



# WAKING UP

## A Guide To Spirituality Without Religion

by Sam Harris

Focus: Spirituality • Meditation • Consciousness



*"The way we think directly influences our experiences in the world."*

*- Sam Harris*

## BIG IDEAS

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## SUMMARY IN A SENTENCE

It is possible to live a good, fulfilling, moral way of life without subscribing to an indoctrinated set of beliefs.

## OVERVIEW

Okay, so Sam Harris is a super-controversial dude... mainly due to his beliefs — or lack thereof — as an Atheist (meaning he doesn't believe in God), and the massive influence he has on his growing community of supporters. He also happens to be Neuroscientist that openly criticizes every religion outside of Atheism ... So, if you can swallow that — and if you can do your best to avoid taking personally anything that seems like an attack on your religious beliefs — then you may benefit from reading this book.

In this FlashNotes book summary, we're going to keep it as un-offensive as possible by focusing primarily on the actionable insights gained from this book — because there are a TON of nuggets of wisdom in here — and nearly every idea he proposes really makes you think (as in: sit there and ponder about the implications of his ideas).

Side note: Harris says that 20% of Americans consider themselves as “spiritual but not religious” (if that’s you, then you might really enjoy reading the original book after you’re done with these FlashNotes)

In all honesty, I’ve never read anything like this before... there aren’t many people that can package, present, and unpack ideas the way Sam Harris can.

It’s the polarity between his perspective as opposed to everyone else’s that makes him so unique and interesting. On one hand, Harris seems to come off just as un-empathetic to religious people as biologist and fellow Atheist, [Richard Dawkins](#). On the other hand, Harris seems to genuinely care about helping people embrace a scientific approach to spirituality.

**His background as a neuroscientist** explains some of the reasons why he *seems* to be bashing every religion on the planet — and coming off as ignorant to the implications of the various Holy books (Old Testament, Bible, Quran, etc.) in the process. For example: the differences between *literal interpretations* of a Holy Text vs the *metaphorical interpretations* of a Holy Text are totally different. But it seems as though Harris’ has a different perspective in that regard.

**His background as a student of philosophy** explains the spiritual side of Harris. The side that people misunderstand and misinterpret. The side that wants to teach the world that it is indeed possible to live a good, fulfilling life without being afraid of hell or being motivated to do good deeds to get to heaven... I mean, wouldn’t we want to do good regardless?

From my perspective, I see a man who’s decided to do something most critics of religion do not — propose a solution. Most people complain about problems all day long, but rarely do they actually get up and make a valiant effort to solve the problem they spend so much time criticizing. In “Waking Up”, I see someone who took the time to craft an alternative path to spirituality than the one most people are used to... and all of it is within the same scientific train of thought from which his criticisms of organized religion were conceptualized.

Side note: if I could give Harris — or anyone with a polar point of view — one single suggestion, it would be to *align first, explain second*. As Dale Carnegie writes about in [“How To Win Friends & Influence People”](#) - to get people to see from *your* point of view, you first need to see things from *their* point of view.

In his own words, Harris says: “I have been waiting for more than a decade to write Waking Up. Long before I saw any reason to criticize religion, or to connect moral and scientific truths, I was interested in the nature of human consciousness and the possibility of “spiritual” experience. In Waking Up, I do my best show that a certain form of spirituality is integral to understanding the nature of our minds. There is no discrete self or ego living like a minotaur in the labyrinth of the brain. And the feeling that there is—the sense of being perched somewhere behind your eyes, looking out at a world that is separate from yourself—can be altered or entirely extinguished. Although such experiences of “self-transcendence” are generally thought about in religious terms, 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. My hope is that Waking Up will help readers see the nature of their own minds in a new light. A rational approach to spirituality seems to be what is missing from secularism and from the lives of most of the people I meet. The purpose of this book is to offer readers a clear

view of the problem, along with some tools to help them solve it for themselves. I sincerely hope you find it useful.”

## **SPIRITUALITY WITHOUT RELIGION**

“There’s a connection between scientific fact and spiritual wisdom, and it is more direct than most people suppose. Although the insights we can have in meditation tell us nothing about the universe, they do confirm some well-established truths about the human mind — our conventional sense of self is an illusion. Positive emotion, such as love and compassion, are TEACHABLE skills. And the way we THINK directly influences our experience of the world.”

## **WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY?**

“Spirituality”: the word “spirit” comes from the latin word “spiritus” which means ‘breath’. Harris says that people are confused about the word “spirituality” and what it means. He says we should take the word seriously.

## **A SEARCH FOR HAPPINESS**

Is it possible to be happy BEFORE anything happens? Before we get that new car? Before we start making tons of money?

Harris says yes. He says it’s possible to experience well-being through meditation.

## **MEDITATION INSTRUCTIONS:**

1. Sit comfortably, with your spine erect, either in chair or cross-legged on a cushion.
2. Close your eyes, take a few deep breaths, and feel the points of contact between your body and the chair or floor. Notice the sensations associated with sitting—feelings of pressure, warmth, tingling, vibration, etc.
3. Gradually become aware of the process of breathing. Pay attention to wherever you feel the breath most clearly—either at the nostrils, or in the rising and falling your abdomen.
4. Allow your attention to rest in the mere sensation of breathing. (There is no need to control your breath. Just let it come and go naturally.)

Every time your mind wanders in thought, gently return it to the sensation of breathing.

5. As you focus on the breath, you will notice that other perceptions and sensations continue to appear: sounds, feelings in the body, emotions, etc. Simply notice these phenomena as they emerge in the field of awareness, and then return to the sensation of breathing.

6. The moment you observe that you have been lost in thought, notice the present thought itself as an object of consciousness. Then return your attention to the breath—or to whatever sounds or sensations arise in the next moment.

7. Continue in this way until you can merely witness all objects of consciousness—sights, sounds, sensations, emotions, and even thoughts themselves—as they arise and pass away.

## THE MYSTERY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

What is Consciousness? As defined by Harris and many others: Consciousness is the experience of “being”.

It’s the subjective feeling of knowing that a collection of atoms and molecules — is actually you.

It’s the awareness of YOU.

\*Fun Fact -> Did you know that there aren’t any pain receptors in the brain?

## THE SELF IS AN ILLUSION

“the conventional sense of self is an illusion... spirituality largely consists in realizing this, moment to moment ... Most of us feel that our experience of the world refers back to a self — not to our bodies precisely but to a center of consciousness that exists somehow interior to the body behind the eyes, inside the head ... The feeling that we call “I” seems to define our point of view in every moment, and it also provides an anchor for popular beliefs about souls and freedom of will. And yet this feeling, however imperturbable it may appear at present, can be altered, interrupted, or entirely abolished ... Subjectively speaking, the only thing that actually exists is consciousness and its contents.”

Heavy stuff. Definitely worth thinking about though... when we say “I”, what do we mean? Try to actually answer the question, “Where am “I”?” and see what you come up with... am “I” my body? My eyes? My mind? Am “I” a combination of it all put together? What am “I”? WHO am “I”?

Harris says that to be truly spiritual is to realize that there’s no such thing as a soul or spirit or self. Saying that a belief in a soul/spirit leads people farther from the truth of what actually is... this is very similar to the Buddhist train of thought.

## THE RIDDLE OF THE SELF

Philosopher Derek Parfit once posed an experiment that went something like this... Imagine for a second that you lived in a world in which teleporting was actually real, and it was totally safe and normal to teleport from one planet to another. You haven’t tried it for yourself yet, but you know plenty of people who have. And they seem to be fine. In fact, these days, people seem to be teleporting to Mars like they were going on vacation. In other words: it’s no big deal.

You get curious, and you decide to do it too.

Now Imagine stepping into the teleporting machine and being put to sleep.

While you’re sleeping, the machine starts doing the same thing it always does: it destroys your physical makeup — breaking you down into atoms, and then copying your physiological makeup and transmitting it to Mars at the speed of light.

On Mars, another machine assembles a duplicate version of you — it re-assembles each atom in exactly the same place and position as before.

Boom. You've just "teleported" to Mars.

Now imagine the "real you" being back on Earth while waiting for confirmation that you've been duplicated in Mars before being destroyed (aka being killed).

Question: is the person on Mars the same person as the person who got into the teletransporter on Earth?

Here's what Harris has to say about it:

"To most readers, this thought experiment will suggest that psychological continuity — the mere maintenance of one's memories, beliefs, habits, and other mental traits — is an insufficient basis for personal identity. It's not enough for someone else on Mars to be just like you; he must actually be you.

The man on Mars will share all your memories and will behave exactly as you would have. But he is not you — as your continued existence in the teleportation chamber on Earth attests. To the Earth-you awaiting obliteration, teleportation as a means of travel will appear a horrifying sham: You never left Earth and are about to die. Your friends, you now realize, have been repeatedly copied and killed.

And yet, the problem with teleportation is somehow not obvious if a person is disassembled before his replica is built. In that case, it is tempting to say that teleportation works and that "he" is really stepping onto the surface of Mars...

Parfit believes that we should view the teleportation case in which a person is destroyed before being replicated as more or less indistinguishable from the normal pattern of personal survival throughout our lives.

After all, in what way are you subjectively the same as the person who first picked up this book? In the only way you can be: by displaying some degree of psychological continuity with that past self. Viewed in this way, it is difficult to see how teleportation is any different from the mere passage of time.

...Parfit's view of the self, which he appears to have arrived at independently through an immensely creative use of thought experiments, is essentially the same as the one found in the teachings of Buddhism: There is no stable self that is carried along from one moment to the next."

... So what's he talking about? What does this all mean to you and I? According to Harris, this implies that the thing we call "I" is all in our head. It's not about having a soul or spirit. What people seem to be calling "I" is psychological. What this implies is, that we're all part of the world and the world is part of us.

Heavy stuff.

## RECOGNIZE THOUGHTS AS THOUGHTS (MEDITATE)

“There is something degraded and degrading about many of our habits of attention as we shop, gossip, argue, and ruminate our way to the grave. Even for extraordinarily lucky people, life is difficult. And when we look at what makes it so, we see that we are all prisoners of our thoughts. The simplicity of our imprisonment is what makes it so complete, and hard to recognize. Most of us do not even realize that suffering cannot arise without thought, or that we have the power to choose what and how to think. This is worth contemplating, and for those skeptical of this tyranny, the typical test is to ask them to not think, say, for one minute. Most of us fail immediately.”

So how do we get out of our heads and still live a good life?

Harris recommends viewing “thoughts as thoughts,” because that reveals the true nature of consciousness.

## GURUS

“If your golf instructor advised you to shave your head, sleep four hours each night, renounce sex, and subsist on a diet of raw vegetables — you would find a new golf instructor, however when gurus make demands of this kind, many of their students do exactly as directed.”

The takeaway here is this: before we listen to some spiritual teacher or guru — let’s think about whether what they’re advising us about actually makes sense to us before we go off and practice it.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)



### **SAM HARRIS**

#### **Author, *Waking Up: A Guide To Spirituality Without Religion***

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 latest book, *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion*, will be published 9/9/14. Mr. Harris’s writing has been published in more than 15

languages. His work has been discussed in *The New York Times*, *Time*, *Scientific American*, *Nature*, *Newsweek*, *Rolling Stone*, and many other journals. His essays have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Economist*, *Newsweek*, *The Times (London)*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Atlantic*, *The Annals of Neurology*, and elsewhere. Mr. Harris is a cofounder and the 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 Ph.D. in neuroscience from UCLA.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [Sam Harris Bio](#)

## DEAN BOKHARI

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Dean Bokhari believes that everyone deserves to live an optimal lifestyle. He believes we can change the world by doing meaningful work that serves the greater good.

Dean teaches people and organizations how to inspire + empower people in a positive way. He is the founder of [MeaningfulHQ](#), a consulting firm in Orange County, CA. With a bold mission to change the world through Leadership - Dean and the Meaningful crew are teaching leaders how they can move the world forward and move their organizations forward - at the same time.

He speaks five languages and holds a B.S. in Political Communication from Virginia Commonwealth University, where he also studied Philosophy. He currently resides in Orange County, CA with his wife, Amna.



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