

BOOK REVIEWS

TRANSFORMATIONS OF CONSCIOUSNESS: CONVENTIONAL AND CONTEMPLATIVE

PERSPECTIVES ON DEVELOPMENT by Ken Wilber, Jack Engler and Daniel P. Brown. Shambhala, Boston and London 1986, \$29.95 (cloth) \$14.95 (paper) and *THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MEDITATION* Ed. Michael A West Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1987, £30.00.

If you go into any bookshop specialising in the occult, the mystical or even the parapsychological you will find a plethora of books on meditation and how to transform your mind, but very few deal with scientific research. At last, however there are some excellent books reviewing research on meditation and the many new theories which are coming out of psychology. I have chosen briefly to review two of these because, although they do not deal with paranormal phenomena directly, I think they are both useful for any psychical researcher who is interested in the potential of human consciousness.

The first is *Transformations of Consciousness*. We have long thought of development, as traditionally studied in developmental psychology as stopping somewhere in the late teens. By then most of the cognitive skills we need for life are fully developed. However, the authors in this book recognise that development carries on; that contemplation, meditation and other methods of training can bring about further changes building on the earlier stages of development; and that these changes have been badly neglected in Western psychology.

There is an explicit connection here with psychotherapy. In the West it has often been only when things go badly wrong that people have sought to change themselves and their lives. In the East the changes have more often been sought by people who are perfectly healthy but want to progress. This book begins some kind of synthesis. There are many issues to confront. Are the directions of change sought in Eastern traditions appropriate for all? Are techniques useful for the neurotic or psychotic helpful for others and vice versa? Is there just one underlying direction of development or many divergent paths? In many different ways this book attempts to address such questions and to articulate a 'full-spectrum' model of human growth and development.

The assumption underlying a lot of the chapters seems to be that there is basically one way to progress. It is best outlined in two chapters; one by Brown and one by Wilber. Both start from the idea that the self is a structure built up during development and that contemplative development involves the creation of new self structures. Both provide schemes of development (or cartographies) which chart these changing processes.

Wilber contributes three chapters which describe his own theories of human development. Here we find his distinctions between basic structures, transitional structures and the self-system which 'climbs' or progresses through the levels of development, changing structure as it goes. We find his theorising on the pathologies which arise at different levels and

how they can be treated. And finally there are his difficult, but helpful descriptions of the later stages in which the self 'falls' into formlessness or emptiness. These chapters give, in a more condensed version, the ideas he has previously described in several books.

Brown and Engler next consider the stages of mindfulness meditation and ask whether these stages have any cross-cultural validity. That is, are they only apparent within subjective belief systems or are they found across cultures. To answer this they studied and interviewed in depth, practitioners and teachers of meditation and developed the 'profile of meditative experience'. They also used the Rorschach test and found that practitioners at each level of practice showed similarities and the features were consistent with classical descriptions of the stages.

They describe the stages of practice very clearly. To give an example there are various forms of Samadhi and they explain that the practitioner must achieve Access Samadhi (a state of stopping the mind) before going on to insight meditation when, for example, there can be insight into the three fundamental principles of impermanence, suffering and selflessness. They give tables showing the six major stages, preliminary ethical practices, preliminary mind/body training, concentration with and without support, insight practice and advanced insight.

For those who know something about classical systems of meditation many of these stages will be familiar. The big difference here is beginning to put them in the context of modern psychology; asking what cognitive processes are going on, what has happened to the self-structure and how the various stages build on each other. I have no doubt that, however inadequate the theories in this book may yet prove to be, these authors have taken the first step towards synthesizing our modern psychology with the centuries of study of the mind in the East. The second book is quite different. It begins with some useful chapters on traditional and psychological perspectives on meditation, meditation in Buddhist psychology and contemporary theories. The second section is a review of mainly experimental studies of meditation and the third deals with meditation as therapy.

One thing which becomes obvious on reading the experimental work is how few and how problematic these studies are. It should be pointed out that a lot of research is missing from this book. That is most of the massive amount done within the Transcendental Meditation tradition by members of the Maharishi International University. This work is often criticised because it is rarely published in refereed journals and therefore is not part of the rest of open science. This aside the reader will here find all the major studies carefully reviewed.

Of special interest to psychical researchers might be the chapter by David Holmes in which he tackles the widespread belief that meditation reduces physiological arousal and helps people to cope with stress. His findings are unequivocal. There is no consistent evidence that meditating subjects attained lower levels of physiological arousal than resting subjects, nor did regular meditators show any less physiological response to stressful situations. Holmes has now turned his attention to studying the effects of exercise on arousal and stress and finds large and reliable effects. I can't help thinking here of the many people who have given up research on ESP when reviews showed similar weak (or arguably non-existent) effects.

In an important chapter on meditation and the EEG (again reviewing the diverse research on this topic) Peter Fenwick describes a most interesting experiment by Orme-Johnson et al within the TM tradition. They tried to show that EEG coherence could be affected by a group of 2500 students meditating a thousand miles away. They reported that coherence between pairs of meditators increased on days when the distant subjects were meditating compared to when they were not. Fenwick notes that if this were so then the laws of physics would need rewriting-a common response to many experiments in parapsychology However he also points out that the study 'was so poorly controlled that it is impossible to gain any useful information from it.' (p. 110).

Apart from a few such experiments, these books contain little of direct relevance to psychical researchers but for those interested in the potential of human consciousness and its development they provide a broad-reaching and thorough introduction to contemporary ideas.

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