

# **WAKING UP: A GUIDE TO SPIRITUALITY WITHOUT RELIGION**

*by Sam Harris*

*Summary & Worksheet*

## The Book In Three Or More Sentences:

Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion is a book that explores spirituality. After all, it's mentioned in the subtitle. The goal though is not to convert you to Christianity, or any other form of religion or tantric belief. Sam Harris tries to derive the best out of the known to man doctrines – without forcing the reader to pledge and obey a cult-like figure or a divine animal – in order to give us the essence of these teachings. And while the goal is noble, the book itself feels structureless and without a clear agenda.

## The Core Idea:

A lot is covered in the book – from spiritual leaders, best praying practices, meditation techniques, to drugs, psychedelics, and communes. And while you'll surely get confused when reading, the key idea kind of looks like this: Spirituality, not religion is the thing we should focus on. Although regular faith wants to help people, it remains monopolistic and narrow-minded. Spirituality, on the other hand, is pure, open-minded, it will help you find your true self and calm your mind.

### *Highlights:*

- *Bringing joy in your life is about finding inner happiness, not surrounding yourself with stuff.*
- *The current moment is all we have. Focus more on the present moment, and avoid constantly thinking about a better future.*
- *If you let it, your mind will bury you with thoughts. To handle the inner chatter, learn to meditate.*

## 5 Key Lessons from Waking Up:

- *Lesson #1: True Happiness Is Inner Content*
- *Lesson #2: Our Minds Are All We Have*
- *Lesson #3: It Is Always Now*
- *Lesson #4: Don't Let Your Thoughts Consume You*
- *Lesson #5: Meditation Will Save You*

### Lesson #1: True Happiness Is Inner Content

The traditional way to get a hold of happiness known to man consists of collecting artifacts that promise joy and satisfaction – more money, clothes, luxury goods, a house, a spouse, friends, attention from others, and all the other shiny things we see on the commercials. Yet, we all know that having access to these well-polished items is not enough.

Getting a salary boost and buying a boat will excite you, yes. But the excitement will last for how long? A week? A month? And then what? We're back playing catch.

People devoted to spiritually approach happiness from a different angle.

These folks don't rely on getting stuff to feel good. They think that true happiness should be present even when the modern items we consider pleasure-giving are removed.

So, instead of pursuing artifacts that bring joy for a little while, they detach themselves from the world and from what we consider worthy, to find happiness within.

That's why people fast, live alone in the woods, inside caves, don't speak for months, meditate for years.

And if you think about it, you'll quickly realize how profound this approach is. After all, if you train yourself to feel happy without external stimulus, you'll more easily endure hardships and remove the self-sabotaging thoughts from your consciousness.

*“If there exists a source of psychological well-being that does not depend upon merely gratifying one's desires, then it should be present even when all the usual sources of pleasure have been removed. Such happiness should be available to a person who has declined to marry her high school sweetheart, re-*

*nounced her career and material possessions, and gone off to a cave or some other spot that is inhospitable to ordinary aspirations.” Sam Harris*

## **Lesson #2: Our Minds Are All We Have**

In a materialistic society that praises looks and money over wisdom and decency, it’s hard to understand that our minds are all we have. That our minds and the thoughts that circle inside our grey matter is what truly matters.

Nope. You still want that long coat with the matching boots. After all, no matter how pure and well-intended your views are, you can’t snap and share a picture of your thoughts online to show how sophisticated you are. Even if you do, in the form of text, for example, you’ll be considered a cheesy slogan sharing guy. And that’s totally uncool online.

However, in every breathing moment you experience, your mind plays a role.

How you interact with others. How you approach your goals. How you treat your spouse and your children. The activities you do during your day. Every experience is heavily influenced by your mind. Every feeling you have is based on your mind.

This realization means one thing: Make sure that the thoughts that cycle inside your skull are serious.

If you allow only good-intended thoughts and block the ones that inspire hate and jealousy, you’ll have more reasons to be satisfied now, in the present moment. Thus, feel more comfortable in your own skin.

## **Lesson #3: It Is Always Now**

*“The reality of your life is always now. And to realize this, we will see, is liberating. In fact, I think there is nothing more important to understand if you want to be happy in this world.” Sam Harris*

Planning a wedding? Conducting a business strategy? Talking about what you want to achieve in 5 years? These are all good things. They can help you live a better life someday. But the keyword is someday, not now.

While our mind crowds itself with thoughts about a future that's more pleasurable than now, we forget to actually experience now. Yes, it might sound confusing but it's actually simple to grasp if you stop for a moment and consider a bad habit we all possess – the inability to enjoy the current moment. Paradoxically, while hustling to become happy in the future, we avoid being happy now.

The solution?

Mindfulness.

A natural question that follows is, “What exactly is mindfulness?”

Nope. It's not a tantric practice that requires a room full of candles to work. In plain English, mindfulness means pure awareness. Or as the author writes, “Being mindful is not a matter of thinking more clearly about experience; it is the act of experiencing more clearly.”

Block your thoughts and don't let them distract you. Train your mind to enjoy the current moment – regardless of whether the moment is bad or good. This way, you'll finally experience life, not just live for a better future.

## **Lesson #4: Don't Let Your Thoughts Consume You**

There's a mental chatter happening all the time in our heads. It often feels like there's another person inside who's job is to document everything our eyes see. “A desk. A glass of water. WOW. Cool car. I wish I can afford one but I can't. I'm so poor!”

Don't believe me? Stop for a moment. Try to have a thought-free moment for 60 seconds? Ready? Go.

What happened? Your mind felt crowded and you were bouncing from one idea to another, right?

Don't worry. You're not crazy. Or at least not crazier than the rest of the human population. This inner monolog is happening to all of us.

One of the reasons we can't shut this chatter is because we have two hemispheres – left and right. And each of them has a different point of view. Yep, they don't usually agree. That's why your mind feels like a battlefield.

To prove this for the readers, Sam Harris shared a famous medical procedure called callosotomy. In short, this procedure involves breaking the connection between the left and the right hemispheres. Once done, this creates two independent conscious minds. Both of them with their separate views of the world.

Yep, kind of looks like a science fiction movie but there's a famous example where a young patient was asked what he wanted to become when he grew up. While loudly stating "a draftsman," he picked with his hand a card from the near desk that spelled out "racing driver."

What does this mean to you?

That if you let it, your mind will bury you with thoughts. We either let them consume us or we handle them swiftly.

And how to handle them?

By meditating.

## **Lesson #5: Meditation Will Save You**

When feeling sad, we try to imagine good things. When we feel good, we try to visualize even better.

But how this makes you feel? Better because there's a brighter future in front of you, or worse because now you feel miserable?

I bet you're feeling worse when your mind wanders and tries to imagine having better things than what you already have. This happens because we're never fully present. We don't live in the now. Our twisted mind always bends reality and pushes towards wishful thinking.

According to the author, to feel better about our lives at the current moment, we need to practice meditation.

But what is meditation exactly?

A lot of folks roll their eyes when they hear these words. I have to admit that I'm one of them.

But after digesting the insights by the author, I can conclude that practicing meditation aims to do one (good) thing: to destroy the ego.

*“The mind is a bundle of thoughts. The thoughts arise because there is the thinker. The thinker is the ego. The ego, if sought, will automatically vanish.” Sri Ramana Maharshi*

If you can cast out the thinker, the ego, and free your mind from all thoughts, you will gain the ability to stand perfectly still and enjoy the current moment.

And how to meditate?

Here’s the short version of the step-by-step program mentioned inside the book:

1. Sit comfortably on the ground or in a chair.
2. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths.
3. Pay attention to your breath.
4. Every time your mind starts to wander gently return in back to the breath.
5. Consider what’s happening around – the sounds of the surrounding environment, emotions, sensations. Be an observer of what’s happening.
6. When you get lost in a thought, consider it for a moment but return to the breath again.
7. Continue doing the above – observing thoughts and sensations. Let them rise, change, and pass away.

*“The principal enemy of mindfulness—or of any meditative practice—is our deeply conditioned habit of being distracted by thoughts. The problem is not thoughts themselves but the state of thinking without knowing that we are thinking.” Sam Harris*

## **Actionable Notes:**

- **PRACTICE MINDFULNESS:** Given the fact that we only live in the present moment, we need to train our minds to experience the current moment as it unfolds. Wishful thinking and daydreaming feel good, but true joy comes from living in the now. When thoughts arise, consider them, and then deflect them. Don’t let them ruin your moment.
- **STOP YOUR MIND FROM WANDERING:** Studies mentioned in the book state that we feel less happy when our minds are constantly wandering, even if what we’re thinking is pleasant. Being mind-

ful, staying in the present moment, and meditating regularly are key components for a happy mind.

- **DESTROY THE EGO:** Ego is not simply the notion of excessive interest about ourselves, it is the reason there's inner chatter happening in our heads. To cleanse your mind from all the thoughts, you must tame the ego. Of course, this is almost impossible for most people. After all, we don't spend years with crossed legs saying "ommm" in the mountains. We live busy lives in busy cities. What we can do is to identify our ego. Spot the thing that constantly rises and ruins the current moment. How? By asking him (the ego) what he really wants.
- **REMOVE YOUR HEAD:** Not actually decapitating yourself, it's a metaphorical practice to help you become more present. The exercise is simple, yet profound. Sit, and write everything you see before your eyes. By observing what's currently around, we'll stop thinking and begin to experience the moment. Or as it's written in the book, "I had lost a head and gained a world."
- **THE PARADOX OF ACCEPTANCE:** Accepting the current reality can feel daunting. After all, we're experiencing anxious feelings all the time. If we let them consume us, we'll go in a downright spiral of sorrow. For instance, if you're about to give a speech and if you're terrified, this can sabotage your appearance. Yet, meditation requires total acceptance and we can use this approach to our advantage. We can embrace the anxiety fully and mold it to become a fuel for our presentation. Or in other words, don't cling in unpleasant sensations, use them to transform your life for the better.

## **Commentary and My Personal Takeaway**

Most people consider spirituality to be a retarded activity. And I have to admit that I'm one of them. There are just too many things that don't feel logical when someone speaks about spiritual awakening.

What Sam Harris tries to do in *Waking Up* is admirable. He aims to promote this metaphysical condition to ordinary people. Present the gains of meditation to people who have no idea what this is so they can live a better life.

To be honest, I liked a large part of the book. There are interesting sections and taking the time to study what was mentioned can make a huge difference in your life. However, most of the text in the book is disorganized. It's part personal story, part a how-to-meditate guide, part drug confessions – yes, there's a section where the author shares his

experience with taking psychedelics to boost his concentration – part something else.

If I can summarize the book in one sentence I'd say this: We're unhappy because we're constantly filling our minds with thoughts and if we want to feel better, we should practice mindfulness.

Key takeaway: True joy will happen when you tame the inner chatter and learn to experience the current moments as they unfold.

## Notable Quotes:

*“Mindfulness in particular fosters many components of physical and mental health: It improves immune function, blood pressure, and cortisol levels; it reduces anxiety, depression, neuroticism, and emotional reactivity. It also leads to greater behavioral regulation and has shown promise in the treatment of addiction and eating disorders.” Sam Harris*

*“In fact, we can directly experience that consciousness is never improved or harmed by what it knows. Making this discovery, again and again, is the basis of spiritual life.” Sam Harris*

*“Paradoxically, this still requires discipline, and setting aside time for meditation is indispensable. But the true discipline is to remain committed, throughout the whole of one's life, to waking up from the dream of the self.” Sam Harris*

## What to read next:

- Actionable [Book Summary: Meditations](#) by Marcus Aurelius.
- Actionable [Book Summary: Flow](#) by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
- Actionable [Book Summary: The Wisdom of Insecurity](#) by Alan Watts

# INTERACTIVE SHEET FOR NOTE-TAKING

*Reading alone won't help you understand the actionable notes. You need to engage with the content. Answer the question below (just type inside the boxes) to outline your future steps:*

1. To live in the now, take a moment and write down the thoughts that arise:

2. What do you truly want?

3. Write everything you see before your eyes:

4. How you can flip the angst into something inspirational?

5. Schedule time for meditation:

*Don't forget to save your changes.*