

Steve Taylor, *Waking From Sleep: Why Awakening Experiences Occur and How to Make Them Permanent*, London, Hay House, 2010, pp. 271. ISBN 978-1-84850-179-9 (Paperback). £10.99

Steve Taylor currently lectures in psychology at Leeds Metropolitan University and is a researcher in transpersonal psychology at Liverpool John Moores University. He has previously published several books on the theme of spirituality and psychology including: *The Fall* (2005), *Making Time* (2008), and *Out Of The Darkness* (2011), as well as numerous articles in a variety of transpersonal psychology journals. In 2012 he was cited as number 31 in the *Watkins Review* list of the most spiritually influential living people. His website, which contains a number of interesting essays, videos, and other resources, can be found at <http://www.steventaylor.talktalk.net>

In *Waking From Sleep* Taylor argues that higher states of consciousness, a subset of what others may understand as spiritual experiences, were once our normal mode of consciousness. This way of experiencing the world is what he means by being 'awakened'. Adults, in most Western societies, are actually in a state of 'sleep'. In this state other people and the rest of the world are experienced as isolated and separate, objects are experienced as inanimate, reality is experienced as dull and shadowy, and life itself is experienced as meaningless. In contrast, the world is experienced as more immediate, alive or animated, and radiant by someone who is awakened. To them, the world is full of meaning and they feel a sense of wellbeing, compassion and joy. At an even higher intensity of wakefulness people may become aware of an all-pervading 'spirit-force' and the oneness of everything. They may experience a different perception of time and feel a more genuine sense of self-identity and freedom. Many of these characteristics will sound familiar to anyone who has previously read about religious or spiritual experience. Taylor draws on numerous accounts of spiritual experiences to illustrate and support his argument, some of which are drawn from the Religious Experience Research Centre archive.

Taylor then goes on to argue that higher states of consciousness should be accepted as valid experiences of how the world really is, as opposed to the materialistic view of science. In support of this argument he relies upon quantum physics, the quality of noetic revelation, and the claim that indigenous peoples experience awakening as part of their normal everyday life. This leads to the question 'Have we lost something which was once normal to us as well? Did something go wrong in our development?' To regain this awakened state, Taylor argues, we can use two methods: disruption of homeostasis using spiritual technologies, such as fasting, sleep deprivation, drugs, and breathing exercises; or various forms of meditation. Taylor suggests that the latter is the preferred approach as it is safer and more likely to result in genuine, inner as well as outer focused, awakening experiences. This is because it allows us to turn off the mechanism that normally desensitizes us from experiencing higher states of consciousness. Once turned off we can then access the flow of 'life-energy'. Taylor summarises 'Awakening experiences occur when there is a more intense than usual concentration – and a greater than usual stillness – of 'life-energy inside us'. He terms these 'ISLE states' (Intensification & Stilling of Life-Energy) and lists various triggers including nature, quietness, sports, and love. He states that 'If we know why awakening experiences occur – both in terms of the external circumstances that give rise to them and the psychological changes that these circumstances cause – then we don't have to wait for them'. The book concludes with an overview of different

methods to attain and maintain ISLE states such as meditation, yoga, detachment, and mindfulness.

A particularly important point that Taylor raises is that awakening experiences can be both natural and potentially healthy, as opposed to previous perspectives that see them as aberrations and potentially unhealthy. Taylor also situates his ideas in the context of the popular 'common-core' hypothesis and Perennial Philosophy. In doing so he plays down the more reductionist explanations of such experiences and reintroduces the scientifically controversial concept of a 'life-energy' or *élan vital*. Therefore, those who favour the Perennialist view will probably find themselves much in accord with Taylor's thesis, whilst those with a more scientific view may be left unconvinced. My own view is that awakening experiences can be valuable opportunities for self-discovery, that they can be helpfully interpreted in a Perennialist framework but, at the same time, have physiological and cognitive explanations.

In summary, this well written and very accessible book, could be read as a modern version of Sir Alister Hardy's *The Spiritual Nature of Man*. Whilst it does not contain as many accounts of experiences it does develop similar themes and provides important updates on more recent research into spiritual experiences.

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