

**Greville Street
Meetings
19 July 98
16 Aug 98**

**Issue No. 45
July 98**

Meetings are held at 10-30am on the third Sunday of the month at 81, Greville Street, Chatswood and are open to anyone interested in the possibility of finding out whether transformation of consciousness, awakening to what we really are, or whatever we want to call it, can come about.

Editor's Note

There is no table of contents this month as the issue is dedicated to the promised paper "Waking from the Meme Dream" by Susan Blackmore. John Wren-Lewis introduced me to Dr Blackmore's work and I subsequently read her book "Dying to Live" about which I made a few notes in the last issue. I found this paper particularly interesting in view of my recent complaints about the enlightenment industry.

We started the last workshop by discussing the unreal expectations generated by cultivation of the idea of the inaccessibility of 'liberation'. What do we mean by liberation? Is it really anything more than seeing things as they really are; freedom from the misunderstanding and, if so, isn't surrender just an acceptance of the facts as revealed.

Someone at Sunday's meeting said when we were discussing one of the experiments, 'well, that's all very obvious but in spite of the undeniable clear capacity at centre, we know that there is more to it than that'. My response is yes, we know there is more and that is the problem. And what we know, in this context, is a distortion rather than an extension of the clear, direct perception. In the language of the meme paper it is the self-meme complex reclaiming centre stage.

I think the paper will be of particular interest to those who find that dialogue and perhaps more particularly 'headlessness', lack intellectual rigour. I am interested in both of these activities because I find them effective in dismantling the mental models that I seem to be so dependent upon. The paper is also very effective in this way and it provides a convincing explanation of why backsliding is so prevalent. That is, the question of why realisation doesn't necessarily lead to transformation.

I wonder if any of the longer term readers remember our discussions of William van den Heuvel's comments on the self and whether they find them compatible with the meme approach. I think William's bottom line was that there is no problem with the self providing always that we accept it as virtual rather than real.

I expect and hope that the paper will stir up strong feelings both for and against or both and that they will be strong enough to persuade you to put pen to paper or finger to keyboard so I can include your feedback in future issues. "Waking from the Meme Dream" will appear in a new book "The Meme Machine" to be published by Oxford University Press in March 1999. My thanks to the author for her permission to reprint here.

(Correction. Gladney pointed out that the address I gave in the last NOWletter for the Stinson - Wilber exchange was wrong. The right one which Erik worked out is: <http://weber.ucsd.edu/~dlane/keny.html>)

Next Headless Workshop Sunday, 6 September

Waking from the Meme Dream

Paper presented at:- The Psychology of Awakening: International Conference on Buddhism, Science and Psychotherapy Dartington 7-10 November 1996 - © Susan Blackmore, Department of Psychology - University of the West of England, Bristol BS16 2JP

Wake up! Wake up!

Errrr, ummmm, grrrrggr, Oh yes, I'm awake now. Wow, that was a weird dream. I really thought I had to escape from the slurb, and it mattered terribly to get to the cupboard in time. How silly! Of course, now I see it wasn't real at all.

Wake up! Wake up!

What do you mean, "wake up", I'm already awake. This is real. This does matter. I can't wake up any more. Go away!

Wake up! Wake up!

But I don't understand - From what? And how?

These are the questions I want to tackle today. From what are we to awaken? And how? My answers will be "From the meme dream" and "By seeing that it is a meme dream". But it may take me some time to explain!

There is a long history, in spiritual and religious traditions, of the idea that normal waking life is a dream or illusion. This makes no sense to someone who looks around and is convinced there is a real world out there and a self who perceives it. However, there are many clues that this ordinary view is false.

Some clues come from spontaneous mystical experiences in which people "see the light!", realise that everything is one, and go "beyond self" to see the world "as it really is". They feel certain that the new way of seeing is better and truer than the old (though of course they could be mistaken!).

Other clues come from spiritual practice. Probably the first thing that anybody discovers when they try to meditate, or be mindful, is that their mind is constantly full of thoughts. Typically these are not wise and wonderful thoughts, or even useful and productive thoughts, but just endless chatter. From the truly trivial to the emotionally entangling, they go on and on. And what's more they nearly all involve "me". It is a short step to wondering who this suffering self is, and why "I" can't stop the thoughts.

Finally clues come from science. The most obvious (and scary) conclusion from modern neuroscience is that there is simply no one inside the brain. The more we learn about the way the brain functions the less it seems to need a central controller, a little person inside, a decider of decisions or an experiencer of experiences. These are just fictions - part of the story the brain tells itself about a self within (Churchland and Sejnowski, 1992; Dennett, 1991).

Some say there is no point in striving for an intellectual understanding of spiritual matters. I disagree. It is true that intellectual understanding is not the same as realisation, but this does not mean it is useless. In my own tradition of practice, Zen, there is much room for intellectual struggle; for example, in the cultivation of the "don't know mind", or in working with koans. You can bring a question to such a state of intellectual confusion that it can be held, poised, in all its complexity and simplicity. Like "Who am I?", "What is this?" or (one I have struggled with) "What drives you?".

There is also a terrible danger in refusing to be intellectual about spiritual matters. That is, we may

divorce our spiritual practice from the science on which our whole society depends. If this society is going to have any spiritual depths to it, they must fit happily with our growing understanding of the workings of the brain and the nature of mind. We cannot afford to have one world in which scientists understand the mind, and another in which special people become enlightened.

So I make no apologies for my approach. I am going to try to answer my questions using the best science I can find. We seem to live in a muddle that we think matters to a self that doesn't exist. I want to find out why.

Darwin's Dangerous Idea

There is one scientific idea which, to my mind, excels all others. It is exquisitely simple and beautiful. It explains the origins of all life forms and all biological design. It does away with the need for God, for a designer, for a master plan or for a purpose in life. Only in the light of this idea does anything in biology make sense. It is, of course, Darwin's idea of evolution by natural selection.

The implications of natural selection are so profound that people have been awe-struck or maddened; fascinated or outraged, since it was first proposed in *The Origin of Species* in 1859. This is why Dennett (1995) calls it Darwin's Dangerous Idea. Sadly, many people have misunderstood the idea and, even worse, have used it to defend indefensible political doctrines which have nothing to do with Darwinism. I therefore hope you will forgive me if I spend some time explaining it as clearly as I can.

All you need for natural selection to get started is a replicator in an appropriate environment. A replicator is something that copies itself, though not always perfectly. The environment must be one in which the replicator can create numerous copies of itself, not all of which can survive. That's it.

Can it really be that simple? Yes. All that happens is this - in any one copying generation, not all the copies are identical and some are better able to survive in that environment than others are. In consequence they make more copies of themselves and so that kind of copy becomes more numerous. Of course things then begin to get complicated. The rapidly expanding population of copies starts to change the environment and that changes the selective pressures. Local variations in the environment mean different kinds of copy will do well in different places and so more complexity arises. This way the process can produce all the kinds of organised complexity we see in the living world - yet all it needs is this one simple, elegant, beautiful, and obvious process - natural selection.

To make things more concrete let's imagine a primeval soup in which a simple chemical replicator has arisen. We'll call the replicators "Blobs". These blobs, by virtue of their chemical constitution, just do make copies of themselves whenever they find the right chemicals. Now, put them in a rich chemical swamp and they start copying, though with occasional errors. A few million years go by and there are lots of kinds of blobs. The ones that need lots of swampon have used up all the supplies and are failing, so now the sort that can use isoswampin instead, are doing better. Soon there are several areas in which different chemicals predominate and different kinds of blobby appear. Competition for swamp chemicals gets fierce and most copies that are made die out. Only those that, by rare chance, turn out to have clever new properties, go on to copy themselves again.

Clever properties might include the ability to move around and find the swampon, to trap isoswampin³⁻⁷ and hang onto it, or to build a membrane around themselves. Once blobbies with membranes appear, they will start winning out over free-floating ones and super-blobbies are made.

Another few million years go by and tricks are discovered like taking other blobbies inside the membrane, or joining several super-blobbies together. Super-doooper-blobbies appear, like multi-celled animals with power supplies and specialised parts for moving about and protecting themselves. However, these are only food to even bigger super-doooper-blobbies. It is only a matter of time before random variation and natural selection will create a vast living world. In the process billions and billions of unsuccessful blobbies have been created and died, but such a slow, blind process produces

the goods. "The goods" on our planet includes bacteria and plants, fish and frogs, duck-billed platypuses and us.

Design appears out of nothing. There is no need for a creator or a master plan, and no end point towards which creation is heading. Richard Dawkins (1996) calls it "Climbing Mount Improbable". It is just a simple but inexorable process by which unbelievably improbable things get created.

It is important to remember that evolution has no foresight and so doesn't necessarily produce the "best" solution. Evolution can only go on from where it is now. That is why, among other things, we have such a daft design in our eyes, with all the neurons going out of the front of the retina and getting in the way of the light. Once evolution had started off on this kind of eye it was stuck with it. There was no creator around to say "hey, start again with that one, let's put the wires out the back". Nor was there a creator around to say "Hey, let's make it fun for the humans". The genes simply do not care.

Understanding the fantastic process of natural selection we can see how our human bodies came to be the way they are. But what about our minds? Evolutionary psychology does not easily answer my questions.

For example, why do we think all the time? From a genetic point of view this seems extremely wasteful - and animals that waste energy don't survive. The brain uses about 20% of the body's energy while weighing only 2%. If we were thinking useful thoughts, or solving relevant problems there might be some point, but mostly we don't seem to be. So why can't we just sit down and not think?

Why do we believe in a self that does not exist? Someone may yet explain this in evolutionary terms, but at least superficially it appears pointless. Why construct a false idea of self, with all its mechanisms protecting self-esteem and its fear of failure and loss, when from the biological point of view it is the body that needs protecting. Note that if we thought of ourselves as the entire organism there would be no problem, but we don't - rather, we seem to believe in a separate self; something that is in charge of the body; something that has to be protected for its own sake. I bet if I asked you "Which would you rather lose - your body or your mind?" you wouldn't spend long deciding. Like many other scientists I would love to find a principle as simple, as beautiful and as elegant as natural selection that would explain the nature of the mind.

I think there is one. It is closely related to natural selection. Although it has been around for twenty years, it has not yet been put fully to use. It is the theory of memes.

A Brief History of the Meme Meme

In 1976 Richard Dawkins wrote what is probably the most popular book ever on evolution - *The Selfish Gene*. The book gave a catchy name to the theory that evolution proceeds entirely for the sake of the selfish replicators. That is, evolution happens not for the good of the species, nor for the good of the group, nor even for the individual organism. It is all for the good of the genes. Genes that are successful spread and those that aren't don't. The rest is all a consequence of this fact.

Of course the main replicator he considered was the gene - a unit of information coded in the DNA and read out in protein synthesis. However, at the very end of the book he claimed that there is another replicator on this planet; the meme.

The meme is a unit of information (or instruction for behaviour) stored in a brain and passed on by imitation from one brain to another. Dawkins gave as examples; ideas, tunes, scientific theories, religious beliefs, clothes fashions, and skills, such as new ways of making pots or building arches.

The implications of this idea are staggering and Dawkins spelt some of them out. If memes are really

replicators then they will, inevitably, behave selfishly. That is, ones that are good at spreading will spread and ones that are not will not. As a consequence the world of ideas - or memosphere - will not fill up with the best, truest, most hopeful or helpful ideas, but with the survivors. Memes are just survivors like genes.

In the process of surviving they will, just like genes, create mutually supportive meme groups. Remember the blobbies. In a few million years they began to get together into groups, because the ones in groups survived better than loners. The groups got bigger and better, and a complex ecosystem evolved. In the real world of biology, genes have grouped together to create enormous creatures that then mate and pass the groups on. In a similar way memes may group together in human brains and fill the world of ideas with their products.

If this view is correct, then the memes should be able to evolve quite independently of the genes (apart from needing a brain). There have been many attempts to study cultural evolution, but most of them implicitly treat ideas (or memes) as subservient to the genes (see e.g. Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman, 1981; Crook, 1995; Durham, 1991; Lumsden and Wilson, 1981). The power of realising that memes are replicators is that they can be seen as working purely and simply in their own interest. Of course to some extent memes will be successful if they are useful to their hosts, but this is not the only way for a meme to survive - and we shall soon see some consequences of this.

Since he first suggested the idea of memes Dawkins has discussed the spread of such behaviours as wearing baseball caps back to front (my kids have recently turned theirs the right way round again!), the use of special clothing markers to identify gangs, and (most famously) the power of religions. Religions are, according to Dawkins (1993), huge co-adapted meme-complexes; that is groups of memes that hang around together for mutual support and thereby survive better than lone memes could do. Other meme-complexes include cults, political systems, alternative belief systems, and scientific theories and paradigms.

Religions are special because they use just about every meme-trick in the book (which is presumably why they last so long and infect so many brains). Think of it this way. The idea of hell is initially useful because the fear of hell reinforces socially desirable behaviour. Now add the idea that unbelievers go to hell, and the meme and any companions are well protected. The idea of God is a natural companion meme, assuaging fear and providing (spurious) comfort. The spread of the meme-complex is aided by exhortations to convert others and by tricks such as the celibate priesthood. Celibacy is a disaster for genes, but will help spread memes since a celibate priest has more time to spend promoting his faith.

Another trick is to value faith and suppress the doubt that leads every child to ask difficult questions like "where is hell?" and "If God is so good why did those people get tortured?". Note that science (and some forms of Buddhism) do the opposite and encourage doubt.

Finally, once you've been infected with these meme-complexes they are hard to get rid of. If you try to throw them out, some even protect themselves with last-ditch threats of death, ex-communication, or burning in hell-fire for eternity.

I shouldn't get carried away. The point I want to make is that these religious memes have not survived for centuries because they are true, because they are useful to the genes, or because they make us happy. In fact I think they are false and are responsible for the worst miseries in human history. No - they have survived because they are selfish memes and are good at surviving - they need no other reason.

Once you start to think this way a truly frightening prospect opens up. We have all become used to thinking of our bodies as biological organisms created by evolution. Yet we still like to think of our selves as something more. We are in charge of our bodies, we run the show, we decide which ideas to believe in and which to reject. But do we really? If you begin to think about selfish memes it becomes

clear that our ideas are in our heads because they are successful memes. American philosopher Dan Dennett (1995) concludes that a “person” is a particular sort of animal infested with memes. In other words you and I and all our friends are the products of two blind replicators, the genes and the memes.

I find these ideas absolutely stunning. Potentially we might be able to understand all of mental life in terms of the competition between memes, just as we can understand all biological life in terms of the competition between genes.

What I want to do now, finally, is apply the ideas of memetics to the questions I asked at the beginning. What are we waking up from and how do we do it?

Why is my head so full of thoughts?

This question has a ridiculously easy answer once you start thinking in terms of memes. If a meme is going to survive it needs to be safely stored in a human brain and passed accurately on to more brains. A meme that buries itself deep in the memory and never shows itself again will simply fizzle out. A meme that gets terribly distorted in the memory or in transmission, will also fizzle out. One simple way of ensuring survival is for a meme to get itself repeatedly rehearsed inside your head.

Take two tunes. One of them is tricky to sing, and even harder to sing silently to yourself. The other is a catchy little number that you almost can't help humming to yourself. So you do. It goes round and round. Next time you feel like singing aloud this tune is more likely to be picked for the singing. And if anyone is listening they'll pick it up too. That's how it became successful, and that's why the world is so full of awful catchy tunes and advertising jingles.

But there is another consequence. Our brains get full up with them too. These successful memes hop from person to person, filling up their hosts' minds as they go. In this way all our minds get fuller and fuller.

We can apply the same logic to other kinds of meme. Ideas that go round and round in your head will be successful. Not only will they be well remembered,

but when you are next talking to someone they will be the ideas “on your mind” and so will get passed on. They may get to this position by being emotionally charged, exciting, easily memorable or relevant to your current concerns. It does not matter how they do it. The point is that memes that get themselves repeated will generally win out over ones that don't. The obvious consequence of this fact is that your head will soon fill up with ideas. Any attempt to clear the mind just creates spare processing capacity for other memes to grab.

This simple logic explains why it is so hard for us to sit down and “not think”; why the battle to subdue “our” thoughts is doomed. In a very real sense they are not “our” thoughts at all. They are simply the memes that happen to be successfully exploiting our brain-ware at the moment.

This raises the tricky question of who is thinking or not thinking. Who is to do battle with the selfish memes? In other words, who am I?

Who am I?

I suppose you can tell by now what my answer to this one is going to be. We are just co-adapted meme-complexes. We, our precious, mythical “selves”, are just groups of selfish memes that have come together by and for themselves.

This is a truly startling idea and, in my experience, the better you understand it, the more fascinating and weird it becomes. It dismantles our ordinary way of thinking about ourselves and raises bizarre

questions about the relationship of ourselves to our ideas. To understand it we need to think about how and why memes get together into groups at all.

Just as with blobbies or genes, memes in groups are safer than free-floating memes. An idea that is firmly embedded in a meme-complex is more likely to survive in the memosphere than is an isolated idea. This may be because ideas within meme-groups get passed on together (e.g. when someone is converted to a faith, theory or political creed), get mutual support (e.g. if you hate the free-market economy you are likely also to favour a generous welfare state), and they protect themselves from destruction. If they did not, they would not last and would not be around today. The meme-complexes we come across are all the successful ones!

Like religions, astrology is a successful meme-complex. The idea that Leos get on well with Aquarians is unlikely to survive on its own, but as part of astrology is easy to remember and pass on. Astrology has obvious appeal that gets it into your brain in the first place; it provides a nice (though spurious) explanation for human differences and a comforting (though false) sense of predictability. It is easily expandable (you can go on adding new ideas for ever!) and is highly resistant to being overturned by evidence. In fact the results of hundreds of experiments show that the claims of astrology are false but this has apparently not reduced belief in astrology one bit (Dean, Mather and Kelly, 1996). Clearly, once you believe in astrology it is hard work to root out all the beliefs and find alternatives. It may not be worth the effort. Thus we all become unwitting hosts to an enormous baggage of useless and even harmful meme-complexes.

One of those is myself.

Why do I say that the self is a meme-complex? Because it works the same way as other meme-complexes. As with astrology, the idea of “self” has a good reason for getting installed in the first place. Then once it is in place, memes inside the complex are mutually supportive, can go on being added to almost infinitely, and the whole complex is resistant to evidence that it is false.

First the idea of self has to get in there. Imagine a highly intelligent and social creature without language. She will need a sense of self to predict others’ behaviour (Humphrey, 1986) and to deal with ownership, deception, friendships and alliances (Crook, 1980). With this straightforward sense of self she may know that her daughter is afraid of a high ranking female and take steps to protect her, but she does not have the language with which to think “I believe that my daughter is afraid ... etc.”. It is with language that the memes really get going - and with language that “I” appears. Lots of simple memes can then become united as “my” beliefs, desires and opinions.

As an example, let’s consider the idea of sex differences in ability. As an abstract idea (or isolated meme) this is unlikely to be a winner. But get it into the form “I believe in the equality of the sexes” and it suddenly has the enormous weight of “self” behind it. “I” will fight for this idea as though I were being threatened. I might argue with friends, write opinion pieces, or go on marches. The meme is safe inside the haven of “self” even in the face of evidence against it. “My” ideas are protected.

Then they start proliferating. Ideas that can get inside a self - that is, be “my” ideas, or “my” opinions, are winners. So we all get lots of them. Before we know it, “we” are a vast conglomerate of successful memes. Of course there is no “I” who “has” the opinions. That is obviously a nonsense when you think clearly about it. Yes, of course there is a body that says “I believe in being nice to people” and a body that is (or is not) nice to people, but there is not in addition a self who “has” the belief.

Now we have a radically new idea of who we are. We are just temporary conglomerations of ideas, moulded together for their own protection. The analogy with our bodies is close. Bodies are the creations of temporary gene-complexes: although each of us is unique, the genes themselves have all come from previous creatures and will, if we reproduce, go on into future creatures. Our minds are the creations of temporary meme-complexes: although each of us is unique, the memes themselves

have come from previous creatures and will, if we speak and write and communicate, go on into future creatures. That's all.

The problem is that we don't see it this way. We believe there really is someone inside to do the believing, and really someone who needs to be protected. This is the illusion - this is the meme-dream from which we can wake up.

Dismantling the Meme-Dream

There are two systems I know of that are capable of dismantling meme-complexes (though I am sure there are others). Of course these systems are memes themselves but they are, if you like, meme-disinfectants, meme-eating memes, or "meme-complex destroying meme-complexes". These two are science and Zen.

Science works this way because of its ideals of truth and seeking evidence. It doesn't always live up to these ideals, but in principle it is capable of destroying any untruthful meme-complex by putting it to the test, by demanding evidence, or by devising an experiment.

Zen does this too, though the methods are completely different. In Zen training every concept is held up to scrutiny, nothing is left uninvestigated, even the self who is doing the investigation is to be held up to the light and questioned. "Who are you?"

After about 15 years of Zen practice, and when reading *The Three Pillars of Zen* by Philip Kapleau, I began working with the koan "Who...?". The experience was most interesting and I can best liken it to watching a meme unzipping other memes. Every thought that came up in meditation was met with "Who is thinking that?" or "Who is seeing this?" or "Who is feeling that?" or just "Who...?". Seeing the false self as a vast meme-complex seemed to help - for it is much easier to let go of passing memes than of a real, solid and permanent self. It is much easier to let the meme-unzipper do its stuff if you know that all it's doing is unzipping memes.

Another koan of mine fell to the memes. Q. "Who drives you?" A. "The memes of course." This isn't just an intellectual answer, but a way into seeing yourself as a temporary passing construction. The question dissolves when both self and driver are seen as memes.

I have had to take a long route to answer my questions but I hope you can now understand my answers. "From what are we to awaken? From the meme dream of course. And how?" "By seeing that it is a meme dream".

And who lets the meme-unzipper go its way? Who wakes up when the meme-dream is all dismantled? Ah, there's a question.

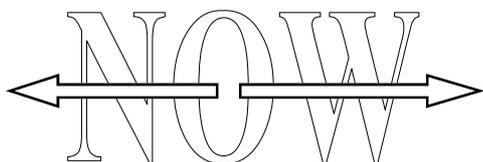
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DIALOGUE MEETINGS SYDNEY AREA

LOCATION	DAY OF MONTH	MEETING PLACE	TIME & CONTACT	Phone Nos.
North Ryde	First Saturday	Swedenborg Centre, 1 Avon Road	12.30pm Barry Hora	043 622 843 Wk.9997 4412
North Sydney	First Wednesday	Don Banks Museum, 6 Napier St	7.30pm Terry O'Brien	02 9949 8379 018 410 127
City	Third Saturday	Theosophical Society Level 2, 484 Kent St	2.30pm Barry Hora	043 622 843 Wk.9997 4412
Chatswood	Third Sunday	81 Greville St. (off Fullers Rd)	10.30 am Alan & Margot Mann	02 9419 7394
Clontarf	Fourth Sunday	49 Peronne Avenue Clontarf	11am Terry O'Brien	02 9949 8379 018 410 127

**DIALOGUE MEETINGS OUTSIDE THE SYDNEY AREA**

LOCATION	DAY OF MONTH	MEETING PLACE	TIME & CONTACT	Phone Nos.
Ourimbah	5th Sundays	RMB 6445 Enterprise Drive	11 am Barry Hora	043 622 843 Wk.9997 4412
Nowra Jervis Bay	First Sunday	North Nowra Community Centre	11am Joan Everitt	02 4443 4727

Headless Workshops - First Sunday every second month. Next workshop 6th September