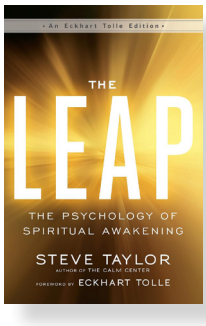

The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening

Steve Taylor

In *The Leap – The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening*, Steve Taylor suggests that most people sleep-walk through life and fail to realize that a far higher state of being is within their grasp. In this summary, we explore the characteristics of the sleep state, contrast it to a higher awakened state, and examine how we can become one of the relative few who wake up from the pathological state of normality.

Normality – Sleepwalking Through Life

> **"…what we wake up from is essentially a state of sleep — a state of constricted, limited awareness, and of discord and suffering. This state is so familiar to us that we assume it's natural and normal, and we take it for granted. But, in fact, this state is aberrational, even pathological. It's a kind of madness that we confuse with sanity simply because we experience real sanity so rarely." (The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening)**

Like many 20th and 21st century psychologists, Taylor claims that to be normal is to be sick. Most normal people, however, do not recognize the pathology of normality. They believe that the suffering and despair they feel is just part and parcel of being human. Taylor rejects this belief. The quiet despair that so many experience is not an inevitable part of the human condition but stems from the core characteristics of modern-day normality (which Taylor refers to as a 'sleep state'). Being aware of these characteristics can help us wake up to a higher form of being and a more fulfilling life.

Characteristics of the Sleep State

> **"People [who are asleep] experience themselves as egos enclosed within their own mental space, looking out at the world… they experience themselves as separate from the natural world — not beings who were living in nature, as a part of it, but beings who were somehow outside nature." (The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening)**

Not only are we a part of nature, rather than an 'ego' looking in on nature, our ego doesn't even represent the totality of our personality. Over-identification with the ego, therefore, cuts us off from higher potentials which typically reside in the unconscious.

> **"…there's a sense of narrowness, with our sense of self confined to the tiny space of our own ego, disconnected from the wide-open space of our whole being and its quality of radiance." (The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening)**

Another characteristic of the sleep state is constant inner chatter, worry, and rumination. Those in the sleep state, in other words, struggle to still their mind and to experience the peace and calm of a quiet psyche.

> **"One of the strangest characteristics of our sleep state is the associational chatter — the endless stream of images, memories, anticipations, reflections, and snippets of information — that**

> **usually runs through our minds when we don't occupy our attention with external things." (The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening)**

Constant inner chatter and endless rumination keep us distracted from the here and now and disrupt our ability to enjoy the present moment.

> **"The constant chatter of our minds creates a sense of disturbance and restlessness inside us, and the frequently negative tone of our thought-chatter generates negative emotions and an overall negative mood." (The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening)**

The sleep state is also characterized by a pervasive sense of fear and anxiety. This results from the isolation we feel due to the over-identification with our ego and is perpetuated by our inability to quiet the inner chatter of worry and rumination.

> **"In our sleep state there's also a sense of fear. Our separateness creates a sense of vulnerability and insecurity, of being threatened by the world and by other people. This insecurity is exacerbated by our chattering thoughts, which anticipate the future and create fear-based scenarios that we imagine repeatedly." (The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening)**

Unhealthy Ways to Escape from the Sleep State

> **"Because the sleep state brings so much discord and discontent, the effort to escape from their psychological suffering dominates many people's lives." (The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening)**

Many of us seek to escape from the unease and discomfort generated by the sleep state of normality. However, the way most of us go about this exacerbates our suffering. For example, many seek out activities that distract from despair, or substances that numb pain. The most common manifestations of this form of escape are compulsive technology use or addictions to drugs or alcohol.

> **"There are two major ways that people try to alleviate their unease. First, they try to simply divert themselves from their inner discord by immersing their attention in external things. This partly explains the massive popularity of television over the past half century or so — it's a simple and effective way to direct our attention outside ourselves and so escape our inner discord." (The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening)**

Another common way of trying to alleviate the distress and discomfort of the sleep state is through the accumulation of money, material goods, and social status. This, however, only further inflates the ego, or as Taylor writes:

> **"…people try to overcome their basic sense of separateness and lack by adding things to themselves. They try to make themselves more significant by accumulating possessions and wealth, collecting achievements, or increasing their success, status, or power." (The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening)**

What is Waking Up?

If the state of sleep causes suffering, the solution is to wake up.

> **"I use awakening to describe the shift from a normal to a higher state of being and the term wakefulness to describe the higher state itself…" (The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening)**

The idea of waking up is not new. Most major religious and spiritual traditions, both past and present, offer practices and ways of life that promote awakening. Furthermore, many of the great philosophical traditions, such as Stoicism, can be seen as offering guidance on how to awaken from the pathological state of normality.

> **"It's truly remarkable that so many people in different cultures at different times in history had the same insight: it was possible for them to transcend their normal state of being, which was limited and constricted, and cultivate a more expansive and intensive state." (The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening)**

Temporary versus Permanent Waking Up

Taylor differentiates between what he calls temporary awakening experiences and permanently wakefulness.

> **"I define a [temporary] awakening experience as an experience of clarity, revelation, and joy in which we become aware of a deeper (or higher) level of reality, perceive a sense of harmony and meaning, and transcend our normal sense of separateness from the world." (The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening)**

Temporary awakening experiences, or what others call peak, religious, or mystical experiences, last minutes, hours, or at most days. They are times when we disidentify from our ego, feel more aligned with the totality of our personality, and connected to the transcendent source of the universe. These experiences infuse us with an overwhelming sense of peace and well-being. But these feelings fade and soon we return to our old way of being.

> **"Awakening experiences occur when we temporarily transcend our normal state of being — or, more strictly speaking, our normal self-system. The structure of our normal self-system — with its strong sense of ego, firm boundaries, and automatic perception — dissolves away, like a tent swept away in a wind." (The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening)**

Permanently Waking Up

Permanently waking up occurs when we transcend our current sense of self and come to identify with the higher potentials of our being. This shift to a higher state of being changes our relationship to ourselves, other people, and the world at large.

> **"I would therefore loosely define permanent wakefulness as a higher-functioning state in which a person's vision of and relationship to the world are transformed, along with their subjective experience, their sense of identity, and their conceptual outlook. This shift brings a sense of well-being, clarity, and connection. The person develops a more intense awareness of the phenomenal world, and a broad, global outlook, with an all-embracing sense of empathy with the whole human race and a much-reduced need for group identity." (The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening)**

Taylor emphasizes that to wake up does not mean to move through life in a never-ending state of bliss. Nor does it mean that we lose the ability to function in our day-to-day life. It also doesn't mean we lose our individual sense of self.

> **"It's important to remember that people who live in this state can control their experience. They don't helplessly swim in an ocean of blissful oneness all the time — they can still concentrate on practical tasks when they need to. They can still make decisions and plans, and orga-**

> **nize their lives. But their sense of well-being, connection, and wholeness is always there as an undercurrent, in the background, which they can tune into at any moment." (The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening)**

Characteristics of Wakefulness

When we awaken, we disidentify with the ego and connect with the greater wholeness of our personality. This disidentification with our ego generates a greater connection to other people and the world at large.

The process of waking up is also characterized by a connection to the transcendent source that grounds all being (or what some call the spiritual essence of the universe). This connection helps imbue our life with meaning and tempers the anxiety and fear that disturb so many of those in the sleep state.

> **"Wakefulness is a state in which we move beyond separateness and into connection and union. Most importantly, wakefulness means connecting with the spiritual essence of the universe — whether we call it brahman, the Dao, or God — and with the deepest part of ourselves. The universal essence is also the essence of our own being." (The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening)**

In addition to union and connection, wakefulness is characterized by a peaceful stillness of the mind. The inner chatter and rumination that defines the sleep state diminishes and our ability to live in the present and to harvest the riches that each moment has to offer intensifies.

> **"A second characteristic of wakefulness highlighted by all the traditions we've examined is inner stillness, or inner emptiness. Awakened individuals don't have busy, chattering minds and aren't assailed by turbulent emotions and desires. They are peaceful inside; their consciousness is pure and calm, like a lake." (The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening)**

Another core characteristic of waking up is self-sufficiency. When we wake up, we no longer feel pulled to conform, nor do we seek the constant approval of other people. Our need for status, power, wealth, and fame diminish and we become capable of following our conscience even at the cost of social rejection.

> **"A third characteristic of the wakeful state across all traditions is self-sufficiency. Awakened individuals have little or no concern for world success, possession, or personal ambition and are unaffected by praise, blame, or humiliation; they have no need for other people's approval. They don't need to add anything to themselves such as success, status, or wealth because they already feel whole." (The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening)**

Wakefulness is also defined by an overall feeling of well-being. Individuals who wake up are not plagued by anxiety, depression, or neuroses. Life is not felt as a burden and a sense of lightness pervades our being.

> **"…wakefulness is seen across traditions as a state of intense well-being. Every tradition agrees that to wake up means to transcend anxiety and fear and attain a sense of great serenity and bliss." (The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening)**

The Most Important Question – How Do We Wake Up?

Due to the suffering and despair associated with the sleep state, the important question is: what leads to waking up? Taylor identifies three main paths.

Path to Waking Up #1 – Natural Wakefulness

The first, and most rare path to waking up, is what Taylor calls natural wakefulness. Some people spontaneously develop toward an awakened state at a very early stage of life. These naturally awakened individuals don't necessarily follow any spiritual path but instead have an innate disposition to waking up.

> **"…wakefulness can occur naturally, without the support of spiritual practices or paths." (The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening)**

What is interesting about naturally awakened individuals is that they don't always realize that they are awakened. Rather this state is so natural to them that they can't conceive of living in a different manner.

Path to Waking Up #2 – Gradual Awakening

While natural wakefulness is not under our control, there are deliberate paths to awakening that we can follow. The first of these paths is what Taylor calls gradual awakening.

> **"The second way wakefulness can occur — after natural wakefulness — is gradually and incrementally over a long period of development. Sometimes this happens accidentally, but in most cases gradual awakening is undertaken consciously and occurs by following spiritual practices and paths." (The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening)**

Gradual awakening occurs when we adopt practices and ways of life that promote the characteristics of the wakeful state. Spiritual and religious traditions, for millennia, have been the primary means toward gradual awakening.

> **"Spiritual paths and spiritual practices represent an amazing discovery: the state of being that we develop as we become adults isn't firm and fixed. We have the freedom and capacity to change our state of being. To borrow Plato's cave metaphor, we aren't doomed to spend our whole lives staring at the shadows on the wall of the cave; we're free to gradually turn ourselves around, to face the light." (The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening)**

While there are many spiritual paths to awakening, there are commonalities to them. One of these is a regulating of our ethical behaviour.

> **"We create disturbance inside us when we behave unethically. Ripples of unease and anxiety flow both inside and outside us. (From the Buddhist and Hindu perspectives, this also creates bad karma.) When we behave ethically we become pure and still inside, and prepare ourselves for the deeper stillness of spiritual development. Unethical types of behavior such as greed, exploitation, and untruthfulness are also fundamentally self-centered; they are based on furthering our own interests over other people's. So regulating our behavior means moving beyond self-centeredness, which again becomes more important as we move further along the spiritual path.**
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> **In a similar way, behaving ethically requires self-control and self-discipline, which are also essential for further development. Some traditions (such as Yoga) believe that regulating our behavior is important as a way of conserving our energy. Rather than expending energy through desires and emotions (such as greed or hatred), our energy concentrates inside us, and this surplus energy is used to fuel spiritual transformation." (The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening)**

Purgation, or purification, is another common element of the spiritual and religious paths to waking up.

> **"Purgation is a process of inner strengthening or spiritual training by which we gain some control over our impulses and desires, particularly our instinctive attraction to comfort and pleasure. Through this process we develop stronger willpower, become more self-sufficient, and less dependent on external conditions for our well-being. Our intention and impulse to wake up begins to override other impulses. Again, this process can be seen in terms of energy: as we restrain our desires for comfort and pleasure, we build up our inner energy." (The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening)**

Another principle common to the spiritual and religious paths that promote awakening is a diminishment of psychological attachments.

> **"Dissolving psychological attachments often occurs in an involuntarily way and, as such, can be a powerful trigger both of gradual and sudden awakening. But in traditional spiritual paths, this is undertaken through a conscious process of renunciation.**
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> **Renunciation means being free of the encumbrances and worldly concerns that dominate most people's lives. It means practicing voluntary poverty and living without possessions, and being free of worldly ambitions for success, wealth, or power, and social roles that confer status and identity." (The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening)**

Meditation is another important element found in the major spiritual paths to awakening. Meditation helps still the mind and promotes the psychological transformation that leads to waking up.

> **"In spiritual traditions, meditation is seen as essential for a number of reasons. First of all, it stills the mind, quietening our distracting thought-chatter and giving us a sense of inner peace. This enables us to go inward, too. The surface thought-chatter of our minds acts as a kind of barrier, which prevents us from investigating the deeper levels of our being. But when meditation stills the mind, we're free to go into ourselves, into deeper and purer levels of consciousness. In addition, meditation brings increased self-control. Once we learn to quiet our thoughts we have an increased capacity for concentration and an increased ability to control our desires and regulate our behavior." (The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening)**

The spiritual and religious paths to awakening are successful because they help break down our old self-system and build up a new one that is more aligned with our higher potentials.

> **"Gradual awakening is a process of transforming our self-system, slowly altering and remolding our normal psychological structures and psychological processes in such a way that we begin to transcend our normal sleep state." (The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening)**

Path to Waking Up #3 – Sudden Awakening

There is another form of awakening, sudden awakening, which according to Taylor is the most common. Sudden awakening is similar to gradual awakening in that the underlying process is the replacement of our normal self-system with a new higher self-system. But as the name of this path implies, this occurs suddenly and often with dramatic force.

> **"The most common way in which human beings shift into a permanent state of wakefulness is through a sudden and dramatic transformation triggered by intense psychological turmoil." (The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening)**
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> **"[Sudden awakening] can happen through intense stress, when the old self-system can no longer withstand the pressure and suddenly breaks down, like a building in an earthquake…As a**

> **result, there's suddenly a great open space of being that was filled by the previous self-system. A new, higher-functioning self-system — an awakened self with softer boundaries, heightened awareness, and reduced cognitive activity — emerges to fill the vacuum, like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis." (The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening)**

While psychological turmoil leads to a breakdown of the normal self-system and clears the way for the emergence of a new, higher sense of self, Taylor warns that not all who go through psychological turmoil come out awakened at the other end. While extreme psychological turmoil can quickly destroy our old sense of self, it is an open question as to whether a new, higher self will emerge or whether we will be left in despair and facing the proverbial abyss.

> **"In most people, the wakeful self-system is probably not ready to emerge. It has not yet become fully formed or integrated as a structure. So when these people experience turmoil and trauma and the dissolution of their psychological attachments, they experience a breakdown without a shift-up. Their normal self-system breaks down with nothing to replace it. There's just a psychic vacuum inside them, which is not filled by a latent higher self. Their higher self isn't yet ready to be born." (The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening)**

People who experience sudden awakening are individuals who often unknowingly have lived in ways that permitted the growth of a new self-system below conscious awareness. The psychological turmoil was merely the tipping point that allowed for the transition between the old asleep self and the new awakened self. This suggests that it is imperative to prepare the grounds for a new self to emerge, as we never know when psychological turmoil will strike and the emergence of a new higher self will be needed to prevent us from breaking down.

> **"Turmoil and stress can be like an earthquake, breaking down the structure of the normal self and allowing a more expansive and intense state of being to unfold." (The Leap: The Psychology of Spiritual Awakening)**