

A PSYCHOLOGIST'S EXPERIENCE WITH TRANSCENDENTAL MEDITATION

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The last few years have seen a tremendous rise of interest in meditation, not only among students and laymen who wish to practice it, but among scientists who wish to study it. One of the most popular forms of meditation, Transcendental Meditation (TM), has practitioners at every major university and in practically every major urban area. This affords an unusual research opportunity for psychologists. In order to illustrate some of the possible aspects of TM to be researched, I shall report on my personal experience of doing TM for one year.

*current interest
in
research
opportunity*

TM is a type of *mantram* meditation. Mantram (singular mantra) is a Sanskrit term and denotes a sound, supposed to have special qualities, which is either said aloud or is listened to only as an auditory image. In TM the latter is the case. People may become Transcendental Meditators by listening to a couple of introductory lectures on the subject and then by being initiated. My initiation procedure took approximately an hour altogether, and consisted of meeting with an initiator of the Students International Meditation Society, talking with her for awhile, and then being given a mantra to meditate upon. Supposedly this time of talking between the candidate and the initiator allows the initiator to decide which mantra is best for the particular candidate. I then meditated for twenty minutes according to their directions, told the initiator about my experiences, and received a few other pointers on meditation. There were then three lectures and question-and-answer sessions on the following three evenings for everyone who had been initiated at that time.

*TM as a type
of mantram
meditation*

initiation

The basic, long-term procedure for TM is to sit in a comfortable, upright position with the head, neck, and spine in a straight line. Meditation lying down is discouraged, because it results primarily in people going to sleep. One then pro-

*basic, long-term
procedure for
TM*

duces an auditory image of the mantra and keeps it going, "listening" to it. The mantra is never spoken aloud again after the initial initiation period. This is supposed to allow the mantra to change according to some inner logic of its own, whereas audible repetition would tend to hold it fixed.

Most people are instructed to meditate for somewhere between twenty and thirty minutes at a sitting, with one sitting early in the morning and a second sitting early in the evening. Meditating immediately after meals is discouraged. One is supposed to keep one's thoughts on the mantra as much as possible, but one will invariably find oneself thinking about something else. When this is so, you simply bring your thoughts back to listening to the mantra.

*author's interest
in meditation*

I had been interested in meditation for some time, both professionally and personally. I had dabbled with various systems of meditation, but had essentially no effects. In general, I have little or no experiences in response to all sorts of psychological techniques that often induce profound experiences in others, such as hypnosis. TM attracted me because a number of my students had started practicing it and claimed it worked very well for them and because of the claim that it "worked" for everyone. I had no interest in the theoretical system propounded by the Maharishi for TM, and, indeed, the whole phenomena of what has been called the "pop guru" was somewhat repulsive to me. Nevertheless, I got initiated into TM, and was told to practice it for a half an hour morning and night. I have been doing this for about a year, although, since I am somewhat rebellious in nature, I generally meditate for about twenty-eight minutes in order to assert my "independence"!

*no personal
experience
of bliss
consciousness*

BLISS CONSCIOUSNESS

The introductory lectures on TM claim that two major things will result from its practice. The first is called bliss consciousness, an ecstatic sort of state in which one loses all sense of self and experiences a joyful, oceanic feeling. I can say no more about this because I have never experienced any sort of ecstatic state during meditation, although I have been rather joyful at times.

UNFINISHED EXPERIENCES

The second major result claimed for TM is that it acts as something of a "psychic lubricant" (my term). By this is

meant that normally we carry out all sorts of activities with insufficient attention and/or insufficient awareness of our own reactions to them. This results in building up a tremendous backlog of partially processed experiences, unfinished business. The psychic-lubricant function of TM is to allow these things to come back into consciousness during meditation and, by virtue of now being conscious, to have the processing of them completed. Thus they no longer block other psychic processes.

*"psychic
lubricant"*

*processing
of unfinished
psychic business*

The latter effect seems to have been very true for my own experiences. Almost always when I find myself thinking about something else rather than the mantra, it turns out to be something which I see (in retrospect) I did not pay sufficient attention to when it happened. It does seem to lose its "charge" or "potency" by virtue of now having become conscious, and then I go back to concentrating on the mantram. For relatively current events, I generally note there's about a one- to one-and-a-half-day lag in partially processed material coming up> i.e., the distractions that come up are memories of events that happened one to two days ago.' Very seldom do relatively immediate events come up unless they are quite important emotionally.

Some of the old material that comes up is much older than this, going back several years, and even sometimes back to childhood. This very old material generally carries a fairly high affective charge. The affect has never been more than I can handle, although it is sometimes strong enough to be depressing or to cause anxiety for a few minutes. None of this is of the nature of what I would call "repressed" material in the classic sense. I am not a represser, both by my own observation and very low scores on the R scale of the MMPI, and I tend to use various intellectualization mechanisms for defense. Thus none of this old material seems to be of the sort that was *totally unavailable* to consciousness, but it was certainly material I was not going to recover on my own!

old material

There was quite a bit of this partially processed material coming up for the first six months or so of meditation, and there has been a fairly steady falloff in the amount of it during a given meditation period, until now, at the end of a year of meditating, not too much of this material comes up. Most of the distractions that come up are current-events material, and I have the conviction that there is much less of a back-

*rate of
processing of
unconscious
material*

I have noticed that this one- to one-and-a-half-day lag has seemed to get shorter as I continue TM. such that unfinished business of the day comes up in meditation. This effect is not clear enough to call it a definite trend, however.

log of this sort of material compared to what it was in the beginning. Thus TM, for me, seems to have worked off a large accumulation of poorly processed experience.

LOSS OF RESPONSE TO ALCOHOL

Another striking effect of TM on me has been a loss of enjoyment of and tolerance for alcohol. Before beginning Transcendental Meditation, I'd been in the habit, for several years, of drinking one to two wineglasses of sweet wine² after coming home from work and before dinner. The usual effect of this was to relax me, cause a mild, warm glow, and to dull my intellectual processes very slightly. The effect was quite pleasant overall.

alcohol effects and TM

Shortly after being initiated, I found that if I tried to meditate within two to three hours of having drunk this amount of alcohol, that I could not meditate at all. As soon as I turned my attention inward to meditate, it was clear that my intellect was *very* dull, that my mind was wandering from subject to subject, like a man terribly drunk lurching down the street and hardly being aware of his environment. I do not know whether I was now more sensitive to alcohol than before, or whether I was simply much more aware of the effect of alcohol on me. My feelings and behavior when not meditating were not particularly changed, so I'm inclined to the latter hypothesis.

As I continued meditating, within a couple of months I found that alcohol had lost all its pleasure for me. I no longer got the warm glow or sense of contentment: indeed, if I drank more than half a glass of wine I almost immediately got a headache which lasted for several hours, with no compensatory joy at all! This has continued through the year of meditation, and consequently I very rarely touch more than *the* slightest amounts of alcohol anymore. I was rather angry about this at first, since I enjoyed my wine, but being angry about it didn't alter the effect, in spite of my *trying* to enjoy alcohol for awhile without getting the deleterious effects. As no other major changes in my life occurred during this year, I attribute this effect to TM.

MENTAL QUIET

Another effect of this year of TM has been a large increase in my ability to cease thinking, to put my mind in a condition

²This was a dose of approximately 112 ounces of alcohol for my body weight of 150 pounds.

where it is alert to incoming stimuli, but is otherwise still. That is, I can be aware of my environment, my bodily sensations, and so forth, without automatically and involuntarily thinking about them, which is my normal state.

*alertbut
"still"mind*

Several years before beginning TM, I had practiced keeping my mind still for approximately four months, during an initial period of interest in meditation. In spite of practicing for about half an hour a day for all that time, I was never able to keep my mind still for more than three or four seconds usually, or about ten seconds maximally with what seemed like heroic efforts. I now find that I can rather easily still my mind for fifteen or twenty seconds with virtually no feeling of effort.

This goes along with a general feeling that I am now a much calmer, more relaxed person as a result of practicing TM. I feel more sensitive to my inner processes, and generally do not get as wound up in my daily activities. This has not resulted from a loss of sensitivity to what I'm doing: the feeling is that I am more sensitive than before, but I have more choice about whether I'm going to get tense and excited, and I generally choose not to.

*increasein
sensitivitywith
less tension*

One minor negative aspect of this change is that if I am unable to have my morning or evening meditation period, I feel slightly jangled and excited: I am anxious to sit down at my next meditation period and move into a calmer kind of existence and let any partially processed material come out.

CONCERN WITH TECHNIQUE

One final change that should be mentioned as occurring over the course of the year is that I'm much less concerned about whether I'm doing it properly. Initially, I showed a reaction, which I suspect is fairly typical of academic people, of being hyper-concerned with the *exact* technique for doing TM, and constantly wondering whether I was doing it correctly. I have finally learned to accept the fact that I will be constantly distracted, that I'll never be sure that I'm doing it the perfect way if there is a perfect way, that all I can do is to sit quietly and, when I realize that I've become distracted, to bring my mind back to the mantra.

acceptance

RESISTANCE TO COLD

I should also note one important effect of TM on me that may have a physiological correlate. Almost immediately after

physicalwarmth

being initiated, I found that although the room in which I meditated frequently got very chilly (50 to 60^{OP}). I was never chilly during the meditation, even if I were practically nude. As soon as I would end my meditation, chilliness would set in and within half a minute I would be quite chilly, even though I had not moved from sitting in a meditative posture. There may be a generalized dilation of the blood vessels of the skin producing this warmth, and this could be easily researched.

RESEARCH POSSIBILITIES

*someobvious
thingsto
investigate*

The TM people stress that there are very individual types of reactions to meditation, and from talking with students and other colleagues who have also been practicing TM, this is deafly true. I do not know how typical my reactions are, but they're certainly not absolutely unique and thus suggest a number of hypotheses that could be researched. Researchers could find people who are interested in TM, conduct various kinds of psychological and psychophysiological assessments before these people are initiated into TM, and then assess changes after various periods of practice. Some of the more obvious things to investigate, generalizing from my own experience, are whether there is a change in the use of repressive-type defense mechanisms, whether there's an improvement in concentration, whether there is an improvement in general health through a lowering of overall tension levels, and the like. I hope that the above account of my own experiences may alert some researchers to the unique research opportunity now available with so many thousands of students practicing TM and other forms of meditation.