SAM HARRIS AND “SPIRITUALITY WITHOUT RELIGION”

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THE ENDNOTES for Sam Harris’ first book, The End of Faith, contain several positive references to Ken Wilber’s work in transpersonal/integral psychology, plus an endorsement of Terence McKenna’s psychedelic-fueled “exquisite ravings.”

So it’s been obvious for over a decade, for anyone who wishes to see, that there was a “New Age Atheist” in Harris waiting to come out, and that he would eventually write a book like Waking Up.

In speaking of his early experiences with MDMA (i.e., Ecstasy), Harris thus reveals:

I now knew that Jesus, the Buddha, Lao Tzu, and the other saints and sages of history had not all been epileptics, schizophrenics, or frauds. I still considered the world’s religions to be mere intellectual ruins, maintained at enormous economic and social cost, but I now understood that important psychological truths could be found in the rubble.

It is likely that the Buddha did indeed exist in flesh and blood. So score one for Harris on that point.

His view of Lao Tzu, however, fares less well:

In the mid-twentieth century, a consensus emerged among scholars that the historicity of the person known as Laozi is doubtful and that the Tao Te Ching was “a compilation of Taoist sayings by many hands.”

And regarding Jesus, the historian Richard Carrier has recently calculated that the odds against a “minimal Jesus” ever having existed are more than 12,000-to-1. (That minimal historical Jesus was simply a preacher who was crucified by the Romans, and around whom a cult arose after his death. Any other claims about Jesus would only make the existence of that new composite even less likely.)

So, to the extent to which a person who never even existed was indeed neither an epileptic, a schizophrenic, nor a fraud, Harris is not wrong—though the non-existence of even a minimal historical Jesus makes St. Paul’s vision (i.e., hallucination) of him on the road to Damascus correspondingly more likely to be the product of epilepsy or the like. (Nowhere in Paul’s epistles, genuine or forged, does he speak of a flesh-and-blood Jesus. All of those epistles predate the Gospels; so it is likely that early Christians, in all sects, regarded Jesus only as a celestial being, not an earthly one.)
When you are defending the mental health of two of the world’s “greatest sages” (out of three) who never even existed, and comparing their “experiences” to your own (on MDMA), you are not off to a good start.

Throughout my twenties, I studied with many teachers who functioned as gurus in the traditional sense, but I never had a relationship with any of them that I find embarrassing in retrospect or that I wouldn’t currently recommend to others. I don’t know whether to attribute this to good luck or to the fact that there was a line of devotion I was never tempted to cross.

And then, very shortly after referencing my own second book (Stripping the Gurus), Harris pointedly opines:

I believe that too much can be made of the failures of specific spiritual teachers or of the pathologies found among their followers, as though such pratfalls [!] discredit the guru-disciple relationship in principle.... I have known many people who learned a great deal by spending extended periods of time in the company of one or another spiritual teacher. And I have learned indispensable things myself.

Note how Harris there elides blithely from “spiritual teachers” to “guru-disciple relationship” and then quickly back to “spiritual teachers” again, as if the terms were synonymous. They’re not (and he knows it).

The sages in question may well have “functioned as gurus in the traditional sense” to their disciples, but Harris’ relationship with them was merely that of a student to his teacher(s), not of a disciple to a guru. The difference is roughly the same as between “playing the field” in casual dating, versus literal “‘til death do us part” marriage: the spiritual aspirant can have many teachers, but only one guru. Further, that spiritual marriage (to the guru) traditionally demands complete obedience on the part of the disciple, with any questioning of the guru’s dictates by the disciple being the product only of “ego” and thus making one a bad disciple.

Few would argue against the idea that it is possible to “learn a great deal by spending extended periods of time in the company of one or another spiritual teacher.” People who have meditated for years can indeed be fully expected to have valuable things to teach others on that subject. But there again, “extended periods of time” spent as a student, who can walk away at any time, are not the same as the experiences one has after crossing the “line of devotion” which is involved in becoming a disciple. As such, Harris’ experiences “from a safe distance” cannot be used to defend “the guru-disciple relationship in principle”: they can only be used to defend the teacher-student relationship.

Shortly after the publication of The End of Faith, Harris guested on Ken Wilber’s Integral Naked forum, in an online interview. None of kw’s dozens of interviews with spiritual leaders and thinkers were adversarial: they were all given from a bully-pulpit, with people who substantially endorsed his ideas, and vice versa. Correspondingly, Harris’ participation in that forum was not of the status of a normal interview, where appearing as an expert would not imply endorsement of the organization or person doing the interviewing. Yet by 2007, former members of Wilber’s
community were openly regarding it as a “cult.” Around the same time, Wilber was shown, conclusively, to have brutally and consistently misrepresented his academic sources, in the creation of his “integral psychology” edifice. (For the details, see my “Norman Einstein”: The Dis-Integration of Ken Wilber.)

None of that pathology was evidently easy to spot, even for an experienced seeker like Harris. Either that, or he saw the problems with Wilber’s Integral Institute, but was willing to overlook them and implicitly give his imprimatur to kw, in order to sell a few extra copies of his first book.

Further, in Waking Up, Harris refers several dozen times to his own “remarkable master of meditation” teacher H.W.L. Poonja-ji (always with the unnecessarily respectful “ji” suffix). He mentions a trivial incident in which Poonja was trying to find a husband for his niece, and had her skin lightened by a photographer, as an example of Poonja not yet being “perfect.” But a much more damning imperfection and misuse of power, not mentioned by Harris, is that Poonja later reportedly fathered a child via a blond, female Belgian disciple.

If Harris didn’t wind up pregnant from the same “meditation master,” and has never had an experience with a spiritual teacher that he “wouldn’t currently recommend to others” it’s not just luck, in him supposedly never having followed a bad teacher. It’s also because he’s not a hot blonde. As Joe Jackson sang, when it comes to the risks and rewards of being on the receiving end of the guru’s attention and libido, “It’s different for girls.”

Likewise, consider Harris’ presentation of Ramana Maharshi—“arguably the most widely revered Indian sage of the twentieth century,” and Poonja’s own guru. While Harris acknowledges that “Ramana ... would occasionally say something deeply unscientific,” and that Maharshi claimed to have a “mystical connection” with Mount Arunachala, he leaves us wondering what the exact nature of that connection was. Maharshi himself left no such doubt, saying: “In visions I have seen caves, cities with streets, etc., and a whole world in it.... All the siddhas [‘perfected beings’] are reputed to be there.”

Sam knows about both of those issues: They are documented in Stripping the Gurus, which he cites in Chapter 5, Endnote 9 of Waking Up. But of course, to mention that Poontang-ji knocked up one of his obedient blond followers would have made it difficult for Harris to continue with the “ji” suffix and not look like a complete twat, not to mention casting no small shadow on Sam’s later statement that “Poonja-ji claimed to be perfectly free from the illusion of the self—and by all appearances, he was.”

Likewise, Ramana Maharshi’s notions about his beloved Mount Arunachala are every bit the equal of L. Ron Hubbard’s volcanic Thetan/Xenu claims. The difference is just that Maharshi saw those cities in vision/hallucination, and fully believed that they existed; whereas Hubbard was creating explicit science-religious fiction for his own financial benefit. As such, the truly nutty Hubbard was in better mental health than was the “most respected sage of the twentieth century.” For, Maharshi’s claims in that regard are not merely “deeply unscientific,” they are deeply delusional.
If you are going to gleefully mock the “pratfalls” of laughable gurus like Trungpa, as Harris does, is it too much to ask that you have the guts and basic honesty to not gloss over the most damning behaviors and claims from your own most highly respected teachers?

(The fact that Harris picks the “easiest” target against which to vent the greatest part of his spleen, speaks volumes. That is, if his own ideological position was stronger, he would search for flaws in the best of our world’s gurus, not the most laughable.)

Indeed, one wonders whether Harris, as a teacher, would encourage his readers to apply his own advice regarding spiritual teachers, to himself; and if not, why not:

Generally speaking, you should head for the door at any sign of deception on the part of a teacher.

Nor is the risk of being “married” to an abusive (or horny) guru the only danger in all that. This is from Michael Murphy’s *The Physical and Psychological Effects of Meditation*:

Long-term meditators reported the following percentages of adverse effects:
antisocial behavior, 13.5%; anxiety, 9.0%; confusion, 7.2%; depression, 8.1%;
emotional stability, 4.5%; frustration, 9.0%; physical and mental tension, 8.1%;
procrastination, 7.2%; restlessness, 9.0%; suspiciousness, 6.3%; tolerance of others, 4.5%; and withdrawal, 7.2%.

Those numbers pertain to practitioners of the Maharishi’s mantra-yoga technique of Transcendental Meditation. As usual, there is no proper control group against which to evaluate the figures for their incremental risk, compared to the normal population. Nor any way to know if the same long-term meditators were typically antisocial, confused and frustrated to begin with, etc.

Nevertheless, there is every reason to expect similar risks to pertain to any other form of transformative spirituality. In all cases, when the techniques are practiced intensively, we are tweaking our brains and nervous systems to do things they didn’t evolve to do. And just as physical athletes take risks with their bodies when training and competing intensively, so too do “spiritual athletes” take corresponding risks of mental and physical injury. (The negative reports from practitioners of kundalini yoga, for example, are legion, from Gopi Krishna on down.)

Elsewhere in *Waking Up*, we find Harris still gushing over the ravings of Terence McKenna—indefensibly imagining that the “undeniably brilliant” McKenna’s psychonautical “books are well worth reading,” when they are rather not even wrong, and cannot reasonably be taken as anything more than the pseudoscientific products of a hopelessly wasted (in both senses of the word) imagination.

Here is a sample of McKenna’s “undeniable brilliance”:

[H]e was open to the idea of psychedelics as being “trans-dimensional travel”;
proposing that DMT sent one to a “parallel dimension” and *psychedelics*
literally, enabled an individual to encounter ‘higher dimensional entities’ or what could be ancestors, or spirits of the Earth, saying that if you can trust your own perceptions it appears that you are entering an “ecology of souls.” McKenna also put forward the idea that psychedelics were “doorways into the Gaian mind” suggesting that “the planet has a kind of intelligence, it can actually open a channel of communication with an individual human being” and that the psychedelic plants were the facilitators of this communication.... 

Another idea McKenna speculated on was that psilocybin mushrooms are a species of high intelligence, which may have arrived on this planet as spores migrating through space and are attempting to establish a symbiotic relationship with human beings. He postulated that “intelligence, not life, but intelligence may have come here [to Earth] in this spore-bearing life form”....

If Harris disagrees with any of that, let him come out and say so, explicitly separating what he considers to be “undeniably brilliant” in McKenna’s consistently woolly notions, and what fails to be “well worth reading.” The ball is, and has always been, in his “New Age Atheist” court.

Harris actually quotes many of the above ideas directly from McKenna, without commenting as to their validity, in comparing them to an NDE that produced an NYT best-seller. Yet, if you subtract ideas like those above, and the other recognized pseudoscience, from McKenna’s corpus, Very Little Indeed remains. And to propose, as Harris does, that McKenna’s “eloquence often led him to adopt positions that can only be described (charitably) as ‘wacky’” is to postulate an odd and hitherto-unnoticed causal connection between eloquence and nonsense.

Harris also claims:

Buddhism without the unjustified bits is essentially a first-person science.

Well, sort of. But consider that in a review of Ken Wilber’s The Marriage of Sense and Soul in Skeptical Inquirer magazine, the reviewer noted that Wilber “implicitly accepts the reality of mystical experiences, and it is sufficient for him that his scientific mystics test their internal experiences against nothing more than each other’s internal experiences. How this would eliminate group bias or error is not discussed.”

Meditators are attempting to do “first-person” science without double-blinding or placebo controls, and frequently even without randomization in the assignment of the subjects into active vs. control groups. As such, the studies concerning its claimed benefits tend to be chock full of selection bias and expectation effects.

Comparably flawed arguments as Wilber’s, in favor of the “scientific” nature of meditation-based religion, were put forth by Itzhak Bentov in the 1970s:

I am lucky to have met several people whose [meditative] experiences have been similar to mine, so that I have been able to compare my information with theirs.
To my great surprise, our experiences agreed not only in general, but also in many unexpected details. This knowledge appears, therefore, to be consistent and reproducible.

Even as early as the mid-1940s, Paramahansa Yogananda was emphasizing the same “scientific” nature of meditation: His Autobiography of a Yogi and other teachings are saturated with claims regarding the “science of yoga,” and the independent reproducibility of meditative experiences, for anyone who practices the techniques.

Harris again:

Many users of DMT report being thrust under its influence into an adjacent reality where they are met by alien beings who appear intent upon sharing information and demonstrating the use of inscrutable technologies. The convergence of hundreds of such reports, many from first-time users of the drug who have not been told what to expect, is certainly interesting.

To whatever extent those experiences are really not the product of information leakage and corresponding expectation effects, it is noteworthy that David E. Jones, in his book An Instinct for Dragons, proposes that we may be hard-wired to believe in dragons. In that view, the “three predators who most threatened our ancestors—the eagle, the leopard, and the snake—merge in mythology to become a single creature, the dragon.” (Jones’ particular ideas are probably wrong, simply because the dragon-motif is in no way as widespread and uniform throughout the world as he presents it.) In The Way of the Shaman, under the influence of ayahuasca (active ingredient: DMT), Michael Harner relates his own similar and common “not been told what to expect” perceptions of “dragon-like creatures.”

Which is to say, if it’s not information leakage, look for something hard-wired in our neurology.

In that regard, check out Oliver Sacks’ first book (Migraine) sometime, for an analysis of Hildegard von Bingen’s art in terms of form constants—gratings, lattices, fretworks, filigrees, honeycombs, chessboards, cobwebs, tunnels, funnels, alleys, cones, and spirals, all of which come straight out of the structure of the human visual cortex, and some of which were already being modeled decades ago in computer arrays of simulated neurons. And then ponder how elaborations of uroboros-like “scintillating scotomas” and geometric form constants could hardly avoid leading one straight into McKenna’s “machine elves” and similar imaginations.

Further regarding the relation of tunnels, funnels and spirals to imagined spiritual travel, Harner relates:

[A] shaman typically has a special hole or entrance into the Lowerworld. This entrance exists in ordinary reality as well as in nonordinary reality....

[One] entrance used by California Indians was a hollow tree stump. Among the Arunta (Aranda) of Australia a hollow tree was an entrance to the Underworld. The Conibo Indians taught me to follow the roots of the giant catalhua tree down into the ground to reach the Lowerworld....
Other shamans’ entrances into the Lowerworld include caves, holes of burrowing animals, and even special holes in the dirt floor of houses.

Entrances into the Lowerworld commonly lead down into a tunnel or tube that conveys the shaman to an exit, which opens out upon bright and marvelous landscapes. From there the shaman travels wherever he desires for minutes or even hours, finally returning back up through the tube (henceforth called the Tunnel) to emerge at the surface, where he entered.

[T]he concentric circles of a mandala often resemble the ribbed aspect that the Tunnel frequently presents, and meditation with the mandala can lead to an experience resembling the entrance into the Tunnel.

For decades, the evolving understanding of why meditation works has been skewed by quasi-Buddhists convinced that their fave techniques of meditation are the best—skirting the question of the reality and details of any mystical experiences by focusing instead on the “witnessing Self” within which all experiences arise.

In the days of Alan Watts, D. T. Suzuki, and early Ken Wilber, it was all naively explained in terms of the conceptualization of one’s sensory gestalt into dualistic opposites. Wilber shortly improved upon that transparently nonsensical situation by borrowing (without attribution) Jung’s distinction between pre-rational and trans-rational states, to create his “Pre/Trans fallacy.” (One of Harris’ endnotes in The End of Faith mentions exactly that idea, specifically referencing Wilber’s books.)

Fast-forward thirty-to-fifty years, however, and the scientific/neurological support that Harris adduces for vipassana meditation can just as readily be sourced for other transformative spiritual paths.

Andrew Newberg’s books, for example, don’t restrict spiritual practice to merely “looking for (or with) a self that isn’t there,” but rather consider the role of the entire brain and nervous system in the production of mystical experiences. To write an entire book on the scientific/neurological basis of spirituality without even mentioning Newberg’s name (years after he appeared in Bill Maher’s Religulous) would hardly have seemed possible; but Harris has done it.

Here, for example, is how Newberg explains the interior experience of an ego-less void, in Why God Won’t Go Away:

The total shutdown of neural input [in interior-directed meditation] would have a dramatic effect on both the right and left orientation areas. The right orientation area, which is responsible for creating the neurological matrix we experience as physical space, would lack the information it needs to create the spatial context in which the self can be oriented. Its only option, when totally deprived of sensory input, would be to generate a subjective sense of absolute spacelessness, which might be interpreted by the mind as a sense of infinite space and eternity; or conversely, as a timeless and spaceless void.
Meanwhile, the left orientation area, which we have described as crucial in the
generation of the subjective sense of a self, would not be able to find the
boundaries of the body. The mind’s perception of the self now becomes limitless;
in fact, there is **no longer any sense of self at all**.

In this state of total deafferentation of the orientation area, the mind would
perceive a neurological reality consistent with many mystical descriptions of the
ultimate spiritual union: There would be no discrete objects or beings, no sense of
space or the passage of time, no line between the self and the rest of the universe.
In fact, there would be no subjective self at all; there would only be an absolute
sense of unity—without thought, without words, and without sensation. The mind
would exist without ego in a state of pure, undifferentiated awareness.

William Broad’s *The Science of Yoga* likewise references studies showing significant increases
in GABA levels among hatha yoga practitioners. He also notes that yoga produces genuine
effects in the practitioner’s body simply by placing pressure on particular nerves and glands
(e.g., the adrenals, and gonads):

The autonomic system is bifurcated, and the studies showed that advanced yogis
could seize control of either side. The sympathetic side promotes the body’s fight-
or-flight response, inhibiting digestion and moving blood to the muscles for quick
action. It does so partly by telling the adrenal glands to squirt out adrenaline, a
natural stimulant that speeds up body functions.... The other side is known as the
parasympathetic. It governs the body’s rest-and-digest functions, calming the
nerves, promoting the absorption of food, and curbing the flow of adrenaline.

The sympathetic system is the body’s accelerator, and the parasympathetic the
brake....

Investigations showed that yogis had a special talent for applying the brake.
Their adroit slowing of the metabolism and related functions was especially
impressive in that it overcame a strong evolutionary bias. The demands of
survival mean that the body, left to its own devices, always favors the accelerator.
After all, the sympathetic nervous system is essentially a means of emergency
response and easily aroused, keeping the body ready for battle or retreat, awash in
adrenaline.

Yogis have pressed these pedals for ages....

The Shoulder Stand pressed the parasympathetic brake, soothing the spirit and
making it “one of the most relaxing postures in yoga”....

The pose calmed because it seized control of one of the most important
functions of the autonomic system—the regulation of blood pressure....

The human body over the ages has evolved a striking array of sensors and
defense mechanisms that constantly take pressure readings of the blood vessels
and make suitable adjustments.

The Shoulder Stand tweaked one particular kind of sensor. It lay in the
carotids—the major arteries that run through the front of the neck carrying blood
to the brain. The carotid sensors make sure the brain gets the right amount of
blood and, given the brain’s importance, get serious attention. Sensors embedded in the arterial walls monitor bulging or contracting [e.g., in the Shoulder Stand] that indicate changes in blood pressure.

Broad continues, on the relation of blood carbon-dioxide levels to spiritual practice:

[Y]ogic rituals worked to bottle [carbon dioxide] up inside the body. The main technique of manipulation was pranayama—the Sanskrit term for breathing exercises and, more literally, control of the life force. Prana means “vital force” and yama means “to restrain or control.”

[Dr. N.C.] Paul gave many examples of how yogis manipulate their breathing to discharge less. For instance, he described a common practice in which yogis take fewer breaths. Such retention, he wrote, “has a remarkable effect” on reducing how much carbon dioxide a person exhales....

[M]any other yogic practices worked similarly to lower the outflow. For instance, he said the repetition of “om,” the holy syllable of yoga, “materially diminished” the carbon loss. Another tactic was to simply rebreathe the same air—a move Paul called “one of the easiest methods” for entering a euphoric trance.

The culmination of Paul’s analysis centered on a common feature of yogic life that worked inconspicuously to concentrate stale air for rebreathing. It was to live in a gupha, or cave, a kind of subterranean retreat with little light or ventilation, made for long periods of contemplative bliss....

Today, a standard figure is that cutting lung ventilation in half prompts blood levels of carbon dioxide to double. And the ensuing dilation of cerebral blood vessels means the brain now gets more oxygen, not less.

Slow breathing turns out to have deep mental ramifications, with increases in calm alertness and raw awareness ... “an extremely pleasant feeling of quietude”....

[T]he repetition of a mantra cut[s] the normal rate of respiration by about half, reinforcing mental calm and producing an enhanced sense of well-being.

And what then of deeper yogic breathing (e.g., in the “Bellows Pranayama”)? Does it flood the lungs and bloodstream with oxygen, thereby ostensibly refreshing the body, mind and spirit, as past and present yogis teach?

Again, no:

Consider a person breathing in a relaxed way. Fresh air mixes in the lungs with stale air, creating an inner environment where carbon dioxide levels remain fairly high. This person, in typical fashion, ventilates the lungs so inefficiently that each relaxed inhalation replaces less than 10 percent of the gas.

Now consider what happens if that individual starts to breathe fast. Blasts of fresh air with extraordinarily low concentrations of carbon dioxide (three-hundredths of 1 percent of the atmosphere) rush into the lungs, lowering the inner levels. Nature
seeks to equalize the concentrations. So diffusion quickly draws more carbon
dioxide out of the bloodstream and into the lungs. The result is that the body’s
levels plunge....

The common name for fast breathing is hyperventilation, and the common danger
is passing out. It can also result in dizziness, headaches, light-headedness, slurred
speech, and numbness or tingling in the lips, hands, and feet.

Rajneesh’s “Hoo” technique of active meditation famously framed exactly those symptoms of
hyperventilation as being spiritual phenomena.

[F]ast breathing does something else that has critical repercussions for mood,
mental outlook, and potentially health—it robs the brain of oxygen.

The reason is that the surge in carbon dioxide causes blood vessels in the brain to
contract, reducing the flow of oxygen and producing lightheadedness and perhaps
blurred vision. Other symptoms include dizziness and giddiness. In extreme cases,
a person can hallucinate or pass out.

Stan Grof’s Holotropic Breathwork (YouTube) can have similar effects as meditation and
psychedelics, in terms of launching one into transpersonal states of consciousness. Its practice
simply involves breathing deeper and faster than normal, for several hours.

Further, contrary to Harris’ happy assertion that his spiritual heroes (in particular, the ones that
have actually existed!) have not been merely epileptics or schizophrenics, Clay Stinson explains:

My neurological research reveals that [the] so-called “very small minority” of
individuals “ready” for “The Path” is constituted of persons who already have
and/or self-induce neurological damage and neurological dysfunction—or are
neuropsychiatrically ill ab initio. Indeed, and once again, these so-called mystics,
meditators, and spiritual “Masters” with the “big realizations” are suffering from
various species of (i) brain damage, (ii) epilepsy, (iii) psychosis, (iv)
schizophrenia, and (v) debilitating depersonalization disorder, or (vi) some
combination of these five.

In my case, I was diagnosed with temporal lobe epilepsy as a youth and years
later delusively believed myself to be making “spiritual” and meditative
“progress” when all my weird “mystical” experiences started (as a result of
intensive and protracted meditation practice). To this very day, these experiences
are always with me, in varying degrees and forms, and never cease. I do wish,
however, that they would stop, forever, and never plague me again.

In the case of a good friend of mine (a highly religious and committed priest) who
has had some of these “realizations” and mystical experiences, he, too, was
diagnosed with epilepsy when he was younger....

These phenomena are NOT anything “supernaturally mystical,” intimations of
SELF or MIND, a timeless and unmediated intuition of the ... Absolute, or
anything of the sort. From what I can gather from my neurological research, ALL
these phenomena have a wholly mundane neurobiological etiology. For instance,
the sustained “white light” experience, or “entering into the light” through meditation, is a form of what neuroscientists call cortex disinhibition—the random firing of neurons in the brain. This random firing, in turn, stimulates the visual cortex producing these lights and luminosities fanatical mystics and zealous meditators talk about. Moreover, the greater the number of neurons firing, the greater is the intensity of the white light. Quantitatively put, **with few neurons randomly firing, all one sees during meditation is a small circle of white, to bluish-white, light.** [Cf. Muktananda’s “blue pearl.”] With a moderate number of neurons randomly firing, one sees, during meditation, a moderately large circle of light. With all or most of the neurons randomly firing, one sees a circle of light so large, brilliant, and luminous that it literally engulfs the field of vision during the meditation session. The mistake, here, of mystics, meditators, spiritual “masters,” and Near Death Experiencers is to identify the “neural noise” or “white light experience” for God, Self, Mind, “mystical realization,” satori, etc....

All ideas and doctrines of mystical “enlightenment” constitutes a myth just as untenable as are the myths and superstitions of, for instance, heaven, hell, levitation, telekinesis, and salvation by Jesus alone.

August L. Reader’s paper, “The Internal Mystery Plays,” is still the best explanation of the physiology underlying inner perceptions of expanding white light, in near-death and meditative experiences. Reader further notes that focusing one’s eyes on the point between the eyebrows, or otherwise crossing them, will subtly invoke the body’s **oculocardiac reflex**, decreasing one’s heart rate.

The same is true of a kundalini-yoga technique like **jyoti [“light”] mudra**, where the little fingers of one’s hands are used to press lightly on the outside whites of the eyeballs: Such physical pressure doesn’t merely cause the perception of photisms, it simultaneously invokes the oculocardiac reflex response.

As such, those techniques have very real (non-paranormal) effects, in producing relaxation/calmness (and ultimately “transcendent spiritual experiences”) in the practitioner.

Harris notes, with unintentional relevance:

> Most of us feel that our experience of the world refers back to a self—not to our bodies precisely but to a center of consciousness that exists somehow interior to the body, behind the eyes, inside the head. The feeling that we call “I” seems to define our point of view in every moment, and it also provides an anchor for popular beliefs about souls and freedom of will.

The kriya (kundalini) yoga taught by Yogananda involves focusing one’s eyes at the supposed “spiritual eye” chakra between the eyebrows, and practicing **jyoti mudra** after the kriyas proper. Each kriya involves a slow inhalation and exhalation, with two kriyas being performed per minute. All of which is done following a period of the internal chanting of “Om,” and not infrequently in a cave or stuffy closet, rich in carbon dioxide.
As such, that yogic path probably really is the “jet plane” route to ... well, to tweaking one’s nervous system to the point where it goes haywire, and one begins seeing and hearing things that don’t really exist.

At any rate, witnessing Buddhists have no monopoly on the dissolution of the subject-object duality: the end-point of the kundalini-yoga path, too, is a state of “Knowing, Knower, Known, as One.” Further, in Yogananda’s path and experience that unitary state is realized simultaneously with an “all-pervading bliss”—a state otherwise simplistically denigrated by Harris as being “rather like a heroin addict or an onanist who has transcended the use of his hands.” (Of course, such a state is unlikely to be ontologically real, regardless of how it’s arrived at. Incidentally, the above-linked poem by Yogananda, based on his own spiritual experiences in *samadhi*, effectively proves that the *Autobiography* was not ghost-written: Anyone who could write spiritual poetry at such a stunning level would not need assistance with writing a simple, if spell-binding [and sadly largely fictional] autobiography.)

As an aside, it is probably no accident that the imagined cerebrospinal chakras roughly coincide with the major nerve plexuses, and thus sources of physical sensation, in the body: the genitals, the full bladder, the stomach, the heart and its mysteriously thumping beat—having no apparent relation to the circulation of blood, prior to recent centuries of medical research—the throat and its tangible vibrations when speaking, and the sense of self as being located “behind the eyes, inside the head.” Even farther aside, the association of the seven chakras with the colors of the rainbow, in sequence from red at the base of the spine to violet or related colors at the crown, dates back only to the 1970s, being first proposed in Christopher Hills’ book *Nuclear Evolution*. Originally of course, in Tantric yoga, there were only five chakras, with those having no association whatsoever with the rainbow colors.

To whatever extent the perception of auras is more than imagination, it is probably rooted in synesthesia:

> The ability of some people to see the colored auras of others has held an important place in folklore and mysticism throughout the ages. Although many people claiming to have such powers could be charlatans, it is also conceivable that others are born with a gift of synesthesia.

In fact, at least one published clairvoyant ([Cynthia Sue Larson](http://www.cynthiasuelarson.com)) has related her own synesthesia to her perception of auras:

> I mention synesthesia in my book, *Aura Advantage*, because it’s a very important part of sensing energy fields around us. When I was an infant, all my senses seemed interconnected, especially sight and hearing. This way of experiencing the world is known as “synesthesia,” a Greek word that means “perceiving together.” Sudden noises would appear as sharp bursts of color that would flash through the house, sometimes even just a bit before the sound itself was heard. Waves of color would wash around my mother and father, so I could see their moods from the colors even before I could focus on the details of their faces. We can intuitively see, hear, smell, taste, and feel things around us that
coincide with our other senses, and discover important additional information about our surroundings this way.

The widely respected New Age healer Barbara Ann Brennan sees the lowest auric levels like this (from her classic book, *Hands of Light*):

She writes: “Most people see a haze around the fingers and hands when trying to sense the aura. It looks somewhat like the heat wave over a radiator. It is sometimes seen in various colors, such as a blue tint. Usually, most people see it as colorless in the beginning.”

In that regard, consider the picture below (from Arthur Zajonc’s *Catching the Light*):
That *photographed* “aura,” however, is the product only of the diffraction of laser light, shone on the hand from behind.

Were the light not emitted by a laser, instead simply reflecting off a light-colored wall or the like, the diffraction would still occur, but the edges would not be as sharp.

That, combined with the after-images produced by the back-and-forth movement of our eyes (i.e., saccades), is all that is needed to account for Brennan’s “etheric aura.”

The chances of any form of subtle energy/bodies existing are very low, given the skeptical debunking (e.g., *James Randi Tests An Aura Reader*) of the claimed abilities of clairvoyants to see auras, and the peer-reviewed, single-blinded study of Emily Rosa on *Therapeutic Touch*. There would doubtless be many more such instances to cite, were purported seers more willing to have their claimed abilities tested under foolproof protocols.

David Lane’s experiments underlying *The Kirpal Statistic* leave one with even less reason to regard such phenomena as being real:

> In the early 1980s when I was teaching religious studies at a Catholic high school, I tried several meditation experiments with my students which convinced me that Kirpal Singh and other gurus like him were taking undue credit for their disciples’ inner experiences. In my trial meditation sessions, I informed my students
beforehand about the possibility of seeing inner lights and hearing inner sounds. Naturally, given the boring routine of secondary education, my students were intrigued. I informed them that I knew of an ancient yoga technique that would facilitate their inner voyages. I turned the lights off, instructed them briefly about closing their eyes gently and looking for sparks of light at the proverbial third eye. I told them that I would touch some students on the forehead lightly with my fingers. They meditated for some five minutes. I then proceeded to ask them about their experiences.

To my amazement, since I felt that Kirpal Singh and others were actually transmitting spiritual power, the majority of my students reported seeing light. A few students even claimed to have visions of personages in the middle of the light. Others reported hearing subtle sounds and the like. I repeated the experiment on four other classes that day. I have also in the past ten years conducted the same experiment on my college students (both undergraduate and graduate). The result, though differing in terms of absolute numbers, is remarkably the same. The majority sees and hears something.

It has been known for decades that vipassana/witnessing meditation has different effects on the brain than do trance-producing content/kundalini techniques. That is, vipassana meditators perform better (IIRC) on tests that measure attention to external stimuli (e.g., motion detection)—not surprisingly, since they spend years practicing exactly that form of attention. Conversely, it’s no surprise that the most-impressive performances on things like voluntary regulation of one’s skin temperature come from yogis whose techniques maximize one-pointed (sympathetic, alert) concentration and (parasympathetic) relaxation simultaneously—along with their focus on breath control, which acts as a remarkable regulator on the sympathetic nervous system.

So, practice vipassana/mindfulness, or content/kundalini meditation techniques; or hatha yoga; or intensive (shamanic) dancing to overload your sympathetic nervous system until it flips into a quiescent, parasympathetic-dominated state. All are just ways of tweaking our brains and nervous systems; and as such, they are all very likely to have real (non-paranormal) effects on our physical bodies and our embodied minds, beyond mere expectation effects or self-selection in the groups of practitioners. But they also typically have unacknowledged risks, even aside from sexually/emotionally abusive gurus and their communities.

Further, regarding Buddhist/Taoist mindfulness meditation:

Mindfulness only works for women, not men, a new study [led by Dr Willoughby Britton] claims.

The meditation method teaches people to focus on their current sensations and emotions—and has rocketed in popularity in recent years....

[T]he researchers claim mindfulness as it is typically practiced is ideal for women, who stereotypically ruminate on things. The practice teaches them to let go of the past and future, and focus on the now.
Meanwhile the biggest stress-driver for [beginner] male participants was the fact that they distract—completely shutting off past and future worries. Since they were, in general, already focused on the present moment, mindfulness was relatively futile.

If you still think Sam Harris is peddling more than selection-biased snake oil, consider *The Buddha Pill: Can Meditation Change You?* by Miguel Farias and Catherine Wikholm. Wikholm has provided a concise summary of their research, in *Seven common myths about meditation*:

Meditation is becoming increasingly popular, and in recent years there have been calls for mindfulness (a meditative practice with Buddhist roots) to be more widely available on the NHS. Often promoted as a sure-fire way to reduce stress, it’s also being increasingly offered in schools, universities and businesses.

For the secularized mind, meditation fills a spiritual vacuum; it brings the hope of becoming a better, happier individual in a more peaceful world. However, the fact that meditation was primarily designed not to make us happier, but to destroy our sense of individual self—who we feel and think we are most of the time—is often overlooked in the science and media stories about it, which focus almost exclusively on the benefits practitioners can expect.

If you’re considering it, here are seven common beliefs about meditation that are not supported by scientific evidence.

**Myth 1: Meditation never has adverse or negative effects. It will change you for the better (and only the better)**

Fact 1: It’s easy to see why this myth might spring up. After all, sitting in silence and focusing on your breathing would seem like a fairly innocuous activity with little potential for harm. But when you consider how many of us, when worried or facing difficult circumstances, cope by keeping ourselves very busy and with little time to think, it isn’t that much of a surprise to find that sitting without distractions, with only ourselves, might lead to disturbing emotions rising to the surface.

However, many scientists have turned a blind eye to the potential unexpected or harmful consequences of meditation. With Transcendental Meditation, this is probably because many of those who have researched it have also been personally involved in the movement; with mindfulness, the reasons are less clear, because it is presented as a secular technique. Nevertheless, there is emerging scientific evidence from case studies, surveys of meditators’ experience and historical studies to show that meditation can be associated with stress, negative effects and mental health problems. For example, one study [Creswell, 2014] found that mindfulness meditation led to increased cortisol, a biological marker of stress, despite the fact that participants subjectively reported feeling less stressed.
[Compare that to Harris’ emphasis: “A review of the psychological literature suggests that mindfulness in particular fosters many components of physical and mental health: It improves immune function, blood pressure, and cortisol levels....” Farias and Wikholm explain the results of Creswell’s study, conducted with proper protocols: “People in the mindfulness group had a higher expectation that the training would have positive effects, and this is likely to be why they scored lower on the stress questionnaire: they were more motivated, they wanted the training to have an impact. However, the biological cortisol analysis showed the opposite result. Creswell suggests that the short mindfulness training may have actually exhausted cognitive resources rather than improved them, especially among those with low mindfulness ability.”]

**Myth 2: Meditation can benefit everyone**

Fact 2: The idea that meditation is a cure-all for all lacks scientific basis. “One man’s meat is another man’s poison,” the psychologist Arnold Lazarus reminded us in his writings about meditation. Although there has been relatively little research into how individual circumstances—such as age, gender, or personality type—might play a role in the value of meditation, there is a growing awareness that meditation works differently for each individual.

For example, it may provide an effective stress-relief technique for individuals facing serious problems (such as being unemployed), but have little value for low-stressed individuals. Or it may benefit depressed individuals who suffered trauma and abuse in their childhood, but not other depressed people. There is also some evidence that—along with yoga—it can be of particular use to prisoners, for whom it improves psychological wellbeing and, perhaps more importantly, encourages better control over impulsivity. We shouldn’t be surprised about meditation having variable benefits from person to person. After all, the practice wasn’t intended to make us happier or less stressed, but to assist us in diving deep within and challenging who we believe we are.

**Myth 3: If everyone meditated the world would be a much better place**

Fact 3: All global religions share the belief that following their particular practices and ideals will make us better individuals. So far, there is no clear scientific evidence that meditation is more effective at making us, for example, more compassionate than other spiritual or psychological practices. Research on this topic has serious methodological and theoretical limitations and biases. Most of the studies have no adequate control groups and generally fail to assess the expectations of participants (i.e., if we expect to benefit from something, we may be more likely to report benefits).

**Myth 4: If you’re seeking personal change and growth, meditating is as efficient—or more—than having therapy**
Fact 4: There is very little evidence that an eight-week mindfulness-based group programme has the same benefits as of being in conventional psychological therapy—most studies compare mindfulness to “treatment as usual” (such as seeing your GP), rather than one-to-one therapy. [However, on the “benefits of conventional psychological therapy,” consider: “In one study, [Jerome Frank] and colleagues provided depressed patients with three treatments: weekly individual therapy, weekly group therapy and minimal individual therapy, which consisted of just one half-hour session every two weeks. ‘To our astonishment and chagrin, patients in all three conditions showed the same average relief of symptoms’.... Frank asserted that ‘relief of anxiety and depression in psychiatric outpatients by psychotherapy closely resembles the placebo response, suggesting that the same factors may be involved.’”] Although mindfulness interventions are group-based and most psychological therapy is conducted on a one-to-one basis, both approaches involve developing an increased awareness of our thoughts, emotions and way of relating to others. But the levels of awareness probably differ. A therapist can encourage us to examine conscious or unconscious patterns within ourselves, whereas these might be difficult to access in a one-size-fits-all group course, or if we were meditating on our own.

Myth 5: Meditation produces a unique state of consciousness that we can measure scientifically

Fact 5: Meditation produces states of consciousness that we can indeed measure using various scientific instruments. However, the overall evidence is that these states are not physiologically unique. Furthermore, although different kinds of meditation may have diverse effects on consciousness (and on the brain), there is no scientific consensus about what these effects are.

Myth 6: We can practice meditation as a purely scientific technique with no religious or spiritual leanings

Fact 6: In principle, it’s perfectly possible to meditate and be uninterested in the spiritual background to the practice. However, research shows that meditation leads us to become more spiritual, and that this increase in spirituality is partly responsible for the practice’s positive effects. So, even if we set out to ignore meditation’s spiritual roots, those roots may nonetheless envelop us, to a greater or lesser degree. Overall, it is unclear whether secular models of mindfulness meditation are fully secular.

Myth 7: Science has unequivocally shown how meditation can change us and why

Fact 7: Meta-analyses show there is moderate evidence that meditation affects us in various ways, such as increasing positive emotions and reducing anxiety. However, it is less clear how powerful and long-lasting these changes are.
Some studies show that meditating can have a greater impact than physical relaxation, although other research using a placebo meditation contradicts this finding. We need better studies but, perhaps as important, we also need models that explain how meditation works. For example, with mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), we still can’t be sure of the “active” ingredient. Is it the meditation itself that causes positive effects, or is it the fact that the participant learns to step back and become aware of his or her thoughts and feelings in a supportive group environment?

There simply is no cohesive, overarching attempt to describe the various psychobiological processes that meditation sets in motion. Unless we can clearly map the effects of meditation—both the positive and the negative—and identify the processes underpinning the practice, our scientific understanding of meditation is precarious and can easily lead to exaggeration and misinterpretation.

In the book, they give this example of the risks of intensive meditation:

[Louise] had taught yoga for more than twenty years, stopping only when something unexpected happened that changed her life forever. During one meditation retreat (she’d been on many), her sense of self changed dramatically. “Good,” she thought initially, “it must be part of the dissolving experience.” But she couldn’t help feeling anxious and frightened.

“Don’t worry, just keep meditating and it will go away,” the meditation teacher told her.

It didn’t. She couldn’t get back to her usual self. It felt like something was messing with her sense of identity, how she felt in her body, the very way she looked at the world and at other people. The last day of the retreat was excruciating: her body shook, she cried and panicked. The following day, back at home, she was in pieces—her body was numb, she didn’t want to get out of bed. Louise’s husband took her to the GP and, within hours, she was being seen by a psychiatrist. She spent the next 15 years being treated for psychotic depression; for part of this time, she had to be hospitalized.

To his credit, Harris does manage to acknowledge (though only in a mere endnote, with no pointers to the actual research) that meditation can precipitate psychological breakdowns:

The research on pathological responses to meditation is quite sparse. Traditionally, it is believed that certain stages on the contemplative path are by nature unpleasant and that some forms of mental pain should therefore be considered signs of progress. It seems clear, however, that meditation can also precipitate or unmask psychological illness. As with many other endeavors, distinguishing help from harm in each instance can be difficult. As far as I know, Willoughby Britton is the first scientist to study this problem systematically.
Yet even there, he manages to caveat it, as if only already-unstable persons might be adversely affected by an “extended, silent retreat” or the like:

Some people find the experience of an extended, silent retreat psychologically destabilizing. Again, an analogy to physical training seems apropos: Not everyone is suited to running a six-minute mile or bench-pressing his own body weight. But many quite ordinary people are capable of these feats, and there are better and worse ways to accomplish them. What is more, the same principles of fitness generally apply even to people whose abilities are limited by illness or injury. So I want to make it clear that the instructions in this book are intended for readers who are adults (more or less) and free from any psychological or medical conditions that could be exacerbated by meditation or other techniques of sustained introspection. If paying attention to your breath, to bodily sensations, to the flow of thoughts, or to the nature of consciousness itself seems likely to cause you clinically significant anguish, please check with a psychologist or a psychiatrist before engaging in the practices I describe.

However, a person like Louise who had taught yoga for twenty years, and been on many meditation retreats without negative incident, would surely not typically be considered to be in that “high risk” category.

Unlike Harris, the authors of The Buddha Pill have gone to the trouble of actually interviewing Britton:

Her interest arose from witnessing two people being hospitalized after intense meditation practice, together with her own experience after a retreat in which she felt an unimaginable terror....

Other unpleasant things happen, too, as Britton discovered through interviews with numerous individuals: arms flap, people twitch and have convulsions; others go through euphoria or depression, or report not feeling anything at all—their physical senses go numb.

Unpleasant as they are, if these symptoms were confined to a retreat there wouldn’t be much to worry about—but they’re not. Sometimes they linger, affecting work, childcare and relationships. They can become a clinical health problem, which, on average, lasts for more than three years....

Meditation teachers know about it—Britton says—but meditation researchers are usually skeptical; they ask about the prior psychiatric history of meditators who develop mental health problems [exactly as Harris effectively does, except he does it pre-emptively, in a seriously inadequate attempt at separating high-risk from low-risk participants], as if meditation itself had little or nothing to do with it....
In 1992 David Shapiro, a professor in psychiatry and human behavior at the University of California, Irvine, published an article about the effects of meditation retreats. Shapiro examined 27 people with different levels of meditation experience. He found that 63 per cent of them had at least one negative effect and 7 per cent suffered profoundly adverse effects. The negative effects included anxiety, panic, depression, increased negativity, pain, feeling spaced out, confusion and disorientation.

When Shapiro divided the larger group into those with lesser and greater experience, there were no differences: all the meditators had an equal number of adverse experiences. An earlier study had arrived at a similar, but even more surprising conclusion. Not only did those with more experience of meditating find themselves with negative symptoms—particularly anxiety, confusion and restlessness—they also had considerably more adverse effects than the beginners.

They then quote the psychologists Albert Ellis and Arnold Lazarus, founders of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy:

Ellis shared Lazarus’ misgivings about meditation. He believed it could be used as a therapeutic tool, but not with everyone. “A few of my own clients,” he writes, “have gone into dissociative semi-trance states and upset themselves considerably by meditating.” Overall, he believed meditation could be used only in moderation as a “thought-distracting” or “relaxing” technique.

Also consider Meera Nanda’s classic deconstruction of Harris’ brand of atheism, in “Trading Faith for Spirituality: The Mystifications of Sam Harris”:

By the end of [The End of Faith], I could not help thinking of him as a Trojan horse for the New Age....

[T]here is this nugget, tucked away in the end notes, which celebrates the prospect of revival of occult: “Indeed, the future looks like the past.... We may live to see the technological perfection of all the visionary strands of traditional mysticism: shamanism, Gnosticism, Kabbalah, Hermetism and its magical Renaissance spawn (Hermeticism) and all the other Byzantine paths whereby man has sought the Other in every guise of its conception. But all these approaches to spirituality are born of a longing for esoteric knowledge and a desire to excavate ... the mind—in dreams, in trance, in psychedelic swoon—in search for the sacred.”

It is hard to believe that the author of this stuff is the most celebrated rationalist of our troubled times.

For completeness, seemingly miraculous coincidences and synchronicities are adequately explained by Littlewood’s Law:
Littlewood defines a miracle as an exceptional event of special significance occurring at a frequency of one in a million. He assumes that during the hours in which a human is awake and alert, a human will see or hear one “event” per second, which may be either exceptional or unexceptional. Additionally, Littlewood supposes that a human is alert for about eight hours per day.

As a result, a human will in 35 days have experienced under these suppositions about one million events. Accepting this definition of a miracle, one can expect to observe one miraculous event for every 35 days’ time, on average—and therefore, according to this reasoning, seemingly miraculous events are actually commonplace.

In closing *Waking Up*, Harris expresses his gratitude:

> As described in the text, I was privileged to learn from some remarkable masters of meditation: Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, H. W. L. Poonja, and Sayadaw U Pandita each provided a crucial piece of the puzzle.

Presumably, Harris thus also considers Poonja to be one of the teachers of his acquaintance who “while still human, seemed to possess so much compassion and clarity of mind that they were nearly flawless examples of the benefits of spiritual practice.”

“So much compassion.” “Clarity of mind.” “Nearly flawless.”

And on the other hand, knocked-up blondes. (And where there’s one, there’ll be many, when it comes to the fuckable female disciples of gurus.)

Gotta love it.

So you see, in the end Sam Harris is no different from anyone else with an ideology to peddle. Exactly as you’d expect, he holds other gurus up to (justified) ridicule and warning, but then remains utterly silent on the “pratfalls” (incl. effective rape and psychological incest) of his own most-respected teachers.

Behavior like that is the *exact opposite* of compassion and integrity.

The tragedy of 9/11 is the best thing that could ever have happened to Sam Harris (and George Bush, who would otherwise have gone down as a one-term *laughingstock-hick president*). Without it, unless his mother had been able to pull some strings, he’d likely still be trying to find a publisher for a first book on some other (i.e., unrelated to Islam) topic.

Even persons who disagree with Harris’ take on spirituality are wont to say that they’d be proud to have him as a friend. For my own part, however, I would rather say: “With friends like Harris, who needs enemies?”

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| 22 |
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