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Book Review

The Untethered Soul: The Journey Beyond Yourself

by Michael A. Singer

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The Untethered Soul should become known as a modern spiritual classic. Why? Because it so directly and skillfully involves the reader in a liberating process of self-inquiry. This is a modest book that attracts no undue attention to itself or to its author. The central character in the book is the reader who is revealed to be a person entranced by repeated cycles of life-dramas while caught up in each of the two constituent roles of dramatic theater – as protagonist and as antagonist. That is the existential dilemma from which the reader is invited to find release by going on a guided inward journey. At its culmination, the journey promises an arrival at (or a return to) a reliably established seat within the clarity of witness consciousness. Then true happiness becomes available along with liberation from the otherwise endlessly recurring cycles of life-dramas that most likely were among the motivations that brought the reader to the book in the first place.

The teaching or argument that is offered in *The Untethered Soul* is divided into five parts. They are: Awakening Consciousness, Experiencing Energy, Freeing Yourself, Going Beyond, and Living Life. The author, while respecting ancient teaching traditions from India and certainly well acquainted with them, explicitly draws upon them for only a few directly relevant figures and concepts. These can help the reader to recognize connections between the book's straightforwardly modern exposition and a large body of teachings that are available in many of the world's great philosophical and spiritual traditions. Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950), the great sage from south India, is evoked as an apt instance of a teacher who was known for his penetratingly direct method of instruction. The Buddha and Plato, widely known teaching exemplars, are also mentioned. Yoga is cited in its root sense as a method for transpersonal and transformative inquiry. A variety of terms for subtle presence or sacred energy (e.g., Chi, Shakti, and Spirit) appear a few times, particularly in the section of the book

on Experiencing Energy. Because the book addresses a universal and perennial human dilemma, it rightly includes a few well-selected references to traditional sources that have acknowledged and addressed them. However, the book is not written to serve any particular philosophical school or religious denomination. It is neither esoteric nor obscure in its language. It has a ringing clarity that will make it accessible to anyone who opens it. In short, the book's teaching is generic in the best sense.

Awakening Consciousness, the first section of the book, begins by inviting the reader to notice the non-stop mental dialogue that is always in process and seems to be located somewhere inside the head. The late social theorist Ernest Becker who studied self-esteem maintenance used a cinematic term for this phenomenon by calling it "the inner newsreel." He found that it creates a more or less consistent self-image to which one becomes attached and that one will tend to protect and preserve at all costs. The active part of the mental dialogue seems to come from an inner voice that narrates the world and at the same time sustains the self-image. In *The Untethered Soul*, it serves as the starting point for an inquiry into the costs of this familiar form of self-maintenance and into the possibility of release from its daunting consequences while remaining realistic about the impossibility of putting an outright stop to it.

A key factor in awakening is to acknowledge that the model of reality that is generated by the inner voice is a much reduced and impoverished one. Although it can function somewhat effectively in the short run as a protective strategy for generating a self-image and maintaining self-esteem, if one would step back and take a look, then it soon would become clear that the model cuts the world down to a size so small that very little reality can get admitted, experienced, contemplated, or enjoyed. When this is acknowledged and then followed by an active will to disengage from

attachment to the contents of the inner dialogue, then spiritual or transpersonal growth can begin: “There is nothing more important to true growth than realizing that you are not the voice of the mind – you are the one who hears it” (Singer, 2007, p. 10).

The ancient distinction between the field and the knower of the field, or between the inner voice and the one who can observe it, is crucial. It provides a focus for the practice of self-remembering and is the first step in a process of self-observation. Sustained awareness of the distinction, the practice of noticing the voice without becoming lost in the narrative that it contrives, is an occasion for transcendence: “Come to know the one who watches the voice, and you will come to know one of the great mysteries of creation” (Singer, 2007, p. 13).

When clearly seen, the chronic afflictions of the human being in society – the dependence on external circumstances, reliance on the opinions of others, and repeated reruns of the inner newsreel – can become the source for the cure by means of awakening witness consciousness. Given time enough, no doubt the individual psyche that is conjured up by unceasing mental chatter and model-building, and which is dubbed “the inner roommate” by the author, inevitably would welcome relief from its chronic recycling of esteem-management materials and would spontaneously open itself to a profound shift in perspective and a change in consciousness. However, intentional observation is an effective intervention that needs only a limited awareness of the repetitive cycles, but does not depend upon an indefinitely long period of maturation of the psyche:

Until you’ve watched your [inner] roommate long enough to truly understand the predicament you’re in, you really have no basis for practices that help you deal with the mind. Once you’ve made the decision to free yourself from the mental melodrama, you are ready for teachings and techniques. (Singer, 2007, pp. 21-22)

Self-inquiry, when guided by skilled teachers and skillful methods, can sharpen the distinction between object and subject and can point toward the transcending mystery that is the consciously witnessing subject. Thoughts, emotions, and physical forms have been categorized by many ancient and classical texts as part of the realm of objects, and have been considered to be plural as part of “the many.” The conscious subject, as separate and independent from the realm of objects, has in some texts been considered to be plural (at least

provisionally), or multi-leveled and converging to singular at higher levels of selfhood, or simply singular; that is, it has been variously understood to be one among multiple enduring selves or else ultimately as one alone. Traditionally India’s influential philosophies—Dvaita, Vishistadvaita or Bhedabheda, and Advaita—have supported and preserved these alternative forms of categorization, and authoritative texts across many traditions not only take distinctions of this kind for granted, but also rely upon them and make them explicit. One well-known instance, in the second chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita*, celebrates the true and unassailable self as that which weapons cannot cut, fire cannot burn, water cannot wet, and wind cannot dry. *The Untethered Soul* invites the reader into direct experience of the essential self by proposing simple experiments in awareness and by taking “consciousness” for its apex term: “Consciousness is the highest word you will ever utter. There is nothing higher or deeper than consciousness. Consciousness is pure awareness” (Singer, 2007, p. 28). Then, reflecting something like the fundamental distinction between the conscious self (purusha) and the realm of objects (prakriti) that had its earliest expression in ancient Samkhya philosophy, the author prepares the reader for self-recognition as pure consciousness:

You live in the seat of consciousness. A true spiritual being lives there, without effort and without intent. . . . You go so deep that you realize that’s where you’ve always been. At each stage of your life you have seen different thoughts, emotions, and objects pass before you. But you have always been the conscious receiver of all that was. (p. 29)

The Untethered Soul welcomes the reader to an inner journey that starts and ends with a quiet and confident awareness of being centered in a state of witness consciousness. This state can be discovered or recovered despite the centrifugal pull exerted by the synchronization of the five physical senses with emotions and thoughts. Together they de-center one’s awareness, leading one to live as eccentric, neurotic, and lost: “When the consciousness gets sucked in, it no longer knows itself as itself. It knows itself as the objects it is experiencing. In other words, you perceive yourself as these objects. You think you are the sum of your learned experiences.” Yet the difference between an eccentric and a centered position will be evident: “When you are a centered being . . . your consciousness is always aware of being conscious. Your awareness of being is independent

of the inner and outer objects you happen to be aware of” (Singer, 2007, pp. 35-36). The British mystic Douglas E. Harding (1909-2007) described this double awareness – awareness of some object or objects of consciousness and awareness of conscious-being which is being conscious – as “two-way looking” (i.e., what you are looking at and what you are looking from). According to Harding, the world can become a problem only when one “overlooks the looker.” In *The Untethered Soul* we find the same perennial insight about self-remembering and self-forgetfulness:

As you pull back into the consciousness, this world ceases to be a problem. It’s just something you’re watching. It keeps changing, but there is no sense of that being a problem.” (p. 37)

True meditation, according to the author, is to contemplate the source of consciousness. Meditation dissolves rather than solves problems, or at any rate it reveals them to be somewhere beside the point.

Experiencing Energy is the second part of the book and a second component of the inner journey. The author clarifies the concept by stating that “The energy we are discussing does not come from the calories your body burns from food. There is a source of energy you can draw upon from inside” (Singer, 2007, p. 42). The inner source of energy is potentially limitless. Nevertheless, it does not seem to be immediately available when contact with the seat of witness consciousness is temporarily lost due to the attractive pull of other-directedness or contraction into fear. A method for opening and remaining open, therefore, is an essential component of a spiritual path and inner journey: “Through meditation, through awareness and willful efforts, you can learn to keep your centers open. You do this by just relaxing and releasing” (p. 47).

In *The Untethered Soul*, two terms from traditional India are used to describe the dynamics of blocked energy. They are chakras (energy centers) and samskaras (traces from past impressions that have not been cleared from heart and mind). Perhaps modern concepts could have served a similar end (e.g., reaction patterns [widely employed in diverse contexts], defense mechanisms [deployed throughout psychoanalytic traditions], or automatization [as analyzed by Arthur J. Deikman]). Again, if we recall that the book is describing behavior patterns in relation to the “spiritual heart” rather than the physical one, then the cardiovascular system in the physical body might provide a somewhat helpful simile.

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Like plaque, a semi-hardened accumulation of substances that circulate with fluids but can dangerously impede blood flow and can build up enough to cause blockage and breakdown, accumulated samskaras circulate in the more subtle level of the psyche where they may be latent for long periods, silent and unnoticed. Then some sensory experience or memory event may activate them so that either “positive” (i.e., attraction and clinging) or “negative” (i.e., fear and avoidance) reactions can be observed:

Clinging creates positive Samskaras, and when these are stimulated, they release positive energy. Hence two kinds of experiences can occur that block the heart. You are either trying to push energies away because they bother you, or you are trying to keep energies close because you like them. In both cases, you are not letting them pass, and you are wasting precious energy by blocking the flow through resisting and clinging. (Singer, 2007, p. 56)

Although protection of the image-ego or self-concept may seem to be less vitally important than protection from direct threats to physical survival, an incredible amount of time, energy, and investments of all sorts are tied up in the self-esteem issues of modern people. Disturbances to self-concept equilibrium, as the author rightly notes, are tolerated so little by most people that their lives come to be based on patterns of revisiting or avoiding other people, particular places, and objects of awareness. Consider, for instance, how many topics might never be allowed to come up in a conversation because of their disturbing effects. The hidden costs incurred by everyday normally neurotic humans to maintain these defenses are high: “Life becomes stagnant when people protect their stored issues” (Singer, 2007, p. 61). Conversely, the reward to release and transcend them is even higher: “The reward for not protecting your psyche is liberation” (p. 62). It might seem paradoxical that the inner work that is required is to let go, relax, relinquish, release. Nevertheless, this is real work that is consistent with what the late Alan Watts identified as “the law of reverse effort.” Where does one go to do this work? “There’s a place deep inside of you where the consciousness touches the energy, and the energy touches the consciousness. That’s where your work is. From that place, you let go” (Singer, 2007, p. 67).

The third part of the book, *Freeing Yourself*, makes clear that the journey that involves inner work does not get easier if it is postponed to some later or

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more convenient time. Whenever it begins, however, it requires facing and then releasing one's overt aversion to fear and one's covert attachment to it as a powerful life-shaping factor. "We define the entire scope of our outer experience based upon our inner problems. If you want to grow spiritually, you have to change that" (Singer, 2007, p. 72). When an opportunity to let go appears, one is wise to take it. To postpone will allow the disturbance to attract and to hold one's awareness, will require the diversion of energy in order to block or manage it, and will keep one at risk, de-centered, and in a "fallen" state. "This is the beginning and end of the entire path – you surrender yourself to the process of emptying yourself. When you work with this, you start to learn the subtler laws of the process of letting go" (p. 74). Details of this process, and the practices recommended in the book, cannot be adequately summarized here, but they reward the reader's close attention and prompt action. While skillful means are needed, a hint of grace supports successful practice. The conjunction of consciousness and energy is a key: "When you are no longer absorbed in your melodrama but, instead, sit comfortably deep inside the seat of awareness, you will start to feel this flow of energy coming up from deep within. This flow has been called Shakti. This flow has been called Spirit" (p. 87). The flow facilitates the inner work, perhaps makes it possible to get on with it at all: "This is the core of spiritual work. When you are comfortable with pain passing through you, you will be free" (p. 106).

In part four, *Going Beyond*, the likelihood of one's potential resistance to release and transformation is acknowledged and addressed. The author begins with an allegory that is a modern equivalent of Plato's Allegory of the Cave in Book 7 of *The Republic*. It vividly expresses the contrast between living within the confines of the bounded and limiting (no matter how much or how little distorted) conceptual world and the "untethered state" of liberation. The author appreciates that the tendency to cling to the constructed conceptual world and to the individual psyche that mirrors it is understandable as a reaction to fear and as an aspiration toward some small zone of safety and comfort – even if these are apparent rather than real. There are evident affinities in this part of the book with Buddhist teachings about the generation of the phenomenal self and conventional world through the stages of dependent origination (*pratitya-samutpada*). Desire, craving, and clinging are deep impulses, and the author observes: "Your sense of self is determined by where you are focusing your consciousness" (Singer,

2007, p. 128). He also notes that "Clinging creates the bricks and mortar with which we build a conceptual self." (p. 129)

The close analysis in this part of the book is balanced by a number of questions, exercises, and thought experiments that offer the reader encouragement to continue the process of inquiry and the movement toward change while being honest about any resistance. It also affords the author repeated occasions to offer assurance and to affirm the challenging nature of the inner journey:

The journey is one of passing through exactly where you have been struggling not to go. As you pass through that state of turmoil, the consciousness itself is your only repose. (Singer, 2007, p. 132)

And similarly: "There is no way out through building this model of yours. The only way to inner freedom is through the one who watches: the Self" (p. 135).

The key features of the practice are restated repeatedly in this part of the book, too. Why? Because these instructions are so easily forgotten by anyone who is anxious or afraid – despite their brevity and clarity:

You have to let go and pass through the cleansing process that frees you from your psyche. You do this by simply watching the psyche be the psyche. The way out is through awareness. Stop defining the disturbed mind as a negative experience; just see if you can relax behind it. When your mind is disturbed, don't ask, 'What do I do about this?' Instead ask, 'Who am I that notices this?' (Singer, 2007, p. 135)

Once again: "Your only way out is the witness. Just keep letting go by being aware that you are aware" (p. 136).

When one arrives at the fifth and last part of the book, *Living Life*, it is like seeing a selection of desserts presented after a fine meal. The reader can save the five essays that comprise this section of the book for last, of course. Alternatively, one or more of them could be read first or even intermittently while working with the first four parts of the book. The topics of these essays are unconditional happiness, nonresistance, contemplating death, the Taoist middle way, and God's love. Each of them creatively expresses the kind of life and the sort of attitude that is taught in a more systematic fashion throughout the first four parts of the book. Together they lightly underline the lesson that "Spiritual practices are not an end in themselves" (Singer, 2007, p. 145).

Each of these essays is pervaded by joy, a love of life, a sense of balance, and respect for death as a friend and teacher. They are like welcome correspondence from a wise spiritual friend who has a profound sense of humor, and are not to be missed.

Reference

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