

SPONTANEOUS AWAKENING EXPERIENCES: BEYOND RELIGION AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT: 'Awakening experiences' have been misunderstood to some degree by their long association with religious and spiritual traditions and practices. The research reported here – 161 reports of awakening experiences – suggests that most of them occurred outside the context of spiritual or religious traditions. Neither were they induced by spiritual practices such as meditation or prayer. **Most occurred 'spontaneously.'** As a result, they are termed here 'spontaneous awakening experiences.' Many activities and situations can be seen as having a certain degree of 'awakening potential,' capable of inducing – or at least being the context for – awakening experiences. Many are psychological in origin, although they may be interpreted in religious terms. Perhaps the term 'spiritual experience' should be applied only to awakening experiences related to – or triggered by – spiritual practices. I suggest a more neutral term ('awakening experiences') to describe them. A psychological/energetic view of awakening experiences is presented which provides a framework for understanding spontaneous awakening experiences.

The word 'spiritual' is difficult to use with any precision, because it has so many diverse meanings to different people. In everyday speech, when someone says 'She's such a *spiritual* person,' it could be interpreted in a variety of ways: that the person believes in ghosts and goes to séances; that she follows the teachings of a religion and goes to church or the mosque every week; that she has healing crystals in the bathroom, goes to see a Reiki healer and reads books about channelling and angels; or that she is calm and humble, generous and compassionate, rather than materialistic or status-seeking. Noting this plethora of meanings, Wilber has written, 'the real difficulty...is getting almost anyone to agree with what we call 'spiritual.' The term is virtually useless for any sort of coherent discussion" (1997, p. 221).

The same applies to the term 'spiritual experience.' I have found that some people believe the term refers to a psychic or paranormal experience, while others use the term with a purely religious meaning (e.g., religious visions, 'hearing' the voice of God or Jesus).

The term 'mystical experience' is problematic too. The terms 'spiritual' and 'mystical' experience are sometimes used interchangeably (e.g. James, 1985; Hardy, 1979), or elsewhere 'mystical experiences' are seen as an especially *intense* form of spiritual experience (Underhill, 1960; Happold, 1986; Marshall, 2005). However, the terms 'mystical experience' and 'mystic' are most commonly used by religious scholars (particularly in the Christian tradition), referring to 'spiritual experiences' or to individuals who have reached a high

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level of 'spiritual development' in the context of religion (so that Happold [1986] and Underhill [1960], for example, refer to the 'Great mystics' such as St. John of the Cross and St. Theresa). It is more unusual for transpersonal or humanistic psychologists to use the term 'mystical' (an exception is Hood [1975], with his use of the term mysticism in his 'M-scale.').

A further issue with the term 'mystical' is its meaning in popular discourse. For Happold and Underhill, a 'mystic' is a person who has managed to expand and intensify his or her normal consciousness, and so has a more intense and truer vision of reality, and a new relationship to the world – including an awareness and sense of connection to the divine. However, in popular discourse, the term 'mystical' is often used to refer to transgressing the boundaries of modern science or reason, as with phenomena such as alien abductions, astrology or crystal healing.

Maslow's term 'peak experience' is more satisfactory. Maslow also recognized that the experience was "often stimulated by non-religious settings and activities" so that "the framework by which we interpret our experience must encompass everyday life - beyond the realm of 'religion'" (1970, p. 170). However, the breadth of term 'peak experience' is slightly problematic, possibly referring not only to spiritual or mystical experiences, but also to *non-spiritual* experiences of well-being, such as the feeling of achieving a long-sought goal, overcoming challenges or obstacles, appreciating what is normally taken for granted, skills mastery, profound musings and unforgettable dreams (Hoffman & Ortiz, 2009). Certainly, some of the examples Maslow gives of 'peak experiences' – e.g., a young drummer who had three peaks when he felt that his performance was perfect, a dinner party hostess who had a peak experience at the end of a perfect evening (Maslow, 1962) – are not what would normally be considered 'spiritual experiences.' These may be experiences of flow, deep happiness, relief or appreciation but they do not appear to involve the shift in perception, the sense of revelation, meaning and connection or unity which spiritual or mystical experiences bring.

The term I would like to employ is '*awakening* experiences.' This term recognizes that in these moments our awareness and perception become more intense and expansive than normal. There is a sense of stepping beyond the normal limitations – or filters – of our normal consciousness, bringing a sense of clarity, revelation and well-being in which we become aware of a deeper (or higher) level of reality (Taylor, 2010). For the purposes of this article, I am defining an awakening experience as

An experience in which our state of being, our vision of the world and our relationship to it are transformed, bringing a sense of clarity, revelation and well-being in which we become aware of a deeper (or higher) level of reality, perceive a sense of harmony and meaning, and transcend our normal sense of separateness from the world.

The term implies that this state is more intense and expansive than our 'normal' one. Different intensities of awakening experiences exist, and different characteristics emerge at the varying degrees of intensity. A 'low intensity'

awakening experience may be a sense of heightened awareness, that one's surroundings have become more real, with qualities of 'is-ness' and 'alive-ness.' A 'medium intensity' awakening experience may include a powerful sense that all things are pervaded with – or manifestations of – a benevolent and radiant 'spirit-force,' so that they are all essentially one; and the individual may feel part of this oneness, realizing that they are not a separate and isolated ego. While in a high intensity awakening experience, the whole material world may dissolve away into an ocean of blissful radiant spirit-force, which the individual feels is the essence of the universe, and of their own being; he or she may feel that they *are* the universe (Hardy, 1979; James, 1985; Taylor, 2010; Underhill, 1960).

Awakening Experiences Outside Religious and Spiritual Traditions

Scholars of mysticism with a religious orientation have a tendency to claim awakening experiences for religion, as if they can only occur through the grace of God, or must at least include a revelation or vision of the divine. This is exemplified by the exclusivity of Fritjof Schuon (in Brown, 1980), who doubted that mystical experiences could occur outside what he called 'the great orthodox traditions' (if they did, they would be 'inoperative, and even dangerous') and Zaehner (e.g., 1972), who believed that only theistic mystical experience was truly valid, and that even awakening experiences induced by natural surroundings were false and misleading. This division is closely linked to dualistic attitudes of monotheistic religions, where the spirit is pitted against the flesh, and the sacred against the profane.

In a similar way, spiritual traditions such as Vedanta, Yoga and Buddhism tend to isolate the 'spiritual' from – and privilege it over – other aspects of existence, creating a duality between the spirit and the body, or between *nirvana* and *samsara*. Transpersonal psychology has been heavily influenced by these traditions and so often assumes a similar stance, paying little attention to awakening experiences occurring outside the domain of such traditions.

In this article I suggest that the apparent close association of 'awakening experiences' (or what are traditionally called 'spiritual experiences') with religious and spiritual practices is misleading. This is not, of course, to say that awakening experiences *cannot* occur in a religious context. Traditional religions involve certain practices and lifestyle guidelines – such as prayer, contemplation, meditation, yoga and acts of service and self-sacrifice – which clearly facilitate awakening experiences. There are a great many reports of awakening experiences induced by these practices, as well as instances of long term spiritual development occurring as a result of the spiritual paths and practices such as Yoga, Tantra, the eightfold path of Buddhism and the Christian monastic tradition (e.g., Hardy, 1979, Taylor, 2010; Underhill, 1960). To some extent, religious traditions are informed and rooted in awakening experiences. Awakening experiences may be, in Maslow's term, 'The Core-Religious Experience,' which is shared by all great religions including ones like Buddhism, Taoism, Humanism, or Confucianism' (1970, p. 28).

However, findings from my own research (Taylor, 2010, 2011, 2012), and that of others discussed below, revealed that a great majority of awakening experiences were not generated by spiritual or religious practices. Rather, the majority of the experiences occurred accidentally or spontaneously. They may be termed 'spontaneous awakening experiences.'

For example, there are a large number of reports of such experiences apparently caused by – or at least occurring in the context of – sport and exercise (e.g., Murphy & White, 1995; Parry, Nesti, Robinson & Watson, 2007). The primary purpose of sport might be exercise, enjoyment or competition, but it seems that, as a secondary effect, it can serve as a kind of 'spontaneous awakening practice.' As Parry et al. (2007) suggest, the desire for transcendent experiences may be one of the reasons why we play and participate in sports. (I am using the term 'awakening practice' to refer to any activity or practice undertaken with the aim of generating awakening experiences, or of developing and establishing the characteristics of the 'awakened' state on a permanent basis. However, when an activity has a strong tendency to generate awakening experiences, even if the participant does not undertake it with the conscious aim of generating doing this, it can be termed a 'spontaneous awakening practice.')

Similarly, Jenny Wade (2000, 2004) has collected many examples of awakening experiences occurring during or after sex, while DeMares & Krycka (1998) found that encounters with wild animals could generate awakening experiences. Collections of experiences by Hardy (1979), Laski (1961), Johnson (1960) and Hoffman (1992) provide many examples of awakening experiences induced or triggered by natural surroundings, art, music and general relaxation. Maslow (1970) suggested that peak experiences are most often associated and achieved through sex, music, and nature. These activities – contact with nature, contemplating works of art, listening to music, sex – can also serve as 'spontaneous awakening practices.'

In his analysis of the thousands of experiences collected by his Religious Experience Research Unit, Hardy (1979) found that only 13.5% were apparently triggered by conscious spiritual practice (prayer or meditation). A further eleven per cent were also triggered by 'participation in religious worship,' which could also be seen as a type of spiritual practice. The highest frequency trigger identified by Hardy was 'depression and despair' (18%), while other significant ones were 'natural beauty' (12.2%), 'literature, drama, film' (8.2%), illness (8%) and music (5.6%). The great majority of the triggers identified by Hardy were accidental or spontaneous.

Rhea White's research into 'Exceptional Human Experiences' also emphasized the wide range of activities which can be the source of awakening experiences. 'EHE' is an umbrella term for an expansive range of anomalous experiences, only some of which are 'awakening experiences.' (For example, White & Brown [2011]) included such experiences as crop circle encounters, déjà vu, encountering fairies, firewalking and haunting.) Nevertheless, the authors (2011) noted a clear trend that many EHEs, which would once have been

associated with religion, were now “being experienced by more people in the midst of daily life.” They suggested that “this may be not so much because these experiences are becoming secularized, but because the sacred is being found in the midst of daily life.”

MY OWN RESEARCH

As a part of the research for my book *Waking From Sleep* (Taylor, 2010), I collected 161 reports of awakening experiences from three sources: a class I taught, an invitation on my website, and workshops I conducted.

For four semesters, I taught courses on Positive Psychology to adults in the extra-mural department at the University of Manchester. I taught a session on Maslow’s ‘peak experiences,’ asking the students to write a description of the most powerful such experience they had had. Most of the students gave me reports of awakening experiences – as opposed to other possible types of peak experience – and I collected more than 60 experiences in this way. Following this process, I put a note on my website, reading “Have you ever had an awakening experience? This could be an experience in which your surroundings have become brighter and more real, when you’ve felt a sense of connection to them and a deep sense of well-being inside. Or perhaps you have felt a sense of harmony and meaning pervade the world, even a kind of ‘spirit-force’ pervading all things, and a sense that all things are one, and you are part of this one-ness. The experience may have left you with a sense that ‘all is well,’ that life is more meaningful and benevolent than you thought. If you have had such an experience, please contact me...” Finally, a number of the reports were collected at two workshops I ran in the lead up to the publication of *Waking from Sleep*.

In this way, 161 individuals reported one awakening experience each. The reports are mostly fairly short, with several sentences describing the situation where the experience occurred, and the characteristics of the experience. Few of them were longer than a page of lined paper. For example, here are three reports given me by my students:

I was swimming in a friend’s lake in Canada (Cedar Lake). I felt as though I was the only person there, the only person in the world. I swam out as far as I could, to the middle of the lake and just looked round, treading water. I could see no houses, no people, no cars or roads. I could hear no noise, just my arms splashing. I felt completely alone, but part of everything. I felt at peace in a way. All my troubles disappeared and I felt in harmony with nature. It only lasted a few minutes but I remember a sense of calmness and stillness and it soothes me now.

We were dancing outside on a beautiful day, surrounded by the hills. As we were dancing I started to feel as if it wasn’t me who was doing it anymore. I didn’t have to think. It was just dancing me, and it was the best I ever danced. I felt like I was just a channel for the music. Everything fell into place with the other members of the group. We weren’t individuals

anymore; we were whole body of six people. There was no division between us. I felt an expansion of awareness into space. I was dancing in the space in the middle of the hills. I was part of this vast background.

My marriage was breaking up and I was in a state of stress and despair. I rang the rector of my church in Cheadle (strongly evangelical) for help. He listened and listened as I poured out my heart to him. After some time he said “You are claiming your rights!” I responded in horror “Am I?” not really knowing what he meant – his voice was neither positive nor negative towards me. I feared the worst! There was a spinning sensation in my head and the top of my head seemed to open up – I felt a sense of being one with the universe. There was a silence between us for some time but I felt “He” (God) was still there. I finished the call and walked into the kitchen and was amazed to see the time – I thought I had been on the phone for say 10 minutes. But the clock showed it was half an hour later.

I quoted from many of these reports in my book *Waking from Sleep* (2010), but only analysed them systematically for the purposes of this article. Here I performed a thematic content analysis of them (Creswell, 2007), focusing on their apparent triggers or the context in which they occurred, and whether they appeared to be spontaneous or consciously induced. In most cases, the analysis was fairly straightforward, as the experiences were described directly and clearly, with the triggers or contexts clearly evident.

RESULTS

Tables 1 and 2 show the apparent triggers of the awakening experiences, and the frequency of their occurrences:

TABLE 1
Apparent Triggers of Awakening Experiences

Trigger/cause	Number of occurrences (n=161, one report per individual)
Psychological turmoil (e.g., stress, depression loss, bereavement)	38 (23.6%)
Nature	29 (18%)
Meditation	21 (13%)
Watching or listening to an arts performance (e.g., a dance performance, music, play)	21 (13%)
HD (homeostasis disruption) states, where pronounced physiological changes result in awakening experiences (Taylor, 2010)	17 (10.6%), of which: 8 drugs 6 sleep deprivation 3 fasting
Participating in creative performance (e.g., playing music, dancing)	7 (4.3%)
Athletic activity (e.g., running, swimming)	7 (4.3%)
Reading spiritual literature	4 (2.5%)
Sex	3 (1.9%)
Prayer	3 (1.9%)
No discernible trigger	11 (6.8%)
	Total: 161

TABLE 2
Awakening Experiences Resulting from Conscious Spiritual Practice versus Spontaneous Awakening

Conscious spiritual practices or activities – including meditation (21), prayer (3), reading spiritual literature (4), voluntary sleep deprivation (3), or psychedelic drugs (4) ^a	35 (21.7%)
Spontaneous awakening experiences – including psychological turmoil,(38), nature (29), watching or listening to an arts performance (21), homeostasis disruption (10), participating in creative performance (7), athletic activity (7), sex (3), no discernable trigger (11)	126 (78.3%)
Total number of experiences reported	161

^a In these cases of sleep deprivation and psychedelic drugs, the practices were consciously undertaken with a view to inducing awakening experiences. Other cases of sleep deprivation and psychedelic drugs were included in the category of ‘Spontaneous Awakening Experiences,’ as they occurred accidentally.

DISCUSSION

Findings revealed the same ‘top three’ triggers identified by Hardy’s research, discussed earlier, although in slightly different order. The most frequent trigger was ‘psychological turmoil’ (23.6%), equivalent to the most frequent trigger identified by Hardy: ‘depression and despair’ (18%). The second and third most important triggers in my research were ‘meditation’ (13%) and nature (18%). In Hardy’s research, ‘natural surroundings’ was the second most important trigger (18%) and ‘prayer and meditation’ was the third (13.5%).

Aside from the high number of awakening experiences induced by psychological turmoil, what is most striking about these findings is the small number triggered by conscious spiritual practice (21.7%). Over 78% were ‘spontaneous awakening experiences.’ Also striking is the small number of awakening experiences related to prayer (3%). Similarly, only a small number of the experiences were given a religious interpretation by the individuals (only 8%), where they felt that they had encountered God or that God had communicated with them. (The third report quoted above is an example: an experience apparently triggered by psychological turmoil which was given a religious interpretation) Admittedly, this result may not be reliable or representative – religious-minded people (who are likely to interpret awakening experiences in religious terms) would be less likely to see the request for reports of awakening experiences on my website; the same goes for attending my workshops.

Nevertheless, the high incidence of ‘spontaneous awakening experiences’ strongly discredits the view that awakening experiences are only valid in a religious context. Surely awakening experiences become religious by virtue of post-experiential interpretation, through a conceptual application of a religious interpretation to a non-conceptual experience. As a consequence, the inclusion of such experiences under the umbrella term of ‘religious experiences’ (e.g., by Alister Hardy and the Religious Experience Unit) is surely misleading and inappropriate¹.

Another reason why the results may not be wholly reliable is fear of disclosing potentially embarrassing experiences. For example, the relatively low incidence of sex as a trigger of awakening experiences here may be due to this factor.

AWAKENING POTENTIAL

These results suggest that many – if not *all* – activities possess a certain degree of ‘awakening potential.’ That is, all activities have some potential to create the conditions which give rise to awakening experiences. This position accords with Wilber’s all-inclusive view of spirituality, with his suggestion that the highest levels of consciousness are accessible at all stages of development, and that the ‘spiritual’ is a part of every line of development (Wilber, 2000). In a similar fashion, it makes sense to assume that the highest levels of consciousness are accessible through a variety of activities and situations – perhaps even *all* activities and situations. (This is an issue which could be clarified by further research, investigating how frequently awakening experiences occur amongst the participants of a wide range of activities.)

At the same time, it is important to note that there are limits to this relativism. Different activities and situations have *varying degrees* of awakening potential. Some activities appear to have a high degree of awakening potential, such as contact with nature, meditation, attending an arts performance, sex or certain sports. Other activities – such as shopping or watching television – may only have a small degree of it. However, even these *may* be the context for an awakening experience. Gackenbach (2008), for example, claims that even playing video games can, under certain circumstances, generate characteristics of higher states of consciousness.

THE SOURCES OF SPONTANEOUS AWAKENING EXPERIENCES

What are the conditions which give rise to awakening experiences? In other words, when an activity or situation generates characteristics such as a heightened awareness, an awareness of an all-pervading ‘spirit-force,’ or a sense of oneness with the cosmos, what type of inner or psychological change is being produced, and giving rise to these characteristics?

Aside from the religious view that awakening experiences are a form of divine grace, there is the materialistic view that they can be explained in terms of neurological or biological factors (e.g. Foster, 2011; Newberg, & D’Aquili, 2000; Persinger, 1983). There is also the ‘mysterian’ view that the experiences cannot be explained. Maslow (1970), for example, was of the view that peak experiences occurred accidentally, for no apparent reason, and could not be consciously generated, or explained.

I have suggested elsewhere (Taylor, 2005; 2010) a psychological-energetic theory of awakening experiences, which helps to explain why awakening experiences are so ubiquitous. I will briefly summarize this theory here.

This explanation begins from the standpoint that there are two types of awakening experiences which have distinct sources. The first are high arousal experiences - wild, ecstatic experiences that happen when the normal

physiological balance of our brain and bodies is disrupted. This is why, throughout history, religious adepts have attempted to induce spiritual experiences by fasting, going without sleep, dancing frenziedly, doing breathing exercises, and taking psychedelic drugs. These activities disrupt our normal physiology, changing our body temperature, blood pressure or metabolic rate, and causing dehydration, exhaustion or chemical changes. If this is done in the context of a religious ceremony or tradition, there is a possibility that an awakening experience may result. These awakening experiences are termed 'HD' states (homeostasis-disruption). The research reported here, however, suggests that homeostasis disruption is not a particularly common trigger of awakening experiences (only 10.6%).

The second type of awakening experiences are 'low arousal'; more serene and calm states which occur when our inner psychic energy – which may also be termed 'life-energy,' 'vitality' or 'the energy of our being' – becomes intensified and stilled. As a result, I have termed this type of awakening experience an 'ISLE' state – ISLE standing for 'intensification and stilling of life-energy' (Taylor, 2010).

This connection between awakening experiences and energy relates to Deikman's suggestion that meditation can induce an intense perception of is-ness and beauty due to a 'de-automatization of perception.' Deikman suggests that mystical experiences are 'brought about by a deautomatization of hierarchically ordered structures that ordinarily conserve attentional energy for maximum efficiency in achieving the basic goods of survival' (Deikman, 2011). As he sees it, the quietening of mental activity through meditation creates a surplus of attentional energy (or psychic energy, as Deikman also refers to it) which means that there is no longer a need for these structures to conserve energy. As a result, the individual's perceptions become de-automatized, and he/she develops an intensified awareness of the phenomenal world.

Similarly, Novak (1996) notes that the 'endless associational chatter' of the mind monopolises psychic energy, leaving none available for us to devote to what he calls the 'open, receptive and present-centred awareness'. However, when a person meditates she diverts attention away from the automatized structures of consciousness which produce 'thought-chatter'. As a result these begin to weaken and fade away, which 'frees up' the psychic energy which they normally monopolise. As a result, in Novak's words, "energy formerly bound in emotive spasms, ego defence, fantasy and fear can appear as the delight of present-centeredness" (Novak, 1996, p.276).

The contemporary spiritual teacher and author Bernadette Roberts makes a similar point when she states that, "the continual movement [of thoughts] inward and outward, back and forward...consumes an untold amount energy that is otherwise left free when the mind is restricted to the now-moment" (Roberts, 1993, p.95). In other words, meditation has the effect of 'freeing up' psychic energy by decreasing its normal 'outflow.'

As this observation suggests, an ISLE state can occur when the ego-mind becomes quiet, conserving the energy normally consumed by thought-chatter. However, there are other factors too. This 'energy-conversation' may also occur when the individual's exposure to external stimuli is reduced (so that less attentional or psychic energy is expended through information processing), and when one is temporarily free of activity or tasks and duties, so that less psychic energy is expended through concentrative effort. A shorthand way of understanding this is to say that under normal circumstances, our psychic energy is largely expended through 'thought-chatter', information-processing and concentration. But in a relaxed state of mind, in quiet surroundings and in a relatively inactive mode, these 'outflows' of energy may be reduced. There is less cognitive activity, less information processing, and less intense concentration, which may create an inner intensification of energy, and therefore lead to an awakening experience. (See Taylor, 2005 & 2010 for a fuller explanation of how the different characteristics of awakening experiences emerge from the 'ISLE' state.)

SPONTANEOUS ISLE STATES

In addition to explaining why meditation can give rise to awakening experiences, this concept of 'ISLE' states can be utilised to explain the occurrence of spontaneous awakening experiences. Broadly speaking, these occur when a certain activity or situation has the effect of generating an ISLE state. For this reason natural surroundings are a frequent trigger of awakening experiences (Hardy, 1979; Hay, 1987; Laski, 1961) – the second most important trigger in my own reports, and the third in Hardy's. The beauty and power of nature may have a similar effect to a mantra in meditation, directing attention away from the chattering of the ego-mind and generating a state of mental quietness. At the same time, when an individual is walking recreationally amongst natural surroundings, there is likely to be a reduced level of concentrative effort and information processing. As a result, an ISLE state may be induced, bringing a sense of inner peace and wholeness and heightened awareness of the phenomenal world. From an intersubjective or participatory point of view, an additional factor here may be the energy which natural surroundings themselves 'transmit' to us. Nature itself appears to have a certain quality of purity and serenity which creates a calm, peaceful state of being. The following are two typical nature-induced awakening experiences from my collection:

The sun was setting and I was watching it go down. I felt everything in the world was here, at this moment. The sunlight was so incredibly bright and pure and beautiful, and the whole sky with the clouds and the blue. That blue was the smoothest and purest blue I've ever seen. I could see everything about the clouds, as if they had a whole new dimension. It seemed so simple and so right. I felt how easy it would be to be happy.

I was walking along a woodland path at dusk in winter-time, under a canopy of very tall pines and fir trees...The light had already gone from the

woods below, but up above, all the delicate tracery of the tree branches was shading off into a pale grey sky. As I walked down the path, the trees moved against the sky, and suddenly the fact that they were moving only because I was moving seemed to open out into a vision of eternity, for want of a better phrase...Everything had significance, but it meant nothing more (and nothing less) than just what it was. At the same time, the inevitability of it all meant that I knew for sure that nothing really mattered, and for an instant I knew also that I was basically immortal, in the sense that death didn't mean anything either.

This is also perhaps why 'watching or listening to an arts performance' featured as such a prominent trigger of awakening experiences. When listening to music or watching a dance performance, the individual may become mentally quiescent and relaxed, and is exposed to comparatively few external stimuli (aside from the music itself), reducing the normal 'outflow' of psychic energy. For example, the following experience occurred while the person was watching a concert performance of Brahms' 4th symphony:

The first movement just seemed to warm me up in some way. I was listening more keenly, going with the flow of the music. I seemed to be able to shut out any distracting thoughts. The slow movement began and I recognised it as a particularly beautiful one. The magical moment came and suddenly it was like glittering petals of sounds exploded. It was as though the orchestra, the composer, and my spirit, our spirit – the audience's – were just opening there and then. We were just opening to generous sunshine. It felt as though some flower inside me had been tight shut, was suddenly just able to open wide.

Again, the 'ISLE' effect of music may not be the only factor here. From an intersubjective or participatory point of view, part of the 'awakening potential' of music may stem from its ability to *transmit* the qualities of an awakening experience from the composer (or player/singer) to the listener. Pieces of music can express or embody awakening experiences, and if he/she is sensitive enough, the listener can absorb this. (Lancaster [1991] makes a similar point in relation to poetry.)

Similarly, here are two reports of awakening experiences from my students, which both occurred during a dance performance:

20 years ago at the Alhambra Theatre in Bradford, the first time the Alvin Ailey dance group had ever visited the UK. They danced a piece called Revelations – based on gospel stories, using gospel music. I became totally immersed in the performance. I felt in awe of these beautiful bodies – moving in such expressively beautiful ways. I almost felt I was up there with them. I was on a real 'high' – and remember a feeling of such happiness, serenity and an appreciation of the human body and the wonderful way it can move.

Attending the swirling Turkish Dervishes performance at the Royal Northern College of Music. It was a very spiritual experience. Room fell

silent, no babies crying, no movement sounds from the audience, only the gentle swishing sounds of white skirts twirling and the soft sounds of felt gliding on the stage. A feeling of intense peace and calm, happiness and tranquillity. Nothing else mattered in the world and outside the room. We all felt as one – it was a mesmerising experience and unforgettable.

Although apparently not a major trigger (4.3%), the awakening potential of sport might be explained in similar terms. In particular, solitary sports which involve long periods of monotonous rhythmic activity – such as running or swimming – and/or which involve a large degree of contact with nature, appear to have a great deal of awakening potential. To some degree, this may be due to homeostasis disruption, since intensive exercise clearly brings significant physiological changes such as increased heart rate, body temperature and blood pressure. However, the rhythmic aspect of such activities may serve as a focusing device, quietening the chattering ego-mind. When the psychiatrist Thaddeus Kostrulaba started running regularly, he noted that he felt “an odd shift in feeling...a sense of well-being, a sense of energy.” He relates this to the use of mantras to induce different states of consciousness, and suggests that ‘the same process occurs in the repetitive rhythm of long-distance running... Eventually, at somewhere between 30 and 40 minutes, the conscious mind gets exhausted and other areas of consciousness are activated’ (cited in Murphy & White, 1995, p.66).

This observation is perhaps part of the reason for connection between sex and awakening experiences too. The sheer pleasure of sex can shift our attention away from the ego-mind, which may fall silent as a result, bringing what D.H. Lawrence (1973) described as “the strange, soothing flood of peace which goes with true sex” (p.54). Jenny Wade has written that “sex can take people to the same realms as trance, meditation, drugs” (Wade, 2000, p. 120). Sexual awakening experiences may also be related to the ‘unblocking’ or release of other energy sources within the body. Reports of sexual awakening experiences often include descriptions of the awakening of new energies. As Wade describes it, “Some people report strange energies coursing through the body. Sometimes it starts with a sense that the sexual charge normally rooted in the genitals is spreading throughout the entire body, lighting it up with crackling power and fireworks” (Wade, 2004, p. 27). Here, for example, a woman described to me the awakening experiences she frequently feels during and after sex:

I feel as if I haven’t got any weight. There’s a warm feeling running all through my body...Nothing else seems to matter, problems cease to exist, as if the feeling takes you over so much that there’s no room for anything else. I feel capable of doing anything...

I also look at things more clearly, look beyond what I usually look at. The colours seem more distinct; if you look at, say, a tree, you see it for what it really is, not just as a tree. You see it as nature, not just as an object.

To identify a cause of awakening experiences is tantamount to suggesting that the experiences can be consciously induced. In other words, if the experiences are due to an intensification and stilling of life-energy, then we should be able to consciously induce an ISLE state, and therefore an awakening experience. In theory there is no reason why this should not be possible (again, this position argues against Maslow's view that peak experiences cannot be consciously generated). ISLE states *are* normally generated spontaneously, but in theory, if we know that certain conditions facilitate them – and hence lead to awakening experiences – then we would simply need to create those conditions. Of course, simply performing a particular activity or creating a situation which is associated with an ISLE does not guarantee that the state will occur. Obviously, not every meditation practice, every walk in the country or every dance performance induces an ISLE state and leads to an awakening experience. But simply being aware of the connection, and the possibility of the experience occurring, may increase the likelihood of its occurrence.

PSYCHOLOGICAL TURMOIL AS A TRIGGER OF AWAKENING EXPERIENCE

At first sight, it may seem strange that the most frequent trigger of awakening experiences is psychological turmoil (or 'depression and despair' in Hardy's research). Maslow suggested that peak experiences are positively associated with individuals who are balanced, creative, and psychologically healthy (Maslow, 1959), but these findings suggest that the opposite can be the case. Individuals undergoing intense stress, depression or physical illness, or traumatic life events such as bereavement or divorce, may undergo a sudden shift to an experience of serenity and liberation. (White and Brown's list of potential triggers for EHE's also includes what the authors describe as "several experiences one would ordinarily seek to avoid: Danger, Death of another, Illness, Loss, Psychotic states, Rejection.")

The powerful 'awakening potential' of psychological turmoil is illustrated by the two following reports from my collection. One woman described to me how, at the age of 20, she became so severely depressed that she had to be admitted to hospital. While there, she picked up a marble which happened to be lying on her bedside cabinet, and started playing with it in her hands. All of a sudden, it was as if the familiar world melted away, replaced by a vision of beauty and perfection. As she describes it:

I saw reality as simply this perfect one-ness. I felt suddenly removed from everything that was personal. Everything seemed just right. The marble seemed a reflection of the universe. All my 'problems' and my suffering suddenly seemed meaningless, ridiculous, simply a misunderstanding of my true nature and everything around me. There was a feeling of acceptance and oneness. It was a moment of enlightenment. The euphoria and inexplicable rush of 'knowledge and understanding' (it was like suddenly gaining access to a whole new comprehension of what we call 'reality') following this episode lasted for days.

Similarly, a man described how he went through a long period of inner turmoil due to confusion about his sexuality, culminating in the breakdown of his marriage. This may have triggered the following awakening experience – according to him, the only one he has ever had:

It was our last family holiday before the break up. We were in Tunisia and went on an excursion down to the Sahara. We went on a camel ride across part of the desert and at the end of the day, I sat on the sand dune watching the sunset. There were quite a few people around but it was as if everyone else disappeared. Everything just ceased to be. I lost all sense of time. I lost myself. I had a feeling of being totally at one with nature, with a massive sense of peace. I was a part of the scene. There was no ‘me’ anymore. I was just sitting there watching the sun set over the desert, aware of the enormity of life, the power of nature, and I never wanted it to end.

As well as triggering temporary awakening experiences, research into ‘post-traumatic growth’ has found that trauma and psychological turmoil can lead to significant personal and spiritual development (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1998). Tedeschi and Calhoun found that individuals became more appreciative of life, more compassionate for the sufferings of others, and more comfortable with intimacy, so that they had deeper and more satisfying relationships. They also developed a more philosophical or spiritual attitude to life, as questions of the meaning or purpose of life became more urgent for them. (Cryder, Kilmer, Tedeschi, & Calhoun [2006] and Lancaster & Palframan [2009] made very similar findings.)

Even more strikingly, intense psychological turmoil may lead to sudden and dramatic psychological transformation (Taylor, 2011, 2012). It may trigger a ‘spiritual emergency’ which, after an initial period of instability, may settle into a more integrated ‘higher’ state of being, in which the characteristics of temporary awakening experiences become established as permanent characteristics (Grof, 1990; Taylor, 2011, 2012). Miller and C’de Baca (2001) interviewed over 50 people who believed they had undergone a sudden spiritual transformation. They found that the majority of the transformations occurred in response to intense unhappiness, or in the midst of tragedy – for example, people who suffered from the post-traumatic effects of childhood abuse, who had been seriously ill, deeply depressed or addicted to alcohol or drugs. (The other cases were apparently the result of a long period of spiritual practice, or had no apparent cause at all.)

These effects demand a very detailed explanation, which is provided elsewhere (Taylor, 2011, 2012). However, stated briefly, the intense ‘awakening potential’ of psychological turmoil is also related – though less directly – to the intensification and stilling of life-energy. When a person is in a state of despair or depression, many of the psychological attachments which they depend upon for their well-being – such as hopes or plans for the future, beliefs about themselves or the world, their sense of status or achievement in life, their

attachment to possessions or other human beings – may be dissolved. This is often the very reason the person is in despair: because the psychological ‘scaffolding’ which supports the ego has fallen away. As a result, the person feels naked and lost, as if their identity has been destroyed. Deprived of its supporting attachments, the ego itself may collapse, leaving a psychological vacuum. In many cases, this is equivalent to a psychotic break, but in other cases, a new self – a more integrated higher self which appears to be latent in many individuals – may arise and emerge into the vacuum, becoming established as a stable, permanent sense of identity.

However, it is also possible to interpret this in terms of a state of intensified and stilled life-energy. Freud (1923/1962) believed that one of the adverse effects of neuroses is the large amount of psychic energy (or libido) they consume, since the psyche has to make a constant effort to keep them repressed. Jung (1928/1988) believed that psychic energy was expended by actual functions such as instinct, desire and attention, and by potential functions such as attitudes and aptitudes. In a similar way, we might say that psychological attachments such as hopes and beliefs or attachment to possessions or other human beings consume and expend psychic energy. On a basic level, the individual has to expend energy to sustain the attachments – for example, they have to make a constant effort to defend their beliefs against other people’s, to maintain their wealth and status, or to maintain the approval of the people whose affirmation they depend upon. But in a more subtle way, these attachments can be seen as psychological forms which are ever-present within the psyche. The self-concept and our sets of hopes and beliefs exist as constructs, even when we are not consciously aware of them and, simply for their existence to be maintained, there has to be an input of psychic energy. There cannot be any form without some energy source which works to maintain that form. In addition, these psychological constructs also *disturb* our being – or perhaps more accurately, they *invade* our being, obscuring its real nature, disrupting its stillness.

In states of despair and detachment, therefore, there is a sudden release of a large portion of life-energy, and now that these psychological constructs no longer exist, there is a sudden new clarity and openness of being, and a new sense of wholeness. As a result, our life-energy becomes highly concentrated, and at the same time still, which equates with an awakening experience.

CONCLUSION

Since only a small number of awakening experiences are induced by or associated with spiritual practices, the term ‘spiritual experience’ may be misleading. The great majority of awakening experiences seem to occur accidentally or spontaneously (hence ‘spontaneous awakening experiences’). All activities have a certain degree of ‘awakening potential’ and paradoxically, certain states, situations and activities have more ‘awakening potential’ than spiritual practices themselves. According to this research, the state of psychological turmoil has the greatest awakening potential, followed by

nature, then (jointly) meditation and watching or listening to an arts performance.

Because of these findings, and because of the confusion relating to the term 'spiritual' described above, I believe that the term 'spiritual experience' should be used more sparingly, and be replaced with a psychologically more neutral phrase such as 'awakening experience.' Perhaps the term 'spiritual experience' could be used specifically for awakening experiences which are related to – or triggered by – spiritual practices such as meditation, prayer or yoga. Otherwise it may be, I believe, inappropriate. (One alternative to this would be to expand the remit of the term 'spiritual,' to incorporate many everyday activities such as contact with nature, sex, listening to music, contemplating works of art, and so forth. If these activities were seen as fundamentally spiritual – at least under certain circumstances – then the awakening experiences they generate could also be validly termed 'spiritual experiences.')

This is not to denigrate the importance of spiritual practice. There is not necessarily a direct relationship between spiritual practice and spiritual experience. We do not just meditate in order to attempt to induce awakening experiences. Spiritual practices such as meditation may create gradual cumulative changes to the psyche, which may make awakening experiences more likely to occur, in any situation or activity. At the same time, regular spiritual practice may gradually lead to a stable, continuous awakened state – a state in which many of the characteristics of awakening experiences are continuously present.

The spontaneous occurrence of so many awakening experiences highlights the fallacy of isolating the sacred and the profane, or separating the 'spiritual' from – and privileging it over – other aspects of our lives, and other aspects of development. Spirituality should not solely be located within the context of spiritual traditions or the practice of meditation, but within a much wider context – in fact, not within any context at all, but as an all-inclusive and all-pervading facet of all experience in every domain. This view accords with both the 'participatory' approach of Ferrer (2002, 2008) and Wilber's 'integral' approach (Wilber, 2000, 2007). Ferrer's advocacy of 'participatory' or 'embodied' spirituality aims to transcend dualities such as spirit/body and sacred/profane. Wilber's approach emphasizes that development must occur across all lines, rather than just in the 'spiritual,' while at the same time – as previously mentioned – the spiritual can be seen as an aspect of *every* line of development².

There is nothing abnormal about awakening experiences. They are completely natural, everyday experiences which can – at least to some extent – be consciously induced. They may be *interpreted* in religious terms, and certain spiritual practices or spiritual paths may make their occurrence more likely (in addition to helping to develop 'awakened' characteristics as a permanent state). However, fundamentally, awakening experiences have a psychological origin, and can be explained in psychological-energetic terms.

NOTES

¹ I believe that, to some degree, the study of mystical experiences has been limited by being associated so strongly with religion. Many prominent scholars of mysticism, such as Evelyn Underhill, R. C. Zaehner and F. C. Hoppold, had strong Christian beliefs and saw 'deity mysticism' – in which the mystic attains union with 'God' – as the highest form of mystical experience. They saw other types of awakening experiences, such as *samadhi*, nature-mysticism or drug-induced experiences, as either inferior or – in the case of drug experiences – false.

These scholars' beliefs prejudiced them against non-theistic forms of mysticism. As Ninian Smart points out, the only difference between the experience of Indian mystics and Christian mystics is interpretation: "[The theist] already considers that there is evidence of a personal God and Creator; in the silent brightness of inner contemplative ecstasy it is natural (or supernatural) to identify what is found within with the Lord who is worshipped without" (Smart, 1971, p.87).

In particular, these scholars' religious beliefs may have prejudiced them against drug-induced mystical experiences. Their association of mysticism with God meant that they could not accept that mystical experience might be produced 'artificially' by man-made chemicals (i.e., completely without the help of God). For example, as a staunch Catholic, Zaehner was extremely hostile to Aldous Huxley's claim that mescaline and LSD could give a person access to the same divine reality that Christian mystics were aware of.

² Another important aspect of the dissociation of awakening experiences from religion/spiritual traditions is the contribution this makes to the debate regarding perennialism. One of the main arguments of 'contextualists' such as Katz (e.g., 1983) is that mystical experiences cannot be divorced from the religious or spiritual traditions in which they occur. As Gimello writes, for example, "Mystical experience is simply the psychosomatic enhancement of religious beliefs and values or of beliefs and values which are held 'religiously'" (1983, p.85). However, if mystical experiences can occur *outside* religious traditions, in people who have no religious beliefs or values, then they obviously cannot be generated by these. This supports the notion that the 'awakened' state is trans-conceptual, and occurs across different spiritual and religious traditions. (There is a similar argument regarding the mystical experiences of young children, who have not yet been exposed to religious beliefs and/or do not yet have the cognitive capacity to understand them [Taylor, 2009].)

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