



9-1-2018

# Joy, Not Elsewhere Classified—Towards a Contemporary Psychological Understanding of Spiritual (and Secular) Awakening

Kelly Kilrea

St. Paul University, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.ciis.edu/ijts-transpersonalstudies>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#), [Religion Commons](#), and the [Transpersonal Psychology Commons](#)

## Recommended Citation

Kilrea, K. (2018). Joy, not elsewhere classified—Towards a contemporary psychological understanding of spiritual (and secular) awakening. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 37 (2). <http://dx.doi.org/https://doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2018.37.2.66>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

This Special Topic Introduction is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals and Newsletters at Digital Commons @ CIIS. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Journal of Transpersonal Studies by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ CIIS. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@ciis.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@ciis.edu).

# Introduction to the Special Topic Section on Spiritual Awakening: Joy, Not Elsewhere Classified—Towards a Contemporary Psychological Understanding of Spiritual (and Secular) Awakening

Kelly Kilrea<sup>1</sup>  
St. Paul University  
Ottawa, ON, Canada

Awakening reportedly leads to a whole host of positive psychological outcomes—wellbeing, inner peace, fulfillment, and joy—as well as some negative ones such as mental health and relationship issues in the initial stages of adjustment. Some early reports suggest that once the new stage is integrated, the psychological benefits greatly outweigh the drawbacks (e.g., Costeines, 2009; Fire, 2011; Kilrea, 2013; Taylor 2012). Both clinicians and ordinary people are typically interested in feeling happier, more at peace, and well-adjusted in the world. The phenomenon of awakening may have much to offer in this regard.

Awakening is an inspiring subject that calls up images of the farther reaches of human potential (cf. Maslow, 1969). It is also a subject with the power to offend, as I discovered in my research over the last several years. In personal communications with other scholars, terms used to label and discuss awakening experiences resonate for some and are off-putting to others, such as the term *enlightenment*—perhaps since such terms have multiple meanings, or could be seen to carry implicit religion-like claims, or since scholars may have a pre-existing religious belief system that defines such terms differently (i.e., Buddhism). Scholars' views reflect a variety of worldviews and belief systems, and can be prone to sensitivity when discussing what is, for some, a rather personal topic within scholarly discourse.

Awakening has been defined and described a number of different ways in the literature, and is associated with a cluster of related terms such as nondual realization, enlightenment, oneness, self-transcendence, cosmic consciousness, unitive

consciousness, and wakefulness—though it is not clear that all of these terms refer to the same thing, or to the phenomenon that is here called awakening. In many cases the term implies a metaphysical stance according to the language and context of a spiritual or religious tradition (e.g., Zen Buddhism, Christian mysticism, Indian yoga, or Jewish kabbalah). In other cases, awakening has been defined developmentally or phenomenologically, with or without a metaphysical overlay. Awakening, approached phenomenologically, may have great relevance in a whole person approach to psychology. No one term used consistently in the literature to refer to this phenomenon. However, based on the descriptions that correspond with each term, this cluster of terms may be referring to the same general phenomenon or a grouping of related phenomena.

All scholarly knowledge is in some degree constructed—even phenomenal descriptions; nonetheless, a consideration of the phenomenology of such experiences may avoid at least some of the debate regarding how the phenomenon should be interpreted. It may be premature to place too much emphasis on interpretation before there is more empirical research focused on lived accounts and phenomenological descriptions of what has been called awakening, which would provide a more detailed, nuanced, and contextualized portrait of how and whether this type of experience is lived across cultures and through the lifespan. Once such a phenomenon has been more fully documented and described, various lenses may be employed to understand such experiences within various structures and theories. With these limitations

of preliminary study firmly in mind, the works presented here offer a modest contribution to the process of inquiry.

For the purposes of this discussion, awakening is defined as a permanent, marked transformation in one's sense of identity, relationship to others, and the world at large. It includes an intensification of present-moment experience, and a greater sense of connection with all humanity. Within psychology, awakening may be considered an ongoing state of consciousness, distinct from ordinary waking consciousness, with specific cognitive, affective, behavioral, existential, and transpersonal features. Paradox appears to be characteristic of this state, where non-ordinary experience (e.g. self-identification as nothing and/or everything; felt-sense of oneness with all life/people/beings; sense of timelessness; pervasive sense of freedom; marked increases in intensity, duration, and frequency of: joy, wonder, awe, inner peace, love, and sensory enjoyment; relative *absence* of anxiety, worry, depression, low self-esteem, and fear of death, rejection, and failure) is experienced as ordinary, or normal (Kilrea, 2013). Onset may be gradual or sudden and may involve a period of adjustment and integration lasting weeks or years, followed by a period of continual development, refinement, and maturing in the state (Kilrea, 2018; cf. Taylor, 2017)

There are a number of issues to consider in the study of awakening. One such issue concerns the nature of the phenomenon: Is awakening spiritual or secular? Both? Neither? Some argue that an awakened state is inherently spiritual due to its transcendent or non-ordinary nature, while others argue that it is essentially secular, in that it appears to be phenomenologically consistent whether or not a spiritual lens or interpretation is applied to it. Categorizing awakening as strictly secular could lead to the psychologizing of a spiritual process, which could be seen to marginalize or relativize the powerful meaning it holds for many who have such experiences. Holding these experiences as transcendent could lead to an essentializing view that may reduce or erase crucial differences, or conflate reports from popular spirituality contexts with advanced spiritual attainments, such as those described in Eastern spiritual traditions.

An equally crucial matter is whether holding a phenomenon as sacred will constrain or bias its scientific study. Religious systems typically have specific interpretations of experiences deemed to be spiritual, whereas scientific study—even Husserlian phenomenology—requires that all interpretations be regularly reconsidered in light of additional data. Scientists should show utmost respect for spiritual traditions and their practitioners, but this respect cannot include uncritical acceptance of beliefs or perspectives that may be attached to practices or particular types of experience.

At the same time, a psychological study of spiritual phenomena must be careful not to appropriate from indigenous cultures or their sacred teachings, or substitute meanings from popular culture in place of those held by an ancient tradition. *Enlightenment* is one of the terms often used synonymously with awakening in the literature, yet this term has a particular meaning in New Age spiritual teachings that is not necessarily consistent with Buddhist teachings. Because the comparative and psychological study of mystical systems of various world religions is still in its early stages, there is currently no critically-informed consensus regarding whether any of the experiences associated with popular spirituality in the West (such as awakening) are the same as phenomena that go by terms translated from Eastern spiritual traditions. As Lancaster (2018, this issue) points out, such questions can and should be pursued both through sacred texts and the hermeneutic understanding they communicate, as well as through contemporary phenomenological inquiry with living participants.

Another issue in research on awakening concerns the nature of the experiencer's state of consciousness: Is the state that follows this profound shift experienced continuously, and if so does it represent a post-conventional stage of development rather than a state of consciousness? If it is a developmental stage to which all could or should aspire, or is it simply one of many ways to unfold as a human being? What are the varieties of the reported state of wakefulness associated with awakening, and are these sufficiently similar and distinct to fit within a single phenomenon? Some have argued that awakened experiencing is not actually a state,

but rather a *non-state* that exists prior to the arising of all states of consciousness, and that it represents consciousness itself.

To make progress on such issues, a baseline understanding is needed of what the reported phenomenon of awakening actually is. A collection of existing empirical reports (primarily qualitative), used to inform the future use of new and existing quantitative measures and new and established culturally-sensitive mixed methods investigations that detail the contemporary lived experience of awakening will be of use in this endeavor. As this appears to be a whole-person phenomenon rather than solely cognitive or behavioral, holistic approaches that seek to provide nuanced portraits of the emotional, relational, cognitive, perceptual, sensory, intuitive, and behavioral aspects of everyday life lived in this state will be beneficial to advancing the current understanding.

The psychological literature to date includes numerous discussions of the nature of reality and the nature of consciousness as it relates to the awakened experience. Hartelius, Thouin-Savard, and Crouch (2018) have warned against “the generalization of particular meaning frames into universal claims about the nature of reality” (p. v). This is good advice, from a scholarly perspective. It also in tension with what is often expressed by participants in phenomenological awakening research who, in reporting their lived experience, make such universal claims about the nature of reality. To them, it is clear. The question about the nature of reality and how it relates to the psychological inquiry into this phenomenon needs to be considered when attempting to make sense of the certainty with which this experience is both lived and communicated by the experiencers. On the one hand, it is impossible to scientifically test metaphysical claims about the nature of reality (e.g., Hartelius, 2016); on the other, the powerful confidence of those who report this type of experience deserves genuine consideration.

The many issues present in the study of awakening need not hinder progress on the simple study of the phenomenon as reported, since even here there are gaps in understanding. While some of the primary features of awakening are known, it is not yet known how awakening leads to greater

inner peace, spaciousness, timelessness, and wellbeing in the experiencer. The field is aware of a phenomenon as described in preliminary form, but this phenomenon is not yet clearly defined, consistently termed, nor well explained. These unknowns are of compelling interest and pragmatic value to the wellbeing and functioning of many in the West, with its high rates of depression and other psychological and psychosomatic disorders. In short, there is enough preliminary evidence to conclude that awakening as a phenomenon, by whatever name, does exist, because it can be measured quantitatively (e.g. Kilrea & Taylor, 2017), and the lived experience of it can be articulated and described in qualitative psychological research.

Future research may look at interpersonal relations between people who report an experience of *wakefulness* in an ongoing sense, to borrow a term from Taylor (2017). In my research I have noticed that when people who are awake in this way meet each other, even for the first time, words often need not be spoken for a deep recognition of the other to occur; it appears that *awakeness* knows/feels/intuits/recognizes awakeness in another. Such meetings often produce broad smiles, spontaneous laughing or giggling, or sustained eye contact and a quiet and simple knowing nod. What is happening here? What is felt and experienced in such a moment of resonance and recognition among two strangers? Moving from anecdotal evidence to rich, well-structured investigations may yield fascinating results with clinical implications.

Clinically speaking, in the current version of the DSM (DSM-5), the formerly-used condition called NOS (Not Otherwise Specified) applied to various diagnostic labels was changed to NEC (Not Elsewhere Classified). Regardless of the term used, a condition called *Joy, NEC*, might be an apt descriptor for individuals experiencing awakening at specific stages. Like effervescent bubbles in a glass of prosecco, Joy NEC (effortless joy spontaneously arising for no apparent reason) as a psychological condition would be an interesting addition to the clinical conversation. While it is unlikely to be categorized as a disorder *per se*, it brings up an important challenge regarding the presumed ordinary state of functioning of the clinical population

at large. Clinical issues beyond those which involve spiritual emergency and spiritual bypassing (avoiding personal pain and issues because it is believed to be unspiritual) at various stages of awakening are yet to be articulated and understood in the collective discourse on awakening and would be important contributions in future research.

Another area for future investigation involves how awakening may be considered from the outside, by an awake *other* or perhaps a sensitive observer-other. The following brief description is based upon my research conducted to date (i.e., Kilrea, 2013; Kilrea, 2018), and my current understanding and experience of the phenomenon:

Awakening includes a particular quality, a particular felt sense of resonance, knowing, accessed through the animate body-being, and also potently through the eyes held in mutual gaze. Awakening often has more to do with an absence of things than with a presence of things. The awake “other” feels intimately familiar. They are nobody, too. Empty. Unselfconscious. Free of fidgeting and mind-wandering distraction/absorption. They are just here.

This description is included to illustrate an interpersonal aspect of this phenomenon that requires further inquiry. Future research involving the development and use of a transpersonally-informed *observational* measure may yield valuable data. Gathered phenomenological reports of *interpersonal* relating in this population could lead to the identification of observable traits, qualities, or behaviors, which may allow for another form of measurement of awakening. Is it possible to know if someone is awakened by observing them? — that is, beyond self-report—and, in a way that honours individual differences? This, like many other components of this phenomenon, is as yet unknown. Combining observational science with other, transpersonal, ways of knowing could be another powerful way to approach future research on awakening.

Other areas of future research involve neuroscience and consciousness studies. According to Berman and Stevens (2015), statistically more powerful EEG patterns exist in the delta, theta, and

alpha wave frequencies during reported nondual events, than in meditation in general. They argue that, “the sheer magnitude of the significant EEG differences that occurred during these self-reported states when compared to the meditation sessions in their entirety supports the notion that this state is indeed a distinct one” (Berman & Stevens, 2015, p. 9). Other studies of the neural correlates of nondual experience (e.g., Josipovic, 2014; Wallace, 2007) provide initial physiological-phenomenological engagements with this phenomenon, as does that of Newburg and Waldman (2018, this issue).

### In this Issue

It is noteworthy that in this 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year following the founding of the field of transpersonal psychology, this special issue represents the first within the transpersonal literature to be dedicated to spiritual or secular awakening. This issue includes a variety of perspectives on the subject of spiritual and/or secular awakening, nondual realization, enlightenment, Satori, Unio Mystico, and other terms associated with this phenomenon. Both empirical and theoretical approaches are presented, in addition to perspectives on awakening from sacred spiritual texts.

Beginning this issue is a paper by B. Les Lancaster, that includes a detailed discussion of awakening as depicted in sacred texts of the kabbalah. Entitled, “Re-veiling the Revealed: Insights into the Psychology of ‘Enlightenment’ from the Kabbalah,” Lancaster asks, “is there a place for these complex notions of wisdom, as presented in kabbalistic texts, in a contemporary psychology of enlightenment/awakening?” The author suggests that contemporary forms of spirituality may be “unduly anti-intellectual” (p. 77), and underscores a collective responsibility to construct a more complete understanding of the psychological aspects of spiritual awakening or enlightenment. He further argues that while direct reports of awakening are important and have legitimate value in terms of psychological study, he is concerned that, “contemporary approaches to awakening emphasize features that are beyond effective psychological analysis... [and that] specifying the ontic nature of the nondual leads to speculation that is inevitably non-psychological” (p. 77).

The author's stated interest is in the *nature of mind* and he aims to construct "operational models that articulate the processes entailed in psycho-spiritual transformation. It is from this specific perspective that . . . analysis of classical mystical texts can enrich the role that psychology might play in the study of mysticism" (pp. 77–78). He compellingly argues the merits of both sources—classical mystical texts and empirical reports of contemporary lived experience—as a way forward towards a richer psychological understanding of awakening. Finally, to summarize the nature of enlightenment in kabbalistic terms, Lancaster describes it as an ongoing process rather than a finite end-state:

There is no final achievement, when the meaning would be laid bare; there is only the ever-deepening process of knowing, of flowing with the dynamic of uncovering and recovering. Enlightenment, for the *Zohar*, is not an end-state, but the hallmark of one who enters and exits the depths in peace, who flows with the rhythms of the psyche, be they conscious or what has come to be described as unconscious. (pp. 83–84)

The second paper in this issue is an empirical contribution by Jenny Wade, entitled, "After Awakening, the Laundry: Is Nonduality a Spiritual Experience?" The author defines *awakening* as a shift into a state of nonduality and describes it as an event or a process that is distinct from *ongoing nonduality*, popularly called enlightenment. She argues that "awakening may be regarded as the threshold of consolidation in nonduality, the breakthrough state that may be a momentary glimpse or an incremental transition" (Wade, 2018, this issue). She further argues that,

In this article the terms *awakening* and *nonduality* should be understood to represent a state believed to share certain characteristics by perennialists but that have not yet been proven empirically to be either phenomenologically distinct or phenomenologically similar across lineages. (pp. 92–93)

The author conducted a qualitative study to determine whether or not participants who had experienced awakening with the help of non-aligned

teachers interpreted their experience as spiritual or secular and why. "Findings suggest that spiritual experiences involve non- or extra-ordinary features, in contrast to awakening and ongoing nonduality, considered to be the essence of ordinariness despite their being unlike consensual sensory reality" (p. 88). The author presents a discussion of the data regarding why it may be that some interpreted their experience (or aspects thereof) as spiritual, while others did not.

The next contribution, by Harris L. Friedman, includes a succinct theoretical perspective on what can be said about a transcendent, ineffable phenomenon such as awakening. His paper, "An Explication of All Cogent Scientific Conceptualizations Regarding the Non-Dual: Finding Nothing to Write," explains that throughout his career he has "characterized all attempts to articulate conceptualizations directly about this topic as futile" (p. 116) because its study, he argues, is beyond the limits of science. He allows that this difficulty "does not limit psychology as a science from pointing to the possibility of the non-dual, including studying people's claims—and their concomitants, about such a possibility" (p. 116). He concludes by inviting each reader to consider the unstated implications of his position as they form their own conclusions on the subject.

The next paper in this issue, "A Neurotheological Approach to Spiritual Awakening" by Andrew Newberg and Mark Waldman, presents empirical data intended to contribute to a taxonomy of awakening experiences. The authors argue that both phenomenological data and neurophysiological data are essential to understanding spiritual awakening. Like Wade (2018, this issue), Newburg and Waldman note that in awakening experiences, "for some, this clarity led to a deep sense of religiousness or spirituality while for others, it took them away from religion" (p. 124). Their approach combines neuroscience, spirituality, psychology, and the phenomenology of awakening experiences in an effort to more fully understand the nature of such experiences and their impact on individual lives: "Neurotheology is the interdisciplinary field of study linking the brain with religious and spiritual phenomena such as beliefs,

practices, and experiences... it is not reductionistic but seeks a common ground between religion and science" (p. 120). The paper synthesizes both self-report and neurophysiological data with the intention of exploring how specific brain processes may be implicated in aspects of spiritual awakening experiences. They speculate that changes in the amygdala, for example, and in thalamic activity, "might account for the substantial transformative shift that is part of these awakening experiences." (p. 124). They underscore the importance of learning more about awakening because "various neurophysiological and psychological aspects of an individual can be radically changed by spiritual awakening experience" (p. 126).

The final paper included in this special issue on awakening is by Steve Taylor, entitled "Two Modes of Sudden Spiritual Awakening? Ego-Dissolution and Explosive Energetic Awakening." This article reviews empirical data from a phenomenological study on awakening, adding early preliminary interpretation of these data as perhaps describing two different ways or forms in which awakening is expressed when the onset is sudden rather than gradual. The author suggests that sudden awakening may occur either through an ego or self-system reorganization leading to a changed ongoing state of wakefulness, or via an intense, dynamic coursing of energy through the body, which may also lead to a more stable state of wakefulness. The author encourages further research to test the ways in which a sudden-onset type of spiritual awakening may develop.

This special issue on spiritual/secular awakening represents a brief overview of past and current perspectives, and touches on approaches from sacred spiritual texts as well as theoretical and empirical aspects of the existing scholarly discourse. Each paper contributes ideas and suggestions for next steps that could be taken towards a more complete psychological understanding of spiritual and secular awakening.

**Kelly Kilrea, Special Topic Editor  
St. Paul University**

## Note

1. This work is published thanks to a grant from the Aid to Publication Program of Saint Paul University.

## References

- Berman, A. E., & Stevens, L. (2015). EEG manifestations of nondual experiences in meditators. *Consciousness and Cognition, 31*, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2014.10.002>
- Costeines, M. (2009). *What enlightenment means: A qualitative study of nondual consciousness as experienced by teachers of nondual mysticism* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 3356468)
- Fire, M. S. (2011). *Exploring the felt experience of nondual consciousness* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 3457707)
- Hartelius, G. (2016). Nonduality: Not one, not two, but many (Editor's introduction). *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies, 34*(1-2), iii-vi. <https://doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2015.34.1-2.iii>
- Hartelius, G., Thouin-Savard, M. I., & Crouch, C. R. (2018). Rigor in the multicultural psychology of the whole person: Embracing the challenge (Editors' introduction). *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies, 37*(1), iii-viii. <https://doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2018.37.1.iii>
- Josipovic, Z. (2014). Neural correlates of nondual awareness in meditation. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 1307*(1), 9–18. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nyas.12261>
- Kilrea, K. A. (2013). *The everyday, lived, physical, and sensory experience of spiritual enlightenment* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 3589672)
- Kilrea, K. A., & Taylor, S. (2016, September). *Defining and investigating spiritual awakening: The development and validation of an inventory of spiritual awakening*. Paper presented at the meeting of the British Psychological Association, Transpersonal Section, Northamptonshire, UK.

- Kilrea, K. A. (2018). The transcendence of meaning in spiritual and secular awakening. In L. L. Armstrong (Ed.). *Existential elements of the family: Finding meaning through life's stages* (pp. 303-327). Leuven, Belgium: Peeters.
- Maslow, A. H. (1969). The farther reaches of human nature. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 1(1), 1–9.
- Taylor, S. (2012). Transformation through suffering: A study of individuals who have experienced positive psychological transformation following periods of intense turmoil. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 52(1), 30-52. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167811404944>
- Taylor, S. (Ed.). (2017). *The leap: The psychology of spiritual awakening*. Novato, CA: New World Library.
- Taylor, S., & Kilrea, K. A. (2017). An inventory of spiritual/secular wakefulness. In S. Taylor, (Ed.), *The leap: The psychology of spiritual awakening* (pp. 273–274). Novato, CA: New World Library.
- Wallace, A. (2007). *Contemplative science: Where Buddhism and neuroscience converge*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

### About the Author

Kelly Kilrea, PhD, is an assistant professor in the faculty of Human Sciences at Saint Paul University in Ottawa, Canada, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in counseling, psychotherapy, spirituality, personality, and human development. She earned a bachelor's degree in English literature at the Royal Military College of Canada, a master's degree in applied sport and health psychology at the University of Ottawa, and a PhD in psychology at Sofia University (formerly the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology). Her research interests include spiritual and secular experiences of awakening (i.e., nondual realization or enlightenment), and the impacts of awakening on identity, relating, emotional regulation, motivation, leadership, parenting, and human potential. Kelly is also a transpersonally-oriented psychotherapist in private practice offering nondual, emotion-, and body-based psychotherapies, and is a mental performance consultant to performers and athletes.

Kelly leads informal meetings on awakening by request.

### About the Journal

The *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* is a peer-reviewed academic journal in print since 1981. It is sponsored by the California Institute of Integral Studies, published by Floraglates Foundation, and serves as the official publication of the International Transpersonal Association. The journal is available online at [www.transpersonalstudies.org](http://www.transpersonalstudies.org), and in print through [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com) (search for IJTS).