



California Institute
of Integral Studies

International Journal of
Transpersonal Studies

Volume 32 | Issue 2

Article 3

7-1-2013

The Peak at the Nadir: Psychological Turmoil as the Trigger for Awakening Experiences

Steve Taylor

Leeds Metropolitan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.ciis.edu/ijts-transpersonalstudies>

 Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#), [Psychology Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Taylor, S. (2013). Taylor, S. (2013). The peak at the Nadir: Psychological turmoil as the trigger for awakening experiences. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 32(2), 1–12.. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 32 (2). <http://dx.doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2013.32.2.1>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals and Newsletters at Digital Commons @ CIIS. It has been accepted for inclusion in *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ CIIS. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@ciis.edu.

The Peak at the Nadir: Psychological Turmoil as the Trigger for Awakening Experiences

Steve Taylor

Leeds Metropolitan University
Leeds, UK

A study of 161 temporary awakening experiences showed that over 23% were triggered by, or associated with, intense turmoil and distress (Taylor, 2012b). Examples of some of these turmoil-induced awakening experiences are given, illustrating the wide variety of traumatic experiences involved. (The type of trauma was found to be less important than its intensity.) These temporary awakening experiences are contrasted with permanent suffering-induced transformational experiences (SITEs). A distinction is made between a primary shift, involving the establishment of a new self-system (which occurs in SITEs), and the secondary shift which may occur after temporary awakening experiences, when the individual's self-system remains fundamentally intact, but she or he experiences a shift in perspective and values. Possible reasons for the connection between psychological turmoil and awakening experiences are discussed, arguing that the experiences cannot simply be explained away as self-delusion or a psychological defense mechanism. It is suggested that there is a connection between turmoil-induced awakening experiences and the dissolution of psychological attachments, together with an intensification of energy.

Keywords: *Turmoil, trauma, illness, awakening, spiritual experience, peak experience*

Some individuals experience powerful long-term positive effects following periods of intense trauma and psychological turmoil. In the term coined by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1998), *post-traumatic growth* can include more positive and fulfilling relationships, a more positive self-conception and attitude to life (Fosse, 2005), an increased sense of confidence and competency and an enhanced appreciation of life (Cryder, Kilmer, Tedeschi, & Calhoun 2006; Stanton, Bower, & Low, 2006), an increased sense of meaning and purpose together with greater spiritual integration (Neal, Lichtenstein, & Banner, 1999), and also a greater sense of responsibility for one's own life and a more accepting attitude to death (Kastner, 1998).

Taylor (2011, 2012a) showed that intense psychological turmoil can also generate a sudden and dramatic transformation—a permanent shift of consciousness and identity. This was termed a *suffering-induced transformational experience* (SITE). The characteristics of this transformation were similar to those of *post-traumatic growth* (PTG). The most prevalent were increased well-being, intensified perception, a sense of connection, improved relationships, a less materialistic

and more altruistic attitude, an increased mental quietness (i.e., less random or automatic discursive thought) and reduced fear of death. The types of turmoil that triggered SITEs were wide-ranging: intense stress and upheaval, depression, bereavement, serious illness, becoming disabled, alcoholism, and encounters with death (through medical conditions or accidents). The intensity of the turmoil was more significant than the type. In almost all cases, the turmoil was of a high intensity, occurring over a long period (Taylor, 2012a).

One significant study with similar findings was undertaken by Miller and C'de Baca (2001), who interviewed more than 50 individuals reporting a sudden psychological transformation. Miller and C'de Baca termed this transformation *Quantum Change* and described it as “a vivid, surprising, benevolent and enduring personal transformation” (p. 4), which can be so sudden that it “break[s] upon consciousness like a forceful wave” (p. 39). More than half of the transformations examined by Miller and C'de Baca occurred in response to intense unhappiness, or in the midst of tragedy—for example, individuals 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.) In this context, quantum change is described as a “point of desperation, a breaking point where something has to give—and it does . . . The result is a new, dramatically reorganized identity” (p. 157). Similarly, Smith’s (2006) national spiritual transformation study found that, of individuals reporting spiritual/religious change, 47% described personal problems as a causal factor, including illness, accident, bereavement, divorce, financial difficulties, and drug/alcohol abuse.

It appears that the only major difference between SITEs (or Quantum Change) and PTG is that the former are sudden and dramatic experiences rather than gradual. (In view of this, SITEs could plausibly be considered experiences of post-traumatic *transformation*.) Many of the participants from Taylor (2012a) could specify a particular moment at which transformation occurred, often at the moment when they shifted to an attitude of acceptance of their predicament. For example, Participant 1 described how, as an alcoholic undergoing the AA recovery process, he experienced transformation at the moment when he handed over his problem. Participant 2, who had become severely disabled, underwent a shift at the point when he heard a voice inside his say, “Let go, man, let go. Look at how you’re holding on. What do you think life’s telling you?” Participant 3 underwent a SITE at the point when she decided that there was no point striving to change her life anymore and gave up.

Awakening Experiences

However, in this article, another potentially positive aspect of experiences of psychological turmoil will be discussed, namely, the fact that they are a frequent triggers of temporary awakening experiences. In the following discussion, the temporary nature of the experiences is emphasized. An awakening experience is, by definition, temporary (Taylor, 2010, 2012b). While the term *suffering-induced transformational experience* was used above to refer to a *permanent* shift, here the term *turmoil-induced awakening experience* is used to refer to an awakening experience induced by psychological turmoil.

Maslow (1964) was aware of the importance of the connection between turmoil and personal or spiritual development, coining the term *nadir experiences*. As he saw it, peak and nadir experiences are not simple opposites but have a close, symbiotic relationship. Nadir

experiences can promote self-actualization; experiences of death, tragedy, and trauma can be important learning experiences bringing permanent change to a person’s outlook and character.

At this point the use of the term awakening experience rather than the more familiar peak experience should be clarified. Maslow’s term is very wide-ranging, covering spiritual or mystical experiences, the achievement of long-sought goals, overcoming challenges or obstacles, flow experiences, skills mastery, profound musings and unforgettable dreams (Hoffman & Ortiz, 2009). The term awakening experience has a more specific meaning, closer to spiritual and mystical experiences. It refers to experiences of one’s awareness and perception becoming more intense and expansive than normal. There is a sense of stepping beyond the normal limitations—or filters—of one’s normal state, a sense of enhanced clarity, revelation and well-being, in which the individual feels that they have become aware of a deeper (or higher) level of reality (Taylor, 2010, 2012b). The term has been specifically defined 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. (Taylor, 2012b, p. 74)

There are different intensities of awakening experiences, and different characteristics that emerge at the varying degrees of intensity (Taylor, 2012b). 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 are 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 they are not a separate and isolated ego. In a high intensity awakening experience, the whole material world may appear to 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).

Many significant triggers of these experiences have been identified. Hardy (1979), Laski (1961), Johnson (1960), and Hoffman (1992) found many examples of awakening experiences induced or triggered by natural surroundings, art, music, and general relaxation. Stringer and McAvoy (1992), Fox (1997), as well as Fredrickson and Anderson (1999) have found that the wilderness experience can generate spiritual or awakening experiences. Other researchers have found that such experiences can be frequently caused by—or at least occur in the context of—sport and exercise (e.g., Murphy & White, 1995; Parry, Nesti, Robinson, & Watson, 2007) and sex (Wade, 2000, 2004). DeMares and Krycka (1998) found that encounters with wild animals could generate awakening experiences, while Taylor (2007) found the same with surfing. However, in Hardy's (1979) analysis of the thousands of experiences collected by his Religious Experience Research Unit, he found that the most frequent trigger of religious experiences was depression and despair (18%), while other significant triggers were natural beauty (12.2%), literature, drama, film (8.2%), illness (8%), and music (5.6%).

Grof's (2000) research has also highlighted the connection between turmoil and spiritual experiences. What Grof described as a spiritual emergency—in which the normal self-system is disturbed and new energies and potentials are released within the psyche, bringing the possibility of transformation—is frequently triggered by a traumatic emotional experience such as losing “an important relationship, such as the death of a child or another close relative, divorce, or the end of a love affair . . . a series of failures or loss of a job or property can immediately precede the onset of spiritual emergency” (p. 137). Similarly, in their list of potential triggers of exceptional human experiences, White and Brown (2013) included several experiences one would ordinarily seek to avoid: Danger, Death of another, Illness, Loss, Psychotic states, Rejection. Psychologist Peter Chadwick (2010) provided a very clear example of a turmoil-induced awakening experience:

I hit the base of my fortunes. Living in a bedsitter in Hackney, East London, I was essentially alone, penniless, unemployed, felt scorned, hated, with no future now and an horrific past. It was as if a portal opened and I was overwhelmed by a positive, euphoric, spiritual experience. It was like being an

empty vessel being filled with the Divine Light of God. The transgressions of my many persecutors quickly became trivial. Hate turned to love, anger and revenge wishes turned to forgiveness. From being a scorned speck of a being, I became an agent of the Almighty! The emotions of anger, fear and sex were totally dormant; the tortuous agonies of my past were forgotten. I was as if reborn. (p. 67)

In Taylor's (2012b) research into awakening experiences, 161 reports of such experiences were collected, primarily via a request online. The request read:

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 oneness. 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.

A number of other reports were collected at courses and workshops. For example, for three semesters I taught courses on Positive Psychology to adults in the extramural department at the University of Manchester. During a session on peak experiences, students were asked to write a description of the most powerful such experience they had had. Many students gave me reports of awakening experiences, as opposed to other possible types of peak experience. The majority of reports—just over three-quarters—were from women. However, since there were a high proportion of women amongst the attendance of the workshops and courses, it would not be valid to derive any significance from this fact.

In Taylor (2012b), a thematic analysis (Creswell, 2007) was conducted of the transcripts, focusing on their apparent triggers or the context in which they occurred, and whether they appeared to be spontaneous or consciously induced. Aware that the researcher's own preconceptions might impinge on the analysis of the reports, an attempt was made to suspend or bracket out any conceptual interpretation of the data while engaging with it (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell,

2007). One possible preconception related to the connection between episodes of intense psychological turmoil and personal transformation, which had been the subject of a previous research project (Taylor, 2012a). Since this connection was so well established, there was a possibility of over-emphasizing it. When it became apparent during the thematic analysis that psychological turmoil was emerging as a strong theme, the transcripts were re-examined, in order to check this as a valid interpretation. However, in most cases, the content analysis was fairly straightforward, as the experiences were described directly and clearly, with the triggers or contexts clearly evident. (At the same time this thematic analysis would have been more valid if undertaken by an external person, or if the results had been validated by the original participants or with a resonance panel.)

This analysis found that, as with Hardy, the most frequent trigger was psychological turmoil (23.6%). The other significant triggers were contact with nature (18%), meditation (13%), and watching or listening to an arts performance (e.g., a dance performance, music, play; 13%). Other, less significant triggers were participating in a creative performance, athletic activity, reading spiritual literature, sex, and prayer. Table 1 summarizes the results of the study.

Examples from the Study

Provided in this section are several examples of turmoil-induced awakening experiences from Taylor's (2012b) study. When dealing with self-reported transformational experiences, the effect of narrative construction should be taken into account. Narrative theorists such as Sarbin (1986) and Bruner (1991) have suggested that the impulse to bring order to chaotic human experience by constructing it into a narrative is fundamental to human nature. Human beings impose narratives on events—or re-narrate them—to bring coherence to experience and help form a sense of identity. Meaning is imposed on experience to make it easier to process, and more comprehensible (Brennan, 2001). Research has shown that creating a new sense of self can help a person to survive and process traumatic experiences; for example, Allen (1999) suggested that in order to survive trauma the individual has to create a new sense of self. Often this is to replace the sense of identity, which has been threatened or destroyed by trauma. Trauma can threaten or destroy a person's basic assumptions about themselves and the world, their roles and psychologically meaningful activities in their lives, and also cause a loss of the sense of control over the person's life (Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

In order to survive trauma, individuals have to regain a sense of coherence and control over their lives.

Table 1. The 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%)
States of homeostasis disruption (pronounced physiological changes)	17 (10.6%)
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 discernable trigger	11 (6.8%)

Source: Taylor (2012b)

They have to create meaning through forming a new narrative of their lives and thereby create a new sense of self. According to Taylor (1983) this includes three basic elements: meaning, mastery, and self-enhancement. It is possible to see how this might apply to reports of suffering-induced transformational experiences (SITEs). It could be argued that the new sense of identity reported by those who report SITEs (Taylor, 2011; 2012a) does not stem so much from the establishment of a new psychological structure (or self-system) but from the creation of a new self-narrative in response to a loss of control and identity. (In such cases, the observations of peers—e.g., friends and relatives—could be important, in order to validate, or not, the claims of self-reports.)

However, this is less likely to apply to reports of temporary awakening experiences, simply because there is no narrative of transformation—and no new sense of identity—to be created. These are incidental, isolated experiences rather than part of a larger narrative. Since this was not a formal research project, and participation was purely voluntary, with no direct contact with the researcher other than through the invitation, one could also argue that factors such as social desirability bias or a desire to conform to the researcher's expectations did not unduly influence participant contributions (McBurney, 1994). Thus, it could be argued that the following self-reports of awakening experiences have a reasonable degree of reliability.

In contrast to SITEs—which, as stated earlier, tend to occur following prolonged periods of intense turmoil—temporary awakening experiences can be induced by relatively short and minor episodes of turmoil. Here, for example, Participant 4 reported an experience she had at the age of 15, one summer when she was on holiday in Wales. While walking back from the beach late at night, she had a massive row with her mother, which left her feeling angry and frustrated. The problem they had been arguing about seemed insoluble. As she described it:

Instead of walking back along the road with my mother and sister, I separated myself by walking along the beach, parallel to the road they were on . . . Suddenly I felt that a great peace had settled inside me. Something magnificent had happened. I felt as if nothing would ever upset me again. The world was wonderful. I have spent my life searching for the feeling again because I know it's there.

Similarly, Participant 5 described how, as a 17 year-old girl, she was upset after splitting up with her boyfriend. She cried for hours, until falling asleep. When she woke up the next morning, she was filled with a peace and contentment she had never known before. As she described it:

I was extremely happy and felt a great love for all things. It was a very strong feeling, the strength of which I had never felt before or since. It was a very sharp contrast to the despair I felt the previous night. I felt as though I was filled with love and compassion. My bedroom looked brighter and sharper and I remember touching things in my room whilst feeling a huge feeling of connectedness. I was conscious of not wanting the feeling to go away. But unfortunately it didn't last long.

However, awakening experiences can occur with longer periods of intense turmoil too, without becoming established as permanent states. For example, Participant 6 described an awakening experience triggered by the break up of her marriage.

My marriage was breaking up and I was in a state of stress and despair. I rang the rector of my church 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.

Here Participant 7 described an awakening experience, which occurred after a long period of frustration and depression:

I wasn't happy at all. You could say I was depressed. I had crashed my car. I hated my job. I hated the way I looked. I was overly ambitious . . . I truly saw myself as a victim of life.

On this day I took my two family dogs out to get some fresh air. Something which I did regularly. On

this occasion it was about 12 o'clock in the afternoon. It was a beautiful day. The sky was blue. There was a slight cool breeze and the sun was doing its job and sending its rays (for free!). I let the dogs off the lead and let them run around like a couple of hairy mentalists. It was then that I found myself looking at a tree. Not a special tree—in fact, it was quite a poor example of a tree. But I found myself staring at it. Glued to it. Then something shifted. Like a switch had been turned on. The tree became the most beautiful thing I had ever seen—ever. It shone new colours. But not only that—I became one with the tree. To such an extent that I no longer existed. All that was left existing was everything! I saw the oneness of life. My identity along with all of its insecurities, ambitions, goals, and fears, melted away like ice in the desert. To this, all I could do was laugh

I thought I had been given the secret to life. Or at least a piece of information nobody had What I felt when I looked at that tree, you could say was love.

Physical Illness

These experiences can sometimes occur in the midst of physical suffering too. Participant 8 reported how several years before she was seriously ill and spent four months in hospital. Much of the time she was so weak and ill that she could not get out of bed, and often felt depressed. However, occasionally this gave way to a powerful sense of serenity:

The first time I was ill, I was ill for six years and in hospital for four months. Even though I was very ill and in danger of dying there were times when I didn't feel afraid at all. At times I had this marvelous sense that all was well, that there was a force supporting me, that I was being cradled . . . I felt a marvelous sense of well-being. At the time I was religious, and I felt as though God was protecting me.

Participant 9 described how once she had broken her hip and was confined to a hospital bed for weeks, feeling frustrated and uncomfortable. One day she was lying there when

Out of the middle of my forehead intense energy seemed to be flowing out of my third eye. I didn't know if anyone could see it. When my mother came in I felt intense love, the same for my friends and

family. I felt such intense love and vulnerability. I felt connected to the universe, as if the source of everything was flowing through me.

The Author's Own Experience

This author had a similar experience in 2006, a few months after the birth of our second child. It was a very stressful time, mainly because our baby was very unsettled at night, and slept infrequently. I also had a heavier workload than normal at the college where I was teaching, and a deadline looming for a new book.

Perhaps as a result of this stress, I became ill. One morning I woke up and could not open my mouth. I could not eat or drink, and one side of my face had swollen up massively. At the hospital, I was told I had quinsy, a complication of acute tonsillitis, and was given intravenous antibiotics, plus a saline drip. The infection had already spread to my neck and chest—which was bright red and swollen—and my bacterial count was very high, and kept rising. I kept getting weaker, until it was difficult for me to walk more than a few paces.

For the first few days I felt worried and depressed, partly because the doctors were worried that I wasn't responding to the antibiotics, and the bacterial count kept increasing. It was also the Christmas holidays, and I missed being at home with my wife and kids. But as I began to adjust to the environment and accept my predicament, a sense of lightness and ease began to fill me. I began to feel a glowing energy inside, as if I had made contact with a reservoir of well-being which was normally too deep for me to have access to. I spent hours lying on the hospital bed, too weak to read or even watch television, but I felt carefree and content.

I had to have an operation under a general anaesthetic but did not feel at all worried. When I was lying down waiting to have my anaesthetic, I felt a deep calmness and serenity, and completely accepted whatever was going to happen. I was filled with a sense that "all was well." The operation was successful and the antibiotics began to work against the infection. After two weeks, I was sent home, and the sense of serenity continued—although fading gradually—over the three weeks it took me to fully recover. As I realized that I was returning to full health, I also felt an enhanced gratitude and appreciation of my health, of the automatic physiological processes and the energy levels I normally took for granted. It seemed like a miracle just to be alive in a healthy, well-functioning body with enough

energy to play with my children, to write, to talk to my wife and friends, and to meet the tasks of my daily life. (Unfortunately this faded after a while too, although I would like to think that it is or was always present, to a lesser degree!) It was largely due to this experience that I became interested in the connection between turmoil and awakening experiences.

Although my own and the two preceding participant experiences were related to physical problems, I believe that their main “trigger” was the psychological turmoil and distress produced by illness or injury. The two preceding respondents both reported psychological turmoil (the first depression, the second frustration), while my own experience featured anxiety. In Taylor (2010, 2012b), it is suggested that some awakening experiences may be caused by “homeostasis disruption,” when the normal physiological and neurological functioning of the organism is disrupted by fasting, sleep deprivation, drugs, pain, hyperventilation, extremes of temperature, and so forth. Since illness also brings a disruption to normal physiological functioning, the above experiences could be interpreted as the result of homeostasis disruption. However, illness and injury in themselves do not appear to be significant triggers of awakening experiences (although there are some exceptions to this: for example, temporal lobe epilepsy, when seizures are often preceded by intense spiritual and religious feelings). The reason for this may be that, as will be suggested presently, there is a strong connection between awakening experiences and psychic energy, and when a person is ill, these energies are usually extremely depleted.

Temporary and Permanent Experiences

Distinguishing between temporary awakening experiences and permanent transformational experiences can be quite difficult. This is especially the case with experiences related to psychological turmoil, as they are strongly associated with permanent transformation (Taylor, 2011, 2012a). The criterion used here for differentiating them was simply the individuals commenting that the experience was only temporary, that it faded away after a certain amount of time, bringing a return to a normal state of mind. Participant 4 stated, “I have spent my life searching for the feeling again because I know it’s there,” while Participant 5 commented, “I was conscious of not wanting the feeling to go away. But unfortunately it didn’t last long.”

The difference between temporary and permanent experiences here is that the latter involve a

transition to a new psychological structure, or, self-system. The previous self-system is dismantled or dissolved, and a new self-system emerges to replace it, one with a new, intensified perception of reality, an increased sense of connection, new values (including a less materialistic and more altruistic attitude), and an increased mental stillness (i.e., less random or automatic thought-chatter). However, in temporary experiences this new self-system does not become established, though it may be temporarily experienced.

In Taylor (2012a), it was suggested that this dismantling of the self-system is due to the dissolution of psychological attachments. Psychological attachments can include hopes and ambitions, the sense of status or achievement, wealth and possessions, social roles, and other human beings upon whom the person is emotionally dependent. The dissolution of these attachments is usually the main reason why a person is in a state of turmoil, and filled with a sense of despair or loss. They can be seen as the building blocks of a person’s sense of identity. When the building blocks are taken away, the structure itself collapses. When this happens for most individuals, the state is equivalent to a breakdown, or even psychosis. Yet for a small minority, this affords the opportunity for a new self-system to emerge, one that has been latent, and already fully developed as a structure. This may simply be a question of intensity. In permanent SITEs, the self-system is dissolved so completely and powerfully that it cannot reform. In temporary experiences, it is only in abeyance. The psychological structure still exists, almost like a mold, which can re-establish itself. But in SITEs the mold itself dissolves away.

However, temporary experiences may still leave permanent effects. That is, even while the individual’s self-system or psychological structure remains fundamentally intact, more minor or superficial changes may occur. For example, whilst not leading to a wholesale shift of outlook and identity, suffering-induced awakening experiences were reported as bringing a new sense of optimism, trust, comfort, or confidence, and an awareness of a spiritual dimension whose existence had not been suspected before. In some cases, they led to an interest in spiritual practices and traditions, as a way of attempting to recapture the peace and sense of meaning and connection. For example, Participant 10 reported that, in the 25 years since her turmoil-induced awakening experience, she

had been exploring what it meant and “how I could perhaps go back there.” Chadwick (2010) recalled that although his awakening experience was temporary and faded away:

Nonetheless, to this day I value that positive experience as it enabled me to as if touch something experientially that my cynical, critical, scientific upbringing had always masked and heavily veiled. As decades went by, the experience of that positive permeability helped in my creative work and opened up for me the world of art and spirituality. Even my sexual life was enriched by it. The experience therefore helped kindle flames within that could not have been conducive in any other way. (p. 68)

One might say that these individuals experienced a secondary shift. Whereas the primary shift—into a new psychological structure or self-system, with a new sense of identity—is like moving to a completely new building, this secondary shift is akin to making changes to (e.g., perhaps renovating or decorating) the existing building. As Huxley (1988) put it, writing of psychedelic awakening experiences, “the man who comes back through the Door in the Wall will never be quite the same as the man who went out” (p. 64). Awakening experiences have a revelatory quality which permanently alters the individual’s outlook and values.

**Why is Psychological Turmoil
so Strongly Associated
with Awakening Experiences?**

Some researchers have questioned whether post-traumatic growth truly exists. Taylor (1983) as well as Taylor and Brown (1988) suggested that what individuals interpret as post-traumatic growth may in fact be a form of positive illusion. Self-deceptive strategies can be used to deal with negative information, including loss and death, together with an unreal sense of limited control of an unpredictable world, and a bleak future. It has also been suggested that post-traumatic growth may be a response to cognitive dissonance, a strategy to shield the individual from confusion and turmoil. Experiences are rationalized in a positive way—ignoring negative aspects—so that psychological equilibrium can be maintained. For example, if a person suffers from bereavement or is diagnosed with a serious illness, they may create positive illusions that they have benefited from the experience. They may even tell themselves that there is a purpose to their suffering, refusing to accept

the random nature of events (Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011). If this applies to post-traumatic growth, it could also apply to turmoil-induced awakening experiences, as well as to instances of permanent transformation triggered by intense psychological turmoil. Of course, there are strong similarities here with the process of narrative construction as previously outlined.

A similar reductionist way of explaining both permanent SITEs and temporary turmoil-induced awakening experiences would be to interpret them as a psychological defense mechanism. One might argue that, unable to cope with the turmoil and trauma facing them, the individuals created a delusory alternate reality, the polar opposite to their harsh reality, in order to alleviate their suffering (temporarily—with awakening experiences—or on an ongoing basis—with SITEs). This might be seen a similar process to the development of dissociative personality disorder, which is also often a reaction to stress and turmoil (Pearson, 1997).

However, it is unlikely that a state of self-deception would feature the same higher-functioning features as awakening experiences. Individuals reported a more intense awareness of their surroundings, a sense of revelation and freedom from psychological discord (e.g., worry, anxiety, and constant thought-chatter), a greater sense of clarity, and an increased sense of connection. A state of regression or delusion would presumably involve impairment, such as a loss of abilities and a deterioration of functions, rather than an enhancement. This suggests that these experiences are not ones of regression but *progression*.

The revelatory nature of awakening experiences is especially important here. Individuals feel strongly that they are encountering reality more directly and intensely, rather than evading it. As has been shown here, this revelatory quality may be so powerful that individuals still feel strongly affected years or decades later. One person recalled a powerful awakening experience he had 40 years ago while meditating: “That tiny glimpse of my potential as a human being has had a huge impact on my life and work” (Taylor, 2010, p. 41). This is a good example of what William James (1985) referred to as the noetic quality of mystical experiences:

[Mystical experiences] are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance . . . as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time. (p. 380)

Detachment and Energy

If one assumes that these experiences are not the result of self-deception, how should they be interpreted? Deikman (1966) suggested that mystical or spiritual experiences were related to a de-automatization of perception. They occur when “hierarchically ordered structures that ordinarily conserve attentional energy for maximum efficiency in achieving the basic goods of survival . . . are set aside or break down, in favour of alternate modes of consciousness” (p. 336). As he saw it, the quieting of mental activity through meditation creates a surplus of attentional energy (or psychic energy, as Deikman also called it), which means that there is no need for these structures to conserve energy anymore. As a result the individual’s perceptions become de-automatized, and he/she develops an intensified awareness of the phenomenal world. Also using the term psychic energy, Novak (1996) similarly noted 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 he or 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 that they normally monopolize. As a result, “energy formerly bound in emotive spasms, ego defense, fantasy and fear can appear as the delight of present-centredness” (p. 276).

In Taylor (2005, 2010, 2012b), a similar connection was made between awakening experiences and energy. This partly relates to the distinction Fischer (1971) made between ergotropic higher states of consciousness—that is, high arousal, active, or ecstatic awakening experiences—and trophotropic higher states—that is, low arousal passive and serene experiences. High arousal states are associated with triggers such as drugs, dancing, fasting, and breath-control, whereas low arousal states are associated with triggers such as meditation and relaxation. High arousal experiences may be due to homeostasis-disruption, when the normal physiological balance of brain and body is disrupted. This may be why, throughout history, religious adepts and spiritual seekers have attempted to induce awakening experiences by fasting, going without sleep, dancing frenziedly, doing breathing exercises, and taking psychedelic drugs. These activities disrupt the normal physiology, changing 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—or simply with the conscious intent of an awakening experience—there is a possibility that an awakening experience may result (Taylor, 2005, 2010, 2012b). Low arousal higher states of consciousness may occur when psychic energy becomes intensified and (usually) stilled, when the individual ceases to expend a great deal of energy through concentration, cognition, or perception. The energy previously monopolized by such functions is retained. At the same time, psychic energy often becomes stilled, in the sense that there are fewer thoughts, perceptions, and items of information passing through consciousness.

In Taylor (2012b) the most frequent triggers of awakening experiences after psychological turmoil were found to be nature (18%), meditation (13%), and watching or listening to an arts performance (13%). Natural surroundings often have a relaxing, mind-quietening effect, which is possibly why research has shown that contact with nature can have a powerful therapeutic effect, as beneficial as psychotherapy or psychiatric drugs (Pretty et al., 2007). In meditation, the individual reduces their exposure to sensory impressions and information by closing their eyes, sitting quietly, and removing themselves from activity. Then they consciously attempt—at least in some varieties of meditation—to slow down or reduce the associational thought-chatter of the mind by focusing their attention on a particular point. As a result, at least in a successful meditation practice, psychic energy becomes intensified and stilled. Awakening experiences induced by watching or listening to an arts performance can be explained in a similar way. An arts performance may have a similar effect to a mantra in meditation, acting as a focus for attention, enabling associational thought-chatter to slow down and fade away, so that the mind becomes quieter and emptier. (Part of the appeal of music and other forms of performance may be because of this meditative mind-emptying effect.)

At first sight, turmoil-induced awakening experiences may not seem to be explicable in these energetic terms. After all, states of psychological turmoil appear to be the polar opposite of the relaxed and serene states just described. They are states of intense emotional and psychological *disturbance*, not stillness. However, there may be a less direct connection between energy and turmoil-induced awakening experiences. This is related

to the explanation for permanent SITEs suggested above: The dissolution of psychological attachments (such as hopes, beliefs, roles, attachment to possessions, status, and achievements) leading to a dismantling of the self-system as a whole (since these attachments are the scaffolding which support the system.)

There may also be a connection with energy here. Both Freud and Jung developed concepts of psychic energy, which could be conserved or expended by psychological functions and structures. Jung (1928/1988) believed that psychic energy was expended through the expression of instincts and desires, by the act of attending to stimuli or information, and through mental concepts such as attitudes and beliefs. Using the term libido for psychic energy, Freud (1923/1962) suggested that one of the problems with neuroses is the large amount of energy which is needed to keep them repressed. In a similar way, psychological attachments can be seen as having an energy-consuming effect. On the one hand, they consume energy because they occupy attention and thought. At the same time, they exist as psychological forms within the mind, which are present even if one is not aware of them at a particular moment. Together these forms constitute a whole network of attachment, and as a structure this network needs a continual input of energy to maintain itself, in the same way that there has to be a continual input of energy to maintain the physical structure of the body. And so when attachments dissolve, the psychic energy they were using is freed up (using Novak's [1997] phrase), generating a high inner concentration of energy.

It is true that turmoil-induced awakening experiences are not—unlike other types of awakening experiences—related to stillness. However, the connection between awakening experiences and inner stillness exists because, under normal circumstances, consciousness inevitably becomes emptier and more still as mental energy is conserved. A lower level of cognitive activity and information processing brings *both* an intensification of energy and increased stillness. The intensification of energy stems *from* the increased stillness. However, in turmoil-induced awakening experiences, there is a sudden surge of energy from another source—not the energy that was bound up with cognitive activity, but that which was bound up with psychological attachments—and so it is not necessary for psychic energy to be conserved.

This explanation is only suggested tentatively.

Some readers may not even accept the existence of the phenomenon of psychic energy (see Taylor, 2010, for a longer discussion—and defense—of this concept). However, the great potential of psychological turmoil to induce awakening experiences—or to use alternate phrasing, the preliminary evidence that a high number of awakening experiences may be induced by turmoil—certainly merits attention, and it is hoped that this paper will stimulate further discussion of this topic. For example, further research might help to clarify why certain incidences of psychological turmoil appear to trigger awakening experiences, while the vast majority of incidences clearly do not. Are there certain circumstances or conditions which make turmoil-induced awakening experiences more likely to occur? Are there certain individuals who are more likely to experience them?

Although he was aware of the significance of nadir experiences, Maslow (1959) also suggested that peak experiences are positively associated with individuals who are balanced, creative, and psychologically healthy. These findings suggest that the opposite can be the case—that intense psychological turmoil is the most powerful and frequent trigger of awakening experiences. Perhaps this only seems a paradox because it is more customary to thinking in terms of opposites, and perhaps, also, this can be seen as an example of integration and wisdom, which arises when duality is transcended.

References

- Allen, G. O. (1999). *It's not a cold: From cancer person to cancer survivor, the process of living with cancer* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from Dissertation Abstracts International, 59(7-A). (UMI No. 9900372)
- Brennan, J. (2001). Adjustment to cancer—coping or personal transition? *Psycho-Oncology*, 10(1), 1-18. doi: 10.1002/1099-1611(200101/02)10:1%3C1::AID-PON484%3E3.3.CO;2-K
- Bruner, J. S. (1991). The narrative construction of reality. *Critical Inquiry*, 18(1), 1-21. doi:10.1086/448619
- Chadwick, P. (2010). On not drinking soup with a fork. In I. Clarke (Ed.), *Psychosis and spirituality: Consolidating the new paradigm* (pp. 65-73). Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Cryder, C. H., Kilmer, R. P., Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (2006). An exploratory study of posttraumatic growth in children following a natural disaster. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 76(1), 65-69. doi:10.1037/0002-9432.76.1.65
- Deikman, A. (1966). De-automatization and the mystic experience. *Psychiatry*, 29, 324-338.
- DeMares, R., & Krycka, K. (1998). Wild animal triggered peak experiences: Transpersonal aspects. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 30(2), 161-177.
- Fischer, R. (1971). A cartography of the ecstatic and meditative states. *Science*, 174(4012), 897-904. doi:10.1126/science.174.4012.897
- Fosse, M. J. (2005). *Posttraumatic growth: The transformative potential of cancer*. Dissertation Abstracts International: Section B: The Sciences and Engineering, 66(3-B).
- Fox, R. J. (1997). Women, nature and spirituality: A qualitative study exploring women's wilderness experience. In D. Rowe & P. Brown (Eds.), *Proceedings, ANZALS Conference* (pp. 59-64). Newcastle, NSW: Australian and New Zealand Association for Leisure Studies the University of Newcastle.
- Fredrickson, L., & Anderson, D. (1999). A qualitative exploration of the wilderness experience as a source of spiritual inspiration. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 19(1), 21-29. doi:10.1006/jev.1998.0110
- Freud, S. (1962). *The ego and the id*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton. (Original work published 1923)
- Grof, S. (2000). *The psychology of the future*. Albany, NY: New York Press.
- Happold, F. C. (1986). *Mysticism*. London, UK: Pelican.
- Hardy, A. (1979). *The spiritual nature of man*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.
- Hefferon, K., & Boniwell, I. (2011). *Positive psychology: Theory, research and applications*. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.
- Hoffman, E. (1992). *Visions of innocence*. Boston, MA: Shambhala.
- Hoffman, E., & Ortiz, F. (2009). Youthful peak-experiences in cross-cultural perspective: Implications for educators and counselors. In L. Francis, D. M. de Souza, & J. Norman (Eds.), *The international handbook of education for spirituality, care and well-being* (pp. 469-490). New York, NY: Springer.
- Huxley, A. (1988). *The doors of perception: Heaven and hell*. London, UK: Penguin.
- James, W. (1985). *The varieties of religious experience*. London, UK: Penguin. (Original work published 1902)
- Janoff-Bulman, R. (1992). *Shattered assumptions: Toward a new psychology of trauma*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Johnson, R. C. (1960). *Watcher on the hills*. New York, NY: Harper.
- Jung, C. G. (1928/1988). *On the nature of the psyche*. London, UK: Arkana.
- Kastner, R. S. (1998). Beyond breast cancer survival: The meaning of thriving. *Dissertation Abstracts International: Section B: The Sciences and Engineering*, 59 (5-B).
- Maslow, A. (1959). Cognition of being in peak experiences. *Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 94(1), 43-66. doi:10.1080/00221325.1959.10532434
- Maslow, A. (1964). *Religion, values and peak experiences*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press.
- Mathieson, C. M., & Stam, H. J. (1995). Renegotiating identity: Cancer narratives. *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 17(3), 283-306. doi:10.1111/1467-9566.ep10933316
- McAdams, D. P. (1993). *The stories we live by*. New York, NY: William Morrow.
- McBurney, D. H. (1994). *Research Methods*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Miller, W., & C'de Baca, J. (2001) *Quantum change*. New York, NY: Guilford.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). Phenomenological research methods. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Murphy, M., & White, R. A. (1995). *In the zone: Transcendent experience in sports*. London, UK: Arkana.
- Neal, J., Lichtenstein, B., & Banner, D. (1999). Spiritual perspectives on individual, organisational and societal transformation. *Journal of Organisational Change Management*, 12(3), 175-185. doi:10.1108/09534819910273757
- Novak, P. (1997). Buddhist meditation and the consciousness of time. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 3(3), 267-277.
- Parry, J., Nesti, M., Robinson, S., & Watson, N. (2007). *Sport and spirituality: An introduction*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Pearson, M. L. (1997). Childhood trauma, adult trauma and dissociation. *Dissociation*, 10(1), 58-62.
- Pretty, J., Peacock, J., Hine, R., Sellens, M., South, N., & Griffin, M. (2007). Green exercise in the UK countryside: Effects on health and psychological well-being, and implications for policy and planning. *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*, 50(2), 211-231. doi:10.1080/09640560601156466

- Sarbin, T. R. (Ed.). (1986). *Narrative psychology: The storied nature of human conduct*. New York, NY: Praeger.
- Sheikh, A. I., & Marotta, S. A. (2005). A cross-validation study of the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory. *Measurement and Evaluation in Counseling and Development, 38*(2), 66-77.
- Smith, S. G., & Cook, S. L. (2004) Are reports of post-traumatic growth positively biased? *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 17*(4), 353-358.
- Sodergren, S. C., & Hyland, M. E. (2000). What are the positive consequences of illness? *Psychology and Health, 15*(1), 85-97. doi: 10.1080/08870440008400290
- Sodergren, S. C., Hyland, M. E., Crawford, A., & Partridge, M. R. (2004). Positivity in illness: Self-delusion or existential growth? *British Journal of Health Psychology, 9*(2), 163-174. doi:10.1348/135910704773891023
- Stanton, A. L., Bower, J. E., & Low, C. A. (2006). Posttraumatic growth after cancer. In L. G. Calhoun & R. G. Tedeschi (Eds.), *Handbook of posttraumatic growth: Research and practice* (pp. 138-175). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Stringer, L. A., & McAvoy, L. H. (1992). The need for something different: Spirituality and the wilderness adventure. *Journal of Experiential Education, 15*(1), 13-21. doi:10.1177/105382599201500103
- Taylor, B. (2007). Surfing into spirituality and a new, aquatic nature religion. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 75*(4), 923-951. doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfm067
- Taylor, S. (2005). The sources of higher states of consciousness. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies, 23*, 48-60.
- Taylor, S. (2010). *Waking from sleep: The sources of awakening experiences and how to make them permanent*. London, UK: Hay House.
- Taylor, S. (2011). *Out of the darkness: From turmoil to transformation*. London, UK: Hay House.
- Taylor, S. (2012a). Transformation through suffering: A study of individuals who have experienced positive psychological transformation following periods of intense turmoil and trauma. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 52*, 30-52.
- Taylor, S. (2012b). Spontaneous awakening experiences: Exploring the phenomenon beyond religion and spirituality. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology, 44*(1), 73-91.
- Taylor, S. E., & Brown, J. (1988). Illusion and well-being: A social psychological perspective on mental health. *Psychological Bulletin, 103*(2), 193-210. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.103.2.193
- Taylor, S. E. (1983). Adjustment to threatening events: A theory of cognitive adaptation. *American Psychologist, 38*(11), 1161-1173. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.38.11.1161
- Tedeschi, R., & Calhoun, L. (1998). *Posttraumatic growth: Positive changes in the aftermath of crisis*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Underhill, E. (1911/1960). *Mysticism*. London, UK: Methuen.
- Wade, J. (2000). Mapping the course of heavenly bodies: The varieties of transcendent sexual experiences. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology, 32*, 103-122.
- Wade, J. (2004). *Transcendent sex: When lovemaking opens the veil*. New York, NY: Paraview Pocket Books.
- Washburn, M. (1998). Psychic energy, libido and spirit: Three energies or one? *Personal Transformation, 31*, 62-67.
- White, R., & Brown, S. (2013). Triggers of potential exceptional human experiences. Retrieved from: <http://www.ehe.org/display/ehe-pageab52.html?ID=72>

About the Author

Steve Taylor, PhD, is a senior lecturer in psychology at Leeds Metropolitan University. He also teaches on the MSc in Consciousness, Spirituality and Transpersonal Psychology distance-learning course, through the University of Middlesex. His previous papers have been published in the Journal of Transpersonal Psychology, the Journal of Humanistic Psychology, the Journal of Consciousness Studies and the Transpersonal Psychology Review. Two of his previous papers have appeared in this journal (Vol. 22, 2003 & Vol. 24, 2005). He is the author of several books, including *The Fall*, *Waking From Sleep*, *Out of the Darkness*, and *Back to Sanity*. He is also a poet, and the author of a volume of poems, *The Meaning*. Website: www.stevenmtaylor.com

About the Journal

The *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* is a peer-reviewed academic journal in print since 1981. It is published by Floragades Foundation, and serves as the official publication of the International Transpersonal Association. The journal is available online at www.transpersonalstudies.org, and in print through www.lulu.com (search for IJTS).