

The Seekers Forum Transcript

The Giant Within You: An Interview with Steve Taylor

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Mark Matousek: Welcome, Steve Taylor. It's so good to finally meet you. I'm glad you could join us in The Seekers Forum.

Steve Taylor: Thanks, Mark. It's great to be with you.

Mark: Thank you. Now, you're one of the primary debunkers of the myths of enlightenment at the moment. I like the way you have a very hard-headed, clear-eyed way of looking at this question of enlightenment that so many folks see as esoteric. But before we get into the myths of enlightenment, I'd just like to ask you what got you interested in this topic particularly?

Steve: It was part of me from a young age. From the age of 16 or 17, I began to have what I now know to be spiritual experiences. Although at the time, I didn't understand them, I thought I was crazy, but eventually, after four or five years, I began to read books about spirituality, and I recognized my own experiences. I wanted to understand the experiences. I wanted to understand why they occurred and why they faded away and if it was possible to live in a permanent state of spiritual experience. That was why I began to study it from a psychological perspective, because I wanted to throw some lights on the phenomenon.

Mark: Can you tell me a little bit about those early experiences?

Steve: Yes, they were usually connected to nature. I would be walking, often in the dark as well. Often in the dark at night, I would go to walk in the park or I would go back to my school to walk around the fields because I wanted some contact with nature. While I was walking, I would feel a sense of connection to my surroundings. Well, first of all, everything would seem more vivid and more real, the trees would become sentient beings, the leaves seemed to be alive, the sky seemed to be somehow alive, the moon seemed to be somehow alive.

I felt as though I was part of the scene and the whole of me seemed to be vibrating in harmony with everything around me. I felt this sense of inner well-being and the sense of being uplifted above my trivial problems and my situation. Yes, that was it. They were usually connected to nature and usually when I was on my own.

Mark: Did you have a spiritual background as a kid? Were you prepared for these kinds of experiences?

Steve: Not at all. That was part of the problem. I didn't understand them. I thought I was crazy because I have no background at all, not even in religion. My parents, they weren't atheist, but they just weren't interested in religion. The only religion I had was soccer. Football, that was my father's religion. My background wasn't intellectual or really cultured either, like a working-class-type background. I didn't really have any framework to make sense of these experiences.

Mark: Let's talk about the subject of enlightenment and what the primary myths are about awakening. Can we start with the idea that they are rare, this sense that folks have that mystic experiences happen one in a million and there's no preparation for it and so on. What does your research show you?

Steve: My research shows that temporary awakening experiences are certainly very common. Around half of the population have had spiritual experiences at least once. Around 40% of the population have had them more than once or regularly. Even when we talk about enlightenment in an ongoing sense, or wakefulness as I call it, that's quite common too. The only issue is that a lot of people go through a shift into a state of wakefulness, but they don't have a background in spirituality. It happens quite accidentally and spontaneously. They don't really understand what's happened to them. They wouldn't describe it as a spiritual awakening.

I think later on, they gravitate towards spiritual books, spiritual teachings, and then they think, "Ah, that's what's happened to me. I've had a spiritual awakening," but for a long time, they don't really understand it. I found in my research, it's by no means uncommon for people to undergo a shift into a state of wakefulness, particularly after long periods of psychological turmoil, after long periods of addiction, or depression, or a bereavement, or after a diagnosis of cancer. It doesn't just happen.

I think that one of the myths is that it just happens to people who are monks or mystics or who follow a spiritual path, but it doesn't. It happens to ordinary people in the midst of everyday life.

Mark: Why is it that negative or destructive, difficult experiences have so much more impact in this regard?

Steve: In my view, it's because long periods of turmoil, or depression, or loss, they break down the structures of the ego. Let's say if you're an addict, for example, over many years, you slowly break down, your ego slowly breaks down; all of the things which define your identity – which is normally psychological attachments to things like ambitions, possessions, success, status, the roles we play in society, our careers and so on – if you're an addict, all of these things are taken away from you. You lose your possessions, you lose your career. It's a long process of loss, basically.

Slowly, all of the psychological attachments, which are basically the building blocks of your ego, they are slowly taken away. In the same way that a house collapses when you take the bricks away, eventually when you lose all of these attachments, your ego collapses, and that's a devastating experience. It's very painful, but from the ashes of your broken ego, a new self can arise. It's almost as if there was a space inside your being which used to be filled by your ego, but now a new self can arise and fill that space.

Mark: What can we do to help that process along? The house has fallen down, we're in a state of spiritual emergency, what then?

Steve: It's interesting because, obviously, all human beings go through turmoil at some point. Everyone goes through suffering, as the Buddha said, it's part of human life. Everyone goes through trauma and crisis and challenges, but not that many people in proportion to the whole population undergo spiritual awakening as a result of the trauma.

There are certain qualities which separate people who do go through the shift from those who don't. One of them is your attitude. If you approach your predicament with an attitude of resistance, and if you are not prepared to acknowledge and face up to your predicament, then that will block the transformational power of the turmoil. But if you are prepared to acknowledge your predicament and explore the feelings that your predicament brings, to

explore the psychological pain you experience, to go into yourself and really face that psychological pain, and then if you are prepared to accept the predicament, if you really surrender to the predicament, to let go and open yourself fully to it, that's usually when the transformation occurs. Acceptance is probably the most important quality.

Mark: What about self-inquiry in that moment of destruction and devastation? What is the role of self-inquiry and asking questions and investigation in stabilizing the state?

Steve: That's really important. You have to be prepared to go inside. A lot of people, even in ordinary life when things are going well, a lot of people are not prepared to go inside. They're not used to it. Our whole culture encourages us to live outside ourselves, to immerse ourselves in distractions and activities. Not many people have the ability to go inside. It's the same when you face challenges or crises, you have to be able to go inside yourself. A lot of people just are not prepared to do that or they're just not ready to do that. You have to be able to go inside yourself and explore your own being, to enter into your own being. That's one of the prerequisites of transformation, that ability to go inside.

Mark: What are some of the questions that we can ask ourselves in that inquiry?

Steve: Well, one of the things I've discovered in my research, particularly in my latest book, *Extraordinary Awakenings*, which is coming out shortly, I did some research on prisoners who'd undergone spiritual awakening, and prison seems to be a very fertile environment for spiritual awakening. I wondered why this is. I think there were two possible reasons why a lot of prisoners go through spiritual awakening or just also gradual spiritual development.

I think maybe the most important one is the one we just mentioned, that when you're in prison, you have to let go because everything which defines your identity is outside the prison. Your roles, your possessions, your ambitions, everything which defines you is just out there, so you don't have access to it. You have to let go, you have to allow your ego to be dismantled, which is very painful for a lot of people and that's why prison is very frustrating and that's why it's full of suffering and turmoil.

For some people, they let go of all of these attachments and it enables them to be reborn and enables a new identity to manifest itself. That can only happen if they're willing to explore themselves. The other thing about prison is that it is a very fertile environment for self-exploration. When people go to prison, particularly if they're in there for a long time, they have to really reflect on their actions; why did I end up here? Why has it all gone wrong? They retrace their steps and retrace their lives and they look at their own attitudes to life and say, "Why has my life turned out so negatively? Is it because there's something negative inside me?"

They think about changing themselves, is it possible to change themselves? Yes, some people in prison, they are able to take that step into themselves and to begin to reflect on their actions and to reevaluate their lives. That's one reason why a lot of prisoners do undergo spiritual development.

Mark: The external situation doesn't change, the circumstances are the same, they're still in jail, but their experience of being there and their experience of themselves shifts to such a degree that there's no more suffering?

Steve: That can happen, yes. Obviously, prison is an environment where there was a great deal of suffering, but some people find that when they go into themselves, just like we were saying before, a lot of people who end up in prison have never gone into themselves, they've never explored their own being. That's part of the reason why they're in prison, because they've been conditioned to behave a certain way by their environment or by their addictions, but in prison, they go into themselves for the first time.

I often say that on the surface of our minds, there's a lot of discord, generally, on the surface of the human mind. There's a lot of flowing restless thoughts, there are some fears and worries and so forth based on the future, there's feelings of guilt about the past, but that's just on the surface. Once you get below the surface, there are endless steps of harmony. It's a bit like the ocean, there's less a lot of turmoil on the surface of the ocean, but you go one meter beneath the surface, and suddenly, you're in the midst of deep stillness.

A lot of people find that when they go into their own being in prison or elsewhere, they find that if they're able to go beneath the surface, then they're in the midst of this inner contentment and this energy and this freshness and radiance which they never suspected was there. Once you've touched into that, then it changes your life, you never lose contact with it. You always have access to it.

Mark: Can you give me an example of someone from the last book who – something that struck you and stayed with you?

Steve: There's one woman I interviewed called Anansa and she was sent to prison for three years in Japan. It's a long story, but some drugs were found in her apartment and she was sent to prison indefinitely. She didn't know how long she would be in there. It was a very brutal environment, much worse than Western prisons. They weren't allowed to speak, they worked for 14 hours a day in a factory in very harsh conditions, they weren't allowed to exercise. After a few months of this, Anansa was in severe physical and emotional pain, her body was aching from all the endless work.

There was a very poor diet, she was very weak physically, but even more so mentally, she felt broken down because she had no idea when she would be released or if she would be released. It was a very violent environment, there were murderers there and other severely violent people. She said that one evening, she went back to her cell and she wanted to – she had one book in the cell with her that she wanted to read, but she was in too much pain to read and she just said to herself, "I just can't carry on, I can't go on with this." She decided she was just going to let go, she just said, "I'm going to let go. I'm going to drop down into the pain rather than resisting it."

She allowed herself to drop down into the pain, and she found herself dropping deeper and deeper and deeper, almost as if she was falling through a bottomless tunnel or a bottomless pit. After a certain point, she suddenly felt this feeling of bliss overwhelm her. This strange, deep raging energy just suddenly burst forth and started to flow through her. At that point, everything changed. She felt as though she had made contact with something deep, enriched inside her, and her whole attitude to the situation changed. She felt that there was this sense of beauty. Even in the incredibly ugly and harsh environment of the prison, she could see beauty everywhere.

Whatever she did, she always felt it was based on this feeling of bliss inside her. Even physically, she improved. She found that she didn't need to eat as much, she had more

energy. From that point on, it became a blissful experience to be in prison. She remained there for another couple of years and then she came back to the UK. Then, it was obviously a very difficult adjustment, partly to adjust to normal life after prison, but also to adjust to living in society again in this heightened state of consciousness. I guess you could call that, it's about acceptance. She let go and drop down into the pain.

Mark: That touches on another myth that you debunked, which is that enlightenment is the terminus. That's where you go and that's where it stops, but that's not the case at all, right? Enlightenment or these awakening experiences are just the beginning.

Steve: Yeah, I think of it as a slight transfer into a different road, just like a road which is higher up the mountain, but it's still a road. You're higher at the mountain, but you're still traveling. You're moving through the landscape, you're exploring new things, it never ends. Actually, a friend of mine, a spiritual teacher called Russell Williams who died three years ago when he was 96. He underwent awakening when he was 29 and it took him a long time to make sense of it.

Even towards the end, when he was in his 90s, he used to say, "Wow, it's amazing. Even after all this time, 50 or 60 years, I'm still discovering new things, new things are still emerging. I'm still curious, I'm still exploring." It never ends. There's no goal. It's a never-ending process.

Mark: What about pain and suffering after awakening, does that continue to arise? What's the relationship to the emotions after an awakening experience?

Steve: Some people have a quite difficult awakening, especially when they are sudden and dramatic, they can be quite explosive and they can cause psychological disturbances, but that normally fades away after a while. That's another problem, because some people who have psychological disturbances after awakening, they are diagnosed with psychosis sometimes because they don't really understand what's happened and psychiatrists don't really understand that either. Usually, in fact, almost always, those disturbances settle down, even if it takes years.

Then awakened people, they become very empathic. They still do feel pain and suffering, they still sense other people's pain and suffering, but it doesn't disturb them as much. They feel it, they cry when people are sad, they cry when people die, they're still emotionally reactive, they're still emotionally sensitive, but it doesn't linger, it kind of passes through. It doesn't cause trauma because it just flows away. Once it flows away, they return to the state of well-being.

Mark: What about person or what about pain about oneself? You talk about empathy, but what about feeling wounded egoically, for example, does that still happen after awakening?

Steve: Not really, no, because they don't have a separate ego to defend anymore or to strengthen. All of that kind of ego defense, ego protection only really arises when you feel separate. If you feel separate, you feel vulnerable and fragile. Once you lose your sense of separateness, once you feel connected to everyone and everything, then you lose that vulnerability, you're not fragile anymore.

Even if people hurt you emotionally or try to hurt you emotionally, maybe there's an initial reaction, but again, it flows away, it doesn't remain, it doesn't fester and turn into resentment, it just flows away and you return to your stable and secure sense of contentment.

Mark: Is that your experience now?

Steve: Yes, that's right. I still learn. I still get irritated sometimes, but it just flows away. I don't carry any resentments. I try to be kind. Even when people try to hurt me, I try to be kind in return. I think altruism arises naturally in spiritual awakening or development because, again, you feel connected, you're not separate anymore. When other people suffer, you want to alleviate their suffering and you want to encourage their development. Life becomes about, not about what you can get from the world, but what you can give to the world. That's certainly my orientation, I want to give my life to help other human beings and to help the human race.

Mark: That touches on another myth that you debunk, which is that after awakening, one is suddenly detached and dissociated, and so the floating above the fray. That is not the case, right?

Steve: That can happen. That's when spiritual development can be sometimes mixed with a bit of narcissism, a bit of self-absorption, that can happen. There are some other worldly spiritual traditions which encourage that, you go to live in a monastery or in the desert or in a hermitage, but in general, most people who undergo awakening become very engaged. It goes back to altruism and connection because they feel other people's pain and they want to help other people and they feel a mission to help the human race, in general.

I think that's the rule. I think most of the greatest social activists in human history were spiritually awakened people, going back to Jesus and the Buddha and lesser-known people like Florence Nightingale, she was actually a very spiritually awakened person. That was the basis of her social reforms and her desire to help with the human beings. Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, they were all spiritually awakened people.

Mark: With flaws, with personal flaws. We know Martin Luther King was a serial adulterer. We know that this doesn't necessarily shift your problematic human behavior, is that correct?

Steve: No. Well, another important thing to remember is there are degrees of awakening. That's one of the myths, I think, that there is a dividing line between sleep and wakefulness or between ordinary consciousness and enlightenment. There's no dividing line. There are lots of gradations and there are lots of degrees of awakening or wakefulness.

I think a lot of people are awakened to some degree in a less intense way, but not so many people are very intensely awakened. Obviously, the more intense it becomes, the less common it becomes. I think people, maybe somebody like Martin Luther King, other people who seem to be flawed as well as awakened, maybe they haven't attained an intense degree of awakening. I think as you become more intensely awakened, your behavior does become more ethical and more moral and more selfless.

Mark: What about the idea that you can be awakened spiritually but psychologically still a mess or physically still self-destructive, and that we need to work on different levels of our being, the way Ken Wilber talks about the spectrum of consciousness and that we have

different levels, and just because you're a great meditator doesn't mean that you necessarily have any generosity toward other people, for example?

Steve: There's some truth to that. I think certainly, in the formative stages following awakening, a lot of people find it hard to adjust because they find it hard to integrate their awakening into everyday life. That can be a difficult process, especially in the modern world. It's quite hard to live in modern society as an awakened person with that degree of empathy and so forth. It can take time for people to integrate their wakefulness into their everyday life. Certainly, it took me a long time. It took me 10 years or more before I became a functioning member of society.

Mark: Really?

Steve: Yes. [chuckles] It only really happened when I was about 29 or 30, that's when I felt, I was like, "Oh, yes, now I can live as a normal person." For me, it was a question of developing my intellect, my emotional intelligence, bringing that into line with my spiritual development. In that sense, there's a lot of truth to that.

At the same time, spiritual awakening consists of a lot of different characteristics, which normally develop in parallel. There is usually a natural process of integration. For example, if you feel a sense of inner well-being, and if your mind is very quiet, and if you feel a sense of connection to other people and to the world in general, then that usually goes in parallel with a high degree of altruism and so forth. It normally goes hand in hand with an attitude of non-materialism, not being interested in material goods, treating other people well. I think a lot of characteristics do develop in parallel.

Mark: That brings me to the question of practice and seeking. What sort of practices would you recommend, not only to facilitate these kinds of experiences, but to sustain them after there's been an awakening?

Steve: Nature is incredibly important, contact with nature. Activities like walking in the countryside, swimming in the ocean or in a lake, they're really good because nature has a quality of stillness. You naturally develop a connection with the natural world when you're in it. I like physical exercise too. Physical exercise is important, like running, swimming I've already mentioned, but if you are in harmony with your body, then it helps to sustain your wakefulness.

Physical harmony helps to feed spiritual harmony, and service as well. I recommend service, being altruistic, even if you have to make a conscious effort to be altruistic. That's really effective because service helps you to transcend separateness. It creates a connection with other people. Spiritual awakening is largely about connection. Anything which connects you, whether it's with nature, or other people, or with your own deeper being, that's a very effective way of sustaining wakefulness.

Mark: I'm not hearing anything about meditation, I'm not hearing yoga, I'm not hearing chanting.

Steve: Well, meditation, yoga, yes, they're really good. Yoga's a great way of developing physical harmony and meditation's a great way of developing spiritual harmony, but a lot of people find it difficult to meditate. I'm always surprised at the number of people who say,

“Oh, I’ve tried meditation and it doesn’t work for me. My mind is just too busy.” That’s probably a reflection on modern life, the stress and busyness of modern life.

I sometimes recommend, well, don’t sit down to meditate, walk in the countryside and just pay attention to your surroundings, go for a swim and pay attention to the feelings of your body in the water. That becomes a meditation. There are lots of different kinds of meditation.

Mark: In terms of following dogma, tradition, religion, is this antithetical to spiritual experience?

Steve: Not necessarily. It can be helpful, actually, because as I’ve already said, a lot of people who undergo sudden and dramatic awakenings are sometimes confused because they don’t have a context to make sense of the experience. But if you are a Buddhist, or if you are a Yogi, or a monk in a Christian monastery, then you do have a context to make sense of it. Your transition will be smoother and you’ll have some support. You’ll be able to speak to your spiritual advisors who will help to guide you.

Those traditions certainly can be helpful, but at the same time, if you are connected to a tradition, you have a lot of conceptual baggage as well. You have to interpret your awakening according to certain concepts and beliefs. So that can be problematic as well because maybe your awakening is slightly different to the way it should be according to your tradition. I’m especially interested in secular awakenings outside the context of spirituality, because in a sense, they’re more pure and raw, if you like, because they’re free of that conceptual baggage.

Mark: Isn’t it true that traditions tend to deny mysticism and tend to deny the presence of spiritual awakening without jumping through the hoops that particular religion puts up for you?

Steve: Yes, that’s true. Yes. That’s the problem. Frameworks are great because they support you, but they can also turn to cages because you have to interpret your experiences according to the scriptures of beliefs, and your experience may not fit to them, which causes dissonance.

Mark: As a psychologist, do you find that your research and this interest goes against the grain of orthodoxy? How do you deal with that in your professional life?

Steve: It can be tricky sometimes. Certainly, there are some very mainstream psychiatrists who say, “Well, there are no such things as spiritual experiences, they’re just brain activity. There are just high levels of dopamine or hormones.” You can’t really talk to those people. It’s a bit like talking to a fundamentalist religious person. You can’t get through to them sometimes because they have so many assumptions and beliefs about reality. It is a kind of religion.

I’m often surprised at how open-minded people are. A lot of scientists are really only interested in their particular subject. They don’t consider the assumptions and beliefs that lie behind mainstream science. I’m sometimes surprised that they are more open-minded than I thought. For example, just a few days ago, I published an article on a mainstream website called *The Conversation Here in the UK*, about the placebo effect. I suggested that the placebo effect can only be explained if you believe or if you assume that mind is more fundamental than matter and that consciousness is a fundamental quality in the universe. Consciousness is the essential quality in the universe.

I was preparing myself for a bit of a backlash from mainstream scientists, but I got a lot of open-minded comments about it. I think a lot of people are beginning to realize that the old-fashioned materialist way of interpreting reality doesn't really work anymore. There are so many flaws in that view of the world.

Mark: Another myth that you talk about is that the world is an illusion. Can you unpack that a little for people? What is meant by that, and how is that not so?

Steve: There are some spiritual traditions, particularly hardcore Advaita traditions that will tell you that the world is an illusion, the material world doesn't really exist, it's just a dream. They sometimes say it's a dream in the mind of Brahman. The same with the body, the body doesn't really exist because only the spirit is real. It's a good way of avoiding problems in your life, "It doesn't matter. It's not real anyway. Who cares? Climate change doesn't matter because the world is an illusion."

There were certain modern-day spiritual traditions which have a similar view, particularly associated with Advaita, as I said, but I think that's completely wrong. The mystics down through the ages have all told us that the world is not an illusion, it's filled with spirit. The only illusion is that when you see the world without spirit, when you see the world in purely physical terms, but in reality, all matter is infused with spirit. Matter and spirit are one.

I've always taken a view that the material world is sacred, the human body is sacred. The human body is a source of spiritual experience. When I go swimming or when I go walking in the countryside and so forth. It's not illusion, it's incredibly sacred and incredibly spiritual. That's more aligned with the tantric view of the world. The great thing about Tantra is that it says that the world and spirits are one and the same.

Mark: So the illusion idea comes from duality. The illusion is only there when we see ourselves as separate or matter and spirit as separate?

Steve: That's right. I think it's a misinterpretation. It is based on this idea of duality between mind and matter or between spirit and the flesh. It happens with a body. If you believe there's a duality between the spirit and the flesh, then you get sexual repression, you get asceticism which inflicts pain on the body and so forth. It becomes very neurotic because it's based on dualism.

Mark: You bring up sexuality. I'm curious about desire. How does desire change after awakening?

Steve: Well, because it's taken away from the center of the ego, it becomes more holistic and it becomes less selfish. Sexuality is not so much about personal gratification, it's about becoming one with something bigger than yourself, becoming one with another person. Desire still exists in a sense, but it's not egotistical desire. It's not a desire for personal pleasure, it's a desire which is bigger than you and which flows through you.

It's a bit like purpose. It's the same with purpose. Now, if you live in a non-awakened state, then your purpose may be to become wealthy, to become successful and so forth, but once you awaken, then you still have a purpose, but it's not a selfish purpose. Your purpose may be to help the human race, to alleviate other people's suffering, to further your own personal development allowing something bigger to flow through you. You still have purpose, but it's a different purpose.

Mark: My last question is, what are you excited about now? Do you feel like we are in the process of arcing toward a new level of consciousness? When you look at the dangers of the world, how do you see the race of light and dark? What gives you inspiration?

Steve: I am optimistic, even though there are so many negative trends in the world at the moment. Overall, I am optimistic because I do think there is a process of collective spiritual awakening underway. I think there are various signs of it. One sign is that research shows that spiritual experiences are becoming more common over the decades. One of the most significant cultural trends of our time is the increasing interest in spirituality, which is pervading mass culture in a way it's never done before. Sometimes in a narcissistic way, but I think generally it's a positive trend.

From my own perspective as a researcher, I'm constantly amazed at the number of people I meet and whose cases I investigate who've undergone spiritual awakening through intense suffering. I suspect there are so many people around us who've undergone this experience, but we don't know about them because maybe they don't interpret it in terms of spirituality. They probably don't understand what's happened to them, but it's not an uncommon experience.

When people undergo this transformation, it's almost as if there is a higher self inside them which is waiting to emerge. It's a latent higher self which is ready, just like a chick which is ready to hatch in an egg. Then when the normal ego fades away, this new self hatches out of the egg and it becomes a person's new self. It's ready and it's there, it's just waiting to emerge.

I feel the same about the human race, in general, that there's a new level of consciousness waiting to emerge, which is slowly expressing itself. Eventually, I believe it will emerge. Whether it takes decades, maybe centuries, but eventually, I think it will emerge and become the whole human race's normal state.

Mark: Well, from your mouth to God's ears.

Steve: Yes, hopefully.

Mark: Hopefully. Thank you, Steve. It's so good to talk to you. I appreciate you taking the time and good luck with your new book.

Steve: Thanks, Mark. It's been a pleasure.

Mark: Thank you so much. Bye-bye.

Steve: Thank you.