

Time for a paradigm shift in mental health care

What I want to share here, after a description of my original crisis, is what happened once I decided to 'go it alone', having realised for myself that my difficulties were not a medical condition to be tranquilised or some mark of the devil, but a call for me to grow as a human being and have the courage to live out my life in all of its authentic beauty and pain. Whether other people viewed what I was doing as 'successful life activity' or not was irrelevant, this became my mission, to take care of myself and follow my heart path. I hope that some universal principles relevant to other people going through extreme states will emerge from this sharing.

I had my first psycho-spiritual crisis in 2001 while living in a small town called Yangshuo in southern China. I consider it one of my homes in the world and have spent much of my adult life there. It is a beautiful place surrounded by limestone karst hills and lush green paddy fields. It is also the home of some excellent Tai Chi teachers.

I had quite an intense 'spiritual practice' at the time. Much of the previous four years were spent intensively exploring Vipassana meditation as well as Tai Chi. In terms of Vipassana I completed about fifteen ten-day courses during the period and maintained a strong daily practice throughout. A good day for me involved three hours of meditation and four hours of Tai Chi.

I was following this lifestyle for a good reason. I had previously had a series of breakdowns / burnouts while a student at Cambridge University and later while working as a financial auditor and then computer programmer. These events left me experiencing terrible headaches whenever I tried to use my head, even to read a newspaper. I was suffering intensely and my doctor at the time only offered me beta blockers, anti-depressants and sick leave. I was grateful for the sick leave and chose to change my life and find a way to help myself.

After four years of this 'spiritual life', what I found instead of freedom from difficulty was even deeper suffering. Something broke me open at this time and I've reflected intensely on what that was, first from the critical direction of 'where did I go wrong?' and then later with the more positive view of 'what helped me to break open?', once I realised I was a happier person for all that happened to me.

What I realised after a year reflecting, was that everything in my life at the time seemed to point towards the spiritual crisis happening. I had fallen passionately in love with a beautiful French woman and was then devastated when we broke up. My work as an English teacher in China felt like a heart calling which was opening me up as a human being but was also revealing an inner rage when my work was blocked by bureaucracy. My intensive work with Chinese Medicine was changing the balance in my body and mind for better or worse as were my Vipassana and Tai Chi practices.

My environment also played an important destabilising role. China at that period was very different to the western world I had grown up in and I had little contact with other foreigners at this time. To make matters worse, China appeared to be on the verge of possible war, all internet cafés having been taped closed that week amid rumours of an attempted invasion of Taiwan.

Other factors from earlier in my life may also have contributed, from a traumatic birth to emotional difficulty as a teenager and bullying at school. Since my teens I had experienced an inability to relax deeply in my body and had focused too much on my 'mental life', whether in terms of inner imagination or head work.

I would say I was ripe for the events that unfolded and, subsequently, some peace came from the realisation that this was 'meant' to happen. It was an important stage in my life journey. This reframing of my suffering as something numinous rather than pathological was essential for my journey back to health and participation in life.

What happened was an eruption of psycho-spiritual material. It started off with a desire to be worthy of the return of my partner. I found myself carrying out ritualistic activity, sorting through possessions with the thought 'keep it or throw it', with a hope that I could become worthy of her somehow through this activity.

Strangely the goal shifted mid-way towards seeking to be worthy of 'God'. Then I sought forgiveness from Jesus to alleviate a terrible sense of guilt. There was also an apocalyptic 'AI' nuclear war theme in which I caused the AI awakening, a left over from my time as a computer programmer perhaps. The world around me smelt 'burnt'. And then there was a Buddhist theme in which I was an aspect of the Buddha, both the creator of the world and a saviour of it.

There was also a practical role of being a 'peace master' or saviour figure, helping China resolve its conflicts with its neighbours in a peaceful way. Many archetypal patterns came up at this time in which I felt myself as both male and female or both angel and wolf and with each theme there was massive reflection and intuitive learning.

Along the way, I behaved in ways which others will have found very strange, breaking social conventions. I was experiencing the outer world in a very different way to my norm. People were like distant ghost figures and I seemed to be interpreting the outside world in ways which supported the archetypal themes going on inside.

I was awake all the time, probably for around ten days or so. I drunk water but didn't eat food. Emotions swung from elation to total despair, when I seemed doomed to eternal damnation. They were interesting times.

It is too easy to judge someone you can't understand as crazy, when in fact at least in my case, my inner reality was being navigated with a deep sense of personal meaning. The behaviour included walking naked through a busy market as a form of crucifixion and penance, multiple baptisms in the river and subsequent dripping wet walks back to my hotel, strange behaviour in the meat market staring stupidly at animals being butchered, climbing on to a roof top which thankfully didn't collapse to find union of the yin and yang and desperate attempts to get to a mountain in the countryside in front of which I felt some peace inside.

Late one night, I called someone I now assume was a prostitute into my room to check if there was poison gas coming out of my air conditioning unit. The hotel management were very patient with me. I also went around extinguishing mosquito coils as I decided they were bad for people's health. There were always complex myths and reasons for my behaviour, but these were not based on conventional understanding.

There were multiple night-long rituals involving external objects which were extremely intense for me, some a personal psychotherapy, others a world therapy for creating peace. I had visual feedback for one of these: the television changed channels by itself at times during the ritual as war or peace seemed more likely.

My anxiety during this time was off the scale and the experience was traumatising in the extreme. I had a self-realisation mid-process that I was either dead or mad. I hoped the latter.

My behaviour wasn't 'safe' at this time. My activities in the river and on the roof of the house next door to my hotel could have brought me to harm. At the climax, I apparently broke a glass door with my arms, after I heard words suggesting I needed to 'break out'. I was also aggressive briefly with an older couple who I perceived had taken something of great value to me. Thankfully I came back to conscious awareness of what I was doing in time and stopped.

Apparently, I harangued a beggar in the street though I have no memory of this. At this stage the Chinese police arrested me, and I struggled with them and the psychiatric team afterwards. Thankfully there wasn't an instinct or great capacity for violence within me, but still once one perceives that one is threatened it is natural to resist as best one can. I am so, so grateful that I didn't cause harm to others in my confusion.

The story from then on was dramatic. From the side of the doctors, they were doing their best to help me and in truth were very kind. From my side, I was being setup for torture and death, I assumed as a punishment for some comments I had made on Chairman Mao.

I found myself tied hand and foot to a wooden bed in an otherwise empty white room surrounded by Chinese people in white coats. Unfortunately, their wound care was done without anaesthetic and when I later tried to convey the experience to my family, I could only find metaphors from war time interrogation and torture scenes in films. At a climax, I screamed my name in Chinese, 'An Dou Nee', while pulling myself up off the bed, in an attempt to 'leave my body'.

In the meantime, my parents were travelling as fast as possible to join me. They had responded immediately to a '2am' call from myself and the police and flew out to Hong Kong the following day, joining me in China on my second day in the hospital. Our time from then on went surprisingly well in the circumstances, my parents handling the challenges well. We shared a 'spiritual' feeling that despite the outer difficulties, 'something' was looking after us. Somehow everything went well.

I was able to leave the hospital after a week and spent my 30th birthday in a pleasant hotel with my family, a cake being bought impromptu by a Chinese man my father met briefly in the street while asking for help. We were given permission to sign off from the hospital a week later and made our way back to the UK feeling hopeful that the worst was behind us.

Once back in the UK though, I found myself experiencing very dark thoughts and impulses, some of which posed a risk to myself and family members. I didn't recognise myself. I was already taking Risperidone, an anti-psychotic which the Chinese psychiatrist had prescribed, and we decided I should consult a local psychiatrist to seek further help.

What followed was a failure of the care system from my perspective. I hoped for emotional care and something transformative. What I got was just more Risperidone. I found myself losing all cognitive capacity within a week or so, life being reduced to one endless routine of lying on the sofa watching day time television, nights spent awake and restless. I went into a deep depression and endlessly ruminated on how to kill myself to escape the pain I was living through. I once saw a snow leopard pacing back and forward in a cage. It felt like that: soul death.

I managed to come off Risperidone in February 2002 over a two-month period, with the help of my family and support of my doctor. I no longer felt psychiatry had anything to offer me and so chose to 'go it alone'.

My experience of this first spiritual emergency was extreme in that I identified fully with the archetypal themes that were coming up for me. However, I was consciously aware most of the time and retained some capacity to function and make decisions. I attribute my capacity for lucidity

during this first episode to my meditation training. The world I was experiencing was a complicated weave of inner 'dream' material and outer reality and my behaviour reflected this.

In a way, I had been cognitively prepared for the experience, by a spiritual medium, who years before had given me a personal myth, of being an 'angel' of sorts. It doesn't matter whether it has any validity, it helped me retain some rational ground to stand on, giving me a conceptual framework for relating to what was happening to me. Something like this is essential for navigating these states, otherwise you easily go into a complete panic. Beyond this though my navigation skills during the first episode were undeveloped.

My memories of the time weren't easily accessible to me after coming out of hospital and I had to work very hard to recover them, facing all the emotion stored in them. They were stored as circular 'dreams' or pictures with no linear time frame and so I had to relive the scenes over and over and reconstruct the memories. This work was not easy, but in my view it was essential and left me better prepared to face my later episodes.

Once I took charge of my personal healing journey, having come off medication and got my 'head' back, I instinctively studied everything I could about non-ordinary states. I had lots of time for this and explored whatever I could find, especially the works of Carl Jung, Chogam Trungpa's *Transcending Madness: The Experience of the Six Bardos*, *The Tibetan Book of Living & Dying* etc. I read a lot.

I followed many healing strategies including Homeopathy, Tibetan Medicine, Aromatherapy as well as Rolfing, Shiatsu, Craniosacral therapy etc. I also restarted my Tai Chi training and found gentle ways to meditate like chanting alongside a recording of a Tibetan monk etc.

There is a lot you can do to help yourself. I have no space to say much here, but the essence of this spiritual training is learning to relax in your body, be with your emotions, understand your mind and who you are, take care of yourself and learn to connect and establish healthy relationships with others.

I felt I needed to reconnect with my travelling life and the resources I had in Asia and so my parents agreed to help by travelling out with me and then leaving me there. I had a mini-crisis soon after but it was okay. I rediscovered my inner confidence and trust in life and it was a good experience.

These Asian journeys continued and what I discovered was that I was moving through life with a kind of synchronistic guidance happening around me. There were pointers everywhere and amazing coincidences which I noticed and followed. My 'heart path' evolved and I found that to step off it or turn away from it left me feeling sad and empty inside. I did so on a few occasions mainly because I felt exhausted by the intensity of the experiences that were being presented for me, but each time I soon chose to get back onto it.

I decided to attend a retreat at a yoga resort for a few weeks in India in 2003. I was able to be honest with the head person about my difficulties and he accepted me warmly encouraging me to do more karma yoga and less meditation, which was good advice. I humbly cleaned toilets for part of the time there as well as doing yoga. I still wanted to go deeper into meditation though and a lead from one friend there took me to Suan Mokkh Vipassana centre in Thailand in January 2004. Here I had a second spiritual emergency. What I want to do now is explore how this second crisis differed from the first, in terms of my improved skill in conscious navigation. Suan Mokkh seemed like a good idea at the beginning as the practices seemed gentler than what I had followed with my Burmese Vipassana before. But in fact, I had difficulty quite quickly because the practice involved focusing

entirely on the breath sensations around the nose, bringing too much attention up to my head. I think if someone is relaxed it's fine, but if not, then at least for me, it had the unintended consequence of leaving me ungrounded. Combining this with a concrete bed I couldn't sleep on, extremely hot nights and a light vegetarian diet created a formula for a 'rocket launch'.

For a while it seemed good, my meditation appeared to go very well, and my mind went totally silent. I started sitting under a tree by the meditation hall unconcerned by the red ants which kept others away. I wondered at the time whether I was becoming enlightened.

As with my time in China, I had unusual experiences. In fact, they were visually even more strange than before. People seemed to be walking at different speeds in different worlds somehow. A morning yoga class was bizarre. During every pose, time seemed to freeze. Life seemed to be waiting for me to get sufficiently upset and react and demand change but each time just as I was about to, life would 'begin again'. It was a surreal experience. I was stunned when at the end of the class, it finished precisely on the hour as originally scheduled. No one knew anything was amiss for me.

Unlike in the first psycho-spiritual crisis in China, this time I could internalise the experience rather than act it out in the outer world. I was motivated obviously because having already had a terrible time with psychiatric services, the last thing I wanted was to be involved with them again. It didn't matter how strange the experience was going to get, I knew I had to deal with it, and I did my best.

In the end, it's just mindfulness practice. You have the experiences, and you do your best to soothe your inner suffering while trying to choose sensible responses to the events, rather than having unfortunate emotional reactions.

After a brief conversation testing the waters, I quickly worked out that the centre wasn't 'crisis' friendly, so I needed to keep things to myself as best I could. I continued my retreat in this state, finding that I had a myriad of helpful voices in my head from people I had known throughout my life: teachers, mentors etc. We chatted internally giving me strength for the lonely path I was following.

I still wasn't sleeping though, and this made things difficult. You need to rest to function well. A little crisis evolved as I had once again volunteered to clean toilets and unfortunately while moving a pile of paper to the main bins, I got covered in red ants which were all over the waste bins. I was bitten by them and it caused me to panic about getting some disease. I did my best to be calm and treat myself with tea tree, but I seemed destabilised by the situation and this went into spiral through the night.

Totally at a loss, sometime during the night, I went to find the course helper, a Buddhist man from Canada. He was very patient with me, responding sincerely to my question on how to know whether I was alive or not. He said, as a Buddhist this is a very good question. We went out to a pagoda to talk, and I related how I had nearly committed suicide over a live rail line two years before, and now didn't know whether I had continued with my life or died and ended up in some 'bardo' after-death state. I told him, I didn't know whether there was an actual world outside of the centre and so he encouraged me to break the rule and step outside the barriers, which I did.

I instinctively made use of another strategy with him, which I had learnt could help me. You simply tune into another human being. I gave him my full attention, putting aside my own suffering for a while. As it happened it didn't work to stop the episode, probably because it wasn't ready to be stopped, but still I believe it helped me to not get too absorbed into my experience. I listened for quite a long time to his life story and journey to Buddhism. He had lost an arm in an accident and depression had followed. Unfortunately for me, there came a stage where I felt that I was merging

with him and his patterns were becoming mine and so I had to gently thank him and return to facing my difficulty alone. Sometimes it works, sometimes not.

The following day things got worse. My mind seemed quiet and still, but not in a comfortable way. It felt very scary and I got concerned that something was being 'achieved' but not what I wanted. I got caught in the unresolvable dispute between Mahayana Buddhism & Theravada Buddhism regarding what is the final goal of life. I felt like I was slipping into the wrong Nirvana.

I felt I needed to come out of the state and so I recovered my watch. This felt like a godsend, seeing time passing. I also found a book, 'The Prophet' by Khalil Gibran. I started reading the poems in the book out aloud and seemed to merge with them. It was totally beautiful, and I felt at peace inside again, but a fellow meditator heard me speaking and aggressively shouted at me for breaking the silence.

I realised then that I needed to leave the centre and go somewhere where I could take better care of myself. I knew I wanted to eat meat to ground myself, and they were only serving vegetarian food and were about to go into a fasting day, the last thing I needed.

So even though I was still totally involved in the archetypal material that was coming up, some part of me was also aware of the state and was doing its best to help me manage my responses to the events. I believe this capacity comes from mindfulness practice.

I was concerned about the process of leaving a silent retreat mid-way. I knew I needed a warm emotional closure. What evolved was a realisation that I needed to consciously manage my external emotional environment as well as my internal one. The people around me could not handle the truth of my inner experience and so I needed to hide this reality from them and intentionally create a positive interaction.

I made a big effort to 'fake it', talking positively with the management about the centre and my experience, but assertively saying I no longer had a desire to continue and that to remain would be false. I even left a voluntary donation to pay for upgrade of the toilets and succeeded in leaving with everyone smiling around me.

Perhaps someone might say I should have been honest with them, but then they would have called the hospital and that was not what I wanted at this time.

The essential requirements for 'faking it' were first to be able to internalise the inner state and second to be able to cognitively 'bridge' to the 'reality' of the others and relate to them as reasonably expected. I consider this a part of advanced mindfulness practice. I was able to be with my inner emotion and confusion and consciously choose an outer expression appropriate for the people around me.

I created a further navigation principle at the time, of 'taking care of others'. I would consciously look after the people around me, essentially out of self-interest as then the good feeling and connection with them supported me to stabilise.

I made my way to Surat Thani, the nearest port, as I planned to go to the island of Koh Phangan to find a sanctuary where I could rest until my parents arrived in Thailand. We had previously arranged a holiday together, and I was confident that if we met, it would help me stabilise. My old haunt, Coral Bay on Koh Phangan, was a beautiful beach resort with no roads nearby or electricity. It seemed a good place to recuperate.

The journey was not easy though. While waiting for a taxi, the vibration of passing cars seemed to shake me like a cocktail flask and, when it arrived, the speed of the taxi sent me high again. At the port, reality took on the quality of a 'hell realm'. It was something to do with the heat, the pollution, the ugly buildings perhaps.

When I tried to buy a boat ticket, the seller asked me for all the money I had on me. This was far more than the correct price. There were many people around paying what was right, so it was strange, but I was intuitively navigating and sensed that he was both a real person, and a mirror, responding with something personal to me. I knew I couldn't take conflict and if I had challenged him, I don't know where this might have gone. The situation felt aggressive and potentially dangerous, and so again I 'faked it', being polite and giving him the benefit of the doubt, but assertively saying, 'oh there must be some mistake...' It worked and he immediately apologised and suddenly the hell realm feeling disappeared.

I spoke with a peer recently who had a diagnosis of acute psychosis the previous week and we discovered that the experiences that freaked him out most were very similar to what I just described. You feel in a way sometimes like a kind of 'god' and other times like a totally powerless 'child' with external reality 'interacting' with your mind.

This may be challenging for doctors to understand, because they are usually deeply embedded in the western materialist view of the objectivity of the 'reality' around them. You need a mystic to explain that reality is not actually like this. What we call our outer reality is a subjective experience which can at times be deeply influenced by our inner reality, both in terms of how we perceive it, and in terms of its manifestation for us. Some people having a spiritual emergency can tap into this state without being prepared for it, and hence confusion and fear may arise.

This journey continued, I can't say much more now, but I found myself in a 'ghost realm' for the boat crossing which was awful and then later an animal realm in which I was a powerful wolf. In each case, I did my best to soothe my internal terror and emotion and keep the people around me happy, smiling and paying for things etc. As a wolf this meant 'protecting them from me', setting intentional boundaries on my sexual freedom. While in an altered state, I need life as simple as it can be and the sexual attention I was receiving was not going to help things. I would say this is another navigation principle, setting boundaries to protect others and oneself. If a safety red-line gets crossed, stop and do nothing.

I really had no idea whether I was alive or dead at this time and so this is taking mindfulness and 'being with your internal emotions' to an interesting extreme.

My experiences continued to be extreme after this time, with major episodes also happening in 2006 in India and 2008 in Northern Thailand. They were still terrifying as each experience took me into unfamiliar dark territory but became easier to navigate thanks to my increased experience.

Finally, in 2010 while in Jerusalem, I found that I experienced reality differently once again, for me a natural response to the collective emotion of this region. But there was no fear reaction. I had already faced everything I could imagine over the years and had survived and come back. I simply internalised my state, 'faked' a conversation on football with a Palestinian taxi driver to connect to him and tune myself back 'in' and then returned to my place to rest and prepare for my journey home.

And since then, my life has been wonderful. I can still have moments when I'm 'out', but it doesn't cause me much difficulty as I have strategies to cope and take care of myself.

My focus now is on seeing whether my journey and what I've learnt can be helpful for others experiencing similar things. I share mindfulness and connection related practices with the intention of helping professionals better relate to and support those in their care. I am also interested in helping individuals experiencing extreme states to better navigate their lives.

I want to finish with an observation on the importance of positive conceptual frameworks. Interestingly, whether one perceives all this as an indication of psychosis and pathological madness leading towards fragmentation or as a spiritual emergency moving towards growth seems to be based on one's life values.

The British psychiatrist I worked with in 2001, responded to a little of this story with a prescription for life-long medication after just an hour-long conversation, although he told me at first it was just for three months to succour my cooperation. Confessing to behaving strangely and seeing the world differently for a while was enough it seemed to be condemned for life.

Later, when I discussed these experiences with friends with a more 'spiritual' background, they saw beyond the emotional difficulties and were more interested in all the insights I had and the changes in how I related to the world. It was obvious to them that this was a spiritual crisis which required a lot of work to process and integrate, but still it was an important stage post in my life.

Certainly, it was not something to be ashamed about, although for many years I didn't feel comfortable speaking about this part of my life with most people.

So, this is my message on spiritual emergency. Right now, if you go to a psychiatrist after experiencing extreme states of confusion and distress, you are likely to be guided towards believing you have a meaningless illness which requires medication for life. You will not be encouraged to see it in other ways or explore the archetypal themes that have been coming up for you. Often you will be further traumatised by the experience of being sectioned in a state-run care facility.

This doesn't mean people doing these jobs don't care, but the care system itself has gone wrong somehow, which is very sad. This message might provoke criticism or comments of irresponsibility from those doing the work, but for me I would simply say, the system isn't fit for purpose and needs to improve and offer more compassionate pathways of recovery as befits a modern society.

I hope my story provides inspiration and conviction that it is possible to help people with their 'spiritual' training. People can learn to mindfully navigate their extreme states and eventually achieve a natural stability. It takes time and patience and a lot of effort, but the journey is worth doing.

I would not encourage others to 'go it alone' like I did as the risks were high. Anyone experiencing spiritual emergency at this level really needs to have a lot of support. But sadly, right now, there is a problem in our society as support isn't available in an appropriate form. This problem will cause many people to suffer unnecessarily and needs to be addressed.

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