

# **Eclipsed by Fear: Transforming Trauma into Sudden Awakening**

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the possibility of transforming trauma into sudden awakening through embracing nondual psychology. At the heart of human consciousness exists an undisturbed pristine state of nondual awareness; an unconditional awareness untouched by the scars of human conditioning. A descriptive account of the author's own transformative experience is given followed by a discussion of the limitations of conventional forms of trauma resolution. Nondual psychology sees that at the core of human suffering is the belief in separation and the resolution to this is awakening to the already existing awakened state of unconditioned awareness. For nondual therapists, a few creative invitations are discussed as a means of facilitating trauma into sudden awakening in meeting the essence of fear and seeing it as energy rather than a problem, embracing the wisdom of no escape and merging with the black space of annihilation. This is also shown through a client case vignette.

While curled up in the middle of the circle in the group room, my chest tightened up like a vice grip with tremendous fear and terror racing throughout my body. The fear was intense. There was an image of myself descending to the bottom of the ocean waving and thrashing about. I thought I was going to die. Here, I was invited to surrender and cooperate with the process; to be with the intensity of the experience but from a place of no judgment. Confused, I took the risk to do just that, however, I would bounce in and out of fear, and as a result I was continually reminded not to judge the process and see that *this moment* is it. And then, suddenly, in the midst of my internal chaos, there was no division, I felt merged with the pain that was arising in my body and mind. An awesome black stillness revealed itself; a silence so great echoed throughout my Being. I was none other than this black stillness. Here, I felt that I did not exist, and yet, at the same time, I was very much aware of the entire process taking place. The chaotic energy ran its course and finally thinned out to reveal a deep sense of peace and relaxation.  
(Author's journal entry)

## **Introduction**

The above experience took place well over 10 years ago while completing an undergraduate degree in Addictions Counselling. It was my first direct experience of nondual consciousness and subsequently facilitated a psycho-spiritual journey towards

wholeness. It would be several years later before I would come to fully appreciate and understand what actually took place. For many years, I had avoided the pain of my biographical history, with the traumatic imprints collected over the course of my then, short life. Of course, at the time, I did not have the language or understanding of what took place within that profound group experience, but the experience was incredibly shocking that it radically changed the course of my life and essentially my work with clients experiencing trauma.

Mark, (a pseudonym), a self-referred, contacted me wishing to do trauma resolution work; to “heal the demons from the past”. At our first session, he reported feeling continually haunted by his past traumas, the abuse from his family and while acting out with drugs and alcohol. This caused him to withdraw from life and from his close relationships, and led to a shutting down of his energy. Mark had also been on a psycho-spiritual journey for the last 4 years embracing the work of David Deida, Krishnamurti and Herman Hesses’ Siddartha. Like most, he was seeking the golden prize of peace and happiness. As a “seasoned spiritual quester” he had also participated in many bio-energetic healing sessions and extensive meditation retreats as a means of finding resolution to his pain. However, he reported feeling continually frustrated and in pain.

While acknowledging the benefits of his prior work, I offered that the experience of no-self can be an important transformative agent. He asked, “That’s what Siddartha saw and what Krishnamurti always spoke about, isn’t it?” I nodded in reply, and responded that awakening is already the case, right now. Awakening is the realization that

there is no separate self apart from existence. The dream is in believing that we are strictly our thoughts; that we are bound by our bodily impulses and emotional states. Or to put it another way “Who you are is the permanence existing right now, regardless of states and experiences” (Adyashanti, 2000, p. 58). And since Mark was somewhat familiar with the spiritual journey, I pointed out that the natural stateless state of no-self is the fundamental condition of who and what we are in the present moment and that, although there are no guarantees, perhaps seeing the various dimensions of our traumas in the light of no-self could be transformative. With this, Mark was open to the invitation.

We will return to Mark's journey through the case study part of this article. Let us take a look at the traditional forms of trauma resolution in contrast to the nondual perspective.

### **Exploring the Benefits and Limitations of Conventional Treatment Approaches to Trauma Resolution**

The impact of trauma can be disastrous to one's being leaving them crippled in their ability to function in the world; from the loss of basic trust and safety in the world, to the loss of meaning and purpose, and suffering unexplained somatic based symptoms. The shock of trauma erodes one's ability to celebrate and live a full life (Herman, 1997; Levine, 1997; Van der Kolk & McFarlane, 1996).

The field of conventional psychology has made significant contributions to treating and healing various forms of trauma. A great deal of therapeutic attention has been paid to healing the wounds of trauma through cognitive-behavioral interventions (CBT) (Davis, 2009; Najavitz, 2002; Rothbaum, B., & Foa, E., 1996), cathartic-type

release therapies like psychodrama (Dayton, 2000), and body-based interventions such as Somatic Experiencing (Levine, 1997) and Bioenergetics (Lowen, 1994). Currently, CBT is regarded as one of the leading treatment approaches in healing trauma and is heavily used in both private and government run treatment centres (Blake, & Sonnenberg, 1998; Najavitz, 2002).

Cognitive distortions, in the form of severe alterations in one's self-perception and perception of the world are considered psychological lesions which emerge in the face of trauma. Where, prior to the traumatic event, an individual viewing themselves as once a psychologically healthy, autonomous person living a full life can deteriorate into a deep sense of worthlessness, powerlessness and shame. Life is then seen as vastly dangerous and completely untrustworthy coupled with a deep belief that one is forever psychologically crippled (Herman, 1992). CBT serves to correct these distortions through cognitive reframing in the form of challenging self-defeating thought patterns and correcting self-destructive behaviors; moving from a negative outlook on one's self and the world to a more positive life-affirming one (Davis, 2009).

Although CBT is extraordinarily helpful in relieving psychological symptoms, new research has pointed out the importance and the revolutionary healing benefits of body-based interventions (Berzeli, 2008; Levine, 1997; Scaer, 2007). According to Levine (1997), the founder of Somatic Experiencing (SE), successful trauma therapy has to involve engaging the body because it is within the body that trauma is stored. He provides a key insight into the emergence of trauma stating trauma does not occur in the event itself, but rather in one's responses to it. The inability for one to access the innate

fight or flight responses towards a perceived threat creates a state of freeze whereby all the pent up arousal energy becomes stuck with nowhere to go. He explains:

Traumatic symptoms are not caused by the “triggering” event itself. They stem from the frozen residue of energy that has not been resolved and discharged; this residue remains trapped in the nervous system where it can wreak havoc on our bodies and spirits. The long-term, alarming, debilitating, and often bizarre symptoms of PTSD develop when we cannot complete the process of moving in, through and out of the “immobility” or “freezing” state (p. 19).

The healing agent is in accessing bodily sensations through awareness of the felt sense and allowing the thwarted defensive responses to complete themselves, thus thawing the frozen energy and moving into a more harmonious integrated state of self (Levine, 1997). I am currently completing my training in SE and have witnessed and personally experienced the extraordinary healing potential of this revolutionary approach. I regard it as one of the most powerful conventional therapies in the field of trauma resolution today.

Increasingly though, conventional forms of trauma resolution are not enough and do not capitalize on the full range of human consciousness. A significant portion of the psychological community have begun integrating conventional approaches within a contemplative framework where the formless aspects of consciousness are explored and used as healing agents (Chodron, 2001; Firman & Gila, 1997; Lumiere, 2003; Ryan, 1998; Schavrien, 2005; Wolinsky, 1999).

Where CBT focuses its attention on psychological thought patterns and behaviors

and the use of positive reframing, the use of contemplative mediative techniques focuses awareness on the knower of the thoughts and behaviors (Miller, 1993; Urbanowski & Miller, 1996). Focusing on the knower of one's thoughts facilitates an expansion of awareness beyond thought constructs, positive or negative, and the habitual tendency to be pulled into one's thought stream diminishes leaving an individual with a sense of freedom. Reframing thoughts, although helpful, simply changes one thought for another, bypassing the spaciousness from which they arise and fall. The focus of meditation is freedom from thought and abidance in the empty nature of thought constructs. Self-defeating thoughts are not simply "shuffled" into more positive ones but seen through and released. This is where mediations can heal traumatic psychological wounds in ways that mere conventional approaches cannot (Urbanowski & Miller, 1996).

Similarly, and on a personal note, it was a few years later after completing my Master's degree in Counselling Psychology that I experienced some of the limitations of conventional therapy. The agency I had been working for enrolled me in several Psychodrama and CBT workshops for trauma resolution. While participating a 5 day training seminar in psychodrama, it started to dawn on me that participants appeared to be trapped in their stories. A number of participants were stuck in the drama of their story where healing appeared to be measured by who could act out the best "auxiliary ego" or have the most intense catharsis. In some cases it did not seem authentic. It was all beginning to seem like a dramatic display of self-aggrandizement. Something seemed amiss.

According to Wolinsky (1999) there appeared to be a fundamental error in

cathartic release type therapies like psychodrama. He points out:

It should be noted here that from 1960 to the present day, psychologists believe that if you could re-experience the unfinished business, i.e., your non-experienced experiences, then healing would take place. But even though people might act out their feelings in psychodrama and “feel” better, relieved, more insightful, more powerful, still the work never got finished. Why? Because there was an error. *The error was imagining that expressing feelings was the same as feeling feelings...Feeling feelings is merging and being them and allowing them to do or not do what they do, without either expression or repression.* Without judgment, evaluation or significance placed upon them and without the intention of getting rid of them (p. 107).

Where there is no judgment there is no stance towards the experience and thus no self. So, not only did this fit my experience at the workshop but it validated the essence of my personal work several years ago, where i felt at one with the entire process and in contact with the essence of my true nature.

Although the incorporation of somatic release and CBT work can be powerfully healing, from a nondual lens the emphasis is not only on what arises in one’s awareness (thoughts, feelings, sensations, images etc) but more importantly, to whom they arise. From a nondual perspective, perhaps it is in the seeing that on one is here that trauma can be radically healed and possibly transformed into a sudden awakening (Gangaji, 2003; Lumiere, 2003). We will now explore this in greater detail.

## **Embracing Nondual Psychology**

Traditional contemplative wisdom traditions have pointed to meditation, sexual union, death and trauma as pathways to awakening (Harvey, 1996; Wilber, 2001).

Nondual wisdom, however, states awakening is already the case, a pathless path that exists in the immediacy of the moment, whether one is experiencing trauma or not (Fenner, 2003; Lumiere, 2003; Predergast, 2003).

Nondual wisdom is the direct understanding that in *this* moment there is a fundamental consciousness that exists which dissolves the distinction between subject and object, where the split between self and other is seen to be an illusion (Prendergast, 2003). Nondual psychology asserts that whether we are aware of it or not, the goal of all human beings is to realize and abide as this fundamental consciousness. This is alternatively referred to as unity consciousness, unconditioned mind, the Absolute, undifferentiated consciousness and no-mind and no-self (Almaas, 1986; Fenner, 2007; Prendergast, 2007; Wilber, 2001; Wolinsky, 1999). Wilber (2001) explains:

Unity consciousness is not a state different or apart from other states, but the condition and true nature of all states. If it were different from any state (for example, if it were different from your awareness right now), then that would imply it had a boundary, that it had something to separate it from your present awareness. But unity consciousness has no boundaries, so there is nothing to separate it from anything. Enlightenment flashes clear in this moment, and this moment, and this (Wilber, p. 142).

This can be extraordinarily relieving to one who believes healing is in some future



moment. Fenner (2003) likened this condition to what the Buddhist traditions modestly called the “ultimate medicine”, because here, “when we rest in the unconditioned mind, there is nothing we need. We are complete. Nothing needs to change. We are fulfilled exactly as we are” (p. 29). There is no separation, no dualism, the moment unfolds as it is. This is not a form of denial but more so of a fluid relaxed non-judgmental awareness:

When we rest in the unconditioned mind it is impossible to worry about a fear. We don’t need to find a miracle cure for an illness, and we are satisfied wherever we are...we are free of the need to be ill or healthy. We might still have a diseased body or experience confusing emotions in our lives, but we are no longer battling our condition” (p. 31).

Here, our existence is not seen as some fundamental problem to be fixed rather life is allowed to flow undisturbed in a relaxed and liberated way. This is where nondual psychology radically differs from other conventional schools of psychology:

Other forms of therapy tend to assume that we need to be fixed because something is wrong with us. We suffer because we’ve had a dysfunctional upbringing, are genetically predisposed to mental illness, have suffered a traumatic experience, or simply don’t have the resources to cope with life” (Fenner, p. 28).

The instance we judge the moment as a problem or should somehow be different than what it is we are split and caught in separation. With this in mind, perhaps we can say that at the “core of human suffering” is the belief in the separation from *what is*. If we become bound in the chains of separation, problems exist, and we are thrust onto the

endless cycle of personal suffering (Papaji, 1992).

Separation is what fuels the illusory sense of self. The seeds of this belief appear to be in the form of fear and desire (Nirmala, 2001). The mind oscillates between fear and desire as a means of survival, never slowing down or given up its stance of separateness. Always on the move, avoiding that which threatens itself and chasing that which gives it a sense of pleasure and security (Sloman, 1981). To put it bluntly, the mind “is always intoxicating itself. Mind is a drug addict... Its drugs are accomplishments, goals, saving the world, being infatuated, being part of a group, being creative” (Sloman, 1981, p. 22). It’s always avoiding the reality of the moment. The mind is an endless cycle of identity projects (Tolle, 1999).

To the mind, the *suchness* of the moment is seen as a threat because it is in the moment that it does not exist. Firman and Gila (1997) called this perceived threat the primal wound, the threat of non-being, of non-existence. The mind sees non-being as representing a lack of some sort as a fundamental experience to be avoided (Almaas, 1986). Accordingly, one of the hallmarks of nondual psychology is to invite a relaxation of the frantic judgments and fixations around this experience and see, perhaps, for the first time, that that which the mind has been avoiding is seen as none other than itself (Fenner, 2003; Prendergast, 2003).

Although profoundly transformative, nondual wisdom and psychotherapy is not for everyone when attempting to heal the scars of trauma. In fact, Adyashanti (2003) went so far as to say “Awakening isn’t the answer for everything. I found out early that it could be absolutely the worst thing that could happen for some people” (p. 67). For some

people, they may not be ready to recognize the already awakened condition of unconditional awareness. Also, initially, individuals who are more receptive to nondual psychology seem to have had some prior exposure to its teachings or have embarked on a contemplative spiritual path. When working with a client unfamiliar with nonduality, it would be important for a therapist to facilitate this approach in a supportive and clear way, honoring where the client is at (Prendergast et al., 2003; Prendergast & Bradford, 2007).

With this in mind, the nondual therapist would be wise in avoiding the trap of applying a “shotgun-like” approach to the various symptoms of trauma faced by their clients, particularly when pointing out the absence of self-identity and the illusionary nature of trauma. This can be counterproductive in the healing work. Clients can begin using nondual language as psychological buffers against their pain and “in the cases of unhealed trauma, ‘hanging out in the absolute’ can appear to be an easy solution” (Fenner, 2003, p. 204). This is seen as completely misguided and not a true understanding or abidance in nondual being. Fenner (2003) explained this phenomenon in more detail:

I have worked with several clients who have been exposed to nondual teachings and come to me confused and upset because they feel cheated.... they fall into the language of the nondual in an attempt to deal with their pain. They might say: “I am not here. No one is here. There is no past. There is no abuse.” While such statements may well be consistent with the language of nondual teachings when pointing out the inherent emptiness of all phenomenon, self included, engaging

such thoughts when there is pain simply offers a bypass from the challenge of being in the relative world (p. 204).

The therapist adopting a particular agenda with their clients runs the risk of forcing an inauthentic outcome which is not considered nondual therapy. The process is fluid and organic, free of hidden agendas and is spontaneous in nature. There is no expectation that a client should experience it or not (Fenner, 2003; Prendergast, 2003). The process is more of an invitation to be that, which is presently aware and available and free from all human conditionings.

It is not about denying the validity of conventional therapy approaches in favor of a nondual one, but integrating it within a nondual perspective. Since nondual awareness is already the case, now, then it can be experienced at any moment. For example, in her work counselling traumatized clients, Lumiere (2003) found that even in the beginning stages of healing, that of developing safety and inner supportive resources, nondual awareness can still be pointed to.

After strengthening resources by bringing more awareness to them, I began to point to the experience of awareness itself as that which is always present no matter what appears and is larger than the [trauma] vortex system, but inclusive of it. Not all clients are ready to recognize nondual awareness. I point to the experience of awareness itself when I am spontaneously moved to in the moment or when the clients bring it up themselves (p. 260).

In the working through of trauma, addressing all dimensions of human consciousness including body, mind and spirit is vital (Wolinsky, 1999). Sadly, in some

cases with clients receiving nondual therapy, what is touted as residing in nondual being has turned into nothing more than a state of dissociation (Fenner, 2003; Lumiere, 2003). A nondual therapist has to tread carefully here. Dissociative states are a frightening result of trauma and are commonly seen with individuals who have suffered reoccurring or complex forms of trauma. With dissociation, an individual's awareness can be split off from some or all of their bodily sensations, thoughts and emotions, appearing as if they are detached and outside of their body (Herman, 1992; Levine, 1997; Scaer, 2007). Specifically, with complex and developmental trauma, pointing out the unconditioned state of awareness may only serve to reinforce a pattern of dissociation (Lumiere, 2003). What is called for at this level of therapeutic work is facilitating an individual's awareness back into the fullness of their body and emotional states, thus establishing safety and groundedness (Najavitz, 2002; Levine, 1994).

However, with all this being said, a nondual approach to trauma offers a profound opportunity for healing and awakening to one's true nature. Following the wisdom of nondual psychology and appreciating its own limitations in psychotherapy with traumatized individuals, let's turn our attention to the themes which emerged that are relevant to the transformation of trauma into awakening. These themes can be identified through the accounts of those who have experienced fear as a natural arising emotional state and not as a problem to be solved, the wisdom of no escape and the mergence with the empty space of non-being. Now let us look at those who have spontaneously transformed their pain into sudden awakening.

## **No One *Here* Who Suffers**

There are many accounts of ordinary people who have suddenly woken up to the dream of separation (Adyashanti, 2008; Nirmala, 2001). What was amazing in these accounts was that the experiences spontaneously occurred in the midst of an ordinary life (Carse, 2006; Foster, 2009; Segal, 1996; Renz, 2005). No techniques were needed, no teaching, no dogma, no gurus, no mantra; the shift in perception from a separate based entity to embracement of oneness was a sudden event (Adyashanti, 2008).

Life itself was always pointing to the absence of separation, from the most delightful to the most horrific of experiences. As Foster (2009) stated, the grace is in realizing there never was anyone who suffered.

Even the most intense suffering is pointing to the absence of the one who suffers.

At the heart of the most intense suffering, right at the heart of it, there is simply nobody there who suffers. Even suffering is pointing to the absence of the separate solid person...There is pain, but there's nobody there who is in pain.

That's the dream, that's the suffering: that there is a *person* here (p. 34).

Existence is a mirror of our fundamental absence. This may be difficult to hear at first, especially in the moment when one is in the vortex of trauma, but the opportunity exists upon investigation that life is just a happening, moment to moment, there is no separate self to claim ownership (Balsekar, 1992).

This can be seen in descriptive accounts of individuals who suddenly woke up in the eye of their own pain and realized the absence of self (Carse, 2006; Foster, 2007; Katie, 2002; Renz, 2005; Tolle, 1999). Tolle (1999) recalled that up until his thirtieth year

he felt as though he lived “in a state of almost continuous anxiety interspersed with periods of suicidal depression (p. 3). He recalled it this way:

“I cannot live with myself any longer.” This was the thought that kept repeating itself in my mind. Then suddenly I became aware of what a peculiar thought it was. “Am I one or two? If I cannot live with myself, there must be two of me: the ‘I’ and the ‘self’ that ‘I’ cannot live with.” “Maybe,” I thought, “only one of them is real.” I was so stunned by this strange realization that my mind stopped. I was fully conscious, but there were no more thoughts... Without any thought, I felt, I knew, that there is infinitely more to light than we realize... Everything was fresh and pristine, as if it had just come into existence... For the next five months, I lived in a state of uninterrupted deep peace and bliss (pp. 1-2).

Similarly, Katie (2002) she experienced a ten-year period spiraling down the vortex of rage, paranoia, and despair and one morning she while laying on the floor of her room, woke up to her true nature:

All my rage, all the thoughts that had been troubling me, my whole world, *the* whole world, was gone. At the same time, laughter welled up from the depths and just poured out. Everything was unrecognizable. It was as if something else had woken up. It opened its eyes. It was looking through Katie’s eyes. And it was so delightful! It was intoxicated with joy. There was nothing separate, nothing unacceptable to it; everything was its very own self (p. xii).

Similar to the experiences just described, we will now take a look at how trauma can be transformed into awakening through seeing fear as energy rather than as a problem

to be solved, relaxing into the wisdom of no escape, and merging with the empty space of non-being. First, let's explore the phenomenon.

### **Fear is Not a Problem to be Solved**

Despite my first taste of nondual awareness 10 years ago, this was not my abiding state. Like most, I found myself wrapped back up in the mind, the idea of separation, and re-visiting my trauma. Thus I had to re-realize some important truths about human consciousness. While interspersed between unconditioned and conditioned forms of existence, I gleaned some important insights. For many years, I viewed fear as a problem and resolved to get rid of it. Yet, within my frantic attempts to overcome it, I found myself stalled and feeling emotionally crippled.

Da Free John (1983) viewed the tendency to overcome fear as a classic trap of the mind, stating that with fear “you cannot get rid of it, because you are considering it in the wrong way. You are considering fear to be a problem that must be solved” (p. 117). Fear is one of many states available to consciousness but is not the natural abiding state of unconditional awareness. He illustrates:

Fear is just an ordinary mechanism that you must master, an attitude of the body. It is something that you are doing ... You can breathe and feel and relax beyond it.

You need take nothing into account philosophically. Just breathe and feel and relax beyond it (p. 117).

By relaxing into the energy of fear and seeing it as an appropriate response in the moment, I began to feel the free-flowing nature of existence racing throughout my body again. In a similar vein, Balsekar (1996) also observed fear was not the problem but



rather the illusory sense of separate self-existence, which comes with resistance to or identification with fear. He says:

The basis of all fear is the entity, the identification with a particular body as a separate individual with autonomy and independence, with volition and choice. Fear, desire and all other forms of affectivity are mere manifestations of the pseudo-entity which constitutes pseudo-bondage, and what needs to be eliminated is this pseudo-entity rather than the manifestations of that pseudo-entity. (p. 70)

At the root of suffering is the core pattern of avoiding the emotional state of fear. Avoidance is the problem rather than fear itself (Foster, 2009). Gangaji (2003) offered that if fear is really investigated through inquiry, met head on and stepped into totally, without any stories or commentaries about it, it can suddenly disappear. Miraculously:

When there is an openness to fear, where can it be found? What a strange creature fear is. It exists only when there is resistance to its existence! When you stop and open to what you have resisted throughout time, you find that fear is not fear. Fear is energy. Fear is space. Fear is the Buddha. (p. 175)

The more life is allowed to unfold and reveal itself, as it is, without reacting out of our emotions or resisting our states of consciousness, the more one can give up control and trust and relax in the aliveness of the unknown. Here, we can see the transformative power of unconditional awareness when meeting the energy of fear. Relaxing into fear opens up to the deeper dimensions of being, that of spaciousness and annihilation of self.

## **The Wisdom of No Escape**

At some moment, we just give up. We come to a full stop and accept the situation for what it is (Papaji, 1992). This is what Renz (2005) experienced as he was gripped by the unfolding story of Yuddhistra and Krishna. The essential piece of the story centres upon the aftermath of a bloody battle and the death of Yuddhistra. Upon his death, Yuddhistra saw his loved ones burning in hellfire and suffering eternally. At this moment, Yuddhistra fell into total despair and the poignant question was asked by Krishna of whether or not Yuddhistra could remain in that condition forever. He recalls:

By this time I was so deeply involved in the play and so completely identified with Yuddhistra that I felt the question was actually addressed to me. He, or I, answered, “I have no desire to change anything or to avoid pain or suffering. If I must remain in this condition for the remainder of my existence, so be it.”... at this moment an explosion-like experience tore through the back of my head, filling my perception with pure light. At this moment, there was an absolute acceptance of being. Time stopped, ... and the world disappeared, and a kind of pure Is-ness in a glaring light appeared. It was a pulsating silence, and absolute aliveness that was perfect in itself---and I was that. (p. xxi)

This is a breakthrough! This is a total acceptance of our fate in the moment. Every moment is then seen as a chance to awaken and therefore there is no need to escape our situation. We surrender to existence. This is the recognition that “no escape is possible or needed. This means fully embracing whatever appears in consciousness rather than ignoring any of it” (Gangaji, 2003, p. 146). When the situation becomes desperate enough

one suddenly embraces what Trungpa (2002) called the “lion’s roar”. “The “lion’s roar” is the fearless proclamation that any state of mind, including the emotions, is a workable situation ... We must respect whatever happens to our state of mind. Chaos should be regarded as extremely good news” (p. 69).

Osho (1979b) saw the need to be saved as a last ditch effort of the mind to save itself, and he encouraged a complete let-go: “Don’t shout and don’t yell. Simply disappear. Relax and let go. Don’t try to hold on to anything. This is the last struggle of the ego to be saved” (p. 236). In the moment of ceasing our futile attempt to get rid of our suffering, pain and trauma, there is the realization of that which is beyond suffering, that which has never been scarred by the pain of our lives (Gangaji, 2003).

In seeing that fear is not a problem and experiencing the wisdom of no escape, another central element in transforming trauma into sudden awakening is in merging with the black space of annihilation. The next section describes the mergence with the empty space of non-being.

### **Merging with the Empty Space of Non-being**

As mentioned earlier, when working with trauma the experience of non-being can suddenly arise and feel like a threat to „snuff“ out one’s existence. Transforming trauma into sudden awakening means confronting this primal wound of non-being and merging with it. Almaas (1986) refers to this experience as “annihilation space,” as it marks the death of the separate self contraction. The mind or self will run away in the felt sense of its own extinction but rather than shoring it up, or soothing a client’s fear through positive reframes, the task of the nondual therapist is to help facilitate a mergence with it:

Only when we allow this emptiness to be, without judgment or rejection, without reaction or opinion, does it shed its obscurations and reveal its inherent truth: the state of no self, the freedom and openness of our Being. We experience ourselves then as a luminous night sky, transparent and pure, light and happy, cool and virginal, deep and peaceful (Almass, 1986, p. 337).

With that, the trauma of the sense of separation is seen through, and the experience of freedom and liberation can be felt. Osho (1979a) could see, however, that most people needed to reach a boiling point in their lives in order for awakening to happen; when conditioned and unconditional forms of existence collide, the identification with self snaps and the dream of separateness is revealed. He says, “From nothingness we come and to nothingness we move ... and just in the middle a momentary dream” (p.184). This mergence also brings about a spontaneous recognition that:

We have the instant and joyous recognition that this is our true home. We finally feel completely at home, we understand why we love to feel at home, and why it is so difficult to feel at home... but now we know with certainty that we are home at last, and wonder how we came to be lost (Almass, 1986, p. 404).

Our home is made here, in the clarity of the moment, beyond the ideas of existence and non-existence. Our complaints and our traumas are burnt up in the fire of awakening. Up to now we have explored the transformational opportunity of accepting the energy of fear, embracing the wisdom of no escape and merging with the empty space of non-being. We will now explore the application of these themes with Mark in the case vignette part of this article.

## **A Case Vignette**

My first couple of psychotherapy sessions with Mark dealt with exploring the history of his trauma and pointing out the stateless state of no-self. There was a tendency for Mark to become caught in his story. Rather than fixating on the story, I fluctuated between acknowledging the importance of his story and his feelings, and introducing the stateless state of unconditional awareness. It took some time and repeated encouragement, but Mark was able to relax the grip on his stories and have some “glimpses” of unconditional awareness, and relax into it.

Our third session became transformative for Mark. He arrived at our session feeling heavy and helpless. He described a deep pain residing within the middle of his chest. Inquiring further, Mark shared that his state of helplessness was in relation to not being able to protect himself during moments of abuse from his father. It appeared that underneath his recollection of the traumatic event was a series of judgments including, “This shouldn’t have happened”, “I should have been able to protect myself” and “Why didn’t my mother stop it?” Here, I encouraged Mark to totally stay with his state of helplessness, not to judge it or to try and change it in any way. With continued support, he was able to tolerate his experience allowing it to open up further. Krishnamurti (2000) called this choiceless awareness where the dualistic split between the knower and the known dissolves and the moment is accepted as it is.

This seemed to propel Mark into the deeper recesses of his being. From this place, while hunched over in his chair and with closed eyes, he appeared eclipsed by a state of fear. Within this state, he reported experiencing himself standing in the middle of a large

coliseum, similar to the ancient coliseums built during the days of the Roman Empire, where he could see thousands of disfigured ghost-like images yelling and cursing inaudible accusations at him – some of which were even re-enacting traumatic events from his life. Recoiling out of fear, his body seemed to tighten up as a means of protecting and defending himself. Noticeably, Mark appeared terrorized.

To avoid a total collapse of his consciousness or even the debilitating effects of dissociation: I suggested that Mark view the fear simply as energy. Wolinsky (1999) described that our labels on feelings often prevent the naturally free-flow of them and that by “de-labeling” emotions and seeing them as energy, the dammed up energy is then allowed to naturally flow. Mark did as I suggested and he experienced a radically different relationship with his fear. He noticed the energy of fear move on its own, doing what it needed to do, and allowed him more space to simply be with the unfolding experience.

I recalled my own transformative work years ago involving the invitation to step into the eye of my pain and accept the totality of it all; to not run or escape from it. Subsequently, this then became my invitation to Mark to do the same.

With tears rolling down his eyes, Mark, to his amazement, reported seeing himself now as a point of brilliant light in the middle of the coliseum and that although the phantom-like figures were present there was no fear. I then asked him to merge with that point of light. To be that empty space, here and now. With this he felt the point of light filling his entire being leaving him feeling light and expansive. The imagery of his experience suddenly dissolved and he felt surprisingly peaceful and relaxed. As Mark

opened his eyes, tears continued to roll down his face as we sat in silence together appreciating the depth of his experience. Very little was said at this point outside of Mark sharing that his tears were of compassion and love; and that he did not feel identified with his psychological history. We honored this by spending the remainder of our session relaxing in the stillness and silence of the moment.

### Conclusion

Needless to say, I was touched by Mark's experience as it mirrored elements of my own years ago. Mark and I met for two more additional sessions and as with myself, the profound states of peace and relaxation subsided and he experienced the return of his mental chatter, whereby he began to doubt the validity of his prior experience. Fenner (2003) warned of this, commenting that a common misunderstanding is in believing awakening to one's true nature is a one time experience; the paradoxical truth of the matter is that, although awakening is already the case, it is realized on a moment to moment basis. Not only that, but Mark would also have to re-realize the wisdom he saw in not resisting his inner experiences, seeing fear as energy, and essentially, the freedom from separate self existence.

Nondual psychology is an exciting adjunct to other forms of trauma therapy. Nondual psychology not only helps alleviate and resolve the wounds of various forms of trauma through dissolution of the belief in separate self-existence, but is also an opportunity to awaken to one's true nature; that of nondual being. Freedom from the self relaxes one's inner psychological and emotional resistance and facilitates movement

towards a natural unfolding where the frozen moments of trauma are thawed and healed. Where conventional forms of trauma therapy address the body and mind, nondualism, which is inclusive of these approaches, anchors itself in the realization of no-self and total harmony with manifest and unmanifest reality. The mystery of who and what we are can touch and heal trauma.

We saw in this article the very real possibility of transforming trauma into a spontaneous awakening through embracing the wisdom of no escape, not taking a position against fear and merging with the empty space of non-being. This may be considered a unique experience in the field of trauma but it can not be ignored. Although not within the scope of this article, it would be interesting to explore what particular types of trauma are best suited for a nondual approach and subsequently which are not. As illustrated Mark's transformational experience, every moment, even the darkest moments of our lives, can be an opportunity to let-go and wake up to who we are and participate in the divine mystery of existence. Zen Master Ikkyu's awakening story captures the diamond-like clarity of awakening found in the midst of individual pain and suffering.

*For twenty years I was in turmoil  
Seething and angry, but now my time has come!  
The crow laughs, an arhat emerges from the filth,  
And in the sunlight a jade beauty sings!*  
Zen Master Ikkyu



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