

A journey of awakening: the emergence of consciousness

Abstract

Life invites people to wake up to their true nature. Either they turn to outside, psychological help or there is an inward path, relying on oneself, to discover the true Self. The disintegration of a person's identity makes way for transformation and the possible recognition that wholeness as a human being is achievable. This paper utilises a qualitative or autoethnographic approach to examine the process. Elements of this personal journey are recounted and discussed as a guide to others seeking realisation of their true nature. Fundamental differences between eastern and western approaches to psychology are also discussed. The call to awake can come at any stage, or age, in a person's life. If it is heeded, a higher state of consciousness can emerge and the nature of reality be realised.

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Introduction

Life can be seen as a journey with phases and rites of passage that are crucial to our unfolding maturation. Life is a mystery and, perhaps, the greatest miracle is that some of us actually survive and are able to engage in life. The journey from the womb to childhood, and then into adulthood, poses various challenges, so various psychological strategies are developed to deal with the uncertainties of life. As our ego identity and personality become stronger, the same survival strategies we once adopted to survive turn into our limitations and bring suffering to us. Life then presents us with a further challenge, this time to wake up to our true Self and allow ourselves to discover our true nature. We all have a choice how to attend to this challenge that life is presenting to us. There is an easy way, where we depend on outside sources (like medicine and psychological help), which is a popular method in the western world. There is also another way, where we learn to know that we are natural healers and need not depend on external sources for our physical, emotional, mental or spiritual health.

Life is a challenge regardless of the nature of our path. There will, almost inevitably, be a time when our essential identity begins to be challenged, and we are then taken through a process of death and transformation. These periods of depression and disintegration can be profoundly significant when we understand their meaning. We may descend into the pain of spiritual crises, called by Christian mystics the 'dark night of the soul'. This *via negativa*, or apophatic way, leads to the 'breakdown of speech, which cracks and disintegrates before the absolute unknowability of what we call God'.¹ The mystic, faced with an overwhelming encounter with the divine, is apt to choose the negative approach to try to express experience. So, St John of the Cross in his book *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* says: '*Nada, nada, nada ... aun en el monte nadas*' ('nothing, nothing, nothing ... and on the mountain nothing').² Similarly, the traditional Sanskrit expression *neti, neti* ('neither this, nor that') reinforces the view that the nature of the divine remains beyond human understanding and the ability of words to express.

In eastern spiritual traditions, seekers of their divine aspect of self are not free of such struggles. Before we begin our spiritual quest, it

is necessary to recognise the truth behind our suffering, the cause of our sufferings and to know that we have free will; to know that being human is not a limitation, as only when we are human can we exercise our power to bring transformation. We need to trust that there is a place of wholeness, if we choose to travel the path, and that we have the potential to be whole. When we trust in our potential to be whole, we can see the light at the end of the tunnel; we know the meaning and purpose of our life, and we know our self-worth. There is such a centre within us that appears distant as long as we are resisting resolving our inner and outer differences, but such a centre is the absolute goal of humanity.

Method

With regards to any transpersonal enquiry, there are a wide variety of research methods possible.³ Some kind of narrative psychology is possible and this review article relies on a personal, or autoethnographic, approach.⁴ Qualitative self-reflection on my journey of personal growth allows the use of my experiences to reflect on wider cultural, psychological and spiritual issues. I offer this work as a guide to others, not as a substitute for the journey that people must take for themselves.

When I was trained as a psychotherapist, I became aware that we are constantly passing through a psychological process, something Jung also recognised in his work of alchemy, the journey of individuation; an alchemical process that occurs in the context of therapy.⁵ During my Advanced Diploma training in transpersonal psychology, I did write an essay on my own journey of alchemical transformation and how this impacted my life as a whole, and my understanding of the alchemical process through personal experiences.⁶ Through this process, I also gained understanding of the Universal aspect of alchemy by having insights into the so many similarities and differences of various spiritual traditions, like Tantra Yoga, Buddhism, Shamanism, western mysticism and Egyptian (Hermetic) alchemical processes. It was not a comparison to say one is better than the other. On the contrary, it was my passion for my vision for 'bridging the gap' by viewing it on a Universal level.⁷ Certain things related to my dreams and poetry consisted of archetypal symbols and images, which had my own alchemical meaning and understanding of these

images, and had a profound impact on my spiritual and psychological maturation. I learnt that the journey begins as we start to acknowledge our wounding and slowly take steps to heal ourselves.

Results

As a therapist, I often come across people who are tormented and depressed by the sense that their lives lack direction and meaning. These successful and accomplished people gradually come to realise that they are stuck in a self-created wheel of suffering: going in circles, working hard but getting nowhere. They go around and around repeating the same pattern because their efforts to cure situations simply set themselves up to repeat them. As a therapist, I do somehow know that they are in certain way acting to keep the wheel of karma turning. Since karma is created by wilful behaviour, it concerns both attitude and action. A therapist's concern should be with what clients hold in their hearts and how they are acting this out in their lives. In traditional therapy, the focus necessarily remains on a client's troubles, whereas its goal should be their extinction. The task of a therapist should be to bring out the humanity of individuals in a way that enables them to become more fully aware and conscious of their actions. Awareness induces natural change in a person, a holistic change of heart and mind, together with an experiential realization that there is another, and better, way to be. We learn that there is no one to fight; we gain some understanding of our Buddha nature and, as we willingly choose to lay down our weapons, only then we begin to live a better life. In my experience, when a person experiences an 'altered state of consciousness' as a result of abandoning a self-centred position, that person can radically change the direction of their life. Thus, radical change is possible for anybody who seriously sets out to do something about it.

Part of my intention in writing about this subject is to bring together ('bridge') these two worlds: western understanding of psychological processes, and how eastern spirituality influences and enhances our psychological journey. In Jungian terms, individuation essentially means the process of becoming a psychological 'individual' who is a separate, indivisible unity or whole. Individuation as a process of self-actualization is at the very heart of all eastern spiritual traditions. It appears that eastern traditions offer a path of practice to support this process, whereas in the western world it just remains a psychological process that aims at psychological maturity, but does not reach into the depths beyond the surface psyche. Its object remains to strengthen the ego rather than to dissolve it. It is true that ego development is necessary in the evolution of an individual before making connection to soul or spirit. But it appears that western psychology remains stuck at ego level, mainly at a mechanical and mental process, while somehow resisting the idea of soul and the divine nature of a human being.⁸ Even transpersonal psychologists remain simultaneously and exclusively occupied with the concept 'human' alone, without any reflection on the divine aspect of self, which is so vital in meeting the needs of the soul. The soul is a power of the Divine Consciousness, which does not disintegrate and is always turned towards Truth, Beauty and Bliss (*Sat, Chit, Anand*). In the east, learning to understand one's connection with the divine is a part of the educational system and upbringing, whereas in the west such a relationship is replaced by materialism, the nuclear family system and an anti-religious attitude.

The knowledge in the west, that physical science so desperately seeks, is simply intellectual, without the least development of the soul. There is very little understanding about thought, form and name. The word 'soul' is often confused with mind and consciousness, mind is confused with brain, and even consciousness is confused with real and

unreal. The 'thought' is the finest part of the universe, the real motive power. While the psychology of the west talks much about mind, it is not true psychology in the strict sense of the word, as it does not admit the existence of Psyche, the soul. As Schopenhauer⁹ observed, 'the study of psychology is vain, for there is no Psyche'. Professor Hiram Corson of Cornell University used to call it 'somatology'.¹⁰ On the other hand, the understanding of the east is both vast and deep. There is no system of psychological philosophy so complete, and so profound, as the system of the *Patanjali Yoga Sutra*.¹¹ Unlike in the west, where there is great confusion between mind and consciousness, eastern psychology and philosophy demonstrate a striking difference between the conception of mind and consciousness. The thought behind our body is called soul, and the thought behind the universe is called God; the universal thought or universal consciousness. How can psychology be of much use to anyone without the understanding of these vital missing parts?

As ego development is necessary in the evolution of the individual before making connection to soul or spirit, similarly religion (*dharma*) can also play an important role in the evolution of soul and making connection to our divine nature. The word *dharma* in the east cannot be simply translated as religion; it is far from being a religion and much deeper than how the word religion is understood in the west. It is a cosmic system where human beings are also there. Unfortunately, religion seems to be rapidly declining in the west and with it our connection to our soul nature is also in decline. By religion, I do not mean the conventional or institutional practice of religion as such, which remains just dogma and has largely lost its meaning a long time ago. Religion is a sacred knowledge of being and becoming. It is a great science in search of finding the truth about our existence. The word religion means realization. It does not mean to worship a certain God and hate those who may believe differently. Religion has become a power and like any other power, while in the wrong hands, its power can be abusive, which seems to have happened when we study the history of religions all over the world. More crimes and devilish activities have taken place in the name of religion than in the name of politics. In fact, religion plays a powerful role behind every act of hate and cruelty. In Europe, people were not allowed to say a word about religion that did not agree with the views of the Christian church. This could be one reason for a lack of respect for the word 'religion' in the present day.

Religion is supposed to be a sacred path to our divine nature and not a battlefield to prove 'might is right'. Since religion is wrongly associated with power instead of love, it is also very addictive and possesses all those negative qualities of addiction (attachment), which hinder the individuation process instead of enhancing it. People following certain religious belief systems become religious instead of being spiritual, or use it as a stepping stone in their individuation process. Religious people remain stuck in 'doing' and lose sight of 'Being', which is the cause and purpose of this existence. A true religion is that which teaches us the meaning of love, shows us that we are in suffering due to our denial of love, and shows us that we are not limited or helpless. A true religion empowers us to realise our own divinity, instead of living in fear of a God who will punish us if we make use of our free will and follow our hearts. Love is not something you 'do' (although in this material age it is often seen that way) then you wonder: 'Why am I not feeling happy when I have everything I wanted?' It is simply because love is not a thing and you cannot 'do' any 'thing' with it. There is no way you can abuse it as a power to undermine anyone else. The reward of love is love. Love is being realised 'who am I' and being capable of owning that 'I' where

the entire Universe evolves. As Vivekanand¹² said: ‘The perfect man sees nothing but God’. A self-realised person (perfect) is not separate from God as he is constantly conscious of his responsibility for being Generator, Operator and Destroyer (i.e., GOD) of the reality he is creating.

It sounds hard and complicated but, in fact, it is so simple that an ego mind fails to grasp it. I am not sure if ever a priest can explain to you the meaning of what Jesus meant when He said: ‘Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God’ (Matthew 5:8). In that one sentence is the gist of all religions. It could save the world, because a vision of unknown (God) never comes until the mind is free of ego and purified to recognise soul (Gold). Mind is not something that you can wash with detergent in order to purify it. The way to purify your mind is willingly and consciously choosing to go through the alchemical journey, turning lead (mind) into gold (soul). Gold means reaching an ultimate state of purity, a place of oneness, where your heart and mind become one (soul), where there is no separateness. To reach that place of purity one has to get rid of all mind stuff that separates us from love—things like greed, anger, fear, resentments, hate and all other vices. It is not to be confused with niceness or politeness where there is a hidden selfish motive of ego mind seeking approval. It is a childlike state. A child does not know hate. It rewards your love with love and even your hate with love. As the child has got no awareness of the existence of things like greed and shame, love is its only truth and he or she is surrendered to it. This is what Jesus meant; it is very simple but very hard to grasp for those who are permanent residents in their heads. There is much remaining unexplored about our understanding of religion, but for now I wish to keep my focus on our current theme.

Psychology has not yet acquired such skills to transform gross mind into soul nature. So far, it is just paddling in the pool of grossness of mind and is content with its findings about its effects on human nature. As mentioned in an esoteric text, ‘Mind is a wonderful force inherent in the Self’ and ‘That which arises in this body as “I” is the mind’.¹³ When the subtle mind emerges through the brain and the senses, the gross names and forms are cognised. When it remains in the Heart, names and forms disappear ... If the mind remains in the Heart, the ‘I’ or the ego (which is the source of all thoughts) will go, and the Self, the Real, Eternal ‘I’ alone will shine. Where there is not the slightest trace of the ego, there is the Self.

The call to travel, either inwardly or outwardly, is in part the call to break free of the constraints of the psychological environment that locks us into all manner of preconceptions and expectations. The sense of imprisonment that can ensue calls forth something from deep within that demands that we break up, break down, or shatter our solid reality so that growth can occur.¹⁴ This force from within is a natural expression of our potential for growth: from seed to a realisation of Self.¹⁵ As the musician Leonard Cohen¹⁶ observed in his song *Anthem*: ‘There is a crack in everything/That’s how the light gets in’.

Discussion

We need to recognise our fundamental human value before trying to make connection to our divine nature. Psychologically also, it is well recognised that all kinds of distress are related to our lack of self-worth. Our culture, education, religion and social structure also contribute much towards our level of self-worth. When we say ‘human life is precious’, it has a bigger meaning than how it is understood in this materialistic world. Our educational system does not offer any understanding of our intrinsic nature. Our knowledge about our

mind, and our wisdom about our innate qualities, remain unconscious to us. We live like beggars, whereas we have the potential to realise ourselves as GOD.

I do believe the Universe is perfect and that the laws of Nature are to serve the purpose of maintaining that perfection and not to benefit human selfish needs. Prophets like Buddha and Jesus show humanity that people possess Buddha nature, that we all have an extraordinary potential that lies hidden within our normal distressed mind. These prophetic experiences are a way of conveying the notion of an intrinsic primordial purity that is temporarily obscured from our view. The freedom this life can offer us is the capacity to understand this intrinsic value.

Perhaps our most remarkable gift that distinguishes us from animals is the capacity of consciousness and reason. In western philosophy, mind and consciousness are sometimes confused between ‘states of consciousness’ and ‘states of the mind’. Both are applied to successive phases of the flux of the inner life. Sometimes consciousness is treated as a quality of mental life. In eastern philosophy, these two concepts indicate two entirely different things. Pure consciousness is the enlightener of the mind, the senses, and their functioning: mind (*antahkaran*) is unconscious matter. In other words, mind is subtle matter and consciousness is immaterial spirit. It is consciousness that manifests the operation of mind and our senses; just as the eyes see the world when they are open and are directed towards it, so also, when consciousness is turned on the mind, the spirit sees or knows the functioning of the mind and the senses. There is no consciousness inherent in the mind. The mind receives the radiance of consciousness from the knowing Self, whose inner instrument it is, and illuminates all things including physical light (Personality). Though it seems to cognise, the mind is not the cognizer, but only an instrument of cognition. Like the Moon, it shines with the borrowed (mirror reflection) light of consciousness.

All three planes of conscious, subconscious and superconscious belong to the same mind which operates on three levels. The question of controlling the mind relates only to the conscious plane, where mind is normally accompanied by the feeling of egoism. We cannot directly control the mind unless we are established in Yoga. The question of controlling the mind on the superconscious plane does not arise. But the superconscious plane can be reached only by those who have controlled their minds on the conscious and subconscious planes. We all have the potential to reach this state of pure mind regardless of our worldly status. As I said before, radical change is possible for anybody who seriously sets out to do something about it.

For westerners, translating the doctrine and practices of eastern spiritual traditions into experience is not a straightforward task. I have seen how easily the essential meaning of these practices has been distorted, if not lost, and basic principles of these doctrines have been misinterpreted by some well-recognised current western spiritual and transpersonal authorities. We need to understand that the western psyche, with its particular cultural inheritances and emotional wounding, does not always comfortably fit within an eastern spiritual approach. It is not to say that western people are spiritually inept; rather it is about appreciating the difference. Due to western upbringing, the emotional life and sense of identity in the west is very different from what one finds in the east. Western Judaeo-Christian values influence people’s worldview, their experiences of the body, sex and gender, their attitude towards good and evil, spirit and matter, sexuality and spirituality, as well as their view of reality.

What is so extraordinarily different about eastern Vedic traditions is its wealth of methods, coupled with teachings that explain the nature of mind and of the reality we experience: a clear and concise way to cultivate the mind and free our lives from needless confusion and suffering. The insights or experiences we might gain emerge through a psychological process that is different for each of us. In eastern traditions, certain deities are used to evoke an experience of emptiness, but seldom is that experience explored. So-called religious or spiritual teachers only talk about it. They do not show you how to step out of your egotistical mind to challenge your fears and grow in your consciousness. Unless individuals are inspired enough to take risks fully to live their experiences, there is very little chance for any change, leave alone transformation, to take place.

Many westerners explore eastern spiritual traditions because they seek a solution to their psychological problems. Spirituality, however, is not about solving problems, but rather accepting and transcending them. Spiritually speaking, 'Life is not a riddle to be solved, it is a mystery to be lived'.¹⁷ We must bear in mind that spirituality does not consist in talk, or doctrine, or books, but in realisation; it is not even learning but rather being. Although good teachers and reading may be useful, such learning ultimately must lead people to 'where we do not know'.¹⁸ Everybody knows not to steal, not injure others and not to lie, but what good is that to you unless you have become able to realise the idea? When this idea becomes your way of being, only then you truly know what it really means. Before that, it is the spelling of the word and nothing more. I used to meditate every day upon purity of thought and not to think ill of any living being, but one day, to my surprise, I realised the person I thought ill most of is my self and no other.

No amount of doctrines or philosophy or ethical books you may have stuffed into your brain will matter much; only what you are and what you have realised. As the anonymous saying goes: 'We don't see things as they are; we see them as we are'¹⁹ and in order to see them as they are (Truth or Reality), we must be self-realised. Nobody can claim to be a Christian just by reciting sermons every day, unless he is able to feel the passion of Jesus and have the courage to risk everything to be like Christ. It is of great importance to know what we have realised about ourselves. Until then, what Jesus, Buddha or Krishna did is of no value to us, unless we do it for ourselves, too. We must find our own light, just as they found theirs. You have to become the Bible instead of following it. Perhaps you can use it as a guide, but know that your Bible is yet to be written by you.

In my spiritual journey, I have discovered a great deal from my own process, as well as from clients and students. It was a lonely and turbulent ride, leading me into valuable insights of my own blindness to my attachments to weaknesses that hindered my perception of reality. It was a most painful experience to acknowledge my blindness (in psychological terms known as 'Shadow') and allow it to be. When struggle ceased, there was clarity and a curiosity to understand the purpose of the existence of my shadow. I realised that none of this was unknown to me, but I was denying its existence to avoid responsibility for my shadow. As Chappell²⁰ says: 'What we cannot accept we repress or hide in the shadow'.

I studied deeply into Jung's work on shadow and gained valuable insights, but found that the spiritual thread was lost by Jung with his overemphasis on psyche. We are more than our body and mind: the shadow we understand is a creation of mind and manifested through the physical body—no body, no shadow. Similarly, all wars are fought in the mind first before any kind of physical involvement. We forget that spirit is beyond body and mind and, therefore, has

no shadow with which to struggle. As long as we remain limited to our mind and physical self, shadow will persist. No surgery, science or psychology can eliminate it. It only happens when we connect ourselves to our spiritual nature and dissolve it instead of trying to tame it. Unfortunately, psychology works towards taming it, thus it keeps us in our so-called human limitations. Our spiritual nature is the highest form of energy; it is already within us, but trapped between the grossness of our body and mind. All we need to do is consistently to keep on working to purify it by acknowledging it and allowing it to be. The first step to work on oneself is to observe oneself – which means to understand one's consciousness (the understanding of the structure of one's consciousness, and its transformation and purification).

Conclusion

It is ego that must evolve, gradually emerging from its origins in primitive, instinctual needs, and grow to inhabit a more conscious and healthy relationship to life. This is a hazardous journey—a journey of awakening and the emergence of consciousness. The call makes us begin to face the wounding that has inevitably occurred in the process of incarnating again in this material world.

It is often surprising for an eastern teacher to encounter such emotional wounding in westerners. This is because, in the east, psychology is part of the spiritual system. It is not separate from it and there is no psychological language as such to process these experiences, as path and process are not considered different, but rather interwoven. In the east, there is no child developmental model, so it is not easy to make people understand the nature of the development of self-identity and how it can be damaged. I am one of the fortunate ones, I suppose, to have this opportunity to live long enough in the west to learn about the pressures of the western way of life and, therefore, have tailored my spiritual guidance to suit western needs rather than simply following the doctrine.

The call to wake up and change comes in many guises, and it may come at virtually any age. The most noticeable sign of any call is a profound sense of malaise, a growing recognition of fundamental dissatisfaction or meaninglessness of life. Life may be insisting that it is about time to begin facing our self-imposed restrictions and limitations. This is sure sign of soul's call to use our human potential to evolve to a higher level of consciousness. The call makes us begin to face the wounding that has inevitably occurred in the process of incarnating again in this material world. In eastern texts, this state is known as *Dukkha*, which in English is understood as 'suffering', although this is not the correct meaning of the word *Dukkha* (which is perhaps more akin to 'uneasiness' or 'dissatisfaction').

It is increasingly noticeable that the western psyche, with its particular cultural inheritance and emotional wounding, does not always fit comfortably within an eastern approach to spiritual practice. All living beings have to go through the pain of their limitations in order to evolve to a higher state of consciousness. When we stop thinking from our everyday mind (stop ideas and fantasies) then we get a glimpse of reality. As Shri Rabindranath Tagore puts it: '*Every now and then I see a glimpse of you, why not always?* Doubts arise in my heart and prevent your vision'. Therefore, when we stop looking for a solution, we find it.

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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