

# Essays on Awakening



By Richard Cox

## 1. Awakening

To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour.

**William Blake**

When I was sixteen I began to have occasional experiences that were totally inexplicable to me. I would later come to think of them as spontaneous awakenings, but at that time I lacked any real narrative for these events, so I fitted them inside a loosely Christian framework. I should mention that they weren't entirely random, rather they were induced by consuming whiskey the evening prior.

Although I lacked a frame of reference, I knew that what was happening was utterly profound. I would experience an absence of worry about the future, and an absence of thoughts leaving me with an intense appreciation of the moment. I would spend those days outside and in awe of the life in the grass, the trees, my dogs. I tried to give expression to the experience and, from my vaguely Christian perspective, it felt to me as though I knew that Heaven existed, knew that this world was only a small part of a much greater one beyond, one from which we come and to which we return. Also that the greater world beyond was infinite in time. This allowed me to drop all my worries about life, leaving me able to appreciate the magic of the moment. Normally mundane things like the feel of a wooden table became fascinating to me.

After a day, the experience would wear off and I'd be returned to 'normal' reality. I'd wonder what had happened, but also strangely sort of forget about it too. I did wonder why no one had ever reported an experience like this. Why had I never heard of this happening? Could it be that I was the only person to have ever experienced it? I thought maybe I'd heard a line in a poem, perhaps by William Blake, which might somehow be talking about this. Something about *seeing infinity in a grain of sand?*

I was vaguely aware that there existed a practice called 'meditation' and I knew that it had something to do with altering consciousness, and there was something spiritual about it—whatever that meant. I started reading about meditation as a way to possibly understand what was happening to me, maybe even recapture it.

In the book I bought there was a lot of talk about 'being in the moment'. Although I hadn't thought about my experiences in that way when they were happening, when I read it, it sort of rang true. Yes, I had indeed been 'in the moment' on those days, this must be the same thing!

In other ways however, what was being described felt very different. There was an emphasis on 'bringing one's attention back to the present moment every time it slips away.' This I couldn't relate to. It felt arduous, as though a constant effort needed to be made, the complete opposite of what I had experienced.

To me, it seemed that this beautiful experience of 'being in the present moment' had a deeper cause. For some unknown reason all my worries had slipped away and I felt totally safe and secure, like nothing truly bad could happen. From this place I was able to let go of the need to continuously go over the past or plan for the future—and just be.

But what was that deeper cause? I didn't know. The next several years of my life were principally dedicated to finding out. Along the way, I did embrace as a practice the mindfulness approach of constantly bringing my awareness back to the moment. I also became invested in *non-dual* philosophy, as well as the introspective *Jnana* approach. Eventually a juxtaposition of all these things led me to where I am now—to being able to make a return to that state of consciousness I had slipped into at the age of sixteen.

## 2. As It Is

Peaceful Pond,

Frog jumps in...

Plop!

**Basho**

In my previous essay, *Awakening*, I described the initial experiences as a teenager, which initiated my interest in spirituality. I concluded that essay at the place where I was beginning my journey to understand and recapture those experiences. I felt like a temporary shift had occurred within me on a very deep level, and I wanted to understand what it was. I intuitively thought that meditation could be a vehicle which would allow me access to that very deep place, somewhere at the core of my being. In some vague way I associated the tranquillity I found there with the tranquillity of sleep.

The meditation book I bought suggested exactly the opposite; that meditation was about moving one's mind to the exterior, not the interior of one's being. It was about becoming more aware of one's breath and surroundings, not discovering one's deeper being. I could relate to this, as during my whiskey induced experiences I had been more aware of my surroundings and taken great pleasure in them. This seemed however, like the result of a deeper—and as yet unknown—cause. This form of mindfulness meditation seemed to me to be mistaking the result for the cause.

I decided to approach things the way I intuited, and attempted to sink my awareness as deeply into itself as it would go. I sank into what felt like very deep and tranquil states of mind, somewhere approaching sleep. Often in this place, spontaneous creativity would open up, where poetic versus would emerge fully formed in my mind. It was a very interesting realm to explore, but would always end with me *actually* falling asleep. I seemed to retain no benefits from the practice that carried over into my day to day life.

Frustrated by this, I began to lose faith in my own ideas. I became influenced by stories from Zen Buddhism, of monks practising meditation intensely for long periods, until suddenly *snap!* Something would release and enlightenment would be attained. With the weight of evidence seemingly on its side, I embraced this view. I tried to *attain* enlightenment rather than discover it.

I ended up embracing this approach with the kind of fundamentalist zeal that is required to do something a bit mad. I would get up early in the morning to meditate, doing so again at lunch time, when I would arrive home and before going to bed. In between times I would be as mindful as possible. I had a job in a mail room at the time and found stuffing letters in envelopes to be a conducive activity to this practice.

Years went by with no attainment coming. I began to feel that I was worse off than people who didn't do any of this stuff. I increasingly realised that I'd swapped my multitude of day to day problems for one big problem: *attaining enlightenment*.

One day, whilst meditating, I recognised that I was always trying to be somewhere that I wasn't. To attain a different state of consciousness from the one I had. I realised that I had never really embraced myself as I was—really looked at things the way they were. As I started to do so, my sense of needing a certain outcome fell away. It turned out the state of consciousness I already had was fascinatingly interesting, I'd just never noticed it.

Around this time a friend recommended I read a book called *As It Is* by [Tony Parsons](#). Tony describes a very similar journey, a movement from trying to change reality to accepting it *as it is*. His more well formed thoughts took me deeper into this experience.

This insight shot to pieces my meditation practice. How could watching one's breath be any more meditative than drinking tea? How could focusing on the world around

me be any more *in the moment* than daydreaming? Why would I disregard the experience of daydreaming? Isn't it incredible? It seemed to me that the problem I'd been trying to solve was not one that required a shift in consciousness—the attainment of some magical state—rather it was to appreciate just how amazing and mysterious the world is *as it is*, whatever it is, with no need to change anything.

I felt like I'd found a solid foundation to rest upon. Whatever I explored in life could add depth and richness, but couldn't add to the fundamental sense that life is simply amazing as it is.

### 3. Who Needs Enlightenment Anyway?

Constantly questing  
Unceasing, unresting  
Paying all price  
For this spiritual vice

Always so close  
Yet ever as far  
This elusive knowledge  
Of who we are

*I seek enlightenment*

I have it this time  
I can feel that it's mine!  
Yet it slips through again  
All effort in vain!

Do I progress at all?  
Have I lifetimes to go?  
Am I better off now  
Than before I did know?

*About enlightenment*

I'd like to think so!

In some ways it's true  
I'm no longer blue  
Perhaps in spite of my quest

Life has gained zest!

I'm happy, have friends

Interests and goals

Life is good

In fact on the whole

Which causes a question to unfold:

*Who needs enlightenment?*

Scales off my eyes

My belief system dies

I have to come clean

I've been chasing a dream!

*There's no such thing as enlightenment!*

Coming around

Life is anew

Beautiful, spontaneous

With nothing essential to do

*Post the quest for enlightenment*

A final word

Of encouragement to you

Examine your striving

And ask is it true...

*Do you need enlightenment?*

#### 4. Entering the Deep State

'The bliss of deep sleep is a free sample of the awareness enjoyed by the mystics when they are awake.'

**Rumi**

For years after my initial awakening experiences I would get up early in the morning to meditate—but over time my reason for doing so changed. For the first few years I had aimed to attain enlightenment, to make something go snap in my mind and catapult me into an awakened state. As I explained in the previous essay, I'd come to see this as an illusion I'd bought into and then extracted myself from. I was no longer really sure of the reason or aim of meditating, only that it was a time to simply be with what is—and that doing so seemed to benefit my day to day life.

One morning, after a poor night's sleep, I realised that it would be fruitless to attempt meditation. I felt that my day would be better if I used the half hour I had to actually get some sleep.

So instead of sitting on my meditation chair I lay back on the sofa and started watching my breath, waiting for sleep to take me. Strangely, watching my breath led to me remaining conscious for much longer than I normally would as I fell into sleep. I began to truly experience being the observer of my thoughts in a much more profound way than I had through normal meditation. A thought would arise and for a moment I would identify with it, I would be that thought. Then a sense of separateness would become apparent as I saw that I was the deeper space from which the thought emerged—the spacious empty consciousness inside.

The feeling was amazing; blissful, peaceful, spacious, like finding deep tranquillity at the centre of my being. In this place my sense of self dissolved into a mysterious ocean of just being. At some point I would inevitably dissolve into that ocean and fully lose consciousness—I would fall asleep.

Awoken by the alarm, I would go to work puzzling over what had just happened. I noticed that, just as with sleep, the tranquillity I experienced in that place wasn't present during the rest of my day. The experience I had entered was profound whilst there, but carried no lasting impact.

It did however make me aware that this was something I could do, drop into the bliss of sleep and consciously experience it. I started doing it more and more, experiencing these tranquil inner depths. I was having a profound inner experience but still it didn't seem to affect my waking life very much.

Philosophically this experience made sense to me; I had a context for it. According to the *perennial philosophy*; this world arises as a dream inside one all-embracing mind. When we enter the deep sleep state, we are dissolving directly into the consciousness in which this dream is arising. We are immersing ourselves in our collective deepest being. As we do this however, we necessarily lose consciousness and fall asleep. Consciousness can only be aware when it has something to be aware of, otherwise it is unconscious. To put it another way, to have a dream we need both the dream itself and the dreamer. A dreamer without a dream is just asleep. Our experience arises as a primal duality of seer and seen and to fall asleep is to lose this duality to oneness.

The question for me then was how to experience these depths of my being without wholly dissolving into them. How could I fall asleep whilst remaining fully awake?

The contradiction resolved after seeing [Tim Freke](#) (who I knew at the time) [interviewed on Conscious TV](#). Tim explained meditation as a journey into sleep, as the deep sleep state is the consciousness at the centre of our collective being. He further explained that the practice of watching the breath was not the meditation itself, but rather that the breath acts as an anchor, holding our awareness in the world so that we may consciously experience the place we normally only go to unconsciously. The deep sleep state.

Seeing this allowed me to integrate this deep conscious experience I was having into my waking world. It allowed me to integrate the blissful state of deep sleep into my daily life. It made previously difficult and esoteric concepts seem very understandable. The concept of self dissolution for example can feel like something which is impossible to experience. Try getting rid of a sense of one's self! What on earth does that mean! On the other hand, we all experience self dissolution every night when we fall asleep. What could be easier?

## 5. Depression and Non Duality

Listen, friend. You aren't 'you'.  
There is a mighty YOU which is an ocean  
in which have drowned a billion 'yous.'

**Rumi**

*The events in this essay take place prior to the previous one, however due to the first three essays telling a continuous story, I have presented them out of a strict chronological order.*

A bout of depression struck me just before my twenty-third birthday. It was a real surprise to me at the time as over the previous several years my life and mental well-being had been on the up. I think I'd been a typically miserable teenager, but at eighteen I'd left school and developed an interest in spirituality and practising meditation. This added a whole new dimension to life for me, something infinitely interesting to pursue. I was for the first time turning my attention around to look within at the nature of my own awareness. Also, for the first time I felt I was in a world where the kind of philosophical curiosity I'd always harboured was met. There were other people out there who asked these questions too. My ability to relate to people improved and I started forming more friendships. All in all I had three years where life was really good and everything was on the up.

So it was a great surprise when this came crashing down. I thought I was beyond such things. I'm sure a lot of things contributed to it. A lifetime of suppressed emotion coming to the surface and all that. I'll skip through the more periphery details and get straight to the core of it though.

As I mentioned, I'd become interested in these spiritual (or non-dual) practices of looking deeply inside one's self to the very core of being. I'd read and been inspired by the writings of mystics who talked about finding an infinite ocean of love there. An

infinite well of goodness at the centre of our being. I believed it, but as time went by I had to acknowledge that it wasn't my experience. When I looked inside I saw no such thing, only infinite darkness, or nothingness. I came to call this place the 'not-nothing', as it wasn't even nothing, as *a nothing* implies *a something* too. I experienced it as a bleak emptiness at the centre of my being. This, it seemed, was what reality really was.

I recall at the time reading a quote by Sigmund Freud, in which he basically described the love of God as something people who cannot form good social relationships make up to comfort themselves. I remember thinking that I didn't believe that, but had to admit that it did tally with my experience. I'd read about this transcendent experience of love, but had to concede that the only love I'd experienced came from other people. I became painfully aware of the transitory nature of this love, how it came and went and was never secure. Goodness knows what a psychologist would have made of this, but I interpreted it as a mystic would, as pointing to the need to find security in a transcendent state of *Being*.

For a long time I was stuck. I would go into the deepest part of 'me' I could access and find only bleakness there. I just wouldn't know what to do or where to go with this. This was having substantial effects on my day to day life, from my ability to get out of bed in the morning onwards. I could be twenty minutes or more preparing some breakfast cereal. Depression would come and go. Sometimes I'd feel absolutely fine then out of nowhere it would strike, affecting me for a few hours then departing again. A day wouldn't go by without it making at least a couple of prolonged visits.

After a year of this I started to wonder if it was something I'd ever escape. It seemed to be getting more intense not less and I wondered if rather than curing it I would at some point have to accept it and learn how to best live with it. A rather dramatic resolution did come however after a year and a half of struggling.

I stumbled across a book by a spiritual teacher called [Brandon Bays](#). In addition to describing a dramatic physical healing, she wrote about an experience of looking within herself and finding this same *dark void* in her centre, which she described as an *abyss* or *black hole*. In confronting this, Brandon had been advised to allow herself to fall into it, to dissolve rather than sit on the edge. In doing so she writes about the seeming darkness turning into an experience of peace and love.

This was a penny dropping moment for me. I realised that I'd always come to the edge of my own abyss, peered in, then not knowing what to do I would move away again. I had maintained my sense of being a separate self from it, separate from the ocean of consciousness at the centre of my being. I hadn't allowed myself to dissolve, it hadn't occurred to me to do so. Where I had been going wrong seemed completely obvious to me now and I vowed to return to that deep darkness within and stay there until I slipped into it.

I sat for perhaps a couple of hours that evening, right on the edge of my sense of inner bleakness. As night time came I eventually thought I ought to go to bed, but I resolved to resume my practice the following morning, and every day after till I found this centre to my own being.

Often at around four in the morning I would awaken with feelings of despair. This was often the most intense period of depression. That particular night looked to be no exception. I awoke as usual, into a kind of waking dream. I saw all the people I knew stood around me, they all disappeared off into the distance until just one was left—and then I was completely alone—with no outside source of love. In this aloneness I slipped into that black/not-black, nothing/not-nothing at the centre of my being. It transformed from darkness into the feeling of being immersed in an infinite ocean of love. It felt like the whole universe was just the thinnest of veils, covering this ocean. The ocean was the field of awareness in which everything was arising.

I felt sorry for any time I'd ever acted in a way that had been needy of another person. Why would I need anyone else to act a certain way towards me when *I was this*.

After a little while the experience subsided and the veil fell back over the ocean. I fell back into sleep. When I awoke the next morning I realised just what a profound experience I had had. I had dissolved into the darkness at the centre of my being and found infinite love there. My depression had totally resolved. As the weeks went by it became clear to me that it wasn't coming back. Although I had many different challenges in the future, I never experienced another bout of it.

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The implication of this experience is that mental health conditions may not arise due to imbalances of chemicals in the brain, but rather might be the symptom of a deeper cause. They might be pointing to something we desperately need to look at within ourselves. For me, in this case, my depression arose out of my lack of connection to my deepest self. It was a symptom and not the cause. Rather than fighting against such conditions then, we could see them as containing a necessary message for us—that we must integrate them to find wholeness.

The experience also suggests that we cannot approach questions about mental health without asking metaphysical questions about the nature of the reality we live in. We cannot hope to treat consciousness without at least pondering what consciousness is. If we see it as an accidental bi-product of a material universe we will interact with it very differently than if we see it as the fundamental property of reality. In the former case, an experience such as mine is essentially a delusion, albeit a healing one. In the latter, my experience is one of contacting the very nature of the consciousness in which the universe is arising.

## 6. The Not-Nothing

In the centre of the centre  
Beyond body mind and soul  
Lies the Not-Nothing  
Black cold and whole

Ever I approach it  
And all my love runs out  
For this is what we truly are  
It leaves no room for doubt

I run back to the surface  
And face the world once more  
Knowing I am empty  
Of all but emptiness at my core

The knowledge of this haunts me  
Day by day it drains  
My secret to carry  
As the life within me wanes

Is there no solution  
Have the mystics been deceived?  
What's this? A miracle, a guide  
Come in my hour of need

In the centre of the centre  
I maintained a separate self  
That too must go says she  
As into Not-Nothing you delf

Arduously I march  
Back down that same path  
Determined to confront  
Tenaciously to the last

Yet it comes for me  
In the middle of the night  
Waking, friends around me  
One by one they take flight

Only one remaining  
Then I'm all alone  
I let go into Not-Nothing  
And suddenly I'm home

An infinite Ocean of love!  
Consuming and surround  
No need for any outside source  
When I am what I've found

Back out in the world  
The veils draws down once more  
Now somewhat transparent  
Maintaining the adore

The mystics have been vindicated  
It turns out that it's true  
Not-Nothing, but everything  
Waits in the centre of the centre for you



## 7. Encountering (the Gnostic) Christ at the End of the Search for Enlightenment

'We need a dream-world in order to discover the features of the real world we think we inhabit.'

**Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method***

When I was eighteen I bought into a crazy, cultish belief system. Let's call it, *The Cult of Enlightenment*. It's a belief that comes from the East and has affected many in the West in recent years. Essentially, the idea is that we can effect a permanent shift in our state of consciousness—a shift into a realisation of the meaning of life, leading to an everlasting state of bliss descending upon us. It is seen as realisation of our deepest nature as a divine and transcendent aspect of God.

I had no trouble believing such a state existed—far from it—as I've explored in previous articles, I had directly experienced slipping into such a place on several occasions over the prior couple of years. Like many people who have spiritual experiences for which they have no context, I was vulnerable to anyone who could provide me with an explanation for them. For me, that explanation came from the philosophies of Buddhism and Hinduism—and their emphasis on attaining enlightenment.

I was something of a reluctant convert at first. I believed in the goal, but was cynical of the methods. The idea of continuous arduous practice to attain something ran counter to my experience of the blissful state I was trying to return to. I didn't have any better ideas however, and when I bought in I bought in deep and devoted every moment of the next two years of my life to its attainment. It was an obsession.

I've told the story of how I eventually shed this belief in the *As It Is* essay. Here I want to specifically address the death of the belief that enlightenment is something one attains. Additionally, I want to talk about religious experiences and how we interpret them.

During the third year my cynicism grew. I came to have more doubts about my practice and noticed more and more inconsistencies. Long after I'd shed the practices themselves however, I still held to the belief that there was a special state to be attained.

What brought this to an end wasn't reasoning, or meditative experience, or reading books (although I'm sure all those things contributed along the way). The most important factor was that the quality of my life had gotten better and better. We can only invest energy in wanting to be somewhere else if we are fundamentally dissatisfied with the place we are in. As I got older, my dissatisfaction with life became less and less. It culminated one evening shortly after returning from a spiritual retreat. I'd had an amazing time, both in the spiritual sense and just in terms of enjoying myself with friends. I felt like the attainment of this super-state must be close, I must be right on the edge of it! My ego was surely going to give in and allow me to slip into permanent bliss! It was as if my cynicism of the possibility of this attainment and my belief in it had grown in unison.

As the days after the retreat passed I felt my sense of bliss slipping away; like I'd come close and missed it. I was back to my mundane life with all its joys and sorrows. Then, one evening while I was sitting at my desk, for reasons I can't recall, I saw on the internet this picture of Jesus (pictured below). I was overcome by the beauty of the image. For me, the sun behind Jesus was symbolic of the *One Consciousness* I'd been trying to permanently feel my connection with, with Jesus himself being the living embodiment of that Consciousness. It was quite incredible for me to find what felt like this Eastern spirituality in the Western religious figure I'd grown up knowing. Suddenly I was struck by just how much I'd come to enjoy my life over the previous years—the good and the bad—in the absence of attainment of any permanent special state of being. The thought arose within me: *'If life is this good, why would I even need enlightenment?'* The penny dropped—as did I—literally, to the floor. In an instant I realised that I'd been chasing an illusion for the past several

years. There was no special state to attain, just the beauty of life as it is. Within that there are moments of joy and sorrow, and moments of opening up to profound spiritual depth as well as moments of feeling disconnected from that. It is all part of life's rich tapestry and I wouldn't want it any other way. My involvement in the cult of enlightenment was over.

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This moment was one of the big shifting points in my perspective on spirituality, as well as being one of the major turning points in my life. I have therefore retold the story of it many times. When I've done so however, I haven't always mentioned the role the image of Jesus played in the shift. It's not that I'm trying to hide it (I often have mentioned it) it's just that it doesn't seem central to the tale. I felt that it was the transcendent beauty of the image that tipped me over the edge. There was nothing Jesus-specific about it. It could equally have been a picture of the Buddha, or Krishna or even a sunset. Anything that would have brought me into the realisation of how amazing life is without the attainment of enlightenment.

As part of my studies into world spirituality I'd read about the Gnostics, the mystical Christians, some of whom presented Jesus as a mythical character rather than an historical figure. I was familiar with the case for a purely mythical Jesus and interpreted my encounter in that light. It never for one moment occurred to me to interpret it as an encounter with the Jesus of history whom the majority of Christians believe in.

As the years went by I would occasionally see videos of people who had had life transforming encounters with Jesus Christ, sometimes in profound visions, sometimes more subtly. At one point I was invited along to an Alpha Course (a Christian induction course in Britain) by a colleague, which I attended and where I very much enjoyed the dialogue.

It wasn't until I came across examples of people involved in Eastern philosophy, who'd encountered Jesus and become Bible-believing, straight-down-the-line Christians as a result, that it occurred to me I could have interpreted my own encounter in the same way. If I'd believed it was Jesus himself who had caused this shift, and not the divinity I took him to represent, then who knows - my life could have gone in a radically different direction.

I'm certainly not saying that my way of interpreting this encounter is the right one, or even that it was the same experience as other people's—I'd have no way of knowing. Whilst I believe the case for Jesus being a mythical rather than historical figure is perfectly reasonable, I also believe, the case for him having lived the life basically described in the Gospels is also perfectly reasonable—*if you start from different premises*. I am therefore not assuming I'm right. In my opinion, what's 'right' is whatever's right for the individual concerned. Whether that's believing in a literal or mythical Jesus, whatever a person feels drawn to and is best helped by in this life is the best option. I'm not interested in winning an intellectual argument on the subject.

What I am saying is that I had an option in how I interpreted this experience. Having been exposed to Eastern spirituality, Gnosticism, archetypal mythology and Christianity—I had more than one way to understand Jesus' role in my perceptual shift. This is in contrast to my earlier awakening experience, wherein I was stuck with only one narrative that made sense in explaining it—a narrative that was in many ways insightful but also brought with it very unhelpful ideas of 'attainment' and 'enlightenment'.

The conclusion of my thoughts is not to support one interpretation of religious experience over another. People are, I believe, perfectly capable of choosing the form of spirituality and accompanying beliefs that work for them. Rather it is a call for pluralism—having as many options available as possible. After a big spiritual experience people are certainly left vulnerable to anyone who can help them to explain it. In that position the moral course of action is, in my opinion, to present the

person with a variety of options, rather than attempting to push one's own favoured theory. Our theories and ideas about the world should exist to serve us, and not the other way around.



## 8. Mindfulness as a Magic Feather - On the Necessity of Unnecessary Things

No need to run and hide  
It's a wonderful, wonderful life  
No need to laugh and cry  
It's a wonderful, wonderful life  
**Black, *Wonderful Life***

The Buddhist's have their own version of the prodigal son story, which differs from the one told by Jesus in several important ways. One way is that when the son arrives back at his father's house, his descent through decadence and debauchery to destitution leaves him unable to recognise his old home. His father's attempts to embrace him only scare him away.

Seeing this, the father realises he must employ *skillful means* to slowly bring his son around. *Upaya*, or skillful means, is a Buddhist concept which emphasises acting in a way that is helpful, rather than ramming unhelpful truths down people's throats. In this example, the father acquiesces to his son's request for work and has him labour on his estate. Even though doing so pains him, he recognises it is the only way to form a relationship with his estranged child.

Slowly, over many years of kind treatment, the son regains enough of his former dignity to rise up out of his fallen condition, and comes to remember who he truly is. At that point the father can properly welcome him home, his labouring is no longer necessary.

In this story Buddhism is acknowledging a paradox. There is a distinction between that which is possible, and that which is *possible*. We recognise this paradox in Dumbo needing his magic feather to fly, or Dorothy journeying to the Emerald City before she can return home. They didn't—*but did*—need these things. In this essay I'll be exploring how a similar paradox arises with mindfulness meditation. Is

mindfulness itself akin to the necessary yet unnecessary work performed by the son?

I'm prompted to explore this as a consequence of facilitating mindfulness sessions for people. Having been involved in this area for a couple of decades, it's always my aspiration to use any insights I've gained to streamline the process. Ultimately I would like people's journeys to be shorter, more productive and less troublesome than my own. Often I feel I succeed in this—however I notice that my efforts can sometimes be counterproductive too.

I must confess I don't possess a great passion for having people sit and force their attention onto their breath for extended periods—experiencing it as an arduous exercise where they battle with the impulse to imagine something more interesting. What I do feel passion for, is pointing people towards recapturing that sense of life as being something magical! To escape the prison yard of mundanity and enter into an ever present world of wonder. Having made such an escape, something as simple as breathing is transformed into a fascinating and transfixing natural phenomenon which we have to tear our attention away from.

I have to temper this desire however, by recognising such a direct approach might not be the right first step for everyone. If I cast my mind back to when I initially became interested in meditation, I recall feeling utterly locked out of any sense of wonder in the natural world. Try as I might I just couldn't see it, the world appeared utterly mundane to me. Boring.

Mindfulness, then, provides a bridge. It moves us out of our default perception, where we may be consumed by the constant arising of thoughts; into another perception, where we force our attention out onto the material world.

This gives us *some of the result* of an awakening to wonder, without the presence of the awakening itself. It is not the final goal or destination, rather it provides a contrast

with our normal state of being. From that contrast a new possibility may be born, a glimpse of wonder may arise. Absent the contrast, our minds may simply turn wonder into another concept to be logged.

Stepping into that state of wonder then ultimately requires the rejection of mindfulness as ever being necessary. After this happens, it is easy to forget why we engaged in such a practice in the first place. Just as the son may have initially felt angry with his father for all the unnecessary work he'd been made to do, so too we can feel we wasted vast amounts of time on an futile exercise. Couldn't he always have recognised his home? Couldn't we always have embraced the majesty of life directly?

A remembrance of the position we were in when we started ameliorates this, we can recollect how much our consciousness has shifted. With this in mind we can be optimistic! Perhaps some people can move into a sense of wonder in a much more direct fashion. For others, perhaps it is possible to smooth and shorten their journey. For others still, we are free from the dogma of *what we should do* to embrace the wisdom of the father in adopting the most compassionate approach. We can open up a greater vision without depriving people of the necessary unnecessary labour.

## 9. The Perennial Philosophy

*This piece is an adapted transcript of a brief talk I gave, introducing the concept of a perennial philosophy. However I felt at the time, I think today I see such philosophy as more of a map of an unknown territory, rather than the territory itself.*

The Perennial Philosophy is a term that's existed in the study of religion for the past few hundred years. It's the idea that if you scratch the surface of the world's spiritual and religious traditions, in spite of their seeming diversity, some very similar concepts about the nature of reality emerge. The mystics of the different religions, the kind of people who may live in monasteries—whether they're Zen Buddhist monasteries in the East, or Christian monasteries in the West—at least a portion of them are coming out of their meditative states and making very similar observations about the nature of reality.

These reports can be summed up by saying reality is more *mind-like*, or more *dreamlike*, than we generally take it to be. In the West, for the past maybe a couple of hundred years or more, the philosophy of materialism has really held sway. This is the idea that what really exists is this blob of material substance that came out of who knows where around fifteen billion years ago. Through an evolutionary process this material has given rise to biological life-forms, which have in turn become conscious of the material creating them. Now this is a very interesting way to look at the world, it may indeed be true, but it's not the only way to look at it. What the mystics suggest is that we should consider the possibility that the world actually might be more *mind-like*—that the basic property of the world isn't material that's giving rise to consciousness, but is consciousness dreaming a material world into being.

Now if that's a bit mind-bending don't worry, I've got a really easy way to understand it. You actually experience reality this way for yourself on a daily basis.

When we dream at night we all think that we're walking around, looking out through our eyes, and seeing an external world around us that appears to be really there. We might experience such things as vast bodies of water, we might see the ocean or mountains, these huge heavy objects. Or we might interact with other life forms, sometimes real animals, sometimes mythical creatures. We also meet other human beings that appear to exist independently from us whom we can converse with. If we were asked in a dream what these things were, we would say that they were *material objects* that had an independent reality from us. We wouldn't even entertain the idea that they, along with the whole world, existed within us. That would seem mad. But as soon as we wake up, if we reflect upon it, we know of course that's exactly the case. There were no mountains, no oceans, no other people in the objective external sense—everything was arising within us.

It would be true to say *in a dream we all have two identities*. We can quite accurately describe ourselves as the individual person who is walking around the dreamworld. On another level however, we are the conscious awareness in which the whole dream is arising. We are both of those things.

Now to take the dream analogy a bit further, you might have heard of something called *lucid dreaming*. It's the idea that we can wake up in our dreams and indeed become aware that we're dreaming. We become aware that the whole world we see around us is arising within our consciousness. It's something I would definitely recommend everyone checks out at least once in their life. It's a fascinating experience; to see great expansive distances, vast bodies of moving water, to interact with other people and realise it's all arising in mind!

Now what the mystics suggest is that we can have an experience similar to that in this waking life. The reason we can, is because life is like a dream. Look at it one way and we are individual characters walking around looking at an external world 'out there'. But induce a certain experience and that appears to flip inside out. You'll

see that actually you and the whole world are arising in one conscious field of awareness—like a dream, but on a different level.

This is not to say it's *my dream* or *your dream*, but a dream we all share as part of *One Big Mind*.

There are certain techniques that can be used to dream lucidly. Things like waking up two hours earlier than you normally would, staying awake for half an hour and then going back to sleep. This works because you carry more of your waking consciousness directly into the dream state. But how would we go about living lucidly? How do we go about having, not the same experience, but a comparable one, in our waking lives? The Sufi mystic Rumi gives us a clue when he writes:

'The bliss of deep sleep is a free sample of the awareness enjoyed by the mystic when they are wide awake.'

So what does Rumi mean by that? Well, what he's pointing to is the importance of this deep sleep state. Rather than just being a place where we go when we lose consciousness, he's suggesting that deep sleep *is* this field of awareness, this one consciousness which the dream of life arises out of. Now we perhaps do have something of a sense of this, because I'm going to bet you probably don't like the sound of your alarm clock going off in the morning. I know I don't! It feels like we're being pulled out of a place that, although we can't remember it, it feels tranquil and blissful and beautiful. We'd rather stay immersed in that state of deep consciousness, that deep sleep state than we are pulled out of it. The problem with it is that you can't really remember it, because when you're in it, you're unconscious. There's something about going into it that we just ceased to exist. So what Rumi is suggesting can be the case for the mystic (and anyone can be a mystic), is they can experience that, but experience it in a wide awake state. You can start to drop into that deep consciousness, that sleep state which the mystics equate with the one

mind dreaming the universe into being. You can then embrace its qualities and carry them into your waking life.

## 10. God's Dreamin'

If God is love

Wanting to be known

Then what would he do?

Simple

He'd create a universe of one and two

And set up a tension

A strife of opposites

Between a 'me' and a 'you'



## About the Author

Thank you again for reading this collection of essays. The most relevant thing to know about me is that I run a podcast, exploring themes of anarchism, philosophy of conspiracy theory, geopolitics and metaphysics. Information about that and anything else I do can be found on my website at:

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