



Spiritual Alchemy: When Trauma and Turmoil Lead to Spiritual Awakening

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Here Steve explores the nature of spiritual experiences, following on the work of Sir Alister Hardy and others. He concludes that we don't have to suffer in order to have spiritual experiences or become enlightened and that there is a 'middle way' between extreme suffering and a life of attachment. He recommends that we 'should try to make sure that we're always partly rooted inside ourselves, so that we never give ourselves completely away to the world.'

Spiritual experiences are overwhelmingly positive experiences. They are experiences of rapture, in which we perceive reality at a heightened intensity, feel a powerful sense of inner well-being, experience a sense of oneness with our surroundings and become aware of a force of benevolence and harmony which pervades the cosmos. When the experience is especially intense, the whole phenomenal world may dissolve into an ocean of blissful spiritual radiance, which we realise is the ground of all reality, the source from which the phenomenal world has arisen, and the real nature of our being.

It seems almost paradoxical, then, that these experiences are frequently induced by states of intense despair, depression, or mental turmoil. Many Network readers will be familiar with the work of Alister Hardy, who established the Religious Experience Research Unit at Oxford University in 1969 (now based at the University of Lampeter in Wales). When Hardy analysed the triggers of spiritual or religious experiences, he found that the most common trigger of them was 'depression and despair.' 18% of the experiences were apparently triggered by this, compared to 13% by prayer or meditation and 12% by natural beauty. Here is a typical report of such an experience collected by the unit:

I was going through a period of doubt and disillusion with life and torn by conflict...Quite suddenly I felt lifted beyond all the turmoil and conflict. There was no visual image and I knew I was sitting on a bench in the park, but I felt as if I was lifted above the world and looking down on it. The disillusion and cynicism were gone, and I felt compassion suffusing my whole being, compassion for all people on earth. I was possessed by a peace that I have never felt before or since ¹.

Over the last few years I have been collecting reports of spiritual experiences (or awakening experiences, as I prefer to call them), and have also found that many of them were triggered by trauma and turmoil. For example, several years ago, a colleague of mine went through a long period of inner turmoil due to confusion about his sexuality, which led to the breakdown of his marriage. This triggered the following experience, which occurred during his last family holiday:

There were quite a few people around but it was as if everyone else disappeared. Everything just ceased to be. I lost all sense of time. I lost myself. I had a feeling of being totally at one with nature, with a massive sense of peace. I was a part of the scene. There was no 'me' anymore. I was just sitting there watching the sun set over the desert, aware of the enormity of life, the power of nature, and I never wanted it to end.

Permanent Transformation

As well as one of the most common, these states of turmoil may be the most powerful trigger of awakening experiences, in the sense that the experiences they give rise to are usually of a very intense kind. The experiences are sometimes so powerful that they lead to permanent change of being, and even a permanent state of enlightenment.

A recent student of mine – a senior lady – told me how, 30 years ago, she was in a very distraught state due to the breakdown of her marriage. As a church-going Christian, she felt that she had let herself – and God – down badly, and felt extremely guilty. She rang the rector of her local church to ask for help and he told her, 'You are claiming your rights!' She was not quite sure what he meant, but suddenly her guilt and pain dissolved away and she had a powerful mystical experience which is still very vivid: '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 silence between me and the rector but I felt that 'He' [God] was there.' She feels that this experience changed her permanently, that she has never been the same person since. As she describes it, 'A change had taken place in me. I was on a high – which has lasted – the honeymoon stage gradually faded – *but I was no longer the person I was.* That person is still within me and carries me through life with a wisdom which still surprises me.' (Her italics)

As a part of my research for a new book, I have found many examples of this permanent transformation: an alcoholic who reached 'rock bottom' and lost everything but then became liberated; a woman who has lived in a

state of wakefulness ever since being told she had breast cancer; and a man who became paralysed after falling from a bridge onto a river bed, who struggled for months with pain and despair, then underwent a spiritual rebirth and now lives in a state of permanent bliss.

It's also very significant that many great spiritual teachers or gurus have found enlightenment after intense periods of mental torment. The most enlightened person I know personally is an 87 year-old spiritual teacher called Russel Williams, who has been the president of the Manchester Buddhist Society for over half a century. Russel had his first major enlightenment experience as a young man, after a long period of frustration. As he describes it:

I was in a state of desperation, very annoyed with myself. There was something I knew that I knew but couldn't get access to. There was something inside me that had to come out but wouldn't. I was pushing it further and further away.

Eventually I was so desperate I shouted out 'somebody help me!' Somebody dropped a blanket over me and I've never known such peace in all my life. It lasted three days. I was a completely different person inside. There was a sense of freedom and peace. And that freedom and peace have continued inside me right until now.

The contemporary spiritual teacher and author Eckhart Tolle had a similar awakening experience. He writes that until his thirtieth year he 'lived in an almost continuous anxiety interspersed with periods of suicidal depression.' One night he woke up with 'a feeling of absolute dread' inside him and felt a strong desire to kill himself. This triggered a powerful spiritual experience, in which he was 'drawn into what seemed like a vortex of energy,' and which led to a state of enlightenment:

Everything was fresh and pristine, as if it had just come into existence. I picked up things, a pencil, an empty bottle, marvelling at the beauty and aliveness of it all.

The next day I walked around the city in utter amazement at the miracles of life on earth, as if I had just been born into this world. ²



Ecstasy of Saint Teresa by Bernini

The Sources of Spiritual Experiences

In order to understand these experiences, we need to understand how spiritual experiences are caused. In my view, there are two basic sources of them, which produce two fundamentally different types of experience.

The first are wild, ecstatic experiences caused by a disruption of the homeostasis of the human organism. These can occur as a result of fasting, sleep deprivation, drugs, breathing exercises, pain, dancing, and so on. All of these activities can put us 'out of homeostasis' – by changing our body temperature, blood pressure or metabolic rate, causing dehydration and exhaustion or chemical changes – and when this happens there's a chance that we'll experience a higher state of consciousness. (Although this certainly doesn't always happen, of course. Most of the time the only effect that depriving yourself of sleep and food often has is to make you feel miserably tired and hungry.)

The second type of spiritual experiences are more serene and calm states which occur when there is an intensification and stillness of life-energy inside us. This can happen in any situation when we're very relaxed, when there's peacefulness around us, and when the mental chatter inside our heads fades away. In meditation, we make a conscious effort to intensify and still our life-energy by being inactive, by withdrawing our attention from the world around us, and by focusing on a mantra (or a candle flame or on our breathing or any other object) to slow down and quieten our mental chatter. As a result, meditation is probably the most effective way of generating spiritual experiences.

However, the experiences can also happen more spontaneously – in natural surroundings, for example, when there's peacefulness around you and the beauty of nature has a similar effect to a mantra in meditation, focusing your attention and quietening your mental chatter. They often occur when people are listening to music or contemplating works of art. Certain sports are also very conducive to spiritual experiences, such as long-distance running or swimming. This is also probably part of the reason why spiritual experiences can occur during or after sex. The sheer pleasure of sex can have the effect of shifting our attention away from our ego-minds, which may fall silent as a result.

In my view, spiritual experiences induced by despair or mental turmoil belong to this second type. Perhaps the key to understanding the experiences is the concept of attachment. Normally, as human beings we are psychologically attached to a large number of constructs, such as hopes and ambitions for the future, beliefs and ideas concerning life and the world, the knowledge we have accumulated, and our image of ourselves, including our sense of status, our appearance and accomplishments and achievements. These are accoutrements which become attached to the sense of self but which are not actually a part of our true nature. At the same time, there are more tangible attachments, such as possessions, jobs, and other human beings whose approval and attention we might crave. These are the building blocks of the ego. We feel that we are 'someone' because we have hopes, beliefs, status, a job and possessions and because other people give us approval.

However, in states of despair and depression all of – or at least some of – these psychological attachments are broken. This is the very reason why you are in despair: because the constructs you've been depending for your well-being have been removed; the 'scaffolding' which supported your sense of identity has fallen away. Hopes and beliefs are revealed as illusions; your possessions and status have

been taken away, your friends or lovers have rejected you. As a result, you feel naked and lost, as if your identity has been destroyed. But at this very point you are, paradoxically, close to a state of liberation. You are in a state of detachment. Your Self has been released from external constructs. In an instant, therefore, the pain of despair and desolation can switch into a state of freedom and joy.

This is close to the interpretation which Russel Williams and Eckhart Tolle have given of their awakening experiences. According to Russel, his enlightenment experience was a matter of 'letting go of everything which I thought was me. The frustration was so much that my old self has to give way.' While according to Eckhart Tolle, his experience was 'a death of the sense of self which lived through identifications, identifications with my story, things around me in the world. Something arose at that moment that was a sense of deep and intense stillness and aliveness, beingness.'³ In other words, both of these teachers see their enlightenment experiences in terms of detachment.

This may be why some severe alcoholics and other addicts have powerful awakening experiences when their addiction has destroyed their lives and they can no longer sustain themselves with hopes or illusions. One of the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous, Bill Wilson, had this experience, when he was lying in hospital after a drinking binge, in a state of mental and physical collapse. According to his biographer, 'there was nothing ahead but death or madness. This was the finish, the jumping off place.' But then, in Wilson's own words

Suddenly, my room blazed with an indescribably white light. I was seized with an ecstasy beyond description...A wind, not of air, but of spirit [blew through me]. In great, clean strength it blew right through me. Then came the blazing thought, 'You are a free man.'...A great peace stole over me and...I became acutely conscious of a presence which seemed like a veritable sea of living spirit. I lay on the shores of a new world.⁴

Wilson's attachments had been destroyed by his addiction. Every external kind of support – relationships, status, hopes and illusions – had dissolved away, so that he was completely desolate and completely free. In the words of Stan Grof, speaking generally of alcoholics and addicts who reach this point, 'the person is left naked, with nothing but the core of his or her being.'⁵

But this may also be, at a deeper level, connected to an intensification of life-energy. Attachments to possessions or to other human beings consume our life-energy. Simply maintaining the attachments uses up life-energy – for example, the constant effort to sustain our wealth and status, to defend our beliefs against other people's, or to keep the approval of others. And in a more subtle way, these attachments exist as 'psychological forms' which are present within our minds even when we aren't aware of them. You can picture them as a whole network of forms which constitute one overall structure of attachment within our psyche. And there has to be a continual expenditure of energy to maintain this structure, in the same way that there has to be a continual input of energy to maintain the physical structure of the body.

As a result, when these attachments dissolve there is a sudden release of a large portion of life-energy. And now that this structure of attachment no longer fills our psyche, there is a sudden new clarity and openness inside us, a new sense of wholeness. Our life-energy becomes intensified and stilled, and therefore we have a powerful spiritual experience.



Encountering Death

This is also why encountering death is such a powerful trigger of spiritual experiences. Like states of despair and depression, facing death may occasionally induce a state of detachment, in which the individual spontaneously releases herself from psychological attachments. The German Zen Buddhist Karlfried von Durckheim experienced this during the First World War, when being surrounded by death made him aware of that there was a part of his being which transcended physical extinction. Later, he collected reports of similar experiences during the Second World War, and found that they were surprisingly common. He found examples amongst soldiers who believed they were about to die on the battlefield, inmates of concentration camps who had lost all hope or survival, and people who were convinced they were about to die in bombing raids.⁶

Such realisations can also occur after a person is diagnosed with a fatal illness, and is told they only have a certain amount of time left to live. Initially he or she experiences feelings of bitterness and despair, which may give way to a sense of serenity and acceptance and a new spiritual perception. When, in 1994, the English playwright Dennis Potter discovered he was dying of prostate cancer he paradoxically became happier and more at peace with the world than he had ever been before, and also developed an intense awareness of the nowness of his experience and the beautiful is-ness of the world. As he said during an interview shortly before he died:

We forget that life can only be defined in the present tense. It is is is. And it is now only...

That nowness becomes so vivid to me that in a perverse sort of way I'm serene. I can celebrate life...The nowness of everything is absolutely wonderful...The fact is that if you see, in the present tense – boy, can you see it; boy, can you celebrate it.⁷

Many people who return from encounters with death – either because a threat passes or they make a miraculous recovery – undergo a permanent spiritual shift. Of course, this is one of the most significant features of near-death experiences. Most of those who undergo the experience gain a new spiritual outlook, becoming less materialistic and egotistical and more compassionate, more concerned with helping and

servicing others than fulfilling their own desires and ambitions. They are no longer afraid of death, they develop either new or intensified religious and spiritual beliefs (though realising the inadequacy of organised religion), and may even develop paranormal abilities. They also report a much greater capacity for joy, and a heightened appreciation of beauty.⁸ These effects may not only be due to the content of the NDE – e.g. the sense of profound well-being, an encounter with a being of light or deceased relatives, or the life-review – but also to a simple and direct encounter with death.

Like intense despair and desolation, imminent death dissolves psychological attachments. If you know you are going to die soon, there can be no more hopes or ambitions for you. Your possessions, your successes, the status and the knowledge you've accumulated can have no more meaning, now that you are going to be separated from them forever. The normal worries and concerns of daily life fade away for you too, as does your attachment to your career and to the people whose approval you sought.

This is why, initially at least, facing death is a painful experience. You are stripped of the externalities which give you your sense of identity, security and well-being. You are literally reduced to nothing. Many people do not move beyond this pain; for them the process of dying is simply a depressing and devastating experience, not redeemed by any sense of joy or meaning. But for some people this state of enforced detachment brings about a shift to a spiritual state. As the attachments dissolve, there is a sudden intensification and stilling of life-energy, enabling the dying person to look at the world with fresh, child-like vision, to experience serenity and peace inside, and to become aware of their essential oneness with the cosmos.

Long Term Spiritual Development

We can look at long term spiritual development in these terms too. Many spiritual teachers have told us that in order to 'find God' or to become one with our true self or with the universe, we have to detach ourselves from possessions, social status and ambitions. Spiritual development means gradually becoming naked, emptying the soul so that the fullness of the spirit can enter. In order to do this, throughout history spiritual seekers have turned away from the everyday world of work and families and chosen to live in the forest, desert or monastery. In all spiritual traditions, adepts are expected to practice 'voluntary poverty', to have a bare minimum of possessions, and to live without any unnecessary comforts and luxuries. They are expected to make spiritual development the only goal of their life, and not to have worldly ambitions for fame, success or power.

We can see this life of renunciation as an attempt to avoid the energy-drainage caused by attachments, so that the seekers could generate a permanently high level of life-energy, and therefore a permanently spiritual state. This underlying purpose of this process of conscious detachment was noted by the scholar of mysticism Evelyn Underhill, who described it as a process of stripping or purging away of those superfluous, unreal, and harmful things which dissipate the precious energies of the self.⁹ The practice of voluntary poverty, for example, can be seen as a method of stopping our life-energy being drained away by possessions. As Meister Eckhart wrote, 'There are men who completely dissipate the powers of the soul in the outward man. These are the people who direct all their aims and intelligence towards transient possessions.'¹⁰ And many mystics and spiritual teachers would say the same of ambitions, relationships and worldly pleasures.

This process of detachment is equivalent to the long periods of suffering and turmoil endured by Eckhart Tolle and Russel Williams before their enlightenment experiences. The only difference is that for them this happened involuntarily, whereas mystics undertake this process consciously. The mystics made themselves suffer, while they simply suffered.

So where does this leave us? Does it mean that we have to suffer in order to have spiritual experiences or become enlightened? Do we have to make our lives as barren and miserable as possible, to renounce the world, take vows of silence and sleep on cold stone floors for years?

Of course not – there is a middle way between this extreme suffering and a life of attachment. As we live our lives, we should try to make sure that we don't become too dependent upon externalities like money, status, hopes, beliefs, our self-image and other people. We should try to make sure that we're always partly rooted inside ourselves, so that we never give ourselves completely away to the world. We should remember that the only true source of well-being lies inside us, and that to attach ourselves to externalities means losing touch with this. Through making a conscious effort to remain self-sufficient and connected to our true selves, our beings will be open and free, and there will always be space for Spirit to flow through.

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