



Oneness experiences:  
a knowledgeable overview

Oneness experiences are powerful indicators of our human potential. But a lot of what has been written and talked about these experiences is vague, waffle, inexact, misleading, or just plain wrong. My colleagues and I have often talked about recording more of what we know, including a statement on oneness experiences, but our practical work has rightly come first. I retired (early) as director of The Human Potential Trust - and Wildlife For All, our "sister" organisation - in November 2017 at the age of 60. I've just written the three essays on the likely psychology of extraterrestrial intelligence - to add something to the discussion about the Fermi Paradox, the Great Filter, the Zoo Hypothesis, etc - so this inter-linked topic was next in line. What's needed is a knowledgeable and authoritative introduction or overview to this subject. And if anyone can provide such a comment at this time, it's myself. I'm not being in any way arrogant in stating this; merely real.

Beginning in the summer of 1975, a series of oneness experiences changed my life. When the first one happened, it was completely unexpected and I was ignorant of such events. After the initial experience, I asked myself if I was going mad. I was training to be a scientist, fully convinced of the benefits of enquiry, therefore I applied this questioning technique to the unusual occurrence. The answer was obviously "no", because what I had just glimpsed was so blatantly a beneficial state, with tremendous clarity of understanding.

As the oneness experiences continued to occur over the next two and a half years, I was able to analyse in increasing detail what was going on. I diligently worked out two frameworks or maps for the two consciousnesses I was experiencing, to explain the "new" one as well as the "normal" way of being. Shortly after moving to London in September 1975 to continue my formal education by studying biology, ecology, and psychology, I discovered a range of books about "spirituality", including some on "mystical" experiences - but, unfortunately, they didn't help (other than to confirm that this subject had long since been known about). I'd already worked out more practical detail than was written in the best of these books, which was a bit disappointing as I'd hoped to add to my learning. Anyway, a final insight brought all previous ones together to become a constant state of being that has since continued for over 40 years to this time of writing. I've written elsewhere in more detail about what happened, including the oneness experiences; see <https://www.thehumanpotentialtrust.org/education.html>

Individuals have been glimpsing a significantly different consciousness or much better way of being for a long time, probably going back at least three and a half thousand years or thereabouts. It has occurred in various cultures, on different continents, to people from many walks of life. Edgar D Mitchell, the sixth man who walked on the Moon, had a oneness experience whilst in space on the way back to Earth aboard Apollo 14. The powerful insight gained by individuals has usually been subsequently expressed within religious, spiritual, philosophical, and poetic contexts. Such culturally-biased interpretations were to be expected but are nevertheless ultimately unhelpful because of distortions and limitations. Instead, a precise "nuts and bolts" mechanical approach is needed. When demystified, this is an educational matter, with no belief required whatsoever. It's psychology. And an evolutionary potential.

I coined the term "oneness experience" during the summer of 1975 to help explain what was happening to me. Shortly afterwards, I learnt they were usually called "mystical experiences" - although other names such as oceanic, unity, transcendent, and peak experiences have been used, plus various religious labels. I've continued to use the same term of oneness experience because it's simple and descriptive - and, as I clearly understand the phenomenon, there's nothing "mystical" or inexplicable about it. Exact knowledge is important, not mystery or hidden secrets. Education should be straightforward and available to all.

Characteristics of a oneness experience have been reasonably well documented. It is an ecstasy of unity. The “normal” sense of self-identity is transcended to a state of non-separateness in which there is connectedness to everything and everyone. An unparalleled love for all is accompanied by a great peacefulness. There is an intellectual illumination or tremendous understanding of this coherent wholeness. The usual sense of time and space is superseded by an eternal reality that is unbounded. Limitations disappear, replaced by an energised aliveness. Senses are heightened as never before. Service before self is the obvious way forward in this “new” perception of “one for all, all for one”. The experience is incomparable to anything known or thought possible beforehand. By contrast, ordinary awareness is a faint shadow. The immense *knowing* that is available when in this altered state of consciousness has been called “ineffable”. We dispute this as it can be fully understood and explained like anything and everything else - albeit only after exact study of, and repeated exposure to, the phenomenon, or via an educational approach that knows the exact process of change. That said, the scale is way off the known charts - so it’s not surprising people struggle to verbalise what is seen and felt.

The oneness experience is a sudden revelation of a greater reality. This expanded awareness seemingly happens as a spontaneous event, although we have identified triggers which prompt its onset. (A few people subsequently learn to bring it on more or less at will, but this is a lesser state for the self-indulgent purpose of comfort through escapism, albeit a somewhat “higher” form of distraction.) It is a brief occurrence, usually lasting a few minutes, despite the overwhelming feeling of timelessness. Whilst in this altered state of consciousness, it’s possible that there’s an accelerated process of thinking. The “out” trigger is resumption of thought within the “normal” paradigm. Although this point can be clearly identified, marking the technical end of the oneness experience, there is nevertheless a powerful “afterglow” that persists for days. This after-effect is often mistaken for some sort of “change”.

It is a rare happening, although not extremely rare. It often occurs just once to an individual, though not always, perhaps followed later on by lesser but still heightened insights.

Not uncommonly, it is associated with taking magic mushrooms, LSD, or another hallucinogenic drug. Our organisation has never endorsed the use of hallucinogens, which are illegal. Researchers argue that there might be some therapeutic benefits, whilst also acknowledging the risks of “bad trips” and possible paranoia. Even if oneness experiences do sometimes happen under the influence of these drugs, they are tainted by unreal hallucinations.

Academic studies have been conducted and continue to be done. The first of these was by Dr Richard Maurice Bucke, M.D., published in 1900 as *Cosmic Consciousness*. Bucke himself briefly experienced a state of oneness in his 36th year. The historical work of this then-eminent Canadian psychiatrist was a worthy beginning - despite faults, such as thinking this phenomenon happened mostly to men (which is untrue). This was closely followed by the work of the American philosopher and psychologist William James, published in 1901 as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James identified “mysticism” as being at the heart or root of the world’s religions. Later, towards the end of his career in 1969, the British zoologist Sir Alister Hardy set up a research centre in Oxford to provide a database of religious and oneness experiences. The American psychologist Abraham Maslow wrote about peak experiences in *Towards a Psychology of Being* (1968) and *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (1971). Maslow was one of the founders of transpersonal psychology - a branch of psychology which, in my view, has so far failed to deliver on its initial promise, largely due to those who have subsequently worked in this area. Psychology has always struggled to be as credible as the other main sciences of biology, physics, and chemistry - and substantial academic work of a breakthrough nature remains to be done with regards to oneness experiences

and human potential. Of course, the situation hasn't been helped by the muddled, half-hearted attempts at "spirituality" or "personal development" which are often little better than a joke. It's difficult to study what is barely happening or seriously polluted with bullshit.

It's generally accepted that meditation is somehow connected to the attainment of a state of oneness. Traditionally, this originated in India with Hinduism (not Buddhism as often believed) as a spiritual exercise - later developing in Taoist China and with Buddhism in India, before spreading to the West such as with Plotinus in Roman Egypt. I've always disputed the relevance of meditation as something useful for achieving a higher state. Whereas I've identified concentration as a preliminary skill or quality, its importance shouldn't be in any way overemphasised. And although I fully recognise the negative effects of emotion - as different from feeling (and we've got a YouTube film on this subject, so refer to our website) - "calming the mind" will do little else other than reducing stress. Countless hours are wasted by people practising meditation, which achieves nothing of worth for anyone, nor does it make the world a better place. Vipassana meditation gets close to what we call *seeing*, but there's little evidence of it actually working or making any kind of significant change. It's all clutching at straws - part of the mess caused by the blind leading the blind. As meditation has had thousands of years to prove its worth, perhaps it's long-since time to dump it and kick it to the kerb?! Furthermore, knowing that my above words will annoy those who have adopted meditation as some kind of religion, it's relevant to add here that an anti-hypocrisy test is absolutely required to help counter people's compulsion for fooling themselves; we suggest "actions speak louder than words". Plus, one of our 16 key factors for being the best you can be is "facing reality".

Whilst I'm in the process of being annoying - or, rather, what I call being "lovingly awkward" - here's another thing that we need to get clear: oneness experiences are usually more or less useless. Years ago, a man called Ron read one of my books, came along to a workshop, then got involved with our work for a while. More than 50 years earlier, Ron held the record for being the youngest ever safe-cracker. He was caught, convicted, sent to prison, then released after serving time. Not long afterwards, the police arrested him again for a job he didn't do and a witness falsely identified him in a line-up, so he was jailed once more (probably not unfairly because he was still an active safecracker, if not guilty of that particular bank robbery). Whilst inside again, Ron had a oneness experience. He gave up crime. And, for the next few decades, he attended the monthly meetings of a London group associated with the Sir Alister Hardy Society, in which they did little except arrange talks and reminisce about their mystical insights of yesteryear. Ron was attracted to our organisation because we put awareness into action; he was tired of pointless talk. Sadly, he was in his early 70s with failing health, so his involvement was brief. Ron told us all that the only lasting benefit of his oneness experience was that it got him out of a life of crime and he would probably have otherwise ended up becoming the head of one of London's drug gangs.

I met Martin when he was working at an animal rescue farm. I was instrumental in him having a oneness experience, the afterglow of which gradually faded despite him being convinced that the insight and effects "would remain". In Martin's case, there was also a long-term benefit: the oneness experience removed his hatred of people which he had acquired through seeing cruelty done to animals. But nothing else lasted, other than a strong memory of a different consciousness.

Usually, it's hard to find any kind of permanent benefit - even though the individual has had the most significant or powerful experience that anyone can have (enlightenment aside). Some struggle to put it into any kind of context. Others do, yet still don't take advantage of their glimpse of a considerably better way of being, effectively remaining stuck.

What was different in my case? I used enquiry to work out, step by step, what exactly was going on. And, whereas I never once tried nor expected to get another oneness experience, they kept happening. I increasingly formed a framework or map of what this alternative consciousness was all about - as well as detailing a contrasting second framework or map for the "normal" psychology. I slipped in and out of both consciousnesses, albeit moving closer and closer to the one that made immeasurably more sense. As everything became clearer when I was "out" of the oneness and its greater understanding, I understood enough to catch my behaviour when I was about to do something that was less than best. I'd immediately stop and make the necessary correction, although I didn't talk in terms of error-focused learning at the time even if I was doing it. From the very beginning, there was no indulgence to any degree with the ecstasy or bliss of the oneness experience. Instead, the simple aim was service before self. As Neil Diamond sang in *Dry Your Eyes*: "And it taught us more about giving than we ever cared to know."

I hinted at this above, but oneness experiences are glimpses that don't last because the mental framework we have built up through normal psychological and sociological conditioning is inadequate or at odds with this alternative consciousness. The sudden insight temporarily suspends usual thought processes, but these must inevitably begin again because we must function. And when normal thinking does kick in, the bigger and better way of being is effectively shut out and "lost". The two paradigms are not a continuum, but rather like oil and water. What is needed is a complete re-think and re-education - which must be based on exact knowledge of the required process. Even when this knowledge is available, it still takes a lot of effort to bring about real progress. Neurology is neurology and our brains are hard-wired. Neural plasticity is an option, but it's easier said than done to fight against habit. Most people either just don't bother, or else fail to do what's needed to follow the process. Avoidance continues to dominate; it is not sufficiently addressed and is massively underestimated as the enemy of change.

Oneness experiences occur with varying degrees of purity. Putting this the other way around, aspects of self usually get in the way as pollution or limiting factors - which sounds strange because the small "self" is always reported as being transcended, but it's nevertheless true to some degree. Conveniently, one major characteristic of the oneness experience is often either overlooked or afterwards forgotten: service before self. Yet this important consequence of action is inherent to "one for all, all for one". (Again, avoidance should never be underestimated. It does what it says on the tin.)

It's also crucial to make clear that oneness experiences are but a glimpse of a greater reality and that the real objective has to be changing towards enlightenment or a constant state of non-selfishness. (I've always been exact to clarify that what has happened to me is a *constant* state, but not necessarily a *permanent* one. There are in-built safeguards in the non-selfish psychology to prevent slippage back to the normal selfish psychology. That said, there is nothing to prevent accidental brain injury or deterioration through illness such as Alzheimer's disease, and in either case what I know and live would be lost.) Having a oneness experience or experiences is not a necessary part of shifting towards our full human potential. Based on past and present team members within our own work, the occurrence of a oneness experience might or might not happen, although the chances of one or more happening seem to be increased. What is relevant is learning and living the process conducive to real change.

Claims of "enlightenment" should be viewed with considerable caution. There is an unfortunate history of charlatans - especially men in their late 20s or early 30s, obsessed with spirituality - who have then probably had a oneness experience, mistaking it as enlightenment. They have fooled themselves for a while, then arrogantly failed to climb down from their lofty claim after becoming drunk on power or adulation. Or perhaps they've just been outright frauds, willing to exploit others from the beginning. As people can be clever, these phoney gurus can talk the talk. But

they will be less likely to be doing much, if anything, of the hard graft action necessary for service before self. Plus it's often what they are not saying or urging which speaks volumes as to their lack of authenticity. This massively important subject of developing human potential is hard enough to grasp without the added muck of fraudsters and cults adding to the murkiness.

The one thing I don't understand is what facilitates a oneness experience. This event can seemingly happen to anyone, suddenly, without specific preparation, in which case there must be some latent or innate capacity waiting to be tapped or plugged into. There will presumably be a precise neurological explanation as to how this is enabled to actually take place. This is assuming that consciousness is merely a product of the brain, either by information processing or energy processing. Or consciousness might be somehow linked with quantum mechanics, as physicists are speculating - in which case, there would still need to be a route from brain to consciousness. Indeed, some physicists think that quantum theory might be needed to help fully explain how the brain works. But nobody yet really knows. And it doesn't really matter anyway as this intellectual question is irrelevant to the actual task of changing our psychology from selfishness to non-selfishness.

Oneness experiences are a pointer towards a much healthier and connected way of being. They can provide clues. But they are not required nor an end goal. Rather, we need to get serious about changing our everyday psychology. Through education, our latent human potential must be actually developed in a real, precise, practical, better, and lasting way for living life. We must progress way beyond a mere glimpse of what is possible.

Iain Scott, November 2020

<https://www.thehumanpotentialtrust.org>

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