

# Spiritual Awakening Experiences: A Phenomenological Study in Transpersonal Psychology

Christian Stokke & Mira Cataya Rodriguez

University of Southeastern Norway

## Abstract

This article studies the phenomenon of spiritual awakening experiences from the perspective of transpersonal psychology. We examine four individual cases, obtained through qualitative in-depth interviews with individuals who have experienced phenomena of peak experiences, kundalini awakening, heart opening, and dark nights. First, we analyse each phenomenon in light of theory and previous research in transpersonal psychology; and secondly, we discuss how various spiritual awakening experiences relate to each other, and how they fit into theoretical models of temporary states and permanent stages.

## Keywords

Spiritual awakening; peak experiences; kundalini; dark nights; spiritual emergence; spiritual emergency; transpersonal psychology; consciousness development; stages of awakening

## Introduction

Spiritual awakening experiences are relatively common among ordinary people (Taylor, 2017), and since the 1970s people have become more willing to talk openly about them (Grof & Grof, 1990). Two common types of awakening experiences are *peak experiences* (Maslow, 1970; Grof & Grof, 1990; Hoffman et al., 2012; Taylor, 2017, 2018) of expanded consciousness, ego dissolution, and feeling one with the universe; and *kundalini awakenings* (Sanella, 1989; Grof & Grof, 1990; Greenwell, 1990, 2018), where currents of energy course through the body and open the heart and other energy centres.

While leading to positive psychological transformation over time, awakening processes often involve painful experiences termed ‘dark nights of the soul’ (Grof & Grof, 1989, 1990; Assagioli, 1989; Ataria, 2016; Greenwell, 2018), where repressed emotional trauma and memories emerge into consciousness. These experiences are temporary states, which may stabilise into permanent higher stages of consciousness (Maslow, 1970; Wilber, 1998, 2007). Psychological study of these phenomena started with William James, C.G. Jung (1975),

Assagioli (1989) and J. Krishnamurti’s writings on the conditioned mind and non-dual awareness, and continued with the founders of humanistic and transpersonal psychology, Abraham Maslow (1970) and Stanislav Grof (Grof & Grof, 1989, 1990). Ken Wilber (1998, 2006, 2007) approaches the topic through integral theory, and transpersonal psychologists Steve Taylor (2017) and Bonnie Greenwell (1990, 2018) have done empirical research with people who have experienced awakening.

## Aims and Scope

This paper aims to examine how unique individual awakening experiences and narratives of transformation fit into theoretical models of states and stages of awakening. Through a qualitative empirical study, we first examine peak experiences, kundalini awakening, heart opening, and dark nights in four individual cases, in light of previous research in transpersonal psychology (Grof & Grof, 1989, 1990; Taylor, 2017, 2018; Greenwell, 1990, 2018). Secondly, we discuss how these phenomena relate to each other, and aim to contribute to theoretical discussions of psychic, subtle, causal and non-dual states and

stages of consciousness development (Maslow, 1970; Wilber, 1998, 2006, 2007).

The authors' academic backgrounds are in anthropology (Christian) and transrational peace studies (Mira). We have published several articles in the field of humanistic and transpersonal psychology on spiritual experiences (Rodriguez & Stokke, 2019; Stokke 2021a, Stokke 2021b). In Rodriguez and Stokke (2019), we discuss how we approach spiritual experiences from a transrational paradigm, which takes people's subjective descriptions of experienced phenomena seriously as empirical data. This is also the epistemological basis for this paper. From our personal life journeys and social networks, both of us are familiar with many of the awakening phenomena described in the transpersonal psychology literature.

## Theory and Definitions

Spiritual awakening processes consist of temporary events that gradually or suddenly lead to permanent transformation. It is a psychological process, which does not depend on philosophical or religious belief (Taylor, 2017). Christina and Stanislav Grof (1990) define these experiences as personal encounters with the sacred or *numinous*, as Jung called it. The Grofs (1990) define spiritual emergence as an innate human potential, a movement towards enhanced emotional and psychosomatic health, freedom, and deeper connections with people, nature and the universe. For most, awakening is easy and gentle. It can be so subtle and gradual that it is almost imperceptible. It could start, for example, with reading spiritual books or synchronistic meetings with new people. For others, the shift can be dramatic and disruptive, what the Grofs (1990) call a 'spiritual emergency'. They see awakening as the organism's natural attempt to throw off negative imprints and heal itself, in a spontaneous version of psychotherapy. If a lot of unconscious material emerges during spiritual emergency, it can interfere with everyday functioning.

Taylor (2017) writes that a few people are born naturally awake, some awaken gradually, but

for most, it happens suddenly. Gradual awakening occurs mostly with people doing spiritual practices, meditation or yoga (Grof 1990), while most spontaneous awakenings occur outside of spiritual contexts (Taylor, 2017; Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2018; Greenwell, 2018). Many things can trigger sudden awakening, including emotional experiences, love-making, childbirth, psychedelics, drug addiction and near-death experiences (Grof & Grof, 1990). Taylor (2017) found that psychological turmoil is the most common trigger, followed by experiences with nature, meditation and art.

Permanent awakening is a fundamental shift, where individuals feel reborn as new persons. This shift brings a sense of well-being, clarity and more intense awareness, increased sense of connection and compassion with all humans, and much-reduced need for identifying with groups. Taylor (2017) notes that this resembles Maslow's (1970) description of the self-actualised person, who has regular peak experiences.

## Peak Experiences

'Peak experiences' is a term Maslow (1971, p. 101) used 'for the best moments of the human being, for the happiest moments of life, for experiences of ecstasy, rapture, bliss, of the greatest joy'. Studying hundreds of cases, Maslow (1970) defined these temporary states as episodes of unitive consciousness, where personal boundaries dissolve, and it feels like becoming one with other people, nature and the universe, with a sense of ecstatic joy, profound peace, transcending time and space, and merging with God. Taylor (2017) and Maslow (1970) believe that almost all people can experience these brief glimpses of higher levels of consciousness. These temporary states may become stable 'plateau experiences' (Maslow, 1970, Wilber, 1998, Buckler, 2011). Peak experiences are the most common of the Grofs' (1989, 1990) ten varieties of spiritual emergence, and correspond to what Taylor (2018) calls 'ego dissolution', one of two main modes of awakening; the second is kundalini.

## Kundalini

Energetic awakenings are less common than peak experiences or ego dissolution (Taylor, 2017), but occur more and more frequently in the West, either spontaneously or because of spiritual practices, and often by transmission from another individual with active kundalini energy (Greenwell, 1990). Following the Grofs (1989, 1990) and Greenwell (1990), we use the yogic terms ‘kundalini’, ‘shaktipat’ and ‘chakras’ to refer to the cross-cultural phenomena of *life-force energy*, *energy transmission* and *energy centres*, respectively.

In the yogic tradition, kundalini refers to the life-force energy in the subtle body, which is latent in all of us, and is associated with libido, or sexual energy (Taylor, 2017; Greenwell 1990; Dixon, 2008). The Tantric tradition sees kundalini as the Goddess *Shakti*, which is the feminine counterpart to *Shiva*, who represents pure consciousness, considered masculine. Energetic awakening is a universal phenomenon described and experienced under various names across many cultures (Greenwell, 1990).

Psychiatrist Lee Sanella (1989) defines kundalini physiologically, as an energy that causes the central nervous system to remove stress and purify blockages. Greenwell (1990), who did her Ph.D. research on kundalini, describes *kundalini awakening* as those events where individuals start feeling this energy, which triggers life-changing physical and emotional transformation processes over several years.

While individual kundalini experiences vary in intensity, duration and triggers, they typically include sensations of energy in the body, starting with goose-bumps when listening to music and tears of joy when seeing beautiful nature, and ranging from soft tingling to electric shocks, and powerful waves of seemingly unmotivated emotions, anxiety, sadness and ecstatic joy (Grof & Grof, 1989).

## Heart opening

Activated kundalini rewires the nervous system, and clears out traumatic imprints and emotional patterns (called ‘samskaras’ in the yogic tradition) stored in the body’s energy field. It opens the chakras, or energy centres (Grof & Grof, 1989), and liberates individuals from cultural conditioning (Greenwell, 2018). Opening the heart chakra plays a key role in awakening (Greenwell, 1990). Heart opening produces an intense loving energy and feelings of unconditional love that embody one’s spirituality.

C.G. Jung (1975) maintains that individuation begins with heart opening, and we can then observe our emotions without identifying with them. Greenwell (1990) believes that the heart’s desires, attachments and emotions also cause the emotional roller coaster of bliss and pain during kundalini and dark nights.

## Dark nights

*Dark nights of the soul*, a term that originates from the mediaeval Christian mystic St John of the Cross, describe transitional periods of negative experiences, cleansing and purging, before, during and after an awakening (Grof & Grof, 1990), when old emotional trauma surfaces. Phenomenologically, dark nights resemble descriptions of traumatic experiences (Ataria, 2016). Greenwell (2018) writes that for several years after an awakening experience, we release blockages in various chakras so that life-force energy can flow. Some patterns transform immediately, but awakening does not erase all psychological issues, and after the initial euphoria, deeper issues surface.

Assagioli (1989) presents a cyclical view of alternating light and darkness, joy and suffering, on the way to self-realisation. Before awakening, many go through a period of emptiness, suffering and inner turmoil. After awakening, ecstatic joy diminishes and parts of the personality revert back to old patterns, with repressed issues emerging and causing depression and despair.

## Stages of awakening

Maslow (1970, 1971) and Wilber (2006, 2007) theorised about permanent stages of consciousness development, sometimes insufficiently grounded in empirical research (Taylor, 2018). In his integral model, Wilber (2006, 2007) operates with four stages of awakening: the psychic, subtle, causal and non-dual, with dark nights in between (Wilber 2007). In earlier versions, Wilber (2006) started with Kohlberg's six stages of moral development, which also include Jürgen Habermas' three cultural levels of traditional, modern and postmodern, and then added four levels of spiritual development from Hindu and Buddhist philosophy on top. From St John of the Cross, Wilber (2006) adapts the 'dark night of the senses' between psychic and subtle, and the 'dark night of the soul' between subtle and causal. This unilinear model fails to explain how traditional mystics could reach awakening without going through modern and postmodern stages. Wilber (2007) has revised it, and now distinguishes between six 'structure-stages' of cognitive and cultural development, and four 'state-stages' of spiritual awakening. For the purposes of this article, it is not decisive whether the psychic stage follows after the postmodern stage in linear development, or if awakening stages intersect with cognitive stages, as in the newer Wilber–Combs lattice.

Wilber's (2007) distinction between temporary *states* and permanent *stages* corresponds to Maslow's (1970) distinction between peak experiences and plateau experiences, which are characteristic of the stages of self-actualisation and self-transcendence, respectively. Taylor (2012) points out that individuals may have many temporary peak experiences and energetic experiences, before entering a permanently more awake stage. Taylor (2017) differentiates between intensities of awakening. At low intensity, we experience heightened awareness; at medium intensity, a sense of connection and love; and at high intensity, the material world dissolves. These three intensities might possibly relate to peak experiences (at psychic level),

heart-opening (at subtle level) and ego death (at causal level), respectively.

## Methodology

### Interviews

The empirical data consists of four individual cases, obtained through qualitative in-depth interviews of 60–90 minutes. We used a semi-structured interview guide, asking interviewees to describe their experiences of peak experiences, kundalini and dark nights, and to reflect on triggers, how experiences transformed them, and stages of development. The interviewer probed for experiences of heart opening. Interviews were framed in terms of theoretical concepts in transpersonal psychology, about which respondents had varying degrees of knowledge. To avoid imposing labels or 'diagnoses' and, rather, including interviewees as partners in analytical dialogue, the interviewer asked whether respondents resonated with the concepts of kundalini, shaktipat, chakras and dark nights. No questions were asked about particular religious or spiritual traditions or teachers, and where participants brought them up, they remain anonymous.

### Participants

The authors chose four participants, two women and two men, by purposive sampling from our own social networks. All respondents were 35–50 years old at the time of the research, living in different cities in Norway and the UK, and did not know each other. All participants follow forms of spiritual practices, and we recruited individuals who were already talking openly about their awakening experiences. We did consider a higher number of respondents, but after interviewing these four, we felt that we had approached data saturation, and had obtained detailed descriptions of most major types and varieties described in the literature. We decided that for this qualitative study, we wanted to present in-depth cases with rich quotations rather than to increase the quantity of interviewees.

Presentation of the participants, with self-chosen pseudonyms and brief awakening story:

- **Meryam** had a gradual spiritual emergence, starting with peak experiences followed by energetic experiences, with a relatively smooth processing of past trauma that has not disrupted daily life.
- **Anna** had a powerful kundalini experience first, followed by gradual awakening with many experiences of unity consciousness, which stabilised after she experienced a non-dual awakening by transmission.
- **'Nobody'** had psychic experiences as a child, followed by difficult feelings in his youth, before he had increasing peak experiences and energetic awakenings as a young adult.
- **John** had a difficult phase of despair and drug use as a young adult, followed by several life-changing awakening experiences triggered by psychedelics and shaktipat.

## Analysis

The authors analysed data together in light of previous research in transpersonal psychology (Grof & Grof, 1989, 1990; Greenwell, 1990, 2018; Taylor, 2017, 2018; Wilber, 1998, 2006, 2007). We categorised data according to the earlier-mentioned themes from the literature and interview guide. The thematic analysis in the Results section is structured accordingly, into the themes of peak experiences, kundalini, heart opening, dark nights, and stages of awakening. Under the last theme, we examine participants' own reflections on transformation processes and developments through stages, which becomes the starting point for analysing how the different phenomena relate to each other in individual cases, and how they fit into theoretical models.

## Limitations

We are aware that our methodological choice to let theoretical concepts guide the interviews creates limitations for the study. With particular

relevance to the topic of spiritual awakening, one of the great 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophers, Jiddu Krishnamurti, points out that assumptions derived from past knowledge actually prevent us from discovering the wholeness of reality (Butcher, 1986). For example, we left out data that did not fit our categories, e.g. several interviewees mentioned synchronicities and other psychic opening phenomena (Grof & Grof, 1990), a topic which deserves a separate study. Had we used a more open-ended interview guide and open-ended thematic analysis, we might have obtained greater data variation and perhaps discovered new connections between phenomena. However, the present study aims to explore how individual experiences correspond to existing theories of developmental stages of awakening (Wilber, 1998, 2006, 2007). Predetermined categories of phenomena known to be common in the literature facilitate this aim, and allow us to more easily compare four individual journeys. Towards the end of the article, we revisit these limitations in light of our findings.

## Results

### Peak experiences

*Meryam* describes a smooth and gradual awakening after yoga and meditation practice. She reports that her first peak experience of unity consciousness happened spontaneously seven years ago while she felt stressed out on the bus to work. She describes that she 'suddenly felt very positive and present in the moment, just seeing the beauty of watching other people and looking outside'. While she had practised yoga and read self-development books, she only realised in hindsight that this was an awakening experience, indicating that it was rather elusive and gradual. Taylor (2017) maintains that a sudden ego dissolution may indeed result from following spiritual practices and reading spiritual books. *Meryam* felt a sudden shift in consciousness with an inner peace and a slowing down of time, which corresponds to Grof and Grof's (1990) description of peak experiences. She says that she now has regular peak experiences during

meditation, which helps her detach from difficult experiences and ‘trust that life unfolds itself’.

*John* reports an intense vision on psychedelics (psilocybin) when he was 18 years old:

I could flip through my whole life inside the brain, like a library. I was shown every situation where I had hurt others directly and indirectly. It physically hurt; it felt like ten thousand needles. After, I developed much greater empathy and compassion. I also experienced I was in a deep hole, where I could not get up, but I could see the light above me.

Grof and Grof (1990) and Taylor (2017) write that psychedelics can cause temporary awakening experiences, because they dissolve the ego. Gradual awakenings outside spiritual contexts often start with a psychedelic experience, which provides what Wilber (cited in Taylor, 2017) calls a *peek experience* – an unexpected glimpse into a transcendental dimension that changes one’s perception of reality.

‘*Nobody*’ reports that he often had altered states of consciousness and out-of-body experiences as a child. His youth was a time of ‘despair, not belonging, meaninglessness, being a total misfit’. Around age 20, he had spiritual experiences triggered by reading *Seth Speaks* and Louise Hay’s *You Can Heal Your Life*. His story resembles Taylor’s (2017), who was born *naturally awake* and felt alienated and depressed as a youth, until he discovered spiritual practices in his twenties. Taylor also experienced that books communicate and transmit awakening; in his case it was Eckhart Tolle’s books. Taylor (2017) writes that naturally awake individuals may feel frustrated with life until they experience transformative moments that represent turning points towards living more authentically. ‘*Nobody*’ describes many ‘episodes where I got a glimpse of something larger’ and spontaneous ‘insights’ that come in despair and personal crisis. He describes ‘feelings of happiness when I got great insights or understandings through

reading, prayer and meditation, dance, and group therapy’. The most powerful experiences have come in group therapy. He says, ‘Taking part in developmental processes of others has given me the strongest feelings of being one with existence; it felt overwhelming, I felt in the flow of energy, melting into the divine, and merging with others.’

His statements express the sense of unity and merging with the universe, described by Maslow (1970, 1971) and the Grofs (1989, 1990). He mentions various triggers identified in the literature, including psychological turmoil, reading books, spiritual practice (Taylor, 2017), dancing (Hoffman et al., 2012) and therapy.

*Anna* experienced a dramatic shift in consciousness three years ago, following an energy transmission from a spiritual teacher. She says, ‘It was a major change of consciousness. I saw the world in a completely new way. It was subtle, everything was the same, yet so different in a way I had never felt before.’ Before this experience, she had been ‘in and out of unity consciousness’, and she stabilised in unity consciousness after the first energy transmission. She had another seven transmissions from this teacher, and says, ‘Each time it felt like I reached a new level of consciousness way beyond unity consciousness, until reaching full realisation’. *Anna* refers to this as ‘non-dual awakening’ (which we discuss later), and emphasises that it was very different from shaktipat or kundalini transmission. Greenwell (2018) explains that energy transmission is a natural phenomenon similar to how laughing and coughing trigger others to do the same. It may happen when an awakened person’s energies and consciousness resonate with another in their presence.

### **Kundalini**

*John* describes a classical kundalini awakening, triggered by shaktipat from a medium:

I felt tingling in the thighs, pelvis and lower body, where the root chakra is. A strong

physical energy spread all the way up to my head. It was euphoric, very emotional and a feeling of happiness. It felt like 40 kilos was taken off my back. My social anxiety disappeared, and I stopped using drugs that same day. I got my feelings back, and afterwards I often get goose-bumps and feel a rush in the body when others say something that resonates with me.

This experience fits the classical yogic description of energy rushing upwards in the body from root to top (Greenwell, 1990). In the yogic tradition, shaktipat usually means that an enlightened teacher (*guru*) with active kundalini activates another's kundalini; but Greenwell (2018) found in empirical research that anyone with heightened energy might activate another's kundalini. Some people feel an intense energetic or psychic impact in their body when in the presence of a lover, friend or stranger, with active kundalini, who need not be aware of transmitting the energy. Sannella (1989) found that kundalini is more easily activated in individuals with a sensitive nervous system.

For ten years leading up to this episode, John had been 'in a very bad place psychologically and emotionally; a period of depression, anxiety and drug use'. Grof and Grof (1990) write that many drug and alcohol users are sensitive due to trauma, with their craving for intoxicants perhaps representing a desire for transcendence, and it is not uncommon that sudden awakening triggers transition to sobriety. Taylor (2017) calls it 'posttraumatic transformation' when individuals in despair experience a dramatic transformation, after which they feel they are a different person, and anxiety disappears. Sannella (1989, p. 108) describes kundalini as 'a therapy from within, far superior to any that we yet know to administer from without'.

*Meryam* describes her kundalini awakening as 'very gradual over a long time, with different sensations of subtle energy'. Her first energetic experience happened spontaneously at work. She 'felt it in the stomach area, not so much in the spine', and while less intense than John's, she describes it as 'powerful'; she felt 'in a different reality' and she 'needed to sit down'.

Later during yoga practice, she has had sensations of 'uplifting' energy, where she felt a 'sense of connection with others'.

'*Nobody*' also describes frequent energetic experiences, 'triggered by music, especially Indian sitar, dancing, meditation, lovemaking, and physical exercise'. He describes these as 'experiences of euphoria and lightness, feeling one with everything'. Taylor (2017) points out that these energetic experiences can be difficult to distinguish from peak experiences of unity consciousness, because ego dissolution usually also has energetic aspects. 'Nobody' has also experienced classical yogic shaktipat, i.e. energy transmission from a guru (Greenwell, 2018): 'I had a transmission of energy from an Indian guru, who held his thumb on my forehead and images appeared.'

*Anna* had a powerful kundalini experience that corresponds to what Grof and Grof (1990) call a 'spiritual emergency', which disrupts psychological functioning (Taylor, 2017) and resembles a psychotic episode (Sedláková & Riháček, 2019). Taylor writes that these may take some years to settle down and integrate. *Anna's* episode took place eight years ago, while she worked with energy healing:

Half my face went numb; a voice appeared and asked me to lie down on the floor. I was pulled down on the floor; it was very physical, and my body moved in different positions and mudras I had never known before. I was exhausted, but not scared. I realised this was good for me.

This physical experience was the first of three rounds, and followed by a strong emotional release and heart opening, which we discuss later. *Anna* experienced involuntary body movements and yoga postures, which the Grofs (1989, 1990) and Greenwell (1990, 2018) mention can happen during kundalini episodes. While *Anna* did not know what happened at the time, she knew it was good for her. After the experience, she felt a subtle change, like a need to be more authentic, and stop people-pleasing.

## Heart opening

Chakras can open in any order, and some individuals are born with an open chakra that enables certain capacities. Heart opening is a significant turning point in the awakening process (Greenwell, 2018).

'Nobody' had psychic experiences as a child, and says that his crown chakra has always been open. Greenwell (2018) writes that an open crown chakra indicates ego dissolution, and facilitates transcendent states such as out-of-body experiences, which is what 'Nobody' experienced as a child. Later, he had heart openings in brief moments and when overwhelmed by grief and pain in bereavement. He describes feelings appearing in the chest, a 'tingling, happiness, openness' and 'the heart becomes big and open'. He did therapy to open the root chakra.

John says that his upper chakras have been open since the psilocybin experience, and that he is still working with opening the lower ones. John's heart opened last year during shamanic healing: 'It felt like my heart physically opened, and expanded into my arms.'

Meryam says that she 'felt that the crown chakra opened more than the others'. She has experienced a wide range of psychic abilities, including telepathy and intuitive phenomena, which indicate an open third-eye chakra. Meryam's heart opened during past-life regression, she felt that 'fear completely dissolved' and she felt 'subtle energy in my arms'. She describes the experience as amazing.

Anna's heart opened during kundalini activation: 'I just cried, and cried, and cried. I felt like my heart opened completely. I felt safe, and I had a strong feeling of love.'

## Dark nights

During dark nights, repressed emotions and memories emerge into consciousness (Grof & Grof, 1990; Greenwell, 2018).

John reflects on emerging trauma and shadow aspects:

Awakening experiences lead to a cleansing process where I become more aware of shadow aspects that come up. I see how I am meant to develop myself further. Darkness and traumatic experiences come up, more light comes in, and it pushes the darkness to the surface.

'Nobody' reports that he still experiences dark feelings, but there is a 'foundation of happiness' so that 'darkness is not as deep and dark any more. If I fall into a dark hole, there is always a way out.' In this regard, Greenwell (2018) points out that behind psychic pain, there is a background feeling of bliss and love, and we gradually learn that thoughts and emotions are not who we are; they are passing experiences which we can calmly observe.

Meryam says that now she 'can still see the challenges, but without panic, fear and anxiety', and it feels like 'everything is meant to happen for my own growth'. Greenwell (2018) writes that many feel alone and have no one with whom to share experiences. Meryam says she 'struggled with the dark night of the soul, and had no one to talk to'.

Anna experienced a disruptive dark night after the energy transmissions. She says, 'I lost my memory, and my intellectual brain disappeared'. Taylor (2017) notes that individuals may experience memory problems, and the Grofs (1990) write that rationality may temporarily dissolve, the logical mind is bypassed by intuition and imagination, and linear thinking becomes impossible. Anna describes her dark night starting two weeks after the energy transmission:

The next six months were tough. A sense of peace was there, I could feel oneness and unity, but in between that, strong traumatic feelings emerged. I isolated myself, it was difficult to be a mother, I was constantly stressed and in fight/flight mode, but occasionally felt a deep calm, before a new wave came. Several times, I was lying on the



floor, feeling I am going to die, and I said ‘I surrender. If I die now, it is ok.’ As soon as I surrendered, the energy shifted and I felt peaceful for a while.

This was three years ago, and now Anna feels more stabilised, feeling a constant background of peace, but still struggling with trauma coming up. This is similar to what Greenwell (2018) describes as typical during dark nights, that there is a background of bliss even while trauma comes up to release. Taylor (2017) writes that powerful sudden openings can make it difficult to do everyday tasks, as Anna describes, and that integrating this experience can take many years. Anna told us that her spiritual teacher thought she was prepared to go all the way, but the series of eight energy transmissions was too much for her sensitive system. She says, ‘The teacher pushed me too much; I wasn’t able to process and integrate the different stages’. In this regard, Greenwell (2018) comments that many teachers have limited knowledge of the awakening process.

### Stages of awakening

While each person’s path is unique, temporary states tend to become stable *stages* (Grof & Grof, 1990). We asked participants to reflect on their own journey through awakening experiences and permanent transformations.

‘*Nobody*’ says that he now has permanent ‘faith in life’ and is ‘not afraid of dying’. While he was born naturally awake, he had a turning point at age 20 in the midst of personal crisis, after which he became aware of having energetic experiences. He says he did not experience stages of development, but an ‘exponential growth, with a series of events that gave deeper and deeper insights’. He says:

Spiritual experiences have given direction to my life and made it more meaningful. I got insights, and search for more answers. The higher and deeper consciousness I get, the more I understand that I do not know. Like a snowball effect.

This perspective corresponds to what the Grofs (1990) write, that self-exploration is an ongoing process, or as Greenwell (2018) writes, awakening is the beginning of transformation.

*Meryam* expresses a chronological progression of events:

I went through phases of expanded consciousness gradually over a period of time. Then I went through a very challenging time. Then I went through all the energetic experiences. Old wounds and traumata still come up. Currently I am in a healing phase.

Her awakening process starts with peak experiences, followed by a dark night, then kundalini, and another dark night.

*John* describes a peak experience on psychedelics, followed by a difficult period, then a kundalini experience, and later a heart opening. He says, ‘All awakening experiences have led me into new stages; they have all been life-changing. The latest experience with the heart opening led me on to a whole new path, a spiritual path.’

*Anna* started with a kundalini experience, and continued with a gradual awakening with many experiences of unity consciousness. She then experienced a dramatic shift in consciousness, which she describes as ‘non-dual awakening’, which made her question the idea of a linear path:

I’ve realised that it isn’t about how far I’ve come in spiritual development. I experienced the peak of what is possible to experience. I don’t feel that stage theories fit my experience. I had learned that spiritual development was supposed to be about following certain steps or stages along the spiritual path – but after my non-dual awakening, I realised that’s not how it works.

Like Anna says, Greenwell (2018) writes that most spiritual traditions promote a gradual path of spiritual development, where practitioners work on themselves to improve certain qualities over years of practice. In contrast, the non-dual

path (*advaita vedanta*) emphasises sudden awakening. Since we are already one with the divine, we only need to lose the illusion of separation. Anna says: ‘I believe we are all already awake and that this is our natural state. My spiritual seeking took me away from seeing the simplicity of true awakening.’

Similar to what Anna is saying, Taylor (2017) writes that contemporary non-dual teachers suggest that awakening just happens. There is nothing to prepare for, practise is not necessary, and making an effort is counterproductive. We simply need to realise that we are *already* awake. Both Taylor (2017) and Greenwell (2018) agree that non-dual awakening requires a direct experience of oneness, as Anna had. It has nothing to do with belief; it is about going beyond the mind. According to Greenwell (2018), when we let go of the mind’s projections, consciousness awakens out of the illusion of separation.

Anna’s description of non-dual awakening also corresponds to how Krishnamurti describes his spontaneous awakening experience when he was 27 years old. He noted that the distinction between observer and observed melted away; he was in everything, and everything was in him. In Butcher’s (1986) words, Krishnamurti realised that the observed only exists within his field of conscious awareness, and that separation is an illusion. Krishnamurti describes this as a purification of the brain, which took him beyond thinking and beyond the duality created by thought. From this experience, he reached the realisation that we cannot arrive at understanding through dogma, philosophy or technique, only through a ‘choiceless awareness’ of the contents of our minds (Butcher, 1986).

## Discussion

### Peak experiences

Peak experiences of unity consciousness have the following characteristics, according to Maslow (1970, 1971) and the Grofs (1990):

- transcending divisions between subject and object;
- reaching a state of wholeness and ecstatic union with humanity, nature and the universe;
- feelings of peace, bliss, going beyond time and space; and
- a sense of sacredness.

A range of activities and impressions can trigger these experiences of ego dissolution, including seeing something beautiful, inspired art, love-making, fusion with nature, music, dancing and athletic experiences (Hoffman et al., 2012). Taylor (2017) found that trauma and turmoil, intense stress and upheaval, depression and alcoholism, and spiritual practices can trigger ego dissolution. In our sample, Meryam had peak experiences following spiritual practice, psychedelics triggered John’s, and ‘Nobody’ was naturally awake. They also experienced psychological turmoil. Anna had many experiences of unity consciousness for a period following a powerful kundalini experience.

### Kundalini

Kundalini awakenings are less common and more intense than peak experiences (Taylor, 2017). In a spontaneous kundalini activation, life-force energy moves through the body (Greenwell, 2018), and the psyche is flooded with waves of emotions of ecstatic bliss, joy, anxiety and sadness (Grof & Grof, 1990). It varies empirically whether energy rises suddenly or gradually, with terrifying intensity or with smooth, soft sensations. Each individual kundalini experience is unique. Common sensations include energy rushes, heart palpitations, insomnia, involuntary body movements, heightened vision or taste, hearing buzzing or ringing, psychic phenomena, telepathy and synchronicities; and intense, unpredictable mood swings with waves of euphoria, ecstatic bliss and unconditional love, alternating with anxiety and sadness, which can happen several times a day or last for weeks.

Energetic awakenings can last months or years, but eventually calm down (Greenwell, 2018). In the yogic tradition, kundalini rises upwards through the body. Some experience it erratically like a geyser, some periodically or permanently as a solid stream, some as a fine stream during meditation only, and others feel only subtle shifts in energy (Greenwell, 1990). Triggers include meditation and yoga practices, breathwork, psychedelics, near-death experiences, trauma, grief and despair, strong love and devotion, love-making, shaktipat and therapy (Greenwell, 2018).

Greenwell (ibid.) found a lot of empirical variation in how kundalini moves in the body. Traditional yogic theory holds that it lies coiled at the base of the spine and moves upwards along the spine from root to crown chakra, while Sanella's (1989) physiological observations indicate that energy rises from the feet, along the back to the head, and along the front to the abdomen. Dixon (2008) argues that it is definitely not a linear path, and kundalini operates simultaneously in all chakras to varying degree, because it happens in the brain from the start, and then follows a course through the body that is specific to each person. Among our cases, John had a classical kundalini activation with energy flowing upwards; Meryam and 'Nobody' had gradual and subtle energetic awakenings, while Anna had a powerful kundalini episode with strong physical and emotional aspects.

### **Heart opening**

The chakras or energy centres in the subtle body open as a result of kundalini activation (Grof & Grof, 1990). In yogic theory, the degree to which chakras are open or obstructed determines the way one experiences and relates to the world. The three lower chakras represent forces of the body, survival, sex, aggression and competitiveness, while upper chakras represent spiritual potentials. While classical yogic theory suggests that lower chakras open before the upper ones, empirical evidence indicates that chakras can open in any order (Greenwell, 2018; Dixon, 2008). In modern society where

many 'live in their heads', it is not uncommon for the upper chakras to open first, then the heart, and eventually the lower ones when individuals integrate and embody their spiritual process.

Greenwell (2018) explains that childhood trauma causes us to dissociate and detach from our body, in the process shutting down the lower chakras, and we feel disembodied and spaced out. She describes heart opening as an intensely physical and emotional experience where all armouring around the heart breaks down, leading to dramatic shifts in energy and worldview, with blockages falling away, and people feeling spontaneous unconditional love. Among our participants, three report that upper chakras opened first, and all four describe heart opening as a significant event, with physical sensations of energy around the heart, emotional sensations of love, and dissolution of fear.

### **Dark nights**

Dark nights occur because awakening brings to the surface unresolved psychological issues, shadow material and psychic darkness, including childhood trauma, memories of abuse, attachment trauma such as lack of bonding, abandonment and separation issues, trauma from and before birth, and archetypal material from the collective unconscious or past-life memories (Grof & Grof, 1990). When feelings of fear, loneliness, experiences of insanity and preoccupation with death flood the psyche, it affects individuals' functioning in the external world.

Experiences during dark nights of the soul may resemble symptoms of depression or psychosis. Without a supportive environment, spiritual emergence may turn into crisis, a 'spiritual emergency' (Grof & Grof, 1989). Many transpersonal psychologists (Grof & Grof, 1989; Sanella, 1989; Corneille & Luke, 2021) emphasise that spiritual awakenings should be seen as therapeutical processes of natural healing rather than as episodes of psychopathology, and they point out that conventional psychology tends to misdiagnose

these cases. House (2001/2010) notes that a large part of clients' anxiety is rooted in the fear of 'not being normal', and conventional psychotherapy, which commonly pathologises phenomena that lie beyond the rationalist framework, contributes to that fear. When operating within this limited framework, professional healthcare may be counterproductive, especially when attempting to 'fix' clients' extra-ordinary conditions by prescribing medications. It may be better to trust the wisdom of the transformative process towards healing, since awakening experiences may indicate evolutionary stages of consciousness beyond the rationalist paradigm of conventional therapy. In many forms of alternative therapy, a 'healing crisis', where symptoms temporarily increase as part of a healing process, is well known.

Greenwell (2018) explains that negative emotions arising during dark nights result from kundalini removing anything damaged or unhealthy. Arising emotions may include fear, shame, anxiety and grief, often without a story attached, so that we may not be aware of the cause of these emotions. We may encounter insomnia, depression, extreme energy, tiredness, cloudy thinking, overwhelming love, and increased sensitivity to toxic people, environments and world events. Taylor (2017) writes that also those who are naturally awake may experience difficulties, since they too have negative behavioural traits and patterns, known as 'karma' and 'samskaras' in the yogic tradition, that may be carried over from past lives. Among our participants, John and Meryam express that they understand that trauma release helps their own growth, 'Nobody' experiences that it is not so dark any more, while Anna is gradually stabilising after an intense dark night.

### **Stages of awakening**

Awakening processes usually consist of several transformational experiences rather than one sudden shift (Taylor, 2017). Our respondents all went through a gradual process of more or less clearly distinguishable experiences, spread out

chronologically over many years. While acknowledging that different varieties of awakening experience merge into one another and can be difficult to distinguish, Taylor (2017) says we should try to map the process, as long as we avoid unnecessary dividing lines. How, then, do peak experiences, kundalini awakening, heart opening and dark nights relate to each other? How do our four participants' awakening stories fit into Wilber's (2006, 2007) model of stages of consciousness development?

Wilber (2006, 2007) operates with four stages of awakening – the psychic, subtle, causal, and non-dual, with dark nights in between. Since Wilber's work is mostly theoretical with limited reference to empirical studies of the phenomena, we will use contemporary mystic, Jim Marion (2011), to operationalise the stages, so we can examine how our participants' experiences fit into each stage.

Marion (2011) applies Wilber's model to interpret his own awakening process in *Putting on the Mind of Christ* which, although not a scholarly work, insightfully links Wilber's theory to Marion's autobiography, and is in Marion's (2011, p. xxvi) words 'faithful to the actual everyday growth process by which most of us evolve spiritually'. Marion (2011) emphasises that stages can overlap, but in his experience, transitions are clearly noticeable. Wilber (2006) acknowledges that he had previously implied that individual spiritual development follows a single path of development, and his revised model clarifies that temporary states are available to all, regardless of permanent stage. Marion (2011) argues that this explains how historical saints, mystics and teachers could reach awakened states while bypassing modern and postmodern cognitive development, which means they preserved mythical beliefs, and without doing the psychological work of integrating shadow aspects, so that they remained abusive.

Marion describes experiences at each stage that correspond to how peak experiences, kundalini and dark nights are described in the research literature discussed in this article, enabling us to

connect Wilber's stages to empirical descriptions of phenomena.

**Psychic stage:** Marion writes that many contemporary spiritual seekers are entering the psychic level, which John of the Cross referred to as the beginners' state. This is the first level *beyond the mind*, where meditators start identifying with the *inner witness*. Many open up to psychic and intuitive phenomena such as out-of-body experiences, and have regular peak experiences (Marion 2011) of unity consciousness, as Maslow (1970, 1971) and the Grofs (1989, 1990) describe.

**Dark night of the senses:** The emergence of subtle kundalini energy marks the transition to the subtle level, with the *dark night of the senses* as an intermediate phase. Marion (2011) personally never felt energy rushing up the spine, but he describes that people often get high on kundalini, which functions as natural psychotherapy that cleanses, heals and transmutes negative emotions. He notes that these cause pain, darkness, depression, fear, and sometimes nervous breakdowns, as Grof and Grof (1990) and Greenwell (1990, 2018) describe.

**Subtle stage:** Marion (2011) writes that the subtle stage often starts suddenly, when the heart centre opens. Marion describes this in a similar way to Greenwell (1990), noting that people develop genuine compassion, and feel unconditional love. It feels like coming home and being reborn, and is usually a creative and productive period of life. Individuals may get into contact with a human guru or spiritual master. It is common to experience telepathy, synchronicities, insights, intuition and bliss (Marion, 2011).

**Dark night of the soul:** The dark night of the soul marks the transition to the causal stage, where Marion (2011) notes that people get rid of their personality and identities like gender, race, nationality and religion. This reflects what Taylor (2017) refers to as 'ego death', where old limiting personality structures die, identities dissolve, and we become free from cultural conditioning, as Greenwell (2018) maintains. Like Greenwell, Marion (2011) points out that individuals stop projecting repressed virtues, shadow aspects and neuroses on to authority figures, and dissolve trauma from childhood and past lives. Negativity may manifest externally, through loss of career, home or car.

**Causal and Non-dual stage:** At the causal level, individuals no longer identify with human personality and identities. They are now free from neurotic projections, detached from everyday struggles and anxieties, and no longer attract negativity, and realise that they are sinless, immortal and divine. According to Marion, the end of this level is the non-dual stage, which John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila did not reach, but Yogananda and Meister Eckhart did.

To sum up Marion's (2011) operationalisation of Wilber's model: peak experiences indicate the psychic level; kundalini activation marks the dark night of the senses; heart opening corresponds to the subtle level; and ego death corresponds to the dark night of the soul. (See Table 1, next page.)

**Table 1** Participants’ experiences in Wilber’s stage model

STAGE	MAIN EXPERIENCE	‘Nobody’	John	Meryam	Anna
Childhood		Out-of-body experiences as a child; open crown chakra	Traumatic experiences	Traumatic experiences	Spiritual longing
PSYCHIC LEVEL	Peak experiences		Peak experience on psilocybin; age 18	Peak experience after practice; 7 years ago	Powerful kundalini and heart opening 8 years ago; then gradual awakening of unity consciousness
Dark night of senses	Kundalini	Difficult feelings in youth; then energetic experiences and heart opening in his 20s	Drug use; then kundalini; age 28	Challenging times; gradual kundalini	
SUBTLE LEVEL	Heart opening		Heart opening last year	Heart opening	
Dark night of soul	Ego death	Negative experiences don’t feel so dark any more	Trauma comes up	Trauma comes up	Non-dual awakening experiences; 3 years ago; then trauma comes up
CAUSAL AND NON-DUAL LEVEL					

If we see stages of awakening as ‘fluid and open, not discrete and linear’ (Wilber, 2007, p. 99), then all four participants’ experiences fit into the model. *Meryam* and *John* follow the stages in the same chronological order. *John*’s events of peak experiences, kundalini activation and heart opening were dramatic and life-changing, while *Meryam* went through the same events in a smooth and gradual way. ‘Nobody’ did not experience clear-cut and distinct stages, but his peak experiences, energetic experiences and dark nights follow the same chronological order. *Anna* starts with a kundalini awakening, followed by experiences of unity consciousness, and then a non-dual awakening. The case of *Anna* indicates that stages are not always linear. Wilber (1998) writes that people can temporarily peak-experience the psychic, subtle, causal or non-dual level in no particular order,

while permanent stages almost always occur in that specific order.

To sum up, then, peak experiences of unitive consciousness often occur as temporary states at the psychic stage, which *John* of the Cross called the beginners’ level. However, individuals at any stage may have glimpses of unity consciousness and non-duality, as *Anna* did. All four of our participants experienced kundalini activation and heart opening, which according to Greenwell (1990, 2018) are significant events in the awakening process, and indicate permanent transformation and transition to the subtle stage.

**Shortcomings and Future Research**

This study raises many questions for future research. In our findings, we were surprised by

how closely participants' experiences of the selected phenomena corresponded to nuances and variations described in past research. Interviewees' experiences also resonated with many of the authors' personal experiences. This indicates a level of scientific validity as well as a personal validation of these subjective experiences which appear to be relatively common, and tend to follow regular patterns. However, future research is needed to explore further whether experiences of awakening phenomena systematically tend to occur in the stages we describe. Little research has been done on the phenomenon of heart opening, and it would be interesting to explore further how heart opening relates to synchronicities and other psychic phenomena. While in-depth studies of individual cases could be suitable for this exploration, we also need quantitative studies of larger samples, such as the recent study by Corneille and Luke (2021), to discover patterns of awakening experiences.

Our sample presents a limitation. While the four participants have different backgrounds, all had some past knowledge of transpersonal psychology, and were familiar with yogic terms (e.g. kundalini and chakras). Indeed, we had selected them precisely because they were already putting their spiritual experiences into words. But this also implies that they had previous knowledge of the categories that structured the interviews, and consequently their phenomenological descriptions were influenced by yogic and transpersonal terminology. If we had interviewed individuals who did not have an explanatory framework, or individuals with religious frameworks, descriptions would have been different.

While awakening experiences often happen spontaneously and appear to be universal, interpretations vary significantly depending on which explanatory paradigms (e.g. mystical Christianity, yogic traditions, conventional or transpersonal psychology) individuals use to make sense of their experiences. Transpersonal psychologists such as Ferrer (2017) suggest that spiritual phenomena are co-created and shaped by individuals' cultural and religious

frameworks, and this needs to be further explored in empirical research.

## Concluding Remarks

Eckhart Tolle (in Taylor, 2017) writes that awakening means dis-identification from thinking, to rise beyond thought. As Greenwell (2018) writes, spiritual seekers often begin the journey by asking about the meaning of life, longing to know what is true, and pursue this search through intellectual concepts. Many contemporary spiritual seekers are at the psychic level, where they temporarily experience being a witness and observing thought. Seeking ends with direct awakening experiences that take people beyond the conceptual understanding of the discursive mind. Heart opening indicates a permanent transformation to the subtle level, where we find most ordinary awakened people, including the participants in this study.

Kundalini activation and heart opening lead to an embodiment of spirituality, where spirituality is no longer about mental beliefs, but is felt as physical phenomena in the body. This means that awakening is a movement from mind to heart to body. Greenwell (2018) writes that she had meditated for 15 years before realising the link between spirituality and physical energy. The cleansing and purifications during the dark night, where trauma comes up, can also take many years, so that few people have reached the causal stage. According to Marion (2011), this is the stage of saints, spiritual masters and enlightened individuals, such as John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Mirabai, Yogananda and Meister Eckhart.

Conventional psychology, attempting to solve psychological challenges through thinking and analysis, tends to pathologise states and stages of consciousness that are beyond the rational. Research in transpersonal psychology, however, suggests that spiritual awakening experiences are therapeutical, and that the solution to psychological healing lies beyond the mind. As Krishnamurti suggests, awakening experiences can dissolve the fear created by the mind, and

liberate us from unhealthy cultural conditioning (Butcher, 1986).

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## About the contributors



**Christian Stokke** is an associate professor in the Department of Culture, Religion and Social Studies at the University of Southeastern Norway, campus Drammen. He holds a Ph.D. in anthropology from the Norwegian University of

Science and Technology. His current research interests include spirituality, transpersonal psychology, life skills education and anti-racism. He teaches multiculturalism and contemporary religiosity in teacher education, leads a research group in religious education and is co-editor of the *Human Rights Education Review*.



**Mira Cataya Rodriguez** is a Ph.D. research fellow in the Department of Culture, Religion and Social Studies at the University of Southeastern Norway, campus Drammen. She holds a masters in transrational peace studies from the University of Innsbruck, Austria. Her Ph.D. project focuses on pedagogical

practices for life skills education and intercultural understanding in religious education. Her research interests also include spirituality and transpersonal psychology. She teaches cultural diversity and contemporary religiosity in teacher education.

Address for correspondence: [christian.stokke@usn.no](mailto:christian.stokke@usn.no)

## SOME HUMANISTIC WISDOM

“Music is the language of the spirit. It opens the secret of life bringing peace, abolishing strife.”

**Khalil Gibran (1883–1931)**