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Lunch with Deepak I: LSD, Quantum Healing, and Plato

A skeptic and a mystic seek common ground. Part one of four.

Matthew Hutson <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/experts/matthew-hutson>>

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In March, I attended a debate on the proposition "The more we evolve, the less we need God," With Michael Shermer and Heather Berlin for the motion and Deepak Chopra and Anoop Kumar against the motion. The next day I published an account titled "Do Not Debate Deepak Chopra <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psyched/201803/do-not-debate-deepak-chopra>> " (subtitle: "He's not even wrong."). Soon after, Chopra reached out to me and invited me to lunch. In April I met him in his office at Deepak Homebase in Manhattan, we had lunch downstairs at ABC Kitchen, and returned to his office. This is a nearly full transcript of our two-hour conversation.

This is part 1 of 4. Here are parts 2 <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psyched/201806/lunch-deepak-ii-hawking-synesthesia-and-scientism>> , 3 <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psyched/201806/lunch-deepak-iii-bullshit-dawkins-and-watson>> , and 4 <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psyched/201806/lunch-deepak-iv-drama-obama-s-dog-and-the-pope>> .

Matt: So, I'm curious why you invited me, what you wanted to talk about.

Deepak: I read your article, "Not Even Wrong." [Laughter <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/laughter>> .] That's been my label for a long time from a lot of people, so I thought I'd give you my perspective on what I think reality is and see if we can expand the conversation.

Matt: So the debate, it seemed like it was ships crossing in the night. The two sides were talking about different things and so I think it was clear to—or everyone else had one conception about what the debate was going to be about: the usefulness of the idea of God as conceived in monotheistic religions. Whereas the two of you were—it seemed like you were avoiding that debate and talking about something else.

Deepak: So let me give you a little background to that. The first time we were invited to the debate by the organizers—I didn't know who they were—the topic was, "As we evolve do we need religion?" So I called the organizers and I said, "Let me rephrase that if you don't mind. Can we say, 'As we evolve do we need religious <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/religion>> experience?'" So they said "We don't know what that means." I said, as I look across the religions of the world, the common features I see are: Number one: transcendence—as a

religious experience, not the dogma, not the ideology, not the institution—but transcendence, going beyond subject-object split. Number two: the emergence of platonic values as a result of that experience, like the desire to know the truth, goodness, beauty <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/beauty>> , harmony, love <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/relationships>> , compassion, joy, equanimity, gratitude <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/gratitude>> and humility, wonder, curiosity. It's very human but it gets overshadowed by everyday experience. And number three: a loss of the fear <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/fear>> of death, because that happens to experience, not to the consciousness in which that experience occurs. I think they didn't understand that, honestly, so they rephrased it as "Do we need God?" So I said, "Listen, before I even go there, can we have a conversation?" So they were very gracious. We all got together with the board or whatever and we had a conversation. I said, "Honestly, God is a very loaded term and if by God we mean some imagined deity or some dead white male in the sky then it's not something that we can even address because we don't have that conception of God as an imagined deity."

Matt: You mean that's not something you personally can address?

Deepak: Yeah I can't address it, nor can my partner. They said, "Well if you make that clear up front, then it's fine, but we still want to maintain God in the title." So I was keen to have this conversation because Michael and I have been going back and forth for 30 years now, and I thought, Michael's come to a very good place with me personally. So we agreed to the title. But if you go to the Eastern wisdom <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/wisdom>> traditions—Buddhism, Vedanta, Shaoism, all the Eastern traditions—then God is pure consciousness, period. So the debate, you're right, they were talking about the mythical God and we were talking about that which is inconceivable as consciousness but makes every concept possible.

So I can give you a background on that because monotheistic religions are at war all the time amongst each other, and all of the problems in the world right now are a consequence of that. But nobody talks about "What is a religious or spiritual <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/spirituality>> experience?" Hundreds of millions of people across the world don't have that idea at all that the monotheistic religions propose. In fact, if you go deep into the teachings of Buddhism, etc., the word God is not mentioned. Only consciousness is mentioned. Vedanta, only consciousness is mentioned. And it's a very different take on consciousness. So, if you'll allow me for a moment to explain that. So when I was a kid, I grew up in India with a father who was agnostic or atheist, who was trained in England as a cardiologist. He went on to become a very famous person. He discovered high altitude mountain sickness. When the Indian and Chinese army were fighting in Tibet he was putting catheters in people's hearts and measuring their cardiac pressures. He described high altitude pulmonary edema and hypertension. My mother was what you might call a Hindu. But even when she told us stories as kids and she talked about all these mythical gods and goddesses, she emphasized the fact that these are mythical, imaginary, symbolic expressions of deep aspirations in human consciousness to understand reality. Now she was also, by the way, she wasn't a very educated woman like my father was. But she had enough ideas in her upbringing to say that the world you experience as everyday reality is not real. She would say that probably because she had heard it an amount of times. But when you're a child, that sticks with you, that the world you experience is not real. So that's my childhood <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/child-development>> background until I went to medical school. Medical school, I embraced everything that my father had taught about reality being physical, material. He was actually more than—he was almost like Michael Shermer in the earlier days when I was growing up.

Matt: How did your parents <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/parenting>> get along?

Deepak: Oh he was a very loving person.

Matt: Completely different philosophies.

Deepak: Yeah but he was an amazing person in terms of being a physician. I mean this is long before technology. He could listen to a heart with a stethoscope and tell you, which you may or may not know, the PR interval, which means the difference in microseconds between the atrial and the ventricular beat, which you could verify on an

electrocardiogram. He was astonishing as a diagnostician. He trained with Wallace Brigden in England who was one of the earlier pioneers in electrocardiography. He was a consultant to the royal heart hospital to the queen at one time before he came back to India, the British army. So, he was an amazing person but he was also very compassionate. On weekends he would see patients free of charge, and my mother would cook food for them and make sure they had enough money for their bus or their train. So there was a very compassionate aspect to him, but he didn't believe in religion or anything like that.

So then when I went to medical school I totally embraced my father's constructs. Except for one or two experiences during medical school, which was in India by the way. And it was one of the newer medical schools after British independence, called the Indian Institute of Medical Sciences, and it was funded by, amongst other people, the Rockefeller Foundation, and so we had lots of international faculty. So in my fourth year of medical school, when the Beatles were in India—that's George Harrison behind you, by the way, in a turban sitting next to me. So that is a later picture but the Beatles came to India in 1969, when I was finishing my medical school. I didn't know these guys at that time. But Sergeant Pepper's had come out, Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds, and we had four medical students as visitors to our classroom for the summer from Harvard. And they had with them a bunch of LSD. So my first experience was—and I was just near 18, when we had the first LSD experience. And then another one. Twice. And suddenly what my mother had been saying all these years about the world being an illusion was in the way an epiphany to me, at the age of 17. I mean I saw that the construction of—dissolving of boundaries like this, this, this and melting away. And then just colors and shapes and forms and sounds. And then a vast nothingness with no boundaries. But I was there. Not as a body, not as a mind, not as anything I could identify with, but just totally boundless. It was totally life-shifting at the age of 18 years. But then what happened is the medical school is very busy. You have to study, pass exams, this, that. And I put that aside, that experience side.

Then at the age of 22, I came to the United States, and I had to do a lot of hardship to get here. My father wanted me to follow in his footsteps and be an academic. He was a professor, too, of cardiology. So I worked hard. India wasn't encouraging people to leave. I had to go to Sri Lanka to pass my exams, I had to borrow money to get a flight to the United States, I passed all that, I had to spend a year in New Jersey at a very ordinary community hospital, hard-working, and I got a residency in Boston with various hospitals with academics. So, Harvard, Tufts, BU, internal medicine, hard work, no thinking about consciousness whatsoever. Just passing one exam after another, getting one fellowship after another.

And then I came here in 1970, July 1, basically as an intern in a hospital that no longer exists in New Jersey, Muhlenberg Hospital, but then in the next year I got into all these academic institutions in Boston and went from one to another. I trained in internal medicine. And then I had heard vaguely of a discipline <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/self-control>> called neuroendocrinology, and I had also heard vaguely of this new revolution in medicine at that time, which was looking at peptides in the circulation. And the peptide that was very popular at that time was something called opiates, which are now popular again, and the opioid receptor, with somebody called George Solomon in Washington, who was an expert in that, but I discovered that the number one guy in the world in neuroendocrinology at that time was a professor at Tufts New England Medical Center, and his name was Seymour Reichlin and he was a legend. Okay, so, if you found a snake in his garden he would dissect it and look at the hypothalamus and identify receptors for opioids <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/conditions/opioids>> , serotonin, this and that. I'll show you his photo recently. I just met him the other day at the consciousness conference, which is bizarre because I hadn't met him in all these years. He's 94, and he was giving a lecture on serotonin and mystical experiences, at the age of 94, and he came to my lecture, and he was one of the most amazing guys in the world, actually. It was a real joy to meet him. This is him, let me show you. Anyway I'll show you his photo in a second. He's 94, he gives talks on serotonin, but he was a legend.

I got a fellowship with him, and through him I met somebody who is no longer alive, Candace Pert, who had actually discovered the opioid receptor, and she and I met at a conference. She later became the chief of brain chemistry at the NIH. And she told me these molecules that we're talking about, serotonin, opiates, oxytocin <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/oxytocin>> , dopamine <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/dopamine>> they are the molecules of emotion. So that's the first time

I've heard that expression. I said, "You should write a book about it." She did. I wrote the foreword and it was for me one of the milestones of my life. And so I applied to Reichlin's fellowship and I got it, and it was like the most prestigious thing you could get.

But then I had my own issues with medicine. Is this interesting to you? So I had my own issues, including the fact that I was seeing patients and I can see that the response was not predictable. You could give two patients the same disease and they had completely different outcomes. So at least in human beings, we didn't respond predictably. As does always occur, the bell-shaped curve, which there is to everything now. So, I started getting interested in mind-body medicine, and I would say I probably coined the phrase. In 1985 I wrote a book which nobody would accept, no publisher would accept, so I published it on my own, called *Creating Health* <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/health>> : Exploring the Mind-Body Connection. The book then was picked up by Houghton Mifflin and became a national bestseller. And I wrote another book called *Quantum Healing* which was vilified by the medical establishment because I was basically proposing, long before anybody was talking about entanglement, I was talking about the entanglement of mind, body, neuropeptides, molecules of emotion, etc., etc., from my own experience. But the books did very well with the lay public. The *New England Journal* did a good review of *Quantum Healing* in 1988, but basically I'm still ridiculed for it by the regular medical establishment.

Matt: Were you talking about quantum entanglement—

Deepak: I wasn't using the word quantum entanglement. I was talking about the fact that thoughts and molecules are inseparable, basically, and that between a thought and a molecule there's a gap, and that gap is consciousness. It's now 30 years since the book, and Rudy was my co-author. He's a neuroscientist at Harvard and the head of neuroscience <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/neuroscience>> at Mass General. He wrote the foreword to the reissue of *Quantum Healing*, which I'll send you, but it's almost now quaint with all that we know of now. But I used that word which annoyed a lot of people, including Richard Dawkins, who ridiculed me, and I said, "Listen, I'm using it as a metaphor."

All science, I was saying, was a metaphor anyway, but it was then that I also got very interested in meditation <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/meditation>> . And then I went to India, and I spend about 10 years in India talking to these teachers, basically, of consciousness, where consciousness is fundamental reality, it is beyond thought or experience, and the word they use is pure consciousness. So I went through an experience with a teacher of meditation who basically asked me questions like I can ask you right now. What is this? [Matt: "It's a glass."] And what's this? [Matt: "Flower."] And what's this? [Matt: "A candle."] What's this? [Matt: "A Sharpie."] "What's this?" [Matt: "A hand. Did I get them all right?"] So far. I said the same thing. But I was having a conversation with somebody, and he said to me, "Those are human constructs." And I was trying to tell this person, who was a meditation teacher, I was telling him about the molecules of emotion. Serotonin. He said they're not real.

So that got me thinking, okay, and I seriously went into wanting to experience pure consciousness, which they all talk about, as transcendence, beyond subject-object split. So, this person that I had this conversation with, he said, "If you were a baby and you had no language, not exposed to any language, this would not be a hand. This would be a shape, a form, a color, maybe a smell <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/scent>> , a texture, a sensation, as an activity of consciousness. But then you would be told, 'This is a hand, you have a body,' and then you would have an interpretation of that experience, which you would call a thought. And then you would also be told, 'This is your body. You have a mind. You're Indian. And you come from a Hindu family.' All social constructs. Fundamental reality is sensory perception <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/cognition>> , which is an activation of consciousness, and its interpretation is thought. The rest is a story. Mind, body, and even universe is a story." Well, that was pretty mind-boggling for a young person at the age of 35. I'd already trained now, here. Slowly, that lead to how one construct leads to another construct. Okay, so this is an iPhone. It's matter. Well I have now reified sensory experience in consciousness, an activity of consciousness in consciousness, with a construct, iPhone. Then I reify it further, made of matter. And now this is very convenient. I can study it. It's made of molecules, made of atoms. So one construct leads to another construct, particles. Then you get ultimately to possibility waves and then you're stuck again.

Okay [laughter], but along the chain, one construct built to another construct to another construct to another construct. Very useful. New York City is a construct. Latitude is a construct. Longitude is a construct. Time is it construct. Money is a construct. Wall Street is a construct. Religion is a construct. God is a construct. Universe is a construct, which you call a model, Okay. So, this led me to consciousness, exploring consciousness. Where now, you have—you know I just came from this conference, on the science of consciousness, where you have physicalists, you have dualists, you have panpsychists, you have idealists, and they're all arguing about the constructs.

So the physicalists are now in a difficult position, because they're trying to explain consciousness with the construct of physicality, and you can't. Because physicality itself is a construct. Then you have the idealists going back to Plato who are saying it's all mental. But even mental ideas are constructs. Then you have the dualists, Descartes, the two are separate, mind and body. But then how do you explain their interaction? It violates simple laws like thermodynamics. If mind is separate and body is separate, how do I lift my arm? I start with a thought so I do this. How do I speak, how do I walk, how do I do anything? So, dualism doesn't make me happy. Idealism doesn't make me happy. Physicalism, I don't know what matter is anymore.

I interviewed the Nobel laureate Wilczek, physicist from MIT. So I said, "What is matter?" "It's particles." I said, "What are particles, subatomic particles?" He says, "They are little things." I said, "But then everybody says that's a wave potential, that's in Hilbert space. What is that? Where is Hilbert space?" He says, "It's mathematical." "What is it?" "It's infinitely dimensional or zero dimensional." "Where is it?" The usual answer is "Shut up and calculate," right? So I realized that the entire new paradigm of multiverse, superstrings, eternal inflation, whatever, is all in mathematical imagination. Hilbert space is in mathematical imagination, the wave potential is in mathematical imagination. I said to Wilczek, "What is matter?" And he said, "We're still trying to figure that out." [Laughter.] I mean this is coming from a Nobel laureate who discovered a particle, you know. So I ended up where I began, which is non-dualism, that there is only consciousness.

Matt: Isn't that idealism?

Deepak: Idealism comes out of non-dualism.

Matt: So there are two types of monism [non-dualism]. There's materialism <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/consumer-behavior>> and then there is idealism. [Each holds that] there's only matter or there's only consciousness.

Deepak: Okay then we can say idealism is closest to non-duality. They don't use that word in the East. Let's go for lunch. [We head downstairs.]

Deepak: With idealism one usually relates to Plato in the West or to Bishop Berkeley and all those guys, you know. But basically, what idealism espouses, it's mental. But non-dualism says even mental is a construct. When you say mental you have words. As soon as you have a word for an experience it's no longer fundamental.

Matt: Non-dualism is a construct too.

Deepak: If I have to use words, yes.

Matt: There's no getting away from constructs.

Deepak: No, there is a way of getting away from constructs. It's called transcendence. Shut up and just be.

Matt: We never stop filtering experience—

Deepak: Every experience is filtered through given constructs. There is no getting away from it. But then we start looking at consciousness—let's find our table. [We find our table.]

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