phenomenon of self-transcendence is generally sought and interpreted in a religious context, and it is precisely the sort of experience that tends to increase a person's faith. How many

Christians, having once felt their hearts grow as wide as the world, will decide to ditch Christianity and proclaim their atheism? Not many, I suspect. How many people who have never felt anything of the kind become atheists? I don't know, but there is little doubt that these mental states act as a kind of filter: The faithful count them in support of ancient dogma, and their absence gives nonbelievers further reason to reject religion.

This is a difficult problem for me to address in the context of a book, because many readers will have no idea what I'm talking about when I describe certain spiritual experiences and might assume that the assertions I'm making must be accepted on faith. Religious readers present a different challenge: They may think they know exactly what I'm describing, but only insofar as it aligns with one or another religious doctrine. It seems to me that both these attitudes present impressive obstacles to understanding spirituality in the way that I intend. I can only hope that, whatever your background, you will approach the exercises presented in this book with an open mind.

RELIGION, EAST AND WEST

We are often encouraged to believe that all religions are the same: All teach the same ethical principles; all urge their followers to contemplate the same divine reality; all are equally wise, compassionate, and true within their sphere—or equally divisive and false, depending on one's view.

No serious adherents of any faith can believe these things, because most religions make claims about reality that are mutually incompatible. Exceptions to this rule exist, but they provide little relief from what is essentially a zero-sum contest of all against all. The polytheism of Hinduism allows it to digest parts of many other faiths: If Christians insist that Jesus Christ is the son of God, for instance, Hindus can make him yet another avatar of Vishnu without losing any sleep. But this spirit of inclusiveness points in one direction only, and even it has its limits. Hindus are committed to specific metaphysical ideas—the law of karma and rebirth, a multiplicity of gods—that almost every other major religion decries. It is impossible for any faith, no matter how elastic, to fully honor the truth claims of another.

Devout Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe that theirs is the one true and complete revelation—because that is what their holy books say of themselves. Only secularists and New Age dabblers can mistake the modern tactic of "interfaith dialogue" for an underlying unity of all religions.

I have long argued that confusion about the unity of religions is an artifact of language. Religion is a term like sports: Some sports are peaceful but spectacularly dangerous ("free solo" rock climbing); some are safer but synonymous with violence (mixed martial arts); and some entail little more risk of injury than standing in the shower (bowling). To speak of sports as a generic activity makes it impossible to discuss what athletes actually do or the physical attributes required to do it. What do all sports have in common apart from breathing? Not much. The term religion is hardly more useful.

The same could be said of spirituality. The esoteric doctrines found within every religious tradition are not all derived from the same insights. Nor are they equally empirical, logical, parsimonious, or wise. They don't always point to the same underlying reality—and when they do, they don't do it equally well. Nor are all these teachings equally suited for export beyond the cultures that first conceived them.

Making distinctions of this kind, however, is deeply unfashionable in intellectual circles. In my experience, people do not want to hear that Islam supports violence in a way that Jainism doesn't, or that Buddhism offers a truly sophisticated, empirical approach to understanding the human mind, whereas Christianity presents an almost perfect impediment to such understanding. In many circles, to make invidious

comparisons of this kind is to stand convicted of bigotry.

In one sense, all religions and spiritual practices must address the same reality—because people of all faiths have glimpsed many of the same truths. Any view of consciousness and the cosmos that is available to the human mind can, in principle, be appreciated by anyone. It is not surprising, therefore, that individual Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Buddhists have given voice to some of the same insights and intuitions. This merely indicates that human cognition and emotion run deeper than religion. (But we knew that, didn't we?) It does not suggest that all religions understand our spiritual possibilities equally well.

One way of missing this point is to declare that all spiritual teachings are inflections of the same "Perennial Philosophy." The writer Aldous Huxley brought this idea into prominence by publishing an anthology by that title. Here is how he justified the idea:

Philosophia perennis—the phrase was coined by Leibniz; but the thing—the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being—the thing is immemorial and universal. Rudiments of the Perennial Philosophy may be found among the traditionary lore of primitive peoples in every region of the world, and in its fully developed forms it has a place in every one of the higher religions. A version of this Highest Common Factor in all preceding and subsequent theologies was first committed to writing more than twenty-five centuries ago, and since that time the inexhaustible theme has been treated again and again, from the standpoint of every religious tradition and in all the principal languages of Asia and Europe.2

Although Huxley was being reasonably cautious in his wording, this notion of a "highest common factor" uniting all religions begins to break apart the moment one presses for details. For instance, the Abrahamic religions are incorrigibly dualistic and faith-based: In Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the human soul is conceived as genuinely separate from the divine reality of God. The appropriate attitude for a creature that finds itself in this circumstance is some combination of terror, shame, and awe. In the best case, notions of God's love and grace provide some relief—but the central message of these faiths is that each of us is separate from, and in relationship to, a divine authority who will punish anyone who harbors the slightest doubt about His supremacy.

The Eastern tradition presents a very different picture of reality. And its highest teachings—found within the various schools of Buddhism and the nominally Hindu tradition of Advaita Vedanta—explicitly transcend dualism. By their lights, consciousness itself is identical to the very reality that one might otherwise mistake for God. While these teachings make metaphysical claims that any serious student of science should find incredible, they center on a range of experiences that the doctrines of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam rule out-of-bounds.

Of course, it is true that specific Jewish, Christian, and Muslim mystics have had experiences similar to those that motivate Buddhism and Advaita, but these contemplative insights are not exemplary of their faith. Rather, they are anomalies that Western mystics have always struggled to understand and to honor, often at considerable personal risk. Given their proper weight, these experiences produce heterodoxies for which Jews, Christians, and Muslims have been regularly exiled or killed.

Like Huxley, anyone determined to find a happy synthesis among spiritual traditions will notice that the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260–ca. 1327) often sounded very much like a Buddhist: "The knower and the known are one. Simple people imagine that they should see God, as if He stood there and

they here. This is not so. God and I, we are one in knowledge." But he also sounded like a man bound to be excommunicated by his church—as he was. Had Eckhart lived a little longer, it seems certain that he would have been dragged into the street and burned alive for these expansive ideas. That is a telling difference between Christianity and Buddhism.

In the same vein, it is misleading to hold up the Sufi mystic Al-Hallaj (858–922) as a representative of Islam. He was a Muslim, yes, but he suffered the most grisly death imaginable at the hands of his coreligionists for presuming to be one with God. Both Eckhart and Al-Hallaj gave voice to an experience of self-transcendence that any human being can, in principle, enjoy. However, their views were not consistent with the central teachings of their faiths.

The Indian tradition is comparatively free of problems of this kind. Although the teachings of Buddhism and Advaita are embedded in more or less conventional religions, they contain empirical insights about the nature of consciousness that do not depend upon faith. One can practice most techniques of Buddhist meditation or the method of self-inquiry of Advaita and experience the advertised changes in one's consciousness without ever believing in the law of karma or in the miracles attributed to Indian mystics. To get started as a Christian, however, one must first accept a dozen implausible things about the life of Jesus and the origins of the Bible—and the same can be said, minus a few unimportant details, about Judaism and Islam. If one should happen to discover that the sense of being an individual soul is an illusion, one will be guilty of blasphemy everywhere west of the Indus.

There is no question that many religious disciplines can produce interesting experiences in suitable minds. It should be clear, however, that engaging a faith-based (and probably delusional) practice, whatever its effects, isn't the same as investigating the nature of one's mind absent any doctrinal assumptions. Statements of this kind may seem starkly antagonistic toward Abrahamic religions, but they are nonetheless true: One can speak about Buddhism shorn of its miracles and irrational assumptions. The same cannot be said of Christianity or Islam.3

Western engagement with Eastern spirituality dates back at least as far as Alexander's campaign in India, where the young conqueror and his pet philosophers encountered naked ascetics whom they called "gymnosophists." It is often said that the thinking of these yogis greatly influenced the philosopher Pyrrho, the father of Greek skepticism. This seems a credible claim, because Pyrrho's teachings had much in common with Buddhism. But his contemplative insights and methods never became part of any system of thought in the West.

Serious study of Eastern thought by outsiders did not begin until the late eighteenth century. The first translation of a Sanskrit text into a Western language appears to have been Sir Charles Wilkins's rendering of the Bhagavad Gita, a cornerstone text of Hinduism, in 1785. The Buddhist canon would not attract the attention of Western scholars for another hundred years.4

The conversation between East and West started in earnest, albeit inauspiciously, with the birth of the Theosophical Society, that golem of spiritual hunger and self-deception brought into this world almost single-handedly by the incomparable Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky in 1875. Everything about Blavatsky seemed to defy earthly logic: She was an enormously fat woman who was said to have wandered alone and undetected for seven years in the mountains of Tibet. She was also thought to have survived shipwrecks, gunshot wounds, and sword fights. Even less persuasively, she claimed to be in psychic contact with members of the "Great White Brotherhood" of ascended masters—a collection of immortals responsible for the evolution and maintenance of the entire cosmos. Their leader hailed from the planet Venus but lived in the mythical kingdom of Shambhala, which Blavatsky placed somewhere in the vicinity of the Gobi

Desert. With the suspiciously bureaucratic name “the Lord of the World,” he supervised the work of other adepts, including the Buddha, Maitreya, Maha Chohan, and one Koot Hoomi, who appears to have had nothing better to do on behalf of the cosmos than to impart its secrets to Blavatsky.5

It is always surprising when a person attracts legions of followers and builds a large organization on their largesse while peddling penny-arcade mythology of this kind. But perhaps this was less remarkable in a time when even the best-educated people were still struggling to come to terms with electricity, evolution, and the existence of other planets. We can easily forget how suddenly the world had shrunk and the cosmos expanded as the nineteenth century came to a close. The geographical barriers between distant cultures had been stripped away by trade and conquest (one could now order a gin and tonic almost everywhere on earth), and yet the reality of unseen forces and alien worlds was a daily focus of the most careful scientific research. Inevitably, cross-cultural and scientific discoveries were mingled in the popular imagination with religious dogma and traditional occultism. In fact, this had been happening at the highest level of human thought for more than a century: It is always instructive to recall that the father of modern physics, Isaac Newton, squandered a considerable portion of his genius on the study of theology, biblical prophecy, and alchemy.

The inability to distinguish the strange but true from the merely strange was common enough in Blavatsky’s time—as it is in our own. Blavatsky’s contemporary Joseph Smith, a libidinous con man and crackpot, was able to found a new religion on the claim that he had unearthed the final revelations of God in the hallowed precincts of Manchester, New York, written in “reformed Egyptian” on golden plates. He decoded this text with the aid of magical “seer stones,” which, whether by magic or not, allowed Smith to produce an English version of God’s Word that was an embarrassing pastiche of plagiarisms from the Bible and silly lies about Jesus’s life in America. And yet the resulting edifice of nonsense and taboo survives to this day.

A more modern cult, Scientology, leverages human credulity to an even greater degree: Adherents believe that human beings are possessed by the souls of extraterrestrials who were condemned to planet Earth 75 million years ago by the galactic overlord Xenu. How was their exile accomplished? The old-fashioned way: These aliens were shuttled by the billions to our humble planet aboard a spacecraft that resembled a DC-8. They were then imprisoned in a volcano and blasted to bits with hydrogen bombs. Their souls survived, however, and disentangling them from our own can be the work of a lifetime. It is also expensive.6

Despite the imponderables in her philosophy, Blavatsky was among the first people to announce in Western circles that there was such a thing as the “wisdom of the East.” This wisdom began to trickle westward once Swami Vivekananda introduced the teachings of Vedanta at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. Again, Buddhism lagged behind: A few Western monks living on the island of Sri Lanka were beginning to translate the Pali Canon, which remains the most authoritative record of the teachings of the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama. However, the practice of Buddhist meditation wouldn’t actually be taught in the West for another half century.

It is easy enough to find fault with romantic ideas about Eastern wisdom, and a tradition of such criticism sprang up almost the instant the first Western seeker sat cross-legged and attempted to meditate. In the late 1950s, the author and journalist Arthur Koestler traveled to India and Japan in search of wisdom and summarized his pilgrimage thus: “I started my journey in sackcloth and ashes, and came back rather proud of being a European.”7

In The Lotus and the Robot, Koestler gives some of his reasons for being less than awed by his journey to the East. Consider, for example, the ancient discipline of hatha yoga. While now generally viewed as a system of physical exercises designed to increase a person’s strength and flexibility, in its traditional context hatha yoga is part of a larger effort to manipulate “subtle” features of the body unknown to anatomists. No

doubt much of this subtlety corresponds to experiences that yogis actually have—but many of the beliefs formed on the basis of these experiences are patently absurd, and certain of the associated practices are both silly and injurious.

Koestler reports that the aspiring yogi is traditionally encouraged to lengthen his tongue—even going so far as to cut the frenulum (the membrane that anchors the tongue to the floor of the mouth) and stretch the soft palate. What is the purpose of these modifications? They enable our hero to insert his tongue into his nasopharynx, thereby blocking the flow of air through the nostrils. His anatomy thus improved, a yogi can then imbibe subtle liquors believed to emanate directly from his brain. These substances—imagined, by recourse to further subtleties, to be connected to the retention of semen—are said to confer not only spiritual wisdom but immortality. This technique of drinking mucus is known as khechari mudra, and it is thought to be one of the crowning achievements of yoga.

I'm more than happy to score a point for Koestler here. Needless to say, no defense of such practices will be found in this book.

Criticism of Eastern wisdom can seem especially pertinent when coming from Easterners themselves. There is indeed something preposterous about well-educated Westerners racing East in search of spiritual enlightenment while Easterners make the opposite pilgrimage seeking education and economic opportunities. I have a friend whose own adventures may have marked a high point in this global comedy. He made his first trip to India immediately after graduating from college, having already acquired several yogic affectations: He had the requisite beads and long hair, but he was also in the habit of writing the name of the Hindu god Ram in Devanagari script over and over in a journal. On the flight to the motherland, he had the good fortune to be seated next to an Indian businessman. This weary traveler thought he had witnessed every species of human folly—until he caught sight of my friend's scribbling. The spectacle of a Western-born Stanford graduate, of working age, holding degrees in both economics and history, devoting himself to the graphomaniacal worship of an imaginary deity in a language he could neither read nor understand was more than this man could abide in a confined space at 30,000 feet. After a testy exchange, the two travelers could only stare at each other in mutual incomprehension and pity—and they had ten hours yet to fly. There really are two sides to such a conversation, but I concede that only one of them can be made to look ridiculous.

We can also grant that Eastern wisdom has not produced societies or political institutions that are any better than their Western counterparts; in fact, one could argue that India has survived as the world's largest democracy only because of institutions that were built under British rule. Nor has the East led the world in scientific discovery. Nevertheless, there is something to the notion of uniquely Eastern wisdom, and most of it has been concentrated in or derived from the tradition of Buddhism.

Buddhism has been of special interest to Western scientists for reasons already hinted at. It isn't primarily a faith-based religion, and its central teachings are entirely empirical. Despite the superstitions that many Buddhists cherish, the doctrine has a practical and logical core that does not require any unwarranted assumptions. Many Westerners have recognized this and have been relieved to find a spiritual alternative to faith-based worship. It is no accident that most of the scientific research now done on meditation focuses primarily on Buddhist techniques.

Another reason for Buddhism's prominence among scientists has been the intellectual engagement of one of its most visible representatives: Tenzin Gyatso, the fourteenth Dalai Lama. Of course, the Dalai Lama is not without his critics. My late friend Christopher Hitchens meted out justice to "his holiness" on several occasions. He also castigated Western students of Buddhism for the "widely and lazily held belief that 'Oriental' religion is different from other faiths: less dogmatic, more contemplative, more . . .

Transcendental," and for the "blissful, thoughtless exceptionalism" with which Buddhism is regarded by many.8

Hitch did have a point. In his capacity as the head of one of the four branches of Tibetan Buddhism and as the former leader of the Tibetan government in exile, the Dalai Lama has made some questionable claims and formed some embarrassing alliances. Although his engagement with science is far-reaching and surely sincere, the man is not above consulting an astrologer or "oracle" when making important decisions. I will have something to say in this book about many of the things that might have justified Hitch's opprobrium, but the general thrust of his commentary here was all wrong. Several Eastern traditions are exceptionally empirical and exceptionally wise, and therefore merit the exceptionalism claimed by their adherents.

Buddhism in particular possesses a literature on the nature of the mind that has no peer in Western religion or Western science. Some of these teachings are cluttered with metaphysical assumptions that should provoke our doubts, but many aren't. And when engaged as a set of hypotheses by which to investigate the mind and deepen one's ethical life, Buddhism can be an entirely rational enterprise.

Unlike the doctrines of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the teachings of Buddhism are not considered by their adherents to be the product of infallible revelation. They are, rather, empirical instructions: If you do X, you will experience Y. Although many Buddhists have a superstitious and cultic attachment to the historical Buddha, the teachings of Buddhism present him as an ordinary human being who succeeded in understanding the nature of his own mind. Buddha means "awakened one"—and Siddhartha Gautama was merely a man who woke up from the dream of being a separate self. Compare this with the Christian view of Jesus, who is imagined to be the son of the creator of the universe. This is a very different proposition, and it renders Christianity, no matter how fully divested of metaphysical baggage, all but irrelevant to a scientific discussion about the human condition.

The teachings of Buddhism, and of Eastern spirituality generally, focus on the primacy of the mind. There are dangers in this way of viewing the world, to be sure. Focusing on training the mind to the exclusion of all else can lead to political quietism and hive-like conformity. The fact that your mind is all you have and that it is possible to be at peace even in difficult circumstances can become an argument for ignoring obvious societal problems. But it is not a compelling one. The world is in desperate need of improvement—in global terms, freedom and prosperity remain the exception—and yet this doesn't mean we need to be miserable while we work for the common good.

In fact, the teachings of Buddhism emphasize a connection between ethical and spiritual life. Making progress in one domain lays a foundation for progress in the other. One can, for instance, spend long periods of time in contemplative solitude for the purpose of becoming a better person in the world—having better relationships, being more honest and compassionate and, therefore, more helpful to one's fellow human beings. Being wisely selfish and being selfless can amount to very much the same thing. There are centuries of anecdotal testimony on this point—and, as we will see, the scientific study of the mind has begun to bear it out. There is now little question that how one uses one's attention, moment to moment, largely determines what kind of person one becomes. Our minds—and lives—are largely shaped by how we use them.

Although the experience of self-transcendence is, in principle, available to everyone, this possibility is only weakly attested to in the religious and philosophical literature of the West. Only Buddhists and students of Advaita Vedanta (which appears to have been heavily influenced by Buddhism) have been absolutely clear in asserting that spiritual life consists in overcoming the illusion of the self by paying close attention to our experience in the present moment.9

As I wrote in my first book, The End of Faith, the disparity between Eastern and Western spirituality resembles that found between Eastern and Western medicine—with the arrow of embarrassment pointing in the opposite direction. Humanity did not understand the biology of cancer, develop antibiotics and vaccines, or sequence the human genome under an Eastern sun. Consequently, real medicine is almost entirely a product of Western science. Insofar as specific techniques of Eastern medicine actually work, they must conform, whether by design or by happenstance, to the principles of biology as we have come to know them in the West. This is not to say that Western medicine is complete. In a few decades, many of our current practices will seem barbaric. One need only ponder the list of side effects that accompany most medications to appreciate that these are terribly blunt instruments. Nevertheless, most of our knowledge about the human body—and about the physical universe generally—emerged in the West. The rest is instinct, folklore, bewilderment, and untimely death.

An honest comparison of spiritual traditions, Eastern and Western, proves equally invidious. As manuals for contemplative understanding, the Bible and the Koran are worse than useless. Whatever wisdom can be found in their pages is never best found there, and it is subverted, time and again, by ancient savagery and superstition.

Again, one must deploy the necessary caveats: I am not saying that most Buddhists or Hindus have been sophisticated contemplatives. Their traditions have spawned many of the same pathologies we see elsewhere among the faithful: dogmatism, anti-intellectualism, tribalism, otherworldliness. However, the empirical difference between the central teachings of Buddhism and Advaita and those of Western monotheism is difficult to overstate. One can traverse the Eastern paths simply by becoming interested in the nature of one's own mind—especially in the immediate causes of psychological suffering—and by paying closer attention to one's experience in every present moment. There is, in truth, nothing one need believe. The teachings of Buddhism and Advaita are best viewed as lab manuals and explorers' logs detailing the results of empirical research on the nature of human consciousness.

Nearly every geographical or linguistic barrier to the free exchange of ideas has now fallen away. It seems to me, therefore, that educated people no longer have a right to any form of spiritual provincialism. The truths of Eastern spirituality are now no more Eastern than the truths of Western science are Western. We are merely talking about human consciousness and its possible states. My purpose in writing this book is to encourage you to investigate certain contemplative insights for yourself, without accepting the metaphysical ideas that they inspired in ignorant and isolated peoples of the past.

A final word of caution: Nothing I say here is intended as a denial of the fact that psychological well-being requires a healthy "sense of self"—with all the capacities that this vague phrase implies. Children need to become autonomous, confident, and self-aware in order to form healthy relationships. And they must acquire a host of other cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal skills in the process of becoming sane and productive adults. Which is to say that there is a time and a place for everything—unless, of course, there isn't. No doubt there are psychological conditions, such as schizophrenia, for which practices of the sort I recommend in this book might be inappropriate. Some people find the experience of an extended, silent retreat psychologically destabilizing.10 Again, an analogy to physical training seems apropos: Not everyone is suited to running a six-minute mile or bench-pressing his own body weight. But many quite ordinary people are capable of these feats, and there are better and worse ways to accomplish them. What is more, the same principles of fitness generally apply even to people whose abilities are limited by illness or injury.

So I want to make it clear that the instructions in this book are intended for readers who are adults (more or less) and free from any psychological or medical conditions that could be exacerbated by meditation or other techniques of sustained introspection. If paying attention to your breath, to bodily sensations, to the flow of

thoughts, or to the nature of consciousness itself seems likely to cause you clinically significant anguish, please check with a psychologist or a psychiatrist before engaging in the practices I describe.

MINDFULNESS

It is always now. This might sound trite, but it is the truth. It's not quite true as a matter of neurology, because our minds are built upon layers of inputs whose timing we know must be different.11 But it is true as a matter of conscious experience. The reality of your life is always now. And to realize this, we will see, is liberating. In fact, I think there is nothing more important to understand if you want to be happy in this world.

But we spend most of our lives forgetting this truth—overlooking it, fleeing it, repudiating it. And the horror is that we succeed. We manage to avoid being happy while struggling to become happy, fulfilling one desire after the next, banishing our fears, grasping at pleasure, recoiling from pain—and thinking, interminably, about how best to keep the whole works up and running. As a consequence, we spend our lives being far less content than we might otherwise be. We often fail to appreciate what we have until we have lost it. We crave experiences, objects, relationships, only to grow bored with them. And yet the craving persists. I speak from experience, of course.

As a remedy for this predicament, many spiritual teachings ask us to entertain unfounded ideas about the nature of reality—or at the very least to develop a fondness for the iconography and rituals of one or another religion. But not all paths traverse the same rough ground. There are methods of meditation that do not require any artifice or unwarranted assumptions at all.

For beginners, I usually recommend a technique called vipassana (Pali for "insight"), which comes from the oldest tradition of Buddhism, the Theravada. One of the advantages of vipassana is that it can be taught in an entirely secular way. Experts in this practice generally acquire their training in a Buddhist context, and most retreat centers in the United States and Europe teach its associated Buddhist philosophy. Nevertheless, this method of introspection can be brought into any secular or scientific context without embarrassment. (The same cannot be said for the practice of chanting to Lord Krishna while banging a drum.) That is why vipassana is now being widely studied and adopted by psychologists and neuroscientists.

The quality of mind cultivated in vipassana is almost always referred to as "mindfulness," and the literature on its psychological benefits is now substantial. There is nothing spooky about mindfulness. It is simply a state of clear, nonjudgmental, and undistracted attention to the contents of consciousness, whether pleasant or unpleasant. Cultivating this quality of mind has been shown to reduce pain, anxiety, and depression; improve cognitive function; and even produce changes in gray matter density in regions of the brain related to learning and memory, emotional regulation, and self-awareness.12 We will look more closely at the neurophysiology of mindfulness in a later chapter.

Mindfulness is a translation of the Pali word sati. The term has several meanings in the Buddhist literature, but for our purposes the most important is "clear awareness." The practice was first described in the Satipatthana Sutta,13 which is part of the Pali Canon. Like many Buddhist texts, the Satipatthana Sutta is highly repetitive and, for anything but an avid student of Buddhism, exceptionally boring to read. However, when one compares texts of this kind with the Bible or the Koran, the difference is unmistakable: The Satipatthana Sutta is not a collection of ancient myths, superstitions, and taboos; it is a rigorously empirical guide to freeing the mind from suffering.

The Buddha described four foundations of mindfulness, which he taught as "the direct path for the

purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of Nibbana" (Sanskrit, Nirvana). The four foundations of mindfulness are the body (breathing, changes in posture, activities), feelings (the senses of pleasantness, unpleasantness, and neutrality), the mind (in particular, its moods and attitudes), and the objects of mind (which include the five senses but also other mental states, such as volition, tranquility, rapture, equanimity, and even mindfulness itself). It is a peculiar list, at once redundant and incomplete—a problem that is compounded by the necessity of translating Pali terminology into English. The obvious message of the text, however, is that the totality of one's experience can become the field of contemplation. The meditator is merely instructed to pay attention, "ardently" and "fully aware" and "free from covetousness and grief for the world."

There is nothing passive about mindfulness. One might even say that it expresses a specific kind of passion—a passion for discerning what is subjectively real in every moment. It is a mode of cognition that is, above all, undistracted, accepting, and (ultimately) nonconceptual. Being mindful is not a matter of thinking more clearly about experience; it is the act of experiencing more clearly, including the arising of thoughts themselves. Mindfulness is a vivid awareness of whatever is appearing in one's mind or body—thoughts, sensations, moods—without grasping at the pleasant or recoiling from the unpleasant. One of the great strengths of this technique of meditation, from a secular point of view, is that it does not require us to adopt any cultural affectations or unjustified beliefs. It simply demands that we pay close attention to the flow of experience in each moment.

The principal enemy of mindfulness—or of any meditative practice—is our deeply conditioned habit of being distracted by thoughts. The problem is not thoughts themselves but the state of thinking without knowing that we are thinking. In fact, thoughts of all kinds can be perfectly good objects of mindfulness. In the early stages of one's practice, however, the arising of thought will be more or less synonymous with distraction—that is, with a failure to meditate. Most people who believe they are meditating are merely thinking with their eyes closed. By practicing mindfulness, however, one can awaken from the dream of discursive thought and begin to see each arising image, idea, or bit of language vanish without a trace. What remains is consciousness itself, with its attendant sights, sounds, sensations, and thoughts appearing and changing in every moment.

In the beginning of one's meditation practice, the difference between ordinary experience and what one comes to consider "mindfulness" is not very clear, and it takes some training to distinguish between being lost in thought and seeing thoughts for what they are. In this sense, learning to meditate is just like acquiring any other skill. It takes many thousands of repetitions to throw a good jab or to coax music from the strings of a guitar. With practice, mindfulness becomes a well-formed habit of attention, and the difference between it and ordinary thinking will become increasingly clear. Eventually, it begins to seem as if you are repeatedly awakening from a dream to find yourself safely in bed. No matter how terrible the dream, the relief is instantaneous. And yet it is difficult to stay awake for more than a few seconds at a time.

My friend Joseph Goldstein, one of the finest vipassana teachers I know, likens this shift in awareness to the experience of being fully immersed in a film and then suddenly realizing that you are sitting in a theater watching a mere play of light on a wall. Your perception is unchanged, but the spell is broken. Most of us spend every waking moment lost in the movie of our lives. Until we see that an alternative to this enchantment exists, we are entirely at the mercy of appearances. Again, the difference I am describing is not a matter of achieving a new conceptual understanding or of adopting new beliefs about the nature of reality. The change comes when we experience the present moment prior to the arising of thought.

The Buddha taught mindfulness as the appropriate response to the truth of dukkha, usually translated from

the Pali, somewhat misleadingly, as “suffering.” A better translation would be “unsatisfactoriness.” Suffering may not be inherent in life, but unsatisfactoriness is. We crave lasting happiness in the midst of change: Our bodies age, cherished objects break, pleasures fade, relationships fail. Our attachment to the good things in life and our aversion to the bad amount to a denial of these realities, and this inevitably leads to feelings of dissatisfaction. Mindfulness is a technique for achieving equanimity amid the flux, allowing us to simply be aware of the quality of experience in each moment, whether pleasant or unpleasant. This may seem like a recipe for apathy, but it needn’t be. It is actually possible to be mindful—and, therefore, to be at peace with the present moment—even while working to change the world for the better.

Mindfulness meditation is extraordinarily simple to describe, but it isn’t easy to perform. True mastery might require special talent and a lifetime of devotion to the task, and yet a genuine transformation in one’s perception of the world is within reach for most of us. Practice is the only thing that will lead to success. The simple instructions given in the box that follows are analogous to instructions on how to walk a tightrope—which, I assume, must go something like this:

1. Find a horizontal cable that can support your weight.

2. Stand on one end.

3. Step forward by placing one foot directly in front of the other.

4. Repeat.

5. Don’t fall.

Clearly, steps 2 through 5 entail a little trial and error. Happily, the benefits of training in meditation arrive long before mastery does. And falling, for our purposes, occurs almost ceaselessly, every time we become lost in thought. Again, the problem is not thoughts themselves but the state of thinking without being fully aware that we are thinking.

As every meditator soon discovers, distraction is the normal condition of our minds: Most of us topple from the wire every second—whether gliding happily into reverie or plunging into fear, anger, self-hatred, and other negative states of mind. Meditation is a technique for waking up. The goal is to come out of the trance of discursive thinking and to stop reflexively grasping at the pleasant and recoiling from the unpleasant, so that we can enjoy a mind undisturbed by worry, merely open like the sky, and effortlessly aware of the flow of experience in the present.

How to Meditate

1. Sit comfortably, with your spine erect, either in a chair or cross-legged on a cushion.

2. Close your eyes, take a few deep breaths, and feel the points of contact between your body and the chair or the floor. Notice the sensations associated with sitting—feelings of pressure, warmth, tingling, vibration, etc.

3. Gradually become aware of the process of breathing. Pay attention to wherever you feel the breath most distinctly—either at your nostrils or in the rising and falling of your abdomen.

4. Allow your attention to rest in the mere sensation of breathing. (You don’t have to control your breath. Just let it come and go naturally.)

5. Every time your mind wanders in thought, gently return it to the breath.

6. As you focus on the process of breathing, you will also perceive sounds, bodily sensations, or emotions. Simply observe these phenomena as they appear in consciousness and then return to the breath.

7. The moment you notice that you have been lost in thought, observe the present thought itself as an object of consciousness. Then return your attention to the breath—or to any sounds or sensations arising in the next moment.

8. Continue in this way until you can merely witness all objects of consciousness—sights, sounds, sensations, emotions, even thoughts themselves—as they arise, change, and pass away.

Those who are new to this practice generally find it useful to hear instructions of this kind spoken aloud during the course of a meditation session. I have posted guided meditations of varying length on my website.

THE TRUTH OF SUFFERING

I am sitting in a coffee shop in midtown Manhattan, drinking exactly what I want (coffee), eating exactly what I want (a cookie), and doing exactly what I want (writing this book). It is a beautiful fall day, and many of the people passing by on the sidewalk appear to radiate good fortune from their pores. Several are so physically attractive that I'm beginning to wonder whether Photoshop can now be applied to the human body. Up and down this street, and for a mile in each direction, stores sell jewelry, art, and clothing that not even 1 percent of humanity could hope to purchase.

So what did the Buddha mean when he spoke of the "unsatisfactoriness" (dukkha) of life? Was he referring merely to the poor and the hungry? Or are these rich and beautiful people suffering even now? Of course, suffering is all around us—even here, where everything appears to be going well for the moment.

First, the obvious: Within a few blocks of where I am sitting are hospitals, convalescent homes, psychiatrists' offices, and other rooms built to assuage, or merely to contain, some of the most profound forms of human misery. A man runs over his own child while backing his car out of the driveway. A woman learns that she has terminal cancer on the eve of her wedding. We know that the worst can happen to anyone at any time—and most people spend a great deal of mental energy hoping that it won't happen to them.

But more subtle forms of suffering can be found, even among people who seem to have every reason to be satisfied in the present. Although wealth and fame can secure many forms of pleasure, few of us have any illusions that they guarantee happiness. Anyone who owns a television or reads the newspaper has seen movie stars, politicians, professional athletes, and other celebrities ricochet from marriage to marriage and from scandal to scandal. To learn that a young, attractive, talented, and successful person is nevertheless addicted to drugs or clinically depressed is to be given almost no cause for surprise.

Yet the unsatisfactoriness of the good life runs deeper than this. Even while living safely between emergencies, most of us feel a wide range of painful emotions on a daily basis. When you wake up in the morning, are you filled with joy? How do you feel at work or when looking in the mirror? How satisfied are you with what you've accomplished in life? How much of your time with your family is spent surrendered to love and gratitude, and how much is spent just struggling to be happy in one another's company? Even for extraordinarily lucky people, life is difficult. And when we look at what makes it so, we see that we are all prisoners of our thoughts.

And then there is death, which defeats everyone. Most people seem to believe that we have only two ways to think about death: We can fear it and do our best to ignore it, or we can deny that it is real. The first strategy leads to a life of conventional worldliness and distraction—we merely strive for pleasure and success and do our best to keep the reality of death out of view. The second strategy is the province of religion, which assures us that death is but a doorway to another world and that the most important opportunities in life occur after the lifetime of the body. But there is another path, and it seems the only one compatible with intellectual honesty. That path is the subject of this book.

ENLIGHTENMENT

What is enlightenment, which is so often said to be the ultimate goal of meditation? There are many esoteric details that we can safely ignore—disagreements among contemplative traditions about what, exactly, is gained or lost at the end of the spiritual path. Many of these claims are preposterous. Within most schools of Buddhism, for instance, a buddha—whether the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, or any other person who attains the state of "full enlightenment"—is generally described as "omniscient." Just what this means is open to a fair bit of caviling. But however narrowly defined, the claim is absurd. If the historical Buddha were "omniscient," he would have been, at minimum, a better mathematician, physicist, biologist, and Jeopardy contestant than any person who has ever lived. Is it reasonable to expect that an ascetic in the fifth century BC, by virtue of his meditative insights, spontaneously became an unprecedented genius in every field of human inquiry, including those that did not exist at the time in which he lived? Would Siddhartha Gautama have awed Kurt Gödel, Alan Turing, John von Neumann, and Claude Shannon with his command of mathematical logic and information theory? Of course not. To think otherwise is pure, religious piety.

Any extension of the notion of "omniscience" to procedural knowledge—that is, to knowing how to do something—would render the Buddha capable of painting the Sistine Chapel in the morning and demolishing Roger Federer at Centre Court in the afternoon. Is there any reason to believe that Siddhartha Gautama, or any other celebrated contemplative, possessed such abilities by virtue of his spiritual practice? None whatsoever. Nevertheless, many Buddhists believe that buddhas can do all these things and more. Again, this is religious dogmatism, not a rational approach to spiritual life.14

I make no claims in support of magic or miracles in this book. However, I can say that the true goal of meditation is more profound than most people realize—and it does, in fact, encompass many of the experiences that traditional mystics claim for themselves. It is quite possible to lose one's sense of being a separate self and to experience a kind of boundless, open awareness—to feel, in other words, at one with the cosmos. This says a lot about the possibilities of human consciousness, but it says nothing about the universe at large. And it sheds no light at all on the relationship between mind and matter. The fact that it is possible to love one's neighbor as oneself should be a great finding for the field of psychology, but it lends absolutely no credence to the claim that Jesus was the son of God, or even that God exists. Nor does it suggest that the "energy" of love somehow pervades the cosmos. These are historical and metaphysical claims that personal experience cannot justify.

However, a phenomenon like self-transcending love does entitle us to make claims about the human mind. And this particular experience is so well attested and so readily achieved by those who devote themselves to specific practices (the Buddhist technique of metta meditation, for instance) or who even take the right drug (MDMA) that there is very little controversy that it exists. Facts of this kind must now be understood in a rational context.

The traditional goal of meditation is to arrive at a state of well-being that is imperturbable—or if perturbed, easily regained. The French monk Matthieu Ricard describes such happiness as "a deep sense of flourishing

that arises from an exceptionally healthy mind."15 The purpose of meditation is to recognize that you already have such a mind. That discovery, in turn, helps you to cease doing the things that produce needless confusion and suffering for yourself and others. Of course, most people never truly master the practice and don't reach a condition of imperturbable happiness. The near goal, therefore, is to have an increasingly healthy mind—that is, to be moving one's mind in the right direction.

There is nothing novel about trying to become happy. And one can become happy, within certain limits, without any recourse to the practice of meditation. But conventional sources of happiness are unreliable, being dependent upon changing conditions. It is difficult to raise a happy family, to keep yourself and those you love healthy, to acquire wealth and find creative and fulfilling ways to enjoy it, to form deep friendships, to contribute to society in ways that are emotionally rewarding, to perfect a wide variety of artistic, athletic, and intellectual skills—and to keep the machinery of happiness running day after day. There is nothing wrong with being fulfilled in all these ways—except for the fact that, if you pay close attention, you will see that there is still something wrong with it. These forms of happiness aren't good enough. Our feelings of fulfillment do not last. And the stress of life continues.

So what would a spiritual master be a master of? At a minimum, she will no longer suffer certain cognitive and emotional illusions—above all, she will no longer feel identical to her thoughts. Once again, this is not to say that such a person will no longer think, but she would no longer succumb to the primary confusion that thoughts produce in most of us: She would no longer feel that there is an inner self who is a thinker of these thoughts. Such a person will naturally maintain an openness and serenity of mind that is available to most of us only for brief moments, even after years of practice. I remain agnostic as to whether anyone has achieved such a state permanently, but I know from direct experience that it is possible to be far more enlightened than I tend to be.

The question of whether enlightenment is a permanent state need not detain us. The crucial point is that you can glimpse something about the nature of consciousness that will liberate you from suffering in the present. Even just recognizing the impermanence of your mental states—deeply, not merely as an idea—can transform your life. Every mental state you have ever had has arisen and then passed away. This is a first-person fact—but it is, nonetheless, a fact that any human being can readily confirm. We don't have to know any more about the brain or about the relationship between consciousness and the physical world to understand this truth about our own minds. The promise of spiritual life—indeed, the very thing that makes it "spiritual" in the sense I invoke throughout this book—is that there are truths about the mind that we are better off knowing. What we need to become happier and to make the world a better place is not more pious illusions but a clearer understanding of the way things are.

The moment we admit the possibility of attaining contemplative insights—and of training one's mind for that purpose—we must acknowledge that people naturally fall at different points on a continuum between ignorance and wisdom. Part of this range will be considered "normal," but normal isn't necessarily a happy place to be. Just as a person's physical body and abilities can be refined—Olympic athletes are not normal—one's mental life can deepen and expand on the basis of talent and training. This is nearly self-evident, but it remains a controversial point. No one hesitates to admit the role of talent and training in the context of physical and intellectual pursuits; I have never met another person who denied that some of us are stronger, more athletic, or more learned than others. But many people find it difficult to acknowledge that a continuum of moral and spiritual wisdom exists or that there might be better and worse ways to traverse it.

Stages of spiritual development, therefore, appear unavoidable. Just as we must grow into adulthood physically—and we can fail to mature or become sick or injured along the way—our minds develop by degrees. One can't learn sophisticated skills such as syllogistic reasoning, algebra, or irony until one has

acquired more basic skills. It seems to me that a healthy spiritual life can begin only once our physical, mental, social, and ethical lives have sufficiently matured. We must learn to use language before we can work with it creatively or understand its limits, and the conventional self must form before we can investigate it and understand that it is not what it appears to be. An ability to examine the contents of one's own consciousness clearly, dispassionately, and nondiscursively, with sufficient attention to realize that no inner self exists, is a very sophisticated skill. And yet basic mindfulness can be practiced very early in life. Many people, including my wife, have successfully taught it to children as young as six. At that age—and every age thereafter—it can be a powerful tool for self-regulation and self-awareness.

Contemplatives have long understood that positive habits of mind are best viewed as skills that most of us learn imperfectly as we grow to adulthood. It is possible to become more focused, patient, and compassionate than one naturally tends to be, and there are many things to learn about how to be happy in this world. These are truths that Western psychological science has only recently begun to explore.

Some people are content in the midst of deprivation and danger, while others are miserable despite having all the luck in the world. This is not to say that external circumstances do not matter. But it is your mind, rather than circumstances themselves, that determines the quality of your life. Your mind is the basis of everything you experience and of every contribution you make to the lives of others. Given this fact, it makes sense to train it.

Scientists and skeptics generally assume that the traditional claims of yogis and mystics must be exaggerated or simply delusional and that the only rational purpose of meditation is limited to conventional "stress reduction." Conversely, serious students of these practices often insist that even the most outlandish claims made by and about spiritual masters are true. I am attempting to lead the reader along a middle path between these extremes—one that preserves our scientific skepticism but acknowledges that it is possible to radically transform our minds.

In one sense, the Buddhist concept of enlightenment really is just the epitome of "stress reduction"—and depending on how much stress one reduces, the results of one's practice can seem more or less profound. According to the Buddhist teachings, human beings have a distorted view of reality that leads them to suffer unnecessarily. We grasp at transitory pleasures. We brood about the past and worry about the future. We continually seek to prop up and defend an egoic self that doesn't exist. This is stressful—and spiritual life is a process of gradually unraveling our confusion and bringing this stress to an end. According to the Buddhist view, by seeing things as they are, we cease to suffer in the usual ways, and our minds can open to states of well-being that are intrinsic to the nature of consciousness.

Of course, some people claim to love stress and appear eager to live by its logic. Some even derive pleasure from imposing stress on others. Genghis Khan is reported to have said, "The greatest happiness is to scatter your enemy and drive him before you, to see his cities reduced to ashes, to see those who love him shrouded in tears, and to gather to your bosom his wives and daughters." People attach many meanings to terms like happiness, and not all of them are compatible with one another.

In The Moral Landscape, I argued that we tend to be unnecessarily confused by differences of opinion on the topic of human well-being. No doubt certain people can derive mental pleasure—and even experience genuine ecstasy—by behaving in ways that produce immense suffering for others. But we know that these states are anomalous—or, at least, not sustainable—because we depend upon one another for more or less everything. Whatever the associated pleasures, raping and pillaging can't be a stable strategy for finding happiness in this world. Given our social requirements, we know that the deepest and most durable forms of well-being must be compatible with an ethical concern for other people—even for complete

strangers—otherwise, violent conflict becomes inevitable. We also know that there are certain forms of happiness that are not available to a person even if, like Genghis Khan, he finds himself on the winning side of every siege. Some pleasures are intrinsically ethical—feelings like love, gratitude, devotion, and compassion. To inhabit these states of mind is, by definition, to be brought into alignment with others.

In my view, the realistic goal to be attained through spiritual practice is not some permanent state of enlightenment that admits of no further efforts but a capacity to be free in this moment, in the midst of whatever is happening. If you can do that, you have already solved most of the problems you will encounter in life.

WAKING UP: SEARCHING FOR SPIRITUALITY WITHOUT RELIGION BY SAM HARRIS PDF

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WAKING UP: SEARCHING FOR SPIRITUALITY WITHOUT RELIGION BY SAM HARRIS PDF

For the millions of Americans who want spirituality without religion, Sam Harris's new book is a guide to meditation as a rational spiritual practice informed by neuroscience and psychology.

From multiple New York Times bestselling author, neuroscientist, and "new atheist" Sam Harris, Waking Up is for the 30 percent of Americans who follow no religion, but who suspect that Jesus, Buddha, Lao Tzu, Rumi, and the other saints and sages of history could not have all been epileptics, schizophrenics, or frauds. Throughout the book, Harris argues that there are important truths to be found in the experiences of such contemplatives—and, therefore, that there is more to understanding reality than science and secular culture generally allow.

Waking Up is part seeker's memoir and part exploration of the scientific underpinnings of spirituality. No other book marries contemplative wisdom and modern science in this way, and no author other than Sam Harris—a scientist, philosopher, and famous skeptic—could write it.

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Review
"Harris's book . . . caught my eye because it's so entirely of this moment, so keenly in touch with the growing number of Americans who are willing to say that they do not find the succor they crave, or a truth that makes sense to them, in organized religion." (Frank Bruni, columnist, New York Times)

"The fact is that Waking Up lends a different picture of Harris (at least to me): an intelligent and sensitive person who is willing to undergo the discomfort involved in proposing alternatives to the religions he's spent years degrading. His new book, whether discussing the poverty of spiritual language, the neurophysiology of consciousness, psychedelic experience, or the quandaries of the self, at the very least acknowledges the potency and importance of the religious impulse—though Harris might name it differently—that fundamental and common instinct to seek not just an answer to life, but a way to live that answer." (Trevor Quirk, The New Republic)

"[A]n extraordinary and ambitious masterwork. . . . altogether spectacular." (Maria Popova, Brainpickings)

"Uber-atheist Sam Harris is getting all spiritual. In his new book, Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion, the usually outspoken critic of religion describes how spirituality can and must be divorced from religion if the human mind is to reach its full potential. . . . But there is plenty in Waking Up that will delight Harris' most militant atheist readers." (Religion News Service)

“The great value and novelty of this book is that Harris, in a simple but rigorous style, takes the middle way between these pseudoscientific and pseudo-spiritual assertions . . . [leading] to a profoundly more salubrious life.” (Publishers Weekly)

"A demanding, illusion-shattering book.” (Kirkus Reviews)

“Don’t read Waking Up . . . if you want to be told that heaven is real. Do read it if you want to explore the nature of consciousness, to learn how just trying to be mindful can free you from anxiety and self-blame.” (MORE Magazine)

“Waking Up is an eye opening, mind expanding book.” (AA Agnostica)

“A seeker’s memoir, a scientific and philosophical exploration of the self, and a how-to guide for transcendence, Waking Up explores the nature of consciousness, explains how to meditate, tells you the best drugs to take, and warns you about lecherous gurus. It will shake up your most fundamental beliefs about everyday experience, and it just might change your life.” (Paul Bloom, Professor of Psychology and Cognitive Science, Yale University and author of "Just Babies: The Origins of Good and Evil")

“Waking Up is a rigorous, kind, clear, and witty book that will point you toward the selflessness that is our original nature.” (Stephen Mitchell)

“Sam Harris points out the rational methodology for exploring the nature of consciousness and for experiencing a transformative understanding of possibilities. Waking Up really does help us wake up.” (Joseph Goldstein, author of "Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening" and "One Dharma")

“As a neuroscientist, Sam Harris shows how our egos are illusions, diffuse products of brain activity, and as a long-term practitioner of meditation, he shows how abandoning this illusion can wake us up to a richer life, more connected to everything around us.” (Jerry Coyne, Professor of Biology at the University of Chicago and author of "Why Evolution is True")

"Sam Harris ranks as my favorite skeptic, bar none. In Waking Up he gives us a clear-headed, no-holds-barred look at the spiritual supermarket, calling out what amounts to junk food and showing us where real nutrition can be found. Anyone who realizes the value of a spiritual life will find much to savor here – and those who see no value in it will find much to reflect on." (Daniel Goleman, author Emotional Intelligence and Focus)

"Sam Harris has written a beautifully rational book about spiritually, consciousness and transcendence. He is the high priest of spirituality without religion. I recommend this book regardless of your belief system. As befits a book called Waking Up, it’s an eye opener." (A.J. Jacobs, bestselling author of The Year of Living Biblically)

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“A brief and forceful broadside at the conundrum that has nagged at every major thinker from Plato to Slavoj Zizek. Self-avowedly secular, [Harris is] addressing the need for individual growth and social betterment, and [is] doing so with compelling argument and style.” —Los Angeles Times

“Harris skewers the concept of free will — that mainstay of law, policy and politics — in fewer than 100 pages.” —Nature

"Brilliant and witty—and never less than incisive—Free Will shows that Sam Harris can say more in 13,000 words than most people do in 100,000." —Oliver Sacks

Praise for The Moral Landscape:

“The most compelling strand in The Moral Landscape is its unspooling diatribe against relativism.” —New York Times

“This is an inspiring book, holding out as it does the possibility of a rational understanding of how to construct the good life with the aid of science, free from the accretions of religious superstition and cultural coercion.” —Financial Times

“Harris’s is a first-principle argument, backed by copious empirical evidence woven through a tightly reasoned narrative… Harris’s program of a science-based morality is a courageous one that I wholeheartedly endorse.” —Scientific American

“Sam Harris breathes intellectual fire into an ancient debate. Reading this thrilling, audacious book, you feel the ground shifting beneath your feet. Reason has never had a more passionate advocate.”—Ian McEwan

“I was one of those who had unthinkingly bought into the hectoring myth that science can say nothing about morals. To my surprise, The Moral Landscape has changed all that for me. It should change it for philosophers too. Philosophers of mind have already discovered that they can't duck the study of neuroscience, and the best of them have raised their game as a result. Sam Harris shows that the same should be true of moral philosophers, and it will turn their world exhilaratingly upside down. As for religion, and the preposterous idea that we need God to be good, nobody wields a sharper bayonet than Sam Harris.”—Richard Dawkins

“Reading Sam Harris is like drinking water from a cool stream on a hot day. He has the rare ability to frame arguments that are not only stimulating, they are downright nourishing… His discussions will provoke secular liberals and religious conservatives alike, who jointly argue from different perspectives that there always will be an unbridgeable chasm between merely knowing what is and discerning what should be. As was the case with Harris’ previous books, readers are bound to come away with previously firm convictions about the world challenged, and a vital new awareness about the nature and value of science and reason in our lives.” —Lawrence M. Krauss, Foundation Professor and Director of the ASU Origins Project at Arizona State University, author of The Physics of Star Trek, and, Quantum Man: Richard Feynman’s Life in Science

“A lively, provocative, and timely new look at one of the deepest problems in the world of ideas. Harris makes a powerful case for a morality that is based on human flourishing and thoroughly enmeshed with science and rationality. It is a tremendously appealing vision, and one that no thinking person can afford to ignore.” —Steven Pinker, Harvard College Professor of Psychology, Harvard University, and author of How the Mind Works and The Blank Slate

“Expanding upon concepts posited in the End of Faith and Free Will, neuroscientist Harris draws from personal contemplative practice and a growing body of scientific research to argue that the self, the feeling that there is an “I” residing in one’s head, is both an illusion and the primary cause of human suffering…. The great value and novelty of this book is that Harris, in a simple but rigorous style, takes the middle way between… pseudoscientific and pseudospiritual assertions, cogently maintaining that while such contemplative insights provide no evidence for metaphysical claims, they are available, and seeing them for ourselves leads to a profoundly more salubrious life.” (Publishers Weekly)

About the Author
Sam Harris is the author of the bestselling books The End of Faith, Letter to a Christian Nation, The Moral Landscape, Free Will, and Lying. The End of Faith won the 2005 PEN Award for Nonfiction. His writing has been published in over fifteen languages. Dr. Harris is cofounder and CEO of Project Reason, a nonprofit foundation devoted to spreading scientific knowledge and secular values in society. He received a degree in philosophy from Stanford University and a PhD in neuroscience from UCLA. Please visit his website at SamHarris.org.

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Waking Up 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 specious 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.

THE SEARCH FOR HAPPINESS

One day, you will find yourself outside this world which is like a mother's womb. You will leave this earth to enter, while you are yet in the body, a vast expanse, and know that the words, "God's earth is vast," name this region from which the saints have come.

Jalal-ud-Din Rumi

I share the concern, expressed by many atheists, that the terms spiritual and mystical are often used to make claims not merely about the quality of certain experiences but about reality at large. Far too often, these words are invoked in support of religious beliefs that are morally and intellectually grotesque. Consequently, many of my fellow atheists consider all talk of spirituality to be a sign of mental illness, conscious imposture, or self-deception. This is a problem, because millions of people have had experiences for which spiritual and mystical seem the only terms available. Many of the beliefs people form on the basis of these experiences are false. But the fact that most atheists will view a statement like Rumi's above as a symptom of the man's derangement grants a kernel of truth to the rantings of even our least rational opponents. The human mind does, in fact, contain vast expanses that few of us ever discover.

And there is something degraded and degrading about many of our habits of attention as we shop, gossip, argue, and ruminate our way to the grave. Perhaps I should speak only for myself here: It seems to me that I spend much of my waking life in a neurotic trance. My experiences in meditation suggest, however, that an alternative exists. It is possible to stand free of the juggernaut of self, if only for moments at a time.

Most cultures have produced men and women who have found that certain deliberate uses of attention—meditation, yoga, prayer—can transform their perception of the world. Their efforts generally begin with the realization that even in the best of circumstances, happiness is elusive. We seek pleasant sights, sounds, tastes, sensations, and moods. We satisfy our intellectual curiosity. We surround ourselves with friends and loved ones. We become connoisseurs of art, music, or food. But our pleasures are, by their very nature, fleeting. If we enjoy some great professional success, our feelings of accomplishment remain vivid and intoxicating for an hour, or perhaps a day, but then they subside. And the search goes on. The effort required to keep boredom and other unpleasantness at bay must continue, moment to moment.

Ceaseless change is an unreliable basis for lasting fulfillment. Realizing this, many people begin to wonder whether a deeper source of well-being exists. Is there a form of happiness beyond the mere repetition of pleasure and avoidance of pain? Is there a happiness that does not depend upon having one's favorite foods available, or friends and loved ones within arm's reach, or good books to read, or something to look forward to on the weekend? Is it possible to be happy before anything happens, before one's desires are gratified, in spite of life's difficulties, in the very midst of physical pain, old age, disease, and death?

We are all, in some sense, living our answer to this question—and most of us are living as though the answer were "no." No, nothing is more profound than repeating one's pleasures and avoiding one's pains; nothing is more profound than seeking satisfaction—sensory, emotional, and intellectual—moment after moment. Just keep your foot on the gas until you run out of road.

Certain people, however, come to suspect that human existence might encompass more than this. Many of them are led to suspect this by religion—by the claims of the Buddha or Jesus or some other celebrated figure. And such people often begin to practice various disciplines of attention as a means of examining their experience closely enough to see whether a deeper source of well-being exists. They may even sequester themselves in caves or monasteries for months or years at a time to facilitate this process. Why would a person do this? No doubt there are many motives for retreating from the world, and some of them are psychologically unhealthy. In its wisest form, however, the exercise amounts to a very simple experiment.

Here is its logic: If there exists a source of psychological well-being that does not depend upon merely gratifying one's desires, then it should be present even when all the usual sources of pleasure have been removed. Such happiness should be available to a person who has declined to marry her high school sweetheart, renounced her career and material possessions, and gone off to a cave or some other spot that is inhospitable to ordinary aspirations.

One clue to how daunting most people would find such a project is the fact that solitary confinement—which is essentially what we are talking about—is considered a punishment inside a maximum-security prison. Even when forced to live among murderers and rapists, most people still prefer the company of others to spending any significant amount of time alone in a room. And yet contemplatives in many traditions claim to experience extraordinary depths of psychological well-being while living in isolation for vast stretches of time. How should we interpret this? Either the contemplative literature is a catalogue of religious delusion, psychopathology, and deliberate fraud, or people have been having liberating insights under the name of "spirituality" and "mysticism" for millennia.

Unlike many atheists, I have spent much of my life seeking experiences of the kind that gave rise to the world's religions. Despite the painful results of my first few days alone in the mountains of Colorado, I later studied with a wide range of monks, lamas, yogis, and other contemplatives, some of whom had lived for decades in seclusion doing nothing but meditating. In the process, I spent two years on silent retreat myself (in increments of one week to three months), practicing various techniques of meditation for twelve to eighteen hours a day.

I can attest that when one goes into silence and meditates for weeks or months at a time, doing nothing else—not speaking, reading, or writing, just making a moment-to-moment effort to observe the contents of consciousness—one has experiences that are generally unavailable to people who have not undertaken a similar practice. I believe that such states of mind have a lot to say about the nature of consciousness and the possibilities of human well-being. Leaving aside the metaphysics, mythology, and sectarian dogma, what contemplatives throughout history have discovered is that there is an alternative to being continuously spellbound by the conversation we are having with ourselves; there is an alternative to simply identifying with the next thought that pops into consciousness. And glimpsing this alternative dispels the conventional illusion of the self.

Most traditions of spirituality also suggest a connection between self-transcendence and living ethically. Not all good feelings have an ethical valence, and pathological forms of ecstasy surely exist. I have no doubt, for instance, that many suicide bombers feel extraordinarily good just before they detonate themselves in a crowd. But there are also forms of mental pleasure that are intrinsically ethical. As I indicated earlier, for some states of consciousness, a phrase like "boundless love" does not seem overblown. It is decidedly inconvenient for the forces of reason and secularism that if someone wakes up tomorrow feeling boundless love for all sentient beings, the only people likely to acknowledge the legitimacy of his experience will be representatives of one or another Iron Age religion or New Age cult.

Most of us are far wiser than we may appear to be. We know how to keep our relationships in order, to use our time well, to improve our health, to lose weight, to learn valuable skills, and to solve many other riddles of existence. But following even the straight and open path to happiness is hard. If your best friend were to ask how she could live a better life, you would probably find many useful things to say, and yet you might not live that way yourself. On one level, wisdom is nothing more profound than an ability to follow one's own advice. However, there are deeper insights to be had about the nature of our minds. Unfortunately, they have been discussed entirely in the context of religion and, therefore, have been shrouded in fallacy and superstition for all of human history.

The problem of finding happiness in this world arrives with our first breath—and our needs and desires seem to multiply by the hour. To spend any time in the presence of a young child is to witness a mind ceaselessly buffeted by joy and sorrow. As we grow older, our laughter and tears become less gratuitous, perhaps, but the same process of change continues: One roiling complex of thought and emotion is followed by the next, like waves in the ocean.

Seeking, finding, maintaining, and safeguarding our well-being is the great project to which we all are devoted, whether or not we choose to think in these terms. This is not to say that we want mere pleasure or the easiest possible life. Many things require extraordinary effort to accomplish, and some of us learn to enjoy the struggle. Any athlete knows that certain kinds of pain can be exquisitely pleasurable. The burn of lifting weights, for instance, would be excruciating if it were a symptom of terminal illness. But because it is associated with health and fitness, most people find it enjoyable. Here we see that cognition and emotion are not separate. The way we think about experience can completely determine how we feel about it.

And we always face tensions and trade-offs. In some moments we crave excitement and in others rest. We might love the taste of wine and chocolate, but rarely for breakfast. Whatever the context, our minds are perpetually moving—generally toward pleasure (or its imagined source) and away from pain. I am not the first person to have noticed this.

Our struggle to navigate the space of possible pains and pleasures produces most of human culture. Medical science attempts to prolong our health and to reduce the suffering associated with illness, aging, and death. All forms of media cater to our thirst for information and entertainment. Political and economic institutions seek to ensure our peaceful collaboration with one another—and the police or the military is summoned when they fail. Beyond ensuring our survival, civilization is a vast machine invented by the human mind to regulate its states. We are ever in the process of creating and repairing a world that our minds want to be in. And wherever we look, we see the evidence of our successes and our failures. Unfortunately, failure enjoys a natural advantage. Wrong answers to any problem outnumber right ones by a wide margin, and it seems that it will always be easier to break things than to fix them.

Despite the beauty of our world and the scope of human accomplishment, it is hard not to worry that the forces of chaos will triumph—not merely in the end but in every moment. Our pleasures, however refined or easily acquired, are by their very nature fleeting. They begin to subside the instant they arise, only to be replaced by fresh desires or feelings of discomfort. You can't get enough of your favorite meal until, in the next moment, you find you are so stuffed as to nearly require the attention of a surgeon—and yet, by some quirk of physics, you still have room for dessert. The pleasure of dessert lasts a few seconds, and then the lingering taste in your mouth must be banished by a drink of water. The warmth of the sun feels wonderful on your skin, but soon it becomes too much of a good thing. A move to the shade brings immediate relief, but after a minute or two, the breeze is just a little too cold. Do you have a sweater in the car? Let's take a look. Yes, there it is. You're warm now, but you notice that your sweater has seen better days. Does it make you look carefree or disheveled? Perhaps it is time to go shopping for something new. And so it goes.

We seem to do little more than lurch between wanting and not wanting. Thus, the question naturally arises: Is there more to life than this? Might it be possible to feel much better (in every sense of better) than one tends to feel? Is it possible to find lasting fulfillment despite the inevitability of change?

Spiritual life begins with a suspicion that the answer to such questions could well be "yes." And a true spiritual practitioner is someone who has discovered that it is possible to be at ease in the world for no reason, if only for a few moments at a time, and that such ease is synonymous with transcending the apparent boundaries of the self. Those who have never tasted such peace of mind might view these assertions as

highly suspect. Nevertheless, it is a fact that a condition of selfless well-being is there to be glimpsed in each moment. Of course, I'm not claiming to have experienced all such states, but I meet many people who appear to have experienced none of them—and these people often profess to have no interest in spiritual life.

This is not surprising. The phenomenon of self-transcendence is generally sought and interpreted in a religious context, and it is precisely the sort of experience that tends to increase a person's faith. How many Christians, having once felt their hearts grow as wide as the world, will decide to ditch Christianity and proclaim their atheism? Not many, I suspect. How many people who have never felt anything of the kind become atheists? I don't know, but there is little doubt that these mental states act as a kind of filter: The faithful count them in support of ancient dogma, and their absence gives nonbelievers further reason to reject religion.

This is a difficult problem for me to address in the context of a book, because many readers will have no idea what I'm talking about when I describe certain spiritual experiences and might assume that the assertions I'm making must be accepted on faith. Religious readers present a different challenge: They may think they know exactly what I'm describing, but only insofar as it aligns with one or another religious doctrine. It seems to me that both these attitudes present impressive obstacles to understanding spirituality in the way that I intend. I can only hope that, whatever your background, you will approach the exercises presented in this book with an open mind.

RELIGION, EAST AND WEST

We are often encouraged to believe that all religions are the same: All teach the same ethical principles; all urge their followers to contemplate the same divine reality; all are equally wise, compassionate, and true within their sphere—or equally divisive and false, depending on one's view.

No serious adherents of any faith can believe these things, because most religions make claims about reality that are mutually incompatible. Exceptions to this rule exist, but they provide little relief from what is essentially a zero-sum contest of all against all. The polytheism of Hinduism allows it to digest parts of many other faiths: If Christians insist that Jesus Christ is the son of God, for instance, Hindus can make him yet another avatar of Vishnu without losing any sleep. But this spirit of inclusiveness points in one direction only, and even it has its limits. Hindus are committed to specific metaphysical ideas—the law of karma and rebirth, a multiplicity of gods—that almost every other major religion decries. It is impossible for any faith, no matter how elastic, to fully honor the truth claims of another.

Devout Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe that theirs is the one true and complete revelation—because that is what their holy books say of themselves. Only secularists and New Age dabblers can mistake the modern tactic of "interfaith dialogue" for an underlying unity of all religions.

I have long argued that confusion about the unity of religions is an artifact of language. Religion is a term like sports: Some sports are peaceful but spectacularly dangerous ("free solo" rock climbing); some are safer but synonymous with violence (mixed martial arts); and some entail little more risk of injury than standing in the shower (bowling). To speak of sports as a generic activity makes it impossible to discuss what athletes actually do or the physical attributes required to do it. What do all sports have in common apart from breathing? Not much. The term religion is hardly more useful.

The same could be said of spirituality. The esoteric doctrines found within every religious tradition are not all derived from the same insights. Nor are they equally empirical, logical, parsimonious, or wise. They don't always point to the same underlying reality—and when they do, they don't do it equally well. Nor are all

these teachings equally suited for export beyond the cultures that first conceived them.

Making distinctions of this kind, however, is deeply unfashionable in intellectual circles. In my experience, people do not want to hear that Islam supports violence in a way that Jainism doesn't, or that Buddhism offers a truly sophisticated, empirical approach to understanding the human mind, whereas Christianity presents an almost perfect impediment to such understanding. In many circles, to make invidious comparisons of this kind is to stand convicted of bigotry.

In one sense, all religions and spiritual practices must address the same reality—because people of all faiths have glimpsed many of the same truths. Any view of consciousness and the cosmos that is available to the human mind can, in principle, be appreciated by anyone. It is not surprising, therefore, that individual Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Buddhists have given voice to some of the same insights and intuitions. This merely indicates that human cognition and emotion run deeper than religion. (But we knew that, didn't we?) It does not suggest that all religions understand our spiritual possibilities equally well.

One way of missing this point is to declare that all spiritual teachings are inflections of the same "Perennial Philosophy." The writer Aldous Huxley brought this idea into prominence by publishing an anthology by that title. Here is how he justified the idea:

Philosophia perennis—the phrase was coined by Leibniz; but the thing—the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being—the thing is immemorial and universal. Rudiments of the Perennial Philosophy may be found among the traditionary lore of primitive peoples in every region of the world, and in its fully developed forms it has a place in every one of the higher religions. A version of this Highest Common Factor in all preceding and subsequent theologies was first committed to writing more than twenty-five centuries ago, and since that time the inexhaustible theme has been treated again and again, from the standpoint of every religious tradition and in all the principal languages of Asia and Europe.2

Although Huxley was being reasonably cautious in his wording, this notion of a "highest common factor" uniting all religions begins to break apart the moment one presses for details. For instance, the Abrahamic religions are incorrigibly dualistic and faith-based: In Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the human soul is conceived as genuinely separate from the divine reality of God. The appropriate attitude for a creature that finds itself in this circumstance is some combination of terror, shame, and awe. In the best case, notions of God's love and grace provide some relief—but the central message of these faiths is that each of us is separate from, and in relationship to, a divine authority who will punish anyone who harbors the slightest doubt about His supremacy.

The Eastern tradition presents a very different picture of reality. And its highest teachings—found within the various schools of Buddhism and the nominally Hindu tradition of Advaita Vedanta—explicitly transcend dualism. By their lights, consciousness itself is identical to the very reality that one might otherwise mistake for God. While these teachings make metaphysical claims that any serious student of science should find incredible, they center on a range of experiences that the doctrines of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam rule out-of-bounds.

Of course, it is true that specific Jewish, Christian, and Muslim mystics have had experiences similar to those that motivate Buddhism and Advaita, but these contemplative insights are not exemplary of their faith. Rather, they are anomalies that Western mystics have always struggled to understand and to honor, often at

considerable personal risk. Given their proper weight, these experiences produce heterodoxies for which Jews, Christians, and Muslims have been regularly exiled or killed.

Like Huxley, anyone determined to find a happy synthesis among spiritual traditions will notice that the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260–ca. 1327) often sounded very much like a Buddhist: “The knower and the known are one. Simple people imagine that they should see God, as if He stood there and they here. This is not so. God and I, we are one in knowledge.” But he also sounded like a man bound to be excommunicated by his church—as he was. Had Eckhart lived a little longer, it seems certain that he would have been dragged into the street and burned alive for these expansive ideas. That is a telling difference between Christianity and Buddhism.

In the same vein, it is misleading to hold up the Sufi mystic Al-Hallaj (858–922) as a representative of Islam. He was a Muslim, yes, but he suffered the most grisly death imaginable at the hands of his coreligionists for presuming to be one with God. Both Eckhart and Al-Hallaj gave voice to an experience of self-transcendence that any human being can, in principle, enjoy. However, their views were not consistent with the central teachings of their faiths.

The Indian tradition is comparatively free of problems of this kind. Although the teachings of Buddhism and Advaita are embedded in more or less conventional religions, they contain empirical insights about the nature of consciousness that do not depend upon faith. One can practice most techniques of Buddhist meditation or the method of self-inquiry of Advaita and experience the advertised changes in one’s consciousness without ever believing in the law of karma or in the miracles attributed to Indian mystics. To get started as a Christian, however, one must first accept a dozen implausible things about the life of Jesus and the origins of the Bible—and the same can be said, minus a few unimportant details, about Judaism and Islam. If one should happen to discover that the sense of being an individual soul is an illusion, one will be guilty of blasphemy everywhere west of the Indus.

There is no question that many religious disciplines can produce interesting experiences in suitable minds. It should be clear, however, that engaging a faith-based (and probably delusional) practice, whatever its effects, isn’t the same as investigating the nature of one’s mind absent any doctrinal assumptions. Statements of this kind may seem starkly antagonistic toward Abrahamic religions, but they are nonetheless true: One can speak about Buddhism shorn of its miracles and irrational assumptions. The same cannot be said of Christianity or Islam.3

Western engagement with Eastern spirituality dates back at least as far as Alexander’s campaign in India, where the young conqueror and his pet philosophers encountered naked ascetics whom they called “gymnosophists.” It is often said that the thinking of these yogis greatly influenced the philosopher Pyrrho, the father of Greek skepticism. This seems a credible claim, because Pyrrho’s teachings had much in common with Buddhism. But his contemplative insights and methods never became part of any system of thought in the West.

Serious study of Eastern thought by outsiders did not begin until the late eighteenth century. The first translation of a Sanskrit text into a Western language appears to have been Sir Charles Wilkins’s rendering of the Bhagavad Gita, a cornerstone text of Hinduism, in 1785. The Buddhist canon would not attract the attention of Western scholars for another hundred years.4

The conversation between East and West started in earnest, albeit inauspiciously, with the birth of the Theosophical Society, that golem of spiritual hunger and self-deception brought into this world almost single-handedly by the incomparable Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky in 1875. Everything about

Blavatsky seemed to defy earthly logic: She was an enormously fat woman who was said to have wandered alone and undetected for seven years in the mountains of Tibet. She was also thought to have survived shipwrecks, gunshot wounds, and sword fights. Even less persuasively, she claimed to be in psychic contact with members of the "Great White Brotherhood" of ascended masters—a collection of immortals responsible for the evolution and maintenance of the entire cosmos. Their leader hailed from the planet Venus but lived in the mythical kingdom of Shambhala, which Blavatsky placed somewhere in the vicinity of the Gobi Desert. With the suspiciously bureaucratic name "the Lord of the World," he supervised the work of other adepts, including the Buddha, Maitreya, Maha Chohan, and one Koot Hoomi, who appears to have had nothing better to do on behalf of the cosmos than to impart its secrets to Blavatsky.5

It is always surprising when a person attracts legions of followers and builds a large organization on their largesse while peddling penny-arcade mythology of this kind. But perhaps this was less remarkable in a time when even the best-educated people were still struggling to come to terms with electricity, evolution, and the existence of other planets. We can easily forget how suddenly the world had shrunk and the cosmos expanded as the nineteenth century came to a close. The geographical barriers between distant cultures had been stripped away by trade and conquest (one could now order a gin and tonic almost everywhere on earth), and yet the reality of unseen forces and alien worlds was a daily focus of the most careful scientific research. Inevitably, cross-cultural and scientific discoveries were mingled in the popular imagination with religious dogma and traditional occultism. In fact, this had been happening at the highest level of human thought for more than a century: It is always instructive to recall that the father of modern physics, Isaac Newton, squandered a considerable portion of his genius on the study of theology, biblical prophecy, and alchemy.

The inability to distinguish the strange but true from the merely strange was common enough in Blavatsky's time—as it is in our own. Blavatsky's contemporary Joseph Smith, a libidinous con man and crackpot, was able to found a new religion on the claim that he had unearthed the final revelations of God in the hallowed precincts of Manchester, New York, written in "reformed Egyptian" on golden plates. He decoded this text with the aid of magical "seer stones," which, whether by magic or not, allowed Smith to produce an English version of God's Word that was an embarrassing pastiche of plagiarisms from the Bible and silly lies about Jesus's life in America. And yet the resulting edifice of nonsense and taboo survives to this day.

A more modern cult, Scientology, leverages human credulity to an even greater degree: Adherents believe that human beings are possessed by the souls of extraterrestrials who were condemned to planet Earth 75 million years ago by the galactic overlord Xenu. How was their exile accomplished? The old-fashioned way: These aliens were shuttled by the billions to our humble planet aboard a spacecraft that resembled a DC-8. They were then imprisoned in a volcano and blasted to bits with hydrogen bombs. Their souls survived, however, and disentangling them from our own can be the work of a lifetime. It is also expensive.6

Despite the imponderables in her philosophy, Blavatsky was among the first people to announce in Western circles that there was such a thing as the "wisdom of the East." This wisdom began to trickle westward once Swami Vivekananda introduced the teachings of Vedanta at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. Again, Buddhism lagged behind: A few Western monks living on the island of Sri Lanka were beginning to translate the Pali Canon, which remains the most authoritative record of the teachings of the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama. However, the practice of Buddhist meditation wouldn't actually be taught in the West for another half century.

It is easy enough to find fault with romantic ideas about Eastern wisdom, and a tradition of such criticism sprang up almost the instant the first Western seeker sat cross-legged and attempted to meditate. In the late 1950s, the author and journalist Arthur Koestler traveled to India and Japan in search of wisdom and summarized his pilgrimage thus: "I started my journey in sackcloth and ashes, and came back rather proud of

being a European."7

In The Lotus and the Robot, Koestler gives some of his reasons for being less than awed by his journey to the East. Consider, for example, the ancient discipline of hatha yoga. While now generally viewed as a system of physical exercises designed to increase a person's strength and flexibility, in its traditional context hatha yoga is part of a larger effort to manipulate "subtle" features of the body unknown to anatomists. No doubt much of this subtlety corresponds to experiences that yogis actually have—but many of the beliefs formed on the basis of these experiences are patently absurd, and certain of the associated practices are both silly and injurious.

Koestler reports that the aspiring yogi is traditionally encouraged to lengthen his tongue—even going so far as to cut the frenulum (the membrane that anchors the tongue to the floor of the mouth) and stretch the soft palate. What is the purpose of these modifications? They enable our hero to insert his tongue into his nasopharynx, thereby blocking the flow of air through the nostrils. His anatomy thus improved, a yogi can then imbibe subtle liquors believed to emanate directly from his brain. These substances—imagined, by recourse to further subtleties, to be connected to the retention of semen—are said to confer not only spiritual wisdom but immortality. This technique of drinking mucus is known as khechari mudra, and it is thought to be one of the crowning achievements of yoga.

I'm more than happy to score a point for Koestler here. Needless to say, no defense of such practices will be found in this book.

Criticism of Eastern wisdom can seem especially pertinent when coming from Easterners themselves. There is indeed something preposterous about well-educated Westerners racing East in search of spiritual enlightenment while Easterners make the opposite pilgrimage seeking education and economic opportunities. I have a friend whose own adventures may have marked a high point in this global comedy. He made his first trip to India immediately after graduating from college, having already acquired several yogic affectations: He had the requisite beads and long hair, but he was also in the habit of writing the name of the Hindu god Ram in Devanagari script over and over in a journal. On the flight to the motherland, he had the good fortune to be seated next to an Indian businessman. This weary traveler thought he had witnessed every species of human folly—until he caught sight of my friend's scribbling. The spectacle of a Western-born Stanford graduate, of working age, holding degrees in both economics and history, devoting himself to the graphomaniacal worship of an imaginary deity in a language he could neither read nor understand was more than this man could abide in a confined space at 30,000 feet. After a testy exchange, the two travelers could only stare at each other in mutual incomprehension and pity—and they had ten hours yet to fly. There really are two sides to such a conversation, but I concede that only one of them can be made to look ridiculous.

We can also grant that Eastern wisdom has not produced societies or political institutions that are any better than their Western counterparts; in fact, one could argue that India has survived as the world's largest democracy only because of institutions that were built under British rule. Nor has the East led the world in scientific discovery. Nevertheless, there is something to the notion of uniquely Eastern wisdom, and most of it has been concentrated in or derived from the tradition of Buddhism.

Buddhism has been of special interest to Western scientists for reasons already hinted at. It isn't primarily a faith-based religion, and its central teachings are entirely empirical. Despite the superstitions that many Buddhists cherish, the doctrine has a practical and logical core that does not require any unwarranted assumptions. Many Westerners have recognized this and have been relieved to find a spiritual alternative to faith-based worship. It is no accident that most of the scientific research now done on meditation focuses primarily on Buddhist techniques.

Another reason for Buddhism's prominence among scientists has been the intellectual engagement of one of its most visible representatives: Tenzin Gyatso, the fourteenth Dalai Lama. Of course, the Dalai Lama is not without his critics. My late friend Christopher Hitchens meted out justice to "his holiness" on several occasions. He also castigated Western students of Buddhism for the "widely and lazily held belief that 'Oriental' religion is different from other faiths: less dogmatic, more contemplative, more . . . Transcendental," and for the "blissful, thoughtless exceptionalism" with which Buddhism is regarded by many.8

Hitch did have a point. In his capacity as the head of one of the four branches of Tibetan Buddhism and as the former leader of the Tibetan government in exile, the Dalai Lama has made some questionable claims and formed some embarrassing alliances. Although his engagement with science is far-reaching and surely sincere, the man is not above consulting an astrologer or "oracle" when making important decisions. I will have something to say in this book about many of the things that might have justified Hitch's opprobrium, but the general thrust of his commentary here was all wrong. Several Eastern traditions are exceptionally empirical and exceptionally wise, and therefore merit the exceptionalism claimed by their adherents.

Buddhism in particular possesses a literature on the nature of the mind that has no peer in Western religion or Western science. Some of these teachings are cluttered with metaphysical assumptions that should provoke our doubts, but many aren't. And when engaged as a set of hypotheses by which to investigate the mind and deepen one's ethical life, Buddhism can be an entirely rational enterprise.

Unlike the doctrines of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the teachings of Buddhism are not considered by their adherents to be the product of infallible revelation. They are, rather, empirical instructions: If you do X, you will experience Y. Although many Buddhists have a superstitious and cultic attachment to the historical Buddha, the teachings of Buddhism present him as an ordinary human being who succeeded in understanding the nature of his own mind. Buddha means "awakened one"—and Siddhartha Gautama was merely a man who woke up from the dream of being a separate self. Compare this with the Christian view of Jesus, who is imagined to be the son of the creator of the universe. This is a very different proposition, and it renders Christianity, no matter how fully divested of metaphysical baggage, all but irrelevant to a scientific discussion about the human condition.

The teachings of Buddhism, and of Eastern spirituality generally, focus on the primacy of the mind. There are dangers in this way of viewing the world, to be sure. Focusing on training the mind to the exclusion of all else can lead to political quietism and hive-like conformity. The fact that your mind is all you have and that it is possible to be at peace even in difficult circumstances can become an argument for ignoring obvious societal problems. But it is not a compelling one. The world is in desperate need of improvement—in global terms, freedom and prosperity remain the exception—and yet this doesn't mean we need to be miserable while we work for the common good.

In fact, the teachings of Buddhism emphasize a connection between ethical and spiritual life. Making progress in one domain lays a foundation for progress in the other. One can, for instance, spend long periods of time in contemplative solitude for the purpose of becoming a better person in the world—having better relationships, being more honest and compassionate and, therefore, more helpful to one's fellow human beings. Being wisely selfish and being selfless can amount to very much the same thing. There are centuries of anecdotal testimony on this point—and, as we will see, the scientific study of the mind has begun to bear it out. There is now little question that how one uses one's attention, moment to moment, largely determines what kind of person one becomes. Our minds—and lives—are largely shaped by how we use them.

Although the experience of self-transcendence is, in principle, available to everyone, this possibility is only

weakly attested to in the religious and philosophical literature of the West. Only Buddhists and students of Advaita Vedanta (which appears to have been heavily influenced by Buddhism) have been absolutely clear in asserting that spiritual life consists in overcoming the illusion of the self by paying close attention to our experience in the present moment.9

As I wrote in my first book, The End of Faith, the disparity between Eastern and Western spirituality resembles that found between Eastern and Western medicine—with the arrow of embarrassment pointing in the opposite direction. Humanity did not understand the biology of cancer, develop antibiotics and vaccines, or sequence the human genome under an Eastern sun. Consequently, real medicine is almost entirely a product of Western science. Insofar as specific techniques of Eastern medicine actually work, they must conform, whether by design or by happenstance, to the principles of biology as we have come to know them in the West. This is not to say that Western medicine is complete. In a few decades, many of our current practices will seem barbaric. One need only ponder the list of side effects that accompany most medications to appreciate that these are terribly blunt instruments. Nevertheless, most of our knowledge about the human body—and about the physical universe generally—emerged in the West. The rest is instinct, folklore, bewilderment, and untimely death.

An honest comparison of spiritual traditions, Eastern and Western, proves equally invidious. As manuals for contemplative understanding, the Bible and the Koran are worse than useless. Whatever wisdom can be found in their pages is never best found there, and it is subverted, time and again, by ancient savagery and superstition.

Again, one must deploy the necessary caveats: I am not saying that most Buddhists or Hindus have been sophisticated contemplatives. Their traditions have spawned many of the same pathologies we see elsewhere among the faithful: dogmatism, anti-intellectualism, tribalism, otherworldliness. However, the empirical difference between the central teachings of Buddhism and Advaita and those of Western monotheism is difficult to overstate. One can traverse the Eastern paths simply by becoming interested in the nature of one's own mind—especially in the immediate causes of psychological suffering—and by paying closer attention to one's experience in every present moment. There is, in truth, nothing one need believe. The teachings of Buddhism and Advaita are best viewed as lab manuals and explorers' logs detailing the results of empirical research on the nature of human consciousness.

Nearly every geographical or linguistic barrier to the free exchange of ideas has now fallen away. It seems to me, therefore, that educated people no longer have a right to any form of spiritual provincialism. The truths of Eastern spirituality are now no more Eastern than the truths of Western science are Western. We are merely talking about human consciousness and its possible states. My purpose in writing this book is to encourage you to investigate certain contemplative insights for yourself, without accepting the metaphysical ideas that they inspired in ignorant and isolated peoples of the past.

A final word of caution: Nothing I say here is intended as a denial of the fact that psychological well-being requires a healthy "sense of self"—with all the capacities that this vague phrase implies. Children need to become autonomous, confident, and self-aware in order to form healthy relationships. And they must acquire a host of other cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal skills in the process of becoming sane and productive adults. Which is to say that there is a time and a place for everything—unless, of course, there isn't. No doubt there are psychological conditions, such as schizophrenia, for which practices of the sort I recommend in this book might be inappropriate. Some people find the experience of an extended, silent retreat psychologically destabilizing.10 Again, an analogy to physical training seems apropos: Not everyone is suited to running a six-minute mile or bench-pressing his own body weight. But many quite ordinary people are capable of these feats, and there are better and worse ways to accomplish them. What is more, the same

principles of fitness generally apply even to people whose abilities are limited by illness or injury.

So I want to make it clear that the instructions in this book are intended for readers who are adults (more or less) and free from any psychological or medical conditions that could be exacerbated by meditation or other techniques of sustained introspection. If paying attention to your breath, to bodily sensations, to the flow of thoughts, or to the nature of consciousness itself seems likely to cause you clinically significant anguish, please check with a psychologist or a psychiatrist before engaging in the practices I describe.

MINDFULNESS

It is always now. This might sound trite, but it is the truth. It's not quite true as a matter of neurology, because our minds are built upon layers of inputs whose timing we know must be different.11 But it is true as a matter of conscious experience. The reality of your life is always now. And to realize this, we will see, is liberating. In fact, I think there is nothing more important to understand if you want to be happy in this world.

But we spend most of our lives forgetting this truth—overlooking it, fleeing it, repudiating it. And the horror is that we succeed. We manage to avoid being happy while struggling to become happy, fulfilling one desire after the next, banishing our fears, grasping at pleasure, recoiling from pain—and thinking, interminably, about how best to keep the whole works up and running. As a consequence, we spend our lives being far less content than we might otherwise be. We often fail to appreciate what we have until we have lost it. We crave experiences, objects, relationships, only to grow bored with them. And yet the craving persists. I speak from experience, of course.

As a remedy for this predicament, many spiritual teachings ask us to entertain unfounded ideas about the nature of reality—or at the very least to develop a fondness for the iconography and rituals of one or another religion. But not all paths traverse the same rough ground. There are methods of meditation that do not require any artifice or unwarranted assumptions at all.

For beginners, I usually recommend a technique called vipassana (Pali for "insight"), which comes from the oldest tradition of Buddhism, the Theravada. One of the advantages of vipassana is that it can be taught in an entirely secular way. Experts in this practice generally acquire their training in a Buddhist context, and most retreat centers in the United States and Europe teach its associated Buddhist philosophy. Nevertheless, this method of introspection can be brought into any secular or scientific context without embarrassment. (The same cannot be said for the practice of chanting to Lord Krishna while banging a drum.) That is why vipassana is now being widely studied and adopted by psychologists and neuroscientists.

The quality of mind cultivated in vipassana is almost always referred to as "mindfulness," and the literature on its psychological benefits is now substantial. There is nothing spooky about mindfulness. It is simply a state of clear, nonjudgmental, and undistracted attention to the contents of consciousness, whether pleasant or unpleasant. Cultivating this quality of mind has been shown to reduce pain, anxiety, and depression; improve cognitive function; and even produce changes in gray matter density in regions of the brain related to learning and memory, emotional regulation, and self-awareness.12 We will look more closely at the neurophysiology of mindfulness in a later chapter.

Mindfulness is a translation of the Pali word sati. The term has several meanings in the Buddhist literature, but for our purposes the most important is "clear awareness." The practice was first described in the Satipatthana Sutta,13 which is part of the Pali Canon. Like many Buddhist texts, the Satipatthana Sutta is highly repetitive and, for anything but an avid student of Buddhism, exceptionally boring to read. However,

when one compares texts of this kind with the Bible or the Koran, the difference is unmistakable: The Satipatthana Sutta is not a collection of ancient myths, superstitions, and taboos; it is a rigorously empirical guide to freeing the mind from suffering.

The Buddha described four foundations of mindfulness, which he taught as "the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of Nibbana" (Sanskrit, Nirvana). The four foundations of mindfulness are the body (breathing, changes in posture, activities), feelings (the senses of pleasantness, unpleasantness, and neutrality), the mind (in particular, its moods and attitudes), and the objects of mind (which include the five senses but also other mental states, such as volition, tranquility, rapture, equanimity, and even mindfulness itself). It is a peculiar list, at once redundant and incomplete—a problem that is compounded by the necessity of translating Pali terminology into English. The obvious message of the text, however, is that the totality of one's experience can become the field of contemplation. The meditator is merely instructed to pay attention, "ardently" and "fully aware" and "free from covetousness and grief for the world."

There is nothing passive about mindfulness. One might even say that it expresses a specific kind of passion—a passion for discerning what is subjectively real in every moment. It is a mode of cognition that is, above all, undistracted, accepting, and (ultimately) nonconceptual. Being mindful is not a matter of thinking more clearly about experience; it is the act of experiencing more clearly, including the arising of thoughts themselves. Mindfulness is a vivid awareness of whatever is appearing in one's mind or body—thoughts, sensations, moods—without grasping at the pleasant or recoiling from the unpleasant. One of the great strengths of this technique of meditation, from a secular point of view, is that it does not require us to adopt any cultural affectations or unjustified beliefs. It simply demands that we pay close attention to the flow of experience in each moment.

The principal enemy of mindfulness—or of any meditative practice—is our deeply conditioned habit of being distracted by thoughts. The problem is not thoughts themselves but the state of thinking without knowing that we are thinking. In fact, thoughts of all kinds can be perfectly good objects of mindfulness. In the early stages of one's practice, however, the arising of thought will be more or less synonymous with distraction—that is, with a failure to meditate. Most people who believe they are meditating are merely thinking with their eyes closed. By practicing mindfulness, however, one can awaken from the dream of discursive thought and begin to see each arising image, idea, or bit of language vanish without a trace. What remains is consciousness itself, with its attendant sights, sounds, sensations, and thoughts appearing and changing in every moment.

In the beginning of one's meditation practice, the difference between ordinary experience and what one comes to consider "mindfulness" is not very clear, and it takes some training to distinguish between being lost in thought and seeing thoughts for what they are. In this sense, learning to meditate is just like acquiring any other skill. It takes many thousands of repetitions to throw a good jab or to coax music from the strings of a guitar. With practice, mindfulness becomes a well-formed habit of attention, and the difference between it and ordinary thinking will become increasingly clear. Eventually, it begins to seem as if you are repeatedly awakening from a dream to find yourself safely in bed. No matter how terrible the dream, the relief is instantaneous. And yet it is difficult to stay awake for more than a few seconds at a time.

My friend Joseph Goldstein, one of the finest vipassana teachers I know, likens this shift in awareness to the experience of being fully immersed in a film and then suddenly realizing that you are sitting in a theater watching a mere play of light on a wall. Your perception is unchanged, but the spell is broken. Most of us spend every waking moment lost in the movie of our lives. Until we see that an alternative to this

enchantment exists, we are entirely at the mercy of appearances. Again, the difference I am describing is not a matter of achieving a new conceptual understanding or of adopting new beliefs about the nature of reality. The change comes when we experience the present moment prior to the arising of thought.

The Buddha taught mindfulness as the appropriate response to the truth of dukkha, usually translated from the Pali, somewhat misleadingly, as “suffering.” A better translation would be “unsatisfactoriness.” Suffering may not be inherent in life, but unsatisfactoriness is. We crave lasting happiness in the midst of change: Our bodies age, cherished objects break, pleasures fade, relationships fail. Our attachment to the good things in life and our aversion to the bad amount to a denial of these realities, and this inevitably leads to feelings of dissatisfaction. Mindfulness is a technique for achieving equanimity amid the flux, allowing us to simply be aware of the quality of experience in each moment, whether pleasant or unpleasant. This may seem like a recipe for apathy, but it needn’t be. It is actually possible to be mindful—and, therefore, to be at peace with the present moment—even while working to change the world for the better.

Mindfulness meditation is extraordinarily simple to describe, but it isn’t easy to perform. True mastery might require special talent and a lifetime of devotion to the task, and yet a genuine transformation in one’s perception of the world is within reach for most of us. Practice is the only thing that will lead to success. The simple instructions given in the box that follows are analogous to instructions on how to walk a tightrope—which, I assume, must go something like this:

1. Find a horizontal cable that can support your weight.

2. Stand on one end.

3. Step forward by placing one foot directly in front of the other.

4. Repeat.

5. Don’t fall.

Clearly, steps 2 through 5 entail a little trial and error. Happily, the benefits of training in meditation arrive long before mastery does. And falling, for our purposes, occurs almost ceaselessly, every time we become lost in thought. Again, the problem is not thoughts themselves but the state of thinking without being fully aware that we are thinking.

As every meditator soon discovers, distraction is the normal condition of our minds: Most of us topple from the wire every second—whether gliding happily into reverie or plunging into fear, anger, self-hatred, and other negative states of mind. Meditation is a technique for waking up. The goal is to come out of the trance of discursive thinking and to stop reflexively grasping at the pleasant and recoiling from the unpleasant, so that we can enjoy a mind undisturbed by worry, merely open like the sky, and effortlessly aware of the flow of experience in the present.

How to Meditate

1. Sit comfortably, with your spine erect, either in a chair or cross-legged on a cushion.

2. Close your eyes, take a few deep breaths, and feel the points of contact between your body and the chair or the floor. Notice the sensations associated with sitting—feelings of pressure, warmth, tingling, vibration, etc.

3. Gradually become aware of the process of breathing. Pay attention to wherever you feel the breath most distinctly—either at your nostrils or in the rising and falling of your abdomen.

4. Allow your attention to rest in the mere sensation of breathing. (You don't have to control your breath. Just let it come and go naturally.)

5. Every time your mind wanders in thought, gently return it to the breath.

6. As you focus on the process of breathing, you will also perceive sounds, bodily sensations, or emotions. Simply observe these phenomena as they appear in consciousness and then return to the breath.

7. The moment you notice that you have been lost in thought, observe the present thought itself as an object of consciousness. Then return your attention to the breath—or to any sounds or sensations arising in the next moment.

8. Continue in this way until you can merely witness all objects of consciousness—sights, sounds, sensations, emotions, even thoughts themselves—as they arise, change, and pass away.

Those who are new to this practice generally find it useful to hear instructions of this kind spoken aloud during the course of a meditation session. I have posted guided meditations of varying length on my website.

THE TRUTH OF SUFFERING

I am sitting in a coffee shop in midtown Manhattan, drinking exactly what I want (coffee), eating exactly what I want (a cookie), and doing exactly what I want (writing this book). It is a beautiful fall day, and many of the people passing by on the sidewalk appear to radiate good fortune from their pores. Several are so physically attractive that I'm beginning to wonder whether Photoshop can now be applied to the human body. Up and down this street, and for a mile in each direction, stores sell jewelry, art, and clothing that not even 1 percent of humanity could hope to purchase.

So what did the Buddha mean when he spoke of the "unsatisfactoriness" (dukkha) of life? Was he referring merely to the poor and the hungry? Or are these rich and beautiful people suffering even now? Of course, suffering is all around us—even here, where everything appears to be going well for the moment.

First, the obvious: Within a few blocks of where I am sitting are hospitals, convalescent homes, psychiatrists' offices, and other rooms built to assuage, or merely to contain, some of the most profound forms of human misery. A man runs over his own child while backing his car out of the driveway. A woman learns that she has terminal cancer on the eve of her wedding. We know that the worst can happen to anyone at any time—and most people spend a great deal of mental energy hoping that it won't happen to them.

But more subtle forms of suffering can be found, even among people who seem to have every reason to be satisfied in the present. Although wealth and fame can secure many forms of pleasure, few of us have any illusions that they guarantee happiness. Anyone who owns a television or reads the newspaper has seen movie stars, politicians, professional athletes, and other celebrities ricochet from marriage to marriage and from scandal to scandal. To learn that a young, attractive, talented, and successful person is nevertheless addicted to drugs or clinically depressed is to be given almost no cause for surprise.

Yet the unsatisfactoriness of the good life runs deeper than this. Even while living safely between emergencies, most of us feel a wide range of painful emotions on a daily basis. When you wake up in the

morning, are you filled with joy? How do you feel at work or when looking in the mirror? How satisfied are you with what you've accomplished in life? How much of your time with your family is spent surrendered to love and gratitude, and how much is spent just struggling to be happy in one another's company? Even for extraordinarily lucky people, life is difficult. And when we look at what makes it so, we see that we are all prisoners of our thoughts.

And then there is death, which defeats everyone. Most people seem to believe that we have only two ways to think about death: We can fear it and do our best to ignore it, or we can deny that it is real. The first strategy leads to a life of conventional worldliness and distraction—we merely strive for pleasure and success and do our best to keep the reality of death out of view. The second strategy is the province of religion, which assures us that death is but a doorway to another world and that the most important opportunities in life occur after the lifetime of the body. But there is another path, and it seems the only one compatible with intellectual honesty. That path is the subject of this book.

ENLIGHTENMENT

What is enlightenment, which is so often said to be the ultimate goal of meditation? There are many esoteric details that we can safely ignore—disagreements among contemplative traditions about what, exactly, is gained or lost at the end of the spiritual path. Many of these claims are preposterous. Within most schools of Buddhism, for instance, a buddha—whether the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, or any other person who attains the state of "full enlightenment"—is generally described as "omniscient." Just what this means is open to a fair bit of caviling. But however narrowly defined, the claim is absurd. If the historical Buddha were "omniscient," he would have been, at minimum, a better mathematician, physicist, biologist, and Jeopardy contestant than any person who has ever lived. Is it reasonable to expect that an ascetic in the fifth century BC, by virtue of his meditative insights, spontaneously became an unprecedented genius in every field of human inquiry, including those that did not exist at the time in which he lived? Would Siddhartha Gautama have awed Kurt Gödel, Alan Turing, John von Neumann, and Claude Shannon with his command of mathematical logic and information theory? Of course not. To think otherwise is pure, religious piety.

Any extension of the notion of "omniscience" to procedural knowledge—that is, to knowing how to do something—would render the Buddha capable of painting the Sistine Chapel in the morning and demolishing Roger Federer at Centre Court in the afternoon. Is there any reason to believe that Siddhartha Gautama, or any other celebrated contemplative, possessed such abilities by virtue of his spiritual practice? None whatsoever. Nevertheless, many Buddhists believe that buddhas can do all these things and more. Again, this is religious dogmatism, not a rational approach to spiritual life.14

I make no claims in support of magic or miracles in this book. However, I can say that the true goal of meditation is more profound than most people realize—and it does, in fact, encompass many of the experiences that traditional mystics claim for themselves. It is quite possible to lose one's sense of being a separate self and to experience a kind of boundless, open awareness—to feel, in other words, at one with the cosmos. This says a lot about the possibilities of human consciousness, but it says nothing about the universe at large. And it sheds no light at all on the relationship between mind and matter. The fact that it is possible to love one's neighbor as oneself should be a great finding for the field of psychology, but it lends absolutely no credence to the claim that Jesus was the son of God, or even that God exists. Nor does it suggest that the "energy" of love somehow pervades the cosmos. These are historical and metaphysical claims that personal experience cannot justify.

However, a phenomenon like self-transcending love does entitle us to make claims about the human mind. And this particular experience is so well attested and so readily achieved by those who devote themselves to

specific practices (the Buddhist technique of metta meditation, for instance) or who even take the right drug (MDMA) that there is very little controversy that it exists. Facts of this kind must now be understood in a rational context.

The traditional goal of meditation is to arrive at a state of well-being that is imperturbable—or if perturbed, easily regained. The French monk Matthieu Ricard describes such happiness as "a deep sense of flourishing that arises from an exceptionally healthy mind."15 The purpose of meditation is to recognize that you already have such a mind. That discovery, in turn, helps you to cease doing the things that produce needless confusion and suffering for yourself and others. Of course, most people never truly master the practice and don't reach a condition of imperturbable happiness. The near goal, therefore, is to have an increasingly healthy mind—that is, to be moving one's mind in the right direction.

There is nothing novel about trying to become happy. And one can become happy, within certain limits, without any recourse to the practice of meditation. But conventional sources of happiness are unreliable, being dependent upon changing conditions. It is difficult to raise a happy family, to keep yourself and those you love healthy, to acquire wealth and find creative and fulfilling ways to enjoy it, to form deep friendships, to contribute to society in ways that are emotionally rewarding, to perfect a wide variety of artistic, athletic, and intellectual skills—and to keep the machinery of happiness running day after day. There is nothing wrong with being fulfilled in all these ways—except for the fact that, if you pay close attention, you will see that there is still something wrong with it. These forms of happiness aren't good enough. Our feelings of fulfillment do not last. And the stress of life continues.

So what would a spiritual master be a master of? At a minimum, she will no longer suffer certain cognitive and emotional illusions—above all, she will no longer feel identical to her thoughts. Once again, this is not to say that such a person will no longer think, but she would no longer succumb to the primary confusion that thoughts produce in most of us: She would no longer feel that there is an inner self who is a thinker of these thoughts. Such a person will naturally maintain an openness and serenity of mind that is available to most of us only for brief moments, even after years of practice. I remain agnostic as to whether anyone has achieved such a state permanently, but I know from direct experience that it is possible to be far more enlightened than I tend to be.

The question of whether enlightenment is a permanent state need not detain us. The crucial point is that you can glimpse something about the nature of consciousness that will liberate you from suffering in the present. Even just recognizing the impermanence of your mental states—deeply, not merely as an idea—can transform your life. Every mental state you have ever had has arisen and then passed away. This is a first-person fact—but it is, nonetheless, a fact that any human being can readily confirm. We don't have to know any more about the brain or about the relationship between consciousness and the physical world to understand this truth about our own minds. The promise of spiritual life—indeed, the very thing that makes it "spiritual" in the sense I invoke throughout this book—is that there are truths about the mind that we are better off knowing. What we need to become happier and to make the world a better place is not more pious illusions but a clearer understanding of the way things are.

The moment we admit the possibility of attaining contemplative insights—and of training one's mind for that purpose—we must acknowledge that people naturally fall at different points on a continuum between ignorance and wisdom. Part of this range will be considered "normal," but normal isn't necessarily a happy place to be. Just as a person's physical body and abilities can be refined—Olympic athletes are not normal—one's mental life can deepen and expand on the basis of talent and training. This is nearly self-evident, but it remains a controversial point. No one hesitates to admit the role of talent and training in the context of physical and intellectual pursuits; I have never met another person who denied that some of us are

stronger, more athletic, or more learned than others. But many people find it difficult to acknowledge that a continuum of moral and spiritual wisdom exists or that there might be better and worse ways to traverse it.

Stages of spiritual development, therefore, appear unavoidable. Just as we must grow into adulthood physically—and we can fail to mature or become sick or injured along the way—our minds develop by degrees. One can't learn sophisticated skills such as syllogistic reasoning, algebra, or irony until one has acquired more basic skills. It seems to me that a healthy spiritual life can begin only once our physical, mental, social, and ethical lives have sufficiently matured. We must learn to use language before we can work with it creatively or understand its limits, and the conventional self must form before we can investigate it and understand that it is not what it appears to be. An ability to examine the contents of one's own consciousness clearly, dispassionately, and nondiscursively, with sufficient attention to realize that no inner self exists, is a very sophisticated skill. And yet basic mindfulness can be practiced very early in life. Many people, including my wife, have successfully taught it to children as young as six. At that age—and every age thereafter—it can be a powerful tool for self-regulation and self-awareness.

Contemplatives have long understood that positive habits of mind are best viewed as skills that most of us learn imperfectly as we grow to adulthood. It is possible to become more focused, patient, and compassionate than one naturally tends to be, and there are many things to learn about how to be happy in this world. These are truths that Western psychological science has only recently begun to explore.

Some people are content in the midst of deprivation and danger, while others are miserable despite having all the luck in the world. This is not to say that external circumstances do not matter. But it is your mind, rather than circumstances themselves, that determines the quality of your life. Your mind is the basis of everything you experience and of every contribution you make to the lives of others. Given this fact, it makes sense to train it.

Scientists and skeptics generally assume that the traditional claims of yogis and mystics must be exaggerated or simply delusional and that the only rational purpose of meditation is limited to conventional "stress reduction." Conversely, serious students of these practices often insist that even the most outlandish claims made by and about spiritual masters are true. I am attempting to lead the reader along a middle path between these extremes—one that preserves our scientific skepticism but acknowledges that it is possible to radically transform our minds.

In one sense, the Buddhist concept of enlightenment really is just the epitome of "stress reduction"—and depending on how much stress one reduces, the results of one's practice can seem more or less profound. According to the Buddhist teachings, human beings have a distorted view of reality that leads them to suffer unnecessarily. We grasp at transitory pleasures. We brood about the past and worry about the future. We continually seek to prop up and defend an egoic self that doesn't exist. This is stressful—and spiritual life is a process of gradually unraveling our confusion and bringing this stress to an end. According to the Buddhist view, by seeing things as they are, we cease to suffer in the usual ways, and our minds can open to states of well-being that are intrinsic to the nature of consciousness.

Of course, some people claim to love stress and appear eager to live by its logic. Some even derive pleasure from imposing stress on others. Genghis Khan is reported to have said, "The greatest happiness is to scatter your enemy and drive him before you, to see his cities reduced to ashes, to see those who love him shrouded in tears, and to gather to your bosom his wives and daughters." People attach many meanings to terms like happiness, and not all of them are compatible with one another.

In The Moral Landscape, I argued that we tend to be unnecessarily confused by differences of opinion on the

topic of human well-being. No doubt certain people can derive mental pleasure—and even experience genuine ecstasy—by behaving in ways that produce immense suffering for others. But we know that these states are anomalous—or, at least, not sustainable—because we depend upon one another for more or less everything. Whatever the associated pleasures, raping and pillaging can't be a stable strategy for finding happiness in this world. Given our social requirements, we know that the deepest and most durable forms of well-being must be compatible with an ethical concern for other people—even for complete strangers—otherwise, violent conflict becomes inevitable. We also know that there are certain forms of happiness that are not available to a person even if, like Genghis Khan, he finds himself on the winning side of every siege. Some pleasures are intrinsically ethical—feelings like love, gratitude, devotion, and compassion. To inhabit these states of mind is, by definition, to be brought into alignment with others.

In my view, the realistic goal to be attained through spiritual practice is not some permanent state of enlightenment that admits of no further efforts but a capacity to be free in this moment, in the midst of whatever is happening. If you can do that, you have already solved most of the problems you will encounter in life.

Most helpful customer reviews

563 of 609 people found the following review helpful.
Sam Harris Has Real Guts
By Robert Middleton
This is an important book in many ways. Perhaps most important because Sam Harris has, for the past several years, been a strong and outspoken critic of organized religion of all stripes. And one thing Harris can do better than almost anyone else, is make his case both clearly and powerfully without any added garbage.

If you've watched his many videos on YouTube, you know the man can make an argument and stand his ground without wavering one iota. And the depth of his research is impressive. If Harris kept his message in this same vein, he would stay safe and continue to be accepted as a credible spokesman for the atheist perspective for a long time to come.

But did he do that with this book? Not on your life. Harris, makes a whole different argument here, one that many may not be familiar with (but that is on display on his blog posts). Religion may be bunkum, he asserts, but spirituality (which may be the foundation of many religions), is a truly worthy pursuit.

No doubt that a great many atheists are not going to like this one little bit. After all, atheists can sometimes be as narrow-minded as believers. For many, spirituality is seen as practically equivalent to religion. But in this book he makes a strong case that nothing could be further from the truth. And he doesn't make his arguments in a detached, completely intellectual way. Some might say that Harris has bought the spiritual kool-aid hook, link and sinker.

Harris is a long-time (25+ years) meditator, seeker after wisdom, student of a variety of spiritual practices and disciple of various teachers and gurus in several Eastern traditions. He most closely aligns himself with the school of non-duality or the direct path to awakening. And the stories of his search, his teachers and his realizations, were for me, the most compelling parts of the book.

Two of the funniest parts, having to do with burst pipes and a rat in Kathmandu, demonstrate that he can easily poke fun at himself.

Now, this is going to go far over the heads of a whole lot of people. This is not simple stuff. It's subtle and

deep. And for me, the section on consciousness and the brain wasn't easy reading. Some may have a hard time accepting that his spiritual orientation is nothing but another irrational belief system that he has railed against for so long.

So you've got to admit, this guy has guts. First he tears down every organized religion known to man as a bunch of irrational, destructive beliefs that only harm society, and then he takes the position that on the other hand, authentic spirituality is the most worthy pursuit one can possibly engage in.

Many people are going to completely misunderstand Harris. (I can't wait to read more of the Amazon reviews as they are posted.) But he's also going to wake up a whole lot of people to a new perspective that they had never even considered seriously for a nanosecond.

Some of the most highly regarded non-dualist teachers should be celebrating this book as it lends much credence to their teachings. Teachers and authors such as Rupert Spira (check out his YouTube videos), Greg Goode, and others, speak with clarity and authority about the non-dual perspective and are accessible to western seekers.

To say that this book is a watershed moment for spirituality might be hyperbole, but just as Harris made it safer for atheists to come out of the closet, he does the same for those on the path of awakening. I can't wait to see what he writes next!

367 of 397 people found the following review helpful.
Quite possibly the most important book I have ever read.
By Amazon Customer
I grew up in a Christian family and then earned degrees in Philosophy and Neuroscience. As an atheist, I've been mourning the loss of faith for years. Just because you want something to be true, doesn't mean it is. Losing one's faith can definitely leave a hole. This is the book that begins to fill the void and emptiness that I've felt from that loss. Thank you Sam Harris. This book will change lives.

8 of 8 people found the following review helpful.
I already knew the mind was a wonderful thing and a very powerful tool but to dig ...
By Vicki DeBord
This is the second book of Sam Harris that I have read and I have to say I'm hooked now. Waking Up is a book I believe everyone should read. I already knew the mind was a wonderful thing and a very powerful tool but to dig this deep into what the mind, consciousness and meditation is all about has been a wonderful experience. Our conventional sense of self is an illusion, wow what a powerful statement. One of the biggest questions that really stuck with me after reading this book was "Is there a form of happiness beyond the mere repetition of pleasure and avoidance of pain?", I say hell yes there is and I'm determined to re-wire my mind to do just this. To think that your mind determines your quality of life not your circumstances or surroundings, if we would all find a way to stop and realize this our lives could be so much different.
Now the idea of a split brain is mind blowing. The facts pointed out by Sam Harris on the split brain are amazing and was the cause of some great discussions with my peers. To imagine that someone can live with only one hemisphere of their brain is wild, and even more crazy that after dividing the brain it caused no changes in the person's behavior, how is this even possible? I will definitely be reading more into the split brain.
Self being an illusion makes sense to me, we all find ourselves talking to this illusory self. I agree that there isn't a region of the brain that holds a seat for a soul known as self for us to talk to when we are lost in thought or just speaking out. To penetrate this illusion you just have to look closely, seems so easy but I find it hard to not reflect back to that illusory self that seems to listen to me.
As you can see from above I found this book very interesting and will be reading more into specific topics of

this book.
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WAKING UP: SEARCHING FOR SPIRITUALITY WITHOUT RELIGION BY SAM HARRIS PDF

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Review
“Harris’s book . . . caught my eye because it’s so entirely of this moment, so keenly in touch with the growing number of Americans who are willing to say that they do not find the succor they crave, or a truth that makes sense to them, in organized religion.” (Frank Bruni, columnist, New York Times)

“The fact is that Waking Up lends a different picture of Harris (at least to me): an intelligent and sensitive person who is willing to undergo the discomfort involved in proposing alternatives to the religions he’s spent years degrading. His new book, whether discussing the poverty of spiritual language, the neurophysiology of consciousness, psychedelic experience, or the quandaries of the self, at the very least acknowledges the potency and importance of the religious impulse—though Harris might name it differently—that fundamental and common instinct to seek not just an answer to life, but a way to live that answer.” (Trevor Quirk, The New Republic)

"[A]n extraordinary and ambitious masterwork. . . . altogether spectacular." (Maria Popova, Brainpickings)

“Uber-atheist Sam Harris is getting all spiritual. In his new book, Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion, the usually outspoken critic of religion describes how spirituality can and must be divorced from religion if the human mind is to reach its full potential. . . . But there is plenty in Waking Up that will delight Harris’ most militant atheist readers.” (Religion News Service)

“The great value and novelty of this book is that Harris, in a simple but rigorous style, takes the middle way between these pseudoscientific and pseudo-spiritual assertions . . . [leading] to a profoundly more salubrious life.” (Publishers Weekly)

"A demanding, illusion-shattering book.” (Kirkus Reviews)

“Don’t read Waking Up . . . if you want to be told that heaven is real. Do read it if you want to explore the nature of consciousness, to learn how just trying to be mindful can free you from anxiety and self-blame.” (MORE Magazine)

“Waking Up is an eye opening, mind expanding book.” (AA Agnostica)

“A seeker’s memoir, a scientific and philosophical exploration of the self, and a how-to guide for transcendence, Waking Up explores the nature of consciousness, explains how to meditate, tells you the best drugs to take, and warns you about lecherous gurus. It will shake up your most fundamental beliefs about everyday experience, and it just might change your life.” (Paul Bloom, Professor of Psychology and Cognitive Science, Yale University and author of "Just Babies: The Origins of Good and Evil")

“Waking Up is a rigorous, kind, clear, and witty book that will point you toward the selflessness that is our original nature.” (Stephen Mitchell)

“Sam Harris points out the rational methodology for exploring the nature of consciousness and for experiencing a transformative understanding of possibilities. Waking Up really does help us wake up.” (Joseph Goldstein, author of "Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening" and "One Dharma")

“As a neuroscientist, Sam Harris shows how our egos are illusions, diffuse products of brain activity, and as a long-term practitioner of meditation, he shows how abandoning this illusion can wake us up to a richer life, more connected to everything around us.” (Jerry Coyne, Professor of Biology at the University of Chicago and author of "Why Evolution is True")

"Sam Harris ranks as my favorite skeptic, bar none. In Waking Up he gives us a clear-headed, no-holds-barred look at the spiritual supermarket, calling out what amounts to junk food and showing us where real nutrition can be found. Anyone who realizes the value of a spiritual life will find much to savor here – and those who see no value in it will find much to reflect on." (Daniel Goleman, author Emotional Intelligence and Focus)

"Sam Harris has written a beautifully rational book about spiritually, consciousness and transcendence. He is the high priest of spirituality without religion. I recommend this book regardless of your belief system. As befits a book called Waking Up, it’s an eye opener." (A.J. Jacobs, bestselling author of The Year of Living Biblically)

Praise for Free Will:

Publishers Weekly Top 10 Science Book of Spring 2012

“A nimble book, amiably and conversationally jumping from point to point. The book’s length is one of its charms: He never belabors any one topic or idea, sticking around exactly as long as he needs to in order to lay out his argument (and tackle the rebuttals that it will inevitably provoke) and not a page longer.” —Washington Post

“A brief and forceful broadside at the conundrum that has nagged at every major thinker from Plato to Slavoj Zizek. Self-avowedly secular, [Harris is] addressing the need for individual growth and social betterment, and [is] doing so with compelling argument and style.” —Los Angeles Times

“Harris skewers the concept of free will — that mainstay of law, policy and politics — in fewer than 100 pages.” —Nature

"Brilliant and witty—and never less than incisive—Free Will shows that Sam Harris can say more in 13,000 words than most people do in 100,000." —Oliver Sacks

Praise for The Moral Landscape:

“The most compelling strand in The Moral Landscape is its unspooling diatribe against relativism.” —New York Times

“This is an inspiring book, holding out as it does the possibility of a rational understanding of how to construct the good life with the aid of science, free from the accretions of religious superstition and cultural coercion.” —Financial Times

“Harris’s is a first-principle argument, backed by copious empirical evidence woven through a tightly reasoned narrative… Harris’s program of a science-based morality is a courageous one that I wholeheartedly endorse.” —Scientific American

“Sam Harris breathes intellectual fire into an ancient debate. Reading this thrilling, audacious book, you feel the ground shifting beneath your feet. Reason has never had a more passionate advocate.”—Ian McEwan

“I was one of those who had unthinkingly bought into the hectoring myth that science can say nothing about morals. To my surprise, The Moral Landscape has changed all that for me. It should change it for philosophers too. Philosophers of mind have already discovered that they can't duck the study of neuroscience, and the best of them have raised their game as a result. Sam Harris shows that the same should be true of moral philosophers, and it will turn their world exhilaratingly upside down. As for religion, and the preposterous idea that we need God to be good, nobody wields a sharper bayonet than Sam Harris.”—Richard Dawkins

“Reading Sam Harris is like drinking water from a cool stream on a hot day. He has the rare ability to frame arguments that are not only stimulating, they are downright nourishing… His discussions will provoke secular liberals and religious conservatives alike, who jointly argue from different perspectives that there always will be an unbridgeable chasm between merely knowing what is and discerning what should be. As was the case with Harris’ previous books, readers are bound to come away with previously firm convictions about the world challenged, and a vital new awareness about the nature and value of science and reason in our lives.” —Lawrence M. Krauss, Foundation Professor and Director of the ASU Origins Project at Arizona State University, author of The Physics of Star Trek, and, Quantum Man: Richard Feynman’s Life in Science

“A lively, provocative, and timely new look at one of the deepest problems in the world of ideas. Harris makes a powerful case for a morality that is based on human flourishing and thoroughly enmeshed with science and rationality. It is a tremendously appealing vision, and one that no thinking person can afford to ignore.” —Steven Pinker, Harvard College Professor of Psychology, Harvard University, and author of How the Mind Works and The Blank Slate

“Expanding upon concepts posited in the End of Faith and Free Will, neuroscientist Harris draws from personal contemplative practice and a growing body of scientific research to argue that the self, the feeling that there is an “I” residing in one’s head, is both an illusion and the primary cause of human suffering…. The great value and novelty of this book is that Harris, in a simple but rigorous style, takes the middle way between… pseudoscientific and pseudospiritual assertions, cogently maintaining that while such contemplative insights provide no evidence for metaphysical claims, they are available, and seeing them for ourselves leads to a profoundly more salubrious life.” (Publishers Weekly)

About the Author

Sam Harris is the author of the bestselling books The End of Faith, Letter to a Christian Nation, The Moral Landscape, Free Will, and Lying. The End of Faith won the 2005 PEN Award for Nonfiction. His writing has been published in over fifteen languages. Dr. Harris is cofounder and CEO of Project Reason, a nonprofit

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Waking Up 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 specious 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.

THE SEARCH FOR HAPPINESS

One day, you will find yourself outside this world which is like a mother's womb. You will leave this earth to enter, while you are yet in the body, a vast expanse, and know that the words, "God's earth is vast," name this region from which the saints have come.

Jalal-ud-Din Rumi

I share the concern, expressed by many atheists, that the terms spiritual and mystical are often used to make claims not merely about the quality of certain experiences but about reality at large. Far too often, these words are invoked in support of religious beliefs that are morally and intellectually grotesque. Consequently,

many of my fellow atheists consider all talk of spirituality to be a sign of mental illness, conscious imposture, or self-deception. This is a problem, because millions of people have had experiences for which spiritual and mystical seem the only terms available. Many of the beliefs people form on the basis of these experiences are false. But the fact that most atheists will view a statement like Rumi's above as a symptom of the man's derangement grants a kernel of truth to the rantings of even our least rational opponents. The human mind does, in fact, contain vast expanses that few of us ever discover.

And there is something degraded and degrading about many of our habits of attention as we shop, gossip, argue, and ruminate our way to the grave. Perhaps I should speak only for myself here: It seems to me that I spend much of my waking life in a neurotic trance. My experiences in meditation suggest, however, that an alternative exists. It is possible to stand free of the juggernaut of self, if only for moments at a time.

Most cultures have produced men and women who have found that certain deliberate uses of attention—meditation, yoga, prayer—can transform their perception of the world. Their efforts generally begin with the realization that even in the best of circumstances, happiness is elusive. We seek pleasant sights, sounds, tastes, sensations, and moods. We satisfy our intellectual curiosity. We surround ourselves with friends and loved ones. We become connoisseurs of art, music, or food. But our pleasures are, by their very nature, fleeting. If we enjoy some great professional success, our feelings of accomplishment remain vivid and intoxicating for an hour, or perhaps a day, but then they subside. And the search goes on. The effort required to keep boredom and other unpleasantness at bay must continue, moment to moment.

Ceaseless change is an unreliable basis for lasting fulfillment. Realizing this, many people begin to wonder whether a deeper source of well-being exists. Is there a form of happiness beyond the mere repetition of pleasure and avoidance of pain? Is there a happiness that does not depend upon having one's favorite foods available, or friends and loved ones within arm's reach, or good books to read, or something to look forward to on the weekend? Is it possible to be happy before anything happens, before one's desires are gratified, in spite of life's difficulties, in the very midst of physical pain, old age, disease, and death?

We are all, in some sense, living our answer to this question—and most of us are living as though the answer were "no." No, nothing is more profound than repeating one's pleasures and avoiding one's pains; nothing is more profound than seeking satisfaction—sensory, emotional, and intellectual—moment after moment. Just keep your foot on the gas until you run out of road.

Certain people, however, come to suspect that human existence might encompass more than this. Many of them are led to suspect this by religion—by the claims of the Buddha or Jesus or some other celebrated figure. And such people often begin to practice various disciplines of attention as a means of examining their experience closely enough to see whether a deeper source of well-being exists. They may even sequester themselves in caves or monasteries for months or years at a time to facilitate this process. Why would a person do this? No doubt there are many motives for retreating from the world, and some of them are psychologically unhealthy. In its wisest form, however, the exercise amounts to a very simple experiment. Here is its logic: If there exists a source of psychological well-being that does not depend upon merely gratifying one's desires, then it should be present even when all the usual sources of pleasure have been removed. Such happiness should be available to a person who has declined to marry her high school sweetheart, renounced her career and material possessions, and gone off to a cave or some other spot that is inhospitable to ordinary aspirations.

One clue to how daunting most people would find such a project is the fact that solitary confinement—which is essentially what we are talking about—is considered a punishment inside a maximum-security prison. Even when forced to live among murderers and rapists, most people still prefer the company of others to

spending any significant amount of time alone in a room. And yet contemplatives in many traditions claim to experience extraordinary depths of psychological well-being while living in isolation for vast stretches of time. How should we interpret this? Either the contemplative literature is a catalogue of religious delusion, psychopathology, and deliberate fraud, or people have been having liberating insights under the name of "spirituality" and "mysticism" for millennia.

Unlike many atheists, I have spent much of my life seeking experiences of the kind that gave rise to the world's religions. Despite the painful results of my first few days alone in the mountains of Colorado, I later studied with a wide range of monks, lamas, yogis, and other contemplatives, some of whom had lived for decades in seclusion doing nothing but meditating. In the process, I spent two years on silent retreat myself (in increments of one week to three months), practicing various techniques of meditation for twelve to eighteen hours a day.

I can attest that when one goes into silence and meditates for weeks or months at a time, doing nothing else—not speaking, reading, or writing, just making a moment-to-moment effort to observe the contents of consciousness—one has experiences that are generally unavailable to people who have not undertaken a similar practice. I believe that such states of mind have a lot to say about the nature of consciousness and the possibilities of human well-being. Leaving aside the metaphysics, mythology, and sectarian dogma, what contemplatives throughout history have discovered is that there is an alternative to being continuously spellbound by the conversation we are having with ourselves; there is an alternative to simply identifying with the next thought that pops into consciousness. And glimpsing this alternative dispels the conventional illusion of the self.

Most traditions of spirituality also suggest a connection between self-transcendence and living ethically. Not all good feelings have an ethical valence, and pathological forms of ecstasy surely exist. I have no doubt, for instance, that many suicide bombers feel extraordinarily good just before they detonate themselves in a crowd. But there are also forms of mental pleasure that are intrinsically ethical. As I indicated earlier, for some states of consciousness, a phrase like "boundless love" does not seem overblown. It is decidedly inconvenient for the forces of reason and secularism that if someone wakes up tomorrow feeling boundless love for all sentient beings, the only people likely to acknowledge the legitimacy of his experience will be representatives of one or another Iron Age religion or New Age cult.

Most of us are far wiser than we may appear to be. We know how to keep our relationships in order, to use our time well, to improve our health, to lose weight, to learn valuable skills, and to solve many other riddles of existence. But following even the straight and open path to happiness is hard. If your best friend were to ask how she could live a better life, you would probably find many useful things to say, and yet you might not live that way yourself. On one level, wisdom is nothing more profound than an ability to follow one's own advice. However, there are deeper insights to be had about the nature of our minds. Unfortunately, they have been discussed entirely in the context of religion and, therefore, have been shrouded in fallacy and superstition for all of human history.

The problem of finding happiness in this world arrives with our first breath—and our needs and desires seem to multiply by the hour. To spend any time in the presence of a young child is to witness a mind ceaselessly buffeted by joy and sorrow. As we grow older, our laughter and tears become less gratuitous, perhaps, but the same process of change continues: One roiling complex of thought and emotion is followed by the next, like waves in the ocean.

Seeking, finding, maintaining, and safeguarding our well-being is the great project to which we all are devoted, whether or not we choose to think in these terms. This is not to say that we want mere pleasure or

the easiest possible life. Many things require extraordinary effort to accomplish, and some of us learn to enjoy the struggle. Any athlete knows that certain kinds of pain can be exquisitely pleasurable. The burn of lifting weights, for instance, would be excruciating if it were a symptom of terminal illness. But because it is associated with health and fitness, most people find it enjoyable. Here we see that cognition and emotion are not separate. The way we think about experience can completely determine how we feel about it.

And we always face tensions and trade-offs. In some moments we crave excitement and in others rest. We might love the taste of wine and chocolate, but rarely for breakfast. Whatever the context, our minds are perpetually moving—generally toward pleasure (or its imagined source) and away from pain. I am not the first person to have noticed this.

Our struggle to navigate the space of possible pains and pleasures produces most of human culture. Medical science attempts to prolong our health and to reduce the suffering associated with illness, aging, and death. All forms of media cater to our thirst for information and entertainment. Political and economic institutions seek to ensure our peaceful collaboration with one another—and the police or the military is summoned when they fail. Beyond ensuring our survival, civilization is a vast machine invented by the human mind to regulate its states. We are ever in the process of creating and repairing a world that our minds want to be in. And wherever we look, we see the evidence of our successes and our failures. Unfortunately, failure enjoys a natural advantage. Wrong answers to any problem outnumber right ones by a wide margin, and it seems that it will always be easier to break things than to fix them.

Despite the beauty of our world and the scope of human accomplishment, it is hard not to worry that the forces of chaos will triumph—not merely in the end but in every moment. Our pleasures, however refined or easily acquired, are by their very nature fleeting. They begin to subside the instant they arise, only to be replaced by fresh desires or feelings of discomfort. You can't get enough of your favorite meal until, in the next moment, you find you are so stuffed as to nearly require the attention of a surgeon—and yet, by some quirk of physics, you still have room for dessert. The pleasure of dessert lasts a few seconds, and then the lingering taste in your mouth must be banished by a drink of water. The warmth of the sun feels wonderful on your skin, but soon it becomes too much of a good thing. A move to the shade brings immediate relief, but after a minute or two, the breeze is just a little too cold. Do you have a sweater in the car? Let's take a look. Yes, there it is. You're warm now, but you notice that your sweater has seen better days. Does it make you look carefree or disheveled? Perhaps it is time to go shopping for something new. And so it goes.

We seem to do little more than lurch between wanting and not wanting. Thus, the question naturally arises: Is there more to life than this? Might it be possible to feel much better (in every sense of better) than one tends to feel? Is it possible to find lasting fulfillment despite the inevitability of change?

Spiritual life begins with a suspicion that the answer to such questions could well be "yes." And a true spiritual practitioner is someone who has discovered that it is possible to be at ease in the world for no reason, if only for a few moments at a time, and that such ease is synonymous with transcending the apparent boundaries of the self. Those who have never tasted such peace of mind might view these assertions as highly suspect. Nevertheless, it is a fact that a condition of selfless well-being is there to be glimpsed in each moment. Of course, I'm not claiming to have experienced all such states, but I meet many people who appear to have experienced none of them—and these people often profess to have no interest in spiritual life.

This is not surprising. The phenomenon of self-transcendence is generally sought and interpreted in a religious context, and it is precisely the sort of experience that tends to increase a person's faith. How many Christians, having once felt their hearts grow as wide as the world, will decide to ditch Christianity and proclaim their atheism? Not many, I suspect. How many people who have never felt anything of the kind

become atheists? I don't know, but there is little doubt that these mental states act as a kind of filter: The faithful count them in support of ancient dogma, and their absence gives nonbelievers further reason to reject religion.

This is a difficult problem for me to address in the context of a book, because many readers will have no idea what I'm talking about when I describe certain spiritual experiences and might assume that the assertions I'm making must be accepted on faith. Religious readers present a different challenge: They may think they know exactly what I'm describing, but only insofar as it aligns with one or another religious doctrine. It seems to me that both these attitudes present impressive obstacles to understanding spirituality in the way that I intend. I can only hope that, whatever your background, you will approach the exercises presented in this book with an open mind.

RELIGION, EAST AND WEST

We are often encouraged to believe that all religions are the same: All teach the same ethical principles; all urge their followers to contemplate the same divine reality; all are equally wise, compassionate, and true within their sphere—or equally divisive and false, depending on one's view.

No serious adherents of any faith can believe these things, because most religions make claims about reality that are mutually incompatible. Exceptions to this rule exist, but they provide little relief from what is essentially a zero-sum contest of all against all. The polytheism of Hinduism allows it to digest parts of many other faiths: If Christians insist that Jesus Christ is the son of God, for instance, Hindus can make him yet another avatar of Vishnu without losing any sleep. But this spirit of inclusiveness points in one direction only, and even it has its limits. Hindus are committed to specific metaphysical ideas—the law of karma and rebirth, a multiplicity of gods—that almost every other major religion decries. It is impossible for any faith, no matter how elastic, to fully honor the truth claims of another.

Devout Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe that theirs is the one true and complete revelation—because that is what their holy books say of themselves. Only secularists and New Age dabblers can mistake the modern tactic of "interfaith dialogue" for an underlying unity of all religions.

I have long argued that confusion about the unity of religions is an artifact of language. Religion is a term like sports: Some sports are peaceful but spectacularly dangerous ("free solo" rock climbing); some are safer but synonymous with violence (mixed martial arts); and some entail little more risk of injury than standing in the shower (bowling). To speak of sports as a generic activity makes it impossible to discuss what athletes actually do or the physical attributes required to do it. What do all sports have in common apart from breathing? Not much. The term religion is hardly more useful.

The same could be said of spirituality. The esoteric doctrines found within every religious tradition are not all derived from the same insights. Nor are they equally empirical, logical, parsimonious, or wise. They don't always point to the same underlying reality—and when they do, they don't do it equally well. Nor are all these teachings equally suited for export beyond the cultures that first conceived them.

Making distinctions of this kind, however, is deeply unfashionable in intellectual circles. In my experience, people do not want to hear that Islam supports violence in a way that Jainism doesn't, or that Buddhism offers a truly sophisticated, empirical approach to understanding the human mind, whereas Christianity presents an almost perfect impediment to such understanding. In many circles, to make invidious comparisons of this kind is to stand convicted of bigotry.

In one sense, all religions and spiritual practices must address the same reality—because people of all faiths have glimpsed many of the same truths. Any view of consciousness and the cosmos that is available to the human mind can, in principle, be appreciated by anyone. It is not surprising, therefore, that individual Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Buddhists have given voice to some of the same insights and intuitions. This merely indicates that human cognition and emotion run deeper than religion. (But we knew that, didn't we?) It does not suggest that all religions understand our spiritual possibilities equally well.

One way of missing this point is to declare that all spiritual teachings are inflections of the same "Perennial Philosophy." The writer Aldous Huxley brought this idea into prominence by publishing an anthology by that title. Here is how he justified the idea:

Philosophia perennis—the phrase was coined by Leibniz; but the thing—the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being—the thing is immemorial and universal. Rudiments of the Perennial Philosophy may be found among the traditionary lore of primitive peoples in every region of the world, and in its fully developed forms it has a place in every one of the higher religions. A version of this Highest Common Factor in all preceding and subsequent theologies was first committed to writing more than twenty-five centuries ago, and since that time the inexhaustible theme has been treated again and again, from the standpoint of every religious tradition and in all the principal languages of Asia and Europe.2

Although Huxley was being reasonably cautious in his wording, this notion of a "highest common factor" uniting all religions begins to break apart the moment one presses for details. For instance, the Abrahamic religions are incorrigibly dualistic and faith-based: In Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the human soul is conceived as genuinely separate from the divine reality of God. The appropriate attitude for a creature that finds itself in this circumstance is some combination of terror, shame, and awe. In the best case, notions of God's love and grace provide some relief—but the central message of these faiths is that each of us is separate from, and in relationship to, a divine authority who will punish anyone who harbors the slightest doubt about His supremacy.

The Eastern tradition presents a very different picture of reality. And its highest teachings—found within the various schools of Buddhism and the nominally Hindu tradition of Advaita Vedanta—explicitly transcend dualism. By their lights, consciousness itself is identical to the very reality that one might otherwise mistake for God. While these teachings make metaphysical claims that any serious student of science should find incredible, they center on a range of experiences that the doctrines of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam rule out-of-bounds.

Of course, it is true that specific Jewish, Christian, and Muslim mystics have had experiences similar to those that motivate Buddhism and Advaita, but these contemplative insights are not exemplary of their faith. Rather, they are anomalies that Western mystics have always struggled to understand and to honor, often at considerable personal risk. Given their proper weight, these experiences produce heterodoxies for which Jews, Christians, and Muslims have been regularly exiled or killed.

Like Huxley, anyone determined to find a happy synthesis among spiritual traditions will notice that the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260–ca. 1327) often sounded very much like a Buddhist: "The knower and the known are one. Simple people imagine that they should see God, as if He stood there and they here. This is not so. God and I, we are one in knowledge." But he also sounded like a man bound to be excommunicated by his church—as he was. Had Eckhart lived a little longer, it seems certain that he would

have been dragged into the street and burned alive for these expansive ideas. That is a telling difference between Christianity and Buddhism.

In the same vein, it is misleading to hold up the Sufi mystic Al-Hallaj (858–922) as a representative of Islam. He was a Muslim, yes, but he suffered the most grisly death imaginable at the hands of his coreligionists for presuming to be one with God. Both Eckhart and Al-Hallaj gave voice to an experience of self-transcendence that any human being can, in principle, enjoy. However, their views were not consistent with the central teachings of their faiths.

The Indian tradition is comparatively free of problems of this kind. Although the teachings of Buddhism and Advaita are embedded in more or less conventional religions, they contain empirical insights about the nature of consciousness that do not depend upon faith. One can practice most techniques of Buddhist meditation or the method of self-inquiry of Advaita and experience the advertised changes in one's consciousness without ever believing in the law of karma or in the miracles attributed to Indian mystics. To get started as a Christian, however, one must first accept a dozen implausible things about the life of Jesus and the origins of the Bible—and the same can be said, minus a few unimportant details, about Judaism and Islam. If one should happen to discover that the sense of being an individual soul is an illusion, one will be guilty of blasphemy everywhere west of the Indus.

There is no question that many religious disciplines can produce interesting experiences in suitable minds. It should be clear, however, that engaging a faith-based (and probably delusional) practice, whatever its effects, isn't the same as investigating the nature of one's mind absent any doctrinal assumptions. Statements of this kind may seem starkly antagonistic toward Abrahamic religions, but they are nonetheless true: One can speak about Buddhism shorn of its miracles and irrational assumptions. The same cannot be said of Christianity or Islam.3

Western engagement with Eastern spirituality dates back at least as far as Alexander's campaign in India, where the young conqueror and his pet philosophers encountered naked ascetics whom they called "gymnosophists." It is often said that the thinking of these yogis greatly influenced the philosopher Pyrrho, the father of Greek skepticism. This seems a credible claim, because Pyrrho's teachings had much in common with Buddhism. But his contemplative insights and methods never became part of any system of thought in the West.

Serious study of Eastern thought by outsiders did not begin until the late eighteenth century. The first translation of a Sanskrit text into a Western language appears to have been Sir Charles Wilkins's rendering of the Bhagavad Gita, a cornerstone text of Hinduism, in 1785. The Buddhist canon would not attract the attention of Western scholars for another hundred years.4

The conversation between East and West started in earnest, albeit inauspiciously, with the birth of the Theosophical Society, that golem of spiritual hunger and self-deception brought into this world almost single-handedly by the incomparable Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky in 1875. Everything about Blavatsky seemed to defy earthly logic: She was an enormously fat woman who was said to have wandered alone and undetected for seven years in the mountains of Tibet. She was also thought to have survived shipwrecks, gunshot wounds, and sword fights. Even less persuasively, she claimed to be in psychic contact with members of the "Great White Brotherhood" of ascended masters—a collection of immortals responsible for the evolution and maintenance of the entire cosmos. Their leader hailed from the planet Venus but lived in the mythical kingdom of Shambhala, which Blavatsky placed somewhere in the vicinity of the Gobi Desert. With the suspiciously bureaucratic name "the Lord of the World," he supervised the work of other adepts, including the Buddha, Maitreya, Maha Chohan, and one Koot Hoomi, who appears to have had

nothing better to do on behalf of the cosmos than to impart its secrets to Blavatsky.5

It is always surprising when a person attracts legions of followers and builds a large organization on their largesse while peddling penny-arcade mythology of this kind. But perhaps this was less remarkable in a time when even the best-educated people were still struggling to come to terms with electricity, evolution, and the existence of other planets. We can easily forget how suddenly the world had shrunk and the cosmos expanded as the nineteenth century came to a close. The geographical barriers between distant cultures had been stripped away by trade and conquest (one could now order a gin and tonic almost everywhere on earth), and yet the reality of unseen forces and alien worlds was a daily focus of the most careful scientific research. Inevitably, cross-cultural and scientific discoveries were mingled in the popular imagination with religious dogma and traditional occultism. In fact, this had been happening at the highest level of human thought for more than a century: It is always instructive to recall that the father of modern physics, Isaac Newton, squandered a considerable portion of his genius on the study of theology, biblical prophecy, and alchemy.

The inability to distinguish the strange but true from the merely strange was common enough in Blavatsky's time—as it is in our own. Blavatsky's contemporary Joseph Smith, a libidinous con man and crackpot, was able to found a new religion on the claim that he had unearthed the final revelations of God in the hallowed precincts of Manchester, New York, written in "reformed Egyptian" on golden plates. He decoded this text with the aid of magical "seer stones," which, whether by magic or not, allowed Smith to produce an English version of God's Word that was an embarrassing pastiche of plagiarisms from the Bible and silly lies about Jesus's life in America. And yet the resulting edifice of nonsense and taboo survives to this day.

A more modern cult, Scientology, leverages human credulity to an even greater degree: Adherents believe that human beings are possessed by the souls of extraterrestrials who were condemned to planet Earth 75 million years ago by the galactic overlord Xenu. How was their exile accomplished? The old-fashioned way: These aliens were shuttled by the billions to our humble planet aboard a spacecraft that resembled a DC-8. They were then imprisoned in a volcano and blasted to bits with hydrogen bombs. Their souls survived, however, and disentangling them from our own can be the work of a lifetime. It is also expensive.6

Despite the imponderables in her philosophy, Blavatsky was among the first people to announce in Western circles that there was such a thing as the "wisdom of the East." This wisdom began to trickle westward once Swami Vivekananda introduced the teachings of Vedanta at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. Again, Buddhism lagged behind: A few Western monks living on the island of Sri Lanka were beginning to translate the Pali Canon, which remains the most authoritative record of the teachings of the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama. However, the practice of Buddhist meditation wouldn't actually be taught in the West for another half century.

It is easy enough to find fault with romantic ideas about Eastern wisdom, and a tradition of such criticism sprang up almost the instant the first Western seeker sat cross-legged and attempted to meditate. In the late 1950s, the author and journalist Arthur Koestler traveled to India and Japan in search of wisdom and summarized his pilgrimage thus: "I started my journey in sackcloth and ashes, and came back rather proud of being a European."7

In The Lotus and the Robot, Koestler gives some of his reasons for being less than awed by his journey to the East. Consider, for example, the ancient discipline of hatha yoga. While now generally viewed as a system of physical exercises designed to increase a person's strength and flexibility, in its traditional context hatha yoga is part of a larger effort to manipulate "subtle" features of the body unknown to anatomists. No doubt much of this subtlety corresponds to experiences that yogis actually have—but many of the beliefs formed on the basis of these experiences are patently absurd, and certain of the associated practices are both

silly and injurious.

Koestler reports that the aspiring yogi is traditionally encouraged to lengthen his tongue—even going so far as to cut the frenulum (the membrane that anchors the tongue to the floor of the mouth) and stretch the soft palate. What is the purpose of these modifications? They enable our hero to insert his tongue into his nasopharynx, thereby blocking the flow of air through the nostrils. His anatomy thus improved, a yogi can then imbibe subtle liquors believed to emanate directly from his brain. These substances—imagined, by recourse to further subtleties, to be connected to the retention of semen—are said to confer not only spiritual wisdom but immortality. This technique of drinking mucus is known as khechari mudra, and it is thought to be one of the crowning achievements of yoga.

I'm more than happy to score a point for Koestler here. Needless to say, no defense of such practices will be found in this book.

Criticism of Eastern wisdom can seem especially pertinent when coming from Easterners themselves. There is indeed something preposterous about well-educated Westerners racing East in search of spiritual enlightenment while Easterners make the opposite pilgrimage seeking education and economic opportunities. I have a friend whose own adventures may have marked a high point in this global comedy. He made his first trip to India immediately after graduating from college, having already acquired several yogic affectations: He had the requisite beads and long hair, but he was also in the habit of writing the name of the Hindu god Ram in Devanagari script over and over in a journal. On the flight to the motherland, he had the good fortune to be seated next to an Indian businessman. This weary traveler thought he had witnessed every species of human folly—until he caught sight of my friend's scribbling. The spectacle of a Western-born Stanford graduate, of working age, holding degrees in both economics and history, devoting himself to the graphomaniacal worship of an imaginary deity in a language he could neither read nor understand was more than this man could abide in a confined space at 30,000 feet. After a testy exchange, the two travelers could only stare at each other in mutual incomprehension and pity—and they had ten hours yet to fly. There really are two sides to such a conversation, but I concede that only one of them can be made to look ridiculous.

We can also grant that Eastern wisdom has not produced societies or political institutions that are any better than their Western counterparts; in fact, one could argue that India has survived as the world's largest democracy only because of institutions that were built under British rule. Nor has the East led the world in scientific discovery. Nevertheless, there is something to the notion of uniquely Eastern wisdom, and most of it has been concentrated in or derived from the tradition of Buddhism.

Buddhism has been of special interest to Western scientists for reasons already hinted at. It isn't primarily a faith-based religion, and its central teachings are entirely empirical. Despite the superstitions that many Buddhists cherish, the doctrine has a practical and logical core that does not require any unwarranted assumptions. Many Westerners have recognized this and have been relieved to find a spiritual alternative to faith-based worship. It is no accident that most of the scientific research now done on meditation focuses primarily on Buddhist techniques.

Another reason for Buddhism's prominence among scientists has been the intellectual engagement of one of its most visible representatives: Tenzin Gyatso, the fourteenth Dalai Lama. Of course, the Dalai Lama is not without his critics. My late friend Christopher Hitchens meted out justice to "his holiness" on several occasions. He also castigated Western students of Buddhism for the "widely and lazily held belief that 'Oriental' religion is different from other faiths: less dogmatic, more contemplative, more . . . Transcendental," and for the "blissful, thoughtless exceptionalism" with which Buddhism is regarded by many.8

Hitch did have a point. In his capacity as the head of one of the four branches of Tibetan Buddhism and as the former leader of the Tibetan government in exile, the Dalai Lama has made some questionable claims and formed some embarrassing alliances. Although his engagement with science is far-reaching and surely sincere, the man is not above consulting an astrologer or "oracle" when making important decisions. I will have something to say in this book about many of the things that might have justified Hitch's opprobrium, but the general thrust of his commentary here was all wrong. Several Eastern traditions are exceptionally empirical and exceptionally wise, and therefore merit the exceptionalism claimed by their adherents.

Buddhism in particular possesses a literature on the nature of the mind that has no peer in Western religion or Western science. Some of these teachings are cluttered with metaphysical assumptions that should provoke our doubts, but many aren't. And when engaged as a set of hypotheses by which to investigate the mind and deepen one's ethical life, Buddhism can be an entirely rational enterprise.

Unlike the doctrines of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the teachings of Buddhism are not considered by their adherents to be the product of infallible revelation. They are, rather, empirical instructions: If you do X, you will experience Y. Although many Buddhists have a superstitious and cultic attachment to the historical Buddha, the teachings of Buddhism present him as an ordinary human being who succeeded in understanding the nature of his own mind. Buddha means "awakened one"—and Siddhartha Gautama was merely a man who woke up from the dream of being a separate self. Compare this with the Christian view of Jesus, who is imagined to be the son of the creator of the universe. This is a very different proposition, and it renders Christianity, no matter how fully divested of metaphysical baggage, all but irrelevant to a scientific discussion about the human condition.

The teachings of Buddhism, and of Eastern spirituality generally, focus on the primacy of the mind. There are dangers in this way of viewing the world, to be sure. Focusing on training the mind to the exclusion of all else can lead to political quietism and hive-like conformity. The fact that your mind is all you have and that it is possible to be at peace even in difficult circumstances can become an argument for ignoring obvious societal problems. But it is not a compelling one. The world is in desperate need of improvement—in global terms, freedom and prosperity remain the exception—and yet this doesn't mean we need to be miserable while we work for the common good.

In fact, the teachings of Buddhism emphasize a connection between ethical and spiritual life. Making progress in one domain lays a foundation for progress in the other. One can, for instance, spend long periods of time in contemplative solitude for the purpose of becoming a better person in the world—having better relationships, being more honest and compassionate and, therefore, more helpful to one's fellow human beings. Being wisely selfish and being selfless can amount to very much the same thing. There are centuries of anecdotal testimony on this point—and, as we will see, the scientific study of the mind has begun to bear it out. There is now little question that how one uses one's attention, moment to moment, largely determines what kind of person one becomes. Our minds—and lives—are largely shaped by how we use them.

Although the experience of self-transcendence is, in principle, available to everyone, this possibility is only weakly attested to in the religious and philosophical literature of the West. Only Buddhists and students of Advaita Vedanta (which appears to have been heavily influenced by Buddhism) have been absolutely clear in asserting that spiritual life consists in overcoming the illusion of the self by paying close attention to our experience in the present moment.9

As I wrote in my first book, The End of Faith, the disparity between Eastern and Western spirituality resembles that found between Eastern and Western medicine—with the arrow of embarrassment pointing in the opposite direction. Humanity did not understand the biology of cancer, develop antibiotics and vaccines,

or sequence the human genome under an Eastern sun. Consequently, real medicine is almost entirely a product of Western science. Insofar as specific techniques of Eastern medicine actually work, they must conform, whether by design or by happenstance, to the principles of biology as we have come to know them in the West. This is not to say that Western medicine is complete. In a few decades, many of our current practices will seem barbaric. One need only ponder the list of side effects that accompany most medications to appreciate that these are terribly blunt instruments. Nevertheless, most of our knowledge about the human body—and about the physical universe generally—emerged in the West. The rest is instinct, folklore, bewilderment, and untimely death.

An honest comparison of spiritual traditions, Eastern and Western, proves equally invidious. As manuals for contemplative understanding, the Bible and the Koran are worse than useless. Whatever wisdom can be found in their pages is never best found there, and it is subverted, time and again, by ancient savagery and superstition.

Again, one must deploy the necessary caveats: I am not saying that most Buddhists or Hindus have been sophisticated contemplatives. Their traditions have spawned many of the same pathologies we see elsewhere among the faithful: dogmatism, anti-intellectualism, tribalism, otherworldliness. However, the empirical difference between the central teachings of Buddhism and Advaita and those of Western monotheism is difficult to overstate. One can traverse the Eastern paths simply by becoming interested in the nature of one's own mind—especially in the immediate causes of psychological suffering—and by paying closer attention to one's experience in every present moment. There is, in truth, nothing one need believe. The teachings of Buddhism and Advaita are best viewed as lab manuals and explorers' logs detailing the results of empirical research on the nature of human consciousness.

Nearly every geographical or linguistic barrier to the free exchange of ideas has now fallen away. It seems to me, therefore, that educated people no longer have a right to any form of spiritual provincialism. The truths of Eastern spirituality are now no more Eastern than the truths of Western science are Western. We are merely talking about human consciousness and its possible states. My purpose in writing this book is to encourage you to investigate certain contemplative insights for yourself, without accepting the metaphysical ideas that they inspired in ignorant and isolated peoples of the past.

A final word of caution: Nothing I say here is intended as a denial of the fact that psychological well-being requires a healthy "sense of self"—with all the capacities that this vague phrase implies. Children need to become autonomous, confident, and self-aware in order to form healthy relationships. And they must acquire a host of other cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal skills in the process of becoming sane and productive adults. Which is to say that there is a time and a place for everything—unless, of course, there isn't. No doubt there are psychological conditions, such as schizophrenia, for which practices of the sort I recommend in this book might be inappropriate. Some people find the experience of an extended, silent retreat psychologically destabilizing.10 Again, an analogy to physical training seems apropos: Not everyone is suited to running a six-minute mile or bench-pressing his own body weight. But many quite ordinary people are capable of these feats, and there are better and worse ways to accomplish them. What is more, the same principles of fitness generally apply even to people whose abilities are limited by illness or injury.

So I want to make it clear that the instructions in this book are intended for readers who are adults (more or less) and free from any psychological or medical conditions that could be exacerbated by meditation or other techniques of sustained introspection. If paying attention to your breath, to bodily sensations, to the flow of thoughts, or to the nature of consciousness itself seems likely to cause you clinically significant anguish, please check with a psychologist or a psychiatrist before engaging in the practices I describe.

MINDFULNESS

It is always now. This might sound trite, but it is the truth. It's not quite true as a matter of neurology, because our minds are built upon layers of inputs whose timing we know must be different.11 But it is true as a matter of conscious experience. The reality of your life is always now. And to realize this, we will see, is liberating. In fact, I think there is nothing more important to understand if you want to be happy in this world.

But we spend most of our lives forgetting this truth—overlooking it, fleeing it, repudiating it. And the horror is that we succeed. We manage to avoid being happy while struggling to become happy, fulfilling one desire after the next, banishing our fears, grasping at pleasure, recoiling from pain—and thinking, interminably, about how best to keep the whole works up and running. As a consequence, we spend our lives being far less content than we might otherwise be. We often fail to appreciate what we have until we have lost it. We crave experiences, objects, relationships, only to grow bored with them. And yet the craving persists. I speak from experience, of course.

As a remedy for this predicament, many spiritual teachings ask us to entertain unfounded ideas about the nature of reality—or at the very least to develop a fondness for the iconography and rituals of one or another religion. But not all paths traverse the same rough ground. There are methods of meditation that do not require any artifice or unwarranted assumptions at all.

For beginners, I usually recommend a technique called vipassana (Pali for "insight"), which comes from the oldest tradition of Buddhism, the Theravada. One of the advantages of vipassana is that it can be taught in an entirely secular way. Experts in this practice generally acquire their training in a Buddhist context, and most retreat centers in the United States and Europe teach its associated Buddhist philosophy. Nevertheless, this method of introspection can be brought into any secular or scientific context without embarrassment. (The same cannot be said for the practice of chanting to Lord Krishna while banging a drum.) That is why vipassana is now being widely studied and adopted by psychologists and neuroscientists.

The quality of mind cultivated in vipassana is almost always referred to as "mindfulness," and the literature on its psychological benefits is now substantial. There is nothing spooky about mindfulness. It is simply a state of clear, nonjudgmental, and undistracted attention to the contents of consciousness, whether pleasant or unpleasant. Cultivating this quality of mind has been shown to reduce pain, anxiety, and depression; improve cognitive function; and even produce changes in gray matter density in regions of the brain related to learning and memory, emotional regulation, and self-awareness.12 We will look more closely at the neurophysiology of mindfulness in a later chapter.

Mindfulness is a translation of the Pali word sati. The term has several meanings in the Buddhist literature, but for our purposes the most important is "clear awareness." The practice was first described in the Satipatthana Sutta,13 which is part of the Pali Canon. Like many Buddhist texts, the Satipatthana Sutta is highly repetitive and, for anything but an avid student of Buddhism, exceptionally boring to read. However, when one compares texts of this kind with the Bible or the Koran, the difference is unmistakable: The Satipatthana Sutta is not a collection of ancient myths, superstitions, and taboos; it is a rigorously empirical guide to freeing the mind from suffering.

The Buddha described four foundations of mindfulness, which he taught as "the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of Nibbana" (Sanskrit, Nirvana). The four foundations of mindfulness are the body (breathing, changes in posture, activities), feelings (the senses of

pleasantness, unpleasantness, and neutrality), the mind (in particular, its moods and attitudes), and the objects of mind (which include the five senses but also other mental states, such as volition, tranquility, rapture, equanimity, and even mindfulness itself). It is a peculiar list, at once redundant and incomplete—a problem that is compounded by the necessity of translating Pali terminology into English. The obvious message of the text, however, is that the totality of one's experience can become the field of contemplation. The meditator is merely instructed to pay attention, "ardently" and "fully aware" and "free from covetousness and grief for the world."

There is nothing passive about mindfulness. One might even say that it expresses a specific kind of passion—a passion for discerning what is subjectively real in every moment. It is a mode of cognition that is, above all, undistracted, accepting, and (ultimately) nonconceptual. Being mindful is not a matter of thinking more clearly about experience; it is the act of experiencing more clearly, including the arising of thoughts themselves. Mindfulness is a vivid awareness of whatever is appearing in one's mind or body—thoughts, sensations, moods—without grasping at the pleasant or recoiling from the unpleasant. One of the great strengths of this technique of meditation, from a secular point of view, is that it does not require us to adopt any cultural affectations or unjustified beliefs. It simply demands that we pay close attention to the flow of experience in each moment.

The principal enemy of mindfulness—or of any meditative practice—is our deeply conditioned habit of being distracted by thoughts. The problem is not thoughts themselves but the state of thinking without knowing that we are thinking. In fact, thoughts of all kinds can be perfectly good objects of mindfulness. In the early stages of one's practice, however, the arising of thought will be more or less synonymous with distraction—that is, with a failure to meditate. Most people who believe they are meditating are merely thinking with their eyes closed. By practicing mindfulness, however, one can awaken from the dream of discursive thought and begin to see each arising image, idea, or bit of language vanish without a trace. What remains is consciousness itself, with its attendant sights, sounds, sensations, and thoughts appearing and changing in every moment.

In the beginning of one's meditation practice, the difference between ordinary experience and what one comes to consider "mindfulness" is not very clear, and it takes some training to distinguish between being lost in thought and seeing thoughts for what they are. In this sense, learning to meditate is just like acquiring any other skill. It takes many thousands of repetitions to throw a good jab or to coax music from the strings of a guitar. With practice, mindfulness becomes a well-formed habit of attention, and the difference between it and ordinary thinking will become increasingly clear. Eventually, it begins to seem as if you are repeatedly awakening from a dream to find yourself safely in bed. No matter how terrible the dream, the relief is instantaneous. And yet it is difficult to stay awake for more than a few seconds at a time.

My friend Joseph Goldstein, one of the finest vipassana teachers I know, likens this shift in awareness to the experience of being fully immersed in a film and then suddenly realizing that you are sitting in a theater watching a mere play of light on a wall. Your perception is unchanged, but the spell is broken. Most of us spend every waking moment lost in the movie of our lives. Until we see that an alternative to this enchantment exists, we are entirely at the mercy of appearances. Again, the difference I am describing is not a matter of achieving a new conceptual understanding or of adopting new beliefs about the nature of reality. The change comes when we experience the present moment prior to the arising of thought.

The Buddha taught mindfulness as the appropriate response to the truth of dukkha, usually translated from the Pali, somewhat misleadingly, as "suffering." A better translation would be "unsatisfactoriness." Suffering may not be inherent in life, but unsatisfactoriness is. We crave lasting happiness in the midst of change: Our bodies age, cherished objects break, pleasures fade, relationships fail. Our attachment to the good things in

life and our aversion to the bad amount to a denial of these realities, and this inevitably leads to feelings of dissatisfaction. Mindfulness is a technique for achieving equanimity amid the flux, allowing us to simply be aware of the quality of experience in each moment, whether pleasant or unpleasant. This may seem like a recipe for apathy, but it needn't be. It is actually possible to be mindful—and, therefore, to be at peace with the present moment—even while working to change the world for the better.

Mindfulness meditation is extraordinarily simple to describe, but it isn't easy to perform. True mastery might require special talent and a lifetime of devotion to the task, and yet a genuine transformation in one's perception of the world is within reach for most of us. Practice is the only thing that will lead to success. The simple instructions given in the box that follows are analogous to instructions on how to walk a tightrope—which, I assume, must go something like this:

1. Find a horizontal cable that can support your weight.

2. Stand on one end.

3. Step forward by placing one foot directly in front of the other.

4. Repeat.

5. Don't fall.

Clearly, steps 2 through 5 entail a little trial and error. Happily, the benefits of training in meditation arrive long before mastery does. And falling, for our purposes, occurs almost ceaselessly, every time we become lost in thought. Again, the problem is not thoughts themselves but the state of thinking without being fully aware that we are thinking.

As every meditator soon discovers, distraction is the normal condition of our minds: Most of us topple from the wire every second—whether gliding happily into reverie or plunging into fear, anger, self-hatred, and other negative states of mind. Meditation is a technique for waking up. The goal is to come out of the trance of discursive thinking and to stop reflexively grasping at the pleasant and recoiling from the unpleasant, so that we can enjoy a mind undisturbed by worry, merely open like the sky, and effortlessly aware of the flow of experience in the present.

How to Meditate

1. Sit comfortably, with your spine erect, either in a chair or cross-legged on a cushion.

2. Close your eyes, take a few deep breaths, and feel the points of contact between your body and the chair or the floor. Notice the sensations associated with sitting—feelings of pressure, warmth, tingling, vibration, etc.

3. Gradually become aware of the process of breathing. Pay attention to wherever you feel the breath most distinctly—either at your nostrils or in the rising and falling of your abdomen.

4. Allow your attention to rest in the mere sensation of breathing. (You don't have to control your breath. Just let it come and go naturally.)

5. Every time your mind wanders in thought, gently return it to the breath.

6. As you focus on the process of breathing, you will also perceive sounds, bodily sensations, or emotions. Simply observe these phenomena as they appear in consciousness and then return to the breath.

7. The moment you notice that you have been lost in thought, observe the present thought itself as an object of consciousness. Then return your attention to the breath—or to any sounds or sensations arising in the next moment.

8. Continue in this way until you can merely witness all objects of consciousness—sights, sounds, sensations, emotions, even thoughts themselves—as they arise, change, and pass away.

Those who are new to this practice generally find it useful to hear instructions of this kind spoken aloud during the course of a meditation session. I have posted guided meditations of varying length on my website.

THE TRUTH OF SUFFERING

I am sitting in a coffee shop in midtown Manhattan, drinking exactly what I want (coffee), eating exactly what I want (a cookie), and doing exactly what I want (writing this book). It is a beautiful fall day, and many of the people passing by on the sidewalk appear to radiate good fortune from their pores. Several are so physically attractive that I'm beginning to wonder whether Photoshop can now be applied to the human body. Up and down this street, and for a mile in each direction, stores sell jewelry, art, and clothing that not even 1 percent of humanity could hope to purchase.

So what did the Buddha mean when he spoke of the "unsatisfactoriness" (dukkha) of life? Was he referring merely to the poor and the hungry? Or are these rich and beautiful people suffering even now? Of course, suffering is all around us—even here, where everything appears to be going well for the moment.

First, the obvious: Within a few blocks of where I am sitting are hospitals, convalescent homes, psychiatrists' offices, and other rooms built to assuage, or merely to contain, some of the most profound forms of human misery. A man runs over his own child while backing his car out of the driveway. A woman learns that she has terminal cancer on the eve of her wedding. We know that the worst can happen to anyone at any time—and most people spend a great deal of mental energy hoping that it won't happen to them.

But more subtle forms of suffering can be found, even among people who seem to have every reason to be satisfied in the present. Although wealth and fame can secure many forms of pleasure, few of us have any illusions that they guarantee happiness. Anyone who owns a television or reads the newspaper has seen movie stars, politicians, professional athletes, and other celebrities ricochet from marriage to marriage and from scandal to scandal. To learn that a young, attractive, talented, and successful person is nevertheless addicted to drugs or clinically depressed is to be given almost no cause for surprise.

Yet the unsatisfactoriness of the good life runs deeper than this. Even while living safely between emergencies, most of us feel a wide range of painful emotions on a daily basis. When you wake up in the morning, are you filled with joy? How do you feel at work or when looking in the mirror? How satisfied are you with what you've accomplished in life? How much of your time with your family is spent surrendered to love and gratitude, and how much is spent just struggling to be happy in one another's company? Even for extraordinarily lucky people, life is difficult. And when we look at what makes it so, we see that we are all prisoners of our thoughts.

And then there is death, which defeats everyone. Most people seem to believe that we have only two ways to think about death: We can fear it and do our best to ignore it, or we can deny that it is real. The first strategy

leads to a life of conventional worldliness and distraction—we merely strive for pleasure and success and do our best to keep the reality of death out of view. The second strategy is the province of religion, which assures us that death is but a doorway to another world and that the most important opportunities in life occur after the lifetime of the body. But there is another path, and it seems the only one compatible with intellectual honesty. That path is the subject of this book.

ENLIGHTENMENT

What is enlightenment, which is so often said to be the ultimate goal of meditation? There are many esoteric details that we can safely ignore—disagreements among contemplative traditions about what, exactly, is gained or lost at the end of the spiritual path. Many of these claims are preposterous. Within most schools of Buddhism, for instance, a buddha—whether the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, or any other person who attains the state of "full enlightenment"—is generally described as "omniscient." Just what this means is open to a fair bit of caviling. But however narrowly defined, the claim is absurd. If the historical Buddha were "omniscient," he would have been, at minimum, a better mathematician, physicist, biologist, and Jeopardy contestant than any person who has ever lived. Is it reasonable to expect that an ascetic in the fifth century BC, by virtue of his meditative insights, spontaneously became an unprecedented genius in every field of human inquiry, including those that did not exist at the time in which he lived? Would Siddhartha Gautama have awed Kurt Gödel, Alan Turing, John von Neumann, and Claude Shannon with his command of mathematical logic and information theory? Of course not. To think otherwise is pure, religious piety.

Any extension of the notion of "omniscience" to procedural knowledge—that is, to knowing how to do something—would render the Buddha capable of painting the Sistine Chapel in the morning and demolishing Roger Federer at Centre Court in the afternoon. Is there any reason to believe that Siddhartha Gautama, or any other celebrated contemplative, possessed such abilities by virtue of his spiritual practice? None whatsoever. Nevertheless, many Buddhists believe that buddhas can do all these things and more. Again, this is religious dogmatism, not a rational approach to spiritual life.14

I make no claims in support of magic or miracles in this book. However, I can say that the true goal of meditation is more profound than most people realize—and it does, in fact, encompass many of the experiences that traditional mystics claim for themselves. It is quite possible to lose one's sense of being a separate self and to experience a kind of boundless, open awareness—to feel, in other words, at one with the cosmos. This says a lot about the possibilities of human consciousness, but it says nothing about the universe at large. And it sheds no light at all on the relationship between mind and matter. The fact that it is possible to love one's neighbor as oneself should be a great finding for the field of psychology, but it lends absolutely no credence to the claim that Jesus was the son of God, or even that God exists. Nor does it suggest that the "energy" of love somehow pervades the cosmos. These are historical and metaphysical claims that personal experience cannot justify.

However, a phenomenon like self-transcending love does entitle us to make claims about the human mind. And this particular experience is so well attested and so readily achieved by those who devote themselves to specific practices (the Buddhist technique of metta meditation, for instance) or who even take the right drug (MDMA) that there is very little controversy that it exists. Facts of this kind must now be understood in a rational context.

The traditional goal of meditation is to arrive at a state of well-being that is imperturbable—or if perturbed, easily regained. The French monk Matthieu Ricard describes such happiness as "a deep sense of flourishing that arises from an exceptionally healthy mind."15 The purpose of meditation is to recognize that you already have such a mind. That discovery, in turn, helps you to cease doing the things that produce needless

confusion and suffering for yourself and others. Of course, most people never truly master the practice and don't reach a condition of imperturbable happiness. The near goal, therefore, is to have an increasingly healthy mind—that is, to be moving one's mind in the right direction.

There is nothing novel about trying to become happy. And one can become happy, within certain limits, without any recourse to the practice of meditation. But conventional sources of happiness are unreliable, being dependent upon changing conditions. It is difficult to raise a happy family, to keep yourself and those you love healthy, to acquire wealth and find creative and fulfilling ways to enjoy it, to form deep friendships, to contribute to society in ways that are emotionally rewarding, to perfect a wide variety of artistic, athletic, and intellectual skills—and to keep the machinery of happiness running day after day. There is nothing wrong with being fulfilled in all these ways—except for the fact that, if you pay close attention, you will see that there is still something wrong with it. These forms of happiness aren't good enough. Our feelings of fulfillment do not last. And the stress of life continues.

So what would a spiritual master be a master of? At a minimum, she will no longer suffer certain cognitive and emotional illusions—above all, she will no longer feel identical to her thoughts. Once again, this is not to say that such a person will no longer think, but she would no longer succumb to the primary confusion that thoughts produce in most of us: She would no longer feel that there is an inner self who is a thinker of these thoughts. Such a person will naturally maintain an openness and serenity of mind that is available to most of us only for brief moments, even after years of practice. I remain agnostic as to whether anyone has achieved such a state permanently, but I know from direct experience that it is possible to be far more enlightened than I tend to be.

The question of whether enlightenment is a permanent state need not detain us. The crucial point is that you can glimpse something about the nature of consciousness that will liberate you from suffering in the present. Even just recognizing the impermanence of your mental states—deeply, not merely as an idea—can transform your life. Every mental state you have ever had has arisen and then passed away. This is a first-person fact—but it is, nonetheless, a fact that any human being can readily confirm. We don't have to know any more about the brain or about the relationship between consciousness and the physical world to understand this truth about our own minds. The promise of spiritual life—indeed, the very thing that makes it "spiritual" in the sense I invoke throughout this book—is that there are truths about the mind that we are better off knowing. What we need to become happier and to make the world a better place is not more pious illusions but a clearer understanding of the way things are.

The moment we admit the possibility of attaining contemplative insights—and of training one's mind for that purpose—we must acknowledge that people naturally fall at different points on a continuum between ignorance and wisdom. Part of this range will be considered "normal," but normal isn't necessarily a happy place to be. Just as a person's physical body and abilities can be refined—Olympic athletes are not normal—one's mental life can deepen and expand on the basis of talent and training. This is nearly self-evident, but it remains a controversial point. No one hesitates to admit the role of talent and training in the context of physical and intellectual pursuits; I have never met another person who denied that some of us are stronger, more athletic, or more learned than others. But many people find it difficult to acknowledge that a continuum of moral and spiritual wisdom exists or that there might be better and worse ways to traverse it.

Stages of spiritual development, therefore, appear unavoidable. Just as we must grow into adulthood physically—and we can fail to mature or become sick or injured along the way—our minds develop by degrees. One can't learn sophisticated skills such as syllogistic reasoning, algebra, or irony until one has acquired more basic skills. It seems to me that a healthy spiritual life can begin only once our physical, mental, social, and ethical lives have sufficiently matured. We must learn to use language before we can

work with it creatively or understand its limits, and the conventional self must form before we can investigate it and understand that it is not what it appears to be. An ability to examine the contents of one's own consciousness clearly, dispassionately, and nondiscursively, with sufficient attention to realize that no inner self exists, is a very sophisticated skill. And yet basic mindfulness can be practiced very early in life. Many people, including my wife, have successfully taught it to children as young as six. At that age—and every age thereafter—it can be a powerful tool for self-regulation and self-awareness.

Contemplatives have long understood that positive habits of mind are best viewed as skills that most of us learn imperfectly as we grow to adulthood. It is possible to become more focused, patient, and compassionate than one naturally tends to be, and there are many things to learn about how to be happy in this world. These are truths that Western psychological science has only recently begun to explore.

Some people are content in the midst of deprivation and danger, while others are miserable despite having all the luck in the world. This is not to say that external circumstances do not matter. But it is your mind, rather than circumstances themselves, that determines the quality of your life. Your mind is the basis of everything you experience and of every contribution you make to the lives of others. Given this fact, it makes sense to train it.

Scientists and skeptics generally assume that the traditional claims of yogis and mystics must be exaggerated or simply delusional and that the only rational purpose of meditation is limited to conventional "stress reduction." Conversely, serious students of these practices often insist that even the most outlandish claims made by and about spiritual masters are true. I am attempting to lead the reader along a middle path between these extremes—one that preserves our scientific skepticism but acknowledges that it is possible to radically transform our minds.

In one sense, the Buddhist concept of enlightenment really is just the epitome of "stress reduction"—and depending on how much stress one reduces, the results of one's practice can seem more or less profound. According to the Buddhist teachings, human beings have a distorted view of reality that leads them to suffer unnecessarily. We grasp at transitory pleasures. We brood about the past and worry about the future. We continually seek to prop up and defend an egoic self that doesn't exist. This is stressful—and spiritual life is a process of gradually unraveling our confusion and bringing this stress to an end. According to the Buddhist view, by seeing things as they are, we cease to suffer in the usual ways, and our minds can open to states of well-being that are intrinsic to the nature of consciousness.

Of course, some people claim to love stress and appear eager to live by its logic. Some even derive pleasure from imposing stress on others. Genghis Khan is reported to have said, "The greatest happiness is to scatter your enemy and drive him before you, to see his cities reduced to ashes, to see those who love him shrouded in tears, and to gather to your bosom his wives and daughters." People attach many meanings to terms like happiness, and not all of them are compatible with one another.

In The Moral Landscape, I argued that we tend to be unnecessarily confused by differences of opinion on the topic of human well-being. No doubt certain people can derive mental pleasure—and even experience genuine ecstasy—by behaving in ways that produce immense suffering for others. But we know that these states are anomalous—or, at least, not sustainable—because we depend upon one another for more or less everything. Whatever the associated pleasures, raping and pillaging can't be a stable strategy for finding happiness in this world. Given our social requirements, we know that the deepest and most durable forms of well-being must be compatible with an ethical concern for other people—even for complete strangers—otherwise, violent conflict becomes inevitable. We also know that there are certain forms of happiness that are not available to a person even if, like Genghis Khan, he finds himself on the winning side

of every siege. Some pleasures are intrinsically ethical—feelings like love, gratitude, devotion, and compassion. To inhabit these states of mind is, by definition, to be brought into alignment with others.

In my view, the realistic goal to be attained through spiritual practice is not some permanent state of enlightenment that admits of no further efforts but a capacity to be free in this moment, in the midst of whatever is happening. If you can do that, you have already solved most of the problems you will encounter in life.

Well, book *Waking Up: Searching For Spirituality Without Religion By Sam Harris* will make you closer to just what you are eager. This Waking Up: Searching For Spirituality Without Religion By Sam Harris will be constantly buddy any type of time. You could not forcedly to consistently complete over checking out a book in brief time. It will be only when you have extra time and investing couple of time to make you really feel satisfaction with what you review. So, you can obtain the significance of the notification from each sentence in guide.