

Circles of Belief: A Guide to the World's Spiritual Traditions and Beyond

CHAPTER 9 **Beyond Religion** (EXCERPTS)

In the early years of the 21st century, the world's religions occupy a paradoxical perch. The largest among them—Christianity and Islam—have been guilty of fostering heinous crimes, including the sexual abuse of children and adults, the systematic suppression of women's rights, and violent acts of religious persecution and terrorism. And yet, neither institution appears to be going away anytime soon. Islam remains the fastest growing religion in the world and is expected to surpass Christianity in world population by the middle of this century. And even as Christianity has been steadily losing membership in the developed world, it is being embraced enthusiastically in the less developed world. One reason for this may be economic. In their book *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart argue that secularism has flourished in Western industrialized countries as they attained economic security, while traditional religion has grown stronger in financially-struggling societies, such as in Africa and parts of Latin America.

Meanwhile in Asia, sectarian warfare and religious persecution have taken their toll in the majority Hindu nation of India and the Buddhist nation of Myanmar (Burma), both of which have terrorized their Muslim minorities, while the Communist Chinese have suppressed all forms of religion with a ferocity and scale outdoing even those religious governments.

The drop in poll numbers for organized religion in the West has accompanied a somewhat inverse rise in the number of people who identify as “none.” Still, the numbers for atheists and agnostics remain low, implying that, despite the abuses of institutional religions, most of the world desires some form of spiritual belief and practice, however they may define it. The brilliant philosopher of religion Lex Hixon once put it this way:

Gold is the most precious metal substance, and yet all sorts of vicious behavior and strange explosions of egocentricity happen around it. That doesn't mean that we have to say, “Someone's made a mistake. Gold couldn't be that valuable after all because look at all the chaos it's causing.” Nor should we say, “Let's do without religion. It couldn't be that valuable because of all the problems it causes.” That's poor reasoning.

(Peter Occhiogrosso, *Through the Labyrinth*)

Alongside these shifting demographic sands, moreover, a stunning evolution in science, spearheaded by the continuing expansion of quantum physics, has changed our understanding of what religion and spirituality mean in today's world. In this closing chapter, I will attempt to outline the increasingly complicated relationship among science, religion, and spirituality, realms of contemporary life that continue to overlap and interconnect in ever more fascinating ways.

Which brings us to the heart of the paradox I mentioned. To take one simple (yet complex) example, mainstream scientists and academic researchers, most of whom profess some form of atheism or secular humanism, are currently putting forward an extremely self-limiting philosophical concept: They insist that only matter exists and that consciousness, or what some call spirit or soul, is simply a projection of the brain. Conversely, the planet's various religions, from the most liberal to the fundamentalist, espouse the principle that matter is superseded by consciousness, or spirit. At the same time, a small but expanding network of scientists and researchers has begun exploring the ways in which consciousness manifests as and controls matter. And they are doing this without relying on the kind of dogmatism that makes religion unappealing to many people in the developed world.

Perhaps fueling this paradox is the resistance of rationalist scientists and theorists to the apparent irrationality of most spiritual principles. That resistance makes it unlikely for them to acknowledge that scientific evidence of what they consider irrational principles already exists in abundance—and has for some time. Moreover, even the researchers who have compiled and collated this compelling evidence admit that they don't yet have an adequate explanation for it, while insisting that is no excuse for pretending the evidence isn't there. . . .

Atheism old and new

Disbelief in divinity is hardly a recent development in human consciousness. During the rise of most of the world's religions, dating back to the early days of Vedic Hinduism some four thousand years ago, and the advent of Buddhism about twenty-five hundred years ago, groups of nonbelievers refused to accept religious practices in general and deities in particular. Although small in number, they nonetheless enjoyed a level of relative tolerance in the ancient world, particularly in Asia. In contrast, Christianity so dominated the West in the two millennia after Christ that atheistic beliefs were of necessity kept quiet, if not entirely secret, for fear of retribution. As the temporal power of the church has waned during the last two centuries, however, atheists have publicly proclaimed a refusal to believe in any deity, especially a Supreme Being. . . .

By the turn of the 21st century, a circle of "professional" atheists, notably **Richard Dawkins** (b. 1941), **Daniel Dennett** (b. 1942), **Christopher Hitchens** (1949-2011), **Michael Shermer** (b. 1954), **Steven Pinker** (b. 1954), and **Sam Harris** (b. 1967), had claimed the public's attention. They believe that atheists and agnostics should not merely acknowledge their beliefs but also actively oppose all religions and attempt to highlight the dangers of organized religion. Atheists, including prominent scientists, promote the belief that the world is entirely material and that talk of a spiritual realm—whether by institutional religions or promoters of a spiritual vision of life—is mere superstition, and that the teaching of such views to children amounts to indoctrination. The belief most current atheists promote, known as **materialism** or **physicalism**, holds that everything, including consciousness, consists of matter and energy and, further, that consciousness itself derives from matter. As with the positivists, materialists believe that only statements that can be proven by logic or mathematics or can be demonstrated by easily verifiable facts are valid and meaningful.

Dawkins, a member of the British landed gentry born in Kenya, has been particularly visible in public debates relating to science and religion since the publication of his book *The God Delusion* in 2006, which became an international best seller. He is seen by some as indicative of a change in the cultural *Zeitgeist*—despite the continuing low percentage of people who call themselves atheists—and has also been identified with the rise of the so-called **New Atheism**. Some atheists, however, distance themselves from the aggressive approach of a group often called “The Four Horsemen of the New Atheism,” originally comprising Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and Hitchens. After Hitchens’s death from esophageal cancer in 2011, it was suggested that his place among the Four Horsemen be taken by **Ayaan Hirsi Ali** (b. 1969), a Somali-born woman and former devout Muslim who abandoned Islam and became an avowed atheist. Hirsi Ali has spoken out and written frequently against the treatment of women by some Muslims, including female genital mutilation. After moving to The Netherlands and becoming a Dutch citizen, she opposed government funding of sponsored religious schools there, most of which are Catholic or Protestant, but a growing number of which are Muslim.

With a PhD in cognitive neuroscience, Sam Harris takes a somewhat different approach to atheism from his fellow Horsemen. In his 2014 book *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion*, Harris describes his experiences with psychoactive drugs, especially MDMA (popularly known as Ecstasy), which he says imbued him with a sense of “boundless love” for all beings. And he gives an account of the years he has spent, many of them in India and Nepal, studying advanced forms of Buddhist meditation, specifically Dzogchen, that have led him to moments of transcendent insight. “Although such experiences of ‘self-transcendence’ are generally thought about in religious terms,” he writes, “there is nothing, in principle, irrational about them. From both a scientific and a philosophical point of view, they represent a clearer understanding of the way things are.”

Attempting to bridge the gap between materialist science and atheism on one side and religious dogmatism on the other, Harris says, borrowing a phrase used by the Buddha, “A middle path exists between making a religion out of spiritual life and having no spiritual life at all.”

Nonetheless, Harris is reluctant to take the logical next step of recognizing that consciousness can exist independent of the brain and that, as a result, personal awareness can continue after death. He refers to our life on Earth as “the only life of which any of us can be certain.” As a corollary, Harris rejects the reality of near-death experiences—in which people accurately report seeing and hearing events during a time in which their brain was effectively dead—despite the many scientific studies that have established their veridical nature, as we will see. . . .

SBNR: Religions of one’s own

As the membership of traditional institutional religions continues to wane, the number of people who identify as atheist or agnostic has barely moved the dial. Most of the share of population that has been drained away from traditional religions has moved in a different direction from dogmatic nonbelief—and this is a significant difference. According to a 2017 survey by the Pew Research Center, “About a quarter of U.S. adults (27%) now say they think of themselves as spiritual but not religious, up 8 percentage points in five years.” Further, their website says, “This growth has been broad-based: It has occurred among

men and women; whites, blacks, and Hispanics; people of many different ages and education levels; and among Republicans and Democrats. For instance, the share of whites who identify as spiritual but not religious has grown by 8 percentage points” since 2012. Perhaps even more significantly, the 2017 Pew study found that roughly 50 percent of “millennials” (born between 1981 and 1996) take a spiritual view of life even as they do not identify with or practice any specific religion.

The phrase “**spiritual but not religious**” (or **SBNR**) is sometimes traced to the book of that name written in 2000 by the Lutheran pastor and spiritual counselor **Sven Erlandson**, who is also described as a Wall Street performance coach. However, the phrase appeared at least two years prior in **David N. Elkin’s** 1998 book *Beyond Religion: A Personal Program for Building a Spiritual Life Outside the Walls of Traditional Religion*. Elkins describes three waves of change occurring from the 1960s to the 1990s: the Human Potential movement, the New Age movement, and the “movement toward the soul” kicked off in 1991 by Thomas Moore’s best-selling book *Care of the Soul*. He adds that these waves of change “helped break the historical tie between religion and spirituality, and they produced a generation of Americans who knew that it was possible to be spiritual but not religious.”

Indeed, **Thomas Moore** (b. 1940) has written his own book with an SBNR slant, *A Religion of One’s Own: A Guide to Creating a Personal Spirituality in a Secular World* (Gotham, 2014), in which he argues against undiluted secularism and in favor of “a courageous, deep-seated, fate-driven, informed, and intelligent life that has sublime and transcendent dimension.” Having spent some thirteen years in a Catholic seminary—leaving before he was ordained a priest—Moore finds a purely secular approach unfulfilling. “The disappearance of religious feeling goes hand in hand with a loss of soul, because at its best, religion speaks to the soul and feeds it. Traditional religion may well need an overhaul from top to bottom, but personal religion is a requirement.” Moore creates his “personal religion” from what he has experienced of other religions and his own Catholicism, as well as art, music, and his practice of psychotherapy, which he calls “a sacred activity.”

And then there’s the trend that one journalist has called “progressive occultism,” defined as “packaging the connection between left-wing politics and occultism as an integral part of the progressive millennial experience.” She may be onto something; Pew survey data has suggested that, as of 2014, the combined number of pagans and Wiccans in America was over a million—up from 98,000 in 1990. By that estimation, she writes, “Wicca is technically the fastest-growing religion in America.” (Tara Isabella Burton, “The Rise of Progressive Occultism,” *The American Interest*, July 2019).

Spiritual intelligence: growing up and waking up

Psychologist Daniel Goleman (b. 1946) developed the concept of “emotional intelligence” (first named by psychologists John Mayer and Peter Salovey) in his 1995 book of that name. In the ensuing years, a number of writers have introduced the somewhat parallel term “spiritual intelligence,” although often with different meanings. The most relevant version from our perspective is probably that described by spiritual teachers such as Ken Wilber (b. 1949), whom we discussed in the section on transpersonal psychology. Through his **Integral Institute** and its 2005 offshoot, the **Integral Spiritual Center**, Wilber has made

useful distinctions about spirituality and religion while refusing to reject one in favor of the other. Questioning the concept of being “spiritual but not religious,” Wilber has sought instead to bring religion and spirituality into greater accord. He is not the only current teacher making these distinctions; researchers such as **Daniel P. Brown, PhD** (not to be confused with popular author Dan Brown, author of *The DaVinci Code*) and others have written significant books in the same field. Wilber’s way of describing the paradigm is the clearest one I know of, so I use it here to describe these developments.

He begins by dividing both religious and spiritual growth—which he labels *growing up* and *waking up*—into a number of historical stages. “Growing up” happens most commonly in the early stages of religion, to which Wilber assigns classifications, such as “archaic,” “magic,” and “mythic.” Despite their primitive-sounding labels, these are the levels at which the vast majority of the world’s practitioners are currently stuck, as Wilber sees it. In an article published on Awaken.com in 2017, Wilber writes:

Most people, certainly in the West, think of religion as being a narrative belief structure. They see it almost entirely in its magic and mythic levels or stages because that’s where orthodox religion in many cases has remained for the longest stretch of its history.

Wilber uses Christianity as his primary example, in which the magic and mythic levels, including belief in the literal truth of the Bible with its miraculous events and healings, dominated most of the first two millennia. Yet he points out that we can observe the “same basic deep structure stages” in Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and other traditions. Beginning with the Enlightenment in the 18th century, however, the world’s religions entered what Wilber calls a “rationalist” stage of growing up, during which their leaders began to accept the rights of other people to practice their own faith, and often viewed many of the doctrines of their own religion symbolically. In rationalist Christianity, for example, Wilber says,

Christ is no longer seen literally as the sole son of god, but as a great world teacher who had and still has a tremendous amount of wisdom much needed in today’s world. This level of rationality or reason was generally the world’s leading edge of evolution for the next several hundred years, until around the 1960s.

By that time, increasing numbers of believers had begun to adopt the attitudes toward other religions that we have discussed above, including both interfaith dialog and a more symbolic understanding of basic doctrines. Wilber cites the example of **Marcus Borg** (1942-2015), an influential American theologian and New Testament scholar active in historical Jesus scholarship (see Chapter 5). Although Borg rejected belief in Jesus as the literal son of God, the virgin birth, the resurrection, and the Genesis account of creation, he considered himself a genuine Christian. What’s more, he claimed that none of his Christian theologian colleagues held those beliefs either.

Further, we can point to contemporary Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists who embrace an almost secular level of belief in their own religion. For example, the Buddhist scholar and teacher **Stephen Batchelor** (b. 1953), a proponent of secular or agnostic Buddhism,

embraces many aspects of Buddhist practice but rejects some of the religion's defining beliefs. In recent books such as *After Buddhism: Rethinking the Dharma for a Secular Age* and *Secular Buddhism: Imagining the Dharma in an Uncertain World*, he applies those principles removed from the religious beliefs that still largely define Zen, Tibetan, and Pure Land Buddhism for hundreds of millions of Buddhists.

This stage of "growing up" is incremental, however; only a proportion of all believers have adopted a "progressive" approach to other belief systems. At the same time that Borg and Batchelor are interpreting their root religion in symbolic or secular terms, millions of fundamentalist Christians in the U.S., as well as Asian Buddhists and sectarian Hindus continue to practice versions of their religions that are considerably less tolerant of other faiths; and a small number of theocratic nations still practice violent forms of religious persecution.

To the overall concept of "growing up" into a more highly evolved understanding of an institutional religion, Wilber contrasts his second major category of spirituality, that of "waking up." As implied by the term, waking up involves direct spiritual experience of enlightenment or awakening in the here and now that is somewhat parallel to what the great spiritual founders and mystics underwent. Although many of those who achieved waking up did so in the context of an established religion—think of St. Francis of Assisi, Rumi, the Baal Shem Tov, or the Japanese Zen master Dogen—growing up and waking up are, Wilber says, "profoundly different types and practices of spirituality."

Waking up, for instance, does not involve progress through a series of belief systems but through a series of internal stages. As Wilber says of this process:

It is a psycho-technology of consciousness transformation, a series of actual practices.

These lead from the small, narrow, finite, skin-encapsulated ego to what is said to be a oneness with the ground of all being, what the Sufis call a supreme identity, a union of the individual with this all-pervading ground, a state known variously as enlightenment, awakening, metamorphosis, moksha, satori, emancipation, salvation, the great liberation.

What is Mysticism?

The stages of mystical awakening that Wilber talks about have been identified and described by a number of scholars, most notably **Evelyn Underhill** (1875-1941), herself an Anglo-Catholic mystic. In her classic 1911 work *Mysticism: A Study of the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, Underhill takes on William James and his listing of the "four marks" of the mystical state—ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity. Writing almost a decade after James's 1902 classic, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Underhill dared to posit "four other rules or notes" of her own. Based on her ongoing direct experience of awakening, her stages contradict some of James's:

1. "True mysticism is active and practical, not passive and theoretical. It is an organic life-process, a something which the whole self does; not something as to which its intellect holds an opinion."
2. "Its aims are wholly transcendental and spiritual. . . . Though [the mystic] does

not, as his enemies declare, neglect his duty to the many, his heart is always set upon the changeless One.”

3. “This One is for the mystic. . . a living and personal Object of Love; never an object of exploration.”

4. “Living union with this One—which is the term of his adventure—is a definite state or form of enhanced life. . . . It is arrived at by an arduous psychological and spiritual process—the so-called Mystic Way—entailing the complete remaking of character and the liberation of a new, or rather latent, form of consciousness; which imposes on the self the condition which is sometimes inaccurately called ‘ecstasy,’ but is better named the Unitive State.”

Underhill also identified five stages that all Western mystics are said to go through, which she called:

1. “The Awakening of Self” to the consciousness of Divine Reality;
2. “Purgation of Self,” a cleansing of all inappropriate attitudes;
3. “Illumination” that arises after mystics “separate out the grossness, death, and darkness,” leaving only that which is eternal;
4. “The Dark Night of the Soul” as described by John of the Cross; and finally
5. “The Unitive Life,” which she defines as a “state of transcendent vitality.”

In this fifth stage, Underhill makes the point—not clearly defined by scholars before her—that the state of divine union produced a “fruitful creativeness,” so that the mystic who achieves unity with God becomes not a reclusive lover of God but, “a pioneer of humanity, a sharply intuitive and painfully practical person: an artist, a discoverer, a religious or social reformer, a national hero, a ‘great active’ amongst the saints. By the superhuman nature of that which these persons accomplish, we can gauge something of the super-normal vitality of which they partake.”

Ken Wilber and others have identified the awakenings that Underhill defined as having occurred among all the world’s meditative or contemplative traditions, which they also call **paths of the great liberation**. Current scholarship shows that similar stages exist in most Eastern traditions as well, including Theravada and Zen Buddhism; Anuttara Tantra and Mahamudra in Tibetan Buddhism; and the Hindu traditions of Kashmir Shaivism and Vedanta. Indeed, the great wisdom traditions virtually all began when a founder or founders directly experienced profound waking up or direct consciousness of union with ultimate Spirit. Although these experiences were and are more common in the Eastern traditions, many Western religions reflect similar stages, including Christian mysticism, Sufism, and Kabbalah. Per this paradigm, the awakening of Jesus during his baptism in the River Jordan, and the revelation of the Quran to Muhammad by the

archangel Jibril (Gabriel) in the mountain cave of Hira can be seen as classic mystical experiences, notwithstanding that orthodox Christians or Muslims view them as acts of divine intervention.

Evolutionary Spirituality

Somewhat akin to Stephen Batchelor's secular approach to Buddhism, a number of teachers have emerged since around the turn of the 21st century who promote the kind of practice-oriented spiritual path that Wilber and others describe. These teachers integrate ethical and compassionate living with a variety of direct practices—most commonly forms of intensive meditation—but without the dogma associated with the world's institutional religions.

Andrew Harvey (b. 1952) was born to British parents in India and was raised a Christian, but has since had extensive practice and study in other traditions, including Hinduism, Mahayana Buddhism, and Sufism, and has written about them all in some depth. He teaches what he calls **Sacred Activism**, describing it as “the product of the union of a profound spiritual and mystical knowledge, understanding, and compassion, peace and energy, with focused, wise, radical action in the world.” And his teaching of the **Direct Path** draws on the spiritual practices of several religions to help create an individualized practice not reliant on any one of those established traditions. In his book *The Direct Path: Creating a Personal Journey to the Divine Using the World's Spiritual Traditions* (2000), Harvey writes about the current era:

What is attempting to be born, I believe, through the agony and terror of this extremely dangerous but also extremely creative and fertile period, is a new humanity, one that is in direct and unmediated contact with the Divine, free of the divisiveness, body hatred, and bias toward transcendence that disfigures all the inherited patriarchal religions, and so is able at last to inhabit time, the body, and the earth with ecstatic consciousness and a passionate and radical sense of responsibility toward all living things.

Although Harvey uses the phrase “Direct Path” to refer to a kind of syncretic amalgam of various traditions, the same term might be more accurately applied to a number of recent teachers who share Ken Wilber's advocacy of ways to “wake up” without the need for traditional dogma or elaborate devotional practices. **Craig Hamilton**, a founding member of Wilber's Integral Institute, is also a member of the Esalen Center for Theory and Research, and was a participant in the **Synthesis Dialogues**, a 35-person interdisciplinary think tank convened by the **Association for Global New Thought**, and presided over by the Dalai Lama. Held several times from 1999 to 2004, the Dialogues brought together teachers who, like Hamilton and Wilber, follow a path they call **evolutionary spirituality**, although some of them do practice in a particular tradition as well, such as the Dalai Lama.

Having studied with spiritual masters in a variety of traditions, Hamilton describes himself as “**post-traditional**.” Based in Berkeley, Calif., he operates his **Integral Enlightenment** organization as part of the emerging field of evolutionary spiritual teachings given both in person and, increasingly, online. In his blog, Hamilton defines the

spiritual path in the current century as “not primarily about freeing ourselves from suffering and securing our own happiness.” In language reminiscent of the Mahayana Buddhist concept of the bodhisattva—highly realized spiritual beings who delay their own entry into nirvana while helping all other sentient beings achieve enlightenment—Hamilton says that the true path of the spiritual practitioner begins, “when we recognize that transforming ourselves in the deepest possible way is in fact an evolutionary imperative with profound consequences far beyond ourselves.” He goes on:

When we begin to embrace the fact that our lives really are not our own to do with as we please, that in everything we do, we are in fact accountable to the Whole, something truly miraculous begins to happen. . . . Ignited by a noble calling to participate in the grand adventure of conscious evolution, we find we no longer have time to worry about ourselves. And in this freedom from self-concern, before long we discover that the deep inner peace and joy we were seeking all along has become the very ground we are walking on.

Nonduality and Neo-Advaita

A wide number of new religions or alternative spiritualities of modern origin continue to arise, called by different names but focused on variations of the direct path. They may be defined as peripheral to society’s dominant religious cultures, but are no less significant as they continue to add followers while institutional religions in the West lose theirs. It would be fruitless to try to name and define them all as many of them rise, peak, and sometimes diminish. Many of those that have been identified actually amount to spinoffs or distillations of prior traditions or teachings.

Nondualism, also called **Neo-Advaita** or the **Satsang movement**, is an example of such religious branching. It derives informally from the teachings of the 20th-century Indian sage Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950; see Chapter 1) as interpreted and popularized by **H. W. L. Poonja** (also Poonjaji or Papaji, 1910-1997). Poonja visited Ramana in South India, where the great sage instructed him specifically in his practice of self-enquiry, or *vichara*, by which Ramana led him to look within for the God he had been seeking in vain outside of himself. “God is not an object to be seen, He is the subject,” Ramana told him. “He cannot be seen, He is the Seer. Find this Seer.” This was Ramana’s way of pointing Papaji to the “direct path,” known in India as Advaita Vedanta. Although Ramana neither sought nor claimed to have disciples and never named a successor, some Neo-Advaitists say that Papaji’s extensive time spent with him bestowed a kind of spiritual credibility on his own teachings.

Ramana Maharshi was not the only Indian guru to have been “discovered” by Western seekers who were drawn to the simplified language of nonduality. His near contemporary Nisargadatta Maharaj (1897-1981) also developed a simple approach to self-inquiry, inspired by his guru, **Siddharameshwar Maharaj** (1888-1936). Although Nisargadatta employed the techniques of bhakti yoga, such as devotional chanting, like Ramana he urged his students to adopt the stance called “witness consciousness.” This means being the objective observer not only of external events, but also of one’s own mind and awareness, as Nisargadatta described it:

The life force and the mind are operating, but the mind will tempt you to believe that it is “you.” Therefore, understand always that you are the timeless spaceless witness. And even if the mind tells you that you are the one who is acting, don’t believe the mind.

As was the case with Ramana, Nisargadatta’s talks were recorded and transcribed into a number of books, including *I Am That* (1973), which was widely read in English. However, some observers point out that nondual teachings, especially based on an experience of sudden enlightenment at an early age, as happened to Ramana, may present a kind of trap for some people. When Ramana was about sixteen, he went into a coma and appeared to be dead, during which time he became aware of a “current” or “force” that he later said he recognized as his true “I” or “self.” He may indeed have had a near-death experience, a term that was not in use in 1896 (see below). Six weeks later he left his uncle’s home in the Tamil Nadu area of South India and traveled to the holy mountain Arunachala, in Tiruvannamalai, where he took up informal life as a renunciate and eventually began teaching. Ramana may never have developed a practice approach to achieving direct awareness simply because he didn’t need one. Indian teachers of nonduality, including Ramana, Nisargadatta, and J. Krishnamurti, seem to expect their audience to have an “awakening” experience merely by listening to or reading their words, without any active practice either to prepare them or to follow up after their “awakening.” (In my own experience as a student, I have found that some teachers who have worked their way through more than one tradition and followed a number of teachers, often accumulating tens of thousands of meditation hours in the process, have had to develop more practicable ways to transfer their insights to their followers, most of whom are householders with families, jobs, and everyday anxieties.)

A number of teachers throughout the 20th and 21st centuries have put forth secularized versions of nonduality. In the Introduction to this book, I wrote about nondualism as a philosophical tenet proposing that one basic misperception is responsible for all human suffering: the fact that each of us clings to the belief that we are individual personalities, ultimately separate from every other individual and even from God and the universe. According to this line of belief, the perception of ourselves as separate egos is a grave mistake that results in various forms of grasping and greed (to shore us up against the rest of the world); hatred and aggression (toward whatever feels threatening); and ignorance (of what appears to the ego to have no material value, often including spiritual practice). This belief is made explicit in the teachings of the Buddha, but it underlies virtually all mystical wisdom, which at its root seeks to break down duality and return us to the unitive condition—or more accurately to allow us to see that we already are one with all existence, if only we would realize it.

For this reason, adherents of nonduality, like members of mystical schools associated with many of the world’s religions, firmly believe that any sense of a division between oneself and others, between oneself and the material universe, or between oneself and God or the Absolute, is an illusion. Some Neo-Advaita proponents take this belief to the extreme of positing an impersonal Absolute that is not possible to describe, or to fathom in the context of personal existence. The British nondualist **Jeff Foster** (b. 1980) went so far as to announce in 2011, “I am officially no longer an ‘Advaita teacher’ or ‘Nonduality

teacher’-if, indeed, I ever was one.” Frustrated by the impersonal approach of many nonduality teachers, he explained his position in an essay entitled “The birth and death of fundamentalism in nonduality and Advaita teachings,” subtitled “Why the impersonal does not ‘exist.’”

Life cannot be put into words, and however beautiful the words of Advaita/Nonduality are, they must be discarded in the end. I could never claim to be any sort of authority on this stuff. . . . If you listen to certain Nonduality/Advaita teachers who are on the scene at the moment, you may get the impression that there is something *terribly wrong* with having a personal “story.” Having a thought-created story about yourself, your past experiences, your relationships, your feelings, your desires and hopes and fears, and so on—in other words, being a living, breathing human being—is a clear sign of delusion and duality. And you need to wake up from this mess!

Here Foster is also taking aim at the fact that a lot of nonduality teaching is densely verbal and conceptual while offering little or nothing in the way of actual practice. It often represents the kind of teaching, from the likes of Eckhart Tolle, and Foster himself, that may sound comforting. But when you ask how to achieve such realizations on a lasting level, you may find that most of these teachers don’t incorporate any practicable guidance.

The reason is both simple and complicated. Practices that have the power to change the way our brains function so as to help overcome deeply-ingrained deluded or self-destructive behavior can take many years to develop, often in the context of large communities of practitioners. The likelihood that an individual teacher working alone would devise a practice that is profound enough to effect meaningful change, and yet accessible to individuals living in the workaday world—as opposed to the relatively privileged setting of monasteries and ashrams—is fairly low.

Spiritual institutions, however, whether based on Western monotheism or Eastern nondualistic practices, can have their own problematic power dynamics, as has been revealed by students of some previously respected Indian, Tibetan, and other Asian (and Western) gurus and teachers, some of whom have been discovered to be acting in abusive ways toward their own students.

Labeling a current range of teachings as “secular nonduality” is not entirely accurate, however. Some of today’s nondualism-identified teachers at least acknowledge the validity of long-established mystical traditions as diverse as Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, Sufism, Vedanta, Kabbalah, and Christian mysticism. Eckhart Tolle, discussed in Chapter 7, credits Zen as one of his primary influences, although he is often identified as a teacher of nonduality. Another popular nonduality teacher, **David Hoffmeister**, bases his work on the text of *A Course in Miracles*, which purports to contain the channeled teachings of Jesus (see Chapter 7) as transcribed in the mid-20th century. According to Hoffmeister’s website, “He followed Jesus’ instructions to ‘become as a child,’ allowing himself to be totally dependent on the Holy Spirit for money, transportation, shelter, food, and the words to speak” in his international teachings based on *A Course*.

The teacher known as ShantiMayi (b. 1950) was born and raised in Ohio, married and raised a family, divorced and later traveled through India, where she encountered a

teacher named Hansraj Maharajji (1900—1966), who adopted her as a student. Although ShantiMayi spent years absorbing the nondualistic teachings of Maharajji, who had studied and practiced in Sikh and Hindu traditions, she does not consider herself a Hindu. Another American teacher of nonduality, known as **Gangaji** (Merle Antoinette Roberson, b. 1942), traveled to India to meet H.W.L. Poonja (Papaji), who gave her the name Gangaji and invited her to teach what she had directly realized with others. Gangaji employs a variation on the practice of self-inquiry to help in the realization of “direct experience,” suggesting that people “just stop and be still. And in that you discover who you are.” She has said that, “I use inquiry as a way of getting the mind to turn inward to the silence. It could be the question, ‘Who am I?’ Or it could be ‘What am I avoiding in this moment?’ Or, ‘Where is silence?’” The line of transmission from Ramana Maharshi may seem indirect, but is nonetheless apparent.

The popular American teacher **Adyashanti** (Steven Gray, b. 1962) from the San Francisco Bay Area, studied with West Coast Zen Buddhists and practiced intensive meditation for years, but says he also read the works of Christian mystics as well as the Gospels. Rather than the spiritual teachings of Jesus, though, Adyashanti was drawn to his social Gospel. “What took me aback was the revolutionary Jesus, how challenging he was,” Adyashanti told Oprah Winfrey in 2014.

He didn’t sit there in a cave like an Eastern sage. He was out in the world and amongst the people—and often amongst the poorest of people. He really wasn’t afraid to point his finger at things that he saw were wrong and say, “That’s not right. That kind of abuse of power, abuse of situation, abuse of position, that’s a defilement of . . . my father. Of God.”

Adyashanti is addressing the tension between the somewhat idealized, privileged situation of the monastery or ashram and the need for spiritual teachers to help everyday people. The Buddhist scholar Robert Thurman has proposed that the most inspired spiritual masters were very clear on this point. He told *Tricycle* magazine in 2019:

When the Buddha built the monastic institution (building on the Indian *ashram*, which was limited to men from the brahmin caste), he said that monastics couldn’t stay more than seven stones’ throw away from the marketplace of the villages and towns. They had to go in and get fresh food every day because they couldn’t accept two days’ worth of food. So he set up the sangha to be closely interconnecting with the society.

Given the broad range of approaches to a concept of spirituality as apparently basic as nonduality, individual seekers may need to look for transformational teachings that they can live with, whether traditional or post-traditional, religious or secular, isolated from or engaged with the public. Nobody has ever said the spiritual path would be easy.

Meditation East to West

When it comes to finding spiritually transformative practices, however, many of us seem to want to have it both ways. For some people, the potency of time-tested traditional wisdom

feels better if it's also backed up by scientific certitude. As it happens, the scientific confirmation of the benefits of the ancient spiritual practice of meditation is accumulating at a notable rate. In the 1960s and '70s, a number of American spiritual seekers—some engaged in academic study of philosophy, psychology, or social science—descended on parts of Asia to explore or deepen meditation and related contemplative practices introduced to the West by Indian yogic teachers, such as Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and Swami Satchidananda. While some Western students studied primarily with Indian masters, however, others were attracted to a form of practice, taught mainly in Ceylon and Southeast Asia, that is closely related to Theravada Buddhist meditation of the sort called **vipassana** or **vipashyana** (Pali, Skt., “insight, clear seeing”). Both Hindus and Tibetan Buddhists use the term vipassana or vipashyana with quite different meanings, but the form of vipassana developed by mainly Burmese Buddhists, including **Ledi Sayadaw** (1846-1923), and popularized by **Mahasi Sayadaw** (1904-1982) and **S.N. Goenka** (1924-2013), was based on the original teachings of the Buddha as recorded in the Pali Canon. Yet, Goenka emphasized the nonsectarian nature of the approach he taught. “Rather than converting people from one organized religion to another organized religion,” he said, “we should try to convert people from misery to happiness, from bondage to liberation and from cruelty to compassion.”

Of the Southeast Asian teachers, Goenka appears to have had the greatest impact on a group of Americans who practiced extensively overseas and eventually brought back with them a version of vipassana they came to call **Insight Meditation**. The most influential members of this group include **Sharon Salzberg** (b. 1952), **Jack Kornfield** (b. 1945), and **Joseph Goldstein** (b. 1944), who cofounded the **Insight Meditation Society** (IMS) in 1975 and opened their first retreat center in Barre, Mass., the following year. Although IMS and its teachings are based on Buddhist principles, their emphasis remains on meditation practice for people of any religious background or none. They hold that atheists can practice meditation, and some do.

Jon Kabat-Zinn (b. 1944) studied Zen meditation with Vietnamese master Thich Nhat Hanh and Korean Zen master **Seungsahn** (1927-2004), and later studied and taught at IMS. Trained as a molecular biologist, Kabat-Zinn developed ways to use meditation to reduce stress. In 1979 he founded the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, where he developed an eight-week course he called **Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)**, a popular short-term therapeutic system that combines elements of meditation and yoga in a secular format, and that can be applied to the treatment of joint pain, anxiety, and immune function. Like vipassana, mindfulness means different things to different people, Buddhist and secular alike. Kabat-Zinn defines it this way:

Mindfulness is awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally. And then I sometimes add, in the service of self-understanding and wisdom.

Kabat-Zinn and his books, such as the best-selling *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life* (1994), have been largely responsible for the adoption of mindfulness meditation by hospitals and health-care practitioners for the

treatment not only of chronic pain but also of anxiety, depression, and substance abuse. The impact of MBSR on pain reduction has been shown by replicated studies published in peer-reviewed scientific journals to be substantial both for experienced meditators with years of practice, and for patients who merely take an eight-week course in meditation and experience results that last as long as four years or more.

Scientific study of how regular meditation affects individuals by measuring brain and bodily changes has been growing over the past half-century, especially since the development of newer techniques and instruments, such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) and electroencephalography (EEG). This technology allows researchers to directly observe brain physiology and neural activity before, during, and after the act of meditation, and to measure changes in brain structure or function. Although earlier attempts to gauge the effects of meditation have been questioned on methodological grounds, the accuracy of more rigorous studies has increased exponentially since the early 2000s.

Perhaps the most significant work in this arena has been carried out by **Richard Davidson**, (b. 1951), a neuroscientist and professor of psychology and psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin, and founder and chair of the Center for Healthy Minds. Working at the University of Wisconsin's ten million-dollar W.M. Keck Laboratory for Functional Brain Imaging and Behavior, Davidson has studied the brains of highly accomplished Tibetan Buddhist monks who have logged as many as 50,000 hours' in deep meditative states over fifteen to forty years. "What we found is that the longtime practitioners showed brain activation on a scale we have never seen before," Davidson told the *Washington Post* in 2005. "Their mental practice is having an effect on the brain in the same way golf or tennis practice will enhance performance."

Teaming with science journalist Daniel Goleman, Davidson reported in their book *Altered Traits* (2017) that the brain is capable of being trained and physically modified in ways that few researchers had imagined. For example, they discovered that some meditators were better able to tolerate higher levels of pain than non-meditators: "The more experienced among the Zen students not only were able to bear more pain than could controls, they also displayed little activity in executive, evaluative, and emotion areas during the pain—all regions that ordinarily flare into activity when we are under such intense stress."

Davidson tested the ability of experienced monks to meditate specifically on "unconditional compassion." As a result of this research, Davidson and Goleman concluded that meditation not only changes the short-term workings of the brain, but can produce long-lasting and even potentially permanent changes as well. The implications of Davidson's research for a conscious evolution in human behavior open the door for great optimism about the future of the race and the planet.

Consciousness and the brain

As noted earlier, a preponderance of scientists and academic researchers profess some form of secular humanism or atheism. Materialist scientists' nonbelief in God or any overarching spiritual plan of the universe may have predisposed them to insist that human consciousness—the sense of awareness that we experience when we think of "I" or "me," including memory and personality—cannot exist separately from the brain. If it could, then

logic would dictate that our consciousness can survive after death, which implies the existence of an afterlife and, by extension perhaps, a Supreme Being or guiding force in the universe.

By insisting that consciousness is produced only by the brain, scientists reason that when the brain stops functioning for good, specifically when the body dies, consciousness ends. The cognitive psychologist and atheist **Steven Pinker** (b. 1954), for example, embraces the “computational theory of mind,” which holds that the human mind, or consciousness, is no more than an information processing system that is implemented by neuronal activity in the brain. Yet, by no means do all scientific researchers agree with this conception, which sounds oddly like Descartes’ view of humans as elaborate clocks. As senior scientist at the Institute of Noetic Sciences **Dean Radin** (b.1952), the leading U.S. researcher in paranormal phenomena, writes in his 2018 book *Real Magic*:

It is sometimes argued that the brain must be generating consciousness because an anesthesiologist can apply a drug cocktail to your bloodstream and reliably switch off conscious awareness. But that doesn’t mean the awareness was caused by brain activity. For example, about 1 in 1,000 people undergoing surgery discover to their distress that they’re fully conscious while under general anesthesia.

Further, no scientist to date has been able to ascertain and describe, in a lab or even theoretically, the process by which the brain creates consciousness. Nobel Prize-winning neurophysiologist **Roger W. Sperry** (1913-1994) summed up the issue this way:

No human has ever seen a brain or anything else produce consciousness, and there is no accepted theory as to how this *could* happen. . . . Those centermost processes of the brain with which consciousness is presumably associated are simply not understood. They are so far beyond our comprehension at present that no one I know of has been able even to imagine their nature.

(Quoted in Denis Brian, *Genius Talk: Conversations with Nobel Scientists and Other Luminaries*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995.)

A surprising number of renowned scientists, including Nobel laureates, have argued against the materialist view in convincing terms. **Sir John C. Eccles** (1903–1997), an Australian neurophysiologist and philosopher who won the 1963 Nobel Prize for his work on the synapse, wrote in his book *Evolution of the Brain: Creation of the Self* (1989):

I maintain that the human mystery is incredibly demeaned by scientific reductionism, with its claim in promissory materialism to account eventually for all of the spiritual world in terms of patterns of neuronal activity. This belief must be classed as a superstition . . .we have to recognize that we are spiritual beings with souls existing in a spiritual world as well as material beings with bodies and brains existing in a material world.

At the same time, no scientist has yet definitively proved that consciousness *does* continue after the death of the brain or body, although a vast amount of anecdotal evidence and research suggests strongly that it does. Among other sources, a large number of books have been published that purport to be channeled from spirits of the deceased and

transcribed by living mediums. These mediums, presumably able to contact discarnate spirits existing in other dimensions, claim to have communicated not only with spirits of the departed, but also with spirit guides, some of whom say that they have never existed in embodied form.

These books, such as *A Wanderer in the Spirit Lands* (originally published in 1896); *The French Revelation* (compiled and edited by N. Riley Heagerty based on channeled material dating from 1906); and *Between Death and Life: Conversations with a Spirit* by Dolores Canon (1993), provide highly detailed information about the experiences of departed souls upon entering the afterlife, their interactions with spirit guides, explorations through the different dimensions and levels of the spirit world, and preparations for possible rebirth into earthly life. The discarnate authors state that in their new environment, spirits communicate telepathically and move from place to place simply by visualizing where they wish to go (teleportation); and they live comfortably without pain or the need to eat, drink, or sleep. Many such reports include an account of a review of the deceased's most recent life, guided by spirits intent on helping the departed learn from their mistakes rather than punishing them for perceived misdeeds.

Many of the spirits who communicate from the other side describe the overall structure of the world they inhabit, often in surprising ways:

We receive our light emanations, wholly from an etheric sun, from which central luminary there comes uninterrupted splendor, baffling description. We have, therefore, no division of time into days, weeks, months, or years, nor alterations of season caused by the earth's annual revolution, for the reason that we have no changing season as you have, caused by the action of the sun on your solar system. We, like you, are constantly progressing from day to day, but our ideas of time and seasons differ widely from yours. With you, it is time. With us, it is eternity. In your sphere your thoughts, necessarily bounded by time and space, are limited, but with us thoughts are extended in proportion as we get rid of those restrictions, and our perception of truth becomes more accurate.

(N. Riley Heagerty, The French Revelation: Voice to Voice Conversations With Spirits Through the Mediumship of Emily S. French, 2015; originally published 1906)

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Going out of the body

Throughout history, adventurous individuals who have had out-of-body experiences have molded our religious and spiritual beliefs. The early prophets of every religion recorded and interpreted their spiritual experiences according to the cultural and religious viewpoints of their day. Thus for thousands of years out-of-body experiences have been revered as holy and transcendental, and often viewed as a profound communion with God.

(William L. Buhlman, The Secret of the Soul: Using Out-of-Body Experiences to Understand Our True Nature)

For centuries, people have experienced the sensation of their consciousness leaving their body to such an extent that they appear to be viewing their body from the outside. As with NDEs, these accounts have appeared in the Bible as well as sacred scriptures of other religions, but have begun to be written about in great depth only during the last century or so. The term **out-of-body experience (OBE)** entered the vocabulary after **Robert A. Monroe** (1915-1995) published his epochal book *Journeys Out of the Body* in 1971. The phrase had been used earlier by British poet and occult researcher **Oliver Fox** (born Hugh George Callaway, 1885-1949), in his book *Astral Projection: A Record of Out-of-the-Body Experiences*, which was published c. 1940 based on two articles published in 1920. But Monroe's book popularized the term, selling millions of copies worldwide. Perhaps he saw it as an alternative to *astral projection*, which had been used by Spiritualists in the U.S. and England; or *soul travel*, the term used by Paul Twitchell, who founded the American spiritual sect Eckankar in 1965 (see Chapter 7). Either way, Monroe's term has the advantage of describing the event without religious or occultist overtones.

An OBE occurs when a person who is awake sees herself from a location outside the physical body. OBEs have been reported in clinical conditions of brain trauma, such as stroke, epilepsy, and psychedelic drug use, and as the result of traumatic experiences, such as car accidents; sensory deprivation (for example, in a flotation tank like those seen in the 1980 movie *Altered States*); and NDEs. Sources, including the BBC, report that as many as one in ten people claim to have had an OBE at some time in their lives. One distinction between an OBE and an NDE, however, is that the subject can initiate and control the action in many OBEs; they can go where they wish on the astral plane, and return at will to their body. A study published in the prestigious journal *Science* on Aug. 24, 2007, by **Henrik Ehrsson**, then at the Institute of Neurology at University College of London, claimed to produce an OBE under laboratory conditions.

Robert Monroe writes that he had his first OBE spontaneously in 1958. Initially he was frightened and spoke to doctors about it, but over time he learned how to release his consciousness from his body, and spent years honing his skills and expanding the range of his explorations. In his later books, Monroe claimed to have encountered disembodied beings who were not only spirits of the dead but also visitors from other dimensions or planes of reality, and perhaps other galaxies, intent on helping him and other humans develop advanced skills in navigating higher states of consciousness.

In the 1970s, he founded **The Monroe Institute** (TMI) in Virginia with the aim of teaching people how to let their consciousness separate from the body, at first during sleep and then virtually at will. Since its origin, some 20,000 people have taken workshops or retreats at TMI where they were instructed in how to plot a course through the levels of consciousness that Monroe had discovered and navigated during his nearly forty years of having OBEs. In his final book, *Ultimate Journey* (1994), Monroe described how he learned while out of body to recognize souls of recently deceased humans who appeared to be wandering in the after-death planes, and to lead them to a safe resting place from which they could proceed to the next stage of their afterlife journey.

If Monroe's accounts are veridical, they raise the question of whether the spirits of the departed need assistance in reaching the afterlife realm. Around the turn of the 20th century, Spiritualists, such as the previously mentioned Robert Crookall, wrote extensively about attempting to aid departed spirits in making their transition. More recently, **William**

Buhlman (b. 1950), a leading instructor in the field of out-of-body experience, has written extensively in one of the most influential books on OBEs, *Adventures Beyond the Body: How To Experience Out-of-Body Travel* (1996). In that book, Buhlman appears to agree with the founders of quantum mechanics about the relative roles of matter and consciousness:

Matter is not the center of reality as we view it. Instead, matter appears to be the end result of a series of energy interactions occurring in the unseen dimensions. With each out-of-body experience I realized more clearly that matter is only a tiny portion of the energy environments that exist. In many respects, matter is the dense outermost result of a magnificent chain of events occurring just beyond our physical vision.

Buhlman makes the argument that entry into the afterlife is not as simple as some sources indicate. Based on thousands of OBEs he claims to have had over fifty years, he says, "I recognized that each environment and dimension within the interior of the universe has specific similarities and differences. The most significant difference appears to be the degree of responsiveness to thought of a given nonphysical environment." Building on the words of the nonphysical entity Seth, as recorded in the Seth Books authored by Jane Roberts, Buhlman believes:

All nonphysical energy is thought-responsive; however, when a group of individuals maintains the same image or beliefs, the group creates, molds, and maintains a consensus reality. In effect, group thought-energy forms, stabilizes, and actually solidifies nonphysical energy. The larger the group (some number in the millions), the more stable the immediate energy environment becomes.

As a result, he says, the afterlife realms are populated by vast numbers of these "consensus realities," some of which resemble the institutional religious communities that flourish on the Earth plane. If we identify with a particular religion, Buhlman believes, our attachment to specific dogma can retard our soul's development after physical death. The nonsectarian nature of spirituality that Buhlman portrays in the afterlife parallels most of the descriptions in channeled books and accounts of mediums, such as those cited earlier, as well as regression hypnotherapists like Brian Weiss and Michael Newton, who portray a hereafter in which compassionate spirit guides help souls understand how they did or did not achieve the mission in life they had agreed to before incarnating (see below). None of these accounts identifies a specific religious tradition as the afterlife's operating system, so to speak. We read about guides, elders, levels of spiritual development, and an overarching principal identified simply as Love or *All That Is* (as Seth refers to it), but no organizing scheme that resembles any of the known religions of Earth.

Buhlman argues that the ability to have controlled, self-initiated OBEs can be both a spiritual practice and a way to prepare ourselves for the ultimate out-of-body experience—death. "By pursuing nonphysical exploration," he writes in *Adventures Beyond the Body*, "we can experience the many possible environments that will be our future home. In a very real sense we can scout ahead and become familiar with our nonphysical homeland." Buhlman teaches methods for initiating OBEs and claims that, if you have the

determination and commitment to put in the time and effort, you can learn to consciously experience the nonphysical self.

Near-death experiences

One particular form of out-of-body experience has garnered more attention than most during the past forty-five years or so. In his 1975 classic *Life After Life*, **Raymond Moody** (b. 1944) devised the term **near-death experience** to describe what more than one hundred people he interviewed had gone: they all had experienced some version of “clinical death” and were then revived after their heart and/or brain had ceased functioning. In the decades since Moody’s book appeared, millions of people from all walks of life and many nations have reported these experiences in a wide range of situations. Moreover, these experiences (commonly called **NDEs**) have occurred under conditions of rigorous observation and in numbers too great to ascribe to mere chance, delusion, or fabrication. Many of the details contained in channeled works like those cited above parallel rather closely the information about the transition from death to afterlife that has been described by individuals reporting what happened when they came close to physical death—or clinically died for a brief time.

The near-death experience had been documented for centuries even before Moody’s book, in texts ranging from the *Republic* of Plato to the New Testament and medieval literature, but only in the past half-century has it become a topic of general knowledge—and some debate. Roughly 15 percent of people who were pronounced clinically dead and whose vital signs terminated, but who were subsequently brought back to life following an accident, heart attack, medical operation, drowning, or being struck by lightning, have reported an NDE. Some 13 million Americans, or 5 percent of the overall population, had experienced an NDE as of 1992, according to a Gallup poll; since then at least another 6 million have been reported, a number that continues to climb. This is true not only in North America but also in Asia, Africa, and Australia, and neither religious belief nor the lack of one, nor prior knowledge or ignorance of NDEs has been shown to have any statistical impact on the likelihood of reporting one.

As Moody and other writers have pointed out, many of these descriptions appear to coincide closely with a body of centuries-old Tibetan literature that describes the transition in consciousness following the moment of death. This literature dates back to the early days of Tibetan Buddhism in the eighth century and includes the *Bardo Thodol*, or *Liberation Through Hearing During the Intermediate State*—better known in the West as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (see Chapter 2). Tibet also has its own tradition of near-death experience, comprising living people known as **deloks** (or delogs; Tib. “returned from death”), who nearly die, perhaps as a result of an illness, and then travel in the bardos—the realms between death and rebirth in Tibetan belief—where they may visit hell realms and paradises, or buddha realms, often accompanied by a protective deity or dakini. After a short time, the delok is sent back to its body with a message for the living, usually urging them to pursue spiritual practice. The deloks, most of whom were women, often met with disbelief when trying to share their experiences with others—much as modern-day NDErs have had difficulty convincing the scientific and medical world of the veridical nature of their inner journey. One example of the literature that has been translated into English was published as *Delog: Journey to Realms Beyond Death*, by Delog Dawa Drolma (1995). In

2019, a leading Tibetan Buddhist teacher, **Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche** (b. 1975), published a book in which he describes his own NDE, which occurred when he nearly died from food poisoning while on extended retreat in India (*In Love with the World: A Monk's Journey Through the Bardos of Living and Dying*, 2019).

People who have returned from NDEs often describe undergoing profound transformations in their lives, most often a new or heightened involvement in spirituality and a greatly reduced fear of death. In addition, the life-review—in which subjects are shown scenes from their lives in rapid succession, with an emphasis on those occasions in which they acted or failed to act with love and compassion for others—seems to be a compelling expression of the laws of karma as understood in Eastern spirituality, or the heavenly judgment of Western belief. In 1993, a book by a first-time author describing her clinical death and resuscitation following a hysterectomy, included an account of rising up to heaven to meet Jesus and scores of angels. The book, *Embraced by the Light* by **Betty J. Eadie** (b. 1942), sold over half a million copies. Eadie is a born-again Christian, and many of her fellow believers find such accounts blasphemous or contrary to Christian belief. In the years since, countless similar books describing NDEs have appeared, written by Christians, atheists, medical professionals, and just plain folks.

Many of the people reporting NDEs describe remarkably similar experiences, first enumerated by Raymond Moody. Although not every report includes all these elements, most include some of them, such as:

1. a sense of floating above their physical body while being able to watch and listen to those trying to resuscitate them;
2. overwhelming feelings of joy or bliss;
3. encountering beings or light forms that radiate unconditional love;
4. following a tunnel of light, at the end of which they may encounter loved ones who have previously passed over;
5. watching a life review in which they are shown events in their life and led to evaluate how they reacted.

One such life review was described by a woman having the NDE as “like watching a movie on fast-forward on your VCR.” Others liken the experience to being in a holographic movie theater in which multiple images from their life are projected, allowing them to explore any of them at length. Commonplace accounts of people who believe they are about to die, whether from drowning or an airplane crash, and who report seeing their whole life flash before their eyes, are reminiscent of these NDE life reviews, especially in that they seem to the experiencer to take place over an extended period of time, when the actual duration is quite short.

A significant aspect of these accounts is that the people having the experience report no pain, whether or not they have been anesthetized (only a small percentage of NDEs occur in hospital settings), and even if they have been suffering from crippling illness or were in a traumatic accident. Moreover, some NDEers say that even after their heart had stopped beating and their brain had flatlined, their inner awareness was able to travel at will, allowing them to listen to conversations in hospital hallways or even to observe

friends or loved ones miles away and accurately report the conversations they heard, as later verified by the speakers.

Those kinds of experiences appear to argue that consciousness is able to separate itself from the body and brain for fairly long times with no ill effects. Some neuroscientists have offered purely physiological explanations for these reports, including oxygen deprivation of the brain; the brain's ability during high stress to release endogenous opioid peptides, including endorphins and enkephalins, morphine-like chemicals that induce euphoric sensations in the mind; and tunnel vision caused by depletion of blood and oxygen flow to the eyes. Still, other established scientists have said that these proposed explanations are only theoretical, and in any case are insufficient to explain the full range of the experience.

Although Dr. Moody states in the introduction to his book that, "I am not trying to prove that there is life after death," in some ways his compiled reports can be seen as the opening round in the most recent stage of debate about the possibility of an afterlife. Christianity and Islam both teach an afterlife based on belief in the immortal soul, but their doctrines are based entirely on faith, presenting no verifiable evidence that we have souls or that they survive physical death. And, although apparently miraculous cures have been attributed to the intervention of the Blessed Mother and numerous Catholic saints, and although physicians have reported on the veridical nature of the cures themselves, they have been unable to verify their cause. The various schools of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism do teach belief in reincarnation, or rebirth, but their doctrines vary substantially and, once again, are primarily based on faith rather than verifiable evidence.

Further, many people have reported what psychologist **Kenneth Ring** (b. 1936) called **shared death experiences**, in which a loved one, caregiver, or bystander appears to partake in a dying person's initial transition into the afterlife. That is, as their loved one dies, these bystanders have what amounts to an NDE themselves. Ring's reports include many of the same phenomena that accompany typical NDEs—except that the people who report them are neither ill nor under the influence of anesthetics or other drugs. No physiological explanation has been proposed for bystanders' spontaneous sharing in the death experience they are observing.

Perhaps the most convincing argument for the veridical nature of NDEs, having little to do with either neurology or physics, is the change in attitudes about life that a significant proportion of people report following such an experience. By some measures, as much as 80 percent of those who reported an NDE say that they have gone through profound changes in outlook, such as losing their fear of death, becoming more generous and charitable, as well as less competitive and less likely to allow previous life limitations to hold them back. Often they are convinced of a new life purpose or mission, specifically to help other people in some way, and they are often likely to change career paths to pursue the mission. This evident consequence, like the experiences themselves, crosses all ethnic, geographic, and religious lines and is difficult to explain based on the merely physical aftereffects of an NDE. People who simply came close to death and recovered, but who did not report having an NDE, rarely describe a change in life orientation or values as a result.

One of the leading medical researchers into the phenomenon of NDEs, **Dr. Sam Parnia**, is director of research into cardiac arrest resuscitation at the Stony Brook School of Medicine in New York State and director of the Human Consciousness Project at the

University of Southampton in England. Parnia has been able to extend the window of time needed to resuscitate someone pronounced clinically dead without brain damage to as much as 24 hours after their death, and so he believes that the term near-death experience is no longer accurate. He has begun using the term **actual-death experience**. As he told Terry Gross on NPR in 2013,

We study people who have objectively died. . . . And therefore, what we've understood is that the experience that these people have of going beyond the threshold of death, entering the period after death for the first few tens of minutes or hours of time, provides us with an indication of what we're all likely to experience when we go through death.

Parnia also feels that the percentage of people who report NDEs after being resuscitated from cardiac arrest, for example, would be much higher than it is, but that trauma to the brain and body causes most people to forget their experiences shortly after they happen. In any case, scientific research into the nature of NDEs is continually expanding and is moving closer to being able to provide definitive evidence that the reports of people who have had NDEs did not result from drug- or trauma-induced hallucinations or were based on "imagined memories."

Among the more surprising revelations about the afterlife visions described both by after-death communications and by people who return from NDEs is that life on the "other side" is far more soul-friendly than many religions would have us believe. These communications and reports contain little talk of the hell realms that Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists all propose—other than those "hellish" states of mind that we are so adept at creating for ourselves. "Some humans continue to hold negative thoughts and emotions after their death," said one medium who was told this by his spirit guide. "By doing so, they create their own hells of the mind. In their shame and self-loathing, they experience the results of their own energy projections. Hell is not a place. It's a state of consciousness."

Even within established religions, different views on the existence of hell still flourish. Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche, the Buddhist lama mentioned above who wrote about his near-death experience in his book *In Love with the World*, grappled with the traditional Tibetan belief in physical hell realms. He writes that his father—the highly regarded teacher **Tulku Urgyen** (1920-1996) "had already explained to me that hell was a state of mind, not a location. He insisted that horrific descriptions of the hot and the cold hells did not point to the next life, but to this one. Their real intention, he explained, was to awaken us to the self-imposed punishment that anger inflicts."

Many Western sources on rebirth describe an afterlife in which souls are given time to decompress from the trials of earthly life; to review their past under the tutelage of compassionate spirit guides; and to prepare for their next incarnation. These different understandings of the reincarnation process seem unlikely to be resolved anytime soon. But one thing is clear: the perception of the cycle of death and rebirth based on information from NDEs and channeled accounts presents a more optimistic vision not only than that of most religions, but also than the materialist and atheist belief that consciousness and memory end when we die.

Past life and Life Between Lives

Around the time that Raymond Moody and Robert Monroe were studying near-death and out-of-body experiences, respectively, a number of psychologists began experimenting with non-clinical applications of hypnotherapy. In 1980, psychiatrist **Brian Weiss** (b. 1944) was working with a clinical patient under hypnosis when she began to experience what appeared to be memories of a previous existence. At the time, Weiss did not believe in reincarnation, but he researched and was able to confirm the details of some of her stories through public records. What's more, while in deep hypnosis his patient transmitted information from higher sources of knowledge whom she called the "Masters." Weiss subsequently developed a practice he called **past life regression (PLR)** to help heal his clients of psychological and related physical ailments. Weiss claims that he has regressed more than 4,000 patients since 1980. His book recounting the story of his experience with that first patient and his subsequent development of past life regression, *Many Lives, Many Masters*, became a best seller after it was published in 1988.

The ability to recall past lives had been documented at least as far back as the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali, written sometime between 200 BC and 400. One sutra states, "Through the direct perception of the latent impressions (*samskaras*) comes the knowledge of previous incarnations" (3.18). Centuries before Patanjali, the Buddha reported that during his enlightenment he experienced recall of hundreds of past lives as humans and various animals. And the American healer Edgar Cayce claimed to gain access to the past lives of his patients while in trance, and used that knowledge to help heal their ailments. (Cayce compiled meticulous written records of his healings, which are still available to the public at the Association for Research and Enlightenment in Virginia Beach, Va.)

In the 1970s, another conventional hypnotherapist was working with a client to help her overcome her feelings of intense loneliness and isolation when she spontaneously began to recall a time between her death in a previous life and her birth in her current life. In the course of numerous sessions with her and other clients, the therapist discerned at least three levels to human consciousness, which he visualized as being in concentric circles. The outermost level he determined to be the conscious mind as conventionally understood, notable for its rational, analytical orientation. Below or within that, he said, lies the subconscious or unconscious that stores all the memories from this life and, if they can be accessed, past lives as well. But the innermost layer, which he called the **superconscious mind**, is home to what some might identify as the Higher Self, a Higher Power, or the soul. The therapist, **Michael Newton** (1931-2016), was among the first to conduct what he called **Life Between Lives regression (LBL)**. After describing the three layers of the mind as he experienced them through his clients, Newton defined the superconscious mind in his bestselling 1994 book *Journey of Souls*:

The superconscious houses our real identity, augmented by the subconscious, which contains the memories of the many alter egos assumed by us in our former human bodies. The superconscious may not be a level at all, but the soul itself. The superconscious mind represents our highest center of wisdom and perspective, and all my information about life after death comes from this source of intelligent energy.

What Newton's clients described while under hypnosis added another level of information to existing speculation about the human soul. Early on in his practice, he addressed questions from critics of hypnosis who contend that a subject in trance will fabricate memories to adopt any theoretical framework suggested by the hypnotist. When subjects are hypnotized deeply, past the meditative Alpha level of brain waves to the Theta stage, but not so far as the Delta level of deep sleep, Newton later wrote, "People report the pictures they see and dialogue they hear in their unconscious minds as literal observations. In response to questions, subjects cannot lie. . . . In hypnosis, people have trouble relating to anything they don't believe is the truth."

Newton's method consisted of regressing his clients to a previous life and then to their death in that life and subsequent entry into their "life between lives," which appeared to be a kind of extended way station preceding rebirth into their current life. During a typical LBL regression, subjects speak of observing themselves dying (in a previous life) as their soul floats higher and higher while looking down on their discarded body, similar to scenes described in near-death experiences. They often encounter spirits whose role is to help them make a transition to the afterlife, as well as the spirits of loved ones who have preceded them there. Souls—their own and others'—may appear as "a mass of energy" that can take on translucent but identifiable human characteristics to make them easier to recognize and respond to. Souls of the departed report that they are able to project an image of themselves as they appeared on Earth, even though they no longer have a physical body.

As also reported by channeled spirits and mediums, souls in the between-lives stage communicate telepathically and travel via teleportation. Regressed subjects sometimes say they encounter advanced beings who may have helped to conduct the soul through its current life and previous lives, and they relate this experience to the traditional belief in a "guardian angel." As the LBL regression proceeds, Newton accompanies his clients while they interact with these supportive spirit entities who help them evaluate their previous life on earth. As part of this guidance, regressed subjects are "reunited" with members of their **soul group**, which may comprise anywhere from five to thirty kindred spirits whom they may have known across many lifetimes.

Although the spirit guides in these interactions don't necessarily refer to God or a Supreme Being, they may imply that a force of some kind provides the energy that keeps the universe operating, which they may call Source or Great Spirit. A spirit being channeled by the renowned medium Emily French, described simply as "one in the next life," put it this way:

Men enquire from whence comes life? Life came from the Spirit, and when the spirit passes through the subtle ether, and the ether gets into the coarser electricity, it takes physical form—gross matter is then impregnated with life. That life never ceases, because, as I have said, it progresses and develops through the physical and is reabsorbed into the Great Spirit, the Source of all life—light, and power, and wisdom.

(N. Riley Heagerty, The French Revelation: Voice to Voice Conversations With Spirits Through the Mediumship of Emily S. French)

Some souls have reported through mediums that the afterlife comprises long periods of learning through reading and reviewing their previous lives, being instructed with the help of more advanced spirits, and preparing for their next life on Earth, should they choose, or be convinced, to reincarnate. According to the information transmitted through these means, afterlife instruction sometimes resembles a kind of enlightened rehab or recovery program led by spirits, many of whom once lived on Earth and understand well the difficulties and paradoxes of human existence. As they share their own progress through the planes of the afterlife, their goal appears to be to help newly arrived souls comprehend why events happened to them as they did, how they can do better in the future, and perhaps how they may evolve to higher planes of reality themselves, not necessarily limited to the earth plane.

Pre-life planning

That souls have a choice in structuring the nature and form of an ensuing incarnation is not new, of course. In Plato's *Republic*, written around 380 BC, the clear-eyed philosopher recounts the story of an ancient Greek warrior named Er, who was believed to have died in battle. Ten days after being discovered on the battlefield, however, Er's body "was found untouched by corruption and sent home for burial. On the twelfth day he was placed on the funeral pyre and there he came to life again, and told what he had seen in the world below."

Commentators on NDEs have often cited Plato's **Myth of Er** as proof that the experience is universal and timeless, but his account also presents the concept that opting for one's next incarnation is a mash-up of luck and discernment. Er reports that souls scheduled for rebirth are eventually brought before Lachesis, one of the Three Fates of Greek mythology, who assigns them lots (like taking a number at the deli counter, only random) and then presents them with "samples of lives" from which they may choose their next incarnation:

And there were all sorts of lives, of men and of animals. There were tyrannies ending in misery and exile, and lives of men and women famous for their different qualities; and also mixed lives, made up of wealth and poverty, sickness and health.

Plato evaluates many of the souls' choices as foolhardy, while others are somewhat surprising. The man who had drawn the lucky first lot chose life as a tyrant: "He did not see that he was fated to devour his own children—and when he discovered his mistake, he wept and beat his breast, blaming chance and the Gods and anybody rather than himself." The last of this particular group to choose was none other than Odysseus, the legendary warrior-sailor, who "sought the lot of a private man, which lay neglected and despised, and when he found it he went away rejoicing, and said that if he had been first instead of last, his choice would have been the same."

Although this scenario reflects Plato's philosophical critique of human folly, it also shows a remarkable resonance with the writings of Michael Newton in which, as we have just seen, spirit guides help pre-incarnational souls choose a life that will build on the successes and failures of their past. **Robert Schwartz** has taken Newton's concept further in his 2009 book, *Your Soul's Plan: Discovering the Real Meaning of the Life You Planned*

Before You Were Born. Pairing individuals with a number of mediums, Schwartz explores the idea, already present in Plato's work, that souls design the nature and course of their lives before they incarnate on Earth. Critics of this concept may argue that it is counterintuitive that anyone would choose a life characterized by physical illness or impairment, drug addiction or alcoholism. But Schwartz makes the case that souls choose these challenges in order to grow spiritually and to help others evolve as well. In a subsequent book, *Your Soul's Gift*, he expands the range of events that souls select in pre-birth planning sessions to include abusive relationships, incest, adoption, poverty, suicide, rape, and mental illness. The rationale for choosing the most challenging life conditions, Schwartz argues, is that they can lead to greater and more rapid spiritual progress.

Other sources, including the renowned mediums Dolores Cannon and Echo Bodine, have supported the idea that the soul grows in wisdom more rapidly when it chooses to undertake the most challenging options for rebirth. Considering that Christians believe that the Son of God chose a life in which he would be tortured and crucified; and that Buddhists believe that the Buddha was reincarnated into a number of harrowing lives before becoming the Awakened One, the choices described by Robert Schwartz may not be as unlikely as they may seem. Schwartz's accounts insist, however, that both the perpetrators and the victims have freely chosen their functions in these life plans. The perpetrators accept their roles, he maintains, so that the victims have the opportunity not only to develop spiritually, but also perhaps to reverse the role of aggressor in previous lives that may have involved the same souls.

As unbelievable as some of these concepts may appear to the logical Western mind, they have been part of Eastern belief systems for centuries. The Vajrayana tradition of Buddhism, for instance, proclaims that, because of constant rebirth, all beings have been our mother in a previous lifetime, and so we need to act compassionately toward even our harshest adversaries as this will benefit us in the long run. The Tibetan teacher **Longchenpa** (1308-1364) wrote about the paradoxical ways in which practitioners can discover the truth of the teachings known collectively as Dharma:

Through people's hate we discover Dharma

And find benefits and happiness. Thank you, those who hate us!

Through cruel adversity, we discover Dharma

And find the unchanging way. Thank you, adversity!

Through being impelled to by others, we discover Dharma

And find the essential meaning. Thank you, all who drive us on!

We dedicate our merit to you all, to repay your kindness.

(Patrul Rinpoche, Words of My Perfect Teacher)

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