"DEEP STATES" OF MEDITATION:
PHENOMENOLOGICAL REPORTS
OF EXPERIENCE

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Meditation has been described as a group of practices that aim to transform consciousness through the deliberate alteration and control of attention (van Nuys, 1973; Boals, 1978; Goleman, 1981). The resulting experiences manifest as a wide range of cognitive, emotional, and perceptual changes in the meditator. For example, the following may be experienced by meditators: the meditation object is distorted (e.g. Deikman, 1969; van Nuys, 1973; Kubose, 1976), fantasies and hallucinations (Banquet, 1973; van Nuys, 1973; Walsh, 1978; Komfield, 1979), increased clarity of perception (Walsh, 1978), a decrease in reactivity to unusual experiences (Walsh, 1984; Forte, Brown & Dysart, 1987-88), a reduction in discursive thinking (Tart, 1971; Komfield, 1979; Walsh, 1984), altered perceptions of time (Deikman, 1969; Kubose, 1976; Komfield, 1979; Brown, Forte, Rich & Epstein, 1982-83), and changes in the perception of the self and body (Maupin, 1969; Komfield, 1979; Brown et al., 1982-83; Forte et al., 1987-88). Finally, meditators widely report affective changes as indicated by a sense of tranquility (Maupin, 1969; Lesh, 1970; Walsh, 1978), an increase in positive emotions described as bliss and rapture (Kornfield, 1979), as well as love and joy (Osis, Bokert & Carlson, 1973; Kohr, 1977).

The purpose of this paper is to focus further on the descriptive qualities of these experiences and in particular to examine what may be called "deep states" of meditation. The electroencephalographic (EEG) recordings of Transcendental Meditators having
such experiences have been analyzed (Banquet, 1973). Meditators have also recounted progressively deepening "concentration" from an intensive Vipassana retreat (Kornfield, 1979). Similarly, in other mindfulness (Vipassana) investigations, meditators experienced a progressively marked reduction in the perception of the self and body (Brown et al., 1982-83; Forte et al., 1987-88). These studies point to changes within the meditation experience but do not emphasize descriptions of the experiences per se. It would be of interest to know whether such changes represent different levels of the meditation experience. Traditional Buddhist and Hindu literature does indeed suggest this for the concentration types of meditation. The Vissuddhimaga of Theravada Buddhism describes eight levels of jhanas through which the meditator experiences integration with the meditation object, fluctuations in energy, a progressive reduction in feelings of what are traditionally described as rapture and bliss, and, in the deepest state, total loss of awareness of all form and self (Goleman, 1988; Brown & Engler, 1980, 1986; Bucknell & Stuart-Fox, 1986). The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali similarly describes the initial fusion with the meditation object, followed by increasing loss of the working memory and the final samadhi state of "pure perception" (Castillo, 1985). The Mahamudra of Tibet, incorporating descriptions of both concentration and mindfulness meditation techniques, describes a detailed cartography of cognitive and affective changes during which specific levels of attainment are achieved in concentration meditation (Brown, 1977). These sources are invaluable as translations of authoritative texts that teach meditative traditions. To some degree, these traditional texts assume a universality in meditative experience.

One comparative study of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, the Vissuddhimaga, and the Mahamudra suggested further that the developmental stages of meditation are of universal and cross-cultural applicability (Brown & Engler, 1986). Few empirical studies, however, have accounted for any commonalities in experiences related to the spiritual beliefs and traditions of meditators, although factor analysis of pre- and post-meditation questionnaires did reveal meditation experiences common to practitioners of Zen Buddhism, Judaism, Quakerism, Unitarianism, and Raja Yoga (Osis et al., 1973; Kohr, 1977).

The study of traditional texts and the use of questionnaires in investigations of the phenomenology of meditation raises the question of how accurately the description of a meditation experience reflects the reality of that experience. Despite the use of factor analysis (Osis et al., 1973; Kohr, 1977) and typological constructions (Maliszewski, Twemlow, Brown & Engler, 1981), questionnaires necessarily assume that their language conveys similar meaning to all respondents. In the light of differences in ways
meditators express themselves, and the often cited ineffability of the meditation experience, research outcomes might be improved by eliciting a full and precise description of the experience. Questionnaires usually cannot properly fulfill this function since to some degree they necessarily presuppose the contents of the experience.

Central to the method of phenomenological psychology is the acknowledgment by the researcher of assumptions held about the phenomenon investigated. These presuppositions may be held through personal experience of the phenomenon or through other sources, such as research. The researcher must then put aside or "bracket" these presuppositions (Denne & Thompson, 1991; Jennings, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1989). This procedure reduces the potential contamination, by the researcher's assumptions, of the understanding of the subject's experience.

Phenomenological psychology explores experience by looking closely at the descriptions of the phenomenon. These descriptions are usually obtained through the transcription of personal interviews. Psychologists have investigated topics such as the experiences of learning (Giorgi, 1985), anger (Stevick, 1971), being criminally victimized (Fischer, 1984), and the experience of transition to meaning and purpose in life (Denne & Thompson, 1991).

While these topics are quite different, they share the assumption of meaning embedded in the experience. The analysis of a description entails both continuous bracketing of presuppositions and reflection on the meaning of the description by the researcher. In this manner, the essential aspects of the experience emerge. The essence of an individual's experience has been called the "manifest constituent" of that experience since it reflects the idiosyncratic nature of the experience for an individual (Denne & Thompson, 1991).

Phenomenological psychology, however, assumes that these manifest constituents are individual reflections of an underlying, invariant order of experience. This has been called the "general constitutional structure" for the experience under investigation (e.g., von Eckartsberg, 1986). Thus, accounts are taken from a group of people for the purpose of understanding in psychological terms the "general structure" of a particular experience (Giorgi, 1985; von Eckartsberg, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1989). This is carried out by looking for the "invariant constituents" that underlie an experience that is commonly shared, but differently described.

The present study attempts to discover, through the detailed explanations of meditators' descriptions, the phenomenology of deep meditation experiences. It is not an endeavor to discover the mean-
the recognition of assumptions or presuppositions the investigator holds concerning the research topic (Denne & Thompson, 1991). These suppositions are then put aside, "bracketed," in order to better understand the experience of the co-researcher. We noted our ideas about the experiences of meditative states based on our own practice of meditation and our readings of the literature on meditation, including the research reports on the topic. In addition, the first author, who conducted all the interviews for the project, noted notions that came to him from the interviews.

Each of these presuppositions was explored in detail. Then each of us attempted to bracket them so that these assumptions did not intrude during the interview or data analysis.

Recruitment of Co-researchers

We use the term "co-researcher" rather than "subject" in this study to indicate the interactional nature of the interview. Following phenomenological psychology, the first author aimed in the interview to work with the meditators in exploring and understanding the meditation experience.

Co-researchers were recruited through both meditation organizations in Sydney, Australia, and through personal contacts. Since an aim of the study was to look for commonalities of experience underlying different traditions and techniques, we looked for meditators from different traditional backgrounds. The final ten medita-
tors chosen for the study came from the following meditation traditions: Siddha Yoga, Transcendental Meditation (TM), Buddhism, and two co-researchers who reported reading widely in various Eastern philosophies but were currently practicing a visualization technique that focused on the chakrasystem of Kundalini Yoga. The two individuals from Siddha Yoga used the same mantra while the two TM meditators had their own personal mantra. All four of the meditators in the Buddhist tradition focused on their breath during meditation, although one of these co-researchers, who was a Zen Buddhist, also used Koans in his meditation. The meditators ranged in length of practice from three to twenty-five years. They were all around middle-age and from a variety of professional backgrounds. There were four females and six males. Each individual reported that they had experienced deep meditation states during their practice of meditation.

Data Collection

The interviews were recorded and lasted approximately forty-five to sixty minutes. The co-researchers were asked to describe their meditation experience, particularly the deep states that they had experienced. In keeping with the phenomenological perspective of this project, the concept of deep meditative states was never defined by the first author. He emphasized that deep states were subjective, and the co-researchers must delineate them from their own experience.

The interview was unstructured. The co-researchers were encouraged to describe their experiences as freely as possible, with the interviewer simply listening. This allowed some reflection by the co-researcher, facilitating expression of the experiences. Additionally, it mitigated against the frequent objection in meditation research to the setting up of demand characteristics (Pekala, 1987). Sometimes the interviewer had to redirect the meditator to their own experience, when, for example, the description digressed to traditional philosophy or the benefits of meditation. Otherwise, the only directive in the interview was the exploration of descriptive terms whose meaning eluded the interviewer. This was sometimes very useful since it encouraged meditators to look for other means of expression, such as analogies, which could help clarify the experiences.

Data Analysis

The data was first analyzed globally to break it down into larger manageable sections. The sections relevant to the research ques-
tion were then micro-explicated to get at the core of the descriptions of deep states of meditation. Throughout the analysis, the texts were annotated to delineate descriptions of deep states of meditation, comparisons between meditation experiences, interpretations or reflections on an experience rather than a pure description, and use of analogies in the description.

Content Units. All transcribed interviews were read thoroughly to get a full sense of the co-researcher’s experiences. The text was then broken up into content units [described as "meaning units" by Giorgi (1985), and subsequently termed "topic units" (Denne & Thompson, 1991)]. A content unit has no "meaning" connotation, and the co-researchers’ descriptions could be considered more usefully as sub-topics of meditation, or simply as "content."

Content units thus embrace larger aspects of the description. Examples of denoted content units are the techniques of meditation, experiences of a particular kind, and at a specified time.

Explication of Descriptions. To get to the core of the meditation experiences, and to understand the nuances that differentiated the experiences for the co-researchers, we used "micro-explication," which is explained in detail by Denne and Thompson (1991).

When the content units relevant to the research question were denoted, further coding of each thought or descriptive phrase was carried out. These Central thoughts or descriptions are termed elements (Giorgi, 1985; Denne & Thompson, 1991). Summary statements were then written next to the relevant text. These statements were typically close or even identical to the original language of the co-researchers. However, when it was possible, the statements were paraphrased and abstracted from the description in order to get a more generalized understanding of the experience of the co-researcher.

The summary statements were used to extract the individual constituents, the core of the individual meditator’s experiences of deep meditation states. The process of the co-researcher reflecting on the experience in the interview, and the investigators’ reflections on the transcribed descriptions, enabled a confident distillation of these constituents from the texts.

The individual constituents of each meditator’s description were then compared and matched as closely as possible. There were then a number of groupings of these constituents. An invariant constituent was found wherever the individual constituents were common to all the co-researchers. An invariant constituent was appropriately labeled. This invariant constituent formed part of the "general constitutional structure" of deep meditation states.
The meditators described a variety of experiences that ranged in frequency from exceptional and rare occurrences to daily events. All of the co-researchers described different levels of experience within their meditation practice. They clearly distinguished meditation experiences from those of ordinary states of consciousness. Furthermore, the meditators distinguished deep states of meditation from more superficial states. All of the co-researchers attempted to describe their experiences in as much detail as possible. The very unusual nature of these experiences, however, limited the expression and understanding of these descriptions to varying degrees.

Despite this limitation, analysis by detailed explication of the texts elicited descriptions of deep states of meditation for all the co-researchers. The analysis revealed three major constituents. Only one of these was experienced by all ten meditators, and thus can be considered invariant.

The other two constituents must be considered as emergent, since not all of the meditators’ descriptions revealed them. By emergent we mean that they are potentially, if not actually, invariant. There are several possible reasons for this. First, not all of the meditators may have been able to describe fully their experiences because of their unusual nature. The individual constituents therefore remained, as it were, dormant. Second, the unstructured format of the interview may have contributed to an only partially described experience. Further interviews or interviews with more structure may have elicited these constituents. Finally, the emergent constituents may not be invariant at all. The following are the three constituents of deep meditation experience revealed in this study:

1. Transcendence beyond the normal physical and mental boundaries of the self (invariant)
2. A different sense of reality (emergent)
3. Positive emotion (emergent)

Each of these will be defined, and a variety of individual descriptions will be given to show the idiosyncratic nature of the experiences which overlay the invariant and emergent constituents. All names used are pseudonyms.

Transcendence

Beyond the Normal Physical and Mental Boundaries of the Self

We use the term transcendence to mean the perception of having moved or gone across. The term normal is used here to denote the
absence of self

sense of the meditators' boundaries in an everyday, non-meditational context. We mean by self only the descriptive terms used by the meditators. This included self, personality, individuality, I, ego, body consciousness, awareness of body, and identity. These terms are used in an ordinary language sense. They do not refer to technical, psychological constructs. Meditators use the terms, however, in different ways.

William and Peter, both Buddhists, described their experiences of transcendence in terms of the dissolution of the self. Peter, a Zen Buddhist, experienced no-self... [in which] there is no "I," either... no sense of ego... this is just dissolving... there is just the universe.

William compared his normal perceptions with that of transcendence:

I am usually aware of the boundary of my body against the skin and you lose that sense in Dhyana... you become a kind of... field of energy, the boundaries of which are not clearly delineated.

William and Peter also described the sense of the absence of self in psychological terms. This experience related to the impermanent and unreal nature of the self and "reality." Thus, life and death were viewed equally in this state of transcendence. William found that the state transcends a kind of ego identity or ego definition of myself... it's a time when one could be quite happy to die, for instance, because there's nothing really there to die.

Nigel, Philip, and William all experienced self-transcendence through a merging with the breath, the object of meditation. For Philip there was a coalescence or another way of putting it... duality between subject and object is overcome... and so there is not the awareness that I am the subject thinking about the breathing which is the object.

Transcendence might be expected to imply a total lack of self-awareness. The experiences suggest, however, some differences in degree of awareness between meditators. Timothy, practicing TM, experienced transcending as the sort of forgetting about my individuality... forgetting who I was... in what direction I was going... what country I was in.

Timothy goes on to say, however, that although he forgot the details of his identity and whereabouts,
I knew that I was ... [I was] so absorbed that I easily forgot everything else ... even though I was conscious I was conscious inside.

Awareness appeared to be functioning at some other level for Christina, a Siddha Yoga meditator, for although she often lost any sense of her body,

like you mentally, you go to check yourself and you're not there.

Again, while Timothy forgot his identity and location, he was aware of a sense of expansion from the center of his being in a very physical way. This expansion felt

literally as though my arms were extended and they extended to the reaches of the universe ... whatever that was ... a kind of immeasurable distance ... my head would feel incredibly expanded and huge ... as if it were capable of being the size that a galaxy could fit into and so that sense of being enormous and yet not out of my body but expanding out from there in all directions, infinitely.

Frederick and Marion appeared to have transcended more completely. There appeared to be no awareness functioning at a personal, directive level during the experience. Marion says,

there was no sense of myself at all ... there was no sense of my physical body ... no thought ... there is nothing there.

Frederick remarked concerning this level of awareness that

I didn't even know that I was a human being. [It appeared to be a very deep level of transcendence, in which there was] complete merging where one loses body consciousness ... there is no personality left ... the last time it happened [I asked afterwards] "where have I been ... where have I been?"

Naomi also expressed her experience of self-transcendence as a complete mergence:

so ... me ... as a sort of entity ... doesn't exist ... because I'm it.

Marion and Frederick both described their experiences as ones which they could only reflect upon after the experience. Frederick:

it's only, as I say in retrospect, that you begin to ... chew over mentally that experience ... and think "that's what it was."

To summarize, all ten meditators have clearly experienced transcendence as part of a deep state of their meditation. Individual accounts varied according to the emphasis placed on perceived breakdown of physical boundaries, total absence of their body, or complete mental and physical mergence with the experience.
An interesting aspect of the differences was the degree of awareness experienced by the meditator during transcendence. There appeared to be different levels of awareness operating, so that, for some, the experience could only be retrospectively recounted. For others, it appeared to be possible to reflect or check themselves during the experience.

A Different Sense of Reality

The second constituent was very difficult to label. This was partly because of the unusual nature of the experience. There was also in some descriptions an overlap with the invariant constituent "Transcendence Beyond the Normal Physical and Mental Boundaries of the Self." Instances of this overlap follow. The major justification for the separation of these two constituents was the attempt of meditators to describe the deep state experience beyond the experience of having transcended the self. We mean by a different sense that some meditators' experiences were described as being apprehended in ways other than the normal modes of perception. Some meditators apprehended their experiences through even normal perceptual channels, but the experiences were extraordinary. We mean by reality descriptions of extraordinary experiences which are quite different from transcendence beyond the self. These included a sense of the external, of power, and of space.

This constituent applied to the descriptions of eight meditators, a few of whom described more than one aspect of the experience. Five of these described a sense of space (practicing Siddha, TM, Visual, and two Buddhists). Two meditators described timelessness (TM, Visual). Four meditators described a sense of something larger than themselves. Two of these described this dimension as powerful (Siddha, Visual). The two meditators not cited here are both Buddhists.

Frederick, Timothy, Marion, Nigel and Rebecca all described this altered sense of reality in terms of a space metaphor. Frederick experienced a

field of awareness that is cosmic ... there was no sense of limitation, there was just awareness ... endless, boundless, oceanic.

Frederick described this field of awareness as inextricably linked with the transcendence experience. As earlier cited, he merged completely into this field. Similarly, Nigel described his current experiences of deep states as

if you've fallen into a hole that's so deep that you still haven't hit the bottom, .. like nothing's happened as it were .. I mean the hole's so big.
Nigel further qualified this description by saying that it is a steady state not characterized by movement. Interestingly, the experience is further likening to being at the bottom of a pond ... a very still, clear pond.

Nigel uses this analogy later to indicate that the experiences of deep states of meditation are centrally characterized by clarity of perception of surrounding stimuli, although not of himself. In contrast, Marion has experienced space as a dynamic dimension over the years:

There is a sense now .. . a sense of space . . . so although there is nothing, now I am experiencing that nothingness as enormous ... like .. out of space ... the longer I can stay in it ... not consciously, not willingly ... the more I see how vast it is.

Marion variously described this space as blackness, nothingness, an absence or a lacuna and

the thing is there's no form ... it's blackness ... and what I find is that it's getting bigger.

Philip and Peter both refer to their experiences of deep states as of "emptiness," without further description. However, Peter does link emptiness to the state of no-self, described under the first constituent.

Christina described a sense of power in the experience of deep states:

it's like a place .. . it's very, very powerful ... it has an energy about it ... that I don't have in my life ... and suddenly you find this, .. it's like ... "Holy schmoly! What have I stumbled on now? What is this energy?"

The quality of the experience is often described as something beyond the normal understanding or knowledge of the meditator. Christina frequently alluded to the experience as a physical place which

is not anything I consciously know about ... [it's] just not having any reference ... it's sort of like a monster-movie ... where the person goes to the "beyond-the-beyond" .. . it's just a very unknown territory.

In summary, the meditators interviewed and using Siddha Yoga, TM, chakra visualization, and Buddhist breathing meditation all described their experiences of a different sense of reality through a "space" metaphor, a sense of something beyond even the experience of transcendence. These descriptions, however, are certainly not definitive of the distinction between Transcendence of the Self.
and a Different Sense of Reality. The latter experience was also characterized by timelessness, external power, revelation, authenticity/naturalness or rightness. There was no invariance for any of these experiential characteristics of a Different Sense of Reality although they were broadly represented by the different groups.

**Positive Emotion**

The third constituent, which was not invariant but could be considered emergent, was positive emotion. A total of seven meditators experienced a change of mood within the deep meditation. There were two main kinds of positive emotion described. These were a deep sense of calm sometimes associated with stillness and a more energetic joy. Some meditators experienced a combination of, or a shift between, these emotions.

Nigel, Frederick, and Timothy each described the state as one of deep calm and/or contentment. Frederick found the state

is utterly serene ... like an absolutely calm ocean.

Nigel also suggests the feeling of placidity within the experience:

it doesn't have so much movement to it ... it's just very calm ... and contented.

It was interesting to note that Frederick, Timothy, Nigel, and Peter all used water as an analogy to illustrate this experience. Peter found

a much deeper state [is experienced with] ... a calming of the mind ... very calm ... the sense that you're coming down from the surface of the ocean.

In contrast to this very relaxed state of experience, both William, Philip, and Naomi found greater intensity of affect expressed as joy.

For William and Peter there was a joyousness which was expressed through an emotional release and emotional expansiveness. Peter states

I am expansive and laughing in a really very deep way ... it's sort of just bubbling ... there is the sense that it is coming out of the universe.

For William, too, there was a sense of joyousness and laughter. He described this in reference to a Buddhist text, the author of which tells us that
the laughter of the unchained mind echoes forever.

This reference summed up for William the deep state of meditation. William also described this meditation experience as

a state of intense pleasure which doesn't come from the usual, recognizable sources of pleasure we can have like music.

This intense pleasure was described as an internally generated and a qualitatively different mind state. Thus there were two kinds of affect for William in the deeper state of meditation. One was an expansive kind of joy, associated with the unshackling of the concerns of the ego. The other was a sensation which was different from any other commonly encountered.

Naomi described her very positive emotion in the context of sudden insight as

... a tremendous amount of joy.

The three meditators who did not experience positive emotion during the deep state were Christina (Siddha), Rebecca (TM), and Marion (visual). Christina experienced some fear during the deep state. This was related to an apprehension of the unknown nature of the experience:

it feels quite frightening in as much as it isn't anything that I know about.

Christina also felt some excitement about the experience, so there was an ambivalence associated with the fear. Rebecca and Marion did not describe affect during the deep states of meditation.

Therefore, while affect was not an invariant constituent, It is clearly an important component for many meditators. The two major kinds of affect were found to be calm and joy. These may be experienced by the same meditator at different times or they may be felt within one experience. Fear was experienced by one meditator, but this was also mixed with excitement.

DISCUSSION

The study elicited three major constituents of the experience of deep states of meditation. The first was invariant for all ten meditators.
Transcendence Beyond the Normal Physical and Mental Boundaries of the Self

Transcendence is described in both classical meditation texts and in the literature of mysticism. *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* (Castillo, Brown & Engler, 1986) and the Buddhist Abhidhamma (Goleman, 1988; Bucknell & Stuart-Fox, 1986) both describe the loss of self in meditation. Initially, there is a recognizable merging with the meditation object and then a sense of complete union with it, entailing absence of self-awareness. Meister Eckart, for example, found "it [the soul] is sunk and lost in this desert where its identity is destroyed" (Stace, 1960, p. 112), and Plotinus entered "a state in which you are your finite self no longer" (Stace, 1960, p. 112).

The central feature of these descriptions is a perceived loss or transformation of the self, in agreement with the meditators' descriptions in the present study. The findings also agree partly with the investigation by Osis et al. (1973). These authors found Self-transcendence and openness as a factor underlying different meditation techniques. There was, however, an emphasis on merging with others or the group, without specific reference to the sense of loss of self. "Openness" was expressed by only two Buddhists in the present study. This had to do with a sort of emotional release from the concerns of the self. Their descriptions were similar to Osis' finding that the ego defenses were lowered in experiences of transcendence.

The description of merging was reported by only one person in Deikman's study (1969). In the studies of Maupin (1969) and Lesh (1970), none of the meditators reported merging, although an unspecified minority of subjects did report loss of bodily feelings in Maupin's study. Thus, transcendence was not a central finding in these earlier investigations. Notably, however, all of those subjects were new to meditation.

Transcendence may, therefore, depend either on the length of practice or on the depth of experience. Brown et al. (1982-83) and Forte et al. (1987-88) reported changes over two weeks and three months of the experiences of Vipassana meditators. These included a sense of the loss of both the body and the self. This is interesting since it suggests that transcendence occurs irrespective of the kind of practice. The present study concerns the experiences of meditators using concentration techniques not mindfulness (Vipassana) meditation.

Furthermore, this study, unlike the Brown and Forte studies, did not longitudinally follow the experiences of meditators. Therefore, it is not possible to conclude that the descriptions of transcendence
reflect an experience over time. However, all the co-researchers are meditators who have practiced for a number of years. Is it possible that the described transcendence is a cumulative result of long-term practice? One meditator described his experience in such a way. In addition, the descriptions indicated different levels of awareness within the experience. There were, for example, two meditators (Siddha Yoga and visualization) who could only retrospectively recollect the details of their experience, so complete was their sense of loss of self.

Stace (1960) notes this "paradoxicality" of awareness as a feature of what he calls "introverted" mystical states. Paradoxicality may not be essential to the mystic experience (Hood, 1975) or deep meditation states. It is, nevertheless, notable, since it suggests a level of consciousness operating within the experience which is not accessible to the personal ego.

The Yoga Sutras describe how loss of self is attained by the process of "purification from memory" of all traces of mental construction associated with the meditation object. In this instance "personal consciousness is as if devoid of its own form" (Castillo, 1985, p, 412) and merges into a transpersonal dimension.

In contrast, the description of another Siddha meditator suggested the presence of sufficient awareness to "check herself" only to find that she is "not there." Thus, her description suggested an incomplete modification of consciousness. Part of her mind was able to consciously reflect on the experience of transcending.

The descriptions of two other meditators further complicate the relationship between transcendence and awareness. One of them, using visualization, described an experience of alternating between complete merging with something larger than herself and normal consciousness. The alternation occurred over the duration of the experience indicating the proximity of radically different levels of consciousness. Nevertheless, within the "altered state" there was no reflection on the experience, since personal awareness was subsumed under this larger dimension. The second meditator, who practiced TM, uniquely described this proximity of normal consciousness and transcendence as a permanent state. Thus, he is aware of a permanent split between normal consciousness and the subjective feelings of expanding infinitely from the inside. He describes the experience of an altered sense of self-reference occurring at the same time. Furthermore, he feels a simultaneous "involvement and noninvolvement" in his actions. This manifestation of transcendence has been reported by other experienced TM meditators (Castillo, 1990). In his description, the TM meditator related this duality of consciousness as a recent development in his meditation experience of twenty-two years. Furthermore, he de-
scribed little demarcation between the transcendent state and that of normal consciousness. This meditator also asserted that, while his experience of transcendence was now partially integrated into normal consciousness, it was no shallower than before. He does not now need to meditate to experience the same depth of transcendence that he had attained in the past through formal meditation.

The TM meditator’s description contradicts the suggestion that consciousness consists of state-specific “worlds” in which the experiences of waking consciousness, for example, are impermeable to the radically altered experiences of other states of consciousness (Tart, 1986). Furthermore, the description suggests that there are cumulatively progressive stages of meditation over a long period. At one stage, for example, this TM meditator needed only to intend to meditate in order to experience transcendence. The possibility of transcendence experienced cumulatively is endorsed in the classical literature which supports a stage or path model of meditation (Brown, 1977; Bucknell, 1986; Castillo, 1985; Goleman, 1988). The only empirical support for this was a study which aimed to validate these classically described stages of meditation (Brown & Engler, 1980).

Brown and Engler found differences in the perceptual responses to Rorschachs of groups of beginners and advanced mindfulness and concentration meditators. However, the method involved interpretation of responses rather than an examination of experiences. The criteria used to establish the differences in meditation proficiency in the Brown and Engler study were partly based on the Profile of Meditation Experience. A methodological problem is that the questionnaire was itself partly derived from the classical texts (Maliszewski et al., 1981), the validation of which was the purpose of the study. Despite these problems, the differences between responses of advanced and beginner meditators suggests that meditation experiences may not only be cumulative but extend beyond the practice itself, an experience already noted in this study. If this is the case, there may be a continuum between the short-term experiences and the long-term effects of meditation. Indeed, the purpose of meditation in Eastern spiritual traditions is the permanent transformation of consciousness. Interestingly, one of the Siddha meditators referred to his transient experience of samadhi as a glimpse of what is described in the Yoga tests as a permanent state, sahaja samadhi.

The Experience of a Different Sense of Reality

This was the most difficult constituent to establish as central to deep states of meditation. One of the reasons for this expressed by meditators was the difficulty of verbalizing their experiences. A
second difficulty was the inextricable connection, in some cases, with the experience of transcendence. Thus, the descriptions of complete merging with some larger dimension logically defied the separation of these descriptions into transcendence and a different sense of reality. Nevertheless, the meditators who experienced this complete merging attempted to describe the qualities of that dimension. These descriptions included the sense of space, spiritual insight, and power.

The use of a sense of space as a metaphor for this constituent was surprisingly common in the descriptions. However, the meditators varied considerably in details of their descriptions. The strong sensation of the expansion of space experienced by one meditator is referred to in Tantric Buddhism (Govinda, 1976). The sense of oceanic vastness and the "field" of awareness described by another is referred to in the Vedanta and subsequently by the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi as "transcendental" or "cosmic" consciousness (Dillbeck, 1983; Gelderloos, 1989; Goleman, 1988). In an examination of the experiences of mystics and of some Buddhist literature, Stace (1960, p. 89) suggested the term "pure unitary consciousness." It is "unitary" because there is no differentiation between self and other, and "pure" because it is characterized by an absence of sensory content. These qualities were described by both a Siddha meditator and one practicing visualization.

The different sense of reality was also characterized in some meditators by the sense that this larger dimension was a source of both power and knowledge. This knowledge was unobtainable through the usual modes of understanding, and had a quality of unshakable, objective certainty about it. Thus, one meditator (Siddha) described the experience as one of spiritual truth, while another (visualization) mentioned the certainty of knowledge of humanity's spiritual path. These descriptions are similar to the quality of mystic experience described by James:

... states of insight into depths of truths unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations full of significance and importance (James, 1981, p. 367).

The two meditators (Siddha and visualization) who described this certain knowledge experienced it as an inextricable quality of the larger dimension into which they had merged. These meditators also related the importance of a teacher or guru in practicing meditation.

Two other meditators (Siddha and visualization) described a sense of power in this other dimension. This power was attributed in one of the descriptions to a "life-force," in the other to "part of consciousness, or God." Such an interpretation reflects the sense of the

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relative passivity of the meditator when perceiving a larger, active energetic force. Similar descriptions are also found in the mystic literature (James, 1981).

The sense of external power and certainty of spiritual truth were noticeably absent from the descriptions of the TM meditators and the Buddhists. This may be tentatively explained partly by the secular orientation of TM teaching, and the disbelief of Buddhism in external powers. One of the Buddhists did describe energy in his experience, but he described it as a part of his sense of self and not a quality of some other dimension.

Empirical support for this emergent constituent is scarce. It was not reported in earlier empirical work (e.g., Deikman, 1969; Maupin, 1965) studies which involved subjects naive to meditation traditions. Again, this suggests that this constituent is experienced by meditators who have practiced for some time. The Osis study (1973) did find "affirmation of the external" as a core item of the factor Intensification and Change of Consciousness, although without reference to power or spiritual knowledge.

In summary, some meditators experience an unusual quality of power and of insight within the meditation. These additional dimensions seem to go beyond the experience of transcendence of self. Perhaps this reflects a deeper level of transcendence rather than a distinct and separate experience within deep states of meditation.

*The Experience of Positive Emotion*

Seven of the ten meditators experienced positive emotion. This was described predominantly as feelings of calmness, joy, and bliss. Calmness was described by meditators from each of the traditions. This reinforces the physiological findings that meditation has a relaxation effect. It is evident from the present study, however, that this relaxation does not simply correspond to changes in autonomic arousal levels. Calmness appeared to be inextricably linked to the shifts in cognitive and perceptual experiences.

Calmness was often described as a stillness and a contentment. This is likely to be connected with the reduction of discursive thinking experienced by many of the meditators. It may be argued that this simply reflects a deeper level of relaxation, but the descriptions suggested something more. Calmness was associated with something bigger than the personal ego. The "calm ocean" and "vast stillness" were descriptions that went beyond physiological relaxation in an attempt to portray something of the quality of
this different sense of reality. Indeed, calmness was a strong element in the transient experience of samadhi in one Siddha meditator. He said that the feeling was so good it was enough to motivate him to meditate for the rest of his life.

Another positive emotion experienced by some meditators was of joyousness. This was sometimes closely connected to insight. Thus, the realization that reality extended beyond the "limited subjectivity" of the ego gave rise to an effusive feeling of joy, for both Buddhists and one of the Siddha meditators. This also had to do with the sense that the experience was a natural state, more "normal" than everyday experience. This was expressed by meditators from all five groups.

Bliss was an emotion described by two meditators, one practicing TM, and one visualization. It seemed to be a more diffuse feeling than joy but more energetic than calmness. The TM meditator described it as "ticklish" and this related to the interaction of the sense of a different reality with everyday functioning consciousness. All these emotions are described in the meditation literature, both Buddhist and Yogic (e.g. Brown, 1977; Bucknell, 1986; Gelderloos, 1989; Goleman, 1988). They are also described in mystical literature (Stace, 1960).

Maupin (1969) found that some subjects expressed contentment. Osis (1973) found positive emotion as a core item of the factor Intensification and Change of Consciousness but not as a factor itself. The qualities of this emotion, however, were not elaborated.

**Expectations, Beliefs, and Experience**

In the interviews we did not directly address beliefs held by the meditators. A few meditators referred to texts in order to interpret their experiences, but most of the descriptions were surprisingly devoid of traditional references.

Some researchers assume that expectations and beliefs in a tradition affect the experience (e.g., Brown & Engler, 1980; Delamonte, 1981; Osis et al., 1973). In the present study, however, we found that common experiences may arise irrespective of expectations or beliefs. These may influence the idiosyncratic nature of individual experience, but this was not fully explored in the study.

Several meditators commented on the apparently spontaneous occurrence of deep meditation states. One person was surprised by this since her knowledge and practice of different meditation techniques led her to believe that her experience was inappropriate to the technique she was practicing at the time. Additionally, she...
noted that she experiences the same deep states of meditation irrespective of the practice.

Several meditators also commented on the transience of the experience. They learned through practice that they had to adopt a passive or at least receptive attitude within the meditation to attain even this temporary state. Furthermore, they have learned that conscious expectations of particular experiences inevitably result in failure.

Future Research

The phenomenological approach revealed three constituents of deep states of meditation. It also revealed a complex range of experiences of meditation. The descriptions appeared to reflect different levels of experience. A future project might systematically analyze, from a phenomenological perspective, the experiences of different groups of meditators.

These could include beginners and long-term practitioners of one technique, similar to the study of Brown and Engler (1980). However, a phenomenological approach could be used longitudinally. This would reveal detailed descriptions of changes over extended time periods. Comparison of the accounts of beginners and advanced meditators may reveal whether or not there are cumulative changes in experience. Such phenomenological changes may be compared to those described in the classical texts. Studies of such texts to date have focused primarily on the elucidation of psychological constructs rather than individual experiences. The comparison of the content of classical texts with the experiences of deep states of meditation, as reported here, may lend support to the assumption that meditation experiences may be universal.

REFERENCES


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