Psychedelics and Mystical Experiences Transcript

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Introduction to Joseph Selby

This is Dr. Talks. Real talk from real doctors on the issues that matter to you most. My guest today is Joseph Selby. And he is an expert at making complicated scientific ideas simple and clear.

He's a founding member of the meditation community Ananda and has been meditating for over a This is a long time over 40 years. He's the author of the books The Physics of God, the Yugas, and his newest book, which is called Breaking Through the Limits of the Brain.

Joseph, it's such a pleasure to welcome you to the show. My pleasure, too. It's the first time that we talk together, but I have a feeling it won't be the last.

And I know this is gonna be a really fun conversation. I was just showing you before we began my actual my copy of the physics of God. And it's it's got a lot of dog years in it of really memorable concepts and passages.

And it's this is a powerful gift of yours to make these really abstract concepts clear and also tie them all together. How did you get into all this stuff?

Well, I came from a family of science oriented people and right into college, that was my main focus was to have a science degree. I was pursuing microbiology at the University of Colorado.

And then I had a very profound, very powerful psychedelic experience, hallucinogenic experience. And it wasn't my first. I'd had many before it and many after it.

But this one stood out because it felt transformative. It felt like I tuned into, I became the person that was my highest potential. And it felt wonderful.

I liked being around people. People liked being around me.

From Science to Spirituality

I felt the whole experience was sacred. I felt the presence. not in a way in which I was crushed in awe, but just that it was natural that the presence was with me and that I was a part of that and I was expressing that.

And that set me very firmly on the spiritual path and looking for especially ways to recreate that experience to once again feel such wonderful peace and harmony and presence.

And step by step that took me into the teachings of Paramahansa Yogananda and meditating regularly, which I've done, as you said, for over 40 years now.

But I never lost the connection to science. I always felt a kinship with the scientific approach, the precision, the accuracy, the way in which it winnows out thoughts that are not grounded in any facts.

So I loved that. I loved the spiritual experience. And the two came together in all of the books that you mentioned. And I think because I'm barely grounded in both, it's perhaps easier, perhaps more natural for me to connect them in ways that people can understand.

I think back to my experience and going back to the 1980s and the whole cultural view at that point of energy healing, energy medicine, spirituality, consciousness, was that it was something over there, spirituality, healing, energy, methods, all of these things were woo woo, they were in one side of society, a very peripheral fringe side.

And then there was the real stuff, science was real. And it's just remarkable how over the last 2535 years that's completely changed and now we find science be used to investigate these phenomena.

I remember when when Robert Becker in the 1960s and Max, Max Cade in the 1960s were hooking people up to EEGs and measuring their brainwaves and saying wow, there is a lot going on here, scientifically, that you can measure about these elevated states, that it began to open people's eyes to it.

And now, of course, routinely, we have these advanced tools like MRIs that we're using to look at what's going on in the bodies and brains of people. And that when we have these sorts of shifts in consciousness, profound things happen in our bodies, and that we can iterate all of these things, and then to the larger cadence, of physics and how the whole universe works.

So it's remarkable that this whole endeavor of science and spirituality, which was so divorced just 30 years ago, has now really come together. Yeah, it is remarkable.

I mean, my book is one where my books are just a handful of now hundreds, thousands probably, of books that are coming out, articles are coming out. workshops, speakers, organizations that really promote this connection between science and religion rather than it remaining separate.

And as you say, I think it has been transformative.

Neuroscience and Meditation Research

I've been pleasantly surprised by how many people have been interested in my books and for whom what I had to share was significant, either significant in the sense that it allowed them to confirm the validity of their own spiritual beliefs, or it allowed some people who were leery of spiritual teachings because they believed that science had ruled them out.

And therefore, if science had ruled them out, they would have to be foolish. to embrace them, but for them finding that science in fact hadn't ruled them out.

And in many ways, theories of physics and the discoveries in psi research and neuroscience have confirmed rather than ruled out these deeper connections that science has to experiential spirituality.

What was one of your first big epiphanies, insights about that connection? What made you set out to say really early on? Well, I started having that with the connections that were being drawn between quantum physics and various theories or concepts coming from experiential spirituality about astral regions, astral bodies, subtle energy bodies, that the two are starting to be confirming rather than veering apart.

And then in recent years, neuroscience took a giant step forward when the new imaging tools became available. So prior to, I'm not exactly sure when, but let's say 1990, the way in which neuroscientists explored the brain was by putting sensors on the surface of the skull and seeing what they could divine from that.

So the EEG was very useful, found things like brain rhythms, et cetera, but then came MRI and particularly fMRI. And fMRI is where MRI is a snapshot at a given time, fMRI is a movie.

And it can see what portions of your brain light up over a period of time. And scientists can ask you questions, stimulate your brain with images, sounds, et cetera, and see where it lights up.

They can see what happens when you move your body. They can see what happens when you are sexually stimulated, but they can also see what happens to the brain when you are meditating, when your forebrain starts to light up with inspiration.

And that very solidly coincides with experiential spiritual teachings that many meditation techniques have a center our focus at the point between the eyebrows or in the forebrain and that is the part of the brain that fMRI reveals

lights up when we meditate so deep correlation strong correlation between what science could measure and what the teachings underlying meditation have been saying for centuries to millennia.

So that was a great launch point for me to go deeper into neuroscience. Yeah, I know Andrew Newberg wrote the foreword to your new book, talks about how the experience is so radical, those transformative states, that for the brain, it can permanently change the way it functions.

And he talks about things like the regions like the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, then lighting up in meditators and really controlling and regulating negative emotion, and the limbic system, and then how the orbital frontal cortex that has to do with attention, becomes highly active.

And so these monks and nuns have spent 10,000 hours, they are highly attentive to the object of the meditation, to the point where they can screen out everything that's not salient to that.

And then how he writes about how the dorsal lateral prefrontal cortex then gets quiet.

Psychedelics and Deep Meditation

And that's the scene, of course, of the self selfing, self absorption, and the pole of the default mode network that really is active in people who are suffering who are worried about the past who are concerned about the future and this big shift in brain activity and brain resources.

And we're starting to work this out. And I think that in the last few years, with even more high resolution MRIs, we're going to be able to develop a whole map of how brain structure and function changes as we do these elevated practices.

So it is really a new dawn in terms of neuroscience, where it's directing us to go in the future. Yes, as you say, it is a it is a huge new dawn, because now the measurements are much more immediate.

They're still measuring essentially electrochemical activity in the brain. So we don't always know why a portion of the brain lights up, but we know it lights up.

and we can correlate it to activities, we can correlate it to thoughts. What I was equally fascinated with, and as you brought up Dr. Newberg, who wrote the foreword for my book, outlines in his book, How God Changes the Brain and How Enlightenment Changes the Brain, is that as meditators go deeper, there are stages.

And the first stage is that everything in your brain is pretty active. And then the activity shifts more and more to the frontal cortex. But, and this is what I found fascinating, the deepest meditators that they measured, even the frontal cortex activity would subside and the brain would in effect go dark.

And yet the testimony of the subjects that they were testing was that that's when they felt the most power and the most presence. And so that's really part of the foundation for the intent of my book, which is that we need to break through the limits of the brain.

The brain is a great tool, a great help to us, but the highest experiences of divine presence in our higher self come when the brain quiets up. Yes. Yeah, he has measured in some of his work has measured a big big drop in brain activity.

And you're right, that's when people have those deepest experiences. So they go brain dead, and they're happy. And the biggest case history of that I have one of my books is Jill Balty Taylor, and how she had that, which calls my stroke of insight when she parietal, she had a stroke and lost use of her parietal lobe.

And she had no idea who she was. She couldn't walk, she couldn't feed herself, she could do nothing in terms of the outward structure of her life. And she was blissfully happy.

Yeah, brain dead and happy. Yeah. So a lot of spiritual teachers have said that the brain is a filter. It's a reducing valve. and that the consciousness that we experience when the brain is active is limited by that activity.

I call it the fireworks show that we have all these neurocircuits that we've created our brain that are interconnected and one fires and then it fires the other circuit and fires another circuit.

And this is kind of our daily life that we get drawn into the behaviors, the thought, the patterns, the memory chains, and especially the emotions, that we routinely have.

The brain supports them all. This brain automatically triggers them all. And it starts off this, as soon as we get up, it starts off this unending chain of neural firing that keeps us occupied all day long.

And unless we do something, or unless we already have the habit of doing something like meditating, that becomes our reality. ongoing fireworks show is a big limit to what we can experience.

Yes. And so meditation in a way penetrates through that and gets beyond those limits of the brain so that we can experience the, the non-local aspects of ourself, the subtle energy aspects of ourself that are always there, always present, always connected to the physical body.

But we tend to not be aware of them. Joseph with the maps project, which many people have heard of or been aware of, and the whole renewed use of psychedelics in therapy, and especially for treating disorders like PTSD, major depressive disorder, persistent anxiety, and so on.

There's this whole new age of using psychedelics therapeutically and therapy. And I was just wondering for you, how did your early experience with psychedelics compared to the experiences you have in deep meditation?

Well, they there are a lot of similarities. There are some differences. psychedelics are a kind of molecule that basically reorients what part of your brain you are operating from.

And I think it's very effective now with PTSD and other, you know, deep emotional traumatic kind of problems that people get into because it's the only thing that automatically takes them away from this routine negative firing of the circuits that support negative emotions.

And the neural circuits that they have that fire and trigger negative emotions are so powerful that they're in a perpetual loop. They just can't escape them because their brain is wired to trigger them.

Daily Practice and Inner Growth

So it takes something often extraordinary like hallucinogenic experience for them to, you know, exhale and realize that they can experience something other than this negative tense experience that they've been carrying around for, you know, can be decades.

So when I had that experience, it just took me out of my normal mind. It took me out of my normal firing pattern of the circuits that I had developed.

I wasn't suffering from any particular negative emotional pattern, but I was suffering from being completely distracted from my spiritual self. And that is a worldwide malady that we don't really know who we truly are, because we're distracted by it.

So as I've meditated over the years, that powerful psychedelic experience I had, has been somewhat of a touchstone for me, I often think about it. And I often think, how am I living today, this moment, consciously, in relation to what I experienced then.

And I have found in all honesty that I'm often in calm, happy, peaceful, positive states that are everlasting. They don't go away when the psychedelic is flushed out of my system.

So it really has been transformative to meditate. And then I have peak experience in meditation that I would say, if anything have been more powerful than anything I experienced in my psychedelic experience almost 50 years ago.

So it does in some ways the same thing. Psychedelics takes you out of the habitual pattern that your mind wants to fire in. And it just takes you out of it.

Meditation creates new circuits that support the new way in which you want to behave in the new way in which you want to experience life and your feelings.

And that becomes more and more permanent, the longer you meditate. Joseph, you had this catalytic experience in college with psychedelics, you then learned to meditate, and you then found you could move to those similar states.

I'm really curious as to what you do nowadays. That was 40 years ago. I'm And you've learned a thing or two at that time. What do you do nowadays? Well, meditation remains the core.

And I think that meditation isn't like riding a bicycle and all you do is ride a bicycle. Even when you ride a bicycle, what you're doing is you're experiencing perhaps beautiful countryside.

You're experiencing the joy of moving quickly through the air. Meditation, opens you to experiences that are ever improving, ever better. So I can't say that I'm doing something specific like meditating differently than I did, but my experiences continue to deepen and ripen.

And more and more, without question, without any hesitation, I know that I'm connected to spirit. I know that I am spirit. I know that spirit is flowing through me and that I gained my insight, my intelligence, my higher feeling, my life force comes from spirit.

And that connection just becomes undeniable the longer one meditates, because that's what you experience. Meditation is a tool that gives you access to something.

And it's the something that is the most important that the actual mechanics of meditation allow you to get past the limits of the brain. But once you get past the limits of the brain, you continue to be transformed.

You continue to be experiencing deeper, more profound, more moving, more life-changing feelings, inspirations, intuitions, it just goes on and on. Yogananda said that you just keep expanding until you reach infinity, that there are no inherent limits to who and what we really are.

no limits to what we are very different from all the stories of limitation that most people tell themselves, and lives most people create for themselves.

As you find as you meditate, has it just been unfolding naturally for you? As you move along this pathway?

Meditation, Activism, and Trauma

Yes, I think it's, it's, it's you. There's, there's nothing foreign. Often the experience I have, and I've read about this from other people, is that when you have a particularly deep experience, part of your brain is saying, well, of course, you know, this is me, this is what I am.

And in Indian scriptures, it's often called sritthi or memory. It's like you're remembering what you are, as if some distant memory that you had long forgotten comes back into your being and you go, yes, I remember that I remember how I feel, because we, we are spirit, we are one with spirit.

And the more time we spend immersed in it, the more we know that truth. powerful. Yeah. And in in their book Alter Traits, Richard Davison and Daniel Goldman talk about how we have these four circuits of enlightenment in the brain, and that they see these light up in meditators.

And they see the same four circuits light up in meditators from every tradition. those circuits are inherently in everyone's brain. It's not like there are people in those circuits are absent, they were there for everybody.

Most people just aren't lighting them up. So getting into the practice of doing that, and your life will begin to shift. I'm curious, when you sit down and meditate in the morning, how long does it take you to get into that deep, profound state where you feel as they have moved from local to non-local awareness?

I find that meditation and how well I can meditate is the same as just about anything else in my life, that it goes in streaks. I will have periods where I sit down to meditate and it's immediate.

I don't need to do any techniques. I don't need to do anything other than just drink in that feeling. And then there'll be other periods of time where I do my techniques and it's an effort.

I'm not naturally connecting. My mind is remaining active. And perhaps I'm running some sort of emotional reaction to something that's going on in my life and it prevents me.

So it's not the same. Every day is different, but it does definitely come in waves, up waves and down waves. I would say over time, the positive waves have gotten deeper and longer.

And the periods, the waves where I'm having more trouble, I'm learning more creative ways to work through them. And so make it, one of them is just opening yourself emotionally to spirit, to feeling a genuine connection to God, a personal connection, praying, talking to God, but just opening your heart.

In some ways it doesn't matter what you say. There's no magic formula of a prayer. It's the fact that you are praying with your heart open. That is what makes the connection.

Joseph, I'm curious about something that you may or may not do. But one of the things I still find myself drawn into is social action and social activism.

And I know that there are sort of two parts people take after they've been this kind of a life journey that referring to here. One of them is the path often of seclusion and practice and deepening and empowering these experiences.

The other is going out in the world and maybe they protest, maybe they donate. Like I made some donations to political candidates. My wife was looking at our credit card bill and was like, oh, wow, you're, you hardly ever do that.

But I'm just donating to causes I believe in. I also volunteer and spend a lot of time actually doing things I think are important in the world. What's your take on that?

What's your personal practice in that regard? And how you see meditation interacting with social action? Well, you sort of put your finger on it in the very first segment, which is that people meditating change the world.

So I think the deepest form of activism is self-change. That as the phrase has been attributed to Gandhi is become the change you want to see in the world.

So if that change takes the form of activism, then that's just part of your flow of how you're gonna change the world. What I think sometimes happens is that activism can make people become emotionally involved in negative ways for themselves.

They're broadcasting fear or anger or some kind of angst about current situation. And I think that that does less service. I don't want to say it does no service, but I think it does less service than if they could do the exact same thing with a heart full of calmness and peace and respect for those who they are having to oppose on issues.

But I think most deeply, whether you are active or not, is that even an hour of deep meditation sends out into the world, sends out into the world mind healing vibrations that are transformative.

Because we can't see them, we don't appreciate how powerful they are, but they do change society in very deep ways because we are we're channeling a higher vibration, we're channeling peace, we're channeling love, just by immersing ourselves in it during meditation.

that psychosphere I mentioned early on, that we are participating in one or another strand of consciousness in that, in that psychosphere. And if we're dialing into the anger, the frustration, the guilt, the blame, the shame, all of the negative emotions in there, we're strengthening that field as well as allowing that part of the field to flow through us.

If we're tuning into all of the pro social emotions and gratitude, joy, happiness, all then we're strengthening that part of the psychosphere. And so meditators are much more likely to be strengthening that.

And then just finally, as we come to a close here, what is your take on trauma? Because people often have emotional trauma. I know some people I work a lot with veterans and they can't even close their eyes without having flashbacks of all kinds of traumatic events that they they they recall.

So just in the last couple of minutes, how do meditators deal with trauma? Well, I think what meditation and various meditation practices, I use the hung saw technique, I use the Kriya yoga technique.

But there are, you know, hundreds of different meditation techniques out there.

Future Work on Miraculous Healing

But I think what they all share in common is a way in which to take one's focus away from the day to day to take one's focus away from what you happen to be feeling if it's negative.

And it takes practice and the more traumatic, the harder it is to take your mind away from it. But I do believe, because I've seen people do it, that if you meditate regularly and with depth, that you can train the mind to move away from reliving trauma.

And the more you have to develop the opposite experience of trauma, you have to develop that feeling of spirit, of joy, of love, of wellbeing. And when you do that, then the deeper trauma that you had previously is triggered less often.

It's not like any of these things go away because they're not really created by the brain. They're just triggered by the brain. So if you can develop new triggers that trigger wellbeing rather than fear, you are going to live a different life.

And gradually those circuits get stronger and stronger until that's what you trigger most often. Yes, that becomes your reality. And you then are living that new reality that you've triggered repeatedly.

And just in the last couple of moments, I'm curious what you're working on next, what your next direction is, what's fascinating you now? I am wrapping up a book that is a is a book without a title at the moment, but it basically delves into In essence, how can miraculous health happen?

What is a miraculous healing and how can it happen in terms of what we understand about molecular medicine, what we understand about biophysics, what we understand about quantum physics?

Where does the ability for the mind or from deep spiritual experience, where does that power come to transform the body, to physically transform the body?

And I'm finding it fascinating and inspiring to see just how powerful we are, that in a very real way, the human body is a continuous miracle. It's been a real privilege and delight to connect with you today.

Thank you so much. And I'm putting a mental bookmark in my mind for that next book. And I'm already mentally bookmarking it and knowing I'm going to get a lot and learn a lot from it.

Thank you so much for your work, for your passion, for your clarity, and for sharing with us today. Thanks again. Thank you for tuning in to Doctor Talks.

We hope today's episode has enlightened and inspired you on your path to optimal health. Each day is a new opportunity to make choices that empower your well-being.

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