

ATTAINMENT OF HIGHER STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS
BY NATURAL MEANS:
NORTH AMERICA: THE VISION QUEST OF THE SIOUX
INDIAN: TRANSCENDENTAL MEDITATION OF THE VEDIC TRADITION

Robert S. Milota
University of San Diego

That solitary communion with the Unseen which was the highest expression of our religious life is partly described in the word hambeday, literally "mysterious feeling," which has been variously translated "fasting" and "dreaming." It may better be interpreted as "consciousness of the divine. (Eastman 1911:6).

This quote by a "civilized" Indian in the early twentieth century is a perfect expression of the vision quest, a practice, in its various forms used by the Indians of North America throughout their history. This "mysterious feeling" was often obtained by natural means. This was unlike the method used by their cousins in Central and South America, where hallucinogenic substances were often the medium to achieve this state of ecstasy, inner communion, altered awareness or whatever one may call this inner experience.

Throughout the world there exist numerous so-called shamanistic techniques and practices to achieve a glimpse into the "other world", or of an alternate reality or consciousness. The shaman would use this for healing; the individual for some insight, healing, or help in his life. The means to achieve this are either natural or drug-induced.

Modern science has now shown what effects the various plants and herbs produced in one's nervous system to help

explain this unique experience called "ecstasy." The various Indian tribes in North America, however, have described incredible visions and miraculous healings without ingesting any substances, but through fasting, dancing, singing, bodily purification, and vision quests. Let us use Charles Eastman's description once again for a clear example:

Having first prepared himself by means of the purifying vapor-bath, and cast off as far as possible all human or fleshy influences, the young man sought out the noblest height, the most commanding summit in all the surrounding region. At the solemn hour of sunrise or sunset he took up his position Sometimes he would chant a hymn without words, or offer the ceremonial "filled pipe." In this holy trance or ecstasy the Indian mystic found his highest happiness and the motive power of his existence. (Ibid: 7-8).

What is happening to produce such visions and profound changes? The Western mind often dismisses such experiences as illusions, hypnosis, or hallucination. In the last twenty years however, scientific research has clearly demonstrated that unique physiological changes occur when one is in a state of meditation. The most thoroughly investigated form of meditation is the Transcendental Meditation Program, introduced to the West by the Indian monk, His Holiness Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Despite the stigma attached by Hollywood, the Beatles, and the sensationalist press, the experience and the results produced by the practice of Maharishi's meditation (commonly called "TM") are known to be valid and a valuable tool to help an individual gain clear insights into his or her "self". And most impressive is the research showing how regular practice of TM reduces stress and actually fine-

tunes one's nervous system.

Yet one may ask, how does this relate to the North American Indians and their ways of gaining inner experience? Both are natural means to alter one's perception or consciousness. By describing the vision quest of the Sioux Indians--the methods and the results--one will see how it has changed the seeker's life, whether for the medicine man, or individual Indian desiring to help himself and his people. Then by analyzing Maharishi's philosophy and techniques (as handed down from the ancient Vedic tradition of India) it will be shown that the mind has the means to turn within.

In other words, the mind is able to transcend so-called ordinary or gross perception to come to the Sacred or inner perception by natural means, and furthermore, this experience is an actual change in one's consciousness--hence the real, lasting results. These results are those revealed by American Indians such as Black Elk and Lame Deer, or, by the thousands of people today who enjoy increased "ecstasy" in their lives' by the regular practice of meditation.

The shaman, whether in Asia, America, Australia or anywhere he is found, is usually described as a unique individual who has obtained, through severe illness, initiation, or vision, a means to transcend to another reality. In that reality the shaman often gains healing powers, abilities to find lost objects and souls, or insights into the future. His vehicle to reach this other reality is usually drugs (accompanied with various rituals).

In contrast, the Sioux vision quest can be undertaken by any member of the tribe (usually males only); however, it is a given for the Sioux shaman or medicine man. It is not a drug-induced vision, but a result of fasting, purification, and the solitary "wait" alongside nature with the sacred pipe.

TM comes from the Vedic tradition that is being revived by Maharishi, and this tradition has shamanistic overtones of ecstasy, transformation, etc., but it is available for anyone who is willing to learn the technique. The Sioux vision quest and TM technique are not exclusive and perhaps show the way for the "shaman" within every person to be revealed, so that one may heal oneself--the ultimate cure.

It has been said that through time the Vedic tradition was distorted and lost (Maharishi 1967: 3). Drug-induced states were used to attempt to mimic the natural ability to transcend. Likewise, this loss may have extended to the American Indian whose roots are in Asia. Yet for some reason the numerous Plains tribes employed a natural way to gain inner experiences, unlike their cousins in the south.

Before describing in more detail the Sioux vision quest, perhaps it would be useful to list nine categories of "mystical" experiences that have been obtained from a survey of literature on the subject. These were used originally to help understand drug-induced experiences:

- (1) Unity. This can occur in either of two forms, internal or external.
- (2) Objectivity and Reality. Insights gained are intuitively felt to be of a more fundamental form of reality than either the

- phenomena of everyday consciousness or the most vivid of dreams or hallucinations.
- (3) Transcendence of Space and Time.
 - (4) Sense of Sacredness.
 - (5) Deeply-felt Positive Mood. This refers to feelings of joy, blessedness, and peace.
 - (6) Paradoxicality. This reflects the manner in which significant aspects of the experience are felt by the experiencer to be true in spite of the fact that they violate the laws of Aristotelian logic.
 - (7) Alleged Ineffability. Often suggested due to the inadequacy of language which in turn arises out of the paradoxicality and uniqueness of the experience.
 - (8) Transiency.
 - (9) Positive Changes in Attitude and/or Behavior. (Campbell 1974: 122-125).

Most of these categories can be recognized in the vision quest experience. With TM, the findings are the same, but with one significant difference; all of the experiences have been supported by intensive scientific research with one "exception"--the transient quality. These states become progressively more permanent (such as feelings of unity and sacredness) with regular practice of TM.

According to the Sioux, the purpose of the vision quest is not only to find a vision, but also to find in this vision help for yourself to lead a better life and help for other people also. (Brown 1974: 45). Usually with help and guidance from a holy man, the seeker goes to a hill, then remains alone to seek his vision in the silence of nature. The Sioux stress humility when going on a quest.

His body was naked, clothed only in a breechcloth, and he wore a furred buffalo robe around his shoulders; his hair was unbraided; and he cried for the vision, tears streaming down his face. All these outward signs . . . were symbols of humility. The vision seeker made himself

pitiabile so that the wakan beings would be moved to hear his prayers. (DeMallie & Parks 1987: 35).

The preparation for the vision quest is probably an important factor in the vision seeker's success: his ability to be alone, to withstand the hardships on the hill, and to gain the vision. Mental and emotional conditioning were necessary prerequisites and thus a holy man aided the seeker, especially if it was one's first quest. For the Sioux, this often occurred between ages 11 and 13. (Mails 1978: 61). The sweat lodge ceremony, usually preceded by fasting, was a purification rite. This enabled the seeker to have a clearer perception and stronger prayers when later alone on the hill. The ceremony is very sacred:

Everything about it has deep meaning, and it is up to the young man who attends this ceremony to purify himself. . . and to be extraordinarily alert and soak in all these meanings. Only thus can he clear his mind and heart of all earthly desires and thoughts, so his own being becomes a clear channel through which the breath of the spirit may blow (Brown 1974: 111).

The heat of the sweat lodge is very intense and very healing. The seeker is purified of physical impurities (this is a scientific fact) and thus mentally and emotionally; he also is freed of impurities. The mind and body are intimately connected, and in the sweat lodge we can see how this principle applies. The continuous singing in the sweat lodge contributes to the healing effect by producing a meditative state. The seeker, after the sweat lodge, can approach the hill and his quest in a clear and steady state of being: "All the vision quester's senses

were alert, waiting for the wakan beings to communicate with him" (DeMaillie & Parks 1987: 36). In this state of awareness and with a complete feeling of humility one awaited the vision.

Lame Deer's biography begins with his vision quest at the age of 16. Left alone on a sacred hill by the medicine man for four days, he awaited a vision. The peace pipe is his special companion and a medium for meditation:

That smoke from the peace pipe, it goes straight up to the spirit world. But this is a two way thing. Power flows down to us through that smoke, through the pipe stem. You feel that power as you hold your pipe; it moves right into your body. (Deer & Erdoes 1972:2).

This pipe has a special history and abounds with symbols unique to the American Indian, - especially the Sioux. Lame Deer calls it their most sacred possession. It is the heart of all their ceremonies:

I knew that within this pipe were all the powers of nature, that within this pipe was me . . . when I smoked the pipe I was at the center of all things, giving myself to the Great Spirit . . . If I mingled my breath with the sacred smoke, I would also mingle it with the breath of every living creature on this earth (Ibid: 252).

On the hill he lost all sense of time and was asleep, yet wide awake (this is identical to the TM experience, verified as restful alertness, a fourth state of consciousness). Lame Deer describes a feeling within called a nagi which he explains as an essence, soul, or spirit, that one cannot see, feel, or taste (this is similar to what Maharishi calls "Being"). This he felt inside him: "Then I felt the power surge through me like a flood." (Ibid: 6).

From that time on he knew he would become a medicine man and he wept with happiness.

Black Elk, in his narrative has similar experiences. He calls the vision quest crying for a vision:

Some people lament in order to ask some favor of the great spirit . . . But perhaps the most important reason for "lamenting" is that it helps us to realize our oneness with all things, to know that all things are our relatives; and then in behalf of all things we pray to Wakan-Tanka that He may give us knowledge of Him who is the source of all things, yet greater than all things (Brown 1971: 46).

Unity is a theme here, and throughout Sioux ritual it is experienced by the seeker. Lame Deer and Black Elk go on to describe their experience and how it affected their lives as medicine men. Most important is the continuous prayer for the people, "that they may live". This is the real goal of the seeker despite any personal needs he may have, for among the Sioux the community comes first and the community extends to all of God's creatures.

The vision received, especially in Black Elk's experience, was not only remembered for life, but often re-experienced. Black Elk's vision also gave him the power to heal sickness among his people. For others a vision did not come, but one only tried again until rewarded with the vision. Some visions were kept secret or shared with a holy man. If the vision was to help the people it was shared with everyone, usually by a special ceremony. Black Elk shared his vision (called the dog vision) to bring relief to his impoverished people. (Neihardt 1972: 157). Also,

individuals who had visions of the same power united together in societies. Therefore, the vision is valuable for the individual and the community. (DeMallie & Parks 1987: 42).

The vision has a long term effect for one's whole life. Whether the vision occurred only once, or it was repeated, the seeker was changed. And, the seeker could go on a vision quest a number of times to help oneself or to help his people, as Black Elk did. A holy man sums this up best in Vison Brown's book:

But remember . . . that you must constantly strengthen these powers and your humbleness and purity by daily being alert to watch and learn from everything you can observe about you . . . Whenever you feel yourself weakening go soon to a hilltop again and send your voices out with the Sacred Pipe to Wakan-Tanka . . . if your heart is good and sincere as it has been on this vision search, the Great Ones will help you (Brown 1974: 131).

Lame Deer neatly sums up his peoples' feelings about the vision quest as opposed to the use of drugs (such as peyote), with these words:

But as I see it now, as I feel it, I want my visions to come out of my own juices, by my own effort - the hard, ancient way. I mistrust visions come by . . . swallowing something. The real insight, the great ecstasy does not come from this (Deer & Erdoes 1972: 206).

Maharishi's Transcendental Meditation also is an "ancient way". The purpose of this meditation is for individual fulfillment or "Cosmic Consciousness", but it too serves humanity:

Cosmic Consciousness is the state where a man lives in the service of the Divine. His thought, speech and action are guided by the divine will. He is an individual but he is a living instrument of God. Whatever he does serves the

cosmic life. He is by nature the most obedient servant of the Divine (Maharishi 1966: 99-100).

He then continues to show how to achieve this state through the regular practice of meditation. Pure Consciousness, Being, or the Unified Field (a term used by physicists) must be contacted, and he describes how this is accomplished through meditation. Our senses are limited in that they experience only the gross levels of the objects they perceive:

If we could develop our faculty of experience through any of the senses, or develop our ability to experience thought before it reaches the conscious level of the mind, and if this ability to experience thought could be so developed that it reached the source of thought, then having transcended the source, it would be possible to reach the transcendental state of pure Being. (Ibid: 51).

Sensory perceptions must come to an end before one reaches Being since the senses belong to the relative field of life. Therefore, whichever sense is used, one must reach the ultimate limit of that sense until one transcends and the experiencer is left alone, the subject with no object of experience. This is somewhat ineffable, yet research seems to show that the mind and body attain a state unlike the common states of waking, dreaming, and sleeping.

Unlike the sacred pipe or singing used by the Sioux, TM uses the medium of thought, starting with the sound quality of a particular sound called a mantra. Thousands are known. Mantras are derived from Sanskrit and mean a sound whose effects are known. Also, each is said to be a name of God. By using the right mantra and the technique properly, one

attains a unique experience of inner peace, positive feelings, oneness, and indescribable joy, often with a special sense of timelessness.

It is usually not as dramatic as the vision quest, but a gradual change occurs to bring the individual to a newer, more fulfilling state of consciousness. The hundreds of scientific experiments performed on meditators verify these inner and outer changes--all from a simple, natural process.

Before giving examples from research, let us look more deeply into the spiritual philosophy and goals of this technique. TM comes from the ancient tradition of the Vedas; the Bhagavad-Gita is a scripture containing the essence of that tradition. In his commentary on the Gita, instead of using terms such as transcending the senses to come to Being, Maharishi describes how TM works, using more traditional, spiritual terms. During meditation one is in a state called "savikalpa samadhi". Increased practice of meditation infuses this state into all aspects of one's existence. Eventually, by regular practice and activity, one achieves union with Brahman or cosmic consciousness:

He whose self is untouched by external contacts knows that happiness which is in the Self. His self joined in Union with Brahman, he enjoys eternal happiness. (chapter five, verse 21).

"Joined in Union with Brahman": this expression, together with "self is untouched by external contacts", presents a criterion whereby a seeker can know he has gained . . . the state of Brahman - cosmic consciousness. While the mind is experiencing objects through the senses, he is awake in the awareness of his self as separate from the field of experience and action. This is in the world and awake in himself. (Maharishi 1967: 267-268).

As already mentioned, the proper technique and use of mantra is the vehicle for this meditation. The Sioux focused on the Sacred Pipe and its sacred meaning. Also, purification, a sincere desire for power and communication with the Sacred, is somewhat analogous to the use of the mantra. Using the spiritual language of the Gita, Maharishi explains how one transcends the ordinary world through worship:

Some yogis perform yagya merely by worshipping the gods, others by offering the yagya itself into the fire that is Brahman. (Chapter four, verse 25). "Worshipping the Gods" is said to be the performance of yagya . . . in order to achieve cosmic consciousness through worshipping, one has to transcend through worshipping. This necessitates entering into the subtle phases of the act of worship. And this is most successfully done in a systematic manner by taking the name or form of the god and experiencing it in its subtler states until the mind transcends the subtlest state and attains transcendental consciousness. Those who are highly emotional, however, may even transcend through an increasing feeling of love for the god during the process of making offerings . . . Transcending the act of worship is said to be the offering of the worship to Brahman. It has the advantage of receiving the blessings of the god and at the same time of helping to develop cosmic consciousness. (Ibid: 213-214).

Maharishi further defines "yagya" as an action which helps evolution. The gods are the deities presiding over the innumerable laws of nature, present everywhere throughout relative life. (Ibid: 144). The Sioux call their gods the Thunder Beings and other terms. Wakan, as mentioned earlier, can be called the supreme god, or God. Likewise, Maharishi, would describe the supreme God or Ishwara, as the Lord of the gods. This is very similar to

the Judeo-Christian tradition of His angels.

Here we see how TM, as a spiritual technique, brings one to a state of transcendent consciousness or ecstasy; describing a state of bliss, timelessness, and other feelings as outlined earlier. A key phrase used by Maharishi--Those who are highly emotional--perhaps shows how the Sioux succeed in reaching an ecstatic state during the vision quest. The Sioux, from the earliest age, is taught reverence for the Sacred, and the vision quest is a highly emotional event (recall, crying for a vision) which brings one to a spiritual state.

TM is easily taught and learned by people of all faiths and beliefs. It produces the same measurable results--subjective and objective--regardless if one believes one's mantra is a name of God or a meaningless syllable. To take an ordinary American on a Sioux vision quest would probably result in little or no spiritual experience. This is a major difference with TM, for the vision quest involves long preparation and a deep desire for a vision, perhaps so emotionally powerful that it transcends the ordinary and produces the ecstasy and vision. The subjective experiences that have been recorded imply this, along with objective results of healing, by men such as Lame Deer and Black Elk, who claim their skill from their visions.

No scientific research has been done on vision quests to measure any changes in one's consciousness. The TM technique, however, is the most thoroughly researched meditation known today. Why bother, one may ask? The answer

is that research shows, without any doubt, that TM produces a unique state of consciousness, unlike the common states known to humankind of waking, dreaming, and sleeping. This could shed some light and understanding on other ways of altering consciousness, like the vison quest, and give more validity to them. In other words, they aren't some form of quackery or superstitious practices. To the American Indians this has been a serious matter, as the white culture, at one time, tried to suppress most of their spiritual practices.

Through modern science the validity of the ecstatic state is being established. Of course, the TM research does not necessarily prove that all shamanistic practices produce profound changes (both subjective and objective). It is a good start in that direction. However, what makes TM unique, is that it is easily learned by anyone and doesn't involve any belief system, dogma, or purificaation rites.

Seated there on the seat, having made the mind one-pointed, with the activity of the senses and throughout subdued, let him practice Yoga for self-purification. (Chapter six, verse 12).

. . . When the mind experiences subtle states of the object of meditation (mantra), it becomes very sharp and refined. . . the breath becomes correspondingly refined, and this soft fine breathing tends to return the nervous system to its normal functioning order . . . the mind gains transcendental consciousness, it reaches its most purified state . . . the whole nervous system gains a state of restful alertness. In this state of body becomes a living instrument tuned to the divine nature. This is the most purified state of the body. When through the practice of . the individual spirit finds its unbounded cosmic nature. . . This is how the practice of . . .

transcendental meditation - results in self-purification (Ibid: 300-301).

Maharishi described this state of restful alertness before any research demonstrated its truth. TM is a form of purification. There is no initial preparation. One just sits comfortably, closes the eyes and meditates, usually for about twenty minutes. The mind and body are purified (freed of stress) during the practice of this meditation. "To support contact with Brahman the nervous system must be in a state of extreme refinement and flexibility." (Ibid: 324). This is possible only when the nervous system is entirely pure. The same theme occurs among the Sioux - purification - alertness - ecstasy.

The research of the last 15 years shows that purification of the nervous system occurs during TM. The mind exhibits an extraordinary alertness, as measured by EEG monitors. Ecstasy? Meditator's descriptions of their experiences can confirm such a deeply personal event.

In 1970, Dr. Robert Keith Wallace studied the physiological effects of the TM technique for his doctoral thesis at UCLA. Since then, hundreds of experiments have shown that TM produces a unique state of restful alertness, indicative of a fourth major state of consciousness. The initial findings have been summarized as follows:

- a) Deep rest as indicated by a marked and significant decrease in oxygen consumption and carbon dioxide elimination.
- (b) Significant decrease in respiration rate, minute ventilation, and heart rate.
- (c) deep relaxation as indicated by a significant and sharp increase in skin resistance.
- (d) normal maintenance of critical physiological

functions as indicated by stable arterial levels of partial pressure of oxygen and carbon dioxide, pH and blood pressure.

- e) significant decrease in arterial blood lactate.
- f) restful alertness as indicated by EEG changes, showing an increase and spreading of alpha and theta wave activity to the central and frontal areas of the brain (Wallace 1986: 58).

What this indicates is that during the 20 to 30 minute practice of TM one is in this unique state of consciousness. The nervous system receives a rest deeper than the deepest sleep whereby impurities (stress) are dissolved. The mind remains awake, but in a unique creative and subtle state of awareness--not a trance. During meditation one is completely aware of inner and outer stimuli (from sounds and odors to thought and feelings). Research supports this, showing increased brain wave coherence, complete synchrony of brain functioning, and heightened awareness. (Ibid: 90-93). Significantly the results are accumulative and evident in one's activity. Meditators display improved memories, reaction times, rapid recovery from illness, decreased use of drugs and alcohol, improved social behavior, and a host of other changes all pointing towards a more balanced, stable, and healthier individual. (Farrow & Orme-Johnson 1977: 230-639).

One can see a blending of science and spirituality, as the researchers prove that something is happening when a person sits quietly with eyes closed and practices this simple mental technique. At this point let us look at selected subjective experiences of meditators while on an

advanced program of meditation and study.

- a) In meditation I had the experience of energy and strength flowing into my body. It was like my mind was a clear channel for energy to flow from an infinite pool into my physical body. Afterwards, my body exhibited increased strength and improved muscle tone.
- b) During meditation I experienced the finest level of creation where the awareness seemed to support and encompass all the aspects of intelligence simultaneously.
- c) During meditation I have experienced the flow of pure consciousness as having a heavenly, sublime sweetness which is usually experienced by all of my senses simultaneously.
- d) I had a moment during meditation when I felt I could know anything, that all knowledge was contained within the wholeness of my own unbounded awareness, and that the knowledge of anything would come to me merely by my thinking about it.
- e) I have often experienced . . . inner wakefulness continuing all throughout a night's sleep, so that even though I was sleeping, inside I felt awake (Ibid: 687).

Many of these experiences are very similar to those of the vision questers. What is significant, however, is that the meditators were being tested for physiological changes during their meditation. The results, as already mentioned, presented a state of consciousness unlike what is commonly experienced.

One can easily surmise that the vision quest and the TM technique are natural means to alter one's awareness and change one's life. East and West have preserved these precious paths which help us realize that special realm of Divine that resides within us and all around us. The search for ecstasy does not have to involve the use of potentially dangerous drugs. The realm of the Sacred, the Divine, our inner spiritual nature (or, as science names it, pure

consciousness or the Unified Field) can be experienced by anyone.

Each culture, religion, or race may have a different name for that same experience. To the Sioux it was attained by a sincere, lifetime search with unique ceremonies and purification rites. Maharishi has brought out an ancient Vedic tradition and made it available for all humankind. Complete transformation, the goal of shamans throughout the world, is also the goal one can attain from meditation--a complete and permanent state of consciousness--enlightenment.

The shaman's goal is usually ecstasy with a more outward expression--"the Soul's ecstatic journey through the various cosmic regions" (Eliad 1951: 417). Regular meditation produces a wholeness in one's inner and outer expression, or total integration. One may attain that state temporarily in meditation, or on the hill of the vision quest, but the goal is permanence. Perhaps it is fitting to conclude with a quote from Maharishi, describing the goal. He gives all credit to his Master--Guru Dev--for reviving this ancient Vedic tradition:

The priceless Transcendental nectar in which saints and seekers lose themselves and forget everything during their deep meditations in silent and barren places - when that same nectar, that very same experience is had in the nearness to the lotus feet of Guru Dev, in an unmoving and stable manner, with the eyes open and in a completely wakeful state, the incomparably blissful Transcendental torrent floods the inside and outside, the mind is drowned in ecstasy. . . In that state, wave upon wave of the bliss of samadhi rises in myriads of forms and channels in complete wakefulness. This is the experience of

jivan mukti, by the grace of the lotus feet of Guru Dev. The experience of the unshakable bliss of samadhi, when we are completely awake, is the jivan mukti, drowned in which the great Mahatmas become Brahman (Maharishi n.d. Lecture Quote).

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