

Yesterday there was a lot of talk about meditation, and how it was great for people in prisons and how it would improve your mood and various other things along these kind of lines. What I'm going to talk about is what meditation does if you do really a lot of it, like really, really, really a lot of it. How much meditation is a lot of meditation? Typically, to get enlightened takes about as much work as getting a PhD, so you would expect it to be the dominant occupation of your life for something between 7 and 10 years, including working your ass off for your A-levels, getting through an undergraduate degree, doing a master's, doing a PhD. Getting enlightened is about a PhD's worth of work.

Very few people in the West claim to be enlightened, even fewer of the people who claim to be enlightened are enlightened, and even fewer of them are doing anything other than teaching. I'm the rare class of individual, where I got enlightened, I'm actually fucking enlightened, and I don't teach, and I don't teach because my teacher said I was just not very nice. So instead of teaching enlightenment, I went to war, I went and mounted a massive charge against the world's militaries, to teach them that Buckminster Fuller was god and the hippies were right about everything, making substantial impact on their thinking. Because there are many more things you can do with enlightenment than just sit on your ass teaching other people how to wind up in the same mess that you're in. I'm going to briefly tell the story, and then I'm going to talk about what spiritual practice means in the 21st century.

I grew up in hell: both of my parents were mentally ill, I was sexually abused, all manner of evil and mayhem that could possibly occur did; people with my kind of family history typically don't live until 30, and spend most of their life on massive drugs. At 15 I started to meditate, about an hour a day, sometimes two. I was physically ill at the time, I had nothing but free time. Although I'm half-Indian, I had no real exposure to Hinduism as a tradition; I just started to meditate, because there was nothing else to do and it seemed to help. After six years of an hour or something a day, after a very, very intense, shall we say, collaborative celebration, in the morning after the trip we were having a debriefing session, and in my head as we were talking I saw an amplifier, just a very, very simple aluminium amplifier with a big knob and a little blue LED on it, and I saw my hand reach down and turn the knob off, and my internal dialogue completely stopped – this is about 1993, 1994 – and it never came back.

Living in the condition of having no internal dialogue, no flow of thoughts, no flow of images, just SMACK into the present is quite an abrupt thing, and for the first two weeks I felt I've gone completely mad. "Oh my god, I have totally broken myself! I'm fucked!" I discovered I could still go to work, I could still socialise with people, I could cook food, get through all the basic things of life... Nobody outside of me seemed to notice any particular change in my behaviour, even though I was lost in this rapturous state of total absorption with the world "Wow, this is amazing! Whoa!!" and then life continued. I'd run right off the edge of every reality map that I had. Because if you go to a psychologist or a psychiatrist and say, "By the way, I did really a lot of meditation, and my internal dialogue has totally stopped... Any ideas what I do now?" Nobody ever winds up there in the West, because nobody does enough bloody meditation, at least they don't do it right.

So, I went off, I read a book called the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, and in it there was a big map of mental states – huge, huge map – and I was about a third of the way forward. I was like "Okay, these guys know what they're doing, I'm going to go off and find somebody who understand the rest of this, this is yoga." I find a guru, and after about three years of being repetitively kicked in the head by the woman that the Oracle in *The Matrix* was based on... She really existed, used to live in Chicago, she lived in a New Age bookstore where one of the wives of the Wachowski brothers worked... All of that nice, soft, maternal stuff the Oracle does? None of that was true. The only part that's true was the repetitive kicking in the head. [laughter] "Did you get it yet, kid?!" WHAP! But, eventually what happened is I woke up. Boom! Understood the nature of space and time, the unity of consciousness and matter, the true age of consciousness and the gurus, all of the rest of the mystical shit that people talk about... All of which is true, none of which is remotely helpful, for reasons I will explain.

So, once you wind up there and you look back, everything else looks completely normal. Trees are trees, grass is grass, people are people. Yeah, they're all cosmic manifestations of the one original brain of the universe and all the rest of that crap, but that was true before you noticed it! Enlightenment is a change of perspective: you go from not understanding what is happening to understanding what is happening; once you understand what's happening, it does not change what's going on. All the time that we felt we understood where animals came from before we discovered evolution, we were wrong. That didn't mean the animals weren't evolving; it just meant we didn't understand what the hell was happening. So it is with enlightenment: we finally understand the nature of consciousness, consciousness proceeds to do what consciousness always did. For example, here is a shadow. Now, once you understand that if you look closely enough what you're

seeing here are pixels, and over there there's a really bright light that's going through some set of digital mirrors and that's what the pixels are, there's still a shadow. You stop being mystified by why there's a shadow – there's a hand, there's a shadow, that's what the shape is – but it doesn't change what it is and where it came from.

The whole process of meditation is sitting and watching what is, and you sit and you watch what is until you finally notice what's actually going on. You work your way down through layer after layer after layer of mental noise and nonsense and mythology and all the rest of this stuff, and eventually you bottom out into consciousness itself, and consciousness itself is just consciousness. The Indians talk about *sat-chit-ananda*, knowledge-being-bliss: they're just trying to describe what happens when you take the light inside of you, that in some sense creates your world, and you turn it around and you point it at itself. Once you could finally put your awareness on awareness, you get a feedback loop that opens the universe to you, and that's why you meditate.

The form of meditation which is kind of taking root in this culture is like the form of yoga which is taking root in this culture. Yoga is not a way to look hot. I understand that many people are using it for that... It's one of eight aspects of yoga, there are eight legs of yoga, all the physical postures are one of the legs, and it's meant to make your body stable enough so that you can sit in one position for an hour and a half at a time meditating, without getting distracted by muscle cramps. That's what yoga is for, it's so you can sit and bloody meditate, that's why it was invented. Also, potentially, if you do it right, you become physically immortal – google *The Alchemical Body* if you're interested in that stuff, it's a very good book – personally, I think that's probably mythology... although I have heard some stories, first-hand.

The second thing that comes from this is that all of these heavy spiritual practices, whether it's prayer or meditation, magic just radiates off this stuff. Every tradition that has enlightened people has stories of wizards. The Daoists who run across water, all this *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* stuff, the European alchemists... Do you guys know about a guy called John Dee?

Answer: Of course!

Of course... "What kind of audience do you think this is?" [laughter] John Dee, for those who are not overly read, was Queen Elizabeth I court magician, and John Dee has one essential claim to fame, which is that he invented the concept of the British Empire. He wrote two books, arguing that as the Romans had used roads to create a trade network and to move armies around their empire, Britain could use ports and ships. So he invented the concept that we could re-implement what the Romans had done but with London at the centre. John Dee's primary work, what he was proudest of in his life, was a 400-page volume of angelic magic, called the Enochian magical system.

So, you sort of look at this stuff and you're like "The guy is smoking crack." Then you look at Isaac Newton. Newton's laws of motion, colours, he named to colours of the rainbow... By the way, he named the colours of the rainbow with seven colours, even though indigo and violet are the same colour, because he needed one colour per planet and one colour per alchemical force... Three-quarters of Newton's work is alchemy, and that's all the stuff where everybody goes "Oh, Isaac Newton, he was such a nonsense-lover, all this alchemy stuff... Love the laws of motion though." Because you're not allowed to take the other side of these men's work seriously, because if you do... "Oh my fucking good, that's really there?! Oh shit!" Yes, it's really there.

The weird thing is everybody who opens up the big door and looks out into the magical universe where all the cosmic shit lives sees something different. The purpose of religion is to enforce conformity on the mythology that floods your brain once you open up the cosmic forces. If you are a strict Muslim and you experience your enlightenment in a Muslim context, the sort of mystical model of the world that gets slammed into your head when you finally look at the universe in that way will be in conformity with the dominant culture around you at the time. This is part of the reason that everything in Western culture went nuts when they discovered LSD, because you had all of these people experiencing enlightenment outside of the conformity of the church. Rather than becoming Saint Ignatius of Loyola, you wound up as Acid-Crazed Bill. "Oh, I've got this mythology of the universe and it's all to do with spiral dynamics, my name is Ken Wilbur!" Where the hell did that come from?! He made it up and then told you it was cosmic law, just like all the others did! Everybody experiences the mythological aspect of enlightenment on their own terms, and if they are a slick talker, they can convince you that's how it works, and then when you experience enlightenment, you experience the same mythology that you were loaded up with when you experience it.

This is how it really works: you've got your Buddhas and your Christs and your Mohammeds and your Abrahams and all the rest of these people, they experience these cosmic states of consciousness, they generate their own mythology, and then they run around telling you they've discovered the secrets of the universe and you should do it their way now. This is why I don't teach. I don't teach, because I'm an asshole. I have a strong tendency to bite people unpredictably, which is not surprising, given what my personal history looks like. You can't necessarily expect to get a perfectly smooth, even curve, if you start with something that looks like an anvil that was wrapped around a black hole. Unmangling the human personality is a completely separate axis of activity from simply understanding the nature of stuff. If you understand that's the shape of a hand... If I had a finger missing, understanding the shape of the hand would not turn it back into the missing finger.

This is another part of the great mythology. The culture misunderstands enlightenment, because the people who are selling enlightenment are shiny, happy, beautiful people. That's nothing to do with being enlightened, that's an absolute by-product! In the same way that hatha yoga produces strong, fit people, enlightenment can produce a certain kind of glossiness. It's just not correlated, alright? And as you begin to rip these things apart and say, "Right, what is the fundamental knowledge about the nature of consciousness, versus the nature of the practices that produced it, versus the mythology that people realise when they open to the cosmic world, versus the tradition that they were embedded in..." When you begin to strip the abstract categories out, the thing that is called enlightenment is really, really pretty small. It doesn't mean it's easy... Schrödinger's wave equation you could write down on a string with something like 35 characters. But the actual mechanics of consciousness, you go from looking out here at the form of a universe, to looking at the mechanisms of consciousness itself, it forms a feedback loop, suddenly everything amps out and you understand the nature of raw consciousness... That's pretty much all there is to it. Everything else is containers and scaffolding.

Building the instrumentation to keep your consciousness stable enough to be able to put the attention on the thing is about three or four years of work. It's like grinding a mirror if you're going to make an astronomical instrument. It takes years to grind a perfectly smooth reflector, then you silver coat it, then you point it at the sky, and now you can see the moons of Jupiter. It takes years to design the microscope, you look into the water, now you can see the microbes, and you just discovered germ theory. Building the instrumentation takes time, years and years and years, because you need long periods, 35-40 seconds minimally, when there are no thoughts in the mind, to be able to begin to turn the awareness onto itself. Lengthening the gap between the thoughts means lowering the mental background noise, and lowering the mental background noise means going through all of the emotional layers and all of the attachments that generate thought. A single emotion that you don't really deal with properly can generate five years of internal chatter. "Should I? Shouldn't I? Should I? Shouldn't I? Should I? Shouldn't I?..." and you finally come back, and it's this deep feeling of uncertainty about your place in the world. You feel it, it goes away, you've been liberated of an emotion, that stream of thought stops, and as a result your mind gradually empties and empties and empties and empties.

If you've been taught that you are your mind, that process feels like dying. This is why there's all of this nonsense about the abyss in the Western magical tradition. "Oh, the abyss! Oh, the abyss!" You go to India, they've never even heard of the abyss, because in India they don't think that you are your mind. So, having a mind go away... "Really, that thing back there? Yeah, I used to do that for saying mantras, now it doesn't work anymore. Contact support." Whereas in the West, if your mind stops, that means your identity is gone, and everybody freaks out and calls that the abyss. If you shut the mind up in degrees and you understand the difference between yourself and your mind, your ideas, that layer can drop off without causing all that much distress. Even for me, hitting that cold... Two weeks of real mayhem.

Now we get to the fun part: any questions?

Question: where can I sign up for your church? [laughter]

It's the Church of the Hexayurt, you just go and build one... Stick to engineering...

Question: I don't believe you. I think what you're describing as getting rid of frameworks is just a new framework. You're just talking about another way of understanding consciousness, and it's the same as the Stoics and it's the same as the mystics and it's the same as Nietzsche and it's the same as whoever you want to talk about – it's just another perspective. I mean, I'm sorry for being sceptical, but it seems to be that...

Because you didn't talk about anything specific; you talked in beautiful abstraction. Maybe you're not trying to get to is abstractions so maybe that's a linguistic problem, but it feels to me like the things you were talking about in very abstract terms are the same things that every other philosopher and everyone else has ever talked about in abstract terms. It's just a different framework, you haven't got rid of frameworks.

Every individual who goes up there sees the same shit, more or less, and then you come back down and you try and tell people about it in language, and you wind up building a model that you use to communicate. That's exactly correct. Yes, it's the same shit.

Comment: "I said what you said, but I made a joke out of it!" [laughter]

Question: So if that's the case, what's the insight?

There is no particular insight. It's the same shit that everybody else says. The bit that's potentially useful is being really, really clear that everybody comes back with their own version of the story. There's a Western notion that you get to some kind of hard, objective truth and you get a perfect description which can be no further simplified.

Comment: I don't know if that is true, actually.

Well, Pythagoras' Theorem. However you state it, it's still Pythagoras' Theorem. However you derive it, it's still Pythagoras' Theorem, and proper mathematical truth is like that. So there's a deep desire in the Western mind to find that kind of certainty about consciousness... I'm not convinced it works that way.

Comment: I'm not convinced what the benefit of enlightenment is yet.

I'm not convinced there is one.

Comment: But you say you spent a lot of time refining your inner state of awareness to get to a certain point of truth, presupposing that there is a certain truth to understanding that we all have, and yet it seems to me what you're doing is stripping away all the interesting stuff that goes on in terms of an internal dialogue, and you get to a state where you can recognise that a hand makes a shadow. What's the benefit in that?

Precisely! In an Indian context, enlightenment is seen as something that you might do sometime after the heat death of the universe. The traditional Hindu setting is that enlightenment is for a tiny fraction of people who've exhausted their karma and have really nothing else to do with their time, it's a tiny minority sport. Then you get Buddhism, and Buddhism says, "No, enlightenment for everybody!" and it's this kind of evangelical enlightenment sect based on one guy that, as far as I can tell, totally missed the fucking point. This Buddhist thing about all life is suffering, that everything is fucked, everything is dukkha, everything is off-centre, there's a fundamental wobbliness in the nature of things... He did it wrong. Buddhism is a mistake. That's the official Hindu viewpoint, you can quote me on that... [laughter] No, I'm absolutely clear about that, I can say that in an official capacity. To Hindus, the Buddha is the ninth incarnation of Vishnu, and his job was to stop people getting enlightened by misleading them – absolutely accurate, from my perspective.

The point is it's not something that appeals to everybody. People shouldn't feel bad about getting on with their life and trying to be a good human being. Not getting interested in enlightenment is like not getting interested in number theory or cosmology. If you're not into it, you're just not into it, it doesn't matter!

Question: What's your personal strategy for carrying on with material existence? [laughter]

I'm absolutely shit at it. Nothing in my life really makes sense, my life is dominated by these chunks of narrative that were just conjured out of the void because I needed something to do... I never have any money, apart from very occasionally there are these huge windfalls, followed by long deserts of... You'd be better asking almost anybody. [laughter] Keep calm and carry on, try not to get killed, etc.

Comment: I ask this, because I've come to something that's kind of like a positivistic nihilism, which I think I came to from doing acid a hundred times... There's this question of materials and the world being full of materials and material relations and how you have a kind of nihilistic politics toward that that's necessary to deal with them?

You get to a point, and this is widely talked about in the Philip K Dick kind of stuff, where you've got to decide whether you're going to try and break out of the system, destroy the system so everybody is free, or just live with it. There are probably some other options as well, but those are your basic choices. Punch a hole for one person, smash the entire thing flat so everybody escapes, or just knuckle under and do what you're told. I think that you need a mixed strategy. If you're dealing with parking, you should knuckle under and do what you're told, drive on the correct side of the road. If you're dealing with your own personal mind, by all means be as free as you possibly can be. And in the kind of communal setting, if you see a whole bunch of people who are stuck in some awful negative rut because they don't know they're allowed to do something different, you can gently remind them and see if they buy it. I mean, I've got an idea: for the next board meeting, why don't we sit around a whole bunch of little tables and talk about things issue by issue and then maybe talk to each other about it, rather than sitting at a big table with a man with a gavel on the end. "What, we can do that? – Yeah, we can do that." But I think it's something where you've got to think of it as a continuation of other parts of life. You take your Nietzschean will to power stuff... Boy howdy, do you have to moderate that depending on your circumstances.

There is no absolute philosophy, because we're in an adaptive environment populated by our equals. And once you understand that evolution is a real thing, the game is as hard as it can be because we've extracting every possible advantage for the whole of our evolutionary history, why would you expect enlightenment to give you a massive edge?

Comment: Well, it's not about the edge because it's an arbitrary process.

Well, I'm not convinced it's arbitrary. I'm pretty sure that it's a way of digging deeper into some fundamental reality, but that fundamental reality is not necessarily objective.

Comment: It's neutral.

It's also something where you've got no guarantee you saw all of it the first time round. When you think of "Okay, I've got as good an understanding as anybody can have of this, but it's a 1x4x9 slab sitting on the surface of the Moon... How confident am I that I really understand everything about this thing, given that all the other people before me who said they were enlightened and understood everything, none of them discovered evolution?" You know, you really have to look back at the history of enlightenment: everybody who failed to get evolution out of their enlightenment trip, who didn't notice the origin of the body... What the fuck?

Comment: Maybe that's why Buddhists don't step on bugs.

David: If one was to engage in the practice of spending long periods of one's time shutting out outside information from one's experience...

Floatation tank style?

Question: Well, you talked about the 45 seconds of thought where you're not thinking about anything. After a few years, as you yourself mentioned, the math starts to add up and you've spent more time thinking about the inside of your own mind than the outside, this moment of inversion you talked about where you see yourself thinking, isn't that just a kind of egocentric dialectical inevitability of your mind having more information about itself than the world?

Notably, most of the enlightenment traditions use extremely low-stimulus environments. Zen monastic life for example, it's the same thing over and over and over again, it's incredibly simple and incredibly repetitive to enable that interiorisation. As for what actually happens at that point... The discovery that the internal world is completely arbitrary and you can just turn it off dumps you right back into the external world in a very, very serious way. Once the internal dialogue stops, there's no place to escape to, and then you spend a bit more time sanding out through the bottom of that particular barrel until you hit the big one, and then after you hit the big one, you get slammed back into reality but now the entire thing is this massive mystical cosmic process, but it's exactly the same shit it was before you noticed. It's not... You see what I'm saying?

Ben: You say that you don't teach. So what is it about this time and the context of this event that you felt it was appropriate to share these things with this group of people?

When I say “teach”, what I mean is I don’t form the guru-disciple relationship with people. As a Hindu, we have this thing called the guru-disciple relationship, and the guru-disciple relationship starts out by creating a kind of surrogate parent, and the surrogate parent basically patches the remaining holes in the ego and holds the insecurity down to a dull roar, while the mind just dismantles itself. “Don’t worry, it’s just like puberty, we’re not going to let you make any stupid mistakes, try not to kill anybody...” as you basically fry the entire surface of your consciousness off. I don’t do that, because if your own parents are evil bastards and your guru is a bit weird, you don’t necessarily have great imprints or great templates to pass down to people. So probably not qualified to be a strictly Hindu-style guru.

Not everybody who gets enlightened ought to teach. It’s not necessarily the most pressing thing that needs to be done right now. After 9/11, 9/11 is when they shut the school that I was part of, and it was just like “There’s no point trying to teach another generation of Western gurus, go and do something about the state of the world,” so I picked housing. 20 years from now, maybe 100 million people will live in those, possibly, because they’re a quarter of the price of a disaster relief tent: bang. No patent: bang.

So, here and now, we’re in one of these cycles where the world that we’ve lived in has gone away. This economic process which is unfolding, there’s no way of reversing it in America, there’s probably no way of reversing it in the Mediterranean Basin, including on the North African, Middle East side, it’s eventually going to destabilise Israel... God only knows what’s actually going to happen, but the period of sort of mild war that we’ve had 10 years of is about to turn into a proper economic depression. We haven’t had one of those for several generations, and the last time we’ve had one we got the Nazis out of the far side. This time we might get civic anarchy, because the nation state tears apart and the Internet continues to basically function, and the whole thing goes completely bananas.

In times like that, when the old world model is just snapping off, there’s an enormous tendency to get the formation of stupid cults, and there’s this kind of happy-clappy, pseudo-Buddhist millennialism stuff going around right now, of which the integral movement is one manifestation, but usually it’s mushroom-toting hippies who’ve done a bunch of yoga, insist that you should be vegan and that if everybody has the right consciousness the world will be okay... That shit needs to just be killed with extreme prejudice – it’s fucking nonsense.

You guys are a particularly culturally powerful group of people, we’ve seen a fair amount of the happy-clappy enlightenment nonsense being preached... “Oh yes, if you do a bit of meditation everything is better...” Yeah, that’s absolutely true. What happen if you do more? Ha-ha... This notion that there’s kind of an LD50 for meditation, after which you’re going to have to face your cosmic existence, or you’re going to have to become some...