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Introduction

As recently as the early 2000s, mindfulness and mindfulness practices were largely alien in Europe and the Americas. Now, they are normal. For some, they are even passé. That has set the stage to move the conversation forwards, because the original intention of mindfulness was not to reduce stress, help us manage chronic pain or do better at work – valuable as these may be. Rather, it was originally taught with the intention of helping people to awaken.

Awakening, sometimes referred to as Enlightenment,[1] is the culmination of the Buddhist path. It is described as a state of complete freedom,[2] fulfilment,[3] a deep insight into the way things really are,[4] an ending of self-centredness[5] and an opening to limitless compassion.[6]

From Mindfulness to Wakefulness: Science and Practices on the Journey to Enlightenment, First Edition. Michael Chaskalson.

All of that can sound quite mysterious. Maybe it isn't.

What I hope to show here is that awakening is a natural, not a supernatural, state. It is how our minds come to function under certain conditions. As such, it can be understood using terms that are more familiar to us. The naturalisation of mindfulness in our culture enables us to talk about issues like awakening using the language of contemporary science and psychology.

Patients suffering from stress, anxiety or relapsing depression in the UK today are sometimes prescribed a course in mindfulness by their physicians. That ball was set rolling in 2002 when Segal, Williams and Teasdale[7] published *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression*. The book describes the outcomes of the first clinical trials into a mindfulness course they had designed, based on the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn,[8] to help people suffering from relapsing depression. The trials had shown their eight-week, group-based mindfulness training programme to be at least as effective, and sometimes more effective, than the usual treatments.

Those findings triggered a wave of psychological and neuroscientific research, which has shown mindfulness training to be helpful in a wide variety of circumstances.[9] Partly as a result of all that research, mindfulness has become commonplace in cultures where, before 2002, it was barely known at all.

When I first took up the practices in the UK in 1975, there was no science around its outcomes. Mindfulness itself could only be learned at Buddhist centres, and there weren't many of them. Today mindfulness apps and teachers abound. To take just one instance, the app Headspace was subscribed to by 2.8 million people in 2023[10] when it earned its owners an estimated $195 million. The app has been downloaded 80 million times.

Mindfulness is now big business, and people learn the practices at work, at home and in schools and colleges.

In much the same way that mindfulness came out of the monasteries and into the wider culture, the idea of awakening might follow a similar path because, crucially, awakening is not the sole province of any one sect or religion. It is universally available to anyone who wishes to pursue it.

When I first encountered the Buddhist path, a path that I have followed for nearly 50 years, I very early on formed the idea of a somewhat binary notion of awakening. You were either, like the Buddha, fully awakened, or you were not. A very few people were awakened, the rest of us were unenlightened – ignorant, really. There were historical figures in the lineage of teachers who were also awakened,[11] and if you were very fortunate, you might even come upon contemporary teachers who proclaimed, or whose followers proclaimed, their awakened status. But truly, the rest of us were outside that mysterious circle.

I don't see it like that anymore, and here I want to introduce the term 'wakefulness'[12] and the simple idea that the journey to awakening can be thought of as constituting a continuing increase in one's level of wakefulness*.

For example, if awakening is the arising of limitless compassion, then an increase in one's own experience of compassion is an increase in one's level of wakefulness.

Sometimes awakening is described as a state of unfailing mindfulness. If that is the case, then an increase in one's level of mindfulness is an increase in one's level of wakefulness.

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* This idea of a gradually increasing experience of wakefulness was first suggested to me by Steve Taylor in a podcast interview I did with him in 2024: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Etle5_Yvxk

Awakening is sometimes spoken of as coming to see things as they really are. As I now see it, any increase in one's own wisdom and understanding is an increase in one's wakefulness.

The good news in all of this is that we can, each of us, increase our levels of wakefulness. If we do that, we will experience more joy, be more loving, happier, wiser and kinder.

Along the way, awakening experiences may perhaps arise.[13] These may be mild – a few moments of deep clarity and profound peace. Or they may be moderate – going deeper, lasting somewhat longer. They could even, in rare cases, be more extreme – an irreversible self-transcendence and a sense of unbounded love.

These mild and moderate awakening experiences can be wonderful, but they are not the key focus of the path I will describe here. Rather, the focus is simply a continuing increase in our overall wakefulness – whatever experiences show up. And as our overall levels of wakefulness increase, so we may also find an increasing sense of meaning, purpose and overall satisfaction to our lives.

In some senses, what is being offered here is a form of secular spirituality – ways of thinking and practising for those who describe themselves as spiritual but not religious.

Of course, even that term 'spirituality' may be somewhat contentious. But there seems to be no other word to describe ways of thinking and practising that seek to plumb the deepest nature of things and that speak to our hearts as well as our heads.

Many of us are put off by what can seem like the exoticism of Buddhist centres or Hindu Temples. Many of us struggle to square our sense of the world with the idea of a creator God and judge found in the three Abrahamic religions. But even those who do not feel at home these days in churches,

synagogues, Gurdwaras or mosques may still feel that there is more to life than just work, family, sport, television and shopping. We may have some intuition, some hunch or insight into the nature of our existence that feeds an incipient sense of awe that we would love to feed or uncover.

Many of us will have felt at times that we have touched on hidden depths that we yearn to explore.

But how to do that? Where can we go?

The major religions have become highly problematic for many of us. Each one of them has been implicated in wars, oppressive religio-nationalism and repressive attitudes such as homophobia, misogyny, antisemitism, Islamophobia and more. Many of them state as fact ideas which some of us can understand only somewhat metaphorically.

We may struggle with the demands of belief or the need to accept a religious or spiritual authority. We may have seen or heard of cases where spiritual authorities have damaged reputations or where there have been apparent ethical compromises.

For some of us, ideas and beliefs that were conceived in the Bronze Age, and which perhaps at that time represented an advance in human culture, no longer carry quite the same force of conviction.

And yet. Many of humanity's greatest artistic, cultural and spiritual achievements come to us by way of the great religious traditions.

I therefore don't want to pose an opposition here between the secular and the religious and to take a stand on the side of the secular. That would be unhelpful. And, disastrously, it would be to ignore the enormous riches that the religious traditions have brought to humanity over the centuries.

For all its flaws,[14, 15] contemporary science and psychology speak to many of us with a force lacking in purely religious language. For many of us, evidence trumps blind belief.

And yet. . .

There's no denying that science is powerful. It is a wonder. But we must not allow it to hollow out the sacred. Bypassing the riches of the human imagination, we may find ourselves in a flat Newtonian world comprising only what can be caught and measured.

That would not be a wakeful perspective.

When we are more wakeful, we see that the universe in its every dimension is a source of deep wonder and mystery. Wherever we look there are marvels. Everywhere. But we do need to learn to look. To really look. To see below the surface of things and watch the workings of the infinite, interdependent, endlessly unknown miracle that is our universe.

When we really see the world that actually *is*, right now, we should be struck by awe.

The best science does not confine this or deaden it. It reveals it.

And it reveals our ignorance. As Karl Popper put it:

"The more we learn about the world, and the deeper our learning, the more conscious, specific and articulate will be our knowledge of what we do not know, our knowledge of our ignorance."[16]

As Matthew Syed has suggested, rather than there being a necessary conflict between the sacred and the secular, the deeper schism may be

". . . between those who are awed by life and those who are never struck by it, or never even step back to ponder it. This is a tragedy. To go through life without the sense that this brief illumination of existence will soon be extinguished, whatever happens in the hereafter, is to risk lying on one's deathbed in a state of shock that life came to ravish and thrill us while we were looking the other way – and now it's gone."[17]

That sense of awe is a foundation to the path of wakefulness. It can come from great science, art, literature, architecture or music, from the appreciation of nature and from spiritual practice in all its forms.

So that is the stance of this book: respectful of the traditions that gave rise to some of its key ideas, hugely grateful to the predecessors who have preserved and transmitted some of its key insights, but standing also in the space of evidence-based ideas and practices – alive to the arts, awestruck by them and by nature.

And there is a crucial further step. Over and above all of that, first-hand experience is the most reliable guide. The key approach is to try things out in practice and to see where they lead.

This is a book for anyone looking to make the most of this short span of life. We can all be clearer, wiser, kinder, more loving, more appreciative. We can all experience more joy and happiness, more delight – more wakefulness.

And this is not only about ourselves. The world is currently in a very sorry state.

Climate change, habitat degradation and declining biodiversity; wealth disparity, economic instability and trade wars; political and geopolitical conflict; mass migration; public health crises like pandemics; air, water and soil pollution; the challenges of rapidly changing technologies; social fragmentation, the breakdown of commonly agreed narratives and a common sense of truth – all of these interact in ways that further magnify harm and uncertainty.

Business as usual will not make things better. The mind-states and attitudes that produced these crises are not the mind-states that will fix them. Market forces will not resolve them, nor will the pursuit of personal self-interest and personal power. Instead, we need a new kind of consciousness.

Whatever actions we take to address the global problems we face will have a much greater chance of success if they come from a lived sense of the ultimately interconnected nature of everything, from less self-centredness and egotism and from greater mindfulness, compassion and wisdom.

Greater wakefulness is not something that is just nice to have – it is something that we must have. It may be crucial to our species' survival.

References

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