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Two Modes of Sudden Spiritual Awakening? Ego-Dissolution and Explosive Energetic Awakening

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A typology of experiences of sudden spiritual awakening is suggested, proposing that they may occur in two major forms, or modes. In a study of 19 cases of self-reported sudden spiritual awakening (within a larger sample that included cases of wholly gradual spiritual awakening), it was found that 13 cases could be interpreted in terms of either (a) a sudden collapse of the ego or self-system (ego-dissolution) or (b) a kundalini-like explosive release of energy. Both these types of spiritual awakening appeared to be most frequently induced by intense forms of psychological turmoil, such as bereavement, depression, addiction, and intense stress. An attempt is made to explain both modes of sudden awakening in terms of the release of energy that is normally monopolized by two different functions. Ego-dissolution awakenings are related to energy associated with the ego, while explosive energetic awakenings are related to energy normally associated with sexuality. The former type of awakening can be characterized as essentially structural in nature while the latter can be characterized as essentially energetic.

Keywords: *awakening, kundalini, ego, sexual energy, spiritual crisis, ego-dissolution*

In mystical and spiritual literature, a great deal of attention has been paid to temporary spiritual experiences. For example, from a religious or spiritual perspective, these have been the subject of studies by Hardy (1979), Johnson (1959), and Laski (1961). From a more psychological perspective, they have been studied by Maslow (1970), Hoffman (1992), and Wade (2004), amongst others. Less attention has been paid to the ongoing or stable form of these experiences—that is, when a spiritual experience becomes an ongoing, stable state of what might be called *wakefulness*, following on from a process of *awakening* (Taylor, 2017). Given that experiences of permanent wakefulness may be less common than temporary spiritual experiences, cases have been difficult to identify and study. Moreover, the claims of alleged permanence in relation to wakefulness are difficult to assess. An early attempt to systematically study cases of permanent spiritual awakening was made by Bucke (2009). Wilber (1999) has attempted to map different levels of awakened states, which he classified as

the *psychic* (the home of nature mysticism), *subtle* (deity mysticism), *causal level* (formless mysticism), and *non-dual*, which is “both the highest Goal of all stages, and the ever-present Ground of all stages” (p. 109). In Wilber's view, non-dual is the stage in which the formless is carried back into the material world, and back into everyday life, where emptiness and form—or *nirvana* and *samsara*—become one.

Wilber has often been criticized for failing to ground his insights and ideas in empirical research (e.g., Grof, 1998). Similarly, Maslow (1970) did not systematically research what he named a *plateau experience*, a stable and ongoing variant of *peak experience*—no doubt due in part to his death shortly after he began to investigate the phenomenon. Miller and C’de Baca (2001) have investigated many cases of such sudden personality transformation, using the term *quantum change* to describe them, but they did not deal solely with cases of what is here termed *spiritual awakening*, also including examples of what they called insightful quantum changes, when individuals gained an intellectual

realization or insight that enabled them to change their behavior or solve specific problems.

The research project (Taylor, 2013) that is being reported here—a phenomenological investigation into the causes and characteristics of reported cases of spiritual awakening—was an attempt to fill in the gap in research by investigating what might be called *permanent spiritual awakening*. The primary purpose of this paper is to suggest a way of understanding and categorizing experiences of sudden spiritual awakening and to encourage further research to investigate the proposed typology. Throughout the study, permanent spiritual awakening was conceived of in terms of a stable, ongoing variant of a temporary spiritual experience—or more generally, a psychological shift into a higher-functioning state of being, featuring a more expansive and intense awareness, and revelations of knowledge and truth which are normally hidden.

Summary of the Original Study

In Taylor (2013), a variety of means—including websites, radio interviews, and social media—were used to attract individuals who felt that they had undergone the experience of spiritual awakening. The announcement used was as follows: "I am about to begin some research on people who have undergone the transformational experience of 'spiritual awakening' or 'enlightenment.' If you have undergone such a transformation and would be happy to share your experience with me, please contact" (p. 86).

At preliminary contact in the study (Taylor, 2013), a number of potential participants were deemed unsuitable or unreliable (e.g., because they only reported temporary spiritual experiences which had not become stable, or because they showed pronounced signs of psychological disturbance or self-delusion). The 25 participants of the study included nine men and 16 women, with ages ranging from 26 to 67 (a mean age of 44.9). They were asked to identify the age at which their transformation had occurred, which was a mean of 35.3 (so that the transformations occurred a mean of 9.6 years ago). The study followed the methodology of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). During the interview, using a semi-

structured approach, participants were encouraged to describe their experiences in as much detail and with as much narrative flow as possible with very few interruptions. They were asked to describe the nature of their transformations, including the characteristics of their present experience, with key questions such as, "Was there a particular point at which you underwent transformation?" and "How has your attitude to life changed since the experience?" (pp. 89–90).

Following the interviews in Taylor (2013), transcripts were returned to the participants for corrections and approval. In accordance with IPA (Smith et al., 2009), the transcripts then underwent thematic analysis, entailing a process of deep engagement with the data. Units of meaning were grouped into clusters, which became significant codes or themes. Once the codes had been identified, they were ranked in terms of prevalence. Other salient findings were recorded, such as the apparent triggers or causes of transformation (as described by the participants) and whether the reported spiritual awakening had occurred gradually or suddenly.¹

Summary of General Findings from the Study

In Taylor (2013), thematic analysis showed that the three most prevalent characteristics reported by the participants were *well-being/positive affective states*, *increased present-ness* (including the ability to do nothing), and *a sense of an ongoing and stable state of being*. All 25 participants reported these characteristics. Other major codes, mentioned by 20 or more participants, were *reduced cognitive activity/less identification with thoughts* (leading to what many participants reported as having a "quieter mind" than before), *reduced/disappearance of fear of death* (including a sense that life will continue in some form following the apparent death of the body), *decreased sense of group identity/need for belonging*, and *a sense of connection*. Some other important themes, mentioned by between 15 and 20 participants, were *reduced interest in materialism*, *intensified perception*, *increased altruism*, *enhanced relationships*, and *ongoing difficulties* (see Table 1 for the full list of codes).

Participants Reporting (N = 25)			
Well-being/positive affective states	25	Enhanced relationships	18
Ongoing/Permanent new state of being	25	Ongoing difficulties	16
Increased present-ness/ability to live in the present	25	Problems integrating new state	13
Reduced cognitive activity/less identification with thoughts	23	Acceptance/letting go	13
Reduced/disappearance of fear of death	23	Spiritual practice (as an apparent factor in transformation)	10
Decreased sense of group identity/need for belonging	23	Physical difficulties	9
Episodes of intense turmoil or trauma preceding transformation	23	Timelessness/slowed down sense of time	9
Sense of connection	20	Heightened/increased energy	8
Sudden transformation	19	Authenticity	8
Reduced interest in materialism	19	Prior interest in spirituality	8
Intensified perception	19	Psychic experiences/episodes following transformation	7
Increased altruism	18	Change of career/job following transformation	7
		More active following transformation	7

Table 1. Number of participants reporting individual codes in Taylor (2013).

Most of these cases of spiritual awakening in Taylor (2013) were reported as following periods of intense psychological turmoil, associated with events such as bereavement, illness, divorce, and episodes of psychosis and depression. Many participants felt that their transformational experiences were triggered by this turmoil. Of the 25 participants, nine reported psychological turmoil as the only apparent factor, and for 14 other participants it was reported as an important contributory factor. For nine of these 14, some form of spiritual practice was also reported as a factor. In other words, these participants were engaging in some form of spiritual practice (in most cases, meditation) while experiencing psychological turmoil. In five other cases, participants were undergoing some form of psychotherapy (such as counselling, or the Alcoholics Anonymous recovery process). Only one person reported experiencing transformation purely as a result of spiritual practice. (In one case, no trigger or apparent case was identified.)

In Taylor (2013), of the 25 participants, 12 described a sudden and dramatic awakening, and seven reported a sudden and dramatic awakening in conjunction with some gradual development preceding and/or some previous temporary awakening experiences. Six participants reported a wholly gradual process of transformation. The study

found that sudden and dramatic awakening was often attended with difficulties. If the participants did not have conceptual frameworks to help them make sense of their transformations (for example, background knowledge of spiritual traditions and practices) and a supportive network around them, they were particularly liable to become confused and to suffer psychological disturbances. These experiences showed strong similarities with the experiences of *spiritual emergency* or *spiritual crisis* identified by Grof (2000), Clarke (2010), and others (Lucas, 2011; Lukoff, Lu, & Turner, 1998; Perry, 2005). For most participants of this study (Taylor, 2013) who experienced these difficulties, the psychological disturbances did fade away eventually. Their new state of being was reported as becoming integrated and stable, even if this process took several years. However, gradual transformations were reported as being less beset by difficulties and as occurring in more integrated and stable ways.

The intention here is to explore a specific result from the study (Taylor, 2013) in more detail. The observation in question is that when spiritual awakening was reported as sudden and dramatic, it could—at least in most cases—be identified as occurring in two different modes: one involving a sudden collapse of the ego or self-system, the other related to an explosive release of *energy*. That is,

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some participants described their transformation in terms of a breakdown of their normal sense of self or identity, while others described it in terms of the arising or release of an inner energy or vitality of some form, akin to the yogic and tantric concept of *kundalini* (Silburn, 1998; see also Greyson, 2000; Sovatsky, 1998, 2014). Of the 19 sudden and dramatic transformational experiences reported, eight could be classified in terms of experiences of the former, while five could be classified in terms of the latter. The six other cases could not be confidently classified in these terms, either because there was not sufficient detail relating to the specific nature of the transformational experiences, or because they were described in different terms. There were two other participants who had some signs of an explosive, kundalini-like transformational experience, but not particularly strong or clear ones. Some cases which correspond to these two modes of awakening will now be summarized.

Ego-Dissolution

Of the eight cases in Taylor (2013) which were identified as examples of *ego-dissolution*, two occurred through a sudden and dramatic transformation following a long period of gradual spiritual development. For example, one participant described how she felt that she underwent gradual development while suffering from depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), during which she was aware of a process of "humbling or deconstructing the ego" (p. 250). During this period, she had what she reported as "peak moments that changed the baseline going forward" (p. 250?), including one powerful experience in which,

I opened my eyes and the world looked different. It was alive. It was infinite aliveness. Everything was bright. Even the space between everything. The colors were incredible and the flowers looked happy. I looked down and I realized I was the sidewalk. (p. 250)

Following this, in March 2008, as she put it, "I moved into a stable state" (p. 250) after participating in a personal development workshop.

Turning to the cases in Taylor (2013) of ego-dissolution that were reported as wholly

sudden and dramatic, one individual reported a transformational experience caused by two bereavements, the death of his wife and son in close succession. Although he had been a Buddhist, and believed he had undergone some spiritual development previously, these bereavements brought a sudden and dramatic awakening. As he described it,

The sense of who I was had been stripped away, and I was left staring at emptiness. . . It shattered the thin shell of my ego. It sounds mad, but it's the best thing that happened to me. . . I could see through much more easily the illusion of separateness. All those years I'd been looking for a pair of glasses which I was already seeing out of. The idea that all was one had been an intellectual concept, but now it's become real. It's what it is. I can't imagine not seeing it now. . . I didn't have any ambition anymore—that all slipped away. I wasn't worried anymore about how I appear to colleagues, about publishing articles. One day I might write a book, but there doesn't seem to be any urgency. . . I do find a lack of identity. People used to ask me "What do you do?" and I used to have a label ready. Colleagues still have their diplomas and certificates up [on] the wall but I don't. I don't even call myself English, or a male. Everything else seems unimportant. . . We go through life collecting clothes but what it's covering up is nothing. It's the fear of nothing that terrifies the ego. It spends all its time protecting itself from nothing—"I'm a Christian, a social democrat"—all to avoid looking inside. (p. 237)

Another participant described a transformation which was apparently triggered by a period of intense stress, including divorce and the failure of his business. He described the process as being like a "set of dominoes falling over":

I began to let go everything in life—my business, home, my children, my marriage, my body. The last domino fell and I went into this state of bliss. All mentation disappeared and everything began to radiate this stunning sense of beauty, stillness and silence. (p. 250)

This led to a freedom from psychological attachments, and a new sense of mental quietness:

There's no attachment to material things, which is a relief. Before, I was attached to my body, to success, or what I wanted to become. . . My mind is very quiet most of the time. Some days I suffer. It kind of works. There is nothing there apart from a still silence, a very peaceful still unifying silence that permeates everything. Then you ask a question and the faculty of speech is triggered. It's beautiful but inconvenient. (p. 250)

However, this sudden shift caused difficulties. He found the practical aspects of life—such as working and maintaining relationships—problematic. As he described it:

I've been in and out of mind for last 6 years. The sense of peace and stillness is always pervading. It's difficult to function a lot of the time, the things that require mind, organising. It's inconvenient in a linear western world when things are run on schedules, to be in a non-linear state. (p. 250)

Similar difficulties were described by other participants. One participant described problems dealing with the practical aspects of life following her shift. This participant also said,

For about a few months following that there was a real state of bliss. It was difficult to speak—I lost the capacity. It took maybe 30 seconds or a minute for the word to come out. It felt strange to talk. I was very present, so present that words were superfluous. . . . After a few months there was more return of mind, more return for a capacity for speaking, intellectual functioning. The last couple of years has been a deepening, an integration, a coming to understand with conceptual terms. There has been a return of the ability to focus the mind. Now everything is a choice—how deep do I go into the vastness? If I want to have a disembodied peak experience of nothingness I just have to sit still and close my eyes. Or if I need to work on something then I simply have to choose to narrow my focus to the task. Sometimes the mind is loud and sometimes

quiet but it's almost always running, unless I do the choosing of the deep nothing state where there is no form. (pp. 254–255)

One possible interpretation of the arising of these difficulties is to conceive of the ego (or self-system) as the center of psychological and intellectual functions, essential for abilities such as concentration, problem solving, decision making, planning, memory, and so forth. So, when the ego dissolves there is a disruption of these functions, unless there is a new, fully formed self-system ready to emerge and take over them. One of the findings of the research project was that difficulties were more likely to occur in participants who did not have a background in spiritual practices or traditions, so they did not have an intellectual framework—and a supportive environment—to help make sense of their new state.

Is it possible to identify the reasons why such experiences as the above are closely associated with psychological turmoil? In an earlier study (Taylor, 2011, 2012a), cases of spiritual awakening following intense psychological turmoil or trauma were specifically investigated. It was suggested that the connection between intense turmoil and spiritual awakening was related to the dissolution of psychological attachments. Psychological attachments can include hopes, ambitions, beliefs, the sense of status or achievement, wealth and possessions, and social roles. The dissolution of these attachments may be the main reason why a person is in a state of turmoil, and filled with a sense of despair or loss. Such attachments can be seen as the "building blocks" of a person's sense of identity. When the building blocks are taken away, the structure itself collapses. In Taylor (2011, 2012a), it was suggested that in some individuals, this dissolution or collapse allowed a new, higher-functioning self-system to emerge and become established as the individual's new sense of identity.

Kundalini-like Awakening

As noted previously, five of the 19 sudden transformational experiences reported in Taylor (2013) were described in terms of an

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explosive release of inner energy or vitality, with some similarities to the phenomenon of *kundalini awakening* (Silburn, 1998; see also Greyson, 2000; Sovatsky, 1998, 2014). (As noted, there were two further experiences that had some signs of this mode of awakening, but the resemblance was not strong.) In the *chakra* system of the yoga and tantra traditions, kundalini—a term derived from the sanskrit word *kunda*, meaning to coil or spiral—lies at the lowest of the seven chakras, the *muladhara*. According to these traditions, once kundalini is aroused, it travels through the *sushumna* energy-channel, located roughly in parallel with the spine (hence the slightly inaccurate but common belief that kundalini travels up the spine itself). It travels all the way up to the seventh chakra, the *sahasrara*, in the crown of the head. Here it manifests itself as spiritual awakening. If the energy can be permanently settled or established at the seventh chakra, the individual will be in a permanent state of samadhi, in union with *Brahman* (Silburn, 1988; see also Ring & Rosing, 1990).

Traditional Hindu sources describe the awakening and liberating effects of kundalini. For example, the Yoga-Kundalini Upanishad (Yoga-Age.com, n.d.) describes how, with the rising of kundalini, “The Yogi takes his stand upon the Inner Reality, the *Atman*. He enjoys the highest state of spiritual experience. He attains peace and is devoted only to the *Atman*.” The tantric text *Paratrisika Vivarana* describes kundalini awakening as “the universal emission—vibrating within the heart of the *sushumna* in the great bliss of union” (as cited in Silburn, 1988, p.10). Such texts also describe processes by which kundalini can be raised, including *asanas*, *mudras* (gestures), breath (*prana*) control and forms of meditation. The Yoga Kundalini Upanishad (Yoga-Age.com, n.d.) states that two things are necessary to raise kundalini: the restraint of *prana* and the technique of *saraswati-chalana* (sitting in the *padmasana* posture, manipulating the breath and holding the ribs, so that the *saraswati nadi* can be opened and kundalini can flow through). The *Goraksasataka* recommends hatha yoga postures such as the *mula bandha*, the *jalandhara bandha*, and *kumbhaka* (Mallinson, 2011). The practice of *brahmacharya*

(usually translated as chastity or celibacy) is also seen as a process by which kundalini may be raised. In kundalini yoga, *brahmacharya* can be characterized as “erotic celibacy” and also as an inner marriage, an expressive and dynamic process of transformation (Sovatsky, 2014).

Kundalini awakening has been investigated by transpersonal psychologists, such as Grof (2000), Sovatsky (1998, 2014), Greyson (1993, 2000), and Thalbourne and Fox (1999). They have paid particular attention to the potentially negative or disruptive effects of the phenomenon. For example, Greenwell (1995) has noted that unprepared kundalini awakening can cause “physical collapse, psychic chaos, and personality upheaval” (p. 1). She has identified seven key factors of kundalini awakening, including “*pranic* movements” (such as involuntary jerking movements, including spasms and vibrations), yogic phenomena (such as spontaneously performing yoga *asanas*, or *mudras*), unusual physiological patterns (such as burning sensations, hypersensitivity, hyperactivity, or lethargy), psychological and emotional changes, extrasensory experiences (such as hearing voices, visions of lights or symbols), psychic phenomena, and mystical states of consciousness (such as a sense of unity and deep serenity).³

In the five kundalini-like experiences reported in Taylor (2013), the participants described a sudden upsurge of energy flowing through them, bringing many of the physiological, audiovisual, and mental phenomena highlighted above. (Interestingly, however, only one person specifically located the source of this energy at or close to the bottom of the spine and rising through it. In the other four cases, the source and trajectory of the energy was non-specific, or general.) Like the experiences of ego-dissolution described above, these experiences of sudden transformation occurred following periods of intense psychological turmoil.

In Taylor (2013), one participant underwent a transformational experience following a long period of stress and depression, and four days of sleeplessness. After an argument with her husband, she felt a sudden sense of release, and a feeling of energy suddenly flowing powerfully through her:

I felt a tremendous amount of energy coursing through my body, and with the energy came healing. My sinuses cleared instantly, and my lungs cleared out and started working perfectly again. I watched this instant healing with amazement. It was intellectual. The final puzzle piece dropped into place. It was “eureka” of course!

Spiritual knowledge was revealed to me, I “knew” it in an instant, and am still to this day learning in a linear conscious fashion what was revealed to me in that instant. I also felt like a ton of stuff went blowing by me and I didn’t pick up on most of it—though I have spent 17 years actively studying and seeking to put this information together into a state that can be perceived with the human mind and heart. . . .

I was in an altered state of consciousness, though I was still very much in control in normal consciousness, it was living a life of duality where I could see from either perspective at will, spiritual, or physical. It was an incredible time that I will never forget, and can still access. I felt like I had broken through a barrier, and I was talking back to people left on the other side, and I so wanted to grab them and pull them through with me! (p. 283)

Another participant’s kundalini-like transformational experience occurred during a state of intense turmoil due to the death of her mother:

My night time experiences were filled with a feeling of an energy rushing through my body with a loud screeching sound, seeing things visions and faces, colours and maps of the solar system, scientific symbols, things I remember from maths at school, formulae. It was just random information at a very very high speed, like a slideshow, showing frames throughout human history. That was when I closed my eyes.

In my waking hours I was seeing colours around people, feeling their feelings, reading their thoughts. The next day there would be a new enhanced sense or ability. I would look in the mirror and my face would change, I would

look at others and their faces would change. I would know who was about to call me or who was about to turn up at my doorstep. (Taylor, 2013, p. 262)

Another participant in Taylor (2013) underwent a transformational experience after a visit to India to learn Ashtanga Yoga. He had suffered from psychiatric problems for a period earlier in his life, and shortly after his return from India, he experienced his “first manic episode for 10 years” (p. 311). He reported “several experiences where my consciousness seemed to rise suddenly, the energy meridians in my body were energized, and my mind became sharper and clearer” (p. 312). Although he was sure he was having some form of spiritual experience, he was admitted to a psychiatric ward, where the staff were sceptical and hostile. However, he “persuaded them to discharge me while I was still unwell” (p. 312).

On the same day that he was discharged, he felt he experienced a “breakthrough”:

I felt a shift in my consciousness, something I hadn’t felt before. My mind was becoming quieter, and at the same time the world was becoming sharper, more real, and the experience was lasting. I went for a swim while my friend taught a class at the gym, and for the first time in my life I experienced myself as consciousness.

I went home that night still feeling very clear, and my mind was still quiet. (Taylor, 2013, p. 312)

This was followed a few weeks later by a second shift, which occurred during a camping trip with his brother while having a shower:

I was in that vibrant dimension of clarity, laughing my head off, absolutely elated. I realised a profound truth, what it meant just to be alive and to be able to have a shower, and have a bed to sleep in, and food to eat. I met my brother in Edinburgh that night and I was amazed at the quality of the colour of the sky, it had never looked like that before, and the warmth on my skin, it was like the world had been made anew. . . .

I spend a lot of time in the present now, more than I ever did, and I can quiet my mind easily when I want to. My family have often remarked on my positive changes, and my psychiatrist told me recently that I'm one of the most psychologically healthy people she's ever met. I've not been able to tell her that when I recovered from the last episode of mania most of my fears and anxiety were gone. (Taylor, 2013, pp. 314–315)

As a final example, in Taylor (2013) a participant experienced transformation during a very stressful period when he was forced to do a job which he disliked at a time when his wife was undergoing tests for cancer. He “literally did not sleep at all for a week due to worry and stress” (p. 302). This apparently triggered what he described as a “sudden uncontrolled kundalini awakening,” which involved convulsions through his spine. It was diagnosed as a psychiatric disorder, even though he was sure he was undergoing “some sort of intense spiritual awakening experience”:

I experienced going back into previous lives to work out issues. This went on for about two days but there was no one to tell about it as the doctors and nurses just look at you every five minutes to make sure you are not doing anything daft. I never spoke to anyone about this at the time, least of all the doctors because I knew it just meant they would detain me longer in hospital. (p. 302)

Distinguishing Two Modes of Sudden Awakening

As noted earlier, the primary purpose of this paper is to suggest a way of understanding and categorizing experiences of sudden spiritual awakening and to encourage further research to investigate the proposed typology. However, a speculative explanation of these experiences will also be proposed, partly related to the theories of Washburn (1980/1995; 2003), and also the interpretation of *temporary awakening experiences* proposed by the author previously (Taylor, 2005, 2012b; Taylor & Egato-Szabo, 2017). The latter interpretation—itsself related to Deikman's (1980)

view of mystical experiences as “brought about by a deautomatization of hierarchically ordered structures that ordinarily conserve attentional energy for maximum efficiency in achieving the basic goal of the individual” (p. 259)—views temporary awakening experiences in terms of an intensification and stilling of *life-energy*. In my terminology, the latter is an essential energy of being, which expresses itself through mental functions such as attention and concentration, and also through sexual impulses and desires (see Taylor, 2010, for a fuller discussion). As will be seen shortly, Washburn (2003) had a similar concept of life-energy, based on a psychoanalytic framework.

Both modalities of spiritual awakening could be similarly seen as related to an intensification (and a sudden release of) life-energy. According to this interpretation, the two different modes may be related to two different kinds of energy that are normally monopolized by two different functions. This accounts for the differences between them. According to this model, ego-dissolution awakenings can be seen as related to energy normally associated with the ego, while explosive energetic (or kundalini-like) awakenings can be seen as related to energy normally associated with sexuality.

In order to fully understand the distinction between the two modes of sudden awakening, it is necessary to briefly consider the energetic aspects of human development from childhood to adulthood. Young children possess an abundance of free-flowing energy: Washburn (1980/1995) has described this vividly, writing that children are “bathed in the water of life. Ripples and waves of delicious energy move through the infant's body, filling it with delight. When its needs are satisfied and it is otherwise content, [it] experiences a sea of dynamic plenitude, blissful fullness” (p. 82).

It may be because of this abundance of rich energy flowing through their being that young children naturally experience certain perceptual and affective features normally associated with awakening experiences, including a more intense perception of the phenomenal world, a sense of the aliveness of phenomena which normally appear inanimate, a sense of meaning or of an atmosphere of harmony, and a sense of inner well-being, bliss,

or joy (Taylor, 2009, 2017; Washburn, 1980/1995). Developmental psychologist Gopnik (2009) has suggested that young children are “aware of much more, much more intensely, than we [adults] are” (p.125). Gopnik has used the term “lantern consciousness” to describe the “vivid panoramic illumination of the everyday” (p. 129) of young children, which she has recognized as similar to the exultation of some religious and aesthetic experiences. Loevinger (1976) also speculated that the child’s “openness to experience” (p. 147) may be regained at higher levels of ego development, at the self-actualization level identified by Maslow, or what Loevinger referred to as *integrated*. This is not to suggest that children are enlightened or awakened in the same sense which spiritually developed adults may be. There are aspects of adult wakefulness which children do not appear to have access to: an all-embracing sense of love and compassion, an identity shift to a deeper or more authentic self, and the introverted withdrawal from the external world into a state of pure consciousness (Taylor, 2009).

It is important to note the three ways in which, according to Washburn (2003), life-energy expresses itself: as psychic energy, *libido* (instinctual/sexual energy), and *spiritual energy* (i.e., the potent blissful energy that is associated with spiritual experiences). Young children have such powerful free-flowing energy—or in Washburn’s terminology, such intense spiritual energy—because little of their energy is expressed through the psyche, or through the libido. Energy is not concentrated into these areas, and so, in Washburn’s terms, they possess a large degree of spiritual power.

The adult ego confers massive benefits—abstract and logical thought, conceptual knowledge, self-reflection, impulse control, exercise of the will, the ability to organize, to make decisions, to plan, to manipulate our surroundings, and so on (Jung, 1928/1988; Loevinger, 1976; Washburn, 1980/1995; Wilber, 1995). But at the same as being a giant leap, it may be that the development of the ego entails a fall because of the massive amount of energy that the ego requires to function and maintain its structure. In particular, it may be assumed that the cognitive activity of the ego—both conscious, rational, or logical cognitive activity, and involuntary *thought-*

chatter—consumes a great deal of energy. As a result, less energy is available for perception, which entails a loss of the intense perceptual awareness (or the “natural spiritual power”; Washburn, 2003) of childhood.

A similar process may occur in relation to sexual energy. As human beings enter adolescence, and as sexual impulses and desires develop—at roughly the same time as the adult self-system becomes strongly developed—energy becomes concentrated in the form of (and expressed as) sexual energy. Thus, energy is diverted to two new sources (the adult ego and sexuality), both of which reduce the amount of energy available to be expressed through simply being present in more encounters with the phenomenal world.

In terms of this theoretical model, a sudden shift into a state of stable or ongoing wakefulness (in other words, sudden spiritual awakening) may occur in two ways. The first is when the ego or self-system dissolves, which frees up the energy normally expended through the activity of the ego, and also through maintaining its structure. The second way is when energy normally monopolized by sexual impulses and desires is released. It may be that the concept of kundalini awakening, as developed by ancient yogic and tantric teachers and philosophers, was developed as a way of describing and explaining the second type of awakening (Taylor, 2016).

Why do these sudden awakenings occur? Or more specifically, why does a sudden dissolution of the ego sometimes occur, leading to a release of the energy normally utilized by the ego? And why does the energy normally associated with sexual impulses sometimes release itself explosively? Spiritual practices and paths may cultivate a gradual form of both types of awakening, sometimes concurrently. *Gradual spiritual awakening* may involve a process of transforming the normal self-system—not necessarily dissolving it, but slowly remolding it into a new type of self-system with softer ego-boundaries (i.e., a reduced sense of duality and separation between self and world), a greater sense of connection (i.e., an increased sense of intersubjective connection with the natural world, other living beings and the whole universe itself), reduced involuntary cognitive activity and other

characteristics of wakefulness (Taylor, 2017). At the same time, some spiritual paths (such as kundalini yoga) may be more focused on consciously cultivating the gradual release of sexually-oriented energy. However, the study reported in this paper (Taylor, 2013) found that sudden spiritual awakening tends to occur accidentally, without conscious cultivation. As noted above, ego-dissolution awakenings tended to occur during periods of psychological turmoil. Typically, they seemed to be related to a breakdown of psychological attachments, through a process of turmoil and loss. For example, in the ego-dissolution experiences cited above, the event was related to depression and PTSD, bereavement (in two cases), and divorce and the failure of a business. As suggested above, it may be that the ego largely consists of an accumulation of psychological attachments, so that when these break down, the ego itself dissolves away.

It is perhaps more difficult to explain awakenings related to an explosive release of sexual energy. While they may also be due to intense psychological turmoil and loss, in Taylor (2013), they seemed to be more likely to occur during periods of intense stress, causing a buildup pressure which leads a sudden collapse of the self-system (as opposed to a dismantling due to loss). They also seemed to be more likely to be associated with major physiological disturbances such as sleeplessness and major psycho-physical changes due to practicing yoga or ingesting psychedelics.

One simplistic way of illustrating the different origins of these two modes of awakening is to use the analogy of a house. In ego-dissolution, it is as if a house is slowly dismantled, through the process of the building blocks of psychological attachments being taken away. But in energetic awakening (due to the explosive release of sexual energy), it is as if the house is suddenly demolished, like a beach house swept away by a tidal wave. These are—in Grof's (2000) phrase—*spiritual emergencies* of the most intense and dramatic kind. (It is not clear why certain people may experience one particular mode of awakening rather than another, but perhaps further research could help to elucidate this.)

A significant difference between the ego-dissolution and kundalini-like experiences

in Taylor (2013) reported above is the latter's intensely energetic aspect—the sense of powerful explosive energy suddenly being released, which the participants described as “coursing” or “rushing” through them. This may be related to Washburn's (2003) notion that psychic energy is used continually, whereas sexual energy (or libido) is often dormant or latent, awaiting a stimulus to be aroused. In Taylor (2013), ego-related transformation sometimes featured descriptions of energy, but their main feature appeared to be structural—that is, the sense of the normal self-system dismantling, dissolving or dropping away. Awakenings related to sexual energy did not appear to feature this sense of ego-dissolution.

So in short hand, permanent spiritual awakening could be characterized in the mode of ego-dissolution as primarily structural in nature, and permanent spiritual awakening in the form of as a sudden release of sexual energy as primarily energetic. As in Taylor (2013), the latter mode of permanent awakening has a more powerful immediate psychological and physical effect and is therefore usually more disruptive. Those who experience this mode of awakening may be more likely to be diagnosed with psychiatric disorders and to undergo psychiatric treatment (all four of the participants quoted above who described explosive energetic awakenings received psychiatric treatment).

At the same time, it is important to point out that I do not believe it is possible to draw hard and fast distinctions between these two modes of spiritual awakening. It is likely that there is a good deal of overlap between them. It may be that in some cases both of the two modes occur together, indistinguishably. In other words, a person may experience ego-dissolution due to dissolution of psychological attachments, and at the same time the sheer stress and pressure of their predicament may trigger an explosive release of sexual energy.

Let me emphasize that these ideas are speculative. Further research is required to ascertain their validity. Nevertheless, I believe that the typology of experiences of spiritual awakening presented in this paper merits consideration. In any case, in a more general sense, the phenomenon of

permanent spiritual awakening is certainly deserving of more attention.

Notes

1. One approach that might have increased the validity of this study would have been to employ the services of another researcher to perform the data analysis. However, as the study was the author's PhD thesis, this was unfortunately impracticable, due to a lack of funds required to pay for another researcher. In addition, the single-method and single-observer approach was conventionally undertaken by the university department where the study took place, with the primary researcher also performing a thematic analysis of the data collected.

Another way of enhancing the validity of the study that was considered was to speak to a number of acquaintances or associates of the participants, in order to gain a more objective view of their reported transformations. However, it soon became clear that this would have been impracticable, due to financial and temporal limitations. The only way this would have been possible would have been to significantly reduce the number of actual participants interviewed, but it was decided that a larger sample was preferable to allow for themes to emerge more clearly.

2. For example, one of these participants reported spiritual awakening at the time of her father's death. At the moment of his passing, she experienced a "huge golden bright light, circular" rising from her solar plexus: "It seemed to be suddenly there and it was spinning round and round. And that developed and grew brighter, and moved through my body and filled my body. There was a flood of joy right through me" (Taylor, 2013 p. 221). This description shares some similarities with the arousal of kundalini. However, the participant specifically referred to light, rather than energy and did not report the disruptive after-effects normally associated with kundalini.
3. Interestingly, the traditional Yogic and Tantric texts do not address the potential difficulties

of kundalini in great detail. Perhaps this is because yogis were less likely to experience such difficulties, because of the more regulated nature of their practice and the close supervision they received. Nevertheless, some texts do allude to the volatile and potentially disruptive nature of kundalini. For example, the Tantric Buddhist text the *Tantrasadbhava* describes the "dazzling sparks" and the "fiery energy" that appear as kundalini rises (as cited in Silburn, 1988, p. 42). The *Vijnanabhairavatantra*—a key text of Kashmiri Shaivism—describes how, if a yogi still identifies with their body, kundalini awakening may cause uncontrollable trembling, and the text also speaks of the "demonic penetration" (*pisacavesa*) that can occur when the energy moves back down through the chakras, causing depression and fatigue (as cited in Silburn, 1988, p. 69).

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