



Differentials of Light of Consciousness: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the Experience of Vihangam Yogis

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Abstract

The Yogic literatures are replete with examples of several unique mystical experiences in deeper states of meditation. These experiences have nevertheless remained largely untouched by the scientific community, possibly because of the extreme inexplicability of such states and the lack of sophistication in evaluating them. More amenable to scientific research, however, would seem to be the simpler states of awareness in meditation such as that of inner light perception. While a few studies have attempted to explore this state by objective means, the subjective experience of this state remains largely unexplored. The present study originates from an interesting sub-theme identified in an earlier study focused on interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) of the experience of inner light perception among Vihangam Yogis. The original study found that the Yogis were very confident in differentiating their experience of inner light perception from other similar experiences. It was thus decided to use IPA to explore the clarity of the differences perceived by the Vihangam Yogis between these experiences. The present study reveals that the meditators could clearly differentiate the state colloquially termed “inner light perception” from (a) external light perception, (b) imagination and (c) dreams. The meditators gave detailed descriptions of their perception of the differences between these experiences, which suggests that the subjective state of inner light perception could be quite different from that of those experiences which the authors have termed differentials of inner light perception. The conclusion reached is that, in addition to further empirical study by means of the traditional modalities and measures, vigorous qualitative study of the subjective dimensions of the state of inner light perception is warranted, with this study indicating that IPA is especially effective in the latter regard.

Introduction

The Yogic literature describes the existence of several mystic perceptual experiences in deeper states of meditation. It is suggested here that the scientific community has refrained from studying these experiences for the following two possible reasons:

(1) Some of these states – such as out-of-body

experiences, having visions of other worlds, altered sense of identity, and so forth – are too strange and inexplicable to believe. In that it is difficult to believe in the existence of these experiences, they are generally considered too implausible for scientific exploration.

(2) We lack adequate sophistication for validating such states. Scientists are thus more inclined to

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explore those states which are more amenable to objectification and, hence, validation. The issue of validation, however, is to be acknowledged as equally applicable to conditions of existence and those of non-existence of such states.

One of these mystic experiences is perception of a sort of luminance, popularly referred to as “*inner light perception*”, in meditative states. In spite of the apparent incomprehensibility and intangibility of this particular perceptual experience, one is compelled to take a closer look at it in light of the following facts:

- (1) The state of “inner light perception” has been mentioned globally. This unusual experience has been documented in almost all Yogic texts as well as in cross-cultural religious texts (James, 1902/2008).
- (2) Several cults, Yogic literature and philosophers as well have often equated inner light perception with godly and supernatural events (Russell, 1999a, 1999b). At times, persons having these perceptual experiences become so preoccupied with the supernaturalism of God that they renounce their current life commitments and move on to isolated places to practise the meditation techniques, a concept popularly known as *Vairagya* in Indian texts (Sivananda, 1959/1998). There are thousands of examples of such people renouncing their customary life activities in India alone (Prince, 1986; Sivananda, 1959/1998). Any phenomenon that has an impact of this scale warrants scientific exploration.
- (3) Indirect evidence of the existence of this perceptual state¹ comes from a number of recent studies aimed at objectifying it for the purpose of validation and which, by means of electroencephalogram measures (Chang, Liu & Lo, 2005; Lo, Huang & Chang, 2003), have provided some objective markers such as the blocking of alpha rhythm during the light perception.
- (4) In spite of the advancements of visual sciences in light processing areas, our knowledge about the cortical processing of brightness and lightness is still incomplete. Developing a scientific stance towards these perceptual experiences can therefore add to the scientific body of knowledge in the broader context of light perception as a whole.

¹ By perceptual state, we mean not only the condition of light perception, but the psychological status of the individual during the experience of light perception.

In view of all these factors, the authors are of the opinion that the essence of the state of inner light perception can be more closely studied by exploring the subjective aspects of this experience.

Inner Light Perception in Vihangam Yoga Practice

Vihangam Yoga is a meditation practice which is rapidly gaining popularity in India. Meditators in this mode often report drastic changes in themselves after practising it. Equally prevalent among them is the occurrence of mystical experiences like that of inner light perception. There were several reasons why we selected this meditation technique from among several others for study:

- (1) We screened four different meditation sects in our city. We went to their meeting places (known as *Satsanga*) and enquired about meditators who perceived some sort of luminance during their meditation procedures. Among the four different sects, the maximum number of meditators reporting luminance perception was found in this particular sect (about 40%).
- (2) Among all the screened sects, meditators of this particular type reported experiencing inner light perception for longer durations, even for a few hours at a stretch.
- (3) Among these meditators, none had a history of substance abuse.
- (4) Most of the meditators continued their routine involvement in their individual life activities. The majority consisted of engineers, technicians, health professionals, and so on. This was especially important, because it was pertinent to the study that the subjective accounts of the meditators would be minimally influenced by environmental factors such as pertain in the case of those who renounce their worldly activities and retreat to hermitages, which are especially prevalent in several Yogic forms in India.
- (5) The meditators tended to give explanations for this experience which they called scientific. There were several Vihangam Yogis who, instead of equating this experience with God or supernatural powers, tried to give a logical meaning to this experience. Although the terminology was that of Yogic literature, their explanation tended to be deducible from their constructs. The details of these explanations are beyond the scope of this paper, but point towards a more logic-oriented approach towards such experiences.

The practice of Vihangam Yoga consists of a meditation technique. The meditation technique is concentrative, with the meditator asked to focus on a point. There are reportedly five stages of meditation and, with each stage, the point of focus in the body changes. During the meditation, several changes are reported in the psychological aspects of the person. Most commonly, a sense of relaxation is reported which is said to be more calming in nature than any other relaxation technique. With progressive practice, several unique experiences are reported, inner light perception being a common one (Prasad, 1998).

The present study was an attempt to assess the validity of such experiences. For this, we used an indirect approach. Instead of focusing on the answer to “*How can it be proved that the phenomenon is inner light perception?*”, we chose to attempt to answer the question “*What else can this phenomenon be?*” In order to answer this question, we compiled a list of alternate possibilities to account for the experience of light perception and proceeded to ascertain the differences in the subjective experiences of the various states. For this purpose, we chose to conduct a qualitative study.

Subjects and Methods

For the purpose of exploring the subjective aspects of this unique perceptual state, we conducted an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) of the experience of Yogis practising a meditation technique called Vihangam Yoga (Prasad, 1998). Participants were recruited from a meeting which they attend every Sunday, which is referred to by them as “*Satsang*”. After informing them of our interest in conducting a scientific study, we screened 128 Vihangam Yogis, enquiring about their perception of light during their meditative procedures. We received positive responses from 41 of these meditators, who gave accounts of seeing some sort of luminance during their meditation. Of these, we recruited 12 meditators who were able to claim (i) to have seen the light for many hours at a stretch and (ii) that they could see the inner light every time they became involved in the meditation. Ten were men and two were women. By religion, ten were Hindus and two were Christians. All of them were residents of the same city, Ranchi. Most of the participants were married and were employed ($N = 7$). The remainder came from a hermitage or *Ashram*. They had given up their previous daily life activities and were living as sages, serving the *Ashram*. The participants ranged in age from 32 to 59 years ($M = 43$ years). The duration of their performance of meditative acts ranged from 5 to 14 years ($M = 8.5$ years). The daily time spent on meditation ranged from 2 to 6 hours ($M = 4$ hours).

Interpretative phenomenological analysis was the method used in this study. This method was considered ideal because of its ability to tap the essence of the subjective experience and to analyse these experiences through interpreting the story told by an individual in his own words. It is a unique type of qualitative study which is founded on the principles of critical realism (Bhaskar, 1978) and the social cognition paradigm (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were the mode of data collection. Each interview started with the common open-ended probe question: “Can you describe your experiences associated with light perception during meditative procedures?” The Yogis were allowed to speak as much as they wanted at a stretch. Further statements/questions to them were prompted in two circumstances: (1) when the Yogis wanted some clarification regarding the questions asked (Chang, Liu & Lo, 2005) and (2) when the interviewer wanted some clarification about the statements made by the interviewees. These questions were non-leading and no optional responses were provided. The questions were usually of the following nature: “We were unable to follow you when you mentioned/said that ‘[...]’. Can you explain [...] a bit more so that we can understand your statements better?” The length of the interviews ranged from 1–2 hours. Each interview was audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed in full by the researcher.

The occasional questions by the researchers were prompted by the need to cover all of the following areas identified for description:

- (a) Experiences of the light perception
- (b) Individual interpretations of the light
- (c) Impact of the light perception on the individuals

Analysis of Data

The analysis of the data was performed by means of the “idiographic approach”, one of the two original approaches outlined by Smith (2007). This method involves the detailed initial analysis of a single interview transcript prior to analyzing the others. During this initial stage, any issues and ideas emerging from the transcript and understood as important in relation to the aim of the study were recorded in the left-hand margin. The transcript was re-read a number of times, and existing ideas and concepts were allocated more abstract keywords that were recorded in the right-hand column and provided

a synopsis of the text. Examination of the first interview provided a list of preliminary themes. Subsequently, the remaining eleven transcripts were examined keeping these themes in mind, with the researcher using the same procedure as in the case of the first interview to search for descriptions with meanings related to existing themes while also identifying novel emergent themes. Using this method, a list of themes for each interview was produced, together with transcript extracts that supported and illustrated them. The list of themes (and corresponding transcript extracts) for each interview was used to identify connecting themes and parallels between the interviews. Once preliminary themes across the interviews (common themes emerging from various interviews) had been established, several were grouped together based on their conceptual similarity, allowing master and subordinate themes to be identified. The transcript extracts that had been paired with the preliminary themes were re-read, and instances that supported the master and subordinate themes were assigned accordingly. Each transcript was then re-read to ensure that the final master and subordinate themes were characteristic of the original material.

Results: Master Themes

From the interviews, four master themes emerged:

- [1] Uniqueness of the nature of light
- [2] Experiences during light perception
- [3] Explanations of the source of light
- [4] Change in outlook towards world and associated changes in thinking.

The details of all the master themes originating from the study are beyond the scope of this paper, the focus of which is more exclusively on an important aspect of the first theme identified above.

Uniqueness of the Nature of Light: What Subjectivity Can Reveal about Light Perception

An important part of the master theme “*uniqueness of the nature of light*” is described here. Further to identifying this theme, we proceeded to elaborate a sub-theme, articulated as “*The light of consciousness is different from other subjective experiences of light perception*”.

To enter the subjective world of the participants’ experiences, we used the question-answer approach. Overall, two open-ended probe questions, as follows,

were used to attempt to generate the differentials:

Question: *Could the light be anything else other than inner light?*

Answer: ...

Question: *What else can be mistaken for inner light perception?*

Answer: ...

These questions, however, were able to generate only one differential from the meditators – that of *light passing through the eyelids*.

Subsequently, we selected two different phenomena to substitute in the phrasing of specific questions about the differentiation of inner light perception from (a) *imaginary pictures* and (b) *dreams*. This method proved conducive both to accessing and to understanding the phenomenological differences between the experiences of inner light perception and similar others. After deriving a description of this differential of the inner light perception from the verbatim accounts of Yogis themselves, we next proceeded to ask them how they differentiated their experience of light perception from this experience. The interview was furthermore preceded by semi-structured questions so that the subjective differences observed between these experiences could be explored in as much depth as possible. These questions were not pre-determined and were adapted according to the account given by each meditator, thus being different for every statement made by them.

Differential 1: Inner Light Perception versus Perception of Light Passing Through Eyelids

This differential was derived mostly from the spontaneous verbatim accounts of the Yogis. However, on a few occasions, it emerged in response to our question “*Could it be anything else?*”, the replies referring to the Yogis’ own earlier experiences of confusion in this regard:

- When you sit in a bright environment, your eyelids can shine a lot. If you start focusing on that shining, it can give you the false impression of perceiving some sort of luminance. This happened many times with me ... but when I saw the real inner light, it was completely different, because it is not seen by your eyes, but by your soul ... difficult to describe indeed.
- Actually, you can get confused many times. In the initial stages, people come to me describing their experiences. When I clarify further, I find that it is actually external light ... just that the

light passed through their eyelids ... a very small fraction of course and they meditated on that light vigorously. I know because I passed through this confusion many times.

- See, eyelids are transparent ... so that light can pass through. When you see it, it can confuse you ... you can become happy and even ecstatic that it is light of God ... happened with me, ha ha ... but one should always clarify it if one wants to proceed in spiritual life.

A vivid description of how the perception of external light passing through the eyelids differs from inner light perception emerged from the verbatim accounts of the meditators:

Excerpt 1.1

Mediator: There are many differences between the inner light and the external light of the initial stages: first of all, the external light is of a piercing quality ... one cannot stare at it for long ... say, for example, you cannot stare at this bulb for a long time ... but the inner light is soft ... soft and soothing ... one can spend hours seeing it ... me, myself, I have spent a couple of hours at a time enjoying the beauty of the inner light ... it's marvellous.

Interviewer: You mean the inner light is pleasant to look at and does not have glare? But there are examples of light from outside which are minimally glaring and generate a sense of pleasure in you, for example, like the lights of minimal glare used in operas and drama theatres, et cetera. Is there some way to differentiate the inner light from them?

Mediator: Hmm ... really I never thought that way ... Your questions are thought-provoking ... I have to think ... Okay! I will try to clarify, but I am not sure how much I can ... because I am not good with words. See, the external light, however less glaring it would be, will still create a sense of tension ... right?

Interviewer: Well, yes, you could say so ...

Mediator: When I analyse it closely ... I feel that the external light, when it hits the mind ... now whatever that will mean in science, will create a sort of impact ... like a collision or sort of that, which I cannot explain but I am sure that it happens The external light actually collides with your eyes ... not these [pointing towards the eyes] eyes, but the inner eye ... the eye of the

mind. Now ... this sense of impact or collision is not there with inner light. It is not ... like made of particulate things or of elements of nature. It is something like a wave (gush) of air ... not this air, but the feeling that you have when a breeze passes through you ... the divine light passes through your mind ... without colliding with it. My God! What am I saying? Is it making some sense? I don't know, but what I say is what actually I feel. It's up to you to decide.

Interviewer: Okay. I am trying to understand. You mean they are both different kinds of experiences. You said that the light is not particulate or made up of elements of nature. Do you mean that the external light is made up of elements of nature? Can you elaborate this aspect a bit?

Mediator: Once again you are going to try my expertise of using words Well, I will try. Now that you are asking, yes the external light is made up of particulate elements of nature. These elements are not molecules or atoms, but the things which these are made up of. These elements are gross. The thing which inner light is made up of is not gross, it is subtle. But for you to understand, it is really difficult. See, you said that there are lights in opera that are less glaring. Right? [Hmm, yes.] But if you wouldn't have seen it, you wouldn't have known it right? [Right.] And in spite of all my efforts to make you feel the light, you wouldn't have felt it. Right? [Hmm ... okay.]

Interviewer: Actually, I am not trying to test the validity of your experience, just that I want to understand. Can you give any explanation why the inner light is different from external light? I mean, at the level of most basic existence, what is the inner light? Perhaps that could make for a clearer picture of how it is different from the external one.

Mediator: What I feel is that inner and external lights are in different dimensions. I will try to give an example. Once I had been in Essel world [an amusement park in Mumbai city]. There I went to a virtual reality play station. There they gave me spectacles. Then there was a screen. There were visions, which looked very real. I knew the visions are artificial, but it was right there in front of my eyes. Now if you compare that vision with ... like my vision for your face or body ... they are both real for me ... I mean I am seeing you both. But the ... what to say? ... the mechanisms by which I am seeing you both

are different. This difference in the mechanism of perception is because both the visions are located in different dimensions. One was in some electronic form in the spec[tacle]s and the other is right in front of me. In the same way, the form in which inner light exists is different from this external light. It is some form of energy which exists in a different dimension from this energy of worldly light. I really cannot say what it is, because I never tested it the way you people test the worldly things. I just accepted it with the assumption that it is a subtle form of energy which exists like any other energy.

Interviewer: Still, what could it be?

Meditator: As I told you, it is a form of energy. See, the light is there in your body in the form of a subtle energy, but to see it, you need to have a special state of awareness. Like the infra-red cameras ... it can help you look at the heat energy coming out of your body in the form of a light. Right? In the same way, you can have visions of energy inside your body if you have that sophistication of your awareness, which is possible through meditation.

Interviewer: Hmm ... possible with meditation, eh?

Meditator: Yes. In the meditation of Vihangam Yoga, one starts by focusing at a point. When all the energy of mind gets focused at the point, in which the power of a guru helps a lot, the meditator gets a different state of awareness. That state cannot be described in words. It is a state of perfect peace. In that state, his vision expands. Subsequently, with higher levels of meditation in Vihangam Yoga, he meditates by focusing his mind at different places. This gives additional sophistication to his vision. It is in these visions that he perceives the inner light. Actually, with higher levels of meditation, his vision becomes subtler and subtler. Thus he is able to visualise subtler lights, which is not possible as such in the awake state. I can understand that it is all jumbled up for you, but all these are facts. Only a practitioner of meditation can experience all these things.

Interviewer: Okay. Thank you for all your time and your talks with us

Excerpt 1.2

Meditator: No no, it's very different ... it's

quality is like watching the moon ... you don't get irritated by watching the moon even if you spend hours ... I mean it's not exactly dim like the moon ... it's bright like sunlight but soft like moonlight ... you have to see it to believe it.

Interviewer: Softness is something related to touch sensation. The meaning of the word in this context is not clear to me.

Meditator: That is what I am saying ... you cannot comprehend until you see it for yourself.

Interviewer: Is it possible for me to see it?

Meditator: Of course it is possible. All you have to do is to follow the meditation technique of Vihangam Yoga.

Interviewer: Is it possible to have a vision of light without the meditation?

Meditator: Well, only if there is Guru's grace on you.

Interviewer: Why is it so necessary to do meditation for perceiving the inner light?

Meditator: Because now your vision is not at its full potential. With meditation, the potency of vision increases. When you focus on the point as the guru teaches you, your ability to concentrate on each and every thing increases. With practice, the ability increases to such an extent that you are able to perceive subtle things. That is when you get the ability to perceive inner light, which is the subtlest of all the lights that I know.

Interviewer: Does it mean that the ability to perceive external light also increases with meditation?

Meditator: Mmmmm ... Well ... yes, up to an extent. Actually, for perceiving external light, you don't need any more expertise. But still, with meditation, the vision does become clearer. Actually, because the meditation is something that cuts off your contact with the external world and takes you inside your own mind, it increases your ability to perceive the things that are inside you. Regarding the external things, I cannot be that sure.

Interviewer: It is a bit confusing for me. I mean concentrating on a point, how does it take you inside ... to the lights inside you, I mean?

Meditator: Actually it is not just concentrating on a point. It is just the first stage of Vihangam Yoga. When your mind has been fully concentrated at a point, you are taken to the next levels of meditation. In the next levels, you are taught to concentrate inside you. Only a guru can teach you how. In those stages, actually your whole consciousness turns inside your own body and mind. It is then that you get to see the inner lights. It is the higher level of meditation.

Interviewer: When the consciousness turns inside oneself, is the state of awareness comparable to the awake state like ... say like you are now?

Meditator: Not at all ... Hmm ... there are two main differences in the states of awareness as I can see it. The first is that the inner awareness is more comparable to the awake state. Now I really cannot describe this. It's like ... the inner awareness is like I am more excited, more happy, more ... what can I say? ... more lively than this state. Secondly, the inner awareness is directed inwardly. I mean, now I am perceiving through my eyes, ears, and other senses. But in inner-awareness, I perceive not with these appendages but with my most inner ... say mind ... by my mind directly. Now I really cannot describe further these states because I am feeling inadequate with my words.

Interviewer: Can you go on describing just a bit more?

Meditator: No please! I really cannot describe it. How can I describe things which are beyond words? I give up in front of you. If you want further clarification, please go to someone more accomplished in meditation than myself. Kindly don't mind, but these things are really impossible to put into words. I hope you understand.

Interviewer: Okay. It's fine. Thank you for being patient with us.

Excerpt 1.3

Meditator: They are absolutely incomparable ... the inner light is not gross like this light ... in initial stages, one can become happy thinking that he is seeing the light of God, but soon one realises that it is not having any impact on his psychology. One who sees the inner light will become calm ... calm and peaceful. It is the effect of light ... it eases all your tensions. But in

external light ... I did not find any such effect ... maybe it's different for different people.

Interviewer: So you mean it is the effect of the light which is more important in differentiating it from outer light rather than other qualities of the light?

Meditator: Well, actually, yes At least it was the most important ... criterion for me. When I saw the inner light, I became completely peaceful within a moment. And that peace is never possible to be achieved with outer light perceptions.

Interviewer: Is there any other difference?

Meditator: Actually, whenever I have this experience, I completely lose the sense of surroundings and even myself. I really am not able to appreciate the qualities of the light ... It's like I become a part of it. Then, when I come back to my senses, I totally am in a shocked state ... not exactly shocked, but like ... it's like something new ... perplexed ... a bit of confusion, et cetera. Very difficult to describe. But when I come back to my senses, I don't remember the qualities of the light. I just remember that I was in a state of extreme pleasure and want to go there again. So I think that is the answer to your question: I have no idea of the quality of the inner light except that it is extremely pleasurable.

See there are many differences ... but very difficult to describe in words All I can say is that you will know it's inner light once you see it ... there is nothing like that in this world ... so you will know that it's completely new.

Interviewer: Can you be a bit more descriptive about what you are saying?

Meditator: See, I told you it is a matter of experience. No matter what effort you put in, no matter what scientific expertise you use, you cannot understand until you see it for yourself.

Interviewer: Okay. But even if I meditate, how can I be so sure that it is the inner light and not the outer light, as many say that it is confusing in the initial stages?

Meditator: The fact is that, in spite of what everyone says, you will not be sure until you see the inner light after that. The best way is to keep meditating and not paying attention to lights.

Along with the experience of the light perception, you will have many other experiences which will lead you to the conclusion that it is inner light.

Interviewer: So there are other experiences associated with it?

Mediator: Yes, there are. Many of them. They do not necessarily correlate with this light-perception experience, but some of them are exclusive to this experience.

Interviewer: Can you describe those experiences a bit?

Mediator: See, I am having difficulty in describing this experience which is so simple in itself. How can I describe these experiences which are much more complicated? It is not at all possible for me. Actually, the experiences are not like those we have in day to day life ... I mean, in a normal awake state, our consciousness is very constricted, so we have experiences of single events at a point of time. But in higher states of meditation, the consciousness expands, one can have multiple world experiences at a time, impossible events like out-of body experiences and so on ... I really cannot put them into words. Please excuse me for it.

Interviewer: Actually, I am more interested in experiences during inner light perception.

Mediator: Any of these experiences can occur with inner light perception, which is an indication that your consciousness is expanding. When this happens, you cannot remain the way you are now. Change in your perception ought to occur. Your ability to perceive also expands. And as a result, these experiences occur. But how this happens has to be experienced ... impossible to put in words. You are awake right now. But can you put all your experiences into words? It's not possible. There will surely remain subtle aspects which are not possible to put into words. Then how can one describe these experiences?

Interviewer: Okay. I understand. Thank you for your conversation with us.

Differential 2: Inner Light Perception versus Imagination

This differential did not emerge from the spontaneous reports of Yogis, but was added to the clarification

list by the researchers. The following are examples of the excerpts which provide a vivid description of the differences between the experience of inner light perception and imagination. These statements were subsequently questioned in a semi-structured format.

Excerpt 2.1

Mediator: Imagination is imagination ... it's not real, right? The inner light, on the other hand, is as clear and as obvious as ... say the light of this bulb ... but of a different quality.

Interviewer: But reality means something that others can also see, right?

Mediator: No. Reality means how real the seen object is [that is] being perceived. The imagined picture cannot be complete. In spite of how hard you try, it will remain incomplete. Secondly, the imagined picture cannot create the emotional and psychological reaction that real objects create. Say, for example ... if I view my mother's photo, it will definitely bring up memories and associated emotions. But if I try to imagine, it will bring some emotions but not as intense as that brought by the real photo.

Interviewer: Is there any other difference between the imagined light and the inner light?

Mediator: Well, I can only see these differences. Maybe you could get other differences from other experts.

Interviewer: Thank you very much for your cooperation.

Excerpt 2.2

Mediator: No no, imagination ... well, you see, you are a psychiatrist, so must be thinking that the light perception is actually our imaginations. Sadly, I cannot prove that it is not so. But, believe me, there is a difference of earth and sky in both.

Interviewer: It would be great if you could point out some differences at your subjective experience level.

Mediator: Hmm ... I am not sure if I will be able to answer that. Let me try Imagination means ... thinking intensely about something, right?... [Mmm, yes, very much so.] But I never came across any imaginary picture that can stay for so long and so steady, and clear. I am very

close to my grandson ... so I keep missing him. I even get his imaginary flashbacks if I am far from my home. But that flashback picture is ... kind of fluctuating ... appearing and then disappearing It is never as steady as the inner light. I don't think it is possible to imagine light as such, because it is not a picture ... just a sort of luminance, right? And even if one does imagine, how can it be so clear and persistent like inner light? You know, the inner light can persist the same way for hours. I don't think this can be so for any imaginary picture.

Interviewer: But inner light is also a product of your mind, right?

Meditator: No. It is not a product of mind. It is what mind perceives in a different state of consciousness. Actually, there is a difference between them both at the very basic level. The imagination is the product of mind, what mind sees when it is highly active by thinking continuously about the image. But the inner light appears when all the activities of mind have ceased. At that time, the mind becomes completely calm ... no thoughts, no memories, nothing. Just peace. It is in that peace that the inner light appears. It cannot be even compared with imagination. There is a difference of earth and sky between both.

Interviewer: Can you point out any other differences?

Meditator: I have given my best shot in this analysis. Please, I cannot think anything more. I suggest you start meditation, because you seem so interested in it. Then you will find out for yourself.

Interviewer: Okay. I will try. Thank you for all your co-operation.

Excerpt 2.3

Meditator: A picture can be imaginative ... but, you see, you have to be thinking about it, right? ... It's under your own control. But the inner light appears when you are focusing on a point ... I mean you are not preoccupied with it ... instead you are preoccupied with something else. And it is definitely not under your control ... it appears and disappears depending on your closeness to God ... only He decides it.

Interviewer: So, while having the inner light perception, you do not get preoccupied with it? I

mean do you have any expectations regarding it?

Meditator: Well, initially I used to expect and plead with God to give me the experience. But, invariably, I don't have those experiences at these times of expectations or, in fact, if I am thinking anything. There is a reason behind this. Actually, when you are expecting the light or any other experience, your mind is active and it is imagining things. But the inner light can only appear when your mind is completely still and is not thinking anything else. But, even in that state, there is no guarantee that the light will appear. As I told you before, it depends on God's will ... at least, this is what I feel about it.

Interviewer: But it is still difficult to comprehend how can one "see" anything when one is focusing at a point. Can you elaborate a bit?

Meditator: I can understand your problem. But, irrespective of how hard I try, I cannot make you feel. Because it's in a different dimension. You have never been in that dimension, so it is completely new for you.

Interviewer: Different dimension, eh?

Meditator: Yes. Different dimension. Seeing is not as simple as we think. Is it really limited to eyes ... and, say, brain? I don't think so. When one focuses at a point, your mind will stay at the place for a while. But, in higher stages of Vihangam Yoga, you are taught to focus on a point that does not have physical dimensions. The points are situated in your body, but you cannot pinpoint these with any external object. It is not made up of physical elements. Instead, it is cosmic. When your mind focuses on that point, your mind not only becomes completely still, but it also acquires dimensions of a new kind. It is in that state that one has experiences of these kinds. It is a whole new world. A world without molecules or atoms. A world without any particulate element of nature. It is that experience which fills you completely. There remains no place for doubt.

Excerpt 2.4

Meditator: Imaginary picture cannot be as clear as that light. For example, I am thinking about one of my family members and moments spent with them. I can be so carried away that I could see my mother's image. But still it won't be clear. But the inner light is like seeing real sun inside you ... it's as clear as anything real ...

Pratyaksham kim pramanam? [What proof is needed for something that is right in front of you?]

Interviewer: Okay. Other than clarity, is there any other difference between the two?

Mediator: Mmmm ... well ... I think, in inner light, you are at peace. In imagination, can one be that calm? I don't know. Actually, I really don't know. I mean, I haven't been that calm in any instance of my life. So I can say that I haven't been at peace in all my imaginations also. But I am not a good imaginer. I think you should ask some poet or artistic person [smiles]. But I really don't think that even Shakespeare or Dinkarji [a great Indian poet] would have had that peace in their most lively imaginations. It's just an estimation. Because you are a researcher, I think you should really investigate some more imaginary person about the difference. For me, no imagination was ever as pleasant as this perception.

Interviewer: Okay. Can you think of any other difference?

Mediator: Hmmm ... well ... I am feeling the differences right now ... but I am not able to put them into words. It's really difficult, you know. It's like ... something filling you inside. In imagination, there is a sense of ... effort. This effort actually is tiring ... it subtracts something from your mind. It does not give you something. But inner light fills you I don't know if it is of any meaning for you.

Interviewer: Yes, it is, very much. Kindly go on.

Mediator: Ha ha ... you are a good motivator. But I am sorry, I am feeling a sense of frustration. I really cannot describe this experience. I thought that I can describe it easily, but now that you are comparing it with imagination, it is really difficult for me.

Interviewer: Okay. You already did tell many things. Kindly feel free to communicate if you think you can say something more.

Mediator: Okay, sure.

Differential 3: Inner Light Perception versus Dreaming

Again, this differential was generated by the researchers, with the aim of clarifying whether what

the Yogis see is actually real or whether it could be that they are falling asleep and dreaming, especially in conditions when meditation of several hours was described. The following excerpts provide examples of how the meditators felt about this comparison:

Excerpt 3.1

Mediator: This is a tough question indeed. In dreams, things can become very real indeed. But, for dreaming, you have to fall asleep, right? ... One does not fall asleep while meditating I don't know much about sleep ... maybe both are the same things But one thing ... I am still aware of my surroundings when I am seeing the light ... not that much, but definitely more than in sleep.

Interviewer: As you mentioned before, even in inner light perception, you become less aware of the surrounds. Could it be that you are not asleep but are falling asleep?

Mediator: Hmm ... No. I don't think so. I know the state of drowsiness. Your body becomes flaccid ... darkness starts setting in ... you lose awareness. Like ... how to put it? ... you lose sense of everything. But it's not like that in inner light. In that condition, your awareness about outside objects decreases, but your awareness regarding your inner world actually increases. You are not ... losing ... but gaining awareness. Yes ... it's a major difference ... your awareness actually increases. But the awareness is inward. It is in no way similar to drowsiness or even dreams.

Interviewer: Could you elaborate the differences a bit more?

Mediator: I want to ... but I don't know how I will. It is really about awareness ... how else can I tell you? I mean, you must have seen dreams, do you really feel that you are under your own control while dreaming? It's not because our awareness is not free, it is somehow crippled ... but in inner light perception, you can control your awareness I don't mean the light. I mean the awareness. You can come back out of the state, you can focus more, you can manipulate it. But it's not so with dreams, right?

Interviewer: Hmmm ... Well, okay. Anything else that you want to add?

Mediator: I am not very confident if I am being helpful to you. These things are so ... beyond

words that, even if I want to tell, I will not be able to. I hope you understand.

Interviewer: Oh sure. Thank you for your patience.

Excerpt 3.2

Mediator: Dreams are too complicated ... I never see only light in a dream. But in meditation, there is only light and it's too divine to be a dream.

Interviewer: But you said that, with inner light perception also, you do have other experiences. How do you differentiate the two?

Mediator: Oh. Well ... Mmm, yes there are other experiences. But even they are not like dreams. And they are occasional, don't happen always. Dreams are like a continuous show on screen ... one thing leading to other ... one event being followed by the other. But it is not so in inner light experience. They are not events ... they are like ... pictures, photo's of some things.

Interviewer: You mean inner light is also like a photo?

Mediator: No no, I am talking about other mystical experiences. They are like pictures, but not events like dreams. Another thing is that, in dreams, you can see yourself. Not often, but many a times. This is not there in inner light perception.

Interviewer: Hmm ... Anything else?

Mediator: Right now I am not able to think of anything else. Maybe later I will be able to give you more accounts.

Interviewer: Okay, thank you.

Excerpt 3.3

Mediator: There is a definite difference between the both. But I cannot describe exactly because I am not sophisticated with words. The difference lies in the awareness of the person ... In dreams, one is not aware of himself, his body or thoughts ... his awareness is constricted. But, in meditation, and during inner light perception, the awareness increases ... not of the surroundings but of yourself ... about your other dimensions.

Interviewer: So all the difference is because of differences in the level of awareness. How does one get to have that awareness by meditation?

Mediator: It's very extensive. Vihangam Yoga meditation is a special kind of meditation, in which the person starts by focusing at a point. When his mind becomes completely still at the point, this itself is another state of awareness. Have you ever been in a state where your mind is completely still? It is called a state of thoughtlessness, which is not possible in any other state except meditation. In that state when the mind becomes completely still, all the things related to your existence change. Your perception, way of thinking, emotional status, et cetera. Then starts the higher level of Vihangam Yoga meditation, when you are taught to focus on more subtle points, which don't exactly have physical representations. To start, the point is imaginary. But it becomes clearer and more evident with progression of meditation. It is actually inside your own body. When you get to see it clearly, then comes the drastic phase of inner light perception and other mystical experiences. This is not related to any physical exercise, not *pranayamas*, not *mantra japas*, no physical manoeuvres. It is purely done on the basis of consciousness. *Vihangam Yoga* is in fact the science of consciousness. So, in spite of all your efforts to localise my experiences on paper, you can never understand until you know what consciousness really is.

Interviewer: Kindly enlighten us on the topic of consciousness.

Mediator: It is a force. A form of energy. But not like the physical energies. All the energies that we know, be it thermal, electromagnetic, solar, hydraulic, everything is physical, made up of subtle elements of nature. But the energy of consciousness is metaphysical ... beyond the physical. It is the energy which is there in every living being ... in you, in me, in everyone.

Interviewer: How do you describe consciousness in sleep and in inner light perception?

Mediator: As I told before, your awareness decreases. The level of consciousness comes down. Actually, consciousness remains, but it goes into a state of unawareness, something that we call "*Tamovritti*". In this condition, the consciousness goes into a dark tunnel known as "*Hita Nadi*". In that tunnel, it becomes completely cut off from external surroundings.

In addition, it also gets cut off from its own self ... actually it goes into a state where it is as good as dead ... but it is not actually dead. It is for a particular duration. After that, the awareness returns to its usual self. But, in meditation, what we call “*Dhyana*”, the consciousness gains more vitality. It becomes more aware ... it becomes more aware of its dimensions ... that is why it is able to perceive objects of other dimensions. It ... kind of expands. It develops ... evolves ... becomes more divine. Even in meditation there are many levels of consciousness. But they cannot be described.

Interviewer: Okay. Thank you for all your patience with us.

Excerpt 3.4

Mediator: The inner light perception is very exciting ... it fills your soul, you become happy and ecstatic. This state is never there in dreams ... instead, dreams are like you are dead ... you are there but you are not excited or happy, you are just trapped in a world of complex perceptions in dreams But the inner light does not trap you ... it liberates you.

Interviewer: But sense of pleasure can happen even in dreams, right?

Mediator: Mmmm ... well, yes. But the intensity of pleasure is very limited. Actually, what I think is that dreams are records of our day to day events. So the amount of pleasure experience that can happen in dreams cannot exceed that of normal life experience. But, in the divine light perception of meditation, the pleasure is limitless. It is so joyful that the rest of all the joys together cannot even make a part of it ... not even a fraction of it. That joy can never be experienced in dreams.

Interviewer: Okay. Other than joy, what else is the difference? You were saying something about a filling-in kind of experience. Can you describe this?

Mediator: Okay. You seem to keep track of what I am saying. Yes, the divine-light fills you. But, to understand that, you will have to understand the meaning of incompleteness and inadequacy. In normal states, we are incomplete. If you try to focus inside yourself, you will find that there is always the sense of a need of something. No matter how much you earn or acquire in the world, that need is going to

persist. This is very evident in the awake state and even more evident in the dream state. In fact, dreams occur because of our need of that happiness ... so that desperation is very clear in dreams. Everyone will accept this fact that the desperation is more in dreams as compared to the awake state. This is because of the aggravation of that incompleteness. In meditation, when you have that divine light, you become more complete. You become more adequate. This is because the light fills your incompleteness. At a more gross level, it can be said that the light gives you the happiness that you have been searching for all these times. But this statement is inadequate to describe how it really fills you. It fills not one but all of your deficiencies ... that is how it fills you. This is impossible in the dream state.

Interviewer: Okay. What else is the difference between the two?

Mediator: What I can find is only these differences. There could be others, but right now I am not able to think of them.

Interviewer: Okay. Thank you for your cooperation.

Discussion

Functional neuro-imaging techniques like EEG, ERP, MRI and so forth are being used globally to study states of meditation. However, it has to be accepted that these modalities have limitations when it comes to studying subjective aspects of any state. For example, persons relaxed by music, meditation, relaxation techniques and so on will have a predominance of the alpha rhythm in their EEG recordings, but their subjective states will vary considerably. Similarly, a person analysing a problem, calculating, memorising, and so on, will have increased blood flow to the prefrontal cortex. But, again, the totality of subjective experiences will differ markedly. This difference can only be fully understood by conducting a qualitative study and interpreting the subjects' verbatim reports. Thus, the importance of exploring the subjective aspects of meditative states is self-evident.

There were two aims in this study: (1) To reveal the subjective aspects of the experience of inner light perception in meditation, and (2) to explore how the Yogis subjectively differentiate between the experiences of inner light perception and other experiences which could resemble this experience. Although this study aimed at investigating the above-

mentioned clarifications, in addition it gave birth to many issues which are pertinent to the study of consciousness as a whole. Earlier there have been attempts to correlate the consciousness problems with specific physical and spiritual practices of Yoga (Persson, 2007; Smith, 2007). The results of the present study can be regarded as a step further towards this clarification. As is evident from the accounts of the Yogis in this study, inner light perception meant more to them than just as an experience of perceiving a luminance. In clarifying this, they tended to create a complete background for the importance of the experience. This background consisted of experiences of extreme joy associated with the perception and their explanations were in terms of consciousness and awareness.

Both of these issues, however, although interesting, are beyond the scope of the discussion here. The background of vivid descriptions nevertheless situates the accounts of inner light perception in the spiritual practice of Vihangam Yoga meditation. As mentioned in the introduction, Vihangam Yoga is a concentrative method of meditation in which the meditator sits in a

particular relaxed posture and meditates on one point. As the meditation progresses, the ability to sustain focus on the point increases, so that the meditator can eventually keep staring at the point for hours at a stretch. Subsequently, the meditator progresses to being taught other meditation techniques, which are also focusing techniques but on different points. In the course of practice, s/he is thus taught higher levels of meditation when asked to meditate on other subtle points (Prasad, 1998). In these higher stages of meditation, the meditator often reports mystical experiences as outlined in the above interviews. The reason behind these experiences cannot be fully accounted for on current scientific grounds. For this reason, we need more data on subjective experiences of mystic states, such as the findings of the present study.

This study contributes little to the issue of validation of such experiences, which would uncontroversially mean more objectification. However, this study provides a potent method for studying the controversial experiences of Yogis, which have been much discussed over the years.

About the Authors

Dr Ravi Prakash (Corresponding Author) (M.B.B.S., D.P.M.) is a psychiatrist, currently working as a senior resident at the Central Institute of Psychiatry in Ranchi, India. His primary interests are consciousness and attention. The focus of his recent research has been on the exploration of various Yogic states as substrates for various studies related to consciousness and attention. His interest in Vihangam Yoga meditation technique as a unique state of consciousness is reflected in a number of international publications related to the inner light perception condition found in this meditation. For exploration of these states, he has also been collaborating internationally with scientists from different fields of science such as quantum mechanics, electromagnetic field researchers and artificial neural network designers. This collaboration has resulted in several research papers with multi-dimensional approaches to consciousness studies. In addition to consciousness and attention, he also has an interest in the neural basis of psychiatric diseases, and the possible role of spirituality and meditation in the treatment of psychiatric diseases. Dr Prakash has more than 15 publications in clinical psychiatry and more than 10 publications in various peer-reviewed international journals in the areas of consciousness and states of meditation. Several of his research papers have been presented at international conferences such as the International Conference on Attention held in India and the IASTED conference on computational intelligence held in Hawaii and at the Edinburgh international conference centre in Scotland. He has also been working on high resolution electroencephalographic (192 channel EEG) recordings of inner light perception states of Vihangam Yoga meditation and the effects of concentrative meditation on various dimensions of attention.



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