



Conscious Life presents

TRAUMA SUPER CONFERENCE

Trauma and spiritual awakening

Guest: Jessica Britt

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[00:00:10] Alex Howard

Welcome everyone, to this interview where I'm really pleased to be bringing you a conversation with Jessica Britt.

This is one of my, I shouldn't say this, one of my favorite interviews of the conference. It's a really important one because we're talking about some of the really extreme experiences that can happen in trauma, but from a lens, from a different lens, from a lens of a spiritual path, and really how whatever happened to us, there is a place in us that is untouched by that. And I think that's a very important message.

To say a little bit about Jessica, Jessica Britt has been a spiritual teacher and training director of The Diamond Approach since 1985. In the 1970s, she specialized in the field of childhood sexual and physical abuse. And she mentioned to me before we started recording, she ran the first ever workshop on trauma at the Esalen institute, which is one of their most important locations hosting self development workshops in history. This was right back in the 70s.

The 80s saw her on the Gestalt staff at Esalen, where she initiated groups for adults with childhood abuse. In her decades of inner work, she has gained a unique perspective on the impacts of trauma on the spiritual journey and its practices.

So, Jessica, welcome. I'm really looking forward to having some time to explore together, and I appreciate you making the time.

Jessica Britt

Oh, you're welcome, Alex. It's my pleasure, actually.

Alex Howard

So we were just having a conversation before we started recording, and you were sharing with me some of your background and work with trauma, really, before trauma was anywhere near being in the zeitgeist of conversation like it has become in recent times. I'd love you to say a little bit about what brought you to working with trauma and some of those early experiences.

[00:02:17] Jessica Britt

Just as you ask me the question now in the moment, the most amazing memory just came into my consciousness. I'm very touched by it actually, I feel very touched by it. So my background is like so many people on the planet, regrettably, there was a lot of abusive trauma in my early childhood. Coming from New York, I basically say I grew up in an X-rated childhood.

And long story short, I went into nursing and I specialized in pediatric nursing and psychiatric nursing with kids. So I saw a lot of children with a lot of trauma, which stimulated inside of me a recognition I needed to go into therapy. So this was in my early twenties. And I was working with a therapist and telling my history, this is like in the 1970s, and he's writing notes and I'm sitting there and he says to me, you're telling me the most horrific things, as if you're telling me about the weather.

When he said those words, first of all, I was like, startled because it was actually a human being being sensitively present with me, and it kind of shattered, not shattered, that's too strong of a word, it woke up something inside of myself that I had a subtle young woman's recognition of how far away I was from myself.

And so in that movement in my continued early therapy I did a tremendous amount of work on my historical self and worked in the field. And over time, there was tremendous understanding, tremendous healing, and a kind of organization of my history, because a lot of people with trauma histories, their histories are chaotic, so I'd say the verbal therapy gave me organization of my history.

And then I ended up doing a form of work called Gestalt therapy. I was blessed to work with a man named Dick Price and his wife Chris Price. Again, this is back in the 70s/ 80s. And I learned to start having feelings because I was quite frozen and dissociated. And that was a whole journey, learning to cry, be angry, all the things that we were famous for in the 70s, early 80s.

And at that time I wanted to work with a reiki therapist because I was living in the Bay Area. Don't ask me how I ended up with a man named, that we know as, Hameed Ali. And he was doing reiki work. He hadn't even started his school yet of The Diamond Approach. And I started working with him and noticing my emotions, if I didn't just... He had a point of view that opened up my emotional body into spiritual qualities.

Like we were talking about it earlier, like through his guidance and our particular approach, as my somatic experience was opening up with the breathwork, and I was allowing myself to have certain sensations, certain feelings, like pain, crying. And there was a way his presence was so quiet, and then he'd have me sense into it really deeply.

And then a kind of compassion or loving kindness literally started arising from within me that was so amazing that I began to understand a kind of inner alchemy that involved the body, the individual consciousness, the historical part of myself, and started waking up in a certain way. And I got very turned on because I was still working as a psychiatric nurse in these days, though I was doing the teacher training with Hameed, that I started feeling like oh, there's something here about supporting a person entering into their most painful trauma layer with fellow people to create a holding environment that brought them in a certain way... Had the potential to bring a person back to their basic goodness.

[00:07:22] Alex Howard

And that is sometimes a very difficult thing to do, right? To turn towards the place that we've often spent much of our energy trying to either shut down or to actively move away from. It's interesting what you say though because I think often people think about feeling trauma or feeling feelings so we can get rid of them, but you're saying something slightly different here, that the feeling of it actually has the potential for something else.

Jessica Britt

Absolutely. And one of the things, and we were talking about it earlier, the gift of adding the spiritual dimension into any kind of inner work, psychological work, trauma work, inner work, but bringing that lens, one, first of all, can begin to recognize that everything about ourselves is included in true nature. That's a very profound nugget.

The Christian tradition, Christ said, you are the light. All the traditions point to the fact that who and what we are is not a mistake. And one of the biggest hurts about trauma, childhood trauma, physical trauma, sexual trauma, emotional abuse, and shaming, is that a young being, any of you sat with a newborn, purity, goodness, sweetness, wonderfulness, right?

That that being could end up by age 13 or whatever, age 5, feeling shame, worthlessness, badness and that their original goodness is just an echo inside of themselves. And for many people, it's totally split off. Some people, it's an echo. And so one of the things that spiritual work points to is that echo, that original goodness, is never destroyed. That's an intellectual piece of information that to begin to feel it takes tremendous practice because it takes a certain kind of holding environment to go inside and to slowly learn to tolerate.

Peter Levine talks about this beautifully. The titration, that is such a gift that he brought into the conversation. Titrating, learning to re-feel, to kind of defrost oneself from the trauma, to come back here takes a community which Thomas is talking about, takes certain kinds of practices, and it takes a certain kind of passion within our own individual souls to want the truth.

Alex Howard

I want to track back to this point around our original purity or goodness or true nature not being tainted or destroyed. Because I think that particularly when there's more serious childhood abuse, for example, one of the feelings that people can be left with is that somehow they've been tainted or they've been dirtied or they've been changed by that experience.

And that is part of the impact, in a sense, because I think that the fear is then that I will never be the same again because of how I've been impacted by this experience.

So I'd love you to unpack this a bit more because I think that there's something that's very beautiful in what you said. And I think it's an important message.

Jessica Britt

It's probably the most powerful, touching, message, actually. One has to consider that rumor, like, I think of the Dalai Lama and the basic goodness. Or Desmond Tutu, when those two get together. And they're so full of goodness.

[00:11:58] Alex Howard

It's infectious when those two get together, right?

Jessica Britt

But why? You see, they just radiate this joy and this goodness. And both those men have witnessed tremendous trauma, up close and personal. What they must feel. So that original goodness. So here's the challenge. It was very beautiful hearing you talk about the services you're offering. Every one of us who are in this field of inner work and healing, whether the collective or the individual, each one of us holds a very important piece.

Because it takes a village to really unpack and alchemize and digest the trauma, to discover the original goodness. So spiritual teachings have a powerful message: there is original goodness. Most people with trauma history, they're hoping that that's true. They're very suspicious, they're like, well, maybe for you, but not me. So it takes a certain kind of inner psychological work.

So I'll self-reference. So I really learned to sense my body, it was a long path to sense my body, to come back in, to have my emotions. And then I realized something in me was still not satisfied. I don't know how to explain it. In our work, we call it the flame. The flame for the truth, right? Something in me just wasn't satisfied.

One of the things that's important with each stage we take, each capacity we gain, oh, I can feel a little more, I get a little more confident. I feel a little bit more goodness. I have more positivity in my life, you see. Gives me more courage. A deeper pain might arise as the resources are building. That's part of that titration thing. Eventually, there are some very deep, kinaesthetic soul wounds. There's no other way to speak about them.

That deep practice, commitment, support, allows an individual to begin to feel because they're getting more courage as they're going through the inner journey. And at the root of our consciousness, our original purity is absolutely there, indestructible. It's just for an individual to feel that, oh, my God, look. Now most of us have that feeling, like, we developed strong armor and defenses. I'm not going to let them get to me.

We have the part that feels like, boy, they really got to me. But inside of that, there's a place like they didn't get to me. The kid has that feeling. Beneath that, there's a deep truth that that original essence, that all spiritual teachings talk about, is indestructible, that the history is conditioned, that trauma makes a very deep impression. I mean, clearly it does.

But it's not an impression that changes the DNA of the soul. It doesn't get into the deep matrix of the basic mystery and goodness of who and what we are. And to just taste that for a moment is so transformative. It's just kind of like it's a dagger counter. And then you begin to recognize, oh, that's what's moving me. Why are people signing up for your conferences? Partly it's because they want to learn how to work with people, do a little bit of healing, but there's a deeper thing that's moving. And if one can begin to recognize this deep inner movement, it gets actually very exciting.

[00:16:41] Alex Howard

It does and I think there's something that's very important and very beautiful in what you're saying. I think what's sometimes really hard is, going back to what you were saying a little bit earlier, that the journey to that place is a journey of turning towards one's suffering, not away from it. And of course, often the last place we want to go is towards because it was too overwhelming at the time and that's why we're trying to move away from.

And so I'm curious as to what supports one in that turning towards, what helps somebody who's, perhaps, almost built their life around strategies to move away from, to turn and look towards and to open up to?

Jessica Britt

It takes many things, actually. As I think of the different speakers that you have and how each one of them will bring a certain element to address the... Well, actually, I'll start this way. I want to slow it down. First, it's recognizing that there is a force in us that wants to feel better. There is a profound existential question in most human beings. What is the meaning of all of this? What is the meaning of suffering? How am I going to deal with my suffering?

Just like you said. And most people go, the vast majority of people go the conventional route. They shut down. They don't want to feel, and they try to solve their suffering issue externally. Drugs, sex, rock and roll, money in the bank, 2.5 children, two cars, or just having enough food on the table is a huge, and a full belly, for so many people on the planet, it's a huge accomplishment.

Now, for a reason I can't explain, there are some people that are moved to go a little further, and they end up doing psychological work. They end up recognizing all my relationships end up poorly. It might have something to do with my background. And they'll go into therapy. Fantastic. And they actually have better relationships. And then some people, the better relationship, but there's something else.

And so some people go, they want a better sex life, and they go, oh, I'm having an okay heart relationship, but the sex, I wonder if it has anything to do with the trauma in my life. And they might go get some body work or start doing some physical therapy. You see? So our own inner desire actually leads the way of how we solve it. And our divine dissatisfaction encourages us to take another step.

Now, for some people, the feeling, or what I call the flame, just keeps them moving. And then they hear rumors, you know, spiritual rumors, true nature, it's all one and loving. And then they decide to go do some spiritual practices. They find a spiritual teacher they really like. And for some people, I'm going to use meditation as an example, sitting in meditation is like heaven, right? They just sit there.

And I call these people, I'm not one of these people...

Alex Howard

Neither am I. Just to be clear.

[00:20:36] Jessica Britt

I know. I had to go dance. I could tell you some funny stories about my original meditation because of the trauma in my history. Now some people with trauma history, sitting meditation is like a refuge. They go in, they know how to get very still and it's like returning to the place where they couldn't get touched and they love to meditate. Other people with trauma, I was one of those people, made me a target.

The guru, the teacher, meditation teacher, says, OK, bring your awareness down into your belly center. Hara, Kath, by all its names. And your usual sense of self is like panicking, like, get me out of here, right? So if you can begin to appreciate that there's a longing for a practice and recognizing that some practices will be a challenge for you, depending on your history, can support you being more kind toward yourself about it versus giving yourself a spiritual inner critic attack.

And it might be like, I was in a body cast as a child, so to sit me down... And I was actually working with Hameed at the time and I went to a two week meditation thing. Not with me, with, actually, Jack Cornfield. This was back in the 70s, I can't remember, or 80s and oh, it was like I was a prisoner of war. Just sit me down, I was crying, and it was too fast for me. And then we realized I needed to open up my body trauma around the body cast because I felt so entrapped.

So for me, movement and dance and yoga was a much more supportive path. We have to recognize what helps us be with ourselves. Now, I love to meditate, and there's a part of me that prefers movement practices. And so it's also to recognize where your soul is moving you. Actually, this third way I just realized is to kind of come to trust yourself, to really begin to feel and trust your own inner call.

And we all take out a direction to begin with. I mean, we do need pointers. In a certain way, each person who's listening to this conference, of all the wonderful guests you're going to have, they're going to respond to, oh, that's the right thing for me right now. And to learn to trust that and also there's this kind of inner movement inside ourselves that wants to support us to return and to know our original purity, actually.

Alex Howard

What I think is important in what you're saying as well is that where something feels particularly difficult, there's also wisdom in that, right? You're describing your experience of sitting to meditate and there being an inner no to that, or inner resistance to that, and it wasn't that oh well I'm just going to give up, but, well, how else do I work with this? Or what does this place in me actually need to help support it? And there's something about that kind of relationship with one's own experience and that that's an unfolding thing.

Jessica Britt

Absolutely. You said it really beautifully. And the other thing I would just add to what you just said, this is where our own inner integrity comes in. Yes. And I said it, I agree with you. To listen and to let ourselves move, but to also recognize, if I had totally stopped meditating, I would also be avoiding something, but also to recognize, oh, I'm having a particularly hard time. Oh, I do feel trapped. It did bring up feelings about being in the body cast.

[00:25:30]

So then in my inner work with my therapist and or Hameed, or whoever you're working with, to let yourself inquire into the wound or the defense that's afraid to meditate, like Jessica, to sit here and meditate, you're actually not in a body cast. In a certain way, to have the right balance between inquiring into the resistance of the practice, that has a certain importance and to let yourself go dance and move and do yoga.

Alex Howard

Yes, but it also strikes me that there's something around knowing where that working edge is and not trying to force through it, but also not hiding away from it. And I think particularly when one's boundaries have been violated as part of the wounds in the first place, it's sometimes difficult to respect one's own edges and to even be attuned to where they are.

And I'm curious as to in working with students, what you notice helps them to find their edge and then to honor it.

Jessica Britt

A beautiful question. Well, of course, first of all, it's to support the person respecting their conflict, to de-shame it, because most people will experience that conflict as a limitation. I should be able to do this. Because all spiritual teachings, and most therapists, and The Diamond Approach, want to encourage the person, well, let's see what happens if you just let yourself feel it for a moment.

Let's try to understand this battle inside yourself. I'll use meditation. What does meditation mean to you? What does it mean to you to sit still? And let the free association and let the soul reveal what it's trying to work out. So that's like, number one, let's hear the story, because a lot of times in trauma, what I notice is that there's a lot of, besides all the mental stuff that goes on, there's a lot of body stuff that goes on.

The holding of the breath, if I do an exhale, I'll land more in my belly. So I'm trying to hold myself up, because if I land on my belly, I'll feel my genitals. I mean, there's so many dialogues. So to just make room, well, let's hear what's trying to be expressed here and to really honor that.

Alex Howard

I feel like part of what we're touching into is the role of inquiry. So maybe you want to say a few words around just briefly what that practice is but also how that can help us explore those places.

Jessica Britt

Just trying to... So much could be said and, obviously, I'm a talker. Once I got defrosted and things started really moving, it's hard to...

Alex Howard

Well, I asked you a question that of course could be many week long retreats to answer. I realize I've just thrown you a slightly tricky one.

[00:29:08] Jessica Britt

Well. I hear Ram Dass' voice, be here now. So it's inquiry, from The Diamond Approach perspective, in a certain way, builds on a deep tradition of really being here now and recognizes that that now is not some future idealized place. That the now is literally whatever you are experiencing in this moment. And that there's a recognition that there's kind of mental thought experience, there's heart experience, there's kinesthetic body experience.

So in inquiry we want to build a person's capacity to actually land in their experience, recognize it, whatever it is, whether it's mental content, these are the thoughts I'm having, these are the emotions I'm having, these are the sensations I'm having. And by landing in it, or just being where you are, we like to say, that the soul's natural curiosity, what's going on here, let's not just mentally understand it, but let's just see what these feelings are.

That the soul itself has a dynamism that wants to tell its story, it wants to express, but we usually don't quiet, take the time to actually be with what we're really experiencing. And so that's like the first step. And there is in the soul, though for some people with trauma it's a challenge, we do have a natural curiosity. And sometimes our curiosity is dull because of the trauma. We're told not to look, don't see, don't feel.

So part of the practice is, in a certain way, to re-awaken our natural movement to be curious. We are curious, inquiring beings. I mean there's a rumor that true nature is the ultimate inquirer. If we open up the inquiring consciousness through the mind, the feelings, and the belly, and give permission to listen, to feel, to be present with, the natural healing movement of the soul will move. And then people do breath work, which helps activate that movement. Dance, yoga. Reality is very curious most of the time, isn't it?

Alex Howard

It is. What also comes to my mind, Jessica, as you're talking there is that, I think, often when one starts to open up to their suffering and their trauma, it often can feel like we don't have what it takes to do it. We don't have the capacity or the courage or whatever it may be to do it. What I think is important in what you're saying as well is that as we do the healing work, what you're speaking to is we also start to awaken parts of ourselves or unlock, different words we could use, but capacities become available as that journey happens.

So maybe you could say a few words about how once we get some movement, maybe some of the material we face gets harder, but also our capacity to meet it also grows.

Jessica Britt

Well, you said it. It's true. That rumor is true. I mean, that's certainly been my experience. It's probably been your experience. Some part in you is really inspired to hold these conferences. Now, I think what's important to say is that what you're saying is true, the soul, our consciousness, has a potential and there is a maturation process. So as an infant, we start off on our backs, right?

And there's a movement that gets us to turn and then the muscles develop and we go to the crawling and the standing and there's this natural movement. Or a flower blooming. The healing process is like that, that there's a movement. And then, let's say, a bud starts moving in us and we

get the support we need, in these tremendous external, needs lots of good gardeners around us that, oh, well, slow down here a little bit.

[00:34:26]

That whole titration principle that Peter is so beautiful with, so that over time in the metabolizing and oh, look, I can actually stand. Oh, I actually can cry and I'm not drowning in it, even though I felt like I was drowning in it. I'm actually quite okay inside of here. Wow. Our natural presence starts rising. I can remember I've seen this in people, around anger, anger is a big one, right? Oh, if I feel my anger, I'm going to murder someone.

And you start feeling the anger with support and the heat of it and slowly, you can't help but notice inside, well, I am angry. I'm feeling angry, but I'm not the anger. We start feeling, something just naturally starts popping up inside, goes, oh. And that's part of that door to the original purity, right? If I let myself feel the anger in the right circumstances, I actually feel a little stronger.

Oh, there is an objective no inside of here. It's a kind of growth and development process, actually, of the soul. And in a certain way, to recognize, and this is an important thing that all, the things we call our limitations, our defenses and all those kinds of things, they really are an incredible cocoon that has protected us through our childhood to get us so far. And that we each have a certain kind of call that will respond to...

Actually, I just realized the hardest thing about everything we're talking about is comparison mind. That my journey through my trauma, my journey to rediscovering my spiritual nature is unlike anybody else's. So even as we're having this kind of very supportive conversation and hopefully inspiring conversation, it's so important to recognize, and it's very moving to me, that each person has a different destiny about which part of the digestion process is theirs to do. Do you know what I mean?

Alex Howard

Yeah. What also strikes me about that is that that comparing mind also is part of the reason why we can feel so alone and feel so lonely on the journey. And there's something about what you're saying around that although our experiences or the exact nuance and flavor of what's happening may be different, we're also very deeply connected.

Jessica Britt

Well, I realize I don't talk about these things so often, and so talking with you, I, again, feel very moved with a particular memory. One of the reasons I was motivated to do some workshops at Esalen, I think I called it, I actually don't remember what I called it, it was for adults with childhood abuse, was I could feel that being in a holding environment of like souls and to begin to share the stories, broke through that loneliness in a certain way.

I'm just having a memory. So there was a group, and we met a couple of years in a row, same people. And I had the group for men and women, and I used to do it by myself and then I started doing it with a male co-leader, which was very useful and really had men and women in the space. And one of the women came up with these signs that said camp Incest. Now, we all laughed, but we also recognize if anybody else had done it other than the woman who did it, we would have killed.

[00:39:02]

You know what I mean? And so that kind of community support is inspiring to share the pain, but also, over time, you really do start learning. The other phrase I love is the iron that's in the fire the longest becomes the strongest steel. So there are many beautiful souls on the planet who have digested 50%, 25% of their history, like the Desmond Tutus or the Nelson Mandelas, who are very public inspirations.

But there are many fine beings who have really done this journey. It would be very interesting, actually, someday, to get all the teachers together to talk about their childhood and what their metabolization process was.

Alex Howard

Yeah. It also strikes me in what you were saying, I know we're starting to run out of time, but it strikes me that, I think, sometimes the fixation can be on I have to heal everything, and I don't have a life on the other side until I've dealt with all of this. And I think what's also important in this is that one doesn't have to deal with everything to be whole or to be able to live their life fully.

Jessica Britt

Oh, beautiful. Well, as I'm feeling into the significance of what you just said, not only that, living your life, right, we just feel into living our life. So you go to a therapy session or a yoga thing or meditation retreat, whatever you're called to, and you're inspired or you learn something and you go home and you suddenly see your partner in it from a slightly different point of view, or you just respond to your child slightly differently, which then gives you fresh, new experiences that then you might take back to the therapist.

And then something else is seen and understood and then you go to work and you go, oh my God, I've been judging my colleague just like my father judged me. So these insights become lived insights and change who we are in our everyday life. Because life, as you were saying, life is inseparable from true nature. There's a rumor it's true nature who's living this life is one of the rumors. And we're one of the divine forms.

So, yes, each person has a very unique karma, there's no question about that. It's part of the multiplicity and the richness of reality that we each have a different destiny and what is ours to do, what is ours to transform. And it's not anybody outside of us can't tell us. It does take a deep self respect and listening, listening to one's capacities and also recognizing one's limits, like going, well, this isn't for this lifetime, I'll handle that next lifetime. That's one of the rumors.

Alex Howard

I'm mindful we're out of time, but I've enjoyed spreading rumors together. Can you say a few words about people that want to find out more about you, The Diamond Approach and what to, perhaps, explore further from this lens? Where can people go and what would be some of what they can find?

[00:43:07] Jessica Britt

Well, as a beginning place, and we are in the process of developing another level, that in our, I think it's called, Diamond Approach Online, there is a teaching that I did on trauma and spirituality that's available. And out of that teaching we'll be doing more on the subject. But The Diamond Approach, we don't focus on trauma as such, it's its own unique path, et cetera.

But the element of trauma, what I want to bring into this space, like I talked about with the meditation, how trauma can inspire us on the search and what are some of the limitations that we run across and how can we deal with them, I think is a very important conversation, to reduce the spiritual inner critic, basically. But that's probably a good starting place.

Alex Howard

Fantastic. And also maybe worth saying that with The Diamond Approach these days people can do online groups, they can do retreat groups, they can do weekend groups. There's quite a few different ways that people can find a pathway in.

Jessica Britt

Yeah, I mean, then there's the whole Ridhwan website, [the Diamond Approach website](#), and there's all kinds of groups. I want to be clear, they're not trauma focused. They're more just the teaching as it is. And we're speaking about it in terms of how it can touch and be relevant for people with traumatic histories, so they're not discouraged, actually.

Alex Howard

Wonderful. Jessica, thank you so much. I really appreciate your time today.

Jessica Britt

You're welcome.