



Conscious Life presents

Trauma, Emotions and Spirituality

Guest: Jessica Britt

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[00:00:10.530] - Alex Howard

Welcome, everyone to this interview. I'm super excited to be talking with Jessica Britt. We're going to be exploring trauma, emotions and spirituality. We're going to be particularly talking about how trauma doesn't just impact our nervous system and our emotional body. Trauma also touches us in a deeper place and part of our capacity towards healing is healing from that place.

To give you a little bit of Jessica's background, 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. The 1980s 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. Well, firstly, Jessica, welcome and thank you for joining me again.

Jessica Britt

It's my pleasure, Alex.

Alex Howard

I was reflecting on what you sent through before the interview and there was a line in there that really caught my attention. You were saying that trauma impacts more than just our nervous system. That trauma impacts us in places that actually are deeper, a deeper place in ourselves. I'd love you to speak to that a little bit to give us some frame of where we're going to go in this conversation.

Jessica Britt

I've been thinking about it a lot. I started working in the trauma field in the 1980s and just getting people to acknowledge trauma has been a very big thing. We've made a very large movement around it and a very large movement around really understanding the effect of trauma on a person's ability to feel good about themselves, to actually function in a really good way in their lives. Probably one of the biggest advancements in trauma work has been in the last 10 years, 15

years or so, that has really been looking at trauma's effect on a person's nervous system, on their bodies. There's tremendous work that's been done on it.

[00:02:47]

In my own exploration, what I've discovered for myself and working with others, is that the trauma doesn't just affect the nervous system, it absolutely affects our sense of self, it really impacts how we see ourselves, how we feel about ourselves affects our sense of our personality. What I've discovered while working through the layers of the history and opening that up, particularly opening up the emotions, that there's a whole other level to a person that we can call their living spirit, their soul, their spiritual nature, their consciousness that's actually within the body, within the nervous system and actually more fundamental to it.

So the trauma impacts not just our bodies, not just our emotions. Trauma affects our connection with our spiritual nature. What I've been really exploring over the last years is how trauma can be a portal to our spiritual nature as opposed to just a closed door to it.

Alex Howard

Which raises a really interesting question around who we are, which is beyond our personality and unknown sense of self. This place that you're speaking to, which is also touched, and shaped, and impacted by trauma, maybe you can speak a little bit more to what that is, and we can explore how we can come to know that place in ourselves.

Jessica Britt

Just feeling into what's been acknowledged through millennium that, to speak about a person's spiritual nature brings in words like living consciousness, brings in words like the soul. One of the challenges with opening up what is consciousness, a personal consciousness, what is the soul, is that there's so many layers of religious history on top of that. There's so many opinions about what that is, especially in the Christian traditions.

I happen to have been raised Catholic. I can remember as a little girl going, "I've got a soul?" And from my sense as a little girl and the way they're like, "Well, where is the soul?" "Oh, the soul is someplace and it's collecting sins." Especially in the west, there's a lot of sense of the soul as a place where our evil deeds are collected. Which is one of the deep impacts of a child who has a lot of trauma, is that they feel like, whether they would put it into words, they feel like there's something in them that is collecting bad, painful marks. "I've done something wrong. It's my fault. I deserve this." All the things that children do when under a lot of traumatic imprint.

I'm saying this to start off with, because I want to kind of open up, what is the soul? If we remove for a moment all these religious meanings of it. To actually contemplate, as we're sitting here, I'm going to invite both of us to contemplate. That when we feel ourselves, also children have a sense of this, what if it's really true, there's something more to us than what we've been told we are? In fact, what I've discovered over the years... Oftentimes you see this with people with a lot of trauma history in their childhood. I call them the children that see that the emperor has no clothes on.

[00:07:24] Alex Howard

That's really great.

Jessica Britt

From that favorite fairy tale. And it's the child, there's usually very sensitive children. You're in this conventional world, you're being told all these things. It's almost like the child, in their deep soulful intuition, can feel that there's something off. Something doesn't make sense here at a deep level. Though, at another level, the children, and there's lots of discussion about this, the children basically blame themselves for their trauma.

Children blame themselves for almost everything. They blame themselves for a parent's divorce. The psychological meaning of that is that the children are trying to fix themselves, manage themselves. For defensive reasons, they blame themselves because it's too risky to really see their parents as evildoers. Then they're really in trouble. They go, "No, I'm the evildoer."

There is that layer. But I'd like to introduce another layer, the spiritual layer, that a young child... If you think about your own children, I'm going to invite everybody to think about young children. There's something so intrinsically sweet and innocent of new-borns. Miraculous, pure, mischievous, feisty. There's this beingness there before they know their name, before they're told that this is their nose, this is your eyes, you're a boy, you're a girl, there's a living being that's there.

If we look, you can feel their livingness. I'm going to suggest that within that living being, they're more than their bodies and their instincts. That sweetness, that aliveness, is a part of their spiritual nature. Out of that spiritual nature, they're very sweet and loving young ones are very generous beings. That part of why a child ends up blaming themselves comes from their spiritual nature's loving nature. Out of love. "Oh, Mommy, Daddy." It's almost like Christ's nature. "I will take on these sins. That out of my loving..." That generosity is a kind of a door into our spiritual nature that's more fundamental than our history. That was very long.

Alex Howard

I was letting you speak because it was great.

Jessica Britt

I can get going, I have to say. I love talking about this. I love the sweet truth of it.

Alex Howard

What also, Jessica, as you're talking, really struck me is that from that place of, to use the word soul, which is the word that we started with here, there is a presence, and there's a palpable presence.

You use the example of a new-born. My sister-in-law has a six-month-old boy, and when he's in the room, he's there. In lots of different ways, whether he's laughing, giggling, crying, frustrating, whatever it is, he's there. There's a presence that's there. And there's something which is us, which is not... He doesn't have a formed personality yet, but there is something which is us, which

is present, which is there. Maybe you can speak about this, it's the us that even experiences the nervous system, it's the us that experiences the events. So maybe you can speak a little more to that.

[00:12:10] Jessica Britt

Beautiful, I love it. I can almost feel them. I can feel them almost. You're speaking, this is so useful, because all young ones are so distinctly unique. Even people who have twins and have identical twins, even though we on the outside might not be able to tell the difference, the mother can. Part of it is not just a little difference in how the eyebrow is, it's that the very essence of the baby, of the toddler has a unique flavor to them. So this presence that you're talking about is so beautiful, that we each have a unique flavor or presence of our consciousness. That's before our personality. Before we are told who we are. That's remarkable, actually.

We all long, in a very deep way, to come to our authentic uniqueness. Trauma or really harsh events, whether it's emotional, coming through the ears or you see something traumatic through your eyes or something traumatic happens against your body, it's clear that there's an impact on the body. It's clear that there's an impact on the nervous system.

The research is clear about it. It's clear that it affects our sense of self and the formation of our personality. What we're opening up in this discussion, is that it's also impacting this unique living consciousness that we are. When the nervous system closes down, which it's going to do to protect itself, it's not just the nervous system... The nervous system, the very livingness and sensitivity of the nervous system, is a beautiful expression of the very livingness and sensitivity of our unique consciousness.

In a certain way, you could say our consciousness uses our eyes and our ears to see and to feel and to sense. As the nervous system contracts and takes on a certain tension... Freud famously said the ego is a body tension. That's a very deep contemplation. I'm suggesting it's not just our bodies. Another word that's used instead of soul, especially in Europe, is the word our psyche. Young really talked about this in very beautiful ways. That there is something about us that infuses our body.

A dear friend of mine just passed away and so this is very near me in this very moment. Those of us who have been blessed to be with someone who passes, something changes in the room as their body process stops. We can talk about what leaves the body. I'm suggesting it's our living consciousness that leaves the body.

Back to your, was it your nephew? You were just talking about. Being at a birth, what comes into the room? I've been at enough births and enough death passages to begin to recognize, there is almost like a spiritual portal that opens up. At birth, the consciousness comes in. It's coming out through the mother's body, but there's a presence that comes into the room. For those of us who have been in death rooms, there's also something, a presence that leaves the body. That is more fundamental than the trauma. Probably the most significant thing, which is why I really like bringing in the spiritual perspective... Go ahead.

[00:17:05] Alex Howard

The nervous system is of the body. It literally is the way that our system is responding and sensing and experiencing the world. If who we are is more than just this body, there's a place within us which is having the experience of a dysregulated nervous system. There is a place within us which is having the experience of overloaded emotions that are not being felt and being held. That place within us which you're speaking to is also having an experience of trauma.

Jessica Britt

Yes, it's definitely having an experience of trauma. There's no question about that. Now let's see how I want to make this bridge. This is classical spiritual language. It is having an experience of trauma. You could say the front face of it is having an experience of trauma. The conditioned part of our consciousness that believes the stories about us, that's taken a particular shape, is definitely having the experience of trauma. What I'd like to suggest is that that place has a back, has a ground of a larger presence or beingness that is not impacted by the trauma. That our original purity, our original sweetness, our original intelligence, our original uniqueness is also there.

One of the things that spiritual work attempts to do is have the living consciousness begin to not just feel and know itself through the front experiences, but through meditation, inquiry, certain orientation, that the living consciousness begins to turn and recognize what's in the most hidden room of itself. Which I would say is one's spiritual nature.

Alex Howard

Another little bridge to make here is emotions. When traumatic events happen, they impact our nervous system, but they also impact our emotional body.

Jessica Britt

Yes, definitely.

Alex Howard

Maybe you can speak a little bit to that, and then how that can be a potential pathway towards this deeper place inside of us.

Jessica Britt

I'm just sensing into my heart center. It's so clear that in traumatic events, the nervous system gets overloaded, but what also gets overloaded is the emotional center gets overloaded. Either with fear, horror, disbelief, shock. There's so much work on this beautiful...

I'm thinking of Peter Levine, and Gabor. There's so many people talking about the freeze. What's freezing? It's our nervous system that's freezing. But it's also our heart center, our emotions that are freezing. Deep connection between the limbic system, where the emotional center is feeling nature... All of that gets dysregulated, for most people, frozen and/or acted out. Both happen. Now

because the emotions are so alive, and not to feel them... Actually, Thomas talks about this, and I thought he did a really beautiful job, that not to feel them, to go numb, is an active process.

[00:21:44]

We have to use some of our life-force against ourselves for the natural movement, the natural response of being hit. You want to go "Ow!" Then how many children are told, "I'll give you something to cry for?" The famous horrifying sentence. Then you have to not respond to your own pain. How horrific is this? There's an incredible, complex thing going on in our consciousness, not just in our bodies, in our sense of self.

Many people end up, out of a traumatic history, not wanting to deal with their emotions. So what's the bridge? Often what you see is that people who are moved to do inner-work, or moved to work on their trauma, recognize that these frozen places, these unmoved places, are either leaving them over-anxious, over-frightened, not really engaged in their life. You can't help but notice that you feel encapsulated. You can't help but notice that there's something off.

So you start doing some kind of therapy, and there's wonderful therapies out there, and you start learning to allow an emotion. There's a huge body of work, and I was involved in that work, where you got a huge gold star if you started catharting and having your emotions. "Great! I actually learned to cry today" and, "Oh, I actually got angry today."

There is something very alivening and wonderful about it, to recognize that you are in a safe enough space to let all of these things start to move. And you do start feeling more alive.

The bridge, one of the things that I'm very thankful to my teacher, Hameed Ali with *The Diamond Approach*, is the powerful way that a bridge was made, that our emotions, I'm going to just use anger as an example, is more than just an emotion of anger. And yes, it's an important step to let the anger move. It's an important step to let the pain move. What was amazing is to recognize... I can remember this moment when I was learning to feel my anger. Anger was a tough one for me. I was a crier, easy to cry anger.

Alex Howard

It's funny how different ones are easy for different people.

Jessica Britt

They also match the enneagram. Yes, it could be a whole thing on just that. But yes, I was a crier. For me to feel angry, one of the reasons anger is so tough for people, is it reminded me of my stepfather. I didn't want to be like him. There was a whole piece of work to do. Can I feel my own anger? It doesn't mean I'm going to be abusive. That's a journey.

So I started feeling my own anger. It was really amazing because when I started feeling my anger, only by feeling it, I recognized something deep inside the anger was not a killer. I was not my stepfather. Yes, I was very, very angry. Then with the anger came heat, came energy. So Hameed said, "Okay, now feel the heat." The angry expression was over. "Just feel the heat." He said, "Okay,

what else do you notice?" "Okay, it feels warm. Oh, my body feels more expanded. Oh, I actually feel strong." Strong. I felt this inner strength I'd never felt before.

[00:26:18]

It was very clear it was not anger. It was just the simplicity of "I feel strong. I feel here, I feel landed." What I started to appreciate, that within each emotion there's a seed to a spiritual quality. So inside the anger was a seed to the strength.

Alex Howard

I want to amplify something here, which I think is really important. Often people's initial place with emotions can be, "Why would I feel that? I'm just going to feel the things I don't want to feel." Often the way that's then responded to, is to get rid of the emotion because it's not good to hold that emotion in your body. But the point you're making here is, it's more than that. That actually, in allowing and feeling that emotion, it's not just trying to get rid of it. There's actually a treasure in it, that it's a gateway and a pathway to something.

Jessica Britt

Yes, exactly. You said it beautifully. Not only do we not want to get rid of them, emotion of motion, motions move, they're dynamic. Usually we're holding back our emotions and we wonder why we feel stuck or limited. It's not getting rid of, it's allowing the movement that our consciousness, not just our bodies... Our soul has sounds, has feelings, has a richness. And that what I'm suggesting... And different emotions lead to different spiritual qualities. I'm just focusing on the red, we call it the red because it's hot and warm and strong, I'm wearing orange in honor of it.

Alex Howard

You're appropriately dressed for the conversation.

Jessica Britt

Exactly. There's a transformational quality. There's an alchemy in allowing the emotions, that the emotions, when held from an orientation of presence, wanting to understand them, giving them room to tell their story, that there's a natural unfoldment and development. I like the word alchemy, where the anger from a certain orientation, with a certain kind of support, can really become a portal to your strength. A spiritual quality.

Feeling one's pain, which is tough, I'm not saying it's easy. Oftentimes it takes the kindness of another to hold the deep sorrow or pain that, over time, allows the heart to have its feelings, to have its pain, can open up within one's own soul, one's own consciousness. Loving kindness, compassion. It's one thing to feel it from the outside. It's quite another to start to feel the compassion actually arise from within one's own beingness in response to the suffering. There's a kind of evolutionary movement. Maybe we could say it that way.

[00:30:22] Alex Howard

It reminds me of what you said earlier in the interview around that inherent goodness in a new-born baby. It's that same quality in us in our adult life, that there is a place within us which is beyond emotion, trauma, nervous system, which has inherent goodness but also an inherent drive towards something.

Jessica Britt

Yes. Beautifully said. If we take what we're talking about and just expand it, these qualities: the strength, the compassion, joy, curiosity, sweetness, love, all these qualities. If we allow our souls, our consciousness to move, we stop sitting on ourselves and saying no to ourself and we start saying yes... This is an important point, saying yes because I want to come to something more authentic about myself. I'm not saying yes just to act out my feelings. "Oh, these feelings are moving, and I want to be with them. I want to feel them, and I understand that they are a portal."

There's something very fundamental that we long for, that missing element. The basic goodness, the purity of our being, the ground of our consciousness, not only has all these qualities, which it does, we can really begin to know, not just intellectually, to recognize, "Oh, my God, I'm not broken. I'm fine in here. Not only am I fine, I'm quite a treasure." To feel one's basic goodness, to feel one's "Oh, these things happen to me, but they're not me."

Alex Howard

The phrase that came to my mind as you were talking was that, to really heal our trauma we have to discover that place within us which is not touched by that trauma.

Jessica Britt

Yes.

Alex Howard

As you spoke to at the start, we've come such a long way, over recent years, in our understanding of trauma. But I think in some cases, one of the prices we've paid for that is an overidentification of that trauma. The breakthrough at one stage becomes the limitation at the next stage. The prison break puts us in the next prison in a way. "Oh, shit, I've had trauma" to "Because I had trauma, my life can't happen." So what I really appreciate about where you're pointing here is that there is a place on the other side of that, or beneath that, or that holds that.

Jessica Britt

There is such a fabulous place on the other side. There is a time where the right action to go, "Oh, yes, I was traumatized, no question." And that needs a lot of attention. There's wonderful work about that. And at a certain point, I remember when I reached it with my work with Hameed and Dick Price at Esalen. I was doing the Gestalt work, and I was being worked at all levels. I realized, "Okay, I now make sense of my history, my verbal therapy. Okay, I now have access to my feelings". Gestalt, Reichian work the different things I did. "Okay, but who am I underneath all of this?" Saying that to Hameed going, "Oh, I'm so glad you noticed. You're more than your history."

[00:35:00] Alex Howard

I could really imagine him saying that as well.

Jessica Britt

He did. I said to him, "Well, I have a body"... He says, "Oh, you're noticing." That was such an amazing moment. The spiritual orientation allows one to go, "Okay, I've worked through, I'm understanding all these layers, but it points to... Then what, and who am I actually?" To actually begin to feel the spiritual qualities. Another sweet memory is coming. When I first started experiencing compassion or loving kindness from within myself.

I've been very blessed working with Hameed all these years, working with Dick Price. I've had some wonderful therapists and spiritual teachers, and I remember choosing both Dick Price and Hameed. They had one, well many things in common. But one thing is they had very kind eyes. Very accepting, very kind eyes. Okay, I'm good here. I remember the time when it was after feeling a very deep pain within the vortex of Hameed's presence, my own willingness to just simply be here, Jessica, with this. There was a deep wound in my chest, and I was just breathing into it and just feeling it and being less emotionally reactive than I normally would be.

I wasn't just immediately discharging it. I was just kind of, "Okay, feel this." Then from within myself, this incredible, the only word I could use, kindness, arose within myself. This compassion arose, and my inner awareness, I'll never forget the moment, was like, "Oh, my God, this is me." I had a feeling like, "Oh, this is..." It was not coming from my history-self. It was such an inspiring, touching moment. There was a lot more to do, I can tell you. But in that moment, to recognize, "Oh, there's something in me, in here that is kind, soothing, present, and way more fundamental than my history." That was a very big turning point.

Alex Howard

I think there's something about that experience which is almost like a reference point, that to have a taste of that place, even if then we lose that connection quite quickly. I think often over time, it's almost like it's training that muscle memory to find that way back to, "Yeah, that's that place again." I guess I'm curious, for people that are watching this, what helps them begin to, or continue to orient towards that place?

Jessica Britt

I feel moved to say, trust your longing to move you towards being more real. Yes, there's a very big movement to learn how to be authentic with one's emotional life, and risk that kind of vulnerability and that truthfulness. And then I want to say stay open and curious, what's the inner nature of these emotions? Could it be true that there's more to my grief than I've considered? Or there's more to my anger than I've considered? If what I'm saying has some possibility of truth to it, is there a gem or treasure inside my emotions? Is there a way that they can continue to open up?

The other thing about the anger, of which there's many reasons why I think the anger piece is so relevant, it's not just to bring strength. It brings a courage. Which allows us to really be curious.

One of the spiritual qualities, it's a very funny one, because a lot of us, depending on our cultural upbringing, that one of the spiritual qualities is curiosity.

[00:40:23]

From a certain perspective, a certain spiritual perspective, whether you want to use God or true nature or Buddha or the absolute, all the names, the many names, is that ultimately true nature seems to be very curious. It's up to a lot of mischief. It's creating a lot of stuff. We could be in favor of what's happening. We can not be in favor of it. But it's clear that there's some kind of dynamic, creative process going on and to consider embracing that in oneself, and talking about curiosity and don't come to a conclusion. Keep things open.

Alex Howard

I also want to spotlight something you said a few minutes ago around trusting that longing. I think we spoke about this together in a previous interview where... I might be making this up, but my memory of what you were saying was that that longing is pointing to something. There is wisdom in that. It's an inner call. It's something not to be tried to escape from, but something to turn towards.

Jessica Britt

Yes. You're speaking in this moment, I can almost start feeling it. In the spiritual language, it's called 'the flame'. There's a longing that this living consciousness that I'm suggesting, that it is more fundamental than our history. It wants to know and express itself, and it's going to come through us as a longing, as a fire, as a flame. Some of the people who are listening here, you can recognize yourself. Your friends know you as warriors of truth. You're going to get to the bottom of it. It takes a certain kind of, "I'm going to get to the bottom of this. I'm going to solve this. I'm going to figure out what the meaning of life is." There are many ways it expresses itself.

And that living dynamism... Probably one of the biggest challenges, I want to just name here, is to trust ourselves. One of the downsides of trauma, a lot of downsides of trauma is that we lose trust in ourselves. One of the things that can begin to rebuild trust in ourselves is if we can kindly and truthfully recognize how brilliant we were, how brilliant all our defenses are, and how brilliant all our hiding places were, until this moment. You are here in this moment, and you can go, "There was a wisdom in my shutting down and I feel the call now to open up. I can trust this."

Alex Howard

Which is often a real sign of the progress we're making on that journey. That there's now enough safety and enough curiosity and enough holding that something else can happen.

Jessica Britt

Yes.

[00:43:55] Alex Howard

So many questions I could ask, and I'm mindful we're out of time. But Jessica, I'd love you to speak a little bit to how people can explore further. I know in particular, at the time of the initial running of this conference, you've got an event coming up at Esalen. So maybe you want to speak a little bit to that, and also maybe a bit more broadly *The Diamond Approach*.

Jessica Britt

I feel called to begin to make more explicit this connection between the spiritual work I'm involved with and *The Diamond Approach*, which I've been one of the teachers of for many years now, with my past expertise in trauma work, and make a more explicit connection like I am in this conversation with you. To take that a step further, I'm offering a workshop at Esalen. And the dates are February 23rd to March 1st 2024. It'll be on the Esalen website at some point soon.

Alex Howard

And that's just www.Esalen.org, people can go there and find that.

Jessica Britt

Yes, thank you. What I'm going to be doing during that workshop is basically expanding this conversation into really focusing on specific emotions as doorways to spiritual qualities. The other thing I'm going to be doing, which we talked about last time, is supporting people to enter into their practices, their spiritual practices, and recognize how trauma history can make certain practices more difficult and certain practices more easy, and open up that conversation to really support practices in a good way.

Alex Howard

Beautiful. And also just mention *The Diamond Approach* and what people can find there as well.

Jessica Britt

The Diamond Approach is online, it's called [Diamond Approach Online](#). Ridhwan Foundation. There's a lot of offerings that within *The Diamond Approach* was a particular spiritual path that integrates many spiritual traditions with western psychology in a very particular way that really opens up the door to this transformative process. Now, an important thing is *The Diamond Approach* itself does not focus on trauma. It's its own particular spiritual path. In this work that I'm doing with you right now and with what I'm doing at Esalen, I'm just making a bridge a little bit more explicit for people who might be interested.

Alex Howard

Beautiful. Jessica, thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate you.

Jessica Britt

You're welcome, dear. Bye.