

## THE BIG IDEAS

### Mindfulness

= Clear awareness.

### Meditation

= Key practice.

### Increasingly Healthy Mind

Is the goal.

### Stages

Of spiritual development.

### Video Games

In your mind.

### Choice

Cultivate the power to make one.

### Accepting + Striving

Is a magic formula.



# Waking Up

A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion

BY SAM HARRIS · SIMON & SCHUSTER © 2014 · 256 PAGES

“Twenty percent of Americans describe themselves as ‘spiritual but not religious.’ Although the claim seems to annoy believers and atheists equally, separating spirituality from religion is a perfectly reasonable thing to do. It is to assert two important truths simultaneously: Our world is dangerously riven by religious doctrines that all educated people should condemn, and yet there is more to understanding the human condition than science and secular culture generally admit. Our purpose of this book is to give both these convictions intellectual and empirical support. ...

This book is by turns a seeker’s memoir, an introduction to the brain, a manual of contemplative instruction, and a philosophical unraveling of what most people consider to be the center of their inner lives: the feeling of self we call ‘I.’ I have not set out to describe all the traditional approaches to spirituality or to weigh their strengths and weaknesses. Rather, my goal is to pluck the diamond from the dunghill of esoteric religion. There is a diamond there, and I have devoted a fair amount of my life to contemplating it, but getting it in hand requires that we remain true to the deepest principles of scientific skepticism and make no obeisance to tradition.”

~ Sam Harris from *Waking Up*

[Sam Harris](#) is part philosopher, part neuroscientist (with a Ph.D. from UCLA) and part contemplative seeker.

And, as you know if you’re familiar with his work, he’s brilliant.

His writing is smart, incredibly clear, and unapologetically direct.

In *Waking Up*, he applies his intellect to the subject of discussing spirituality rationally—devoid of the baggage of both religious superstition/dogma and New Age woo woo-ness. My book is nearly entirely underlined. (Get a copy [here](#).)

Sam walks us through 5 chapters: *Spirituality, The Mystery of Consciousness, The Riddle of the Self, Meditation, and Gurus, Death, Drugs, and Other Puzzles*.

It’s packed with Big Ideas.

As always, in this Note I’m going to focus on the uber-practical stuff we can apply to our lives today. Get the book for more insight into the theoretical constructs (and practical applications) or rational spirituality.

For now, I’m excited to share some of my favorite Ideas so let’s jump straight in!

*“Although the insights we can have in meditation tell us nothing about the origins of the universe, they do confirm some well-established truths about the human mind: Our conventional sense of self is an illusion; positive emotions, such as compassion and patience, are teachable skills; and the way we think directly influences our experiences of the world.”*

~ Sam Harris

*"A true spiritual practitioner is someone who has discovered that it is possible to be at ease in the world for no reason, if only for a few minutes at a time, and that such ease is synonymous with transcending the apparent boundaries of the self."*

~ Sam Harris

## MINDFULNESS

"There is nothing spooky about mindfulness. It is simply a state of clear, nonjudgmental, and undistracted attention to the contents of consciousness, whether pleasant or unpleasant. Cultivating this quality of mind has been shown to reduce pain, anxiety, and depression; improve cognitive function; and even produce changes in gray matter density in regions of the brain related to learning and memory, emotional regulation and self-awareness. ..."

*Mindfulness* is a translation of the Pali word *sati*. The term has several meanings in the Buddhist literature, but for our purposes the most important is 'clear awareness.'"

Mindfulness.

Think: "Clear awareness."

Specifically: "Clear, nonjudgmental, undistracted attention to the contents of consciousness, whether pleasant or unpleasant."

As we've discussed in our growing collection of Notes on Mindfulness, the benefits of mindfulness are profound.

Reduced anxiety and depression. Improved cognitive function. Denser gray matter where it matters. And other such goodness.

Clear awareness is, clearly, where it's at.

How do we cultivate this type awareness? Glad you asked. :)

## MEDITATION

*"Your mind is the basis of everything that you experience and of every contribution you make to the lives of others. Given this fact, it makes sense to train it."*

~ Sam Harris

"Happily, the benefits of training in meditation arrive long before mastery does... Again, the problem is not thoughts themselves but the state of thinking *without being fully aware that we are thinking*.

As every meditator soon discovers, distraction is the normal condition of our minds: Most of us topple from the wire every second—whether gliding happily into reverie or plunging into fear, anger, self-hatred, and other negative states of mind. Meditation is a technique for waking up. The goal is to come out of the trance of discursive thinking and to stop reflexively grasping at the pleasant and recoiling from the unpleasant, so that we can enjoy a mind undisturbed by worry, merely open like the sky, and effortlessly aware of the flow of experience in the present."

Our primary tool to cultivate mindfulness?

Meditation. (Of course.)

Sam provides the steps to meditate effectively (similar to what we discussed in Meditation 101). Check out the book for the full instructions. Essentially: Sit comfortably with your spine straight. Close your eyes, breathe deeply. Become aware of your breathing. When your mind wanders, bring it back to your breath. Repeat.

He makes it very clear that, although it's easy to describe the steps involved in meditation, they are far from easy to implement. Thankfully, he tells us, we don't need to master the process to see tremendous benefits.

(He shares a funny analogy of telling someone how to tightrope walk—it's easy to describe but hard to do. Something like: Just find a cable that will support your weight. Start at one end. Step forward by placing one foot in front of the other until you get to the other side. Repeat. Don't fall. HAH. It's a heck of a lot easier to describe *how* to do that than to actually do it, eh? Same with meditation. :)

Key points here:

*"The problem is not thoughts themselves but the state of thinking without knowing that we are thinking."*

~ Sam Harris

Remember that thinking in and of itself is (obviously) not the problem. It's *thinking without being fully aware that we're thinking*.

Pause for a moment and feel the difference there.

Truly getting that subtle shift in perception required to actually SEE yourself thinking is the essence of the book and the essence of waking up in general.

Most of us, most of the time simply run from thought to thought to thought to thought to endless discursive thought—without even being aware that we're doing it.

Simply taking a deep breath and SEEING that you're running from thought to thought to thought to thought to endless discursive thought is a HUGE step in the right direction.

In fact, practicing that shift is the essence of mindfulness—bringing that clear, nonjudgmental awareness to the contents of our consciousness.

But you can't do that if you constantly get swept away by thoughts. Hence, the practice of meditation. Repetition after repetition we bring our attention back to our breath. Again and again. We train ourselves to notice when our mind has wandered and we bring it back. Again and again and again.

P.S. This line struck me deeply: "The goal is to come out of the trance of discursive thinking."

Particularly the word "discursive." Apple dictionary tells us *discursive* = "digressing from subject to subject." It's from Latin *discurs-*, literally "gone hastily to and fro."

—> Discursive. "*Gone hastily to and fro.*"

Ever do that? :)

Here's to training our minds to settle down into the clarity of mindfulness.

## AN INCREASINGLY HEALTHY MIND

"The traditional goal of meditation is to arrive at a state of well-being that is imperturbable—or if perturbed, easily regained. The French monk Matthieu Ricard describes such happiness as 'a deep sense of flourishing that arises from an exceptionally healthy mind.' The purpose of meditation is to recognize that you already have such a mind. That discovery, in turn, helps you to cease doing the things that produce needless confusion and suffering for yourself and others. Of course, most people never truly master the practice and don't reach a condition of imperturbable happiness. The near goal, therefore, is to have an *increasingly* healthy mind—that is, to be moving one's mind in the right direction."

I love that.

As nice as it would be to experience a state of well-being that is completely imperturbable, that state is just a *little* bit off in the future for most of us. (Hah.)

So, our goal is to practice easily regaining our state of well-being when it is perturbed.

And, most importantly, our immediate goal is NOT to reach a state of perfect well-being once and for all! but to get excited about creating "*an increasingly healthy mind*" <— love that phrase!

Think 4% or 5% improvement.

Day in and day out we get just a LITTLE bit better. We train our discursive monkey mind to settle down just a LITTLE bit faster. We recover our equanimity just a LITTLE bit sooner.

As we discuss all the time, you compound those tiny gains over an extended period of time and you just changed your life in HUGE ways. Let's do that.

Here's to an *increasingly* healthy mind!

*"There is now little question that how one uses one's attention, moment to moment, largely determines what kind of person one becomes. Our minds—our lives—are largely shaped by how we use them."*

~ Sam Harris

## STAGES OF SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

*"In my view, the realistic goal to be attained through spiritual practice is not some permanent state of enlightenment that admits no further efforts but a capacity to be free in this moment, in the midst of whatever is happening. If you can do that, you have already solved most of the problems you will encounter in life."*

~ Sam Harris

"Stages of spiritual development, therefore, appear unavoidable. Just as we grow into adulthood physically—and we can fail to mature or become sick or injured along the way—our minds develop by degrees. One can't learn sophisticated skills such as syllogistic reasoning, algebra, or irony until one has acquired more basic skills. It seems to me that a healthy spiritual life can begin only once our physical, mental, social, and ethical lives have sufficiently matured. We must learn to use language before we can work with it creatively or understand its limits, and the conventional self must form before we can investigate it and understand that it is not what it appears to be. An ability to examine the contents of one's own consciousness clearly, dispassionately, and nondiscursively, with sufficient attention to realize that no inner self exists, is a very sophisticated skill."

Stages of spiritual development.

This is a REALLY important idea.

Letting go of the self is one of the hardest things we can possibly do.

Fact is, if you're having a tough time turning off the electronics at night to get a good night of sleep, eating well and exercising consistently, you're going to have a tough time actualizing and transcending your self.

If we want to move BEYOND the conventional self, we must first *arrive* at a healthy version of the conventional self.

And how do we do that?

Via the fundamentals, of course.

Remember [John Wooden](#) and his socks.

He wanted to do the very difficult: Consistently win NCAA championships. So, he started with THE most basic skill imaginable, how to correctly put on socks. Then he trained his team in the most basic fundamentals again and again and again (repetition!!).

What are *your* fundamentals? How're you doing with them?

What's ONE way you can optimize them just 5% more today?

## YOUR MIND AS A VIDEO GAME

"Having spent years observing my mind in meditation, I find such sudden transitions from happiness to suffering both fascinating and rather funny—and merely witnessing them goes a long way toward restoring my equanimity. My mind begins to seem like a video game: I can either play it intelligently, learning more in each round, or I can be killed in the same spot by the same monster, again and again."

What a great perspective.

How are *you* playing the game of life?

Imagine your life as a video game.

Are you playing it intelligently, learning more and more each round?

Or...

Are you allowing yourself to get killed by THE SAME MONSTER in the SAME SPOT over and over again?

It's kinda funny when you look at it that way, eh?

Let's play wisely!

#killthemonster!!

## CULTIVATING YOUR CHOICE

*"Our habitual identification with thought—that is, our failure to recognize thoughts \*as thoughts,\* as appearances in consciousness—is a primary source of human suffering. It also gives rise to the illusion that a separate self is living inside one's head."*

~ Sam Harris

"Of course, a house is a physical object beholden to the laws of nature—and it won't fix itself. From the moment my wife and I grabbed buckets and salad bowls to catch the falling water, we were responding to the ineluctable tug of physical reality. But my suffering was entirely the product of my thoughts. Whatever the needs of the moment, I had a choice: I could do what was required calmly, patiently, and attentively, or do it in a state of panic. Every moment of the day—indeed, every moment throughout one's life—offers an opportunity to be relaxed and responsive or to suffer unnecessarily."

Sam shares the amusing story of water leaks in his house.

The first time it happened, he and his wife discovered a leak in a rarely-used room and they were grateful they discovered it early before it became a big problem. They called for help. Got it fixed and used it as an opportunity to see just how great civilization is.

Then it happened again. This time it was a little more annoying. Another quick call and solved.

Then... A pipe burst and the house was under repairs for a couple weeks. Case solved. No more need for distress.

Until... Another drip! Now Sam lost it. Laughing.

Thank goodness for a meditation practice to quickly return from that perturbed state, eh?! :)

Lesson here: EVERY SINGLE MOMENT of our lives offers us an opportunity to play the video game of life. Do we want to show up relaxed and responsive and playfully engaged? Or do we want to let our negative thoughts take over as we show up inflexible, cranky and miserable?

The choice is ours.

And, again, cultivating the ability to consciously MAKE that choice is the ultimate game.

How are YOU choosing to respond to the inevitable challenges?

P.S. Sam continues the prior passage with this: "We can address mental suffering of this kind on at least two levels. We can use thoughts themselves as an antidote, or we can stand free of thought altogether. The first technique requires no experience with meditation, and it can work wonders if one develops the appropriate habits of mind. Many people do it quite naturally; it's called 'looking on the bright side.'"

The way he and his wife used the bright side as they positioned the bowls to catch the drips? They appreciated the fact that they could have been catching sewage rather than water!

P.P.S. What's annoying you these days/today?

How can you practice looking on the bright side right now??

## ACCEPTING + STRIVING

"Merely accepting that we are lazy, distracted, petty, easily provoked to anger, and inclined to waste our time in ways that we will later regret is not a path to happiness.

And yet it is true that meditation requires total acceptance of what is given in the present moment. If you are injured and in pain, the path to mental peace can be traversed in a single step: Simply accept the pain as it arises, while doing whatever you need to do to help your body heal. If you are anxious before giving a speech, become willing to feel the anxiety fully, so that it becomes a meaningless pattern of energy in your mind and body. Embracing the contents of

*"However numerous your faults, something in you at this moment is pristine—and only you can recognize it. Open your eyes and see."*

~ Sam Harris

consciousness in any moment is a very powerful way of training yourself to respond differently to adversity. However, it is important to distinguish between accepting unpleasant sensations and emotions as a strategy—while covertly hoping that they will go away—and *truly* accepting them as transitory appearances in consciousness. Only the latter gesture opens the door to wisdom and lasting change. The paradox is that we can become wiser and more compassionate and live more fulfilling lives by refusing to be who we have tended to be in the past. But we must also relax, accepting things as they are in the present, as we strive to change ourselves."

Want to navigate pain?

Sam gives us the single step: *"Simply accept the pain as it arises, while doing whatever you need to do to help your body heal."*

Love that.

Complete acceptance WHILE (important conjunction) doing whatever needs to be done.

<— That's a winning formula.

Here's to cultivating our mindfulness via our meditation and moment-to-moment practices as we optimize, actualize and transcend ourselves in greatest service to our families and world,

B

**Brian Johnson,**  
*Chief Philosopher*

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## About the Author of "Waking Up"

SAM HARRIS



Sam Harris is the author of the bestselling books *The End of Faith*, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, *The Moral Landscape*, *Free Will* and *Lying*. *The End of Faith* won the 2005 PEN Award for Nonfiction. His writing has been published in over fifteen languages. Dr. Harris is cofounder and CEO of Project Reason, a nonprofit foundation devoted to spreading scientific knowledge and secular values in society. He received a degree in philosophy from Stanford University and a PhD in neuroscience from UCLA. Connect: [samharris.org](http://samharris.org).

## About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at [brianjohnson.me](http://brianjohnson.me).