

What Biohacking Borrows from Shamanism – Manvir Singh, Ph.D. – #967

Dave Asprey:

You're listening to The Human Upgrade with Dave Asprey. I recently read an article in Wired Magazine, and it was interesting because it was called "The 'Shamanification' of the Tech CEO." And it was an article about how deprivation has become en vogue with CEOs. And since I'm a fan of Wired Magazine, Kevin Kelly, one of the founders, has been on The Human Upgrade before, a real interesting guy. And one of these days, I'll get Jane Metcalf, the other one on. As a former computer hacker, cyber punk guy from the 90s, it's always been one of my favorite and most interesting magazines. So seeing this article was really cool.

And it was by a cultural anthropologist who studies this kind of stuff. And I said, "Hey, what would happen if we had him on the show?" So, we're going to talk about CEOship. We're going to talk about shamanification, what that means, what self denial looks like and go through some learning there because this apparently is the week of that kind of discussion. Later on, we're going to have an episode with the Peruvian shaman who does iowaska and see what we can learn here. This is a guy who has a PhD in evolutionary biology from Harvard, which is a very interesting subject. If you're a longtime listener, you know we've had several evolutionary biologists on, and those conversations are always cool. So with no further ado, I'd like to introduce you to Manvir Singh. Manvir, welcome to the show.

Manvir Singh, Ph.D.:

Yeah. Thank you for having me. I'm excited to chat.

Dave:

You're an anthropologist at the Institute for Advanced Study in?

Manvir:

Toulouse.

Dave:

But you're in Indonesia and you're studying some ancient... You're not in Indonesia as we talk, but you've traveled to Indonesia. And you write in the article in Wired about how you've seen this across a huge data set, including the people you hang with saying, I have to deprive myself of this or of that. And overall, I would say the article's a little bit critical, saying why do they feel like they have to do this? Is that a good take on it? Did I read the article in a way that's sort of like there's a little bit of self-deception involved in doing this?

Manvir:

Mean critical of whom? Of the shamans or tech CEOs?

Dave:

No, of either shamans or tech CEOs because they're sort of self deceiving themselves into believing that the stuff they're doing works.

Manvir:

Okay. Yeah... I guess one way of thinking about it would be a criticality. More generally, it's about trying to just understand something that seems puzzling and interesting and providing a cross-cultural perspective on it. I guess whether you think it is critical depends on how you feel about these double discourses, where there's a certain kind of justification and another reason underlying it. But that is a pretty pervasive kind of way of interacting. You know what I mean?

Dave:

I think I understand what you're saying there, and it's funny because I read it. You're saying, well, look at Elizabeth Holmes, right? She lives on kale juice, which by the way, that's a sign of a problem because kale is gross. But anyway, okay, there's this. And then there's Jack Dorsey, who's talked a lot about intermittent fasting, and I know he's tweeted with me publicly about using Bulletproof Coffee in a fasting process. And you even talk about biohacking and transhumanism in here and saying American CEOs are acting like shamans did. And you argue that shamanism is an emergent behavior that all cultures have to explain some stuff. Talk to me about that. I've never heard anyone say it comes from basically biological quirks in humans that causes shamanism to arrive. Explain how that is, and then why you think tech CEOs are actually becoming shamanic in their things.

Manvir:

Yeah. So if we look at societies around the world, there is this very puzzling recurrence of what seems to be a pretty peculiar package of practices and beliefs, where you have specialists or practitioners who enter these altered states or states that are foreign from normal human functioning, in those states engage with some unseen reality and provide services from weather control to healing to divination and so on. And so you have this practice that pops up quite reliably in quite diverse spots, and it's pretty reliably associated or tied to these other practices, dramatic initiations, forms of deprivation and so on. So I'm starting with this observation and just asking, why does this happen? What is it about human psychology, about how humans socially interact, about the way culture evolves that leads us to reliably produce this pretty puzzling package of practices and beliefs? So that's just the first point, and we can discuss that - whether or not shamanism is as widespread and recurrent as I'm saying it is.

Dave:

I believe that we can just take that as a given. I've studied a lot of shamanic stuff. Here's one of my favorite resources, volume one and volume two of Shamanism. You probably have these books somewhere in your studies as well. Wouldn't surprise me, and I've read dozens of other books, and I've traveled the world and done shamanic practices in different cultures as part of the weird stuff that I do. All right. Yes. It's widespread pretty much anywhere you look, whether they call it shamanic or they call it some other flavor, but it is clearly inspired from the bone people or something similar. Okay. Yeah, shamanism is everywhere. We'll just say that that's real. Okay, keep going.

Manvir:

Okay. So then the next question is why? And now there have been put forward many explanations. A popular one, at least among cognitive and evolutionary researchers is this one put forward by Michael Winkelman who says that trance states are these technologies for producing insight.

Dave:

Yes.

Manvir:

There's that famous figure of a brain on psilocybin and a brain not on psilocybin, or the networks, and the psilocybin piece has all of these connections among networks that normally aren't interacting. And so he's arguing from a place like that, but to trance is this technology for producing insight, for providing social services.

Now, I think there can be something compelling in this. I think the weakness of that is that the states that shamans engage in and that they enter are tremendously psychologically diverse. There isn't some coherent, singular cross-cultural trance state. And you can just look at the technologies that they use for entering these, which range from sensory deprivation to various kinds of hallucinogens, to various kinds of other psychotropic substances, to dancing, to rhythmic drumming, to meditative solitude. There are nice research reviews that go through all kinds of altered states and run through their psychological effects, and they're incredibly diverse. And so I think that is a weakness of it.

What I find more compelling and what I think a lot of research would support, and we can dig into this, is this idea that what shamans are really doing is they are providing individuals with a service and particularly a service of controlling uncertainty. So there are all kinds of uncertain forces in the world, illness, the weather, whether my business does well. There's a lot of information that we otherwise don't have access to. And people not only want control over these things, but they believe that there are patterns, there are forces that dictate how these resolve, gods, witches, fate, spirits, whatever, the list goes on, government conspiracies and so on. They believe often that there are some kind of agentic forces that oversee how uncertainty resolves.

And so what these shamans are doing is that they are claiming to engage with these invisible forces and they are convincing individuals and themselves that they are different from normal humans, that they have fundamentally transformed in some way that allows them to have this insight. So that's an explanation of shamanism that I find compelling. I would say that this doesn't deny that shamans are providing benefits or they are providing services.

I was actually just speaking a couple of days ago to an anthropologist, Pauline Wiessner. She's at ASU. She's worked with Kalahari, what many people would call 'Bushmen' for decades. And she was describing this experience where she had this incredibly anxiety-inducing experience in the United States related to medical care, to the medical care of someone she loved. And she flew to the Kalahari. She stayed with the Bushmen, as she often calls them, or the group in particular are the [foreign language 00:10:15]. The click is kind of tricky in the same way that you feel apprehensive about French words.

So she goes to bed, and she wakes up and she's screaming. She's having this terrible nightmare. And she says that the Bushmen come together, and they start a trance dance immediately. The women are clapping, particular men are entering trance, and they do this all night. The way that they describe it, there is an energy that boils inside of you, and then they heal you through touch. And she talks about this feeling of being cared for, of being looked out for. These individuals are, as they understand it, engaging near death. They're really sacrificing themselves. Everyone has shown up, and everyone is here to heal Polly. And that kind of assurance is both very healing, and for her was really alleviated some of that anxiety.

Anyway, that's a very long anecdote to say that while I think that a compelling explanation for shamanism is that it emerges to assure people that they can control uncertainty, that isn't to deny other kinds of benefits that shamanic practices might provide.

Dave:

It's interesting because I've looked at the use of language in your piece for Wired. And it definitely sounds sort of like, yeah, all of the stuff that shamans are doing, it is kind of BS, right? But then clearly it emerges probably because we're crazy. And here's a line from it: "The shamanification of American CEOs is about more than just deprivation. It's about meditation, psychedelic drugs, silent retreats, playa names, infrared heat lamps, DIY surgeon, and every other ancient or post-human widget that CEOs and founders subject themselves to on the path to becoming saints with iPhones." Not exactly a ringing endorsement of it.

I was intrigued because the through line here was this stuff doesn't make any sense, and the reason that it stuck out to me is I'm a computer science guy. I was raised an atheist. If you would've told me 20 years ago that I would've gone to Mount Kailash, to walk around Mount Kailash, and that I would be learning shamanism from various people. I am not a shaman. I just know some shamanic practices. But I would've just said you're insane.

What I started doing though, was measuring what worked to improve my performance quantitatively, right? I realized that altered states are the same as high performance states because average states are average performance states. So if you want to go into an intuitive state, you want to go into a connected state, you want to go into an ecstatic state, sure, there's technologies. I have neuroscience tech, and I can run electrical currents and do blinky lights. Or we could go do Tibetan bowls and create binaural beats or all the shamanic drumming, all the stuff you just talked about, right?

But I realize, I didn't know how to do my job as a CEO of a company that I grew from nothing to more than a 100 million in revenue. I didn't know how to do that without accessing those altered states, and I just wanted the tech to get me there the fastest, right? It wasn't about feeling special. It wasn't about telling everyone I'm special. It was about how do I get all this shit done? Because there's so much moving so quickly that- it wasn't like that if you were an IBM CEO in 1950. "Well, I'll have my secretary's secretary bring me the file cabinet."

In fact, right behind me on this side is an 1885 filing cabinet. It's behind this white thing. You can't see it. But I have it there to remind me of how your iPhone has a million of those in it, right? So the speed, I couldn't do my job until I said, all right, I'm going to be a rational computer science guy. And yeah, I'm going to go to burning man.

So I read this, and I'm like, man, I would've failed had I not gone down these weird things that don't make any sense to me, except that they work and that I can measure the changes in the amplitude of my brainwaves, and that when I can get there.

How do you bring those together? Is shamanic practice sort of like saying, well, all cultures say the sky is blue, just because it's there versus they convince themselves the sky is blue, but it's not really there? How do you do this as a research? I'm really curious about it.

Manvir:

Wait, how do I do what?

Dave:

You're sort of saying, well, clearly this weird shamanic thing, they're convincing themselves with this thing, but we don't think that we're convincing ourselves the sky is blue, right? So we all agree on that, but if all societies have a shamanic practice and shamanism is a non-average state, it would follow that, okay, this stuff is present everywhere. It's just not common everywhere because it's above average or below average or it's just not average.

The reason I'm going here is Joe De Sena or sorry, not Joe Des, Joe Dispenza. Both of those Joes have been on the show. Joe Dispenza went through and studied the Yogic cities, which you may be familiar with and said, 'that's weird if we look for evidence of these amongst meditators, we find it. If we look for evidence of these amongst common people who don't meditate, there is no evidence. So I'm looking here for a truth and with hundreds of thousands of people listening, sort of saying, all right, is it that these shamanic realms exist everywhere, and some of us are trained to see them, some of them aren't? Or is it that they don't exist, and some of us are just batshit crazy, and we use them for marketing?

Manvir:

Yeah. Okay. So you bring up a number of points there, which we can dig into.

Dave:

Yeah.

Manvir:

So the first is you seem to be presenting a, we can formalize it as a hypothesis, that altered states are technologies for producing some kind of insight or allowing individuals to do things they otherwise wouldn't be able to do. And so then the question then becomes, what predictions does that make about what shamans and shamanism should look like around the world? One simple prediction would be, or one simple question is what does that predict about the jurisdiction of shaman's, like what shaman's should do? And so what prediction do you think derives from that?

Dave:

That what shaman should do?

Manvir:

Yeah.

Dave:

An interesting question.

Manvir:

And also makes the prediction that the form of the technology for inducing the altered state should correspond with the particular service that they provide. Or that there should be some correspondence where you're leveraging the service to maximally take advantage of the technology of inducing that altered state.

Dave:

That actually we know some stuff about because of my neuroscience company there. Depending on which of the altered states a shaman is going to and the way that shamans that I'm familiar with would explain this for the most part and I'm translating between different practices that I'm aware of, there's the underworld, which is a place where they go. And it's a place where most people can go, but probably shouldn't unless they have some guidance because according to the shamans I believe, there's probably some danger there if you don't know what you're doing. Anyway, they go there, and there's things you

can do that are healing related; there's things you can do that are tapping into collective consciousness; there's things you can do that are related to communication.

So when we're looking at someone's brainwaves, and I have the fortune of having seen some brainwaves of people with Yogic cities and things like that, and when you can measure the brainwaves, what you'll find is that if they're going into say the collective consciousness zone, it's a different brain pattern than someone who's going into an astral travel or a healing practice, or a universal heart opening kind of connected thing.

So bottom line is, it's sort of like if you were to hire a builder, a general contractor for your house, you'd say, well, yeah, that's the guy putting in the bricks, and he looks like this. And the guy putting in the electricity looks like that. so you'd sort of choose the right tool for the job, and keep in mind, I am not a shaman. I've just worked with a bunch of shamans, and I've looked at some brainwaves. So I'm doing my best here. So sort of saying there are people who do energetic architecture to create stuff or to know stuff.

It seems like there's enough of this because if you ask Serge and Larry, you were able to ask Steve jobs, you were able to ask the founders of Hewlett Packard, there's a rich history. Watson and Crick: "I woke up from a dream. I was in an altered state." And so many people listening have had these profound experiences where something important happened. And I can tell you there having yak butter tea on the side of Mount Kailash was the inspiration for me to start Bulletproof Coffee. It actually happened that way. It wasn't like a myth that I made up afterwards. It happened, and I wasn't asking for it to happen. It was expecting it to happen.

Manvir:

Yeah.

Dave:

Right. So I'm trying to figure this out, going all right, is it that the demands on CEOs are so strong that they're going to these tool sets that were really something that you would laugh at a person for doing because there's no choice, or are they doing it because it makes them look cool so they can be like cult leaders?

Manvir:

Well, so like green juicing-

Dave:

Dude, I hate that stuff, but yeah. Okay.

Manvir:

What do you think is the story behind green juicing?

Dave:

Well, I have a anecdote for that. I fell for that in about 2002, 2003. Not because I was a CEO. I was a tech guy. Yeah. I was getting my MBA, or I had just gotten my MBA at Wharton. So, I was certainly on the career track, but I felt like shit. And I had weighed up to 300 pounds, and my brain was turning off. And I thought, oh, this is going to work. So I read some stuff and oh, this vegan thing's a great idea. And I went for it. And I was drinking my green juice and blending kale and doing all that crap.

And I lost some weight, and I had some altered states, actually a lot of altered states that came from it, states of deprivation actually, to your point in the article. I became ungrounded, which happens a lot. It's a thyroid function and a hormone crashing and an interruption of minerals in the body. And then I started cracking teeth, and I got out of immune problems, inflammation, and I realized it was stupid. And I had a commitment to myself to only do what worked.

Before that though, I also worked out an hour and a half a day, six days a week on a low fat, low calorie diet, trying to lose weight. That didn't work. And it was the frustration with doing stuff that someone told me would work and finding it didn't work. So I said, I'm just going to measure it. Right. And what I found on the vegan diet is I lose weight, and you felt good for a little while. Then I got screwed up. What I find is that when people long term do lots of, especially the kale and spinach green juices, they tend to become worse and worse mentally. But they become, what's the word for it... more flighty, more ungrounded, less able to regulate their emotions. And sometimes that can feel like a spiritual state that's sought after. Sort of like, oh, I now I'm really feeling my emotions. I'm like, yeah. Or your body's panicking because it had too much deprivation.

Manvir:

Yeah. Well, I mean, so I would definitely acknowledge that different kinds of altered states can be leveraged to produce different psychological states that one has-

Dave:

That's a great statement. I like that.

Manvir:

Nevertheless, if we take green juicing as an example, or we take the alphabet diet as an example or we take Arianism as an example, you have both a diet that is arguably, I mean, green juicing, so much of the discussion of green juicing has been that it is impossible to live off of a diet that is so impoverished of fat and protein.

Dave:

Oh, it'll trash your biology over time, but it's probably good to do it for a month.

Manvir:

Yes. But I mean, if she's claiming to do it for many years, and not only claiming to do it, but finding opportunities to talk about it. So I think there's both the kinds of diets that are borderline unrealistic, but then also the opportunity to constantly leverage that as a way of building a persona or a platform. So I'll give you an example. I did not use this person's name because I thought it would be mean-spirited, but I interviewed one individual who has been very vocal about dopamine fasting. They have talked to major news outlets about it. They have written public posts.

Dave:

I'm an investor in that guy's company. I know who you're talking about.

Manvir:

Well, okay. Yeah, I don't want to... But anyway, so he was saying that he finds it a real travesty, this idea that certain individuals would use claims of deprivation to build a public persona. And nevertheless, he

has written about it publicly. I went to his LinkedIn page, he mentions it three times on his LinkedIn page. During our conversation, he found opportunities to talk about the particular media outlet in which it appeared. So from one perspective, I don't want to call him a hypocrite. He's actually incredibly thoughtful, but one perspective would say this individual is both arguing for the benefits of this, finding it really reprehensible this notion that certain individuals would leverage it, and then seems to be potentially leveraging it for such a benefit. But again, he was very friendly on the call and very eager to share his thoughts. So this is why I didn't include it in the piece. I didn't want to be mean.

And we can step back and think more generally about what are the intuitions that humans or the inferences that humanity makes more generally about deprivation. And so one context in which it emerges is shamanism, but it also emerges in others. So for instance, in Mentawai where I do field work, yeah, Shaman's engage in deprivation. Also, if I want to engage in black magic, then I have two avenues. Has the person hurt me? If they've hurt me, then it's believed that, okay, the spirits will be more down. They think it's more justified to help me steal this person's soul and do what I want to it. If this person has not hurt me, then it's expected that I should engage in some kind of deprivation. I should cover my body in turmeric. I should not eat for anywhere from six hours to two days, depending on who you ask. I should not have sex.

And the way that this is narrativized is that it's understood that through my deprivation, I force the spirits to assist me. There is again this notion of it cultivating some kind of power, some kind of ability to bend the world to my way. Another example in a domain that is very different from shamanism is there's this incredible paper about the Barama River Caribs and about law and justice among these Barama River Caribs. I think it was in Guyana. And so the ethnographer describes this belief in something called a kanaima, which is essentially some kind of ghoulish ghost ninja. And it's believe that any individual who has been attacked can invest in becoming a kanaima.

And really important to becoming a kanaima is incredible deprivation. You have to live off of fungi. You have to drink rain water. You can only eat one bird. And it's believed that through this kind of intense deprivation, you are cultivating the ability to become invisible, to essentially do things that normal humans cannot. And this is this very reliable intuition. This is the way it becomes narrativized or described. If we look across cultures and we ask people, what does deprivation do? The answer isn't as much, oh, it changes my psychology in a way that gives me insight. It's it cultivates special abilities. It cultivates power. It cultivates the ability to call spirits, to become invisible, to force ancestors to do my bidding. And so I am really just following the intuition that is being articulated, among other things, in providing this kind of an account.

Dave:

Have you ever tried it? You ever tried stealing someone's soul or becoming invisible?

Manvir:

Yo, I really wanted to try, just to get an ethnographic insight into it. Someone had stolen a number of our chickens, and I brought it up with a friend of mine. I was like, oh, should we do, it's called [foreign language 00:28:02]. Should we do some [foreign language 00:28:03]? It's quite involved. You have to get all kinds of animal parts that are otherwise very difficult to get. You have to get the teeth of serpents. You have to get the stinger of scorpion. You have to get a shark tooth, ideally. You get all of the most dangerous objects. And then you put them in a container. And then you call the soul into that container. [crosstalk 00:28:21]

Dave:

Did you do it?

Manvir:

No, I did not because first of all, it's a pretty dark act to engage in. People get quite apprehensive about it.

Dave:

It is.

Manvir:

Yeah. I was more just interested in the ethnographic reality of it. But my good friend had admitted to doing it. He bought-

Dave:

Did it work?

Manvir:

I actually don't recall if he said it worked or not. Yeah. But to come back to this point earlier, so you had put forward this trance as a technology hypothesis. And then that makes predictions about what shamans should do and might predict that they should often be leaders. If they should be looked to for particular kinds of information, they should be seen to solve particular kinds of problems. And it becomes an empirical question.

In my own kind of comparative studies, I have used existing data sets that look at what shamans do. And the thing that they most reliably do is they help people overcome uncertainty. They call rain when you cannot get rain. They tell you they help you treat illnesses that have otherwise been very difficult to treat. They promote harvest. They call spirits to help you in business. And it's in these particular domains where people also very frequently use magic, where they use rituals, they use incantations, they use various kinds of occult gizmos.

But again, I'm an empiricist. I published the paper. There were a number of commentaries that put forward different hypotheses. And I would be very eager for people to formalize those and make predictions and test the domains in which they occur.

Dave:

It's really interesting-

Manvir:

After I publish this piece, in the piece there is a line that says something like "reviews of fasting and cognitive effects have found that, or most studies have found little, have found no change or deficits. And then a number of people got in touch with me, and they said, hey, you missed a really important literature that has developed since 2019. And the literature that I had looked at is about one time fasting events and the psychological effects for individuals who do not engage in very much fasting. Since 2019 there is a growing literature that looks at the long term psychological effects of a fasting regime, six months of intermittent fasting. And those actually do show cognitive benefits.

Dave:

They do. It's pretty profound. I find, because I get to look at amplitude of brainwaves of people who are regular fasters or when I can mimic fasting by just increasing keytones in people, when you're doing altered states work, which is what people are doing when they're at my neuroscience thing, they can do about 2.5 times more trance type of work when they have keytones, which you get from intermittent fasting, or from MCT oil. If I don't give them the MCT oil, they just don't have the mental resilience to do the deep work that they're doing there. And a lot of the work is supported by transpersonal psychology. There's 30 years of research on the actual power of forgiveness and things like that. But it's very hard and scary work sometimes to do that. So you just want to have a fully powered brain to do it and dopamine. Not only dopamine, but insulin resistance makes for a lower powered brain. So if the brain can work better biologically than it would follow that you could think better and you could also access any of these altered states better. And that's the world that I live in is that those are possible. [crosstalk 00:32:14].

Manvir:

Can I ask you a quick question?

Dave:

Yeah.

Manvir:

So a number of CEO founders that I spoke to, who are quoted in the piece, talk about this need to cultivate a persona of being able to do something, of being special, of having power, of being charismatic. And they actually use the word special in particular, or one of them did, because what they had said was you have to appeal to investors. You have to appeal to potential clients. You have to appeal to talent. Now, would you agree with this notion that as a CEO founder, there is a pressure to appear like you can do things that regular people cannot?

Dave:

There's a pressure to appear that you can do CEO things. I don't actually think that most investors are more trustful or likely to give money to a CEO who says I meditate and I do yoga. And especially if you go back a little while. So I first put yoga meditation and Modafinil, which is the limitless drug, in my LinkedIn profile back around 1999, 2000. And I'd go to these meetings, and I didn't care because I was already successful in my tech career. I was a co-founder of part of the company held Google's first servers, and I had made 6 million bucks when I was 26. Lost it when I was 28. But I just didn't care. I'm like, I'm just going to do this cause I'm weird. Right?

Manvir:

What do you think about now?

Dave:

Well, so now it's getting more accepted. But if you looked at what the tech CEOs who were fundable in the late nineties, early aughts, what they would do, there's always a set of behaviors that are the accepted behaviors for the fundable CEOs. And the set of behaviors changes over time. What I'm actually happy about is the type of practices that allow the very highest levels of human performance seem to include meditation, yoga, self-reflection and resetting dopamine systems the way you get from dopamine fasting. If you don't do those things, provably, especially the very recent work that's coming

out around actually increasing the number of dopamine receptors, being able to continuously motivate yourself.

Being a CEO, and I feel like I'm qualified to this, it's one of the shittiest jobs there is because it's very lonely, right? Cause everyone's looking to you, but you can't always tell that even the people who are closest you work with, you can't tell them everything that's going on or things you're concerned about. That's why CEOs like me spends huge amounts of money to be in other groups with other CEOs who actually understand the bizarre world that we live in. So there's a lot going on there, where we're saying, okay, with all this pressure and things are moving faster, it's globalization, all that kind of stuff, so we're juggling a whole bunch.

So if I was an investor, and I am an investor in about 20-something companies, what you find is that the CEOs who have figured out how to continue to stay motivated and positive in this world, almost universally have to be doing something that is psychedelic, breath work, cold exposure, Burning Man, otherwise they can't hack it. And they fail. And they go to drugs. They go to sex addiction. They hit the wall. And I just don't know how to do my job if I hadn't have learned all these things. If I hadn't of fasted for a week in a cave and written a book about it. And it's funny, cause in the article, you're like, look by 2020 intermittent fasting wasn't enough, and dopamine fasting, abstaining from food and any other kind of stimulation had taken off, these self denial fads are often touted as biohacking innovations. Okay. I created the field of biohacking. Dude, are these fads or are these just technologies to tweak my neuro receptors so they do what I want? Like I'm really curious.

Manvir:

I mean, it's an empirical question.

Dave:

I could be self-deceiving all this time.

Manvir:

Well, yeah. So there are two separate questions here, and I don't want to conflate them.

Dave:

Okay.

Manvir:

One is what are these psychological and physiological effects of these practices? The other is to what extent are individuals leveraging these practices, are claiming to engage in these practices to promote a persona,?

Dave:

The myth, creating an origin myth or something. A hundred percent people are doing that. and I watch people kind of copy that, and look, I stood up and said, here's my origin myth. I'm a fat computer hacker, except it's not a myth if it's actually what happened. Then yes, I did do the thing in Mount Kailash. I wouldn't have expected any of this crap. I wasn't looking to start a coffee company. I was looking to start a computer c-rated company. This stuff happened to me. So I was truthful about it.

But you do see routinely, especially amongst the under 30, 'I want to be an influencer,' you got to ask yourself why you want to be an influencer other than just to make money. But if you're doing

that, it's very beneficial to say I did all this crazy stuff. It's more beneficial to have actually done it, learned from it, learned from some masters, had a chance to chew on it and then to share it in a value added way.

But yeah, absolutely it's marketing. And before that, it's I went to the gym. We have this long, like you have to do hard stuff to be worthy. And that goes back to Greek myths as far as I can tell. To be great you have to suffer. I don't actually believe that, but that's what humans believe.

Manvir:

Yes. Yes. I mean, so that is the point, this notion that- okay, so we have two questions here, which we can address separately. One is to what extent are individuals promoting claims that they suffer to cultivate a perception that they are great, that they can be great, that they have power. And you-

Dave:

Unquestionably people lie. Yes.

Manvir:

Yes. Yeah.

Dave:

I see your point now. I see it.

Manvir:

As you just said, people have the intuition that through suffering, you become great. And I think the manifestations of that suffering can be manifold. But the argument is that CEOs, like humanity always, talk about the ways in which they suffer to promote a perception that they are great.

Now, the other question that you've brought up is to what extent are the different technologies that we have talked about or covered promote the particular benefits that are being touted or that are being discussed. And so I think we differ here, and of course you have thought like a lot about this. I have also thought about it, although from a very different perspective. And I think that's where it comes down to empirics. It comes down to we run studies, and we look at the effects, and we run a certain number of them in a diverse enough context to be pretty sure about what variables are mediating it. I think it's also quite easy when we, I'm not saying that you engage in this, but I'm saying that I and everyone engages in this, when I have a particular expectation of a causal association, that by engaging in X you should become Y, then it's very easy to find confirmatory evidence and...

Dave:

Oh, all humans do that.

Manvir:

Yeah, of course.

Dave:

It's built into our operating system, and it happens automatically. Whether you tell yourself you do, or you don't, you just do.

Manvir:

Yeah. Yeah.

Dave:

Okay.

Manvir:

And so if we look at intermittent fasting, so the review that I found that someone sent me, *Frontiers in Endocrinology*, came up in April. It looked at five human studies. All of them, I believe, have been conducted since 2019. Two are mixed results. Three are promising. Now were people intermittent fasting before 2019? Probably. I mean, yes. Clearly.

Dave:

Oh yeah.

Manvir:

And is some of intermittent fasting inspired by the intuition that you had just put forward, that through suffering you become great? I would, I would argue that it has, or I think it's at least plausible.

Dave:

For longer fasting. I would buy it. Anyone who's learned how to do intermittent fasting for more than two weeks realizes that there is no deprivation. You're simply just not hungry, and you have more energy.

Manvir:

Right. Right.

Dave:

It's actually just a net easier way of living.

Manvir:

Right, right, right. Okay.

Dave:

Yeah.

Manvir:

Maybe some of the other fasting regimes that people discuss and have. In terms of the other biohacking innovations, again, it's an empirical question, but they all do have this interesting result that they promote a perception that you are crawling away from normal humanity. That you are becoming special.

Dave:

Oh yeah. And I am. I have no interest in being normal humanity. I would probably end up killing myself if I was stuck there because that would be boring. But I'm not saying that as a marketing thing, to say, everyone, look at me. What I'm saying is this tech and these states are A, they're real and B, they're beneficial and C, they're achievable for normal people, not just for tech CEOs and people with shamanic lineage and all that kind of stuff. They're just part of the human condition. So you owe it to yourself to figure out which altered states you want to choose to be in because they're better than where you are today. And so here's the tool set that I know about. And by the way, do you know about anything you can tell me, which why I want to talk to you because you study all sorts of cool stuff.

But you're right. There are people who misuse that to say, I am special. I want to be a guru. And the guru thing is a whole odd thing that I'm sure you've probably studied as part of your work as an anthropologist. And I've always found it interesting. I also know gurus, and I'm friends with some of them, who have fucking weird powers. They can do stuff that humans aren't supposed to be able to do, unless you believe in those super powers in the Yoga Sutra thing. And you're like, what the heck? So what I find though, is that if people become reliant on a guru, then as soon as the guru dies, the people are screwed. And if people learn to be their own personal guru, where they learn to do the stuff that they need, well, then they're free.

And that's the state that I'm looking for. And I don't mind calling guru friends and saying, hey, can you help out on how to do this? And maybe they'll teach me something. But that's a very practical, computer sciencey way of thinking about it. I think that's why people know about my work because I'm just willing to share all that stuff. And I'm sure some people think I have some kind of superpowers. I don't think so. I think these are human powers. I just maybe have done a better job at mining them. And I think all of us have to do that, Otherwise we're going to blow ourselves up as a species.

Manvir:

Yes. Yes. And I think that's commendable.

Dave:

How do we sort it out? How do you do this as an anthropologist? Okay, you got three CEOs. One of them claims to have done all this suffering stuff because he wants to be cool, and he feels like he's not enough. And two of them actually just did it because they did not to be CEOs without it. How would you spot the charlatan?

Manvir:

How would I spot the charlatan among the three? I wouldn't say being an anthropologist gives me some kind of special insight into who is a charlatan and who is not what. Although, we could, again, just take an empirical perspective. So you were enumerating particular psychological benefits that derive from different techniques. So we might say that through green juicing, you become I think you said detached or floaty or something. I forget the precise word.

Dave:

Yeah. I don't know if that's a benefit, but you might convince yourself it's a benefit. It feels different anyway.

Manvir:

Yes. Yes. The broader point just being that we could make a prediction about the particular psychological benefits that would [crosstalk 00:44:30] them based on good empirical research is where I would come from.

Dave:

Yeah.

Manvir:

And so then you can see like what are these individuals claiming? So someone might say, yes, I engage in green juicing, and it really promotes my focus. And it's because of that that I'm an incredible manager, and I can mediate disputes, and I can respond to any email in a second and stay up like 20 hours a day. And then we can say, okay, based on the empirical research we can make some informed speculation about to what extent that is legitimate or valid.

Dave:

That is possible. But you have to be doing modafinil juicing. Not green juicing.

Manvir:

Yeah. Okay.

Dave:

I'm just kidding.

Manvir:

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. But I wanted to mention that just because I think, and this is why I was coming back to this prediction about what should shamans do, I think it's very easy to say these kinds of technologies are useful. They are beneficial. And so when individuals engage in them, they engage in them because they produce these benefits. But because something produces a benefit does not necessarily mean that it is being leveraged for the benefits that it's producing or that it exists because of the benefits that it's producing.

Dave:

You're totally right. People are misusing the fact these tools exist, saying they're using the tools when they're not, or maybe they're using them but they're overselling that it's because that's how they got their magicians cloak and magic wand or whatever. Your point's valid. And there's something else that just came out literally yesterday on Neuroscience News. And it was a study of uncertainty and pain relief. And I doubt you've seen it unless you follow the same threads that I do.

What they did is they took a group of people who had chronic ongoing pain. And they said, hey, we have some music that can help with pain. And one group listened to the music. The other group was told they had control over a pitch and tempo in the music that they didn't actually have control of. And the group that thought they had control over the music had very statistically significant improvements in their pain reduction from the perception of control, even though they didn't really have any, okay.

That really supports what you're saying, that calling a shaman actually can have a meaningful effect on your pain because it gave you the perception of control. But it doesn't mean that the shaman didn't actually do something that helped with your pain and the perception helped. And we're working

on teasing out which of those shamanic techniques are real. And the scary thing there is shaman number one may be able to do it. And shaman number two may either be a charlatan or just a shaman who does some other kind of work that didn't work for you. And I have no idea how to tell the difference between the two, other than to try them both and see which one worked. Do you have any advice for people trying to make that decision?

Manvir:

Well, I would say that in any society in which you have uncertainty about the extent to which individuals are charlatans, you have a discourse. So in every society in which there are shamans, there is a constant secondary discourse about who is legitimate, who is not, what are their particular abilities, to what extent are they doing this, for the sex and the food, et cetera. It's interesting that you were reading that study. I just this morning and yesterday have been in a hole of looking at how engaging in rituals alleviates anxiety, which is-

Dave:

Oh wow.

Manvir:

Slightly different, but again, by engaging in these practices. And we can ask are individuals engaging in these rituals. I want to stop the rain from coming. I engage in a ritual. It alleviates my anxiety. And maybe as a result, maybe I'm actually good at doing other stuff. I'm less anxious, so I'm more socially charismatic or confident. Does that ritual exist in the first place because individuals perhaps erroneously believe that it will stop the rain or because it produces these benefits. Again, things can exist and produce benefits, but that doesn't necessarily mean that's why they exist in the first place. But like you're saying it's a tricky thing to untangle.

Yeah. Do you know what I mean?

Dave:

Yeah. And do you know the pigeon study with the pigeon dancers to get fed?

Manvir:

Of course, yeah. The Skinner study, super precision in pigeons.

Dave:

Right. And so for listeners, this is a study where they would with a random timer drop bird seed in to some pigeons. And eventually the pigeons realized that if they did these exotic dances, that it would cause the randomly generated bird seed to appear. So they would do these elaborate rituals that really didn't cause anything, but that even pigeons decided to. Since humans and pigeons share a lot of the same operating system, everything below our conscious mind, we're probably doing some of that in our life. In fact, we're almost certainly doing that. It's by design supposed to be impossible for us to just know that, but we can do that using science and math and things like that.

Manvir:

Right. Right. It's a constraint in our ability to figure out signals when they are noisy.

Dave:

Yes, exactly. And where I ended up, as I said, all right, what we do in Western science, even with anthropology and all, we're standing on the shoulders of our ancestors. The first culture anthropologists figured out some practices that worked. You're relying on statistical methods that have been achieved over the past mostly 150 years and things like that. And we continuously do this. So I said, all right, from these spiritual technologies, I'm going to do the same thing. And someone also from Harvard, Daniel P. Brown, is really interesting. Are you familiar with his work?

Manvir:

I'm not. No.

Dave:

So he's spent about 40 years on this. I don't know which department he'd be in, probably psychology, psychiatry. He's one of the foremost living experts on hypnotism, which is another altered state technology. In his spare time, he translates 13th-century cave meditation books from Sanskrit into English, and was on the show oh, last year sometime. Really fascinating interview talking about Sirhan Sirhan and how yes, he was in a hypnotic trance when he killed RFK. He was like, what? So we have guys like that, who I would say is a master of his work who are saying, I'm going to be influenced by people who deprive themselves in caves in the 13th century and carefully wrote down every step of their meditation to reach this specific thing.

And when you look throughout all of these ancient literatures or ancient practices, they carefully distilled for sometimes tens or even hundreds of generations he practices that most rapidly produced a very specific state, the same things that I was learning in the monastery in Nepal. Or maybe similar things. I feel like there's a whole big map of altered states. You do this state for this, this state for this that we used to know about that some pockets of ancient knowledge exist in, and that neuroscientists are working on right now. And it has nothing to do with telling anyone that you're doing this. It has nothing to do with waving a flag that says, "I have special powers. I'm a CEO. Give me \$80 million in funding." But it does have something to do with how do I show up every morning, not yell at the team that I've hired. How do I not hire the narcissists and sociopaths? By the way, I have a unique ability to hire those. All CEOs learn eventually, I think, how to have better discernment of their team, which I'm always working on.

But if there was a magic incantation I could have done and I could have spun around reverse clockwise on my head three times in a cave in order to gain that faster, I would've done it even if I had to fly to Thailand. I just need the tools so that I can build a clean team, which I think I'm getting better at. I have a great team now. If I ignored all of that stuff, that whole side of human nature, that whole side of human knowledge that's been going on for a long time, I don't think it's all just mysticism. I don't think it's just marketing. I actually think that it's necessary for us to evolve and do the things we're supposed to do.

And I kind of feel like you might believe that, too because you follow one lineage, one could argue that you're also practicing deprivation. Because well, you're a Sikh, right? You don't cut your hair and your beard. And there's spiritual significance to that, one that actually I think is very valuable. But you're following that. Do you, from that perspective, believe that there are benefits? Or what's your anthropological excuse for your own practice of something that another person might say is deprivation?

Manvir:

Yeah. So that's a great question. The way that I see my own, what we might call costly religious or spiritually related behavior, is being as Sikh is really tied up with my identity. Both my parents are Sikhs. All of my family is Sikh. I have a lot of pride in the cultural lineage from which I derive. There are just stories that have been passed down that I think are incredible. My grandfather was hunting with his father by horseback. They were hunting lions. And his father accidentally shot himself while cleaning the gun. And my grandfather took off his turban, and wrapped up the wound, and put him on the horse and rode back. And unfortunately my great-grandfather had passed away, but that is a story that I have a lot of pride in that very explicitly features the turban. So yeah, there are a couple things. There's coming from a cultural identity or a cultural background that I dig and find beautiful in many ways. Sikhism has incredibly evocative and beautiful hymns that are kind of psychedelic in some instances.

Dave:

What do you mean kind of?

Manvir:

Right.

Dave:

There's a whole psychedelic practice that isn't drug based. [foreign language 00:54:54] is a, well, there's probably 10 million of them, but there is [foreign language 00:54:59] from I think Northwestern who wrote a book called Meditation is Medicine. He's a westerner who became Sikh. And he went through, and I did his practices straight from your tradition every morning for several years, with all the mantras and the mudras and positions and all that. And yeah, it's mind altering. It's a technology for reaching these states, and it's one you use all the time.

Manvir:

Right, right. Yeah. and from the hymns, it seems to, yeah. Okay. We can just put that aside. But yeah, I think it's an incredibly evocative tradition that I am glad to be a part of. I also really like having a turban. This is maybe weirdly instrumental, but I like it for a couple of reasons. One, if I see someone else with a turban, there is such a feeling of affiliation and comradery.

Dave:

Yeah. It's a tribal thing, right?

Manvir:

It's a tribal thing. Yeah. I moved to Denmark when I was 22. Someone was like, oh, someone at [foreign language 00:56:00] knows someone who knows someone who lives in Denmark, another Sikh. He picked me up from the airport. I lived with them for two weeks while looking for an apartment. There's a real sense of comradery of in-groupness of community. And also growing up as a kid with a turban is tricky. It's hard.

Dave:

It's tough.

Manvir:

You kind of are othered in some ways. It also comes with a lot of awesome dimensions. But at this point I kind of like being a guy with a turban. I'm in a way a bit exotic. It allows me to cultivate a certain exoticism that I think would be difficult too otherwise. Yeah. So just to be super explicit, those are how I think about my religious [crosstalk 00:56:46].

Dave:

Got it. And I'm absolutely not criticizing at all. I think there's a lot of venerable traditions in Sikhism. Now are you with Jain as well?

Manvir:

No. No. That's a distinct.

Dave:

Okay. And some of my nutritional things, by the way, I think garlic and onion actually have effects on your brain. Cause I've spent six months with electrodes on my head developing the neuroscience protocols that I do. And I can feel a difference if I eat a bunch of garlic. It does something to my awareness that I don't particularly like. So I think there's something to Jainism. I'm not strict on that, but there's something going on in there where the nutrition affects the subtle conscious states.

Manvir:

Yeah. And again, like the theme is, I don't want to dismiss the capacity for various cultural technologies to produce insight or to produce the kinds of ends that they are sometimes justified in. I would say that I am skeptical of some of them. I have some degree of uncertainty about the capacity of everything that is done to produce everything that is being claimed.

Dave:

Yeah.

Manvir:

And as you seem to agree yourselves, I think regardless of what's going on here, people leverage them for other ends.

Dave:

And I really understand the point of the article now. What I don't throw the baby out with bathwater. I think intermittent fasting has been profoundly important, and I've really been doing it for 15 years now. And I can't bring it cognitively the way I need to if I eat croissants for breakfast. It just doesn't work. And I would. I actually like croissants, and I would love to have them for breakfast. I'm just not going to do that because it's not worth it. And to me that's not a deprivation at all. That's a 'I would like a short-term pleasure or a long-term pleasure.' And I'm just choosing the greatest area under the curve of pleasure that I can find.

Manvir:

Right. I mean actually, after people have sent me these articles, especially this new review and this stuff done in the past couple years, I'm like, oh dang, I should probably engage in intermittent fasting.

Dave:

I'm going to convert you.

Manvir:

Yeah. I think I've been converted.

Dave:

Do you want me to send you an infrared light, and I'll cut up your Magic the Gathering cards, and we'll be good to go?

Manvir:

You can never cut up my Magic the Gathering cards. I will die before you cut up my Magic the Gathering cards.

Dave:

How did I know? All right, well how would someone who's listening to the show be able to know whether they're talking with a CEO who's chest-thumping spiritually, saying that they do all these things just to be cool or to be powerful, versus someone who's actually using some technologies for high performance?

Manvir:

Well, okay. Before we think about that, why do you think that's an important question?

Dave:

Well, if you're going to put a million dollars behind someone, I would want to put the million dollars behind the person who's actually using technologies to perform better versus the guy who is pretending because that guy's almost provably a narcissist, and narcissists destroy society.

Manvir:

Okay. Right. Okay. That makes sense. Like I said earlier, it requires a pretty sophisticated understanding of what these different technologies do for one thing. One thing is to say, "what are you engaging in? What benefits do you think those provide?" As with Elizabeth Holmes, it seems like a lot of things that she claimed were actually just demonstrably false, so maybe if you can tell that they're straight up [crosstalk 01:00:23].

Dave:

As far as I can tell, she's a narcissist, not a sociopath. And the difference in the, I'm working on the book after the next book will be about this, but narcissists convince themselves of their false reality. So they don't know that they're doing what they do. And then sociopaths know that they're deceiving you, they just get off on it. And fortunately it's only maybe five, six percent of people are sociopaths and narcissists, the conscious deceivers. Everyone else, they're self-deceivers, which allows them to become you-deceivers.

Manvir:

Right.

Dave:

I think at Theranos, Elizabeth Holmes was almost certainly convincing herself that all this worked when her scientist would say your technology is bogus. It couldn't be bogus because then she would fail. And she's the kind of woman who doesn't fail. Therefore, it's not bogus. And that inner loop would run entirely unconsciously. And then, she'd look around, and I have dealt with that in multiple companies that I run where self-deception is rampant. And I'm looking for the technologies that allow me to find the self-deceivers and eject them from the company quickly or show them that they don't need to self-deceive anymore. And what I do when I run CEOs through my neuroscience thing is I show them their own self-deception using a lie detector, so they get over it. so I really believe society has to get rid of this, otherwise we will self-destruct. So I'm motivated to do that, mostly because I plan to live a long time and I want to live around people who aren't in the state of self-deception. And I'll use any spiritual technology on the planet to remove that from my world anyway.

Manvir:

Yeah. Yeah. I mean it's hard. I don't know a good way to distinguish them other than this kind of involved and I don't think-

Dave:

An interviewing process.

Manvir:

Yeah.

Dave:

Well, if you meet a shaman who can just do it automatically, would you introduce me to him?

Manvir:

Of course. Of course.

Dave:

It's been fascinating to chat with you, and I appreciate what you were saying in the article in Wired now that I grasp it fully, which is that there are some people who are using these technologies to create a myth around themselves that maybe isn't real. And I think you and I both believe that there are some people who are successfully using some of the technologies some of the time for benefit. We just are still in the process of figuring out what works best for who, when.

Manvir:

Yes. Yes, exactly. I think we very much agree on those points.

Dave:

Awesome. Manvir, thanks again for being on the show. Your website Manvir, or it's "muhn-veer", but M A N V I R dot org. And my last question for you is your written art, you're a Fulbright scholar, you're a really smart guy, tell me about death and various breeds of rabbits? Why did you make a book on that?

Manvir:

Yeah. Why death and rabbits? I just found God's of Death to be so beautiful and evocative and overflowing. They are just an explosion of an imagination and embodiment of this experience that we're constantly trying to figure out. And then I just found rabbits to be such an amusing contrast because they're adorable and small. Yeah.

Dave:

It was pretty cool. So I'm like, all right, whenever I have someone on the show, I always take a look at their work and on your website, like I've got some art, and I looked at this. And yeah, you've got ancient death gods interspersed with kind of cute bunnies. And as an anthropologist, I can totally see it, but it also kind of reminds me of someone who goes to Burning Man. Have you been?

Manvir:

Yeah, I've been there a couple times. I'm actually having trouble getting tickets right now.

Dave:

Yeah, I'm going to be at Machu Picchu this year instead of that. But after that, I'm going to Burning Man every year. Even if they cancel it, I'm going anyway. So that's my plan.

Manvir:

Yes, yes. No, I'm actually a big fan of Burning Man.

Dave:

Nice.

Manvir:

Yeah. I've engaged in a number of the technologies that I talked about in the piece. I'm a curious man who himself wants to cultivate abilities and experience.

Dave:

My read on you is you actually use a lot more of those technologies than you are admitting to yourself so far, but that they're working for you.

Manvir:

Potentially. Perhaps. I guess maybe everyone has their own level of self-deception.

Dave:

I believe we all do. And then as we age, and as we gain wisdom and as we cultivate relationships that allow us to see that like, holy crap. I never thought I was relying on that. So thank you so much for taking the time and just for your work. It's really interesting. And I also appreciate the warning there that not everyone who stands up in a place of leadership and says "I did all this cool stuff" actually did it. And maybe they're talking about it not because it worked, but because they just want to be cool. There is great danger to that. I see it in the world of biohacking. I see it in the world of CEOs. And we won't even talk about the world of Bitcoin. Thanks again, my friend.

Manvir:

Yeah. Thank you. Can I just say at the end, if anyone knows how I can get access to two Burning Man tickets, if they can let me know?

Dave:

All right. We'll put that in there. And I had a hard time with that as well. So we'll hope that works.

Manvir:

Yeah. Thanks. Thanks for the conversation.

Dave:

You got it.

Manvir:

This was a lot of fun. Yeah.