

Consciousness Summary

Exploring the nature and illusion of awareness.

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About the book

In "Consciousness," Susan Blackmore takes readers on a riveting exploration of one of the most enigmatic aspects of human existence — the nature of consciousness itself. Through a blend of philosophical inquiry, scientific research, and personal reflection, Blackmore challenges conventional beliefs about the self and the mind, arguing that consciousness is not what we often perceive it to be. Engaging with topics ranging from mysticism to the latest findings in neuroscience, she ultimately posits that consciousness may be an illusion shaped by the brain's complex functions, inviting us to reconsider what it truly means to be aware. This thought-provoking journey will not only captivate your intellect but may also alter your understanding of your own existence, making it a must-read for anyone curious about the depths of human perception and reality.

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About the author

Susan Blackmore is a renowned British psychologist, lecturer, and writer, best known for her work on consciousness, memes, and altered states of consciousness. With a PhD in psychology from the University of Sussex, she has dedicated her career to exploring complex philosophical questions surrounding the nature of self and consciousness. Blackmore is particularly recognized for her interdisciplinary approach, drawing insights from psychology, neuroscience, philosophy, and cultural studies to challenge traditional views of human experience. As a prolific author, she has written extensively on topics including the science of consciousness and the role of memes, culminating in her influential book "Consciousness," where she delves into what it means to be conscious in an increasingly mechanized world.

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Chapter 1 Summary: Falling into Zen

In "Consciousness," Susan Blackmore embarks on a rich exploration of thought—its limitations, its interplay with meditation, and its potential to deepen our understanding of consciousness. She begins by emphasizing the joy found in thinking but acknowledges the challenge of clear thinking, especially when addressing profound questions about existence and consciousness. Blackmore points out that science demands rigorous thought, yet how often are scientists trained to calm their minds before diving into inquiry? This reflection sets the stage for her inquiry into consciousness as she intertwines her intellectual pursuits with personal practice.

1. **The Duality of Thinking and Not Thinking:** Blackmore argues that some inquiries about consciousness require not just insight but also the ability to refrain from thinking. This dual approach is emphasized in meditation, particularly within Zen practice, where an excess of thought can lead to confusion rather than clarity. She highlights how spiritual traditions often discourage excessive thinking in favor of an experiential understanding of one's true nature.

2. **The Appeal of Zen:** Encountering Zen Buddhism becomes a turning point for Blackmore. With its emphasis on direct experience over dogma and rigorous questioning, she finds it aligns closely with the scientific method. While she clarifies that she is not a Buddhist or part of any religious order,

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Zen's techniques resonate with her quest for clarity and understanding, leading her to employ its principles in her investigation of consciousness.

3. **Calming the Mind Through Meditation:** Meditation is identified as an essential method for calming the mind. Blackmore recounts her journey learning to meditate—beginning with Zazen, or "just sitting"—and the struggles faced along the way. Through her experiences on retreat, especially during cold, challenging conditions, she learns that the act of meditation reveals the chaotic state of her mind, underscoring the initial necessity of calming the mind to engage deeply with existential questions.

4. **Embracing Mindfulness:** As Blackmore encounters the concept of mindfulness, she grapples with the idea of being present in each moment. Through sustained practice, she discovers its profound effects—feeling alive, aware, and engaged with her surroundings, rather than caught in the tumult of past regrets and future anxieties. This realization eliminates much mental clutter, enabling her to experience life more vividly.

5. **The Continuity of Practice:** Continuous practice becomes a theme in Blackmore's explorations. While initially practicing with vigor, she emphasizes the importance of finding balance and not overwhelming oneself. Simplifying her commitment to daily meditation, she emphasizes the value of consistency over intensity, which allows for gradual but significant progress.

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6. **The Role of Questions:** The quest for understanding leads her to formulate ten pivotal questions about consciousness. These questions arise from a mix of scientific inquiry and Zen philosophy, promoting deep contemplation rather than straightforward answers. Each question not only prompts deep inquiry but also requires a calm and attentive mind—an interplay of inquiry and tranquility that Blackmore meticulously navigates.

7. **The Interrelationship of Science and Zen:** Throughout her journey, Blackmore emphasizes how her scientific training and Zen practice enrich one another. The act of questioning becomes not only a tool for uncovering truths about consciousness but also a method to interrogate the nature of the self. By integrating personal experience with scientific inquiry, she seeks to explore consciousness in a holistic manner.

In essence, Blackmore's journey through meditation and inquiry into consciousness is portrayed as a richly woven tapestry of thought, experience, and practice. It poses the vital question of how we understand ourselves and the nature of our consciousness, suggesting that perhaps there is much to learn when we blend the art of wondering with the rigor of scientific approach. Through her vivid experiences, Blackmore invites readers to consider the complexities of consciousness and the powerful potential of integrating mindful practice with intellectual exploration.

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Chapter 2 Summary: The problem of consciousness

Consciousness, often heralded as one of science's most profound mysteries, presents challenges that have persisted since the dawn of philosophy, encapsulated in the mind–body problem or dualism. The essence of this conundrum lies in the stark contrast between our experiences of the external world and the subjective nature of our consciousness. While physical objects like glasses of wine exist in a shared, observable reality characterized by predictable behavior, the subjective perceptions we have—like the taste and smell of the wine—are inherently personal and inaccessible to others. This distinction leads to an exploration of conscious experiences, often referred to as qualia, which represent the unique personal qualities of sensations that are not fully understood or agreed upon among individuals.

1. The Dualism of Experience: Throughout history, dualism—the belief in the separation of mind and body—has been a prevalent worldview. Many philosophers and ordinary individuals alike find it compelling to believe in a non-physical essence or soul that transcends mere physical existence. This belief persists despite scientific advances dispelling the notion of an immaterial mind influencing the body. The major historical model of dualism from René Descartes proposed a distinct mind separate from the physical body, raising challenges unresolved by Cartesian philosophy, such as the interaction between the two realms.

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2. **The Hard Problem of Consciousness:** Fast forward to modern discussions, scientists grapple with the 'Hard Problem' of consciousness: how do brain processes lead to subjective experience? While neuroscience provides insights into brain functions—such as how sensory information is processed—the question of where consciousness fits in this complex system remains elusive. Observations show that our brain handles actions and decisions predicated on neural processes, often without conscious intervention. This raises doubts about our intuitive sense of being the central 'doer' in our actions, leaving a gap between physical mechanisms and subjective awareness.

3. **Nondual Insights:** In contrast to dualistic beliefs, many spiritual traditions—such as Buddhism, Taoism, and Advaita—offer nondual perspectives, positing that the apparent separation between self and world is an illusion. These teachings suggest that the self is not an independent entity but part of a larger interconnected reality. This fascinating view challenges the idea of an inner self directing thoughts and actions, inviting individuals to recognize the emptiness of inherent selfhood and the nature of experiences without an autonomous doer.

4. **The Science of Consciousness:** Most contemporary researchers acknowledge the connection between consciousness and physical processes but struggle with integrating subjective experience into scientific accounts. Concepts like the 'stream of consciousness' or the 'theatre of consciousness'

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create metaphoric frameworks that can inadvertently revert to dualistic thinking, complicating our understanding of how consciousness manifests. The notion of neural correlates of consciousness seeks to establish a scientific basis for subjective experience, yet proving how consciousness arises from neural activity remains fraught with challenges.

5. **The Illusion of Vision:** The perception of vision exemplifies these complex dynamics, where eye movements and change blindness reveal the limitations of our visual experiences. Common metaphors likening consciousness to a stream or a stage miss the mark, as they imply an inner viewer that cannot be substantiated. New theories, such as the 'sensorimotor theory,' propose that seeing involves the skills of interaction with the environment rather than merely constructing inner visual representations.

6. **Reexamining Agency and Continuity:** The implications of findings from cognitive neuroscience, including Ben Libet's famous experiments on free will, compel an examination of our assumptions about agency, consciousness, and continuity. Many beliefs regarding a separate, continuous self or a rich mental movie fail to align with scientific discoveries showing that our conscious experiences may be more fragmented and less controllable than we intuitively understand.

As we navigate these complex issues, it becomes paramount to question our ingrained assumptions about consciousness and personal experience. This

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inquiry calls for a reflective examination of what it truly means to be conscious and challenges the fabric of beliefs surrounding the self and reality. Through a rigorous analysis of our own experiences, supported by explorations in both science and meditation practices, we can foster a deeper understanding of consciousness and potentially uncover insights that bridge the gap between subjective and objective realms.

Key Concepts	Summary
Dualism of Experience	Historically, dualism suggests a separation between mind and body, with many believing in a non-physical essence or soul. This perspective persists despite scientific refutation of an immaterial mind influencing the body, posing unresolved challenges about interaction between mind and body.
Hard Problem of Consciousness	The 'Hard Problem' raises questions about how brain processes lead to subjective experience. While neuroscience uncovers brain function, the integration of consciousness into this framework remains elusive, highlighting the disconnection between physical mechanisms and subjective awareness.
Nondual Insights	Spiritual traditions like Buddhism and Advaita propose nondual perspectives, suggesting the self is part of an interconnected reality rather than a separate entity. This outlook challenges the notion of an autonomous doer directing thoughts and actions.
Science of Consciousness	Researchers recognize the link between consciousness and physical processes but struggle to incorporate subjective experience into scientific models. Neural correlates of consciousness aim to establish a scientific foundation, yet proving consciousness's emergence from neural activity is challenging.
Illusion of Vision	Vision illustrates the complexities of consciousness, where eye movements and change blindness reveal limitations in visual experience. New theories, like sensorimotor theory, suggest vision relies on interaction skills instead of just inner visual re-construction.

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Key Concepts	Summary
Reexamining Agency and Continuity	Cognitive neuroscience findings prompt reevaluation of beliefs about agency and the self. Many assumptions about a continuous self or a coherent mental narrative conflict with evidence that conscious experiences can be fragmented and less controllable than expected.
Reflection and Inquiry	To understand consciousness, it is essential to challenge ingrained beliefs about personal experience and reality. This reflection includes both scientific exploration and meditation practices, striving for a deeper comprehension that connects subjective and objective realms.

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Critical Thinking

Key Point: The Illusion of Vision

Critical Interpretation: Imagine for a moment that your perception of the world—a beautiful sunset, the laughter of a friend, or the taste of chocolate—is not merely a passive reception of sensory information, but a dynamic engagement with your surroundings. By embracing the idea that your consciousness is less about holding a constant inner narrative and more about fluid interactions with the world, you may find a newfound appreciation for fleeting moments of beauty and connection. This perspective invites you to let go of the need for a continuous self that controls every thought and action, allowing you to immerse yourself fully in the present. This realization can inspire you to cultivate mindfulness in your daily life, encouraging you to embrace the richness of experiences as they come, rather than being anchored by the past or lost in future worries. Such an approach not only enhances your appreciation of life's simple joys but also opens the door to deeper understanding and harmony with the world around you.

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Chapter 3: 1. Am I conscious now?

In Chapter 3 of "Consciousness" by Susan Blackmore, the exploration of consciousness begins with a simple yet profound question: "Am I conscious now?" This inquiry triggers a reflective process wherein the author feels an awakening upon asking the question, suggesting that consciousness may not be a constant state but rather something that can ebb and flow.

As Blackmore repeatedly poses this question to herself, she scrutinizes the nature of consciousness, noting an initial struggle to remember to ask it frequently. This inconsistency prompts her to wonder whether her previous states were truly conscious or simply semi-conscious. Significantly, she discovers a recurring sensation of "waking up," which evokes feelings of concern about previously existing in a sort of mental haze. The act of questioning consciousness seems to introduce clarity and presence that were absent before.

To cope with distractions, Blackmore and her students implement various strategies to remind themselves to ask the question. These range from

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Chapter 4 Summary: 2. What was I conscious of a moment ago?

Exploring the nature of consciousness and our awareness of prior experiences reveals a perplexing puzzle that raises profound questions about perception, memory, and the essence of self. The inquiry begins with a simple yet profound question: What was I conscious of a moment ago? This seemingly innocuous inquiry leads to a series of reflections that subvert our assumptions about consciousness and memory.

To illustrate this exploration, the author reflects on the experience of suddenly becoming aware of a sound, such as a clock chiming or a cat purring beside her. Despite the apparent immediacy and clarity of these sounds in retrospect, the act of asking the question of consciousness raises uncertainty about whether these experiences were truly acknowledged at the time they occurred. This pattern becomes more pronounced as the author engages in the exercise repeatedly, noticing that while threads of awareness seem to emerge when prompted, they often appear disconnected from the primary focus of attention.

1. The Disconnection of Awareness: Through various examples—from the sound of a siren to the feeling of breathing—the text reveals a phenomenon where awareness of sensory input often happens in retrospect, leading to confusion about whether one was conscious of these experiences while they



unfolded. Each auditory or sensory detail feels vibrant upon reflection but is characterized by a sense of disjunction and separateness. This suggests that consciousness may not operate as a seamless flow but rather in fragmented threads that only reveal themselves upon reflective questioning.

2. **The Nature of Memory:** The author confronts the challenge of discerning genuine conscious experiences from those that are simply reconstructed memories. Instances such as hearing a crow's screech highlight an important point: awareness often arrives only after a stimulus has occurred. This temporal disconnect raises critical questions about when true consciousness occurs in relation to stimuli and whether memories can be trusted as genuine reflections of prior experiences.

3. **The Illusory Self:** As the author grapples with tracing the threads of past awareness, she confronts a deeper existential dilemma about the self. If the observed consciousness is composed of multiple disparate threads that seem to operate independently, it leads to a questioning of the singularity of the self. Is there a single "I" experiencing these moments, or could it be that consciousness is a collection of disparate interactions without a coherent underlying self to anchor them?

4. **The Void of Consciousness:** Ultimately, the exploration reaches a moment of existential confrontation with a perceived void when attempting to identify what was consciously experienced just moments prior. This void

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symbolizes not just a gap in memory but a more profound philosophical realization about the ephemeral nature of consciousness itself. The recognition of nothingness challenges the very nature of being and invites contemplation about the essence of existence and the transitory flow of experiences.

In summary, the inquiry reveals consciousness as a fragmented, retrospective process that resists easy categorization. The struggle to understand past awareness leads to profound revelations about the nature of self, memory, and the experience of nothingness. Ultimately, the author is left grappling with a deeper understanding of consciousness itself—a complex interplay of threads that, while rich in appeal, defy simple comprehension.

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Critical Thinking

Key Point: The Illusory Self

Critical Interpretation: As you delve into the nature of your own consciousness, allow yourself to embrace the profound realization that the self you perceive is not a singular, unified entity but rather a collection of momentary experiences and fleeting thoughts. This insight invites you to reflect on the beauty of your fragmented existence, where each thread of consciousness contributes to your rich tapestry of being. Instead of clinging to a fixed identity, you can liberate yourself from the confines of 'I' and 'me,' finding peace in the idea that you are a dynamic interplay of sensations, memories, and thoughts that shift with each passing moment. This understanding can inspire you to fully immerse yourself in the present, acknowledge the transient nature of your experiences, and discover a deeper appreciation for the complexity of life.

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Chapter 5 Summary: 3. Who is asking the question?

In this exploration of consciousness, the narrative begins with the protagonist grappling with the profound question of "Who is asking the question?" This seemingly simple query quickly escalates into a complex investigation of self-awareness and perception. Initially overwhelmed and confused, the protagonist attempts to redirect the inquiry by focusing on the experiential aspects of the world surrounding them.

1. The journey begins with a keen observation of a flagstone outside the hut, prompting reflections on perspective. The protagonist contemplates the distinction between "here" and "there," which introduces the nuance of viewpoint in perception. As they engage with the question of who is observing, they turn their attention inward. However, this introspection leads to frustration; each inquiry reveals an absence instead of a definitive self.
2. In a state of reflection, the protagonist acknowledges a sense of stillness amid the chaos of thoughts and external stimuli, ultimately confronting the same confounding question. They endeavor to articulate who is experiencing the myriad events unfolding around them. In this cycle of introspection, the distinction between observer and observed begins to blur, leading to a realization that the perceived world might encompass the self.
3. An anecdote involving Buddhists in nature serves as a key turning point.



Following instructions to point at various objects, the protagonist surprises themselves by realizing they cannot see their own head, sparking a moment of clarity about the interconnection of self and world. This experience illustrates a fundamental principle: perceiving the absence of a distinct self can lead to an expansive identification with the surrounding world.

4. The narrative threads back to the unfolding experiences of life, where the protagonist grapples with how to integrate this perspective practically. While moments of stillness and perception seem easier in solitude, they become complicated in social interactions, especially when anger or frustration arises. In understanding that there is no separate self apart from the experience, the protagonist cultivates compassion towards others.

5. Returning again to the initial question remains daunting yet revealing. The act of asking becomes a focal point for understanding consciousness itself. Engaging in daily activities, such as polishing brass bells, evolves into a meditative practice where the protagonist contemplates the nature of action and the essence of the doer. This leads to further questioning: who is the one performing the action?

6. The reflection deepens as the protagonist acknowledges a vast emptiness within, realizing that both thought and breath arise from this void. This void indicates that the act of questioning may not necessitate a definitive answer. Instead, the journey of inquiry becomes an end in itself—a process that

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nurtures awareness of the interdependent nature of self and experience.

In conclusion, the chapter unfolds a rich tapestry of introspection, illustrating the interplay between self and perception. The clarity that comes from recognizing the absence of an isolated self highlights a profound interconnectedness with the world. Ultimately, the protagonist's exploration reveals that the quest for understanding consciousness is not solely about finding answers but engaging with the inherent mystery it embodies.

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Critical Thinking

Key Point: Recognizing the Absence of a Distinct Self

Critical Interpretation: Imagine standing still in the hustle and bustle of life, where for a moment, you let go of the notion that you are a separate entity. As you reflect deeply on the question, 'Who is asking this question?', you begin to see yourself not as an isolated individual but as part of a vast web of experiences and consciousness. This realization inspires you to cultivate compassion and understanding towards others, recognizing that their struggles, like your own, are part of the same intricate tapestry of life. As you navigate social interactions, you find that your response to frustration and anger shifts; instead of reacting with separation, you engage with empathy. Each moment becomes a chance to connect, to share in the collective human experience, deepening your sense of belonging and purpose in this shared journey of consciousness.

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Chapter 6: 4. Where is this?

In the exploration of consciousness, one must begin with the immediate experience present in front of them. The author observes three sprigs of bright yellow winter jasmine, prompting questions of perception and existence. In grappling with the question, "Where is this?" the author reflects on the nature of experience and the objects of perception, suggesting an inherent complexity in what appears straightforward.

1. Complexity of Location: The initial thought is that the flowers are located in front of the author, yet deeper reflection reveals the problematic nature of this idea. Philosophers have long debated the location of experiences: are they in the external world or in the brain? The author mentions Max Velmans and his theory of reflexive monism, which purports that consciousness exists both in the physical world and in the brain. Despite this complexity, the realities of perception challenge the notion of an independent experience, as the author's engagement with the flowers reveals that experience is subjective.

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Chapter 7 Summary: 5. How does thought arise?

The exploration of how thought arises is a captivating journey rooted in personal experience and meditation practices derived from Tibetan Buddhism. This inquiry began for me during a retreat at Maenllwyd in 1993 and resurfaced during solitary contemplation in 2007. The structure of the retreat differed significantly from standard Zen or Chan retreats, offering a unique perspective shaped by ancient teachings.

1. The retreat was anchored around a remarkable notebook containing Mahamudra instructions, brought back by John, the facilitator and former student of a Tibetan lama, Khamtag Rimpoche. Through a serendipitous series of events, John discovered this lama while on an anthropological trip in the Himalayas, culminating in a pilgrimage that led to the acquisition of priceless insights intended to transcend traditional boundaries.
2. Each day of the retreat followed a deeply structured format, demanding physical and mental discipline. Despite initial challenges such as fatigue and distracting thoughts, I slowly began to find pockets of tranquillity during meditation. Observing patterns in my thinking, I realized some thoughts constrained my experience, while others, when released, exhibited a fascinating impermanence.
3. The core questions from Tipun's notebook urged me to reflect on the

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nature of tranquillity, the essence of thought, and the relationship between the two. As I sat contemplating these queries, I discerned the importance of attention. An essential part of this journey is maintaining an open focus that embraces all without judgment or choice. It became evident that the act of observing thinking led to a detachment from the incessant judgments often associated with self-criticism.

4. As the retreat progressed, my understanding deepened through experiences of grief and anger inevitably surfacing during intense meditation sessions. However, I found solace in compassion, recognizing that such emotions were transient. One transformational visualization exercise, meant to cultivate empathy, helped me dissolve my anger towards others, illustrating the intertwined nature of compassion and insight in Buddhist practice.

5. With each question posed by John during the retreat, I acknowledged the complexities of awareness and its differentiation from the processes of thought. The inquiry slowly revealed the illusory nature of both states, unraveling the perception of a split self. This understanding fostered a sense of freedom from the shackles of judgment and self-doubt.

6. In contemplation, I began to appreciate how thoughts arise seamlessly within tranquillity. At times, they seemed to emerge almost autonomously, creating a profound awareness of the tenacity of both the observing mind and

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the thoughts it experiences. The interplay revealed a deeper connection to the fabric of existence, emphasizing that thoughts and the sense of self are not as separate as they may initially seem.

7. Reinvigorated by the insights gained, I continued to explore the experience of non-elaboration—challenging traditional notions of time and self-awareness. Encountering John’s stimulating questions about the nature of awareness itself pushed my introspection to new heights, as I wrestled with the implications of whether the observer is detached from the very thoughts being observed.

Ultimately, this evolving inquiry not only deepened my understanding but also cultivated a richer practice where the aim shifted from a fleeting grasp of understanding to a continuous immersion in the present moment. I discovered that the questions themselves served as vessels guiding me toward a state of tranquillity, where meditation becomes less about achieving a destination and more about embracing the unfolding of experience. As I sit now, reflecting on these transformative moments amidst nature's cyclical rhythm, I cultivate a steady awareness, navigating the delicate interplay between thought and stillness, fully aware that the journey itself is the essence of insight meditation.

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Critical Thinking

Key Point: Understanding the transience of thoughts can liberate you from self-judgment.

Critical Interpretation: Imagine standing at the edge of a serene lake, the surface reflecting the sky above—a moment of clarity, where you can see your thoughts rise and fall like ripples. Recognizing the impermanence of these thoughts invites you to fully embrace each experience without the burdens of criticism or fear. By letting go of the need to cling to certain judgments about yourself or the world, you free yourself to explore life with an open heart and a curious mind, discovering tranquility in the present moment.

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Chapter 8 Summary: 6. There is no time. What is memory?

In "Consciousness," Susan Blackmore recounts her transformative experience during a week-long retreat focused on a single koan: "There is no time. What is memory?" Upon arriving at the retreat led by John Crook, she feels immediately drawn to this koan, which prompts profound reflections on the nature of time and memory.

From the start, the retreat establishes a disciplined routine. Each participant rises early for meditation and engaging exercises before embarking on their contemplative work with the chosen koan, which sets the tone for their introspective journey. Blackmore grapples with the koan's paradox, oscillating between agreeing with it and then disputing it. Initially, she recognizes the statement's truth but struggles to reconcile it with her sensory experiences of time as she observes the movement in nature.

As hours of meditation pass, she encounters intense distractions, leading her to hallucinate a pattern on the carpet. Despite these challenges, she frequently returns to the core questions imposed by the koan. Through persistent reflection, she begins to appreciate the koan's complexity—acknowledging that memory seems intrinsically linked to her experience of time. The koan serves as a vehicle for her mindfulness, urging her to stay present and investigate her thoughts as they arise.

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Her awareness of time and memory deepens through various encounters with John during formal interviews, during which she articulates her insights and frustrations, revealing the depths of her internal inquiries. Blackmore recognizes that all moments seem intertwined in a cycle of memory, presenting the enigma of "now" and indistinctness of the past and future. Each moment feels ephemeral and elusive, fueling her inquiries concerning the nature of consciousness itself.

As the retreat continues, Blackmore experiences an irritating sensation of "blindness," feeling trapped between the paradox of trying to grasp the present moment and realizing its elusiveness. Her frustration leads her to a climactic moment where she confronts that traditional markers of experience—such as the delineation of past, present, and future—might not exist as she once believed.

On the retreat's final day, Blackmore comes to a humbling recognition: the consensus of her past understanding about mindfulness—that it signifies being fully present—declines in light of her experiences. The koan has effectively shattered her previous assumptions, leaving her with more questions than answers as she contemplates her understanding of consciousness and the fabric of time itself.

Through this journey with the koan, Blackmore elucidates that reality may

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not be a linear progression shaped by time but rather a continuum where memories and experiences exist as interconnected fragments, each urging her to delve deeper into the fundamental nature of existence. The retreat serves as a microcosm reflecting the overarching themes found within her explorations of consciousness, revealing profound insights into the malleable relationship between time, memory, and subjective experience.

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Chapter 9: 7. When are you?

In Chapter 9 of Susan Blackmore's book, the narrator reflects on a week of meditation focused on the koan "When are you?" While this seems like a straightforward question, it unfolds into a complex exploration of time, self, and existence.

- 1. Arriving and Sensing:** The narrator arrives at a retreat in nature, noting how the environment feels intertwined with her identity. This intimate connection to place evokes thoughts of how memories and familiar settings shape a person's being, emphasizing that part of one's self may reside in external surroundings rather than merely within.
- 2. Engaging with Time:** As the meditation begins, the first word "When" prompts the narrator to delve into the concept of time. She grapples with the nature of memories, realizing they exist in a fluctuating present, rather than being easily categorized by past timelines. This exploration reveals the transient and elusive nature of "now," illuminating her struggle to pinpoint when events occurred, or even when her recollection of them takes

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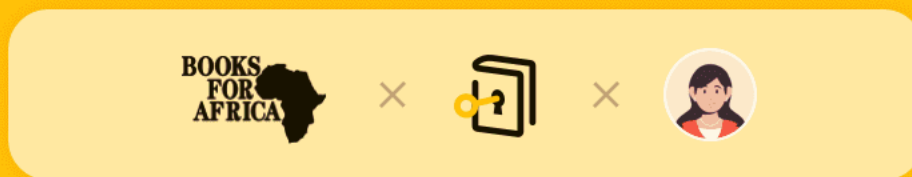
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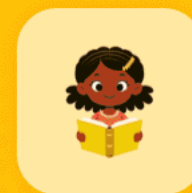
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Chapter 10 Summary: 8. Are you here now?

In Chapter 10 of "Consciousness" by Susan Blackmore, the author reflects on her journey through a two-week meditation retreat, intertwining personal struggles and profound insights into the nature of consciousness and self-awareness. Here's a detailed summary of the core themes and insights organized into key points:

- 1. Commitment to Meditation:** Blackmore commits to a two-week meditation retreat, despite her preference for the simplicity of Zen practices compared to the more complex Tibetan rituals at the Mahamudra retreat. She aims to explore the question posed by Tipun: "What is the difference between the mind resting in tranquillity and the mind moving in thought?"
- 2. Initial Challenges:** The first day proves to be overwhelming as Blackmore struggles with longer meditation sessions and the distractions of group activities. Her previous familiarity with less structured Zen meditation makes the rigid routine challenging, leading to feelings of frustration and the urge to leave.
- 3. Mindfulness Practice:** Despite her dislike for being assigned as a kitchen assistant, who must remain mindful in a busy and distracting environment, Blackmore finds moments of solace during solitary tasks. She reflects on the importance of mindfulness in all circumstances and begins to



cultivate a more accepting attitude toward her responsibilities.

4. Sleep Deprivation and Insight: Amidst her lack of sleep, Blackmore grapples with how this affects her mindfulness. She questions whether exhaustion serves a purpose in deeper insights and acknowledges an internal conflict regarding the value of her prior unaided meditation experiences.

5. Exploration of Consciousness: Throughout the retreat, Blackmore engages in explorations of consciousness, drawing from varying philosophical perspectives, including those of William James, Antonio Damasio, and Daniel Dennett. She contemplates the nature of thoughts, perceptions, and their intertwining with the self.

6. The Nature of Thoughts: During meditation, Blackmore starts to observe that her thoughts often seem to be occurring independently before she becomes aware of them. This realization prompts a significant shift in her perspective as she begins to understand that there may not be a distinct thinker separate from the thoughts themselves.

7. Interactions with John: Blackmore has conversations with John, her retreat leader, which reveal her struggle between her intellectual contemplation and practical experience of letting go of thoughts. John encourages her, but she grapples with his interpretation of awareness and seeks to validate her own insights.

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8. Transformative Realizations: By the end of the retreat, Blackmore experiences a transformative realization about the interconnectedness of thoughts and perceptions. She discards the notion of a central experiencing self and embraces the idea that experiences and observers arise and dissolve without a fixed identity.

9. Challenge to Traditional Notions of Self: The chapter proposes that the traditional view of a singular, persistent self is an illusion, instead presenting consciousness as a fluid and dynamic interplay of experiences where multiple threads of awareness coalesce.

10. Driving and Silence: Upon returning home, Blackmore applies her meditative insights to her daily life, experiencing driving as a meditative act of being present without conscious thought. This culminates in her realization that silence and awareness exist beyond the confines of typical cognitive processes.

The chapter concludes with Blackmore noting her newfound ability to observe the flow of experience without necessarily engaging in constant thought activity, suggesting a deeper understanding of consciousness as a collection of moments arising not from a singular self but from a vast, interconnected tapestry of awareness. Her interlacing of personal struggle and profound awakening provides a roadmap for others seeking to explore

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the depths of consciousness and the self.

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Chapter 11 Summary: 9. What am I doing?

In this reflective chapter, the author immerses herself in the simple act of sitting outside, grappling with profound questions concerning free will, action, and consciousness. As she sits quietly, she is enveloped by nature—the song of birds, the buzzing of bees, and the warmth of the sun—all inviting her to contemplate her existence in this moment.

1. **The Nature of Action:** In pondering the question “What am I doing?” the author recognizes that actions like sitting, breathing, and hearing occur largely without her conscious control. This leads to the realization that many of the actions she perceives as her own may instead be determined by prior causes and conditions, challenging her perception of free will.
2. **Free Will vs. Causality:** The notion that everything is intertwined in a web of cause and effect is a central theme in both Western philosophy and Buddhist thought. The author highlights that while human beings often perceive themselves as independent actors, the Buddhist concept of dependent origination emphasizes that nothing exists in isolation. Rather, every action emerges from a complex interplay of factors—a perspective that undermines the traditional notion of free will.
3. **The Illusion of Control:** As the author continues to explore the question of agency, she reveals her struggle with the duality of feeling responsible for



her actions while recognizing that those actions unfold through a myriad of societal, genetic, and environmental influences. She reflects on moments of effort in meditation and the experience of labor during childbirth to elucidate that hard work does not necessarily equate to conscious agency.

4. Self-Observation: Engaging in observations about her own responses—like the instinctual reaction to a movement in her peripheral vision—she confronts the limitation of the self as a doer. This leads her to further investigate the nature of perception and suggests that seeing and experiencing might not be strictly her doing but a shared interaction with the environment.

5. The Dilemma of Responsibility: Navigating through the delicate balance of feeling responsible for her choices while acknowledging the absence of an implicit ‘self’ that makes those decisions creates anxiety. Yet, she recalls a Zen master affirming that while ultimate freedom from responsibility is a philosophical truth, one must still engage with accountability in daily life.

6. Acceptance of Action: The author concludes with the perspective that by relinquishing the illusion of free will, action continues to unfold naturally, removing the burden of personal responsibility and allowing a flow of experience. Embracing this viewpoint provides a sense of liberation from the constricting narratives of the self as doer. She acknowledges that decisions emerge from the fabric of ongoing experiences rather than from an isolated

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'I' acting freely.

In sum, the chapter serves as a contemplative inquiry into the essence of self, action, and free will, ultimately leading the author to an acceptance of the interconnectedness of all actions and the illusion of separate agency. This brings forth a greater sense of peace as she navigates through life's decisions, recognizing the seamless interplay of existence rather than lingering in the confines of perceived control.

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Critical Thinking

Key Point: Embracing the Illusion of Control

Critical Interpretation: Imagine stepping outside, surrounded by the vibrant sounds of nature, where each chirp and rustle reminds you of your connection to the world around you. In this moment, as you reflect on your actions, you begin to understand that many of the choices you think define you flow from a complex web of experiences and influences. You realize that by letting go of the burden of perceived control over your life, you can embrace a deeper sense of peace and liberation. No longer do you need to grapple with the anxiety of responsibility like a heavy weight on your shoulders. Instead, you can allow life to unfold naturally, appreciating the intricate dance of cause and effect that shapes your existence. This perspective not only empowers you to navigate your decisions with grace but also invites you to fully engage in life's experiences without the need to assert a singular 'I' as the author of every action. In this acceptance, you find a profound freedom, an understanding that your essence is woven into the fabric of a larger existence, where each moment is an opportunity to flow with life rather than resist it.

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Chapter 12: 10. What happens next?

At the core of human existence lies a fundamental question: what happens after death? This inquiry often intertwines with the greater question of self-identity—who am I? The author expresses a profound yearning to survive beyond physical death, a feeling many share, which has sparked intense debates among religious and scientific communities. Science generally dismisses the notion of a soul or spirit residing in the brain, instead positing that consciousness results from our complex physical systems. In contrast, various religions offer alternative perspectives, from reincarnation to eternal damnation or paradise, further complicating the discourse.

As the author reflects on the concept of self, an endeavor to trace the essence of their being through conscious experiences reveals a disorienting truth: every exploration of self leads to the discovery of more experiences, not a singular, continuous identity. This realization breeds doubt about the persistence of self, particularly in moments of mindfulness when the observer appears to shift between varying experiences.

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Chapter 13 Summary: Being conscious

Consciousness, as explored by Susan Blackmore in Chapter 13 of her book "Consciousness," presents a compelling narrative that fundamentally questions the traditional understanding of the self and its relationship with the mind and body. The author contends that consciousness is, in essence, an illusion—an intricate and persuasive one that leads us to mistakenly perceive our minds as separate entities from our physical bodies. This perspective challenges the focus of consciousness studies, which often grapple with the 'hard problem' of explaining how subjective experiences arise from the objective workings of the brain. Here, Blackmore posits that rather than delving into this elusive issue, it might be more enriching to investigate the very illusion of dualism itself and how it manifests.

1. **The Illusion of the Self:** Blackmore's inquiry into personal experience reveals a startling conclusion: the concept of a persistent self, or a continuous stream of experiences labeled 'what it's like to be me,' disintegrates upon closer examination. When introspecting, one discovers that what we perceive as a singular self is actually a collection of fleeting, transient selves that emerge alongside our sensations, perceptions, and thoughts. Each moment of reflection gives rise to a brief, unique self, which vanishes just as quickly, leaving us to question whether there is ever a true observer of these experiences.

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2. Non-existence of a Mental Theater: Traditional notions of consciousness commonly depict it as a unified stage where experiences unfold. Blackmore challenges this perspective, suggesting that rather than a seamless narrative of conscious experiences, what exists are disparate sensations and thoughts that arise in parallel, lacking a coherent organizational structure. This fragmentation contradicts the idea that we can pinpoint what is occurring 'in consciousness' at any given moment.

3. Reassessing Consciousness Studies: The author argues that many foundational assumptions in consciousness research—that imply the existence of a persistent self, an inner observer, or a clear delineation of conscious contents—are fundamentally flawed. Engaging in introspection reveals that these notions are often misleading, prompting Blackmore to reject them in favor of a fresh understanding that seeks to explain not a continuous experience but rather the intricate neural processes that give rise to the illusion of consciousness.

4. Beyond Neural Correlates: Rather than seeking neural correlates or definitions of consciousness, Blackmore suggests that the focus should shift toward understanding the mechanisms by which the brain creates the illusion of a self. This would involve examining the interplay between sensory and verbal processes that construct a fleeting observer—an apparent self that emerges temporarily, rather than a continuous entity. Such investigations could elucidate how different brain processes yield variable perceptions of



time and selfhood, culminating in the essential connections between 'me' and 'now.'

5. Moments of Unique Awareness Blackmore expresses curiosity about instances where individuals reflect on their consciousness or sense of self, noting that these moments likely engage extensive integrative brain processes. These rare glimpses into consciousness might contribute disproportionately to our self-concept, particularly for those who practice mindfulness, which could potentially enhance the continuity of self-awareness.

As Blackmore navigates these complex ideas, she reflects on the nature of insight and understanding, revealing how ideas can sometimes precede a full intellectual grasp. Her earlier experiences with altered states of consciousness lead her to the notion that stripping away the layers of transient observers and simplifying the convoluted theories of self can lead to a clearer appreciation of existence as a series of interactions devoid of a singular, enduring self. This interplay between body and the external world, devoid of dualism and agency, emerges as a more authentic representation of consciousness than the cognitive constructs we often cling to. Ultimately, Blackmore invites readers to reconsider their perceptions of self and consciousness, urging a deeper examination of the processes that create the illusion we often take for granted.

Topic	Summary
The Illusion of the Self	Blackmore argues that the perceived persistent self is actually a collection of transient selves that emerge with each moment, challenging the existence of a true observer.
Non-existence of a Mental Theater	She refutes the idea of a unified narrative in consciousness, suggesting that experiences are fragmented and occur in parallel without a coherent structure.
Reassessing Consciousness Studies	Blackmore critiques traditional assumptions in consciousness research, favoring a focus on neural processes that create the illusion of consciousness rather than searching for a continuous experience.
Beyond Neural Correlates	She proposes shifting focus from neural correlates to understanding how the brain constructs the illusion of self, emphasizing the temporary nature of self-awareness and perception.
Moments of Unique Awareness	Blackmore notes that moments of reflection on consciousness reveal significant brain processes, influencing our self-concept, especially for mindfulness practitioners, enhancing continuity of self-awareness.
Reflection on Insight	She suggests that understanding the transient nature of the self leads to a clearer appreciation of existence, advocating a view of consciousness as interactions without a singular self.

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Critical Thinking

Key Point: The Illusion of the Self

Critical Interpretation: Imagine for a moment, standing in front of a mirror, not seeing your image as a solid entity, but rather as a series of ephemeral reflections—a mere collection of moments and experiences. In this understanding, as Susan Blackmore presents in Chapter 13, the idea of a persistent 'self' crumbles, inviting you to consider that who you think you are is simply a ballet of fleeting thoughts, emotions, and sensations, dancing in harmony yet never quite solidifying into something you can identify. This realization can be profoundly liberating; it encourages you to embrace the transient nature of your experiences without clinging to a fixed identity, allowing you to live more fully in the present. By recognizing that each moment births a new version of yourself, you begin to appreciate your life as a dynamic flow, rich with possibilities and free from the burdens of a static self-image. This perspective empowers you to engage with your life with openness and curiosity, fostering a deeper appreciation for the beauty of momentary existence.

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Chapter 14 Summary: Response of a Zen Master

In his response to Susan Blackmore's manuscript on consciousness, Zen teacher John Crook provides a dual perspective, assessing the text both as a scholarly work and through a Zen lens. His insights present a rich tapestry of feedback that underscores the intersection between intellectual inquiry and experiential practice within the realm of consciousness studies.

- 1. Overall Impressions:** Crook praises the manuscript's clarity and provocative nature, noting that it reads like a retreat report and reflects Blackmore's journey through her Zen apprenticeship. He acknowledges her diligent investigation of consciousness but hints at an incomplete engagement with Zen practice, emphasizing that in Zen, no inquiry is ever wholly finished.
- 2. Subjective vs. Objective Empiricism:** Crook expresses agreement with Blackmore's approach to consciousness studies, particularly with her emphasis on subjective empiricism. He identifies her work as part of a Western phenomenological tradition, albeit one that is like no other, as it intertwines Zen methodologies with Western philosophical inquiries.
- 3. Limitations of Intellectual Focus:** From a Zen perspective, Crook critiques Blackmore's self-identification as "not a Buddhist," suggesting that such definitions create a dualism that may limit her understanding. He warns



against reducing practice to mere intellectual exploration, urging her to engage more deeply with Zen principles rather than confining her investigation to pre-defined goals.

4. Identifying Biases: Crook observes a tendency in Blackmore's writing to "pick and choose," which can obscure an authentic Zen experience. He encourages her to broaden her inquiry by engaging more comprehensively with Zen texts and practices, rather than restricting her focus to preconceived questions that may bias her findings.

5. Discovering 'Nothing': As Blackmore wrestles with concepts of 'nothingness' within her exploration of consciousness, Crook highlights the dangers of becoming attached to this notion. He warns against these potential pitfalls as they risk shaping her understanding in a one-dimensional way, forgetting the dynamic interplay of emptiness and form in Zen thought.

6. Intellectual Insights vs. Experiential Awareness Crook notes that Blackmore's increasing intellectualization of her practice could detract from her experiential insights. He points to instances where her analytical approach limits the simplicity and clarity of Zen understanding, suggesting a need to let go of complex arguments in favor of embracing direct experience.

7. The Nature of Discourse: In a critical discussion about a specific

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interview, Crook articulates the challenge of navigating differing interpretations of experiences in Zen practice. He illustrates the need for an integrative approach that transcends dualistic language, advocating for a “third way” that encompasses both perspectives rather than getting trapped in arguments.

8. Final Reflections: Crook concludes by noting the difference between intellectual argumentation and true Zen realization. He finds the subsequent discussions on free will and survival somewhat tedious compared to the more impactful parts of the manuscript and cautions that readers might focus on these sections at the expense of the substantive insights expressed earlier.

Throughout his letter, Crook encourages Blackmore to continue her Zen practice, emphasizing that the exploration of consciousness is an ongoing endeavor. He invites her to contemplate what it truly means to engage with Zen, ultimately echoing the sentiment that in matters of profound inquiry, the journey is as significant as the destination.

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