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After Awakening, the Laundry: Is Nonduality a Spiritual Experience?

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Historically the exclusive purview of contemplative religious paths, awakening into nonduality was considered the pinnacle of human attainment, even if, in some traditions, it proved to be the threshold to even more sublime states. Awakening was traditionally available only to dedicated elite seekers, usually renunciates who practiced for years in monastic communities, their progress directed by the authorities of their lineage. Today technologies for creating the electroencephalographic signatures of advanced meditators are available for purchase, and esoteric religious practices like Zen meditation and asana yoga have been secularized as stress-reduction techniques and physical exercise, respectively. Increased numbers of teachers of nonduality not aligned with any religious lineage and requiring no religious belief are in the business of helping people awaken, i.e., achieve a discrete shift in awareness, in which the consensual, apparently manifest reality of normal waking, adult sensory experience is perceived to derive from a singular unmanifest source in a seamless whole. This study investigated whether people who awakened with the help of nonaligned teachers, usually after working with lineage teachers, considered their awakening to be a spiritual experience, and why? This qualitative study examined the awakening experiences of 26 adults of varying religious backgrounds to see how they interpreted them. Findings suggest that spiritual experiences involve non- or extraordinary features, in contrast to awakening and ongoing nonduality, considered to be the essence of ordinariness despite their being unlike consensual sensory reality. Awakening was not always easy or smooth, and the ramifications of its secularization outside a spiritual context are many.

Keywords: *nonduality, awakening, spiritual experience, spirituality, secularization, contemplative*

The clashes of fundamentalist movements with increasingly secular cultures in many countries make headlines (e.g., Bruce, 2002, 2008), and the rise of personal spirituality, rather than reliance on established religions is as marked a trend as secularization in the technologically-developed world (e.g., Droogers, 2007; Flanagan, 2007; Heelas, 2007; Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Holmes, 2007; Huss, 2014; Voas & Bruce, 2007). Just as transpersonal psychology now includes psychological, humanistic, existential, feminist, and ecological perspectives along with a “religious perspective” (Daniels, 2013, p. 31; Hartelius, Rothe,

& Roy, 2013; Hartelius, Friedman, & Pappas, 2013), so contemporary engagement with the sacred is becoming diffuse and in some ways secularized in European and Anglophone countries. This study investigates how some people today regard an experience formerly the exclusive purview of religion: realization of the ultimate state of many contemplative paths, commonly called *awakening*. Historically seekers dedicated years of practice, usually in monastic settings, to awaken, that is, attain a state of nonduality, in which thinking in terms of opposites or subject-object differences does not exist (e.g., Loy, 1986, 1998; Wade, 1996).

The progress of seekers in contemplative traditions was supported by their religious communities and directed, monitored, and sanctioned by their lineage authorities. Initiates awakened when they accessed unmediated apperception of the Absolute, called by different names in different religious traditions (e.g., *nirvana*, *kensho*, the kingdom of heaven, *unio mystica*, *fana fi'llah*, *samadhi*, etc.). But do these different names refer to the same state, and is awakening or nonduality in different traditions the same thing? Perennialists (e.g., Goleman, 1988; Huxley, 1944; Loy, 1986, 1998; Underhill, 1955; Wilber, 1985), working from cross-cultural comparisons of religious texts and personal accounts, argue that nonduality shares certain core characteristics, regardless of lineage, and have even gone so far as to consider these states to be essentially the same. More recently this view has been challenged (e.g., Ferrer, 2000; Yandell, 1994). The problem is that descriptions of awakening and ongoing nonduality that would meet contemporary scientific phenomenological standards are virtually absent from the literature for any given lineage, rendering cross-lineage comparisons impossible. Even where descriptions do exist, they are usually abstruse because of deliberately esoteric language or idiosyncratic usages peculiar to a given path. For example, the various *mansions* in the *interior castle* of St. Teresa of Ávila (1588/2011), a Carmelite nun, are not only obscure metaphors outside her sixteenth-century Spanish Roman Catholic frame of reference, but they also bear almost no resemblance to the descriptions of nonduality given by the French Carmelite Brother Lawrence a century later (de Caussade, 1861/1975).

Today people still dedicate years and resources to awakening, however understood, but most of them living in technologically-developed countries do so without the support of a religious community or the structure and focus provided by a cloister. They live secularly, taking discretionary time and income away from work and family obligations, and often going counter to mainstream cultural religious and secular norms. Concomitantly, secularization has altered many traditional religious contemplative paths in significant ways (e.g., Brown & Engler, 1980; Carey, 2005; Engler, 1986, 2003; Farb, 2014; Sharf, 1995). Today, technologies that modify

brainwaves to simulate the electroencephalographic signature of meditative states are available for purchase, and religious practices are translated into healthcare technologies, such as the adaptation of Buddhist meditation techniques into *Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction* (MBSR; Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 2003), and positive emotion training (Jazaieri et al., 2013; Jinpa, 2006, 2010, 2011; Ladner, 2004), as well as the use of asana yoga for physical exercise. Within this new context, this study asks whether people today consider their awakening to be a spiritual experience and why. This study focuses on a population representative of many contemporary seekers: those who frequently started meditating in religious traditions, such as Buddhism and various Hindu paths, but often became eclectic in their practices and worked with teachers not aligned with a particular religion. Many such teachers took the same path: They began studying within a lineage, awakened, and were vetted by authorities within their lineage but modified their own teachings in a way that did not involve the religious dogma or practices to create, in effect, an unaligned path (e.g., Adyashanti, n.d.; Krishnamurti, 1982).

My interest in how contemporary seekers of nonduality interpret their awakening experiences came from my personal process, which included a variety of distinct experiences that I interpreted as both spiritual and not spiritual. As a researcher in the structuring of consciousness familiar with the contemplative literature, I had tried meditation to attain nonduality without success. My first glimpse was a brief but compelling opening that occurred spontaneously and involuntarily during sex. I considered it spiritual mainly because it matched descriptions in the Buddhist literature and because it was a dramatic break from normal awareness:

The whole world disappeared in a wash of white light that became clear, and then nothingness, nonduality, the void—what Zen Buddhists call *kensho* or what is popularly known as nirvana or samadhi. My understanding of reality was forever altered. When I came back to normal consciousness, I was awestruck, jubilant. Suddenly, I *got it*—*this* is what the saints and sages were talking about, *this* is what is true.

I was bubbling over with the profundity and blessed absurdity of it all, including amusement at having a Buddhist experience rather than a Christian one. (Wade, 2004, p. 8)

Some years later, I had a longer lasting experience of nonduality stimulated in a spiritual setting to which a friend had invited me, a public *darshan* with Chalanda Sai Maa Lakshmi Devi, a uniquely honored female teacher in the Vishnuswami lineage. Although not attracted to Hindu teachings nor to guru relationships—and particularly skeptical of Sai Maa’s guided visualizations referring to Atlantis during the session—my private meditations that day, perhaps augmented in some unknown way by Sai Maa, produced a strangely emotional, insightful altered state that lasted several hours until I went to sleep that night. The remainder of the *darshan* the next day was uneventful. The following day, however, I awoke in a state of incomprehensible wellbeing in which I was no different from *All-That-Is*, although I was aware of a “self” going about the world in normal activities. This state was paradoxically surprisingly different from the way I had experienced life previously yet simultaneously quite ordinary. I told only one or two people about the change, saying rather sheepishly, “I guess I had a spiritual experience” as a shorthand way to explain the continual bliss-in-the-moment I was experiencing. The state lasted for about three months until I had an adverse reaction to a psychoactive drug. On one occasion, I was able to recreate the same nondual state for a couple of days, but it receded again.

Most recently I participated as a research subject in Jeffery Martin’s 15-week Internet-based Finders Course experiment to find a reliable, short-term means of producing nondual awareness, which he calls *persistent non-symbolic experience* (PNSE). Martin’s protocol combines different meditation methods and positive psychology techniques in a particular sequence for specified minimum times and requires no previous experience and no religious belief. As part of the study, I immersed myself in direct inquiry using Fred Davis’s (a non-aligned teacher of nonduality) videos over a weekend. Discursive thought had disappeared weeks earlier, but now a subtle shift occurred as the separate self

dropped away while I was doing laundry. In fact, the change was so subtle that I wrote to Jeffery to see whether I was in nonduality because it did not have the blissful component of my previous experience, and seemed totally ordinary but in a very particular way:

I think I woke up while folding clothes. . . . I thought it would be more dramatic . . . or at least somehow more noticeable. It was more like taking off a garment: everything looked and felt the same, but all the meanings were different now that I wasn't a me seeking anything any more. The heavens didn't open, and my senses kept operating just as they always do.

When I perceive things, they appear just as they always have except I seem to understand them in a different way, and they're no more important or different than my “self” is. I really do get that this is all there is. This is it, and to the extent that there's a me, it's all the same thing. When I try to find something “wrong” with the way I'm perceiving things in terms of it's all being one thing and that thing being full of appearances, I really can't. But it feels also extremely ordinary (I know many texts refer to this). . . . I also have no desire to quit using personal pronouns even though there's no real me except for all of this and the little conditioned me that's sort of the clothes and separation I took off but is still around with the other manifestations.

This most recent awakening experience has been lasting after an initial period of some oscillation and reactions to stress that tended to focus my awareness in limiting ways. The contrast between the unusual percepts I associated with “spiritual experiences” and different-but-ordinary awareness of the last and continuing experience of nonduality was marked.

What Is a Spiritual Experience?

Spirituality historically was subsumed under the study of religion (Hill et al., 2000; Zinnbauer, et al., 1997). Prior to the rise of secularism, they were also overlapping constructs, with the term *religion* including both institutional and personal

searching for, and experiencing of, the sacred (Hill et al., 2000; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Now religion is largely seen as the institutional and organizational dogma and practices that structure specific religious groups in contrast to spirituality, which is seen as the personal experience of the sacred (Hill et al., 2000). Despite general agreement about this distinction between religiosity and spirituality, little consensus exists about spirituality itself. Furthermore, a significant proportion of the academic spiritual literature eschews a transcendent or supernatural divine component, even in transpersonal studies, demonstrating further secularization of what had formerly been considered sacred.

For example, in a review of the literature, Myers and Willard (2003) concluded that spirituality is “the capacity and tendency in all human beings to find and construct meaning about life and existence and to move towards personal growth, responsibility, and relationship with others” (p. 149). Hermans and Koerts (2013) defined spirituality simply as growing in discernment (p. 5). Researchers developing the *Spiritual Attitude and Involvement List* (SAIL; de Jager Meezenbroek, et al., 2012) for working with patients with life-threatening conditions focused on connecting with the “essence of life,” especially connectedness with self, others, nature, and the transcendent (p. 142), which they do not equate with God (Garssen, Visser, & de Jager Meezenbroek, 2016). Another review (Kimball, Cook, Boyatzis, & Leonard, 2016) cited trends that identify spirituality with transcendence (notably Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, & Saunders, 1988) and that involve a relationship to the “sacred,” signifying entities representing ultimate truth and devotion, including God (notably Hill & Pargament, 2003; Shults & Sandage, 2006; Pargament, 2007). According to Hitzhusen (2004), spirituality “can involve transcendence, ineffability, mystery, feelings ‘deep in one’s soul,’ beauty, goodness, contemplation, a sense of inspiration or renewal, encounter with sublime natural settings, and intuition of the divine; it is often characterized by a sense of awe, unity, personal balance, or inner peace” (p. 41).

Given the array of views on spirituality, it is hardly surprising that definitions for a spiritual experience vary. Several authors emphasized the

transformational outcome of a process that expands the individual’s worldview, regardless of whether it involves a sense of the transcendent or sacred. For instance, Hinterkopf (1994) described it as a subjectively felt event that takes people beyond their previous worldview to new understandings of themselves and others, as well as new ways of making meaning. Myers and Willard (2003) similarly viewed spiritual experiences as creating new meaning and personal growth by helping individuals “move beyond former frames of reference and risk change” (p. 149). In contrast Prest and Keller (1993) and Klass (1995) defined spiritual experiences as merging with something outside the self, transcending individual existence, and sensing a presence larger than the self that somehow also encompasses the self. For May (1974), a spiritual experience is a direct feeling experience “of the ground of being, or of the process of flow of the universe . . . in which one feels at one with creation, deeply meaningful, and in pervasive union with all things” (p. 85). Selvey (1977) built on May’s definition, adding that such experiences are “usually felt as big, boundless, and intense . . . somehow timeless, open, selfless, helpless, and as basically desirable” (p. 77).

Laubach (2004) conducted a rare study relating spiritual experiences and religion, specifically investigating the impact of spiritual experiences on religious belief. He defined spiritual (and paranormal) experiences as “intrusions in the stream of consciousness that are perceived by the actor as not originating within the ‘self’” but as “having the same facticity as empirical experience and are regarded as ‘proof’ of an esoteric belief system” (p. 239). It is important to note that Laubach uses *paranormal* and *spiritual* interchangeably, indicating the common association of non-ordinary subjective experience with spirituality (cf., Mencken, Bader, & Kim, 2009; Shushan, 2014, pp. 385–386). Referring to spiritual experiences as “mind glitches” (p. 240), Laubach (2004) examined whether such experiences enhanced socially sanctioned belief systems, such as those of the individual’s religion, or promoted autonomous, nonconformist beliefs. His premise was that people would attribute the “intruded” mental objects to a spirit realm, and because of their perceived origin, privilege them

over socially sanctioned religious beliefs. To test his theory, Laubach retrospectively analyzed data from the *General Social Survey* (GSS), a large national survey of non-institutionalized American adults that has been conducted since 1972. The 1984, 1988, and 1989 versions included questions originally developed by Greeley and McCready (1974) about the frequency of telepathy, clairvoyance, communication with the dead, and “mystical experiences.” Laubach used the 1988 data because they included modules on religious beliefs and practices essential to his premise. About 75% of 1988 respondents reported having had at least one of the four kinds of experience, and 15% reported frequently having at least one of them.

Laubach (2004) compared hypotheses for two competing theories: a “conformity” theory that spiritual experiences would strengthen a person’s identity with their religion; and a “substitution” theory that “paranormal beliefs” would replace “religious beliefs,” and vice versa, that strong religious beliefs would negate belief in the paranormal (pp. 244–245). He used a non-recursive model to assess simultaneously the relationship between the frequency of spiritual experience and the intensity of six behaviors—religious identity beliefs, social interaction with God (closeness to God, anger at God), religious conformity beliefs, communal religious practices, moral autonomy beliefs, and private spiritual practices—in both directions. The results showed strong support for Laubach’s premise that spiritual experiences have a negative effect on religiously normative beliefs and a positive effect on spiritual autonomy, and no support, or actual disconfirmation for, the other two theories.

Laubach’s (2004) findings accorded with the sociological theories and research on spirituality and the erosion of religion (e.g., Droogers, 2007; Flanagan, 2007; Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Huss, 2014; Varga, 2007). This view is shared by well-known atheist neuroscientist Sam Harris (2014) in his popular book *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality without Religion* and by theologians who acknowledged that “spiritual experiences” occur not only “in cultures still strongly influenced by traditional religious frameworks but even in the most secularized of cultures” (Knight, 2013, p. 58).

The Awakening Experience

Whether thought of as Laubach’s (2004) “mind glitch,” a fairly generic term he used for any kind of spiritual experience, or not, awakening, the goal of most contemplative Eastern and Western paths, involves a discrete shift in awareness, in which the consensual, apparently manifest reality of normal waking adult sensory experience is perceived to derive from a singular unmanifest source in a seamless whole (cf. Blofeld, 1978; Cohen & Phipps, 1979; Cooper, 2005; Dikshit, 1973; Huxley, 1944; Kapleau, 1965; Loy, 1998; Maharshi, 2004; Suzuki, 1962). In other words, the term awakening here will be used to describe the shift into a state of nonduality. Critics argue that cultural conditioning (including contemplative practices, religious beliefs, language, etc.) creates different phenomenological experiences of nonduality, arguing that the void of Buddhism, for example, is experienced differently than the *unio mystica* of Christianity (e.g., Ferrer, 2000; Jones, 1993; Katz, 1983)—and research supports this view (e.g., Wade, 2004). Nevertheless, the essential distinguishing markers of nondual awareness (time, space, agency) as a discrete state of consciousness, compared to ordinary awareness, seem the same (Wade, 1996; cf. Goleman, 1988; Loy, 1986, 1998), although they are too broad to distinguish between different levels of nonduality itself, which come with further practice, discussed below. As noted, in any case, lineage-specific, culturally-determined differences in the phenomenology of nonduality are beyond the scope of this paper. “Awakening” to nondual realization involves dissolution of the ego-based awareness into omnipresent, irreducible, *Absolute Mind*, including the dissolution of all subject-object dualities or opposites, a kind of non-plurality of reality (e.g., Loy, 1998; cf. Chang, 1959; Hixon, 1989; Kapleau, 1965; Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003; Parker, 2000; Robinson, 2007; Thompson, 2002; Tolle, 1999; Ullman & Reichenberg-Ullman, 2001). Without further qualification, 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.

Awakening, which may be an event or a process, is not the same as the consolidation of ongoing nonduality, sometimes popularly called enlightenment (Caplan, 1999). Rather awakening may be regarded as the threshold of consolidation in nonduality, the breakthrough state that may be a momentary glimpse or an incremental transition. The awakening realization is often unstable for a time owing to the conditioning of ego-based awareness—and especially to the demands of everyday living outside a monastic context (e.g., Blackstone, 2006; Lumiere & Lumiere-Wins, 2003). Moreover, some religious traditions recognize progressive levels of enlightenment as practitioners deepen into the consolidated experience of nonduality and grosser phenomena drop away (Theravada Buddhism, for instance, recognizes four stages of attainment).

Traditionally awakening and enlightenment occurred under the supervision and vetting of spiritual teachers in recognized lineages reserved for initiates, surrounded by secrecy and dogma, and inaccessible to most people. Nevertheless, spontaneous awakenings among people with little or no spiritual training occurred (e.g., Chang, 1959; Hixon, 1989; Huxley, 1944; Underhill, 1955), and according to several writers (e.g., Ardagh, 2005; Greenwell, 2005; Prendergast, 2003; Tolle, 1999), awakening is becoming more common through methods not aligned with an identifiable religious path. A growing number of teachers of nonduality utilize techniques that may derive from venerable religious traditions but require no religious belief nor adherence to the tradition; frequently their own enlightenment was not within any recognized lineage, often because they themselves engaged in a *mélange* of paths, pursued realization as autodidacts, or spontaneously awoke. Whether they use the terms “awakening” or “nonduality” or other language, teachers who are discernibly talking about this phenomenon from their writings and teachings include Eckhart Tolle, Byron Katie, Judith Blackstone, Scott Kiloby, Richard Moss, and Leonard Jacobson, to name a few practicing today. They reported breakthrough experiences that occurred in any circumstances, not just within the context of contemplative practice.

Is Nonduality a Spiritual Experience?

For example, Eckhart Tolle had an epiphany when he awoke from sleep during a period of deep depression, and Byron Katie woke up watching a cockroach crawl on her foot as she lay on the attic floor of a halfway house where she was an inmate. Furthermore, some, despite extensive knowledge of classical techniques from religious lineages, teach nonduality stripped of mystery and esotericism, such as Fred Davis, who says, “The so-called ‘event’ of awakening is less spiritual than it is mechanical . . . simply [bending] attention/awareness back on itself” (personal communication, November 5, 2016).

In a phenomenological study of nondual consciousness, Costeines (2009) interviewed “spiritual teachers of nondual mysticism” (p. iii) who had attained ongoing nondual awareness and were guiding others toward that realization, with results relevant to the current study. Significantly—and although Costeines refers to his sample as “spiritual teachers” (p. iii)—participants did not need to be formally affiliated with a religious tradition because “many highly respected teachers of nondual mysticism eschew traditional formats . . . and . . . lineage membership is a notoriously flawed gauge of authenticity” (p. 73), and because some nondual teachers avoid traditional affiliations, regarding them as unnecessary or even counterproductive (p. 75). Nevertheless, he recruited through an Internet search for teachers of Advaita Vedanta, Buddhism, contemplative Christianity, Judaic Kabbalah, Kashmiri Shaivism, and Taoism in addition to unaligned teachers. His sample consisted of 16 Caucasians, seven women and nine men aged 38–54 residing in North America, of whom only three employed religious terms for their current practice, two referring to Zen Buddhism (but not identifying with a particular lineage) and one Roman Catholic priest. Most mentioned eclectic practices leading to their awakening and said they had been involved with “spirituality” for years but did not use such language about their own teachings, preferring instead idiosyncratic descriptors, such as “being open (as nothing)” (p. 95), “self, here, now” (p. 92), and “being with what is” (p. 88). One asked, “What is or is not spiritual?” (p. 88).

Costeines (2009) asked participants to describe their awakening. All but one experienced

one or more events of a sudden, nondual realization in which the sense that forms and persons exist as separate entities was dispelled by a direct experience of oneness. This sudden revelation could be destabilizing, and one participant was institutionalized for a time in a mental hospital. Some participants realized that a “spiritual” goal was unhelpful, such as “Sal,” who said, “In my own terminology I had been looking for ‘the kingdom,’ like the kingdom of God, and here it was—I had never left it, it was all around me” (p. 103). At least two in the sample had had no spiritual or religious training at all when they awakened. Nevertheless, Costeines’s participants described awakening phenomena typically associated with spiritual or religious experiences, including: extraordinary positive affect, such as joy, vitality, peace, and love; transcendental insight and unspeakable wonder; the dissolution of egoic identity and fixations, which often occurred over time and resulted in changes in lifestyle and values; and the transcendence or resolution of suffering. For some, awakening experiences featured the dramatic energetic and perceptual shifts associated with kundalini activation. Eventual consolidation in nonduality resulted in the realization of personhood as an “experience within the totality of *consciousness-existence*” (p. 117) characterized by “awareness of spiritual immortality,” which Costeines defined as knowing that “physical death has no impact upon the consciousness [the participants] know themselves to be” (p. 118); disidentification from mental constructs and lack of mental narration; timeless awareness (experiential eternal now); nondual action, in which agency co-arises spontaneously and effortlessly with the flow of events (“life lives itself,” p. 125); beatific peace; spontaneous joy; absence of neurotic suffering; unitive relationships; and unitive love. These features are consonant with other studies (cf. Conway, 1988; Wade, 1996), but the rarity of nondual awareness in any population and its historical inaccessibility, owing to religious prohibitions and cloistered communities, have made it difficult to study and, until recently, have promoted its esotericism. With the reversal of these trends, as noted above, awakening may be the next craze, and shortcuts seem to be appearing on the horizon.

The trends away from religiosity in technologically-developed countries, the popularity of teachers and practices free from religious or spiritual trappings, the translation of contemplative techniques into secular wellbeing methods, and the non-spiritual interpretations of nonduality by awakened people, such as the teachers in Costeines’s (2009) study, raised the question this study explores: whether people today consider their awakening to be a spiritual experience, and why?

Method

To investigate that question, a qualitative research approach was selected utilizing *thematic analysis*, a technique that emerged from grounded theory and that is used across most other qualitative methods (e.g., Boyatzis, 1998; Patton, 2015; Percy, Kostere, & Kostere, 2015), in order to discern the phenomenological shift from ordinary awareness to an awakened state, how that occurred, and how the individual made sense of, or understood what had happened by attributing to it “spiritual” or “religious” qualities, if that had been done. The research design was to interview laypeople who had utilized eclectic practices, both with religious and non-aligned teachers, as seekers and were now consolidated in nondual awareness retrospectively about their awakening experience to see how they viewed them, especially since awakening is often a process involving several glimpses of nonduality before it becomes a steady, established state. Thematic analysis was chosen as a realist method for this exploratory study that crossed over several different types of qualitative data sets, each with their own associated methods: phenomenology, narrative inquiry, and grounded theory (e.g., Bernard & Ryan, 2010; Boeije, 2010; Braun & Clark, 2006; Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012; Patton, 2015). The approach taken here was realist in that it sought to describe the experiences, meaning, and reality of participants (Braun & Clark, 2006; MacQueen & Namey, 2012).

To qualify for participation, volunteers had to meet the following criteria: 1) Be 21 years old or older for legal informed consent; 2) Speak fluent English to articulate subtleties associated with the ineffable qualities of nondual awareness; 3) Self-identify as having been consolidated in a nondual

state of awareness for a minimum of six months in order to reflect on the awakening process; and 4) Not presently be a disciple or devotee of a religious teacher, which might bias their interpretation of awakening. Regarding the third criterion, no reliable objective measure exists to assess the attainment of nonduality, but it is possible to discern signs of it in the distinctive ways people use language to describe their experience, as perennialists (e.g., Huxley, 1944; Underhill, 1955) and other researchers (e.g., Cook-Greuter, 2000/2008; Wade, 1996; Wade, 2004) have argued. Concerning the last criterion, a bias for a non-spiritual response in talking to non-aligned practitioners is potentially as strong as a pro-spirituality response would be from a practitioner aligned with a religious lineage. However since Costeines's (2009) study indicated that most non-aligned teachers had tried different religious paths and were open to them, a finding borne out by other anecdotal data, it was decided to interview people whose awakening occurred in circumstances not associated with a religious tradition but who might have tried religious paths. Their bias for a non-spiritual interpretation was considered to be less than the likely pro-spiritual interpretation of people whose awakening occurred within a religious tradition and who were still affiliated with one.

A convenience sample was solicited via the Internet through three venues not aligned with any tradition or requiring religious beliefs or affiliation of any kind: 1) a community of "graduates" of Jeffery Martin's Finders Course who had paid to enroll in a continuation called the Explorers Course; 2) non-aligned teacher Fred Davis's community of students; and 3) Liberation Unleashed, a global network of awakened people who guide others to awakening in ways that do not adhere to any single spiritual tradition. Volunteers responded to an email address and engaged in a brief email exchange designed to screen for their qualifications. One did not meet the inclusion criteria, and five qualified volunteers could not schedule interviews within the time constraints of the study. Some volunteers preferred to write their responses, and they were furnished a written version of the interview protocol (Appendix); all others participated in an audio-recorded telephone or Internet interview not to exceed one hour.

Respondents were assigned pseudonyms for confidentiality, except when they requested to use their real names; details that might compromise the confidentiality of respondents or others were changed. All recordings were transcribed verbatim, and both written submissions and transcriptions were thematically analyzed.

The data set consisted of transcripts, correspondence and other written records submitted by participants as well as field notes of impressions and impromptu protocol modifications made during the interviewing process. Analysis consisted of becoming familiar with the data, generating preliminary codes and then refining them, identifying potential themes, reviewing them across the entire data set, and refining and defining them (e.g., Braun & Clark, 2006; Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012; Patton, 2015; Percy, Kostere, & Kostere, 2015). Coding utilized an inductive approach (Patton, 2015), resembling grounded theory (Braun & Clark, 2006), based closely on participant wording to produce code labels, and, in fact, a subsequent analysis was done using a theoretical approach (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012; Percy, Kostere, & Kostere, 2015) looking for predetermined categories in the data analysis regarding spiritual or nonspiritual experiences, as understood and described by participants. For this theoretical analysis, the above steps were followed and then patterns related to spirituality were placed together, and those that did not were separated. All patterns were then examined for the emergence of overarching themes, and patterns were used to elucidate the themes. Patterns that did not fit pre-existing spiritual/nonspiritual categories were open for any new patterns or analysis and grouped into any remaining overarching themes. As more data accumulated, the analysis progressively focused on patterns emerging for different types of experiences and how those showed up in the ways participants described what had happened. Themes were labelled, refined, reviewed, and defined (e.g., Braun & Clark, 2006; Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012; Percy, Kostere, & Kostere, 2015). Taking a conservative stance toward validity, aggregate categories (codes or themes) supported by fewer than three unprompted, convergent responses to open-ended questions were eliminated (R. E. Boyatzis

& M. Esteves, personal communication, May 9, 1999). Comparisons were made with demographic data to determine whether themes clustered by demographic factors.

Results

The final sample comprised 26 people, 11 women and 15 men, all Caucasian but of different nationalities. The majority were American (14; 5 women, 9 men). Three (1 woman, 2 men) were from the United Kingdom, two (1 woman, 1

man) from Australia, and 1 each from Canada, the Netherlands, Denmark, France, Republic of South Africa, India, and New Zealand.

It was an older sample, with 52.0 years the mean age for women and 50.5 years the mean age for men (Table 1).

Education for the sample was diverse, ranging from high school to doctoral degrees (Table 2). Men tended to be more educated than women.

The participants' occupations also varied. The largest category was people in business of some

Table 1 *Participants by Sex and Age*

Age	Women	Men	Total
20-29	0	1	1
30-39	1	2	3
40-49	3	5	8
50-59	6	3	9
60-69	0	3	3
70+	1	1	2
Total	11	15	26

Table 2 *Participants by Sex and Highest Level of Education Completed*

Education	Women	Men	Total
High School	0	1	1
Some College	3	2	5
Associate or Technical Degree	2	1	3
Bachelors Degree	4	6	10
Masters Degree	1	4	5
Doctoral Degree	1	1	2
Total	11	15	26

Table 3 *Participants by Sex and Spiritual Affiliation Reared in and Current*

Spiritual Affiliation	Reared In		Current	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
None	5	8	10	11
Atheist	1	2	0	0
Christian	5	4	0	0
Buddhism	0	1	0	3
Advaita	0	0	1	1
Total	11	15	11	15

kind (7; 3 women, 4 men), followed by those who were unemployed (5; 3 women, 2 men), and those working in science and healthcare (5; 2 women, 3 men). Three women were artists. The remaining men were retired (2), students (2), a chaplain, and a homemaker.

Fourteen (5 women, 9 men) had not been brought up in a religious tradition, but the vast majority (24; 11 women, 13 men) had been active seekers at some point in their lives, exploring a variety of spiritual and religious paths in addition to those listed in Table 3 before awakening, such as spiritualism, Kabbalah, a Course in Miracles, mystical Christianity, paganism, karma yoga, bhakti yoga, psychedelics, and shamanism as well as studying with different teachers. It is notable that this sample, although recruited through secular venues, included five who now identify with a religious tradition, Advaita Vedanta or Buddhism.

People were asked to describe their awakening experiences and process as a way to validate their consolidation in nonduality and to illuminate how they regarded their awakening. Awakening experiences differed substantially, first in terms of the conditions under which they occurred. Most (14, 54%; 7 women, 7 men) happened when people were going about ordinary activities rather than during a contemplative practice.

I was writing an email . . . trying to think, “Well, what do I think about that [the subject of the email]?” and looking inside, and suddenly there was no me inside my head and no more sense of that. I had been in the Finders Course and had been doing a meditation practice for one hour a day, and reflected on just looking at that space and realizing there wasn’t anything there. It was just interesting, intriguing: where did I go? But focusing on that space just opened up the universe of love, no sensation of love within the body but external, just delight, nothing generated from within but all from without. Everything felt and looked and smelled and sounded like love, all the senses tuned, colors more brightened, sounds more beautiful, like the universe was caressing me in a gentle way. Not a creepy way, but like a good parent, a sense of “we’re safe. .

. . .” It’s difficult to say because self-referential thoughts ended. There was nothing in there any more but a sense that the brain would have its thoughts, the patterns to get through the day—go to the grocery store, talk to the cashier—would happen . . . but the thoughts are not me any more, just a kind of biology. (Alice)

I was actually driving my car. I’d been working with a guide on Liberation Unleashed, and I had been completely in brat mode: Why is this not clearer? Why can’t I see? What is looking? I was having a complete drama in the car. And then there was just a sense that there wasn’t a separate me, a separate self, that everything around me was not happening to me, it was just happening with me. I was just a part of it. (Alexandra)

Then one day, whilst out for a lunchtime walk a new model of perception and awareness presented itself. I began to see events like electrons hitting the screen of awareness which represented the experience of the present. Every event like a picture on a screen leaving the screen unaffected. No actual things at all, just the receiving of experience in the moment. But if there were no actual things out there, what about in here? The gaze of attention shifted inwards to the myriad of internal processes I had already begun to . . . investigate, and for the first time, in a single instant, it was realized [that] there are no things within either, just more processes, more electrons hitting the screen. No inner, no outer, no things, no separation, and then something shifted. The experience was like being taken from a closely fitting cocoon to vast limitless space. A centerless awareness. Presence with the emptiness of all. It was like a bubble popping and it was fully and very obviously apparent in that instant that the vanished “self” had never really existed at all. (Carson)

For nine (35%; 2 women, 7 men), their first awakening happened while they were engaged in a practice designed to bring about such experiences. Ed was meeting a teacher of nonduality to see whether he wanted to work with him:

We hung out for awhile and then sort of started talking about spiritual experiences, and I said, half jokingly, "Okay, I want a spiritual experience right now." And he said something to the effect of, "Can you feel this?" and what I felt was this sort of field of being, spacious openness that I had never consciously experienced before, and I knew that I had "received the wordless transmission," and that was the first time that I had a conscious experience of presence. (Ed)

Rudy was following the instructions of a Liberation Unleashed guide during a work break when he was walking alone in a park.

So, while I was walking I was focusing on just experiencing directly whatever there was. I was looking at the trees and then . . . the first change in perception was a sense of separation diminishing, which brought a strong feeling of intimacy with the trees, sky, everything. Colors seemed slightly more vivid, but more importantly, there was a sense of unity, of a strong presence, I felt very present. I felt immediately elated and joyful. Thinking switched from the familiar more or less continuous babble to excited thoughts, such as, "This is it!" with thoughtless intervals of perhaps a few seconds. (Rudy)

For another man, it happened at a meditation workshop.

I went to an enlightenment intensive, like a Zen workshop where you're working with four questions . . . What am I? Who am I? What is another? What is life? . . . Then you sit with a partner and work . . . and you ponder the questions all the time. I had a big opening, and I was in the present moment and everything was just arising in me, and the inner was the same as the outer. (Gus)

For three people (12%; 2 women, 1 man) awakening occurred during acute, high-stress life events. Justin's happened during a near-death experience when he was four years old, Erin's during a family crisis involving life-and-death issues. Sarita, who began having unrecognized *kundalini* activations she feared were medical crises, thought she was dying during the acute ones and/or going

crazy. Although she had dabbled in "pop shamanism kinds of things" in her youth, she "wasn't a spiritual person and was not doing any practices or anything like that." A month after her father died, she seemed to hear her mother's voice coming through the walls and ceiling sneering at Sarita's frightening kundalini eruptions:

I started crying and cried for 24 hours to get through it and then I went silent for a week, just sat and stared out the window. . . . One day . . . I started walking across the room and some light came in from one of the sky lights and temporarily blinded me and that's when the awakening happened. I've talked to a lot of people, and some people wake up in oneness in what I call the Disney awakening. Mine was more the quantum physics awakening, and literally becoming that, becoming the absolute stillness. And then seeing the beginning vibration of *shakti* and that getting stronger and stronger, and getting fascinated with the vibration. And then the big bang and being. (Sarita)

The nature and progression of awakening experiences ranged from a few characterized by debilitating, traumatic kundalini eruptions like Sarita's to those so subtle they tended to be noticed retrospectively rather than in the moment. Twelve participants (46%; 5 women, 7 men) had one large memorable experience that altered everything, and although it may have been intermittent for a time, gradually it became their stable experience through more subtle realizations and integration.

I was reading and just gone. I was on a family vacation, and I was so out of my body for a week or more, I can't explain when or how it happened. I was high as a kite. Everything was already there, and now I can point to it and say, "Oh, yeah" There wasn't an I there, but just an observing presence. . . . My mother was like, "This is not my daughter . . . Who is this? . . . You just get out of that state right now," and it was hilarious. And I just said, "It's okay now, I'm in the spirit and I'm in the sound, and it's all okay, just relax." I was awake like I'd been stepping in awareness, and you watch yourself

breaking up, and it took awhile. My mother said, "Stop meditation. That's it, buy a television." Typical parents. It's just the closest to the state of is-ness, just being with it is. (Mari)

I got up to stretch my legs, opened the door to call my cat, whose name is "Mycat," and suddenly the absolute absurdity of a thought owning anything hit me, and I just started laughing. I knew in that moment what the cosmic joke was all about, and I knew that what I had been looking for had happened. . . . It was like before that moment, the basic background of awareness was strapped into a child's safety seat in the back of a car, and ego—for lack of a better word—was driving the car, and not too safely at that. Afterwards, it was ego that was finally strapped safely into the child's safety seat, and the car was safely driving itself. . . . [At a later time] whatever it is that I am was perceived to be "inside" a body. Now "I" don't seem to have a sense of location. . . . Everything in experience was—and still is—alive, and it is me. (John)

I had one turning point. It certainly wasn't a bells-and-whistles experience, just a realization I had at that moment. . . . I had about a 45-minute conversation with [a teacher] on Skype, and going away from that I had the epiphany in the camper in the front yard. It's a little fuzzy now, hard to remember the actual sequence, but I was there by myself going oh, wow wow. And I continued to look on the Internet and came across Liberation Unleashed about three days after that event, and by that time there were already doubts starting in my mind about the awakening, and when I saw them I decided to seek confirmation What I had realized, my epiphany was, "This is it, the totality of my experience is this. This is it." That phrase took me through the portal to realize the oneness of everything. . . . I now have a kind of feeling that I was born that day in 2011. (Hugh)

Nine participants (35%; 5 women, 4 men) described multiple awakenings in which an initial event was followed by a series of discrete experiences. Clint, homeless and depressed,

was reading *The Celestine Prophecy* (Redfield, 1993/2006) one morning on a buddy's couch, when he began to have a kundalini awakening and his awareness seemed to separate from his body and fly through stars and planets:

I'm agog and agape and amazed and awed with just an awareness of what I now call unlimitedness. . . . For six months afterwards, every time I closed my eyes and lay down I felt that sensation in my body and all I had to do was say yes, and the elasticity happened. . . . And that kept me on the path to experience the unlimitedness of our true nature and the perfection of things. So now twenty years later after all the integral experiences from that big bang is nondual thinking . . . where it's rare that I have thoughts. I'm the environment, the environment is now subject to my consciousness. (Clint)

I was biking to an appointment . . . and suddenly I SAW/experienced/REALIZED that everything I saw around me, I saw the way I saw it because I *believed* that it looked like this. . . . I write the words in capitals because it wasn't a conceptual seeing/realizing. It was a . . . knowing with every cell . . . real and full understanding. . . . I got goose bumps all over my body and it felt like a physical burden fell off my shoulders. It was as if something opened up, a veil suddenly fell away . . . as if boundaries fell away, as if infinity became visible, as if everything suddenly became clear and light. . . . [A couple of months later] I think the penny really dropped after pulling a blanket over my head and giving up/surrendering while lying on the couch after thinking about not getting it. I saw through the illusion that there really exists such [a] thing as an I/me/self. . . . After seeing through the illusion of self I had two bigger-impact-than-the-ordinary-byproduct-experiences: (a) really experiencing time doesn't exist, that there is only "now" and that this "now" is infinite and boundless; (b) experiencing what is meant by "consciousness doesn't happen in the body, the body happens in consciousness." (Jacqueline)

A gentle dissolution of the sense of separation between here (the watching) and the sky (the watched). It was so gentle, I did not realize that anything had “happened,” only that the meditation that afternoon felt quite peaceful and calm. . . . For just a moment, the sense of seeing something separate from “me” had disappeared, and it was such a non-event, it was only by what followed that I recall the experience vividly. . . . Once thinking started, all hell broke loose [and I had a panic attack. Then about a year and a half later as I was reading a blog about no-self] in a jarring, abrupt manner the distance between the “outside” things and the inside “me” collapsed. No one was separate from anything here anymore. There wasn’t anyone “inside” here anymore. . . . For the first month it was “all I could do” to get dressed and go to work each day. It was a strain interacting with people and objects that needed attention. . . . Over time integration happened. (Manfred)

Alternatively, some (5, 23%; 1 woman, 4 men) described their awakening process as just a continued refinement of subtle experiences.

It wasn’t like anything. It was like, “Oh, this is what they’ve been talking about.” It was just peace beyond understanding, and I recall it as being a millimeter away, an infinitesimal distance from everything because it was an always-running-under-the-surface kind of feeling because it didn’t end. It was still there, and that was distinct from all the super highs and crazy stuff. It was gradual, and my private sessions with Fred Davis involved many awakenings, but there was no sudden, oh! It was just like, I know this is it. (Salvatore)

There has never been a significant moment, more like lots of small, little smooth ones, usually noticed after the fact. For instance, certain situations didn’t affect me anymore. Patterns weren’t followed. Identifications started dropping off and were only noticed after they had gone sometime later. . . . This has been ongoing for three and a half years so far. Movement is

my experience with the large, spacious, calm quietness, which I call “That Which Notices” always there There is no ending. (Sophie)

It happened subtly over about three days, and at the end of those days I realized something was different. . . . as if reality had been deconstructed and then put together with an extra element I hadn’t seen before. . . . Self sort of came and went. Experience was empty of self, a feeling of space, which has changed gradually over the last eight months, where I used to feel I was inside here, inside the body looking out. Now I feel like there is still a self here, but I don’t believe it. I look inside and see nothing and feel very peaceful. (Donald)

Four (15%; 1 woman, 3 men) reported kundalini surges in such close relationship to their awakening that the two could not be readily separated. For three of them, the kundalini symptoms have been overwhelming, and they still suffer involuntary, unpleasant, debilitating physical problems. Ed’s “energetic phenomena” were “kicked into high gear” after a sitting period at a retreat when his body began moving involuntarily, a symptom that “became a fairly regular part of [his] experience for the next 10–12 years,” accompanied by sensations of shooting electricity, intense anxiety, or strange breathing. He began to have nerve pain in his arms, undergoing three surgeries to address it. Ed’s athletic pursuits have been significantly curtailed, even including his ability to use a computer. Sarita’s kundalini experiences have never stopped, and their severity changed her life in many ways, including the ending of a 20-year relationship and the loss of two jobs. It has been difficult to find healthcare workers, therapists, and nondual teachers who truly understood her experience. She likens her awakening to “a disease, and it’s easy to get tied up in that, but that’s the path, the process that’s happening.” Chester’s awakening “didn’t start getting bad until I started losing the sense of body . . . and then it started waking me up at night, and I’d have to find the wall. I would curl up and have to have someone around me to give me reassurance . . . to find any kind of center.” Then he began to have

physical symptoms as his “nervous system literally went into shock” with bouts of severely painful nausea and vomiting for which he was hospitalized at times:

You can see how it works together [the kundalini and cognitive awakening processes]. You find yourself out in the void, so you come back down, and that awareness is still with you and the funniest thing was that it got acclimatized. It was always there. You couldn't get away from it. I'd go to meditation groups, and people would talk about trying to be mindful, and I couldn't get away from it. . . . Sometimes I think I'm in recovery from nonduality. (Chester)

For each reported awakening experience, not just the first one, people were asked whether they considered them to be spiritual or not, and why. The sample was almost evenly divided on their initial response to the question: 10 (39%; 3 women, 7 men) thought their experiences were spiritual; 8 (31%; 5 women, 3 men) said they were not; and 8 (31%; 3 women, 5 men) gave equivocal responses. But people did not judge all their awakening experiences the same way, and as they explored their first impressions (without prompting) their thinking sometimes shifted, more often to the position that nonduality is not spiritual. For example, Jacqueline said her first awakening was spiritual “because it felt like experiencing a bigger truth than everyday-life truth, like experiencing a piece of what existence really is about, and it felt transcending the personal and more real than ‘ordinary’ reality.” She thought her second awakening experience was spiritual but then changed her mind:

I think so [that it was spiritual] because of the major shift in perspective and the extent of difference from how reality is perceived by the majority of people. But right now, while writing (about one year after), I don't consider it spiritual but very ordinary and real, one of the most ordinary and real things there is. (Jacqueline)

Jacqueline called her last awakening experience definitely spiritual “because it's experience beyond conceptual comprehension and ordinary daily perception.”

Is Nonduality a Spiritual Experience?

The question, and indeed the notion of the word spiritual, because it (or any vocabulary) suggests duality, was troublesome, accounting for most of the equivocal responses (6, 23%; 1 woman, 5 men).

Probably not spiritual, well, yes and no. . . . All of it is thoughts, and ultimately, whether it's spiritual or not is a concept and doesn't mean anything. (Donald)

What is spirit? Is it a thing? Is it separate? If its definition gives a sense of either of these, then no, it's not spiritual. I would say it's divine, but I say that as one with no belief in a separate creator god. There are no things in this experiencing, no self, no other, so how can there be a separate entity called god? All of these definitions rely on erroneous self-view. . . . It is not truth in the absolute sense, which is undivided. (Carson)

Using that vocabulary, you are limiting, in that the question implies a separation between spirituality and whatever else. (Mari)

If I had to describe it to anyone I'd use that word, but it's not spiritual. That's only the category we've got for something different. I would almost go as far as to say it's psychological more than spiritual. Another word I'd use is reality, but there is no objective reality as such. Everything is taken in through our conditioned filters, so everybody has a unique experience of everything. So experiential would be a better word than spiritual or psychological, and that's a mess, I know. We have to conceptualize it to communicate it, and we don't have the language to do that. (Hugh)

A close reading of responses yielded several themes that clarify how nonduality is perceived. The primary theme (13, 50%; 7 women, 6 men), foreshadowed by Jacqueline's reflections above, concerns the degree to which perception is judged to be “ordinary” in the sense that it is unconditioned or unmediated (“just what is,” not the consensus sensory reality of normal adult waking consciousness) as opposed to some non-ordinary, altered-state perception, which participants considered spiritual. One of the clearest records came from Shelly, who

had been “on a ‘spiritual path’ the whole of my adult life,” trying many different approaches. After her first awakening, she realized,

There is . . . no future magical state to be had. . . . Everything is profoundly and eternally Okay. . . . all interpretation of reality up to then was mired in BS—confused complicated fallacious pseudo-understanding. Everything was different yet it was all the same. . . . I also got very non-woo woo after this. If I could have got a whole new wardrobe of conservative taupe colored pants and shirts, all the same, I would have. All the jewelry went back in the box. . . . All the new-age concepts went out the window as rubbish. I couldn’t continue my duties for my guru. . . . I dropped out of all of it. . . . Now I think of “spiritual” as woo-woo and this is simply seeing Reality, pure and simple. I don’t discount the possibility . . . of more subtle realms, and I guess that’s what I have considered “spiritual” in the past. . . . I wouldn’t say I got judgmental about spiritual stuff, but it just fell by the wayside. . . . No, it’s just what’s happening. I’m very pragmatic about it. It just is. . . . I wouldn’t run to a friend and say, “I had this amazing spiritual experience!!” I would say, “I saw the reality that lies beneath the illusion today, and I AM That.” I think [spiritual] is something otherworldly and unknowable or something. . . . in the realm of mystical and unexplainable. (Shelly)

Others said:

I was always looking for this experience that Eckhart Tolle was talking about where everything was just washed away, and the mind just goes blank all of a sudden. My opening was incremental . . . a slow awakening, not very sudden, so I wouldn’t call it a spiritual experience. (Gus)

I don’t recall it seeming spiritual. I was more like, “What? Why doesn’t everyone know this? Why didn’t anyone tell me this earlier?” (Terrence)

No [not spiritual], just experience. It just is, life life-ing. . . . There were no drugs involved, no epiphany, no big bang, just this. I suppose I expected a spiritual experience to be “more” somehow. This is less not more. (Sophie)

The awakening proper is not a spiritual experience. It can be useful to differentiate spiritual experiences as peak experiences or altered states of consciousness from insight or recognition. (Ed)

In fact, some people (4, 15%; 2 women, 2 men) actually preferred the fact that their awakening was not extraordinary, such as Donald, who said, “I never had any profound spiritual experiences like, no states of bliss or anything, but I’ve never achieved that or tried to. My experience has been quite subtle in a way, and overall that’s a very good thing because it just makes me happier.” Mitch addressed the specialness angle from the perspective of the normalizing of awakening.

We can use that word spiritual to describe something that’s different, but it’s kind of an ordinary way of being now, just the innate humanness we all have the capacity to be, if we’re not tricking ourselves. . . . I don’t really see that as a spiritual experience now. The specialness has gone away. . . . If I were talking to somebody else I might call it a spiritual awareness or a spiritual shift, but I don’t really think of it like that anymore. (Mitch)

Experiences filled with love, bliss, and a sense of unity (7, 27%; 3 women, 4 men) were considered spiritual. Terrence, speaking of one of his awakenings, said, “This seemed spiritual because it was a unity experience. I felt connected to all, especially people.” Justin, whose awakening began with a childhood near-death experience, said:

It was inside me, more like the song, “This little light of mine, I’m gonna make it shine,” except there was no me or mine, there was an “us” and it had the power to make me and others feel really good, and knew stuff about almost everything. It set the course for my life. I’ve been deeply spiritual ever since. . . . It feels all knowing, all pervasive, and without end. Beloved is me. We are Brilliant. All are. And it’s brilliant. (Justin)

Five people (19%; 2 women, 3 men) who considered their awakenings spiritual said that everything is spiritual. Their accounts included

statements describing a process that brought them to this view as their awakening deepened and sweetened. For instance, Sarita described an evolution “as the heart chakra opens more.” According to her,

There is such a devotional experience, the unfolding of emotion through that, really to me is a deep spiritual piece. . . . I didn’t think it was spiritual at first, I really didn’t. But that’s something that has grown over the years as the heart becomes more open and resilient. There’s just a feeling of great devotion, and things become more like a Rumi poem in that sense. There is an inner beloved. (Sarita)

This evolution was echoed by Alexandra, who traced movement this way: “In the beginning I did get into, there’s no God, no point, but there is such an overwhelming sense of love, being loved, being held in love that that is spiritual.” Others said:

Everything is spiritual, and all is either motivating or inspiring us to the awakening of our unlimitedness. These mini-big-bangs, yes, they all occurred exactly when I needed them to occur. . . . The beatings I got in my life were also spiritual . . . like a plane on autopilot . . . is always autocorrected toward its destination. (Clint)

It is the basis for further progress. It is the clarity that has opened up here so far. . . . It has brought a peace, stillness, and sense of spaciousness into everyday life. It provides a clear direction for helping others. (Manfred)

I do consider it a spiritual experience, and it doesn’t feel real heavy that way. It feels like a natural progression. It opened up so many different possibilities to me that were beyond logic, beyond my belief system and programmed mind. (Norman)

Just as five participants’ progression from awakening deepened into unity, love, and bliss above, three people’s (2 women, 1 man) responses suggested that their interpretation was colored by the transition from such positive feelings into a spaciousness devoid of emotion. This transition

was surprising and led them now to consider awakening not spiritual.

In Christian translations we have this natural navigation to say there’s something there when we’re more connected to the environment and have all this oneness feeling that can be translated into God as omnipresent when you go into I Am That. But also those connections start to go away, and once that happens, there’s no self to experience that from. If you’re nice and quick pulling off the Band-Aid, no more ego is very cool, but if it’s a slow pull, and you can feel the hairs being ripped out—no, wait a minute, I’m dying, I don’t want to do this—you find you don’t have a choice any more, and there we start getting into the void. And you lose the intimacy and really strong emotions. Spiritual to me was early, like God was in that moment the way the sun came through the clouds. But when the center is gone, no warmth and connection, it’s a whole new ball field with nothing to connect to, no warmth because it’s a void, and the void isn’t spiritual. (Chester)

Up until fairly recently I’d have said everything was very spiritual, but now it’s very different. In the past I always thought [when I dropped into these deep, selfless states of awareness to sculpt] it was spiritual and that I was guided by angels and that I had a connection with God or whatever God is. And now I’m in such a wide space I just can’t name it. I have no emotion, even for [partner]. I got an email from [him] that he had cancer, and what amazed me is that I care about him more than anybody and will do whatever I can for him totally, without question, but the truth is that I really didn’t care, I had no emotion. I don’t know if it’s more evolved, it’s just totally new territory. (Lena)

The last subject area participants offered as a basis for their sense of spirituality or not was insight into the truth of experience, and here they did not agree. Six (4 women, 2 man) said it was not spiritual:

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It's not spiritual. I've come to realize it's just an experience, and that's all it is. I attached so much to it [awakening] at first and was hell-bent on getting it back, told myself I had the magic, and then it was gone, that I had lost it. But the mind made that, convinced me I had something and it was gone. . . . But there's just an absence of thought, and the identity of Laurie has fallen away. (Laurie)

I considered it simply an experiment in perception that was bafflingly successful. It is simply impossible to describe the freedom this brought. (John)

Saying it would be spiritual would be another story, wondering what is going to happen next. I had no idea that it was this. . . . I believed that sort of thing all along, or I wouldn't have been delving around I'm like, hey, there's emptiness inside. (Rosalyn)

It's just basically life, a life experience to realize there is life and we are life, and we are being lived. (Erin)

Three men see the same insight as spiritual.

To me spiritual is about realizing our true nature as awareness, and seeing through the illusion of myself as a person with a "real" identity. Here for the first time I experienced . . . without an experiencER, and the illusory separation between "me" and my surroundings fell away. (Rudy)

Spirituality is about dropping beliefs, confusion, false views. All the rest is just supporting material or distraction and packaging. (Manfred)

For the first time I can define spirituality as referring to the fact that I'm unlimited, untouched, and eternal. Otherwise I don't know what spirit is. But unlimited, untouched, and eternal—I have a better working relationship with those terms, so if people ask me I want to say yes, and I know what I mean by that. (Salvatore)

When participants were asked what was important to convey to others about awakening, a

significant number of them (7; 4 women, 3 men) spontaneously brought up the issue of spirituality, specifically a desire to disabuse people of erroneous perceptions about awakening in terms of what is required and what is entailed. Two of these individuals considered their own experiences spiritual, yet they, along with the others, want to dispel the "specialness" of awakening.

I think there's a lot of fear around awakening, a lot of veneration but also a lot of fear, misunderstanding. I'm not perfect in having integrated it with my life, but it's important for people to know you can have whatever they are afraid of not having: money, jobs, houses, husbands. . . . You can live in the world and not be of it, and you can have fun in the game. Like they say in India, it's just play. (Mari)

It wasn't what I expected. I had a story about awakening. I was going to transcend and overcome all difficulties. My psyche was no longer going to give me any problems. Sorry for that. On a serious note I think I expected to transcend being a human, I was going to be much better than being a human. But in losing the self I became the human being I always wanted to be. That's so much better than I could have expected. . . . It seems like a cunning trick. (Alexandra)

People are thinking that you become some kind of weirdo, or white robes and stuff, when you have an awakening. People are asking on forums, "Can I still get a girlfriend?" "Can I still listen to 2Pac [Tupac Shakur, a rapper]?" People have a lot of strange beliefs about what happens if you have an awakening. My experience is just that everything is easier. You can only be a strange person by not being negative any more, and a lot of people and relationships are based on negativity. (Gus)

I think it's time to remove the mystique from awakening, and make it more accessible. There are more of us now to help others with the process. I don't see this as being able to be mainstreamed any time soon by any stretch.

However the possibility of awakening should be made more accessible to those already ardently seeking. (Shelly)

To summarize, the triggers, type of progression, and relative drama or subtlety of the awakening process did not have any obvious relationship to people's considering it a spiritual experience, nor did any of the demographic factors. Despite the problems inherent in asking participants consolidated in nonduality to discriminate using a concept like "spiritual" and "not spiritual," respondents tended to view their awakening as a spiritual experience if it involved non- or extraordinary sensory perception of consensus reality, however briefly. In contrast, direct, unmediated perception of reality, recognized to be quite different from culturally normal experience, was considered a truer experience of the ordinary—and hence not spiritual, even if its novelty required integration to become the individual's normal state. Awakenings and ongoing experience characterized by unusually positive emotions—all-pervasive love, bliss, joy—and a sense of unity with All That Is were felt to be spiritual. Other participants, who were aware of the blissful awakenings but were no longer having positive feelings—or indeed feelings of any kind—did not see their awakenings as spiritual experiences.

Discussion

This study as designed involved a number of limitations and delimitations that may have affected the results. To meet the study objectives, a sample was chosen who had unspecified experience in a variety of spiritual or religious and secular methods, chosen with the qualification that they had attained nonduality when studying with a non-aligned teacher. No detailed investigation of their work with aligned or unaligned teachers was made, so it is not possible to know how or to what degree a religious or spiritual orientation or training—or a secular one—may have influenced the results. Moreover, many non-aligned teachers themselves actually come from a strong religious background in terms of their own attainment but teach a method without reference to spiritual or religious paths. The recruiting venues for the study represented

themselves as nonaligned venues, and thus were appropriate for the purpose of this study, but they represent a fraction of possible venues available and quite possibly represent greater or lesser degrees of secularity or religiosity in the nonduality continuum. Although comparisons were initially made using a demographic breakout by recruitment venue, no trends were observed in the data regarding whether participants recruited from certain sites were more likely to regard their experience as spiritual. It is possible also the persons who volunteered to be interviewed were somehow more motivated to do so because of their views, spiritual or nonspiritual, of their nonduality compared to those who did not volunteer to participate.

Although the sample was small, the size was sufficient for a qualitative study because of the degree of saturation and few demographic splits (e.g., Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 1998; Green & Thorogood, 2009), and the results were reported only when they approached significance at the level of three convergent responses to neutral unprompted, open-ended questions (R. E. Boyatzis & M. Esteves, personal communication, May 9, 1999). Thus the themes reported range from significance to saturation; the data are robust.

The findings shed an interesting light on the spirituality literature, which was not developed from contemplative, much less awakened, populations, but more often to explain an autonomous impulse toward the sacred as opposed to religiosity. The seeking involved in contemplative approaches is certainly consistent with Myers and Willard's (2003) contention that spirituality is an impulse toward personal growth, and even more so with Hermans and Koerts's (2013) position that spirituality is growing in discernment. Less clear is the relationship of the current findings with definitions of spirituality as connection, such as de Jager Meezenbroek et al. (2012) and Garssen, Visser, and de Jager Meezenbroek (2016), who focused on connectedness with the "essence of life" in terms of self, others, nature, and a non-theistic "transcendent" (de Jager Meezenbroek et al., 2012, p. 142), and Kimball et al. (2016), who identified spirituality with transcendence and a relationship to the sacred, including ultimate truth. Connectedness and relationship inherently involve

duality. Transcendence in these definitions, on the other hand, is not well defined: transcendence of consensus sensory reality? Of duality? If the former, spirituality as theorized may or may not be consistent with what awakened participants described as spiritual. The more participants experienced altered-state sensory phenomena with their awakening breakthrough, the more likely they were to call it spiritual, consistent with other literature on “big” experiences (e.g., C’de Baca & Wilbourne, 2004; Miller, 2004; Miller & C’de Baca, 1994, 2001; Taylor, 2012). The more participants referred simply to the “transcendence” of duality, the more likely they were to consider their experience non-spiritual, but a realization of ultimate truth.

The spiritual experience literature, on the other hand, is consistent with participants’ accounts of awakening experiences per se, both in terms of definitions stressing transformation through expanded worldviews (Hinterkopf, 1994; Myers & Willard, 2003) and definitions stressing a transcendence of individual existence (Klass, 1995; May, 1974; Prest & Keller, 1993; Selvey, 1997). It is important to remember that the spiritual experience literature also developed in contrast to the religious literature, and, as Laubach’s (2004) study illustrated, it focuses on subjective breaks with consensus sensory reality, which do not necessarily involve nonduality but usually refer to psi phenomena. “Spiritual experience,” therefore, in this literature—as well as in the current participants’ interpretations—tends to comprise non-ordinary or extra-ordinary percepts—and most (two-thirds) of participants in this study said their awakening experiences were not spiritual or were equivocal about whether they were spiritual or not.

Nonduality per se, although it is non-normative in all cultures, is, in reality, quite ordinary perceptually, owing to the diminishment of conditioning. An aphorism found frequently in the Zen literature illustrates the point:

Before a man studies Zen, for him the mountains are mountains, and the waters are waters; when . . . he has achieved a certain truth . . . the mountains are no longer mountains and the waters are no longer waters; but when he has

finally arrived at . . . [enlightenment], once more the mountains are mountains and the waters are waters. (Benoit, 1959, p. 89)

Garfield and Priest (2009) expanded on these three stages of realization, saying that understanding that mountains are mountains resembles the first seven Ox-Herding Pictures in the Zen tradition; that the sense that mountains are not mountains corresponds with the eighth, blank Ox-Herding Picture, symbolizing the awakening breakthrough into nonduality; and that the realization of the mountains as mountains again corresponds to the last two Ox-Herding Pictures representing the consolidation of nonduality in everyday experience. However, a more accurate rendering of this sentiment arguably comes from *Dōgen*, in the *Sansuikyo* fascicle, discussed in regarding unmediated, direct apperception of reality:

An ancient Buddha said, “Mountains mountain, water waters.” These words don’t say that “mountains” are mountains, they say that mountains mountain. . . . This being the case, we should study “mountains.” When we investigate mountains in this way, mountains mountain. (*Dōgen*, as cited in Tanaka, 2013, p. 325; cf. Garfield & Priest, 2003; Deguchi, Garfield, & Priest, 2013)

This kind of perceptual shift is the quintessence of ordinariness, but, as Garfield and Priest (2009) pointed out, it is hardly the way most people experience reality. All participants’ ongoing perceptual experience—once their awakening was integrated—was “ordinary” in the nondual sense.

The tendency of roughly a third of the sample to view their awakening as definitely spiritual reflected a resistance to the duality of language, which is meaningless in nonduality, but was most strongly expressed as a reflection of their ongoing experience of love, bliss, and unity (not necessarily their awakening breakthroughs). As noted in the results, not everyone’s post-awakening experience is immediately blissful; these positive feelings can blossom and expand with time, or people can find themselves passing through these positive feelings

into a place of no emotion, or people may never have those blissful experiences. Since emotion was the strongest indicator that ongoing nonduality was considered spiritual, it is important to examine more closely these differences, although it is a nascent area of research.

To put these findings into perspective, it is helpful to examine recent research identifying different qualities of nonduality evident but not systematically documented in a number of contemplative traditions (e.g., Chang, 1957; Goleman, 1988; Kapleau, 1989; Watts, 1957). Martin (2013, 2015), in an analysis of 50 adults consolidated in ongoing nonduality, and subsequently validated with results of over 1,200 people (Martin, in press), identified four more or less distinct “locations” or phenomenological states within nonduality, which may explain some of the variability in this study’s participant interpretations of nonduality as spiritual or not as well as some of the distinctions reflected in different traditions over time. Restricting the discussion here to the most relevant distinguishing characteristics of these states (Martin, 2013, 2015, in press), *Location 1* featured a greatly reduced sense of self, deep sense of peace, being-ness, and integration of what was previously experienced as internal and external, including sometimes an expanded sense of self beyond the body. If the transition was not dramatic, people may not be aware of the shift except retrospectively, a phenomenon some participants reported.

According to Martin (2013, 2015, in press), *Location 2* involved the dissolution of the self to the extent that personal agency and identity disappear, and distinctions appear illusory. Life is experienced as all positive (cf. Goleman, 1977; Huxley, 1945; Underhill, 1955). *Location 3* involved the kind of nonduality associated with unitive paths (such as descriptions from Gnostic Christianity, *bhakti yoga*, or Sufism as expressed in Rumi’s poetry): location in the eternal now and dissolution into the Absolute, characterized by an impersonal or universal positive affect comprising compassion, joy, and love, and a sense of the perfection of all things (cf. de Caussade, 1861/1975; *The Gospel of Thomas*, 77). *Location 4* lacked affect of any kind, including the sense of unity with God or an all-pervasive consciousness. Self-related thoughts were entirely absent, and the

loss of emotion and self could give rise to a sense of nothingness, or of life as emerging from an infinite spaciousness, more associated with the void described in Eastern traditions (cf. Chang, 1959; Kapleau, 1989; Watts, 1957). The current study’s participants who described deep feelings of love, joy, and unity sound like people in Martin’s (2013, 2015, in press) *Location 2* or *3*, and their reports of these feelings growing after their awakening hint at an awakening perhaps in *Location 1* or *2* evolving toward *Location 3*. Similarly those participants who found themselves without emotion seem to have been in *Location 4*, and some definitely referred to having come to it after periods of high positive emotion. Quite possibly the joyful, loving, unitive nonduality states may seem more “spiritual” than the “non-spiritual” emotionally-void void, but both are clearly described in different contemplative literatures, as are the other “locations.” Much more research is needed in these areas.

What is most striking in all of this is that “spiritual experiences” seem to be defined fairly commonly in the literature and by people who have realized nonduality as having non-ordinary or extraordinary qualities, whereas nonduality itself does not—and indeed participants tended to deplore its mystique, a relic of religious elitism and cross-cultural misunderstanding. Perhaps the biggest question raised here is whether secularization of nonduality in terms of extra-religious realization, making it more accessible, will affect its quality—or whether people without sufficient moral guidance (even assuming religious authorities provide that) and peer community support will be able to negotiate nonduality and its sequelae in a healthy manner. Since the small samples of the current study and Costeines’s (2009) study included people whose awakening process cost relationships and jobs, led some to homelessness and incarceration in mental institutions, and debilitated others for years with kundalini disturbances, doing nonduality “on your own” clearly involves hazards. Granted that religious communities and teachers have been corrupt (such perennial scandals are too numerous to list; a few notable examples in the nonduality communities include Andrew Cohen, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, Adi Da Samraj,

Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, and Sathya Sai Baba), that some individuals involuntarily awaken without seeking, and that few communities or teachers know how to manage kundalini awakenings, individuals awakening without some of the traditional supportive structures religious institutions provided are likely to face many challenges. In fact, the desire for an easy, efficient way to awaken has spurred numerous non-human technologies that attempt to cut religious community and spiritual teachers out of the equation altogether, such as the devices to alter brainwave patterns to match those of meditators that appeared in the 1970s and their many contemporary offshoots, as evidenced by the Spiritual Technologies 2.0 conference (Institute of Noetic Sciences, 2016) and the Wisdom 2.0 summit (Blodgett, 2018; Bunzel, 2014), for example. If the trend toward nonreligious attainment of nonduality continues, and if awakening is not necessarily perceived to be a spiritual experience, what are the ramifications for the religious institutions that used to be the guiding lights and guardians of such knowledge?

Just as I was completing this project, I mentioned these secular methods to two noted Buddhist teachers of nonduality. Both independently expressed concerns about the importance of dharma communities; the need for teaching moral precepts, such as the Eightfold Path; and assuming awakening to be a goal rather than following a goalless path of practice. When asked about the last, their responses were that their teaching was more about selfless living and compassion as well as the spiritual community itself than about awakening per se. The results of this study point to the value of an experienced community for those adjusting to awakening, if not later in the process, but the findings also suggest that a peer support network of “those who have gone before” may be preferable to one of authoritarian structure, closely held knowledge, doctrinal requirements, and esoteric ritual. The search for “special” or “magical” experiences and the popularity of physical tools like psychoactive substances or crystals to facilitate personal growth or wellbeing are likely to be harder to combat, especially with the large, diverse industry of manufacturers and service providers

who support “spiritual experiences.” Nonduality is simple, requires nothing in the way of props, and is inherently without drama, as distinct from the kundalini manifestations that may accompany realization. Who will want it if it is not special, “spiritual,” or hard to attain?

Is this entire trend toward secular technologies and nonaligned teachers, which may include the way the “ordinariness” of nonduality was interpreted by the participants in this study as nonspiritual, just more evidence of European and Anglophone divergence from the rest of the world’s spirituality? Secularism, often called the “disenchantment” of the world (e.g., Walsham, 2008), has been a rising metaphysics in the West for centuries. The *secularization thesis*, displayed across many disciplines, is characterized by the following tenets (Stark, 1998): modernization, especially science, industrialization, urbanization, and rationalization, will kill spirituality; personal belief (spirituality) cannot survive the increase in “rational” and “scientific” thought that will become a societal norm; and secularization, although chiefly viewed as a cognitive process, possesses the same compelling psychological qualities as spiritual belief. It would be hard to overstate the pervasive bias of secularism in European and Anglophone countries, which in all likelihood supports the move toward non-aligned teachers and technologies for attaining nonduality and may also account for a non-religious bias in interpreting nondual experiences lacking supernatural phenomena.

However, social scientists, theologians, and philosophers now speak of “postsecularism” or the “postsecular turn” (e.g., Habermas, 2008; Merz & Merz, 2017; Partridge, 2004; Ziebertz, & Riegel, 2009) to describe the resurgence of belief in the sacred, both religious or spiritual—and it must be stressed that secularization theory was an isolated trend particular to certain European and Anglophone cultures that has *never* been applicable to non-Western societies (e.g., Cannell, 2010; Merz & Merz, 2017; Taylor, 2007). For example, the non-theistic Buddhism embraced in Western cultures, notably of the kind studied for attainment of nonduality, is quite at variance with Asiatic Buddhism, which syncretically mixes with Confucianism, Taoism,

Shintoism, and indigenous traditions. The Buddhism typical of Thailand, Vietnam, Japan, Myanmar, Tibet, and China ranges from theistic to polytheistic, whereas nontheistic forms, if they exist there at all, are practiced by a small, intellectual elite (Stark & Finke, 2000). According to Berger (1999), formerly a secularization proponent himself, what needs to be explained is not the spirituality of the world, but the anomalous secularism of the minority who live in Anglophone countries and Europe.

The degree to which nonduality is subject to cultural bias and artifactual phenomena specific to certain practices remains an area of intense debate, as noted above (e.g., Ferrer, 2000; Yandell, 1994), and it is not clear to what extent religious techniques and spiritual teachers versus secular techniques and nonaligned teachers influence the phenomenology of nonduality or its interpretation. This study does not provide any definitive answers, but it does shed new light on hoary conventions that have been aloof to challenge about the spirituality of nonduality until quite recently, being besieged by secular innovation as well as a countervailing drive for nonordinary spiritual experiences, both supported by for-profit enterprise.

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Appendix

Research Protocol

Name:

Age:

Sex:

Race/ethnicity:

Religious/spiritual affiliation:

Highest level of education completed:

Occupation:

1. Some people have had more than one experience of non-symbolic or nondual awareness. Please tell me about the first time you transitioned to awareness that was not mediated by the normal categories of self and symbols.

a. Probes:

- i. What were you doing just before the experience?
- ii. What happened?

iii. How did your perception change? (From what to what? What did you notice that was different from before?)

iv. What emotions, if any, did you experience?

v. How did your thinking change, if it did?

2. How long did this state last?

a. Probes:

i. If it ended, what happened to make it cease?

3. Did you consider this a spiritual experience? Why or why not?

4. What impact did the experience have on you if any?

If you have had other experience(s) of transitioning to non-symbolic or nondual awareness, please tell me about them as well. [Repeat as necessary for all additional experiences.]

5. How long after your first experience of non-symbolic or nondual awareness did this one occur?

a. Probes:

- i. What were you doing just before the experience?
- ii. What happened?
- iii. How did your perception change? (From what to what? What did you notice that was different from before?)
- iv. What emotions, if any, did you experience?
- v. How did your thinking change, if it did?

6. How long did this state last?

a. Probes:

i. If it ended, what happened to make it cease?

7. Did you consider this a spiritual experience? Why or why not?

8. What impact did the experience have on you if any?

9. Concluding questions: Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience, or to ask me about this research?

Thank you very much for your participation.

About the Author

Jenny Wade, PhD, is a specialist in the structuring of consciousness in normal and altered states, with an emphasis on their transformative potential. A professor in the Integral and Transpersonal Psychology program at the California Institute of Integral Studies and consultant, she applies noetic theory and qualitative analysis to leadership and organization development in a wide range of industries. She has developed numerous proprietary assessments, research tools, and models for clients in addition to publically available research.

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