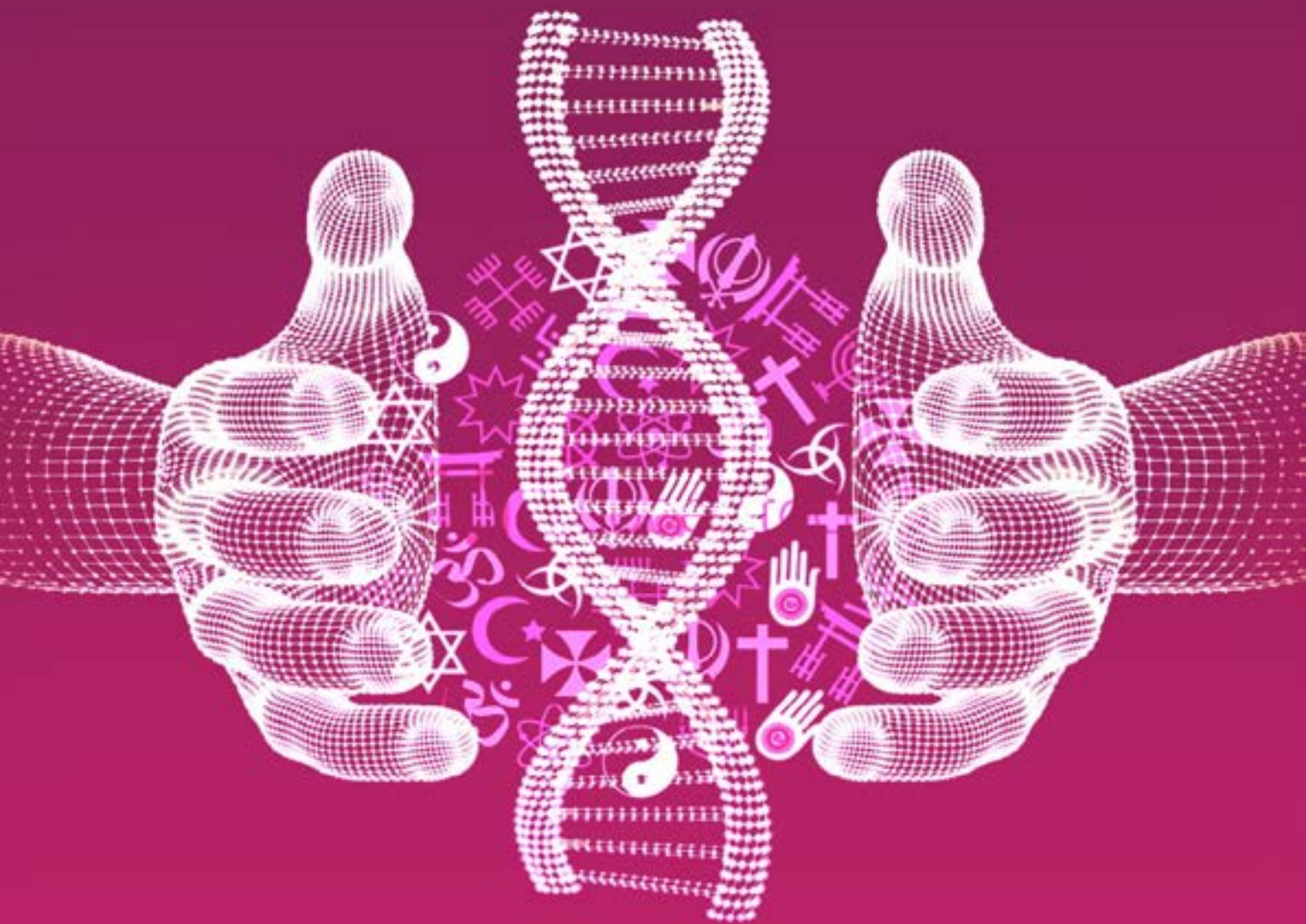


Imaginal Box SUMMARY

RUPERT SHELDRAKE'S
**SCIENCE AND SPIRITUAL
PRACTICES**



Reconnecting through Direct
Experience

Imaginal Box Presents

A SUMMARY of

Rupert Sheldrake's

**Science and Spiritual
Practices**

**Reconnecting Through Direct
Experience**

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About Rupert Sheldrake

Rupert Sheldrake, PhD, is a biologist, author, and parapsychology researcher whose work has consistently challenged scientific orthodoxy, most famously his theory of morphic resonance, which states that nature exhibits a form of memory. More recently, he gave a TEDx talk in support of his book *The Science Delusion* (published as *Science Set Free* in the US), which directly confronts dogma within the scientific community and for which the talk was banned.

He continues to publish books and give lectures, challenging his audiences by taking them to the point where answers to scientific questions begin to pose deeper, spiritual, questions.

About Imaginal Box

Imaginal Box is a mind, body, spirit book summary subscription service with a mission to distil the wisdom of the world's most influential spiritual teachers and traditions in order to enrich the minds and souls of those committed to seeking spiritual knowledge. Our summaries are unique literary works designed to introduce the ideas of important mind, body, spirit book titles as well as contextualise the work within a wider framework for the reader who may wish to explore the topic further.

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1

The quiet explosion of spirituality

One could be forgiven for thinking that throughout the last two centuries religion has lost ground to science and atheism. The declining numbers of churchgoers in the West and the popularity of writers such as Richard Dawkins would seem to support this.

However, alongside these trends there has been an explosion of interest in spirituality. In the UK, while 50% state they have no religion, only 13% describe themselves as atheists, while 87% believe that human beings have some spiritual element and 33% believe in actual spiritual entities. Also, increasing numbers of people are reporting direct religious or mystical experiences:

from 22% in 1962, to 33% in 1994, and up to 49% in 2009. Combine this with the popularity of practices such as yoga and meditation and it's clear that spirituality is thriving. Furthermore, studies since the 1970s into practices such as meditation, prayer, community singing, and gratitude - practices found in all religions - have shown numerous physical and mental health benefits. So while the interpretation of such benefits differ according to the faith (or lack thereof) of the practitioner, these practices remain part of humanity's shared heritage with the power to enrich our lives.

★

2

Meditation changes the structure of the brain

In many ways, meditation resembles prayer. However, a key difference is prayer concerns wishes or thoughts, whereas meditation is about detachment from thoughts. The two practices complement each other nicely if we liken meditation to breathing in, and prayer to breathing out.

When we meditate, we are flooded with distracting thoughts until we consciously re-establish the point of our attention e.g. mantra or breath. We then begin again. Over time, our ability to keep focus increases, thus cultivating our ability to live in the present as we learn to allow these thoughts - which

either pull us into the past (memories, regrets etc.) or the future (fantasies, worries etc.) - to pass like clouds in the sky.

Since the 1960s, countless studies have found a range of benefits, such as reduction in blood pressure, anxiety, allergies, angina, insomnia, and ulcers, as well as improvements in digestion, energy levels, fertility, and depression. Even the US military uses mindfulness training to help veterans recover from PTSD as well as improving the performance of the Marine Corp!

Part of the reason for meditation's effectiveness comes from the fact that it actually changes the structure of the brain. This was observed by comparing gamma-wave brain-scans of Tibetan monks with control subjects while meditating. The results showed that the

monks produced substantially more – and more organised - gamma wave activity than the controls. And these changes are not temporary, as other studies have shown increases in grey matter, especially in areas of the brain associated with memory and decision-making. It has also been observed that these changes start to manifest after as little as eight weeks of meditative practice.

However, while these “secular” benefits are well-understood, less understood are the effects on consciousness, with many reporting an absorption of individual consciousness into a more expansive, “mystical”, consciousness and an attendant feeling of deep, indescribable bliss. At this point, the belief system of the practitioner is required to make sense of the experience.

Imaginal Step

Learn how to meditate and practice it daily. Follow these instructions if you have never meditated before:

a. Choose a point of focus: a word, mantra, prayer, or your breathing

b. Sit quietly in a comfortable position

c. Close your eyes

d. Relax your muscles, starting from your feet all the way up to your head

e. Breathe slowly and deeply in through your nose and out through your mouth. Each time repeating the point of focus in your mind

f. If thoughts intrude, simply release them and return to the point of focus

g. Continue for ten to twenty minutes

This is best done once or twice a day. For best results, do it in the morning or evening.

Exploration Point

There are many different forms of meditation and the instructions given in this chapter are an effective introduction to the topic. Repeated practice of this meditation offers many benefits as well as laying the groundwork for later, more advanced, meditative practice.

3

An attitude of gratitude enhances your life

We all know the feeling of gratitude when we receive a gift. However, these days we pay for most things, replacing

gratitude with its opposite – a sense of entitlement. We take for granted things like electricity, running water, or the ability to buy food. This habit then leads to taking our health, or clean air, or the love of our parents for granted. Until they are gone.

When we stop taking things for granted, we release the power of gratitude in all things. Our very existence is dependent on a vast cosmology more abundant than we can imagine. However, for atheists and philosophical materialists – while existence is mathematically amazing - it is not worthy of gratitude because it is simply the result of blind forces of luck. It is not a gift. Even the love of parents is reduced to being an evolutionary mechanism.

But in religious traditions, the universe exists as a gift from higher orders of being, making it natural to feel gratitude for our participation in it. Studies have shown that people who are habitually grateful are less depressed, more satisfied with their lives, have more self-acceptance, and have more purpose in their lives than those who are habitually ungrateful. They are happier people because gratitude encourages us to step out from the limits of our ego and places us in a harmonious, life-enhancing flow of giving and receiving which makes us more aware of a wider context. And this is not only true in the human realm, the cultivation of gratitude shows us how reliant we are on the non-human world of plants, and weather, and ecosystems and the Sun...and so on, until we achieve appreciation of the source of all

things, and arrive at that state of mind which Hindus call *Sat-chit-ananda* - Being-Consciousness-Bliss.

★

Imaginal Steps

- 1. Count your blessings. Make a habit of listing (either mentally or on paper) things you are thankful for. For example, before going to sleep at night or on a designated day once a week.**
- 2. Say Grace before meals. This can be verbal, or holding hands, or simply silently acknowledging the gratitude for the food you are about to eat.**

★

Exploration Point

For some readers, the idea of saying Grace evokes a distinct memory of Christianity. And while the message of the book is that all religions and spiritual traditions - properly practiced - are valid spiritual paths, some may have uncomfortable associations connected with a given faith. For example, Christianity. In this case, it is worth remembering that the practices in the book are common to various traditions. So feel free to adapt the practice to suit your temperament. For example, use the prayers of another tradition, or even make your own prayers and replace specific spiritual phrases with other words you are more comfortable with.

★

4

The non-human world - from plants to planets - is alive and conscious

We are part of nature. And we take great pleasure in it. All over the world people love pets like family. Even in large cities people enjoy parks and spend hours in their garden. We take breaks in the countryside to reconnect with a source of energy greater than ourselves. Research even shows that those who walk in nature are less stressed and have better memory. Furthermore, many people (especially children) report spiritual experiences whilst outdoors – feeling connected to the unity of all things in a manner beyond description.

And yet, in our culture there is a barrier between the human and the non-human and for many the non-human world is considered *less than us*. It's evident in the way we study it – flowers are killed so we can inspect them, animals are anatomical diagrams in textbooks, and the solar system is a model in the classroom. For many, the models and diagrams are more real than the living organism itself. This is in keeping with the philosophical materialism underpinning atheism which sees the universe and nature as unconscious and mechanical.

However, if matter is unconscious, how is human consciousness possible? How can consciousness come from something without consciousness? This is called the “hard problem of consciousness” by scientists. One

far-reaching theory attempting to answer this is the theory of *panpsychism*. This theory proposes that all self-organising systems (from atoms and cells up to plants and animals and then up to humans and beyond to planets, stars, and galaxies) possess an intelligence. Perhaps not a “human-like” intelligence, but an intelligence nonetheless.

Despite being proposed by atheists, the theory is nevertheless scientific taboo as it is essentially a scientific justification for the animism that our ancestors believed. For example, medieval Europeans believed plants and animals had souls and that heavenly bodies were governed by intelligences. This is especially true of the Sun, which has long been the object of spiritual and cultural adoration. But could the Sun *really* be conscious? The patterns of elec-

tromagnetism detected from the Sun are vastly more complex than the electromagnetic activity in our brains. So perhaps the idea is not so fanciful. And if so, what does it think about? Is it possible to somehow communicate with it through Sun worshipping rites as found in numerous belief systems?

★

Imaginal Step

Greet the sun in the morning. Perhaps perform the yogic *surya namaskar* (Sun salutation). Or simply acknowledge the light as it streams through your windows. Ask for its light to illuminate your spirit and your day.

5

The beauty of nature is a glimpse into the mind of the Divine

As already mentioned, the wonder and awe humans have for nature runs deep in our being. Many green spaces are legally protected to preserve their beauty, which could be viewed as a modern, secular version of the sacredness of various trees which our ancestors believed in - for example the Oak sacred to the Druids.

This appreciation is nowhere more apparent than the admiration we have for flowers. The appreciation we have for the beauty of flowers is as old as humanity itself. Temples in ancient Egypt had flowers carved into them, Buddhism makes frequent use of the lo-

tus as a metaphor, the Old Testament makes numerous references to plants and flowers, and Jesus himself told his followers to “consider the lilies of the field”. Of course, there is a practical dimension to this beauty - the flowers evolved bright colours as an evolutionary mechanism to attract insects - but while this Darwinian evolutionary theory helps to understand the survival of flowers, it doesn't explain the origin of the actual sense of beauty. This raises the question: is nature the source of beauty, or does beauty transcend nature?

The Christian mystic St Anselm described God as that “than which no greater can be conceived”. If this is true, then God must include the fragrance of a rose because a God which cannot experience it would be less than

a God which could. So, by definition, all beauty is within the mind of God. This understanding then shifts our perspective of God from being a separate creator standing apart from his creation, to a *God within which* the natural world exists and, by extension, a *God within the natural world*. So, when we “consider the lilies of the field” we are accepting an invitation to behold the presence of the Divine itself.

★

Exploration Point

Again, Sheldrake uses the word “God” in the context of the work of the Christian mystic, but our understanding of this should not be limited to only a Christian definition. As explained in this chapter, Sheldrake instead invites us to view a pantheistic interpretation

of an ultimate reality revealing itself to us in the form of all that is material, rather than standing above it. This is similar to the Hindu concept of Brahman, or ideas found in Taoism, and various Shamanic belief systems.

Imaginal Step

Cultivate a relationship with a tree. Choose one near where you live and visit it frequently. If it flowers, make sure to see it during this time to behold its full beauty. Sit beneath it and listen to the wind rustling through its leaves. Ask it questions...and listen for the answer in the feelings you experience in response.

By connecting with something much older than ourselves - and which will probably outlive us - we gain a broader perspective on our own lives.

6

Rituals establish a connection with the past

Whether religious, national, seasonal, or rites of passage all societies have rituals. A distinguishing feature of all rituals is that they follow a formal pattern. In this way, rituals are memories transmitted from the past and connect each participant with every other participant across time, imbuing a shared sense of value and identity. For example, the Jewish Passover connects contemporary Jews with those about to leave Ancient Egypt and the Christian Holy Communion connects participants with Jesus's disciples at the last supper. This is why many rituals are performed in languages oth-

erwise not spoken by the participants. Sceptics often dismiss this as blind adherence to tradition, but it runs deeper.

Other types of rituals such as rites of passage and drowning have more substantial psychological and spiritual effects. For example, rites of passage (such as marriage or the Native American “vision quests”) represent the shedding of an immature identity and initiation into the adult world of responsibility. Drowning, such as baptism, in its purest form is a way of bringing participants to a Near-Death-Experience (NDE) state after which many claim to have “seen the light” and been “reborn” (much as people who experience medical NDEs also claim).

But the effects of this historical and psychological continuity may run deeper still if we consider Sheldrake’s

own theory of morphic resonance, which proposes that the laws of nature evolve in response to similar patterns of activity over time. For example, when scientists attempt to crystallise a new chemical compound it can take a long time to take shape. However, it crystallizes quicker the second time. And still quicker the third. And so on until an upper limit is reached. It is as if each subsequent process is drawing upon the memory of those that went before it. The same effect is observed in behaviour: when rats are taught a new skill in one lab, rats *all over the world* pick up the new skill more quickly. Thus we can see that our deep need for rituals is an expression of the collective memory of our ancestors in a literal, as well as figurative, sense.

7

Music is universal...and the universe is music

Music is as old as humanity. Bone-pipes and flutes dug up in France and Germany date to 40,000 years ago, not long after *Homo sapiens* arrived in Europe. In fact, other fossil evidence puts some musical instruments back as much as 1.8 million years ago i.e. the period of *Homo erectus* and *Homo ergaster*.

It is thought that singing and dancing arose together - possibly as a way of warding off predators in the manner of a war chant, much like the *haka* of the Maori, which is now performed by the New Zealand rugby team before a match. What's more, such coordinated movement seems natural for humans

as when we walk together we naturally fall into lock-step in the manner of a military march. This effect is amplified in chant singing when people move, make sounds, and even breathe in unison. As such, music is a powerful participatory activity wherein people take strength from a group identity as well as express and experience emotions together.

There are also numerous physical and mental health benefits of singing together. Samples of saliva taken from people before and after singing showed increased activity of the immune system, while other studies done in nursing homes of group singing showed reduced depression, reduced feelings of loneliness (from the release of the bonding hormone oxytocin), as well as reduced symptoms in dementia

patients.

But, looking deeper, why do ancient religions assume that gods and goddesses like music? Perhaps it is helpful to remember that, for many ancient traditions, the universe is vibratory. For example, Hindu mythology posits that the universe was formed out of the primal *Om* or *Aum*, and even in Christianity God speaks the universe into existence (“In the beginning was the Word”). Such traditions find support from modern developments in quantum physics which posit that the universe is not made of matter, but of patterns of vibration. So perhaps the levels of vibration of the universe, from the movement of subatomic particles to the orbits of planets, are all part of a vast musical expression...and music as we experience it is just a small part of a richness beyond our comprehension.

Imaginal Steps

- 1. Sing communally. Visit your local church and participate in their hymns.**
- 2. Chant. Introduce the chanting of a mantra into your meditations. As you meditate, begin to gently hum your chosen mantra (for example *Aum*). Use the sound as a way to explore your awareness and gradually seek to integrate yourself with the sound through your breath. Then slowly permit the sound to become quieter until you are listening to the profundity of silence.**

★

8

Pilgrimage sites are places of psychological and spiritual power

The urge towards pilgrimage could be rooted in genetic memory of before settled civilisations when we were migratory. Then, over time, sites along the journeys we felt compelled to go on acquired religious significance for various reasons.

The impulse for pilgrimage is so deep that even in countries which ban it, it simply transmutes again into a socially accepted form. For example, the pilgrimages in Communist Russia to Lenin's preserved body. It could also be argued that part of the popularity in tourism is an expression of this impulse. Of course there are differences: tourists

often travel in comfort while pilgrims often walk and endure hardships along the way. Pilgrims also have different motivations such as for healing, to ask for a blessing, or to express faith.

But actual pilgrimage is certainly experiencing a revival. For example, Santiago de Compostela in Spain, the most famous European pilgrimage, which has existed since Medieval times, has seen pilgrim numbers explode from just 1000 in 1987 to 263,000 in 2015.

But the question remains: is there any actual “power” in these places? The famous pilgrimage site at Lourdes in France - where in 1858 a peasant girl saw apparitions of the Virgin Mary - heals thousands each year. And many of these are authenticated medically, forcing sceptics to admit their validity. So it seems that some places do have

a certain power. For some, this is probably due to being naturally inspiring, for example mountain tops, springs, or waterfalls etc. Others may have a flow of energy around the site. This can be understood in both spiritual and scientific terms as - by attempting to bridge heaven and earth - many sacred sites actually attract lightning strikes. Perhaps the sacredness of the Oak in Celtic, Nordic, and Ancient Greek culture was precisely due to its proneness to being struck by lightning and therefore blessed by the thunder god.

Morphic resonance may also contribute to the spiritual power of these places. As by performing the pilgrimage, we draw upon the collected sanctity of all pilgrims who have trodden the same path before us. In that way, our own belief contributes to the collective spiritual power of these places.

Imaginal Steps

- 1. Go on a pilgrimage. All over the world, many pilgrimage sites are being reopened. For example, in England, the British Pilgrimage Trust is reopening many ancient pilgrimage routes.**
- 2. Turn your journeys into pilgrimages. Whenever you visit a new place, locate the spiritual centre (church, synagogue, temple, etc) and pay your respects. This has the effect of linking you with the place you are in as well as providing quiet moments for reflection.**

★

Final thoughts

It is tempting in the modern world to consider religion and spiritual practices as mere historical artefacts or, where

they continue to be practiced, as superstitions. Combine this with the liberatory philosophical allure of atheism and science's progress in answering many questions about the nature of the universe and it seems that we have simply outgrown religion.

However, while science does an excellent job of explaining the "how" of existence, it flounders embarrassingly when confronted with "why?" And while the life-enhancing effects of scientific progress are undeniable, why are mental health problems spiralling out of control in the developed world? If we combine these observations with the countless scientific studies consistently showing the improved life conditions of people that follow a religious or spiritual tradition, then we see that such traditions may still have something to offer us yet.

Imaginal Steps

The spiritual practices discussed in this book are not exhaustive. And will not work equally well for all people. Some personal experimentation is required. At first, try the practices which resonate with you the most and commit to them for a short time. If you observe benefits, continue and integrate it more deeply into your life. If not, try another. Over time you will find the practices which suit you and, once a pattern of personal practice is established, you can begin to enjoy the benefits associated with them.

And for those who already follow a religious or spiritual tradition, perhaps experiment with the practices which are more often associated with other belief systems and see how compatible they are with your own. Also, for those

which you already perform, consider the possibility that the power of the practices has been dimmed through familiarity. Seek to understand it from a new perspective and establish a new connection to give the expression of your beliefs new vigour and relevance.

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