

A Personal, Retrospective Study of Spiritual Awakening

Jacob Gotwals

Author Note

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To contact Jacob Gotwals, visit <http://jacobgotwals.com>

A journal article on intuitive inquiry (Anderson, 2004)—one of the readings for this course—reinforced my view that shifts in a researcher's understanding of a research topic can be a valid focus of research. This article also introduced me to the concepts of *resonance validity* and *efficacy validity*, which support the idea that a study can be considered valuable to the extent that it resonates for its readers and helps them make sense of their own lives (as opposed to the more traditional view that a study is valuable to the extent that it contributes to theoretical understanding of the research topic within the research community). These ideas have influenced the form and contents of this study.

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Introduction

In 2002, I discovered the work of Ken Wilber, a philosopher interested in integrating science and mysticism. His work provided me with a conceptual map that gave me an initial understanding of the landscape of mystical spiritual experience. (For an updated version of such a map, see (Wilber, 2006, Chapter 3).) Contemplating this map helped me understand that there were important, significant states of human experience that I had not yet experienced personally. To explore these states, in 2004, I initiated a period of fairly intense spiritual practice and study that led to a shift in my perception and my sense of identity. I use the term *spiritual awakening* to describe this shift, which began around 2009 for me and continues evolving to this day. This paper explores the question "What is spiritual awakening?" by highlighting some of the experiences and shifts in understanding that I experienced between 2004 to 2014.

The term *spiritual awakening* can be used to refer to a wide range of phenomena. I use this term specifically to describe a shift in identity and perception precipitated by an experiential exploration of the nature of self, awareness, and subjective experience that leads to the "nondual" state that Ken Wilber describes (2006, p. 74). Perhaps the most precise way to define *spiritual awakening* is operationally, through instructions for practices for precipitating such an awakening within the practitioner—so, for a more complete understanding of what I mean by spiritual awakening, I recommend the practices that precipitated my own awakening.

Instructions for these practices can be found within the Mahayana branch of Buddhism—specifically, in the Kagyu and Nyingma schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Examples of such instructions can be found in (Namgyal, Kunsang, & Rinpoche, 2004), (Rinpoche, 2004), (Urgyen, 2000), (McLeod, 2002), and (Wallace, 2006).

Methods

As I investigated spiritual awakening between 2004 to 2014, I followed my intuition, which led me through a series of many iterative (and often overlapping) "research phases". In each phase, I refined my understanding of the type of spiritual awakening I was seeking, as well as my understanding of the most effective spiritual practices for attaining that type of awakening; then I engaged in those practices, attended to my experiences, and compared those experiences with the results I had been expecting. My understanding of spiritual awakening served as my theory, my practices served as encounters with the world (or "experiments") that tested my current theory, my experiences served as data and were "recorded" as memories, and my analysis of that data helped me refine my theory and plan my next iteration of practices.

It would be beyond the scope of this paper to describe this 10-year iterative process in detail. However, in the "Results" section below, I highlight some of my experiences of spiritual practice, and in the "Discussion and Conclusions" section that follows, I describe some ways that my understanding of spiritual awakening has shifted due to these experiences. The descriptions of experiences and understandings below are largely based on a 5500-word self-dialogue journal that I created just before writing this paper as an additional data collection process.

Results

My Experiences of Spiritual Community

Up until 2004, I had been using books and online resources to guide my practice. I seemed to be making some progress, but the limitations of this strategy were starting to become clear: communication was only one-way (I could not ask questions of others). I started feeling called to seek spiritual community, and I successively explored a number of local spiritual communities, including two Hindu-based communities, a community based on Theravada

Buddhism, and three communities based on Tibetan Buddhism. I participated in these communities for varying amounts of time—several for just one visit, and one for about a year. Sooner or later, I concluded that none of them were quite the right match for me.

Around 2008, in the fourth community based on Tibetan Buddhism that I explored (Albuquerque Karma Tegsum Choling, a local Buddhist center in the Karma Kagyu Lineage under the 17th Karmapa, Orgyen Trinley Dorje), I finally found what I was looking for: a path that made sense to me and that I trusted, and a guide (in the form of a fellow practitioner who was further along in his practice than me, and who seemed intelligent, friendly, and open to in-depth discussions of spiritual practice). My progress was supported by my conversations with him, readings he recommended, weekly discussion groups at the center, classes with visiting teachers, and my continued daily spiritual practices (including meditation, yoga, and qigong). All of this was sufficient to foster my initial awakening process in 2009; this process continued and deepened in following years.

During my two year association with this community, I met with several teachers to explore creating a student-teacher relationship, but none of these matches seemed compelling enough for me to invest in deepening these relationships. Later, through online exploration, I came across the work of Ken McLeod, an independent Buddhist teacher in the Tibetan tradition. I felt a strong resonance with his teachings and contacted him to initiate a student-teacher relationship, but unfortunately he had stopped teaching shortly before that time. He referred me to a student of his, George Draffan, who I worked with one-on-one for a few years; this work gave me more confidence in the validity of my awakening.

My Experiences of Spiritual Practice

Calm Abiding Meditation. The practices that I have found to be most supportive of awakening are "calm abiding" meditation (or *samatha*) and "insight" meditation (or *vipassana*). The following excerpt from my self-dialogue journal describes some of my experiences of calm abiding meditation:

I sit down to meditate. (My posture doesn't have to actually be sitting, but it usually is; sitting cross-legged on a meditation cushion seems to give me better results than any other posture. However, sometimes after starting out in this posture, I will use other postures for variety and for ease on my body; for instance, I might lie down or sit in a chair.) If I'm very distracted, I will choose an "object" of attention (that is, something to focus my attention on). This could be my body sensations or various sensations associated with my breathing. If I'm less distracted, I may take the entire range of my current subjective experience as my object of attention. When I notice that my attention is no longer on my chosen object—almost always, this is because I'm thinking, and my attention has shifted to things I'm thinking about—I return my attention to my chosen object.

Years ago, when I first started meditating, I would almost always be asleep within 15 minutes of sitting down to start my practice. Later, I wouldn't get as sleepy, and my attention would be flooded with memories and images from my past. Later, my attention started being drawn to images of faces that would arise in patterns in the carpet. These days, run-of-the-mill thinking is my biggest source of distraction.

Initially, as I start each meditation session, I direct my attention to my body, noticing any areas of tension or stress and allowing my attention to rest on these areas. As

I do so, the tension gradually dissipates on its own. Often, as tension dissipates, I feel a sensation of energy being released, and as this happens my arms and feet often shake spontaneously. It seems that there is energy trapped in the tension; releasing the tension seems to free that energy.

My intention in this practice is to reach a peaceful, relaxed, calm state of mind and body, and to strengthen my attention so that I can direct it at will. In order to achieve this, I split my attention two ways: the bulk of my attention goes toward my chosen object, but I reserve some of my attention for monitoring the placement and strength of my attention itself. When I notice that my attention is being sucked into coarse mental processes (like thinking) or subtle mental processes (like repetitive rhythmic patterns or melodies), I note that occurrence (perhaps silently thinking the word "excitation", or perhaps not) and I return my attention to my chosen object. As I do so, these mental processes gradually dissipate. I also attend to my clarity of attention. When I notice that my experience of my chosen object lacks vibrancy, I note that occurrence (perhaps silently thinking the word "laxity", or perhaps not) and look more closely at my chosen object.

On a "good day", over the course of 20 minutes to an hour, my body relaxes, my attention stabilizes, my mind calms down, sensations become more vibrant, and feelings of bliss start to arise. On a "bad day", I'm too distracted for this practice; my attention does not stabilize, and I try a different practice.

The longer I meditate for, the more powerful these effects become—up to a certain point, at which I find taking a break to be helpful. An hour and a half is generally the longest I will meditate before changing my posture, and I almost always change

posture after half an hour or so to give my body some variety. I don't view meditation as an endurance test; in my opinion, relaxation is quite important for awakening. It's hard to be relaxed when one is uncomfortable.

Insight Meditation. The following excerpt from my self-dialogue journal describes my experiences of insight meditation:

The most effective time to do insight meditation seems to be after my mind has been stabilized through a session of calm abiding meditation. In insight meditation, first, I examine the relationship between myself and awareness. I look for myself, but I can't find myself anywhere; all I find is various subjective experiences, like the feeling of sitting on the cushion and the visual appearance of my body. I am aware of these experiences, so I realize that I can't *be* these experiences. Soon, I recognize that I am *awareness itself*. Now I turn my attention to subjective experience, noticing sensations, emotions, thoughts, and so forth, and their *mysterious nature*: while I can correlate the *contents* of subjective experience with various aspects of the material world, the subjective experiences *themselves* don't seem to exist within the material world.

Next, I examine my assumption that there is a material world corresponding to my subjective experiences, and recognize it as just that: an assumption. Without making any judgments about the truth, falsehood, or usefulness of that assumption, in simply *recognizing* that assumption, my subjective experiences start to seem more "real" than the presumed material world of "objective" reality.

Now I turn my attention to the relationship between awareness and subjective experience, and I discover them to be two sides of the same coin; one cannot arise without the other. I recognize the space of awareness/experience as the perfect,

featureless, mysterious ground of each experience that arises. I recognize that while particular experiences come and go, and my while body was born and will die eventually, the space of awareness/experience was never born and will never die; it is *not a thing*, but the *space* within which the experiences of all things arise. I now have the sense that I am spirit (that is, awareness/experience), everything that arises in awareness is spirit, and I am everything; perfect, birthless, deathless spirit, within which all the drama and variety of life play out.

Formal Practice and Daily Life. The following excerpt from my self-dialogue journal describes how I intersperse formal meditation practice with spiritual practice in daily life:

I generally try to meditate three times a day, for about half an hour in each sitting. Occasionally, I have devoted an entire weekend to practice, which intensifies the effects of meditation. However, I generally prefer taking a more measured approach in which I intersperse formal practice and daily life, rather than doing extended retreat practice.

In addition to formal practice, I also integrate calm abiding and insight practices into my daily life. Ideally, formal practice is just that: *practice* for daily life.

I experience daily life as a continual process of "falling asleep" to spirit and reawakening to spirit. This happens many times a day. Reawakening happens spontaneously, but spiritual practice makes reawakening both more likely and more frequent.

Benefits of Awakening. The following excerpt from my self-dialogue journal describes several personal benefits that I have experienced related to awakening:

Spiritual insight creates a sense of equanimity; with insight, I see all of life's diversity as the play of spirit. Compassion still arises when I sense suffering, and I still act, but my

actions are less driven by attachment and existential fears. When I'm awake, turning my attention to love, an experience of love arises, for no reason—first for myself, then for everything in life. There is a subtle joy in simply being aware and experiencing. Turning my attention to the meaning of a given experience, I sense a deep, subtle meaning that appears as an emotion, an understanding, and a knowing of what to do.

Discussion and Conclusions

Shifts in My Understanding of Spiritual Awakening

Below, I compare various understandings of spiritual awakening that I had in 2004 (as I started my period of intensive study and practice) to my present understandings in 2014.

- Spiritual traditions:
 - In 2004: The mystical branches of the various spiritual traditions provide the best and most reliable sources of guidance for awakening.
 - In 2014: Many factors are at work within the various spiritual traditions. Some of these factors are conducive to awakening; others are not. Like all institutions, spiritual institutions tend to develop a drive toward self-perpetuation; this drive can create conflicts of interest that can interfere with the ability of these institutions to facilitate awakening.
- Teachers:
 - In 2004: Finding a compatible spiritual teacher and working one-on-one with her/him is important for awakening.
 - In 2014: While working one-on-one with a compatible spiritual teacher can be helpful, awakening is also possible with the support of informal relationships with

compatible peers. Awakening may also be possible through independent study and practice alone, but I believe this is a much slower and more arduous route.

- Conceptual understanding:
 - In 2004: Awakening cannot be understood conceptually, and trying to do so is not helpful for awakening.
 - In 2014: Awakening is a shift in identity and perception fostered by a recognition of the mysterious nature of awareness and subjective experience. In order to recognize this, one must *look*; thinking (without looking) doesn't help. However, awakening does precipitate shifts in conceptual understandings of self and reality, so comparing one's understandings to the understandings of others who are further along a path of awakening can be helpful for assessing one's progress along that path.
- Nondual unity:
 - In 2004: Awakening involves "becoming one with everything". It's not clear what this means or what the experience of this would be like.
 - In 2014: Awakening involves identifying with awareness and recognizing the unity (or nonduality) of awareness and subjective experience; so when one is awake, one is identified with everything that one experiences (and in that sense, one is "one with everything"). This is distinct from the recognition of the interrelatedness of all things that can arise through the study of systems theory.
- Change in perception:
 - In 2004: After one awakens, one perceives the world differently. It's not clear what the experience of this altered perception would be like.

- In 2014: Awakening gives one access to a new way of experiencing life. Before awakening, most of us experience ourselves as human bodies—having subjective experience and existing in objective reality. Awakening allows one to experience oneself as spirit—the unity of awareness and subjective experience—in which, and as which, experiences of objective reality (and other realities) may arise and subside.
- Difficulty and complexity:
 - In 2004: It's not clear whether awakening is possible for me or how long it will take. It's not even clear whether anyone alive today is awake. Awakening may require very complex spiritual practices.
 - In 2014: Awakening is possible. The practices required for awakening are fairly simple, but finding those practices may not be easy, and performing them requires some time and effort. Awakening itself challenges conventional views of self and reality; it will be experienced as emotionally challenging to the extent that one is emotionally attached to these conventional views.
- Permanence:
 - In 2004: Once one awakens, one is always awake.
 - In 2014: Once one awakens initially, one starts continually "falling asleep" and "reawakening". This may occur many times per day. Daily spiritual practice is required to support reawakening, but reawakening occurs with much less effort than one's initial awakening.
- Relationship to cessation:
 - In 2004: Awakening may require the cessation of cognitive processes.

- In 2014: The cessation of cognitive processes may have some benefits, but cessation is not sufficient for awakening. Slowing cognitive processes and bringing mindfulness to them facilitates awakening by freeing attention from automatic, habitual processes like thinking. However, for awakening to occur, attention must be directed toward inquiry into the nature of self, awareness, and subjective experience (via insight practices).
- Relationship to personal growth and healing:
 - In 2004: Awakening may facilitate personal growth and healing via unknown mechanisms.
 - In 2014: Spiritual awakening does not automatically make one's personality "perfect". People who are awake are quite capable of acting destructively and causing harm. However, awakening does accelerate personal growth and healing by bringing awareness—a healing force—to one's own psychological processes. Awakening also reveals ways that awareness *itself* is perfect. Awakening can reduce existential anxiety (fear of non-existence) as one recognizes a new identity more fundamental than one's body and personality: indestructible spirit. Awakening does not *replace* the personality, but *builds* on it—so there may be a danger of psychosis if awakening is attempted without first developing and consolidating a stable, functional, integrated personality.
- Relationship to paranormal abilities:
 - In 2004: Awakening may facilitate paranormal abilities via unknown mechanisms.
 - In 2014: Awakening itself does not automatically give one paranormal abilities. However, awakening may free one's thinking so that one may more easily accept the

possibility of the *existence* of paranormal abilities. Furthermore, practices that support awakening may also support the *cultivation* of paranormal abilities. It's possible to have paranormal abilities yet *not* be spiritually awake (as I define spiritual awakening).

Limitations of this Study

The retrospective aspects of this study are based on my memories. Written documentation (for instance, journals) might have supported greater accuracy, had they been available.

This study is based on one person's experience—my own. If I had included experiences of additional people in this study, this might have increased the study's validity and utility and reduced the effects of any unconscious bias on my part.

The term *spiritual awakening* has been used to refer to a range of phenomena. I do not necessarily expect readers of this paper to have experienced spiritual awakening (as I define it), so my use of this term inevitably creates significant opportunities for confusion and misinterpretation. My definition (in the introduction) may help, but I doubt it will completely resolve this issue.

Conclusions

Spiritual awakening (as I have defined it) is possible, with appropriate support and consistent practice. It can be beneficial and transformative. I was able to find the support I needed for my journey of awakening, but in retrospect, I can see ways in which this journey might have been easier and quicker if I had found support systems better matched to my personal strengths and needs. In my future work, I intend to explore ways of making such support systems available to others.

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