

The 'Aha' Moment in Co-Active Coaching and its Effects on Belief and Behavioural Changes

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Abstract

Life coaching lacks a clear ontology of its range and depth. What is clear though is that people seek life coaching to make changes in their lives. One kind of change is frequently demonstrated in Gestalt psychology: when looking at a picture, perception dictates what you see as 'figure' and what as 'ground' and it is not possible to see both simultaneously. Then a 'switch' happens and the perception of figure and ground reverses, resulting in an 'Aha' moment. In this research I was interested to explore whether the psychological 'Aha' moment is fundamental to the transformational change sought by the 'Co-Active' model of life coaching (Whitworth et al, 1998). A phenomenological methodology was used that reduced first-person accounts to common themes through a grounded theory analysis. Co-Active coaches gathered data from client participants: diaries captured the lived experience of the Aha moment, and questionnaires and interviews conveyed the lingering effects of the moment on beliefs and behaviour. Each phase – diaries, questionnaires and interviews, informed the next. Findings reveal that the 'Aha' moment is experienced somatically and emotionally as well as cognitively, with the striking of many chords across a spectrum of consciousness from body, to mind, to soul, to spirit (Wilber 1989). The more chords it strikes, the greater the resonance and degree of cognitive and behavioural change.

Key Words: Aha moment, co-active coaching, spectrum of consciousness

Introduction

An impetus for this study was a desire to help shape an ontology of coaching which is *not* therapy, *not* mentoring and not a skill that a consultant or therapist of any kind can claim, tacked on to their usual professional description, but an evolved means of relating in its own right.

The 'co-active' approach to life coaching was used as the context for the study since it reflects the growing corpus of work that is encompassing a 'positive' psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000). In this work virtues and strengths are being considered alongside vulnerability and psychopathology. Importantly, this shift takes seriously the contributions of religious involvement and spirituality to an individual's orienting system. If life coaching can be categorised alongside 'insight' psychologies, such as psychotherapy, Gestalt, transpersonal psychology etc., then the role and nature of insight deserves to be studied in its own right, and not confined, as the vast majority of studies have traditionally been, to the role of cognitive insight, that is insight into problem-solving tasks.

In this study, Wilber's 'Spectrum of Consciousness' (1989) model was found to be useful for plotting the range and depth of 'Aha' moments. The model posits an evolution of consciousness from matter to body to mind to soul to spirit. According to Wilber, each succeeding level transcends and includes its junior but not vice versa. In other words, body includes matter and transcends it, mind includes body and transcends it etc., but mind cannot exist without molecules. In other words, one has to proceed through stages of development towards spiritual awareness.

The 'Aha' moment is here defined as the prime device by which clients in life coaching achieve transformational (rather than incremental or merely behavioural) change. Following an overview of the Co-active coaching model and a detailed discussion of methodology, the results of the study are outlined. These point to experiences of 'Aha' moments at stages of consciousness development well beyond the Cartesian portrayal where the pinnacle of consciousness is represented as the fruits of mental operations.

Co-Active Coaching

The Co-Active coaching model differs from more behavioural or cognitive models where the focus is on improved performance, or, put another way, stops at the level of mental productions and therefore ignores more evolved and more insightful ways of experiencing 'reality'.

During a tape-recorded interview with one of the founders of Co-Active Coaching, Henry Kimsey-House (April 2004), he described to me its background. He claimed that it was the first truly holistic approach designed to address the client's whole life, at every level of consciousness. At the heart of the founders' search, he explained, was the question "How do you speak to the whole human?" He outlined the importance of the use of language to get beyond the root, i.e. the individual perspective of the client, and the role of metaphor in this quest, since "metaphor allows you to get bigger than your life to date". The use of metaphor was developed from a programme for actors that Henry had attended. He and his co-founders, Laura Whitworth and Phil Sandahl wanted to develop a simple linguistic approach that anyone could understand – a language of being in a culture where the language is predominantly of action and doing. All three founders were familiar with the works of Ken Wilber and had been influenced by his thinking as well as many others such as Rupert Sheldrake, Rollo May, Briann Swimme and philosophies of Eastern mysticism. They see, for example, intuition as being a field and not a quality. Intuitions, in the form of 'Aha' moments, tap into what our species already knows because someone, somewhere deposited the knowledge into the morphogenic field. Intuition is also fostered in the coach so that he or she can tap into the energy field around the client's responses to see whether the subject matter 'lands' (the notion of 'lands' is presumably part of the simple speech the co-founders wanted to utilize as described above). The components of the model are: fulfillment coaching, where the aim is to unveil the client's values and life purpose; balance coaching, where the adoption of different perspectives to a presenting problem are explored using a dramaturgical approach; and process coaching, which takes clients beyond their minds and into their bodies to promote body-mind unity through the exploration of subconscious sensations and memories experienced in different body parts.

Kimsey-House talked about 'Aha' moments emanating from the morphogenic field. Indeed, while the focus of this study is on a first-personal, phenomenological account, the 'Aha' moment in consciousness could have been investigated through different lenses. This is where Wilber's (1997) 'Four Quadrant' framework lends epistemic clarity. The idea is that any phenomenon in consciousness can only be fully elucidated by researching it in four different ways, depending upon the object of investigation. In other words the 'Aha' moment can be investigated, as here, in personal, phenomenological field, the 'I' where subject and object are one. Alternatively the study could have been undertaken through the 'WE' of inter-subjectivity. In this case focus group interviews might illuminate how 'Aha' moments are represented among groups in society. These two quadrants represent internal realities of the individual and the group. Alternatively the study could have been conducted in one of two exterior, objective quadrants.

The study could have been concentrated in the 'IT' of the individual by, say, investigating neuronal activity or measuring brain-waves as they operate in the moment of the 'Aha'. A study through the lens of the social quadrant, the 'ITS' might investigate whether insightful solutions are institutionally supported and might find evidence of this in, say, the growing popularity of transformational learning. Some research seeks to link two quadrants. A case in point here would be the instance of 'neurophenomenology' (Lutz 2002) whose research marries the scientific study of consciousness to the minute examination of experience within a first-person methodology so that data may be linked to experience – a marriage of 'I' and 'IT'. Nevertheless, the study here sought the clarification of the lived personal experience of the moment and so demanded an interior, private, phenomenological approach.

Methodology and Data Collection Methods

Qualitative, Phenomenological Approach

The 'Aha' moment happens in the conscious experience of the individual. Since I was interested in exploring the lived experience of the moment, the methodology demanded a qualitative, idiographic method. Data reported would come wholly from the internal, subjective and unique perspective of client-respondents and so pointed to a phenomenological approach. A guiding theme in phenomenological enquiry is to 'go back to things in themselves' meaning to address the universe that is experiencing the moment in situ, or as close to in situ as possible. In part, phenomenology derives from symbolic interactionism, which directs the investigator to take the role of the other, to the best of her ability. This is a foundational part of co-active coach training. The ability to gather data very close to 'in situ' i.e. immediately after the coaching session and the requirement for empathy drove my decision to be personally involved and to recruit fellow co-active coaches to conduct the research. As researcher, I should be equipped to empathize with participants during the exploration of what the 'Aha' moment means for the latter as conscious, purposive actors for whom ideas and meanings are central to their lives.

Grounded Study

Qualitative research has a penchant for inductive, hypothesis-generating research and this is what is needed with a phenomenon so poorly understood as the 'Aha' moment. I do not believe that qualitative researchers, attempting to formulate novel hypotheses, have much option but to use some form of grounded theory and so this was the strategy used. The lack of empirical data on the subject means that I was able to approach the research quite naively, an advantage in avoiding *a priori* theorising. However the injunction of some phenomenologists to examine data as "a phenomenon to be gazed upon, to be known naively and freshly through a 'purified' consciousness" (Moustakas: 1994:85) assumes a 'tabula rasa' quality that I don't believe is possible. My antidotes were to constantly seek clarity from respondents on exactly what their reported data *means* for them and to be persistently reflexive, in the sense of being aware of one's own assumptions in interpreting the data, as recommended by Alvesson & Skoldberg (2000).

The highly situated activity of life coaching brings into focus the special coach-client relationship and how this impacts on the methodology. In a sense, co-active coaching *is* a methodology. In keeping with a 'positive psychology', the client is held as 'creative, resourceful and whole' and the focus is not on any expertise but on the relationship – the container that holds the space for the client's self-knowledge and advancement. Confidentiality, trust, openness and authenticity are built into the relationship by mutual consent. My co-researchers would therefore

not have to be ‘trained’ in how to conduct research, as their co-active training should ensure that they act in an open and authentic manner.

Interpretive Paradigm

There are two ways of looking at the interpretive component of the study. Firstly, the ‘Aha’ moment *may* be idiosyncratically experienced but it can be stimulated within the intimacy of the coaching relationship –the ‘WE’ of inter-subjectiveness, or the hermeneutic circle which supplies the data.

The second interpretive element relates to the interpretation of what is ‘given’ in the data. The participant has to communicate the experience of the ‘Aha’ moment as a representation, through the symbolism of language. The researcher must then represent to herself using her own understanding of these symbols so that the representation of a representation takes her two steps away from the original act as experienced by the participant. The further along the spectrum of consciousness, especially at the level of spirit, the more incomprehensible the language becomes, cloaked as it is in metaphor. From an existentialist perspective there is no way around this, except to keep checking for the accuracy of meaning.

As befits a grounded study, I chose a variety of methods that would roll out in such a way that the data could be scrutinized throughout the research period. Diary keeping and the entries from clients’ reports yielded a pattern of concepts and ideas that could then be utilized to fashion a questionnaire. Data collected from questionnaires were scrutinized for central themes and concepts and these were employed to design the questions for the final data collection phase – telephone interviews.

Systematic Self Observation

Phenomenology deals with an act – that of insight – that discloses itself intuitively or immediately to the mind’s eye and the ‘object’ under study is part of subjective consciousness and not anything outside of the experiencing subject. According to Rodriguez & Ryave (2002), systematic self observation (SSO) is a method designed to produce accurate descriptions of informants’ experiences. This makes it particularly appropriate to this research proposal where the meanings, perspectives and feelings in the data are precisely what the researcher wants to know. “Because the researcher asks informants to respond to these features of their experience, SSO could be characterised as an event-contingent, open-ended self-interview, eliciting a description of experience that is drawn from direct observation” (2002, p. 9). The method permits clients to describe how they experience an ‘aha’ moment and at first hand since, unlike traditional methods where researchers must analyse and interpret their observations, in SSO the observer and the observed are one. Since data is expressed in informants’ own voices, there are no pre-ordained theoretical categorizations. This fitted very well with my objectives of capturing a first person phenomenological, lived experience as well as following the tenets of grounded theory where theory building is the aim.

Research Subjects

Diaries

- 12 co-active coaches (including the researcher) journalled their thoughts/feelings on what happened in the 'space' between coach and client vis-à-vis 'Aha' moments and insights. These responses were emailed back to me.
- 20 of their clients were asked to reflect on and journal their thoughts/feelings in a diary immediately after six coaching sessions to provide information on how, and under what circumstances any 'Aha' moment was experienced.

Questionnaires

- A questionnaire was emailed to 30 past coaching clients to see if attitudinal / behavioural changes have persisted. These participants filled in a questionnaire designed to investigate the role of 'Aha' moments in sustaining attitudinal and behavioural change.

Interviews

- A sample of clients (either diary keepers or questionnaire respondents) was interviewed by telephone at the end of the research period to validate and amplify responses. Additional interviews were conducted with respondents who had encountered life-altering epiphanies. Transcripts were recorded.

Pilot Studies

At the beginning of this project, I had expected reports that might be classified, using Wilber's Spectrum of Consciousness model mentioned above to find insights at the 'body, mind and even soul' levels, the last referring to those yearnings of the 'real self' stripped of cultural conditioning and involving life purpose and mission insights. These are the elements of the spectrum that would be addressed by humanistic and transpersonal psychologies. However, I took a different stance after perusing the data collected during the pilot stages of this study. I was struck by the pattern of terms used by these sources, terms which were reminiscent of Eastern literature pertaining to mystical experiences when individuals achieve 'satori' or enlightenment. My sources' reports seemed to suggest that they were experiencing mini, if not full satoris! This piloted data was suffused with metaphor and other non-prosaic language to describe Aha moments. Sometimes these depicted an 'all at once' transformation. For example:

"The Aha moment releases a valve on a nearly abandoned oil well...the pressure release and momentum evicts all the other crap that has been lying dormant in the pipe, well hidden from concern and attention. So with this release, comes relief" (PR, former client of mine).

and sometimes a more staged, gradual process:

"Aha moments result from the accumulation of new awarenesses and set you free from the mental plane so you can experience your soul" (J P, Co-active Coach).

And sometimes an apparent combination:

"This first burst of insights was followed by a cascade of connections and several months later, by a full-scale revelatory experience" (T. D, former client)

These reports of 'Aha' moments fit the theoretical frameworks of many influential writers on consciousness. For Krishnamurti and Bohm (1999), the experiencing of insight is an all-at-once affair and changes thinking forever.

Wilber (1989) would, along with other developmental theorists, see moments of insight as more gradual, staged affairs. The literature would suggest that satoris, in general, have to be actively worked towards, although some research shows revelatory experiences happening to individuals who have never prayed, meditated or otherwise sought religious or spiritual expansion. Millar & De Baca's (2002) longitudinal study demonstrates this. Some of their respondents had been at their lowest ebb when spiritual revelation occurred. So there is empirical support for 'Aha' moments happening whether sought or not. However experienced, it became apparent that Wilber's spectrum model of consciousness would provide an invaluable theoretical framework to capture the reported experiences of the Aha moment. The moment could not be confined within notions of body and mind, but would have to encompass soul and spirit too.

Data Analysis

Ideally the researcher utilizing grounded theory is looking for a saturated theoretical account of the phenomenon under inquiry. Such an account is, in principle, achieved by adopting the 'constant comparative' method (Strauss & Corbin 1998). This refers to the repeated comparison of information from data collection and emerging theory. Data analysis proceeds in a prescribed way:

- Data is openly coded – categorized and named by looking for similarities and differences
- Axially coded – looking within a single category and how it connects with other categories and in what contexts and conditions
- Selectively coding to supply theory – yields core categories to which all other categories are subsidiary.

Having coded the data in this prescribed fashion, I found that it produced several useful themes, including triggers of the 'Aha' moment, 'Aha' learning versus other types etc, but for the purposes of this paper only one of them is elucidated: the intensity and features of 'Aha' moments and where they may be located along the Spectrum of Consciousness.

Results

Wilber describes the evolution of consciousness along a spectrum from body to mind to spirit as a movement from subconscious to self-conscious to superconscious. Results show that the Aha moment can be experienced at varying levels of intensity and unlike other 'ways of knowing', respondents almost invariably report feeling the moment in their bodies as well as, or instead of, in their minds. It is as if the Aha moment is an orchestral affair, where the more the different sections of the orchestra are brought into play, the greater the resonance for the client and the greater the degree of belief and behavioural change. Support for this 'bodymind' consciousness can be found in neuro-biochemical studies. Pert (1997) demonstrates how internal chemicals – neuropeptides and their receptors- form the biological foundation of our awareness and responses. These chemicals can be found throughout the body – in the immune and endocrine systems as

well as the brain - and are released and exchanged throughout the bodymind in an intelligent and homeostatic-seeking network. To return to the musical metaphor, the Cartesian paradigm would see the brain as the conductor of the organism, with every section mechanically playing to its tune. The more holistic 'bodymind' theories see the whole organism as conscious and purposive. The mind, or consciousness, is non-local, "the body *is* the unconscious mind" (Pert, 1997). Memories are stored in a psychosomatic network extending throughout the body and these memories can create subconscious emotional ease or discomfort. Lack of bodymind congruence has been shown to be predictive of the development of psychosomatic health problems (Wickramasekera 1995). Much effort in co-active coaching goes into re-connecting clients with their bodies and exploring feelings and sensations, often in metaphorical terms. This recognition that emotions are accessible through the body is giving rise to a profusion of 'meridian' therapies, and many coaches, including the researcher, are becoming qualified in emotional freedom techniques which aim to unblock energies trapped in the meridian system throughout the bodymind. In the 'Body Experiences' section below, the heart, gut, solar plexus and general body energy that accompany the 'Aha' moment are heavily featured in the reports.

In tandem with somatic, body-based, therapies, co-active coaching fosters non-judgmental self-examination – the self-consciousness of which Wilber speaks. The adoption of different perspectives, especially when addressing areas where clients feel 'stuck', is widely reported in the data for having clients realize that they have choice, free will and are empowered to develop a more internalized locus of control. Co-active coaching draws heavily on the techniques of transpersonal psychology, particularly in the realm of creative visualizations, through role-play. In keeping with the tenets of humanistic and transpersonal psychologies, co-active coaching sees the client as driven by meaning, purpose and commitment with an intrinsic desire to self-fulfill through growth and development. Examples of such growth are reported in the section 'Mind Experiences' and reflect a loosening of rigid belief systems, accompanied by feelings of relief and release.

The findings under the section labeled 'Soul Experiences' clearly reflect the fulfillment that is derived from release from the mental plane into the core desires of the whole organism. The data supports Wilber's (2000) posited evolution from 'self-conscious' to 'super-conscious' meaning being concerned not just with self, but also with self in communion with others. These findings accord well with his contention that the goal of humanity is movement towards a 'world-centric' level of consciousness where we develop and move toward our innate social interest – a 'superconsciousness' with global reach.

Reports of 'Spiritual' and 'Non-Dual' experiences begin to show the inadequacy of language (or at least Western language) to convey these phenomenological realities. Language is only a signpost to reality, not reality itself but because influential sections of the scientific community refuse to admit of the non-material world, this has resulted in science dismissing this spiritual, interconnected and boundless reality as not measurable, not observable, and certainly not explicable in any terms with which they could identify. Zohar (2005) points out that science cannot deal with consciousness yet because to observe consciousness, one must study it from within the *experience* of consciousness. She explains that she has personally encountered many spiritual states of consciousness and concludes that, "Where the phenomenology of consciousness exceeds the objective paradigm of science to explain it, the onus of proof is on science because I believe in my own experience". Indeed absence of proof is not proof of absence, as this study attempts to demonstrate.

Aha Moments along the Spectrum of Consciousness

Body Experiences

Data concerning Aha moments being felt in the heart, chest, stomach, gut, solar plexus, or as a sudden rush of energy throughout the body, I classified into the core category, 'body experiences'. So the difference between an 'Aha' moment and just knowing something new is that the Aha is felt in the body. Bohm (1994:159) appreciates the bodily accompaniments of an 'Aha' moment of insight. Talking of insight, he says:

“Wherever it comes from, the important point is that it works directly at the physical level of the organism, along with everything else. So it really affects you through and through”.

The diary and questionnaire entries showed that almost all clients reported *feeling* the 'Aha' moment, often accompanied by feelings of peace or increased energy flow:

“ I feel it in my heart. I feel I am expressing my authentic self. I feel whole and at peace with myself. I'm not sure I can describe it any better than that”. (N.M., client)

It is interesting to note that the strings in an orchestra form the continuous background into which other instruments are introduced. The above quote is typical of respondents experiencing their 'Aha' moment as a plucking of the heart-strings.

“Freedom – a loosening of knots of fear and frustration in my abdomen and an opening to possibility” (J.B., client)

Referring back to the neuro-biochemical research of Pert (1999), she notes that a preponderance of neuro-peptides, the 'molecules of emotion' of the title of her book, can be found in the lining of the gut.

“Energy throughout. Blood rushing to my neck and face”. (S.E., client)

Perhaps this quote is an example of the 'unconditioned energy of which Krishnamurti and Bohm (1999) speak. They believe that insight may come from awakening unconditioned energy, thereby allowing thought to begin to look at its own conditioning.

Mind Experiences

Reports of change in perspectives, beliefs, self-talk, decision-making powers, clarity of ideas etc. were labeled as a core category 'Mind Experiences'. Mental 'Aha' moments have to do with a change in beliefs or perspectives, or a strengthening of the ego by releasing negative self-talk or thinking patterns. Of course mind and body are not separate so in some ways this is a false distinction but nevertheless, changes in mindset have a huge effect holistically in the client's life.

There seems to be a suspension of critical faculty between the moment of the 'Aha' and the response:

“No processing of information is involved. In the moment of the Aha itself, thoughts seem to cease. It’s like they need to reorient themselves before going on in a new direction” (D.L., client)

Such reports accord well with recent findings in neuro-biological studies. Jung-Beetman et al (2004) used scalp electroencephalogram recordings to show high-frequency neural activity in one hemisphere beginning 0.3 seconds prior to insight solutions. Their study suggests distinct patterns of performance and differential hemispheric involvement for insight versus non-insight solutions. Bohm (1994) believes that the processes of thought *seem* mechanical but that insight can change them. He portrays thought as a self-deception arising out of the failure to see that it represents the socially and culturally conditioned mind, as well as being infused with our knowledge, imagination and our past. This means that perception is never fresh or naïve, but always coloured by all of these representations (and that includes academic researchers!). However, thought is unaware that representation enters the perception and clouds it. Thought convinces ‘us’ that ‘it’ is ‘right’ and, unexamined, remains rigid and impenetrable. Resulting unexamined, habitual thought patterns produce an ‘electrochemical fog’ in the brain which only insight can penetrate by having the mind becoming aware of its own movement. Krishnamurti (1999) agrees that you cannot change the conditioned mind *with* the conditioned mind. Space has to be opened up (usually through meditative and contemplative practices) so that an ‘Aha’ moment has a place to land:

“Previously held beliefs have lost their power. I can choose to allow myself to feel them and let them move on” (S.B., client).

This realization of choice is actively fostered in the ‘balance’ part of Co-Active coaching, where the client is invited to view the same problem or event from multiple perspectives. Irwin & Morrow (1995) highlight the importance of perspective taking in behavioural change. In each chosen perspective the client is directed inwards to thoughts and feelings so that a thorough ‘bodymind’ analysis can be applied to each stance. This role-playing stemmed directly from the drama training of the founders of Co-Active coaching. This interruption of the habituated thinking patterns is crucial to experiencing a ‘Mind’ Aha moment as one client explains:

“They are a turning point, the point of inner clarity when I suddenly know how to proceed and why. They are the moments when the doing and being come together” (F.P., client).

Felt Experiences

Reports emphasizing emotions were labeled ‘Felt Experiences’ The felt experiences of ‘Aha’ moments are always associated with relief, peace, calm, and often excitement and an ‘inner knowing’ or intuition:

“A sense of illumination and relief – like putting something in a box and being able to label it – it takes away some of the fear and gives you new hope of being able to move forward” (L.P., client).

‘Aha’ moments would seem to help forge bodymind unity – head and heart, reason and instinct:

“I was like in a flow. My mind is calm, the chatter has stopped, my body is relaxed and I have a confirmation of truth in my gut, like an inner knowing” (C. L., client).

According to Vaughan (1979, intuition is suppressed because it frightens us and smacks of the ‘paranormal’. This is because we are trained in school to use rational and intellectual abilities only and become identified with these. Disidentification becomes possible by owning one’s perceptions in order to get them out of the way of intuition. This suggests the innate nature of intuition and she quotes Sri Aurobindo who says that intuition is a memory of the truth. So intuitive experiences expand consciousness to include more of reality and more understanding of what is true.

Soul Experiences

The concept of soul may have been banned by 17th century mechanistic science, but for some contemporary theorists, the concept is closer to ‘mind’ (see, e.g. Sheldrake 1987). The unearthing of often hidden values on which to build life purpose, mission and meaning is a central function of the ‘Aha’ moment. Those who reported uncovering their most deeply held values also reported this happening at the level of ‘inner knowing’ or intuition. Together with those who highlighted a sense of connection with others/the universe, these were labeled ‘soul experiences’.

Soul experiences have the quality of expanding not only one’s own horizons of awareness but a sensation of connecting with others too. Such reported experiences chime with the tenets of many developmental theorists where development means moving from dependence to autonomy, passivity to activity, subjectivity to objectivity and selfishness to altruism. There is a distinct suggestion of altruism, or at least empathy towards, and connection to, others.

“I feel a stream of energy going to the other person and coming back, doing a circle” (J.R., client)

Bohm (1994:187) would predict that when thought, through proprioception, or awareness of itself, is controlled, connection at a deep level becomes possible: *“When people are really in communion, in some sense a oneness arises between them as much as inside the person”.*

“Clarity and conviction and euphoria and being in touch with something higher than me, seeing me as more than my thoughts, feelings, body...am more loving, accepting and compassionate to myself and others. (S. F., client)

Spiritual experiences

Reports of experiencing beyond the realms of the physical body were labeled ‘Spiritual Experiences’

“This first burst of insights was followed by a cascade of connections and several months later, by a full-scale revelatory experience” (RL, client).

“The role of the Aha moment in my life is knowing that this isn’t IT” (MW, key informant, non-client)

This knowing suggests an ‘inner knowing’ or intuition. Bohm (1994) uses the term ‘insight’ and regards it as an active energy, a subtle level of intelligence that permeates the universe at large and is of a different order from mind and matter. He proposes that this energy is able to directly affect the structure of the brain and clear the ‘electrochemical fog’ created by accumulated reflexes of habitual thinking.

“My spirit feels like it is expanding very far beyond my body ”(MW, key informant, non-client).

As well as attempting to capture the lived experience of the ‘aha’ moment, a major goal of a future strand of this research is to explore the lasting effects of ‘aha’ moments on attitudes and behaviour. For Miller & de Baca (2001) an ‘Aha’ moment can represent the beginning of a vivid, surprising, benevolent and enduring personal transformation that they call ‘quantum change’. They report that many quantum changers express and discuss their experiences in spiritual, or mystical terms and distinguish this ‘mystical’ type of quantum change from the ‘insightful’ variety that constitutes a conceptual re-organization. Both types share one element of mystical quantum change – the noetic element of sudden realization or knowing. However Miller & de Baca apparently fail to share the breadth and depth of my conceptualization of ‘Aha’ moments: “Such insights are distinctly different from the ‘a-ha’ insights of ordinary experience”. (p.5). As I hope this study will demonstrate, it is more useful and fits the data better to see ‘Aha’ moments as occurring at any level and depth on the spectrum of consciousness with insight registering on the mental level, intuition at the level of the soul, and epiphany at the level of spirit.

Non-Dual Experiences

When the subject/object duality was reported to have been shattered, these were labeled ‘Non-Dual Experiences’. Non-dual awareness transcends the sense of individuality, which is replaced by an awareness of the inter-connectedness of all things. These reports would seem to be so much outside of our current materialist thinking that they might be seen to be delusional. However, a paradigm shift may be under way. Jenny Wade experienced non-duality during the sexual act. She kept this to herself for many years until a chance conversation proved that she was not alone. This led to case-study research featuring many accounts of non-dual awareness during the sexual union (Wade 2004). From a neuro-biological standpoint, Pert (1997) believes that happiness is our default state when the biochemicals of emotion are flowing through the organism is a smooth and rhythmic movement. She concludes that “bliss is hardwired” (p. 265). Respondents appear to confirm this:

“I am filled with this incredible light that shines down from my head all the way through my spine and into the core of the earth and I am amazed. I’m present in this body, I’m aware of my surroundings. I’m not my surroundings. And this is totally new to me but it’s very very, very old. I have been this before but I am this now and I will always be this”. (M.W. former coaching client)

“Not only what I was seeing was expansive but I became expansive – just in total communion with everything that is”. (L. H., non client)

“Didn’t see anything for a few minutes and I kept looking up in the Western sky and lo and behold, there it is, very high up in the sky and that was the big Aha moment. When I

saw Venus it was as if...I guess the best way to describe it would be that my consciousness had been elevated and with it the whole consciousness of mankind was elevated. Like my being there in the space with Venus I'd kinda moved up my understanding...in a sense felt drawn up in my understanding of consciousness and in my being drawn up, the entire consciousness of mankind had been drawn up". (R.K.P., non client)

Conclusion

This research shows that the characteristics of an 'Aha' moment of insight are fundamentally different from insights of a problem-solving, purely cognitive nature. The phenomenological experience of the 'Aha' involves bodily accompaniments and other sensations that are suggestive of tapping into a non-conditioned energy that we might call 'soul' or 'spirit'. The findings may be interpreted from other perspectives, but I found the 'Spectrum of Consciousness' model an invaluable aid in plotting the levels of consciousness along which an 'Aha' moment is shown to occur. As the study demonstrates, 'Aha' moments can be experienced in the body, the mind, the soul, the spirit, or a combination of all of these. 'Aha' moments at the epiphany end of the scale were described by respondents in a way, which is reminiscent of 'non-dual' awareness when a sense of separate subjectivity dissolves and the person feels at one with the whole universe.

This exploration of the levels of consciousness along which 'Aha' moments are experienced suggests that there are levels of awareness that *cogito ergo sum* - the dominant paradigm of Western thinking - may be incapable of capturing since such eliminative reductionism fails to take account of higher states of consciousness. Prevailing 'scientific' paradigms continue to favour behavioural and cognitive approaches to psychology. Any truly holistic model of coaching must, it is argued, integrate all that is possible for the richness of human life, in body, mind, soul and spirit. As for the 'location' of an Aha moment, the study shows that, while there may be physical correlates of the event, its impact and aftermath are experienced in a space that science is not (yet) equipped to reveal. In the words of Plotinus, knowledge has three degrees: opinion, science and illumination. It is at the level of illumination that this study has thrown up results that I had not expected. The findings, together with further research in this area, will help to devise concepts that can shape a holistic model of life coaching.

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