

MANTRA MEDITATION AS A CASE OF HABITUATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR A NEW THEORY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

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I proposed that the study of mental exercises, such as meditation, may lead to a radically different theory of consciousness than has been previously held in Western thought. The use of a mantra as a concentrative device that may undergo habituation is discussed as a possible vehicle for gaining a new understanding of mind.

Keywords: meditation, theory of consciousness, mantra, habituation, mental exercises, concentration.

A *mantra* is a Sanskrit word or sound upon which a person may focus to induce meditation. The state of *meditation* can be described as complete absorption with one sensation or cognition, so that the mind is said to be “one-pointed.” By first vocalizing the mantra and then by silent repetition, attention can be disengaged from usual preoccupations and set to rest.

Meditation is an exercise in mental self-control and mantras are a device to this end. The purpose of attaining this “one-pointedness” of mind is, according to Patanjali (1953), “control of thought-waves in the mind” (p. 120). Patanjali, who wrote the *Yoga Sutras* in circa 500 BC, had a classic Hindu approach to meditation and the use of mantras. He likened the mind metaphorically to a tempestuous sea constantly aroused by incoming sensations, emotional responses, and mental images.

Tibetan Buddhism has a somewhat different approach. As outlined by Bernbaum (1974), it is “a matter of attaining completeness, a matter of feeling an experience, a matter of growth and maturation” (p. 100).

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Bernbaum describes the approach thus: “To attain this completeness, Tibetan Buddhism tries to incorporate the whole man in meditation through all his senses. It therefore combines the chanting of mantras with visualization of the chanted symbols and corresponding body gestures. The adept will chant the name of a deity, visualize it, and assume its pose. These three means of meditation—embodying speech (sound), mind (sight), and body (touch)—are called *mantra*, *yantra*, and *mudra*. Fusion of the three in ritual evokes a sense of inner unity that spreads out from the adept’s body to include the universe” (p. 100).

The use of a mantra apparently enables the meditator to become continuously aware of a single stimulus event. Various sensory modalities may be used, including—as well as those mentioned by Bernbaum (1974)—the sense of smell (concentration on a pleasant perfume), or the movement of the breath as one inhales and exhales. This last is a basic meditation technique that is said to have been taught by the Buddha.

The meditator fixes his/her attention on a mantra, thus shutting out external stimuli that would normally induce physiological arousal. In this way, concentration on the mantra aids in the development of the quiet physiological state of meditation that is described by Wallace and Benson (1972) as a hypometabolic state.

The need for the development of concentration exercises is derived from the fact that people tend to continuously respond to stimuli. Because humans are constantly bombarded with stimuli, we tend to accumulate more and more stress. This effect is analogous to continually eating and never giving one’s stomach a chance to digest its contents. 14

When people are constantly responding to stimuli, they become controlled by these stimuli. In this way, we become conditioned. The use of a mantra is not just a deliberately chosen activity; rather, the mantra itself is a self-produced stimulus and, thus, controllable by the meditator. By being selective about inputs, the person acquires control of his or her mental processes. A person who constantly practices this type of meditation exercise can train himself or herself to enter the state of contemplative “one-pointedness” that we call meditation.

One psychological process operating in meditation may be *habituation*, which is defined in psychological and learning theory terms as the process whereby an organism decreasingly responds to a repeating stimulus. When measured psychophysically, a person habituates to a stimulus when it evokes no response. The attention the person pays to the stimulus also decreases to a point at which s/he loses conscious awareness of it. For example, if a person finds the smell of a barn overwhelmingly unpleasant but is compelled to stay in the barn, after a while s/he ceases to respond to the smell. That is, one’s awareness of the offending smell decreases as one habituates to it.

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The mantra is a repetitive stimulus presented to consciousness. It may, therefore, undergo habituation. Some mantric meditators do report this phenomenon—that is, awareness of external stimuli wanes and they gradually cease responding to the environment. Eventually, a quiet ensues with relatively little mental noise. The confused buzzing of mental activity that they normally experience seems to slow down and then cease, and the meditator experiences mental quiet.

Meditation is also of value outside the meditative state because it tends to cleanse the “doors of perception” so that the world is seen with greater clarity. As Ornstein (1972, p. 136) noted:

The concentrative form [of meditation] turns off the normal mode of operation and allows a sensitivity to subtle stimuli that often go unnoticed in the normal mode...It also produces an aftereffect of “fresh” perception when the practitioner returns to his/her usual surroundings.

In other words, although the meditator may habituate to the mantra, when s/he ceases meditating it appears that s/he has not habituated to the usual external stimuli of the nonmeditation state. Upon returning to his or her usual state of consciousness, s/he perceives and responds to external stimuli with greater attention.

Eventually, awareness of the mantra itself may cease. This phenomenon may account for meditation being described as *consciousness without object* or *pure consciousness*, which entails an experience of being void or empty. It is a state in which apparently ordinary ego-awareness of self is gone. The state is so uncharacteristic of the mind as we generally understand it that Buddhists refer to it as a state of “no-mind.” What this means is that we are accustomed to thinking about the mind in terms of its contents. The mind is seen as attending to our mental business; however, there seems to be more to the mind than its activity quotient.

Western accounts of consciousness do not reflect an understanding of consciousness without object. The prevailing view seems to be that the contents of consciousness create consciousness and it is not possible to view the mind as existing without content. The doctrine of the mind as a conglomeration of associations is one of the oldest psychological viewpoints. This classic view of the mind, as created by sensations that are bundled together, is the basis of stimulus–response psychology.

The second major view is the theory of neuropsychology, in which the operation of the brain is believed to be the mind. Neural activity generates consciousness; thus, when the brain dies, so does consciousness or mind. At present, there is no accepted neuropsychological accounting for the phenomenon of meditation; however, meditation is being actively studied by neuroscientists in relation to the characteristic slow-wave brain waves that it produces, by comparing these with the faster wave activity of normal waking consciousness (Pirot, 1976). It is also speculated that

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during meditation, the left (dominant, linguistic) hemisphere is inhibited and the right (nonverbal, perceptual) hemisphere can express itself (Meissner & Pirot, 1983). Meditation may provide a way to access the nondominant right hemisphere and, thus, allow us to discover hidden parts of our mind.

A third predominant view holds that the mind is an information processing device. Per this view, which dominates experimental cognitive psychology, the mind is likened to an electrical device that receives, operates, and responds to information in a computer-like fashion. Thus, the use of a mantra in meditation is a way of feeding redundant information through the system, and the system need not operate actively on the information. Without varying information, there is no need for a system to register, operate on, and store; thus, information processing comes to a halt. The consciousness correlate of this is a “noise-free” mental state. As such, meditation is an anomaly in information processing terms; the theory cannot account for the phenomenon.

These three views and similar others have dominated Western thinking about consciousness to the extent that it is difficult for us to comprehend the notion of a pure mind uncontaminated by thought—a concept that has been traditionally held by Eastern philosophies. The view of the Eastern thinkers is that the objective of meditation is to arrive at a mental state in which the mind can behold itself without content. In this state, it finds itself to be a void. The meditator then realizes that the mind is created and controlled by him/herself and is not at the mercy of incessant stimuli. In this view, the mind is seen as not the repository of mental contents, but, rather, the governor of the person.

The quiet, void state of consciousness has challenged both Western and Eastern mystics alike to attempt description, yet there is general agreement that it cannot be described. In fact, translation of the experience into words is considered impossible because the state is ineffable and wordless. As Chang (1963) noted in *The Song of Mahamudra*, “Though words are spoken to explain the void, the void as such is never expressed.”

It is difficult to give an analogy, but the state of meditation seems to be akin to the peacefulness of mind one experiences when captivated by a beautiful, natural wonder. The mind is absorbed and at rest. The void is not considered to be a negative mental state; rather, it is a state of being in which one’s usual imagery and reaction patterns are put to rest. The person experiences a state in which the center of awareness is consciousness itself, without objects of consciousness.

In light of opposing points of view about consciousness, it would appear that a radically different theory ought to be developed to account for the phenomenon of meditative states of consciousness. Meditation phenomena present a challenge to our theories of mind. The study of mantras, with

their implications for the nature of mental processes, would seem to be an important stage in the development of our understanding of consciousness.

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