

# Introduction

If you're like most people, your life has become increasingly complex and fast paced. As you rush from one event or task to another, you're most likely being bombarded by "weapons of mass distraction" that tip you off course even as you dutifully struggle to maintain your balance. Between the ringing of your cell phone, e-mail, kids' soccer games, business trips, 514 television stations (not to mention the TiVo recordings waiting for you), and taking care of all the basics, you may find yourself just skimming the surface of your life. It's easy to end up zipping from one thing to another, replacing truly renewing activities with more numbing pleasures. These many demands on your time can force you to make tough choices. You may find yourself prioritizing obligations that cannot be avoided and relegating joyful, meaning-making pursuits to the end of your to-do list. As a result, much of the time you may feel stressed, depleted, or overwhelmed.

Alternatively, you may feel a sense of restlessness, boredom, or meaninglessness. You may be someone who's now living "under the radar," no longer engaged by the pursuits that once brought you a sense of meaning and joy. You may feel disconnected from the world or have trouble finding

your place in it. Perhaps you want to break out into a richer and fuller life, but you haven't yet figured out how.

Or, maybe you have reached a place of relative balance and abundance in your life, and now you want to integrate your insights and transformations more fully into your relationships, your work, and your creative pursuits. Perhaps you envision that when you live from a place of greater depth, the roots and fruits of your life will generate the kind of sustenance that touches others. You may want to create a life that will allow you to contribute to the well-being of your community in ways that are in line with your talents, affinities, inner resources, and most authentic nature.

Regardless of which of these drives you can relate to the most (it may be a little bit of each), you can probably identify a desire within yourself to live more deeply. If so, you are not alone. As psychologist and leader in mind/body medicine Jon Kabat-Zinn told us:

[There is] *a huge and rising hunger on the part of just about everybody for authentic experience and reconnecting with what's deepest and best in ourselves in an ever accelerating and complex world.* (2004)

The good news: opportunities to transform your life in ways both small and large are available to you in every moment of every day—there are an infinite number of doorways into living deeply. The possibly daunting news: living deeply may require nothing less than a complete transformation of the way you view the world and your place in it.

## LIVING DEEPLY

As you'll read, our decade of research on transformation has found that dramatic and lasting change for the better springs from *radically shifting your perspective of who you are*. Great external changes often come out of this shift in perspective. You may well find that as meaning and purpose become more clear to you, things that are out of alignment in your life gradually (and sometimes quickly) fall away. But the most fundamental change is

within you; it is a profound shift in your perspective, where you direct your attention and your intention.

This most essential change, the one from which all other changes spring, is a change in your worldview and your perception of what's possible. Transforming your consciousness may be the most important thing you can do for yourself and the world.

Ultimately, this book is a kind of map of the transformative terrain. While we aren't able to traverse the entire terrain by ourselves, we have been able to talk to the explorers who have been there, some of whom have traversed common pathways and some of whom have taken exotic journeys and are bringing back their travel journals to share what they found. We explore the mystery of consciousness with a Christian monk, a Lakota elder, a rabbi, and a Zen Buddhist roshi. We identify the common elements of transformation in the experiences of a Himalayan Yoga swami, a transpersonal psychologist, a seasoned oncologist, and a Methodist minister. We found, amazingly, that an evangelical Christian, a successful businessman, a devout Sufi, a skilled athlete, a dedicated physician, a reluctant soldier, a Jewish mother, and an agnostic musician are all walking surprisingly similar paths. We share some of these overlapping cartographies with you in hopes that you will recognize some of the terrain yourself and begin to more consciously create your own path to transformation. *Living Deeply* will provide you with resources to help you maintain your balance, while recruiting you to actively collaborate with the forces—both internal and external—that conspire to move you toward wholeness.

## THE ART AND SCIENCE OF TRANSFORMATION

In this book, we share what we've learned about transformation through a decade-long program of research, and we explore how our research findings can help you live more fully and deeply. No matter who you are, where you come from, or what your current path is—whether you seek to transform your life completely or to simply make adjustments that will add a layer of richness and depth to your life—we hope that you'll find something valuable here.

## *The Institute of Noetic Sciences*

This focused inquiry builds on thirty-five years of consciousness research at the Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS). *Noetic* refers to knowledge that comes to us directly through our subjective experiences or inner authority. This type of knowledge might take the form of an intuition that helps guide your decisions, or an epiphany that leads you to a creative breakthrough. Moreover, noetic experiences often carry an unusual level of authority that can help guide you to new understandings and new ways of being. Noetic experiences thus differ from the kind of knowledge that comes through reason or the objective study of the external world. However, we argue that it is both possible and necessary to bring to this realm of intuitive knowledge a scientific perspective and method. Bringing a scientific approach to noetic phenomena has allowed IONS to delve deeply into the nature of human consciousness and its vast potentials.

Edgar Mitchell, an Apollo 14 astronaut, founded IONS in 1973. Having had the remarkable opportunity to walk on the moon, Mitchell then had the window seat on the way home. During the flight back, a moment of epiphany occurred in which his entire sense of meaning and purpose shifted. In that moment he understood that the major crises of our times are due not to aspects inherent to the external world, but to flawed and inadequate worldviews. The mission of IONS is to explore consciousness through both science and human experience in order to advance individual and collective transformation.

In the fall of 1997, our team of researchers initiated a study focused on the process of transformation. We collected narrative descriptions of transformations experienced by people representing many walks of life. From mundane to life-threatening, these experiences led our respondents to fundamental shifts in their sense of self and their way of being in the world. For one man it came during his time as a conscientious objector in Vietnam. Through a specific prayer, in an extraordinary moment, he found inner peace even as he saw his colleagues being shot down. For a mother and daughter, it came when the mother used energy healing to help her distraught daughter find balance during a life transition, leading to profound transformative shifts for both.

We were intrigued by the fact that while the experiences people shared with us differed widely, a golden thread of commonality shone through them all. Some experiences occurred in extraordinary situations; others in ordinary, everyday situations. Some were initiated by experiences of great suffering; others by experiences of awe and wonder. But in each, a radical broadening of worldview and redefinition of identity, meaning, and purpose took place.

Despite differences in content and context, the process of transformation was described very similarly—often even with the very same words. Whether told by a seasoned meditator or a mother of three who had never meditated at all, these stories hinted at a jewel-like tapestry of human experience that transcends cultural differences. As we analyzed the stories for patterns that would shed light on the inner workings of transformation, we found ourselves filled with more questions: What constitutes a transformation of consciousness? What triggers transformation? How can we sustain the moments that move us beyond ourselves? And what impact do transformational experiences have on how we live our lives?

Seeking answers, we took advantage of the wide range of teachers and leaders in the human potential movement living and working in the San Francisco Bay Area and convened three focus groups between September 1998 and May 1999. To our surprise and delight, teachers from different transformational programs came eagerly. They, too, were seeking answers to questions about the mystery of transformation. The discussions were poignant, honest, and often profoundly moving. Together we began to map deep inventories of life experience that led the participants to express gratitude, feelings of connectedness, and a strong sense of community. Often the transformational journey is lonely, even for the masters themselves.

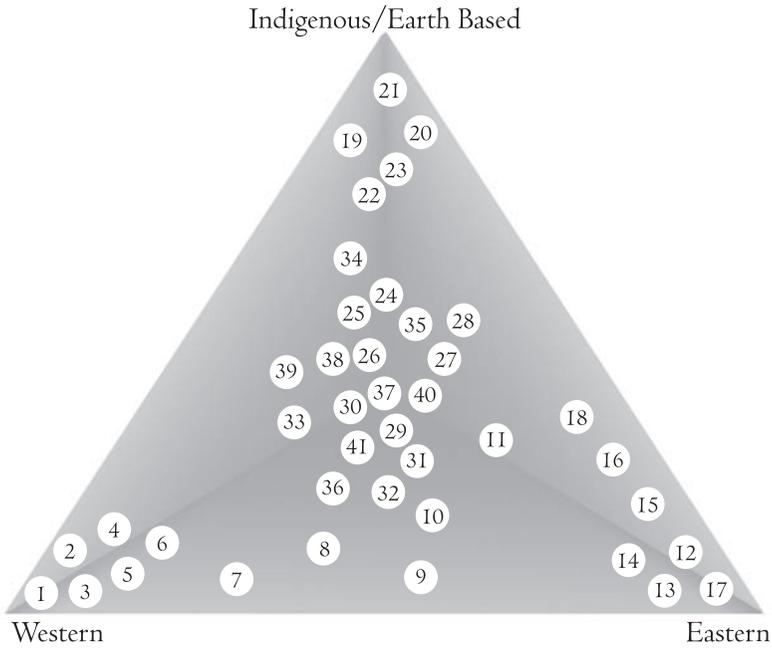
Inspired—and still filled with more questions than answers—we decided to probe the topic of transformation more deeply, and with greater scientific rigor. Beginning in 2002, the three of us invited fifty world-renowned scholars, teachers, and practitioners to participate in detailed research interviews. These teachers were selected specifically to represent a diverse range of transformative practices and philosophies (see figure 1). They represent traditional religions, spiritual philosophies, and modern transformative movements with roots in Eastern, Western, and indigenous

traditions, as well as forms that integrate many paths—sometimes referred to as *integral*.

Our overarching goals were to explore the phenomenon of consciousness transformation and learn more about the various transformative paths that lead to beneficial outcomes for self and community. In addition, we launched an online survey, both to begin to answer some of the questions that remained and to test some of our hypotheses (Vieten, Cohen, and Schlitz 2008). Do contemplative practices really foster the transformative process? Is a teacher or a community of like-minded practitioners useful? What kinds of practices are most helpful to what kinds of people? We heard from a schoolteacher in Illinois, a nurse in New York, a businessman in Los Angeles, and many others. Answering dozens of specific and open-ended questions, nearly nine hundred respondents helped us learn more about similarities and differences in the transformative process across people and practices.

While this sample is self-selected, and as such isn't representative of the general public in the way a random selection of all American households would be, it has offered a valuable opportunity for studying transformation in a large number of people who have lived through the process. Over 80 percent of those sampled reported having had at least one profoundly transformative experience, and 90 percent engage regularly in some form of transformative practice. The lives of these nine hundred people have become natural laboratories for studying the transformative process.

Over the years, we have engaged in thousands of hours of rigorous analysis of content and data from our fifty teacher interviews. Out of this work comes *Living Deeply*. We have organized the chapters in our book around the themes that emerged from our research. In each chapter we have carefully selected quotes (*italicized text*) from these surveys and interviews that illuminate our findings. In each phase of our research program, what has touched us most—what was emphasized again and again, and what we want to share with you—is the fact that transformation is an ongoing, natural process that's available to you right now. It's something that you can cooperate with in ways large and small, every day of your life.



1. Roman Catholicism
2. Benedictine Catholicism
3. Lutheran Christianity
4. Episcopal Christianity
5. First Church of Christ
6. Church of Religious Science
7. Judaism
8. Kabbalah
9. Islam
10. Sufism
11. Nondualism
12. Vipassana (Buddhism)
13. Zen Buddhism
14. Shavism/Yoga
15. Kundalini Yoga
16. Transcendental Meditation
17. Bhakti Yoga
18. Himalayan Yoga
19. Yoruba
20. Goddess Religion/  
Earth-Based Spirituality
21. Native American Spirituality

22. Cross-Cultural Shamanism
23. Mongolian Shamanism
24. Psychedelic Psychotherapy
25. Somatics
26. Movement/Expressive Arts
27. Aikido
28. Johrei Healing
29. Transpersonal/  
Humanistic Psychology
30. Consciousness Studies
31. Integral Transformative Practice
32. Attitudinal Healing
33. Avatar
34. Holotropic Breathwork
35. Nine Gates Mystery School
36. Unitarian Universalism
37. Archetypal Perspectives/  
Dream Work
38. Relationship-Centered Medicine
39. Mindfulness/Mind-Body Medicine
40. Religious Scholarship
41. Noetic Sciences

## *The Perennial Philosophy and Pluralism: Two Guiding Lights*

This project has been influenced by a search for common truths across cultures, philosophies, and people. We sought to shed light on a *perennial philosophy* of transformation, a term first used by sixteenth-century Italian philosopher Agostino Steuco in his book *De perenni philosophia libri X* of 1540. In the eighteenth century, German mathematician and philosopher Gottfried Leibniz used this term to designate a universal or shared set of truths that underlie all philosophies and religions, and Aldous Huxley later popularized it in his classic book *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945). Similarly, in our research we sought to find commonalities in the transformative process, across individuals, cultures, religions, and philosophies—a common map of the transformative terrain that would apply to people from all walks of life. As much as there are things that distinguish each of the perspectives, practices, or approaches we studied, our goal has been to find points of intersection.

Indeed, this book is organized as an exploration of the shared ground of transformation that exists across worldviews. However, even though descriptions of transformation overlap among traditions and individuals to an astounding degree, pointing to some important patterns in the transformative process, we realize that there is no simple formula. As we have engaged in this research program, we have confronted some of the challenges that naturally face any attempt to find patterns across different traditions, as well as challenges that typically occur with any scientific effort to objectify the ineffable. Indeed, in research such as this, there is the potential to overgeneralize, thereby trivializing fundamental and important distinctions between the various paths. While we cull out those aspects that are similar, we may be ignoring deep and important differences. These are important concerns, and we take them seriously.

As we engaged in our comparative analysis, we were informed by the work of cultural pluralism. Diana Eck of the Pluralism Project at Harvard University makes the distinction between *diversity*, which is a demographic fact, and *pluralism*, which is the celebration of difference (2006). Pluralism is an active engagement with diversity. It requires participation with “the other.” Pluralism recognizes that while there is common and enduring

wisdom that can be found in edicts such as the Golden Rule—wisdom that is likely to be equally applicable to all traditions—it’s a serious oversimplification to view disparate religious, spiritual, and transformative frameworks as homogeneous.

Our experience thus far is that while commonalities among traditions point to a robust model of transformation that goes beyond sects and cultures, each individual tradition—and each individual person—provides a unique perspective that the others may not have. Forest-dwelling Buddhist monks who have explored the nature of their own minds for hours and years on end in silent solitude are likely to have something different to tell us about transformation than do nuns who have dedicated their lives to serving in urban-jungle soup kitchens. Moreover, both of these groups are different from the busy parent or overworked nurse who are also part of the transformative story.

In our research, and in this book, we have purposely and specifically focused on studying the kinds of transformations in consciousness that happened for Richard Gunther and countless others—to wit, transformations that sometimes quickly, sometimes gradually, but in all cases dramatically and permanently change the person’s worldview to one of being more loving, kind, compassionate, altruistic, connected to others, and dedicated toward creating a more just, sustainable, and peaceful world for all.

All science, and all spirituality, begins with the quest to explore and then describe in detail a phenomenon—what causes it, what factors facilitate it, what factors inhibit it, what its outcomes are, and what mechanisms explain its occurrence—often to discover how the process can be facilitated intentionally. A good example is cancer remission. It is as natural for scientists as it is for mystics to delve as deeply as possible into healing events and positive outcomes in hopes that a deeper understanding of the phenomena will yield clues to facilitating or supporting the positive process in others.

For the mystic, this exploration might lead to a deep inward journey, initiation into the mysteries of traditions that seem to hold some keys to the experience, or many years of painstaking spiritual practices that shed light on the phenomenon. For the scientist, it may involve years of data collection and analysis, whether this takes the form of detailed interviews, reams of EEG printouts, hundred-megabyte databases of brain scans, or step-by-step

clinical trials that test and retest potential biological targets or pharmacologic agents, also to shed greater light on the phenomenon of interest.

In our case, our single-minded focus was on the phenomenon of experiences people have, and practices they engage in, that stimulate and sustain a new worldview that may best be described as positive consciousness transformation (a term we will unpack in more detail in chapter 1, “Seeing with New Eyes”). We admit freely that our interest in this topic, much like that of a researcher who focuses on cancer remission, is to find out more about how it happens so that we can facilitate it in others.

Throughout our research, and throughout this book, we were dogged in following the golden thread of positive transformation, and in doing so did not take many other paths that may have been just as deserving of deep inquiry. In this book, we do not address in depth many of these paths. For example, what happens in the case of negative transformations in consciousness, such as becoming dedicated to a path of harm toward people who do not hold the same belief? What are the negative consequences of experiences of oneness or dissolution of self? What might be the dangers inherent in blending science and religion? Though these topics are worthy of exploration, we were dedicated to leaving these questions to the side for the moment, to stay focused on our goal. Again, we recognize the dangers of oversimplification where these topics are concerned, and we have attempted whenever possible to offer counterpoints to each premise for which we argue. In the end, however, our goal in this book, based on our research, is to make a case for the idea that positive consciousness transformation is possible, is more common than most might imagine, and is best explored by bringing together the perspectives of the scientist and the mystic.

## NAVIGATING THIS BOOK

In this book we have drawn from:

- Findings from our own decade-long study of the transformative process—from analysis of hundreds of stories of transformation, teacher focus groups, fifty interviews with teachers and masters of transformative practices, and

almost nine hundred surveys with people engaged in their own transformative journeys

- Direct wisdom from a broad cross-section of religious, spiritual, and transformative practices, as shared with us by some of the leading voices in the transformative movement today
- Scientific evidence from a diverse array of fields—from cognitive neuroscience to physics to psychoneuroimmunology to social psychology
- Leading theories of transformation
- Experiential practices for living deeply

Whether you're a seasoned practitioner of a formal transformative tradition, a practitioner of an eclectic array of practices, or a newcomer to the transformative path, you can use our research to affirm, deepen, and inspire your own inner experiences and insights.

This book isn't a new program of growth and change. There are thousands of programs and techniques available for personal transformation: crash courses in healing our internal splits, in reintroducing us to our inner wisdom, in mobilizing the law of attraction, and so on. These programs have been radically life changing for thousands, perhaps millions, of people. However, though this myriad of methods, programs, and techniques for enriching your life exists at your fingertips, it can sometimes be difficult to figure out what's right for you, let alone how to grow your new insights into long-term ways of being.

This book offers you a different approach to constructing your own transformative path, day by day—an approach based on what we've learned through our research and that of others about how transformation is stimulated and sustained. Your path may well include attending a transformative retreat, or signing up for an intensive multiyear transformative training program. It might just as easily include a commitment to cook a grand meal once a week, start a reading group, plant an herb garden on your patio, or simply take ten quiet minutes for yourself each day. Rather than provide you with the next surefire formula for a life overhaul, *Living Deeply* will encour-

age you to you find ways that you can add greater richness, meaning, depth, and joy to every moment of every day.

In chapter 1, “Seeing with New Eyes,” we ask, What is it that actually shifts in a transformational experience? Chapter 2, “Doorways to Transformation,” explores some of the various triggers and catalysts of transformation. In chapter 3, “Preparing the Soil,” we identify three key elements that can help you set the stage for a transformation. In chapter 4, “Paths and Practices,” we look at common patterns across diverse transformative practices and identify the activities and commitments that teachers across traditions identify as essential. In chapter 5, “Why Practice?” we explore some of the ways that transformative practice works to effect profound and lasting life change. In the next three chapters, we look at some of the major milestones of consciousness transformation. Chapter 6, “Life as Practice, Practice as Life,” considers ways you can integrate transformative experiences into your everyday life, bringing them into your family, organizations, and institutions, grounding your transformation and making it sustainable for yourself and others. In chapter 7, “From ‘I’ to ‘We,’” we discuss how transformative practice involves core shifts in your personal identity that translate into lasting changes in worldview. In chapter 8, “Everything Is Sacred,” our research suggests that over time, you begin to see glimmers of the sacred shining through even the most mundane and sorrowful of experiences in everyday life. Finally, chapter 9, “No More Floating Clouds,” offers a synthesis of what we’ve learned through our research on transformation. Here we present a model of consciousness transformation drawn from common elements across a variety of traditions. Recognizing the dynamic and nonlinear nature of the transformative process, we hope that this model will be useful for people at any stage of the process.

## A TIME OF CONVERGENCE

We write this book at a unique moment in human history. Never before have so many worldviews, belief systems, and ways of understanding reality come into contact. Buddhist monks are sitting down with Harvard scientists to talk about the neuroscience of mindfulness. Indigenous healers are working side by side with physicians to treat patients in major hospitals.

Quantum physicists and living-systems biologists are confirming traditionally held spiritual views of consciousness.

This engagement of different ways of understanding what's real and true is leading to the discovery of new tools for living in the midst of complexity. As ancient spiritual wisdom converges with the latest scientific understandings of the world and our place in it, we are finding new answers to the age-old questions of "Who am I?" and "What am I capable of becoming?"

This book weaves together the rigors of the scientific perspective with the deep wisdom of the world's traditions to create a nondenominational, multicultural map to help guide you on your way through the transformations—whether large or small—that impact your life, your relationships, and your community. We've sought to unearth the commonalities of diverse practices, to decipher pathways to transformation that you can use regardless of whether you're religious or spiritual; involved in business, the military, or the PTA; get your peace of mind from meditation or the golf course. Ultimately, this book encourages you to become the scientist of your own experience and the cartographer of your own transformative journey. The opportunity is yours. Welcome to the adventure.