

**POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH AND SPIRITUAL AWAKENING:  
HOW WE SOMETIMES GAIN BY LOSING OUR MOST PRECIOUS ATTACHMENTS**  
by Randy Compton



(The material from this article comes in large part from the book Out of the Darkness: From Turmoil to Transformation by Steve Taylor. He outlines the process of personal and spiritual transformation as a result of trauma and turmoil so clearly and in a way that answered many questions I had about my own experience of trauma being the doorway to spiritual transformation. This article is meant to clarify my own experience and add some bits to the ongoing discussion of the process and many paths of spiritual transformation.)

*“There will always be some degree of suffering in our lives and when it comes, we should not try to see it in wholly negative terms. We should always be aware that, buried inside it, there is an opportunity for growth and transformation...Beneath the terrible, painful surface there is a massive reservoir of spiritual potential...Spiritual awakening exists as a potential inside everyone. It’s just that normally the potential is dormant. To manifest itself, it normally has to be triggered by turmoil and trauma. However, if we know it’s there, latent in the same way that a butterfly is latent inside a caterpillar it should be possible to release it in other ways, too.”*

-Steve Taylor

In my previous paper, Spiritual Transformation Through Trauma, I outlined the basic elements of trauma and spiritual transformation and shared my own personal process along the way. Writing it was one of the most important things I have done. It felt true. And it felt scary to share with others. I was shy and a bit afraid of how others would receive it. It was so meaningful that I didn't want anyone who read it to not get it because not getting it would mean my experience wasn't valid.

I've grown since then. The process has deepened. And, I have felt a greater understanding of what is happening inside me, something I deeply wanted to know since I had been getting many conflicting ideas of what was happening, why, and how I should best support the process.

## Three Types of Spiritual Transformation: Temporary, Gradual & Sudden

In his book Out of the Darkness, Steve Taylor explains that there are three core types of "spiritual alchemy"—or spiritual transformation—that one experiences as a result of intense turmoil and trauma: 1) temporary awakening experiences; 2) gradual but permanent awakenings; and 3) sudden and dramatic awakenings. I knew after reading this that my own process fit the "gradual but permanent awakening". It answered my questions of why I would slip back and forth between states and why I felt that my own feelings of Knowing and Being something way beyond my normal sense of self would not only never go away but were permanent states that were being uncovered in gradual but sometimes intense breakthrough moments over time. And, they had always been in me as my Own True Self, always waiting and ever ready to emerge as I took continual steps towards It, towards my Self.

### Temporary Spiritual Experiences

Most of us have experienced some type of transformational experience in our lives. Often they have come as a result of some intense or traumatic life event, whether it was a deep and intense loss or abrupt shock to the system where we were forced out of our normal way of perceiving or being. As a result of this experience, we got in touch with something profound, saw something ineffable, or knew something truer than we've ever felt before.

These temporary awakening experiences help us understand that there is more to life than what we see around us, even when the world and the conversations we normally have don't speak about it. While these experiences may fade over time, they are seeds that have been planted—and when watered over time through patience, practice and perhaps more turmoil or trauma—will inspire us for the rest of our lives. They might possibly even sprout into a more gradual, permanent awakening.

### Gradual but Permanent Awakenings

In some instances, the amount of turmoil and trauma is so intense that it causes the scaffolding of our ego to be dismantled. The one thing that we built our lives around that meant everything to us—a career, our reputation, our financial success, our health, our family and loved ones, whatever it is—is lost and then so are we. We breakdown. And it is in this critical moment that we determine whether this intense suffering will become a breakthrough to an awakening or whether it will become something we get through and return to our "normal" life. The key is the extent to which we face the pain head on, the extent to which we can fully face the terror, the depression, the anxiety or even the horror, and then to feel it fully. It is not easy to do. And though it will break you, these cracks in the armor of our ego self allow the light of the Self to stream through.

In the case of gradual but permanent awakenings, our turmoil and trauma is intense enough over a long period of time that it chisels away at our normal psyche in such a forceful way that once it has dissolved, it is never able to reform itself. From this, the individual experiences a

permanent state of wakefulness. There may be more to uncover but a significant chunk has been dislodged and an awakened state has been revealed in part forever.

For many, trauma and turmoil will have negative long-term impacts, such as chronic anxiety, chronic depression, dissociation, emotional numbness, aggression, even multiple personalities or dissociative identity disorder. But the good news is that as terrible as these consequences are, it is possible they can be balanced by—and even transcended by—long-term positive effects. Post-traumatic growth is possible and it occurs when we have the courage, the skills, and the patience to face the terror and find a way to feel it and accept it over time.

What does post-traumatic growth look like? The signs include an ability to step back from our situation, to stop striving so hard, to allow things to unfold and happen on their own, to trust in the future, to be more sensitive and more open to life, and to be more self-reliant and more authentic.

However, in most of the cases that Steve Taylor observed, the process was not a gradual one but a sudden one. Of the thirty plus people he interviewed for his book, including well-known spiritual teachers such as Eckhart Tolle and Byron Katie, most of their transformation happened in a dramatic and powerful moment.

#### Sudden, Abrupt and Permanent Awakenings

Steve found over and over again that people had spiritual transformations that were permanent when they hit the wall and decided, consciously or unconsciously, to let go, to face whatever would come because death couldn't be worse than what they were facing. And by facing death, a profound sense of life emerged.

*"Then one night it happened. The void rolled out completely, the world disappeared and my consciousness expanded into an infinite timeless consciousness. Everything shone with a light. I looked at my dog and saw myself looking back and again laughed and cried at the same time. A massive energy pervaded my body, which I couldn't seem to contain." (Jill)*

*"Everything just began unraveling. My messy, insignificant life seemed perfect. Then the floodgates opened, the water broke. I was filled with pure light. I entered a state of bliss that lasted several months. I guess I can say that I gave birth to myself or to 'the self'. To sum it up as a scientist, I experienced a frequency change. To sum it up in spiritual terms, it was an initiation." (Stephanie)*

*"It was as though I had shutters around my brain and they were being pulled up one by one. And knowledge was flooding through. I was expanding. It was all coming at once, flooding through, as if my ego was crashing down. And suddenly I'm aware of everything there is. There's still a physical me, but there is also a*

*real me. The real me is very light, pure and perfect. Everything is perfect. There is a white spirit in everything, in us, a superior mind, far greater than anything I could have dreamed of. I'm joined with God seeing everything from a much higher perspective." (Glyn Hood)*

*"It was as if my entire being had been clenched in a tight fist and suddenly the fist opened up and let go completely. Everything dropped away. I began seeing and experiencing a kind of upwelling or emanation inside me. It was in front of my eyes, but also inside my eyes and inside my body and it started flowing upward. It was emptiness, the void, but it was luminous. It was just a current of bliss." (Michael Hutchison)*

In all these cases, people came away with a permanent state of awakening. The shift happened abruptly and dramatically and things just fell away to reveal their luminous Self and the Self of All. Unlike a temporary awakening experience, which inspires one for the rest of one's life and fuels one on the journey, the intense shift that occurs after letting go completely is permanent. One sees the world in a whole new way.

What is true in all cases, distinguished only by the degree of one's suffering and turmoil, is that suffering and turmoil can open up deep reservoirs of spiritual wisdom and in many cases unleash an awakened state of Being. Trauma and turmoil can serve a purpose. Seen in this light, one might seek to head into trauma rather than away from it. One might seek to plumb the depths of it, for the deeper one goes, the deeper one becomes until perhaps at last a permanent sense of awakening is realized.

Kahlil Gibran writes in The Prophet, "The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain." Nietzsche always thought his suffering served him. About this, he said "I doubt whether suffering improves a man; but I do know that it makes him deeper."

Research on spiritual transformation shows that half of these events occur due to tragedy and half occur as a result of steady spiritual practice. In fact according to some research, depression and despair is a more common trigger of spiritual experiences than prayer.

So, what does this mean for us? It means that when suffering occurs there is opportunity. Rather than rail against it, we can lean into it. Rather than complain about it, we can see it as a vehicle for our own transformation. Something wonderful is happening. Yes, it's painful and awful. And, yes, it can be debilitating and unbearable. But it can also be telling us that we are on a spiritual path and we are heading in the right direction. Rather than trying to get rid of it or fix it, our job is to head into it. Not blindly nor brazenly but with a sense that we are in an alchemical process which burns as it transforms.

My Own Thoughts

While Steve Taylor suggests that gradual but permanent awakenings are less common, my sense is that they might be more common if we used trauma therapy more often with a spiritual focus. In my own experience, I had deeply spiritual awakening experiences that seem to be permanent but which weren't yet fully integrated and which are taking time to settle in. For example, I faced death and completely let go with the result of a profound shift in consciousness and awareness but it wasn't complete. It cracked open something that would never go away and which I experience again and again, but something which still competes with another reality that is different. As I wrote in my previous paper,

*"I got to a place in a quiet and deep moment where I said to this dark force, 'Take me, do what you want with me.' There was nothing else I could do to make it go away and all I could do was surrender. I was tired and was willing to let go completely. But I also felt something deeper in that I knew I couldn't be killed, some part wouldn't die even in death. Something else would remain. At that point, I touched the immortal within."*

This knowing is there. It is permanent. And yet there is still more to be chipped away, to reduce the occlusion, and this chipping away continues to be painful and uncomfortable. There may be many more people in this process than he thinks. The chipping is happening and for many of us, there is simply no turning back.

What may be most important is our ability to allow the process to unfold. While this is easy to say, doing it in our culture is hard. It means not following cultural norms that say hold it together, don't fail, don't lose control. It is a risky path and not for the feint of heart. And it is hard for friends and family to determine whether someone is failing and close to breakthrough or just heading into yet another breakdown with no breakthrough on the horizon. As far as I can tell, it may simply come down to one's commitment to and faith in the process...and Grace, which appears unbidden. One never knows when hitting bottom will reap rich rewards and outsiders looking in may only be able to watch in helplessness.

Yet, if we do have a sense that more is possible when trauma and turmoil exist, if a person can spiritualize their experience and see it as an opportunity for post-traumatic growth, much can happen. If our world can see suffering as an opportunity for spiritual growth, imagine what can happen. It is really up to us. Each one is given the opportunity.

For some, we may choose (or be given) the fast path of supremely intense suffering which may awaken us abruptly. For others, we may choose (or be given) the somewhat fast path of chronically intense suffering which may awaken us gradually. And for others, we may choose (or be given) the moderate path of occasional suffering, which may give us awakening experiences that build and build over years and perhaps lifetimes.

One can also expand this theory beyond the individual into the cultural. As we suffer on an individual level, so too do we suffer collectively. As our world suffers from environmental degradation, economic instability, material and spiritual poverty, we can view these not as

problems to be fixed but as opportunities to embrace. Rather than trying simply to fix them and end the suffering, we can gently and consciously allow the process to unfold within and without by feeling into things, by allowing trauma and turmoil to move through our culture, by being willing to feel worldly pain and discomfort without trying to push it away—all at the same time that we are working to improve the situation, heal the problem and create a better world.

We can do this by getting bigger and allowing the intense pain to be felt and watched from afar like watching a lightning storm in an open sky. As Steve Taylor shows, this can happen abruptly or slowly over months and years. We can dissolve the normal structure of our individual and collective psyche and head into the void, where sooner or later our butterfly self emerges, and perhaps even, sooner or later, our butterfly collective self and culture emerges.

What he doesn't talk much about is what happens as the butterfly self emerges slowly and gradually. My experience is that as this self emerges, especially after prolonged trauma, it may require deep rest, more solitude, more quiet and tender care for a number of years.

Neil Steven Cohen talks about an element of this process in this way:

*“As you begin to open, soften and reconnect with previously denied parts of yourself, there will be a heightened sensitivity. This enhanced sensitivity may not be comfortable at first. For this opening is new, vulnerable and less defended. The old emotional armor begins to melt and fall away.”*

We can support one another in this process by acknowledging this truth and encouraging one another to take great care and get deep rest, both for healing the pain of the constant chipping away and for protecting and nurturing the sacred child within, the “Undefended and Receptive Heart”<sup>1</sup> that is being born.

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<sup>1</sup> Neil Steven Cohen, The Voice of Heart, p. 103