

## Healing altered states of consciousness

Instability in body-mind gives rise to self-discovery and an altered state of consciousness. This is the experience of most people. Especially, when the instability portends facing bodily death, one's inner search is intense, and one may go through depression, despair and denial. In such extreme cases, a model for the human existence is important. It has been said that healing is not simply curing the body. The latter is important when we need to come back to health for transactional purposes. However, at the end point, when returning to health is not possible, healing is vital.

### WHOLENESS AND HEALING

Wholeness and health are related to all three elements that make up life – namely, body, mind and consciousness (or spirit, reality); all these should function in unison for health. The role of a therapist is not just to look at the body; not simply address the distress of the mind; but to bring into balance the triad so that a positive progression toward our goal is possible. And what is that goal? Spiritual leaders have spoken of that goal as to realize or experience oneness of all life, including even the inanimate world around us. It is not just a feeling and knowing we are all one in an intellectual way. It is one of the total and transcendental identification of all that we see and hear, touch, feel and taste. In fact, we need to go beyond the sensory experience to become one with the world. Senses and the mind limit and focus our attention and experience. When we can go beyond the instruments we use to experience the world, we come in contact with Reality.

Thus, the role of the therapist is to lead the person to inquire into the nature of this reality, this consciousness without making a commitment to the type of reality that the person could be looking for. In other words, the role of the therapist is more complex and suggestive than that of a clergy (of any religion). Once the body-mind has been put in order, so to say, once the person realizes that body-mind is an instrument needed for a purpose, then the search for reality could be initiated. An informed start of this search alone will constitute a beginning toward total healing. The

ultimate destiny of the body-mind is to decay and die. This is the final and relative reality. But beyond this relative reality is an ultimate reality, one that needs to be defined and if possible, experienced.

Thus, healing and consciousness are intimately inter-related. We have not really defined consciousness; it is only mentioned that consciousness is something that continues after the death of the body. It is the self or soul in many traditions; it is the ultimate reality. Consciousness we are dealing with is not the one that we are interested while a patient is in coma; is he/she consciousness or not. It is not reflective awareness, self-awareness or any other psychological correlates that are discussed in literature.


### UNITARY CONSCIOUSNESS

An altered state of consciousness is a change in one's normal mental state as a result of trauma or accident or induced through meditation, drugs, some foods, etc.<sup>[1]</sup> The person is not unconscious. There are also many common experiences that create altered states of consciousness (ASC), such as sleeping or daydreaming, sleep deprivation, euphoria or panic. Dream state, hypnosis, and meditation are also considered as ASC. ASC is a relative state of mental functioning. The mind is still wandering (such as in a dream) or concentrated and focused as in meditation. A thoughtless stillness could be experienced from time to time that could take us beyond ASC. Thus, ASC is a state wherein citta is still active; beyond this active citta is manas and buddhi, the last being in close proximity to purusha.

Yoga introduces the concept of purusha, the eternal principle that activates the entire universe. In the tradition of upanishads, we talk about Brahman or unitary consciousness, an unchanging reality that permeates all that we see around us. Yoga is a means to achieve this goal of experiencing unitary consciousness. The path to follow is delineated in Yoga Sutras of Sage Patanjali, through Kriya Yoga, Jnana Yoga or Bhakti Yoga. We thus move from ASC to an unalterable state wherein complete identity with everything around is achieved. Names and forms disappear to be replaced by the enduring reality, the outer cover being replaced by the inner everlasting entity.

### MEASUREMENT

Health at the biochemical level is well understood, and many intricate measurements are available to observe biochemical homeostasis. Electrophysiological measurements have also

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<p><b>DOI:</b> 10.4103/0973-6131.158468</p>	

been developed to follow neurophysiological homeostasis. However, measurement of subtle energy – that seems to be fundamental to many of the macroscopic mechanisms reflected in biochemistry and electrophysiology – is at its infancy; its definition and measurement is not fully understood and accepted. There are lacunae in both definition and applications. While a detailed discussion regarding the definition cannot be provided in this write-up, there is enough material in literature that gives an overview in a persuasive manner.<sup>[2,3]</sup> It is perhaps time to look at energy homeostasis in the biological environment, which could provide a basis for life processes themselves.<sup>[4]</sup>

Keeping this in mind, a new section is available in this Journal for reporting the role of Yoga in bringing energy homeostasis in individuals. Since energy depletion or increase could be a harbinger of disease processes, it is thought an investigation into this could lead to new ideas in energy-related work. Most holistic methods work with energy; hence an appraisal of energy could be a fruitful avenue to pursue.

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**How to cite this article:** Srinivasan TM. Healing altered states of consciousness. *Int J Yoga* 2015;8:87-8.

**Source of Support:** Nil, **Conflict of Interest:** None declared.

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