

Hypnotic Trance - Our Unclaimed Inheritance

Have you ever been deeply absorbed in a good book, engrossed in a movie, or enraptured by a beautiful sunset? What was that like for you? I'm sure it was deeply pleasurable and would you be surprised to know that what you had just experienced was a mild hypnotic trance. Trance is defined as a state of relaxed and absorbed attention, and contrary to popular belief is not some outlandish, far-out phenomenon, but one with which we are all intimately acquainted.

Our ideas about hypnosis, the study and understanding of trance and how to create it, have been deeply influenced in Western culture by many stereotypes and half-truths or downright misrepresentations. Many people have attended a stage hypnosis show, or watched it on television, and been amazed, whether shocked or entertained, by the hypnotist's apparent 'control' over his subjects as he got them to do the most outrageous and ridiculous things on stage. Worse still, we think of the character Svengali, in the novel *Trilbi*, who turns a naive country girl into a sophisticated socialite, in return for sexual favours, all through hypnosis. Svengali was immortalised in the English language and the word Svengali has found its place in the dictionary as a synonym for a shady character. Little wonder then that many people simply put hypnosis into the category of weird and not so wonderful phenomena exemplified by 'The Twilight Zone'.

As with all half-truths, the grain of truth is that the real history of hypnosis has also been characterised by controversy. From its use in ancient India as a transformational technology, and in Ancient Greece at the famed Oracle of Delphi, hypnosis re-appeared in Western culture in the flamboyant character Mesmer, whose costumes, theatrics and miracle cures earned him the wrath of the medical establishment of that time. Eventually, and somewhat disingenuously, he was finally discredited as a charlatan. It was only early in the previous century that hypnosis was grudgingly accepted by the medical community as a legitimate and effective treatment modality, through the pioneering efforts of a growing community of medical doctors such as Milton H. Erickson M.D., who risked censure and discipline by their peers in courageously pursuing the truth in a search for even more effective ways of helping people.

We have many synonyms for the trance experience, all of which serve to disguise the fact that what is happening subjectively is the identical experience. We speak of reverie, day dreaming, active or guided imagination, meditation, the Relaxation Response and contemplation, to name a few, all of which imply states in which the mind is somewhat awake while the body is somewhat asleep. And that state we all experience at least twice a day, the moments after when we first awaken in the morning and those just before we fall asleep at night. Numerous times during the day, the same phenomenon occurs - relaxing in a warm bath, bored in a classroom or lecture, staring vacantly into space while a tedious meeting drags on,

captured by the sparks and dance of colours as we gaze into a fire place, assisted perhaps by a sumptuous glass of wine or two. Then there is the natural trance of a never-ending road on a long drive, where somehow, a natural intelligence greater than our own, somehow manages to drive the car safely, for the most part, while our mind wanders. Finally, there is the physiological response known as 'The Ultradian Rhythm' a forty-minute cycle of alertness and relaxation identified by Dr Ernst Rossi M.D in his book 'The Psychobiology of Mind Body Healing'. Schools and colleges recognise this by limiting a lecture period to fifty minutes, so that students will not get too sleepy and can start the next lesson somewhat refreshed by the natural break.

So while we may be comfortable with all these naturally occurring trance experiences, the mind balks at the idea of being put 'under' - a misnomer for what is technically referred to as the 'induction' of hypnosis, which is deliberately going into trance through the assistance of another person or doing a particular technique on oneself. This is a great pity, for, as we shall see, there is far more to the benefit of trance than its pleasant relaxing character, which in itself has been shown to have valuable healing potentials.

There are a number of myths about the hypnotic trance state, which we would do well to address. The biggest of these is the idea of being under the 'control' of another. No one who chooses not to go into trance can be

hypnotised against his or her will. In an interesting slight of mind however, if a person can be convinced that they do not have control, inevitably, they will participate, not recognising that they have in fact co-operated in their own induction. All hypnosis is in fact self-hypnosis, a fact I have my students prove for themselves by having them make up their minds simply to refuse to go along with the attempts of the hypnotising student.

A related issue is that of the fear, also unfounded, that the hypnotist could get the subject to do something unethical. In study after study, people who have been hypnotised and then told to do something that they perceived as being unethical have inevitably 'popped out' of trance. Impressive as the skills of a good stage hypnotist may be, no one has ever done anything in a trance, which at some level they haven't agreed to.

Many people are surprised at their first experience of hypnosis that it seems so natural and familiar. "I couldn't believe how relaxed and comfortable I felt through the whole process" Jenny Andrews told me after her first hypnosis session, "and I could hear and remember everything that you said." This highlights another myth, that in hypnosis one's normal functions of memory, self-awareness and even seeing and hearing normally are somehow disconnected. A trance state may vary in its extent of relaxation, from light to medium to deep. It is true that in a very deep trance certain 'hypnotic phenomena' such as amnesia and distortions of time, space and body may

occur; these two are not unheard of in everyday experience either, and are certainly not essential conditions of being in a trance.

"What if I can't come out?" is another question I am sometimes asked in my trainings. This too is impossible. The most that could happen is that the person would fall into a restful sleep, awakening in due course when their bodies had had enough.

The final myth is that there are certain people who can't be hypnotised. Not only is this not true, but it is impossible, as we have seen in our discussion of trance as a naturally occurring state which we all experience many times during the day. Like any skill however, people do vary in their ability and can improve with practice. If we believe that we can't be hypnotised then we have simply hypnotised ourselves into believing that; and that is exactly what we will experience.

So why learn to explore this state if it is happening naturally anyway? The answer is because of the often-amazing benefits of being able to do so consciously for purposes of inner healing, personal growth and change. For in this state of relaxed alertness, our normal and habitual patterns of limiting beliefs and thinking can be suspended while we offer ourselves positive and beneficial suggestions. If you have ever tried to make a personal change through willpower alone, you will know how difficult it can be. Just think of the sad and limited staying power of most new years resolutions. It is far more

effective to engage the resources of a deeper wisdom in our body-mind. In future articles we will explore just how this can be done by anyone with a sincere desire, the willingness to set aside some time for disciplined exploration, and no serious problems requiring professional assistance.

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