



HOW TO *be a* SPIRITUAL REBEL

A DOGMA-FREE GUIDE TO
BREAKING ALL THE RULES *&*
FINDING FEARLESS FREEDOM

JAC O'KEEFFE

“From the moment of our first breath, we begin a long and at times arduous journey of mental conditioning, one of creating our individual and social selves. In *How to Be a Spiritual Rebel*, Jac O’Keeffe astutely guides us how to leave this conditioning and its endless searching behind for a new life beyond boundaries, beyond limitations. In such a life, each moment is lived not by conditions of the mind but rather by your inner spiritual nature, which guides you in an ongoing and ever-blossoming transformation of openness to and participation in life itself. Freedom for its own sake and authenticity are the hallmarks of a life lived free of the conditioned self.”

—**Paul J. Mills, PhD**, professor in the department of family medicine and public health, director of the Center of Excellence for Research and Training in Integrative Health, and chief of the Behavioral Medicine Division at the University of California, San Diego; and director of research at The Chopra Foundation

“Jac O’Keeffe is one of the rare presenters of prior-to, without, or beyond consciousness and non-duality. This provides a context making her unique as both a teacher and educator.”

—**Stephen H. Wolinsky, PhD (Narayan)**,
disciple of Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj

“Jac O’Keeffe has brilliantly deconstructed her own deep spiritual process to provide clear, simple guidelines and practices for all others who long for psychological and spiritual freedom. She provides tools to prepare us for living the deepest Truth, free of personal clinging to false identities. Using her own internal journey as a template, she offers a path to freedom and teaches us how to change neural pathways in the brain, freeing consciousness from the conditioned restraints and limitations caused by self-referencing thought and emotion. This unique, modern book on non-dual awakening and beyond will become a classic for those who seek realization.”

—**Bonnie Greenwell, PhD**, transpersonal psychotherapist and non-dual teacher; and author of *The Kundalini Guide*, *The Awakening Guide*, and *When Spirit Leaps*

“*How to Be a Spiritual Rebel* illuminates a clear and practical pathway for breaking out of automated mental patterns, and finally living an authentic life. With fierce honesty, courage, and palpable care for her reader, Jac shares potent turning points in her own journey into practices that will serve any lover of the Truth to cut through subtle deception and find their way to Freedom.”

—**Miranda Macpherson**, contemporary spiritual teacher, author of *The Way of Grace* and *Boundless Love*, and founder of OneSpirit Interfaith Foundation (UK) and the Living Grace Sangha

“*How to Be a Spiritual Rebel* offers potent truths about how mindfulness and compassion can bring greater happiness, health, and freedom into our lives.”

—**Shauna Shapiro, PhD**, professor in the department of counseling psychology at Santa Clara University, and author of *Good Morning, I Love You*

“In *How to Be a Spiritual Rebel*, Jac O’Keeffe provides a deeply wise, kind, and practical guide to untangling yourself from limiting beliefs and habits, and points to the intrinsic freedom of the heart that is available to us all.”

—**Hugh Byrne, PhD**, senior teacher with the Insight Meditation Community of Washington, and author of *The Here-and-Now Habit*

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Introduction

Our family business was a dairy farm. It was an efficiently run endeavor, not least because of the wonderful, fertile pastures of North Cork, Ireland. A dairy farm is labor intensive, commanding all hands on-deck for at least ten months of the year. The family comprised of my parents, five older sisters, and a sheepdog. We were raised with a strong work ethic; cows require milking twice a day until midway into the last trimester of each pregnancy. Then came calving season kicking off in mid-January. During the six weeks that followed, the farm shifted focus to accommodate a bovine maternity ward and neonatal clinic. The population increased daily with newborn calves that, once taken from their mothers, had to be taught how to drink milk from a bucket. Cows hollered for their newborns, and my father would say, “She’ll forget her calf in a few days.” I wasn’t so sure.

When we started going out with boys (who had to have a car due to our rural location) as teenagers, we would find a note on the kitchen table when we came home late at night. The note would ask us to check on an animal that was calving. I enjoyed getting a pair of rubber boots for a date, bringing him to the back stall, watching his horrified face as he saw, for the first time, a calf’s front hooves (when all was well) protruding from the birth canal. I had no interest in boys who were of farming stock. I wanted a ticket out of cow dung and milking machines for as long as I can remember. Although I must admit being reared on a farm had many romantic moments: gathering bales of straw, picking wild blackberries, and the gift of living in the rhythm of nature.

The flip side was there also. My father was angry. He had a short fuse and believed that violence was to be administered to children and animals alike. Beatings were frequent and arbitrary. My mother

stepped back into the shadows when he was physically violent, perhaps to protect herself. Later, as adults, each of us six girls had to face and process traumatic experiences from childhood. Some of us delved deeper into therapy than others. All in all, we now function moderately well as a family, and there remains much wisdom and maturation to be gleaned from healing our past.

When I left home for college as a young adult, I discovered that students were eligible for free psychotherapy. Within a week of learning this, I began therapy and continued with regularity until graduation. After college I continued with therapy, moving from psychotherapy to rebirthing, past life regression, voice work, sweat lodges, and plant medicine (both in the Amazonian jungle and in Ireland), along with a multitude of other modalities of varying efficacies. My journey continued far beyond finding peace with my father. Through these explorations, I found tools that helped me answer the fundamental questions that had been with me as long as I can remember. *What am I doing here? Am I here at all? What's it all for? Does purpose matter?* These questions led me to spirituality, and by my early thirties that was my singular focus. I was guided, and often driven towards, something that I could not glimpse until later. Sometimes curiosity or a desire to be happy motivates our spiritual growth. Other times our motivation is neither personal nor logical. In these cases we can feel compelled by another force, by an innate impulsion that we intuitively know we can and must trust.

During my spiritual explorations, meditation served as my anchor while my external life changed in every way imaginable. Abandoning the home I had set up with my husband and my successful healing practice that had a six-month waiting list, I went towards sunlight. I wanted to know more. What was the light that is referred to in healing and new age modalities? I decided I should start with what I truly knew and understood light to be—and that was physical sunlight.

I moved to a campsite in Spain, and after three months of concerted meditation, the next step became clear. I resolved to follow an inner urge (that to the best of my knowledge did not originate in my mind) and take whatever step presented next. I was never shown two steps at the same time. I would take one step, and eventually the next

would be given. Then I would take that step. And so on. Within two years I was in the south of India, focusing only on my spiritual practice. Apart from meditating and chanting, my waking hours were dedicated to identifying every piece of my conditioning I could, and breaking its authority by challenging my norms and expectations. I broke every personal law and social rule that had questionable validity. I wanted to know who I would become if I stopped obeying my shoulds and shouldn'ts, if I no longer fulfilled my expectations of myself. *What would happen if I became the person in my past or my present whom I judge negatively?* I broke all the rules, and I learned through experience. I wondered: *What would happen if I had no habitual reference points? If I no longer supported my thoughts, my beliefs, and my socially-ingrained values, would I have a personal identity?* These are lofty questions, but I've never been interested in theory. My research was, and continues to be, action-based. I spent very long periods of time in silence, external silence, and eventually internal silence. For a long time, there was nothing but silence.

Then one day I became acutely aware of a change taking place in my brain. There had been copious spiritual experiences, most of which are forgotten now, but not this one. This particular event marks a significant point of growth on my path and is further discussed in Chapter 6. I was in the shower, which where I was staying in southern India meant self-administering jugs of cold water drawn from a bucket of non-potable water. In this moment I noticed that something was happening in my brain. There was a sensation mostly localized deep within the upper left side of my head. It felt like something in my brain was tearing and breaking apart. It wasn't physically painful. I experienced it as simply a sensation. I had an uncanny feeling that something familiar was slipping away, coupled with an uncomfortable knowing that the change that was occurring would be permanent. I instantly came up with two scenarios; either an unusual spiritual experience was happening, or I was losing my mind. My trust in my ongoing process was so solid at that stage that both options were met with full acceptance. I was ready for whatever came next.

Many years later I learned that I had short-circuited my *self-referencing network*, which I have since seen defined as the *Default*

Mode Network (DMN). The personality of “Jac,” the Irish woman, repositioned itself as an outpost of an inner divine nature that is common to all. I had tipped the balance to where a meditative state was the new normal. My attention had anchored itself within me, in an inner sanctuary of stillness and truth. After this, all thoughts stopped for two years. I continued to participate in the world, but did so against the backdrop of peace and stillness, instead of the self-talk and internal commentary that used to be there. This sense of peace and stillness has remained with me ever since.

In recent years neuroscience has started catching up with facts that I learned from my spiritual path. It’s an exciting time we live in, when science can offer vocabulary for and new ways to help us understand the changes that one experiences on a spiritual journey. What I know to be true is starting to be mirrored in neuroscience. What I know to be Truth stands apart from any phenomenal explanation. Both what is true and Truth are accessible to you. I recommend viewing science as a support, an aid to understanding and categorizing what we know from our shared experience. To date, the wisdom of our internal knowing is still much more profound than the reaches of science, and, though I sometimes draw on the insight of science, your experience will be your guide in the book that follows.

In my work as a spiritual teacher I address each student individually. Together we explore and identify inhibitors to spiritual awakening. Each path is unique and, while certain issues are common to all, one also needs a tool kit for honest self-reflection and self-management. Skills in psychological introspection are equally as important as skills in meditation. Teachers who have not explored their own psychological vulnerabilities are susceptible to the abuse of power and exploitation of students for their own unaddressed needs. Our divine nature does not negate our human nature; unexamined belief systems compromise our human potential and obscure the intelligence of our divine nature. Any bona fide spiritual path means honoring both psychological and spiritual aspects of one’s experience. Authentic awakening, an awakening that is fully integrated (embodied) in each moment, requires an honoring of both your divine and your human nature.

In *How to Be a Spiritual Rebel: A Dogma-Free Guide to Breaking All the Rules and Finding Fearless Freedom* I have selected the most common psychological issues that block students from spiritual growth and maturity. I encourage you to embrace both psychological and spiritual perspectives as one approach, so that you will be open to exploring whatever shows up as an inhibitor to your spiritual growth. Traditionally, the psychological approach is called the “indirect path,” while withdrawing all attention from the mind is the “direct path.” My work combines both approaches. Just like the gardener who knows which weeds to dig up by the roots and which can be covered with bark mulch, I recommend that you be open to understanding more about the subtle tricks of your mind. Some beliefs must be challenged, while others can be ignored. The chapters ahead will help you to cultivate the wisdom to know the difference.

I’ve worked as a spiritual teacher for over a decade, and it has been my privilege to see many students awaken. I hope that these same teachings, distilled here in this book, are even more accessible now that they have been enriched by recent scientific findings. I have no interest in drawing evidence from science that merely seems to fit my purposes. I see the tracks of science and spirituality in parallel, each has its own *raison d’être*. As a spiritual teacher my bias is to the inner knowing that is beyond evidence, time, and space. I give gratitude to science and scientists who can pave the way to a greater understanding. The evidence they find serves to relax your mind with understanding so that you might surrender to the depth of your own being and the ultimate fearless freedom that awaits. The words herein are simply signposts pointing the way.



PART 1

**IN THE ABSENCE
OF COURAGE**

CHAPTER 1

Freedom

This book helps you define and honor what you know to be authentic and true within you. I spent years honoring what I believed was authentic and true only to discover that I was supporting my own conditioned beliefs—sophisticated beliefs, but still just beliefs all the same. How do we get beyond beliefs so that you can access what is not an idea from your conditioned mind? How can you discern for yourself what is authentic and true? That’s our journey. There is a place inside you that is deeper than the stream of thoughts produced by the conditioned mind. As you get more familiar with that place, it comes to feel like *you*. A place, no, it’s not a *place*. But the word “place,” clumsy as it is, must suffice to express something that is outside time and space, outside and beyond personal consciousness. Yet we know it intuitively once we are oriented in its direction. Words are very effective in helping us navigate the external, outer world that makes up the bulk of our life. Now I’m using the same material tools (words) to guide you through an immaterial territory that is simply not made of the same stuff.

How can I navigate you to what is deeper than your thoughts? Does the word “deeper” work? How can I be sure you can sense where I am pointing to when each person’s path is entirely different? How I can satisfactorily explain in print what cannot be adequately conveyed in words? *I can’t*. As I wrote this book, I made a concerted effort to try and avoid what has become spiritual jargon, but I have at times resorted to clichés to give direction and pointers that might be of use to you. Phrases like “look within” and “inner spiritual nature” are clichés. When you come across them in this book, try to set aside what

you think they mean and instead feel into their meaning. In other words, discover what they mean to you in each moment by dropping your consciousness below your neck, into your torso. When you look inwardly towards your spiritual nature by sensing and feeling, rather than thinking, what I am talking about with these words will resonate inside you. This resonance is the gateway to freedom.

There is freedom when you are able to live your life each day in alignment with your own authentic, true nature. Playing safe ends, and manipulation stops. You no longer say and do things in order to forward your own subtle agenda. In my work I meet many people who meditate daily for years and still remain quite dysfunctional in their day-to-day lives and relationships. This book addresses how to end the conflict between your inner spiritual nature and how you think and act in life. Our goal is to attune your mind to your spiritual nature and to free up your actions so that you are honest and true to the core of your being. You are not done until you can walk and talk your deepest wisdom. Even then, ongoing growth and development continue. The spiritual path has no ultimate destination.

Early on my spiritual path I was in conflict. My culture and community advocated behavioral norms and guidelines, as all societies do, based on their values and traditions. From what I could see it wasn't working. Most people seemed unhappy. I could find little evidence that these commonly-accepted rules worked for anybody. For example: Victim mentality underpinned feigned humility. People who subscribed to the value that it's better to give than to receive often seemed unable to receive. And misfortune brought positive attention from the wider community while good luck and prosperity were rarely celebrated. I wanted to know the best way for me to live my life, so I refined the question. *What are my guiding principles?* I listed my values and my passions, which meant encountering questions like: *Were these ideas I had adopted from other people and taken as my own? How can I find out what I'm drawn towards? How can I find out what is authentic and not conditioned in me?*

As I became suspicious of directions that came from others, I began to push against the rules. I would welcome the internal consequences (my emotional and mental responses) of my actions. At least

I could learn about how I functioned and operated from my own decisions. Life became a series of test cases, learning from my actions in a conscious way. This reorientation was empowering. The more I pushed against the rules the more the potency and influence of external authority and power faded. It brought me to another conflict. My conditioned mindset was made up of rules from other people that I had adopted as my own. I saw that I believed that these rules were appropriate and valid for my life. I had absorbed and internalized a cacophony of voices telling me how I should feel, present, and behave. Some version of the outside world was inside me. These internalized rules were a greater challenge, only I now had logic and experience to validate my reasons for trusting them. The rebel in me that pushed against external rules became a spiritual rebel. Pushing against my own thought processes, beliefs, values, and comfort zones was a methodology that made sense to me if I wanted to find anything truly authentic. Breaking my own rules, testing the validity of what I had taken to be true, and being a spiritual rebel smashed my way through to clarity, love, and freedom.

A few years ago, I fractured a vertebra in my lower spine and badly damaged three discs. My own research and some medical advice suggested that three months in bed would repair my body. During that time, I was in intense pain, unable to walk or sit up without assistance for the first few weeks. Within the first day of my injuries I was exploring the spiritual insights I could gain from the experience. I had heard that when one is spiritually awake, all suffering stops. I wondered if that was true. I wasn't interested in taking pain medicine because I wanted to see if I could experience suffering. Was I suffering? There was terrible pain, yes, but was I suffering? What was the relationship between me and the pain in my body? The rebel within me doesn't accept something as true without checking it out first. I spent ten weeks in bed, but I didn't suffer. I experienced a great deal of pain, but I wasn't *suffering*.

Reorienting my attention from external influences to the internal territory of my mind, and then diving deeper into consciousness itself, is the story of how I became a spiritual rebel. The viewpoints and

practices explored in this book brought me to the ongoing experience of living my life in fearless freedom.

Are you ready to be guided by your spiritual nature? When you allow your inner spiritual nature to guide your life, it shows up as a humble willingness to be open to life. You are open, vulnerable, and honest in the absence of your usual protective strategies. Your inner nature informs and modifies your personality. Let's find out what your inner nature feels, tastes, and looks like, and let's explore how you can trust it to navigate you through your life. Our goal is to have your personality serve your inner nature. This can only happen when you are committed to your own freedom; in other words, when your personality is not in charge and you are not concerned about being accepted, right, or loved. With natural confidence and humility, you respond to an impetus that is not limited by your persona and personality. When you can do this, you are in perfect alignment, fully human and fully divine, without conflict. That is freedom.

What if your belief in all of your habitual thinking processes fell away? Can you imagine how you would experience every moment if you no longer believed your thoughts? For starters you would no longer be dissatisfied, unfulfilled, and searching. If your mind's interpretation of your experience were to cease its judging, commenting, and filtering processes, what would you think and feel right now? What if all the things you have taken to be true are simply thoughts that you believe? What if you stopped looking for something better, not because you are helpless or have resigned yourself, but because you have effectively decommissioned the incessant commenting, complaining, nitpicking, reactionary, uncreative, incessantly dissatisfied mind? Your mind very seldom makes you happy, and if it does, it's a happiness that doesn't last.

In the chapters that await your attention, many self-created obstacles are dismantled for you. At other times you will have to engage in a proactive manner to break free from that which binds you. That which restricts your freedom the most, that which punishes most severely is a misused mind. Take this journey. Engage fully in the process and results will come. Keep an open mind in spite of current

beliefs and trusted points of view that endeavor to resist a new paradigm.

Be honest with yourself. Are you reading this book to stimulate your intellect? Are you willing and available to let transformation happen? I didn't write this book to produce some nice inspirational quotes for you to hang on your wall. It's a journey. The chapters that follow introduce problems and provide practices that will enable you to resolve the problem. Recognizing and breaking your own rules is required. The intent is not to trade your current lifestyle with one of reckless abandon. Though this will happen for some, it is to liberate you from the limits and constraints of your personal thinking patterns and assumptions. Do not be concerned with the external evidence that might come with an internal transformation. Accept that your behavior has to change to some extent as your thinking patterns change. While your mind might call it selfishness, proceed with courage, setting aside all excuses that your mind creates. Establish right now that what you do with your life is your responsibility.