

How spiritual is Deepak Chopra?

Susan Blackmore, for Skeptical Inquirer, written October 2022

Published in Skeptical Inquirer, Vol 47, Issue 2. March/April 2023, pp52 to55

Please note: This article is my pre-publication version and may have been changed for publication. Therefore please do not quote from this article.

Deepak Chopra, Ayurvedic practitioner and famous promoter of mind-body medicine, is among the richest spiritual leaders in the world with 95 books to his name and a thriving, and very lucrative, alternative therapy business. He has millions of followers on social media and says his goal is to reach at least a billion people. In other words, he is extremely influential and wants to become more so.

There are many reasons to worry about his powerful influence, from his misuse of science and philosophy to his extreme health and medical claims. On science, he sprinkles his books and lectures with such terms as epigenetics, neuroplasticity, homeostasis, or quantum superposition yet twists them to fit in with his extravagant claims. He talks much about evolution but sneakily twists the idea from talking about the undirected Darwinian process that explains the evolution of life on earth, to praising the ever-popular (and long discredited) idea that consciousness is driving human evolution towards ever higher states.

As for his philosophy, Deepak claims that everything is consciousness and matter does not exist. He says there are no objects, no sounds, no bodies, and no mind, but only consciousness having experiences. He happily pounces on the difficulty materialism has in explaining consciousness – a problem that numerous scientists recognise and are working on – but seems completely oblivious to the fact that idealism confronts the opposite problem in explaining the appearance of matter. Saying ‘matter does not exist’ is his glib (non-) solution.

Turning to health, Deepak claims that ‘quantum healing’ can banish illness, end aging, and overcome death. He says that through meditation and insight people jump to a new level of consciousness and so attain perfect health. And, being perfectly consistent, he has never been ill and claims he will live, wealthy and healthy, well beyond a hundred years. That’s a strong claim for someone now in his mid-seventies.

I don't wish to add more to the many scathing criticisms that have been made of these ideas; I want to ask a question. As a spiritual teacher, perhaps the most influential spiritual teacher around, does Deepak Chopra practice what he preaches?

Deepak's books are full of sound spiritual teachings on meditation, compassion, and kindness. His teachings on the nature of self and transcendence chime with those on no-self found in Buddhism and Hinduism. He has a beautiful, gently soothing voice, and I have found some of his early-morning guided meditation sessions truly helpful. But the spiritual life is not only about meditation and *The Ultimate Happiness Prescription*ⁱ urges Deepak's followers to 'Live for enlightenment'. Does he do this himself? Is he a shining example of someone seeking enlightenment and living by his own spiritual principles? This is the question that has been bothering me and I recently had the opportunity to ask it and find out.

I have met Deepak several times, having quiet meals with him away from busy conferences, or just snatching a few minutes' chat when we had the chance. In private I have found him attentive, interesting, willing to engage in all sorts of topics and, above all, open and friendly. He is not always this way in public.

My first, and rather dramatic, encounter with him took place ten years ago in a debate called 'The War of the World Views' with Menas Kafatos, Leonard Mlodinow, Deepak, and meⁱⁱ. This was at the 2012 'Toward a Science of Consciousness' conference that happens every two years in Tucson, Arizona. Each of us began with a short lectureⁱⁱⁱ. I disagreed with Deepak's 'consciousness only' theory and although I agreed with many of his spiritual ideas, I pointed out how he diverts his popular 'seven spiritual laws' into ways of making money. The most popular of his books (he has published nearly 100 and is still writing) was then *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success*^{iv}; recently it's been followed by *Abundance: The Inner Path to Wealth*^v. In both it is not 'inner wealth' or spiritual gifts and abilities he is talking about but plain old money and power. Should a spiritual path be aimed at getting financially rich?

As soon as I finished my talk, Deepak leapt out of his armchair^{vi}, stood over me, and lectured me on the four principles of Vedanta (a school of Hindu spiritual philosophy). These are Artha, Kama, Dharma, and Moksha. Moksha, he explained, means money or wealth, and spiritual people should not be ashamed of being wealthy. "And I am *very* wealthy" he added. Then, coming closer and jabbing his finger aggressively at me, he explained the four stages of the Vedanta life. "In the tradition I come from," he said, "the first 25 years of your life is spent in education and knowledge. The second 25 years of your life is spent in making money

and achieving success. The third 25 years of your life, which is where I am now, is spent in giving it back. And I have a foundation that feeds 1.5 million children every day. And the fourth phase of life is giving it all up and trying to achieve transcendence, enlightenment. So, I am very well on the path that I started out on. And I'm not ashamed of it." Afterwards I felt flattened. He had been aggressive both verbally and in his manner; he had hardly let me get a word in edgeways, and I wished I had found the strength to stand up to him. I blamed myself for being so submissive.

Later, I began to wonder. Deepak was then 65 years old, with just ten more years of the third phase ahead of him. But what would he do at 75? Would he give up flying first class around the world giving lectures, selling alternative therapies, leading retreats, promoting his Center for Wellbeing, and getting even richer? Would he really follow what he claimed was his spiritual path and give it all up 'trying to achieve transcendence, enlightenment'?

I confess that these questions stayed with me all those ten years. Is Deepak really following the Vedanta path he so proudly proclaimed to me? Does he live by the values he espouses of love, compassion, and inner peace? When his time comes, will he move into that final phase of life and use all his own spiritual teachings to fall into enlightenment? Might I even meet him again in 2022, when he would be 75, and ask him myself?

My opportunity came when I learned that this year he was, once again, to be at the Tucson conference – now having been upgraded to '*The Science of Consciousness*' ('Toward' apparently no longer needed!). I contacted an organiser and she immediately suggested that Deepak and I could have a 'return match' and arranged a public 'Dialogue' for us after the opening reception. She even made sure that the previous evening Deepak and I had a private dinner together. I had come to the conference with my daughter and co-author, Emily Troscianko, who found us a quiet table, got us drinks, and left us to it.

As ever, we got on well, talking about our lives, our meditation practice, our thoughts about consciousness, and our plans for the following evening. He said he was "done with debates" and I didn't mind that; I didn't want to turn our event into a fight any more than he did. So, I suggested I might open with just a couple of minutes saying that I agreed with much of his spiritual teachings but not with his theories of consciousness or quantum healing, and then we could just have a conversation about the agreed topic which, after much discussion over email, was to be 'Mystery of Existence. Why is there sentience?'

We even talked about ageing, both of us being in our seventies, and Deepak said he was now meditating more and working less. Maybe, I thought, he really is gently winding down from his frenetic working life towards his search for enlightenment. After all, I don't suppose the Vedanta way means you have to go into solitary retreat on your 75th birthday. So maybe he is following the Vedanta path after all. Maybe he would talk about this tomorrow and answer my question.

This being Tucson in April, the welcome reception was outdoors, in lovely desert surroundings, under starry skies, with delicious food and wine. I was enjoying myself, a little nervous about what was coming, but well-prepared with my few opening words. Then just before we went into the lecture theatre, Deepak strode up to me and said, "I think we should each begin with ten minutes about our life journey". I was thrown. That was not what we had agreed the evening before. I didn't think of my life as a journey, I had no time to prepare, yet I lamely agreed^{vii}. Only much later did I wonder whether this was a deliberately manipulative move.

My next shock came from the moderator, Stuart Hameroff. He is one of the original founders of these conferences, the current co-Chair, and a leading proponent of a quantum theory of consciousness. We'd long disagreed, and I knew he was annoyed with Emily and me for including only a brief summary of his theory in our consciousness textbook^{viii}, but he was only there to chair the event, so I was not worried. I should have been.

Struggling to pull together something about "my life journey", I mentioned the dramatic out-of-body experience I had had as a teenager. I said how wonderful it has been, over my lifetime, that neuroscience has finally given us a thorough understanding of how and why these strange experiences happen^{ix}. Then after barely five minutes, Stuart, although supposedly the moderator, leapt in and demanded I provide evidence. I managed to stop him after two or three more interjections and carried on until, abruptly, he told me to stop. I was thrown by this, but not having looked at my watch, I did as he said. I only discovered much later, when the video went online, that it was less than nine minutes.

Then began the weirdest 'dialogue' I have ever had. Deepak made long speeches that changed topic so often that I could hardly follow him, let alone find a way to respond to one point before he'd moved on to the next. Meanwhile, Stuart, though supposedly in the chair, kept interrupting me whenever I tried to respond. I remember sitting there, flanked on either

side by these two men, constantly interrupted and desperately trying to get the discussion back on topic.

After a while I began to hear a kind of roaring sound from the audience. It was not so loud that I could hear what was going on and, in any case, I had to concentrate so hard to find any chance to speak that I had no spare brain power to listen. I saw a woman walk up towards Stuart and disappear again, but I had no idea why and just kept trying to get a word in (I later learned that it was Stuart's wife).

With only ten minutes to go, I realised it was now or never to ask my question. I grabbed the moment and jumped in with, "I would like, if it's all right with you, to change the subject and ask a different question." I reminded Deepak of our meeting ten years ago and then, to my own surprise, and quite unplanned, I jumped up, leant over him as he had done to me all those years ago, and repeated the four stages of the Vedanta life.

"I would like to ask you, Deepak. Now you've come to this final stage in your life. What form is ..." But Stuart interrupted me again. I tried to ignore him and carry on, "What form is this stage of your life going to take? What form is your withdrawal from life and seeking enlightenment going to take?" I suggested that he might not choose the traditional route of life in a cave in the Himalayas with villagers bringing him food once a week but thought he might prefer a beautiful place on the California coast to meditate in solitary retreat. What is your withdrawal going to be like, Deepak?

And here's his response: "I think at this stage, I surrender to the formless [laughter from the audience], and without that formless there is no form. And I go back to my tradition. Tagore says, in this infinite playhouse of forms I got sight of the formless. The formless is the only thing that's timeless. Forms come and go and if we surrender to that mystery of form, the formless, then that is what I call faith. Faith is surrendering to the invisible that makes the visible possible and when you understand that, in that invisible, we are all entangled then the ultimate message that comes from that is love."

"Good, very good," said Stuart.

What a master of deflection. Whatever I asked Deepak, he managed to squiggle away to some totally different topic, in this case entanglement and love. And how could I object to 'love'? But I persevered, 'I think it is possible, but difficult, to carry on with a life of writing lots of books, earning lots of money, coming to conferences, and flying around the world, but

that's not the point of this four-stage process...' Again he interrupted and again I persevered, "But here you are in Tucson, on an aeroplane from New York".

All he said to that was, 'It's something to do, right?' I fought back. 'Seeking enlightenment is also something to do'. But he cleverly got out of that one. 'No', he said, 'You fall into it. You don't seek it because that which you are seeking is the one that's seeking.' 'Deepak gets the last word,' said Stuart, and it was over.

I staggered off the stage and found myself surrounded by people asking, 'Are you all right?' 'Do you feel okay?', 'You poor thing', all of which baffled me. I guess I was still buzzing from the effort of concentrating and didn't know what they meant. Then others started calling the men bullies, children, pathetic 15-year-old boys, and shouting about the outrage of two grown men turning on one woman. And only then did I begin to grasp how it must have seemed to the audience. One man even said, 'I want to apologise on behalf of all men'! Some, I learned later, had simply walked out.

When the video was posted online some weeks later^x, my instant reaction was deep disappointment – even shame. I was so feeble!! I watched myself being gradually diminished and doing nothing to fight back. I should have jumped up and interrupted Deepak many times over. There were so many sensible points I could have made, and instead I just sat there putting up with it. Why didn't I challenge him on 'matter doesn't exist', or talk about the neuroscience that is changing the mystery of consciousness, about the new philosophy and science of how the self is constructed, or why illusionism means replacing false assumptions with a nondual view of consciousness^{xi} – or any number of other things I had in mind? How could I have let them walk all over me?

Emily was upset by the event and shared with me some excerpts from the diary she had written the morning after. She said she had been moved by how people rallied to my defence, listing some of the comments people had made. One said it was like watching me being attacked by two bulldogs. Another that that it was depressing to see Deepak, as someone they had respected, behave like this with claims of wisdom but ultimately just an enormous ego he was trying to defend. Three said how embarrassed or ashamed it made them feel as men. One even thought that it robbed the entire conference of its credibility, perhaps because people tend to think of the Tucson conferences as a space for openness, sharing very different ideas, and a general air of niceness. This certainly wasn't nice.

For Emily and some, but not all, of the others the most obvious interpretation was about gender. Here were two men ganging up on one woman whose life-long coping strategy has been to ignore sexist treatment and whose response to this debacle was to blame herself. But in the end, Emily concluded that “maybe what was under attack here was not in fact womankind but scepticism. And lots of people really dislike scepticism”.

She wondered why these two “dislike scepticism so much they’d be willing to risk making themselves look like close-minded misogynists to attack it?” Answers are not hard to find. Stuart was, as ever, pushing his quantum agenda, and Deepak was on brand with his blend of dubious science and banal but spiritually-coated life advice and untestable but lucrative claims.

I still blame myself for not standing up to them, but I did get my answer. One enormous ego remains fully intact and, despite his many claims, Deepak shows no sign of stepping boldly into the fourth stage of the Vedanta life. While he tells the rest of us how to live for enlightenment, he is not willing to surrender his busy, powerful, and wealthy life just yet.

Notes

ⁱ Chopra, D. 2009 *The Ultimate Happiness Prescription: 7 Keys to Joy and Enlightenment*. Harmony.

ⁱⁱ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ZFGkqNhgM

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZxVDHfi_YI

^{iv} Chopra, D. (2009). *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success: A Practical Guide to the Fulfillment of Your Dreams*, New World Library

^v Chopra, D. 2022 *Abundance: The Inner Path to Wealth*, Rider

^{vi} https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ZFGkqNhgM

^{vii} <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JiMYe5tPFt8>

^{viii} Blackmore, S. and Troscianko, E. 2018 *Consciousness: An Introduction*, **Third Edition**, London, Routledge

^{ix} Blackmore, S. 2020. *Seeing Myself: What Out-of-body Experiences Tell Us About Life, Death & the Mind*, London. Little, Brown

^x <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JiMYe5tPFt8>

^{xi} Blackmore, S. 2016 Delusions of consciousness. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 23, 52-64 and 2017 In Frankish, K. (Ed) *Illusionism as a theory of consciousness*, Imprint Academic