light up your life

Shine the light of awareness into the shadowy corners of your consciousness and find freedom from unhappiness. By Sally Kempton

Recently, I heard a young mother talking to her four-year-old, who had just dripped chocolate ice cream onto his shirt. Her tone was impatient, but it was her words—"Can't you be more conscious?"—that struck me, especially because the kid seemed to know exactly what she meant.

Those words—"be more conscious"—are almost as much a part of our postmodern jargon as the word "cool". Any dictionary will give half a dozen meanings for "conscious". And as a culture, we use "conscious" and "consciousness" to describe anything from an individual's effort to pay attention, to the movement made up of people interested in knowing the truth of who they are and how the universe works, to a level of our being, and to the underlying intelligence at the heart of life: spirit itself. And much more.

Since the late 1960s, the phrase "being conscious" has been a code for holding a whole complex of progressive social concepts: environmentalism, grass-roots political action, socially responsible investing, microeconomics, and sensitivity to the concerns of people of a different culture, race, or gender. In a recent poster for a yoga event, I noticed that one of sponsors, an investment firm, was called Be Conscious, while a participating studio went by the name of Conscious Yoga. Consciousness has become a brand.

But to the sages of the Indian Vedantic tradition and to many yogis, consciousness (or awareness) is both an entrance point into the truth of who we are and also the instrument by which we awaken. And as our ideas of what a human being really is have evolved, so has the yogan ideal of a conscious life.

When I began my inner journey, in the 1970s, yoga and psychology often seemed opposed to each other—psychology being about the personal self, yoga having to do with that in us which is eternal. But over the last 30 years, more and more of us have come to recognise that the path of consciousness—the inner essence of yoga—asks us to wake up on every level. That means waking up not only to our divine self but also to those selves that don't feel so divine.

At some point, we need to investigate and integrate the ways in which our habitual patterns of thinking and feeling trip us up. On this path, we learn not to push away moments of discomfort but to welcome them as opportunities to see into and eventually through the unexamined beliefs, expectations, and assumptions that may be driving us. Being conscious in the yogan sense of the word means taking a radical kind of responsibility for yourself.

RADICAL RESPONSIBILITY
The crucial first recognition on the path to radical consciousness happens when you realise that your inner states—your motives, emotional reactions, and patterns of thought—are constantly altering your experience of the world around you. I am not suggesting, as some new age teachings do, that if you redirect your thoughts or develop strong, emotionally charged positive intentions, your life will automatically start to go swimmingly. Nor am I implying that everything unpleasant that happens to you is your fault, the result of some wrong thought or forgotten karmic mistake. Obviously, we're all embedded in complex webs of culture, physical environment and other macro-conditions that shape and often control our destiny in ways that are beyond our individual ability to change. (Moreover, though positive intentions have great power, they don't always ensure that everything will work out the way you'd like.)

Nonetheless, if you look deep into your own life, you can't help noticing that your beliefs and expectations, many of them formed in early childhood, skew the way
you experience reality. And though spiritual practice is enormously important in freeing us from identifying with these patterns, it will not, by itself, remove them altogether. I know of many people, myself included, who regularly “get” the truth of oneness in an immediate, experiential way. They realise that everything is one energy, that “I” as an egoic being doesn’t actually exist and that a peaceful, balanced state is always available. Yet at the level of daily life, they are still undermined by the same emotional tendencies, the same difficulties in relationships.

Indeed, yoga and meditation can profoundly shift your worldview and certain kinds of psychotherapy and bodywork can help free you from much of your patterning. But for real freedom, there is no substitute for becoming conscious of what lies in your unconscious—for the kind of self-inquiry that can start to show you what lies beneath the surface mind.

To some degree, you are always going to be at the mercy of your unconscious until you learn not only how to drop the thoughts that cause suffering but also how to loosen the tendencies behind them. Carl Jung, a great pioneer of modern psychology, famously described the phenomenon of projection, in which inner tendencies that you can’t allow into your consciousness get projected onto other people, so that they seem to be coming to you from outside yourself. A sophisticated text of Vedanta, the Yoga Vasishtha, puts the same insight like this: “Your vision creates your reality.” Essentially, this is also the conclusion of neuroscience. The world appears to you as it does because of the filters established in your brain. These filters—not just your “stories” about reality, but the energies behind those stories—largely determine your take on reality, and they will go on creating seemingly external circumstances that mirror your expectations and beliefs.
But this is the beauty of the path of consciousness. If you take responsibility for your own experience and try giving attention to your own part in the process, your consciousness has an amazing way of freeing up your capacity for creative response.

PETTY TYRANTS
Sometimes it's easier to see this in hindsight. A case in point: I once worked with a man who bullied and belittled me. I responded defensively, and after a while I became gun-shy around him. My work suffered, of course, but what really suffered was my self-esteem. I used to wonder, "Why doesn't this man respect me? Why doesn't he understand how hard I work?" After a while, I learned to read his moods and used persuasion and flattery—tactics that the powerless have perfected for centuries to influence petty tyrants. I learned a lot from this experience, but still, for a long time afterward, I couldn't think about this man without resentment.

A few years ago, I ran into a friend from that period, and we began reminiscing about our former boss. I told her that I still resented him. My friend asked me, "What could you have done at the time that would have made a difference?" I thought that my answer would be, "Stand up for myself." But what came up instead was, "I could have laughed." If I'd been able to treat his tantrums lightly, it would have defused the tension between us.

What stopped me? Mainly a slew of unexamined tensions and fears about authority, not to mention feelings of unworthiness, all stewing in my subconscious, just waiting for some bully to trigger them. But the deepest problem was that a part of me believed that if I became enough of a victim, then some higher authority—a grownup, perhaps? God?—would come along and rescue me. On some level, I was waiting for the deus ex machina and not taking responsibility for creating change myself.

Don't get me wrong—I'm not saying the guy wasn't a bully. Nor am I saying that I deserved to have a bad time because I didn't have the awareness or strength to overcome my circumstances. What is true is that as soon as I recognised my own responsibility in the dynamic, I stopped being angry at my boss. Instead, I could see that the real issue was the inner patterning I carried and the need for it to be brought out of its shadowy home in the depths of my subconscious, then to be seen and, to use Jung's term, integrated.

One basic principle of consciousness is that your outer life reflects your inner life: Every time you feel hurt by a careless lover or made angry by an aggressive driver, you are being shown a part of your shadow.

It's not that you caused the lover to be careless or the driver to be aggressive, but if you did not have some tendency to feel hurt or angry, you wouldn't get hooked by the person or the situation. Once you recognise that truth, you can stop blaming the people who seem to be making you unhappy—including yourself!—and start looking toward the source of the pain.

SHADOWS AND MONSTERS
Though there are many useful practices for bringing consciousness to our shadow feelings, I've found that the most efficient way of working with deep emotional tendencies is through sensations in the body. That's because the triggers that really get you reach far deeper than the discursive mind. They're layered into your energy body, lodged in your brain tissues and in your muscles. So bringing consciousness to shadow feelings isn't just a question of insight. You begin to truly free yourself from these patterns only when you learn how to feel and release them in the body. And this is done with the tool of awareness itself.

For the last few months, I've been inspired by watching my friend Sharon, who is working in this feeling-based fashion. Sharon is by any measure someone with a successful life. She's the centre of a family, she works for worthwhile causes, and she's practised yoga and meditation for years with powerful teachers. She also suffers from a belief that people don't like her. Yes, she even knows that's just a story she doesn't need to tell herself.

four truths about becoming conscious

The tricky part of becoming conscious is that it requires practice—you have to rouse yourself every time you fall back into the trance of unconsciousness. When you find yourself in that trance, remind yourself of these four truths:

1. Your inner state alters your experience of external reality.

2. Nobody else—not your friends, your soul mate, your parents, or the people who annoy you—can change your inner state more than temporarily.

3. Your "free will" is constantly being undermined by unconscious emotional drives, by beliefs held and decisions made in early childhood, and by all the fears and traumas that you've been stuffing into your unconscious.

4. The time to free yourself from all this is now.
But when her son Todd began wanting to spend holidays with his father, her first husband, it fed her belief. The whole thing came to a head at Christmas, when her family had gathered, and Todd called to say he wouldn't be coming. Sharon was blindsided by a wave of fury. She screamed at Todd, slammed down the phone, went to her room, and cried for hours. "I kept thinking, 'I know better than this. This is crazy.' But it wouldn't go away."

Such a "hot" moment can be the best possible time to transform a feeling. Sharon saw that if she could turn her full attention to the anger and grief, she might be able to discover its root and let it go. So she coached herself to step back from the immediate situation. She saw a long string of moments when someone who was "supposed" to love her had let her down. She saw that each event had the same resonance, the same hot black anger, disappointment and grief.

She deliberately turned her awareness, like a laser, onto the feeling of grief. She found it in her body—a burning sensation that was stuck in her chest and throat.

Then she began to sob. But the sobs did not feel as if they belonged to the adult Sharon. They felt like the sobs of a young girl. "The hardest thing at that point was to keep my attention with the feeling," she said. "It was so uncomfortable that all I wanted to do was get out of there. I took refuge in insights I remembered from my reading—identifying the psychological pattern, attaching it to my father, and so forth. Then I'd drag myself back to the sheer energetic sensations. It became a meditation—a meditation on the energy of this emotion."

As she sat there, the sharp edges of her resentment and grief started to shift and soften. Her chest opened and her shoulders straightened—she'd had some kind of release.

**WHEN "NOBODY LOVES ME"**

"Of course, I'd known for a long time that my nobody-loves-me story was related to something that happened a long time ago, that it didn't have to do with any current situation. But knowing it on an insight level is one thing. Realising it energetically is something else."

Ever since then, Sharon says, she's begun to stop taking it personally when people don’t want to spend time with her. "I still get pangs of it sometimes. But that deep anguish, the swamp of hurt feelings, is just not there."

A great eighth-century teacher of Vedanta, Shankaracharya, said that as a fire burns down a forest that has been growing for centuries, so a moment of illumination can burn the tendencies of a lifetime, as it did for Sharon. Each time we bring the light of awareness into the corners of our psyche, it is like turning on the light in a dark room. As we get accustomed to the feelings, we find we can leave the light on. The monsters and dragons reveal themselves to be shadows. Then we don't have to do anything to get rid of them. It's as if they were never there. ✫

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