

Science and Mystical Experiences

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Peter: Sundari, I was looking at a sample of the new book *Waking Up* by Sam Harris and thought of you, as James said you are interested in science and its connection with spirituality. Harris is an admirable figure, perhaps the most sincere truth-seeker among the so-called New Atheists and a neuroscientist with impressive credentials. The book is an attempt to disengage transformative spiritual experience from religious doctrines and to show what empirical evidence there is to support certain mystical experiences. It is fairly cheap, if you have a Kindle device or Kindle app.

~ Take care, Peter

Sundari: Hello, Peter, lovely to hear from you again! You are often in our thoughts with great fondness. I hope all is well with you and that I get to see you next year. We are planning a weekend seminar the first weekend of April in Princeton. Thank you for the information on the Sam Harris book. I have heard of him. I must say though, I find the atheistic/scientific approach to the topic of spiritual experience somewhat tedious, however brilliant the scientist may be. Trying to prove or disprove mystical experiences is not a subject I am terribly interested in because, as we well know, they cannot be proved or disproved. Science for the most part does not take consciousness into account because science takes objects (the mind) to be real - and even when the more enlightened scientists do talk about consciousness they take it to be something we have instead of who we are. It goes without saying that there is more nonsense in the spiritual world than anywhere else, so I do understand science taking this subject on.

That said, spiritual experiences - however temporary they may be - do happen, as you well know. Science in many ways has become as dogmatic about the basis of its (often unexamined) precepts as religion is. However, what one makes of spiritual experience is quite another story. I think in many cases they can be an impediment to self-inquiry if not properly understood and contextualized. It is often the case that spiritual experiences of whatever nature or magnitude happen to experience-hungry people or spiritual seekers who use devotion and spiritual experience as a way of avoiding looking directly at the ego in the light of self-knowledge. Attachment to spiritual experience can be one of the most difficult things to relinquish on the path to *moksa*. I have seen that especially true in people who have had difficult life paths and suffered harsh traumas. A damaged, insecure ego with low self-esteem can fall into the addiction to these mystical experiences as a way of validation and even protection. Without self-knowledge this does become an impediment because of the experiential component. If the knowledge from the experience is assimilated and understood, these experiences have the potential of producing self-knowledge if properly evaluated in the light of valid teaching.

But why does one need them anyway? The problem so often with mystical experiences is that they seem to suggest that enlightenment is something extraordinary, something amazing - they bring in the WOW factor. Enlightenment is the most ordinary thing there is; that is fact. Perhaps that is a letdown for some egos.

I tend to be a sceptical on the subject, as I have a more scientific, knowledge-based mind. However, I do know that mystical experiences have their place and can be an important part of the spiritual journey – IF understood correctly. Having them debunked or proved by a scientist is not so interesting to me though.

As a young girl, before I realised that Catholicism did not make sense, I was very drawn to the mystical side of that religion and experienced the experiential high that devotion gives. I had a few amazing out-of-body experiences. I even felt drawn to becoming a contemplative nun; if only I could have found some logic (and an actual teaching) in Catholicism! By age 18 I had moved on and left that all behind, becoming a dedicated knowledge-seeker. I never fell in with the *yoga* crowd or any other experienced-based path, somehow avoiding them all, for which I am very grateful. I did and still do experience not being in the body as a natural “state” of being for the *jiva*. I tried magic mushrooms recently for the first time, as I have never experimented with drugs (it is never too late to have a crazy childhood, right?), and no matter how many I took, nothing happened. I stayed me, awareness. It’s no big deal, because I have always known I am not the body but the knower of the body.

I still have an attitude of deep devotion, worship and gratitude, and practice this daily. We have an altar at home at which we chant and say prayers. This is an important part of life for the *jiva*.

Thanks for thinking of me though. I appreciate it, and it is great to connect with you again.

~ With much love, Sundari