

# INTRODUCTION

*Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the wise.  
Seek what they sought.*

—*Matsuo Bashō*

It is late fall. An engineering student is rushing to a college final. He is wearing his best clothes, meticulously cleaned and ironed. Once the test is over, he will be free to enjoy himself for the entire winter break. However, “joy” is not yet part of his vocabulary.

The student clutches a bundle of notebooks more tightly and scurries on. He is almost there. Once he crosses a small park, he will join a buzzing crowd of similarly anxious fellow freshmen. No, not nearly as anxious.

Without slowing his pace, he opens a notebook and frantically scans a page for a formula that just popped up in his agitated mind. He is utterly unaware of the massive gray clouds above him, the tall bare trees around him, and a deep muddy puddle straight ahead of him.

Before he knows it, he is in free fall. His feet have slipped from under him, and he is swiftly sliding into the cold, wet muck. Horror, despair, mad scrambling...and suddenly, his mind grows quiet.

This is not happening to anyone. He is just a physical body succumbing to the pull of gravity. There is nothing to hold on to, and no one to hold on.

He lies peacefully in the middle of a large, dirty puddle. His notebooks slowly sink around him. He is completely relaxed, making no attempts to get up. There is nowhere to rush to.

## The Uncharted Present

He has never felt so free.



For centuries, mystical teachings have alluded to a liberating vision hidden in plain sight. Anything we might imagine to be true, they claim, is never quite so and never remains quite the same. The failure to acknowledge this simple fact of life brings us into a conflict with reality, breeding struggle and frustration. Accepting the inescapable mystery and flux, all the way down to our basic sense of being, leads to experiencing the immediacy of the moment, free from the baggage of our solidified misconceptions. We can realize such freedom from the confines of the past by letting go of attachments to the known and embracing a life of continuous emergence, never defined and ever unfolding.

The exploration we are about to undertake is inspired by two ancient sources. One is a way of living (*tao*) that was revered by philosophical Taoism for being natural, spontaneous, creative, and indescribable. The yielding, effortless action in accordance with *tao* (*wu-wei*), often likened to the flow of water, enables us to preserve harmony with the natural order:

*If you try to change it, you will ruin it.  
Try to hold it, and you will lose it.*

—Lao Tzu

The other source of inspiration comes from the Buddhist “three characteristics of existence.” Impermanence (*anicca*) means that the destiny of all physical and mental phenomena that come into being is dissolution. Non-self (*anatta*) implies the absence of an enduring core animating physical and mental forms in the world of impermanence. Suffering (*dukkha*, also translated as “unsatisfactoriness”) is the consequence of our inherent inability to derive lasting satisfaction from the impermanent forms that lack abiding essence:

*Birth is dukkha, aging is dukkha, death is dukkha;  
sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are  
dukkha; association with the unbeloved is dukkha;*

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*separation from the loved is dukkha; not getting what  
is wanted is dukkha.*

—Gautama Buddha

Though illuminating and poetic, these existential insights are expressed within the frameworks that reflect their historical and cultural contexts. Naturally, they were not informed by modern scientific understanding. *The uncharted present* is an interdisciplinary secular inquiry intended for skeptical readers who seek greater harmony in their lives yet feel reluctant to dive into mysticism. It seeks to shed light on the invisible forces that confine our thinking to predictable patterns, compelling our mind to contract around the appearances arising in it, only to become trapped inside the invisible web of its own making. Rooted in spiritual traditions, the book aspires to ground ancient insights in modern science.

Unlike pithy poetic images that holistically capture the nature of complex multifaceted concepts, scientific models may often feel clunky in their attempts to decompose a living thing into abstract, independent facets. While artificial and ultimately inadequate, such simplification erects a scaffold of empirical evidence that allows our analytical minds to gain intellectual understanding of questions that we may only vaguely intuit otherwise. Once we achieve this understanding, we can promptly discard the analytical props. Hence, the logical and poetic may go together, helping us avoid dead ends and fruitless struggles while bringing forth more comprehensive insights. This book embraces both, first engaging the head and then feeling its way down.



We start peeling off the layers of delusion that shield us from the immediacy of being by exploring our beliefs that make the world appear stable, understandable, and predictable. Whereas recent advances in scientific understanding allow us to appreciate the extraordinary complexity of our universe, we may retain a deep-seated propensity to remain “naïve realists” by tacitly assuming that our experience of the world captures its true nature. In this book,

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we will try to gain deeper understanding of the mental processes that our mind employs to create beliefs about the world and then experience them as real. This understanding could help instill the sense of profound mystery and reduce the likelihood of mistaking our convictions and intuitions for the truth.

We will try gaining a better understanding of who we are and our place in the world by turning inward and observing the workings of our mind. Developing a better appreciation of its limited ability to comprehend the complexity of the surrounding world may cast the struggle to control our life in a different light. Understanding of “free will” may help us let go of effort and rely instead on the ability of the unfettered mind to discover more creative and harmonious solutions through contemplation and spontaneous insight.

Seeing the felt boundaries of our continuously emerging self as porous may help dissolve the claustrophobic feeling of residing in an illusory bubble that separates us from our physical and social surroundings. We may be surprised to discover that we are a lot less insulated from the world and each other than we have ever realized. We will inquire into the nature of the ephemeral self that appears to be traversing our life on its brief journey “from cradle to grave,” acknowledging our fundamental impermanence and lack of enduring essence. This recognition may profoundly alter our experience of ourselves, from being a “thing” stretched across time to existing only as a brief apparition, emerging and fading away.

At the end, we will consider a way of mindful living that manifests the qualities traditionally associated with “spiritual progress”, expanding our individual insights through mindful dialogue. Learning from the rich tradition of Buddhist mindfulness, we will explore a simple open-ended meditation designed to help busy skeptics with sedentary lifestyles embody their conceptual understanding.

Having the solid ground yanked from under our feet, with no definitive answers or comforting reassurances offered in return, may appear both impractical and unsettling. Yet the message is ultimately optimistic, making the apparent existential predicament of a self-conscious organism trapped inside a perishing vehicle traversing

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a meaningless universe appear as a tasteless cosmic prank, but not necessarily a gloomy one.



The book combines observations from cybernetics, complexity, psychology, neuroscience, and the theory of evolution, against a backdrop of philosophical musings on the nature of self, reality, free will, and ethical choice. Yet it is written in simple language and requires no technical background. Empirical evidence and inspirational quotes freely interlace the text, with annotations providing the original context for both. To capture the daunting complexity of the subject in such a compact volume, the narrative winds in a large spiral, building upon itself and gradually taking the reader deeper into the absorbing thicket of the mind, with new threads blending in and reappearing as increasingly familiar themes. Ultimately, everything falls into place.

Although I do not pose as an authority and rely on the knowledge of those highly regarded by their peers, the book may frustrate the experts in every field involved. Buddhist scholars, philosophers, psychologists, neuroscientists, engineers, mathematicians, and biologists may roll their eyes upon encountering such casual treatment of their respective disciplines. If you are a person who prefers Lewis Carroll's mathematical papers to his whimsical fantasies, you may want to skip straight to the bibliography and enjoy the original non-nonsense technical writings in full.

There is one exception, however. My central message is the transformative power of not-knowing. And on that matter, you may safely treat the book as authoritative.

*“What is the spirit of the practice?”*

*“Inquiry.”*

*“What do I inquire about?”*

*“Good start.”*

*—Robert Aitken*