

Meditation and the Nonlocal Mind

| Dean Radin, PhD |

One of the barometers of mainstream popular culture in the United States is the cover story in *Time* magazine. In 1975, a cover story reported on “The TM Craze,” referring to the rising popularity of the Transcendental Meditation movement. In 1987, the cover featured actress Shirley MacLaine holding a quartz crystal, with the description, “A strange mix of spirituality and superstition is sweeping across the country.” In 1996, a cover story addressed the question, “Can prayer, faith and spirituality really improve your physical health? A growing and surprising body of scientific evidence says they can.” In 2001, the “Power of Yoga” was on the cover. In 2003, we learned about “The science of meditation.” By 2014, the cover story was on “The mindful revolution: The science of finding focus in a stress-out, multitasking culture.”

In a mere four decades, the tone of these articles evolved from bemusement at the fringe beliefs of crazy hippies, to angst over a rising tide of superstitions, to surprise that those hippies were apparently on to something, to science discovering something new and exciting, and then to widespread beneficial practices with obvious value. This shift in opinion is reminiscent of how humans always seem to react to new ideas. As Arthur Schopenhauer, the 18th century German philosopher, put it, “All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident.”

When it comes to meditation, we are now firmly in the self-evident stage, because on December 14, 2014, *60 Minutes*, the long-running news program on the CBS television network, featured a glowingly positive segment on mindfulness meditation. An accompanying feature on the CBS website was an article listing the “10 dangerous myths about meditation.” They included

“Meditation is New Age nonsense,” “Meditation is a religion,” “Meditation is just relaxation,” “You can’t meditate if you can’t sit cross-legged,” and so on. The media used to endlessly repeat such warnings with a straight face. Today such pronouncements are recognized in hindsight as little more than reactionary impulses.

Given this shift in mainstream opinion, what else may become self-evident about meditation in another few decades? One possibility is that science will rediscover something that had been known for thousands of years, and then suppressed, and then impulsively tossed into the wastebasket of superstitious beliefs. That something is the original purpose of meditation and the consequences of engaging in disciplined practice. While it is now widely accepted that meditation can lead to lowered stress and a healthier mind and body, that is not all it does. The rest of the story is more interesting and more revolutionary. Indeed, most meditation researchers today are unwilling to talk about it in public for fear of damaging their reputations.

The unspeakable original goal of meditation is *enlightenment*, also called achieving a state of *illumination*, or to become *awakened*. This refers to the experience that one’s personal identity, ego, or self is identical to the “universal Self.” The latter Self is personalized in traditional religions as God, Allah, Jehovah, Brahman, or by innumerable other names. But it can also be regarded as a wholly impersonal religious or spiritual feeling. As Einstein¹ put it,

The religious geniuses of all ages have been distinguished by this kind of religious feeling, which knows no dogma and no God conceived in man’s image; so that there can be no Church whose central teachings are based on it. Hence it is precisely among the heretics of every age that we find men who

were filled with the highest kind of religious feeling and were in many cases regarded by their contemporaries as Atheists, sometimes also as saints (p. 21).

Science has yet to study the ontological claims of enlightenment because it is not clear how one would go about objectively exploring a universal Self. Fortunately, before enlightenment occurs, something else is said to happen that *is* amenable to scientific study—various superpowers arise. At least, that’s what yogis, sages, saints, and mystics across all cultures have told us for millennia. From today’s secular, skeptical perspective, how shall we interpret such fantastic claims? This was the question that I explored in my book, *Supernormal*.² To help narrow the scope of that book, I focused on claims about the development of super abilities in the tradition of classical Yoga. These abilities are called the *siddhis*, a Sanskrit term meaning “attainment” or “perfection” as a result of meditative practice.

Within western culture today, such claims tend to evoke reactions ranging from awe to anger. There is a substantial literature on the formative roles of mysticism, miracles, and the supernatural within religious scholarship. But most scientists—and for that matter most scholars of comparative religion—are taught that claims of supernormal abilities only reflect the poor state of knowledge in ancient times, and as such, such tales are unworthy of serious academic consideration, except perhaps as fodder for the study of legends and mythology.³

However, as tensions over the health benefits of meditation are dissolving, a new research agenda is forming. Part of that agenda can be traced to the Dalai Lama. For years, the Dalai Lama has hosted dialogs between scientists and Buddhist monks; the intention of those meetings is to explore possible connections between modern and ancient ways

of knowing. The Dalai Lama's celebrity and gravitas have contributed significantly to the dramatic shift in the "serious" media's opinions about meditation, which in turn has made the study of meditation safe for academics to pursue. The same is true for granting agencies, which can now openly provide research support without fear of tarnishing their images. Almost all of that funding to date has focused on safe topics, like the neuroscience of meditation and its clinical efficacy.

But the Dalai Lama is also interested in topics like reincarnation, precognition, and the other legendary siddhis. He has claimed to see some of them in action. His beliefs about these abilities, and his attempts to discuss them, have made many scientists uncomfortable. They are perplexed because they know that the Dalai Lama is serious and knowledgeable about science, but he also persists in bringing up topics that our textbooks tell us are illusory at best and nonsense at worst. Only crazy hippies believe in those sorts of things, right?

Bewilderment arises because if the Dalai Lama's beliefs are correct, then it means that some of our cherished scientific assumptions, including fundamental concepts about who we are and how the world works, are at least incomplete, and maybe even wrong. This prospect is frightening to academics who have made their careers promoting possibly incorrect ideologies. Nevertheless, the worldview suggested by advanced meditative practices suggests, for example, that it is untenable to try to model the universe as a mindless clockwork mechanism. Something else is going on, something that intimately connects consciousness with the physical world.

This worldview is expressed, among other places, in the classic text of yoga, Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, written about 2000 years ago. Patanjali tells us in straightforward terms that if you sit quietly, pay close attention to your mind, and diligently repeat this practice, then you will gain—what to the naïve eye looks like—supernormal powers.⁴⁻⁶ Patanjali wrote that these powers, the siddhis, can also be obtained by ingesting certain drugs, by contemplation of sacred symbols, via various ascetic practices, or through a fortuitous birth. But

abilities earned through meditation are regarded with more respect and are considered to be more permanent than those gained through less disciplined methods.

As though to calm the fears of future scientists, the Yoga Sutras assure us that these superpowers have nothing to do with faith, religious doctrine, divine intervention, or supernatural miracles. Buddhist scholar Wallace⁷ writes,

In Buddhism, these are not miracles in the sense of being supernatural events, any more than the discovery and amazing uses of lasers are miraculous... What may appear supernatural to a scientist or a layperson may seem perfectly natural to an advanced contemplative, much as certain technological advances may appear miraculous to a contemplative (p. 103).

Many variations of the siddhis are described in the yogic tradition. Today we associate most of them with garden-variety psychic or "psi" phenomena. They include telepathy (mind-to-mind communication), clairvoyance (gaining information about distant or hidden objects beyond the reach of the ordinary senses), precognition (clairvoyance through time), and psychokinesis (direct influence of matter by mind, also known as PK).

For most people, psi experiences occur spontaneously. The most dramatic cases occur during periods of crisis or extreme motivation. By contrast, the siddhis are said to be highly reliable and under full conscious control. The most advanced siddhis are said to include abilities associated with comic book superheroes: invisibility, levitation, invulnerability, and super strength. The siddhis are also described *inter alia* in shamanism and in the mystical teachings of most religions. Indeed, nearly every culture throughout history has taken for granted that superpowers are real, albeit rare, and surveys today continue to show that the majority of the world's population still firmly believes in one or more of these capacities.⁸

Which is more likely to be correct about the siddhis—the world's contemplative traditions or today's scientific orthodoxy? Science has been exceptionally effective in discerning fact from fiction, and undoubtedly *some* aspects

of ancient wisdom are much closer to fiction than to fact. But science is constantly evolving and regularly discovers previously unimaginable things.

So, as a first step, we can simply ask meditators about their experiences. A survey of over a thousand meditators, conducted as part of an advanced meditation research initiative by the Institute of Noetic Sciences, found that three out of four meditators reported increases in synchronicities as a result of their practice. Nearly half reported sensing "non-physical entities," and a third reported psi experiences such as clairvoyance or telepathy. This indicates that for meditators, exceptional experiences are not so exceptional after all, and that in turn justifies closely studying these experiences under more controlled conditions.

Of course, psi experiences have been studied in the laboratory for over a century.⁹ Based on analyses of thousands of experimental reports published in peer-reviewed journals, scientific confidence in the existence of psi phenomena is high and continues to increase. But interest in explicitly exploring the link between meditative practice and psi is relatively new. With the mainstreaming of meditation, we can expect to see more research on this topic, especially along the lines of an experiment my colleagues and I reported in this journal in 2011.¹⁰ In that study we investigated the experience of "timelessness" often reported by advanced meditators.¹¹ We asked whether such experiences were just cognitive illusions, or if awareness actually extends through time. The experiment found evidence suggesting that awareness did indeed reach into the future, which is consistent with siddhis that Patanjali described thousands of years ago, and with the findings of several dozen contemporary experiments studying unconscious forms of precognition.¹²

The present issue of this journal is devoted to the concept of *nonlocal mind*, a neologism that covers both psi and the siddhis. *Explore* remains one of just a few journals indexed in PubMed.com that is open to publishing articles on this topic. As meditation research matures and old taboos disappear, we hope to publish more articles on this interesting line of research. We also hope that the societal maturation required to make it safe to

explore the “science of the siddhis” will not take another 40 years.

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Dean Radin, PhD, is Chief Scientist at the Institute of Noetic Sciences and Volunteer Faculty in the Department of Psychology at Sonoma State University. Before joining the research staff at IONS in 2001, he held appointments at AT&T Bell Labs, Princeton University, University of Edinburgh, and SRI International. He is author of three books including *The Conscious Universe* (HarperOne, 1997), *Entangled Minds* (Simon & Schuster, 2006), and *SuperNormal* (Random House, 2013).