

Waking From Sleep:

Awakening Experiences and a Permanent State of Wakefulness

Steve Taylor

One evening last summer, when I was on holiday with my family in Wales, I decided to explore some of the farmland around our rented bungalow. I climbed over a gate I hadn't noticed before because it was hidden by long grass, and found myself looking down at a valley, with farmers' fields sloping as far as I could see and hundreds of sheep dotted over the hills.

After I'd been walking for a few minutes, looking at the fields and the sky, there was a shift in my vision, as if someone had pressed a switch. Everything around me became intensely real. The fields and the bushes and trees and the clouds seemed to be powerfully *there*, even to have their own kind of identity, almost as if they were sentient beings instead of just inanimate objects. I also felt a sense of unity with my surroundings. As I looked up at the sky, I could sense that somehow that the space which fills it was the same 'space' which fills my own being. What was inside me, as my own consciousness, was also 'out there'. In some sense I felt that the universe was inside me, and that I was it.

This is an example of what I call an 'awakening experience.' In awakening experiences, the world becomes more real and beautiful, and an atmosphere of harmony seems to fill our surroundings. We feel serene and whole inside, and our normal problems and worries seem to fade into insignificance. The world seems like a benevolent and meaningful place, and we feel part of everything around us, with an intense empathic connection with other people.

At a higher intensity of awakening, we might become aware of a kind of spirit or force pervading our surroundings, a radiant energy which seems to underlie the whole world and to make everything one. Our own identity may seem to dissolve away, as we become part of this oneness.

Awakening experiences happen when the 'filters' which limit our normal awareness of the world fade away. We 'wake up' to a wider and fuller reality, and in comparison our normal vision seems incomplete and even unreal. We feel that now we're seeing the world as it really is, as if we're seeing it in three dimensions rather than two, or in colour rather than in black and white.

The Triggers of Awakening Experiences

Awakening experiences can sometimes occur for no apparent reason, but mostly they are generated by certain activities or situations. As a part of the research for my book *Waking From Sleep*, I collected over 100 examples of awakening experiences from friends, students and strangers. I found that two of the most common triggers of them were nature and meditation. Many people I spoke to had awakening experiences while they were walking in the countryside, swimming in lakes, or gazing at beautiful flowers or sunsets. Other people had them while they were meditating, reaching a state of pure consciousness, outside of time and space. Others had awakening experiences after meditating, when the perceptions were sharper and richer and they felt a sense of connection to their surroundings.

Two other common triggers of awakening experiences are dancing and listening to music. For example, one friend told me about an experience he had while he was dancing in a group outdoors:

As we were dancing I started to feel as if it wasn't me who was doing it anymore. I didn't have to think. It was just dancing me, and it was the best I ever danced. I felt like I was just a channel for the music. We weren't individuals anymore, we were a whole body of six people. I felt an expansion of awareness into space. I was dancing in the space in the middle of the hills. I was part of this vast background.

While another friend described an experience he had while listening to a concert performance of Brahms' 4th symphony:

The magical moment came and suddenly it was like glittering petals of sounds exploded. I could immediately feel the stream of life flowing around me. It was a movement of feeling as though I was experiencing heaven on earth. I felt] a huge sense of euphoria, an intense sense of well-being. Life became idyllic, and it carried on for days. For five days I felt completely energised.

Many of you have probably experienced something like this during or after sex too: a feeling of well-being which goes beyond sensual pleasure, and is caused by a change of consciousness. Perhaps earlier you felt stressed and worried, as if your life was full of problems – but often after sex everything seems miraculously different. Your problems seem to have disappeared (proving that to a large extent we create our own problems *by* worrying), and you seem to be glowing inwardly, as if a kind of dynamo has been switched on inside you, filling you with a feeling of completeness and serenity. Here, for example, an acquaintance of mine describes how she feels after she has orgasms:

I feel as if I haven't got any weight. There's a warm feeling running all through my body...Nothing else seems to matter, problems cease to exist, as if the feeling takes you over so much that there's no room for anything else. I feel capable of doing anything...

I also look at things more clearly, look beyond what I usually look at. The colours seem more distinct; if you look at, say, a tree, you see it for what it really is, not just as a tree. You see it as nature, not just as an object.

Sports can generate awakening experiences too, particularly fairly sedate and rhythmic sports like jogging and swimming. I've recently taken up running myself, and found that it has a powerful 'awakening' effect. I usually run for 20-25 minutes, around the fields close to my home. I'm not particularly fit or athletic (at least not at the moment) so I find it a little awkward to begin with, and feel that I'm not going to be able to run for very long. But after a few minutes I fall into a rhythm. The running becomes more effortless and my state of mind begins to change. If mind is busy with chattering thoughts, I begin to 'dis-identify' with them, to detach myself from them and allow them to fade away. After 15 minutes or so I stop – partly for a short rest but mainly so that I can look at my surroundings. Everything around me looks more beautiful and striking – the trees seem more real and distinct, and the dark of the sky seems rich and powerful. When I look at the sky, I sometimes have a sense that I'm really here, on the surface of this planet, with the universe stretching everywhere around me. It feels amazing to be alive in the midst of it all, and sometimes my individuality seems to fade away and I become aware of myself as a part of the whole universe. The whole universe is alive and that alive-ness flows through me and is a part of me.

I run for another 5 or 10 minutes after my break, and by the time I get home I'm filled with a glow of well-being which lasts for the rest of the evening. I feel content and complete, and my mind seems impervious to worries, resentments or aversions. As a result, running has become a form of spiritual practice for me.

The Causes of Awakening Experiences

There are two basic types of awakening experiences, which have two distinct causes. The first are wild, ecstatic experiences that happen when the normal physiological balance of our brain and bodies is disrupted. This is why, throughout history, people have tried to bring about spiritual experiences by fasting, going without sleep, dancing frenziedly, doing breathing exercises, and taking psychedelic drugs. All of these activities disrupt our normal physiology, changing our body temperature, blood pressure or metabolic rate, and causing dehydration, exhaustion or chemical changes. And when this happens there's a chance that we'll have an awakening experience. This certainly doesn't always happen, of course. Most of the time the only effect that depriving yourself of sleep and food often has is to make you feel miserably tired and hungry. Usually this awakening effect only occurs in the context of a religious ritual or ceremony.

The second type of spiritual experiences are more serene and calm states which occur when our life-energy (or vitality) becomes more intensified than normal. This can happen in any situation when we're very relaxed, when there's peacefulness around us, and when our minds become quiet. In meditation, for example, we intensify our life-energy by being inactive and withdrawing our attention from the world around us. But most importantly, by focusing on a mantra (or a candle flame or on our breathing or any other object) we slow down and quieten our mental chatter. We often don't realise it, but this 'thought-chatter' - the endless stream of memories, daydreams, worries and impressions that fills our minds whenever our attention isn't occupied - uses up a massive amount of mental energy. And so when this chatter becomes quieter, or even fades away altogether, our life-energy becomes much more intense. This extra energy fuels our perceptions, so that the world becomes a much more beautiful and harmonious place, and fills us with a sense of well-being.

This is also why nature can trigger awakening experiences. Its beauty and power can have a similar effect to a mantra, quietening our mental chatter, until our life-energy intensifies and we become still and quiet inside. The same applies to running and swimming, with their repetitive rhythm. And listening to music, dancing and sex can also have the same mind-quietening and energy-intensifying effect. The sheer pleasure of sex can have the effect of shifting our attention away from our ego-minds, which may fall silent as a result.

Generating Awakening Experiences

If we know what causes awakening experiences, then in theory we should be able to generate them at will. If you like, you could do this through this disrupting your physiology, by regularly fasting, going without sleep or taking psychedelic drugs. However, it goes without saying that this could be dangerous to your health, both physical and psychological. With this kind of awakening experiences, you have little control over what's happening to you, and there's also the risk of not being prepared for the intense realities you gain access to.

It's more sensible to try to induce the second type of awakening experiences, by making a conscious effort to intensify your life-energy. An important part of this is learning to be inactive, and how to relax. Many of us spend our lives rushing from one activity to the next, filling our free time with endless entertainments and distractions, never allowing ourselves to do nothing or to be alone with ourselves. But once we learn how to do this, there is a whole host of activities we can do – dancing, playing or listening to music, swimming, meditation, walking in the countryside, sex – with the aim of generating awakening experiences. Simply knowing that we're likely to 'wake up' once these activities have helped our minds to become quiet and still will increase the likelihood of us having the experiences.

Permanent Wakefulness

But ultimately, we need to make wakefulness our *normal*, everyday state. This might seem impossible: surely we would find life impossible if we were continually aware of the beauty and harmony of the world, and of our own oneness with it? But if we were naturally awake, this awareness could be a state which was always potentially there, and which we could tune into whenever we desired, at the same time as dealing with the tasks of everyday life.

Becoming permanently awake means having a permanently high intensity of life-energy inside us. We can achieve this by trying to make sure that our lives are never too stressful or hectic, that we have regular periods of silence and solitude, and that we regularly meditate or do some other form of 'energy-intensifying' practice. *Service* is important too. Whether it's bringing up children, doing voluntary or community work, helping elderly neighbours, performing service for others helps us to connect to a wider reality, a shared human consciousness beyond our individual selves. As a result – hopefully – the boundaries of the ego become softer, which helps us to move towards wakefulness.

In a sense wakefulness is natural. Some of the world's indigenous peoples seem to live in a natural state of wakefulness. They naturally possess a heightened perception, a sense of the aliveness of things and, an awareness of spirit-force pervading the world. Young children are naturally awake too. They see the world in a much more real and intense way than adults, experience a powerful natural well-being and often have intense spiritual experiences, where they become one with the world, or see it pervaded with an intense spiritual radiance.

So by having awakening experiences, or even moving to a state of permanent wakefulness, we're really only going back to our original state, returning to the state of well-being, wonder and connection which is our birthright.

Tips on generating awakening experiences

Go running in natural surroundings, such as a park or field. Give yourself up to the rhythm of your legs, and allow your thinking mind to become quiet.

Listen to music with full attention, and with a quiet mind. Let the music wash over you, fill your whole being, until you forget yourself and your surroundings.

Meditate for 20 minutes, focusing on a mantra, or on the rhythm of your breathing. Let the chatter of your mind fade away, and be conscious of your own inner energy, filling your body

inside. After meditation, walk into your garden, or into some nearby fields, and become aware of its beauty and is-ness.

What can we do to make wakefulness our normal state?

To become permanently and constantly 'awake', we need to build up a permanently high intensity of life-energy inside us, which we can do by following these guidelines:

Meditate regularly. Regular meditation has a cumulative effect. It makes our minds permanently quieter, and so permanently intensifies our life-energy.

Practise mindfulness. Mindfulness is a form of meditation which you can practise in your daily life. As you walk, be mindful of your feet touching the ground, and of the surroundings you're walking amongst. When eating, be fully attentive to the taste of the food, and the sensations it creates in your mouth.

Enjoy Silence and Solitude. Many of us try to avoid solitude and silence, but we should learn to relish them as an opportunity to completely relax and make contact with our true selves.

Service. Helping and supporting others makes us less self-centred and more connected to the universe.

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Steve Taylor is the author of *Waking From Sleep* (Hay House), described by Eckhart Tolle as 'One of the best books on spiritual awakening I have ever come across.' He lives in Manchester, England, with his three young children and is a lecturer at Leeds Metropolitan University and Salford College. His website is www.stevenmtaylor.com.