

# NOW AND ZEN



## More about the book

What's really going on behind Life, the Universe and Everything? What do we actually know for certain and what *can* we know about the nature of reality beyond our personal whims, beliefs, dreams, hopes, fears and wishful thinking? How far can we trust religious dogma or scientific theorising to really get to the truth behind everything? And how far *can* they get to the truth?



The ideas in *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* originate not just in the teachings of our greatest thinkers - they're also in accounts given by the most ordinary of people. What's proposed in the book is that the reality we so fondly assume to be *it*, can be thought of as some sort of illusion or at least as a rather pale reflection of what's really going on. This is not necessarily saying the world as we know it doesn't exist at all, just that our conventional, everyday, understanding of reality is not the whole story. Whilst our five senses can be seen to provide only very limited, misleading and sometimes quite erroneous information about the world, the really significant illusions arise from the way we think.

# NOW AND ZEN

The book describes what this means and looks especially at the way we deal with the world by classifying and categorising objects, experiences and events. This process seems to work well enough in everyday life, but it's based on a couple of seriously suspect assumptions. One is that reality is inherently divisible in the way we each divide it up - an approach based on the unwritten and unacknowledged premise that the universe consists of innumerable but separate bits and pieces - chairs, cars, stars, thoughts, people, and so on. The second suspect assumption is that the inherent meaning of every object, experience and event we encounter, is identifiable not only from its individual characteristics but also from the characteristics that it does not have. Thus we know what 'dark' means because it's not only black but is also not 'light'. The argument is that although it enables us to get by in the world, thinking in this dualistic way, within a structure based on oppositional concepts (yin-yang), may not tell us how the world or the universe really is.



Added to this is the very common assumption that not only does each of us exist as an independent entity, but also that time exists - past, present and future - somehow on its own, quite independently from us and our understanding of it. The perception we each hold of ourselves as isolated egos and of time as consisting of the past, present and future are so very much ingrained in our everyday way of thinking that they are rarely questioned.

The resulting (mis)understanding of Life, the Universe and Everything is known as *Samsara* - the illusion of maya - in both Hindu and Buddhist thought. In the western world, however, positivist scientific endeavour has traditionally had a powerful influence and the idea that human understanding could be mistaken on such a cosmic scale is hardly ever considered. There's no problem with this of course. The use of a word like 'illusion' suggests we're somehow being misled or even wilfully choosing this erroneous path (a view that has spawned a plethora of religious doctrines around the concepts of temptation and sin). But *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* does not suggest there is anything wrong with



# NOW AND ZEN

the way we see the world; in fact, the world as it is is perfect. What it does suggest is that there's a greater, universal, indeed cosmic, understanding behind our everyday understanding, and that it's possible for every single one of us to experience this.

## Realistic possibilities

This book looks at the possibility that behind the world as we know it lies an Ultimate Reality that's both beyond description and beyond ordinary conception. This Ultimate Reality is not made of anything, has no parts, was never created or caused and is not going anywhere. It seeks no final end for mankind, nor does it select only the saintliest, nicest and kindest of us: we can all unite with Ultimate Reality.

In support of the assertions made in the book the various chapters outline a number of possibilities. In the chapter, *What's really real*, we are introduced to the idea that the entire universe could be no more than an idea – far simpler than thinking of it as somehow tangible. The next chapter deals with *Illusions* and outlines the possibility that everything we believe to be real could really be only a screen, a veil of appearance that could fall away to reveal Ultimate Reality. Another chapter describes how the assumed existence of time itself may be quite erroneous because the only time there is, is now, and it's here and gone within the same timeless moment.



One way of thinking about timelessness is described in the chapter on *Unhappening*, in which it is suggested that the Big Bang is continually 'happening' in reverse as well as in the usual way we think about it. This reverse Big Bang - Ghab Gib - where time goes backwards, exactly mirrors the usual Big Bang. If the two were to come together (as they do all the time) they would negate and annihilate each other (as they do all the time). And it's within this timeless moment of now, at the point where the yang of the usual creative Big Bang annihilates the yin of the reverse un-creative Big Bang, that we exist. Within this moment of now is not just everything we experience but everything the universe is.





# NOW AND ZEN

What's more, it's possible that rather than being simply *how we do things*, our constant attempt to make sense of things is actually *what we are*. Outside of this way of thinking there is nothing more, no me and no you because, as the chapter on *Ego* explains, the belief that each of us is an individual, separate, entity is a complete illusion. Nor can we expect to read a clear account of these rather peculiar claims because the whole thing is beyond words. The book is therefore, admittedly, no more than a doomed attempt at *Describing the Indescribable*.

But all is not lost: tried and trusted methods of approaching the personal experience of Ultimate Reality have been passed down to us across the ages. Whilst simple *Faith* may be accessible to the few and the use of *Psychoactive drugs* may appeal to others, the approach of *Meditation*, based on the very simple technique of mindfulness, is available to all who wish to use it. But it should be stressed that nothing in the possibilities described here and, especially, nothing in mindfulness meditation, requires the reader to believe in, practise or not practise, alchemy, astrology, magic, mystical energy line alignment, crystal consultation, shamanism, spiritualism or any other similar New Age (or old-age) practice or belief system. Whether they be real or imaginary, true or false, these are all irrelevant to the practice of mindfulness. Nor is it necessary to be highly intelligent or to have a deep piety, moral strength, purity of action, clarity of conscience, optimistic approach to life or to have had a happy childhood. Mindfulness meditation is a practice requiring no specific or general religious belief or world-view. An atheist can practise mindfulness meditation just as well as a devoutly religious person.

## **What's in it for me?**

The chapter entitled *Ockham's Razor* states that in deciding between two competing hypotheses, the one that makes the fewest assumptions should be favoured. In other words, so long as both theories account for the phenomenon we're interested in, the simpler one should be adopted over the more complex one.

In this book the ideas behind samsara and nirvana, duality and transcendence are outlined. These are discussed in an attempt to describe and account for our usual

# NOW AND ZEN

experience of reality - our Everyday Reality - in terms that do not require the acceptance of assumptions about the prior existence of Gods, demons or an afterlife. Within this book it's suggested that the idea of Samsara, with ourselves and our attachment to dualistic thinking at its heart, offers the most simple explanation for what we experience. Not only does this account for everything we each know but it can be seen to be the most simple explanation for what we know of the way the universe works.

Furthermore, the concept of Samsara can be seen to encompass some profound religious teachings from across the globe and across the centuries, whether or not you personally believe these teachings to be literally true. There are symbolic elements within the story



of Adam and Eve, for example, that duplicate elements at the heart of yin-yang. The ideas behind these two sets of teaching stem from very different religious traditions and are ostensibly unrelated. Nevertheless, whilst the book

draws out some similarities between these conventionally unconnected narratives, it makes no suggestion that these similarities are necessarily intentional. The point is that the parallels between the two ideas - the account of Adam and Eve and the dynamics of yin-yang - can work just as well for those who take a literal interpretation as they can for those for whom the Adam and Eve tale is purely allegorical. It's also worth remembering that many of these ideas are used in the text for their value as heuristic devices, as a means to facilitate our enquiry into that which cannot be said in words. So, for example, the existence or non-existence of time, the occurrence or not of Unhappening and the literal understanding behind Adam and Eve are not the issue. Creation myths are used in the book as a metaphor or exercise to aid the identification of a greater truth. And so it is with specific words used in the text. The Hindu term samsara has proved to be most useful in pithily summing up a whole range of ideas, but this doesn't mean Hinduism is necessarily the most potent religion. Indeed, whilst *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* leans heavily on several specific religious traditions, especially Zen Buddhism, it doesn't seek to endorse or refute any particular teaching, whether religious or not. Furthermore, which



# NOW AND ZEN

religion is 'most right' is not the point. Whatever helps us to understand the ideas described in *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* is what matters.

## **The paradox of duality**

So how do we know an Ultimate Reality of the sort described in the book, exists? The answer is, not surprisingly, that this is a circular question, an attempt to describe the indescribable and conceive of the inconceivable. *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* aims to demonstrate the case for something that neither exists nor does not exist, that neither *is* nor *is not*. The point is that in our usual analytical mode of thought we can only conceive of something as either existing or not existing. This is the conceptual framework within which we carry out our daily lives and we have difficulty in conceiving of anything other than that which is within these dualistic parameters. But dualistic thinking is how we think, *what we are*, we cannot use it as a means to understand that which is neither *nothing* nor *something*, neither *nothing* nor *not nothing*, neither *something* nor *not something*. And because logic is itself part and parcel of this way of thinking, it cannot take us outside of duality. This suggests we should turn our attention to some of the alternative approaches discussed in the book, especially prayer, fasting, faith, meditation and, controversially perhaps, psychoactive drugs. Some or all of these may enable us to surmount the constraints imposed by logic and dualistic thinking and to transcend their limitations.

## **What can we really know if everything we think we know is a product of the way we think?**

Could it be possible that behind all appearances - *despite* all appearances - there lies a timeless reality, a changeless unity that is inherently beyond both words and concepts? The book argues that this Ultimate Reality is not made of anything, nor is it made of nothing. It's bound by no rules of reason, logic or natural laws. It's not been created so needs no creator. It will never end because it has never begun. It's neither bound by time nor outside of time: it is transcendental. Because it encompasses everything, Ultimate Reality contains illusion - Samsara - and this is us. It's us who inhabit an Everyday Reality where the differentiation of objects and events is so much a part of experience that we're

# NOW AND ZEN

conceptually blinded to anything beyond the duality of yin-yang. We spend our time wandering and wondering on the ways of the world, on cause and effect, real and unreal, on salvation and damnation, all the while missing the obvious - that everything we think we know is a product of *the way we think*. And the way we think is dualistically. Indeed, we *are* dualistic thinking. There's no-one to whom dualistic thinking is happening: *we are it*. It's duality that helps us to structure our conscious experience of the world and duality that is the core element of our nature. It's what makes us ask: 'Who are we?', 'Why are we here?', 'Where are we going?' Indeed ...

## ... Why is there anything at all?

The concept of Unhappening raises doubts about our commonsense assumption that *anything* is actually happening. If everything that comes into being, simultaneously reverts into non-being, then surely everything that seems to us to exist will simply be cancelled out, in the way the mathematical constructs of +1 and -1 cancel each other out? But perhaps there's more to the question 'Why is there anything at all?' than simply concluding that nothing is 'happening' anywhere.

*Mindfulness, Now and Zen* has suggested that questions of this sort are founded on our unwritten and almost universally hidden (and erroneous) assumption that the essential nature of reality, Ultimate Reality, must be based within the parameters of logic and reason, cause and effect, the passage of time, and so on. These are questions that could only arise within a cognitive set constrained by dualistic principles. Questions such as 'What was there before the Big Bang?', 'Why was there a Big Bang?' and 'Why is there an Everyday Reality anyway?' are seen to be meaningless outside our dualistic world-view. Ultimate Reality, as described in this book, stands outside all that is relative and outside all that is absolute: it is transcendent.

## So, what is duality?

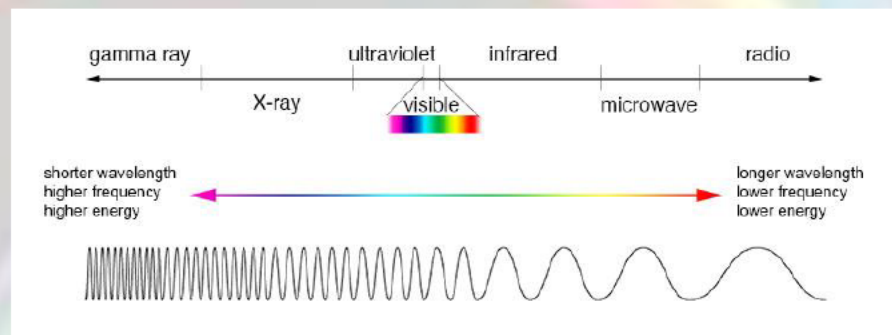
Duality is the virtual structure upon which we hang our concepts and within which our cognitive processing takes place. However, dualistic thinking in the everyday understanding of life is an



# NOW AND ZEN

important stage of learning for infant children; we seriously doubt there could be an alternative to it because it's all we know and all we have ever known. We see it all around us every day of our lives; why would we ever think it might not be reality in its entirety? But imagine a world in which all humans, like some animals, can only see in shades of grey rather than in the spectrum of colours we are used to, which themselves are only a part of a much wider spectrum.

No doubt we would have developed a detailed language to describe the finer gradations in the range of shades we see, but all would nevertheless



lie between black and white. Now imagine someone coming along and pointing out that in fact all the London buses so familiar to millions of Britons are not grey at all but are actually red. Clearly, no-one would know what they were talking about because everyone knows London buses are grey, and 'red' whatever that is, would be a concept beyond anyone's understanding. We would seriously doubt that there could be an alternative to shades of grey because grey is all we know and all we have ever known. We see it all around us every day of our lives; why would we ever think it might not be reality in its entirety? So it is with Duality. If you only know a world of up/down, black/white and yin/yang, you only expect, and only see, a world of up/down, black/white and yin/yang. This duality is the framework we have each contrived to enable us to make sense of our experiences. It facilitates the development of an Everyday Reality that can be shared between us, but the downside is that this actively prohibits serious consideration of anything that may not be encapsulated within duality. And this is where non-duality comes in, along with those who claim to have experienced this. The question is, are they ...



# NOW AND ZEN

## Saints or sages, simpletons or psychotics?

No doubt we'll differ in the plausibility we each accord to those people who tell us they have seen beyond the constraints of dualistic thinking. Certainly, in past times 'Seeing God', 'communing with the universe', 'escaping the confines of the ego' or whatever, might have rapidly provoked a stunning range of reactions, from reverence through to bemusement, rejection, psychiatric intervention and martyrdom at the stake. And perhaps one serious strain on our credulity has been the apparent inability of the individuals concerned to describe in simple terms what they claim to have witnessed. Somewhat surprisingly perhaps, it turns out that Ultimate Reality, the ground of our being, is completely indescribable in words. The chapter headed *Describing the Indescribable* considers this in some depth and attempts to explain why efforts to communicate the meaning of dualistic thinking have frequently been couched in analogy and metaphor. Some of the most authoritative attempts are described in the book, but we don't need to rely on the words of religious teachers or philosophers and sages from bygone ages to see what they were talking about. We can each see examples of duality all around us wherever we look in the world. Indeed, so universal is our experience of duality that we might well conclude that we're somehow entrapped within it. But are we really trapped, and would it matter if we were? We see that everything is just fine as it is (in the chapter on *Absolute Perfection*), and maybe we're quite happy with our life anyway and have no desire to escape the illusory experience of dualism.



But those who choose otherwise are offered the possibility that Ultimate Reality really can be found outside the usual dualistic way we navigate our cognitive framework. It's said that when we transcend our usual way of thinking we can each know the sense of vibrant REALITY that is brought by Cosmic Consciousness, as well as the immeasurable intellectual illumination and the deeply personal,



# NOW AND ZEN

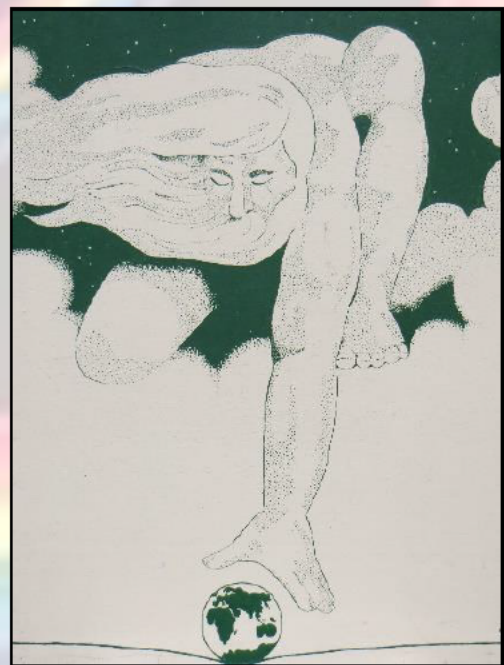
profoundly loving, unconditional acceptance that's found in Ultimate Reality. And why not? After all, *we are it*.

## The Complete Guide to Ultimate Reality

The teachings of many who have known Cosmic Consciousness frequently bear testimony to the overwhelming sense of love, acceptance, mercy and beauty that the experience has shown them. Does this mean these are actual characteristics of Ultimate Reality or are they the nearest that words can come to communicating the experience of Cosmic Consciousness to those within Everyday Reality? Perhaps the description of Cosmic Consciousness as being one of overwhelming reality, love, joy and unconditional acceptance is the best we can do to describe the ineffable experience of transcending all conceptual understanding? Since this is essentially an experience of the pre-conceptual, within which all concepts, thoughts and ideas originate, it's perhaps inevitable that when we come to communicate it to others, we have no way to do so other than by translating the experience into concepts and words. And straight away we're into the world of Everyday Reality, of Samsara, with all its inherent characteristics, categorisations, differentiation and duality.

### **Does Ultimate Reality really exist?**

Maybe Ultimate Reality is right in front of us all the time - the illusion being that we think we're not seeing it when, in reality, we are. It's as if we're on the side of Ultimate Reality that doesn't know itself, unlike the side called Nirvana that knows both sides as one (rather like the sound of one hand clapping). Unlike anything else - atoms, unicorns, gravity, flightless birds and fairies - the existence of Ultimate Reality is in a rather unique position. For one thing, it completely defies description, and for another its actuality remains untestable. When it comes to judging the evidence for and against a hypothesis the usual approach might be to weigh up those



# NOW AND ZEN

factors that identify the characteristics of the phenomenon under investigation and to assess whether experiment and experience confirm or deny the presence of these. For most things this methodology is perfectly acceptable, but it makes very little sense when what we're looking at is *everything*.

However, one aspect that we should consider in assessing the likeliness of the sort of Ultimate Reality discussed in the book is *why* such a thing might exist. But Ultimate Reality is neither a 'being' in time nor a 'being' outside of time. Nor is it subject to the laws of cause and effect. Indeed, it's not a 'thing' in any sense. While it can be described as a unity, as absolute simplicity and perfection, these are not separate characteristics because they are all part and parcel of the unity. Nor should we assume that Ultimate Reality must envisage a final destiny for creation that would provide a final justification for the existence of mankind. Perhaps humanity has no ultimate destiny because we're there already: in a timeless state nothing is changing so nothing is going anywhere anyway. What this boils down to is that there are no grounds for us to make any assumptions whatsoever about the 'intentions' of Ultimate Reality. All such ideas are firmly rooted in Samsara; in the timelessness of Nirvana they are seen to be mere illusions.

And we can all see beyond illusion. Whilst many reports of Cosmic Consciousness have originated in wholly exceptional individuals, the book shows that some quite ordinary people claim to have united with Ultimate Reality. This has apparently not always required them to have a particular religious background or to be any more or less virtuous than any other human being. Nor have they been any less egotistical or any more devout or deserving than any other person, which does suggest there is hope for us all.

The question is, if they did it, how can you?

## **How can you see Ultimate Reality?**

One of the propositions made in *Mindfulness, Now and Zen* is that, despite all appearances, we appear to be literally living in the past. In relation to the present moment we are a sort of echo, a memory, a trace or a reflection.



# NOW AND ZEN

It's been suggested that the only way to grasp Ultimate Reality, to experience Cosmic Consciousness, is to do-it-yourself, and it's in this spirit that the book has emphasised the role performed by meditation in bringing us personally into the here and now. No claims are made that meditation is the only way to attain Cosmic Consciousness, nor that it's necessarily the best approach for everyone. Indeed, simple faith, in the form of an intense and immediate belief in Ultimate Reality, may be a much more productive approach for some. Similarly prayer, in its numerous forms, might offer the most profitable approach to spiritual experience for many others. But at the heart of each of these is the development of egolessness - the loss of that sense of self that makes each of us so certain that we are separate from each other, separate from the world and separate from the entire cosmos. And whilst some might argue for the use of psychoactive drugs, less controversial is the role played by simple acts of contemplation and reflection in the quietness of one's mind. The *Exercises in Cosmic Thinking* that are outlined in the book are intended to stimulate such musings, in the anticipation that ultimately this will enable our thinking to be more versatile.

## **Is there anybody in there?**

The bottom line is that in our search for Ultimate Reality maybe the most important thing we can do is to stop looking 'out there' and start by looking in the here and now. Our fascination with science, and especially particle physics, as the route to knowledge of Ultimate Reality is reflected in (and maybe arises from) our continual search for truth 'out there' in the world of tangible stuff, the world of phenomena. But in seeking Ultimate Reality in the material world the scientific method is seriously limited. It restricts our judgement of the acceptability of evidence for what *can* really be real to a tight set of rules, when we can't know in advance exactly which rules - if any - are relevant to the search for *knowledge of everything*. Add this to the exclusive focus on what is tangible and measurable, and you've imposed rigid and artificial boundaries on what sort of Ultimate Reality you can actually hope to find.

The final message of the book then, is this: Stop looking out there! When Jesus said *the Kingdom of Heaven is within*, he was affirming a particular piece of wisdom that's been

# NOW AND ZEN

passed down to us through the ages from many different religious traditions. And those who have spoken of this have always brought the same message: *leave your ego behind and look within.*

## **Mindfulness meditation**

In simple terms: practise Meditation. Unlike prayer it requires no religious belief; unlike fasting it requires no physical hardship, and unlike psychoactive drug use it requires no external neurological stimulus. With meditation, everything comes quite naturally from within.

