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INTRODUCING TRANSPERSONAL PHENOMENOLOGY: The direct experience of a sudden awakening

Article Index



- INTRODUCING TRANSPERSONAL PHENOMENOLOGY: The direct experience of a sudden awakening
- Introduction
- Sudden Awakening and Problems of Identity Integration
- Transpersonal Phenomenology
- The Eye of Contemplation: Utilizing the Transpersonal Inquiry and Interview Process
- Transpersonal Phenomenological Themes
- Precursors and Epitaphs
- A Shattering Dissolution
- A Terror That Binds
- Madness, Self-Torture and Rotting

- A Seekers Fate is Sealed: No Way Back
- Burning into What Already Is
- Discussion
- References

Summary

This paper introduces a transpersonal approach to conducting phenomenological research with the emphasis on illuminating a first person account of a sudden awakening. Although within Eastern cultures awakening is typically understood as the purposeful undertaking of spiritual or religious practices toward transcending the ego, liberating the self, contacting the divine, or becoming consciousness itself, the unsuspecting Westerner who suddenly finds himself or herself without a self may not have the reference to ground such a radical shift in identity. This was the case for the first author in this study. Through our transpersonal inquiry (i.e, dwelling and beholding, noetic reduction, noumenal parsing, and recognition) we were led to understand that a sudden awakening can involve psychological upheaval, terror, mental collapse, a search for balance and integration, and an understanding of how to trust existence in the absence of a permanent self-orientation.

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Introduction

The room was small, probably no bigger than this, and suddenly it appeared to expand infinitely, carrying with it a rush of tremendous energy that engulfed me. There was panic and terror, but amidst everything else there was an uncanny calmness as if time had stopped and I was watching everything happen. I was there, but not there all at the same time; everything was both real and unreal, it was like being formless.

This sequence of events has been referred to by many names (e.g. opening to the infinite, silent Brahman of the Hindus, kensho, liberation, mystical experience, That, union with god, realization of Self, or sudden awakening), but beyond conceptual points of reference such experiences are not theoretical they are experiential (Adyashanti, 2004; Satprem, 2000). In Western culture, such phenomena are usually considered the result of years of training in spiritual practice (sadhana) (Balsekar, 1992; Kornfield, 2001) or as psychotic abnormalities (Lukoff, 1998). Recently however, this conceptualization is changing as sudden awakening experiences are reported more frequently by Westerners with no history of spiritual or religious practice (Prendergast, 2003).

Spiritual awakening, known through the ages to be pursued by spiritual and religious seekers alike (Metzner, 1998), cannot be precisely defined as it is intimately unique to the individual (Adyashanti, 2004; McKenna, 2002; Renz, 2005). It can, however, be conceptually understood as an "opening to the mystery of

consciousness itself, to the fundamental nature of our minds, and to seeing what it is that binds us and what it is that frees us" (Goldstein, 2002, p. 132). The transpersonal philosopher Ken Wilber (1979) equated awakening experiences with what he called "no boundary" moments where the individual's sense of self or identity markedly expands beyond his or her usual mind/body location in time and space. Metzner (1998) states awakenings are often experienced as "delightful" and that they can broaden our relationship to ourselves, significant others, and to the totality of the "Kosmos" (Wilber, 1995, p. 56). It is important to note, however, the experience of awakening and its aftermath do not always lead to a spontaneous apprehension of reality free from obstructions; nor does the mind/body necessarily assimilate profound experiences without psychological disturbance (Almaas, 1996; Wilber, Engler, & Brown, 1986).

Sudden Awakening and Problems of Identity Integration

Grof and Grof's (1989) work on altered states of consciousness and spiritual emergencies led them to suggest that psychological disturbances associated with sudden awakenings can occur "when the intellect is not well coordinated and developed; when the emotions and the imagination are uncontrolled; when the nervous system is too sensitive; or when the inrush of spiritual energy is overwhelming in its suddenness and intensity" (p. 35). During these times, the understanding of one's self and world can be challenged resulting in an integration-identification failure (Wilber, Engler, & Brown, 1986). The failure of integration is neither a cognitive distortion nor a brain abnormality; rather the mind/body reacts to an inner fear of disintegration which is followed by a free fall and flood of abysmal terror (Almaas, 1996; Epstein, 1986).

The late Suzanne Segal's (1996) The Collision with the Infinite: A Life Beyond the Personal Self is a personal account of her awakening experience, its aftermath, and the resulting shift in her identity/self-structure. For Segal (1996), the sudden awakening experience led to a ten-year journey that included periods of profound fear, terror, psychological upheaval and finally the divestiture of her personal identity. Innocently described, Segal (1996) recalled her initial awakening experience:

I was in no hurry and decided to take a bus instead of the metro … As I took my place in line, I suddenly felt my ears stop up like they do when the pressure changes inside an airplane … I lifted my right foot to step up into the bus and collided head-on with an invisible force that entered my awareness like a silently exploding stick of dynamite, blowing the door of my usual consciousness open and off its hinges … What I had previously called "me" was forcefully pushed out of its usual location inside me into a new location … Physical existence was experienced to be on the verge of dissolution, and it (the physical) responded by summoning an annihilation fear of monumental proportions. (pp. 49-51)

The experience of a sudden awakening can have profound effects on the mind/body and, it may be assumed, on life following such an awakening.

In Western culture great emphasis is placed on the state, value, development and survival of the individual self. Thus, terror and aversion may be a common reaction to an awakening as experienced by an unsuspecting Westerner (Segal, 1996). By contrast, Eastern culture has a vast array of spiritual traditions, religions, and schools of thought that prepare the individual for a series of awakenings, i.e., Sufism, Taoism, Hindu Vedanta, and various schools of Buddhism. In these spiritual traditions, following an initial awakening, the practitioner is then guided to fully flower this realization by living a life in accordance with its truth (Doori,

2002).

For Westerners, stumbling upon the infinite is certainly not a deliberate ambition (Chah, 2002; Renz, 2005; Sahn, 2006). Rather, awakening can be experienced as a spontaneous, abrupt shift both intense and powerful. This shift is aptly illustrated by McKenna (2002) who describes the legendary Arjuna's awakening experience as found in the Bhagavad-Gita: "Arjuna didn't get out of bed that morning hoping to see Krishna's universal form. He was just having a bad day at the office when the universe flashed him" (p. 5). And in the midst of an awakening experience, our self is brought into question, even extinction. Therefore, it is helpful to consider the subjective nature and essences of these experiences with an aim of comprehending how they impede personal growth or, conversely, lead to the full flowering of one's Being (Segal, 1996). In this article a transpersonal phenomenological inquiry of an awakening experience is presented with the purpose of: 1) elucidating a Westerner's experience of awakening, and 2) bringing clarity to the transpersonal themes that appear in consciousness in the aftermath of an awakening experience.

Transpersonal Phenomenology

In studying awakening experiences and transpersonal lines of development Wilber (2001) suggests it is important to consider the three modes of attaining knowledge. "The eye of flesh, by which we perceive the external world of space, time, and objects; the eye of reason, by which we attain knowledge of philosophy, logic, and the mind itself; and the eye of contemplation, by which we rise to a knowledge of transcendent realities" (Wilber, 2001, p. 3). The eye of contemplation and its inherent wisdom guides the inquiry for this article as awakening experiences often involve phenomena that transcend dimensions of logic, space, time, and present realities and are thereby estranged from ordinary everyday life world (Gowack & Valle, 1998).

Transpersonal phenomenology is an approach that invites the reader to fundamentally witness one's lifeworld in a radically different fashion (Valle, 1998). This approach starts with the ego's perceptions of separateness and "give-ness", and then turns to investigate the reality situated beyond an embodied ego by revealing a re-remembering of a primordial existence. This case presentation is viewed through a transpersonal phenomenological lens of inquiry that unconditionally accepts a multiplicity of phenomenological states, conditions, experiences, and modes of Being and non-Being. Traditional schools of phenomenology suggest that consciousness is intentional, meaning that consciousness always has an object, which therefore emphasizes a relationship between the perceived and the perceiver (Heidegger, 1962; Osborne, 1990). Conversely, transpersonal phenomenology is supported by unadulterated awareness that is not dependent upon an interrelationship between perceiver and object. According to Valle (1998), this is a noumenal space from which both intentionality and phenomenology come into our awareness. It is mind, not our consciousness, "that is characterized by intentionality, and it is the recognition of the transintentional nature of Being that calls us to investigate those experiences that clearly reflect or present these transpersonal/transcendent dimensions" (p.277).

The Eye of Contemplation: Utilizing the Transpersonal Inquiry and Interview Process

This transpersonal study is explored and related through the eye of contemplation. The eye of contemplation reflects the researcher(s) familiarity with the awakening process and experience of surrender (Almaas, 2004). Traditional phenomenology, even if the researcher is alien to the phenomena under study, her or she can still adequately employ the eye of mind and juxtapose his or her life-world into the participant's narrative resulting in a newly-created life-text born from the interactions between the experiencer and interviewer (van Kaam, 1967). However, the experience of awakening along with its co-emergent transpersonal states and stages, does not filter and transmit from spirit to mind to language as easily as daily social, cultural, and lifeworld experiences. Thus, despite the premise that transpersonal phenomena leave their footprints in the observable world and shape existence as we know it (Almaas, 2004; Waite, 2006), apprehending such occurrences from the viewpoint of the unawakened mind may be difficult and therefore transpersonal phenomena can often be considered products of a disordered mind (Lukoff, 1985).

The transpersonal inquiry does not place a disordered or non-disordered value on experience, but rather is a "meeting", where both interviewer and interviewee collapse their self structures and concomitantly enter a unified field of consciousness (Almaas, 2004). A subject is not interviewing another subject; instead the interviewer and interviewee are consciousness directly experiencing facets of consciousness beyond ego structures (Almass, 2004). We explore the inner world of consciousness by actively and knowingly seeing ourselves as ourselves so that we might apprehend how spirit to mind becomes manifest, reflexively colouring, shaping, and informing our outward existence (Wilber, 2001).

Narrative Immersion and Illumination

After the transpersonal interview inquiry was completed we began the practice of narrative immersion and illumination, which included the following steps: 1) Dwelling and beholding 2) Noetic reduction 3) Noumenal parsing and 4) Recognition.

Dwelling and beholding occurs, in part, during the interview process but becomes a foundation for revealing various facets of consciousness after the inquiry is completed. It is also an instructive process because, as the researcher dwells amongst revealed phenomena, intelligence arises on its own accord. The eye of contemplation compels the researcher to stake footings and begin to build understanding through words and sentences until there is an infusion of familiarity that draws the researcher nearer to perceiving the noumenal essence of a participant's experience.

In transpersonal therapy, clients are asked to sit in their pain or enter into their suffering without judgment. Dwelling and beholding leads the researcher to enter, and then disappear, into the phenomena thereby relinquishing control of interpretation to gain awareness of what is simply present. This comprehension then allows the researcher to immerse himself or herself further by way of noetic reduction.

Noetic reduction is similar to Husserl (1964) and van Kaam's (1967) hypothetical reduction. Using hypothetical reduction, the researcher reduces the concrete, vague, intricate, and overlapping expressions of the participants' lived experience into more precise descriptive terms with a goal of creating discrete, breathing entities that capture lived experience. In this study, we deviate from Husserl's (1964) idea of 'bracketing' – a concept he understood to be a stripping away of certain structures of experience so that one could then be led to the data's actuality or its absolute intrinsic character. While Husserl considers such a reduction to be beyond one's natural attitude (calling it the transcendental reduction) he remains burdened by his own claim that consciousness always has "directedness" and an object to which it is directed (Moran, 2000). It is noted that our implementation of noetic reduction captures a mirroring of perception that is not ego-bound.

Noetic reduction differs from the transcendental reduction and/or other phenomenological attempts at reduction and functions ideally for our investigations. We are exploring consciousness itself, apart from intentionality, and do not claim that the ego "I" perceiver must be bracketed. Instead, we assume noetically (that is before we move to reduce anything), that there is an absolute consciousness, a pure bare perception, or a groundless ground of being. Almaas (1987, 1994, 1997, 2004) acknowledges how the self, and within the world of the human, we immediately compartmentalize experience without considering the subtlety of awareness, but that "it is clear, however, that the pure capacity for perception, before recognition, is a necessary ground for all our experience, including experience of inner content" (p. 50).

Through noetic reduction the researcher begins to separate basic knowledge from ordinary knowledge. According to Almaas (2004) basic knowledge is "the fundamental element of knowingness that is inherent in all our experience" (p. 53). It occurs before discernment and, because of its rawness, it is not experienced as a memory nor can it be filtered through the mind and rendered as a cultural artifact. Ordinary knowledge, however, is exactly that: an artifact of memory and culture handed down through mediums of constructed knowledge. And yet, we understand that both basic knowledge and ordinary knowledge arise from the same absolute field of consciousness (Almaas, 2000, 2004).

Noetic reduction is a careful process of trying to remain aware of the absolute field of consciousness while we move from discriminating forms, ideas, and concepts into thought and thinking about experience rendered by basic knowledge. We avoid tainting the transpersonal or direct mystical felt sense of pure consciousness through our mental interpretation. Thus, as the narrative is broken down and language is put to experience, much data remains paradoxical: one sentence claiming such an essence and the next sentence negating that same essence. In terms of action, noetic reduction is a silent encounter with the insights gained from dwelling and beholding. We take sentences, paragraphs, and experiences and then we move to an allowing of splitting experiences; cutting them out from the unified field of consciousness. This illusionary splitting gives the notion that the researcher has created multiple lifeworlds – however these multi-lifeworlds are facets of consciousness, stories illuminating the sacred, where the researcher becomes a witness and co-creator of flesh. This brings our approach to its next phase, noumenal parsing.

Here our approach becomes phenomenological and hermeneutical. The researcher is motivated to organize, configure, and illuminate the essences of our participants' awakening experiences toward perceiving how noumenal structures of consciousness transform the ego so that the topic understudy, sudden awakening, stands alone, but also includes all the knowledge constructs that have been shaped by basic knowledge (Almaas, 2004). Noumenal parsing is a reconciliation and reclamation practice where the researcher peers into the now of the narrative to create insight by unifying the eye of flesh, reason, and contemplation. Noumenal parsing does not have a complete end point. It can be said to blend into what we call recognition as the researcher retreats from all conceptualized horizons and returns to what is being illuminated: in this case sudden awakening.

Illumination is not an action-oriented process. Illumination is simple illumination in the here and now. This is a meditation in its own right as the life-text becomes the attended and a question is posed to the manifested product of consciousness: "what is resonating here"? This is not a measurement or an interpretation, but an acknowledgment of the echoes of experience. Assuming basic knowledge was apprehended, consciousness will speak through the narrative and recognition will occur to bring the reader eye-to-eye with himself or herself (Almaas, 2000, 2004).

Transpersonal Phenomenological Themes

The elucidation of the case phenomena compiled in this paper spans a two-year period, 2001 through 2003, detailing an in-depth life-text derived from three transpersonal inquiry interviews conducted from 2005-2007 between the first and second author.

Our case participant is the first author; a 36-year old Caucasian male, married, with three children. From this point forward this article will make use of the first person narrative. At the time of my first and subsequent awakening experiences, I had a spiritual nature but did not belong to any religious faith. Prior to these life-altering encounters, I was in my second year toward obtaining a Bachelor's degree in Addictions Counseling. At that time, I was drawn toward understanding the deeper nature of the self, primarily through the psychoanalytic (Object Relations) work of R.W. Fairbairn, H. Guntrip, and M. Klein. I was also interested in the work of D.W. Winnicott with specific reference to his theoretical conceptualizations: the good enough mother, holding/containing environment, true/false self and transitional object/phenomena.

I revered the true/false self theories, recognizing them as a coming home, in that I was able to comprehend the origins of my internal psychic conflict. From there I came to understand how I had created a false self in childhood to manage the threat of a hostile and withholding environment (Winnicott, 1965). Apart from this, I often felt connected to something larger than myself and began to realize that the trueself was a fallacious notion. In fact, I had touched a wholeness beyond ego and separate self periodically in childhood, adolescence, and during my adult years.

Precursors and Epitaphs

Our first theme introduces two significant and recurring patterns in my awakening process: 1) an antecedent of the surrender required of no-selfhood, and 2) the subsequent principal obstacle to overcome before accepting the true condition of the self; that being the ego's dissolution and the fear that accompanies such a transformation (McKenna, 2002; Renz, 2005; Segal, 1996). Enveloped by the grinding of the ego and the cataclysmic fear evoked as the ego dissolves, we are led to the essence and teleological nature of our first theme, the Precursors and Epitaphs.
Our transpersonal journey begins as I recall a vivid, portentous dream that, despite its prophetic wisdom being beyond my grasp, invites the reader to consider that my awakening may have been inevitable, even unavoidable (Kornfield, 2002):

I remember between the ages of four or five, maybe even earlier… Everyone was on this great big spaceship and I could see out and I knew that I was doomed. I thought everybody who existed on Earth was basically…this was it. A big cataclysm, it was terrifying! Why my mind conjured up the end of time, the end of me I am not sure, but there's a repetitive theory here, what I experienced…That fear returned from the dream years later in awakened consciousness… But there seemed to be intelligence in that dream beyond a person who was of that age. If I look at the terrifying part of that dream and what went on twenty-five years later, that might have provided some molding for me to some degree. This is really salient because I remember peering out of a window during my dream, but it was almost as if the person was already beyond himself…And at a young age to see this happening…My eyes were just a witness to the world.

Twenty-five years passed before the molding and wisdom of this dream was comprehensible to me and another three would pass before I would fully understand and gain comfort from my eye as being "witness to the world". Today I describe my sudden awakening experience of that winter of 2001 as a stirring of terror so deep it would eventually reveal a reality that would shift my view of the world forever: no self-hood.

A Shattering Dissolution

Awakening to reality can be the beginning of the inner journey home, toward the realization of one's true nature (Almass, 2004). This voyage (from an ego lived reality to Being) is an arduous one, especially when the individual fights for psychic survival because parts of their self-structure have suddenly shattered and dissolved. This experience may lead one to directly perceive essence, emptiness, or consciousness apart from their usual sense of "I-ness" without self contraction (McKenna, 2002; Renz, 2005; Segal, 1996). For myself, this sudden shift appeared to create a fissure or split in my psyche, and it struck me that consciousness was now functioning without me.

After being on the ward that day I went back to my room. I was feeling a little out of sorts and out of the blue the room expanded and I expanded with it… I was ripped out of my body; it felt like a huge energy rush, it floored me. I was in my body, but I was completely witnessing my body at the same time… I was in a huge panic. I actually left the room, because I thought something wasn't right, I thought maybe I could run from the room and everything would be alright. So I opened the door and ventured down the hallway and there were these two nursing students, they asked me "Are you alright?" And I am looking at them, thinking "Something is terribly wrong"! But I wasn't going to tell them what occurred. It was for about two hours of being there but not being there and everything was unreal. No, it was like everything was unreal… It was like I was actually formless and I remember saying to myself and I kind of wanted it to stop…

My immediate interpretation of this event led me to formulate a psychoanalytic explanation. I rationalized that my experience was psychoneurotic with origins in early ego development (oral stage). I further determined an internalized object relationship was key to my current ego deflation, depersonalization, and I was experiencing this as psychic fragmentation (Guntrip, 1969). However, despite this pragmatic approach to self-analysis, my experience continued through the night and into the next day:

There wasn't enough understanding for me because I thought this was something that was happening to me. That there was this other entity that was happening to me and I had to shake it off, figure it out, it was really intense. It was like…you go back in the room and things just …I thought I was a dual person, a total split … I had a sense of being a complete witness to everything but fighting it, having another side of me that was totally judging the experience. My voice, when I spoke… my mind was thinking and my voice was speaking, right? I remember looking in the bathroom mirror the next morning but I didn't know who was looking back at me. There was no recognition of that person. There a dead body in the mirror, right? And I'm thinking, well how can that be? But there was obviously something that was still seeing this and still functioning.

Not prepared to fully surrender my former self-diagnosis, I further hypothesized that this experience mirrored a schizoid state as my idea of my self was disappearing along with an increasingly shaky notion of my separate identity (Guntrip, 1969). While my explanation served the ego in terms of 'distraction', I knew at an intimate level these experiences (and the ones that would follow) could not be explained through

psychoanalytic musings. They were fair conceptualizations but as experienced realities they fell short of accurately describing what was currently manifesting.

According to Nisargadatta (1990), the abyss is both an enemy and a gift, but this is only understood by seeing into its emptiness and perceiving its true heart. My journey had now brought me to the abyss. For me this meant learning to become unshakable in the face of my greatest enemy, terror (Chah, 2002).

A Terror That Binds

The late Joseph Campbell emphasized the importance of symbolic power in the journey that follows an awakening. Campbell (1988) suggested that it could connect the individual "with that mystery which" we are (p.57). For me, the ever-present symbolic power of awakening had not yet been accepted. I was unwilling to acknowledge this 'mystery' as who I actually was.

I managed to facilitate the psycho-education group that morning, but afterward things really began to spin out of control. I had gone to coffee with my supervisor and one of the care aides. As we walked up the old hallway toward the cafeteria this rush of energy hit me… Nothing appeared to exist anymore and I am thinking this isn't good. And for some reason I couldn't tell them what was going on for me. I said to them, "I got to go, I have to get some book," that was my excuse. So I walked back to my room to see if I could get things back under control. I was pretty nervous and I was trembling considerably. I was a bit messed up, but I thought "I am going to have to continue on with the day." So I left the dorm and went back to the hospital and thought I would check in on the discussion board on WEB CT. So I sat there and interestingly enough the psychiatrist for the ward walked by… For a minute there I grabbed on to the thought about telling him what was going on for me. But then, I thought if I do that, either I am going to fail my practicum or they might put me on some meds. So the rest of the day I fought this in and out experience between being in my body and not being in my body.

Instead of allowing the experience to float through my mind/body structure, I contracted, immediately, labeled the experience "horrific" and created a gap between myself and the terror. The key nondual psychotherapeutic insight is not found in minimizing fear or analyzing the egoic contraction but instead by considering why there was such a profound reaction to yet another noumenal experience. This why reflects two areas of concern for the unsuspecting awakener: 1) the experience is profoundly raw and alien to the self-structure, thus; 2) its power in the psyche is so radical it cannot be ignored or completely understood thereby changing one's self-orientation forever (Segal, 1996). Awakening is aptly named as the experience exposes the ego helping it to melt, forever altering where You, I, and the world begins and ends. The common expression, "thoughts without a thinker" applies beyond an abstract concept to become a lived reality, regardless of the self fully accepting its emergence.

In this state, terror often arises within the newly-awakened mind. This phenomenon of terror, elsewhere termed "the body of fear" (Kornfield, 2002, p.39), can, despite its abysmal intensity and horror, be transformed into fearlessness. My further experience hints at such a process:

I managed to make it through Tuesday and Wednesday and that night I decided to go to the show. Meanwhile, I was still trying to figure out what was happening because on the way to the show, it was snowing and I could see people around, but to me the people didn't really exist. To make matters worse, that night the

theatre was completely empty. So just a total big black screen and I thought "Is this really happening" (laughing). One person eventually showed up so this made me feel a bit better, but then I thought, "I am creating everything that is going on." And then I had these waves of thoughts, "Telling me that you are the only person that is here… You are the only person that exists." That scared the hell out of me. I couldn't make a connection between what the experience was revealing to me and what my mind was trying to tell what was going on. Today, I understand this more correctly… But back then I was trying to save Jason.

Amidst such confusion and despite feeling bound by my fear, consciousness indeed was speaking directly to me (Balsekar, 1992). More accurately described, it was being 'ripped through me' as I continued to resist acceptance. These experiences would increase in intensity over the next months steadily pushing me toward an acceptance that awakening had a clear purpose and intent over which the self had little control or influence.

Four days after my initial awakening experience I drove back home, but this where it got more intense. I thought that maybe at home, where my family was, might make me more grounded. But it acted in reverse….I recall coming to the door, I still remember where everybody was that evening…Haley was on the stairs, she was about seventeen months old. My wife was on the couch and my older daughter and son were on the sofa watching television. I remember them saying hello to me and all of sudden I felt this emptiness hit me and it was like they didn't exist nor I. Actually, in that moment, they were perfect strangers to me. I intuitively realized that nothing was holding me anymore and then I got even more freaked out. My wife and I went to bed that evening and I remember waking up in the middle of the night not really knowing where I was… I didn't know my name; I couldn't remember my wife's name… I remember running into the bathroom and looking into the mirror. I knew who I was but I didn't… And for a split second there, I thought maybe if I killed myself I could end my suffering. But I didn't, for whatever reason, I managed to climb back into bed, but I knew that this formlessness feeling wasn't going to go away and I didn't how long I could handle such torment.

For me, the reality of no-selfhood would become a matter of accepting my extinction to allow the noumenon to reign as the phenomenal manifestation in the psyche. As I experienced years later, this 'allowing' was instrumental in diminishing my egoic reactions to the absolutes' permutations.

Balsekar (1992) afforded this shift in consciousness to maturing wisdom and further added "the absolute has become the relative, the potential has become the actual" (p. 18). I continued to require a logical understanding for my experiences as I was not prepared to accept that the truth of the matter had already found me.

Madness, Self-Torture and Rotting

Awakening, a timeless experience and also a living phenomenon, has roots in the oldest of wisdom traditions. It appears as a paradox because of the un-pure mind (Chah, 2002). As McKenna (2002) humorously states, "The paradox is that there is no paradox. Is that not the damnedest thing?" (2002, p. 13) In my case, deliberate reasoning and conscious contemplation kept surrender at bay while emotional turmoil and suffering continued to intensify:

A month following my awakening experience I had gone to the library at the college…I don't know why this

even happened. I was in the library looking around, because I had read some of Guntrip's work in reference to schizoid states and I was trying to make a link between his theories and clinical experience in regards to what I was experiencing. So for whatever reason, I had come across a book by Soygal Rinpoche, his further contribution to the Tibetan Book of the Dead. I can still remember flipping through the first thirty pages and coming across a passage that I felt was similar to my recent experiences and saying, "Well, this is what happened to me!" At that time I had not read anything Eastern, nothing! And after reading that I felt I was given a glimmer of hope… I wasn't going crazy, somebody else has experienced this. And yet, the underlying fear was there, so it was helpful, but at the same time I was terrified of never being me again.

Transpersonally speaking, my aforementioned experiences point toward a significant, underlying essence in regard to awakening, which is living the paradox of damnation. I was choosing to be damned by attaching to my self rot instead of seizing freedom from mind. To break free of bondage to the mind, a certain level of understanding and desire for freedom is necessary; however, this same mind needs to fully embrace the vast emptiness (no-selfhood) to allow Being to flower. This no-mind mind becomes accessible through the intuitive guidance offered by an awakening experience. And yet, when this struggle for freedom – ridding oneself of oneself – is imposed upon an unwitting, reluctant individual, madness is sometimes a bi-product (McKenna, 2004). I recollect, with fondness, this vivid account of my struggle to maintain my separateness:

I began to actually see the idea of the no-self thing was actually true; it was becoming clearer that I could not deny the truth of my experiences. When I started to accept and surrender a little peace would arise while other times I wasn't okay with it and I fought it. For example, I went and got a job doing security. You don't start until 10:00 at night and you work until 5:00 in the morning. Meanwhile, I wasn't sleeping, because I was battling my mind tooth and nail and then things would get even sketchier… I remember one night driving to the industrial area where I had to secure a large business. I guess I must have been tired and took the wrong road after leaving…I don't know where I ended up, I was just frazzled. I shed a few tears, punched the windshield a few times, screamed at existence, and then I just stopped the car and said, "This is pretty crazy"? I really thought I was going mad because I couldn't even figure out where I was and didn't know more or less who I was. Yes, so that comes back to the … out in the desert phenomena that was a real dark night of soul period for me.

Beyond my madness, self-torture and rot, a mysterious and uncanny development grew within my body. Tremendous emotion began to build. I sensed it was influenced partly by the fear of no-selfhood; but also it appeared my body was an energy system that was intimately connected to a universal consciousness.

I remember pulling up the moving van, vividly walking up…we had a little hedge…vividly walking up by the hedge to the back door and just before I opened that door…it was like an ocean of energy…it was like a cord was shoved into my belly where it was just vacant, vacant space that hit my belly and it was like…you know, your belly is only this big but the immeasurable emptiness that I felt at that moment, which lasted for a couple of months…It included panic and terror and deep, deep, sadness but also… I don't even know how to describe it. It was actually August 1st, it would have been 2001. The hole continued to be there and then I started having weird pains … not pains…something in the back of my neck. I called them energy cysts. It took about six months to release and it was here that I began to connect the hole and energy in my stomach to my neck. I don't know if I was all that attentive to my own emotions previous to my awakening experiences or at least the connection to my body.

As I continued to investigate this emerging phenomenon I contemplated the sensation in my stomach and wondered why it was followed by a pervasive sadness. "It was like a channel was opened in my body, it was like the whole universe had extended through the centre of my belly." Spiritual literature suggests this felt sadness was not other-worldly but actually a communion with the world's suffering, past and present.

Kornfield (2002) has remarked, "There are times in spiritual life when it feels as if all the barriers we have erected to shield ourselves from the pains of the world have crumbled. Our hearts become tender and raw and we feel a natural kinship with all that lives" (p.65). The truth of no-selfhood was again knocking at my door and although I continued to leave its insistent call unheeded, it was impossible to ignore. The glowing embers of freedom had burst into a raging, open flame.

A couple months later we were in the process of moving to a new city so I could finish my Bachelor's degree, and I remember picking up the Power of Now, by Eckhart Tolle. And I began reading it and was totally engrossed in minutes while my wife drove us back home. There were some passages that I really resonated with, the fear wasn't gone and the formless energy still freaked me out, but a drive to understand it had genuinely begun. I knew I could no longer escape what was happening and there was a piece of me that kind of knew what I would have to give up to be free.

A Seekers Fate is Sealed: No Way Back

The aftermath of my first and subsequent awakening experiences indicates that my understanding of the self and world had become radically altered. I was compelled to analyze the experience and also to eradicate the self-torture brought about by realizing that my identity was an illusion and did not have any substance of its own (Chah, 2002). For me the fear of letting go had now become a 'fearful-willing' pursuit, whereas the first six months following my initial experience was fraught with psychological upheaval as I fought to remain separate and time bound (Adyashanti, 2004). I began to realize the pain of denying what was occurring only brought more psychic upheaval. This understanding then led to the birth of the seeker.

I think what initially helped to calm my fears, besides stumbling on the Tibetan Book of Living and Dying, was a further introduction into non-duality and Buddhism, by way of a book given to me by an acquaintance. It was a book written by Rajneesh, at the outset of the book there was this statement: "The creator cannot follow the well-trodden path. He has to search out his own way; he has to inquire into the jungles of life. He has to go alone." So I started to read it further, and I said to myself "Well, these are the thoughts that I have had since I was six years old," and again came some confidence that maybe I wasn't crazy, maybe there is a bigger piece to what is going on here.

The seeker that was me traveled many different paths as I struggled to live an awakened life. While I still experienced free-floating anxiety and cosmic panic, I was learning to accept that those familiar to me could not provide security or give me a reference for a newly-adopted existence; nor could the conventional world offer guidance through the territories I now knew existed.

So now it was September… October, 6 months or more since the initial awakening experience and I had come to the conclusion that my wife wouldn't be able to understand me, my kids won't be able to understand, her parents, my parents, no one. So I began to look at it from ancient Zen perspective, you know that saying, "At the beginning mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers and then mountains are no longer mountains and rivers are no longer rivers…" So here I was, utterly convinced that I stumbled upon something ineffable and ungraspable and I thought, "Well if there is no place to go I might as well start tapping into Zen and figure out how to make the mountains and rivers mountains and rivers again."

This new wisdom afforded me an interim sanctuary in which to finish my third year studies and provided a

psychological space where I began to devour a multitude of spiritual literature, seeking answers to help me adjust to a life that appeared to have taken on its own trajectory, void of a permanent self.

This juncture of my awakening journey casts significant light into the shadows of what it means to awaken, that being the intention of the seeker. The seeker or quester or Bhikkhu or Bhakta represents the individual who wishes to taste the divine, know god, reach nirvana, or be the one who knows (Balsekar, 1992; Chah, 2002; Satprem, 2000). In Western culture, a seeker or quester is best described as the individual who has stumbled upon awakening; while in Eastern society, the Bhikkhu, an ordained Buddhist monk (Hahn, 1974) and the Bhakta, a Hindu practitioner, are life-long devoted to the path of God (Baleskar, 1992). And yet, despite the language we use to delineate their affiliations and their geographical location, at the root of their desires lies the search for reality.

So then I started piecing stuff together a little bit and then in pieces, it has taken a long time, there is no question. I think the biggest turning point for me…I would get things, things would come to me and I would have a good two weeks of clarity, and then I would react to experiences or perceive them as being a threat to my supposed new understanding. I remember one time heading to this lake and my wife was driving and all of a sudden, I would be out in the middle of the field. Everything would be me; I would be the wind, everything… On another occasion I remember driving to the golf course and as I turned down a bend and descended down the hill my consciousness suddenly expanded through the windshield, it was hard to drive. That would freak me out a little bit, it was hard to contain. There were lots of periods where I would start to understand things but there was still a Jason trying to figure this all out…and I was going to solve it and then things were going to be okay. So one part of me wanted to get back prior to the first awakening experience, but I started to learn that I didn't want to be that person anymore…and that's when things started to change a little because I realized how my existence was pretty self-serving, fearful and ego-based.

Here we witness the ignorance of the new seeker: the quest for reality is rarely the intended goal (McKenna, 2004). I was beginning to see the self as the obstacle to freedom, but my reaction was immature and clearly based in self: "I was going to solve it and then things were going to be okay." I had determined that every remark about awakening; every understanding; every piece of information about no-self would require my consideration. I was drawing my own map and missing the territory. McKenna (2002) acknowledges that awakening is "a fish in the ocean trying to find water" (p.139), and while seeking appears to be inextricably tied to the awakening journey, it is sheer courage that allows one to become who he/she truly is.

I began to realize that I was vaster than I could ever imagine, but that vastness can be scary as our inner and outer boundaries begin to shift. There's a big resistance…when Almaas talks about the tearing away of the ego and tears away, tears away, tears away. For me I was always reading to get the understanding. I could get the understandings at a certain level but I always thought there had to be a certain moment, or a certain understanding that was going to make me okay.

Burning into What Already Is

In our final theme, we present a subtle but important shift in my awakening journey: the acceptance that the mind is not the ground of being. Through my awakening experiences, I came to understand the timeless insight that no-self is always the natural state of being and that my reluctance to embrace this truth was

responsible for the terror and separation I had been experiencing.

I started realizing that when a person is in that place of spaciousness, the place of no-self, which always is, I was giving my ego credit for that. I actually thought that I was creating that, but that is actually available to us all the time, but I never could understand that. I always thought we created that, right? So I couldn't trust it. So then the whole basic trust concept really became a significant teaching for me and then I started to realize that in those places of panic and terror my mind was creating all that movement and content, because it is no different than what I am experiencing with you, right here and now! There is no difference between the panic state… It is all self created, but in the background, there is no change.

Insights into and beyond the mind became transversable through the words of A.H. Almaas and I credit his teachings as the initial influence that helped me to begin to sit peacefully in emptiness.

When I started reading Almaas's Point of Existence [I devoured that book in about two days] it was a revelation. That was the biggest turning point for me… I could sit and cry with that book, I could sit and understand it and then I realized, well this was just me…The black chasm made a lot of sense and after reading about the tearing of the ego I had finally found something that spoke to the depth of my experiences… I started being okay with sitting in the abyss and began to be okay with letting Jason go.

My journey had revealed to me that there is a simple reality underlying and emanating from a sudden awakening. 'Burning into what already is' is a priori; awakening itself; that which already is (Wilber, 1997). When an individual stumbles into such a profound experience the shift in comprehension is both dramatic and irrevocable. Wilber (1997) states: "The realization of the Non-dual traditions is uncompromising: there is only spirit, there is only God, there is only emptiness…This realization undoes the Great Search that is at the heart of the separate-self sense" (p. 281). For me, my Great Search had now matured and I was beginning to perceive emptiness through the eyes of being empty:

Heading toward 2003, I was beginning to adjust to this new level of consciousness and I didn't have the knots in the back of my neck and the hole in my belly was also healing. That's when I started to read Stephen Levine. There was a little bit of a shift there because then I started to have to admit to myself that I didn't have the answers. This provided a good place for me to work on dealing with my ego centered existence toward opening to a more reflexive way of being. I began to confront the fear and panic that continued to come up. This enabled me to close the gap between experiencing Being directly and the splitting…The minds resistance to accept the demise of a separate self… I know that now, but I don't think I really understood that then. Thus self and no-self, there wasn't a divide, the paranoid split was dissolving.

The experience of dissolving returns us to Almaas's (1987, 1990, 1996, 2002, 2004) Diamond Approach to self-realization. Students learn to connect themselves to their entire human psyche (e.g. ego, personality and soul) to develop a relationship with their fundamental nature (Almaas, 2004). This is similar to what spiritual traditions call the death and rebirth process whereby death is equated with transcending ego and rebirth is the embodiment of one's awakening experiences. The Diamond Approach is an inclusive path toward fully apprehending what awakening encompasses. As Almaas (1996) remarked, "If one part of you is alienated, rejected or split away, the integration is not yet complete" (Almaas, 1996, p.2).

In the two years following my initial sudden awakening there continued to be a subtle rejection of what is. I had not yet fully embraced existence in all its manifestations. Specifically my experiences and life-text rendered a large split related to cosmic engulfment and identity integration resistance which, at times, drained my psychic energy. However, at other times, surrender would come of its own accord and in these moments journeying for the sake of the journey itself provided the fuel necessary to embrace more of the unfolding

mystery.

As things continued to move on I get larger moments of peace… We talked about the Heart Sutra… and the whole emptiness and the form concepts… Well I got half-way through the book and I remember one evening laying on the floor reading and this joy washed over me for about ten minutes… Everything was perfectly still. For me, I guess I am searching for peace, freedom, it's about freedom.

My Great Search and awakening experiences brought me beyond a cognitive resolve. I began to see that my symptoms were secondary to the simple truth of awakening: that men and women can grow, develop, and evolve to the level of embracing Spirit itself or embodying a "supreme identity" (Wilber, 1997, p.39).

So recalling the long periods of vastness and bitter fear, it seemed liked for hours and hours and hours and hours and hours. But I knew at one level that it was just self falling away and me trying to grab on to save… to solidify my existence. I did not want it to be real; but knowing it was real. I don't know why there needed to be a worry in the first place… But looking back now it had to be that way… The mind stops, starts, I realize now I have I to get out of the way and allow it.

It is here where one's basic trust must reside; where peace in the truest sense can arise; where a mature spirituality is born by inviting awakening into every moment of everyday life. Interestingly, another journey begins where our final theme ends. In 2004, I began to nurture the blossoming of my awakening and I continue this practice to present day. I am beckoned by the spirit of awakening and, in the words of Wilber (2001), "let the search wind down; let the self-contradiction uncoil in the immediateness of present awareness; let the entire Kosmos rush into your being…" (p.57).

Discussion

Through the approach of transpersonal phenomenology a noumenal presentation of a Westerner's sudden awakening was illuminated shedding light on both the effect that awakening has on the unsuspecting individual; and the psychological shifts that take place alongside subsequent awakening experiences. These shifts appeared necessary for the awakener to return to the world (albeit with a different self-orientation and view of the Kosmos in general). My awakening shattered the concept of what I understood my self to be.

While these experiences provided me with glimpses into the nature of mind and self, they were not met passively, as we learned that the ego or our "I" does not take its usurping uncontested. My recounts of terror and psychic turmoil viewed through the eye of contemplation illustrated that no-selfhood is not a state of mind. Awakening appears to work from the inner to the outer and, acting as a harbinger, the individual is awakened from the inside; creating waves and ripples that move outward to revolutionize how the external world is interpreted and understood. However, our inner core recoils from transformative energies. My experiences attest to how the egoic "I" marshals its defenses as a result of bumping up against one's true nature.

While we did not compare a non-Westerner sudden awakening to that of a Westerner, the wisdom traditions make it clear there are paradoxical paths and "gateless gates" that allow states and stages of self-realization to guide our way home (Adyashanti, 2004; Almaas, 2004; Chah, 2002; Kornfield, 2002; Wilber, 2001). The phenomenology of our transpersonal approach affirmed the wisdom traditions' claim that our true nature is

always already present (Wilber, 2001) and we learned that having a sudden awakening without holding direct knowledge of essence brought forth a burning desire toward wholly claiming what appears to be the human birthright (Almaas, 1996); that is a knowing about which mystics have written since time immemorial. We recognize that a sudden awakening concerns the expansion of one's boundaries beyond an enclosed ego toward entering into the field of consciousness itself.

A sudden awakening does not lead to a finality of thought, circumstance, insight, particular condition or state of mind. As we have been witness to an unfolding journey, we have learned that a sudden awakening can ignite an unbridled passion for understanding the process of awakening and also toward learning how to negotiate the ebb and flow of living as Being. In conclusion, our case study illustrates that, following the experience of a sudden awakening, much is still left unsettled. As shown here, the embracement of non-dual living spawned by a sudden awakening required further integration and a continual burning through of residual ego structures. Such a cleansing helps to reveal a home without center (Foster, 2008) whilst existence continues to sing, manifesting its myriad of forms.

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