

**A PHENOMENOLOGICAL
INVESTIGATION INTO THE
PSYCHOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION
INTERPRETED AS 'SPIRITUAL
AWAKENING':
POSSIBLE CAUSES, CHARACTERISTICS,
AND AFTER-EFFECTS**

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Abstract

This thesis studied transformational experiences of 'spiritual awakening' from a psychological perspective, using a phenomenological qualitative approach (specifically, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis). The aim was to study the phenomenology of individuals who claim to have had this experience. Purposive sampling was used to find a group of individuals who felt that they had undergone the experience of 'spiritual awakening.' Twenty-five participants made contact, primarily through the author's website, which focuses on issues relating to psychology and spirituality. Given this approach, the sample represented a *subset* of those who may have experienced spiritual awakening in broader contexts. The participants were interviewed using a semi-structured format. The transcripts were coded, then the main themes of the twenty-five interviews were elicited.

Twenty-five major codes were identified. These were ranked in terms of the number of participants who shared them. All twenty-five participants reported a shift into a new psychological state, with a new sense of identity, new modes of cognition and perception, a new relationship to their surroundings and to other human beings (including increased authenticity and compassion) and new values (including a less materialistic attitude and increased altruism, in some cases leading to a change in career). In this respect, the study found that much of the phenomenology of their experiences was similar to the characteristics of 'spiritual awakening' as expressed by spiritual traditions and also by transpersonal psychologists.

However, a significant number of participants also reported initial and ongoing difficulties and fluctuations in their state, including psychological disturbances, cognitive problems, difficulty dealing with practical and organisational tasks, confusion, and physical problems such as sleeplessness and ongoing pain. In this sense, the study confirmed the close relationship between spiritual experience and psychopathology, as noted by Grof (2000), Clark (2010), Lucas (2011) and others.

The study discussed possible causes of the different aspects of the participants' experiences, and also the possibility that the phenomenology of their experiences may have been at least in part the result of narrative construction (especially in the aftermath of intensely traumatic experiences), in relation to the need to reconstruct their identity and establish a conceptual framework to make sense of their

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This study found that it may be misleading to conceive of the psychological shift interpreted by the participants as 'spiritual awakening' as a purely positive state, without attendant difficulties. It is perhaps more accurate to think in terms of a 'spiritual opening' – a psychological shift which can bring a more intense and expanded awareness, but which can create instability and disturbance.

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I would like to express my gratitude for the support and encouragement of my two supervisors, Professor Les Lancaster and Professor Stanley Krippner. I would also like to thank all of the participants in this study, for their openness in sharing their experiences.

Declaration

I affirm that this thesis was composed by myself and that all of the work herein (aside from the sources cited) is my own original research.

1. Introduction

In transpersonal psychology and religious studies, a great deal of attention has been paid to temporary 'spiritual experiences' or 'higher states of consciousness.' For example, from a religious or spiritual perspective, they have been the subject of studies by Hardy (1979), Johnson (1959) and Laski, (1961). From a more psychological perspective, they have been studied by Hoffman (1992), Maslow (1970), Wade (2004), White (2011) and Taylor (2010), amongst others. (Other studies will be referred to in the Literature Review, 2.2).

However, less attention has been paid to the state of permanent 'awakening', particularly from a psychological point of view. Maslow did not systematically research the 'plateau experience' or the 'self-actualised' state. Miller and C'de Baca (2001) 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 'spiritual awakening', also including examples of 'insightful' quantum changes, when individuals gained an intellectual realisation or insight which enabled them to change their behaviour or solve problems.

Most cultures throughout history have conceived of or described a 'higher' state of being, in which their awareness of reality and their relationship to the world is transformed. This state has been seen as bringing a more acute and intense awareness of reality, revelations of knowledge and truth which are normally hidden, and a state of well-being. In comparison, the ordinary human state appears limited. This 'higher' state has been referred to in different cultures and languages as *satori*, *samadhi*, 'deification', *fana* or *en sof*, and so on. It is conceived as an 'awakening' from the limited state of normal consciousness.

Most cultures have made a distinction between temporary experiences of this state and a permanent, ongoing experience of it. In the Hindu Vedanta tradition, this is the distinction between *nirvikalpa* or *savikalpa samadhi* (usually seen as temporary) and *sahaja samadhi* (Feuerstein, 1990). In Sufism, there is a similar distinction between *fana* and *baqa* (Spencer, 1963); likewise in Zen Buddhism, *kensho* and *satori* are comparable terms (Suzuki, 1956). In the Christian spiritual tradition, there is a similar distinction between mystical *experiences*, and mysticism as a permanent state, as in the state of 'deification' or 'theosis' (Underhill, 1960). Maslow (1970) made a

similar distinction between the 'peak experience' and the 'plateau' experience, or between 'peak experiences' and the 'self-actualised' state.

Spiritual traditions suggest certain practices and lifestyle guidelines which can both offer temporary awakening, and help the individual to move to a permanent state of awakening. Specific practices include meditation or contemplative prayer, breathing exercises, 'contemplative reading' (known as 'lectio divina' in the Christian tradition), contact with a person who has already become 'enlightened', as well as ascetic practices such as self-inflicted pain, fasting or sleep deprivation (Feuerstein, 1990; Happold, 1996; Spenser, 1963; Underhill, 1960). Lifestyle guidelines towards this end have included celibacy, renunciation and 'voluntary poverty.' There are also well-developed and methodical systems such as the eightfold path of yoga and the eight-limbed path of Buddhism. In some cultures, monastic traditions have developed whose main purpose was to facilitate 'spiritual awakening'. In Christian monastic traditions, this incorporated practices such as long periods of silence and solitude, contemplative reading, celibacy and renunciation (Underhill, 1960; Happold, 1996).

This study aims to systematically study the phenomenology of reported experiences of 'spiritual awakening', specifically using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. The most common themes of the participants' transformational experiences will be identified through a process of coding transcripts and texts. These themes will then be compared to the major characteristics of 'spiritual awakening' as identified by different spiritual traditions and transpersonal psychologists, highlighted in the Literature Review.

The long term effects of these transformational experiences will also be investigated. For example, do the participants report changes to their values, their attitude to material goods, or their relationships with others? Do they report any changes to their lifestyle e.g. changes to their career or leisure activities?

Finally, the reported triggers or causes of the transformational experiences will be investigated. For example, previous research (e.g. Miller and C'de Baca, 2001; Taylor, 2012a) suggests that intense psychological turmoil can trigger a sudden shift into perceived 'spiritual awakening', while from the standpoint of spiritual traditions, specific practices and lifestyle guidelines are believed to facilitate a gradual movement to awakening.

The study will reflect on different possible interpretations of the participants' experiences, although it is beyond its scope to reach any firm conclusions in this area.

2.0 Literature Review

This review will examine the researches of psychologists (primarily transpersonal psychologists) with regard to the causes and characteristics of spiritual awakening, at the same time as examining the concept of 'awakening' in different spiritual/religious traditions. The purpose of this is to identify these causes and characteristics of the state so that they can be compared to the reports of the participants of the study. This will also provide a conceptual framework within which the phenomenology of the participants' experiences can be analysed. I will also investigate the characteristics of temporary spiritual experiences, and discuss whether there is a relationship between these and a permanent state of 'spiritual awakening.' I will investigate the different contexts in which 'spiritual awakening' occurs, including turmoil and trauma, and discuss the relationship between the state and psychosis or mental disturbance.

2.1 The Use of term 'Enlightenment'

In recent decades, the term 'enlightenment' in particular has become widely used with the meaning of 'spiritual awakening' in the west. Many authors (e.g. Feuerstein, 1990; Loy, 2011; Mitchell, 1991; Tolle, 1999) have used the term across different spiritual traditions, referring to a general state of liberation or awakening. Even Forman (2011) uses the term in this general sense, whilst arguing – in his book of this title – that 'Enlightenment ain't what it's cracked up to be.'

However, there is some debate about whether this is an accurate use of the term 'enlightenment.' Even in Buddhism, there is a good deal of debate about what the term 'enlightenment' means, partly because the Buddha was reluctant to describe it, or even discuss it. In Theravada Buddhism, enlightenment is not seen as a positive state of bliss or universal oneness, but as an extinction, a 'blowing out', in which 'there is not this world, and no other world' (in Spencer, 1963, pp. 80-1). (A fuller discussion of the meaning of 'enlightenment' in Buddhism is given in section 2.3.1, p.44).

As a result, it is problematic to extend the term 'enlightenment' from Buddhism to other spiritual traditions. For these reasons, I have used the term 'enlightenment' only sparingly in this context, and have preferred the more neutral

term ‘awakening.’ I have attempted to restrict my use of the term ‘enlightenment’ to a Buddhist context. (I did however use term in my notice to attract participants, in conjunction with ‘spiritual awakening’, to reflect the common currency of the term and make my meaning clearer.)

The popular usage of the term ‘enlightenment’ often infers that the state is one of continual well-being, a state of permanent bliss in which the individual transcends the normal difficulties of everyday life and the anxieties of the normal human mind (e.g. Cohen, 2011; Mitchell, 1991; Tolle, 1999). This notion of ‘awakening’ also appears in spiritual texts such as *The Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad-Gita*. For example, in *The Upanishads* it is stated that, ‘When it [the soul] discovers the Atman, full of dignity and power, it is freed from suffering’ and ‘when a man knows the infinite, he is free; his sorrows have an end’ (*The Upanishads*, 1985, p.86).

However, this concept of ‘enlightenment’ may also be problematic. Other researchers and authors have suggested that ‘spiritual awakening’ is not a blissful trouble-free state but may – especially in its formative stages – be attended with psychiatric disturbances, psychological difficulties and even physical problems (e.g. Grof, 1993; Clarke, 2010; Lucas 2011). The Christian concept of the ‘Dark Night of the Soul’ – a period of turbulence following the onset of spiritual awakening – also suggests that spiritual awakening may not be a permanent blissful state (Underhill, 1960; Happold, 1986). The potentially ‘problematic’ nature of spiritual awakening will be explored further in section 2.3.9 (p.44).

2.2 Studies of Temporary Spiritual Experiences

It is important to examine temporary spiritual experiences, since they may share characteristics with permanent spiritual awakening. They may be viewed as a temporary experience of a state which, following the onset of spiritual awakening, becomes a *permanent* state. In the Indian Yoga and Vedanta traditions, both *nirvikalpa* and *savikalpa samadhi* are temporary ‘awakened’ states of oneness, usually occurring during meditation. They are also both incompatible with daily life (Sri Chinmoy, 1989). However, it is also possible to attain a permanent state of *sahaja samadhi*, where the individual retains his or her oneness with *Brahman* as they live their day to day life. As Ramana Maharshi (1993) put it, ‘Remaining permanently in the primal state [of samadhi] without effort is *sahaja*’ (p.89). There is a parallel here

with the concepts of *fana* and *baqa* in Sufism. Whereas *fana* is the temporary experience of 'passing away', *baqa* is a permanent state of 'abiding in God' (Azeemi, 2005). There is also similarity with the concepts of *kensho* and *satori* in Zen Buddhism. Although these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, *kensho* usually refers to a more shallow and temporary experience of awakening, while *satori* refers to a deeper and more long lasting state (Suzuki, 1956).

Spiritual experiences have been the subject of many studies, focussing on the characteristics of the experiences (e.g. James, 1985; Johnson, 1959; Marshall, 2005), how common the experiences are (e.g. Heald, 2000; Greeley, 1974), and the causes or apparent triggers of the experiences (e.g. Hardy, 1979; Laski, 1961). These different areas will be examined in turn.

2.2.1 'Spiritual Experience' and 'Spiritual Transformation' as Terms

It is perhaps useful to begin by clarifying my use of terminology. The terms 'spiritual' and 'mystical' experience are sometimes used interchangeably (e.g. James, 1985; Hardy, 1979), or elsewhere 'mystical experiences' are seen as an especially *intense* form of spiritual experience (Underhill, 1960; Happold, 1986; Marshall, 2005). However, the terms 'mystical experience' and 'mystic' are most commonly used by religious scholars (particularly in the Christian tradition), referring to 'spiritual experiences' or individuals who have reached a high level of 'spiritual development' in the context of religion – so that, for example, Happold and Underhill refer to the 'Great mystics' such as St. John of the Cross and St. Theresa. It is rare for transpersonal or humanistic psychologists to use the term 'mystical' when discussing spiritual experiences which occur in a non-religious context – that is, experiences apparently triggered or generated by activities or situations such as contact with nature, sport, music, sex (an exception is Hood [1975], with his use of the term mysticism in his 'M-scale.' Marshall [2005] also uses the term but is also a scholar of religion rather than a transpersonal psychologist.) Examples of alternative terms are 'transcendent experiences' (e.g., Wade, 2000, 2004), 'peak experiences' (e.g. Maslow, 1971), 'exceptional human experiences' (e.g. White & Brown, 2011), 'transpersonal experience' (e.g. Assagioli, 2007), in addition to the popular 'spiritual experience' (e.g. Wilber, 1995; Grof, 1990; Murphy, 1992; Daniels, 2005).

A further issue with the term 'mystical' is its meaning in popular discourse. For Happold and Underhill, a 'mystic' is a person who has managed to expand and intensify his or her normal consciousness, and so has a more intense and truer vision of reality, and a new relationship to the world – including an awareness and sense of connection to the divine. However, in popular discourse, the term 'mystical' means going beyond the bounds of modern science or reason, as with phenomena such as alien abductions, astrology or crystal healing.

Maslow's term 'peak experience' is problematic in some respects too, particularly in terms of its breadth. As Maslow himself and others have used the term, 'peak experience' has a wide range of meaning, referring not only to 'spiritual' experiences but to other experiences of well-being, such as the feeling of achieving a long-sought goal, overcoming challenges or obstacles, appreciating what is normally taken for granted, skills mastery, profound musings and unforgettable dreams (Hoffman & Ortiz, 2009). Certainly, some of the examples Maslow gives of 'peak experiences' – e.g. a young drummer who had three peaks when he felt that his performance was perfect, a dinner party hostess who had a peak experience at the end of a perfect evening (Maslow, 1962) – are not what would normally be considered 'spiritual experiences.' These may be experiences of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992), deep happiness, relief or appreciation but they do not appear to involve the shift in perception, the sense of revelation, meaning and connection or unity which spiritual experiences bring.

White's term 'Exceptional Human Experience' (e.g. White & Brown, 2011) is also very broad. It is an umbrella term for a wide range of anomalous experiences, only some of which are 'spiritual.' For example, White and Brown (2011) include such experiences as crop circle encounters, déjà vu, encountering fairies, firewalking and haunting. These are certainly unusual or altered states of consciousness, but they do not necessarily involve the sense of transcendence, connection and heightened awareness which *higher* states of consciousness bring.

I have previously suggested the term '*awakening* experiences.' This term recognizes that in these moments our awareness and perception become more intense and expansive than normal. There is a sense of stepping beyond the normal limitations – or filters – of our normal consciousness, bringing a sense of clarity, revelation and well-being in which we become aware of a deeper (or higher) level of reality (Taylor,

2010). However, since the term has limited currency, it is not appropriate to use it in a wide-ranging discussion.

The word 'spiritual' is not without difficulties either. Again, in popular discourse the term has many different meanings. In everyday speech, when a person says 'She's such a *spiritual* person,' this could have a variety of interpretations: that the person believes in ghosts and goes to séances; that she follows the teachings of a religion and goes to church or the mosque every week; that she has healing crystals in the bathroom, goes to see a Reiki healer and reads books about channelling and angels; or that she is calm and humble, generous and compassionate, rather than materialistic or status-seeking. Noting this plethora of meanings, Wilber has written, 'the real difficulty...is getting almost anyone to agree with what we call "spiritual." The term is virtually useless for any sort of coherent discussion' (1997, p. 221). The same applies specifically to the term 'spiritual experience.' I have found that some people believe the term refers to a psychic or paranormal experience, while others use the term with a purely religious meaning (e.g. religious visions, 'hearing' the voice of God or Jesus) (Taylor, 2010).

However, the term 'spirituality' has been widely used by researchers in reference to a state of being – both temporary and continuous – in which the individual experiences reality at a heightened intensity and experiences a sense of connection to a transcendent force or energy. For example, Stringer and McAvoy (1992) suggest that 'spirituality' is associated with the following characteristics: awareness, human interconnectedness, attunement, inner feelings, connection or relation to a greater power/deity, inner self-knowledge, faith or beliefs, inner strength, sense of wholeness, oneness, peace and/or tranquillity, values, intangibility and a shared or common spirit. Stringer and McAvoy (1992) also identified a number of feelings associated with spirituality, including exuberance, calmness, quietness, gentleness, clarity, security, hope, curiosity, tranquillity, joy, equilibrium, oneness, exhilaration and peace. Fredrickson & Anderson (1999) associated the term 'spirituality' with similar characteristics, including intangibility, centring force, heightened sensory awareness, timelessness, being empowered, hope, grounded and secure, full of wonder, awe, and humility. Friedman (1983) has noted that spiritual states are associated with a more expansive and inclusive sense of self, stretching beyond mere identification with personal ego and body.

While the term ‘spirituality’ can be used to refer to both an ongoing, general ‘spiritual’ state and temporary spiritual experiences, the more specific term ‘spiritual experience’ was defined by Fox as ‘an altered state of consciousness where an individual may experience a higher sense of self, inner feelings, inner knowledge, awareness and attainment to the world and one’s place in it, knowledge of personal relations and the relationship to the environment, or a belief in a power greater than imaginable’ (Fox, 1997, p. 455).

Similarly, as a part of her ‘Spirituality Scoring System’, Casto (in Krippner & Sulla, 2012) defines ‘spiritual experiences’ as:

Experiences in which a sense of direct contact, communion or union with something that is considered to be ultimate reality, God or the divine; and/or experiences in which one’s sense of identity temporarily reaches beyond or extends past his or her ordinary personal identity to include an expanded perspective of humanity and/or the universe; and/or experiences where one appears to enter a sacred realm or condition that goes beyond the ordinary boundaries of space and linear time (in Krippner & Sulla, 2012)

Despite Wilber’s complaint, it seems that the terms ‘spirituality’ and ‘spiritual experience’ have been used more consistently and specifically by researchers, and I will therefore adopt these terms in this study.

2.2.2 The Characteristics of ‘Spiritual’ Experiences

There is a general agreement amongst scholars of mysticism on the characteristics of spiritual experiences. James (1985) suggested four main characteristics: ineffability, a noetic quality (that is, revelation or illumination), transiency and passivity (that is, although they may be facilitated by certain practices or activities, there is a sense in which they are involuntary and cannot be controlled). Stace (1964) added five other characteristics to these: unity, transcendence of time, deeply felt positive mood, sense of sacredness, paradoxicality and persisting positive changes (that is, although they are transient, the experiences generate longlasting effects in attitude and behaviour). Hood’s mysticism scale (1975) identifies similar characteristics in more detail, including absorption ‘in something greater than myself,’ a feeling ‘as if all things

were alive,' a revelation of ultimate reality, and an experience in which 'time, place, and distance were meaningless.' Greeley (1974) lists 13 similar descriptors of mystical experience, including a 'Feeling of deep and profound peace', 'Sense of my own need to contribute to others,' 'Conviction that love is at the center of everything,' 'The sense that all the universe is alive,' and 'Sense of the unity of everything and my own part in it.' Similarly, Stringer and McAvoy (1992) point out that spiritual experiences include both cognitive and affective aspects. The cognitive aspects include 'active contemplation', while the affective include tranquillity, joy, love, hope, awe, reverence and inspiration.

It is possible to think in terms of different intensities of spiritual experiences, with different characteristics which emerge at different intensities (Taylor, 2010). A low intensity spiritual experience may feature a sense of heightened awareness, that one's surroundings have become more real, with qualities of 'is-ness' and 'aliveness.' Underhill refers to this as 'a clarity of vision, a heightening of physical perception' (in Deikman, 2011). While James (1985) describes how, in mystical experiences, 'An appearance of newness beautifies every object' (p.248). James illustrates this with a report from an evangelist named Billy Bray, describing his conversion experience: 'Everything looked new to me, the people, the fields, the cattle, the trees. I was like a new man in a new world' (ibid., p.249).

A medium intensity spiritual experience may include a powerful sense that all things are pervaded with – or manifestations of – a benevolent and radiant 'spirit-force', so that they are all essentially one. The individual may feel part of this oneness, realizing that they are not a separate and isolated ego. He or she may feel a strong sense of compassion and love for others, recognising that other individuals are part of the same spiritual 'ground' as them (Underhill, 1960; James, 1985; Hardy, 1979; Taylor, 2010). Deikman (2000) found that this profound sense of spiritual connection is often experienced by individuals who provide care and service for others, such as voluntary workers, community or charity workers, counsellors or teachers. As one counsellor described his experience of working with a particular client, 'There was a blending of souls. It was a like a third dimension of communication, on a different plane altogether. We didn't need to speak to each other because we knew what each other was thinking. There was an intense vibrancy. It was electrifying' (Deikman, 2000, p. 88).

Deikman found that this sense of oneness can expand further, so that the individual feels not solely connected to another individual, but to a transpersonal dimension, a shared network of consciousness beyond human individuality. Most of the 24 caregivers interviewed by Deikman reported frequent 'transpersonal' experiences of this type. For example, a doctor who set up an organisation providing care for cancer patients described it as 'A sense of connection that you have to something beyond the moment...It's like seeing both of you as part of a much larger process that has no beginning and no end.' Similarly, a man who set up an organisation to give care for AIDS sufferers described it as, 'An extension of self... You're serving something greater and deeper than the person in front of you' (Deikman, 2000, p.88).

In a high intensity spiritual experience, the whole material world may dissolve away into an ocean of blissful radiant spirit-force, which the individual feels is the essence of the universe, and of their own being; he or she may feel that they *are* the universe (James, 1985; Hardy, 1979; Taylor, 2010).

In terms of different intensities of spiritual experience, it may be helpful to consider the distinctions in Yoga philosophy (as delineated originally by Patanjali) between *savikalpa samadhi*, and *nirvikalpa samadhi*. Literally translated, the former means 'ecstasy tied to a particular form' while the latter means 'formless ecstasy' (Feuerstein, 1990). The experience of seeing the world as the manifestation of Spirit, and realising that one is a part of the ocean of Spirit too, is *savikalpa samadhi*, since there is still a self which is perceiving the world, and a self which feels a sense of unity with it. But in *nirvikalpa samadhi* – which Yoga philosophy suggests is the highest possible form of consciousness – there is no consciousness of self. Consciousness expands beyond the boundaries of the normal self the awareness of being an 'I' completely falls away. The individual does not merely become *one with* the absolute reality, but actually *becomes* it (Feuerstein, 1990).

In the Neo-Platonic tradition, the concept of *henosis* has a similar meaning. Plotinus referred to the spiritual ground of reality as 'The One' and the process of becoming one with it was *henosis*. (According to his disciple Porphyry, Plotinus had four experiences of this in his lifetime.) In his 6th Ennead, Plotinus describes this experience: 'In this seeing, we neither hold an object nor trace distinction: there is not two. The man is changed, no longer himself nor self-belonging; he is merged with the Supreme, sunken into it, one with it' (in Happold, 1986, p. 210).

In the Christian tradition, Meister Eckhart referred to the spiritual ground as 'the Godhead', the unconditioned source from which the whole world – including God himself – flows out. Similarly, other Christian mystics – particularly from the Eastern Orthodox Church, such as St. Gregory Palamas – refer to the process of 'deification' or 'theosis', whereby the individual becomes 'deified' and attains a state of oneness with God (Underhill, 1960).

The characteristic of 'ineffability', as noted by James (1985) and Stace (1964), may also be related to different intensities of the experience. It may not apply to lower intensity spiritual experiences – after all, there are hundreds of perfectly good descriptions of them in sources such as Hardy (1979), Happold (1986) and Taylor (2010) – but it appears that higher intensity experiences are more difficult to describe, as they move beyond the recognisable everyday reality which is mapped by language, with its subject/object duality and distinctions between past, present and future. The Upanishads, for example, describe ultimate reality as 'indefinable, unthinkable, indescribable' (In Happold, 1986, p.147). The Kena Upanishad states that Spirit is 'beyond knowledge' (ibid.). In Christian mysticism, there is also a recognition that the human mind – and its language – can never understand or capture this absolute reality of God. As Meister Eckhart wrote, 'Why dost thou prate of God? Whatever thou sayest of him is untrue' (ibid., p.64). Or in the words of St. Augustine, 'There is in the mind no knowledge of God except the knowledge that it does not know Him' (ibid.). As a final example, the 16th century Jewish mystic, Isaac Luria, is believed to have told his disciples, 'I can hardly open my mouth to speak without feeling as though the sea bursts its dam and overflowed. How then shall I express what my soul has received?' (in Hoffman, 2007, p.104).

2.2.3 The Frequency of Spiritual Experiences

With regard to how common the experiences are, Heald (2000) found that 29% of 1000 people had had an experience of 'a sacred presence in nature'. Similarly, Greeley (1975) asked 1,460 people if they had ever had the experience of being 'very close to a powerful, spiritual force that seemed to lift you out of yourself.' 35% of his respondents reported that they had, with 21% saying they had had the experience several times, and 12% that it happened often. Similarly, a survey by the National Opinion Research Centre at the University of Chicago found that two thirds of

Americans have had at least one mystical experience, and that 5% had them often (In Fenwick, 1995).

2.2.4 The Apparent Triggers of Spiritual Experiences

In his analysis of the thousands of experiences collected by his Religious Experience Research Unit, Hardy (1979) found that the highest frequency trigger was depression and despair (18%), followed by 13.5% apparently triggered by prayer or meditation, and 12.2% triggered by natural surroundings (12.2%). It is true that many of what Hardy classes as religious experiences are not strictly spiritual experiences in the sense the term is being used here. For example, Hardy includes religious visions (a person who was in 'utter despair' and had a vision of a figure in a 'dusty brown robe' who said 'Mad or sane you are one of my sheep' [Hardy, 1979, p. 91]) and a woman's vision of her dead husband. Nevertheless, there are still a significant number of experiences in Hardy's collection which do include the features of spiritual experience e.g. perceiving reality with a heightened intensity, a powerful sense of inner well-being, a sense of oneness with one's surroundings and of the oneness of phenomena, awareness of a spiritual or divine force pervading the world and radiating harmony and benevolence etc. (1)

Maslow (1971) suggested that peak experiences are most often associated and achieved through sex, music, and nature. In Taylor (2010) a large number of reports of spiritual experiences are presented with a wide variety of triggers, including contact with nature, sporting activities (e.g. running and swimming), sex, psychological turmoil, contact with an 'awakened' person, attending an arts performance (e.g. music, dance or theatre). White (2011) found a similar variety of triggers for what she called 'Exceptional Human Experience.' (Again, what White refers to as 'EHEs' do not solely refer to spiritual experiences, but do incorporate them.)

This makes it clear that such experiences are not solely the preserve of religious or spiritual traditions, or solely accessed by practices associated with those traditions. Religious scholars of mysticism such as Schuon (in Brown, 1980) have doubted that spiritual experiences can occur outside what he called 'the great orthodox traditions' (p.132). Similarly, Zaehner (1972) was dismissive of both drug-induced and nature mysticism. As a Catholic, he believed that mystical experience was proffered by the grace of God. He could not accept the possibility that it could

arise from natural or man-made chemicals. Whereas W.T. Stace's stated that 'It is not a matter of it [the psychedelic experience] being similar to mystical experience; it is mystical experience' (in Zaehner, 1972, p.79), Zaehner designated both drug-induced and nature-based mystical experiences as 'profane' mysticism.

Zaehner also accepted the Christian assumption of duality between nature and God. Traditionally, the Christian God is transcendent and otherworldly, and opposed to the gross realm matter. Consequently, Zaehner could not accept the premise of nature mysticism: namely, that the material world is pervaded with Spirit and is therefore in essence divine. In contrast, Zaehner believed that the universe was 'mindless, devoid of consciousness and amoral' (1972, p.60).

According to Zaehner, nature mysticism is closely related with drug-induced mysticism, since both are forms of psychopathology. The essential distinction is between these types and theistic or monistic mysticism, which he saw as 'true' mysticism. Zaehner saw nature mysticism as a 'second cousin' of manic depression, with a difference 'only of degree, not of kind' (1957, p.89). At the same time, both drug-induced and nature mysticism were for him a form of infantile regression. Borrowing from Freud, he suggests that extrovertive mystical experience is a retrogressive step, where the ego regresses into the undifferentiated unconscious and regains 'the original innocence, the oneness that the human race enjoyed in Adam' (1957, p.168).

Another Christian scholar of mysticism, Happold (1986) takes a slightly more liberal stance, accepting that any individual can have a mystical experience without any spiritual training or religious background, and writing respectfully of the non-monotheistic eastern traditions such as Buddhism and Vedanta. He identifies three different types of mysticism – nature-mysticism, soul-mysticism and god-mysticism – and gives them equal status. However, on closer examination, he also appears to privilege theistic mysticism over any other type. He states that the mysticism of the Upanishads and of Theravada Buddhism 'lacked warmth and humanity... The possibility of love of God was absent' (1986, p.155). He is more admiring of the Bhagavad-Gita, where 'God' is no longer an impersonal force but a personal, humanised being. He sees Christian mysticism as the highest point of development, where there was 'a complete *coinherence* – there is no better word – of matter and spirit, of the One and the All and the All and the One' (p.114). However, this claim is dubious, since a large number of other traditions could lay claim to this same

coinherence. For example, the Upanishadic concepts of *atman* and *brahman*, with one being identical with the other, suggest this. As the Isa Upanishad, for example, describes the state of a person seeing 'all beings in his own Self, and his own Self in all beings' (*The Upanishads*, 1988, p.49). Or in the famous phrase of the Chandogya Upanishad, 'Believe me, my son, an invisible and subtle essence is the Spirit of the whole Universe. That is Reality. That is Atman. Thou art that' (ibid., p. 117).

Similarly, in Mahayana Buddhism, there is no distinction between mind and matter, or form and emptiness. According to the Heart Sutra, 'Emptiness does not differ from form, and the very emptiness is form' (van de Weyer, 2000, p. 7/17). This is also highlighted in the concept of *namarupa*, which suggests that mind and form are mutually dependent and inseparable.

In contrast to the views of religious scholars such as Schuon and Zaehner, there are a large number of reports of spiritual experiences apparently caused by – or at least occurring in the context of – sport and exercise (e.g. Murphy & White, 1995; Parry, Nesti, Robinson, & Watson, 2007). The *primary* purpose of sport might be exercise, enjoyment or competition, but it seems that, as a secondary effect, it can serve as a kind of 'spontaneous spiritual practice.' As Parry et al. (2007) suggest, the desire for transcendent experiences may be one of the reasons why we play and participate in sports.

Similarly, Wade (2000, 2004) has collected many examples of spiritual experience occurring during or after sex, while DeMares & Krycka (1998) found that encounters with wild animals could generate higher states of consciousness. Similarly, collections of spiritual experiences by Hardy (1979), Laski (1961), Johnson (1959) and Hoffman (1992) provide many examples of spiritual experiences induced or triggered by natural surroundings, art, music and general relaxation.

White and Brown (2011) also noted a clear trend that many EHEs which would once have been associated with religion were now 'being experienced by more people in the midst of daily life. This may be not so much because these experiences are becoming secularized, but because the sacred is being found in the midst of daily life.'

2.2.5 Explanations of Spiritual Experiences

Again, it is important to investigate possible causes or sources of spiritual experiences, because there may be parallels with a state of permanent spiritual awakening.

From a religious perspective, spiritual experiences may be interpreted as a form of grace. As McNamara puts it, for example, 'Mystical experience is a free gift of God' (1992, p.378). From a materialistic perspective, the experiences are explicable in terms of – or at least correlate to - neurological or biological changes (e.g. Foster, 2011; Persinger, 1983; Newberg, & D'Aquilli, 2000). According to Persinger (1983) and Ramachandran & Blakeslee (1988), spiritual experiences are the result of stimulation of the temporal lobes of the brain. Newberg and D'Aquilli (2000) suggest that mystical experiences of 'oneness' come when the posterior superior parietal lobe (which is responsible for our awareness of boundaries) is less active than normal. Newberg also suggests that mystical feelings are linked to the autonomic nervous system, which controls our bodily organs. The autonomic nervous system has two halves: the parasympathetic (which slows down the activity of our organs) and the sympathetic (which speeds them up). According to Newberg and D'Aquilli, the serene feelings which meditators often experience are linked to an over-active parasympathetic half, while the feelings of ecstasy which may come through dancing, chanting or taking drugs are related to an over-active sympathetic half. (In fairness to the researchers, they only claim that the experiences *correlate* to these neurological and biological activities, allowing for the possibility of a non-reductive explanation.) (Taylor, 2010).

Another materialistic explanation is suggested by Winston (2005), who theorises that the sense of peace and well-being associated with spiritual experiences is caused by higher levels of the neurotransmitter dopamine. Winston suggests that particularly 'spiritual' or religious people may simply be people who have a naturally high level of dopamine in their brains.

However, as Wilber (1996) has pointed out, we can just as easily see these brain states as results of higher states of consciousness rather than causes of them. These researchers may only be investigating the 'footprints' of mystical and spiritual experience, rather than the experience itself. For example, as regards Winston's

theory, it may be that spiritual experiences themselves give rise to a higher level of dopamine (Taylor, 2010).

At the same time there is the difficulty of explaining subjective experience in purely objective terms. Physicalist theories of higher states of consciousness are subject the same 'explanatory gap' as theories which suggest how the brain might produce consciousness itself. McGinn (1993) has written that 'You might as well assert that that numbers emerge from biscuits or ethics from rhubarb' as suggest that the 'soggy clump of matter' which is the brain produces consciousness (p. 160). And we can say the same for the suggestion that increased or decreased activity in different parts of this 'soggy clump of matter' might produce higher states of consciousness. Similarly, Strawson (2006) believes that there is fundamental gulf between matter and conscious experience which makes it impossible for the latter to emerge from the former. In contrast to a liquid, where you can see how molecules can work together to produce something different to themselves, there is nothing about the brain which seems to work together to generate conscious experience.

As far as higher states of consciousness are concerned, the point is that if it is problematic to explain consciousness itself in terms of the brain, then it is surely problematic to try to explain awakening experiences (or higher states of consciousness) in terms of different patterns of brain activity. (2)

Deikman (2011) suggests that spiritual experiences are related to a 'de-automatization of perception.' They occur when 'hierarchically ordered structures that ordinarily conserve attentional energy for maximum efficiency in achieving the basic goods of survival.' As he sees it, the quietening of mental activity through meditation creates a surplus of attentional energy (or psychic energy, as Deikman also refers to it) which means that there is no need for these structures to conserve energy anymore. As a result the individual's perceptions become de-automatized, and he/she develops an intensified awareness of the phenomenal world.

Similarly, Novak (1996) notes that the 'endless associational chatter' of the mind monopolises psychic energy, leaving none available for us to devote to what he calls the 'open, receptive and present-centred awareness' (p.276). However, when a person meditates she diverts attention away from the automatized structures of consciousness which produce 'thought-chatter'. As a result these begin to weaken and fade away, which 'frees up' the psychic energy which they normally monopolise. As a result, in Novak's words, 'energy formerly bound in emotive spasms, ego defence,

fantasy and fear can appear as the delight of present-centredness' (Novak, 1996, p.276).

I have suggested elsewhere (Taylor 2005, 2010) that there are two basic categories of spiritual experience which have two distinct sources. This follows the distinction which Fischer (1971) made between 'ergotropic' higher states of consciousness - that is, 'high arousal', active or ecstatic states - and 'trophotropic' higher states - that is, 'low arousal' passive and serene experiences. 'High arousal' states are associated with triggers such as drugs, dancing, fasting and breath-control, whereas 'low arousal' states are associated with triggers such as meditation and relaxation.

'High arousal' experiences occur when the normal physiological balance of our brain and bodies is disrupted. This is why, throughout history, religious adepts have attempted to induce spiritual experiences by fasting, going without sleep, dancing frenziedly, doing breathing exercises, and taking psychedelic drugs. These activities disrupt our normal physiology, changing our body temperature, blood pressure or metabolic rate, and causing dehydration, exhaustion or chemical changes. If this is done in the context of a religious ceremony or tradition, there is a possibility that an awakening experience may result. These awakening experiences are termed 'HD' states (homeostasis-disruption) (Taylor, 2005, 2010).

'Low arousal' higher states of consciousness occur when our inner psychic energy – which may also be termed 'life-energy,' 'vitality' or 'the energy of our being' – becomes intensified and stilled. The intensification and stilling of this inner energy from any activity or situation can give rise to an awakening experience. As a result, this type of awakening experience is termed an 'ISLE' state – ISLE standing for 'intensification and stilling of life-energy.' This 'ISLE' state is frequently induced by meditation, contact with nature, attending to an arts performance and general relaxation (Taylor, 2005, 2010).

2.2 Studies of Permanent Spiritual States

2.3.1 Bucke's Cosmic Consciousness

Richard M. Bucke's *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind* (2011) was an early study of permanent spiritual awakening, focussing on a

number of individuals who Bucke believed had attained what he termed 'cosmic consciousness.' Bucke gathered 36 historical and contemporary cases of this consciousness, including the Buddha, Moses, Jesus Christ, Dante, Shakespeare, Walt Whitman, and a number of anonymous contemporaries. In a detailed analysis, he lists a number of major characteristics of 'cosmic consciousness', including subjective light ('Suddenly immersed in a flame or rose-coloured cloud, or perhaps rather a sense that the mind is itself filled with such a cloud or haze'), joyfulness, intellectual illumination (a revelation of the meaning, purpose and 'alive-ness' of the universe), suddenness ('the the illumination is instantaneous'), a sense of immortality, a loss of fear of death, and an absence of concept of sin.

So far these characteristics are generally in accord with those of temporary spiritual experiences, but Bucke adds others which other scholars of mystical experience do not identify. For example, he mentions the factor of age, believing that the onset of 'cosmic consciousness' occurs between the age of 30-40. He also mentions that cosmic consciousness brings 'added charm to the personality – so that men and women become strongly attracted to the person,' and also that it brings 'a change in the appearance,' or 'transfiguration' (Bucke, 2011).

Elsewhere, Bucke formulates the particular personality type which is most likely to experience the state. As well as being aged 30-40, individuals who experience cosmic consciousness are generally male, highly developed intellectually and morally, 'of superior physique,' together with 'strong and earnest religious feelings' (ibid.).

In common with the notion that there are different intensities of temporary spiritual experiences, Bucke suggested that there are different degrees of cosmic consciousness. 'Within the plane of cosmic consciousness one man shall be a God while another shall not be, to casual observation, lifted so very much above ordinary humanity' (ibid.). He also comments on the difficulty that some individuals have in understanding their state of being, feeling that they be deluded or even insane:

The first thing each person asks himself upon experiencing the new sense is: does what I see and feel represent reality or am I suffering from a delusion? The fact that the new experience seems even more real than the old teachings of simple self consciousness does not at first fully reassure him, because he probably knows that delusions, when present, possess the mind just as firmly as do the actual facts (ibid.).

However, in every case, this period of doubt is only temporary, as the person becomes convinced by the revelatory nature of the experience: 'Each person who has the experience in question eventually perforce believes in its teachings, accepting them as absolutely as any other teachings whatsoever' (ibid.).

Bucke developed an evolutionary view of cosmic consciousness, seeing it as a stage of psychological development which awaits the human species as a whole. As he writes:

The new sense will become more and more common and show itself earlier in life, until after many generations, it will appear in each normal individual at the age of puberty or even earlier, then go on becoming still more universal, and appearing at a still earlier age until after thousands of generations it shows itself immediately after infancy in nearly every member of the human race (ibid.).

In this view, Bucke was reflecting the evolutionary concept of spiritual development as conceptualised by German idealist philosophers such as Fichte and Hegel (Wilber, 1995), and also anticipating the evolutionary spirituality of Teilhard de Chardin (1961) and Wilber (1995).

Bucke's study was a pioneering attempt at delineating the characteristics of what he terms 'cosmic consciousness' as a psychological state. Nevertheless, there are a number of flaws in his study. Some of his cases of Cosmic Consciousness are dubious and circumstantial, based on very little evidence, or on a questionable reading of evidence. For example, Bucke believes that Shakespeare experienced cosmic consciousness, quoting at length from the sonnets. However, Bucke's contention that the 'he' whom the poet addresses in the sonnets is 'cosmic consciousness' personified, is dubious. (The usual interpretation – which Bucke admits is the obvious one – is that they are addressed to a young man, possibly a homosexual lover.) For example, the famous lines 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?/ Thou art more lovely and more temperate,' are interpreted as referring to the 'cosmic sense' – an interpretation which seems rather far-fetched, particularly in view of the lack of evidence for a mystical or spiritual view of the world in Shakespeare's plays.

Another slightly dubious example of 'cosmic consciousness' is Bucke's portrayal of Jesus. Bucke consistently translates the phrase 'The kingdom of heaven'

as 'the cosmic sense', so that the sentence, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' becomes 'translated' as 'A proud man is hardly likely to acquire the Cosmic Sense.' This interpretation is surely a leap of faith. (Although if Bucke had been aware of the 'non-canonical' gospels, such as the Gospel of Thomas, he would perhaps have been able to put forward a stronger argument for Jesus as experiencing 'cosmic consciousness'.)

Another dubious argument is Bucke's belief that cosmic consciousness is becoming more common. His evolutionary vision generates this view, but the evidence he presents for it is unconvincing. He notes that there a large number of cases of cosmic consciousness occurring over the previous two centuries, but of course, it could well be that there were many cases of cosmic consciousness in earlier centuries which he was simply unaware of, partly because they went unrecorded.

This evidence-less belief is representative of the weakness of many of Bucke's views in *Cosmic Consciousness*. His research was flawed in that his criteria for accepting cases 'cosmic consciousness' were too weak and vague, resulting in a large number of questionable cases. As a consequence, many of the assertions he makes based on his analysis of the cases – for example, that Cosmic Consciousness normally occurs in the male sex, between the ages of 30-40 - are unsound.

2.3.2 Quantum Change

One significant recent study of permanent spiritual awakening was undertaken by Miller and C'de Baca (2001), who interviewed more than 50 individuals reporting a sudden psychological transformation. Miller and C'de Baca termed this transformation 'Quantum change' and described it as 'a vivid, surprising, benevolent and enduring personal transformation' (p.4), which can be so sudden that they 'break upon consciousness like a forceful wave' (p.39).

Miller and C'de Baca identified two different types of 'quantum change' – the 'mystical type' and the 'insightful' type. The characteristics of the former are very similar to the characteristics of mystical experience examined in Section 2.2.2: ineffability, a noetic quality, a sense of unity, transcendence and awe and of distinction from ordinary reality. However, for Miller and C'de Baca's participants these characteristics were permanently established. Other permanent changes reported were a release from fear and depression, deeper relationships, a greater interest in

spirituality and a 'lifting of ingrained behaviour' (p. 39). The participants also reported a change in priorities, with their most important priorities being spirituality, personal peace, family, honesty, growth, humility and faithfulness. Although the transformational experience itself was sudden, in some cases these changes of values and attitudes occurred gradually. Some participants initially continued with their previous lifestyles, until their new priorities began to manifest themselves.

Miller and C'de Baca found that, in all cases, the shift was felt to be permanent:

A fear reported by some early quantum changes is that their new found identity might dissipate. Although a guarantee cannot be given to the individual person, the stories here at least assure us that quantum change can and does endure. Some people knew this right away – that they had passed through a one way street. Others had been less sure. Yet everyone we interviewed (admittedly a self-selected sample) found that the transformation not only endured but continued and grew over time. (Miller and C'de Baca, 2001, p. 177)

More than half of the transformations examined by Miller and C'de Baca occurred in response to intense unhappiness, or in the midst of tragedy – for example, individuals who suffered from the post-traumatic effects of childhood abuse, who had been seriously ill, deeply depressed or addicted to alcohol or drugs. (The other cases were apparently the result of a long period of spiritual practice, or had no apparent cause at all.) As they describe it:

Whether it began in ordinary or unusual circumstances, more than half of those who experienced a quantum change had been consciously unhappy or desperately so. Some...were transformed in the midst of a crisis or a dreadful tragedy: a man lying with his neck broken, a woman cradling a dying baby in her arms, some were suffering chronic illness or great physical pain (ibid., p.24).

In this context, 'quantum change' can be seen as a 'point of desperation, a breaking point where something has to give – and it does...The result is a new, dramatically reorganized identity' (ibid., p.157).

In attempting to deal with the question of why intense pain and emotional distress only results in quantum change for a minority of people, Miller and C'de Baca discussed the question of whether there was a particular personality type which was more liable to undergo the transformation. They note that William James believed that experiences of religious conversion were more likely to happen to people with an 'active subliminal self' who have more access to the subconscious, and are more emotionally sensitive, suggestible and a 'tendency to automatism' (e.g. unaccountable impulses, automatic writing or speech, intuitive ideas (James 1985). Significantly, and in line with James' findings, Miller and C'de Baca asked the 'quantum changers' to complete a personality test, which found that around two thirds of them had a predominantly 'intuitive' personality.

2.3.3 Maslow: Self-Actualisation – Plateau Experiences

Maslow's concept of 'self-actualization' has some similarities with 'Quantum Change.' 'Self-actualized people' are different from others in a number of significant ways. They are largely free of negative thoughts or feelings, live spontaneously and freely, less materialistic and self-centred, and more altruistic than other people, with a greater need for peace and solitude and a sense of duty or mission which transcends their personal ambitions or desires (Maslow, 1970) They also have a great capacity for appreciation, and a constant freshness of perception. In Maslow's own words, they

have the wonderful capacity to appreciate again and again, freshly and naively, the basic goods of life, with awe, pleasure, wonder and even ecstasy, however stale these experiences may have become to others...Thus, for such a person, any sunset may be as beautiful as the first one, any flower may be of breathtaking loveliness, even after a million flowers have been seen...A man remains convinced of his luck in marriage 30 years after his marriage and is as surprised by his wife's beauty when she is 60 as he was 40 years ago (Maslow, 1970, p.163).

Self-actualised individuals experience what Maslow called 'B-cognition.' This has two aspects: an awareness of the connection and unity of all things, so that 'the

whole of the cosmos is perceived and everything in it is seen in relationship with everything else, including the perceiver,' (Maslow, 1971, pp. 252-253); and also a state of absorption so intense that the individual awareness of their surroundings and themselves fades away, so that 'The percept becomes the whole of the cosmos' (ibid., p. 253). (The latter aspect is very similar to the state which Csikszentmihalyi [1992] describes as 'flow').

The distinction between temporary mystical/spiritual experiences and permanent spiritual awakening (or Quantum Change) is paralleled by the distinction Maslow makes between 'peak' and 'plateau' experiences. Like the term 'Exceptional Human Experience', the term 'peak experience' covers a wide variety of states of well-being in addition to spiritual or mystical experiences, including the feeling of achieving a long-sought goal, overcoming challenges or obstacles, appreciating what is normally taken for granted, skills mastery, profound musings and unforgettable dreams (Hoffman & Ortiz, 2009). As the term suggests, the 'plateau experience' is a continuous or ongoing form of the peak experience, in which its characteristics are established as permanent deep-rooted traits. In this state, as Maslow describes it, 'There is nothing exceptional and nothing special, but one lives in a world of miracles all the time' (Maslow, 1972, p. 113). Whereas in the peak experience, characteristics such as awe and mystery are dramatic and powerful, in the plateau experience, they are 'constant rather than climactic' (ibid.). (Maslow turned his attention to plateau experiences late in his life, and was perhaps unable to develop the concept as fully as he intended.)

2.3.4 Wilber's View of Transpersonal Stages

Wilber (2000) defines four levels of transpersonal experience. The first is the psychic level, which Wilber sees as the home of nature mysticism, 'an intense mystical union with the entire gross realm – the realm of nature, Gaia, the World Soul.' (p.109). The second level is the subtle, which Wilber sees as the home of deity mysticism, of 'directly cognized, vividly intense, and ontologically real forms of your own divinity.' (ibid.) Thirdly, there is the causal level, which equates with *nirvikalpa samadhi*, *nirvana*, pure emptiness, 'the home of formless mysticism' (ibid.). And beyond this there is what Wilber terms the 'non-dual', which is 'both the highest Goal of all

stages, and the ever-present Ground of all stages' (ibid). This is the stage where the formless is carried back into the material world, and back into everyday life, where emptiness and form – or *nirvana* and *samsara* – become one.

These levels are most commonly experienced in temporary spiritual or peak experiences, but they can also become established as permanent structures of consciousness. As Wilber puts it, 'Evidence suggests that, under conditions generally of prolonged contemplative practice, a person can convert these *temporary* states into *permanent* traits or structures, which means that they have access to these great realms on a more-or-less *continuous* and *conscious* basis' (Wilber, 2011). At this point, these 'states' become 'permanently available patterns or structures of consciousness' (ibid.).

Wilber's distinction between the 'causal' and 'non-dual' levels follows the distinction between *nirvikalpa* and *sahaja samadhi*, and between *fana* and *baqa* in Sufism (Azeemi, 2005). However, as Daniels (2005) has pointed out, it is not entirely clear how the non-dual stage differs from the mysticism of the psychic stage. Both are a type of extravertive mysticism, where the world is seen as infused with the divine, and the individual experiences himself or herself as one with the world. It is also not entirely clear why Wilber should place 'nature mysticism' lower in his hierarchy than 'deity mysticism.' In *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* (1995) Wilber speaks disparagingly of nature mysticism: 'But nature, sweet nature, is mortal and finite...we are free to identity with a finite, limited, mortal Earth; we are not free to call it infinite, unlimited, immortal, eternal' (Wilber, 1995, p.301-2). (Here Wilber is echoing Zaehner [1957], who saw nature mysticism as a 'profane' form of mysticism, similar to drug-induced mystical states.) It could be argued, however, nature mystics such as Richard Jeffries or Wordsworth are not worshipping nature *itself*, in a pantheist or pagan sense, but are responding a spiritual force or energy which they perceive as present in nature – as in Wordsworth's famous lines, 'A motion and a spirit A motion and a spirit, that impels/ All thinking things, all objects of all thought/And rolls through all things (Wordsworth, 1812/ 2011).

Ferrer (2002) has also criticised Wilber for over-emphasising the individual nature of transpersonal experiences, and neglecting their intersubjective, communal and social aspects. Similarly, de Quincey (2000) has argued that Wilber's concept of intersubjectivity is limited, referring only to linguistic exchange, rather than what de

Quincey sees as 'true' or strong intersubjectivity, which he describes as '*ontological intersubjectivity* relying on co-creative nonphysical presence' which 'brings distinct subjects into being out of a prior matrix of relationships' (de Quincey 2000, p. 188). If intersubjectivity only occurs through language, de Quincey argues, then, according to Wilber's 'Four Quadrant' model, it is actually located in the right hand quadrant, since language only operates through signs and symbols, which are exterior entities. De Quincey equates this with a lack of emotion in Wilber's work as a whole. As he writes, 'It is the *felt relational* component of Wilber's theoretical psycho-philosophical work that is most conspicuously missing" (ibid., p. 191).

2.3.5 Spiritual Awakening Following Trauma and Turmoil

Hardy (1979) found that 'depression and despair' was the most common trigger of religious experiences of all, associated with 18% of experiences. Miller and C'de Baca (2001) found that the majority of cases of quantum change occurred in individuals following episodes of intense psychological turmoil and trauma.

A strong correlation between psychological turmoil and personal growth or transformation has been identified by other sources. The potentially positive after-effects of psychological turmoil have been highlighted in research into 'post-traumatic growth,' a term coined by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1998). This suggests that experiencing trauma may have positive effects which transcend simple adjustment and coping (Taylor, 2012a). Post-traumatic growth (PTG) typically features a shift in perception, knowledge and skill, bringing about positive changes in relationships, in self-perception and attitude to life, including philosophical/spiritual changes (Fosse, 2006). Cryder et al (2006) describe it as 'a qualitative change in functioning across domains' (p.67). They emphasise that it can bring a new sense of competency and confidence, together with a new sense of possibility, a new appreciation of life, and spiritual development (Cryder et al, 2006). PTG has been identified in many different types of trauma, such as bereavement, rape, stroke victims, heart patients, and the parents of hospitalised children (Sheikh and Marotta, 2005)

Grof (2000) has also found that traumatic life events and emotional turmoil can generate permanent transformation. Grof calls potentially transformative events 'spiritual emergencies' and describes them as 'Difficult states of a radical personality

transformation and of spiritual opening' which can result in 'emotional and psychosomatic healing, remarkable changes and conscious evolution' (Grof, 2000, p.137). Trauma and turmoil can disturb the normal stable structure of the psyche, allowing new energies and potentials to seep through. Grof summarises the different circumstances where this can occur as follows:

In some cases, the psychospiritual crisis begins shortly after a traumatic emotional experience. This can be the loss of an important relationship, such as death of a child or another close relative, divorce, or the end of a love affair. Similarly, a series of failures or loss of a job or property can immediately precede the onset of spiritual emergency (Grof, 2000, p.137).

Neal et al (1999) conducted similar research to Grof, studying the transformational effects of life-events such as serious illness, divorce or the loss of a job, as well as near-death experiences and spiritual experiences. In a study of 40 participants who had undergone such experiences, they found that initially these events could trigger a 'dark night of the soul', where the individual's previous values were thrown into question, and life ceased to have any meaning. Following this, however, the participants entered a phase of spiritual searching, and then – having acquired new spiritual principles to live by – a third phase of spiritual integration, when they applied these new principles (Taylor, 2012a).

The research of Lancaster and Palframan (2009) also suggests the possibility of permanent transformation. They investigated the cases of six individuals who experienced 'post-traumatic growth' in response to events such as illness, alcoholism, and domestic abuse. They found that an attitude of acceptance of the event promoted growth, while avoidance inhibited it. In all six cases, the individuals reported increased serenity, well-being and meaning.

Maslow was also aware of the importance of the connection between turmoil and personal or spiritual development, coining the term 'nadir experiences'. As Maslow saw it, 'peak' and 'nadir' experiences are not simple opposites but have a close, symbiotic relationship (Maslow, 1964). 'Nadir experiences' can promote self-actualisation, so that 'the most important learning experiences reported to me by my subjects were single life experiences such as tragedies, deaths, trauma . . . which

forced change in the life outlook of the person and consequently in everything that he did' (in Edmonds & Hooker, 1990, p. 23).

Research also suggests that stressful life events and crises (particularly stressors from difficult relationships) and intense frustration and dissatisfaction, may be a trigger in religious conversion (Ullman, 1989; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998). Religious conversion can be immediate and abrupt, occurring over seconds or over a few days and is often felt to be long term or permanent (Paloutzian, 1996; James, 1985; Brown & Caetona, 1992). James defines conversion as a process by which an individual who felt themselves to be 'wrong, inferior and unhappy becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy' (1985, p.189). Brown & Caetona (1992) describe conversion as a cognitive restructuring that causes a major shift in the individual's portrayal of themselves and the world. It clearly, therefore, has some similarities with the type of transformation to be studied in this thesis.

It is also perhaps significant that many spiritual teachers or gurus have experienced 'realisation' or 'awakening' after intense periods of mental torment. This is true of the 19th century Indian mystic Ramakrishna, who attained a state of realization at a time when he was extremely depressed and frustrated. Despite long periods of intense prayer and meditation, he still felt a massive gulf between himself and the divine. His predicament seemed so hopeless that he decided to commit suicide. But as he picked up a sword, he suddenly experienced a vision of pure spirit, which heralded a shift to a new state of consciousness:

The buildings...the temple and all vanished, leaving no trace; instead there was a limitless, infinite, shining ocean of consciousness or spirit. As far as the eye could see, its billows were rushing towards me from all sides...to swallow me up, I was panting for breath, I was caught in the billows and fell down senseless (in Isherwood, 1965, p.65).

The contemporary spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle had a similar experience. He writes that until his thirtieth year he 'lived in an almost continuous anxiety interspersed with periods of suicidal depression' (Tolle, 1999, p.2). One night he woke up with 'a feeling of absolute dread' inside him and felt a strong desire to kill himself. Shortly afterwards, however, he was 'drawn into what seemed like a vortex of energy' and underwent a powerful transformational experience:

Everything was fresh and pristine, as if it had just come into existence. I picked up things, a pencil, an empty bottle, marvelling at the beauty and aliveness of it all. The next day I walked around the city in utter amazement at the miracles of life on earth, as if I had just been born into this world (Tolle, 1999, p.2).

Tolle claims that, although they have dimmed a little, he has retained this heightened awareness and sense of wonder and bliss ever since (Taylor, 2011).

The American spiritual author and mystic Richard Rose also underwent a sudden and permanent transformation following great psychological turmoil, following the death of his brother in the Second World War, and then the discovery that his wife had been unfaithful:

At the peak of the pain, I went out the window. I was aware of seeing people on the street, except that I was above them... I realized I was not just my individual self. I was the whole mass of humanity and the Observer watching it all. I was Everything. This propelled me into an indescribable experience of what I can only call 'Everything-ness' (in Gold, 2011).

Other spiritual teachers and authors who have had similar experiences include Byron Katie, Catherine Ingram, Russel Williams, Ramana Maharshi and Krishnamurti (Taylor, 2011).

However, it is important to point out that other researchers have questioned whether post-traumatic growth truly exists. What individuals interpret as 'post-traumatic growth' may in fact be a form of positive illusion (Taylor, 1989), or a response to cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 2008), a strategy individuals use to shield themselves from confusion and turmoil. Experiences are rationalised in a positive way – ignoring negative aspects – so that psychological equilibrium can be maintained. For example, if a person suffers from bereavement or is diagnosed with a serious illness, they may create positive illusions that they have benefited from the experience. They may even tell themselves that there is a 'purpose' to their suffering, refusing to accept the random nature of events (Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011). And if this applies to post-traumatic growth, it could also apply to sudden 'spiritual

transformation' triggered by intense psychological turmoil, as in the cases of the spiritual teachers just mentioned.

2.3.6 'Voluntary Suffering' in Spiritual Traditions

This relationship between psychological turmoil and spiritual awakening may be reflected to some degree in spiritual traditions, in the sense that in some traditions, adepts have *voluntarily* inflicted suffering on themselves. This can be seen, for example, in the practice of asceticism, where spiritual seekers such as mystics and monks have consciously inflicted suffering upon themselves in the belief that this would aid their spiritual development (Taylor, 2011). The ascetic deliberately denies his body's needs, and inflicts pain and discomfort upon himself, either through fasting, abstaining from sensual pleasures and comforts, or by physically beating or injuring himself (Underhill, 1960; Happold, 1986). Asceticism has been seen as an expression of the anti-physical ideology of Christianity, the belief that the 'flesh' is corrupt and evil and has to be punished (e.g. Wilber, 1995). And it is possible that some ascetics were motivated by morbid self-hatred and neurotic feelings of guilt towards sex and other bodily processes, which made them want to punish themselves. However, to some extent, the ascetics may have used pain and discomfort as a way of attempting to generate spiritual experiences. As the related practices of sleep deprivation and fasting illustrate, pronounced self-induced physiological changes may induce altered or higher states of consciousness (Fischer, 1971; Taylor, 2005).

However, as a 'spiritual technology,' asceticism has both long and short term aims. Particularly with milder forms of asceticism (where the emphasis was on discipline and denial rather than actual pain), the long term aim was to 'tame' physical desires, so that they no longer dominated the individual and monopolised energy and attention (Taylor, 2010). In the Christian mystical tradition, this is the process of 'mortification,' or of subduing the 'body of desire.' Christian mystics like St. Francis of Assisi, St. Theresa, St. Catherine of Siena and Walter Hilton denied themselves pleasure or gratification, and purposely sought out unpleasant situations (Underhill, 1960). St. John of the Cross expresses this spirit of this self-denial when he writes that in order to purify the soul, the seeker has to 'strive always to prefer, not that which is easiest, but that which is most difficult; not that which is most delectable

but most unpleasing...not that which is restful, but that which is wearisome' (in Happold, 1986, p.360).

The Indian traditions of Vedanta, Yoga and Buddhism generally take a more measured approach, believing that one of the prerequisites of spiritual development is to control one's physical appetites (Taylor, 2010). The desires for sex, food, alcohol, sensory stimulation, laziness, material comforts and luxury goods should not be allowed to run riot. Instead we should be moderate, giving our bodies what they need without being inveterate pleasure-seekers (Feuerstein, 1990; Wood, 1959). In Buddhist terms, this means following the 'Middle Way', a path of moderation midway between excess and extreme asceticism.

In the Yogic tradition, asceticism is known as *tapas* (literally 'heat'), and usually means being celibate, controlling desires and instincts and avoiding pleasures. Frustrating the body's desires and instincts is believed to create spiritual radiance and vitality, generating an energy called *ojas* which pervades the whole of the body and mind (Feuerstein, 1990; Taylor, 2010). The yogi Swami Prabhavananda defined *tapas* as 'the practice of conserving energy and directing it toward the goal of yoga...obviously, in order to do this, we must exercise self-discipline; we must control our physical appetites and passions' (Prabhavananda & Isherwood, 1969, p.102).

Another, more psychologically oriented form of self-inflicted discomfort which has traditionally been a part of spiritual traditions is renunciation, or detachment. In many spiritual traditions, adepts are expected to relinquish family life, worldly pleasures and personal ambitions, and to practice 'voluntary poverty' – that is, to have a bare minimum of possessions, not to own any property and to live without any unnecessary comforts and luxuries (Taylor, 2010).

Ideally, renunciation and asceticism are temporary measures, two parts of a training process directed towards a particular end: a release from what Underhill calls 'the tyranny of selfhood' and from the dominance (and energy-monopolisation) of hedonistic impulses and psychological attachments. As Underhill (1960) writes of detachment, 'It is a process, an education directed towards the production of a definite kind of efficiency...[These Disciplines] release the self from the pull of the lower nature, establish it on new levels of freedom and power' (ibid, p.178). (Renunciation will be discussed in more detail in the section on Christian spiritual traditions on page 52.)

Possibly, therefore, such practices reflect a recognition of the transformational potential of suffering and deprivation, and a desire to harness this potential.

2.3.7 Encounters with Death

One of the most intense forms of trauma the individual can experience is to encounter their own mortality, either through one particular incident (e.g. a heart attack, a car accident or a near drowning) or through knowing that they (may) only have a certain amount of time left to live due to a fatal illness. Research suggests that encountering death in this way can have a powerful and positive transformational effect (Taylor, 2011). For example, survivors of near-death experiences (that is, a close encounter of death where the individual may feel that they leave their body, experience a 'life review', journey through a tunnel towards a light, meet deceased relatives etc.) have reported gaining a new spiritual outlook, becoming less materialistic and egotistical and more compassionate, more concerned with helping and serving others than fulfilling their own desires and ambitions (Fenwick, 1995; Grey 1985; Moody, 1975). They have reported becoming less afraid of death, develop either new or intensified religious and spiritual beliefs (though realising the inadequacy of organised religion), and even develop paranormal abilities. They have also reported a greater capacity for joy, and a heightened appreciation of beauty. As one woman who died for a short time after heart attack told the researcher Margot Grey:

The things that I felt slowly were a very heightened sense of love, the ability to communicate love, the ability to find joy and pleasure in the most insignificant things about me...I seemed to have a very heightened awareness, I would say almost telepathic abilities (Grey, 1985, p. 97).

While another person who had a near-death experience after a heart attack told Grey:

Since then, everything has been so different. I go out into the sunlight and I can taste the air; the sky is so blue and the trees are much greener;

everything is so much more beautiful. My senses are so much sharper. I can even see auras round trees (ibid).

A follow up study by Van Lommel (2004) found that these changes remained 8 years later. The NDE patients still did not report any fear of death, firmly believed in an afterlife and there was still a profound shift in their values. Their priorities were love and compassion for themselves and others, and nature rather than materialism or personal ambitions. As Van Lommel puts it, 'The long lasting transformational effects of an experience that lasts only a few minutes was a surprising and unexpected finding' (2004, p.118).

Similarly, in a life changes questionnaire given by the NDE researcher Michael Sabom (1998), people who had had NDEs several years previously showed an increase in faith, in a sense of meaning, capacity for love and involvement with family.

However, it is possible that this transformation may not be wholly the result of the *content* of the NDE – e.g. the life review or the meeting with beings of light or deceased relatives – but also due to encountering one's own mortality. This is suggested by research showing the positive 'post-traumatic' effects of cancer. Many cancer patients report PTG, including improved relationships, increased self-confidence and higher levels of spirituality and appreciation for life (Stanton et al., 2006; Tomich & Helgeson, 2004). Similarly, Guji (2005) found that cancer patients reported a marked degree of positive transformation and personal growth, including a redefined meaning and purpose in their lives, and a desire to live more fully and authentically. Referring to the survivors of breast cancer in particular, Kastner et al (1998) use the term 'thriving' to refer to the process of personal transformation and transcendence. They describe cancer survivors as living more authentically, with a more accepting attitude to death, more personal responsibility and a stronger relationship to the 'divine.' As the psychologist Jonathan Haidt writes, 'A diagnosis of cancer is often described, in retrospect, as a wake up call, a reality check, or a turning point...The reality people often wake up to is that life is a gift they have been taking for granted' (Haidt, 2006, p. 140).

Other types of encounters with death may have similar effects (Taylor, 2010). The German Zen Buddhist Karlfried Graf von Durckheim has described how, during the First World War, being surrounded by death brought him to the

awareness that there was a part of his being which transcended physical extinction. As he stated, 'When death was near and I accepted that I also might die, I realized that within myself was something that has nothing whatsoever to do with death' (Durckheim & Prabhupada, 2009).

Later von Durckheim found that many people who lived through the horrors of the Second World War had similar experiences to his. As he later stated:

There are so many people who went through the battlefields, through the concentration camps, through the bombing raids. And within their hearts they retain the memories of those moments when death was near, when they were wounded and nearly torn in pieces, and they experienced a glimpse of their eternal nature (Durckheim & Prabhupada, 2009).

Durckheim explained these seemingly paradoxical effects in terms of surrender and acceptance, penetrating the hard shell of the ego and allowing what he calls 'Being' to flow through and touch us:

Many of us have experienced the nearness of death – in air raids, illness, or at other times of mortal danger – and have found that if, at the very moment when terror engulfs us and our inner resistance collapses, we can somehow submit and accept...we are suddenly calm, our fears are instantly forgotten, and we have the certainty that there is something in us that death and destruction cannot touch...We are suddenly, inexplicably conscious of a new and invincible strength. We do not know its source or its purpose – we only know that we are standing in it, that it encloses us utterly. This is a sign that Being has touched us, and been able to penetrate our innermost being, because the shell we had fashioned for ourselves – and that cuts us off from it – has been atomized (Durckheim, 1992, p.16).

Grof (1993) has identified a similar effect through his **holotropic** therapy. He has found that, in non-ordinary states of consciousness induced by LSD or breathing exercises, it is possible for individuals to re-live the experience of being born (Taylor, 2011). In Grof's view, the process of birth has such strong parallels with process of dying that to relive your own birth also means to experience your

own death. As a result, Grof speaks of the 'death-rebirth' experience. According to him, those who undergo this experience are permanently transformed. The normal filters which restrict and distort our normal consciousness fall away, so that perception becomes much more intense. Nothing is familiar or taken for granted to them. As Grof writes:

We may feel that we are really seeing the world for the first time in our lives. Everything around us, even the most ordinary and familiar scenes, seems unusually exacting and stimulating. People report entirely new ways of appreciating and enjoying their loved ones, the sound of music, the beauties of nature (1993, p.77).

They also become aware of 'futility of exaggerated ambitions, attachment to money, status, fame and power' (ibid). Their time orientation changes, with the future and past becoming much less important than the present, and they develop 'an increased ability to enjoy life and derive pleasure from things' (ibid).

This research suggests, then, that encounters with death may not simply lead to temporary spiritual experiences, but cause a permanent shift to a new state of being. Transformation may occur even if the individual does not appear to physically 'die' for a period of time and experience a continuation of consciousness, and so does not experience the common 'content' of NDEs. Pronounced psychological changes may result simply from being faced with the prospect – and the reality – of death (Taylor, 2011).

However, as with post-traumatic growth, these findings should be qualified by considering the possibility of positive illusion or responding to cognitive dissonance. Terror Management suggests, for example, that a large part of human activity is devoted to protecting ourselves from an unconscious fear of death. Being made aware of death creates an anxiety which we may try to escape through acquiring possessions, seeking status and success, strongly defending the worldview of our culture etc. The individual's identity and security is threatened by death-awareness, and so he/she attempts to reinforce them (Becker, 1974; Pyszczynski et al., 2004; Solomon et al., 1991). It might be argued, then, that, at least to some extent, these reports of transformation and well-being were a form of 'positive illusion' developed as a response to the anxiety of confronting death.

2.3.8 Spiritual Awakening and Psychosis

A number of psychologists and psychiatrists have viewed mystical or spiritual experiences as a form of psychosis, an aberrational 'abnormal' state caused by neurological or psychological dysfunction. (This is the 'pre-' variant of Wilber's [e.g. 1995] pre/trans fallacy.) Freud (1930) typified this tendency by explaining the 'oceanic feeling' as a regression to early childhood, when a child is still at his mother's breast and his or her ego has yet to differentiate itself from the external world (Taylor, 2010). Similarly, Moxon suggested that mystical experiences were a regression to an even earlier state, to the womb. They were 'nothing less than a return to the intra-uterine condition,' and the 'God' which mystics felt that they became one with was 'a projected image of the narcissistic ego...a regression to the mother' (in Merkur, 1999, p.51).

In a more extreme example of what Wilber would interpret as the pre/trans fallacy, Leuba (1925) suggested that spiritual experiences were a combination of hysteria and neurasthenia, with symptoms of neurosis, hallucinations and hypersensitivity. Similarly, a 1976 report of the 'Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry' concluded that mystical experiences were a kind of psychosis, caused by a loss of the normal 'healthy' ego boundaries, which brings 'delusions' of a fantasy universe in which problems do not exist (Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry, 1976).

Similar attitudes underlie the attempts of many neurologists to 'explain' mystical/spiritual experiences in terms of brain activity. It has also been argued – for example, by Grof (1990), Clark (2010) and Lucas (2011) – that psychiatrists often misunderstand the characteristics of spiritual awakening, and mislabel them as psychosis. According to Grof (2000), a spiritual emergency can resemble psychosis in that there is a sudden inrush of new spiritual energies and potentials which may feel threatening and even overwhelming. Psychiatric difficulties may be experienced, but if the individual is given sufficient support and understanding – which is unfortunately not often the case – the spiritual emergency may become integrated and established as a higher and more integrated state of being (Perry, 2005). According to Lucas (2011), there are two important factors in determining whether a spiritual emergency leads to genuinely integrated transformation: firstly, 'the individual's

frame of reference, the lens through which they view their own experience' and secondly, 'whether their experience is validated or pathologized' (p.71). In other words, both the individual and the professionals who he/she encounters should be aware of the potentially positive and transformative aspects of the experience, rather than responding with confusion, fear and negativity. (Spiritual emergencies have been compared – for example by Lucas [2011] and May [2005] - with the Christian mystical concept of the Dark Night of the Soul.)

Grof (2000) makes a clear distinction between a spiritual emergency and psychosis *per se*. He suggests that the essential difference between psychosis and spiritual emergency is that the latter occurs when there is an 'observing self' who stands apart from the psychic disturbances and can rationalise and understand the experience to some degree. In psychosis, however, there is no observer; the self is completely immersed in the experience and so cannot control or integrate it. However, Clark (2010) disputes this, suggesting that it is inappropriate to make a distinction between spirituality and psychosis, and more advisable to think in terms of a whole spectrum of 'transliminal states of consciousness.' Brett (2010) also argues that there is no categorical difference between spiritual emergencies and psychosis, and that any apparent distinction results from how the experience is contextualised and labelled, and its outcome.

Grof also makes a distinction between spiritual emergency and spiritual *emergence*. Whereas spiritual emergencies are sudden and dramatic, and often very disruptive to the normal self-structure, spiritual *emergences* are more gradual and less disturbing. As Lukoff, Lu, and Turner (1998) note, 'In spiritual *emergence*...there is a gradual unfoldment of spiritual potential with minimal disruption... whereas in spiritual *emergency* there is significant abrupt disruption in psychological/social/occupational functioning' (p. 38).

At the same time, there are some parallels between the states of 'awakening' and the state of psychiatric disturbance often diagnosed as schizophrenia. Schizophrenia has been described by psychiatrists as bringing a 'heightened perceptual acuity' (Cutting & Dunne, 1989) and a greater sensitivity to the 'the raw data of new experiences' (Epstein, 1979). For example, a schizophrenic patient named Norma McDonald reported that when she developed schizophrenia it was as if her brain 'awoke' after being asleep for years. Her senses woke up to the is-ness of her

surroundings, and she became acutely aware of the behaviour and motivations of other people. After recovering and reflecting on her experience, she speculated that potentially human beings are always able to 'hear every sound within earshot and see every object, line and colour within the field of vision.' But as this would make everyday life very difficult, 'the mind must have a filter which functions without our conscious thought, sorting stimuli and allowing only those, which are relevant to the situation in hand to disturb consciousness' (in Peake, 2006, p.224).

This is very similar to the 'reducing valve' theory – or 'filter theory' – as described by Aldous Huxley in *The Doors of Perception*. According to Huxley (1988), the function of the brain is to stop the self being overloaded with sensory information from the external world, and so a 'reducing valve' has the function of 'filtering out' the information which is considered non-essential for survival. But under certain conditions – such as under the influence of LSD or in mystical states – the 'reducing valve' stops functioning and our awareness becomes more intense and expansive. However, in a state of schizophrenia, this heightened awareness may be a negative experience. This intense reality may be interpreted as threatening and uncontrollable (Huxley, 1988; Campbell, 1970).

2.3.9 Potentially Negative Effects Following 'Spiritual Awakening'

As the connections between psychosis and spiritual awakening suggest, the 'awakened' state is not always conceived of – or experienced – as a stable, blissful trouble-free state. For example, Bernadette Roberts experienced a 'spiritual awakening' in which she became aware of oneness everywhere, with no distinction between 'individual' objects. She described it as 'an opening up of everything upon which I gazed, [revealing] a reality that was the same throughout, be the object animate or inanimate' (1993, p.37). She interpreted this reality as 'God': 'God or life was not *in* anything, it was just the reverse: everything was *in* God' (ibid., p.29).

After this initial experience Roberts was 'never to revert back to the usual relative way of seeing separateness and individuality' (ibid., p.32). This was accompanied with a loss of her own sense of separateness, and even of her own sense of selfhood: 'With the falling away of all sense of having an interior life, there had been a turning outward to the seeing of Oneness and the falling away of everything

particular and individual' (ibid. p.60). At the same time, she experienced a heightened intensity of awareness, which she described as 'original consciousness' and compared to the fresh and immediate perception of young children.

However, Roberts' 'awakened' state was by no means one of constant bliss. On the contrary, after an initial stage of joy and ecstasy, her experience of 'falling away' from her sense of self led to a sense of painful emptiness inside, as if her "self" had been 'blasted into a million irretrievable pieces' (ibid., p.59). This was accompanied with a sense of falling away from God, and a descent into a state of sterility and confusion which she felt was close to insanity:

It meant a state of no feelings, no seeing, no relationships with anything, nothing but absolute emptiness everywhere you turn. The utter sterility of this state is all but humanly unendurable, especially for any length of time: to bear the burden of complete unknowing was a weight that moment by moment threatened to crush me without bringing death (ibid., p.66).

However, slowly Roberts began to undergo what she describes as a 'period of acclimating', realising that this painful phase was 'the means of transition from the old to the new life' (ibid., p.92). The sense of emptiness and alienation was gradually replaced with a sense of identity with God, or Reality itself: 'It takes a while to adjust to a new way of life wherein it eventually discovers that the basic structure of the mind and its faculties remain intact and perfectly functional, but functional in a new way' (ibid., p. 97).

Robert Forman (2011, 2012) also experienced negative aspects to 'awakening.' He perceived himself to undergo a permanent shift in consciousness in 1972, the main aspects of which he describes as follows:

My experience, indeed my life, became noticeably different than had been before that date: behind everything I am and do now came to be a sense of silence, a bottomless emptiness, so open as to be without end. The silence bears a sense of spaciousness, or vastness, which extends in every direction... Though it rapidly became too normal or everyday to seem amazing or ecstatic, it is quite pleasant and peaceful, since that day, it has been what I am... Vast silence has been the me that watches and lives and holds it all. I am, strange to say, infinite (Forman, 2012, p. 12).

Since then, Forman reports a permanent absence of ‘background thought’, a shift in identity (away from a localized sense of self to what he describes as a ‘strangely non-personal yet infinite openness’), together with a sense of being rooted in a ‘witness consciousness’, able to observe his experience without being involved in it, and a sense of interconnectedness. However, Forman also reports that ‘enlightenment’ did not bring an end to negative emotions, nor did it make life easy and perfect. He suffered from anxiety, relationship problems, still felt incompetent in his job, needed psychotherapy to deal with emotional trauma, daydreamed about having affairs with women, had rape fantasies and continued shoplifting (Forman, 2011). He has concluded that this is a problem of expectation, and that the idea that spiritual awakening leads to a state of constant bliss and freedom from suffering, as well as a life of ethical perfection, may be misleading. As he has written, ‘Spirituality is a field of grand illusions...Men and women undertake its rigors in part because of its promise, the utterly perfected life. It turns out that such a promise of perfect illumination is dishearteningly false’ (ibid., p.1).

Clarke (2011) has also criticized a one-sided purely positive view of spirituality, which excludes the ‘dark night’ and other potential dangers. As she writes, ‘The shadow is conveniently swept into the “pathology” bin, leaving the way clear for a healthy-minded spirituality...This one sided perspective is smoothly achieved by the way in which spirituality is defined in order to leave no room for the discordant’ (2011, p.48).

(These negative aspects of ‘spiritual awakening’ are also reflected in the Christian concept of the ‘dark night of the soul’, which will be described shortly, on page 53.)

2.3.10 The Idealization of Spiritual Teachers or Gurus

Perhaps the issue of expectations relates to spiritual teachers and gurus too. The notion of ‘enlightenment’ as a state of perfection may create an expectation that spiritual teachers should be morally perfect, and free from egotism, greed or bad-temperedness, and other negative character traits, treating other individuals with equanimity and fairness. There is perhaps an expectation that the perfect bliss of the ‘enlightened’ state should manifest itself in a ‘perfect’ personality, which has

transcended desire and fear, and other natural human emotions. According to Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, for example, the 'enlightened' person would 'attain a level of life which is the basis of all morality, virtue and right action' (1990, p.427). While the scholar of mysticism Richard Jones has written, 'Compassionate action becomes the expression of what [the mystic] is. One is no longer imposing self centered desires through actions. All actions become works for other beings' (2004, p.381). In addition, in the *Visuddhimagga*, the 5th century Buddhist teacher Buddhaghosa (2011) states that once a person becomes fully enlightened, it is impossible for them to act impurely. They live in a state of effortless *sila*, in which their behaviour is morally perfect.

With such expectations, it is perhaps not surprising that so many spiritual teachers have been found wanting, and behaved less perfectly than their followers have wished. For example, the Tibetan Lama Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche reportedly became an alcoholic and slept openly with his female disciples, while his 'heir' Osel Tendzin reportedly had frequent sex with his disciples, knowingly infecting them with the AIDs virus (Rawlinson, 1997). Bhagwan Rajneesh – otherwise known as Osho – was reportedly addicted to nitrous oxide, collected Rolls-Royces, and also slept with many of his female followers (Milne, 1987). As Andrew Cohen – a spiritual teacher himself – has written:

How could a spiritual genius and profoundly Awakened man like Da Free John, who makes such a mockery of his own genius through his painfully obvious megalomaniacal rantings, leave so many lost and confused? And how is it that his teacher, the Guru of gurus, the extraordinarily powerful Swami Muktananda, who literally jolted so many thousands far beyond what they imagined possible, could leave behind him so much skepticism and doubt as to the actual depth and degree of his attainment? How is all this possible? (Cohen, 1992, p. 128)

In recent years Cohen himself has suffered many accusations of impropriety and misconduct from his followers too, including allegations of bullying and financial extortion (Yenner, 2009).

Of course, it may be that some of these teachers are simply charlatans who are skilled in manipulation. Alternatively, perhaps they genuinely have – at least in some cases – undergone some form of awakening or transformation, without becoming

‘perfect’ human beings. As Forman (2011) suggests, it is possible that their followers have unrealistic expectations, based on an idealization of the ‘awakened’ state.

2. 4 Spiritual Awakening in Different Traditions

So far this review has mainly focused on spiritual experiences and spiritual awakening as they occur in a secular, non-religious setting. In this section, the concept of ‘spiritual awakening’ will be examined as it occurs within religious and spiritual traditions. I will examine how religious and spiritual traditions understand and interpret the process of spiritual awakening, and whether their concepts of ‘awakening’ share the same characteristics, and are variants of the same essential state, or whether they are ontologically different states, constructed and contextualised by the beliefs and conventions of the traditions. Obviously there is not sufficient space here to provide a thorough review of this subject – which would be the task of a whole volume of comparative religion or mysticism – so this review will be selective, although hopefully highlight the salient and significant points. The main aim is to elicit the major characteristics and causes of spiritual awakening so that these can later be compared to the experiences of the participants of this study.

2.4.1 Spiritual Awakening in Buddhist traditions

In Theravada Buddhism, it is difficult to define ‘awakening’ or ‘enlightenment’ accurately, due to the Buddha’s reluctance to enter into metaphysical discourse in the Theravada texts. (As the Buddha puts it in the *Majjhima-nikaya*, to engage in speculative metaphysical discourse is similar to man who has been wounded with a poisoned arrow but refuses to let anyone remove it until he finds out where the arrow came from, who shot it, what case he is a member of, and so on [van de Weyer, 2000]). *Nirvana* is a ‘blowing out’ of the flame of life, a state where craving has ceased, where ‘there is not this world, and no other world’ (in Spencer, 1963, pp.80-1). This could be interpreted as a simple state of extinction, a liberation from suffering in the sense that the individual will no longer be re-born into the world – or it could be interpreted in more mystical terms, as an extinction of the individual self in union, or a merging of the self with the cosmos. It is because of these possible interpretations

that Happold (1986) described Buddhism as ‘the most mystical and the least mystical of the higher religions, the most spiritual religion and not a religion at all’ (p.77).

More specifically, however, the Buddha in the *Sutta Pitaka* (e.g. in the ‘Snake-Simile Discourse’) spoke of four different types or levels of enlightenment. Firstly, there is the *sotapanna*, or ‘stream-enterer.’ At this level, there is a loss of personality traits such as greed (for sensory pleasures, personal gain and possessions), and resentment and pride (so that the person is not strongly affected by praise or success). The person perceives the relative and impermanent nature of things, and is free from unethical behaviour such as lying, stealing, sexual misconduct or exploiting others (Goleman, 1992).

The second level is *sakadgami*, the ‘once-returner.’ At this level, the individual abandons ‘gross feelings of desire for sense objects and strong resentment’ and ‘an impartial attitude towards any and all stimuli is typical’ (ibid., p.227). At the third level, the *anagami* – ‘non-returner’ – loses the last vestiges of greed or resentment and ‘all aversion to worldly states such as loss, disgrace, pain or blame ceases’ (ibid.). The ‘non-returner’ feels no ill-will to any other being, with no enemies, so that the word ‘dislike’ has no meaning. He or she lives in a state of complete equanimity, free from even the most subtle desire for sensory objects.

Finally, there is the *arahant* – the ‘fully realized being.’ He or she is completely free from suffering, and so does not generate any new karma. He or she has no sense of self, with no possibility of experiencing states such as greed or hatred. As Goleman describes it, ‘All past deeds are erased, as all future becoming; only pure being remains’ (ibid.). In Goleman’s words, ‘The last vestiges of ego relinquished in this final stages include: all feelings of approval for or desire to seek the worldly states of gain, fame, pleasure, praise, any desire for even the bliss of the material or formless jhanas; mental stiffness or agitation, covetousness of anything whatsoever’ (ibid., pp. 227-8).

According to Buddhaghosa in the *Visuddhimagga*, once a person becomes fully enlightened they exist in a state of bliss, contentment and detachment, which determines their thought and behaviour. Whereas unenlightened people must make a conscious effort to live morally and virtuously (*sila*), the fully enlightened person is in a state of effortless *sila*. They do not need to restrain themselves from acting or thinking impurely, because they no longer experience desire, now that the ego has dissolved (Goleman, 1992; Buddhaghosa, 2011). Buddhaghosa also speaks of

enlightenment as a state of *vinnanam anidassanaam*, consciousness in its undivided purity, no longer split into subject and object (Lama Anagarika Govinda, 1983).

Similarly, in the Mahayana tradition, the *Lankavatara Sutra* defines enlightenment as a state in which ‘all passions have subsided, and all mental hindrances have been cleared away; where egolessness is accepted; and where there is transformation at the deepest level of consciousness, leading to realization’ (in van de Weyer, 2000, p. 8/10). The *Heart Sutra* highlights the characteristics of equanimity and detachment from worldly gain or praise: ‘Enlightened men and women are indifferent to any kind of personal attainment...In their indifference to personal attainment, and their lack of desire for self-justification, enlightened men and women can never be humiliated or upset by others’ (ibid., p.7/17).

In the Mahayana tradition, the concept of nirvana shifts from an apparently neutral state of self-extinction, to a positive state of – according to the text *Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana* – ‘the annihilation of the ego-conception, freedom subjectivity insight into the essence of Suchness, the recognition of the oneness of existence’ (in Spencer, 1963, p. 91). Some Mahayana texts, such as the *Sutra of Perfect Awakening*, put forward the view that enlightenment – or *Bodhi*, awakening – is a natural state which is always present, like gold within ore. In other words, enlightenment is a process of ‘uncovering’ our true nature. According to the *Tathagatagarbha*, the Buddha principle – or Buddha Nature – is latent in all beings. It is an active principle with a transformative power, so that awakening partly occurs through allowing this transformative power to manifest itself. *Bodhi* is a state of perfect insight, a state of non-duality, in which, according to the *Shurangama Sutra* ‘the one is infinite and the infinite is one’ (2011).

In the Mahayana tradition, there is a stronger emphasis on compassion and love and on collective rather than individual enlightenment. When a person attains enlightenment, he gains, in Suzuki’s words, ‘a realization in this life of the all-embracing love and all-knowing intelligence of the Dharmakaya’ (Suzuki, 2000, p.349). According to the Mahayana teacher Devala, ‘he who feels a universal love for his fellow-creatures will rejoice in distributing blessings among them, and will find Nirvana in so doing’ (ibid., p. 364).

2.4.2 Spiritual Awakening in Hindu Spiritual Traditions

In the *Upanishads*, the concept of spiritual awakening equates with a transcendence of the separateness of the personal ego, and the union of the individual self, the *atman*, with the spirit-force which pervades the universe, *brahman*. As the Chandogya Upanishad (1988) puts it, 'Believe me, my son, an invisible and subtle essence is the Spirit of the whole Universe. That is Reality. That is Atman. Thou art that' (p. 117). Awakening means transcending the seeming duality between the self and the world, and the seeming separateness of phenomena in the world. As Feuerstein puts it, 'Enlightenment, or liberation, is that condition of being in which the gulf between subject (mind) and object (matter) does not exist. It is the immortal state' (1990, pp.153-4). The individual realises that their essential nature – and the essential nature of reality – as *satcitananda* (being-consciousness-bliss). Bliss or joy is the nature of *brahman*, so union with *brahman* means experiencing this bliss. As the Taittiriya Upanishad (1988) puts it, 'Brahman is joy: for from joy all beings have come, by joy they all live, and unto joy they all return' (p.111). Or as the Katha Upanishad puts it, 'When the wise realize the omnipresent spirit...then they go beyond sorrow' (ibid., p.59).

In this state, the individual no longer experiences fear. The Katha Upanishad states that 'When he knows the Atman...then he goes beyond fear' (ibid., p.62), while similarly, the Isa Upanishad states that, 'Who sees all beings in his own Self, and his own Self in all beings, loses all fear' (ibid., p.49). Fear is seen as the consequence of separation. Duality presupposes opposition and conflict, whereas unity brings harmony and joy. Awakening is seen as the result of transcending desire and attachment. As the Katha Upanishad puts it, 'When all desires that cling to the heart are surrendered...when all the ties that bind the heart are loosened, then a mortal becomes immortal. This is the sacred teaching' (ibid., p.66).

In the Yogic tradition, Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutras* seems to imply that *samadhi* or union arises from a state of mental stillness and emptiness, when thoughts and mental fluctuations cease. The second sentence of the *Sutras* states, '*Yoga citta vritti nirodha*' (according to Feuerstein's translation, 'Yoga is the restriction of the whirls of consciousness'). This state of mental cessation or restriction enables the 'seer' or transcendental self to emerge (Feuerstein, 1990, p.171).

In the Yogic tradition awakening is equivalent to the state of *sahaja samadhi*, when the temporary experience of *samadhi* in meditation becomes a permanent state, integrated into everyday life. According to the modern scholar of Advaita Vedanta,

Dennis Waite, in this state the sage ‘carries out the functions of a normal person, even thinking when necessary, but is forever resting in knowledge of his true Self’ (2003, p.195). Waite emphasises that *sahaja samadhi* is not an *experience*, since ‘This implies someone who experiences and some “thing” separate from us and the experience, that is experienced as in knower-knowing-known’ (ibid., p.193). Echoing the Upanishads, Waite writes that in this state, there is a ‘total lack of desire or fear. These can only exist where there is an ego to feel limited and want to fill the perceived emptiness and avoid threats’ (ibid., p.192).

In the Hindu Tantric tradition this ‘worldly’ awakening is emphasised even further. Liberation or *moksha* does not mean transcending the world, or moving beyond *samsara* (as it may be interpreted to mean in Theravada Buddhism), it is a matter of bringing the material world *into* spirit. As Feuerstein (1990) describes it, ‘Enlightenment is not a matter of leaving the world or of killing one’s natural impulses. Rather, it is a matter of envisioning the lower reality as containing and coalescing the higher reality, and allowing the higher reality to transform the lower.’ (p. 252). This has some parallels with the Kabbalistic concept of *tikkun olam*, ‘the healing of the world’ (Lancaster, 2005).

2.4.3 Spiritual Awakening in the Christian Tradition

As described by Underhill (1960) the Christian ‘Mystic Way’ has five stages. Firstly, there is the awakening of the self, when the person first becomes conscious of ‘divine reality’ in the world; secondly, purgation, when the person realises his or her ‘own finiteness and imperfection’ (p.169) and undergoes a process of self-discipline and purification in order to transcend these limits. This process may include ascetic practices and a lifestyle of renunciation and detachment. The mystic may relinquish family life, worldly pleasures and personal ambitions, and practice ‘voluntary poverty.’

Like asceticism, renunciation can easily be interpreted as part of the ‘ascending’ world-rejecting tradition which posits an artificial duality between matter and spirit (Wilber, 1995). However, the underlying purpose of detachment was noted by Evelyn Underhill, who describes it as a process of ‘stripping or purging away of those superfluous, unreal, and harmful things which dissipate the precious energies of the self’ (1960, p. 204). Similarly, Meister Eckhart pointed out that ‘There are men

who completely dissipate the powers of the soul in the outward man. These are the people who direct all their aims and intelligence towards transient possessions' (1996, p.117).

The third stage of the Mystic Way, as delineated by Underhill, is illumination, which is when the original state of awakening returns, but more intensely. There is a heightened awareness of the phenomenal world, a vision of all-pervading divine presence and an inner joy or ecstasy.

For some mystics this was the end point of their development, but for others illumination was followed by a fourth stage, the Dark Night of the Soul. The 'dark night' is by no means a universally-accepted stage of the spiritual path in the Christian mystical tradition – for instance, it does not have a place in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, and by no means all Western mystics refer to it. However, it was described by many prominent Western mystics, such as Angela de Foligno, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Teresa, Henry de Suso, St. John of the Cross, and others. (Happold, 1986; Spencer, 1963).

The 'dark night' is a period of desolation and despair, when the mystic feels abandoned by the divine, as if – in Meister Eckhart's words – 'there were a wall erected between Him and us' (In Underhill, 1960, p.389). The mystic feels spiritually arid, full of self-contempt and contempt for the world. The concept of the 'Dark night' originates with St. John of the Cross' poem 'Noche Obscura del Alma.' Interestingly, the phrase has also been translated as 'The Obscure Night of the Soul', which highlights the confusion and sense of loss which the state involves (Lucas, 2011).

However, as Underhill points out, the Dark Night of the Soul is actually a process of further detachment, a 'last and drastic purgation of the spirit' (ibid., p.396). It is a complete emptying of the self, to allow pure love to flow through the soul, so that it can experience union with the divine (Lucas, 2011). The mystic has already dissolved psychological attachments to external objects, and now he has to break his attachment to *himself*, to surrender his individuality and his will (Taylor, 2010).

(Although spiritual emergencies have been compared to the 'Dark night of the soul', since the Dark night is a specific stage of the mystical path, following on from the awakening of the self, purgation and illumination, it is possibly a misuse of the term to apply it to *any* phase of turmoil, despair and confusion associated with spiritual awakening.)

If the mystic emerges from the Dark Night, she reaches the final stage of the mystical path, that of Union, or deification, when she does not merely *see* God in the world, but becomes one with Him. (In Neo-Platonic terms, she attains *henosis*.) Her soul is one with the ground of reality, or in Meister Eckhart's phrase (1996), the Godhead. As St. John of the Cross describes his own experience of this state, 'My will went forth out of itself, becoming divine: for now united with the divine love, it loves no more with its former scanty powers and circumscribed capacity, but with the energy and pureness of the divine spirit' (in Bucke, 2011). Since the essence of the whole cosmos is divine, this state also involves becoming one with the whole cosmos. There is no longer a separate 'I'. The mystic's identity now includes the whole world. As St. John puts it, 'The heavens are mine, the nations are mine and the earth is mine; mine are the just, and the sinners are mine: mine are the angels and the mother of God; all things are mine, God himself is mine and all for me, because Christ is mine and all for me' (ibid.).

The anonymous author of the 14th century spiritual text *The Cloud of Unknowing* describes this state as becoming 'Oned with God.' The 13th century Christian mystical text *On Cleaving to God* – usually attributed to Albertus Magnus – describes the goal of contemplation as being to 'pour ourselves into God with all the strength of our inmost soul,' that we may be 'absorbed into His Being' (in Spencer, 1963, p.236). According to this text, the force which enables this unification to take place is love, so that it is the love of God which 'transforms us into God' (ibid.). Similarly, Meister Eckhart speaks of how the individual 'enters into' God through love, and becomes 'transformed into God, so that we may know Him as He is' (ibid., p.241). In a poetic description of this state of oneness, Meister Eckhart writes, 'The eye through which I see God is the same eye as that with which God sees me; my eye and God's eye are one eye, and one sights, and one knowledge, and one love' (ibid., p.242).

It is significant that, as in Buddhism, in the Christian mystical tradition 'awakening' is divided into different stages, or levels – initially, the 'awakening of the self,' then 'illumination', followed by 'deification' (or *theosis*, the term used in the Eastern Orthodox Church). This corresponds to the suggestion that there are different intensities of temporary spiritual experiences. The stages of 'awakening of the self' and 'illumination' appear to correspond to the lower intensities of spiritual experiences, when the individual perceives reality as a heightened intensity, filled

with radiance and harmony, and has a sense of a spiritual force or energy pervading the world. The individual is filled with a sense of wonder and awe at the beauty and power of the spiritually-infused reality. At the stage of union or deification, there is a complete transformation of being, a transfiguration, featuring a transcendence of individuality and separation. The duality between the observer and the observed falls away, together with the seeming separateness between different phenomena. The whole world melts into oneness, along with the 'individual' soul. The nature of this ultimate reality – the 'Divine Dark' or 'Godhead' – is divine love and bliss, and these qualities fill the mystic himself too.

Other mystics – such as St. John of the Cross – speak in terms of stages of contemplation, and 'degrees of prayer.' Through the stages of deepening concentration, in Happold's words, 'a communion is established between the seer and what is seen,' (1986, p.70) and 'polar opposites of normal thought and perception fade away' so that there is a 'sense of Oneness and Timelessness' (ibid., p.71). St. John of the Cross calls the higher stages of the contemplative path 'dark contemplation', which Happold (1986) further divides into the categories of Recollection, Quiet and Contemplation proper. During the phase of Recollection, the self becomes more receptive and trustful to the divine. Although separate to it, he or she is conscious of its presence, in the world and in their soul. In the 'quiet' stage, the mind becomes still and empty, filled with what Happold calls 'a strange and indescribable silence' with 'a new level of vivid awareness, marked by a deep peace and living stillness' which is maintained effortlessly (ibid., p.75). As St. Teresa describes it, in this state the soul 'seems to have no more to desire. The faculties are at peace and do not wish to move' (ibid., p. 76). There is still a sense of individual identity, but this identity has been completely transformed.

At the highest stage of contemplation, the soul lives in a 'dark silence' which is at the same time 'filled with light and heavenly music' (ibid., p. 86). The mystic becomes 'one spirit with God' (in Tauler's phrase) and lives in a state of 'spiritual marriage', in union.

It is worth emphasising that this is an ongoing state of being, not just an experience which comes and goes. In similarity with *sahaja samadhi* - or Wilber's non-dual stage - the mystic who has attained deification lives in constant union with the divine, throughout their everyday life. According to Underhill (1960), St. Catherine of Genoa was in 'unbroken consciousness' of the divine for 22 years,

during which she lived a highly active life as a theologian and nurse, tending to the sick and the poor of Genoa and eventually becoming the manager and treasurer of the city hospital. Similarly, St. Teresa of Avila attained constant mystical awareness at the age of 37, after which she lived a life of frenetic activity, which included writing several books and founding 17 convents. The 17th century French mystic Marie de L'incarnation describes this state of permanent 'contemplation' very vividly: 'My soul has dwelt in her centre, which is God...One can read, write, work, do what one will, and nevertheless this fundamental occupation always abides and the soul never ceases to be united with God' (in Spencer, 1963, p.254).

2.4.4 Spiritual Awakening in Jewish Mysticism

In the Jewish Hasidic tradition, God is seen as pervading both the world and the human soul. There is the visible outer glory of God in the world, and the inner glory of God as 'the soul of the soul' (Scholem, 1955, p. 110). As the Baal Shem Tov described it, 'Let man realize that when he is looking at material things he is in reality gazing at the image of the Deity which is present in all things. With this in mind man will always serve God even in small matters' ('Hasidic Judaism', 2011).

In our normal state, we are separated from this divinity – in exile from the divine source, as the Baal Shem Tov described it. We live in a state of forgetfulness and separation. There appears to be a chasm between us and the divine, even though the chasm itself is actually illusory (Hoffman, 2007). However, the adept attempts to awaken to this divine presence through intense devotion and prayer – both ecstatic and fervent prayer, and *kavana*, or mental concentration, similar to the 'one-pointedness' of Buddhism. He transcends time and space, and is filled with joy and exaltation, becoming absorbed into God. (Clearly, this is a similar state to the Sufi *fana* or to *nirvikalpa samadhi*). The goal of the Hasidic adept is essentially the same as that of the Christian or Sufi mystic: the annihilation of the separate self, in oneness with God.

The Kabbalah aims to awaken human beings to divine reality, through transcending the world of the senses. In the 'language mysticism' developed by Abulafia, this can be done via the letters of the Hebrew alphabet – in particular, contemplation of the name of God (Lancaster, 2005). Abulafia also taught breathing

exercises and bodily postures as spiritual techniques, possibly learning these direct from Yoga teachers in his travels.

As for the mystics of other traditions, the ultimate goal of the Kabbalah is union with the divine. As Abulafia wrote:

The man who has felt the divine touch and perceiving its nature is no longer separate from his Master [i.e. God] and behold, he is his Master, and his Master is he, for he is so intimately united to Him that he cannot by any means be separated from him (In Scholem, p. 140).

In the *Zohar*, the major work of the Kabbalah, this state of the union with God is referred to as *devekut* (or *devekuth*), 'cleaving to the divine.' The *Zohar* does not concern itself so much with the ecstatic *experience* of union with God, but more with *devekut* as a permanent state of being (again, not dissimilar to *sahaja samadhi* or *baqa*). Edward Hoffman describes *devekut* as a state of mental stillness and emptiness, and of ecstasy and awe, in which 'through calming the whirl of thoughts that is our ordinary mind, we open a door that leads to an exalted awareness of the wonder of the entire cosmos' (2007, p.75). (Hoffman's terminology here clearly echoes Patanjali's description of Yoga, quoted on page 51). Lancaster (2005) emphasises that this state brings a complete transformation of consciousness, as the individual enters into a realm of 'pure thought' where 'normal thought is annihilated, together with the ego which illusorily believes that it controls those thoughts' (p. 191). In the words of the Maggid of Mezeritch, 'One must regard oneself as nothing and forget oneself totally...Then one can transcend time, aspiring to the world of [pure] thought where all is equal' (ibid.).

In *devekut*, the adept is aware of the harmony and unity of the cosmos, and also his own unity with it. The universe and everything in it is pervaded with translucent brilliant light (in fact, the term *Zohar* literally means 'splendour' or 'brilliance'). This world of wonder and radiance is the natural, naked state of reality, but our normal, limited consciousness denies us access to it. It is necessary for us to expand and intensify our awareness, and Kabbalistic texts recommend a variety of meditative exercises to do this, including prayer, chanting, visualisation of symbols, contemplating the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and contemplating and visualising the wonders of the universe. They also recommended cultivating an attitude of

indiscriminate joy, which would create an opening for the divine to flow through (as opposed to sadness and depression, which close us off to the divine). (Hoffman, 2007; Lancaster, 2005).

The mysticism of the Kabbalah has a collective altruistic emphasis which is not as strongly present in the Hindu or Christian traditions (although it occurs in Buddhism in the concept of the *Bodhisattva*.) Lancaster (2005) notes that the true objective of the Kabbalah is not merely individual transformation, but transformation on behalf of – and for the benefit of – the whole of humanity. Its purpose is ‘that of bringing the dynamics of Godhead into their proper conformation, thereby promoting *tikkun olam*, the “healing of the world”’ (p.40). As the *Zohar* states, ‘There can be no perfection above without the perfecting influence of humans when they are righteous and act from love’ (in *ibid.*, p. 43).

2.4.5 Spiritual Awakening in Sufism

As in the Christian and Judaic mystical traditions, the goal of Sufism is union with God, not merely as a temporary experience but as a permanent state – in Spencer’s words, ‘a transformation of human personality whereby the unification is so realized that it becomes a permanent condition of being’ (1963, p.319). The experience of *fana* – usually translated as ‘passing away’ – is one in which the individual’s identity fades away and dissolves into oneness with the world. As Al-Ghazzali describes it, in *fana* mystics ‘are annihilated, and they themselves are no more. They no longer contemplate themselves, having passed away from themselves, and there remains only the One, the Real’ (*ibid.*). In this way, *fana* is very similar to *nirvikalpa samadhi*. And just as the latter is related to *sahaja samadhi* – as a permanent, ongoing state – *fana* is related to *baqa*, the permanent state of ‘abiding in God.’ In fact, in contrast to the Yogi, the Sufi adept is *obliged* to return to the world of time and space from the emptiness of absorption in the divine. In Sufism, the world of time and space is a sacred manifestation of the divine, so the adept has to share in its divinity, and manifest it to others (Spencer, 1963). (Note the parallel here with *tikkun olam* and with the *Bodhisattva*. Essentially, the goal of Theravada Buddhism is to *escape* the world of time and space, into the emptiness of *nirvana*. Strictly speaking, the Theravada Buddhist does not see the world as sacred, and so is not obliged to participate in its wonder. However, although he/she is free from *samsara*, the

Boddhisattva feels a sense of compassion for the sufferings of others still trapped in it, and so returns to the world, to help bring others to liberation.)

Baqa is a state of unification – *tawhid*, in Arabic – in which the mystic no longer has a will of their own, but lives in and through God, in a state of ecstasy. They no longer have a sense of planning their own life, or making things happen. Life unfolds naturally and spontaneously through them, by virtue of divine power. Although a part of the world, they are not concerned with their position in it, or with status, position and wealth. They do not cease to exist, but their individuality is absorbed into God, giving them a permanent sense of His being pervading both the world and their own being (Azeemi, 2005; Hadhrat Junaid Baghdadi [Rahmatullahi Allaih], 2011).

2.4.6 Spiritual Awakening in Taoism

In the Taoist tradition, the term *ming* is used by Chuang-tzu to describe a state in which the individual no longer experiences duality and separation, and realises their true nature as Tao, and so becomes one with it (Tao Te Ching, 1988). In this state, he or she follows the *wu-wei chih-Tao*, ‘the non-striving Way of Transcendence.’ We have seen that other mystical traditions speak of the adept giving up their individual will and becoming the manifestation of the will of God, and there is a similar concept in Taoism: the individual gives up their own will, and allows the Tao to flow through them, so that they live in a state of ‘actionless activity’ (*wu-wei*). As Kuo Hsiang puts it, the sage has ‘no deliberate mind of his own’ (in Conway, 2011). The follower of the Tao must ‘empty out’ themselves, until they are no longer an individual, and no longer experience separation (Skildsden, 2006). As Chuang-tzu, advocated, ‘be empty: that is all. The perfect man’s use of his mind is like a mirror’ (in Spencer, 1963, p.101). At the same time as being empty, the sage’s mind is also completely still: ‘To a mind that is still the whole universe surrenders’ (ibid.).

According to Chuang-tzu, when a person attains union with Tao, he or she accepts all events with equanimity. They are neither moved to joy by positive events or to despair by tragic events. They lose fear of death – indeed, it is said that Chuang-tzu did not mourn even when his wife died (Spencer, 1963). The distinction between life and death no longer has any meaning, together with other distinctions such as me-you and I-it.

To some degree, in the *Tao Te Ching*, the ideal human state is envisioned as a return to the spontaneity, openness and unself-consciousness of childhood. The *Tao Te Ching* (2011) advises us to 'Return to the state of the infant', and says that the person who 'has in himself abundantly the attributes (of the Tao) is like an infant.' In the same way that the aim of the Taoist cultivation practices – like Tai Chi and Chi Gung – to help the body to become as supple and flexible as a child's body, the mind should also become open and flexible, reflecting the state of the body.

2.5 Some Common Themes from Spiritual Traditions

2.5.1 Transcending Separateness into Unity and Connection

All the above traditions share the view that spiritual awakening entails a movement beyond separateness and into connection and unity with a transcendent power. In spiritual traditions associated with monotheistic religious traditions (mystical Christianity, Jewish spiritual traditions and Sufism) this transcendent power is usually identified as 'God', whereas in Vedanta and Yoga it is conceived of as non-personal all-pervading spiritual force (*brahman*). This transcendent power is seen as the essence of our own being, and the personal self – or ego – is seen as an obstacle to connection with it, standing in the way of the unity of *atman* or *brahman*.

The personal self, with its desires, attachments and ambitions, has to be dismantled – or at least its boundaries should be softened – so that individual identity can merge with the transcendent, becoming one God or *brahman*, as in the concepts of *devekut*, deification and yoga (union). As a result, spiritual traditions use such terms as 'self-annihilation' and 'self-naughting', and speak of the individual giving up their own will, so that the divine can flow through them. (Or in Taoism, so that they can become pure channels and instruments of the Tao.)

This is the one common characteristic of spiritual traditions which Ferrer (2002) identifies. Although Ferrer disputes the claims of 'perennialism' and believes that there is no mystical 'core' shared by the world's spiritual traditions, he accepts that there is at least one common theme of spiritual traditions in the sense that they all feature a movement beyond self-centredness towards connection with something greater.

2.5.2 Altruism and Compassion

Spiritual awakening is not just associated with connection or union with a transcendent power, but also – since this power is all pervasive, and the essence of everything which exists, including all human beings – a union with other human beings. It is also commonly conceived as a union with the whole human race. As the Jewish mystic Cordovero states, ‘in everyone there is something of his fellow-man. Therefore whoever sins injures not only himself but also that part of himself which belongs to another.’ In this way, it is important to love others because ‘the other is really oneself’ (in Spencer, 1963, p.200).

As Cordovero suggests, this connection with other human beings generates love, compassion and altruism. Since we share our identity with other human beings, we can *feel with* them, and so feel the desire – and responsibility – to aid their development and help reduce their suffering. As a consequence, spiritual awakening inevitably engenders a sense of compassion and altruistic action, an impulse to serve others. As Mears Owens writes of the concept of enlightenment in Zen Buddhism, ‘All enlightened persons possess many characteristics in common, such as compassion, selflessness and desire to serve others’ (Owens, 1992, p.186). Enlightenment is, she writes, characterised by a ‘sense of universal brotherhood’ (ibid., p. 201). The altruistic impulse this gives rise to is strongly expressed by Shantideva in the *Bodhicaryavatara*: ‘I wish to remove the suffering of every living being, enabling all to move towards enlightenment...My concern for the welfare of others gains me greater merit than any act of worship’ (in van de Meyer, 2004, p. 8/12). (This impulse is expressed in the concepts of *tikkun olam*, the *Boddhisattva* and in the Sufi’s obligation to share in the divinity of the world and manifest it to others.)

Similarly, in the Jewish Hasidic tradition, there is a strong emphasis on humility and love, directed to all human beings irrespective of their status or background. This stems from the view that since God is present in everyone, no human being can be truly evil, and so they should be shown mercy and compassion. As the Baal Shem Tov is reported as saying, ‘Only the truly humble man in heart will not feel it a hardship to love one of the wicked, thinking “for all his wickedness, he is better than I am”’ (in Spencer, 1963, p.208). In the Zohar, the aim of prayer (*kavana*) is not merely to bring the adept closer to union with God, but also to generate joy and

peace in the world, which are ‘brought down’ to and spread to all those who are open to it (ibid.).

One effect of this all-pervading love and compassion is that it enables the individual to transcend ‘moral exclusion.’ This is the tendency to apply morals only to people we value, who are within our *scope of justice* (or moral community), such as family members, friends, compatriots, and coreligionists. We are happy to treat them justly and fairly, to share resources, make sacrifices for them and encourage their well-being. However, we do not extend this treatment to people outside our own group, such as people of a different gender, ethnic group, religious identity, political affiliation, and so on. They are *morally excluded*, and we are liable to deny them rights and treat them unfairly (Christie et al., 2001). However, for the ‘enlightened’ person in these spiritual traditions, no one is excluded from empathy and moral reality. Their sense of compassion stretches beyond superficial social or cultural differences. As Owens writes, ‘In Zen one is unaware of differences of race, age, sex, or social status. One is aware of everyone’s True-nature, even if dormant’ (1992, p.201).

2.5.3 Diminishing of Self-interest/Concern for Personal Gain or Ambitions

The above two characteristics can be seen as closely related to a diminishing of *self-interest*. ‘Enlightenment’ brings a decreased concern with personal attainment, ambition and success. As the *Heart Sutra* notes again, ‘Enlightened men and women are indifferent to any kind of personal attainment...In their indifference to personal attainment, and their lack of desire for self-justification, enlightened men and women can never be humiliated or upset by others’ (van de Weyer, 2000, p.7/17). Similarly, Goleman notes that, in the highest stage of enlightenment in Buddhism, there is a falling away of ‘all feelings of approval for or desire to seek the worldly states of gain, fame, pleasure, praise, any desire for even the bliss of the material or formless *jhanas*’ (1992, pp. 227-8).

Similarly, the *Bhagavad-Gita* describes the awakened person as being ‘beyond both praise and blame, whose mind is steady and quiet’ (1988, p.68). The Christian concept of detachment implies something similar: that in order to attain the states of contemplation – or deification – the individual has to relinquish their

attachment to worldly concerns such as ambitions, possessions and status (Underhill, 1960; Happold, 1986).

Therefore it might be said that this lack of self-interest or concern for personal gain facilitates the increased altruism and compassion above.

2.5.4 Inner Emptiness and Stillness

Spiritual traditions also share the view that the process of spiritual awakening involves an 'emptying out' of the mind, a stilling and purifying of consciousness, and that the *state* of being 'awakened' is characterised by an inner emptiness and stillness. Patanjali states that yoga arises from 'restricting the whirls of consciousness' (Feuerstein, 1990, p.171) while Hoffman writes that *devekut* arises through 'calming the whirl of thoughts that is our ordinary mind' (2007, p.75) and is characterised by mental stillness and emptiness. While in Taoism the individual has to 'empty' themselves out so that the Tao can flow through them (Skildsden, 2006).

In the Christian tradition, Dionysus the Aeropagite describes the aim the mystical path as being to 'leave behind the senses and the operation of the intellect' (in Happold, 1986, p.215). Meister Eckhart (1979) describes our normal condition as a 'storm of inward thought' and states that 'If God is to speak his word in the soul, she must be at rest and at peace' (p.7). In a strikingly similar phrase, the *Bhagavad Gita* describes how the 'storm of the sense-desires' makes us ignorant and confused, and states that in order to find the truth our minds should become 'stable and steady, like the flame of a lamp which rests in its place where no wind comes to disturb or cause it to flicker' (1988, p.84). Similarly, the Maitri Upanishad states that, 'When the mind is silent, beyond weakness and non-concentration, then it can enter into a world which is far beyond the mind: the highest End' (*The Upanishads*, 1988, p. 103).

Similarly again, the *Lankavatara Sutra* defines enlightenment as a state in which 'all passions have subsided, and all mental hindrances have been cleared away; where egolessness is accepted; and where there is transformation at the deepest level of consciousness, leading to realization' (van de Weyer, 2000, p. 8/10). While Owens describes the purpose of Zazen meditation to 'attain not merely enlightenment but ever-deepening enlightenment experiences by stilling the discursive intellect' (1992, p.200).

In other words, there is an agreement that, in order for awakening to occur, the normal 'self-structure', with its chattering, discursive cognitive activity, and the conceptual apparatus it has developed, must be quietened or transcended. The implication is that this 'self-structure' is an obstacle to awakening; it has to be quietened or transcended so that higher self can emerge and become established as new identity. And once this has occurred, the transformed person exists in a state of relative inner quietness and stillness.

There is a similarity here with what Forman (1990) describes as the 'pure consciousness event', although Forman's term 'event' implies a temporary passing experience, whereas this is a permanent state ('The pure consciousness state', as it might more accurately be referred to.)

Kelly and Grosso (2007) make a similar point, remarking that one common aspect of mystical experience – both temporary and ongoing or permanent – is that it involves a 'deconditioning' of the mind. That is, mystical experience entails a 'dismantling' of the normal self-system, an 'emptying out' of its concepts and schema.

2.5.5 Heightened Awareness

Spiritual traditions also share the view that spiritual awakening brings a wider and more intense awareness of reality. Mystics perceive a world which appears *more real*. In comparison, the world as perceived through our normal consciousness is considered illusory, or at least only a *partial* reality. In a sense, unity and connection are a part of this: it is his or her more intense vision of reality which enables the awakened individual to perceive this unity. And this unity is felt to be *more real* than the seeming separateness of one's normal vision of the world. In Vedantic terms, for example, the illusion of *maya* is uncovered, revealing a world of unity in place of an illusory world of duality and separateness (Feuerstein, 1990). Or in the words of the Sufi mystic Al-Ghazali, this is a state 'whose relation to your waking consciousness is analogous to the relation of the latter to dreaming. In comparison with this state your waking consciousness would be like dreaming!' (in Scharfstein, 1973, p.28).

In the Christian mystical tradition, this heightened awareness begins at the stage of awakening, when the mystic first perceives the presence of the divine in the world, and becomes more intense at the stage of illumination. Underhill describes this

state as one of 'a clarity of vision, a heightening of physical perception' (in Deikman, 2011). Similarly, the state of contemplation is described by Happold as featuring 'a new level of vivid awareness' (1986, p. 75) and also by an increasing perception of connection and oneness.

2.5.6 Radiance and Light

There is also a cross-traditional association of spiritual or mystical experiences and states with the quality of light, or radiance. That is, the individual who undergoes spiritual awakening perceives a world pervaded with light and radiance, and is also aware of a radiance within his or her *own* being.

Of course, this association is suggested by the term 'enlightenment', as well as by the term 'illumination', and terms such as 'the inner light' and 'Children of the Light' (both Quaker terms). As Cohen and Phipps remark (also using the term 'enlightenment' in a general sense, across different spiritual traditions):

The enlightened are bathed in light. Likewise they radiate light, which is present in the aura that surrounds the heads of saints and bodhisattvas in Christian and Buddhist art. There is a subtle form of light that strikes the inward eye and suffuses the body. Enlightenment is no metaphorical term. (Cohen and Phipps, 1979, p.141)

Across spiritual traditions, the ground reality of the universe – pure consciousness, *Brahman*, the Godhead, or *Dharmakaya* – is described as possessing a brilliant radiance. In Vedanta, *Brahman* is often compared to the Sun: the *Bhagavad-Gita* states, 'If the light of a thousand suns suddenly arose in the sky, that splendour might be compared to the radiance of the Supreme Spirit' (1988, p.53). The term *Zohar* can be translated as 'splendour' or 'brilliance' and the text itself describes the universe as pervaded with translucent light (Hoffman, 2007).

Since our own being partakes of the ultimate reality – in Vedantic terms, since *brahman* is one with *atman* – this radiance suffuses our own being too. It is the nature of our deepest nature, our pure consciousness. (Bucke includes 'subjective light' as a characteristic of cosmic consciousness.) As the Katha Upanishad states, 'The light of the Atman, the Spirit, is invisible, concealed in all beings. It is seen by the seers of the subtle, when their vision is keen and clear' (1988, p.61). Feuerstein notes that both

experiences of *samadhi* and the state of permanent awakening are associated with visions of light: 'Experiences of inner light occur well before the yogin has reached the point of spiritual maturity where the confrontation with the transcendental Light takes place' (1990, p.239).

This radiance is a prominent characteristic of temporary spiritual experiences. Here, for example, is a report of a spiritual experience which occurred following a meditation practice:

Through all the objects in the room glowed a radiance. All problems dissolved, or rather, there were no problems, there was no death and no 'I-ness'; it was a feeling of absolute bliss. This was followed as I gradually 'came back into the world' by a feeling of intoxication, so great was the happiness (in Hardy, 1979, p.63).

Interestingly, this radiance can be perceived in other human beings too, closely connected to an intense sense of connection and empathy with them:

I looked at the faces of those around me and they seemed to be suffused with an inner radiance. I experienced in that moment a sense of profoundest kinship with each and every person there...I lost all sense of personal identity then. These people were no longer strangers to me. I knew them all. We were no longer separate individuals, each enclosed in his own private world, divided by all the barriers of social convention and personal exclusiveness. We were one with each other and with the Life which we all lived in common (in Johnson, 1959, pp.83-84).

It is also significant that radiance may also appear as a quality of 'awakened' individuals as perceived by others (Taylor, 2010). For example, when the English author and poet Edward Carpenter visited Walt Whitman – who Richard M Bucke included as an example of cosmic consciousness - he was immediately aware of a 'certain radiant power in him, a large benign effluence and inclusiveness, as of the sun, which filled out the place where he was' (Carpenter, 2011). Similarly, when Paul Brunton visited Ramana Maharshi he described being conscious of 'spreading ripple of telepathic radiation from this mysterious and imperturbable man' (Brunton, 1972, p.141).

There are also intriguing parallels here with the radiance which is often reported by individuals in near-death experiences (van Lommel, 2004; Fenwick, 1995; Grey 1985). NDEs have many striking characteristics – often including the sense of leaving one’s body, an encounter with deceased relatives or with ‘beings of light’, a journey through a tunnel towards a place of light, and a ‘life-review’ – but from an *affective* point of view, the ‘spiritual’ aspects of NDEs are very significant. Typically, NDEs *incorporate* spiritual experiences. Many NDE patients report a profound sense of well-being, an intense feeling of love, and a sense of the one-ness and harmony of the universe (Fenwick, 1995; Grey 1985; van Lommel, 2004). For example, a heart attack victim who watched from above while paramedics tried to restart his heart and then passed through a tunnel towards a light, commented that ‘There is no comparable place in physical reality to experience such total awareness. The love, protection, joy, giving sharing and being that I experienced in the Light at that moment was absolutely overwhelming and pure in its essence’ (in Fontana, 2005, p.387). Another person reported that, ‘It was just pure consciousness. And this enormously bright light seemed to cradle me. I just seemed to exist in it and be part of it and be nurtured by it and the feeling just became more and more ecstatic and glorious and perfect’ (in Lorimer, 1990, p.86).

The prevalence of descriptions of ‘light’ in these experiences is very striking. This is echoed in the following passage from the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, describing the individual’s initial experience of death:

Your respiration ceases, all phenomena will become empty and utterly naked like space. [At the same time] a naked awareness will arise, not extraneous [to yourself], but radiant, empty and without horizon or centre. This intrinsic awareness, manifest in a great mass of light, in which radiance and emptiness are indivisible, is the Buddha [nature] of unchanging light, beyond birth or death (Coleman & Thupten, 2008, p. 57).

This question is not relevant to this study, but it would certainly be interesting to speculate on whether the radiance which is perceived in these different contexts is related.

2.5.7 Well-being

In every religious or spiritual tradition, spiritual awakening is also associated with increased inner well-being. Stace (1960) speaks of a 'deeply felt positive mood' as a characteristic of mystical experiences. And this characteristic is equally strong in a permanent context. Spiritual awakening is associated with the transcendence of anxiety and fear and a sense of inner peace, exultation or ecstasy.

In Vedanta, bliss is one of the qualities of consciousness itself, as in *satcitananda* (being-consciousness-bliss). The essence of Brahman itself is joy: 'Brahman is joy: for from joy all beings have come, by joy they all live, and unto joy they all return' (The Upanishads, 1988, p.111). In Buddhism, it is clear that enlightenment means transcending the inevitable suffering of *samsara*, but in many Theravada texts it is not clear whether this is equivalent to a positive state of bliss or joy, or to a neutral state of extinction (this is obviously closely related to the question of how enlightenment or nirvana are defined). However, Buddhaghosa (2011) in the *Visuddhimagga* does state that enlightenment means existing in a state of bliss.

Christian mystics are very clear that spiritual awakening brings a permanent state of joy or well-being. In St. John of the Cross' words, 'Such is the sweetness of deep delight of these touches of God, that one of them is more than a recompense for all the sufferings of this life, however great their number' (in Bucke, 2011, p. 124). Underhill (1960) notes that inner joy or ecstasy is a characteristic of the stage of illumination, while Happold (1986) states that during the phase of Recollection (one of the stages of contemplation) the soul is filled with a deep inner peace. Similarly, in Jewish spirituality, *devekut* is described as a state of joy and exaltation (Hoffman, 2007; Lancaster, 2005), as is the Sufi state of *Baqa* (Azeemi, 2005).

A related quality here is *equanimity*. 'Enlightened' individuals are described as reacting to the events of their lives with calmness, without becoming overly upset by negative events, or overly joyous about positive events. Chuang-tzu describes this as a characteristic of union with the Tao. The *Bhagavad-Gita* describes the awakened person as being 'the same in pleasure and pain; to whom gold or stones or earth are one, and what is pleasing or displeasing leaves him in peace' (1988, p.68).

2.6 A Perennial Philosophy?

The validity of the concept of a 'perennial philosophy' is too great a subject to debate at length here, since the aim of this review is to elicit the characteristics of spiritual awakening. However, following the brief summary of the characteristics of spiritual awakening in different traditions, it is interesting to speculate on whether these characteristics are universal or context-specific. That is, are they characteristics of a fundamental state of being or consciousness expressed through different traditions, or are they distinct and independent states developed through the conceptual framework of different traditions?

The concept of the 'perennial philosophy' has been accepted by many prominent transpersonal psychologists. Maslow, for example, believed that the 'peak experience', interpreted in a religious context, was the source of all religions, and formed a common core within them: 'To the extent that all mystical or peak-experiences are the same in their essence and have always been the same, all religions are the same in their essence and always have been the same' (1970, p.20). Grof has made the same distinction between the 'superficial' externalities of religion and their mystical core: 'Genuine religion is universal, all-inclusive, and all-encompassing. It has to transcend specific culture-bound archetypal images and focus on the ultimate source of all forms' (1988, p.24). Although Wilber originally saw himself as an advocate of the perennial philosophy, he now sees himself as offering a 'neo-perennial' approach, integrating the core concepts of the tradition with modern and post-modern insights (Wilber, 2000). Religious scholars such as Huston Smith, John Hick, Frithjof Schuon and Seyyed Hossein Nasr have also strongly supported the concept of an 'underlying religion' or 'spiritual core' which external religion traditions interpret and express in different ways. According to this view, concepts such a personal God, an impersonal *brahman*, *sunyata* (emptiness), the Void, the Tao, the Godhead, pure consciousness etc. are simply different 'signs' or concepts to describe the spiritual essence or ground of reality. As the English monk Bede Griffiths put it:

This is the great Tao...It is the nirguna brahman...It is the 'Dharmakaya' of the Buddha, the 'body of reality'...It is the One of Plotinus which is beyond the Mind (the Nous) and can only be known in ecstasy. In Christian terms it is the abyss of the

Godhead, the 'divine darkness' of Dionysus, which 'exceeds all existence' and cannot be named, of which the Persons of the Godhead are the manifestations (Griffiths, 1976, p.25).

In the Jewish tradition, the term *En sof* might be appended to Griffith's list of terms. According to Lancaster (2005) this is a term which is 'intended to convey the infinite that is paradoxically both ever-present in the world and yet utterly transcendent' (p. 26). (Elsewhere he describes the term as meaning 'the limitless essence of God' [ibid., p.48]). Reb Yakov Leib HaKohain (2011) describes *En sof* as 'an impersonal absolute pervading all things, a god-without-form' which is 'virtually identical' to the Upanishadic concept of *Brahman*.

One major critic of the perennialist approach was Katz (e.g. 1983), who held that spiritual and mystical traditions are culturally derived, and that each one is fundamentally different. According to his 'constructivist' (or 'contextualist', the term he himself prefers) approach, it is meaningless to speak of 'mysticism' in itself, since there are only *types* of mysticism developed by different traditions. Thus, it is only meaningful to speak of 'Jewish mysticism' or 'Christian mysticism.' Following the philosophy of Kant, Katz holds that since all experience must be mediated, the claim that mystical experience is somehow pristine and pre-conceptual (hence *unmediated*) has no validity (Katz, 1983).

More recently, Ferrer (2002) has contended that the perennial philosophy is a flawed concept because it has a hypocritically intolerant attitude to conventional or external religion, and privileges itself over non-spiritual traditions. He also charges perennialism with 'objectivism' – the belief in a detached and objective reality – with its 'insistence that there is a pre-given ultimate reality that can be objectively known by the human intellect' (p. 90). Like Katz, Ferrer holds that any similarities between different traditions are the result of contact and influence: 'Spiritual doctrines and intuitions affected, shaped and transformed each other...this mutual influence led to the unfolding of a variety of metaphysical worlds – rather than one metaphysic and different languages' (ibid., pp. 93-94).

This is a very difficult argument to substantiate, since it suggests that similarities in different spiritual traditions are the result of cultural contact. For example, it would seem to suggest that the common concept of an all-pervading spiritual force (e.g. *Brahman*, *Tao*, *En Sof* or Plotinus' *The One*) are the result of the

concept spreading from one individual or culture to another. There is some evidence (or at least possibility) of cultural spread (e.g. the possibility that Plotinus may have had contact with Upanishadic teachers, and Plotinus' influence on Christian mystics), but it seems a stretch to explain the widespread occurrence of very similar concepts across practically all cultures at different times.

One difficulty of Ferrer's approach is that he views 'perennialism' in purely conceptual terms. He writes, for example, that

What I am suggesting here is that the common core of spirituality espoused by the perennial philosophy is not the conclusion of cross-cultural research or interreligious dialogue, but an inference deduced from the premise that there is transcendent unity of reality, a single Absolute that underlies the multiplicity of phenomena and towards which all spiritual traditions are directed (Ferrer, 2002, p. 87).

However, one might argue that while it is true that the perennial philosophy is not based on research or dialogue, it is not based on inference either, but on *experience*. Perennialism is borne of spiritual or mystical experience rather than on reasoning. As a concept, it only arises because individuals from various religious traditions – and indeed, outside those traditions – have had *experiences* of the 'ground reality', 'the divine ground,' 'absolute reality,' 'The One', and so forth.

In itself, this experience is *non-conceptual*. It can only rise in a state of consciousness where all conceptions have fallen away. It is therefore problematic to treat it in conceptual terms – which is, of course, why many traditions do not attempt to describe the experience. Of course, the very term 'perennial philosophy' is itself misleading, since 'philosophy' implies a conceptual basis and some form of rational or logical argument. (This is how Ferrer approaches the argument.) Perhaps it would be more accurate to use the term '*perennial experience*'.

Of course, one does not have to take a 'hard' perennial stance and argue that spiritual traditions embody or express identical concepts or experiences. A 'softer' perennial stance would be that different traditions emphasise and take a different perspective of certain aspects of the 'awakened' state, due to cultural and philosophical differences. As Loy (2011) suggests, analysing the differences and similarities between Samkhya-Yoga, Advaita Vedanta and Theravada Buddhism, 'It

seems more likely that various characteristics are stressed because of the differing metaphysical systems within which enlightenment occurs.'

2.7 The Triggers/Causes of Spiritual Awakening

As for the causes of spiritual transformation, religious and spiritual traditions share the view that it is a state which has to be cultivated through spiritual practices and certain lifestyle guidelines. Some spiritual traditions proscribe very specific guidelines e.g. the eightfold path of Buddhism, the eight-limbed path of Yoga, a monastic lifestyle containing elements such as silence, solitude, prayer and meditation. Other practices or ways of living which are seen as aiding spiritual development are asceticism, renunciation and celibacy. Additionally, there are many specific practices recommended by the traditions, which can foster spiritual development, or bring about transformation itself e.g. various techniques of meditation, visualisation exercises, acts of service, the studying of sacred texts, and the contemplation of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet (Underhill, 1960; Feuerstein, 1990, Lancaster, 2005).

One of the common themes is that the path of spiritual development is a path of purification, or a path of gradually emptying, stilling or deconditioning the mind. This may include an element of training or 'taming' the mind and body too – learning to steady the chattering mind, or the process which Christian mystics referred to as 'mortification' i.e. learning to control sensory desires, or to tame 'the body of desire' (Goleman, 1992; Underhill, 1960).

In other words, the process of spiritual development is aided by what Wilber describes as 'prolonged contemplative practice' (2011): certain practices, techniques and ways of living which bring about a transformation of consciousness.

However, the link examined in section 2.3.5 between psychological turmoil and apparent spiritual awakening suggests that transformation may not always be a gradual process. The evidence presented in that section (2.3.5) suggests that psychological turmoil can act as a trigger for sudden transformation, without any prior spiritual practice or training. (Incidentally, this also argues against Wilber's view that every developmental level has to be passed before we progress to the highest transpersonal levels. In cases of sudden transformation, it appears a number of levels of development may be 'jumped'.)

2.8 Conclusion to Literature Review

After beginning the review by examining temporary spiritual experiences, it is perhaps important to emphasise again the distinction between awakening as an experience, and as a state. As Owens (1992) writes in relation to Buddhism:

During the enlightenment-event one is unable to see, think, talk, eat, walk or function on the phenomenal plane. During the enlightenment-state, however, which follows the numinous event, one returns to consciousness of the body and its needs, of society and one's relations to it. Discriminating thought returns, but it is no longer dominant (p.185).

In other words, in the enlightenment-state the individual obviously has to continue to function in the world, to interact with their environment and with other individuals, and this entails integrating the 'awakened' state into his or her everyday life. This is similar to the distinction in Sufism between *fana* and *baqa*. *Fana* means a dissolution of the separate self, a unity with all creation, but *baqa* arises from this – a more stable and continuous state of living in God (Azeemi, 2005). The Vedanta concept of *sahaja samadhi* has a similar meaning – a permanent state of *samadhi* which is experienced throughout daily life (Chimnoy, 1989). Wilber's non-dual stage implies this too. At this point, the individual returns to the world and to every day life, but he or she lives in a transfigured world, experiencing a constant sense of oneness, and a constant awareness of Spirit (Wilber, 2000).

It is this state which this study will attempt to examine. More specifically, questions which will be examined include:

- Do the characteristics of the participants' transformational experiences resemble the characteristics (identified in section 2.4) of spiritual awakening as expressed through different spiritual traditions?
- Do these characteristics correspond to those of temporary spiritual experiences?

- In relation to the causes or triggers of spiritual awakening, did the participants report gradual or sudden transformation? Were the type of 'spiritual' practices and ways of living described in section 2.4 a factor in their transformation?
- Did the transformational experiences occur in the context of religious or spiritual traditions, or outside them?
- Given the connection identified between psychological transformation and turmoil, was there any connection between their experience of spiritual awakening and psychological turmoil, or encountering their own mortality?
- Again, given the connection identified in relation to 'spirituality emergencies' or 'spiritual crises', did the participants report any form of psychological or mental disturbance?
- In relation to this, is the participants' experience of 'spiritual awakening' one of continual well-being – as popular notions of 'enlightenment' suggest – or attended by any difficulties or disturbances?

Notes:

(1) For example, one of Hardy's respondents described the following experience:

I was going through a period of doubt and disillusion with life and torn by conflict...Quite suddenly I felt lifted beyond all the turmoil and conflict. There was no visual image and I knew I was sitting on a bench in the park, but I felt as if I was lifted above the world and looking down on it. The disillusion and cynicism were gone, and I felt compassion suffusing my whole being, compassion for all people on earth. I was possessed by a peace that I have never felt before or since (Hardy, 1979, p.76).

While here another of Hardy's respondents describes an experience that occurred while he was 'meditating during a time of emotional stress':

I had an intense feeling of having slipped out of time and of knowing in a quite different way from intellectual knowledge. Knowing with all my being what is meant by the concept of God is love. I felt that I had experienced divine love in its reality and immediacy...I became conscious of an exquisite sense of relief and peace. My gloomy doubts had been instantly swept away, leaving behind a new belief in the existence of God (ibid, p.109).

(2) On closer inspection, the kind of experiences which Persinger and Ramachandran managed to induce by stimulating the temporal lobes are not what we mean by spiritual experiences. What they are referring to are what are often termed ‘mystical experiences’ in the common, pejorative sense of the term – that is, paranormal or irrational phenomena which cannot be substantiated by science. Ramachandran, for example, claims that stimulating people’s temporal lobes generates visions of UFO’s, shamanic-type journeys to other worlds, or supposed regressions to previous lives. Persinger’s helmet often produces what he calls a ‘sensed presence’ – that is, the person feel that they’re not alone, that there is somebody or something behind them, or that they’re being watched. The helmet also induces visions of bright geometrical patterns, and awakens powerful childhood memories. But apart from the strong feelings of well-being and a feeling of alertness, these reports do not include any of the characteristics of spiritual experiences which we have discussed (Taylor, 2010).

It is also significant that Granqvist (2005) was unable to replicate Persinger’s findings. He has also cast doubt on the validity of Persinger’s research, suggesting that the experimenter-expectancy effect may have been responsible for its positive results. In addition, Granqvist claims that participants had prior knowledge of the purpose of the experiment.

(3) Interestingly, these concepts are echoed in many indigenous cultures. Many tribal peoples’ religious practices were based on their awareness of – and their reverence for – what certain Indigenous American groups called the ‘Great Spirit’, or the ‘Life Master’: that is, a universal Spirit-force. To give just a few examples, in America, the Hopi Indians called Spirit-force *maasauu*, the Pawnee called it *tirawa*, and the Lakota called it *wakan-tanka* (literally, the ‘force which moves all things’). The Ainu of Japan call it *ramut*, while in parts of New Guinea it was called *imunu*. In Africa the

Nuer called it *kwoth* and the Mbuti call it *pepo*. The Ufaina Indians (of the Amazon Rain Forest) called it *fufaka* (Taylor, 2010).

3. Methodology

3.1 Design of Study

This was a qualitative study with an idiographic focus, to explore lived experience and ascertain how individuals react to and are changed by significant life events. As a result, a phenomenological approach was deemed most appropriate, rather than other qualitative methods such as grounded theory or discourse analysis. As Starks and Brown Trinidad state, 'The goal in phenomenology is to study how people make meaning of their lived experience; discourse analysis examines how language is used to accomplish personal, social, and political projects; and grounded theory develops explanatory theories of basic social processes studied in context' (2007, p.1372).

The emphasis on experience rather than on theory in this study also suggested a phenomenological rather than a grounded theory approach. In phenomenological research the emphasis is on describing holistic *psychological* structures rather than creating a theoretical model to explain experience (Wertz, 2012). In discourse analysis, the emphasis is on patterns of verbal performance rather than on subjective experience. Discourse analysis sees written or verbal language itself as the source and context of meaning, rather than actual experience (ibid.)

Phenomenological research in general involves an effort to uncover patterns and difference within human experience, whilst at the same time conveying its richness and fullness (Valle, 1998). In the light of this, interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was deemed most appropriate for this study. As Smith *et al.* (2009) point out, in interpretive phenomenological analysis the researcher engages intensively with the data he/she collects, using intuition, insight and critical awareness, and consequently uncovers and amplifies meanings contained in it. Smith *et al.* also note the importance of interpretive phenomenological analysis in gaining insight into the experience of 'people whose voices might not otherwise have been heard, or whose experiences were ignored, or else constructed quite differently by mainstream theoretical models' (Smith *et al.*, 2009, p.206). This was relevant to this study because the state of 'spiritual awakening' has been subject to a great deal of misunderstanding and misinterpretation. For example, as Clarke (2010), Grof (1993) and Lucas (2011) have suggested, psychiatrists tend to misinterpret the state as a form of psychosis, and may even prescribe medication to deal with its 'symptoms.' Similarly, as noted in the Literature

Review, psychoanalytical thinkers such as Freud (1930) have interpreted the state as a form of infantile regression. Many of the individuals who undergo the shift may also misinterpret themselves, or at least feel confused by it, without a framework to interpret it (Clarke, 2010; Lucas 2011; Taylor, 2010).

The study followed the four stages proposed by Van Kaam (Valle, 1998).

1. Problem and question formulation (the phenomenon);
background to study and research questions
2. Data generating situation (collecting descriptions); *recorded interviews*
3. Data study procedure (explication) - *coding and analysis of transcripts*
4. Presentation of results (formulation) – *tables and overview*

Other research methods were initially considered, including psychometric methods. Certain psychometric tests have been developed to investigate spiritual experience, and spiritual development, such as Friedman's (1983) 'self-expansiveness level form' (SELF), and MacDonald's 'Expressions of Spirituality Inventory' (2000). Other more general tests of well-being, gratitude and attentiveness might have been appropriate too, such as Ryff's (1995) or Deiner's (1985) tests of well-being and life-satisfaction, the 'Gratitude Questionnaire' devised by McCullough et al. (2002) and Brown and Ryan's 'Mindful Attention Awareness Scale' (2003). These tests could have been used to provide a more objective view of the participants' experience, ascertaining whether they have undergone a genuine and significant psychological change.

However, psychometric research would have been insufficient in exploring the participants' experiences in detail, yielding only a relatively narrow set of data. For example, it might not yield information about the variety of different factors which led to the participants' transformations, or the variety of different changes to values, perspective and perception that they might report.

One method of ensuring a more objective approach would have been to combine different research methods, perhaps a combination of psychometric research with phenomenological research. Such a process of 'triangulation' has been seen as a way of reducing bias in single-method and single-observer studies (Cohen & Manion, 2000). However, for reasons of practicality – since this would have made the study

complex and unwieldy – one specific research method was chosen. Of course, further development of the research project undertaken for the PhD could embrace such triangulation; indeed following up some of the observations made here using psychometric procedures is to be recommended.

Another method which might have led to greater objectivity and reduced bias would have been to employ the services of another researcher to perform the data analysis. However, this would have been impracticable, due to the funds required to pay for another researcher. In addition, my academic background – including in my university department – has followed a single-method and single-observer approach in qualitative research, with the primary researcher also performing a thematic analysis of the data collected. My MSc thesis (Taylor, 2009b) together with one of my previously published papers (Taylor, 2012a) used this process, while further examples include Gordon-Finlayson & Daniels (2008), Lancaster & Palframan (2009) and Lancaster & Platt (2010). In addition, my examination of the literature giving guidance on the analysis of data in phenomenological research did not emphasise the importance of employing the services of an independent researcher (e.g. Cresswell, 2007; Groenewald, 2004). Therefore it was seen as a satisfactory approach for the researcher to also analyse the data, so long as I was conscious of potential biases I might bring to the analysis and would attempt to ‘bracket’ them out. This ‘bracketing out’ (or *epoche*) means that ‘in a sense no position is taken either for or against’ (Lauer, 1958, p. 49), so that the researcher’s own assumptions or theoretical concepts do not impinge on the experience of the participant (Cresswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

One possible avenue for gaining a more objective study discussed with my supervisor was to speak to a number of acquaintances or associates of the participants, in order to gain a more ‘objective’ view of their reported transformation. After all, one of the problematic aspects of qualitative research of this nature was the reliability of participants’ self-reports. How can one be sure they were reporting their experience honestly? How can one be sure they were not simply inventing a narrative which they believe the researcher would like to hear? Speaking to associates of the participants might have validated some of the participants’ claims.

However, it soon became clear that this would have been impracticable. Interviewing associates of the participants would have taken up a large amount of time and would have reduced the number of actual participants I could have interviewed. It was important to have a fairly large number of participants so that clear themes could

emerge. In addition, the same issues which make self-reporting problematic would equally apply to associates of the participants. How could one be sure that they would not simply be saying what they thought the participant – and the researcher – would like them to? Relatives and friends of the participants would be especially likely to describe them in a positive light.

3.2 Study Sample

Purposive sampling was used to find a group of individuals who felt that they had undergone the experience of ‘spiritual awakening.’ In order to attract participants, I placed an announcement on my website, reading: ‘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 me at...’ The announcement was also included on the website of The Scientific and Medical Network, and I also mentioned my research during several radio interviews with UK and US radio stations, conducted as publicity for one of my books.

In this way, 25 participants made contact with me. Most of these came through my website, or through the Scientific and Medical Network site, but 6 also made contact as a result of the radio interviews.

I was aware that through these avenues I was selecting from a fairly small and fairly homogenous section of the population, but felt that this would be advantageous since I was hoping to investigate the state of ‘spiritual awakening’ from a psychological perspective. I was aware that the section of the population I was advertising to would be largely disconnected with conventional religious traditions. As a result, I felt that there would be less of a religious or conventionally spiritual context which might make the psychological aspects of the experiences more difficult to study. In addition, if individuals affiliated with a variety of traditional religions and spiritual traditions had been my participants, this would have generated a multitude of different concepts which may have proved difficult to compare. Thus, I felt that such a homogenous group would ensure greater ease of comparison.

Participation was purely elective, with no enticement offered.

Table 1 provides basic information about the 25 participants of the study:

Table 1: Details of the participants of this study

Participant	Gender	Age	Years since 'awakening'	Age at time of transformation
P1	M	50	7	43
P2	F	49	9	40
P3	M	46	2	44
P4	F	40	1	39
P5	M	67	26	41
P6	M	29	10	19
P7	M	49	11	38
P8	F	29	7	22
P9	F	62	21	41
P10	M	57	12	35
P11	F	35	3	32
P12	F	44	3	41
P13	F	38	13	25
P14	F	44	18 (approx.)	26 (approx.)
P15	F	57	8	45
P16	F	51	18	33
P17	M	38	3	35
P18	F	44	4	40
P19	F	41	5	36
P20	M	44	10	34
P21	F	41	8	33
P22	M	39	5	34
P23	F	31	N/K	-
P24	F	41	6	35
P25	F	56	20	36

Mean: 44.9 Mean: 9.6 Mean: 35.3

3.3 Research Instruments and Procedure

Ethical approval for the study was sought, in accordance with the British Psychological Society's (BPS) guidelines, and approved by the ethics committee at Liverpool John Moores University (see appendix 1). The nature and the purpose of the study – together with the issues of confidentiality and withdrawal – were explained through the 'participant information sheet' (see appendix 2). After reading this, the participants signed a consent form (see appendix 3).

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with five of the participants, in neutral surroundings (cafes). Since the other participants were located large distances away, they were interviewed through Skype, or – in four cases – by telephone. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were recorded. Interviews took place during the period December 2010 to August 2011.

The participants were asked their age, and how many years had elapsed since their transformational experience. They were then asked to describe the nature of their transformation, including the characteristics of their present experience. Since, from the phenomenological perspective, it is important to focus upon the meaning of the experience for the individual, and their interpretation of it (Smith et al., 2009, Valle, 1998), it was felt important to leave space for the interviews to be as spontaneous as possible, so that the participants were able to focus upon the aspects of their experiences which they felt were most significant, without prompting. For this reason, it was felt that a semi-structured interview would be most appropriate. Typically, the semi-structured interview has a number of 'set' questions or issues to cover, although it is not necessary to proceed through these in the same order, or to use the same wording each time (Flick, 2002). In this way, the semi-structured interview can reveal a wealth of information, and detailed descriptions of the topics under investigation, as well as creating a good rapport between participant and researcher (Flick, 2002). In this study, there were 12 'key' questions. These were as follows:

1. Was there a particular point at which you underwent transformation?
2. How has your attitude to life changed since the experience?
3. Has your attitude to material things changed?
- 4 Do you feel there is any difference in your relationships with other people?

5. Did you have any interest in spirituality or self-development when you were younger?

6. Are you happy to do nothing?

7. Do you have a strong sense of empathy and compassion?

8. Do you feel a sense of connection?

9. How would you identify yourself? e.g. as a Christian/Pagan/Buddhist, an American/British person etc. Or do you identify with the whole human race?

10. Do you still experience 'thought-chatter'? Does your mind still fill up with random thoughts when it isn't occupied?

11. Has your attitude to death changed?

12. Do you think the transformation is permanent?

Some of these questions were designed to encourage the participants to describe their experience as fully as possible. The question 'Was there a particular point at which you underwent transformation?' was designed to encourage them to describe their transformational experience, including the experiences which preceded it. Other questions were designed to allow them speak freely and in general terms about the changes they had experienced: e.g. 'How has your attitude to life changed since the experience?' Other questions were designed to investigate significant areas of human behaviour which would give clear indication of a psychological transformation: for example, attitude to possessions, to death, identity. Other, more specific questions were designed to examine issues which I believed were salient based on my own previous research into and experience of spiritual development or transformation. For example, the question 'Do you experience 'thought-chatter'?' was based on my awareness that spiritual development involves a quietening and stilling of the mind. 'Do you feel a sense of connection?' was based on my awareness that spiritual development involves going beyond a sense of separateness and an increasing sense of connection, leading to a sense of oneness or union. Other questions focused on salient characteristics of psychological transformation, such as whether it was permanent ('Do you think the transformation is permanent?') and whether it was gradual or sudden ('Was there a particular point at which you underwent transformation?') It was hoped that such questions would discover whether the participants felt they experienced the characteristics of spiritual awakening as identified by the literature review.

As IPA suggests (Smith, 2009), participants were encouraged to describe their experiences with as much description and narrative flow as possible, with very few interruptions. They were all forthcoming about their experiences, and spoke fluently and eloquently.

Since the participants would be revealing personal information, I was aware of the importance of concepts in counselling such as active listening, congruence and empathy, and attempted to practise these as a way of facilitating trust and openness (Rogers, 2003). In the event, the participants were comfortable and open during the interviews, eager to discuss their experiences. With every participant, there was a sense that they were grateful for the opportunity to share the positive nature of their experience with others.

3.4 Data Collection/Analysis

The texts of all the interviews were transcribed within three days of them taking place, omitting some 'stumbling' and 'stuttering' phrases (e.g. 'you know', 'or something'). They were then sent to the participants, who were asked to read through and check that the content had been accurately transcribed. Once this approval had been given, the transcripts were coded using thematic content analysis (Anderson, 2007; Creswell, 2007). This entailed a process of deep engagement with the data, as the transcripts were read several times and examined for meaning and structure.

During this process I was aware that my own pre-conceptions could affect my analysis of the data. As Smith (2007) notes, the expectations, prior learning and experiences of the researcher will also have a bearing on the research. There should be no pretence of complete 'objectivity.' In fact, research is always a co-creative process between researcher and participants. The researcher sets the goals of the research, chooses the sampling style, the semi-structured interview questions and so forth, and the results of the research are partly determined by all of these factors (Smith, 2007). They are also influenced by the personal history and the conceptual framework of the researcher. Even without conscious awareness, the researcher may have developed certain schemata which will inevitably influence data analysis.

My own experience of spirituality has largely taken place in the framework of Vedanta and Mahayana Buddhism, so I was aware that concepts from these traditions

might influence the analysis. My personal belief has always been that a state of 'sahaja samadhi', or 'moksha' – in the sense of a permanent stable state of 'awakening', or a more intensive and expansive state of consciousness – exists as a possibility. I was aware that I used to have – and perhaps still have to some degree – a somewhat romantic notion of 'spiritual awakening' as a stable state of permanent well-being. However, this has been mitigated to some degree by my reading of literature on 'spiritual emergencies' and 'spiritual crisis', and the connection between 'awakening' and psychological turmoil and instability and personal transformation, which in some cases may continue for a long period (Grof, 1993; Clarke, 2010; Lucas, 2011).

I have investigated many spiritual traditions, and have perceived myself as a something of a 'perennialist', in the sense that I have believed that there is a common core to all religious and spiritual traditions, and that they are directed towards similar goals: the expansion of awareness, the transcendence of separation or a state of permanent connection with a transcendent power.

At the same time, I was brought up in a secular way and have never been connected to any specific religious faith. My own view now is that spirituality can exist both within and outside religious traditions. Spiritual experiences may, I believe, become religious experiences when they are experienced by individuals who adhere to particular religious traditions, and interpreted in terms of religious concepts (Taylor, 2012b).

Another preconception I was aware of related to the connection between episodes of intense psychological turmoil and personal transformation. I completed an MSc thesis on this subject directly before beginning this thesis in 2009 (Taylor, 2009b), later extended and published as a research paper in *The Journal of Humanistic Psychology* (Taylor, 2012a). Since this connection was so well established in my mind at the time I began the thesis, I was aware that I might be prone to over-emphasising it. When it became apparent in the coding process that psychological turmoil was emerging as a strong causal factor, I wanted to be sure that this was not because of my preconceptions, and went through the transcripts again, double-checking the coding.

I was fully aware that these factors may influence my analysis of the results and so attempted to suspend or 'bracket out' any conceptual interpretation of the data while engaging with it. One way in which I did this was to employ a type of 'mindful'

perspective – that is, I attempted to engage with the data in a wholly present way, aware that all preconceptions and expectations had formed in my mind in the past.

However, I was aware that there are limits to the efficacy of bracketing, particularly since many views or concepts are so deep-rooted that the individual may not be consciously aware of them. I consider how my own views may have coloured my interpretation of the data in the ‘Limitations of this Study’ section (5.3)

3.5 Coding Process

The coding involved attaching conceptual labels to sentences. I attempted to isolate the basic ‘units of meaning’ behind the participants’ phrases and sentences, using short phrases or single words to summarise the main theme of their descriptions, omitting articles, prepositions and in many cases verbs, highlighting the ‘core’ meaning with nouns and adjectives. This was a process of ‘delineating units of meaning’ in which statements relevant to the research question are isolated (Creswell, 2007; Holloway, 1997), while at the same time attempting to be conscious of – and to ‘bracket out’ – my own preconceptions. For example, P8 told me ‘There was just a lot of stress leading up to it. I’d been in a very close relationship with a friend and it had got to the point where it was suffocating and breaking down.’ I summarised this as ‘Stress - suffocating relationship.’ As another example, P3 told me, ‘I have this feeling a lot – a sense of connection. I don’t feel mental – I feel very very sane, very calm and very peaceful but great. It’s also given me a really great amount of energy.’ This was coded as ‘Connection - very calm and peaceful – lots of energy.’

Following this, the units of meaning were grouped into clusters, becoming significant themes or topics. I then collected these themes separately to the transcripts themselves, cut them out, and compared and connected them. It quickly became clear that there were certain themes which were closely related and could be grouped together into main and subordinate themes. For example, there **were** many different themes which expressed a sense of well-being, with slightly different variations – for example, a sense of appreciation, gratitude, freedom, inner peace, calmness and so on. Many of the participants described undergoing different varieties of psychological turmoil - bereavement, failure, loss, depression, addiction – prior to their transformation, which could clearly be grouped together (under the heading ‘Episodes of intense turmoil or trauma immediately preceding transformation’). The theme of

'connection' occurred in various forms – a strong sense of connection other people, to nature, to an 'energy' or force beyond themselves, or to an all-encompassing sense of oneness. Although this was a wide spectrum of different experiences, they all involved moving beyond a sense of separateness, and connecting with a wider reality. Similarly, a large number of participants reported an increased sense of 'living in the present'. Others also mentioned an increased ability to enjoy inactivity and to enjoy solitude. I decided that the latter two themes were linked to 'living in the present', since enjoying inactivity and solitude strongly imply an enjoyment of and an ability to live in the present (with a lack of activity or distraction to immerse one's attention in). Other themes were clear because they were specifically addressed by the questions – for example, the question 'Has your attitude to death changed?' led to the theme of 'Reduced fear of death.' Likewise, 'Do you think the transformation is permanent?' led to the theme of 'Permanent/ongoing new state of being.'

Once I had 'coded' most of the transcripts a clear pattern was evident, with a fairly homogenous set of themes recurring. A number of characteristics quickly emerged as prominent 'core' characteristics. During this process, I was aware of my own impulse to detect certain themes once they had become apparent. As patterns were beginning to emerge, I was aware of an impulse to 'find' the same characteristics in other participants. I attempted to 'bracket out' this impulse, but it is possible that I may still have been affected by it.

Once my first attempt at coding had been completed, I reflected on the results in relation to the transcripts and became aware that I had neglected to focus on certain negative aspects of the participants' experiences. I believe this was an example of my – initially unconscious – impulse to present a romantic view of the participants' experiences, perhaps due to my absorption of the 'myth' (as expressed by Forman) that 'awakening' equates with a state of continual peace and contentment. On becoming aware of this, I undertook a new coding process, specifically focusing on potentially negative aspects of the participants' experiences, and this time the theme of 'ongoing difficulties' emerged strongly, in addition to 'problems integrating new state' and 'physical difficulties.'

Once the codes had been identified in this way, the number of occurrences of each theme across the 25 participants was identified, so that the themes could be ranked in terms of their prevalence.

These codes are listed in the following Results section, along with other salient findings which emerged from the transcripts, such as the apparent triggers or causes of transformation (as described by the participants) and whether ‘spiritual awakening’ had occurred gradually or suddenly.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Overview of Findings

All 25 participants reported a shift into a new psychological state, with a new sense of identity, new modes of cognition and perception, a new relationship to their surroundings and to other human beings (including increased authenticity and compassion) and new values (including a less materialistic attitude and increased altruism, in some cases leading to a change in career). P13 described this as ‘a shift in consciousness and in identity’ and noted that she felt so different that when she returned to her home town she was ‘fully expecting to walk into the room and for family and friends not to recognise me. I felt so different, like a completely different person to be honest. All my internal frames of reference have changed.’ (p.226) Or as P22 put it, ‘I’m in many ways a different person now, living a different life.’ (p.309) Similarly, P2 stated, ‘I feel like a different person.’ (p.218). While in answer to the question ‘Do you think the transformation is permanent?’ P16 stated, ‘It’s like saying, is birth permanent? There are some things that are done and can’t be undone.’ (p.283)

All participants believed that this new psychological state was permanent, or at least ongoing. They reported it as fairly stable, although with some fluctuations and difficulties. P24 stated, ‘I can tell you that it *feels* stable. It’s been about three years now and it feels stable.’ (p.318). A small number of participants were initially worried that the state would fade away, but were reassured by its stability. As P12 reported, ‘I worried that one day I would wake up and it would hit me like a brick, but it is permanent and I feel like I am in a growing developing phase at the moment, its not over yet.’ (p.260) In some cases a significant amount of time had elapsed since the transformation, but they did not believe it had not faded. Two participants (P5 and P25) had begun a process of gradual spiritual development more than 20 years ago, while another (P9) had experienced sudden transformation 21 years ago. For 7 others, it had been between 10-19 years since their transformational experience, or since the onset of their gradual development. The most recent transformational experience was P4’s, which occurred approximately a year before she was interviewed.

Of interest here was research showing that many individuals respond to intense trauma by attempting to construct a new ‘self-narrative’ or identity (Mathieson & Stam, 1995; Neimeyer, 2006). Trauma may have the effect of

dismantling or destroying a person's sense of self. P7 remarked on this directly: 'The sense of who I was had been stripped away, and I was left staring at emptiness.' (p.236) Since most of the participants did undergo intense turmoil and trauma (see Table 3, p.97), it was possible that this was a factor in their new sense of identity. This was also related to the suggestion that what is interpreted as 'post-traumatic growth' may actually be the result of cognitive dissonance or positive illusion (Taylor, 1989; Festinger, 2008). In other words, the participants' belief that they had assumed a permanent and stable new identity may have stemmed from a need to convince themselves that their turmoil and trauma had a positive purpose.

This is not to say that this new state of being was reported as constant. In particular, the results showed that just over half the participants (13) underwent a period of integration, a challenging phase of adjustment in which they faced confusion, incomprehension (both from themselves and others), psychological disturbance and physical problems. There are some similarities between this phase and the concept of 'The Dark Night of Soul' (a term which was actually used by two participants). Some participants felt that this process of integration was still continuing, and that their state was still causing some problems. For example, P13 described how she was in pain and didn't sleep properly for 8 months, with psychological disturbances including memory problems, lack of concentration and confusion. As she reported, 'It took 2 to 3 years to feel stable and finally understand what was happening.' (p.263) P10 described how, for the year following his transformation, he was in a state of bliss in which 'All mentation disappeared and everything began to radiate this stunning sense of beauty, stillness and silence.' (p.250) However, at the same time he was unable to deal with the practicalities of daily life. As he reported, 'I was incapable of working, doing anything, even feeding myself, [I] lost weight, I couldn't relate to anybody.' (p.250) After about a year, 'my mind started to return, my identity started to return. And when it did I went into a state of panic and terror. It was like being abandoned by God. Like going from colour to black and white. The sense of separation returned, the sense of being a you and me. The dualistic perception was back and with it this terrifying fear of what had happened.' (ibid.) This 'dark night of the soul' phase continued for 6 months, until 'eventually I started integrating both of them, living in both domains, and that has taken – well, it's still going on, I'm still working on it. I've been in and out of mind for last 6 years.' (ibid.) Both P10 and P8 reported such problems as ongoing. They

both reported finding it difficult to cope with the practicalities of everyday life, and to be active. As P8 reported, ‘Generally my mind is still, which can sometimes make life difficult, when I should be being active. It makes doing things very difficult sometimes.’ (p.244)

A number of participants even showed signs of regret at their new state. For example, P21 reported, ‘There are days when I wish it had never happened because life seems to be a little too complicated sometimes. There are the odd days when I think I know too much.’ (p.303) In a similar way, P13 felt that she had become too sensitive and less able to cope with over-stimulation: ‘I feel that I pick up a lot of other people’s thoughts and feelings and ‘stuff’ and can easily get pulled off centre and outside of myself into other people’s issues...Over-stimulation is something I have to be aware of.’ (p.264)

This reported stability was also offset by the fluctuations mentioned by a number of participants. For example, P17 reported that, although the state felt permanent, she occasionally did shift out of it: ‘It’s now more dominant and if I shift out of it, I’m very aware of it and I can easily shift back into this sense of well-being and presence.’ (p.288) In a similar way P20 reported that, although the shift seemed stable, ‘I can go several days in a state of love peace and joy but then it fades away.’ (p.299)

Although all participants felt they had undergone a permanent shift, some believed that the state was not *finite*, not the end point of their development. This is implied by the second half of P12’s quote above (p.94): ‘But it is permanent and I feel like I am in a growing developing phase at the moment. It’s not over yet.’ (p.260) Or as P4 put it, ‘I think it’s kind of raised me up a level if you like. It’s really a building block for me to move from.’ (p.225)

The fluctuations reported by some participants, and the fact that some believed that they had not reached an end point of development, might suggest that their state was not as stable or permanent – or as discontinuous with their previous state – as they believed. It is possible that their belief that they had undergone a permanent ‘awakening’ was to some extent generated by the popular concept of ‘enlightenment.’ As Charles Tart has commented, enlightenment has been popularly conceived as ‘all or none. Somebody is enlightened or somebody is not enlightened’ (in Forman, 2011, p.9).

For the participants who did not report a difficult period of integration, a prior interest in spirituality or engagement in some form of spiritual practice appeared to be an important factor. (Only 1 participant who had a prior interest in spirituality reported undergoing a difficult phase, while no participants engaged in spiritual practice experienced it.) This perhaps highlights the importance of possessing an intellectual framework with which to interpret and understand the new psychological state, described by Lucas (2011) as ‘the individual’s frame of reference, the lens through which they view their own experience’ (p.71). Lucas also noted that a spiritual emergency is more likely to become integrated if it is validated rather than pathologised by professionals and friends/relatives, and this validation would be more likely to occur if a person is in contact with others interested in spirituality or engaged in spiritual practice (e.g. a meditation group, a yoga centre, friends who read ‘spiritual’ books).

4.2 Mode of Transformation: Sudden/Gradual

12 participants reported a sudden transformation, without any previous awakening experiences or gradual spiritual development. 7 participants reported moments of sudden transformation which followed previous awakening experiences and/or gradual spiritual development. For 6 participants transformation was wholly gradual. Table 2 summarises these results:

Table 2: Mode of Transformation

Type of Transformation Reported	N =	Illustrating quotes
Sudden	12	<p>P22: '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.' (p.301)</p> <p>P1: 'It was a sudden and in fact brutal transformation induced in a sort of therapy session.' (p.206)</p> <p>P15: 'Yes, March 2, 1993 at probably 8:30 AM Eastern Standard time US.' (p.275)</p> <p>P13: 'For me it was very sudden - instantaneous really. It happened in February 98.' (p.258)</p>
Sudden preceded by some gradual development, including previous experiences	7	<p>P11: 'There were definitely peak moments that changed the baseline going forward and there were also a series of those. It seems to have both been awakening sudden and gradual.' (p.252)</p> <p>P17: 'It's been both [gradual and permanent] to be honest – I've had kind of 5 or 6 moments of clarity which revealed themselves in a way that was unprompted and unexpected.' (p.281)</p> <p>P2: 'My 3 experiences followed extreme distress and turmoil based on not being able to help people I cared about.' (p.210)</p>
Gradual	6	<p>P7: 'In my case it was much more gradual, working on it for many years. The insights had been growing and I'd got an intellectual understanding of what I was seeking.' (p.233)</p> <p>P5: 'It was very gradual and gentle. A process, not a violent experience.' (p.223)</p>

N = number of participants describing each mode of transformation

4.3 The Characteristics of ‘Spiritual Awakening’ as Reported by the Participants

As shown in Table 3 (p.97), and in Tables 4.1-4.25 (pp.98-122), the three most prevalent characteristics reported by the participants were well-being/positive affective states, an increased ‘present-ness’ (including the ability to ‘do nothing’) and a sense that this state was ongoing and stable (and possibly permanent). All 25 participants reported these characteristics. However, the first code – well-being/positive affective states – was reported more than once (and in most cases, several times) by individual participants, in different variations. For example, at different points during my interview with P14 she remarked that ‘Most of the time there is absolute bliss. A deep lingering peace which is unshakable’ (p.269); ‘There is an absolute inner freedom’ (p.270); ‘There’s a feeling of rightness doing certain tasks. There’s an absolute welcoming of everything that is;’ (ibid.) and ‘What it really is, I would say, is pure absolute grace.’ (ibid.) Similarly, at various points P2 remarked, ‘I felt very connected, very calm, very safe but really like we’re all one, that there was nothing to ever worry about’; ‘I felt very accepting of my illness and very very grateful to be alive’; ‘The experience was full of grace and powerful, peaceful and beautiful’; ‘There’s a great sense of awareness and calmness, a greater feeling of the spiritual’; ‘There’s a gratitude in just being well enough and alive to stare out of the window and look at a tree. It’s lovely. I never feel bored;’ and ‘It’s so calm and still it’s absolutely wonderful.’ (p.217) On the basis of this recurrence, the code of ‘well-being/positive affective states’ can be seen as the most frequent and prevalent characteristic identified by this study.

Other major codes, reported by 20 or more of the participants – listed in Table 3 (p.97) and in more detail in tables 4.1-4.25 (pp. 98-122)– were ‘Reduced Cognitive Activity/Less Identification with thoughts’ (which many participants reported as having a ‘quieter mind’ than before), a ‘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’; ‘Episodes of intense turmoil or trauma immediately preceding transformation’; and ‘Sense of Connection.’

Other significant codes – occurring between 18 and 13 times, and therefore amongst the majority of the participants – reported (and listed in Table 3 and Tables

4.1.-4.25) were ‘sudden transformation’, increased altruism, enhanced relationships, reduced interest in materialism, intensified perception, ongoing problems/fluctuations, problems integrating new states and acceptance/letting go.

It is perhaps helpful to make a distinction between the reported characteristics of both the *process* of ‘spiritual awakening’ and of the *state of being* ‘spiritual awakened’ which follows from this. If we follow this distinction, the most significant codes reported by the participants appear as follows:

Most significant characteristics of the transformational process of ‘spiritual awakening’ as reported by the participants:

- Episodes of intense turmoil or trauma immediately preceding transformation
- Sudden transformation
- Belief that the state was ongoing, stable, possibly permanent

Less significant characteristics of the transformational process of ‘spiritual awakening’ as reported by the participants:

- Problems integrating state, including possible psychological disturbance
- Physical difficulties following transformational experience
- Spiritual Practice (as an apparent factor in transformation i.e. was being undertaken preceding the transformation)
- Prior interest in spirituality
- Change of career/job following transformation

Most significant codes of the state of being ‘spiritual awakened’ as reported by the participants:

- Well-being/Positive Affective States
- Increased ‘Present-ness’

- Reduced Cognitive Activity/Less Identification with thoughts
- Reduced/Disappearance of fear of death
- Decreased sense of group identity/need for belonging
- Sense of Connection
- Increased altruism
- Enhanced relationships
- Reduced interest in materialism
- Intensified perception
- Ongoing difficulties/Fluctuations
- Attitude of acceptance/letting go

Less significant codes of the state of being ‘spiritual awakened’ as reported by the participants:

- Timelessness/Slowed Down sense of time
- Psychic experiences/episodes
- Authenticity
- Heightened/increased energy
- Increased activity

Breaking the codes down in this way was helpful in making comparisons with the characteristics identified by other studies of ‘spiritual awakening’.

The codes are summarised in Table 3, where they are ranked in order of frequency:

Table 3: Number of participants reporting individual codes

Code	N =
Well-Being/Positive Affective States	25
Ongoing/Permanent new state of being	25
Increased 'present-ness'/Ability to live in the present	25
Reduced Cognitive Activity/Less Identification with thoughts	23
Reduced/Disappearance of fear of death	23
Decreased sense of group identity/need for belonging	23
Episodes of intense turmoil or trauma preceding transformation	22
Sense of Connection	20
Sudden Transformation	19
Reduced interest in materialism	19
Intensified perception	19
Increased altruism	18
Enhanced relationships	18
Ongoing difficulties	16
Problems integrating new state	13
Acceptance/Letting Go	13
Spiritual Practice (as an apparent factor in transformation)	10
Physical difficulties	9
Timelessness/slowed down sense of time	9
Heightened/Increased energy	8
Authenticity	8
Prior interest in Spirituality	8
Psychic experiences/episodes following transformation	7
Change of career/job following transformation	7
More active following transformation	7

4.4. Main Codes in Greater Detail, with Tables

In this section, 25 tables (4.1-4.25) show these codes in ranked order (according to their general number of occurrences), with quotes from some of the participants illustrating them.

Table 4.1: Increased sense of well-being/Positive Affective States
Subordinate/Related themes: Appreciation and gratitude, freedom, love, peace.

Participant	Illustrating quotes
P1	‘My life has been nothing but a great mystical adventure since the transformation, and every day is a blessing, filled with joy and bright light even if it’s raining “cats and dogs”. All kind of negative feelings have almost totally disappeared and I’m afraid of nothing.’ (p.206)
P6	‘My experience has led me to inner contentment. Contentment and an intensification of gratitude; to be filled with awe when I see a flower, a cloud, a bird, a person.’ (p.230)
P14	‘Most of the time there is absolute bliss. A deep lingering peace which is unshakable, which is just anchored.’ (p.266)
P4	‘Something inside me has changed in the way that I don’t worry about anything – I know everything’s okay... I feel a huge sense of peace.’ (p.221)
P9	‘I’m at peace. I’m free, I don’t worry about a thing. I don’t have anything to worry about. I don’t live with stress. Prior to being clean I did it with reefer, but now it’s just through being clean.’ (p.244)
P25	‘I would say that there is peace and there is a sense of freedom.’ p.318)

Table 4.2: Ongoing/Permanent state of being: Subordinate/Related Themes: stable, transformation or shift to a new state

Participant	Illustrating quotes
P4	'I think it's kind of raised me up a level if you like. It's really a building block for me to move from.' (p.222)
P12	'I worried that one day I would wake up and it would hit me like a brick, but it is permanent and I feel like I am in a growing developing phase at the moment.' (p.257)
P13	'Definitely a shift in consciousness and in identity. What was interesting was that I moved back down to Devon (my home town) and was fully expecting to walk into the room and for family and friends not to recognise me. I felt so different, like a completely different person to be honest. All my internal frames of reference have changed.' (p.263)
P24	'I can tell you that it <i>feels</i> stable. It's been about three years now and it feels stable.' (p.315)
P5	'I can't imagine returning from "Just am" to "I am this, that, the other." Of course brain damage can break down the visible personality in a hurry, but I don't think that speaks to anything fundamental.' (p.225)
P10	'[It's] not just permanent but infinite. Permanent is too small a term.' (p.249)

Table 4.3: Increased 'present-ness'/Ability to live in the present
Subordinate/Related themes: enjoyment of inactivity, enjoyment of solitude

Participant	Illustrating quotes
P7	'I'm able to live more in the present moment and value that.' (p.234)
P15	'I am very happy to do nothing – I don't seem to get bored anymore or have to need to be something or just go somewhere for the sake of it. I can be on my own for long periods of time and doing nothing and that is okay with me.' (p.272)
P20	'It took me a very long time but I now look forward to nothing better than sitting and meditating in thoughtless awareness. It must seem very strange to an Ego oriented person, the idea of doing nothing. Some people cannot sit still and get bored very easily. I don't get bored anymore. I only work two days per week and all I do otherwise is read books go for walks and meditate.'(p.295)
P22	'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.' (p.303)
P23	'I am happy to do nothing. The silence is so beautiful. In the silence everything is taken care of. It's so nice just to sit and do nothing. That's one of my favourite times. I can just sit in silence for hours.' (p.308)
P25	'I really love my quietude. It gives me the chance to read and delight and meditate in a different way that allows for reflection and for an ever-deepening.' (p.320)

Table 4.4: Reduced Cognitive Activity/Less Identification with thoughts
Subordinate themes: ‘Quiet mind’, less affected by negative thoughts

Participant	Illustrating quotes
P2	It’s so calm and still it’s absolutely wonderful...I wish everyone could have a quiet mind. When I see people getting impatient in a queue I think “I wish you could have that quietness.” (p.214)
P5	‘Not nearly as many [thoughts] as before. Anyway, they’re just thoughts—clouds drifting by. The point would be to let them drift, not invest life-force in them.’ (p.224)
P25	‘I don’t mind thoughts but they do not have any pull. I let them dance. I can have quietness but I don’t have to be bothered by thoughts either. They’re like little puppets. The mind is not my enemy anymore. Looking at it is like looking at a tree. It’s just as empty of inherent existence and just as joyful.’ (p.319)
P14	‘My mind is quiet most of the time. To use my mind, I have to zoom into a task. My mind is still, but it’s still used as a tool. It takes an effort to remember something. It feels like memory is only ever now as well.’ (p.269)
P18	‘No thought chatter. It is as if something physical shifted in my brain. Even now my mind is pretty quiet – I sometimes imagine things but that voice has faded away. I used to have a constant stream of chattering thoughts.’ (p.288)
P23	‘Thoughts sometimes arise, but they arise and pass. It doesn’t hang around. A lot of the time my mind is quiet.’ (p.309)

Table 4.5: Reduced/Disappearance of fear of death

Participant	Illustrating quotes
P1	‘I’m not afraid of dying anymore and I can’t even think of death as something negative, it’s just a passing to another state where the soul separates from the body and unites with the universal soul.’ (p.208)
P3	‘I really don’t have any particular fear of it. I feel very calm about it. There are times I would quite be willing to accept it if I was told my death was to come, even though I don’t want to die just yet.’ (p.219)
P16	‘I find myself not only not at all afraid of it [death] but actually really looking forward to it...Being in that 'outside of time/outside of space' place, I guess you'd have to say it's like stepping outside of prison walls, of which it will be very nice to go back home again.’ (p.280)
P18	I would probably be shocked if I was told I had one day to live but I’m not afraid of death. We’re just like little fireflies – bursting forth from this main energy. We’re just sparks and we go back to that source and we spark some more.’ (p.288)
P22	‘I’ve no fear of death any more. I’m not in a rush to die, but I’m not attached to the body and the life and the possessions. Life is a miracle and a mystery, and I’m happy with that.’ (p.305)
P8	‘I’m not afraid of death at all – in fact in some ways I think it’s something to look forward to, a kind of liberation.’ (p.241)

Table 4.6: Decreased sense of group identity/need for belonging. Subordinate/related themes: all-encompassing sense of identity, no distinctions, no labels

Participant	Illustrating quotes
P6	‘I don't even salute the British flag as I see it as causing divisions. When you've experienced one-ness all labels seem silly.’ (p.231)
P19	‘I do not want to be connected to any religion. I feel that we are definitely one.’ (p.291)
P20	‘Even my love of football has waned. It was a massive part of my life but that desire to belong has pretty much gone. Everyone seems to need to belong to a particular group but I don't need that anymore.’ (p.296)
P22	‘I'm alive, that's the closest I can get to an identity. I share that with every other living thing. We all share the same life force.’ (p.305)
P7	‘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 the wall but I don't. I don't even call myself English, or a male. Everything else seems unimportant. I don't have strong opinions about politics. I don't support a football club anymore – I used to support QPR. Now I just watch football matches and I just think “I hope they all win.” I enjoy the game for its own sake. A lot of people hang on to these things because they need to identify. We through life collecting clothes but what it's covering up is nothing.’ (p.237)
P5	‘I'm a citizen of the cosmos. I don't have any sense of regional or political identity – and around where I live a lot of people do.’(p.226)

Table 4.7: Episodes of intense turmoil or trauma immediately preceding transformation. Subordinate/related themes: bereavement, failure, loss, depression, addiction, psychological disturbance

Participant	Illustrating quotes
P1	‘It happened after a terrible breakup with my last girlfriend, and I was for the first time in my life thinking of giving up fighting for getting better from my deep depression.’ (p.206)
P5	‘This was a process most obviously in response to a big, fat midlife crisis (about age 41), during which my marriage nearly broke up.’ (p.223)
P7	‘I became very familiar with grief and loss. Almost overnight I had lost two important roles in my life... The sense of who I was had been stripped away, and I was left staring at emptiness.’(p.233)
P11	‘So I left and then I was diagnosed with PTST and major depression to do with my military service and that was the single biggest factor in my spiritual transformation.’ (p.250)
P17	‘I became aware of a deep deep sadness, a hole in my soul. Before and after appearing on TV, I was in floods of tears. At that time I was considering taking my own life. It was an extraordinarily painful process.’ (p.281)
P21	‘It was really sad at the time. I’d never realised how much of a bad childhood I’d had. ..What happened was that I just woke up one day and realised that I couldn’t put up with my mother anymore.’ (p.297)

Table 4.8: Sense of Connection. Subordinate/Related themes: sense of oneness, connection to nature, awareness of complexity and perspectives

Participant	Illustrating quotes
P1	‘Yes, I have a strong feeling of understanding for the things people think, feel and do, and that I am directly connected to everything else in the universe.’ (p.208)
P2	‘I feel very connected to nature, and with animals. I feel a very strong spiritual connection when I’m with people who I care about.’ (p.214)
P8	‘I feel massively connected to my inner self, my higher self, and I struggle when I lose it. And I feel very connected to other people even though I’m more discerning.’ (p.241)
P21	‘We’re all connected and we’re all being looked after, if we’re willing to stay in the present moment and not dwell in the past and worry about the future which hasn’t arrived yet. I feel connection and a great deal of comfort from nature too, from Mother Earth.’ (p.288)
P22	‘I feel a part of nature, I feel more connected to the plants and trees and animals and the river and the mountains than I do the built environment. I feel a connection with people, but I also feel connected with tree and birds and grass and hills...There are times when everything seems alive.’ (p.305)
P13	‘I experience life as an interconnected co-creative partnership with some kind of intelligent force or ever-present sentiency.’ (p.263)

Table 4.9: Sudden Transformation. Subordinate theme: Sudden ‘leap’ after some gradual development beforehand or previous spiritual experiences

Participant	Illustrating quotes
P18	‘The precise moment was while crying in deep sorrow. I became aware of an immense silence... That period of pure realization lasted about 7 or 8 months.’ (p.286)
P10	‘At that point it was 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.’ (p.246)
P17	‘At that moment I experienced a deep sense of serenity, knowing that my life was absolutely perfect. I was okay as I was. My work on the planet was to wake up and to do whatever I need to do from that place of awakening.’ (p.281)
P19	‘I was reading <i>The Power of Now</i> and looking at the space in the room when I suddenly felt my mind clear and I felt lighter as though all my problems had gone.’ (p.289)
P20	‘Out of nowhere at 5am one morning I had what I now realise was a sudden uncontrolled Kundalini awakening.’ (p.293)
P24	‘On the way home I started to experience almost like little sparklers going off inside my body and mind... My dogs were not separate from whatever I am – there was a lack of those boundaries between myself and my surroundings. Then I just got up and everything looked that way.’ (p.310)

Table 4.10: Reduced interest in materialism. Subordinate themes: Giving away possessions, no longer interested in shopping, less interest in personal success

Participant	Illustrating quotes
P10	<p>‘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.’ (p.247)</p>
P11	<p>‘I used to shop and be addicted to home and garden television. I wanted to be an interior designer. I was obsessed with objects and creating peace in space. I was looking to possessions as a way to feel better but now I don’t need to feel better. There is no attachment. I gave away all my books; I don’t need things.’ (p.222)</p>
P19	<p>‘When it first happened I had the urge to give away a lot of my things. I decided I didn’t care about having new things or lots of material objects for decoration.’ (p.290)</p>
P20	<p>‘Now I have lost all material desires. I used to think my life would only be complete if I had a newer faster motorbike and drove my wife mad for years with impulsive purchases of dozens of different bikes.’ (p.294)</p>
P21	<p>‘I became less materialistic. Before when things were bad I used to find solace in material things, spending massive amounts of money... Now I find I’m much more laid back. I wouldn’t swap this feeling of knowing that the universe is looking after me.’ (p.299)</p>
P24	<p>‘I don’t pay attention to possessions, hardly any attention...I enjoy certain things. I have musical instruments; I play music. We have a nice house but it’s not what I’m looking for. My sense of self doesn’t come from them. I’m not attached to them.’ (p.312)</p>

Table 4.11: Increased altruism. Subordinate/Related themes: Compassion, empathy, forgiveness

Participant	Illustrating quotes
P10	‘Being of service to all things in all, in the name of the highest good. To serve humanity, that’s my intention.’ (p.248)
P13	‘Now I feel a very strong sense of purpose and sense of spiritual calling. I feel called to serve the evolution of human consciousness, to support others through awakening.’ (p.262)
P15	‘One of the major effects of awakening was coming to a place of love and forgiveness for those who abused me and the understanding that came about what was going on – I began to see all that happened in the light of the bigger picture. A great love grew inside me for them.’ (p.272)
P19	‘I have gone back to being vegetarian. I want to do what I can to live sustainably and will be more active in helping others. I am not content to just sit back and watch things happen and say to myself, that is the way of the world. I want to do my small part to change the world we live in.’ (p.289)
P22	‘My compassion has only grown stronger. I feel a great deal of concern for the people I see, in some ways I can see myself as them, imagine what it would be like to have their difficulties, and I experience concern for their welfare.’ (p.304)
p9	‘I feel a strong sense of compassion. I love people. I love helping people, love encouraging people, love being around people.’ (p.245)

Table 4.12: Enhanced relationships. Subordinate/related themes: Authenticity, honesty

Participant	Illustrating quotes
P6	I don't take life as seriously as I did and I think this helps my relationships as I'm more relaxed and less anxious.' (p.230)
P17	'My kind of pre-awakening relationships were very much much egocentric i.e. what can I get out of this relationship? Very much dishonest at times, very fear-based. Today most of the time – I do slip back into old patterns sometimes - I'm very much more present in relationships.' (p.283)
P18	'My relationships have healed. For example, my surviving daughter left home for a while in high school because our relationship was so troubled. She came back right after my awakening experience and since then it has really improved a lot.' (p.287)
P7	'I think it just feels warmer and more comfortable from my side. I don't now how they see me, but from my side there is less possibility of friction or disagreement or conflict. Things that might have annoyed me or irritated me don't affect me at all. I just let it go.' (p.236)
P19	'I am more tolerant and less judgemental of other people. I am generally more relaxed and not as anxious about talking to people which I had a problem with before). I am not afraid to say what I feel now. I am not as obsessed with what other people think of me now.'(p.290)
P8	'Yes, a lot more compassion and understanding. If people are behaving in a certain way, I'm aware that there are reasons why they're like that.' (p.240)

Table 4.13: Intensified perception. Subordinate/Related themes: sense of aliveness, heightened perception of beauty, sense of the beauty of nature

Participant	Illustrating quotes
P2	‘I felt a very heightened awareness, to the point where I was very conscious of every sound and everyone’s expression.’ (p.210)
P24	‘Sometimes I just stop and breathe and am amazed at the fact of aliveness, dumbfounded by what life is.’ (p.315)
P17	‘I just experience a vast presence which is just infinite and pretty mind-blowing. Especially in nature, or even at times when I’m in London walking to my clinic. But it’s so much easier in nature because nature is the perfect embodiment of presence.’ (p.285)
P21	‘I’m more sensitive to the things around me....I was focused on keeping myself safe from harm all the time. My perception of everything has changed – I look at things from an adult perspective, a more spiritual perspective.’ (p.288)
P22	‘...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.’ (p.301)
P15	‘Colours seemed brighter, more alive. I would walk in nature and feel I was part of it – like I was walking with the trees....Everyday ordinariness had more meaning and depth and life opened up to me in the present moment.’ (p.271)

Table 4.14: Ongoing Difficulties. Subordinate themes: Fluctuation in state; effort needed to sustain state; negative effects; regret

Participant	Illustrating quotes
P7	'Moods still occur. Some days I feel happier than others, whether that's physiological I don't know. Sometimes I feel grumpy, but it doesn't last.' (p.237)
P8	'Generally my mind is still, which can sometimes make life difficult, when I should be being active. It makes doing things very difficult sometimes.' (p.241)
P10	'I'm still working on it. I've been in and out of mind for last 6 years...It's difficult to function a lot of the time, the things that require mind, organising.' (p.247)
P13	'Now I feel that I pick up a lot of other people's thoughts and feelings and 'stuff' and can easily get pulled off centre and outside of myself into other people's issues...Over-stimulation is something I have to be aware of. That happens very easily.' (p.261)
P20	'I am a long way from abiding in a permanent state of wakefulness. I can go several days in a state of love peace and joy but then it fades away.' (p.296)
P21	'There are days when I wish it had never happened because life seems to be a little too complicated sometimes.' (p.300)

Table 4.15: Problems integrating new state. Subordinate themes: confusion, incomprehension (both from self and others), psychopathology, ‘Dark night of the soul’

Participant	Illustrating quotes
P20	‘I ended up spending 6 out of the next 12 months in a psychiatric hospital pumped full of drugs. The doctors and psychiatrists told me I had experienced a psychotic episode after first discussing possible schizophrenia.’ (p.293)
P10	‘I was incapable of working, doing anything even feeding myself, lost weight, I couldn’t relate to anybody. After that my mind started to return, my identity started to return.’ (p.247)
P16	‘I was really blown apart and needed to do a lot of work and seeking to integrate and figure out how to live with this new person I was. I was very confused, and often too honest.’ (p.278)
P21	‘But there has been a lot of incomprehension. Quite a few people who I used to have in my life just see me as selfish and weird. I can’t stand them whining about trivial things anymore.’ (p.299)
P13	‘I had memory problems, and problems with concentration and confusion, particularly in the early stages. I was on a short term a memory cycle of about 30 seconds and everything was just sort of slipping through my mind.’ (p.259)
P8	‘After that my whole senses opened up and I found everything overwhelming. I was completely blown open too fast. I had no filter. I was so open and so delicate. Whenever I went out it was very chaotic. I was having psychic episodes but I didn’t understand them. I could sense other people’s thoughts.’ (p.239)

Table 4.16: Acceptance/Letting Go. Subordinate/Related themes: surrender, trust

Participant	Illustrating quotes
P9	'Surrender and trust in a higher power. I surrendered to the fact that I needed a new way to life. I was not resistant. I try to tell people in the programme that resistance is what makes it difficult.' (p.244)
P5	'I now live a very surrendered life. I have no further ambitions. At this point there is nowhere to go.' (p.263)
P15	'These last years have been about surrendering to this source of life, letting go of the past and coming deeper and deeper into the present.' (p.272)
P8	'Because I trust the universe, it seems like things happen easily for me.' (p.240)
P11	'It's really strange - if I don't get to do nothing my life runs in a flow. It does whatever it does. Whatever comes up, comes up. I don't have much structure. It needs to be spontaneous. I used to have 25 minute increments of tasks. Life was never being lived because it was always carrying out previous plans. I was exhausted for years.' (p.253)

Table 4.17: Spiritual Practice (as an apparent factor in transformation i.e. was being undertaken preceding the transformation). Subordinate/Related themes: Reading of spiritual texts, studying with spiritual teacher

Participant	Illustrating quotes
P5	‘Meditation was a factor. It was scattered at first, then an intensive three and a half year period using a seven-level set of discs “Awaking from Dreamtime” (Aboriginal) supposed to open energy through each chakra in turn. I don’t know how much of a factor that was aside from meditation itself.’ (p.223)
P14	‘I dedicated all my time to meditating, about three hours a day, doing every spiritual practice under the sun, Mahayana Buddhism, emptiness teachings, studying <i>A Course in Miracles</i> . Eventually I got into non-duality.’ (p.264)
P20	‘One year ago at the age of 43 I discovered Sahaja Yoga that brings about a very gentle and controlled Kundalini awakening and I am now reaping the benefits of the transformation it has made to my life.’ (p.293)
P25	‘The permanent change began through a couple of friends I met, one of whom was very experienced, a teacher, and another person who practised advaita. We had a little group there, three of us, and we read a lot and we were guided. I was able to ask questions, and began to see through the separate self.’ (p.318)
P24	‘I took up a practice of noticing my thoughts and emotions and resting in presence all day long on a repeated basis. Not a practice, but living meditation - you do it through your life.’ (p.310)

Table 4.18: Physical difficulties

Subordinate/Related themes: Sleeplessness, uncontrollable energy, kundalini

Participant	Illustrating quotes
P13	'I started to develop physical symptoms which stopped me in my tracks and that forced me to reassess... My body was in pain. I was fatigued but couldn't sleep. I didn't sleep properly for about 8 months.' (p.259)
P16	'Needless to say, after four nights of not sleeping I was not in great shape. Physically I was wrecked. My sinuses were completely clogged, and my lungs were very congested. I was talking in whispers, because my throat was so tight.' (p.275)
P8	'I was working in a bookshop at the time but had to stop because I was ill. I was diagnosed with ME. I was too ill to go out.' (p.239)
P15	'I hardly slept. After two or three weeks it came to a stop.' (p.212)
P1	'The things that happened to me in this first period (six to seven months) were in many ways extreme both physical and psychological... At first it was things like no hunger (lost about 18 kg in 21 days), no sweating, a feeling that the time stood almost still and that I was immortal.' (p.206)

Table 4.19: Timelessness/Slowed down sense of time

Participant	Illustrating quotes
P11	‘When you’re present all the time every day seems full. A day seems to last for such a long time.’ (p.252)
P13	‘I live as a timeless soul enjoying my physical experience. That is my daily reality.’ (p.263)
P16	‘I also understood about why mystics have talked about "for all eternity". In a mystical consciousness, within that one instant, you sense forever and ever, and are forever changed.’ (p.276)
P18	‘The first realization is an ongoing process. That happened in time, in the past, but the realization is of the true nature of time. The timeless quality of reality.’ (p.286)
P21	‘I feel as if I have more time. I never had the time to notice things are around me.’ (p.298)
P23	‘There is no time...No past no future, just things appearing and happening. Everything just is.’ (p.308)

Table 4.20: Heightened/increased energy

Participant	Illustrating quotes
P3	'I have loads more energy and am excited about everything I do, but not completely attached to it.' (p.217)
P18	'The other change is that I have incredible amounts of physical energy. Presence and awareness heal the body. I have lost close to a hundred pounds in the last 3 years.' (p.288)
P24	'Everything that arises falls away immediately and doesn't leave a trace. That frees my energy up. My energy isn't used in seeking. It frees up my energy to find out what I'm really interested in, just for the sheer enthusiasm of it. So it becomes clear what it is I want to do but not in terms of the future. It's more like what I want to do now; it shows up really easily.' (p.312)
P16	'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.' (p.275)
P19	'Even though exhausted from lack of sleep (my baby was 8 months at the time) I felt rejuvenated and refreshed.' (p.289)

Table 4.21: Authenticity. Subordinate/Related Themes: Honesty, 'in touch with self'

Participant	Illustrating quotes
P21	'My relationships are more authentic, and a lot more meaningful, because I can't be arsed playing games and putting on a mask.' (p.299)
P17	'I have a stable authentic sense of who I am, independent of what's going on in my life, independent of what my thoughts and feelings are.' (p.283)
P19	'I feel like I have more courage to do what I believe in now. I am going to trust my instincts more and my inner knowing, rather than listening to what others think is the right thing to do.' (p.289)
P13	'It's very important for me to follow my own rhythms and cycles, whereas before I was disconnected from that, pushing myself based on timescales and diaries and expectations. Now I'm more authentic and more aligned and in tune with who I really am.' (p.260)
P8	'I'm a lot more intuitive and in touch with myself, a lot more aware of my own energies.' (p.240)
P1	'Since the transformation I control almost everything in my life by my choices. I am almost fearless (but not careless) and I have a very strong self-reliability.' (p.207)

Table 4.22: Prior Interest in Spirituality

Participant	Illustrating quotes
P7	'I did practise meditation since being a teenager, starting with TM in the 70s. I was working in London and got involved in the Buddhist society there. I went to retreats. I became interested in the applications of meditation and mindfulness.' (p.234)
P12	'I have had an interest [in spirituality] for years, and had experiences and an interest when I was younger, but for many years life got in the way.' (p.255)
P17	'I used to do a lot of personal development workshops, a lot of spiritual meetings, meditation practices, basically trying to find out who the hell I was.' (p.282)
P24	'When I was smoking pot in my early 20s I would read books on eastern mysticism, just dabbling. I had no spiritual practice, just an interest.' (p.311)

Table 4.23: Psychic experiences/episodes following transformation

Participant	Illustrating quotes
P2	‘I could actually hear spiritual guidance, like someone who was psychic. I could be with my sister and my friends and they could ask me something but if I could quieten my mind and tried not to think I could actually hear spiritual guidance or wisdom coming through – not me thinking, it was just coming into my consciousness.’ (p.210)
P14	‘My chakras opened up. I felt that I could see with my third eye. I became aware of past lifetimes. A lot of people I had known in previous lifetimes came back into my life.’ (p.266)
P13	‘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.’ (p.258)
P16	‘This was the beginning of a remarkable time when a spiritual guide started to have conversations with me. I learned first hand that one has to go through hell before you get to heaven.’ (p.276)
P8	‘I still have psychic experiences sometimes, like pre-cognitive dreams. Sometimes I just know things without knowing why I know them. And sometimes synchronistic things happen.... I started having past life memories, and to remember in between my lives.’ (p.241)

Table 4.24: Change of career/job following transformation

Participant	Illustrating quotes
P2	‘It no longer feels ‘right’ to pursue a job where I cannot include my beliefs regarding healing.’ (p.212)
P17	‘I think one of the single greatest changes has been in the shift in the nature of my work. I practice as an integrative medical doctor and now I’m blessed that the vast majority of patients who come to see me are on a path of spiritual awakening.’ (p.284)
P20	‘I lost all interest in my hobbies and my charity work. I continued my stress free 2 days a week job as it fits my life very well.’ (p.295)
P21	‘Before I was a nail technician. I owned a nail salon. After my change I went totally in the opposite direction. The more I delved into counselling the more my nail salon didn’t make sense. It didn’t make sense. The bigger my view of things became, the smaller it seemed. I didn’t enjoy it anymore. I didn’t go through all of these changes and have all this empathy just to be a nail technician.’ (p.300)
P3	‘It made me more aware of what was going on and the things that I was doing and I decided to have a bit of a change, which led me to different career choices. I left behind a well paid job in local government and started training in hypnotherapy.’ (p.217)

Table 4.25: More active following transformation. Subordinate/related themes: strong sense of purpose, sense of urgency

Participant	Illustrating quotes
P1	<p>‘Today I’m working more than ever. In fact I have three jobs and a very good income that I don’t want or need any more.’ (p.207)</p>
P25	<p>‘But at the same time it has allowed me to be more active. When stillness and silence was my only means of escaping the mental labelling of separateness, then I felt the need to retreat. Now I can be involved in this mystery of life without it having to distract me. I do not have stillness and silence as my refuse. There is no need of something to leave.’ (p.320)</p>
P13	<p>‘Now I feel a very strong sense of purpose and sense of spiritual calling. I feel called to serve the evolution of human consciousness, to support others through awakening.’ (p.262)</p>
P8	<p>‘Now I feel a sense of urgency – you’re not here to float around. This is a phase of integration – I feel that now I’m going to move into a new phase, a more active phase, of trying to engage more with life.’ (p.277)</p>
P19	<p>‘I am not content to just sit back and watch things happen and say to myself, that is the way of the world. I want to do my small part to change the world we live in. There is so much unnecessary pain and suffering and I don’t want to be a passive contributor to that insanity anymore. I also am very enthusiastic about my creativity.’ (p.290)</p>

4.5 Further Comments on the Codes

The code of 'Well-being' was most prevalent code of all, appearing in all participants' accounts, in most cases several times in each. Various types of positive affective states were described: serenity, appreciation, inner peace, joy, a sense of ease or liberation, together with some negative descriptions, such as a loss of anxiety, never worrying or feeling fear, or never feeling other negative emotions such as anger or hatred.

Similarly, all participants reported experiencing a new psychological state (code no.2, Table 4.2). For many participants – although its emergence was often attended with some confusion and incomprehension, and problems of integration – this new identity was reported as emerging almost fully-formed

One important subordinate theme of code no.3 ('increased present-ness') was enjoyment of inactivity, or the ability to 'do nothing.' Inactivity was reported as not boring to the participants, and they had no urge to 'fill' empty time with distractions and activities. They reported experiencing the lack of this impulse to be constantly active as liberating. As P1 put it, 'I love to be totally alone with myself, doing absolutely nothing, and the most fantastic thing is that it can be anywhere in the world and in all kind of situations.' (p.207) Many participants remarked on this as a significant change, mentioning that previously they did find it difficult to be inactive, and lived lives of constant activity. As P11 described her previous life, 'I used to have 25 minute increments of tasks. Life was never being lived because it was always carrying out previous plans. I was exhausted for years.' (p.253) Or as P20 described this shift, 'In the past, I couldn't sit still for five minutes. I had to be doing something or going somewhere. The transition from that to being able to sit and do nothing is massive.' (p.295) P12 noted this enjoyment of inactivity meant that she no longer grew impatient while waiting: 'I have noticed that waiting no longer bothers me, I don't feel the need to clock watch. I take the opportunity to meditate and be still.' (p.256)

Table 4.4 illustrates the code of 'Reduced Cognitive Activity.' All but two of the participants reported this code, although there was some variation. Some participants reported that their minds had become completely quiet, with a complete cessation of involuntary discursive thinking. For example, as P18 described it, the 'inner voice' which generates discursive thought had disappeared: 'No thought

chatter. It is as if something physical shifted in my brain.’ (p.288) Or as P2 described her lack of ‘thought-chatter’: ‘It’s so calm and still it’s absolutely wonderful.

Sometimes I just sit and I wish everyone could have a quiet mind. When I see people getting impatient in a queue I think “I wish you could have that quietness.”’ (p.214)

Some participants reported that they still had some ‘thought-chatter’, but significantly less than before. As P8 responded to the question, ‘Do you still experience “thought-chatter”? Does your mind still fill up with random thoughts when it isn’t occupied?’: ‘Nowhere near as much as I used to. A lot of the time my mind is very still.’ (p.241) Some participants reported that they were aware of an ‘inner silence’ which was always present even if thoughts did arise. The ‘silence’ was a constant background which thoughts could appear on the surface of. As P10 put it, ‘There is nothing there apart from a still silence, a very peaceful still unifying silence that permeates everything.’ (p.248) P12 remarked that, ‘Because I notice the thoughts, because they are set against silence, they are not always there and I no longer have the chatter endlessly.’ (p.256)

Others reported that, whilst some ‘thought-chatter’ was still there, they felt less identified with it. They were able to stand back, observe their thoughts and let them flow by, without becoming immersed in or overly affected by them. For example, P7 described his discursive thinking as ‘like walking into another room, with the TV playing in the background. I don’t have to pay attention to it.’ (p.237) P5 described his thoughts as ‘Clouds drifting by. The point would be to let them drift; not invest life-force in them.’ (p.224)

At the same time, some participants were aware that thinking was sometimes useful as a practical tool, which they could call upon if necessary. P7 remarked that, ‘Sometimes I need to listen to it [thinking] because I have things which need planning - going shopping, paying the bills. It’s a useful machine.’ (p. 237) Similarly, P14 reported that, ‘To use my mind, I have to zoom into a task. My mind is still, but it’s still used as a tool.’ (p.269)

A number of participants reported that they had a reduced fear of death because they sensed that death was not the end of existence. Many of them used striking terminology to describe this. For example, P16 described her concept of death as ‘like stepping outside of prison walls, of which it will be very nice to go back home again.’ (p.280) Similarly, P18 said, ‘We’re just sparks and we go back to that source and we spark some more.’ (p.289). Some participants found that the term

'death' had little meaning, particularly in the sense of being an opposite to 'life.' For example, P9 remarked, 'I believe that death is a part of life. It's just a transition to a different state' (p.245) while P17 stated that 'Now I embrace death. I don't really recognise the term. Rebirth, maybe.' (p.284) Some participants were clear that this attitude to death was completely different to their previous one, which had been fearful, with no belief in life after death. For example, P8 stated that, 'I used to think there was absolutely nothing. I thought people who believed in life after death were idiots...I'm not afraid of death at all – in fact in some ways I think it's something to look forward to, a kind of liberation.' (p.241)

In regard to Code no.6 (as illustrated in Table 4.6), the participants reported a decreased sense of belonging to a particular group, or to 'label' themselves with any particular role. They reported a strong characteristic of transcending all forms of identity – such as regional, national, ethnic, religious or cultural – and a decreased need to define themselves in terms of external identities. This was clearly illustrated by two participants who mentioned that they had previously been football fans, but no longer felt the need to follow a particular team. As P7 reported, 'Even my love of football has waned. It was a massive part of my life but that desire to belong has pretty much gone. Everyone seems to need to belong to a particular group but I don't need that anymore.' (p.296) Similarly, P20 reported that, 'I don't support a football club anymore – I used to support QPR. Now I just watch football matches and I just think "I hope they all win." I enjoy the game for its own sake.' (p.237)

Code no.7 (as shown in Table 4.7) illustrates that the great majority of the transformational experiences this study examined were reported as being preceded by intense turmoil and trauma (23), although frequently (in 13 of those 23 cases) accompanied with spiritual practice or therapy. There was a wide variety of types of turmoil or trauma, including long term depression (for example, P17, P16, P6, P3, P1), bereavement (P7, P18, P12, P4 and P13), a combination of stress, loss and depression (P3, P2, P8 and P5), emotional pain (P22, P21, P15), addiction (P24 and P9), intense stress (P20, P10 Mac), physical suffering together with stress (P14, P19).

Code no.8 (Table 4.8), an increased sense of connection, could be seen as an important factor in other prominent codes, such as well-being, reduced fear of death, decreased sense of group identity and increased altruism. This sense of connection was reported in different ways – a connection to nature, to other people, to a 'higher' or deeper self inside them, to their surroundings in general, or less concretely, to a

transcendental or spiritual force. Many participants reported two or more of these different types of connection, such as P2 with the natural world and other people: 'I feel very connected to nature, and with animals. I feel a very strong spiritual connection when I'm with people who I care about.' (p.285) Similarly, P8 described a strong connection both to her inner self and other people: 'I feel massively connected to my inner self, my higher self, and I struggle when I lose it. And I feel very connected to other people, even though I'm more discerning.' (p.241) P1 described a specific connection to other people and to all things in general: 'I have a strong feeling of understanding for the things people think, feel and do, and that I am directly connected to everything else in the universe, in "oneness".' (p.208)

In Code no.9 (Table 4.9), for 19 participants 'spiritual awakening' was reported as occurring suddenly, at a specific, identifiable point. P18, for example, described a 'precise moment' in a state of deep psychological turmoil when she 'became aware of an immense silence.' (p.286) P20 was even aware of the specific time when his awakening occurred: 'Out of nowhere at 5 am one morning.' (p.293) P16 was even more specific, reporting that her experience occurred on 'March 2, 1993 at probably 8:30 AM Eastern Standard time US.' (p.275) P10 described a moment when 'the last domino fell' and he 'went into this state of bliss.' (p.246)

Some participants described how this moment of sudden transformation had physical manifestations. P15 was aware of a 'tremendous amount of energy coursing through my body.' (p.275) P20 identified his moment of transformation as a 'sudden uncontrolled Kundalini awakening' (p.293) while P24 described how 'On the way home I started to experience almost like little sparklers going off inside my body and mind.' (p.310) P4's experience was one of light rather than energy: 'There was a huge golden bright light, circular, it seemed to be from the solar plexus and 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.' (p.220)

12 participants reported a clear cut and sudden moment of transformation which occurred without any forewarning. However, for 7 participants this 'moment of transformation' was reported as being preceded by some previous spiritual experiences, and some previous gradual development. For example, P17 had '5 or 6 moments of clarity' (p.281), the first of which occurred 10 years previously. This was followed by years of what he refers to as 'the usual spiritual seeking', until a breakdown led to his shift to a stable 'spiritual' state. Similarly, P2 described three

individual transformational experiences – each triggered by intense psychological turmoil – over period of 9 years, each of which were transformational and ongoing, but which each lead to a more intense state of awakening.

Others reported some gradual spiritual development earlier, usually through spiritual practice, which was followed by a sudden transformational experience, which ‘shifted’ them to an apparently ‘higher’ level of psychological functioning. P24 reported gradual development for around 18 months, while performing a meditative practice which he describes as ‘noticing my thoughts and emotions and resting in presence all day long on a repeated basis. Not a practice, but living meditation.’ (p.310) Following this, there were two major experiences. In the first, ‘a lot of the busy-ness of my mind and the seeking energy fell away. The next day I woke up and felt like I was looking at the world from a place that was behind thought.’ This was followed, ‘three or four months later’, by a final transformational shift in which ‘Everything I looked at seemed to have no separate existence from what I was – the absence of all those dividing lines both in space and time. Space was just the dividing line between me and the floor or me and the door. It was as if the sense of time fell away, all those divisions of the past, present and future.’ (p.310)

P11 reported that she felt she underwent gradual development while suffering from depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, during which she was aware of a process of ‘humbling or deconstructing the ego.’ (p.250) During this period, she had what she describes as ‘peak moments that changed the baseline going forward’, 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 colours were incredible and the flowers looked happy. I looked down and I realised I was the sidewalk.’ (ibid.) Following this, in March 2008, as she puts it, ‘I moved into a stable state’ after participating in a personal development workshop (ibid.).

Regarding code no.10 (Table 4.10), 19 participants reported a reduced interest in materialism. Several participants mentioned that they previously sought solace or fulfilment in materialism. They reported that they used shopping and spending as a way of trying to deal with their anxiety and discontent. For example, P21 remarked that, ‘Before when things were bad I used to find solace in material things, spending massive amounts of money.’ (p.286) P11 stated that ‘I was looking to possessions as a way to feel better but now I don’t need to feel better.’ (p.222) P20 said that he used

to think ‘my life would only be complete if I had a newer faster motorbike and I drove my wife mad for years with impulsive purchases of dozens of different bikes.’ (p.294)

These strong acquisitive impulses were reported as falling away with the participants’ transformational experiences. P17 reported that there had been a ‘complete shift’ from his previous attitude, when he drove a £70,000 Jaguar and ‘was absolutely focused on a being a millionaire.’ (p.283) P20 described how he has ‘lost all material desires,’ (p.294) while for P19 the shift in values was so pronounced that she felt an impulse to give away her possessions: ‘When it first happened I had the urge to give away a lot of my things. I decided I didn’t care about having new things or lots of material objects for decoration.’ (p.290)

Some participants reported that for them it was not a question of feeling repulsion towards material goods, but of not being *attached* to them. For example, P24 reported, ‘I don’t pay attention to possessions, hardly any attention...I enjoy certain things. I have musical instruments; I play music. We have a nice house but it’s not what I’m looking for. My sense of self doesn’t come from them. I’m not attached to them.’ (p.312) P10 remarked that ‘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.’ (p.247)

There was a reported shift from acquisition to altruism, which P17 described very clearly: ‘What’s shifted is my focus, on what I can get from life to what I can give to life.’ (p.283) The participants’ focus was no longer *themselves*. They were no longer self-centred, and were as concerned for the well-being of others as for their own well-being. (The code of ‘Increased altruism’ will be discussed in more detail in section 5.1.12.)

Regarding code no.11 (Table 4.11), 19 participants reported a heightened or intensified perception, including a sense of the aliveness and beauty of their surroundings, and particularly the natural world. P22 described how his surroundings became ‘sharper, more real,’ while P7 was ‘struck by how fresh everything seems, how wonderful it is to be here at all. There’s a sense of wonder, like a young child.’ (p.235) Similarly, P13 remarked that ‘I always had a sense of beauty but it’s become more heightened now,’ (p.260) while P17 and P12 both described their awareness of an ‘awesome presence’ (in P12’s phrase on p.256) or as P17 put it, ‘a vast presence which is just infinite and pretty mind-blowing. Especially in nature.’ (p.285)

In relation to Code no.13 (Table 4.13), the majority of the participants reported that their relationships had become deeper, more fulfilling and authentic. They reported a number of different aspects to this. One of these was becoming more tolerant and understanding. For example, P8 reported that her relationships had improved because she has 'a lot more compassion and understanding. If people are behaving in a certain way, I'm aware that there are reasons why they're like that.' (p.240) Similarly, P19 said that her relationships had improved because 'I am more tolerant and less judgemental of other people.' (p.290) Similarly, P2 remarked that 'Now I'm far more tolerant. I've always felt that you shouldn't judge people. I'm very conscious of that. I'm more careful of what I say to and do.' (p.213) P7 mentioned that 'Things [about other people] that might have annoyed me or irritated me don't affect me at all. I just let it go.' (p.236) This also implied tolerance and understanding. As a result, the participants generally reported experiencing less animosity and enmity in their relationships. As P5 put it, 'I have no enemies, never have had, can't even imagine what an enemy would be.' (p.224)

Another factor reported by some participants was that their relationships had improved because they were no longer concerned so much about other people's opinion of them. With greater self-reliance and authenticity (code 20), they reported depending less on affirmation and respect from other people for their sense of well-being. For example, for P19, another factor in her improved relationships was that 'I am not afraid to say what I feel now. I am not as obsessed with what other people think of me now.' (p.290) Similarly, P6 mentioned that 'I don't take life as seriously as I did and I think this helps my relationships as I'm more relaxed and less anxious.' (p.230) P11 remarked that in relationships she used to be 'on guard, ready to defend myself against potential criticism or judgement, always self-conscious, wanting to be seen in the best possible way. To be found wanting would be like death...All of that stopped. I could just see people instead of focussing on what they thought of me. I was just listening, with so much less judgement, just allowing them to be themselves.' (p.252)

Another factor was that their relationships themselves were reported as authentic, less superficial, and more intense. As P1 remarked, 'I can easily establish strong and intense relationships with other people.' (p.207) P13 mentioned that 'being more authentic' in relationships was very important to her (p.261), while P21 reported

that 'My relationships are more authentic, and a lot more meaningful, because I can't be arsed playing games and putting on a mask.' (p.299)

The ability to be *present* in relationships was a reported factor too. As P17 put it, 'Today most of the time – I do slip back into old patterns sometimes - I'm very much more present in relationships.' (p.283) Or as P3 put it, 'When I'm with them [his wife and children] I'm present.' (p.218) P18 also remarked on this presence, and made the significant point that it led to a tolerant and non-judgemental attitude. She was non-judgemental (and this perhaps applied to other participants too) because she did not carry any preconceptions or prejudices in her encounters with people: 'There are no barriers, no judgement, just meeting people as they come into perception, just interacting with the situation.' (p.287)

Interestingly, some participants mentioned that they had fewer friends now, and that some old friends had fallen away. They appeared to have closer relationships with a smaller number of people. P11 reported that because of her more relaxed and tolerant attitude 'some people fell away; they needed more engagement from me. I wasn't going in on their stories.' (p.252) Similarly, P14 remarked that, 'I used to much overextend myself all my life socially, and that stopped, a lot of friends I had been intensely present with and considered dear friends turned out to probably be more acquaintances and slowly dropped away.' (p.268)

However, some participants commented on difficulties in relationships, particularly with old friends and relatives. This was related to code no.14 ('ongoing problems', Table 4.14). 16 participants of this study reported ongoing problems, including psychopathological elements. The reported difficulties included a sense that, as P21 remarked, 'life seems to be a little too complicated sometimes', which sometimes made her 'wish it had never happened.' (p.300) Similarly, P13 described feeling too 'open' and vulnerable: 'I feel that I pick up a lot of other people's thoughts and feelings and 'stuff' and can easily get pulled off centre and outside of myself into other people's issues...Over-stimulation is something I have to be aware of. That happens very easily.' (p.261)

Also reported by some participants was an inability to deal with the organisation and practical requirements of everyday life. As P10 remarked, 'It's difficult to function a lot of the time, the things that require mind, organising.' (p.247) For P8, the stillness of her mind made 'doing things very difficult sometimes.' (p.241)

Other participants described their state as fluctuating. For example (contradicting his claim that his 'awakening' was permanent), P20 remarked that, 'I am a long way from abiding in a permanent state of wakefulness. I can go several days in a state of love peace and joy but then it fades away.' (p.296) Similarly, P22 remarked that, 'I still experience some anxiety, and very occasionally depressive thoughts.' P11 remarked that, although she feels a permanent change has taken place, the state was 'immensely variable. Within that permanence there has been a settling in. Life brings up the old conditioning.' (p.270)

Elsewhere, participants reported needing to 'make an effort' to maintain the state – perhaps, again, contradicting their reporting the state as stable and ongoing. For example, P6 reported that 'It's permanent in the sense that I know that with effort I can bring about feelings of joy, contentment, gratitude and awe.' (p.232) P19 reported that although her mind was quieter than it had been before, she still has to 'work at trying to keep the thought-chatter away.' (p.292)

There were also problems experienced by participants in terms of integrating and adapting to their new state (code no.15, Table 4.15). For four participants in particular – P8, P10, P11 and P13 – the sudden disintegration of their old sense of identity was reported as bringing a loss of the cognitive abilities which were incorporated within that identity, such as concentration, memory and practical problem-solving (e.g. in jobs). For example, P11 found that she had to re-learn the ability to form concepts, and even found it difficult to speak:

I ended up having to remember how to conceptualise things. It was a little destabilising... 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. (p.251)

Similarly, P10 described how 'all mentation disappeared and everything began to radiate this stunning sense of beauty, stillness and silence. That lasted for about a year. I was incapable of working, doing anything even feeding myself, lost weight, I couldn't relate to anybody. After that my mind started to return, my identity started to return.' (p.247) P13 felt so overwhelmed by her new psychological state that 'I

couldn't work or do anything. I was working in an art gallery and then I let that go.' (p.259)

While for P11 the return of cognitive and conceptual functioning was a smooth transition, P10 experienced it as a 'dark night of the soul.' As he put it – using language which is strikingly similar to the 'Dark night' as described by St. John of the Cross – when his mind and sense of identity returned, 'I went into a state of panic and terror. It was like being abandoned by God. Like going from colour to black and white. The sense of separation returned, the sense of being a you and me... That went on for about 6 months and then eventually I started integrating both of them, living in both domains.' (p.247)

P11 and P13 both felt that this process of integration was underway, and close to being completed. P11 reported that she 'moved into a stable state about March of 08.' (p.251) For P13 'It took 2 to 3 years to feel stable and finally understand what was happening.' (p.260) However, for both P8 and P10, these difficulties were ongoing. P10 felt that, although he had made significant progress towards integration, the process was still ongoing: 'I started integrating both of them, living in both domains, and that has taken – well, it's still going on, I'm still working on it.' (p.247)

Secondly, most of these 13 participants reported some degree of confusion following their transformation. The reported positive effects of their new psychological state were offset by incomprehension and confusion. As P2 put it, 'I didn't understand at all what was going on. I had no concepts to help me understand it. Something was happening which felt very strong spiritually but I didn't know what was going to happen at the end of it.' (p.211) P15 felt as though she had been 'invaded' and 'had very little idea of who I was.' (p.233) P16 reported that 'I was really blown apart and needed to do a lot of work and seeking to integrate and figure out how to live with this new person I was. I was very confused.' (p.278) P13 stated that 'I had never read a spiritual book or meditated, never done any spiritual practice, so I had no framework or reference point at all. It was all new. I documented as much as I could but there was so much happening so quickly.' (p.259)

However, this period of confusion was often reported as temporary. Gradually the participants were drawn towards spiritual practices, therapies and books, and began to make contact with other individuals with these interests. P2 described how her experience 'ignited an interest in spiritual books' (p.211) while P15 described how, although she had broken contact with some old friends – who didn't understand

what had happened to her - 'I have also gone on to meet new and like minded people'. (p.272) The physical difficulties which came with P13's transformational experience brought her into contact with alternative therapies – such as Reiki – which led her to investigate spiritual philosophies. Similarly, P21's transformational experience led her to study counselling. As she described it, she 'went on to study counselling at a place where they had a spiritual focus on the courses. After that I went on to study transpersonal psychotherapy. It opened up a whole new world of being able to help ourselves. A journey of emotional growth – I wasn't an adult before.' (p.297)

As a final example, P20 reported initially feeling 'a little in the wilderness, trying to understand what had happened to me' and began a process of 'seeking, searching for answers.' (p.297) Eventually, this led him to meditation and yoga, which he reported as helping to stabilize and integrate his new psychological state.

Thirdly, a small number of participants reported continuing incomprehension from friends even after they had established a new sense of identity. Although they reported better relationships with people in general, in some cases relationships with their partners, relatives and friends deteriorated. They felt that they had shifted into a different psychological state, while others around them had remained in the same state. As a result a gulf had opened up. P15 had separated from her husband, and found that 'I had very little in common with a lot of people who I knew...Over time I have renewed some old relationships in a different way and let some go completely.' (p.272) P21 found that 'people from the past don't understand me. People accuse me of being selfish because I sometimes say no – I might have to say no, because now I'm trying to take care of myself. I need to take time out.' (p.299) Similarly, P16 noted that she initially found it difficult to communicate with her family and old friends, and that she was still 'often too honest' with them.

In relation to code no.16 (Table 4.16), several participants reported feeling that they were 'letting go' so that a higher force could take control of their lives, and it was this 'higher force' specifically which they trusted in. P15 described how 'These last years have been about surrendering to this Source of Life', while P9 described her awakening as a process of 'surrender and trust in a higher power.' (p.244)

The participants' attitude of acceptance was apparently an important part of this 'letting go.' They reported that they were prepared to accept whatever happened to them, even negative events. P11 described how her life 'does whatever it does.

Whatever comes up, comes up.’ (p.253) P14 described how she surrendered to everything as a result of her illness. After facing death four times, P14 ‘surrendered’ to death, and as she describes it, ‘felt absolute peace’ as a result. (p.265)

Code no.17 (Table 4.19) illustrates that there were 9 cases in which spiritual practice was reported as facilitating a transformational experience while participants were in the midst of a period of intense turmoil. P5 described how his transformation occurred gradually during a period of frustration and depression when he ‘just started reading and contemplating...Meditation was a factor. It was scattered at first, then an intensive 3 and a half year period.’ (p.223) P14’s transformation was also gradual, following a period of intense physical and psychological hardship. In the midst of this, she ‘dedicated all my time to meditating, about three hours a day, doing every spiritual practice under the sun.’ (p.264) Similarly, P24’s transformation was related to his spiritual practice of ‘noticing my thoughts and emotions and resting in presence all day long on a repeated basis. Not a practice, but living meditation - you do it through your life.’ (p.310)

Interestingly, however, 5 out of the 6 participants who reported wholly gradual transformation were engaged in spiritual practice. Three of these – P5, P14 and P24 – reported becoming engaged in spiritual practice during periods of intense psychological turmoil, at a point when they felt their transformational process was already underway.

In connection with the code of ‘Authenticity’ (Table 4.21), 8 participants reported that following their transformation they felt they were living more authentically. They reported being more in touch with their instincts and intuitions, with more self-reliance, and less influence from the expectations of others. They reported being more aware of the importance of following their deepest drives and impulses, even if the people around them might think negatively of them as a result. It was more important for them to be ‘true to themselves.’ As P1 put it, ‘I control almost everything in my life by my choices.’ (p.207) Or as P19 reported, ‘I feel like I have more courage to do what I believe in now.’ (p.289)

This authenticity was reported as causing some problems in relationships. For example, P21 found that she was less willing to placate her friends when they told her their problems, when she knew that they only wanted sympathy and were not really willing to change. As a result, ‘a few people who I used to have in my life just see me as selfish and weird. I can’t stand them whining about trivial things anymore, and not

doing anything about it, like a friend who was complaining about her boyfriend for four years.' (p.299) Similarly, P17 reported that in his relationships he has become, 'Very honest - I feel nauseous if I withhold truth.' (p.283)

As Code 22 (Table 4.22) shows, only 8 of the 25 participants reported a prior interest in spirituality. These participants reported the least difficulty integrating their new state. This could perhaps suggest that they already had an intellectual framework within which to interpret and understand their experience (Lucas, 2011), or to help them construct a new identity as 'spiritually awakened' people. They were also – as with people who were engaged in spiritual practice at the time of their reported transformation – more likely to have a supportive network of friends around them, who could validate rather than pathologise or misunderstand – their experience, or help them to construct their new identity.

In relation to Code 23 (Table 4.23), 7 participants reported psychic episodes following their transformation. In most cases, this was reported as an experience of 'knowing' information in a non-rational way e.g. through 'remote viewing' or powerful intuition, or a sense that information or guidance was simply 'coming through' from an unknown place. For example, P2 'could actually hear spiritual guidance or wisdom coming through – not me thinking, it was just coming into my consciousness.' (p.210) While P8 said that 'Sometimes I just know things without knowing why I know them.' (p.241) P16 felt that there was a 'spiritual guide' who was communicating with her.

Both P8 and P13 and P8 had pre-cognitive experiences. P13 knew 'who was about to call me or who was about to turn up at my doorstep' while P8 reported pre-cognitive dreams. P20 and P14 both experienced memories of past lives. While he was lying in a bed in a psychiatric hospital after his transformational experience, P20 'experienced going back into previous lives to work out issues' (p.293) while P14 'became aware of past lifetimes. A lot of people I had known in previous lifetimes came back into my life.' (p.266)

With code no.24 (Table 4.24), since the participants felt that they had taken on a new identity, it was not surprising that some of them reported no longer feeling comfortable with their previous jobs. As P3 described it, his transformation 'made me more aware of what was going on and the things that I was doing and I decided to have a bit of a change, which led me to different career choices. I left behind a well paid job in local government and started training in hypnotherapy.' (p.221) Or as P2

put it, 'It no longer feels "right" to pursue a job where I cannot include my beliefs regarding healing.' (p.212)

The participants felt that their previous jobs no longer seemed meaningful or fulfilling. As P21 described her old career as a nail technician, 'It didn't make sense. The bigger my view of things became, the smaller it seemed. I didn't enjoy it anymore. I didn't go through all of these changes and have all this empathy just to be a nail technician.' (p.300) Or as P15 described it, 'I have not gone back and could not go back to "normal 9-5 work" so I have had to take a leap of faith there and trust in life providing for me as I believe being an artist, writer and poet is my "calling."' (p.272)

Finally, in relation to code no.25 (Table 4.25), seven of the participants reported that, rather than becoming withdrawn and more passive, since their transformation they had become more active. P1 reported that 'Today I'm working more than ever. In fact I have three jobs and a very good income (that I don't want or need any more).' (p.207) In most of these cases, this increased activity was connected to their altruism; their activity sprang from their desire to help other people. P19 felt a desire to 'be more active in helping others. I am not content to just sit back and watch things happen and say to myself, "that is the way of the world." I want to do my small part to change the world we live in. There is so much unnecessary pain and suffering and I don't want to be a passive contributor to that insanity anymore.' (p.289) Both P8 and P13 reported that they felt a sense of mission. P13 reported that she now feels 'a very strong sense of purpose and sense of spiritual calling. I feel called to serve the evolution of human consciousness, to support others through "awakening."' (p.262)

4.6 Codes compared to the characteristics of 'spiritual awakening' from other studies

Maslow (1970) described self-actualisers as less materialistic than others, with a greater need for solitude, a freshness of perception, a greater capacity of appreciation, and a sense of mission or duty beyond their personal ambitions and desires. These characteristics were either directly mentioned or strongly implied in the participants' reports. A lower level of materialism and freshness of perception were specific codes; a greater capacity of appreciation was a related theme of 'Well-being/Positive Affective states', the need for solitude was implied by the strong need and enjoyment of 'doing

nothing', while the sense of mission or duty beyond their personal ambitions was strongly implied by the code of increased altruism, together with the codes of decreased sense of group identity/need for belonging (with an all-encompassing sense of identity) and 'more active' (with the related codes of strong sense of purpose or urgency). Other characteristics of 'self-actualised' people noted by Maslow which relate to the codes of this study included 'more efficient perception of reality and more comfortable relations with it' (code 1), 'Gemeinschaftsgefühl [a feeling of kinship with others]' (code 8 and 10), 'autonomy; independence of culture and environment' (codes 6 and 21), deeper and more profound interpersonal relations (code 11); and 'resistance to enculturation; the transcendence of any particular culture' (code 6) (Maslow, 1970, pp. 153-172). At the same time, there were characteristics listed by Maslow which did not appear as codes, for example, 'philosophical, unhostile sense of humor', 'self-actualizing creativity' and 'discrimination between means and ends, between good and evil.' (ibid.) (Three participants did mention enhanced creativity, but this was not a prevalent code).

The characteristics listed in Table 3 (p.97) were also similar to the descriptions of the state of Cosmic Consciousness as defined by Bucke – for example, joyfulness (code 1), intellectual illumination (a revelation of the meaning, purpose and 'alive-ness' of the universe) (code 13), suddenness (code 9), a loss of fear of death (code 23), together with a sense of immortality (also code 23). One characteristic identified by Bucke (an absence of concept of sin) was not identified as a code in this study.

The major codes listed in Table 3 (p.97) had similarities with the characteristics of 'quantum change' as described by Miller and C'de Baca (2001). These were listed by Miller and C'de Baca as ineffability, a noetic quality, a sense of unity, transcendence and awe, and of distinction from ordinary reality. Although ineffability does not seem to apply – few of the participants had any difficulty describing their experiences – the other characteristics are certainly covered by the codes. 'Distinction from ordinary reality' applies in the sense that all participants described a new vision of the world around them, and a new relationship to that world, which was very different to the 'reality' they had previously been aware of.

Perhaps the main difference between the codes listed in Table 3 (and in more detail in Tables 4.1.-4.25, pp. 98-122) and those identified by Maslow, Bucke and Miller and C'de Baca was the absence of what could be termed the 'negative' characteristics of this study e.g. the codes of 'problems integrating new state', 'ongoing problems/fluctuations' and 'physical difficulties.' The state of self-actualisation as

identified by Maslow, the state of ‘Cosmic Consciousness’ as described by Bucke and the state of ‘quantum change’ as described by Miller and C’de Baca, are wholly positive states, with no apparent negative consequences.

The two possibilities suggested here were that these authors were romanticising the concept of ‘enlightenment’ or ‘awakening’ – see Section 5.2.5, p. 181 – or that the participants of this study did not attain a sufficient degree or intensity of awakening to transcend these negative characteristics and reach the wholly integrated, wholly positive state described by Bucke, Maslow and Miller and C’de Baca. In other words, these authors were describing a *higher* degree of awakening than that reported by the participants of this study.

There were also parallels with the psychological transformation undergone by many NDE patients. The long-term effects of near-death experiences have been found to be reduced fear of death, increased compassion, altruism and love, decreased materialism and a heightened sense of meaning (van Lommel, 2004; Sabom, 1998).

4.7 Parallels with ‘Spiritual Awakening’ as Defined by Spiritual and Religious Traditions

The literature review identified the following characteristics of the concept of ‘awakening’ as defined by spiritual and religious traditions:

- Transcending Separateness into Unity and Connection
- Altruism and Compassion
- Diminishing of Self-interest/Concern for Personal Gain or Ambitions
- Emptiness and Stillness
- Heightened Awareness
- Radiance and Light
- Well-being

These characteristics had similarities with the codes listed in Tables 3 and 4.1-4.25. Aside from the obvious correspondences, the characteristic of ‘Diminishing of Self-interest/Concern for Personal Gain or Ambitions’ corresponded with the codes of ‘reduced interest in materialism’ and ‘Attitude of acceptance/letting go’. The Taoist tradition sees the ‘awakened’ state as one in which the individual gives up their own free will, so that the divine can flow through them, and the code of ‘acceptance/letting go’

implied this. Several participants reported the ability to accept life as it was, rather than imposing conditions on it – that is, rather than attempting to control it and ‘willing’ it to be different. As P7 put it, ‘Now everything that comes along is okay. I can say yes to life whatever it brings whereas before I used to have conditions.’ (p.235) Or as P11 described her life, ‘It does whatever it does. Whatever comes up, comes up.’ (p.253)

Similarly, the characteristic in spiritual traditions of ‘Inner Emptiness and Stillness’ corresponded with ‘Reduced Cognitive Activity/Less Identification with thoughts.’ Several participants reported that their minds had become more still and quiet. Even if they still experienced ‘thought-chatter’, they reported that they didn’t identify with it as much, and so were less affected by it. As P25 put it, ‘I don’t mind thoughts but they do not have any pull. I let them dance. I can have quietness but I don’t have to be bothered by thoughts either. They’re like little puppets.’ (p.319)

One important question here, however, was that, since these characteristics are traditionally identified with various spiritual traditions, or with ‘spiritually awakened’ people, and since many participants were familiar with these (in the aftermath of their transformational experiences, if not beforehand), it was possible that their reporting of these characteristics was influenced by this knowledge. It was possible that the knowledge they gained of spiritual traditions helped them to construct a narrative and a new sense of identity, or to help them to create ‘positive illusions’ to protect themselves from the turmoil they experienced (Taylor, 1989). Again, there may be issues of circularity and conforming to the expectations of the researcher here too. (This will be discussed further in Section 5.3, p.184).

The lack of *religious* content in the participants’ experiences might also seem surprising. None of them interpreted their experiences in conventionally religious terms, nor used religiously oriented vocabulary to describe them. Terms such as ‘God’ or the ‘divine’ were absent, as were concepts such as ‘heaven,’ ‘sin’ or ‘salvation.’ To some extent, this may be contextual. Only four participants reported that they had had a religious upbringing, but all four stated they had become disenchanted with the religions, and no longer practised them. None of the participants were presently practising a religion. It was therefore unsurprising that they did not *interpret* their experience in religious terms.

Perhaps most importantly, however, there was an issue of selection here. The audience from which participants volunteered – visitors to my website, members of the

Scientific and Medical Network or the listeners of the radio shows on which I spoke – were unlikely to contain a large number of conventionally religious individuals. It was therefore not surprising that none of the participants used a religious framework to interpret their experiences.

4.8 The Triggers/Causes of Spiritual Awakening

As Table 5 below shows, psychological turmoil emerged as by far the most frequent reported trigger of ‘spiritual awakening’. For 9 participants this was reported as the only apparent factor, while for 14 other participants it was reported as an important contributory factor. For 9 of these, some form of spiritual practice was also reported as a factor. In other words, they engaged in some form of spiritual practice (in most cases, meditation) while they were experiencing psychological turmoil. In five other cases, they were undergoing some form of psychotherapy (e.g. counselling, Hokami therapy – a form of bodywork - or the AA recovery process). Only one person reported experiencing transformation purely as a result of spiritual practice, including the reading of spiritual texts and studying with a spiritual teacher.

This could be interpreted as substantiating the connection between spiritual transformation and psychological turmoil previously identified by Miller and C’de Baca (2001), Grof (2000) and Neale (1999).

Table 5: The Apparent Causes/Triggers of ‘Spiritual Awakening’ as Reported by the Participants

Reported Trigger of ‘Awakening’	N =	Illustrating Quotes
Psychological turmoil failing,	9	<p>P10: ‘I’d been divorced, my business was I was under a lot of stress...I started crying a lot for no apparent reason.’ (p.246)</p> <p>P20: ‘During an extremely stressful period of my life I was doing a very intense senior management job that my personality and character could not cope with...I literally did not sleep at all for a week due to worry and stress.’ (p.293)</p> <p>P18: ‘I was still going through a lot of depression because of my daughter’s death. I knew that my subconscious mind had a lot of pain in it...I felt so overwhelmed by life.’ (p.286)</p>
Psychological turmoil together with spiritual practice	9	<p>P19: ‘I was reading The Power of Now and and looking at the space in the room when I suddenly felt my mind clear.’ (p.289)</p> <p>P14: ‘I dedicated all my time to meditating, about three hours a day, doing every spiritual practice under the sun.’ (p.264)</p>
Psychological turmoil together with therapy/counselling	5	<p>P1: ‘It was a sudden and in fact brutal transformation induced in a sort of therapy session.’ (p.206)</p> <p>P15: ‘It [the permanent transformation] was over 8 years ago. I was seeing a Hakomi therapist and was doing body work to connect with extreme trauma from my childhood.’(p.271)</p>

Spiritual practice (as sole factor)	1	<p>P21: 'It was about two or three sessions after counselling...It was 8 years ago and I understood perfectly what she was talking about...I felt like I was a new person.' (p.302)</p> <p>P25: 'The permanent change began through a couple of friends I met, one of whom was very very experienced, a teacher... We had a little group there, three of us, and we read a lot and we were guided. I was able to ask questions, and began to see through the separate self.' (p.318)</p>
No apparent cause or trigger	1	

N = number of participants reporting each cause or trigger

4.9 Other Salient Points

An analysis of the texts revealed an apparent relationship between reported psychic experiences and psychological disturbance. All 7 participants who reported psychic experiences following transformation (for example, apparent visions of past lives, precognition, the sense of being ‘channelled’ by entities or other human beings) also reported psychological or psychiatric disturbances.

Another salient point reported by the participants was the effect of a prior interest in spirituality. Of the 8 participants who reported a prior interest in spirituality, only 1 reported difficulties integrating their new state of being, whereas 11 of the remaining 17 participants reported this. This would seem to suggest that a prior interest in spirituality makes a perceived shift to a new state of being more manageable. (This will be discussed further in the next section.)

Of the 10 participants who were engaged in some form of spiritual practice preceding and during their transformation, only one reported difficulties integrating their new state. (13 participants reported some integration problems in total.) This suggests that for the participants spiritual practice has an important role in stabilising and integrating a perceived psychological transformation. (Again, this is to be fully discussed in the next section.)

4.10 Answers to Specific Research Questions

Some of the questions at the end of the Literature Review (p.73) were already dealt with in the discussions of individual codes, but they should also be summarized here:

- **Did the characteristics of the participants’ transformational experiences resemble the characteristics (identified in section 2.4) of spiritual awakening as expressed through different spiritual traditions?**

There were significant parallels between the phenomenology of participants’ experiences and the characteristics of ‘awakening’ in spiritual traditions. The only theme from spiritual traditions which did not feature strongly was ‘radiance and light.’ It might be possible to argue that some participants had simply become aware

of the characteristics of 'awakening' from spiritual texts and reported these characteristics without genuinely experiencing them. This may have been part of a process of 'narrative construction' which helped them to form a new self following traumatic experiences (Bruner, 1991; Sarbin, 1986).

- **Did these characteristics correspond to those of temporary spiritual experiences?**

The reported characteristics of the participants (as listed in Tables 3 and 4.1-4.25) do largely correspond to the characteristics of temporary spiritual experiences. As seen in the Literature Review (2.2.2), the characteristics of temporary spiritual or mystical experiences have been identified as unity, transcendence of time, deeply felt positive moods (including a sense of profound peace, joy, love, awe), a sense of sacredness and aliveness of the cosmos, paradoxicality, persisting positive changes, a noetic quality (that is, a sense of revelation) and heightened awareness (Greeley, 1975; James, 1985; Stace, 1960; Stringer & McAvoy, 1992; Taylor, 2010). All of these featured strongly in the codes and illustrative quotes (Tables 4.1-4.25, pp. 98-122), but as ongoing, apparently stable characteristics. James also mentions 'ineffability' as a characteristic of mystical experiences, and this would appear to be the only characteristic which was not present in this study, since the participants were able to describe their psychological state with quite freely and accurately. However, it may be that the characteristic of 'ineffability' is more applicable to the *highest* levels of mystical experience, such as *nirvikalpa samadhi*, or – in Wilber's (1995) scheme – the 'causal level', where reality appears formless, without duality or distinction, and is therefore very difficult to describe.) This could be seen as evidence that the participants did not experience the higher – or highest – levels of spiritual experience.

The equivalence of temporary and permanent spiritual states is also, of course, recognised in spiritual traditions – for example, in the correspondence between *nirvikalpa* and *sahaja samadhi* in Vedanta and between *fana* and *baqa* in Sufism.

- **In relation to the causes or triggers of spiritual awakening, did the participants experience gradual or sudden transformation? Were the type of**

‘spiritual’ practices and ways of living described in section 2.4 a factor in their transformation?

As shown in Table 2 (p.93), 12 participants reported sudden transformation, without any previous awakening experiences or gradual spiritual development. 7 participants reported moments of sudden transformation which followed previous awakening experiences and/or gradual spiritual development. For 6 participants transformation was wholly gradual.

The spiritual practices and lifestyle guidelines recommended by spiritual traditions were not reported as a major factor in most of the participants’ transformational experiences. Only one participant reported spiritual practice as the sole trigger or cause of their transformation. Nevertheless, spiritual practice was apparently important as a ‘catalytic’ factor, in tandem with intense psychological turmoil. 9 participants reported transformation apparently as the combined effect of psychological turmoil and spiritual practice. For 5 participants, therapy was also reported as a ‘catalyst’ of spiritual awakening, again during a phase of psychological turmoil. For these participants, therapy seemed to trigger an ‘opening’ of the psyche in the same way as spiritual practice. In one participant (P23) there was no clear trigger or cause of spiritual awakening.

It was also significant that spiritual practice *was* reported as an important factor for the participants who reported *gradual* transformation. 5 out of 6 of the cases of gradual transformation involved spiritual practice, 4 in conjunction with intense psychological turmoil, and one (P25) alone. This does not therefore necessarily argue against the efficacy of what Wilber calls ‘prolonged contemplative practice’ as a method of bringing spiritual growth and transformation.

• **Did the transformational experiences occur in the context of religious or spiritual traditions, or outside them?**

The transformational experiences did not occur in the context of religious or spiritual traditions. Only one person, P7, was attached to any particular spiritual tradition. He had a longstanding interest in Buddhism, although did not consider himself a ‘Buddhist.’ Although a small number of participants were brought up in religious traditions and/or had a prior interest spirituality, they were not attached to or involved

in any particular tradition at the time of their transformation, and for a long period beforehand.

- **Given the connection identified between psychological transformation and turmoil, was there any connection between their experience of spiritual awakening and psychological turmoil, or encountering their own mortality?**

As Table 5 (p.141) shows, psychological turmoil was reported as a major factor in the participants' reported experiences. All but one instances of their transformational experiences followed periods of intense turmoil. However, it is perhaps significant that in only 9 out of 23 cases was psychological turmoil reported as the only trigger. In 14 cases, there was another causal factor reported, either spiritual practice or therapy. The prevalence of turmoil and trauma as apparent triggers could be interpreted as substantiating the view that the participants' belief that they had undergone 'spiritual awakening' was – at least to some degree – the result of narrative construction or positive illusion.

- **Given the connection identified in relation to 'spirituality emergencies' or 'spiritual crises', did the participants report any form of psychological or mental disturbance?**

This study did identify a connection between reported spiritual awakening and psychological disturbance. This connection was especially strong amongst the participants who did not have prior knowledge of spirituality, and were not following any spiritual practice at the time of their transformation, and who did not have a supportive and understanding network of peers and professionals around them to help them make sense of their experience. On the other hand, the participants who reported a prior knowledge of spirituality, who were engaged in some form of spiritual practice, and had some degree of support and understanding around them, did not report as many psychological difficulties, although in some cases they reported confusion and relationships problems.

- **In relation to this, was the participants' experience of 'spiritual awakening' one of continual well-being – as popular notions of 'enlightenment' suggest – or attended by any difficulties or disturbances?**

As shown in Table 4.15 (p.115), many participants reported difficulties during the initial stages of their transformational experiences, including physical and psychological difficulties. Some felt that these faded as their state stabilised, but others – more than half of the participants – continued to experience some difficulties and fluctuations in their state (as shown in Table 4.14, p.114). These included a feeling that life had become too complicated, difficulty in dealing with organisational and practical aspects of life, and a re-emergence of mental restlessness ('thought-chatter') and a shift back into their previous state of being. For many of the participants, therefore, 'spiritual awakening' was not experienced as a state of continual well-being. In general, therefore, the participants' reports did not accord with the notion of 'enlightenment' as a state of constant bliss, suggesting either that they had not attained 'enlightenment' in this sense, or that – as Forman (2011) suggests – this view of 'enlightenment' is a myth.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Discussion of Main Themes

In this section, the main codes of the results are discussed. Possible reasons for their occurrence are suggested. Many of the codes were closely interlinked, so that it is impossible to discuss them individually without referring to others.

5.1.1 Well-Being/Positive Affective States

Subordinate/Related themes: Appreciation and gratitude, freedom, love, peace, joy

One way of interpreting ‘spiritual awakening’ is to think in terms of a dissolution of the normal – or at least previous – ‘self-system’ (or ‘self-structure’, or ‘psychological structure’) and the apparent emergence of a distinct, new ‘self-system’. To some degree, the normal psychological structure of human beings is associated with discord and psychological suffering. This concept is at the root of many spiritual traditions, particularly in Buddhism, with the notion that to be alive equates with suffering. In Buddhism, suffering stems from our sense of separation from the world around us, our sense that we are independent entities directing the course of our lives. In Hinduism, suffering stems from *maya*, our illusory sense of duality between ourselves and the world around us, and our sense of the distinctness and separation of different phenomenon. Similarly, from a psychological point of view, Fromm remarked that “[Man’s] awareness of his aloneness and separateness...makes his separate, disunited existence an unbearable prison.” Many modern spiritual teachers have similarly emphasised how fear and suffering stem from our sense of separation (e.g. Tolle, 1999).

Csikszentmihalyi (1992) suggested that human beings’ fundamental psychological state is one of ‘psychic entropy’. This is produced by the constant disturbance – and often negative tone – of our thinking, which we have little or no control of. (Meister Eckhart [1996] described this as the ‘a storm of inward thought’) As a result, Csikszentmihalyi (1992) suggested that human beings generally find it difficult to deal with unstructured time and tend to suffer from psychological difficulties during periods of inactivity. (This is discussed in more detail in relation to the code of ‘present-ness’, in Section 5.1.3) This is one of the reasons why the state of

‘flow’ has such a powerful psychological effect, since in ‘flow’ this psychic entropy fades away. We gain control over our consciousness, and become free of its disturbance and negative tone.

Both the prevalence and the negative effects of ‘psychic entropy’ were illustrated by Killingsworth and Gilbert (2010). Using an I-phone to survey people’s moods and thoughts at different times of the day, they found that the participants spent up to half of their waking hours with a ‘wandering mind’, with random thoughts and scenarios running through their minds. The results highlighted the negative effects of thought-chatter: people who spent more time in ‘mind-wandering’ were found to be more prone to depression, and found it more difficult to relax. In fact, the study showed that people found it impossible to relax properly with random thoughts drifting through their minds.

In Taylor (2012a) I use the similar term ‘cognitive discord’, suggesting that together with our sense of ‘ego-isolation’ or ‘ego-separation’, this creates a fundamental level of psychological suffering which manifests itself in various pathological ways, such as the drive to acquire unnecessary material goods, to gain power and control over human beings, together with the strong need for identification and belonging.

The participants reported becoming less affected by this psychological discord. The decreased level of separation and ‘ego-isolation’ was suggested by the code of ‘connection’, which 20 of the 25 participants referred to (Table 3, p.97). (After all, connection is only made possible by a decreased degree of separation. It is separation which prevents us from connecting.) This was also suggested by the code of ‘increased altruism’ (18 occurrences), which implies a greater degree of connection to other human beings. Altruism can be seen as linked to empathy, which allows us to enter the mental space of other human beings, and gain an inkling of their emotional or psychological state. If we sense that they are suffering, this may generate an altruistic desire to try to alleviate it. In other words, the greater our sense of connection, the more altruistic we are likely to be.

A decreased level of ‘psychic entropy’ or ‘cognitive discord’ was suggested by the code of ‘Reduced Cognitive Activity/Less Identification with thoughts’ (23 occurrences). The participants either described their minds as quieter than before, with less involuntary ‘thought-chatter’ running through them, or they described

themselves as less affected by their involuntary thoughts, with the ability to stand back and observe them, without necessarily 'believing' them.

The decreased level of separation, together with decreased 'psychic entropy' can therefore be seen as one source of the participants' reported well-being. This particularly applied to a decreased level of anxiety, fear and worry, since these states are often generated by involuntary thinking – indeed, the basis of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy is that patterns of negative thinking create negative mental states and emotions (Foreman & Pollard, 2011).

One common subordinate theme of 'Positive Affective States' was appreciation, or gratitude. For example, P17 commented that 'I have come to experience a deep sense of well being and gratitude which is with me most of the time now.' (p.282) P7 described a 'sense of appreciation of the simple things - a simple cup of tea, looking out of the window, the sunshine on the leaves, the wonderful green of the trees.' (p.235) While P6 commented that, 'My experience has led me to inner contentment and an intensification of gratitude; to be filled with awe when I see a flower, a cloud, a bird, a person.' (p.228)

This theme may be connected to the code of 'Increased "present-ness"/Ability to live in the present,' in the sense that living in the present may lead to a greater appreciation of life, and a sense of the value, wonder and beauty and many seemingly 'mundane' aspects of ordinary life. (Perhaps there was a reverse causal connection too: an attitude of greater appreciation to life or the world would lead to the individual paying more attention to their present experience.)

At the same time, it is important to point out that although all participants did report enhanced well-being, they also reported some difficulties and fluctuations in their state. Several participants reported negative effects, including a sense of over-complication, increased sensitivity, and difficulties dealing with everyday tasks. Others mentioned that sometimes their sense of well-being faded, or that they had to make an effort to sustain it.

This might give some support to the view that narrative construction, self-delusion, positive illusion or cognitive dissonance were important factors in the participants' reports (Bruner, 1991; Sarbin, 1986; Taylor, 1989). In other words, perhaps their previous investigations into spirituality had made them aware that well-being (or serenity, peace, joy and other variants) is a prominent aspect of spiritual awakening, and they were keen to emphasise this. Perhaps reported well-being

formed an important aspect of the positive illusions they created as a defence mechanism against the turmoil and loss many of them experienced. It is possible that in their need to construct a new identity following the dissolution of their previous identity in the midst of turmoil, or in their need to present a narrative of spiritual transformation to me – as the researcher – or to themselves, the participants over-emphasised their well-being in their reports.

5.1.2 Ongoing/Permanent new state of being

Subordinate/Related themes: stable, transformation or shift to a new state

All participants reported experiencing a new psychological state, as shown in Table 4.2 (p.102). For many participants – although its emergence was often attended with some confusion and incomprehension, and problems of integration – this new identity was reported as emerging almost fully-formed. This could be interpreted in terms of the concept, first put forward by Aristotle, that higher ‘forms’ are latent in lower ones, and that evolution is a process of gradual unfolding of latent potential, leading to the actualisation of God, which is the highest form (O’Rourke, 2004). Myers put forward a similar view of evolution, arguing that, as Kelly puts it, ‘Implicit in these [Myers’] ideas about the evolution of the universe from a formless homogeneity to complex forms of life was the idea that all of the latter were somehow inherent in the former’ (2007, p.79).

At the same time, this should be weighed against the fluctuations which some participants mentioned. Again, from the point of view of narrative construction, it may be significant that some participants reported the state as stable at the same time as fluctuating, and that sometimes they shifted out of it, or that it took them effort to sustain it. Such inconsistencies might suggest that the participants were presenting a narrative of ‘spiritual awakening’ based on the idea that ‘enlightenment’ or ‘awakening’ is a permanent, continuous state.

This point would support the view that the new identity the participants reported was constructed by them in response to the intense trauma that many of them experienced, in which their previous identity was dismantled or destroyed. Experiencing trauma often brings an ‘ego shock’ or loss of self, which individuals often respond to by attempting to construct a new ‘self-narrative’ or identity (Mathieson & Stam, 1995; Neimeyer, 2006).

5.1.3 Increased ‘present-ness’/Ability to live in the present

Subordinate/Related themes: enjoyment of inactivity, enjoyment of solitude

Becoming more ‘present-centred’ – ‘living in the here and now’ or ‘in the present’ – has traditionally been seen as one of the aims of spiritual development, and has often been associated with a greater sense of well-being and authenticity. Being ‘present’ frees us from negative emotions from the past and the future, and opens us to the beauty and freshness of the phenomenal world and the experiences we have in it (Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Tolle, 1999). Pascal wrote that:

We are so unwise that we wander about in times that do not belong to us, and do not think of the only one that does; so vain that we dream of times that are not and blindly flee the only that is... Thus we never actually live, but hope to live, and since we are always planning to be happy, it is inevitable that we should never be so (Pascal, 1987, p.43).

The ‘present-centred-ness’ reported by the participants could therefore be seen as a further source of their well-being (including their sense of gratitude and appreciation) and their increased sense of connection. One might say that they reported a state of natural ‘mindfulness’, and apparently gained some of the benefits of the state (Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Siegel, 2007). Or one could also argue that since this quality is such a prominent one in popular spiritual literature (with the success of books such as Tolle’s *The Power of Now*) this characteristic would inevitably be prominent in a narrative construction of ‘spiritual awakening,’ or have formed an important part of the positive illusions they created in response to turmoil and trauma.

However, this ‘present-ness’ could possibly be linked to the code of ‘Reduced Cognitive Activity/Less Identification with thoughts.’ As Pascal’s quote on the previous page suggests, failing to live in the present is partly the result of being preoccupied with the future and the past – that is, with *thinking* about the future and the past. Ultimately, the future and the past are concepts, created by the human mind – human beings never actually *experience* either, since (as Pascal suggests) our minds and bodies are always in the present. So a reduced level of cognitive activity would

presumably equate with a reduced interest in the future and the past, and a greater degree of 'present-centredness.'

Another code which could possibly be linked to this is that of 'acceptance/letting go'. This may lead to greater orientation in the present because it may mean that the individual is no longer so attached to the personal 'history' of past events and experiences, or to their future hopes and ambitions, and no longer focused on the future (at least to the same extent.) Having 'let go' – and therefore no longer being psychologically attached to these – the individual may no longer define themselves in terms of past events or achievement, or in terms of ambitions. Similarly, the loss of the fear of death releases the individual from the constant future-oriented striving for significance, and the constant reference to the past for self-reinforcement. As a result, there is a shift to a state of 'presence.'

5.1.4 Reduced Cognitive Activity/Less Identification with thoughts

Subordinate themes: 'Quiet mind', less affected by negative thoughts

This code accorded with Kelly and Grosso's (2007) point that one common aspect of mystical experience – both temporary and ongoing or permanent – is a 'deconditioning' of the mind. That is, mystical experience entails a 'dismantling' of the normal self, an 'emptying out' of its concepts and schemata. In other words, this code is closely linked to the idea that the primary change the participants have experienced is the dissolution of their previous 'psychological structure', and its replacement with a new 'self-system' which was possibly latent inside them.

Of course, this is another popularly known characteristic of spirituality, usually seen as one of the aims of meditation, so it is possible that the prevalence of this characteristic was the result of narrative constriction or positive illusion.

5.1.5 Reduced/Disappearance of fear of death

A number of participants reported that they had a reduced fear of death because they sensed that death was not the end of existence. This is very similar to the reaction of NDE patients, who also generally report a loss of fear of death and a belief in life

after death (e.g. Van Lommel, 2004). However, it was interesting that the participants of this study did not actually believe they were *experiencing* the state of death, as many NDE patients believe. It seems logical that a benign and positive *experience* of (seeming) death would result in decreased fear of the state (and a belief in life after death), but for the participants of this study, this belief in life after death seemed to be an element of their overall reported shift in awareness, their new sense of connection and heightened awareness. From the standpoint of their new identity – and the awareness which accompanies it – it appeared *clear* that there was life after death. The duality between life and death seemed to fade away in the same way that other dualities seemed less defined, such as the duality between self and others (resulting in increased altruism) or between the self and the world.

This reported reduced fear of death could be seen as a causal factor in relation to other codes. According to Terror Management Theory, the unconscious fear of death creates an anxiety which the individual attempts to alleviate through strategies such as status or power-seeking, materialism or becoming attached to national or religious identities (Becker, 1974; Pyszczynski et al., 2004; Solomon et al., 1991). Similarly, Wilber (1981) suggests that fear of death is the root of the human striving for wealth, status and power. Fear of death creates a basic sense of insignificance. The ego feels itself as fragile in the face of the enormity of death. The fact that death could strike us down at any moment – and will eventually reduce everything we have achieved and accumulated to nothing – gives us a basic sense of meaninglessness which we instinctively need to escape from (Taylor, 2012b).

If these theories are correct, the loss of fear of death could be at the root of some of the changes in values and perspective associated with ‘spiritual awakening’, such as decreased materialism and a decrease in the need for social identity and belonging.

5.1.6 Decreased sense of group identity/need for belonging

Subordinate/related themes: all-encompassing sense of identity, no distinctions, no labels

In Wilber’s (2000) terms, the participants reported a ‘worldcentric’ outlook, as opposed to the ‘egocentric’ and ‘sociocentric.’ As Wilber describes it, at the

worldcentric or postconventional stage, 'awareness is no longer trapped and limited to my group or my tribe or my nation, but opens to a universal, global, worldcentric awareness, where all people are treated with justice and fairness, regardless of race, sex religion or creed' (Wilber, 2000, p.158). (This obviously links to the code of altruism) Friedman's (1983) concept of 'self-expansiveness' was also relevant here. This illustrates how 'the self-concept can expand from a narrow individualistic identification to wider social, ecological, temporal, and biological identifications to very expansive transpersonal identifications' (Pappas & Friedman, 2007, p.323).

There may also be a link here with the absence of a religious context for the participants' experiences. Some participants reported recoiling from identifying themselves with one particular religious or spiritual tradition, feeling that the concept of identity was opposed to the sense of unity and connection they experienced. As P19 put it, 'I do not want to be connected to any religion. I feel that we are definitely one.' (p.291) Some participants noted that they felt a kinship or attraction to certain religious or spiritual traditions, but did not identify with any tradition exclusively. As P15 put, 'While I resonate with a lot from Buddhism, Paganism and the Mystics from Christianity and Sufism, I don't see myself as any of that.' (p.273) Or in P20's words, 'I have no religion as such. I do my yoga and meditation but I would never say I belong to any particular religion or group.' (p.296) P6 expressed this recoil from 'exclusivism' clearly by stating that 'When you've experienced one-ness all labels seem silly.' (p.231)

Of course, this may be partly due to the participants' lack of grounding in religious traditions. If they had been affiliated with religious traditions to begin with, it does not necessarily follow that they would have rejected those traditions. It is, of course, possible to be rooted in – or to feel a kinship with – a particular religious tradition at the same time as being open to and wholly respectful towards other traditions. Even though they were affiliated with a particular spiritual tradition or religion, many mystics and spiritual teachers have been strikingly ecumenical and open to other traditions. In the Hindu tradition, for example, this was true of Ramakrishna, Ramana Maharshi and Gandhi. Ramakrishna frequently read the Christian Gospels and the Qu'ran, and stated that 'All religions are true - as many faiths so many paths' ('Sri Ramakrishna,' 2011). However, there are exceptions too, such as the Indian contemplative Ramajuna, who vigorously attacked the Advaita philosophy of Sankara, stating that 'The entire theory rests on a fictitious foundation

of altogether hollow and vicious arguments...devised by men...whose intellects are darkened by the impression of beginningless evil; and who thus have no insight into the nature or words and sentences' (in Ferrer, 2003, p. 93). Because of exceptions such as the latter, Ferrer (2003) argues that there is no evidence that mystical awakening brings a transcendence of dogma, and a more tolerant and ecumenical outlook. He argues that the perennial position is itself dogmatic, and that the perennialist 'commitment to a nondual monistic metaphysic that is supposed to be absolute, universal and paradigmatic for all traditions is ultimately a return to dogmatic exclusivism and intolerance' (2001, p. 94). He continues: 'For every ecumenically oriented mystic (actually the exception to the rule), there are dozens of notably exclusive figures' (ibid.).

However, Ferrer speaks of the 'perennialist commitment' as if this is a manifesto which has been carefully laid out by a council of mystics, like the councils of church fathers who discussed the tenets and beliefs of Christianity. In reality, there is nothing conceptual or dogmatic about the 'perennial position' – it is simply a loose agreement on a view of reality based on a common *experience* undergone by people from different traditions at different times.

5.1.7 Episodes of intense turmoil or trauma immediately preceding transformation

Subordinate/related themes: bereavement, failure, loss, depression, addiction, psychological disturbance

I have suggested elsewhere that one reason for the connection between turmoil and spiritual awakening (Taylor, 2011, 2012a, 2012c) may be the dissolution of 'psychological attachments' during periods of intense turmoil. According to this view, under normal circumstances, most human beings can be seen as psychologically attached to a large number of constructs, such as hopes and ambitions for the future, beliefs and ideas concerning life and the world, the knowledge they have accumulated, and their image of themselves, including their sense of status, their appearance and accomplishments and achievements. These are *accoutrements* which become attached to the sense of self. At the same time, there are more tangible attachments, such as possessions, jobs or other roles (such as parent, husband or

wife), and other individuals whose approval and attention we might crave. These provide food for the psychological construct of the self-image, supporting the sense of identity like scaffolding, and providing a sense of well-being and security. They are the building blocks of the sense of “I”. The individual feels that he or she is “someone” because they have hopes, beliefs, status, a job, and possessions and because other human beings give them approval (Taylor, 2011, 2012a).

During states of trauma and turmoil, these psychological attachments – at least some of them – can be interpreted as being dissolved. This is perhaps the very reason why a person suffers despair or depression: because the constructs he or she has been dependent upon to sustain their well-being have been removed; the “scaffolding” which supports their sense of identity has fallen away. Hopes and beliefs have been shown to be illusions; possessions and status have been taken away, friends or lovers have rejected them. As a result, the person feels naked and lost, as if their identity has been destroyed. But at this very point they are, paradoxically, close to a state of liberation (Taylor, 2011, 2012a).

P7 was aware of this process himself. Reflecting on the loss of his daughter and his wife in a few months, he stated, ‘Almost overnight I had lost two important roles in my life: I had been a husband for 22 years and a father for 17 years. 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.’ (p.233)

Kubler Ross and Kassler (2000) make a similar point, suggesting that battling illness and facing death can “slew off” the roles and masks which cover the true self. As Kassler notes, ‘Our inherent gifts are often hidden by layers of masks and roles we’ve assumed. The roles...can become ‘rocks’ burying our true selves’ (ibid., p.25). Kassler uses the phrase ‘chipping away the excess’ to describe how illness and death can release us from these (ibid. p.35).

Another possibility is that turmoil and trauma do not necessarily trigger transformation in such a radical, deep-rooted way, but by dismantling the individual’s previous identity so that they feel obliged to *construct* a new sense of identity, a coherent sense of self, which for the participants of this study entailed forming a personal narrative of ‘spiritual awakening’ (Allen, 1999; Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

Another similar argument would follow from the view that what an individual interprets as ‘post-traumatic growth’ is actually the result of cognitive dissonance, or positive illusion (Festinger, 2008; Taylor, 1989). Applied to this study, the argument

would be that the participants convinced themselves that they had undergone 'spiritual awakening' as a way of making sense of their experiences and protecting themselves against the potentially devastating effects of turmoil and trauma.

5.1.8 Sense of Connection

Subordinate/Related themes: sense of oneness, connection to nature, awareness of complexity and perspectives

The prevalence of this code might suggest that the participants' new sense of identity (or new 'self-system') had more labile boundaries than their previous one. In Friedman's terms (1983), their self-concept was reported as more expansive and inclusive.

The movement from separateness to connection – and ultimately to complete unity – features in most evolutionary concepts of spiritual development. In Wilber's original 'romantic' model of spiritual development (1977), the individual recovers the sense of one-ness with the world which young children and 'primitive' peoples experience, but at a mature, self-conscious level. Wilber (1995) later adapted this view, believing that this was not actually a question of 'recovering' this oneness, but simply of potentially misleading parallels between the infant state of 'undifferentiation' and the mature state of unity. According to his pre/trans fallacy, there is no correspondence between the two stages of development, just a superficial similarity.

In Wilber's later model, there is an increasing sense of connection – leading to complete union – through the psychic, subtle, causal and non-dual stages. At the non-dual stage – as the term suggests – there is no distinction between subject and object at all. This applies to individual development, but Wilber's philosophy has a strong emphasis on *collective* evolution, where he asserts that the human race as a whole is moving – or will move – through the same developmental stages which the individual moves through in personal spiritual development. Eventually, therefore, our species will collectively move through the transpersonal stages, transcending the separateness and duality of our present state. In this sense, mystics are evolutionary 'throw-forwards', prematurely glimpsing the higher stages which will become the 'stable' or average level of development for human beings many centuries hence (Wilber, 1995).

The 'Omega Point' envisaged by Teilhard de Chardin (2003) is similarly conceived of as the culmination of the evolutionary process, the point at which all matter is wholly infused with spiritual energy, and all phenomena – including human beings – become one. There is also a parallel here with Hegel's philosophy, in which the stage of 'Reason' – the culmination of human development – is a transcendence of the objective and subjective, and a merging of all into one (Shand, 2002).

5.1.9 Sudden Transformation

Subordinate theme: Sudden 'leap' after some gradual development beforehand

The notion of sudden 'enlightenment' – of experiencing a moment of 'awakening' or transformation – is a very prevalent aspect in popular conceptions of spirituality, so it is possible that this formed part of a narrative of 'spiritual awakening' which the participants constructed as a part of the need to form a new identity. There may also be an issue of circularity in the sense that the term 'spiritual awakening' implies a sudden experience rather than a gradual one, so one would obviously expect those who responded to a request for participants in a study of 'spiritual awakening' to make this claim.

5.1.10 Reduced interest in materialism

Subordinate themes: Giving away possessions, no longer interested in shopping, less interest in personal success

This reduced materialism may be related to the code of a reduced fear of death. Terror Management suggests that acquiring possessions and seeking status and success are two ways in which human beings respond to fear of death, reinforcing their identity against the threat of death (Becker, 1974; Pyszczynski et al., 2004; Solomon et al., 1991). However, a reduced sense of separateness is possibly an even more significant factor. The 'separate self-system' may be associated with a sense of vulnerability and incompleteness, and may generate an impulse for the individual to become attached to groups to strengthen itself. Materialism may be another response to this sense of vulnerability and incompleteness, an attempt to 'bolster' the self by accumulating wealth and possessions, or status and success. Possessions may provide a sense of permanence and protection, while success and status may provide a sense of

significance, a sense of being 'someone' which may offset a sense of incompleteness. As Kasser puts it, materialistic values can be seen as 'a symptom of underlying insecurity and a coping strategy (albeit a relatively ineffective one) some people use in an attempt to alleviate their anxieties' (2003, p.29).

5.1.11 Intensified perception

Subordinate/Related themes: sense of aliveness, heightened perception of beauty, sense of the beauty of nature

A heightened intensity of perception in spiritual experiences has been related to energy. In a discussion on the psychological effects of meditation, Novak (1996) makes a connection between perception and 'psychic energy.' He notes that the 'endless associational chatter' of the human mind monopolises psychic energy, leaving none available to devote to what he calls the 'open, receptive and present-centred awareness' (p. 276). However, when a person meditates she deprives the automatized structures of consciousness (which produce 'thought-chatter') of attention. As a result they begin to weaken and fade away, which 'frees up' the energy which they normally monopolise. As a result, in Novak's words 'energy formerly bound in emotive spasms, ego defence, fantasy and fear can appear as the delight of present-centredness' (ibid).

The term 'psychic energy' perhaps requires some elucidation. Some psychologists assume the existence of 'attentional energy' (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi, 1992; Deikman, 2011; Marchetti, 2004) or 'psychic energy' (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi, 2003; Novak, 1995) without making it clear exactly what this energy is. Others talk more obliquely of 'mental effort' (e.g. Gross, 1996) or 'pool of attentional resources' (Kahneman, 1973), seeming to assume the existence of some form of 'mental energy' without actually using the term. More explicitly, Washburn (2002) suggests the essence of our being is a life-energy which expresses itself in three different ways: as psychic energy, as libido (or sexual energy), and as spiritual power. He notes that psychic energy is used continually, fuelling our ongoing conscious experience, while libido and spiritual power are both 'potential' energies, which are usually latent but become 'activated' by certain stimuli.

Earlier psychologists also used the concept of psychic energy very freely. Both Freud and Jung, for example, used the term *libido* for psychic energy. Although

they had a different views on the nature of this energy – typically, Freud saw it as sexual in origin – they both saw the psyche as a ‘closed system’ with a finite amount of energy, which could be ‘portioned out’ in different amounts to the different structures and functions of our minds. In Freud’s (1962) model, the id, the ego and the superego competed against one another to monopolise psychic energy. If you spend most of your time chasing after hedonistic pleasures like sex and food, your ‘id’ is monopolising your psychic energy, and leaving little over for the ego and the superego. Whereas if you have a very powerful conscience and are constantly assailed by feelings of guilt, the superego is monopolising most of your psychic energy. Freud also believed that one of the problems caused by repression is that the act of repressing instincts or old experiences can take up a large portion of our *libido*, leaving less energy for other functions.

For Jung, psychic energy was the power behind all of our experience – such as thinking, concentrating, instincts and sexual desire – but which was of a different nature to that experience. As he saw it, psychic energy could be *actual*, manifesting itself as the ‘dynamic phenomena of the psyche, such as instinct, wishing, willing, affect, attention, capacity for work etc.’ Or it could be *potential*, when it shows itself as ‘possibilities, aptitudes [and] attitudes’ (1928/88. p.15). And as with Freud, if a lot of energy was used up by one of these functions then there would be less available in other areas.

William James used the term ‘vitality’ with much the same meaning as ‘psychic energy.’ In his essay *The Energies of Man*, he puzzles over the question of why we all feel more or less alive on different days, and how most of us feel as if we should be more alive than we are, as if there are reserves of vitality inside us which ‘the incitements of the day do not call forth.’ James notes that it is only when we make an effort to *act* that we are able to ‘raise the sense of vitality.’ As he puts it, ‘*excitements, ideas and efforts...are what carry us over the dam.*’ (1917, p. 75)

Like Novak, Deikman explains mystical experiences as resulting from a ‘deautomatization of perception’, caused by a ‘surplus’ of psychic energy – or attentional energy, as he terms it here:

...brought about by a deautomatization of hierarchically ordered structures that ordinarily conserve attentional energy for maximum efficiency in achieving the basic goods of survival... Under special conditions of dysfunction, such as in acute

psychosis or in LSD states, or under special goal conditions such as exists in religious mystics, the pragmatic systems of automatic selection are set aside or break down, in favour of alternate modes of consciousness (Deikman, 2011).

The reported intensified perception of the participants of this study could be interpreted in terms of this 'de-automatization of perception.' Deikman points out that perception may normally become 'automatized' as an energy-conserving measure, so that the individual can devote attention and energy to the practical tasks of everyday life. Or in Novak's terms, energy is simply consumed through the cognitive activity of the ego. Therefore, perhaps when psychic energy is 'released' through detachment, perception no longer needs to be automatic. So if the participants experienced an apparently permanent deautomatization of perception, it is possible that this was because of an energy surplus' within their psyche, meaning that there was no need for deautomatization. There was more energy available for perception, or for 'present-centered-ness.'

Another possible interpretation would be in terms of Lancaster's (2004) 'I-tag' theory, which suggests that memories of previous perceptions of a particular object or phenomenon 'feed into' – and largely constitute – perception in the present. As a result, perception is largely automatic and 'second hand', while our sense of identity is largely memory based. However, for the individuals who undergo a pronounced identity-shift may become more independent of both this memory-based identity, and memory-based perception. They gain a new, apparently more authentic sense of identity, and new fresh and intense perception.

5.1.12 Increased altruism

Subordinate/Related themes: Compassion, empathy, forgiveness

The prevalence of this code made sense in terms of the codes previously discussed, although it could also be seen as an attempt by the participants to present themselves in a better light, both to themselves and to me as researcher, possibly forming part of a constructed narrative of an identity as 'spiritually developed' people, or a 'positive illusion' of themselves as 'better' people as a result of their experiences.

At the same time, increased altruism could be interpreted as related to the code of 'increased sense of connection.' The ability to empathise has been described

as the ability to 'read' other people's emotions, or the ability to imagine what others are feeling, by 'putting yourself in their shoes' (Baron-Cohen, 2004) In other words, empathy is seen as a *cognitive* ability. But it is possible to view empathy as a more profound ability to make a genuine psychic or emotional connection with another person, and actually *enter into* their mind-space (Taylor, 2012b). In this sense, empathy stems from what De Quincey (2011) sees as genuine intersubjectivity – a transcendence of separateness, and a merging of identity. Therefore, empathy relates negatively to separateness.

This code could be interpreted as being related to a decreased interest in materialism too. As is illustrated by the shift from 'acquisition to altruism,' materialism and altruism also appear to be negatively related. For example, research on the long term effects of Near-death Experiences has found both a decrease in a materialistic attitude and an increase in altruism. Kraus et al. (2011) found that rich people tend to be more self-obsessed, and less concerned with the well-being of others, with an 'ideology of self-interest.' They also found that people with lower incomes were more likely to behave altruistically.

An all-encompassing empathy and altruism appears to be a feature of what Wilber refers to as the 'worldcentric' stage, at which 'You become idealistic in the best sense of the world, wishing to relieve the suffering of – and extend happiness to – all peoples – not just your family, or you friends, or your tribe, your nation (those are all sociocentric and ethnocentric) but to all peoples, regardless of race or sex or creed' (2000, p.159).

P15 reported an increased facility of *understanding*, which led to an attitude of forgiveness. She remarked that, 'One of the major effects of awakening was coming to a place of love and forgiveness for those who abused me and the understanding that came about what was going on – I began to see all that happened in the light of the bigger picture.' (p.272) In P19's case, empathy extended to animals, so that she made the decision to become a vegetarian.

5.1.13 Enhanced relationships

Subordinate/related themes: Authenticity, honesty

That the majority of the participants reported that their relationships had become deeper, more fulfilling and authentic can be seen as related to other characteristics

such as an increased sense of connection, increased altruism and increased authenticity. Perhaps the increased ‘lability’ of their self-boundaries – and in Friedman’s terms (1983), their more expansive and inclusive self-concept – manifested itself in an increased sense of connection to other people, and a greater ability to identify with others.

5.1.14 Ongoing Problems

Subordinate themes: Fluctuation in state; effort needed to sustain state; negative effects; regret

These issues may be related to the parallels or similarities between spiritual awakening and schizophrenia or psychosis. According to the ‘filter theory’ of consciousness (Huxley, 1988; Marshall, 2005), both mystics and schizophrenics have relinquished the filter which reduces awareness of reality to the minimum required to deal with the practicalities of everyday life. However, as Huxley (1988) and Campbell (1970) would interpret it, the mystic has control over this awareness, whereas the person with schizophrenia is overwhelmed by it. As Campbell puts it, ‘our schizophrenic patient is actually experiencing inadvertently that same beatific ocean deep which the yogi and saint are ever striving to enjoy: except that, whereas they are swimming in it, he is drowning’ (1970, p.220).

Does this code suggest that the participants had not become as ‘awakened’ as they might like to believe? Do the negative aspects and psychopathological elements contradict their claim to have undergone ‘awakening’?

Perhaps, to a large extent, this depends on how ‘spiritual awakening’ is conceived of. The popular notion of ‘enlightenment’ – as reflected in books such as *The Power of Now* (Tolle, 1999) and *Loving What is* (Katie, 2002) – is that the state is one of unbroken peace and contentment, in which the individual transcends all anxiety and fear, and all desire. Because of the negative aspects of their state, the participants could not be seen as ‘enlightened’ in this sense.

In some popular accounts, ‘enlightenment’ is also described as effortless (Foster, 2007; Parsons, 2000; Tolle, 1999). In fact, all effort – including all spiritual practice – is seen as opposed to enlightenment, since effort reinforces the ego, and enlightenment involves a transcendence of ego (Foster, 2007; Parsons, 2000). So, according to this definition, the fact that some participants reported needing to ‘make

an effort' to maintain their state would suggest that they have not attained 'enlightenment.'

The other possibility here is that this popular notion of 'enlightenment' is in itself romantic and unrealistic, and that in reality 'spiritual awakening' is often attended with difficulties and fluctuations, and may include psychopathological elements.

5.1.15 Problems integrating new state

Subordinate themes: confusion, incomprehension (both from self and others), psychopathology, 'Dark night of the soul'

From a constructionist point of view, this period of integration could be seen as the period during which the participants were struggling to form a new narrative as the basis of a new sense of identity. The fact that they were gravitating towards spiritual practices and spiritual literature perhaps shows that these were important elements in the construction of their new identity as 'spiritually awakened' people.

Grof (2000) notes that 'spiritual emergencies' can be very challenging, involving a sudden 'inrush' of new energies and potentials which can be overwhelming, and cause psychiatric difficulties. The most serious psychological disturbances were reported in participants with no prior knowledge of spiritual traditions and who were not engaged in spiritual practices at the time of their transformation. This fits with Nightingale's (2007) finding that 43% of the cases of spiritual emergency she investigated occurred in individuals with no previous experience of spiritual practice. Washburn's [1980] view of spiritual development also suggests that a sudden and dramatic undoing of 'primal repression' can cause psychological and physical disturbances. It may be that the sudden 'inrush' of new energies, or a sudden occurrence of what Washburn calls 'primal repression', may have a destabilising effect on the mind, making it impossible for it to function in an integrated, orderly way.

If the participants' experiences are interpreted as being to some degree the result of narrative construction, the important point may be that their prior knowledge of spirituality meant that these participants found it relatively easy to construct a new sense of identity as 'spiritually awakened' people. Others found this more difficult, as they first had to create the conceptual framework to make this possible.

Lucas (2011) suggests that there are two factors which help determine whether a 'spiritual emergency' becomes a negative or a positive experience: the individual's own frame of reference (that is, whether they themselves understand the experience and can integrate it into their lives) and whether the experience is pathologised or validated by the individual's culture. It is possible that a lack of understanding by the individual, and a dismissive or pathologising attitude by peers and medical professionals, may make psychological disturbance more likely. As P20 reported, 'All through the initial experience I was sure I was having some sort of intense spiritual awakening experience, but knew nothing about anything like that at the time and had no-one to ask.'

Certain participants' reports had some similarities to the Christian concept of the 'dark night of the soul.' In the Christian mystical tradition, the Dark Night of the Soul was seen as a *deepening* of the mystical state. The mystic believed he or she had attained a permanently stable awakened state, only to fall from this into desolation and uncertainty. This was a process of greater detachment, in which the mystic's attachment to their own selfhood was dissolved away. P23's report was similar to this, in that she reported existing in a spiritual state well-being and connection without questioning it. However, as she reported:

When I got to the age of 26 I did start questioning it. I started wondering, 'Why do I have no likes and dislikes? Why is my mind empty?' I hit a massive wall of despair – it could be the dark night of the soul. I wanted to understand it, so I became attached to it. I was bombarded with answers but had no one to talk to. I had no reference points as to what was happening. (p.310)

However, after she emerged through this phase, she reported that 'as a result it's deepened, over the last four or five years. I would just sit there and feel ecstatic. The only words I have for it is love wanting nothing and giving everything. I keep disappearing, keep having glimpses of oneness.' (ibid.)

Similarly, P10 reported how, after existing in a state of undifferentiated bliss for several months, his 'mind started to return,' which he experienced as a state akin to 'being abandoned by God.' (p.250)

However, strictly speaking, the difficulties reported by other participants experienced could not be seen as equivalent to a 'dark night of the soul', since they

were reported as occurring immediately following their transformational experience, and were part of the process of integrating and understanding their new state, rather than a 'deepening' of a state which was already established.

5.1.16 Acceptance/Letting Go

Subordinate/Related themes: surrender, trust

The importance of acceptance itself as an attitude which can facilitate transformation has been shown in the research of Lancaster & Palframan (2009) and Kubler-Ross (2005). Similarly, in Taylor (2012a) it was found that most individuals who underwent positive psychological transformation following periods of intense turmoil had experienced a moment of 'acceptance' of or surrender to their predicament, when they 'let go' of resistance, either voluntarily or because they reached a point of desolation where they had no resources left.

5.1.17 Physical difficulties

Subordinate/Related themes: Sleeplessness, uncontrollable energy, kundalini

There are many reports of 'kundalini' awakening causing pronounced physical and psychological problems (Taylor, 2010; Grof, 2000). For example, Gopi Krishna described how he had been meditating in the lotus position for hours when he felt a strange sensation at the bottom of his spine. He focused on the sensation and it grew stronger, until suddenly he felt 'a stream of liquid light entering my brain through the spinal cord' (in Wilson, 1985, p.576). This led to a high intensity spiritual experience, in which 'I was now all consciousness, without any outline, immersed in a sea of light, simultaneously conscious and aware of every point, spread out, as it were, in all directions without any barrier or material obstruction... in a state of exaltation and happiness impossible to describe' (ibid.)

However, now that this energy had been awakened, Gopi Krishna was unable to control it. For months he was in a state of agony, feeling exhausted but unable to sit still, rest or even eat. He suffered from hallucinations and sharp pains all over his body. It was only after years of effort that he managed to 'tame' the wild energy and settle into a more stable state.

Washburn's (1980) view of spiritual development may help to explain such experiences. As 'primal repression' is undone, powerful currents of energy flow through us, filling us with well-being or bliss. This energy heightens our perceptions and feelings, and, in Washburn's words 'gradually reveals itself to be – or to be the access to – the Sacred Ground, the Fertile Void, the Formless Godhead' (ibid., p. 5). 'Kundalini awakening' may be when 'primal repression' occurs suddenly rather than gradually, so that there is a sudden and dramatic flood of these energies, which the individual cannot control.

The experiences of some of the participants could certainly be interpreted in these terms – in particular, the physical problems reported by a number of participants, including difficulties with sleeping. These problems could be interpreted as an influx of new, uncontrollable energy. (Interestingly, P20 retrospectively interpreted his experience as a sudden kundalini awakening, although psychiatrists diagnosed him with schizophrenia.)

5.1.18 Spiritual Practice (as an apparent factor in transformation i.e. was being undertaken preceding the transformation)

Subordinate/Related themes: Reading of spiritual texts, study with spiritual group or teacher

The connection between spiritual practice and gradual transformation might be interpreted as suggesting an important role of spiritual practice in enabling a new sense of identity to be stabilised and integrated. Only one person who was following a spiritual practice reported some integration difficulties – P6, who went through a period of confusion. (He felt his transformation 'opened up a can of worms because I had to find out what I had experienced and nobody I knew had the slightest clue what I was talking about.' [p.231]) This may be partly because their knowledge of spirituality gave them an intellectual framework to make sense of their experience, because for them there was no sudden de-stabilising 'inrush' of new energies and potentials, or because this knowledge made it easier for them to construct a narrative forming the basis of a new identity, or for them to create 'positive illusions' incorporating the characteristics of 'spiritual awakening'. In this light, it is perhaps significant that of the six participants whose 'spiritual awakening' was reported as gradual, five had been engaged in spiritual practice. Although four of these

participants reported psychological turmoil as the main trigger of their transformation, it is possible that they had undergone some degree of psychological development – or identity construction – beforehand.

Another question relevant here was the distinction (or lack thereof) between spiritual practice and therapy. Five participants reported transformational experiences while undergoing some form of therapy, including counselling, bodywork, and the AA recovery process. A wide definition of ‘spiritual practice’ could possibly include some types of psychotherapy, such as person-centred counselling and the AA recovery process (see Hinchcliffe [2008], for a discussion of the AA process as a spiritual path.) In a wider definition of spiritual practice, therefore, this code would have been more prevalent.

5.1.19 Timelessness/slowed down sense of time

Stace (1960) included ‘transcendence of time’ as one of the characteristics of mystical experience, while Johnson (1959) found that one of the characteristics of the many spiritual experiences he collected was ‘sense of time obscured.’ Several of the experiences he collected include a sense of transcending linear time. One person stated that the experience ‘seemed like the twinkling of an eye; it also seemed like eternity,’ (p. 56) while another had ‘a sense of time arrested and of the feeling that I was looking on a picture as old as the world’ (p.86).

In Taylor (2007) I suggested that perception of time is flexible and liable to vary according to two basic factors: information processing, and the degree to which the self system is ‘boundaried’ or separate. Ornstein (1969) showed that there is a relationship between the amount of information the mind processes and time perception, with a larger amount of information-processing leading to a slower perception of time. In a series of experiments, he played tapes to volunteers with various kinds of sound information on them, such as simple clicking sounds and household noises. At the end he asked them to estimate how long they had listened to the tape for, and found that when there was more information on the tape (e.g. when there were double the number of clicking noises), the volunteers estimated the time period to be longer. He found that this applied to the *complexity* of the information too. When they were asked to examine different drawings and paintings, the participants with the most complex images estimated the time period to be longest. As

Ornstein concluded, 'When an attempt is made to increase the amount of information processing in a given interval, the experience of that interval is lengthened' (1969, p.38).

The slowed down or expanded sense of time reported by some participants would make sense in these terms. It might be related to two of the other codes: 'intensified perception' and 'Increased present-ness'/Ability to live in the present.' Intensified perception means an increased amount of 'perceptual information' will be processed. More phenomena **are** perceived, and in more depth and detail, resulting in an apparent expansion or 'lengthening' of time. A state of 'present-ness' is important in this regard because being more 'present' results in increased attention to one's experiences, and therefore intensified perception (Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Deikman, 2011). As P11 put it, 'When you're present all the time every day seems full - a day seems to last for such a long time.' (p.252) Or as P21 put it, 'I feel as if I have more time. I never had the time to notice things around me.' (p.298)

Present-centredness also highlights that time is a conceptual construct. The past is a concept based on memory – together with recorded historical information – while the future is a concept produced by the cognitive abilities to anticipate and plan. On an experiential level, the individual can be seen as *always* in the present. Therefore increased present-ness entails a decreased cognitive and conceptual focus on the future and the past, and therefore on time itself. In a sense, the individual becomes more *free of* time, less 'time-bound', and may not have any sense of time whatsoever. This perhaps reflects the experience of P25, who stated that, 'There is no time...No past, no future, just things appearing and happening. Everything just is.' (p.308) While P13 stated that I live as a timeless soul enjoying my physical experience. That is my daily reality.' Similarly, P18 spoke of 'the timeless quality of reality.' (p.286)

5.1.20 Heightened/Increased energy

Possibly the heightened energy reported by some participants **was** related to what Deikman (2011) describes as a 'de-automatization of perception' resulting from decreased cognitive activity. It is possible that this decreased cognitive activity – and

the 'freeing up' of energy it brings – will bring an overall sense of heightened energy. As Roberts put it, 'the continual movement [of thoughts] inward and outward, back and forward...consumes an untold amount of energy that is otherwise left free when the mind is restricted to the now-moment' (1993, p.95).

At the same time, there may be a connection to Washburn's (1980) view of spiritual development. The undoing of the 'primal repression' of the Dynamic Ground opens the psyche up to a reserve of powerful energy. Washburn could therefore help to explain the heightened energy experienced by some participants, together with the psychological disturbances and physical problems some participants experienced.

5.1.21 Authenticity

Subordinate/related themes:

Honesty, 'in touch with self'

This authenticity could also be seen as a part of a positive self-construct, a conceptual strategy to convince themselves that their new identity is superior to their previous. Alternatively, it could be seen as related to a reduced level of general fear and anxiety, which itself stems from the participants' reduced sense of separation. It is possible that an enhanced sense of well-being and connection means being less dependent on affirmation and approval from others.

5.1.22 Prior interest in Spirituality

P7's case could be seen as illustrating the importance of possessing an intellectual framework within which to understand a transformational experience. With a background in meditation and Buddhism – and a number of previous spiritual experiences – he reported being readily able to interpret his experience, and to rapidly adjust to it. As he describes how he responded to the death of his son and wife:

The sense of who I was had been stripped away, and I was left staring at emptiness. I recognised that grief is mostly self-pity; a very distasteful emotion. I also recognised the truth of impermanence and change. There were tears and pain, of course, but I knew that if I turned towards the feelings of emptiness and despair and explored them,

rather than resisting them, I would be able to move on. Within the emptiness there was a stillness that somehow reassured me that 'all was well'. (p.236)

5.1.23 Psychic experiences/episodes following transformation

Stace noted that 'there is a certain correlation between the types of persons who have mystical experiences and those who see visions and hear voices' (1960, p.50).

Marshall (2011) notes a number of connections between psychic and mystical experiences: they both 'bring perceptions and cognitions that appear to reach beyond the normal range, spatially and temporally' (2011, p.6); they share predisposing factors and triggers (such as a quiet state of mind, spiritual practices, physical and mental illness); they are both features of near-death experiences, and finally 'the mystical can develop out of the psychical' (ibid., p. 10).

One similarity mentioned by Marshall in relation to the first connection he makes is that both mystical and psychic experiences bring an 'altered sense of time.' There is also a certain similarity between a telepathic communication with another human being or animal, and the notion of becoming 'one with' phenomena. Becoming one with phenomena means entering into their being, or at least sharing their being, and in principle, telepathy must involve a similar experience of connection. (For information to be gleaned, a connection must be made in the first place.) In the mystic's experience, the emphasis is on the *affective* aspect of connection, while in telepathic communication the emphasis is on the *epistemological* aspect.

It was perhaps significant that all 7 of these participants reported some psychological disturbance following their transformation, and also that 6 out of the 7 experienced a sudden – rather than gradual – transformation. Of the 7 participants, 5 underwent sudden transformation without any gradual development or prior spiritual experiences, while one (P2) had a sudden transformation following two earlier transformational experiences, while one person (P14) experienced gradual development. This suggests that both psychic experiences and psychological disturbance may be related to a sudden and dramatic 'opening' of the psyche, and an 'inrush' of new energies and potentials. Kelly and Grosso (2007) make a similar point, adopting Myers' terminology, by describing the intense creativity of some schizophrenic patients as the result of 'superabundance of subliminal uprush, unchecked by the necessary supraliminal control' (p. 475). However, when the

transformation is more gradual and stable, then it appears that psychic experience is less likely. In other words, this is a question of how 'controlled' or 'boundaried' the self is, or conversely, how 'labile' it is, and therefore how open to the 'uprush' or 'inrush' of energies.

Focusing on the connection between mystical and psychic experience, Marshall utilises the 'filter theory' proposed by Myers, James, Bergson and – most recently – Kelly and Grosso (2007). Filter theory suggests that there is a potential 'reservoir' of phenomena from which our consciousness selects – and is confined to – only the material which is biologically necessary for us. The 'filters' are the psychological and biological processes which 'edit out' the unnecessary material and limit us to a narrow range of experience. And as Marshall puts it, 'persons with "thin boundaries" have less severe filtering systems and so have greater access to subconscious content and therefore to psychical and mystical extension of consciousness' (2011, p.10).

The participants' reports suggested a relationship between spiritual awakening and psychological disturbance, and psychic experience may be a part of this relationship too. Perhaps the core of this relationship is that the more 'labile' the boundaries of the 'self system' are, the more likely a person is to have all three types of experience, possibly independently, but often at the same time. Or in Thalbourne's (2006) terminology, this is a question of 'transliminality.' Individuals with a high degree of 'transliminality' are more open to 'influxes' from the unconscious and the environment, and therefore more liable to have mystical, psychic and psychotic experiences. Or in Marshall's terminology, it may be that a 'less severe filtering system' makes the individual more liable to psychological disturbance too.

The fact that 7 of the participants did report psychic experiences supported this connection. However, the lack of psychic experience in 18 participants might be taken as evidence that they did not undergo a genuine, deep-rooted 'spiritual awakening', and that their reporting of the characteristics of the state was largely the result of circularity and/or narrative construction. Alternatively, there may have been other factors which worked against a direct correlation between spiritual opening and psychic experience, one of which may have been that a sudden and dramatic 'opening' of self-boundaries (or a sudden opening of the 'filter') appears to make psychic experience more likely, whereas a gradual opening makes it less likely.

5.1.24 More active

Subordinate themes: strong sense of purpose, sense of urgency

There is a view – expressed often by theorists from the psychodynamic tradition – that spiritual development and spiritual practice are narcissistic enterprises, bringing a withdrawal from the world and from social responsibility. Freud, for example, saw the ‘oceanic feeling’ of spiritual experience as a regression to the non-differentiated state of early childhood, and considered religious and spiritual practices as an attempt at a ‘restoration of limitless narcissism’ of the childhood state (Freud, 1930, p.19). Similarly, Masson and Hanly saw the effort to ‘transcend the ego’ through spiritual practices as a regression to a narcissistic state, characterised by megalomania and ‘the withdrawal of interest from the natural world’ (1976, p. 52). These claims of narcissism and withdrawal may seem to be justified by the detachment and renunciation of some spiritual traditions, where the adept leaves family life and everyday society behind, and focuses himself exclusively upon his spiritual development.

However, it is by no means always the case that spiritual development entails withdrawal and passivity. In fact, although they underwent periods of detachment and withdrawal, many well-known mystics were extremely active and engaged with the everyday world. The 14th century Italian mystic St. Catherine of Siena, for example, spent three years living as a hermit and an ascetic before undergoing permanent transformation. At that point she abandoned her solitude and was active in society for the rest of her life, teaching, serving the poor and the sick and trying to bring peace to the warring states of Italy (Underhill, 1960). Similarly, her 15th century compatriot (and namesake) Catherine of Genoa spent four years living as an ascetic, until she felt that, as her 19th century biographer wrote, ‘her mind became clear and free, and so filled with God that nothing else ever entered into it’ (ibid., p. 220). And from this point on, she was extremely active as a theologian and nurse, tending to the sick and the poor of Genoa and eventually becoming the manager and treasurer of the city hospital. As a final example, after spending her youth as a nun, St. Teresa of Avila lived a life of frenetic activity, including founding 17 convents and writing several books. Other notable examples of ‘active mystics’ are Gandhi and the Baal Shem Tov.

In the light of this, it may be significant that withdrawal or inactivity did not emerge as a code from this study. None of the participants reported a desire to retreat from the world; none of them reported a desire to become monks or hermits, or that they felt alienated from or disinterested in everyday life. Admittedly, this may have been largely due to the selection of the study sample. After all, individuals who had undergone spiritual awakening and become monks or hermits would not have made themselves available as participants.

5.2 Other Salient Points From the Research

5.2.1 The Possibility of Narrative Construction

When considering the participants' reports of their transformational experiences, the effect of 'narrative construction' should be taken into account. Narrative theorists such as Sarbin (1986) and Bruner (1991) have suggested that the impulse to bring order to chaotic human experience by constructing it into a narrative is fundamental to human nature. Human beings impose narratives on events – or re-narrate them – to bring coherence to experience and help them form a sense of identity (Mathieson & Stam, 1995; McAdams, 1993; Neimeyer, 2006). We impose meaning on our experience to make it easier to process, and more comprehensible (Brennan, 2001).

Research has shown that creating a new sense of self can help a person to survive and process traumatic experiences. As Allen (1999) suggests, in order to survive trauma the individual has to create a new sense of self. Often this is to replace the sense of identity which has been threatened or destroyed by trauma. Trauma can threaten or destroy a person's basic assumptions about themselves and the world, their roles and psychologically meaningful activities in their lives, and also cause a loss of the sense of control over their life (Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

In order to survive trauma, the individual has to regain a sense of coherence and control. They have to create meaning through forming a new narrative of their lives and thereby create a new sense of self. According to Taylor (1983) this includes three basis elements: meaning, mastery, and self-enhancement.

Since all but one of the participants of this study underwent psychological turmoil prior to their transformational experiences, it was easy to see how this could apply to them. For them, narrative construction may have been an important part of

their effort to form a new sense of identity. This new identity may have been based on the concepts they absorbed from their investigations into spiritual traditions and practices in the period following their transformational experiences.

5.2.2 The Possibility of Self-Delusion

Taylor and Brown (1988) suggested that self-deceptive strategies can be used to deal with 'negative information', including loss and death, together with an unreal sense of limited control of an unpredictable world, and a bleak future. Cognitive dissonance and positive illusion have been suggested as strategies individuals use to deal with traumatic experiences, causing them to believe that they have undergone 'post-traumatic growth' (Taylor, 1983; Festinger, 2008). Is it possible that these self-deceptive strategies were used by some of the participants as a way of managing the turmoil and loss which many of them experienced?

The very fact that such a high proportion of these cases of 'spiritual awakening' occurred following periods of intense turmoil and trauma would seem to support this view. The extreme nature of some of the participants' claims also offered evidence for this view. For example, P1 reported that 'All kind of negative feelings have almost totally disappeared and I'm afraid of nothing' (p.206), while P 9 reported that, 'I don't worry about a thing. I don't have anything to worry about. I don't live with stress.' (p.244)

However, one might also argue that the state reported by the participants appeared in some senses to be a *pro*gression rather than a regression. The participants reported a more intense awareness of their surroundings, being relatively free of the normal psychological discord (e.g. worry, anxiety and constant thought-chatter); they reported being less selfish, more altruistic and empathic with better relationships, and so on. A state of regression or delusion would presumably involve impairment, such as a loss of abilities and a deterioration of functions. But the participants reported a higher functioning state. This relates to Sodergren et al.'s research into post-traumatic growth arising from illness (2000, 2004). This research found that a positive interpretation of personal growth after illness was not a form of self-delusion. The individuals' responses to the 'Silver Lining Questionnaire' developed by Sodergren and Hyland (2000) illustrated genuine personal growth.

Since there were only the participants' own self-reports to justify this, it might be argued that the belief that they possessed these positive qualities was a part of their positive illusion or self-delusion, or at least part of a narrative they constructed to make sense of their experience. Triangulation would have helped to validate this, and perhaps it could be investigated with further research. To ascertain whether the participants did undergo a deep-rooted psychological shift – with new modes of perception and cognition – it would be beneficial to *measure* certain characteristics using psychometric tests. For example, the participants' psychological well-being might be measured by Ryff's (1995) 'Psychological well-being scale', or Deiner et al.'s (1985) 'Satisfaction with Life Scale'.

5.2.3 Gender and Spiritual Awakening

Bucke (2011) believed that cosmic consciousness occurs generally to men. (In fact, his list of examples of cosmic consciousness does not include any women.) However, Tolle suggests that women are naturally 'closer to enlightenment' than men: 'The egoic shell in women is not quite as rigid as in men. The ego is a little bit less entrenched; there is a little less mind-identification. Women are more in touch with their body, with their feelings' (in Taylor, 2011, p. 223).

In this study, the majority of participants were women. However, the low proportion of men obviously did not suggest direct support for Tolle's view and against Bucke's. It may simply have been that men were less willing to discuss their transformational experiences, and consequently were under-represented amongst the group who responded to the request for participants. Since some of the participants responded via requests made in radio interviews (related to my books), it may be that the audience of these radio programmes was mainly female. (This was very likely a factor in the lack of religiously oriented participants as well.) From the constructionist viewpoint, one could argue that since modern 'mind, body, spirit' products are largely marketed towards a female audience – for example, with a plethora of women's spirituality magazines in the UK such as *Spirit and Destiny* and *Soul and Spirit* – women are more likely to form a conceptual framework (and a narrative) of 'spiritual awakening.'

The relationship between gender and spiritual awakening is a topic which could be further investigated.

5.2.4 Different Degrees of Spiritual Awakening?

In common with the notion that there are different intensities of temporary spiritual experiences, Bucke (2011) suggested that there are different degrees of cosmic consciousness. 'Within the plane of cosmic consciousness one man shall be a god while another shall not be, to casual observation, lifted so very much above ordinary humanity' (ibid.). Wilber's (2000) model also suggests different levels of awakening, from the psychic, to the subtle, the causal and the non-dual. As we saw in the Literature Review, Buddhist theory suggests different types – and levels – of enlightenment too.

A few participants reported a slightly more intense degree of 'awakening' than others – for example, P14, P18, P23, P10 and P11 - based on the fact that some codes were reported as particularly intense for them. For example, while most participants reported reduced cognitive activity (or less identification with it), some reported complete mental quietness much of the time. This was true of P10, who reported that most of the time he has no mental activity at all: 'There is nothing there apart from a still silence, a very peaceful still unifying silence that permeates everything.' (p.248) Similarly, P18 remarked: 'No thought chatter. It is as if something physical shifted in my brain. Even now my mind is pretty quiet – I sometimes imagine things but that voice has faded away. I used to have a constant stream of chattering thoughts.' (p.288) In much the same way, while some participants reported an expanded sense of time, others reported a state of timelessness. P23 reported that to her, 'There is no time...No past, no future, just things appearing and happening. Everything just is.' (p.308) While P18 commented on 'The timeless quality of reality.' (p.286)

Finally, while some participants reported a sense of connection, the above five participants experienced a stronger sense of *oneness*. P11 said that 'The deep aliveness of space is so amazing it takes your words away. I don't feel connected to it. I feel like I am it.' (p.253) P14 spoke of 'feeling at one with everything...Consciousness is seen as a fertile ground, undimensional, unconditioned.' (p.266). However, aside from this, there was not a great deal of distinction between the participants' experiences in terms of different degrees or levels, certainly not enough to delineate the different levels which Wilber (2000) highlights. Generally, the participants' experiences were strikingly similar and

homogenous. At the same time, it could be argued that this was because none of the participants had become stabilised at the *highest* transpersonal levels – which would also perhaps explain why many of them experienced fluctuations and difficulties.

5.2.5 An Idealisation of ‘Enlightenment’?

A number of possibilities were suggested by the finding that many of the participants of this study did not appear to experience ‘awakening’ as a continuously blissful state, but reported difficulties and fluctuations, including elements of psychopathology. One possibility is that the participants were exaggerating the extent of their awakening, perhaps out of an impulse to conform to the researchers’ or their own expectations, or perhaps out of a desire to construct a narrative of ‘spiritual awakening’. Or perhaps they did experience a degree of awakening, but not a sufficiently advanced degree to overcome these difficulties, or for the state to become completely stabilised to the point where it was completely continuous and effortless.

Another possibility is that the idea of ‘awakening’ – or ‘enlightenment’ – as a continuously blissful state is itself an idealisation or romanticisation. Perhaps, as Forman (2011) states in his book of this name, ‘Enlightenment ain’t what it’s cracked up to be.’ As Clarke (2011) has suggested, perhaps there has been too much focus on the positive aspects of spirituality, leading to an overly ‘one-sided’ view which neglects potential dangers and difficulties. There is a great deal of research showing that the initial stages of ‘spiritual awakening’ are fraught with complexities and potential problems (Clarke, 2010; Grof, 2000; Lucas, 2011), and this study showed that these complexities and potential problems may continue for many years afterwards. Bernadette Roberts described her own transformational experience as ‘A new dimension of knowing and being that entails a difficult and prolonged readjustment’ (1993, p.13).

Ultimately, this is perhaps a question of terminology. If the term ‘enlightenment’ is – perhaps fallaciously – used to refer to a state of constant bliss, then the term cannot be used to describe the participants’ experiences. However, if ‘awakening’ refers to an ‘opening’ of awareness, an emergence of latent potentials and a new sense of identity, meaning and connection – attended by psychological instability and other difficulties – then the term could possibly be applied to the

participants' experiences, also taking into account the potential effects of narrative construction and circularity.

One key to explaining this may be to think in terms of different degrees of 'awakening.' It may be that most participants of this study 'only' arrived at a relatively 'low' degree of awakening, and that potentially higher degrees – including a state of unbroken calm and joy which may equate to the popular notion of 'enlightenment' – lie further along the continuum.

Speaking personally, this study has made me aware that I did have a tendency to idealise the concept of 'spiritual awakening.' Both the reading I did for the Literature Review – e.g. on the relationship between psychosis and 'spiritual awakening' (e.g. Clarke, 2010; Lucas, 2011) and the negative aspects of enlightenment highlighted by, for example, Roberts (1995) and Forman (2011) – and the findings of the research presented here have meant that I no longer think of 'spiritual awakening' as – at least potentially – a state of permanent, ongoing bliss in which one transcends the anxieties and confusions of a normal psychological state. If it has any validity at all, this type of 'awakening' or 'enlightenment' is probably extremely rare. (Or perhaps this reflects a problem with sampling. Perhaps individuals who are 'awakened' to the degree that they *did* experience permanent ongoing bliss would simply be less likely to see my original request for participants. Or perhaps, if they did see it, they would be less likely to respond.)

However, far from entailing any disillusionment, this view of 'awakening' – as a far from ideal state, in which the individual still suffers to some degree and still has difficulties to overcome – has led me to reconceive the state as more accessible, 'humanised' and integrated with normal psychological functioning.

5.2.6 'Spiritual Opening'

Perhaps, however, the term 'spiritual opening' would be more accurate for the experiences of the participants of this study than 'spiritual awakening'. 'Spiritual opening' would refer to a psychological shift which brings a more intense and expanded awareness, but which can create difficulties. 'Spiritual opening' can be a difficult process, especially if it occurs suddenly, without a history of spiritual practice. The individual's previously stable psychological structures are broken down, creating disturbance and instability, disrupting psychological functions such as

concentration and logical or abstract thinking. The opening of previously stable self-boundaries may also lead to a sense of being overloaded with perceptual information, and a sense that life has become overly complicated.

After a certain amount of time, and especially once the individual has established a conceptual framework to make sense of their experience, these difficulties and disturbances may fade, as the individual's new identity becomes more stable and integrated – although based on the reports of some of the participants of this study (for example, P8, P10, P20) there is no guarantee that full integration will occur.

Conceived in this way, the concept of 'spiritual opening' has some similarities with Grof's (2000) concept of 'spiritual emergency', and with 'filter theory' in general. Interpreted in terms of 'filter theory', 'spiritual opening' is the point where the filter falls away, bringing heightened and expanded awareness.

5.3 Limitations of this Study

One limitation of this study was that, since its aim was to study the phenomenology of reported spiritual awakening, it left the question open as to whether the reported experiences were simply constructed narratives (formed in an attempt to construct new meaning and identity, as a form of 'positive illusion' in response to cognitive dissonance) or whether they were genuinely reflective of a deep-rooted psychological shift, in which a new psychological structure was established, with different modes of perception and cognition.

In other words, this study did not offer any clear criteria of distinguishing someone who simply *claimed* to be 'spiritually awakened' – and uses the information they gleaned from spiritual texts and teachers to support their case – from someone who actually had undergone the deep-rooted psychological transformation implied by 'spiritual awakening.' (In the Further Research section following this section, types of research which may be productive in this area are suggested.)

This relates to – and incorporates – the limitation of how reliable the participants' reports of their own experiences were. As discussed in Section 5.2.2, individuals who undergo intensely traumatic experiences may experience a loss of identity which is followed by an attempt to form a *new* identity. It is possible that the participants' accounts were influenced by the accounts of spiritual awakening and the

spiritual texts they read in the years following their transformation – when many of them were going through a difficult period of integration and confusion – and perhaps the new identity they formed was based on the characteristics of ‘spiritual awakening’ they encountered.

The issue of circularity is also significant. Since the participants knew that they would be presenting themselves as having undergone an experience of ‘spiritual awakening’ how can one be certain that they did not simply report the narrative which they felt was expected of them? Perhaps they felt obliged to report what they believed were the characteristics of ‘spiritual awakening’ to present themselves as worthy and credible participants.

Of course, the issue of expectations applies equally to other research methods. When participants complete questionnaires, for example, how can one be sure that they are being honest about themselves, or whether they are conforming to what they believe are the researcher’s expectations? For example, this may be an issue with surveys of happiness or well-being, where participants are asked to rate their level of well-being (e.g. Seligman, 2002). Research participants are reluctant to portray themselves in a negative light, and are likely to respond in a manner which they think will be viewed favourably, as in the concept of ‘Social Desirability Bias’ (McBurney, 1994). This could have applied to the participants of this study too.

Quantitative research is often seen as more objective and reliable than qualitative, but this issue is complex. The expectations, wishes and preconceptions of the research can impinge even on seemingly ‘hard’ areas of science. For example, Vul et al. (2009) have criticised neuroscientists who use fMRI scans to ‘locate’ emotions and aspects of personality to certain areas of the brain, stating that many ‘used a method that inflates the strength of the link between brain region and the emotion or behaviour’ (p.285).

This potentially applied to this study too. I was conscious of some of my biases and preconceptions at the outset of the study, including my belief in ‘spiritual awakening’ as a potentially permanent state, my previous research into the connection between turmoil and psychological transformation, my secular background and its potential influence my non-religious interpretation of spirituality. I attempted to ‘bracket’ these out, but such conceptual frameworks may be so deep-rooted that they influence one’s attitudes and actions without conscious awareness. I became aware,

for example, that due to this influence I had omitted themes relating to difficulties and psychopathology during my initial coding of the participants' transcripts.

The high proportion of sudden and dramatic reports of transformation in this study – as opposed to gradual – may perhaps be explained to some degree by the use of the term 'awakening' in the notice to attract participants, since the term is suggestive of sudden change. Perhaps if the notice had specified 'gradual or sudden spiritual transformation' or 'long term or sudden spiritual awakening' a greater number of participants who had reported gradual long-term transformation through spiritual practice may have featured. This is one area which could be investigated through further research.

Another limitation is that the method of attracting participants was likely to exclude individuals from a conventionally religious background, who might have interpreted their experiences in religious terms.

5.4 Avenues of Further Research

As just mentioned in the Limitations section, research might be undertaken to ascertain whether the phenomenology of reported spiritual awakening is simply a self-constructed narrative or is reflective of a deep-rooted psychological shift. For example, tests of cognitive functioning might also help to establish whether the participants genuinely had undergone deep-rooted psychological change. Tests of information processing and attentional performance might be devised and administered to ascertain if the participants genuinely had developed intensified perception and a higher degree of 'present-centeredness' (see Moore & Malinowski, 2009).

Other psychological tests could be used to help ascertain if the participants have really attained a 'higher functioning' state. For example, Ryff's (1995) or Deiner's (1985) tests of well-being and life-satisfaction could be used. Similarly, the 'Gratitude Questionnaire' devised by McCullough et al. (2002) could be used to ascertain if participants genuinely have developed a more appreciative attitude. Finally, Brown and Ryan's 'Mindful Attention Awareness Scale' (2003) could be applied to ascertain if participants genuinely have developed a more intense perception and heightened awareness to beauty, since it is designed to assess for 'open or receptive awareness of and attention to what is taking place in the present'

(ibid., p.822). Such research would help to underpin and validate – or not – the qualitative research of this study with a more empirical basis.

Since intense turmoil and trauma were reported as a major factor in the transformational experiences of the participants of this study, and given that many people undergo intense turmoil and trauma at some stage in their lives, further research might examine why turmoil only has this reported ‘transformational’ quality for a minority of people. As noted in the Literature Review (Section 2.3.5), research suggests that avoidance reduces the potential for transformation. Lancaster and Palframan (2009) found that posttraumatic growth was less likely to occur when individuals avoided thinking or talking about their problem, while those who did confront and accept their predicament underwent significant personal growth. My previous research (Taylor, 2011; 2012a) found that turmoil was more likely to have a transformational effect when it was approached with an attitude of *acceptance*, when individuals stopped resisting their predicament and ‘let go’ or ‘surrendered’ to it. However, these findings might be clarified with further research.

From a more empirical perspective, it would be fruitful to combine elements of this research with the methodologies developed by Friedman and MacDonald, including psychometric research of spiritual or transpersonal experiences and states. Friedman and MacDonald (e.g. 2002) have attempted to establish a solid empirical basis for transpersonal research. This includes Friedman’s (1983) ‘self-expansiveness level form’ (SELF), an 18 item test which measures how far the individual’s experience of self corresponds to the ‘higher’ or ‘true’ self as described in mystical and transpersonal texts. Similarly, MacDonald’s ‘Expressions of Spirituality Inventory’ (2000) is an attempt to provide a framework for different conceptions of ‘spirituality’ and ‘spiritual experience.’ This inventory exists in both long and short forms (98 and 30 items) and participants respond using a five point scale. It would be interesting to see how the participants of this study – or other individuals who have experienced a similar psychological shift – would score on such psychometric tests. This would provide triangulation which might help to validate – or not – the results of this study.

6. Conclusion

The participants reported many characteristics which are similar to spiritual or mystical experiences, with the difference being that they reported them as stable or ongoing. These characteristics include enhanced well-being, heightened perception, increased empathy and compassion, more authentic relationships, a heightened sense of appreciation and connection, and so on. Thus their reported characteristics appeared to share some of the characteristics of 'spiritual awakening' as described in many spiritual traditions. The participants reported this state as being distinct or discontinuous with their previous state. (It was possible that their reports were influenced here by popular notions of the state of 'enlightenment' or 'awakening'.)

Perhaps the main characteristic of this psychological state as reported by the participants was a high degree of connected-ness and openness, and a corresponding lack of separateness and duality. This reported sense of connectedness and lack of separateness could be seen as one of the causal factors of many of the characteristics of this state, including enhanced well-being, reduced fear of death, reduced sense of group identity/need for belonging, sense of connection, increased altruism, reduced materialism, enhanced relationships, and acceptance/letting go. Another important reported characteristic of this state was 'reduced cognitive activity', which could also be seen as a causal factor of many other codes, including increased present-ness (incorporated the enjoyment of inactivity), intensified perception, enhanced relationships, timelessness/slowed down sense of time and heightened energy.

The transition to this state was reported to most likely occur suddenly and dramatically, as a result of intense psychological turmoil. In some cases this was reported as *wholly* the result of intense psychological turmoil; in other cases, it was in conjunction with some form of spiritual practice (e.g. meditation or mindfulness exercises) or some form of therapy (e.g. counselling or the AA recovery process). At the same time, some participants of this study reported gradual 'spiritual awakening.' In these cases, spiritual practice was more important as a causal factor (again usually in conjunction with intense turmoil). 5 out of the 6 cases of gradual spiritual awakening involved spiritual practice.

At the same time, many of the participants did not experience this state as one of continuous bliss and ease. Certainly many experienced serious difficulties in the initial stages of their transformational experiences, and for some participants

difficulties and fluctuations continued. Initial difficulties included psychological disturbances, 'cognitive dissolution', confusion, relationship problems, and physical problems such as sleeplessness, pain and uncontrollable energy. Ongoing difficulties included over-sensitivity, difficulties dealing with organisational and practical tasks and dealing with the fluctuating nature of their state. In this respect, this study confirms the close relationship between 'spiritual awakening' and psychological disturbance identified by Grof (2000), Clarke (2010) and Lucas (2011), and also the relationship between spiritual experience and psychosis noted by Campbell (1970) and Huxley (1988).

This study suggested either that the idea of 'spiritual awakening' as a blissful trouble-free state is an idealisation, or that there are different degrees of the 'awakened' state and most of the participants of this study had perhaps attained one of the lower degrees, where difficulties and fluctuations were still prevalent. It is possible that to some degree their reporting of their experiences was influenced by the popular notion of 'enlightenment' as a permanent, stable state which is distinct and discontinuous with normal consciousness (Forman, 2011).

There is also the possibility that the apparent similarity of the participants' experiences with those of 'spiritual awakening' as described in spiritual traditions was the result of a narrative construction of their experiences. Since all but one of the participants experienced intense psychological turmoil prior to their transformational experience, this may have generated a strong impulse to give meaning to their experiences, to establish a conceptual framework within which to make sense of them, leading to the creation of a new sense of identity. Most of the participants developed an interest in spirituality and spiritual practices in the years following their transformation, and it is possible that they used the knowledge gained as a basis for this new sense of identity. Perhaps positive illusion or self-deception was a factor here too, used as a strategy by the some of the participants to manage the loss and turmoil they experienced. Thus their reporting of many of the characteristics of 'spiritual awakening' did not necessarily mean that they actually experienced a deep-rooted psychological shift equivalent to spiritual awakening.

This may not simply be a question of either/or. It is possible that many of the participants did genuinely experience characteristics of spiritual awakening to some degree, and these were combined with a degree of narrative construction and perhaps positive illusion.

I suggest the term 'spiritual opening' as an alternative to 'spiritual awakening' to apply to many of the participants' experiences – a term which has fewer positive connotations than 'awakening', and can easily incorporate some of the negative aspects experienced by the participants.

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Appendix 1

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET



Title of Project: An investigation into the causes, characteristics and after-effects of the psychological transformation which has been termed 'spiritual awakening'

Researcher: Steve Taylor, School of Natural Sciences and Psychology

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether to take part, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it involves. Please take time to read the following information, and ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide if you want to take part.

1. What is the purpose of the study?

I am undertaking PhD research on the subject of psychological transformation and spiritual awakening. As you consider yourself to have undergone such a transformation – or are considered by others to have undergone it – I would like to interview you about your experience. Questions I would like to investigate include: Does this state have identifiable characteristics? Can it be identified as a particular psychological state? How does it differ from a 'normal' state of mind? How does it affect people's relationships and lifestyles?

2. Do I have to take part?

No. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do you will be given this information sheet and asked to sign a consent form. You are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. A decision to withdraw will not affect your rights/any future treatment/service you receive.

3. What will happen to me if I take part?

The interview will last approximately 1 ½ to 2 hours. It will be recorded, and transcribed by me. I will then quote from your responses in the thesis, and use a process of 'coding' to highlight the main themes of your experience in relation to the other participants'.

4. Are there any risks / benefits involved?

There are no potential risks or inconveniences involved in this study.

5. Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

Your responses will not be used in any other material besides my thesis, and I will not include any personal information. The material will not be passed on to any other sources. I will not use your real name, but refer to you to as an alias, or as 'Participant 1' or '2'.

Contact Details of Researcher

Appendix 2

LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY CONSENT FORM



Title of Project: An investigation into the causes, characteristics and after-effects of the psychological transformation which has been termed 'spiritual awakening'

Researcher: Steve Taylor, School of Natural Sciences and Psychology

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information provided for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily ☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and that this will not affect my legal rights. ☐
3. I understand that any personal information collected during the study will be anonymised and remain confidential ☐
4. I agree to take part in the above study ☐
5. I understand that the interview/focus group will be audio / video recorded and I am happy to proceed ☐
6. I understand that parts of our conversation may be used verbatim in future publications or presentations but that such quotes will be anonymised. ☐

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Name of Researcher

Date

Signature

Appendix 3

17 September 2010 15:44

Dear Steve,

Satisfaction of Provisos - Full Ethical Approval

With reference to your application for Ethical approval:

An investigation into the causes, characteristics and after-effects of the psychological transformation which has been termed 'spiritual awakening'

On behalf of Liverpool John Moores University Research Ethics Committee (REC) the Chair of the Committee has reviewed your response to the request for further information related to the above study. The Committee is now content to give a favourable ethical opinion and recruitment to the study can now commence.

Approval is given on the understanding that:

- adverse reactions/events which take place during the course of the project will be reported to the Committee immediately;
- any unforeseen ethical issues arising during the course of the project will be reported to the Committee immediately;
- any substantive amendments to the protocol will be reported to the Committee immediately.
- the LJMU logo is used for all documentation relating to participant recruitment and participation eg poster, information sheets, consent forms, questionnaires. The JMU logo can be accessed at www.ljmu.ac.uk/images/jmulogo

For details on how to report adverse events or amendments please refer to the information provided

at: http://www.ljmu.ac.uk/RGSO/RGSO_Docs/EC8Adverse.pdf

Please note that ethical approval is given for a period of five years from the date granted and therefore the expiry date for this project will be **17th September 2015**. An application for extension of approval must be submitted if the project continues after this date.

Yours sincerely