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The depersonalization and derealization experiences of novice subjects while meditating by gazing at a blue vase are strikingly similar to the experiences reported by TM meditators.

Depersonalization and Meditation

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From a review of the literature on meditation and depersonalization and interviews conducted with six meditators, this study concludes that: 1) meditation can cause depersonalization and derealization; 2) the meanings in the mind of the meditator regarding the experience of depersonalization will determine to a great extent whether anxiety is present as part of the experience; 3) there need not be any significant anxiety or impairment in social or occupational functioning as a result of depersonalization; 4) a depersonalized state can become an apparently permanent mode of functioning; 5) patients with Depersonalization Disorder may be treated through a process of symbolic healing - that is, changing the meanings associated with depersonalization in the mind of the patient, thereby reducing anxiety and functional impairment; 6) panic/anxiety may be caused by depersonalization if catastrophic interpretations of depersonalization are present.

Deikman (1963, 1966a) and Kennedy (1976) reported cases in which depersonalization and derealization occurred in individuals practicing meditative techniques designed to alter consciousness. Deikman's cases reported depersonalization and derealization during meditation practice. Kennedy's cases reported these conditions in waking consciousness. In order to determine whether experiences of depersonalization and derealization were occurring in the waking consciousness of meditators, six practitioners of Transcendental Meditation (TM) were interviewed regarding their subjective experiences while engaged in daily activity. All of the persons interviewed reported having at least one experience of what could be classified as depersonalization.

Depersonalization

DSM-II-R (APA 1987) defines depersonalization as: "(1) an experience of being as if detached from and an outside observer of one's mental processes or body; or (2) an experience of feeling like an automaton or as if in a dream" (p. 276). Typically, depersonalization is a state in which an individual experiences a "split" in consciousness between a "participating

self" and an "observing self." The participating self is composed of body, thoughts, feelings, memories, and emotions. The observing self is experienced as a separate, uninvolved "witness" of the participating self, with the perception that all of the normal aspects of personality are somehow unreal and do not belong to the observing self. There is the experience of being split off from one's participating self and "watching" that self behave.

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There are also secondary characteristics of depersonalization, which may include: feelings of dizziness, floating, or giddiness, a feeling of the participating self being "dead," a loss of affective responsiveness, and a feeling of calm detachment (Levy and Wachtel 1978).

Depersonalization, an experience in which the perception of the self is altered, is sometimes accompanied by derealization, an experience in which perception of one's environment is altered. In derealization the environment may take on a two-dimensional or "unreal" quality. Sometimes, normally stable, solid, inanimate objects may be seen to vibrate, or "breathe," to be unsolid, fluid, or alive. Shapes and sizes of objects may change, or objects may disappear altogether. Colors may be especially vivid, and some objects may be seen as "shimmering."

Persons experiencing depersonalization frequently report an especially distinct separation between the observing self and mental activities. When these mental activities are cognitive in nature, the affected individuals complain that it seems as if they are not doing their own thinking, imaging, or remembering because they can observe an independent flow of these phenomena in their minds. When the mental activities are affective in nature, the persons will often complain not that their emotions are changed in quality, but rather that there is a loss of emotions (Taylor 1982).

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Depersonalization also occurs in the nonclinical population. DSM-III-R estimates that single brief episodes of depersonalization may occur at some time in as many as 70% of young adults. This estimate is supported by the findings of Dixon (1963), Sedman (1966) and Trueman (1984). Dixon observed that over half of his college student subjects could recognize descriptions of depersonalization as something they had experienced. When one takes into account the high incidence of depersonalization, in both the clinical and the nonclinical populations, it is not surprising that many authors postulate an organic basis or substrate for its occurrence. Mayer-Gross (1935), for example, considered depersonalization a "pre-formed functional response of the brain": a

physiological disturbance that could be triggered by a wide variety of factors.

The etiology of depersonalization is unknown, but in addition to the disorders mentioned in DSM-III-R, depersonalization has been linked with prolonged sleep deprivation (Bliss et al. 1959), ingestion of hallucinogenic drugs (Felsing et al. 1956; Guttman and Maclay 1936), sensory deprivation (Reed and Sedman 1965), feelings of anxiety (Lehmann 1974; Nuller 1982), and alterations in the person's mode of attention, such as prolonged gazing at a particular object (Deikman 1963, 1966a; Levy and Wachtel 1978; Renik 1978). Psychoanalytic writers on depersonalization have emphasized the defensive function of this experience. Most analytic writers see depersonalization as a means of defending against guilt, painful affects, intense conflict, danger, or conflicting ego identities (Lehmann 1974; Levy and Wachtel 1978; Sharaberg 1977; Stolorow 1979).

Meditation and Deautomatization

Deikman has referred to the effects of meditation as the "de-automatization of the psychological structures that organize, limit, select, and interpret perceptual stimuli" (1966b p. 329). In his experiments on meditation, Deikman (1966a) had inexperienced subjects gaze at a blue vase resting on a simple brown end table. The subjects sat for 30 minutes gazing at the vase and were then interviewed regarding their experiences. Most of Deikman's data came from two subjects, A and G, who completed the longest series of sessions: A, 78 sessions; and G, 106. Some of the reports:

A, 54th session: "It was also as though we were together, you know, instead of being a table and a vase and me, my body and the chair, it all dissolved into a bundle of something which had... a great deal of energy to it but which doesn't form into anything but only feels like a force."
[1966a, p. 105]

G, 62nd session: "... things seem to sharpen and there is a different nature to the substance of things. It's as though I'm seeing between the molecules... the usual mass of solidity loses its density or mass and becomes separate." [1966a, p. 113]

A, 58th session: "The only way I can think of to describe it is being suspended between something and something, because the world all but disappears, you know, the usual world ... so that I'm in a world of converging with that, whatever it is, and that's all there is."
[1966a, p. 113]

G, 74th session: "... solid material such as myself and the vase and the table... seems to be attributed then with this extra property of flexibility such as in its natural, fluid state." [1966a, p. 113]

The obvious depersonalization and derealization experiences reported by Deikman's novice subjects while meditating are strikingly similar to the experiences reported below by my more experienced informants outside of meditation. A key to understanding these phenomena may be in studies involving repetitious and stabilized stimuli. Piggins and Morgan (1977) suggest that the stabilized retinal images and repetitious auditory input that characterize some meditation techniques (including TM) may be considered as evoking mild sensory deprivation conditions. This is consistent with the hypothesis of deautomatization. Sensory deprivation conditions may be interpreted as the mechanism by which the meditator "short-circuits" the automatic functioning of the perceptual and cognitive systems. The diffusion and partial or complete loss of boundary experienced by Deikman's subjects in gazing at the vase is consistent with experiments on visual fixation in which geometrical shapes were observed to fragment, disappear and reappear, as a whole or in part (Evans and Piggins 1963).