

Ways to Go Beyond and Why They Work – IONS

Blog

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Never before has any civilization had access to almost all the world's spiritual practices. In major cosmopolitan cities, it is now possible to attend rituals from a wide range of religious traditions, to learn to meditate, to practice yoga or chi gong, to take part in shamanic practices, to explore consciousness through psychedelic drugs (albeit illegally in most places), to sing and chant, to participate in a wide range of prayers, to learn martial arts and to practice a bewildering array of sports.

All these practices can take us beyond normal, familiar, everyday states of consciousness. They can lead to experiences of connection with more-than-human consciousness, and a sense of a greater conscious presence. Such experiences are often described as spiritual.

The experiences themselves leave open the question of the nature of the spiritual realm. As I discuss in my new book, [Ways To Go Beyond, And Why They Work](#), there are several possible interpretations of spiritual experiences, including the materialist view that they are all inside brains and that there are no more-than-human forms of consciousness 'out there'.

At the same time, spiritual practices are being investigated scientifically as never before. We are at the beginning of a new phase of scientific, philosophical, and spiritual development.

This convergence of science and spiritual practices is surprising from the point of view of materialist orthodoxy, in which the vast majority of contemporary scientists have been trained. Yet it is entirely consistent with the scientific method, which involves the formation of hypotheses – guesses about the way the world works – and then testing them experimentally. The ultimate arbiter is experience, not theory. In French, the word *experience*, means both 'experience' and 'experiment'. The Greek word for experience is *empeiria*, the root of our English word 'empirical'. The exploration of consciousness through consciousness itself is literally empirical, based on experience. Spiritual practices provide ways in which consciousness can be explored empirically.

Ways to Go Beyond continues the enquiry I started in my book [Science and Spiritual Practices](#), published last year, in which I discuss seven different practices that have been investigated empirically, both by the practitioners themselves and by scientists studying the effects of their practices. In this new book, I discuss seven further practices:

1. The Spiritual Side of Sports
2. Learning from Animals

3. Fasting
4. Cannabis, Psychedelics and Spiritual Openings
5. Powers of Prayer
6. Holy Days and Festivals
7. Cultivating Good Habits, Avoiding Bad Habits, and Being Kind

At the end of each chapter, after the discussion of a particular kind of practice, I suggest two ways in which readers can experience this practice for themselves. I conclude with a discussion of why these practices work.

Some people may find it surprising that sports can be thought of in spiritual terms, but I believe that in the modern world it is through the exercise of physical skill – whether in playing football or tennis, skiing downhill, or windsurfing – that many people experience being in the flow, or come into the present, or feel themselves part of something greater than themselves.

These two books do not constitute a comprehensive survey of all spiritual practices. There are many others, including yoga, service to others, tai chi, chi gong, devotional worship or *bhakti*, tantric sex, caring for dying people, dream yoga, and the practices of the arts. Some practices suit some people better than others; some practices are better at some times of life than others, and all religious traditions have their own combinations.

I have taken part in all the practices I discuss in this book. Many people are more expert than I am in each of these practices. I am not a guru, but an explorer. My purpose is to show that there is a wide variety of ways to connect to greater conscious realities, however we conceive of them, and that the effects of these practices can be investigated scientifically. We are on the threshold of a new era of the exploration of consciousness, both through a revival of spiritual practices and also through the scientific study of them. After several generations in which science and spirituality seemed to be in opposition, they are becoming complementary. Together, they are contributing to an unprecedented phase of spiritual evolution, beginning now.

About the Author



Rupert Sheldrake, PhD, is a biologist and author of more than 90 technical scientific papers and nine books. He was a Fellow of Clare College, Cambridge, and of Harvard University, lived for seven years in India, including two years in the ashram of Fr Bede Griffiths, and is currently a Fellow of IONS. His new book [Ways to Go Beyond and Why They Work](#) has just been published and is also available as an audiobook, read by Rupert Sheldrake himself.