

# BREAK THE NORMS

QUESTIONING EVERYTHING YOU THINK  
YOU KNOW ABOUT GOD AND TRUTH,  
LIFE AND DEATH, LOVE AND SEX

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# INTRODUCTION

## BLINDLY FOLLOWING NORMS

I remember what it was like before I *really* knew the truth. Sure, I could recite Hindu scriptures from memory. I honored my family and my community, and pursued my culture's idea of "success" in my corporate finance job. It seemed like I was on a positive track. I was "comfortable." That's the goal, right? I thought I knew exactly what God wanted me to do—and I did my best to deliver.

But I often felt haunted inside. Deep down, I knew that I wasn't free. I felt like a robot, routinely thinking, acting, feeling, and behaving according to my programmer's desires. Have you ever felt this way?

Because I grew up in a family of spiritual Gurus, I spent my childhood studying with holy men and meditating in sacred temples. So I had the seeds of faith in my heart and these seeds grew into incredible spiritual experiences that made me feel deeply that I was not living up to my fullest potential. The intense meditations (*Sadhna*) had a message that echoed within my being: there was more to me that needed to unfold.

Spiritual teachings are borrowed knowledge. Our teachers and lineage holders can only point the way, and while we can absorb their messages, memorize sacred texts, and do the practices composed by enlightened beings, spirituality is meaningless if we only think about it, talk about it, and read about it. Only after experiencing those teachings in our day-to-day lives do we become *spiritual*.

What I realized was that I needed to leave my conditioning behind in order to experience the real me. I had often heard that a divine

presence within could dissolve all limiting patterns and lead me to a life of freedom—but I had not yet had a concrete experience of this truth. I knew I had to break my norms, rooted deep down in my soul. I had to move beyond my culture’s idea of success and God. Continually, I have to write my own success story and find the God who speaks to me directly, not through pundits and priests.

I can’t say there was one dramatic moment in which I suddenly “woke up” and realized that I was free to break out of the conditioning that ran my life. There were many spiritual experiences to remind me of my purpose as I grew up. I would often listen, but passively, without acting on them because the courage to walk my talk was still missing. Part of me wanted to continue the comfortable life that we all are conditioned to pursue—while another part constantly felt the spiritual pull to lead a movement to raise human awareness. It was a tug of war.

It was the deaths of my sister and a childhood friend that planted the seeds of questioning in me. Their lives ended, but mine started to expand—and I was left alone to guide my fate. My sister was a bright student who was very well versed in mantras. When she started falling ill, I never thought the sickness would end in her death. My mind constantly reaffirmed to me that young people don’t die of sickness. Why would anything bad happen to her?

My dad called one day while I was visiting and asked my sister to recite the *Kujjika*, a two-page Sanskrit mantra. She recited it all in one breath. She always did. The significance in this recitation was that it was her last one. My sister slipped into a coma right after saying the last word. We lost her a few days later.

This tragedy changed me forever. To work with my grief, I started meditating for hours, even days. But there was something more waiting to test my strength. Just three years later, I lost my best friend in a sudden accident. I heard the news in my basement room, and my soul was so shocked that I couldn’t sleep in that room for more than a month.

Their passings opened up all my questions about life and death, about meaning and how to live. I thought I knew the answers to it all. But I feel they left an assignment for me to complete. Over time, I would come to understand that my life’s work is not about finding the answers to my

questions—it is about building the courage to question my answers. But I had to pursue false answers before I learned to truly question.

In 2004, I left India to join my father in New York City and pursue a business degree. I attended one of the best colleges with the full intention of working in the finance industry until I turned forty years old. Only then would I establish a spiritual center where I could impart all my spiritual practice to people who wish to adopt a mindful lifestyle. But within a year of landing an internship at an investment-banking firm, the chaos I witnessed in New York inspired me to leave the financial world.

It was not just the blind race after money that bothered me. It was a painful feeling of being enslaved by the conditioning to be the “best.” Being myself wasn’t an option. I was expected to be the fastest rat in the rat race. Thankfully, a mentor helped me find the courage to take a look at my genuine self.

During my sophomore year in college, Maureen Berrios, a smart and successful CPA, hired me for tax season. I watched her shower tough love on every intern but me. To make sure I was not invisible to her—and not just a dumb intern—I asked her a question one evening.

“Maureen, how am I doing? A little feedback will help me to improve.”

She gazed into my eyes like a tough but caring mother as she said, “Are you ready to hear the truth?” I pretended that I was ready. She poured it all out in one breath: “I don’t think this is the place for you. I don’t mean this office, specifically. I mean Wall Street, the material world. You are meant to help the world by adding meaning to our lives. Your energy is so different from all the people I come across. You can decide to stay in the financial industry. But ultimately, you will be on a social service path helping people with your wisdom.”

Maureen was so confident about this that when I requested that she write a recommendation letter for my MBA application to Harvard, she said, “Let them come to study under you. Why are you going there?” Attending Harvard was the dream I had set my heart on when I left India. I wanted to be a Harvard MBA graduate. So when Maureen said *they will come to you*, I thought either she was consoling me because I wasn’t a fit for Harvard yet or she really did see something in me.

Her words eventually led me to see in myself what she saw. I left the financial industry and started Break the Norms as a platform to help spiritual seekers. And one of my first clients was from Harvard. I even took a few Harvard alumni to India for a spiritual retreat. Maureen knew.

Life changed gradually as I started to peel off the layers that society had tattooed upon me. I began to understand that spirituality is a daily job. If we apply ourselves diligently, with regularity, to our meditation and learning, we will glimpse, little by little, the divine truth within. This is the key to freedom: We must experience divine truth for ourselves. Any good teacher will only guide us to awaken what already exists inside.

As a student of divine light and a seventh-generation spiritual teacher, I've dedicated my life to spreading this message to the seekers globally. I am committed to living a free, fearless life and helping others to do the same. I have decided to walk in each and every corner of the world and pick the seekers who are willing to live this spiritual path. The freedom and clarity that I have discovered in me is meant to be in the lives of everyone.

Growing up in a household of Gurus, I have been exposed to hundreds of spiritual paths. The approach that resonates for me the most is Tantra. Most of my communication in this book comes from a Tantric perspective.

Now, I know what you may be thinking: *Isn't Tantra all about sex?*

The short answer is no. Tantra is a full tradition, rich in wisdom, myth, sacred texts, practices, and revelations. It makes me sad to see websites claiming to offer "mind-blowing sex with Tantra." This kind of thing gives Tantra a bad rep. People think Tantra is Indian pornography, or complicated acrobatics for the bedroom. The irony is that Tantra certainly can blow your mind, but not in a pornographic way!

Originating in India, Tantra emerged as a response to the ascetic, monastic traditions of renunciation that filled the land. Before the development of Tantra, the most common way to walk a spiritual path was to leave your home, family, and profession. It meant going to meditate in a monastery or cave, shaving your head and wearing robes, and often begging for food at the temple. The idea was that the only way to fully experience spirit was to separate yourself from the distractions of sexuality,

lust, career, business, greed—all worldly attachments. Only then could the mind become quiet enough, and pure enough, to see God.

While these older Indian traditions recommend that seekers remove themselves from the trappings of a human life in favor of a monastic path, Tantra teaches enlightenment within a typical human life. It is taught for householders who have homes, marriages, families, jobs, and responsibilities. Tantra wants us to achieve the best of both the spiritual and material worlds. It wants us to experience the sacred right in our daily lives. That's why it includes topics considered taboo in other religions, like sex and money. Tantra evolved from older traditions to benefit those who wanted both spiritual and worldly success. Always immensely practical, Tantra offers philosophies and technologies to support seekers in realizing their divine nature—while staying in the world of intimate relationships, family, livelihood, and all the messiness that comes with human life.

Some Tantric teachings *do* address sexuality. That's so those who do not choose celibacy can learn to work with their sexual energy as divine energy—to have a transcendent experience in their bodies. Have you heard of the chakras? That entire system of energetic centers in the body originates in Tantric tradition. We call this system the “subtle body.”

By associating Tantra exclusively with sex, the Western world has corrupted what began as a pure and powerful method for working with the subtle body. Tantra invites us to experience ecstatic states of healing and transcendence in our own bodies and in connection with others.

Today, it is more important than ever to understand Tantra. The essence of Tantra lies in its strength to make you spiritually independent. Tantra teaches each of us to accept and acknowledge ourselves the way we are. In fully accepting the totality of our embodied experience, we can access the freedom that is our birthright.

Tantric teachings are based on the notion that truth is not reliant on conditions. That means the divine can be found *through* our humanity. While other traditions teach that we must banish sexual desires, anger, greed, ego, and many other “negative” emotions, Tantra invites us to use each human experience as a pathway to our higher selves. And that's the intention of this book, too.



I teach Tantric practices and principles because they make sense to me—and because they *work*. But everything I say can be applied to your life, regardless of religion or creed. Please embrace or reject whatever I say on your own terms. If Tantra resonates with you, that's great. If not, you will find some spiritual perspective that makes sense to you. All true spiritual paths lead to the same place. The key is finding one that feeds your unique soul.

As you engage this path, get ready to be brutally honest. Get ready to unlearn your suffering. It's time to discover our real reasons for being alive. It's time to break the norms. I want you to know that you will not find a formula in this book. I do not have a "one size fits all" prescription to yield specific results for every single person. I will not give you a map of where to go in your life. But I *will* give you instruments for your travel. I will share stories, teachings, and tools that invite you to see your own true nature for yourself. It's that nature that is your guide. It's that infinitely intelligent space in you that will illuminate your path.

When you read this book, you can expect to be challenged. I am not here to fluff up your concepts of who you think you are. I am not here to tell you that you are beautiful and perfect just as you are, and that you can have everything you dream of no matter what. If that's what you're after, you'll have to find a different book!

I'm here to point you toward something much deeper and more important than that. I'm here to expose your blind spots so that you can bring them into your direct vision. It's those blind spots—those subjects our psyches have made taboo—which block our connection to the Source.

While we uncover blind spots, we can expect some cosmic punches. We are programmed to crave cosmic blessings. A cosmic punch is similar to what your mom gave you when you wouldn't stop eating cookies. It is tough love to improve your life. It is needed because the structures that have kept our lives in place may need to fall away. Relationships may need to end. We may need to be humbled. Jobs may take on whole new forms.

But I promise, the clarity and freedom that comes with the discovery at hand is worth any growing pains you may encounter along the way.

The information I am going to share with you in this book is special and sacred. I have come across many who are in the market to check out

new spiritual teachings for weekend reading. But this book is not for lazy weekend reading. Read even just a page or two daily, but do it with your whole awareness involved. Bring everything deeper into your experience by writing down the questions and thoughts that pop up in your mind during the reading. Then you can refer to, savor, and reflect on them over and over again.

In chapter 1, I will start with an overview of what it means to break the norms and take a first look at how to do it. Each subsequent chapter will focus on one specific (and often taboo) area of life. In each area, I will illuminate cultural norms that widely influence our beliefs about the world and, therefore, deserve a thorough investigation. I will share my perspective on each norm and invite you to question each norm for yourself.

The exercises and meditations in each chapter are meant to support you in your process of discovering the truth for yourself. They will help you to take what you've read beyond the realm of the mind and into a deeper place in your soul. Take the time to do the exercises so you can receive the maximum benefits of this book.

My hope is that this book will be a mirror for your life. I want to hold the mirror in such a way that you can see directly into the cycles of pain and suffering that you unconsciously repeat. With this kind of reflection, you can take steps to create powerful change. My intention is to reflect your own wisdom back to you, so you can see it and claim it for yourself. I will be doing a very poor job if, years from today, my students are still making appointments to see me for the same problems they came for five years ago. My aim is to make you independent of me and, at heart, independent of every spiritual Guru out there. It will not happen overnight, but it *will* happen. I want to be there for you as a guide.

You are a precious human with incredible talents. There is no one “out there” who can claim what is yours to discover. I want to witness the splendor of freedom in your eyes. I want to ignite your divine spark into a sacred fire that burns through your conditioned consciousness. You *can* embrace a new awareness—a higher one—and this book will help you get there.

## THE UNLEARNING BEGINS



**T**oo many souls suffer the disillusionment that comes from following a destiny that is not their own. Instead of waking up joyful and energized, many of us feel like robots, pushing forward like a machine to keep life going. We feel trapped by our commitments and lost without material things we believe we must have. We struggle to behave in ways that are respectable and work to arrive at what we think we should achieve.

We follow paths that are “normal” in our culture. I call these external patterns that shape our lives “norms.” My definition of a *norm* is “any thought or behavior that has been learned from outside sources, such as parents, religion, culture, or society at large.” Norms may or may not reflect our internal truths, but most of us don’t take the time to notice how they fit. Instead, we blindly follow a norm laid before us by others—a path that always leads to a dead end. This is because if we never examine these norms that influence our choices, we may have a persistent, haunted feeling. We may suffer with anxiety or feel lost. To distract ourselves from this harrowing emptiness, we may drink more alcohol or get hooked on reality TV. Maybe we’ll seek fulfillment by going to one self-help workshop after another or following strict diets. Or perhaps we’ll try to find an idealized romantic relationship or dream of the freedoms we’d have by leaving the relationship we are in. In so many ways, we look outside ourselves for the fulfillment we wish we could find inside.

And what if we *do* look deeper, only to discover we feel culturally “unacceptable” emotions like anger or sexual urges? We may try to hide or suppress these feelings in order to maintain our sense of stability. But instead, they come out in ways that make us feel crazy. We look at the long line in the grocery store and want to push people out of our way, or we find it painful to sit in the car while traffic moves at five miles per hour. We might become addicted to pornography, or even want to participate in sexual violence.

Perhaps the saddest outcome from blindly following the norms is a feeling that life is passing us by. We know we are not exactly *happy*, but we have no idea how to make changes. We have heard of this nice thing called “purpose,” and while we might want that for ourselves, we think that kind of spiritual insight is only for bestselling authors or famous philanthropists or people living in caves. We may even lie awake at night fearing death. Or worse, fearing that we haven’t ever really lived.

We have no tools to understand our divinity. We hear about it, read about it, but are too afraid to explore it. It feels too weird to ask questions, either of ourselves or of others, about topics that baffle us—questions like, “What happens when we die?” “Will I ever find my soul mate?” and “Is there a God?” These are some of the taboo questions that we will explore in this book. If we don’t address these questions, we will continue to suffer in silence, or ignore that we have a problem, or even blame external factors for our pain. If we blame our parents, God, our karma, or our partners, we’re still turning our awareness outside of ourselves—and distancing ourselves even further from what we truly seek. We may even reject the help of a sincere spiritual teacher.

We simply don’t realize there is another way.

## BREAKING THE NORMS

To outsiders, it looks like Adam has it all—a lovely home in Los Angeles, an attractive wife, two darling children, a glamorous car, and a hearty reserve of wealth. As the head of a reputed media-consulting firm, meeting the who’s who of Hollywood is just another day. But Adam looks at his life and wonders, “Is this all there is?” He has been drinking an extra

scotch or two each night to “take the edge off” after a long day. Sometimes he wakes up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat, but he can’t quite figure out why.

It’s time to call bullshit on the cultural programming that keeps us enslaved to external influences. It’s time to question taboo subjects for ourselves. How we can do that is what this book is all about.

I want you to know that you can completely overhaul your life. Whatever is not working can shift into something new. It takes a strong commitment on your part, and it won’t be easy—but it can happen. You can upgrade your quality of life, on your terms. You can function at a higher level that is fueled by inspiration. And you can free yourself to follow your deepest passions. How to do this is as simple as questioning the norms for yourself—and discovering the free soul that lives in your heart.

Each of us has a shining, resilient, infinitely intelligent soul. Life’s conditions sometimes beat us down and make us forget our true nature. These conditions could be pressure to get good grades in school, the struggle to survive the rat race, or the compulsion to follow the status quo. We can get trapped inside the demands that come from outside ourselves. These demands could be from a spouse who feels you don’t care for their feelings, a boss who feels you are a burden on the company, or an investment that you owned but now owns you. Conditionings may have built a home in us. And that home can be quite sturdy. My entire practice focuses on shaking these “homes” built in us.

When we clear the cultural and familiar dross that covers our light, a new life becomes possible. We can see through the external conditioning planted in us by society, religion, and the media, to name a few. The good news is that we don’t need a figure from heaven to help us see through our patterns. A daily disciplined practice of meditation will help us to sail through this journey. In addition to meditation, be willing to listen to the truth. Speaking the truth is great, but listening to the truth with no guards is liberating.

This openness to truth helps us to make conscious choices. Human beings are blessed with the gift of choice every day. The daily conscious choices we make will determine if we react to our patterns or take a