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Jonathan Shear

Virginia Commonwealth University, jshear@vcu.edu

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Eastern Approaches to Altered States of Consciousness*

I. Eastern civilizations have traditionally placed much greater emphasis on altered states of consciousness than the civilizations of the West. Altered, “higher” states are crucial to the major Eastern religions. They play an important role in the practice and content of cultural activities from poetry, painting, and dance to traditional martial arts throughout much of Asia. And their existence is taken for granted, and often emphasized, in popular mythology. So it is only natural that Eastern civilizations over the centuries have paid a great deal of attention to analyzing the nature of these states and developing techniques to produce them as effectively as possible.

A wide variety of approaches to altering states of consciousness have been developed and used. These include purely mental meditation procedures, ancillary physical procedures, and behavioral procedures combining mental and physical components.¹ The story of Eastern approaches to altering consciousness is much too vast and complex to be covered in a single chapter. Nevertheless if we confine ourselves to the major traditions such as Yoga, Vedanta and East-Asian Buddhism, important common understandings of altered, “higher” states of consciousness readily emerge. For despite their different imagery and often conflicting metaphysical interpretations, they all emphasize meditation, recognize comparable “levels” of mind, and describe the same basic “higher” states of consciousness.

This chapter will describe important experiences, states of consciousness, levels of consciousness, and real-world effects emphasized by these traditions, relate them to features of meditation procedures, and offer reflections from the perspective of ongoing scientific research.

Experiences:

II. The major Eastern traditions focusing on developing higher states of consciousness all hold that meditation, when successful, can enable the activity of the mind to settle down and disappear entirely, so that its fundamental inner nature, independent of all the contents of ordinary awareness, can be experienced with clarity. Different traditions may interpret the experience differently, according to their different theories. But there is wide agreement that the expe-

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¹ The use of pharmaceutical approaches is also mentioned favorably in some very ancient texts. In recent millennia, however, it has generally been downplayed and portrayed negatively, and major traditions often discourage it as damaging to aspects of the nervous system responsible for the growth of higher states of consciousness.

rience is fundamentally important. For it is said to enliven our true inner nature, and help free it to express itself naturally and fulfillingly throughout life. Gaining the experience is also said to enhance psychological and physiological integration and functioning, and to have all sorts of beneficial effects, including liberation of our natural tendencies for compassion and helpfulness, and enhanced performance in all areas of life. And most important for our present discussion, it is said to be the basis of growth of a unique higher state of consciousness referred to as “liberation” or “enlightenment,” the overarching goal of all the major meditation traditions.

The experience itself is extraordinarily simple. Indeed, it appears to be the logical ultimate of simplicity. For it has nothing in it all—no perception of objects, no colors or sounds, no feelings or emotions, no thoughts. This of course is not easy to imagine. In fact it is *impossible* to imagine. For if anything we can imagine were in it, it would not be this completely empty experience. What is the experience like? By all accounts it is not *like* anything at all. Just itself. Yet it is different from *unconsciousness*. For unlike unconsciousness, when one comes out of the experience, one can *remember* it. What is it remembered as? Not *as* anything at all. Just itself.

Some traditions, such as Yoga and Vedanta, call the experience “pure consciousness,” inasmuch as it appears to be consciousness itself, that is, what remains when everything one is conscious *of* has been removed *from* consciousness. Buddhist traditions generally refer to it as “emptiness,” reflecting the fact that it is empty of everything that can be imagined. Vedanta also refers to it as “Being,” since all that can be said about it when one emerges seems to be that it *was*. Many Buddhists also often refer to it as “non-being,” since there seems to be nothing there. Zen Buddhists refer to it in all of these ways, reflecting both the usefulness and inadequacy of all these terms. All the traditions naturally link the terms used to their preferred metaphysical beliefs. But all questions of metaphysics and terminology aside, in tradition after tradition all over the world the descriptions make it clear that what is being referred to appears to be completely empty of empirical content, so empty, in fact, that it does not even contain the internal perceptual manifold or “space” in which such content could appear.

The standard descriptions of the experience can easily seem incomprehensible to people who have never had it. So they may often try to “explain them away” as empty words, reflecting little more than the preconceptions of people committed to metaphysical traditions and their terminology. People who have had the experience, however, find the above sorts of descriptions quite natural, regardless of their backgrounds, metaphysical or not. Indeed anyone with much famili-

arity with the topic is likely to know, or at least know about, people who had the experience spontaneously and only later became drawn to some meditation tradition or other after they learned that it seemed to describe the experience they had already had.

Laboratory studies of meditators also give us good reason to take the above sorts of experiential reports seriously. Meditation traditions have reported for centuries that the experience is accompanied by significant reduction of metabolic activity, including most conspicuously complete cessation of respiration. This is found in many Indian traditions, including, for example, the *Yoga Sutras*, the canonical text of Yoga. It is found in ancient Taoist texts. The association is so standard that Chinese Zen even uses the expression “breath stops” as a name for the experience itself. Laboratory studies of people practicing traditional meditation procedures now provide objective, scientifically significant corroboration of such reports. Studies of people practicing the Transcendental Meditation (TM) technique from Advaita Vedanta, for example, show extremely high correlation between reported instances of the experience and cessation of perceptible respiratory activity, as reported in the traditional literature. They also report that the O₂ and CO₂ levels in the blood remain unchanged during these episodes of respiratory suspension, consistent with the traditional accounts of reduction of metabolic activity. They also have found other physiological parameters unknown to pre-scientific observers, such as high frontal alpha EEG coherence, correlated with this and closely related meditative experiences. (See, for example, Travis FT, & Wallace R.K., 1997; Travis, F.T, *et al.*, 2010)

The application of these findings to the question of whether traditional sorts of descriptions of the pure consciousness/emptiness should be taken at all seriously is straightforward. For it would hardly seem plausible that different types of procedures, practices in different cultures with different, often opposing belief structures, would produce the same pairing of (i) a specific, unique type of experiential report and (ii) a unique unconscious physiological state unless (iii) the reports reflected the natural correlate of that particular state, rather than (iv) the inconsistent and often opposing contexts of belief in which the reports were made. The traditional reports and contemporary research thus give us good reason to think that at least sometimes reports of experiences devoid of all empirical content reflect the experiences themselves, rather than such

things as metaphysical beliefs and wishful thinking.² In other words, they give us good reason to conclude that experiences corresponding to the standard descriptions of pure consciousness/emptiness actually exist.

III. The question naturally arises of why throughout history people should have been so concerned to obtain such an experience which, being completely empty, is devoid of anything interesting? The simplest answer is that it has been thought to be desirable for the effects it produces. For it is widely held to be the basis of developing all sorts of remarkable, intrinsically desirable experiences and states, including that of full enlightenment. Consider, for example, the following examples from modern North Americans and Europeans practicing Zen (Japanese Buddhist lineages) and TM (Advaita Vedanta), traditions especially well known for their focus on altered, “higher” states of consciousness.

First, two descriptions of the pure consciousness/emptiness experience we have been discussing:

E1. The time comes when no reflection appears at all. One comes to notice nothing, feel nothing, hear nothing, see nothing . . . But it is not vacant emptiness. Rather it is the purest condition of our existence. (Zen: K.S., quoted in Austin, *Zen and the Brain*, 1998, p. 473)

E2. My meditations are characterized by the experience of “no experience” . . . I just remain in the Absolute for the entire sitting and nothing else seems to happen, other than the feeling of bliss permeating me completely. (TM) (P.B., quoted in Maharishi, 1977, p. 80)

Next, some more advanced experiences of the kinds often said to develop from the above:

E3. A thousand new sensations are bombarding my senses, a thousand new paths are opening before me . . . a warm love pervade[s] my whole being, because I know that I am not just my little self but a great big miraculous Self. My constant thought is to have everybody share this deep satisfaction. (Zen) (A.M., in Kapleau, 1972, p. 245)

E4. Then I knew that my little me had become big Me . . . I felt like I had been reborn into the purity and innocence of a new-born child, yet I felt wise, like a person who had lived for a long time. My inner awareness is immovable, stable, integrated, flexible and confident. I am no longer dependent on changing circum-

² This is not to say that reports that are false and/or simply confused cannot also occur. Meditation traditions have accordingly devised various protocols to separate valid from invalid such reports. To minimize the risk of their being thwarted, these protocols are generally not a matter of public record, and will not be discussed here.

stances, friendships, or activities for an inner stability peace and fulfillment. (TM) (D.N., in Maharishi, 1977, p. 81)

E5. I noticed a totally new feeling of softness and sweetness develop. There were days when I felt my heart melting as if I could take everything in creation into myself and cherish it with the greatest love. Often I would have long periods of the day when everything I saw seemed to be glowing with divine radiance. (TM) (J.B., in Maharishi, 1977, p. 81)

E6. The least expression of weather variation, a soft rain or a gently breeze, touches me as a—what can I say?—miracle of unmatched wonder, beauty, and goodness. There is nothing to do; just to be is a supremely total act . . . When I am in solitude I can hear a “song” coming forth from everything. Each and every thing has its own song; even moods, thoughts, and feelings have their finer songs. (Zen) (D.K., in Kapleau, 1972, p. 268)

E7. My self, activity, and what I am interacting with, as well as one object with another, all seem to be connected through perception. Body and environment are not separated. It seems all of creation constitutes the fluctuations of my body and consciousness. These fluctuations have a quality of sameness. The same style of wave function is in everything. It also seems that every object contains all sizes of waves, all in some kind of synchrony. Yet underlying that, there is no movement or fluctuation. (TM) (L.A., in Maharishi, 1977, p. 84)

E8. The least act, such as eating or scratching an arm, is not at all simple. It is merely a visible moment in a network of causes and effects reaching forward into Unknowingness and back into an infinity of Silence where individual consciousness cannot even enter. . . Yet beneath this variety they [all things] intermingle in one inexpressibly vast unity. (Zen) (D.K., in Kapleau, 1972, p. 268)

From the perspective of our ordinary waking state experience, these six experiences, filled with such things as “expansion of self,” refined perception, bliss, universal love, and unity with all of nature, are all quite remarkable. They are precisely the kinds of things that often attract people, especially in the West, to meditation in the first place.

Higher States of Consciousness:

IV. The contents of the above experiences might at first glance appear to be a bit of a jumble. But Eastern traditions have developed a variety of phenomenological maps to make sense out of the above sorts of experiences and relate them both to each other and to our more ordinary ones. And the list of experiences above was organized in accord with one of the most basic maps, a map of “higher states” of consciousness used for centuries by major meditation traditions. In its

simplest form the map distinguishes three major “higher” states of consciousness in the sequence in which they typically are reported to develop. The identifying phenomenological feature of each of these states can be described as follows:

- H1. pure consciousness/emptiness, *by itself*, in isolation from everything else
- H2. pure consciousness/emptiness *permanently stable throughout* all of one’s experiences
- H3. pure consciousness/emptiness *as the perceived ground of everything* one experiences, external as well as internal.

The first thing that we can note is that all of these higher states of consciousness are defined in terms of the relation of pure consciousness/emptiness to all the other contents of our awareness. In the first of these states, pure consciousness/emptiness is experienced alone by itself. And this experience is widely held to be the precondition of recognizing the experiential nature of *consciousness* itself, as contrasted with the all the other things we experience, in the first place. That this should be the case should not be surprising. Our attention is normally drawn to what is changing in experience. This is a psychological truism, and information theory often even defines “information” as “news of a difference.” So even if consciousness actually is the pervasive ground of all consciousness experience, as most meditation traditions hold, its presence would not draw one’s attention to one part of one’s perceptual field in preference to any other.

Consider, by way of analogy, a person in a movie theater. So long as his or her attention is on the changing shapes and colors of the movie, the unchanging flatness of the screen is unlikely to be noticed—until, that is, the film (but not the light) stops, leaving the screen to be seen alone by itself. So it should not be surprising if, as widely reported, the experiential nature of pure consciousness/emptiness usually first becomes apparent only in the first “higher” state, L1 as defined above, where it is experienced alone *by itself*, after all objects of perception have disappeared, before it can also be experienced *along with everything else* one experiences, the defining feature of the second higher state, L2 above.

For most people, of course, the experience of pure consciousness/emptiness by itself at first occurs only as a result of practicing a meditation technique designed to produce it. Once it has occurred, however, what had formerly been merely subliminal can become apparent along with other experiences, first, perhaps, along with quiet thoughts and feelings in meditation, later along

with all the dynamic, previously “overshadowing” experiences of daily life. This may at first occur episodically. But in time, according to tradition after tradition, it can become experienced as stable and permanent throughout all the changing experiences of the waking state of consciousness, the chaos of the dream state, and even the obscurity of dreamless sleep. Different explanations are given for this progression. But regardless of explanations, it should be easy to see why the experience L1 of pure consciousness/emptiness *by itself* is the natural prerequisite for the more advanced higher state L2 of pure consciousness/emptiness permanently stable *throughout* all of one’s other experiences.

The next higher state L3, pure consciousness perceived *as the ground of* all of one’s experiences, is more difficult to grasp. Here, using our movie screen analogy, it is as though one’s perception has become so subtle that all the colors are seen not only as *on* the screen but *of* it. That is, to stretch our analogy further, it is as though one *sees* (rather than merely grasps conceptually) that the colors are not something superimposed on the screen but direct expressions of its nature. But for our purposes it will be enough simply to recognize the typical descriptions of the phenomenological nature of L3, where everything, internal and external alike, is perceived as emerging from the same pure consciousness/emptiness that one experiences in L1. With this the whole universe, oneself included, is perceived as a single unified existence.³

We should note here, however, that while major non-dual traditions such as Zen Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta clearly emphasize all the “higher” states as described above, non-dual traditions such as Yoga and Dvaita Vedanta argue one could never in fact perceive a single ground of everything, despite how things might appear to an advanced experiencer. For even if pure consciousness can (and should) be experienced as the ground of different individuals’ awareness, this does not imply that the pure consciousness experienced by each has the same source any more than pure water drawn from two different wells has to come from the same aquifer. Theravada Buddhism rejects the notion that the emptiness an advanced practitioner can recognize everywhere represents a fundamental “ground” either of oneself or the universe as a whole, for they reject the notion of such a ground in the first place. Nevertheless, all questions of metaphysical interpretations aside, there is wide agreement among the major traditions that the above

³ It is worth noting that pure consciousness/emptiness, as devoid of empirical qualities, is the *only* phenomenologically definable “thing” (or non-thing) that, logically speaking, could ever be experienced as the ground of all possible experiences. For anything that has empirical qualities of its own, would be incompatible with logically possible experiences where those qualities were not present.

higher states (or variations extremely close to them), defined phenomenologically, not only exist but represent important advanced stages of spiritual growth.⁴

V. The higher states map by itself is rather abstract. So to fill it out somewhat let us return to the experiences described earlier. The list consists of pairs of examples drawn from Zen and TM. The first pair (E1 and E2) consists of examples of pure consciousness/emptiness; the second (E3 and E4) consists of examples of what is often called “expansion of self;” the third (E5 and E6) consists of examples of refined aesthetic and expanded affective perception; and the fourth (E6 and E7) consists of examples of perceptions of a deep unity with all of nature. The relation of the first pair of experiences (E1 and E2) to the list is transparent: they are both, as already noted, examples of pure consciousness/emptiness by itself, the first higher state described by the map. The relation of the other pairs, however, will need some explanation.

The second pair, for example, states

E3. A thousand new sensations are bombarding my senses, a thousand new paths are opening before me . . . a warm love pervade[s] my whole being, because I know that I am not just my little self but a great big miraculous Self. My constant thought is to have everybody share this deep satisfaction. (Zen)

E4. Then I knew that my little me had become big Me . . . I felt like I had been reborn into the purity and innocence of a new-born child, yet I felt wise, like a person who had lived for a long time. My inner awareness is immovable, stable, integrated, flexible and confident. I am no longer dependent on changing circumstances, friendships, or activities for an inner stability peace and fulfillment. (TM)

Both of these examples describe typical meditation-related experiences of “expansion of self,” as noted earlier. But they do not mention pure consciousness/emptiness, the crucial variable in the definition of all the higher states on the map, at all. So their relation to the map might

⁴ Compare, for example, emphatic comments to this effect by Samdong Rinpoche (noted scholar and head of the Dalai Lama’s government in exile) in Shear and Mukherjee, 2006, p. 360.

We can also note that the first and third of the higher states described above (pure consciousness/emptiness by itself and *as the ground of everything*, respectively) correspond to the “introvertive” (IME) and “extrovertive” (EME) mystical experiences, identified by Walter Stace in the mid 1900’s and often held by scholars to be the two central mystical experiences. Stace, however, took the IME to be the more advanced experience (perhaps because, unlike the EME, it seems to have nothing in common with ordinary experience), and as a result was puzzled by the fact that the supposedly more advanced IME experience was recorded in the literature much less often than the supposedly less advanced EME. The map and gloss above resolve Stace’s puzzle by showing, and explaining, the actual sequence of development traditionally described.

not at first glance be at all apparent. Once we know the linguistic conventions of Zen and Advaita Vedanta, the traditions associated with the two descriptions, however, the connection becomes readily apparent. For both of these traditions tend to (i) use the term “self” to refer to self as ordinarily understood in terms of body, personality, self-images, etc., and (ii) “Self” (with a capital “S” in English) to refer to what they take the self (or “Self”) to *really* be, namely pure consciousness/emptiness itself, experienced deep within. Thus when they say such things as “not just my little self but a great big miraculous Self” and “my little me became a big Me” what they mean is not, of course, that they have grown physically bigger, but that what they *experience themselves as being* has shifted from (i) the small, space-time bounded entities they formerly thought of themselves as, to (ii) the pure unbounded consciousness now experienced in the midst of their daily lives, even as they wrote their descriptions. This in turn identifies the passages as describing the type of experiences characteristic of the state S2 above, where pure consciousness/emptiness—here identified with Self—is experienced along with all the ordinary experiences of daily life.⁵

We should note however that the above examples are offered just to illustrate what experience in this second advanced state L2 is like. The examples by themselves do not indicate whether this kind of experience was established permanently throughout waking, dreaming and even, as strange as it might sound, throughout deep dreamless sleep, as full development of S2 would require.

The relation of the third pair (E5 and E6) of experiences to the map of higher states is more complex. We will return to these experiences in section VIII below.

The relation of the fourth pair (E7 and E8) to the map, however, is straightforward. They describe everything, their minds, bodies, consciousness and external universe as comprising a profound unity, and they refer to the unifying ground as unfluctuating consciousness, an infinity of silence, and beyond the grasp of the intellect. Zen and Vedanta (along with many other traditions) regularly use such expressions to refer to the pure consciousness/emptiness they take to be the perceived ground of both (i) individual consciousness and (ii) all of nature. The use of these

⁵ We should note that Theravada Buddhism, emphasizing the Buddhist doctrine of “no-self,” eschews such talk about “Self.” Mahayana Buddhism, however, referring to the *Mahaparisamadhi Sutra* that they take to be preserved in Tibet and China but lost in India and South-Asia, holds that the “no-self” doctrine is a preliminary one that Buddha said was to be superseded by a doctrine of transcendental Self of the sort described above. Thus the above terminology while consistent with Mahayana is inconsistent with that of Theravada. Terminology aside, however, they all appear to have the experiences described above.

expressions in the above descriptions, written by advanced meditators in the context of these traditions, thus makes it clear that the perceived unifying ground they are referring to is pure consciousness/emptiness. These experiences, in other words, are clear examples of experiences characteristic of the highest state, S3, in the map.

VI. The above modern examples of reports of higher states have been used to illustrate the significance of the typology of the map. The map, once understood, can then often clarify otherwise confusing claims and reports in the fields of meditation and mysticism in general. For it can let us recognize inconsistent claims about the contents and implications often arise from the fact that different states of consciousness are being referred to. And it can also help us see that seemingly unrelated descriptions are often actually reflecting the same higher state. Sorting things out in this way is not always easy, of course, since experiential accounts are often described and/or alluded to in very different ways in different traditions and cultures. Still, with the above map, otherwise obscure relationships can often become transparent. Thus, for example, it is easy to see that the following account of a disciple's experience, written by Shankara, the eighth century Advaita Vedanta Master, refers to the map's highest state. L3.

I dwell within all beings as the Atman [Self], pure consciousness, the ground of all phenomena, internal and external. I am both the enjoyer and that which is enjoyed. In the days of my ignorance, I used to think of these as being separate from myself. Now I know that I am all. (Shankara, 1970, p. 105)

The following excerpt from Butsugen (Chinese: Fo-yen Ch'ing-yuan), the twelfth century Chinese Zen Master, might at first seem entirely unrelated. But with a little thought the map lets us recognize that it reflects the same higher state.

A short while ago my attendant monk told me that it was raining too hard and the audience might find it too difficult to hear me . . . Most people might say the sound of the rain itself is the great sermon. Is this right? I say no, it is not! The sound of the rain—this is the sermon *you* are giving. (Quoted in Suzuki, 1971, p. 5)

On its own, the assertion, “the sound rain is the sermon *you* are giving,” might simply seem to be a typical Zen enigma. But Butsugen's meaning becomes clear when he follows the above remark with the story of Gensh's (another famous Zen master) responding to a warning shout of “Tiger!” by shouting back,

“It is you who are the tiger!”

Tiger, rain, you, everything . . . all one thing. That's how it seems in the map's highest state. For, D.T. Suzuki, commenting on the above text, adds, here "all the worlds in the ten quarters are [experienced here as] your whole body." (*Ibid.*, p. 6)

The map's structural phenomenological categories can thus in short be used to identify state-specific structural features of diverse types of experiences, even when the experiences are expressed in seemingly unrelated language. This in turn can help identify when differences of metaphysical claims and theories reflect differences of state-specific types of experiences offered in evidence. The hierarchal, developmental nature of the map has also been used for centuries to sort theories as well as experiences hierarchically as reflecting more and less full levels of development of consciousness—although such conclusions are often roundly disputed by those said to be of lesser levels of development.⁶

Having seen something of the phenomenological significance and the use of the states of consciousness map, let us now turn to a second ancient phenomenological map, a map of "levels" of inner awareness.

Levels of Inner Awareness:

VII. This map distinguishes six levels of inner awareness, each defined phenomenologically.⁷ All of the levels are said to be experienceable in sequence as the mind reduces its activity and settles inward to its silent core in meditation, and as it returns to the surface again. Noticing the levels may require that the settling and/or emerging take place slowly, especially since the deepest levels are exceedingly abstract. Depending on the technique practiced and one's habits of attention, one may simply "pass through" any particular level without noticing it, especially at the beginning of one's practice. But all the levels are said to be experienceable by sufficiently advanced practitioners. The content of each more superficial level is also held to emerge from the deeper ones. From surface to depths, the levels are

- L1. senses
- L2. discursive thinking
- L3. discriminative intellect
- L4. pure individuality or ego
- L5. pure bliss (pure positive affect)

⁶ The best known example of this of course are the traditional disputes between Theravada and Mahayana.

⁷ Portions of this section have been adapted from Shear, in Walach and Schmidt, in press.

L6. pure consciousness (pure emptiness)

We are all familiar with the first two levels, “senses” and “discursive thinking.” The phenomenological nature of the first level, the “senses,” needs no special explanation. The second level, “discursive thinking,” is where thinking in words, as in ordinary internal discourse, takes place. The third level, “discriminative intellect,” is more abstract. It is said to underlie the activity of discursive thinking and intelligent activity in general. Without it we would not be able to distinguish different sensory objects, recognize that words are particular kinds of “objects,” or even understand that words relate to other things, much less relate to them meaningfully. As abstract as this level is, however, its existence can be recognized experientially in the pre-verbal thinking of the kinds ordinary people sometimes, and highly creative people often, report.

The deeper levels are less likely to be familiar. All of them lie outside the ordinary range of experience. They are all highly abstract. And they are usually first experienced clearly only as a result of meditation. Level L4, “pure individuality” or “ego,” at first may appear to be completely empty, and seem to be the experience of pure consciousness/emptiness we have been discussing. For it is completely devoid of all sensations, thoughts, images and other localized phenomenal objects—all the kinds of things, in other words, that we are ordinarily aware of. It is in effect the “space” of mind (the phenomenological manifold), experienceable independently of all the contents of the more superficial levels when their activity has settled in meditation, and all phenomenal objects have disappeared, while one nevertheless remains awake. Traditionally the experience is often likened to that of being *a disembodied observer* in the midst of *vast emptiness*. Thus, in the language of Vedanta, one is said to “hold one’s individuality” in a “void of abstract fullness,” steady like “a lamp in a windless place.”⁸

This experience might easily appear to be the experience of pure consciousness/emptiness discussed above. But unlike the experience of pure consciousness/emptiness, the experience of pure individuality is, phenomenologically speaking, not *completely* empty. For the sense of being a disembodied observer or “mind’s eye” *in the midst* of vast emptiness, makes it clear that it still contains the “I – it” *structure* of ordinary experience, even if the “it” has been reduced so far to nothingness that nothing but the emptiness of the phenomenal manifold remains to be

⁸ The above terminology is from the tradition of Advaita Vedanta, as in Maharishi 1967. Compare also the following from the Zen tradition,

[inner] space becomes the object of consciousness, followed by an awareness of objectless infinity, and then by absorption into a void which has ‘nothingness’ as its object.” (Austin, 1998, p. 474)

experienced. In the middle of the experience, one does not think “Ah, emptiness,” since this would be a thought, and there are no thoughts or other phenomenal objects here. But the empty structure can be remembered, and recognized conceptually, when one returns to more ordinary levels of awareness. It can also be remembered as permeated by abstract undifferentiated objectless bliss.

Level L5, “pure bliss (or pure positive affect)”, is even more abstract. For here there is no longer any sense even of being an observer or having a vantage point. Thus even the empty subject-object duality of level (iv) is no longer present. All that remains is abstract bliss or well-being itself—“happiness beyond the superlative,” as the *Bhagavad Gita*, canonical to most Indian traditions, puts it.

Level L6, “pure consciousness (pure emptiness),” is simply the pure consciousness/emptiness we have been discussing, the logical ultimate of abstraction.

VIII. The basic link between the *levels* and *states* maps is straightforward: The pure consciousness/emptiness of the deepest level, L6, of the levels map is the same pure consciousness/emptiness central to the definitions of all the states described by the higher states map. The first higher state S1 amounts to experiencing this deepest level *by itself*. The second higher state S2 amounts to experiencing it as *a stable component* of one’s awareness in general. The third higher state S3 amounts to experiencing everything *in terms of* its nature. And so far as the traditions that focus on these higher states are concerned, the central function of meditation is to enable attention to settle down through all the levels of inner awareness until the deepest level is first experienced and then enlivened throughout all of one’s awareness in the appropriate ways.

The same process of moving attention from the surface levels through the intermediate levels to the deepest level and back again also is found to enliven the intermediate levels as well. Which particular levels are enlivened to what degree is highly variable, and depends on such things as the particular techniques practiced and the nature and degree of development of individual meditators. But it is a widely reported effect. And it is not hard to recognize in some of the experiences we described earlier.

Repeated experience of the deep bliss-filled level L5, for example, is often followed by experiences of aesthetic beauty and expansive love such as those described in

E5. I noticed a totally new feeling of softness and sweetness develop. There were days when I felt my heart melting as if I could take everything in creation into myself and cherish it with the greatest love. Often I would have long periods of the day when everything I saw seemed to be glowing with divine radiance. (TM)

E3 . . . a warm love pervade[s] my whole being, because I know that I am not just my little self but a great big miraculous Self. My constant thought is to have everybody share this deep satisfaction. (Zen)

Enlivenment of refined pre-verbal strata of level L3 of the map, coupled with growth of positive affect, is said to produce the kinds of subtle conceptual and perceptual discrimination evident in the following passage

E6. The least expression of weather variation, a soft rain or a gentle breeze, touches me as a—what can I say?—miracle of unmatched wonder, beauty, and goodness. There is nothing to do; just to be is a supremely total act . . . When I am in solitude I can hear a “song” coming forth from everything. Each and every thing has its own song; even moods, thoughts, and feelings have their finer songs. (Zen)

And the same kind of perceptual refinement is naturally evident in experiences such as the following, characteristic of the highest state of the states map.

E7. It also seems that every object contains all sizes of waves, all in some kind of synchrony. Yet underlying that, there is no movement or fluctuation. (TM)

E8. The least act, such as eating or scratching an arm, is not at all simple. It is merely a visible moment in a network of causes and effects reaching forward into Unknowingness and back into an infinity of Silence where individual consciousness cannot even enter (Zen)

The above examples should be enough to give an idea, at least in principle, of how the states and levels maps have traditionally been used both to help understand meditation-related experiences and evaluate the degree of development of meditators.

Practical Effects:

IX. In culture after culture it is taken for granted that access to the deeper levels of awareness and development of higher states of consciousness can significantly enhance a wide spectrum of human abilities. Many different kinds of explanation for this are offered, some metaphysical, others down to earth. The logic of many of the latter can be explained as follows: The higher states we have been discussing all involve enlivening the silent non-active empirically contentless ground of awareness, consciousness/emptiness itself. In one common analogy, a mind in

which this qualityless ground remains lively when the other levels become active will, like a completely clean mirror, be optimally responsive to its environment. Or, to use a modern image, a mind that is tuned to pure silence is like a good stereo. Free from internal noise, it is completely silent when the programs are off and the volume control is turned up high. A stereo that maintains the absence of internal noise when programming is reintroduced, optimizes its signal-to-noise ratio. It will, in other words, be “high fidelity.” Thus according to this logic, minds that preserve the silence of their own fundamental nature as a baseline while engaged in activity can be expected to be more perceptive and effective in whatever they do.

Enlivenment of the subtle activity of the other deep levels of inner awareness, it would seem, should enhance this result. Refined intellectual and perceptual discrimination should be expected to enhance activity in the world holistically. Stable experience of bliss ought to help people become more ethical. For the selfish cravings for happiness that all too often block our natural concern for the well-being of others should be expected to be reduced in people who are already fulfilled. And growth of unbounded love should enliven this concern for others directly.

Whether or not the above sorts of explanations are plausible, real-world results of the kinds they are supposed to explain have been reported for millennia. Claims of such results have also become the subject of scientific research.

X. The idea that higher states of consciousness might produce such practical results, however, seems counter to the widespread understanding that they are really impractical, best suited only for hermits, monks and others who want to withdraw from daily life. The practice of meditation involves withdrawal of attention from the world inward to the mind’s silent, non-active source. To facilitate this, serious seekers often withdraw from ordinary life for extended periods of time. The states sought are thus easily associated with withdrawal from ordinary life. If the traditions we have been discussing are correct, however, this association is merely contingent, and highly misleading. For they often emphasize that it is a mistake to confuse the *paths to* these states with *the states themselves*. For, as the famous Mahayana image puts it, the path and the goal are as different as a boat and the shore it should take one to. Ancient texts and modern teachers alike often make it clear that they do not think of the goal in terms of withdrawal from life, but as the basis for maximum success in it.

The traditions we have been discussing are often quite explicit about this. It is a theme in many Zen stories. It is expressed in the *Bhagavad-Gita's* injunction that we should become established in pure consciousness as the *basis for performing action (yogastah kurukarmani)*. The fact that this injunction is given to a warrior on the battlefield, where performance is a life and death matter, is especially telling. The same theme of is a well known feature of the Zen and Taoist martial arts that have had ample time—and the highest motive—to determine what really does and does not actually work in practice. And, moving from battle to high culture, throughout much of Asia practices designed to produce higher states are integrated into the training in artistic disciplines such as poetry, calligraphy, painting and dance, both because of the efficiency in action and the creativity, refined perception, deep positive affect and intimacy with nature they are thought to produce.⁹ Comparable ideas have been reflected in well known Taoist texts and stories about artisans as well as artists and warriors, since the time of Laotse and Chuangtse.

As valuable as such purported external effects of higher states might be, the major meditation traditions all consider them secondary to the internal psychological ones. These include such things as psychological stability, happiness, joy, creativity, freedom from dysfunctional cravings, and liberation of our natural tendencies to be concerned for the welfare of others—all features of what psychologists today often refer to as “self-actualization.”

XI. How seriously should we take such claims? All of them, internal as well as external, are just the kinds of things that modern scientific protocols are designed to examine.¹⁰ And in recent decades thousands of studies have been conducted on the psychological, physiological and behavioral correlates and effects of meditation and associated experiences of higher states. Significant problems in interpreting the results of such studies have arisen, however. These problems arise from the fact that meditation techniques often differ greatly in both their internal mechanics and their internal and external effects. Consider for example the following short list of features of major meditation procedures described by representatives of the traditions referred to:

⁹ Compare for example D.T. Suzuki's fascinating *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Suzuki, 1970).

¹⁰ Claims about fantastic abilities such as being able to become invisible, walk on water and change one's size at will, etc. are also often found. Texts such as the *Yoga Sutras* even list techniques intended to develop them in the service of enlivening subtler levels of awareness and helping the nervous system become fully integrated. Such texts also contain strong warnings, however, that it is all too easy to become attached to such abilities and distracted from the goal of enlightenment. In the absence of credible scientific evidence for such abilities however, we need not deal with them here.

Zen Buddhist practices are likely to use concentration, whether directed perceptually towards breathing, or conceptually towards paradoxes (*koans*) that defy intellectual resolution. Taoist practices emphasize circulation of energy throughout channels of the body. Transcendental Meditation uses relaxed attention to special sounds (or *mantras*) repeated silently within the mind. Yoga adds many other procedures and objects, such as concentration on energy centers in the body (*chakras*), the “light” of the mind, and attributes of God. Theravada Buddhism emphasizes dispassionate observation of the impermanence of sensations, thoughts, and whatever else is meditated on, including the self itself. Sufism follows the inner feeling of love for God.

Traditional meditation procedures thus differ with regard to the mental *faculties* they use (attention, feeling, reasoning, visualization, memory, bodily awareness, etc.), the *way* these faculties are used (effortlessly, forcefully, actively, passively), and the *objects* they are directed to (thoughts, images, concepts, internal energy, breath, subtle aspects of the body, love, God). They also often differ strongly with regard to how they relate to questions of belief, with some systems emphasizing the need to hold particular philosophical, metaphysical and/or religious views and others emphasizing complete independence of them all.¹¹

This diversity makes it difficult to talk about effects of “meditation” considered generically, since different procedures often produce very different results. Thus, for example, procedures focusing on respiration and those ignoring it have been found to have different effects on respiratory parameters, as might be expected, and procedures involving intense focus and those emphasizing effortlessness naturally have different effects on variables such as EEG patterns and trait anxiety. Traditional texts, contemporary teachers’ claims and contemporary meditators’ reports also differ greatly about how quickly (if at all) experiences and states of the kinds we have been discussing are likely to be gained. Some claim ordinary people can begin to enjoy them within a few weeks or months, others insist that it is likely to be years, and others hold that only a very few people have the ability to gain them at all.

Perhaps because the topic is relatively new to modern Western culture, people nevertheless have often tended to lump all meditation procedures together and think of them as more or less equivalent. This has led to significant errors in interpreting the existing research. One has been to take the many conflicting outcomes on given variables as implying that meditation (conceived generically) has no significant effect at all. An opposite error has been to assume that results

¹¹ The two preceding paragraphs were adapted from the “Introduction” to Shear, 2006, p. xvi..

found for one procedure can simply be presumed to be produced by other procedures as well. Both of these mistakes are of course methodologically unsound. They are also unfortunate. The first diminishes interest in further research. The second has often led people to begin to practice particular procedures on the basis of results reported for some other procedure and, not finding the expected result, to become disillusioned and reject meditation in general.

What is needed is a concerted, nuanced research program to determine which procedures produce what experiences and states on what subpopulations and over what time frames. Only then will we know how practical the idea of gaining the remarkable experiences, states and effects we have been discussing really is.

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