

# EXPLORING AWAKENING EXPERIENCES: A STUDY OF AWAKENING EXPERIENCES IN TERMS OF THEIR TRIGGERS, CHARACTERISTICS, DURATION AND AFTER-EFFECTS

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*ABSTRACT:* Awakening experiences are temporary experiences of an intensification and expansion of awareness, with characteristics such as intensified perception, a sense of connection and well-being. Ninety awakening experiences were collected and thematically analysed to identify their triggers and characteristics, and also their duration and after-effects. Four main triggers of awakening experiences were found: psychological turmoil, contact with nature, spiritual practice and engagement with spiritual literature (or audio or video materials). Characteristics were found to be positive affective states, intensified perception, love and compassion, a transcendence of separateness, a sense of revelation and inner quietness. The duration of the majority of experiences was from a few minutes to a few hours. The most prevalent after-effects were a desire to recapture the experience and a shift in perspectives and values. The study confirms the importance of psychological turmoil in generating awakening experiences, and that most awakening experiences occur spontaneously, outside the context of spiritual practices and traditions.

## Introductory Discussion

The term awakening experience refers to a temporary expansion and intensification of awareness, 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. We perceive a sense of harmony and meaning, and transcend our normal sense of separateness from the world, experiencing a sense of connection and even unity (Taylor, 2010, 2012b). The term awakening experience is preferred to the similar term spiritual experience partly because it emphasises research findings that such experiences most frequently occur outside the context of spiritual traditions, and without being induced by spiritual practices such as meditation or prayer (Taylor 2012b). In addition, the term awakening experience depicts the expansive nature of these experiences, the sense that one is transcending the limitations of our normal state and gaining a more intense awareness (i.e., an awakening). Another reason why the term is preferred over spiritual experience is the wide range of interpretations of the term “spiritual.” As reported in Taylor (2012b), the original study initially requested reports of spiritual experiences, but some individuals offered reports of psychic experiences (for example, visions of recently deceased relatives) or experiences of an overtly religious nature (for example, a vision of

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Jesus). These are significant experiences, but not the type the original study intended to investigate. The term awakening experience has a more specific meaning. (See Taylor [2012b] for a fuller discussion of why the term awakening experience is preferred to other terms such as mystical experience and peak experience.)

This article is partly intended as a follow-up to a previous study (Taylor, 2012b) in which 161 awakening experiences were analysed. This previous study was primarily focused on the triggers of awakening experiences. Findings indicated that the most significant triggers were psychological turmoil (23.6%), nature (18%), meditation (13%) and watching or listening to an arts performance (13%) (Taylor, 2012b). Less significant triggers were found to be homeostasis disruption (i.e. physiological changes due to ingesting psychoactive substances, sleep deprivation or fasting), participating in a creative performance and athletic activity. Around 7% of the experiences had no discernible trigger. In this way, the research found that most awakening experiences were accidental or spontaneous, rather than consciously induced by spiritual practice. In fact, the study found that almost 78% of the awakening experiences occurred outside the context of spiritual practices, in a spontaneous fashion (Taylor, 2012b).

Previous studies have shown a similar association between such experiences and a variety of secular triggers or contexts such as sport and exercise (e.g., Murphy & White, 1995; Parry, Nesti, Robinson, & Watson, 2007), sex (e.g., Wade, 2000, 2004), music (Boyce-Tillman, 2006; Sinnamon, Moran, & O'Connell, 2012), contact with nature (Sharpley & Jepson, 2011; Terhaar, 2009) and wild animals (DeMares & Krycka, 1998). 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.

Part of the purpose of the presently reported study was to conduct an analysis of a further sample of awakening experiences, to see if the findings of the original study were reliable. A further purpose was to analyse the experiences in a more systematic and detailed way, from a range of perspectives not covered by the original study. These included the characteristics of the experiences, their duration and after-effects.

### **The Characteristics of Awakening Experiences**

In the study of mystical/spiritual experiences, there is agreement amongst scholars on many of their primary characteristics. James (1902/1985) suggested four main characteristics: ineffability, a noetic quality (that is, revelation or illumination), transiency, and passivity (that is, although they may be facilitated by certain practices or activities, there is a sense in which they are involuntary and cannot be controlled). Stace (1960) added five other characteristics to these: unity, transcendence of time, deeply felt positive mood, sense of sacredness, paradoxicality, and persisting positive changes (that is, although they are transient,

the experiences generate long lasting effects in attitude and behaviour). Hood's mysticism scale identifies similar characteristics in more detail, including absorption "in something greater than myself," a feeling "as if all things were alive," a revelation of ultimate reality, and an experience in which "time, place, and distance were meaningless" (Hood, 1975, pp. 31-32). Stringer and McAvoy (1992) point out that spiritual experiences include both cognitive and affective aspects. The cognitive aspects include "active contemplation," while the affective include tranquillity, joy, love, hope, awe, reverence and inspiration. Previous research has also suggested that such experiences are usually of short duration, typically lasting from a few moments to a few hours, although traces may remain for a longer period (Marshall, 2005). In Greeley's (1974) research, only 21% of mystical experiences were reported to last for more than a day, while 37% lasted a few minutes or less, and 19% lasted between ten minutes to half an hour.

In the original study (Taylor, 2012b) it was suggested that it is possible to think in terms of different intensities of awakening experiences, with different characteristics that emerge at different intensities. A low intensity awakening experience may feature a sense of heightened awareness, that one's surroundings have become more real, with qualities of "is-ness" and "alive-ness." Underhill refers to this as "a clarity of vision, a heightening of physical perception" (in Deikman, 1980, p. 249). While James (1902/1985) describes how, in mystical experiences, "An appearance of newness beautifies every object" (p. 248). James (1902/1985) illustrates this with a report from an evangelist named Billy Bray, describing his conversion experience: "Everything looked new to me, the people, the fields, the cattle, the trees. I was like a new man in a new world" (p. 249).

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. The individual may feel part of this oneness, realizing that he or she is not a separate and isolated ego. He or she may feel a strong sense of compassion and love for others, recognising that other individuals are part of the same spiritual ground as them (Hardy, 1979; James, 1902/1985, 2010; Underhill, 1911/1960). Deikman (2000) found that this profound sense of spiritual connection is often experienced by individuals who provide care and service for others, such as voluntary workers, community or charity workers, counsellors or teachers. As one counsellor described his experience of working with a particular client:

There was a blending of souls. It was a like a third dimension of communication, on a different plane altogether. We didn't need to speak to each other because we knew what each other was thinking. There was an intense vibrancy. It was electrifying. (Deikman, 2000, p. 88)

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 both the universe and their own being; he or she may feel that they are the universe (James, 1902/ 1985; Hardy, 1979; Taylor, 2010). This may be seen as similar to the state of nirvikalpa samadhi, which Yoga philosophy suggests is the highest possible form of consciousness. Here consciousness expands beyond the

boundaries of the normal self and the awareness of being an ‘I’ completely falls away. The individual does not merely become one with the absolute reality, but actually becomes it (Feuerstein, 1990). In the Neo-Platonic tradition, the concept of henosis has a similar meaning. In the Christian tradition, Meister Eckhart (1996) spoke of union with what he referred to as ‘the Godhead,’ the unconditioned source from which the whole world – including God himself – flows out. Similarly, other Christian mystics refer to the process of deification or theosis, whereby the individual becomes ‘deified’ and attains a state of oneness with God (Underhill, 1911/1960).

Previous research has suggested a negative correlation between the intensity and the frequency of such experiences. In other words, while low intensity awakening experiences appear to be fairly common, high intensity experiences occur infrequently (Taylor, 2010, 2012). A survey of mystical experiences by Hay & Heald (1987) found a similar pattern, with 21% of respondents reporting an experience of “a sacred presence in nature” and only 5% reporting an awareness that “all things are one” (p.22).

Part of the purpose of the presently reported study was to systematically analyse the characteristics of the 90 experiences, to see if they correspond to the above research.

### **The After-Effects of Awakening Experiences (The *Secondary Shift*)**

As Stace (1960) noted in relation to mystical experiences, although they are temporary, awakening experiences often have significant after-effects. These can be described in terms of a secondary shift (Taylor, 2013a). According to this terminology, a primary shift is a fully-fledged spiritual or personal transformation, similar to the “awakening”, “liberation” or “enlightenment” described by various spiritual traditions. At the same time, this shift often happens outside the context of spiritual traditions, most frequently to individuals who are in the midst of intense psychological turmoil (Miller & C’de Baca, 2001; Taylor, 2011, 2012a, 2013b). In this shift, the individual feels as if she gains a new sense of identity, as if she is re-born, even to the extent that the only real connection with her previous identity is that she is associated with the same body and name (Miller & C’de Baca, 2001; Taylor, 2011, 2012a, 2013b, 2017). This shift is therefore deep-rooted and fundamental. The secondary shift is less deep-rooted and fundamental – not a fully-fledged transformation of identity, but a shift in perspective and values. The transformation may lead to significant cognitive and affective changes, with different values (e.g., less materialistic, more altruistic), different beliefs (e.g., belief in life after death) and a different attitude (e.g., more optimistic, more trusting). Maslow (1994) highlighted such after-effects in relation to peak experiences, writing that, “My feeling is that if it [the peak experience] were never to happen again, the power of the experience would permanently affect the attitude toward life. A single glimpse of heaven is enough to confirm its existence” (p.75). In turn, such changes in attitude may lead to significant lifestyle changes, such as new interests, new relationships and a new career. However, the shift is still secondary in the sense that the individual feels that his previous self-system and

previous sense of identity remain intact. Since the individual's ego-boundaries remain essentially intact, he does not experience the intense connection or oneness or the intensified perception of the phenomenal world that awakening experiences frequently feature (Taylor, 2005; 2009; 2010; 2012b). These individuals experience themselves as the same continuous ego-self as before, although they may possess a different cognitive map of reality.

Such a secondary shift has been frequently reported following psychedelic experiences. It has been well attested that psychedelic experiences can cause a long-lasting shift in perspective, creating new concepts of reality and an openness to anomalous or spiritual concepts (Conway, 1989; Griffiths, Richards, McCann, & Jesse, 2006; McKenna, 2004; Strassman, 2001). As Huxley (1954/1971) famously wrote of psychedelic awakening experiences in *The Doors of Perception*, "The man who comes back through the Door in the Wall will never be quite the same as the man who went out" (p. 24). (In Taylor [2013a] it is suggested that this is the main benefit of psychedelics: although they cannot generate a primary shift – since they simply involve a dissolution of the normal self-system without the emergence of a new self-system to replace it – they can facilitate a secondary shift.)

Temporary awakening experiences can also be viewed from this perspective, as a temporary dissolution of our normal self-system, and the temporary 'installation' of a different, higher-functioning self-system, which does not become established. Although temporarily disabled, it is as if the individual's normal self-system is still intact as a structure, and so re-establishes itself. It is tempting to describe the normal self-system as a kind of psychic 'mould' that exists as a potential even when the system itself temporarily dissolves, so that it is able to re-form. In temporary awakening experiences, the structure is only in abeyance, with the mould still intact. But when permanent transformation occurs – in the form of a primary shift – not only the structure, but the psychic mold itself dissolves away. It is replaced by a new psychological structure, or self-system, so that the individual does experience a new sense of identity.

However, awakening experiences in general – not just psychedelic awakening experiences – have been found to frequently cause a secondary shift. Although these were not systematically studied in previous research on awakening experiences (Taylor, 2010, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2013b), such a shift in values and perspectives was evident from some of the reports. Some participants reported that their experiences had brought a new sense of optimism, trust, comfort or confidence (Taylor, 2012b). In a study of transformational experiences brought on by intense psychological turmoil, one participant described an awakening experience during which she "felt the most intense love and peace and knew that all was well" (Taylor, 2011, p. 4). The experience reportedly only lasted for a few minutes, but in its aftermath the person found that the feeling of dread had disappeared from her stomach, and felt able to cope again: "I looked around and thought about all the good things in my life and the future. I felt more positive and resilient" (p. 4).

For some, the memory of the awakening experience – and the knowledge that this dimension of meaning and harmony existed – had a comforting and reassuring effect. One person reported that her awakening experience, "only lasted a few

minutes but I remember a sense of calmness and stillness and it soothes me now” (Taylor, 2010, p. 10). Others reported a desire to recapture the experience, and developed an interest in spiritual traditions and practices in an attempt to do this. One woman described how “I have spent the last 25 years since exploring what it meant and how I could perhaps go back there” (Taylor, 2011, p. 8). Another person reported how she had “spent my life searching for the feeling again because I know it’s there” (Taylor, 2011, p. 7).

The presently reported study aimed to investigate such after-effects more systematically.

### **Method**

Ninety reports of awakening experiences were collected. Most of these were sent to the primary author in response to a note on his website, which read:

Have you ever had an awakening experience - that is, a temporary expansion and intensification of awareness? 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 same question was used as a way of attracting participants through social media (Facebook and Twitter). Others reports were sent spontaneously to the author from readers of his previous writings on awakening experiences. In most cases, one report was provided per individual. However, 13 participants provided more than one report. In total, 68 participants contributed reports.

Reports varied in length between several sentences and several pages. In a small number of cases, where the reports were deemed to provide insufficient detail, participants were asked to provide further information, for example, “Could you tell us more about the circumstances in which your experience occurred?” or “Could you tell us more about how the experience affected you, e.g., how it changed your perception of things, or altered your sense of reality?”

The 90 experiences were then analysed, initially to identify their triggers, or the context in which they occurred. This was undertaken by two individuals independently – the co-authors of this study – to provide greater validation. (Prior to this, one of the researchers, Krisztina Egeto-Szabo, had very little familiarity with the field of transpersonal psychology or with the main author’s previous work. This was seen as a way of reducing possible bias.) Identification of the triggers was only deemed valid if both individuals agreed. In the great majority of cases, triggers were easy to identify, and agreement was easily reached. However, in some cases, further discussion and clarification was required. In 24 cases, it was agreed that the experiences had two triggers operating simultaneously. In six cases, no agreement was reached – in which case the experiences were deemed to have “no discernible

trigger.” Following are three excerpts from the reports, which illustrate how – in most cases –triggers were clearly evident (“P” refers to participant number):

P 3: Many years ago, my daughter was in the process of committing slow suicide with drugs and alcohol. I had tried everything I knew how to do to change her behavior. I really felt it was within my power to save her, but I could never find the right words or actions to be of the slightest effect.

One day I took a walk alone in a wooded area. I was crying and in such despair walking along a small path. Then, suddenly, I felt a weight lift up from my shoulders. I felt so light and at peace. The feeling was accompanied with a new thought. The thought was this: you cannot live someone else’s life for them. They have to live it themselves, and there is nothing you can do, so let them go. From then on, I have been so much happier, knowing that I didn’t have to take on the world’s burden on my own shoulders. Now I just help if I can, but leave others to live their own lives. I can still picture myself on that quiet path among the redwoods and the lifting of the heavy weight from my shoulders. I guess you could call it grace. (Trigger: Psychological turmoil)

P 18: I guess my first and most clearly recalled ‘extraordinary consciousness’ experience was around the age of ten. . .I was in the habit of going to some local woodland and there conceal myself by laying down amongst the thick ferns. Lying hidden and silent I would listen to the woodland, to the soft rustle of the grass, and the creaking of trees in wind as the forest sang its strange song. The most amazing part of the experience was just simply lying cocooned in all this wonder and being completely at peace with my surroundings. (Trigger: Contact with nature)

P 61: I had begun meditating at home. Just for the fun of it, I’d been practising maintaining my concentration, all day and even when I was falling asleep – every waking moment – a very contracted narrow focus for several days. Then one night, just as I was about to get into bed, I thought, “Oh I’ll just let go of this and go straight to sleep.” When I awoke the next morning I found my mind was almost completely silent. I got up and thought well this won’t last, but it stayed and I sat to meditate. My head totally clear and I was so awake. I thought, “I’m really going to meditate today.” After about twenty minutes, I found myself returning my focus to my body more and more powerfully. I drifted off, as you do in meditation, when [I] awoke to my drifting I came back with such force that there was a kind of ‘flip’ and I found myself in total silence again, a stillness. The furniture in the room, the walls, carpet, skirting board all seemed to be vibrating with life. They seemed to share the same quality. Thoughts came occasionally and just drifted over like clouds. I could look at them and see their quality. I remember an angry thought appeared and I found it quite humorous. My body was breathing all of its own, I was completely detached and yet at the same time intimate with everything that arose. I also felt serene and a feeling of being at home. I could see clearly that my normal awake state is in actual fact asleep! The difference between normal consciousness and this clear way of being is that marked. Its exactly like that. After a few hours the clear awake quality became covered and I longed for it to ‘return.’ (Trigger: Spiritual practice)

In addition to the cases where more than one trigger was identified, there were several cases where a “predisposing factor” was identified, in addition to the overt trigger(s). In most cases, this was a period of psychological turmoil, which acted as a predisposing factor to an awakening experience triggered by spiritual practice, spiritual literature or contact with nature. Here is an example of such an experience (psychological turmoil as a predisposing factor, with contact with nature as an overt trigger):

P 20: I was buried under too many of life’s demands and if you asked me how I was, I might have said, “I feel like I am treading water, to keep my head above it!” I did actually know I had so much to be grateful for, but I couldn’t break the hypnotism/cloud of my stressful life story and enjoy the good. . .I walked down to the beach planning to enjoy the sun and the sea. When I arrived, there was no one else around, just rocks and white sand. And this amazing, clear, turquoise water was rolling over black rocks and white sand in beautiful, continuous waves, back and forth, back and forth. The only sound was the waves. I had planned to lie down and relax in the sun, but I was awestruck. I couldn’t take my eyes off of the water. I had never seen anything like this! I just kept saying, “Oh, my God! Oh, my God! Oh, my God!” I think I was there in this state for at least an hour. I was filled with joy, then moved to tears, then back to joy... At one point I was aware of a small shift inside of me, an awareness that I had found something good and that there could be other experiences in life that could be like this. I knew that a door had been opened, just a little and that now I could have more of this in my life.

In three cases, reading spiritual literature was identified as a predisposing factor — that is, an awakening experience occurred during a period when participants were reading a good deal of spiritual literature, which appears to create an environment conducive to an awakening experience.

## Results

Table 1 shows the identified triggers of an awakening experience. In cases where it was decided that there was more than one trigger of an experience, the triggers were counted twice, so that the total number of occurrences is greater than the total number of participants.

Table 1  
*Triggers of Awakening Experiences*

Trigger/cause	Number of occurrences
Psychological turmoil (e.g., stress, depression, loss, bereavement, combat)	37
Nature	23
Spiritual practice (e.g., meditation, prayer, yoga)	21
Spiritual literature	15
Love	5
Watching or listening to arts performance	3
Other (e.g., sex, athletic activity, homeostasis disruption, singing in choir, witnessing altruism)	10
No discernable trigger	7



Table 2 classifies the experiences according to whether they occurred in a spiritual or non-spiritual context – that is, whether they were triggered by spiritual practices (such as meditation, yoga, prayer or reading spiritual literature) or accidentally by ordinary activities in the midst of everyday life.

Table 2  
*Awakening Experiences Happening in a Spiritual Versus Non-Spiritual Context*

Context	Number of individuals reporting (n = 90)
Spiritual context (e.g., meditation, yoga, prayer, spiritual literature)	29 (32%)
Non-spiritual context (e.g., psychological turmoil, nature, relaxation, love)	58 (65%)
Unclear	3 (3%)
	Total = 90

Table 3 shows the characteristics of the awakening experiences identified by thematic analysis. In almost all cases, participants reported more than one characteristic, so that – as with Table 1 – the number of reported instances of each of the characteristics is greater than the total of participants.

Table 3  
*Characteristics of Awakening Experiences*

Characteristic	Number of individuals reporting
Positive affective states (e.g., peace, joy, sense of harmony, lack of fear, appreciation)	41
Intensified perception (e.g., aliveness, brightness, energy, light)	37
Connection/oneness	29
Love/compassion	27
Different time perception / being in the present	21
Deeper general 'knowing' / awareness	18
Lack of mental thought chatter / commentary	12
Unusual and unexplained bodily sensations	6

Table 4 shows the duration of the experiences. Only 51 of the 90 participants commented on this aspect of their experience.

Table 4  
*Duration of the Experiences*

Duration	Number of individuals reporting (N = 51)
Minutes (from a few minutes to an hour)	16
Hours (from more than an hour to a day)	12
Days (from more than a day to a week)	8
Weeks (from more than a week to a month)	6
Months (from more than a week to a year)	7
Years (more than a year)	2

## **Intensity of the Experiences**

Based on the description of the characteristics of different intensities of awakening experiences given in the introductory discussion above, the majority of the experiences could be roughly classified as low or medium intensity (or low to medium) experiences. However, 11 experiences appeared to be high intensity awakening experiences, similar to the states of absolute union described by spiritual traditions (for example, nirvikalpa samadhi, henosis or theosis). These were experiences in which time and space dissolved away, and participants described losing their normal sense of identity and merging or becoming one with the universe. Here are quotes from these participants illustrating the experience (“P” refers to participant):

P 36: I was vast and merged with the universe. No longer could I perceive myself as separate, I was in and of the universe, with time and space altered. I knew I could be everywhere all at once. There was no concept of distance or past and present. . . The sense of peace, blissful and oneness is hard to put into words.

P 4: Everything just melted. I looked at the tarry telegraph pole outside of my friend’s house four doors up. It was just pulsating with life and energy; the road surface was the same. I looked to myself, I was made up of the same pulsating energy. Time just melted as well.

P 24: With casualties mounting, I was in a state of high anxiety and I figured that there was no way I would live through this seemingly endless battle. At one point after carrying yet another severely wounded Marine to a waiting chopper something happened to me. It is actually indescribable but I will make a feeble attempt to do so. I opened up, literally, from my perspective. I came out of myself. I expanded infinitely. I disappeared. It didn’t last long but it was the most powerful experience I’ve ever had.

P 40: The feeling extended to inanimate objects; the path, lampposts, buildings, cars, sounds of music; everything was made of the same stuff and the only word I could find to describe it was love. Everything was made of love. I felt immersed in a sea of love where everyone and everything were made of this same ‘energy’; I was no longer a separate ‘ego’ but was consumed by this energy of love. Everything became One and I was outside of time.

## **After-Effects**

A thematic analysis was also undertaken to examine the after-effects of the experiences. The results were too varied to present in the form of tables. Instead we will present these results in qualitative form.

In total, 51 participants (not the same 51 who described the duration of their experiences) described the after-effects of their awakening experiences. Thirty-one participants expressed a desire to recover their experience after it faded, although none were able to do so. However, many participants experienced positive effects

of the awakening experience years, or even decades, later. Eleven participants reported some negative effects as well as positive ones.

Here the main themes of our analysis of the reported after-effects of the experiences (including aspects of the secondary shift) will be highlighted, with examples:

### **Fading of the Experience and Desire to Recapture It.**

P 9: I remember standing there for about five minutes afterwards thinking about how I could get back, or what to do the next time it happens. I never got back and haven't since had such a high intensity experience.

P 10: Gradually, my thoughts and my normal state of consciousness returned. All in all the experience lasted for about an hour, but rather than feeling saddened by its departure, I was eternally grateful for the experience. I had had my first taste of Heaven, and I was desperate to find my way back there.

P 29: Unfortunately, it didn't stick or have a long term transformational power. . . . This state of being stayed for a little more than six weeks, then all of a sudden, like it came it went again. For the next days it went back and forth but eventually the old psychological structures came back.

P 34: This lasted for about a month and then slowly it all disappeared and I become sad and perplexed. It never occurred again at that intensity. I am now 69 years old and have been following a spiritual discipline for many years. . . . I continue with my studies and it has been 40 years since that time.

P 42: One day I could actually feel it slipping away (almost like a dental anaesthetic wearing off!) but couldn't hold on to it. I noticed the petty thoughts which were part of life before, gradually creeping back and life on this 'higher plane' disappeared. I read and watch videos daily in the hope I can somehow find a return to this state.

P 59: It was a fleeting experience which I tried to recapture but the memory at least stayed with me. Since then I have had other occasional glimpses and periods of stillness and peace but none stand out as much as these early awakening moments.

P 61: After a few hours, the clear awake quality became covered and I longed for it to return.

### **A Long-Lasting Change of Perspective and Values.**

P 9: To know that it's there (or here, I should say) is a great liberation.

P 20: I knew that a door had been opened, just a little and that now I could have more of this in my life.

P 28: I slowly returned to a less awakened state despite great efforts of reading and meditating, it has however changed my life and opened my eyes to many new ways.

P 44: However, when I started to think about what was happening, the bubble burst, so to speak, and everything was back to normal. In all about 50-plus years of playing, I've only had this experience twice, but one was stronger. So, as a result, this changed my perspective on life in that I now believe in a higher power and spirituality.

P 47: The blissful feeling has faded away again and comes back from time to time, but somehow it was a leap for my future/ongoing spiritual journey.

P 52: Then, my dear companion, Fear, came back into the room, worried about how long this amazing clarity and openness would last, instantly creating a gap for thoughts to slowly come creeping back into the old me. . . . Even though that whole experience was brief, it left a little piece of knowing and hope. While I still was and am on a journey of self-reflection, it left me knowing that your inner Truth is always there for you.

P 55: That moment allowed me a glance into the other side and opened me to the knowing that I am never separate, alone, nor unheld. That was my first awakening.

P 60: I wish I could say it lasted but it did not. Once I got to my departure gate for the boarding before the flight, it had begun to "wear off." But I haven't forgotten it and I never will.

### **Negative After-Effects.**

P 23: I am now back to my daily routine and the thoughts seem to be magnified. I am constantly thinking and worrying and wonder why this now seems to be so.

P 26: The feeling of frustration was overwhelming.

P 29: Unfortunately, it didn't stick or have a long term transformational power. . . . This state of being stayed for a little more than six weeks, then all of a sudden, like it came it went again. For the next days it went back and forth but eventually the old psychological structures came back. . . . My current situation (13 years later) is that I feel completely depressed, dead and absent.

P 45: My ego has seemed to come back and I feel myself being buckled down by the hustle and bustle of everyday life. I am still at peace, but I feel I am not at that same level of Nirvana as I was in my first meditation sittings.

P 66: I said to myself, "I need to get back there! This is not the truth!" I saw the truth for 5 days. . . . Now it's one month later and I'm still in my mind all the time. . . . The truth is that I'm kind of depressed cause I don't know what to do.

## **Discussion**

These findings broadly confirmed previous studies of awakening experiences or spiritual/mystical experiences. In terms of the triggers of awakening experiences,

the results were similar to those of Taylor (2012b). They re-affirmed the importance of psychological turmoil (e.g., stress, depression, illness, bereavement) as a trigger of awakening experiences. This was the most frequent trigger of the experiences, followed by contact with nature and spiritual practice. These second and third most frequent triggers were the same as those in Taylor (2012b). (A possible variation here would be for reading spiritual literature to be included in the category of spiritual practice, in which case the latter would be almost as significant a trigger as psychological turmoil.)

However, there was some slight variation in other triggers. In Taylor (2012b), the trigger of witnessing a creative or arts performance was found to be significant, making up 13% of the total. In this study, this trigger was not significant, with only two occurrences. Another difference was the significance of reading spiritual literature in the present study, compared to Taylor (2012b). There were 16 cases of this in the present study, compared to 4 in the previous one (Taylor, 2012b). Another slight difference is that in Taylor (2012b), 10.6% of awakening experiences were triggered by homeostasis-disruption or physiological changes (e.g., psychoactive substances, sleep deprivation, fasting). However, in this study only 2 experiences were related to homeostasis-disruption.

These differences can perhaps be explained in terms of the nature of the samples in the two studies. In the original study, many participants were participants of Positive Psychology courses - extra-mural adult students at public courses the primary author taught at the University of Manchester. These participants were highly socially active individuals, who regularly attended courses, workshops and other events. As a result, they were perhaps more likely to attend creative arts events, and so more likely to have awakening experiences in this context. At the same time, most of these participants were unfamiliar with spiritual practices or traditions, and therefore unlikely to have awakening experiences in response to reading spiritual literature. In contrast, a proportion of the participants of the present study were already familiar with spiritual practices and traditions, being individuals who logged on to the primary author's website, or who had read his books. They were therefore likely to regularly read spiritual literature (or watch videos or listen to audio recordings on spiritual themes) and so more likely to have awakening experiences in this context. Perhaps this also explains why the participants of this study were less likely to report homeostasis-disruption as a trigger of awakening experiences. The primary source of homeostasis-disruption in the previous study was ingesting psychoactive substances. It may be that since the sample of the present study was generally more focused upon spiritual practices and traditions, they were less likely to report awakening experiences induced by psychedelics. At the same time, it is striking that both samples – despite their different nature – featured the same three main triggers, with psychological turmoil the most significant one in both studies.

The present study confirms the emphasis on non-spiritual contexts in the occurrence of awakening experiences. In the original study, almost 78% of the experiences occurred in a non-spiritual context; in this study, the figure was 65%. Again, perhaps the smaller figure in the present study could be explained by the likelihood that more participants in this sample had an ongoing engagement with spiritual

practices and paths, and so were more likely to report an awakening experience in the context of spiritual practices. Nevertheless, this study confirms the finding of the original study (also indicated by the research of others, such as Hardy [1979], Laski [1961] and Maslow [1970]) that awakening experiences (or spiritual or religious experiences) often occur spontaneously and accidentally, in the midst of everyday life. As the original study concluded, this lends support to the suggestion that the term awakening experience is more appropriate than spiritual experience. In fact, it is striking that, in a sample where a good number of participants had familiarity with spiritual practices and traditions, a large proportion of awakening experiences still occurred in a non-spiritual context.

In a more general sense, the study confirms the remarkable power of states of trauma and intense psychological turmoil to induce positive and transformational states. There is a connection here with the concept of post-traumatic growth, which has highlighted positive long-term effects of undergoing traumatic events such as increased appreciation, deeper and more authentic relationships, a heightened sense of meaning and a new awareness of spiritual and philosophical issues (e.g., Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Other research has shown that intense psychological turmoil can be the trigger of a permanent shift into “wakefulness” (Miller & C’de Baca, 2001, Taylor, 2011, 2012a, 2017).

### **Characteristics of Awakening Experiences**

The main characteristics of this sample of awakening experiences were found to be (in order of frequency) positive affective states (e.g., peace, joy, appreciation), intensified perception, love and compassion, a transcendence of separateness (or sense of connection or unity), a sense of revelation (or “deeper knowing”) and inner quietness. This largely accords with previous research, including the characteristics of spiritual or mystical experiences suggested by scholars such as Stace (1960), Greeley (1974) and Hood (1975). The finding that high intensity awakening experiences were less common also accords with previous research (Taylor, 2010, 2012; Hay & Heald, 1987). The findings on duration also accord with previous research, confirming that the majority of such experiences tend to be of a short duration (Greeley, 1974; Marshall, 2005).

It is striking that a number of the individuals who had high intensity awakening experiences reported no familiarity with spiritual practices or traditions at the time their experience occurred. For example, the high intensity awakening experience described by P 4 (as reported in the results section) occurred when he was small child (“around four years old”). The experience described by Participant 24 took place when he was in his early twenties, as a soldier fighting in Vietnam. He described the circumstances in which it occurred:

On January 21st, 1968 my unit was sent to Khe Sanh, Vietnam, smack dab in the middle of hell. On the day I arrived Khe Sanh Combat Base (KSCB) came under a heavy mortar, artillery and rocket attack, which destroyed the main ammunition dump. While that is taking place an NVA battalion attacked and

partially overran Khe Sanh Village, which was about a kilometer south of KSCB and decimated the Marine Company that was holding the village.

This suggests that experiences of union with all reality – described in traditions as nirvikalpa samadhi, henosis, theosis or devekut (in the Kabbalah) – are not confined to spiritual or religious traditions and are a natural potential of a human experience. In fact, this applies to awakening experiences in general. Although they may sometimes be related to spiritual practices (such as meditation or prayer) or occur within the context of spiritual traditions, they can (and most frequently do) occur in other contexts. Maslow (1994) saw the peak experience as a psychological phenomenon that could be interpreted in religious or spiritual terms, but need not be. As he put it, peak experiences can be likened to “raw materials which can be used for different styles of structures, as the same bricks and mortar and lumber would be built into different kinds of houses by a Frenchman, a Japanese, or a Tahitian” (Maslow, 1994, p. 73). The same is true of awakening experiences.

This has some bearing on the debate in religious studies between contextualism and essentialism (or perennialism) - that is, whether spiritual or mystical experiences share the same essential features across spiritual traditions (despite some differences in interpretation), or whether they are intra-traditional experiences that are generated by the concepts and practices of the traditions, and therefore essentially independent. Transpersonal psychologists such as Hartelius and Ferrer (2013) have argued against perennialism, with Ferrer (2002) suggesting that spiritual traditions are not expressions of the same essential truths or realities, since there are “a variety of metaphysical worlds – rather than one metaphysic and different languages” (p. 34). However, the fact that experiences that include the same essential features of spiritual experiences can take place outside spiritual traditions, amongst people who have no familiarity with those traditions (or spirituality in general), strongly suggests that there is some form of underlying psychological or experiential landscape that precedes spiritual traditions and informs them. It is important to make a distinction between mystical teachings and mystical experiences. Whilst the teachings and conceptual frameworks of mystical traditions may differ significantly, the mystical experiences that are reported across traditions - and most significantly, outside them - do share essential features. In this way, the findings of this study confirm the results of various studies using Hood’s M-Scale which have found common features of mystical experiences occurring across and outside traditions (Hood, 2006). (See Taylor, 2016, for a fuller discussion of these issues.)

### **The Psychological Conditions of Awakening Experiences**

In Taylor (2012b), it was suggested that a large proportion of awakening experiences are linked to an “intensification and stilling of life-energy” (Taylor 2005, 2010, 2012b). In certain “meditative” situations and activities, our life-energy becomes intensified and stilled, due to the fact that we expend less energy than normal through concentration, perception and cognition. In particular, this state occurs when the ego-mind becomes quiet, conserving the energy normally consumed by thought-chatter. In a relaxed state of mind, in quiet surroundings and

in a relatively inactive mode, the normal “outflows” of energy may be reduced, which leads to an inner intensification of energy, and therefore to an awakening experience (Taylor, 2005; 2010, 2012b). This is partly because the more intense inner energy means that perception becomes - in Deikman’s (1963) phrase - “de-automatized.” Since energy is no longer being consumed by the activity of the ego-mind, there is “surplus energy” available, which is used in perception. Perceptions therefore become enriched and intensified, and we become aware of aspects that our normal automatic mode of perception does not reveal. And since our normal ego-boundaries are largely created and maintained by thought-chatter, when the mind becomes quiet, our sense of separateness begins to fade away, replaced by a sense of connection or even unity. (For further details on how a state of intensified and stilled life-energy – or an ISLE state – gives rise to the different characteristics of awakening experiences, see Taylor [2005]).

A good proportion of the awakening experiences in the present study could be explained in these terms. Certainly, awakening experiences induced by meditation and other spiritual practices can be explained in these terms, because of their mind-quietening effect. (And of course, when we meditate or pray, we ensure that we reduce our exposure to external stimuli and concentrative activity, also reducing our expenditure of energy.) Reading spiritual literature undoubtedly has a similar effect, with the added factor of the “transmitting” effect of spiritual power and wisdom from the text itself. Awakening experiences induced by contact with nature can also be explained in these terms. The beauty and power of nature has a meditative effect, generating inner quietness. Nature also appears to have qualities of purity and serenity that transmit to us and generate a peaceful state of being. And although they did not figure as significant triggers in this study, the association of awakening experiences with arts performances, sport and sex can be also be explained in similar terms (Taylor, 2010, 2012b).

But what about the most significant trigger of awakening experiences in this study, psychological turmoil? This can perhaps also be partly explained in terms of an intensification and stilling of life-energy. Often, in states of intense turmoil, a person experiences a dissolution of psychological attachments such as hopes, beliefs, ambitions, or attachment to possessions, status or achievements. This is often the reason why a person is in a state of intense turmoil – that is, because these attachments have been broken down. However, such psychological attachments consume and expend a great deal of energy as psychological forms that are present within the psyche. So when the attachments dissolve, there is a sudden release of a large portion of life-energy. At the same time, with the attachments absent, there is a new inner clarity and openness.

Another possible factor in awakening experiences triggered by psychological turmoil is what might be termed ego-dissolution. Psychological attachments can be seen as the “building blocks” of the ego. They create and maintain our sense of identity. So when psychological attachments dissolve, the ego itself may dissolve away, in the same way that a house collapses if enough bricks are taken away. As a result, the boundaries of the ego disappear, enabling a sense of connection and unity. There is a sense of connection to a deeper self, an essential being that seems to underlie the ego. It is perhaps because of this combination of two factors – an



intensification and stilling of life-energy together with ego-dissolution – that psychological turmoil is such a powerful and frequent trigger of awakening experiences. Below are some examples from this study:

P 23: After six months of suffering from the loss of my husband of 20 years and the loss of my land and cottage in Northern Ontario as well as an illness that came back, as I crawled into bed that evening I felt a flutter in my heart and awoke the next morning to the most profound sense of peace and oneness I had ever experienced. It lasted about two days and still remains slightly in my heart.

P 29: At the time IT happened, I was in severe distress, my mind going crazy, having suicidal thoughts all day long. . . I was completely hopeless as I lay on my bed, when all of a sudden an energy shot up from belly into my head. . . With that in one instance everything changed. All the depression anxiety and fears, all the chatter and conflict in my mind, all the discomfort were gone and left me in a state of profound peace, joy, love and a deep aliveness. It felt like being a small innocent child again.

P 49: Some years ago I have experienced the most wonderful awakening state in the context of a highly intense suffering. . . I was witnessing the inevitable end of my 7-year relationship, with a devastating powerlessness. The end of that profound connection that we've shared was something unimaginable for me, in the sense that I couldn't imagine my existence without him and literally I was convinced that I wasn't going to survive. When it all ended I was facing a suffering that I didn't imagine could possibly exist and there I was face to face with this dark and frightening aloneness that was so scary, it felt unbearable. The fear was so real and overwhelming that shook my core and everything I was so deeply that I began to experience a clearness and connection with everything that existed, with the whole Universe that felt beyond human. I was in a state of such pure happiness and acceptance, that I was no longer afraid of anything, I was trusting the Creation and that was enough. Out of that depth arose such a compassion and connection to everything that surrounded me that I could feel even the pain of the flowers being picked. Also, a great intuition was born in me that made me realize my vocation as well, that is becoming a psychotherapist.

P 59: In my 20's, following the break-up of a relationship, my psychological world fell apart and I fell into a deep depression. I was off work for some time and spent a week or 2 with my sister. One day whilst travelling in the back of my sister's car with my, then young, niece and nephew and feeling particularly low, I had a moment of complete clarity. Time seemed to stop and I looked around at my niece and nephew and at the passing countryside and felt that all was well, all was serene, nothing was wrong. It was a fleeting experience that I tried to recapture but the memory at least stayed with me.

### **The Therapeutic After-Effects of Awakening Experiences**

In some cases, the ego can become permanently dissolved following an awakening experience triggered by intense psychological turmoil. If this happens, a person

may experience an ongoing state of wakefulness. An awakening experience may herald a permanent spiritual transformation, the establishment of a new identity to replace the self that dissolved away. However, in temporary awakening experiences, the normal ego-self re-establishes itself, even if the person now has a new conceptual outlook and new values. In other words, the person may not experience a primary shift but still experience transformational elements of a secondary shift.

This was perhaps one of the most significant findings of this study: that, despite their temporary nature, awakening experiences have powerful ongoing transformational effects. Fifty-one of the 68 participants reported these positive after-effects (11 reporting some negative effects too). This suggests that awakening experiences have a pronounced therapeutic effect, similar to the therapeutic effects identified by some researchers in relation to psychoactive substances (Loizaga-Velder & Verres, 2014; McKenna, 2004) and nature (Bragg & Atkins, 2016; Neill, 2003). This suggests that awakening experiences could, in theory, be consciously cultivated for their therapeutic value, perhaps by attempting to induce an “intensification and stilling of life energy,” as mentioned above. (Indeed, it is surely the case that awakening experiences contribute to the therapeutic effects of contact with nature and psychedelics, although this is a connection that could be verified by more research.) However, it should be noted that, even though we can create conditions that are conducive to awakening experiences, their appearance is still unpredictable. This would obviously limit their efficacy as a form of therapy.

### Conclusion

This study confirms the importance of psychological turmoil as a source of awakening experiences. It also confirms that awakening experiences occur most frequently in non-spiritual contexts, as spontaneous events. In this sense, the term awakening experience is more appropriate than spiritual experience. Awakening experiences – and also an ongoing state of wakefulness – are natural psychological states that are accessible from a wide range of activities, not just from those related to spiritual traditions. This supports the idea (related to the concept of essentialism) that awakening experiences are more fundamental than spiritual traditions, and share common characteristics that are interpreted in different ways by different traditions, rather than being intra-traditionally specific. At the same time, the underlying psychological conditions that give rise to the experiences can be identified, perhaps relating to an intensification and stilling of life-energy, or ego-dissolution. The powerful positive after-effects of awakening experiences suggest a strong therapeutic element.

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