

New York Times Bestselling Author

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TOTAL
MEDITATION

PRACTICES IN
LIVING THE AWAKENED LIFE

EXCLUSIVE SNEAK PEEK

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INTRODUCTION

A Call to Wake Up

Dear Reader,

There are many good reasons to meditate, reasons that date back thousands of years. But this book was written not with a glance backward, but with a view forward. I call this the awakened life. It is synonymous with being in the light, finding grace, and being liberated from pain and suffering. It is the embodiment of true happiness. Total meditation is the key that unlocks them all.

If I can convince you that this is the life for you, what awaits is literally unimaginable. The things that are going to happen to you today, tomorrow, and for the rest of your life will no longer fall into predictable patterns. Every day will bring the experience of newness and creativity—if you allow happiness to unfold.

First, however, we have to ask the most basic question: What makes a person truly happy? A loving relationship, a settled family life, a successful career? There are probably as many answers as there are people in the world. But despite all our old ways of finding happiness, the ground under our feet is shifting. Something new, urgent, and exciting is happening. You will only become part of the change, however, by looking beneath the surface of your everyday life.

Everyone structures their happiness within a lifestyle. From day to day we make individual choices about things we'd like to do. For instance, do you want Chinese takeout for dinner? Maybe, maybe not. Have you checked your e-mail? Not yet, but you will. Surrounding these small daily choices is something bigger: the major decisions we've made about our individual lifestyle. Only in the last few decades has society begun to pay attention to the fact that your well-being depends crucially on your lifestyle.

You have the freedom to choose a poor lifestyle that includes tobacco, alcohol, no exercise, and a diet heavy in processed food. But do you really want to live like that? There's enough information available to avoid those heedless choices. As a result, better choices can be made, choices that involve pure foods, moving your body in beneficial ways, and honoring the environment. You might even ask, What is the absolute best lifestyle? This can be a life-changing question, and, if taken seriously, it transforms the very notion of what it means to be happy.

More and more people have made good lifestyle choices about diet, exercise, not smoking, and so on. But the key to the *best* lifestyle hasn't been found. Don't blame yourself. Modern secular society has some dominant trends that work against true, lasting well-being. Anxiety nibbles around the edge of almost everyone's life. The trends causing ever-increasing loads of stress include:

- A faster and faster pace of living
- A deluge of distractions, including the Internet and video games
- Increasing rates of aging and dementia
- Rampant consumerism spreading to more and more countries
- Dislocation and crumbling of traditional families
- An epidemic of anxiety and depression
- Global problems such as climate change, terrorism, pandemics, and refugeeism
- Collapse of trust in public institutions and politics
- Runaway disparity between rich and poor, along with racial disparity and injustice

These challenges are persistent and growing. You hear about them or experience them firsthand every day. Such massive challenges are inescapable, and individuals, as kindhearted as they may be, are powerless to solve them. Any single issue on the list is enough to overwhelm you if you get too close to it. Dealing with malaria in Africa, opiate addiction in the Rust Belt, suicide among veterans, or the looming prospect of Alzheimer's disease for the baby boomer generation—take any one of these problems and you can devote every waking hour attempting to solve it. Some people already are doing so, and while great strides are being made, the majority of our age-old problems still continue to exist.

For the average person, however, these threats provide a background of troubling chaos. You cannot put your head deep enough in the sand to be unaffected. The most enlightened diet, exercise, meditation, and yoga programs do not provide a solution.

With that in mind, I set out to find the best lifestyle that to ensure well-being despite the chaotic condition of the modern world. The best lifestyle can be described in a single phrase: *waking up*. Or, in other words, to be aware of everything around you. To wake up means devoting yourself to going beyond the everyday routines that people live by, the secondhand beliefs and opinions we have all adopted, the expectations we cling to, and the agenda of the ego. Waking up is about higher consciousness, or, in other words, a deeper awareness. Waking up is not a faraway goal—it can be your daily reality, starting here and now.

People still don't realize how all-important awareness is. To be aware is to notice something you didn't notice before: You become aware that the room is getting too warm, so you turn down the thermostat. You become aware that a friend hasn't called as often as they used to, so you call them to see how they are. These simple examples illustrate an important point: Nothing can be changed in your life unless you first become aware of it. This fact seems obvious as soon as it is stated, and yet there are depth, power, and possibilities in awareness that people rarely understand. What you can do with awareness will literally change every part of your life.

We validate reality with our mind. If your mind is truly open and free of confusion and conflict, reality will be perceived as a field of unlimited possibilities. If that sounds exaggerated, it's not—we have just learned to live with radically lowered expectations. We are trapped at a level of consciousness that fuels chaos and confusion, no matter how nicely we think our own life is going. Through a gradual development

of bad physical, mental, psychological, and spiritual habits over the years, we have walled ourselves in. Being mind-made, the walls we have created are invisible but strong, sometimes impregnable.

As an illustration, let's imagine that a stranger, a clear-eyed, clairvoyant observer of human nature, followed you around today. There is no threat to you except that this stranger can read your mind. Here is what his notes might look like:

7:30 A.M.: Subject woke up, got out of bed, starting thinking and planning. Mental activity 90%, the same as yesterday.

8:30 A.M.: Conversation at breakfast table—typical exchanges. Subject leaves home for work, mental activity in neutral.

9:00 A.M.: Subject arrives at work. Mental activity falls into familiar grooves. Subject hopes today will be more exciting than yesterday.

11 A.M.: Subject immersed in work, starting to feel some stress from coworkers, boss, general environment.

NOON: Subject moves gratefully off to lunch. Mental activity relaxes as subject anticipates a pleasurable hour.

2:00 P.M.: Pleasant sensations from lunch have dissipated. Subject knuckles down to work again. Mental activity 80% of any day at work.

And so it continues. If asked for details, our clairvoyant observer would describe how often you repeat the same words and thoughts, exchange the same opinions, avoid the same unpleasantness, and so on, according to a set of fixed patterns that you do not deviate from very much. It would take a clairvoyant observer to discern these fixed patterns, because by and large we don't notice them. The unfortunate news is that a considerable portion of our day is spent being a robot of routine, repetition, and habit.

Do you really want to live like that?

WHAT YOU NEED TO DO

The process of waking up, of paying attention to our patterns and doing something different in life, needs to become continuous. It needs to become a lifestyle, because there is so much unconscious behavior in everyone's existence, even when seemingly everything is going our way.

It has perplexed me over the years that people are not really interested in their state of awareness, but I've come to know why. Whether we know it or not, each of us is fascinated by the mind's activity, meaning the constant stream of desires, fears, wishes, hopes, dreams, plans, expectations, and, for the fortunate, insights, intuition, and creative ideas. In other words, we become seduced by our thoughts. This can be alluring, distracting, and sometimes dangerous. By comparison, awareness is silent and still. It doesn't involve the same type of thinking that most of us use every day. You cannot watch it in motion or grab on to the next thing it does. Being uniform and constant, consciousness is taken for granted by everyone. As a result, we pay little attention to awareness, which in turn leads to a vicious circle: the less aware we are, the less we enact our power to shape our personal reality.

In the past, people needed so much help just to survive that they used awareness like a life jacket in a stormy sea. Pain and suffering were the norm; getting enough food was a daily struggle; the chance of falling prey to disease, accident, and violence was extremely high. In this context we see the rise of spiritual traditions that flourished in the earliest Vedic civilization in India, followed by Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The naked fact is that everyday life was so filled with threats on every side that priests, gurus, saints, sages, and avatars had a ready-made and eager audience of people looking to transcend their dangerous existence.

Today, seeking an escape from the world has drastically diminished as a motivation for awareness, but the desire for transcendence is still within us. The most basic spiritual practices have become optional, and we choose our personal practice from a lavish menu the way we choose an entrée from a restaurant menu. People often pray or meditate to *escape* worldly cares and find something “higher.” But I was struck by a comment from the noted Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thích Nhất Hạnh: “Meditation is not an evasion; it is a serene encounter with reality.” This is what modern people need to hear. They need an incentive that makes meditation more than a choice on a menu.

Getting anyone to adopt the awakened life depends upon shifting gears in ways many might find drastic, as Thích Nhất Hạnh well understands:

We do so much, we run so quickly, the situation is difficult, and many people say, “Don’t just sit there, do something.” But doing more things may make the situation worse. So you should say, “Don’t just do something, sit there.” Sit there, stop, be yourself first, and begin from there.

There’s a beautiful simplicity in those words that has inspired me to write as simply as possible in this book, speaking informally as one person to another. I ask you, the reader, to take the same attitude, as if these pages were meant for you personally, because they are. In this book I want to highlight that there *is* such a thing as the best lifestyle. It is the awakened lifestyle. Nothing that’s good in your present life has to be sacrificed—waking up expands every aspect of the good life. What’s really at stake is making the decision to wake up, here and now. That’s the first step in the direction of a future that really works, instead of a present that threatens to defeat us. What applies to meditation also applies to transformation: *Sit there, stop, be yourself first.*



The image features a solid orange background. In the center, there are three overlapping circles of varying shades of orange and yellow, creating a layered, sun-like effect. The word "EXERCISE" is centered within the innermost circle.

EXERCISE

SAFETY AND SECURITY

YOUR GOAL: To feel completely safe and secure

Today's Insights:

You are only as safe as you feel.

Your true self is never under threat.

The world reflects your inner safety or inner insecurity.

When you are whole, you are totally safe.

To be safe is to be present here and now.

At the level of the true self you are perfectly safe and secure. There is no threat that can shake your true self from this knowledge, because it is innate, coming directly from pure consciousness. Obviously, everyday life brings situations that feel the exact opposite. The news is filled with stories about disaster and imminent danger. Worst-case scenarios run through our mind when we feel threatened. Stress itself is a threat, even in small doses, because it triggers the stress response, which we inherited as a way to cope with threats by running away (flight) or physically standing up to danger (fight).

A breakthrough occurs in total meditation, because you begin to experience the truth: Being safe is a state of awareness. Today you can get closer to living in a state of awareness that makes you totally safe and secure.

THE THREE QUESTIONS THAT MATTER

Today you can promote your safety and security by reflecting on the three questions that matter. It will probably be most effective simply to choose one question. Let your attention be attracted to the issues that are calling out to you personally.

WHAT AM I DOING RIGHT?

- Any step that gets you feeling safe *in yourself* is right. The basic move is to go into meditation mode whenever you start to feel pressured or insecure. By doing this, you shift your awareness away from stress.
- Get to a quiet place, take a few deep breaths, and pay attention to your body's signals. When you feel tightness, strain, discomfort, or pain, attend to these sensations. Let your attention go to the area of discomfort as you breathe slowly and evenly. Don't force anything. Be patient and let your awareness ease the discomfort naturally.

- Notice the people around you and their state of awareness. Stress goes viral very easily. You want to minimize how much time you spend with people who feel pressured or put pressure on you.
- We are all in the habit of being fascinated by bad news, natural disasters, and all kinds of catastrophes. Get in the habit of paying the least attention you can to such stories. If they make you feel anxious or unsafe, say silently “I am not in danger here” and wait until you feel safe again.
- Be around people who are secure and confident in themselves. Often they are the quietest, most comforting kind of people.
- Create a surrounding that reflects the state of inner security. Focus on peace and quiet, orderliness, visual beauty, and light.

WHAT ISN'T WORKING FOR ME?

- Any step that makes you feel unsafe *in yourself* isn't working for you.
- Being worried or anxious never resolves a situation. At the first sign of worry, center yourself and find your calmness again.
- Being around insecure, anxious, and defensive people may make you feel stronger or give you the sense that you belong. But this is the wrong kind of belonging. It reinforces the belief that the world is unsafe and you are unsafe in it.
- Dwelling on worst-case scenarios doesn't work. You waste time and energy on something that needlessly takes you out of your inner comfort zone.
- Avoid the urge to justify yourself to others. Being defensive is no protection. The more defensive you are, the more insecure is your inner life.
- Giving in to someone else makes you feel you are not strong enough in yourself. Avoid anyone who doesn't treat you as an equal, with respect and consideration.
- Taking outside threats personally doesn't work to keep you safe. If bad news doesn't actually affect you, send hopeful and compassionate thoughts to those who are affected, then turn your attention to something else.
- Latching on to someone else's strength doesn't work to make you safer. You will become dependent, and whenever you have to stand up for yourself, you will feel self-doubt and insecurity.
- Relying on more money, status, power, or possessions to make you safe doesn't work. You are only hiding from your own fear and insecurity. Make inner security your goal, always.

WHAT IS MY NEXT STEP?

- First priority: Do more of whatever you are doing right. Do less of whatever isn't working for you.
- Visualize white light in the area of your heart. Sit quietly and commune with this light.
- Set aside time to go somewhere that feels totally peaceful and safe. Take sanctuary in this place, shutting out any external threat or pressure. Let the feeling of this place merge with you, so that inside and outside both radiate the same peace.
- Take time to support someone you know who needs help. Bring a sense of comforting, reassuring, and being of service to this person. In this way you share your own inner sense of security. Being an anchor for someone else expresses your inner strength and security.
- Look at your area of greatest stress: work, family, or relationships. Find one way today to reduce the stress. Examples: Talk to a person causing you stress and calmly ask for help. Avoid office politics by making yourself available to anyone without taking sides. Reduce the noise and distraction at home. Honestly share feelings with your partner, avoiding accusations and blame.

Your insight today:

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