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An Awakening: Have Awakening Experiences been Neglected by Psychology?

Steve Taylor PhD

One of the roles of psychology is to examine different facets of subjective experience, and to investigate their possible causes and effects. When Abraham Maslow formulated his concepts of 'peak experiences' and 'self-actualisation' in the 1950s, he believed that psychology had been 'selling human nature short' by focusing too much on its negative aspects, and ignoring its positive. At the beginning of the 1990s, when American psychologists such as Martin Seligman and Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi initiated the field of Positive Psychology, they made much the same complaint: that there was an imbalance in psychology, and that the discipline needed to focus more on what makes life worth living and what can make human beings flourish, rather than just on investigating and curing mental illness.

After more than two decades, Positive Psychology has brought about a welcome emphasis on positive human experiences. But in my view, there is one type of positive human experience - perhaps the most positive of all - which is not been adequately investigated, even in positive psychology. This is what I refer to as an 'awakening experience.'

In this article, I will discuss some of my research into these experiences, explaining their characteristics and after-effects. Most importantly, I will explain why they are so significant, and why psychology needs to pay more attention to them.

What are Awakening Experiences?

A few years ago, on holiday with my family in Wales, I decided to explore the farmland around our rented bungalow. I climbed over a gate and found myself looking down at a valley, with farmers' fields sloping as far as I could see and hundreds of sheep dotted the hills. After I'd been walking for a few minutes, looking at the fields and the sky, there was a shift in my perception, as if someone had pressed a switch. Everything around me became intensely real. The fields and the bushes and trees and the clouds seemed to be powerfully there, as if an extra dimension had been added to them. They seemed more vivid, more intricate and beautiful. I also felt somehow connected with my surroundings. As I looked up at the sky, I felt somehow the space that fills it was the same 'space' filling my own being. What was inside me, as my own consciousness, was also 'out there.' And also inside me, there was a glow of intense well-being.

This is a fairly typical example of an 'awakening experience.' As a psychologist, I have been studying such experiences for a decade. I have defined the experience as a temporary expansion and intensification of awareness that brings significant perceptual, affective and conceptual changes.

According to my research, the three most common characteristics of the experiences are positive affective states (including a sense of elation or serenity, a lack of fear and anxiety), intensified perception, and a sense of connection (which can be towards other human beings, nature, or the whole universe in general). Other significant characteristics include a sense of love and compassion, altered time perception (which often includes a sense of being intensely present), a sense of a deeper knowing (as if the person is becoming aware of realities that are normally obscure) and a

sense of inner quietness (as if the normal associational chatter of the mind has slowed down or become quiet). There is a strong sense that a person has transcended a limited state and that awareness has become more authentic than normal.

These experiences are sometimes associated with spirituality or religion, where they are typically described as 'spiritual experiences' or 'mystical experiences.' However, I think this is misleading. I prefer to interpret the experiences in a secular context. This is partly due to personal reasons. I am not religious (in fact, I consider myself an atheist). But more significantly, my research has found that by far the majority of awakening experiences do not occur in a religious or spiritual context. For example, in a study of 161 reports of awakening experiences published in *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* (Taylor, 2012a), I found that only 22% occurred in a spiritual context - that is, as a result of spiritual practices such as meditation, reading spiritual literature and prayer or fasting. The great majority of the experiences occurred unexpectedly in everyday settings, to people who knew nothing of spirituality or religion.

As a result, I prefer to use the term awakening experience, rather than 'spiritual experience.' In my view, such experiences have been far too strongly associated with religion and spirituality, which has led to a neglect in their study in mainstream psychology. They should be seen as completely natural experiences that are most likely to occur spontaneously in relation to a wide variety of situations and activities.

Secular Ecstasy and other Concepts

There are some well-established psychological concepts which include some of the characteristics of awakening experiences. For instance, there are certainly clear similarities with what Maslow called 'peak experiences.' However, the 'peak experience' is a very wide-ranging concept which includes awakening experiences but embraces a host of other types of experience. Maslow referred to peak experiences generally as 'moments of highest happiness and fulfilment' and gave examples such as 'being in love...listening to music or suddenly "being hit" by a book or painting, or from some creative moment' (Maslow, 1962, p. 67).

Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi's (1992) concept of 'flow' also has some superficial similarities with awakening experiences. Both are states of intense well-being and connection, in which one loses one's sense of being a separate self. However, there are also significant differences. For example, unlike flow, awakening experiences usually aren't related to states of absorption; in them, attention is usually very open and wide-ranging rather than intently focused on a particular activity or task. The concept of 'awe' is related to awakening experiences too. As studied by psychologists such as Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt, awe refers to an experience of 'deep appreciative wonder' at the 'immensity, beauty and complexity of a phenomenon that takes on universal significance e.g. through art, nature, human excellence' (Haidt, 2002, p. 864). However, although awakening experiences may sometimes feature awe, they are really a much broader phenomenon with a much wider range of characteristics. Awe can also potentially include characteristics of confusion, fear and dread which are absent from awakening experiences.

In other words, flow and awe are not equivalent to awakening experiences - they simply share a small number of the same characteristics. You could compare it to negative psychological

experiences such as episodes of depression or panic attacks, which share some of the same characteristics, but are essentially different. I believe strongly that, despite touching on elements of them, psychology has neglected the study of awakening experiences as a category in themselves.

In fact, one of the most significant studies of awakening experiences have come from outside psychology. In 1961 - coincidentally, at around the same time that Maslow was formulating his concept of the peak experience - the English author and broadcaster Marghanita Laski researched the concept of 'ecstasy' in a non-religious context. She showed that such experiences could readily arise from secular activities such as enjoying natural scenes or works of art (Laski, 1961). In 2014, Rory McBride (2014) discussed Laski's work in the pages of this journal, highlighting characteristics such as 'intense joyful sensations,' 'feelings of unity and oneness,' and 'a sense of profundity and release from mundane reality' (p. 168). It is easy to see from these characteristics that the concept of 'secular ecstasy' is very close to that of an 'awakening experience.' Like me, McBride voiced concern that these experiences have been researched so little within psychology.

The Triggers of Awakening Experiences

At this point, let me describe some of the most important findings from my own research. This has included two general studies of reports of awakening experiences (Taylor, 2012a, Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017) and a study of transformational experiences related to psychological turmoil (Taylor, 2011, 2012b).

My research has found that there are three contexts that consistently show up as major triggers of awakening experiences, as well as a host of less significant ones. The most common trigger of awakening experiences is one that may initially seem puzzling. I have found that around a third of awakening experiences occur in situations of stress, depression and loss. For example, a man described how he went through a long period of inner turmoil due to confusion about his sexuality, which led to the breakdown of his marriage. But in the midst of this turmoil, he had an awakening experience in which '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' (in Taylor, 2012, p. 86). A woman described how she was devastated by the end of a seven year relationship, 'facing a suffering that I didn't imagine could possibly exist.' However, in the midst of this suffering, she 'began to experience a clearness and connection with everything that existed...I was in a state of such pure happiness and acceptance, that I was no longer afraid of anything. Out of that depth arose such a compassion and connection to everything that surrounded me' (in Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017, p.61).

The second major trigger of awakening experiences identified by my research is contact with nature. Around a quarter of the experiences take place in natural surroundings, apparently induced by the beauty and stillness of nature. People reported awakening experiences that occurred while they walking in the countryside, swimming in lakes, or gazing at beautiful flowers or sunsets. For example, one woman reported an awakening experience that occurred when she was swimming in a lake, when she 'felt completely alone, but part of everything. I felt at peace...All my troubles disappeared and I felt in harmony with nature. It only lasted a few minutes but I remember a sense

of calmness and stillness and it soothes me now' (Taylor, 2012a, p.77). These are the type of experiences that were often described by romantic poets such as William Wordsworth and Percy Shelley.

The third most significant trigger of awakening experiences according to my research - with a similar frequency to contact with nature - is spiritual practice. This primarily means meditation, but also includes prayer and psycho-physical practices such as yoga or tai chi. The relaxing, mind-quietening effect of these practices seems to facilitate awakening experiences. It is important to point out that, even here, there may not be a connection with religion. With the exception of awakening experiences associated with prayer, those who reported these experiences did not follow a conventional religious path. They belonged to the category of 'spiritual, not religious', and were following certain practices because of their beneficial effect, rather than through a religious conviction.

After these three triggers, there are several slightly less significant ones, including watching or listening to an arts performance, reading (particularly spiritual literature), participating in a creative performance (such as dancing or playing music), love and sex. Only a small number of sexual awakening experiences were reported, but it is possible that participants were reluctant to divulge such intimate experiences, so that in reality the frequency of such experiences may be higher.

The After-Effects of Awakening Experiences

One of the most significant things about awakening experiences is their after-effects. Even though they are typically of a very short duration - from a few moments to a few hours - they frequently have a life-changing effect.

Many people described an awakening experience as the most significant moment of their lives, reporting a major change in their perspective on life, and in their values. In our 2017 study of 90 awakening experiences, the most significant after-effect was a greater sense of trust, confidence and optimism. For example, one person reported that 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' (Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017, p.56). Another person reported that, 'To know that it's there (or here, I should say) is a great liberation' (ibid., p.55).

One person had a powerful awakening experience while suffering from intense depression during which she 'felt the most intense love and peace and knew that all was well' (in Taylor, 2011, p. 4) The experience only lasted for a few minutes, but in its aftermath she found that the feeling of dread had disappeared from her stomach, and she felt able to cope again, which led to a new, positive phase in her life. As she described it, 'I looked around and thought about all the good things in my life and the future. I felt more positive and resilient' (ibid.).

Such changes in attitude sometimes led to significant lifestyle changes, such as new interests, new relationships and a new career. Speaking of the peak experience, Abraham Maslow wrote that 'My feeling is that if it were never to happen again, the power of the experience would permanently affect the attitude toward life' (Maslow, 1994, p.75). And this certainly applies to awakening experiences too.

However, in a small number of cases, there were negative after-effects. After the exhilaration of their awakening experience, some people came back down to earth with a bump. They found

everyday life dreary, and felt frustrated to be immersed in their normal routines and responsibilities again. As one person stated, 'I feel myself being buckled down by the hustle and bustle of everyday life' (Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017, p.56).

The Causes of Awakening Experiences

It might be tempting to explain awakening experiences in terms of unusual neurological functioning. Perhaps they are related to unusual levels of activity (or lack of activity) in certain parts of the brain. For example, neuroscientists such as Michael Persinger and V.S. Ramachandran have suggested that spiritual experiences are the result of stimulation of the temporal lobes. Persinger (1983) has even claimed to induce mystical experiences with a 'helmet' – popularly referred to as the 'God helmet' – which stimulates the temporal lobes with magnetic fields. Another theory, put forward by Newberg and d'Aquili, is that mystical experiences of oneness arise when the part of our brain responsible for our awareness of boundaries (the superior posterior parietal cortex) is less active than normal. (In fairness, the authors don't actually say that the state actually cause spiritual experiences, just that they correlate with them, although others have interpreted his theories in this way.)

However, these theories are very speculative, to say the least. In these pages six years ago (in an article entitled 'Neuroscience for the Soul') Craig Aaen-Stockdale (2012) provided an overview of the research that relates spiritual or religious experiences to brain activity, and found numerous flaws, particularly a lack of control groups and successful replication. As he concluded, 'Sceptics are, in my opinion, far too quick to claim that God is "all in the brain" (usually the temporal lobe) when in fact the evidence base is disturbingly weak' (2012, p. 523) While a small number of temporal lobe patients may have spiritual-type experiences, they are more likely to experience feelings of anxiety and disorientation. In fact, some studies have suggested that temporal lobe patients are actually less likely to have religious or spiritual experiences than others. At the same time, Newberg and D'Aquili's claim that spatial awareness is associated with the posterior parietal cortex is disputed by other neuroscientists, who generally associate this with the temporal lobe (Karnath et al., 2001).

In a more general sense, such neurological explanations suffer from a simplistic assumption that conscious experience is directly produced by brain activity. This assumption may seem logical, but there is no viable explanation of how the soggy grey matter of the brain could give rise to the richness and variety of conscious experience. In the field of Consciousness Studies, this is referred to as the 'hard problem' (Chalmers, 1996). According to the philosopher Colin McGinn (1993) to assume that conscious experience is produced by brain activity is like saying that 'numbers emerge from biscuits or ethics from rhubarb' (p.60).

This doesn't mean that there are no neurological correlations with awakening experiences. They may well exist, but as no more than correlations. At the same time, it is difficult to see how the correlations could be discovered, since awakening experiences almost always occur unintentionally, and so there is little possibility of producing them in brain-imaging labs.

In my view, there is probably no need to resort to simplistic neurological explanations of awakening experiences, since they can be largely explained in psychological terms. A significant number of awakening experiences are related to states of relaxation and mental quietness. This is

certainly true of meditation, and also of contact with nature, watching arts performances and participating in creative activities.

Consider what happens when a person sits down to meditate, for example. They purposely remove themselves from activity and external stimuli, and then attempt to quieten their mental chatter by focusing their attention on a specific object, such as a mantra, their breathing or a candle flame. As a result, mental energy is no longer expended to the same degree as normal, and begins to intensify inside them. This may explain the heightened awareness that awakening experiences feature. The American psychologist Arthur Deikman - who was perhaps the first person to study the psychological effects of meditation - referred to a process of 'de-automatization of perception' (Deikman, 1963). Perceptual processes that normally function to save attentional energy (by automatising the perception of familiar phenomena) no longer function, because of the increased mental energy. As a result, our surroundings become more real and vivid.

A similar process may happen when a person is in natural surroundings. Natural scenery may have a similar effect to meditation, in providing a focus for a person's mind, and a retreat from being busy and bombarded with stimuli. This may lead to a similar build up of mental energy and also the same de-automatisation of perception. The most important factor seems to be quietening of associational mental chatter, which normally expends a great deal of mental energy.

But how can we explain awakening experiences linked to psychological turmoil? It's difficult to interpret these in terms of relaxation and mental quietness, since they usually occur in a states of mental agitation and distress. But here a factor may be that the sense of shock and loss often associated with psychological turmoil may bring a deconstruction of normal psychological structures and processes. In most states of turmoil, this may only cause further distress - with the possibility of breakdown - but occasionally this may have a positive effect, causing a de-automatisation of perception, and a transcendence of familiar modes of cognition. (There is, incidentally, a parallel here with the concept of post-traumatic growth, which also highlights how positive after-effects - such as a heightened sense of appreciation, purpose and meaning - follow a wide range of traumatic events.)

A Second Wave Positive Psychology

These are only speculations, of course. I hope that other psychologists will investigate awakening experiences and develop their own theories. An experience that is so common, and has so much significance for individuals, should not be neglected, particularly now that the experience need not be associated with religion, or even with spirituality. Awakening experiences could be investigated in a similar way to experiences of flow. Like flow, an awakening experience is an optimal psychological state which arises from certain unusual psychological conditions, themselves generated by certain activities and situations.

In positive psychology, there has long been an emphasis on quantitative research over qualitative, in an attempt to establish the scientific credentials of the field. For the same reason, positive psychologists have tended to avoid any experiences that might be seen as 'spiritual' or 'transcendent.' Awakening experiences are difficult to study quantitatively; rather, they lend themselves to phenomenological qualitative research. As a result, positive psychology has not embraced the study of

such experiences. However, psychologists such as Itai Ivtzan and Tim Lewis have initiated a 'second wave' positive psychology which does emphasise the importance of qualitative research and is open to spiritual or transpersonal aspects. Perhaps the study of awakening experiences could form a part of a 'second wave' positive psychology. This would go some way to filling a significant gap in the study of psychological states.

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I've always been fascinated by awakening experiences, since I began to have them myself as a teenager. In fact, my main aim in becoming a psychologist was to study them - to find out how common they were, and why they occurred. I find it very significant that they have been reported across many different cultures and historical eras (obviously with differences of interpretation, and often framed in a religious or spiritual context). They are important because they suggest that our normal awareness of the world, and our normal understanding of life, is not reliable or complete. They suggest that we are, to some degree, asleep. They offer us a glimpse of a wider potential, and a more fulfilling life.