

The
Science of
Enlightenment

HOW MEDITATION WORKS

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sounds true
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Contents

	Editor's Foreword . . .	ix
	Author's Preface . . .	xv
CHAPTER 1	My Journey . . .	1
CHAPTER 2	The Most Fundamental Skill . . .	27
CHAPTER 3	Mysticism in World Culture . . .	49
CHAPTER 4	Calming and Clarifying . . .	67
CHAPTER 5	Insight and Purification . . .	83
CHAPTER 6	The Many Faces of Impermanence . . .	105
CHAPTER 7	The Realm of Power . . .	135
CHAPTER 8	The Real No Self . . .	155
CHAPTER 9	The Power of Gone . . .	167
CHAPTER 10	Return to the Source . . .	179
CHAPTER 11	My Happiest Thought . . .	205
	Index . . .	227
	About the Author . . .	231
	About Unified Mindfulness . . .	233

CHAPTER ONE

My Journey

I have practiced, taught, and researched meditation for almost fifty years. If you were to ask me how that has had an impact on my soul, I'd have to say it's been bittersweet. Don't get me wrong; the sweet part totally trumps the bitter. Meditation has been very good to me. It has vastly deepened my sensual fulfillment and allowed me to see that my happiness need not depend on conditions. It has given me a new way to view myself and provided me with a set of tools for refining my behaviors and improving my relationships. Yes, sweet. But the icing on the cake is that every day I get to see people's lives change as the result of things I share with them. Often those changes are dramatic. People get to live their lives on a scale two or three times bigger than they otherwise would have been. That's a large claim, but the mechanism is quite simple: meditation elevates a person's base level of focus. By focus, I mean the ability to attend to what's relevant in a given situation. By base level, I mean how focused you automatically get in daily life when you're not making an effort to be focused. If you're consistently two or three times more focused in each moment of life, then you're living two or three times bigger, two or three times richer. Five decades ago, some very kind people in Japan slipped me the secret: you can dramatically extend life—not by multiplying the number of your years, but by expanding the fullness of your moments. Knowing that I have lived with such richness makes the visage of my inevitable death less problematic. That's the sweet part.

So what's the bitter part? It is that most people will, in the end, not allocate the modest amount of time and energy required to do that. I live with the knowledge that most people will never have what

they so easily could achieve. I know that the demands of daily life will convince them that they cannot set aside even a few moments to develop the one skill that will make it possible for them to optimally respond to those demands. The phrase “what’s wrong with this picture?” comes to mind. But once again, don’t get me wrong. I’m not bummed out. In fact, I’m rather optimistic about the future. I explain why in the last chapter of this book.

Although we may never meet in person, I feel subtly connected to you through these pages. Whether you have a meditation practice or not, the mere fact that you’re interested in a book like this means that you’ve come a long way. Welcome.



I call what I present here a “science of enlightenment.” By science, I mean an experiment that is reproducible by anyone. Meditation is something that human beings all over the world have been doing for a long time. Done properly, under the guidance of a qualified teacher, the results are—to a certain extent—predictable. Science can also refer to a structured body of knowledge, which the path of meditation definitely represents.

The other noun in the title is “enlightenment.” Defining enlightenment is notoriously tricky. Almost anything you say about it, no matter how true, may also be misleading. Having said that, here’s a place to start: you can think of enlightenment as a kind of permanent shift in perspective that comes about through direct realization that there is no *thing* called “self” inside you.

This is a very rough and ready definition. We might call it the “executive summary.” Notice that I’m not saying that there is no self, but rather no *thing* called a self. Of course, there is certainly an *activity* inside you called personality, an *activity* of the self. But that is different from a *thing* called the self. Meditation changes your relationship to sensory experience, including your thoughts and body sensations. It allows you to experience thoughts and body sensations in a clear and unblocked way. When the sensory experience of the mind-body

becomes sufficiently clear and uninhibited, it ceases to be a rigid thing that imprisons your identity. The sensory self becomes a comfortable home, not a jail cell. That's why enlightenment is sometimes referred to as liberation. You realize that the thingness of self is an artifact caused by habitual nebulosity and viscosity around your mind-body experience.

Confusingly, the experience of no self can also be described as the experience of true self or deepest soul. You can call it no self, true self, big self, elastic self, liberation, nature, or true love—you can call it whatever you want. The important thing is not so much what you call it but to know why it's relevant to your life and how you can feasibly get there. That's the purpose of this book.

Sometimes this realization happens suddenly. You can read about that sudden version in books like Philip Kapleau's classic *The Three Pillars of Zen*, which contains numerous testimonials from people who experienced enlightenment quite suddenly. But in my experience as a teacher, enlightenment usually sneaks up on people. Sometimes they don't quite realize how enlightened they've become over time because they have gradually acclimatized to it.

So the perception of self—what it is, and how it arises—is central to the science of enlightenment. We'll be looking at this in detail in the course of this book. But for now, I'd like to make a few disclaimers about my definition of enlightenment.

First, my definition represents the low bar. That is, it describes the *minimum* change needed to qualify. However, that doesn't mean it's the end of the journey. In point of fact, it is merely the beginning of the unfolding of the “wisdom function” within you.

Second, there are some people who claim that enlightenment is fictional, an exaggeration, or a celestial height that mere mortals can never approach. Let me be clear: enlightenment is real. Not only is it real, but it is something that can be achieved by normal human beings through the systematic practice of meditation. Can people get to that place without practicing meditation? Yes, but meditation makes it more probable that they'll get to that place, and meditation makes it more probable that they'll continue to grow optimally after they get there.

In the course of this text, we'll look at some of the signposts along the path as well as some of the potential pitfalls and how to avoid them. I hope to sensitize you to the issues that can arise and give you a practical understanding of how to proceed. Of course, none of this can substitute for getting personal guidance from a qualified teacher, but it will hopefully function as an inspiration, a supplement, and a guidebook.

Third, I'm fully aware that "enlightenment" is a term with the potential to cause misunderstandings and even contention. There is some dispute in spiritual circles about whether enlightenment is something a teacher should even explicitly talk about, and whether it's a goal to be achieved or something that already exists, or both.

I'm familiar with these various viewpoints and am sensitive to the concerns they represent. Philosophically, I'm fully prepared to argue for either side of such questions. But as a teacher, I feel it is my duty to take a stand and to teach from a certain perspective. Each perspective has its own characteristic hazards. The perspective I've chosen is to explicitly describe enlightenment and present it as a feasible goal for ordinary people.

Spiritual practice is often described as a kind of path with recognizable stages. But such a practice-as-path paradigm can involve some pitfalls. In colloquial usage, the word "path" implies a starting point, a destination, and a distance separating the two. But if enlightenment means realizing where you've always been, then the distance between the starting point and the destination must be zero, contradicting the very concept of a path.

Moreover, when we describe spirituality as a path, it immediately sets up all kinds of craving, aversion, confusion, and unhelpful comparisons. People wish they were at some other place on the path, and they struggle to get there. When we think about spirituality as a path, we create the idea of enlightenment as an object out there in the future, separate from ourselves.

As teachers, we're damned if we do and damned if we don't. If we describe a path to enlightenment, it leads to the aforementioned problems. If we fail to describe a path, people won't have motivation or

direction, and they won't be sensitive to the benchmarks. They won't know how to make optimal use of signs of progress. They won't know how to recognize windows of opportunity when nature presents them.

Thus to teach about enlightenment is to mislead people. On the other hand, to fail to teach about enlightenment is also to mislead people. You might say that to be a teacher means being willing to take on some bad karma in the service of greater good karma.

There is a Zen story about an enlightened teacher who was climbing a tree. He slipped and fell in such a way that he was able to bite onto a branch, but he couldn't reach it with his hands or feet. He was literally hanging by his teeth. Then, from under the tree, a student asked him the question, "What is the essence of enlightenment?"

The teacher knew the answer to the question, but in order to give it, he would have to open his mouth, in which case he would fall to his death. On the other hand, if he failed to give the answer, he would be shirking his duty to aid his fellow beings.

This story is the basis of a *koan*, or Zen question: "If that were *you* hanging from the tree, what would you do?" The koan is intended for advanced students who are in the position of teaching. It deals with a central paradox that comes up whenever we attempt to describe a path to enlightenment. If you teach that there is a path, you subtly mislead people, so you're dead. If you don't teach a path, you fail to inform and encourage people, so you're dead. Either way, you're dead. What would *you* do?

So to write a book like this represents a choice on my part—a choice to die in the line of duty. But how did I get involved in all this to begin with?

Growing Up

I was born in Los Angeles, California, in 1944. My mother tells me that I was a difficult baby—whiny, fussy, agitated, high maintenance. Many of my earliest memories center around three themes: great difficulty dealing with physical discomfort, utter inability to be around others who were in emotional discomfort, and a constant sense of

agitation and impatience. If I physically hurt myself in any way, or if the room was too hot or too cold, or if I was ill, I would literally freak out. I can remember devising elaborate strategies to put off for as long as possible visits to the doctor (shots!) and visits to the dentist (drilling!). I simply could not abide pain of any sort.

I was also inordinately impatient in school. I would watch the clock all day, longing for the hands to reach 3:00 p.m., when I could leave. I felt frightened and uncomfortable in social situations and had to leave the room if any adult was going through difficult emotions. A girl I knew in school, whose parents were close to mine, died suddenly. My parents went to visit the family, but I refused to accompany them. I simply had no idea what to do around people who were grieving.

I did very poorly in school, which was a source of great consternation for my parents. If the concept of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder had existed in those days, I probably would have been diagnosed as having a severe case and been heavily medicated.

To sum it all up, my genes and early conditioning predisposed me to be “antimeditative.”

At the age of fourteen, I developed a passionate fascination with Asian languages and the traditional cultures of the East. As a result, I began attending a Japanese ethnic school in addition to American public school. In 1962, I graduated from Venice High School where I was a nerdy social outcast. In the same week, I graduated from Sawtelle Japanese Language Institute, where I was the class valedictorian. The institute wanted to showcase the Japanese-speaking white guy. My high school grades were not good enough to get me into college, but my uncle Jack found out that, even if you had bad grades, if you did well on tests that measured your potential for success in college, you could get admitted to the University of California system. I took the tests, did quite well, and was admitted to UCLA as a potentially gifted student.

At UCLA, I majored in Asian languages and took my senior year in Japan as an exchange student. That year was one of the happiest times in my life. I was in paradise. In those days, it was uncommon for a foreigner to speak Japanese, but I could speak, read, and write

like a native. I could open any door just by opening my mouth. I hardly attended my university classes at all. Instead, I spent most of my time exploring the culture. One of the things I got involved with was the *sencha* tea ceremony. I was horrible at it, being by nature klutzy, antsy, and unfocused, but it was still a lot of fun because almost all the other students were young, cute, kimono-clad girls. I felt like the sole thorn in a rose garden. My tea teacher must have sensed that I needed some remedial training in being an adult, so she suggested that I go to Manpuku-ji, a Zen temple in Kyoto, with which she had some connections.

I spent a month at the temple. I didn't do any meditation, but I did hang out with the monks, talking with them and learning about Buddhist culture. They made a profound impression on me. I sensed that they knew about some sort of "secret sauce," a way to be deeply happy regardless of conditions. And I sensed that they would willingly share it with me but would never force it upon me. I would have to take the initiative if I wanted to experience it for myself. But I was not ready yet, given my intrinsically antimeditative personality.

Still, hanging out with the monks of Manpuku-ji did change me. I became fascinated with Buddhist ideas and culture, albeit from an academic perspective. Upon my return to the United States and my graduation from UCLA, I entered a PhD course in Buddhist studies at the University of Wisconsin. In the late 1960s, Madison was a wild scene, and I loved it. I participated in the riotous antiwar protests, got tear-gassed and clubbed by the city police, vastly improved my Sanskrit, studied Tibetan and Pali, and read the Buddhist classics in their original, canonical languages. I spent my summer breaks in San Francisco, learning about pot and LSD. I was able to complete all my PhD coursework in just two years and was sent back to Japan to do research on my doctoral thesis.

At that time, the University of Wisconsin had the largest academic program in Buddhist studies in the Western Hemisphere. The chairman of the program, Richard Robinson, was my mentor, idol, and role model. He was an awesome polymath who could pun in Sanskrit and Japanese in the same sentence. His specialty was Buddhist logic—the

sylogistic forms used by Indian and Tibetan philosophers to refute the “thingness” of things based on reasoning similar to Zeno’s paradoxes.

During this time, two events occurred that profoundly altered the course of my life, one just before my departure to Japan and the other about a year after.

The Brownie Epiphany

As I mentioned, during my two years of graduate school, I spent my summers in San Francisco, being initiated into the drug-centered zeitgeist of Haight-Ashbury. One afternoon, my friends and I dropped acid and went to the movie *Yellow Submarine*. The next day, I was alone in a friend’s apartment and decided to smoke some hashish. Then I got the munchies, and began eating a delicious, chewy chocolate brownie.

I *really* got into that brownie. For a few minutes, I entered a state of *samadhi* (extraordinary concentration) centered on the taste and tactile sensation of the brownie. I became so focused on the act of eating the brownie that everything else fell away. There was just the brownie.

It was sweet and yummy, but I also noticed that it had interesting textural properties. There were holes in the brownie caused by gas bubbles, and around those holes, the cake was harder and more dense than in its other parts. As I bit into the brownie, I could clearly detect the diffuse texture of the cake, the dense envelope around the holes, and the nothingness inside the hole. I remember thinking, “The holes taste as good as the cake.” *At that instant, the duality of existence versus nonexistence passed away, and for a moment, I was thrust into a world of oneness.* Something had shifted—dramatically.

That shift did not immediately go away, even after I had completely come down from the drugs. For about two weeks, I walked around in a magic world. Prior to that, the things I had read about in my Buddhist studies seemed to me to be nothing but mythological ruminations and philosophical conjectures, elaborated by scholars with too much time on their hands. Now, for the first time, I realized that they were not just concocting speculations. They were trying to describe something that human beings actually experience. After a couple of

weeks, the experience faded into a pleasant memory, but it left me with a permanent intellectual shift. I now knew that certain parts of the Buddhist tradition, which I had been studying as philosophical concepts, were in fact direct descriptions of actual experience. At the time, I had no way to get back to that experience, but at least I knew for sure that there was something in Buddhism besides quaint culture, scholastic speculation, and superstition.

Looking back now, with decades of experience under my belt, I understand exactly what occurred that day in the Haight. Such spontaneous, transient, micro-tastes of enlightenment are not uncommon. I suspect that they occur for many, perhaps even most, people. Typically, the experience happens without warning and without previous practice, and passes after a few minutes, or hours, or days. In my present capacity as a meditation teacher, I am frequently approached by people who have had such spontaneous experiences—unfortunately often well after those experiences have already faded for them. I do not understand exactly why such spontaneous experiences occur when they do, to whom they do. In my case, the drugs may have facilitated it, but they were not the central factor, because drug-based epiphanies vanish as soon as the drugs are metabolized, and my experience definitely did not vanish immediately. I'd give anything to know what occurs neurophysiologically when people have such spontaneous quasi-enlightenment experiences. The fact that unitive no-self experiences happen to people who have no meditative training or spiritual perspective indicates to me that enlightenment is in some sense natural and just waiting to happen. When we finally learn why they happen spontaneously, albeit transiently, to some people under certain circumstances, we will probably be able to foster an enlightened age on this planet. That's why I said that I'd give anything to know, from a scientific point of view, what happens in cases like my brownie epiphany.

On the other hand, although I don't know why such experiences occur spontaneously for some people, I definitely know why they fail to last for most people. There are several reasons for this. The first is that, in general, people who do not meditate do not have high habitual levels of concentration power. When a unitive, or no-self/big-self, state

arises, they lack the concentration power to zero in on it and maintain it in the center of their awareness. Second, even if people have some concentration power, they usually lack the sensory clarity to track how selfhood arises and passes in real time. Third, most people do not have high levels of habitual equanimity. Equanimity is the ability to allow sensory experience to well up without suppression and to pass away without identifying with it. After a glimpse of no self, the old habitual “self-self” will rearise. Without tracking skills and equanimity, people quickly re-identify with their former habitually patterned identity and, consequently, the unitive perspective fades.

By way of contrast, if some level of cultivated concentration power, sensory clarity, and equanimity precedes a spontaneous insight into oneness, that insight can be held centrally in awareness through concentration, and when the old habitual self reemerges, there need not be a reidentification with it. This is the difference between peak experiences, such as my brownie epiphany, and actual enlightenment. Enlightenment is not a peak from which you descend over time. It is a plateau from which you ascend, further and further as the months, years, and decades pass.

Learning to Pay Attention

Once I completed my PhD coursework, all I needed to do to get my academic degree was write my dissertation. As my thesis topic, I decided to study the Shingon school of Japanese Buddhism. Shingon is a Japanese version of Vajrayana, similar in many ways to the practices that are central to Tibetan Buddhism. However, Shingon is not a direct import from Tibet to Japan; rather, the Tibetan Vajrayana and the Japanese Vajrayana share a common ancestor in late Indian Buddhism. Interest in Tibetan Vajrayana practice was beginning to burgeon in the late 1960s, but virtually no Westerner had studied the tradition’s Japanese version. It occurred to me that Shingon studies would be a perfect subject to make my academic specialty. The topic required familiarity with a wide range of languages—modern Japanese, classical Japanese, classical Chinese, Sanskrit, and Tibetan—all of which