"Crying out of Recognition": Experiences with Meditative Practices in a New Religious Movement

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A great deal of attention has been focussed on the larger social environments which give rise to and 'explain' New Religious Movements (NRMs) (Stark and Bainbridge 1980; Wallis 1984; Beckford 1986). Scholars know that in this environment individuals may develop new ways of being that enlarge or replace former notions of the self and the world (Beckford 1986), yet too little has been made of the understanding that members have of their own experience within such groups; a description of their experience within such groups, in their own words, has yet to be heard. In this study I propose to access such self-understanding through their experiences of meditative practice. To this end, I interviewed members of an NRM in Quebec, Canada, specifically, "The i and I Art of Living Foundation"—or "i & I" as it is known to its members. I use the term "NRM" for lack of a better one, though the Foundation is not considered a religion by its founder or its members, but rather, in their own words, "a spiritual, self-development movement."

The Foundation

The Foundation's roots are in India, with offshoots in Europe and North America, so the organization may be termed an International NRM.[1] Its leader is Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, a spiritual master from Bangalore, India. (He is not the well-known musician of the same name.) In Canada the movement began in the late 1980s when devotees in Halifax wrote and implored Shankar to come to the West and eventually he did make visits.

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From these visits an organization grew up around his teachings, and in 1991 land was bought in Quebec for a retreat facility. Today, the Foundation in Canada is a registered charity, involved in service projects around the world.

The Foundation provides a variety of meditative techniques to its members, "practices" (see Lexicon at the end of this study) which result in "altered states of consciousness" (ASCs).[2] One of the most central of these practices is *sudarshan kriya*, a technique that involves breathing in a specific rhythmic pattern. (This technique was cognised in 1982 by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar.) It is intended to help center the participants' awareness "in the present moment" as well as to release emotional and other blockages. Thus the introductory workshop which "i & I" offers participants centers around this technique and is called "The Healing Breath Workshop." Participants who have completed this program are encouraged to take part in weekly *kriya* or *satsang* (see Lexicon), and at least once a year in extended silence courses (4–7 days) in which a variety of other techniques are taught.[3] It was at a number of these 'courses' that the research described further below took place.

Meditation and Description

In terms of meditative experience, research has tended to take, on the one hand, an approach through positivist science of the physiological concomitants of meditative experience, or, on the other hand, the social-scientific questionnaire approach. As to the first, there are many studies based on objective measures of physiological changes during meditative practices. Indeed, evidence suggests that there are in fact physiological changes that are specific to meditation. However, this research is far from doing justice to the meditators' experience (Tart 1990, 215). Measures of autonomic reactivity do not tend to include informants' perceptions of their own experiences. The point then is that physical or material measures cannot be interpreted as indicative of states or of the nature of the experience of such states for the individual (Echenhofer and Coombs 1987, 167).

Questionnaires have also been utilized in social scientific research on meditation. In such cases a researcher creates categories such as attention, memory, imagery, emotions, time sense, and so forth, for analyzing the meditative experience (Brown et al 1988; Gelderloos and Beto 1989). However, these categories are based on the researcher's conceptualizations of what meditation experience is and not the informant's own conceptualizations of his or her experience. As such the power in the research equation is held by the researcher, and of course, it is the researcher's own knowledge that limits what can be learned.

My initial research question concerned the nature of the practice for the practitioner. This question came out of my own years of experience with a variety of meditative practices. As a seasoned meditator, meditation teacher and anthropologist, when I reviewed the meditation research I was surprised by the lack of attention that had been paid to the meditators' experiences as described by themselves—their own understandings of what their experiences may or may not have been. I was also impressed by the implicit assumption on the part of researchers that there were 'results' of meditation to be measured. It is my conviction that by empowering the informant, and not using preset categories for meditation experience, the meaning and emotional components of experiences with meditation, whether designated "peak" or "altered states of consciousness" or otherwise, will come to view more naturally. Perhaps such self-descriptions will even surprise the researcher or reader with some new insight into human nature or experiencing.

Methodology

In order to address this lack in meditation research, my research agenda was to let the practitioners of meditative practices tell the stories of their experiences with practices that were the most meaningful for them. This was the core of the in-depth interviews. As a researcher, then, my task was to bring into language meditators' experiences, so the first task I and my informants were faced with was establishing a lexicon adequate for expressing these experiences and the meanings associated with them. In our culture there is a dearth of ready-made language with which individuals who practice such techniques can express themselves when it comes to discussing these experiences. The researcher may well not be able to ask the appropriate research question if she does not have the concepts with which to ask, and such concepts are not available in everyday English.

In solving this problem I relied on Given's method of "thick participation" (Given 1993), an innovation on Geertz's "thick description" (Geertz 1973). Given suggests that anthropologists are better able to theorize ritual experiences by themselves experiencing the ritual and attending to their own subjectivity. I found that thick participation allowed me to experience something of the nature of the ritual state of my informants, so that I was able to realize the meaning of such states and thus able to ask the right questions.[4] Thick participation also gave me access to the specialized lexicon used by my informants to talk about their experiences. As an insider, I took part in the functions and practices of the NRM; this, then, is insider anthropology, or anthropology done by an individual who is part of the group that is to be studied.

The lexicon I have constructed is a compendium of words, concepts and analogies that meditators use in order to discuss their experiences. Despite the difficulties of putting into words experiences that are rarely talked about in our culture, the language of the interviews achieved a beauty of its own, as individuals strove to find the analogies and terms to express what had happened to them during meditation. My being a practitioner and teacher of meditation and related practices was obviously helpful in establishing this lexicon and of course it also structured the knowledge given to me. This research then provides understanding of the practitioner's experiences with meditative practices by using anthropological qualitative methods designed to bring these meditative experiences into language.

My mode of finding informants was designed to prevent informants from seeing me in an authoritarian role. Many, though not all, of the interviews were done in the environment of a meditation retreat, using a tape recorder. Rather than announce myself at a meeting and ask for volunteers, which I felt would be donning the public role of 'the researcher', I decided to find my informants individually. I selected the individuals and my only criterion was their willingness to talk to me, although I tended to avoid those higher up in the organization in order to try to avoid 'motivated' informants. I allowed my informants to generate information, although I had set topics that I wanted to cover. These, therefore, were guided conversations or in-depth interviews (Spradley 1979, 58). I found it necessary to discuss my own experiences of ASCs with informants and thus the interviews had a particularly vulnerable quality to them for me. My experiences were not data for the purposes of my research but rather a contextualization for my informants' understanding.

Demographic Features of "i & I"

Before we enter into these interviews, certain demographic features of "i & I" members are worth our attention.[5] In the summer of 1994 I administered 171 questionnaires to participants at "i & I" courses and workshops. From these I discovered that the age spread bulges significantly around the thirty-five to forty-five mark, 61% of attendees being in the 30–49 year old category. A high percentage of attendees have never married or are not currently married (approximately 35% are married, 33% never married, 22% divorced, 5% separated, 2% widowed). Most striking of the marital statistics is the fact that of all the American males who completed the questionnaire, 46% were never married. There are a great many more single middle-aged men involved than one would find in a general population sample. Furthermore, 57% of attendees had no children even though they are in their prime childbearing years. While

recording interviews, I had become increasingly aware that the group in which I was participating in was not just providing a milieu for meditative experiences, but was also at times a group that provided resources and kinship, somewhat akin to a family. In fact, the guru speaks of the retreat center as home for members, and teachers within the group refer to the group as family.

These courses and workshops were advertised in both Canada and the United States, but since the retreat center in Quebec was, at the time, the only North American Center, a high proportion of the attendees were in fact American. Of those who filled out questionnaires, 68% were from the United States and only 22% from Canada; the remainder were of various other nationalities, including British and German. I also found that the level of education of the people I met was high as compared to the wider population: 73% had finished high school, 30% had achieved a B.A., and 21% an M.A. Concurrent with the high level of education is the finding in the occupation category that 52% of respondents were in the professional/technical category. I concluded that income levels were higher than average and this was certainly borne out by observations during fieldwork. This NRM then is a highly select group vis-à-vis the wider context of society. However, it is clear, as the reader will see in the following 'tales', that these individuals were seeking meaning, and for some this need was met by their experiences within "i & I."

During fieldwork for this study,[6] I interviewed thirteen individuals to record what they understood their experiences to be during meditative practices and the impact of these experiences on their view of themselves and their world. I organized verbatim material from these interviews into a range of themes, and the following is an introduction to these themes organized around my informants' own stories.

Tales of Meditative Experience

The first theme to be considered here is *religious background*. Of the thirteen informants interviewed, six had become disillusioned with the religious background of their birth and some severely so. The following speaks of their experiences:

> Susan: We're going to talk just generally about your spiritual experiences ...what kind of religious upbringing did you have?
>
> Tom: I had a Catholic upbringing. I went to a Catholic grade school and probably about the age of twelve or fourteen when I entered high school I became completely disillusioned with going to church, so at that time I felt like my religious life ended....Personally I feel like I received quite a lot of psychological damage going to the Catholic grade school and

church. I still have bitter feelings about my religious upbringing.

And another experience of disillusionment:

Susan: Did you actually start going to church again?

Shirley: No. Before I was very on the outs with God. I was very angry with him. I said I don't care, I don't like your way....So I sort of left it. I said Good-bye, I've had it, you know. I was kind...and I kind of thought if He (God) can't be at least as good as I...I don't want him. That was the sort of discussion I had with God. I don't like your way. You're too hard. If my children did something, if they were wicked even I would forgive them and it seemed to be that the church didn't have that forgiveness. So therefore I thought if that's God I don't really want him.

I followed this topic from the first round of interviews with a discussion during a second series of interviews on whether there had been a change in religious beliefs subsequent to experiences with meditative practices. Of those who discussed this topic, a definite change had taken place. The following is one story:

Susan: And do you feel that these experiences have changed your religious beliefs?

John: Yeah, I don't take religion all that much serious...I've become much more spiritual and much less religious because religion deals much more with concepts and ideas....I feel like [what I am] moving more into is love and faith.

Susan: Is that what you would call spiritual?

John: Yeah more interested in spirit and less interested in the idea...I feel like I'm moving...less to belief and more to faith. Faith...that I don't have to know what's happening and away from a belief system where I figure out everything else.

Susan: Where you get it all tied up?

John: Yeah in case I miss somethin'.

Susan: Gotta get it safe!

John: Gotta get it safe, yeah cos God's gonna condemn me or somethin'. It's just so ridiculous I don't have to put everything into a system. That's so disgusting it's so useless.

This story speaks to the fact that as a result of experiences with meditative practices, religious beliefs were changed in those who were inter-

viewed. Interestingly, when analysis of religious preference was undertaken using quantitative methods, 32% of respondents stated no religion. The largest religious affiliation was Catholic (16%), followed by Jewish (11%), Protestant (10%), and Hindus (4%). Given that "i & I" is a religious group it is interesting that the largest single religious affiliation is that of no religion. The distinction, as outlined by the informant above, must be made between philosophy and religion. This appears to be a rejection of organized religion as such, though these individuals would define themselves as spiritual or religious people following a philosophy or life-style but not a religion. The qualitative stories describe this process.

The next theme is *initial motivations for practicing meditation*. This is a collection of stories of how individuals initially became involved with the group. The majority of individuals became involved through the influence of friends. Even when they did not feel a drive to experience meditative practice, they were influenced to do so by friends or family. All of my informants identified 'significant others' as giving them the initial motivation to learn meditative practices.

The core of the interviews was my informants' descriptions of their most meaningful meditative experiences. I collected these stories together under the theme "experiences with meditative practices." Analyzing the data from these conversations, it became apparent that there was no one type of 'peak', or ASC, experience. The experiences were idiosyncratic, but were sometimes characterized by states of oneness or flow, where the individual felt herself to be at one with her surroundings. The state of 'oneness' with the rest of creation was described by three out of thirteen informants. The following conversation describes the onset of such an experience:

> Susan: As far as experiences go, are there any that stand out?
>
> Corey: There are probably quite a few. There's been some quite remarkable...I know there's been occasions where I've been with him [the guru] and there's been a lot of people and I totally lose track of myself as a separate individual...it's a feeling or experience of [unity], at a fundamental level of a connection between everyone and it is a very peaceful, very fulfilling sensation to the body and to the soul, very complete, very natural.

I would suggest on the basis of listening to many such tales of ASCs that the technique of *sudarshan kriya* and related techniques practiced by these informants allowed them to come to experience states radically different from those they were accustomed to. Awareness was brought to bear on areas of experience that are outside of normal awareness for westerners (Laughlin et al 1983, 46; Laughlin et al 1990). Unity was experi-

enced with others, but a unique differentiation of self was maintained at the same time. After such experiences of oneness or flow, the self may be reordered at a higher level of complexity than previously (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, 41).

Under the third theme, *changes in self-image and the view of the world subsequent to meditative experiences*, 'tales' were told of a shift in worldview subsequent to meditative experiences. My informants stated that their worldview was charged with less negative emotion than previously. (By worldview I do not denote some comprehensive system of belief but rather a more experiential feel for what reality is.) From the interviews, initial indications are that the view of the self became more positive.[7] Of five conversations with individuals in which the issue of the change in worldview was discussed, all five definitely noticed a change in worldview subsequent to the meditative experiences. A taxonomy derived from meditators' reports of their experiences of changes in lived reality due to meditative experiences ranges from "seeing the world as wonderful" to "a greater appreciation of the environment." The experience of "seeing the world as wonderful" is recounted below:

> Agnes: Everything seems wonderful. The world's a beautiful place and people are beautiful; this I try to see in people that I don't really admire all that much.

Here are two further examples of changes in worldview:

> "I have a lot more respect for everything in my environment, everything, even rocks."

> "I don't see what's happening around me to be so vitally, so horribly important that it's worth a fight every day..."

One individual was able to take what happened to him in the world more "lightly" and was less intimidated by others, while another felt she was more compassionate and less judgmental. This change in worldview as a result of meditative experience is core to understanding members' commitment to the group.

A further theme I discussed with members was the issue of *a language to describe spiritual experiences* and the need for a language to speak of the meditator's experiences to others. It emerged that when an individual did seek such a language, the terms and expressions were found from courses with teachers of meditative techniques, from gurus, from poetry, from Sanskrit and from books. Such language is essential in order to discuss the experiences of ASCs. I was struck by the extremely idiosyncratic way in which experiences are expressed. In particular, I was impressed at the

beauty of what I heard in comparison to my own rather earthy appreciation of spirituality. It was not without difficulty that we rendered into discourse the meditative experience for which there was neither a comparable context nor vocabulary in the West. We had consciously to develop an adequate language in order to converse. On occasion we paused while we searched for terms with which to continue our discussion. The fact that both researcher and informant had been subject to similar experiences allowed for the creation of discourse which otherwise could not have occurred.

The following conversation illustrates how experience may be represented in conversation, a little at a time. It also illustrates some of the difficulties for both fieldworker and informant in using language to describe inner experiences. The fact that both fieldworker and informant have been exposed to similar processes facilitates the understanding between the two parties.

> Susan: The nature of the experience itself, the basis, could you tell me something about the feelings, sensations associated with...
>
> John: Mhmm. And it's more of, I find emotions flow more, both positive and negative ones.
>
> Susan: When you say flow...?
>
> John: What I see it as, is something that's more like I'm getting more freed up as far as emotion goes. Meaning emotions float more and more ups and downs.

The silences that I came across in my research were as interesting as the conversations. Thus the areas in which I lack results, or where results were difficult to obtain, are worth mentioning. In the area of NRM research there has been a dearth of information about emotional concomitants of spiritual experience (Beckford 1990). Hoping to investigate the emotional nature of meditative experiences, I specifically included emotion in my questions to informants in order to pay attention to an area that has been systematically neglected. However, it was with difficulty that I collected responses to such questions. Many of my informants dried up, seemed at a loss for words and generally were unable to talk about emotional experiences.

I believe that these questions were difficult for some of them to answer because they did not have ready access to their emotional states and did not customarily discuss them. However, ten out of the thirteen informants were able to relate some information. A few were able to penetrate deeper in this area using analogies—such as childbirth, falling in

love, and sex—for their experiences. Their choices of analogy obviously had deep personal meanings attached to them. Paradoxically these yielded some of the most fruitful results of the whole project. The following illustrates the intensity of these experiences as my informant likens a particular meditative experience to orgasm:

> Mary: I'd been having a very thoughtful 'program'...but toward the end the best I can describe is almost, a bit embarrassing, it was like a spiritual orgasm almost.
>
> Susan: I've had that.
>
> Mary: That was the first time it ever happened to me. It brings tears to my eyes even to think about it now and I only can use the word orgasm because it's the only experience I've got in daily life that is that absorbed and that clean, there is nothing else there but that feeling, but it was completely in my head and my chest. It was just phenomenal...I don't want to minimize it, I don't want to put it on such a crude physical level, because it wasn't that way, but it's the only other experience that I've had that is a little bit similar. It was completely non-physical. It was amazing, just amazing....

The experience of recalling and re-telling the emotional content of meditative practices was sometimes sufficiently intense to cause weeping during the conversations. The following is an example:

> Susan: Could you tell me about the emotional quality of the experiences?
>
> Mary: Incredible joy, incredible joy. Whenever I'm telling you about the recognition of what's inside is outside I could not control my laughter and at the same time crying. Not crying out of sadness, but crying out of recognition, about how beautiful it is. [She cries.] After thirty-seven years or whatever I am to have recognized that and it's really so simple. It was just amazing and now the emotions are joy and lightness.

This experience gave me some indication of how important these experiences are for the individual and how strong the drive to attain such states may be.

There was also a silence in the research around *the relationship with the guru* or teacher. The meditators follow the teachings of a guru and much of the language they use to discuss and understand their meditative experiences is derived from their guru's teachings, among other sources. However, when answering questions about the nature of the relationship between the individual and the guru, there was very little information given. I asked all informants about this topic, but few responded to the

question. Others who responded were sufficiently non-committal that I received very little material in this area. However, of the conversations where the subject of the guru was discussed, the emphasis seemed to be mainly on a personal relationship with deep feelings associated with the relationship.

Conclusion

From tales such as these I gained some insight into the deeply meaningful experiences some individuals have within this particular NRM. For this research I did not focus on the social environment which gives rise to NRMs and the explanation for their existence,[8] nor did I concern myself, as previous meditation research has, with measurable 'results'. Instead I paid attention to the members' understanding and interpretation of their personal experience within this meditative group. I sought to record their experiences in their own words without pre-categorization. I found that these are individuals who experience ASCs and are influenced by significant others to do so. The experiences they have with ASCs are often deeply meaningful for them, in personal ways. For some individuals, their view of the world becomes more positive after exposure to such experiences. However, they are unwilling to discuss their experiences with the guru and have been disillusioned with traditional forms of religion—yet they still seek spiritual experience. What we have here, it would seem, is largely a group of single people who lack the traditional kin structures typical of their age group. The "i & I" family provides these people with quasi-kin structures and the spiritual experiences they crave. I conclude that these disparate needs, spiritual and social, are fulfilled in a community such as this.

Appendix: A Meditator's Lexicon

(The following are meditator's terms that appear in the interviews and this paper)

Breathing practice: a meditative practice using breath to focus the attention inwards.

Flow: an experience derived usually from meditative practices where the individual experiences self and other as one, without obstacles to expanded awareness.

Guru-disciple relationship: the relationship between the individual meditator and his teacher of meditation, sometimes characterized by devotion but not necessarily so, but often characterized by intense emotion.

In the present moment: according to the 'knowledge' too much of human time is

spent in the past or the future, and thus meditative practices are designed to bring awareness into the present moment.

Kriya: literally an action, but in this context designates the meditative practice of *sudarshan kriya*.

Meditating: to sit quietly with eyes closed while practicing a technique which directs the awareness from outer phenomena inwards.

My program: a term to cover a variety of complementary practices done in a specific order each day.

Practices: any of a number of breathwork (*pranyama*), bodywork (*yoga*) and meditative techniques.

Satsang: chanting and dancing in group, as well as listening to teachings and doing practices together.

Spiritual orgasm: an experience that may occur during meditative practices where energy arises within the body and rushes to the head accompanied by physical sensations of sensual bliss (*kundalini* for those who know something of yogic practices and experiences).

Endnotes

1. This study of meditative practices with "i & I" is part of a larger, ongoing sociological study (qualitative and quantitative) of "i & I" as an NRM. NRMs have been typologised as world-rejecting, world-affirming, or world-accommodating (Wallis 1984). "i & I" is neither distinctly world-affirming (i.e., one becomes more successful in the world by developing your full potential) nor world-rejecting in its hermeneutic; rather, if anything it leans more in the direction of world-accommodation (i.e., the world is there but the spiritual life is more important).

2. There are a variety of experiences that I would categorize as ASCs, experiences that for this group result from meditative practices. In general I would define an ASC as a state dissimilar to the waking state of consciousness that is also neither a dream nor a sleep state. Associated with such states are increased perception, out-of-body awareness, differing bodily parameters and perceptions of the body, and differing mental processes. Subsumed under my categorization of ASC are experiences of unity, transcendence, alterations of perception, perceptions of outer change, dispassionate awareness, and the process of unity becoming diversity (Buber 1958, 6). One theorist believes that there is an individual level of susceptibility to ASCs (Armour 1969), known as a threshold, and those who do meditative practices are more prone to such experiences. There is also the meditator's own definition of an ASC as will be seen in this paper.

3. "i & I" teaches courses in various parts of North America. Many of the participants in the North American courses are presently, or were once, members of the Transcendental Meditation Movement led by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Sri

Sri Ravi Shankar was also once intimately involved with T.M., although, interestingly, the British followers of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar are mostly drawn from the followers of Sai Baba, not from T.M.

4. Through thick participation in ritually-produced states of mind, the anthropologist constructs a link between the daily life of waking consciousness and states of consciousness that are induced by rituals such as meditative practices, so that a new understanding of these ASCs may be gained by the researcher and her informants. This research methodology is important both for anthropologists as well as other scholars who would understand the experiences of groups other than their own (such as NRMs). Using thick participation as a method results in new information on ritually produced states of mind and their meaning. As the ethnographer experiences something of the nature of the ritual state of her informants, she empowers the voice of the informant to report these experiences and their meanings.

5. Data on NRMs is hard to come by due to problems with entry to the field. For example, I proposed a qualitative and quantitative study of candidates for The Natural Law Party but was turned down by the Head Office of the Transcendental Meditation Movement in Canada.

6. Fieldwork and interviews took place in August of 1991 in Bangalore, India, July and October of 1992 in Quebec, August 1992 in the U.K. and July 1994 once again in Quebec. The location was in each case a meditation retreat. In Quebec this took place at a retreat center owned by the organization and the informants were course participants in a week-long meditation course. At these courses there were 100–200 participants.

7. While my informants in this part of my study were usually quite positive about how their worldview had changed, another informant, interviewed in a different setting shortly after having been diagnosed with a terminal illness, had an understandably negative worldview and sense of self. "i & I" members still undergo life crises but they generally feel that their life is more positive since their initiation into meditative practices.

8. Neither did I focus on the movement's structure. However, I did find "i & I" to be a 'low-commitment', relatively dispersed, non-hierarchical organization that has not acquired the problems of boundary maintenance and control found in other NRMs (Galanter 1989, 111).

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