

MULTIDHARMA

A New Map of Awakening for 21st Century Spiritual Explorers

By Pierce Salguero, PhD

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1. INTRODUCTION

Awakening (or enlightenment, self-realization, etc.) is a topic that is discussed in many religious and spiritual traditions. Each of these has its own map of the path, using distinct models and vocabularies. All of these traditions agree that awakening involves a series of mystical, spiritual, or religious experiences — a sequence of insights and realizations leading to profound transformation in how you perceive yourself and the world. But each tradition or practice system paints a different picture of what the “dharma” (i.e., the path and the goal of this process) looks like.

As a scholar of Asian religions, I have spent many countless hours over the past four decades both reading traditional texts and listening to contemporary people’s accounts about awakening and other intense spiritual experiences. I additionally have extensive personal experience navigating this territory in nearly 40 years of spiritual explorations. What I have noticed from all of these real-life examples is that, regardless of which traditions they participate in or practices they engage with, in real life, the details of people’s awakening processes can often unfold differently than traditional writings or teachings have led them to expect. It seems that no two people seem to undergo the exact same openings in the exact same way.

At first, I was puzzled about why there would be this variability. Over time, however, I’ve abandoned the notion that there is one truth, path, or dharma that’s the same for everyone. Given all of the differences between humans in pretty much every aspect of our mental, physical, psychological, and cultural makeup, why should we expect that spiritual development would be one-size-fits-all?

This book presents a new way of thinking about spiritual development that recognizes and validates this diversity. It is intended for advanced spiritual seekers and

experiencers who are in the midst of their own awakening process, having tasted profound spiritual insights or phenomena for themselves. (If you have not yet had any such experiences, I'd recommend that you read my introductory book, *A Lamp Unto Yourself*, which will make more sense to you when just starting out on your journey.) Importantly, the intended reader for this book is also someone who is eclectic and nontraditional in their approach to spirituality, who does not feel that they are being well served by the maps and models currently on offer.

This book presents a new understanding of awakening that offers a paradigm shift in how we talk about the process. In putting out this new map, which I call "Multidharma," I hope to begin to address what I see as a significant gap in the way that we have been thinking about spirituality in the contemporary West. We will ponder in detail those problems and their potential solutions in the pages to come. For the moment, suffice it to say that Multidharma weaves insights and techniques from different spiritual traditions together into a novel synthesis. It is a model of awakening that is independent from any particular tradition, but it attempts to include them all within a framework that prioritizes flexibility and individuality.

I am a scholar, but if you have come here in search of a scholarly treatment of this subject, you won't find that here. I have recently become involved in a formal academic research project that is interviewing more than one hundred awakened people about long-term spiritual development, and I will publish about that when the time comes. However, at the time I am writing these words, I haven't yet conducted any interviews or accessed any data from that study. Instead, this map is drawn from long-term study of Asian religions; my own personal experience, thoughts, opinions, and reflections; as well as informal, nonscientific conversations with friends and acquaintances. This book is therefore completely separate from any of my academic work and is in no way connected with my "day job" as a researcher or professor. What I have written here should be thought of as a matter of opinion and personal experience rather than of scholarship.

I am also something of a spiritual coach or consultant, and I have been using this new map for several years in that work. I have found that, for some people, it can be helpful

to have this alternative way of thinking, particularly when traditional models don't seem to fit their lived experience. Of course, the more I talk with others and use the model in practice, the more I make adaptations and improvements to it. I can say that this book represents my best efforts to explain my thoughts at the time of this writing, but I may revise or expand the model in the future.

This book is divided into five chapters. The first, the introduction you have just started reading, provides an overview of awakening, the advantages and shortcomings of spiritual maps more generally, and this new map's central metaphor of "threads" (by which I mean dimensions, facets, flavors, or even paths of awakening). Following those introductory comments, the second chapter introduces the four main spiritual threads, describing what it is like to initially open up each thread as well as the trajectory of deepening as one moves further down each one over time. Then comes Chapter 3, on the relationship between the threads, their integration with one another, and their intersections with daily life. It also describes arriving at the end of the threads, when the very ideas of awakening, enlightenment, and the spiritual journey are "released" and cease to be relevant any longer. Next, Chapter 4 discusses the implications of this new model both for individual practice and for supporting others. Then, the fifth and final chapter is a conclusion that briefly talks about the goals of spiritual practice.

As we proceed through this material, there are three things I would ask you to remember. First of all, Multidharma is a model intended for a specific audience and for a specific purpose. It is a zoomed-out, big picture way of speaking about awakening, written for people who are ready for something different than what is available in the traditional maps or models. It's not a rejection of tradition or new religion or ideology that you have to accept or fit into. It's not an attempt to describe reality, or an argument about what is ultimately true. It's just a tool to give the reader an alternative vantage point. It might make sense or click for some people and not for others, and it is perfectly fine with me if it doesn't resonate with you.

Second, please always remember that there is no hierarchy built into this map. It's no "better" to find yourself in one part of the map than the others. Sinking deeply into one particular part of the territory is just as "advanced" as into any other. There's also

nothing wrong with someone who isn't interested in this model — or even someone who is disinterested in spirituality altogether. Instead of molding you to fit into this or that idea of how awakening should or shouldn't unfold, the goal here is to help you to identify, welcome, and deepen into the unique features of your own process, whatever those are. Each person's spiritual journey is different, and that diversity is all perfectly okay. It's what this book is all about.

Third, while I believe that a new map is something that can be beneficial for many, I strongly believe that each person ultimately must forge their own way. Whatever map you use — whether it comes from an established spiritual tradition or from this very book — it will at some point need to be transcended. The Buddha knew this well, describing his teachings as a boat designed to convey you across a river, which should be abandoned once you have arrived on the other side, and not continually carried around for the rest of your life. This little book is intended to be treated like that boat. Use it until it's no longer useful.

Defining awakening in the twenty-first century

A good place to begin our conversation is for me to clearly define what I mean by “awakening.” Some people use the term awakening to refer to the highest state of perfection or enlightenment, and others freely use the term to refer to any meaningful experience whatsoever. Since it's used in so many different ways by so many different people, it's essential for me to get all my cards out onto the table before jumping any deeper into this book.

In these pages, “awakening” refers to a particular kind of transformative process that human beings can and do undergo fairly regularly. This process involves a series of spiritual, mystical, or religious experiences — often brought on by intentional practice, but also sometimes caused by trauma, near death, other strong kinds of experiences, or even spontaneously arising with no perceivable cause. Such experiences have been

documented across cultures for millennia by countless individuals including religious founders (Moses, the Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, etc.), mystics (Meister Eckhart, Teresa of Avila, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, etc.), artists (T. S. Eliot, Ralph Waldo Emerson, etc.), and even scholars and scientists (Carl Jung, Erwin Schrödinger, and the many contributors to the 2022 book *Spiritual Awakenings: Scientists and Academics Describe their Experiences*).

Research measuring the predominance of spiritual experiences has found that they are widespread. For example, about half of the population of the U.S., the U.K., and Canada report having had a spiritual, religious, or mystical experience of some kind according to recent surveys by Pew Research Center, YouGov, and Ipsos Public Affairs. These days, you can find people talking about these kinds of experiences all over social media, YouTube, podcasts, and websites. Also, there are databases with thousands upon thousands of first-hand reports written by ordinary people from all walks of life (e.g., those hosted by the Alister Hardy Trust, the Academy for the Advancement of Postmaterialist Sciences, the International Association for Near-Death Studies, and others). People are not making this up and they are not delusional.

While spiritual experiences have been known and valued across cultures throughout history, different ancient and modern traditions have prioritized particular kinds. They have additionally discovered and systematized specialized mind-body techniques that can reliably evoke these desirable experiences, and they have developed complex philosophical systems to make sense of it all. Most of these traditions prescribe a certain way of working in order to deepen into these experiences over the long term, a process that is normally described as a path of discovery of more and more profound truths. Many religious and spiritual traditions also create communities of people who value these experiences and processes, whether inside or outside of monastic settings, thus creating supportive social and cultural contexts that support seekers and experiencers on their paths of discovery. You can say that these traditions found ways to turn the human capacity to have these kinds of experiences into meaningful engines of positive transformation in people's lives.

Mystical, spiritual, and religious experiences are undoubtedly real at the experiential

level, but each tradition has its own claims about what these experiences tell us about reality. These positions are determined by culture, beliefs, philosophies, and other conceptual frameworks. In contrast, I'm interested in talking about trends that are broader than any one tradition, and so this book will be careful to avoid making any claims about ultimate truth. While describing spiritual experiences phenomenologically (i.e., what they are like experientially), I won't extrapolate from that into any specific ontology (i.e., a fixed worldview or philosophy about what's real). In other words, everything I'm presenting here in this book should be read as merely providing descriptions of what things subjectively *seem like*, never as an attempt to pin down what they *actually are*.

Speaking now strictly at the phenomenological level, I define an awakening process as a series of mystical, spiritual, and /or religious experiences that involve a profound, visceral, and immersive shift in one's identity, perception, and worldview.

Let's take those elements one at a time. Prior to an awakening, one's identity typically involves having a particular body, personality, and biographical history. In various contemporary spiritual traditions, this sense of self is often called the "separate self," "ego self," "narrative self," "the character," or similar terms. We can say that someone is identified with this self insofar as they perceive it to be synonymous with who or what they are, and we can say that they are reifying this self insofar as they understand it to be an actual and real thing. Because most people prior to awakening are constantly both identifying with and reifying this sense of self, a huge portion of their thoughts, emotions, and energies is focused on establishing, maintaining, and defending it. An entire world is produced by this activity, including all of one's goals, desires, fears, plans, meaning-making, belief systems, behaviors, lifestyles, and other aspects of life. This self is the center of the world, and the experiential universe revolves around it.

The awakening process jolts us out of this habitual identity. This change can be experienced with wonder and awe at a new sense of freedom or expansiveness, or with great confusion or even fear as the world that previously seemed so real crumbles away. We can feel as if we are totally enlightened, we can believe we are suddenly seeing the ultimate truth, we can be totally mystified as to what's going on, or we can

feel overwhelmed to the point of thinking we are going crazy. It's also possible that, through regular spiritual practice over the long term, awakening may happen very gradually, one small shift at a time, in a more gentle, sustainable, or even imperceptible way. Whether things should happen quickly or gradually, dramatically or quietly is a matter of great debate in some corners of spirituality. In this book, we needn't take sides on arguments like these; we can just neutrally describe these as possibilities that might occur.

In a true awakening process, the former identity or sense of self undergoes a fundamental reorientation. The identity "pops out" of the narrative self and lands in a new kind of meta-level identification that subsumes or transcends the previous one. Some typical new meta-identities include feeling that one is awareness, consciousness, God, Self (with a capital S), some configuration of energy, a soul, a divine being or spiritual entity of some kind, a collection of entities or parts, or many other possibilities. Another thing that might happen is that one feels like the self ceases to exist, or that one has dropped all identification whatsoever. How people will put into words and conceptualize this shift in identity will vary according to the details of their tradition, beliefs, practice system, and the particularities of their own individual experience.

In addition to a shift in identity, according to the definition used in this book, an awakening process also involves a tangible, deeply felt perceptual shift that affects the way that reality is experienced by the senses. It is not simply a conceptual idea, but a lived and felt sensory reality. We are not talking about a mental exercise or a shift in one's philosophical orientation. Understanding conceptually that all beings are interlinked in a bioenergetic web that unifies all of life, for example, is not the same as viscerally perceiving that very web. Understanding philosophically that "me" is merely an intellectual construct is not the same as discretely feeling like the center-point of one's being has suddenly collapsed and disappeared.

Again, the specific sensory effects vary from person to person. For example, individuals who have awakened to experiencing themselves as Gaia, Brahman, or God might report sensory changes such as being able to see objects glistening with divine power, energy, or light. Those who have awakened to non-self, on the other hand, are more likely to

report solid objects dissolving or the disappearance of certain sensory phenomena. Those who have awakened to a new identity as a soul or a spirit being might suddenly find themselves able to perceive ghosts, travel to other planes of existence, or sense the future.

Naturally, these changes in identity and perception typically also trigger shifts in one's worldview (i.e., both one's ontology — what one thinks is real — and how one sees the universe being organized). When someone who previously was an avowed atheist awakens to the realization that “I am consciousness,” for example, they may also become firmly convinced that consciousness, rather than physical matter, is the primary reality of the universe. Likewise, when someone who previously believed in God awakens to the realization that the self is just a construct, they may also become equally sure that God could not possibly exist either. After awakening, people will often feel they have discovered “True Nature,” “The Absolute,” “The Ultimate,” or other such terms that imply a new worldview even if they don't articulate their new ideas in detail.

These three facets — a radical shift in identity, perception, and worldview — are defining characteristics of what I call awakening. But these shifts unfold, deepen, and mature over time. Many people react to their first spiritual experience by thinking that they have spontaneously become completely enlightened, but this is a well-known trap. Usually, the three shifts are initially experienced in brief spurts. One oscillates between experiencing things in the new or the old way. Eventually, the shift becomes increasingly stable over time until one could be said to have undergone a “persistent” or “abiding” awakening. As people undergo a gradual refinement and acceptance of their new identity, ways of perceiving, and notions of reality, they start fashioning an entirely new life for themselves. Their goals, desires, fears, plans, meaning-making, belief systems, behaviors, lifestyles, and other aspects of life realign to conform to the awakened state. This process of reorientation is often referred to in contemporary spiritual circles as “embodiment.”

Different spiritual traditions and practice systems talk about different goals or end points for the awakening and embodiment process. This is one of the things we will think about in more detail in the pages to come. Suffice it for now to say that most

traditions advocate completely stabilizing into a particular way of being — living your life from a new awakened baseline with an identity (or lack thereof), mode of perception, and worldview that is prescribed in advance by the tradition. Others articulate the goal as a multifaceted or multidimensional awakening that integrates more than one way of being into a cohesive and integrated whole. Still others say that eventually the whole process comes to a stop and fades away, leaving you back where you started, like coming full circle.

All of the above are included in my definition of “the process of awakening,” but ideas about how the details of these transformations should unfold vary greatly from tradition to tradition. While they all agree that you must extract yourself from a narrow sense of egoic self and unlock new ways of seeing and understanding reality, spiritual practice systems each have different techniques they say you should use to achieve those effects. They each prescribe their own ideas about where you should land and what you should do next. Also, they prefer different speeds: some say that it happens gradually through a particular type of meditation, others lay out detailed practices involving a whole suite of mental and physical practices, while still others prescribe “pointers” to spark sudden realizations.

This book recognizes and validates all of these possibilities without necessarily preferring one over the other. The Multidharma model described here proceeds from the understanding that no tradition has a monopoly on effective techniques for awakening, or the single correct answer to how it should be done, or the definitive picture of what it all means. While acknowledging that certain traditional spiritual systems can reliably evoke awakening and help people deepen into the process, Multidharma also recognizes that not everyone responds in the same way to these techniques. In other words, what follows is a map of awakening that is built on the premise that all of these approaches are legitimate and valuable, but there is no one-size-fits-all spirituality, no single path that is the best fit for everyone.

The other thing that many traditions seem to spend a lot of energy on is distinguishing “proper” awakening from deviation, delusion, or even madness. Multidharma doesn’t take sides here either. Now, I’m neither a psychologist nor any other kind of medical

specialist, but I don't see how we can expect vastly different traditions from different cultures in different parts of the world to see eye to eye on where any of these boundaries are. I think we need to recognize that there is a whole range of possible ways of awakening, and that we don't have to glorify some while demonizing others as if it were a zero-sum game. I do want to clearly set some limits to my own definition of awakening: I don't consider ways of being that intentionally cause harm and suffering for oneself or others to be forms of awakening; or those that are based on cultivating hatred, greed, superiority, fear, or other negative traits; or dysfunctional states of consciousness that are completely unable to navigate practical material reality. But within those boundaries, I'm perfectly comfortable with the idea that one person's or culture's awakening is another's madness and vice versa.

How do you feel about this new, more capacious approach to awakening? Personally, I think the time is right for it. Historically, within a traditional monoculture — if you were living in Japan, Nepal, France, or Chichén Itzá a thousand years ago, for example — pretty much every spiritual practitioner around you would have been participating in the same sort of techniques in the same social and cultural context, with the same worldview and the same vocabularies and symbols. For better or worse, whatever kinds of spiritual experiences you had in that setting would have been interpreted within the shared framework of your community. That situation stands in stark contrast with contemporary times, when we're now all embedded in global, multilingual, and multicultural contexts; when our spirituality involves borrowing and experimenting with all sorts of practices from all over the world; and when our sanghas are internationally dispersed and digitally connected. With a practically infinite range of techniques widely available on the internet and people freely able to play around with all of them, twenty-first-century seekers are often awakening outside of any single system or formal structure. This creates a more diverse and eclectic spiritual landscape than has ever before existed in history.

Please understand that, by pointing this out, I am in no way criticizing traditional spiritual practice systems. I really value the practices and perspectives that have been preserved over time and think traditional communities should be the object of intense gratitude for all of the gifts they have made available to us. But, at the same time, I can

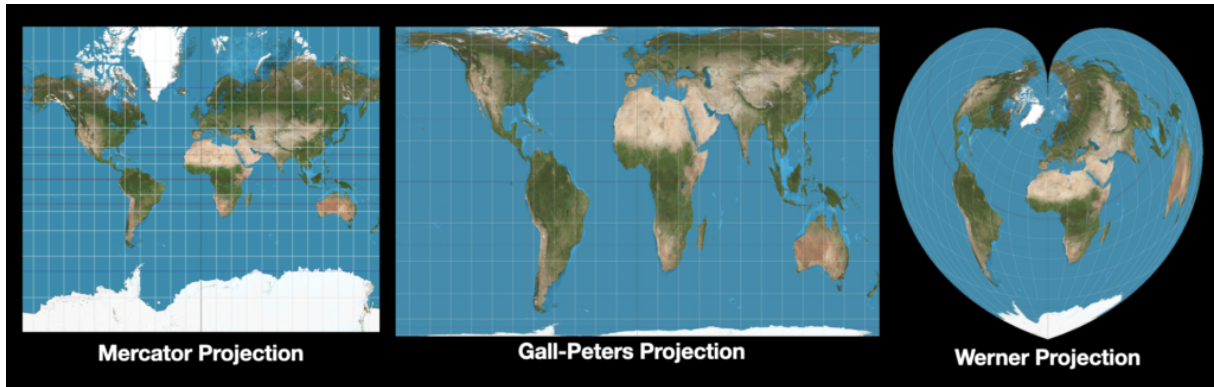
also plainly see that no traditional model or worldview is up to the task of encompassing the sheer diversity and complexity of the totality of contemporary spirituality. A Hindu model of awakening cannot be expected to be able to fully integrate Amazonian Shamanism into its frameworks; a Catholic system of spiritual development cannot be expected to find a place for the insights gained through Japanese Zen meditation.

The abundance of the territory has overflowed our existing maps. Of course, practitioners who remain within a specific traditional framework may continue to get enormous benefit from the tried-and-tested maps valued by their chosen community. However, those of us who are explorers of the broader spectrum of what contemporary spirituality has to offer may find ourselves in need of a more flexible theoretical framework that can accommodate a wider range of spiritual practices and experiences. That's what Multidharma is attempting to offer.

Maps and territories

In the preceding pages, I have repeatedly referred to Multidharma as a spiritual map. The noted twentieth century Polish philosopher of science Alfred Korzybski famously wrote the dictum that “a map is not the territory it represents” (*Science and Sanity*, p. 58). This essential insight is fundamental background for the model I’m going to elaborate in the coming pages. The reader simply *must* understand that this book is an exercise in map-making and is not pretending to be describing the awakening territory itself.

All cartographers know that different maps provide us with different understandings of the territory, and they each have their own advantages, disadvantages, and distortions. Take for example the various ways that Earth’s spherical globe is projected onto a flat two-dimensional surface. As you may remember learning in elementary or high school, there are many different methods of doing so, three of which are depicted in the image below.



Images by Strebe on Wikicommons

The Mercator method of projection on the left is perhaps the most familiar to most Western people. This kind of map has a distinct advantage in being useful as a navigation chart, since straight lines on this map are equivalent to consistent compass bearings. However, the Mercator projection also has the feature of distorting the areas of the territory the further north or south you go on the map. By the time you get to the polar areas, the map has lost all proportionality, such that it looks like the land masses of Antarctica and Greenland are as large as the rest of the world combined, which is certainly not the case in reality.

The Gall-Peters projection, which is widely used in the UK and by certain international organizations, does a much better job of representing the relative size of land masses throughout the world. However, the continents are stretched vertically in ways that misrepresent their shapes. That is to say, in correcting for the disadvantages of the Mercator projection, this map introduces new disadvantages and distortions of its own.

The third image above, the Werner projection, corrects one disadvantage of both the Mercator and Gall-Peters, which is that neither gives us a clear sense of the spherical shape of the Earth. Using this projection, we can get a clear sense of how close northern Canada is to northern Russia, for example. But, yet again, bringing certain aspects of the globe into focus obscures other things. We've lost the consistent compass bearings and have gained a lot of distortion at the edges of this new map.

I've only given three examples here out of the many possible methods of projecting a sphere onto a flat surface, but I think you get the point. No matter what method is used, certain features of the Earth will become easier to see while others will become obscured and disfigured. Maps, that is to say, will always have their own unique advantages and distortions; you simply can't have all pluses without any minuses.

Part of the reason that maps have these advantages and disadvantages is that they each unavoidably enforce a distinct vantage point from which its user must view the territory. There is no such thing as a map that doesn't fix the viewpoint from a particular perspective. All of the maps depicted above, for example, show the world from a vantage point as if you were somewhere out in space, looking down at the Earth's entire surface spread out in front of you. In contrast, do you remember the famous map of New York by Saul Steinberg that appeared on the front cover of *New Yorker* magazine on March 29, 1976? That map had a different vantage point, placing the viewer a few dozen feet above 9th Avenue. In the foreground, you see 10th Avenue, then the Hudson River, a tiny strip of land marked "New Jersey," a bit of territory representing the whole rest of the US, the Pacific Ocean, and then beyond that, China. The goal here was clearly not to accurately represent the areas of different countries or the distances between them like the other maps above. Instead, it was to draw a satirical map of the world from an extremely New York-centric viewpoint.

Steinberg had an agenda in making that map, a certain critique he wanted to get across, and that fact reminds us that no map is free from having an inherent ideology or value system. To give another example of this, I grew up in South America, and in that part of the world it is not uncommon to see the Mercator map of the world flipped upside down so that north is down and south is up. When you invert it like this, instead of the map showing Europe in the top center, it's now South America at the apex. While the technical information of the map remains exactly the same, this simple shift in orientation can lead to a very different visual statement about which countries are more important than others.

Finally, another feature of all maps is that they have different experiential effects on their users. When my children were young, my wife and I used to take them to art

museums. They never seemed to enjoy the experience until one time we took them to a museum that had a “scavenger hunt” map for children. Rather than leading them through the exhibition chronologically according to the era of the painters like the adult map of the museum did, the kids were told that they were in the “parrot” room or the “castle” room. With this shift in perspective, their experience changed from boredom to excitement and curiosity, as they ran around searching the artwork for the objects their map had indicated could be found in this room. My point is that all maps affect us experientially and shape our emotional relationship with the territory. They can do this overtly or even manipulate us in more covert or subtle ways that we can’t easily detect.

So, to recap: maps are never the territory, all maps have advantages and disadvantages, all maps force us into a particular perspective, all maps have ideological agendas, and all maps influence our experience of and relationship with the territory. Let’s now take those insights into the topic at hand: maps of the awakening process.

There are countless spiritual maps, forwarded by many traditional and modern practice systems and teachers. However, the vast majority of these maps of awakening share a common core metaphor or underlying structure. It’s as if all maps of the world only ever depicted the globe as a rectangle, like the Mercator and Gall-Peters, and no one ever thought to use a heart shape like the Werner Projection.

The common structure of spiritual maps is the idea that we can carve up the process of awakening into discrete stages, phases, or steps. Different traditions delineate the steps differently. The stages of insight in Theravada, the ten ox-herding pictures in Zen, the *bhumis* in Mahayana Buddhism, the levels of consciousness in TM or in Patañjali’s *Yoga Sutras*, and so forth each have their own characteristics and particular unique details, but they are all examples of maps with stages, phases, or steps.

Now, to be clear, I am in no way arguing that these maps or the fundamental underlying metaphor of steps are *wrong*. Just like none of the methods of projecting the Earth mentioned above are wrong, and neither are the upside-down map, Steinberg’s map of New York, or the scavenger hunt map of the museum. Let’s stipulate here that all of these maps are correct in their own way, and each can be valuable for their own purposes and perspectives. But even so, they are all still just maps; none of them is the

actual territory.

How you respond to any given map of awakening is part of your own unique individuality. For example, you might find yourself participating in a spiritual tradition whose map squares quite well with your own personal experience. You might find that this map helps you to make sense of the territory you are navigating, and that the disadvantages of the map are clear enough not to present major pitfalls or blind spots. You might find that your general experience of the map is positive or even inspirational. If that's the case, then that's fantastic. There's no reason at all for you to try out a different map!

On the other hand, you might have found that your experience with maps based on stages/phases/steps has been less positive. For example, you might have found that your own experiences didn't neatly fit into any of the stepwise models, making you feel frustrated, lost, or perplexed. You might have found that thinking in terms of discrete steps is detrimental to you, perhaps because you're always checking "where you are" against the map in a way that's distracting or obsessive. Or, you might have found that you spend a lot of energy judging yourself and others according to which stage they're at and feel that the hierarchical structure inherent in the map is becoming counterproductive for you.

If you can relate to any of that, then this book is going to present an alternative kind of map for you to consider. This new Multidharma map is based on a completely different underlying metaphor than the others. Just so we're clear, I'll reemphasize that this is not about arguing that this new map is *better* than the others. It's just different. This map doesn't claim to replace the old ones but simply presents the territory in a different light. It's like switching from a rectangular map to a heart-shaped one. By doing so, it can depict the awakening process in a fresh way that brings different things to our attention. Of course, it will necessarily also introduce its own disadvantages and distortions. If you find it doesn't work for you, then feel free to go back to what you were doing before or find another model that works even better for you.

My point is simply that, because no map is actually the territory, we don't ever have to get fixated on any of them. Unfortunately, however, that's not the way a lot of seekers

and teachers treat their spiritual maps. Too often, people cling to their maps, determined to seek safety in them even when they are unhelpful or even damaging. They become fundamentalists, insisting that their map is the only accurate one. They treat their maps as ultimate truth, and call anyone using another one delusional. Some even place their maps up on pedestals, sometimes literally bowing down and worshipping them.

Let's repeat Alfred Korzybski's wise phrase again: "a map is not the territory." Maps are simply *tools* designed to help us to navigate the territory. The moment these tools stop serving us in a helpful capacity, we should trade them in for new tools that better serve our needs. This book is an experiment in trying out a new tool to see if it works for you.

The metaphor of threads

Instead of the usual stages, phases, or steps, this book's new map of awakening is based on the metaphor of threads. What kind of threads, you ask? Picture the kinds you might use to weave textiles of different kinds. They come in all shades of colors, as well as ranging in thickness from the thinnest type you might use in a sewing machine to thick yarns used for knitting or crochet. I am going to talk about weaving these threads into a complex, unique, potentially even messy creation that is a metaphor for your very own idiosyncratic awakening.

That's the metaphor. Now, let's dive into it a bit deeper. As I've tried to make clear above, any map will naturally have its own advantages and disadvantages. The main advantage of this new threads-based map is that we are going to be able to move away from the kind of stepwise thinking that stages/phases/steps maps force upon us. This is the kind of thinking that says, "I am now at stage 2 of the awakening process. At this stage, the following things should be present in my experience in order to confirm I have achieved this level. My job now is to closely follow the instructions I've been given in order to catch up with the others who have moved on to stage 3," and so forth. Again, there's nothing wrong with that kind of thinking if it works for you. But if it

doesn't, this is an invitation to try an alternative way of conceptualizing awakening.

Instead of discrete and sequential steps or attainments, the metaphor of threads will help us to think in terms of processes. It's the same territory, just sliced up differently. To make a comparison, imagine if you were used to listening to a particular song in terms of its sequential structure: verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, chorus. But then, someone came along and asked you to instead separate out the instruments and listen to them one by one. As you listen to just the drum track all the way through, then go back and listen to just the bass line, then just the guitar chords, and so forth, you're in fact listening to the same music, but you're hearing something completely different. Instead of thinking about the song's discrete sections, you're now able to hear each instrument as a distinct "thread" that runs throughout the song. Sometimes that thread moves to the foreground or the background, maybe it builds over time or introduces new variations on a common theme, maybe you gain more appreciation for each musician's individual contribution to the piece of music. All sorts of new information can come to light as you hear the song in a different way.

It's my belief that focusing on the "threads" of awakening rather than the stages provides a more flexible, more inclusive map that can better account for the diversity of ways in which the awakening process unfolds for many people. However, it is to be expected that once we move away from stepwise thinking, we are going to lose some of the advantages of that kind of map. Remember, there are always tradeoffs to any cartographic choice. In this case, we will be sacrificing the precision and certainty of being able to locate ourselves within a clear system of levels and grades. We won't be easily able to compare ourselves with others to see where we stand relative to one another in the awakening process. We also will lose the ability to confidently define our experiences using terminology from established spiritual traditions. Multidharma's inherent valuing of individuality and flexibility over the predictability and safety of tradition may be refreshing, or it may feel ungrounded. Different maps will work better for different people, or even for the same person at different times. How you use this map, whether you combine it with others, or whether you even use it at all is therefore completely up to you.

The main idea with this multithreaded map is that — like the individual instruments making up a piece of music — each thread represents a major aspect, tone, texture, or theme of awakening. Each of the threads has its own vocabularies, practices, phenomenologies, identities, and ontologies. You can think of these as different ways of approaching spirituality, different categories of traditions, or different goals and outcomes. The next chapter will introduce four of the most common threads that many people experience during awakening, which I call emptiness, oneness, energy, and psyche. However, not everyone experiences all of them. There are three-, two-, and even one-thread awakenings. The customizability of this map for different kinds of awakening is one of its chief advantages.

In this map, not everything that occurs during the awakening process is necessarily a thread. There are also epiphenomena. What differentiates a thread from epiphenomena is that the former always involves a developmental trajectory. Threads are aspects that open up, progressively deepen, and move toward an end point. Epiphenomena, on the other hand, are things that happen along the way but don't have a trajectory, don't deepen, and don't develop over time. These might include any kind of spiritual, mystical, or religious experience — and they may be intermittent or persistent — but they don't involve major shifts in one's identity, perception, and worldview. In other words, they are not central or core parts of the awakening process as I have defined it.

At the risk of getting ahead of ourselves, let's take a specific example and imagine two different people who both experience kundalini energy as part of their awakening process. In case A, the person experiences strong flows of energy running through their body at various times throughout the awakening process, but these do not seem to be connected to one another and do not develop into a totalizing vision of the whole cosmos consisting of energy, as we will discuss later in the energy thread chapter. They are strong experiences, but epiphenomenal. On the other hand, in case B, the person may have fewer discrete experiences of kundalini, but they seem to build upon one another over time. Eventually, these energetic experiences culminate in an understanding that both the self and the entire universe is dynamically manifesting every moment, arising from a primordial source of energy. Because it has this trajectory of deepening and development toward this end point — and because it involves a

transformation in identity, perception, and worldview — we can call energy (in the form of kundalini) a thread for this person.

One of the main advantages of Multidharma is that thinking in terms of threads can draw attention to particular patterns or themes in the awakening process that otherwise may have gone unnoticed — or at least the connections between them were overlooked. Another advantage is that whole traditions or practice systems can be interpreted through this model, showing you how different traditions fit together as well as where they don't. Let me repeat: *this map isn't replacing traditions*. Rather, it sits alongside them and shows the underlying similarities and differences between them at the level of process and phenomenology. It gives us a generalizable language that is nonhierarchical and neutral, which allows us to put these traditions on an equal footing without collapsing them into one another or making claims about one being better than the other.

A related implication of this model is that each thread represents a separate dimension, kind, type, or path of awakening that can be supported and engaged with separately. Each thread calls for its own kind of techniques or practices, meaning that if you experience more than one thread, you don't necessarily have to find all of the answers within a single community of spiritual practitioners. For example, you might find that a particular form of meditation is quite effective for working with one thread but that another thread is better addressed using qigong, shamanic drumming, psychotherapy, diet, exercise, or something else. Once you understand these dimensions of awakening as separate threads, you won't need to find a single teacher, book, or practice that addresses all of your needs. You can instead construct a synthesis out of different traditions or approaches that works for your own unique awakening process and bodymind configuration.

Fundamentally, a threads-based map fosters a sense of open inquiry. Stepwise models require you to synch up with the expectations of a given system. You can only understand your own experiences by holding them up to predetermined norms. The threads, in contrast, acknowledge the individuality and diversity in the expression of each person's awakening process. The map invites you into an open-ended exploration

of the uniqueness of your own experience. Instead of being forced to conform to a preexisting protocol, you become empowered to weave your own braid.