

## C O L U M N S : I N S C A P E S

### **Enlightenment: Is Science Ready to Take it Seriously?**

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I'm not given to making grand predictions, but in this case I can't resist: the very real spiritual transformation at the heart of mysticism is about to explode into the secular mainstream, and the consequences may just revolutionize our scientific understanding of the mind.

Yowzer! No doubt the reader's New Age flapdoodle-detector is now shrieking. Bear with me. Let's first get the tricky business of defining enlightenment out of the way.

For expediency's sake, I'll define enlightenment as a complex and multi-faceted process by which the mind comes to know – and over time rest more securely in – its own ground. As this happens, our habitual sense of being a separate and bounded self begins to fade. Ultimately, the person for whom this happens no longer feels themselves to be an autonomous entity looking out at an external world; rather, they feel themselves, more and more, to be an intimate part of that world's humid expression, an unfolding natural process no different than anything else in nature. As a result, practitioners report a liberating sense of freedom, ease, spontaneity. The volume of self-referential thought often decreases, although, since enlightenment happens along a deepening continuum, they are still routinely trapped in old habits of dualistic thinking.

Despite the fact that this transformation has been painstakingly described in virtually every contemplative tradition – from Buddhism, Taoism and Hinduism through to the mystical branches of the Western Abrahamic religions – and is the central drama in the lives of thousands of lucid and intelligent human beings, here in the West there is zero mention of the phenomenon in any of our bastions of intellectual respectability. You'll never read about spiritual enlightenment in a Malcolm Gladwell book, or the pages of *The New York Review of Books*. This is true even in most Western Buddhist books, where enlightenment may be mentioned as a general principle or orientation, but almost never as a tangible transformation that happens to real 21<sup>st</sup>-century human beings.

The reason for this probably has to do with accessibility. The first American Buddhist teachers, most of them operating out of the Insight Meditation Society (Joseph Goldstein, Sharon Salzberg, Jack Kornfield and others), acted as skillfully as possible to bring the benefits of meditation to a large secular audience. Given how skittish Western intellectuals are around religious themes, the last thing you'd want to do here is start raving on about mystical oneness.

There is also a lively debate in the spiritual world about the advisability of even mentioning different states and stages. On the upside it can help orient practitioners within often strange and difficult experiences; on the downside it can burden them with unrealistic expectations of “progress” that end up getting in the way. Compounding this, there are whole schools of contemplative thinking who argue that all of us are already enlightened; we have no where to go and nothing to do.

The majority of old-guard U.S. Buddhist teachers erred on the side of caution; as a consequence most of their books are filled with sensible soft-dharma insights gently shaped to fit our general Western model of psychotherapy. There are exceptions, and those exceptions, I’d like to argue, are about to become the new rule.

There is a new spirit of openness, for instance, in both the culture of spirituality and the culture of science. One spiritual Trojan horse is yoga. Another is the increasingly popular practice of “mindfulness.” Both of these are powerful spiritual technologies. Most people approach them for practical fitness or stress-reduction reasons, and this is all they ever deliver on. But, for a small percentage, something else happens. They find themselves – deliciously, inexorably, sometimes alarmingly – moving along a course of spiritual development they never expected.

I teach mindfulness meditation, so I have a particular interest here. Mindfulness is the practice of bringing clarity and concentration and equanimity to our moment-by-moment experience. Doctors chirp happily about its secular benefits even as the terrifying specter of loving mystical connectedness pours from the belly of the horse. You can thank Jon Kabat-Zinn for this. His pioneering Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction model is everywhere – over 120 medical centers in the US alone offer mindfulness programs, and there has been a commensurate scientific interest in the subject – official NIH-funded studies on mindfulness have gone from two in the year 2000 to 128 in 2010. Mindfulness in small doses is an immensely helpful way to address stress and anxiety and pain and all kinds of other conditions. Mindfulness in large doses is called vipassana; it rewires the brain and extirpates the sense of a separate self. Come for the raisin, stay for the perspective-shuddering cosmic U-turn. What starts subtle can grow, and, as the brilliant Buddhist teacher Shinzen Young says, “subtle is significant.”

In the multidisciplinary world of consciousness studies, the buzzword is nonduality, a translation of Advaita (literally “not two”), an ancient branch of Hindu philosophy. I’ve presented at two ‘Toward a Science of Consciousness’ meetings, a terrific annual assembly of the biggest names in neuroscience and philosophy of mind, among them Antonio Damasio, David Chalmers, Wolf

Singer, Susan Greenfield, Stuart Hameroff and others. For the past few years nonduality has been a popular subject of discussion. There is even a dedicated ‘Science and Nonduality’ conference - now in its fourth year – that features some of the same speakers, many of them offering straight-to-the-bone “Direct Path” instruction in books and DVDs and weekend workshops.

The Internet is the great culprit in all of this. Where once you had to climb a mountain in Tibet to get answers to spiritual questions, you can now find them on Wikipedia, or an easily-arranged Skype call. Enlightenment is the Internet subject par excellence – vague, contradictory, fiercely blogged about by ill-credentialed authorities. It’s no small irony that the very medium that is hopelessly fragmenting human attention is simultaneously offering up some of the necessary tools to heal us – that is, if you can separate the wheat from the chaff.

Within American Buddhism, the heart of this new transparency calls itself “Pragmatic Dharma.” The influential Buddhist Geeks podcast and conference is at the center of it. For the past few years, in popular interviews with dozens of scientists and teachers, they talk openly about different aspects of the awakening process, including frank testimonials of their own enlightenment experiences. This is a culture of learning and experimenting and exploring together. The Geeks believe – as do I – that the reticence and secrecy around spiritual transformation is no longer helpful or productive.

How do we know that all of these self-described enlightened practitioners and teachers aren’t bullshitting us? We don’t. And we won’t until we find some identifying neural signature in the brain, if such a signature even exists. I know several neuroscientists working on this question right now.

In my own case, I have stopped quibbling. People I’ve known for years tell me about their enlightenment experiences and I believe them. I believe them because my curiosity about what may be happening in the mind is greater than my allegiance to an outdated and uninformed scientific consensus. Western psychology is still outgrowing a reactive skepticism towards the subjective anecdote that it inherited from behaviorism. Fortunately, this is changing. These days, there is a growing appreciation among investigators that if you want to understand consciousness – as opposed to just brain activity – you have to start taking first-person reports seriously. This will soon include reports of enlightenment.

Science changes. That’s what it’s supposed to do. How it stands to change from enlightenment is something I’ll address in my next column.