

Real dangers of meditation¹

The meeting of western science and eastern meditation has not always been smooth.² On the positive side, we now know more about the nature and effects of meditation—and how to recognize the “real” thing—or at least avoid the negative aspects.

By the mid-1970s, clinical reports of negative outcomes of various mantra meditation programs began to appear in psychiatric literature.³ These included people becoming unemployable because they were unable to control their mental states (for example, everything around them seemed unreal), and even more serious problems ranging from depression and agitation to psychosis.

Leon Otis, a psychologist at Stanford Research Institute, found that adverse outcomes were related to how long that person had meditated using such methods.⁴ **Michael Persinger**, neuroscientist at the Laurentian University, Sudbury, Ontario, Canada, found that, for some people, meditation can bring on symptoms of complex partial epilepsy, such as visual abnormalities, hearing voices, feeling vibrations, or experiencing automatic behaviours.⁵

Another concern, explored by Esalen founders, **Michael Murphy** and **Steven Donovan**, was that advanced practitioners of mantra meditation ranked high in suggestibility,⁶ not surprising given its similarity to self-hypnosis. A number of people in the US have successfully brought legal suits for damages suffered as a result of their participation in meditation programmes, especially commercialized methods such as TM (“transcendental meditation”).⁷ Legal suits against TM for damages were common.⁸

Many people doing TM suffered from problems and difficulties regarding thinking and attention. Other impairments included emotional difficulties, blackouts, anxiety, “spacing out” [feeling drowsy, weak and bored], amnesia, and losing track of time.⁹ In short, TM is not safe.¹⁰

¹ Abridged from Piya Tan, *Meditation: A safety guide*, Singapore: The Minding Centre, 2013 [Intro](#).

² This section is mostly based on <http://www.ex-premie.org/pages/ismeditation.htm>.

³ Clinical reports of negative outcomes. A Lazarus, “Psychiatric problems precipitated by Transcendental Meditation,” *Psychological Reports* 39 1976:601-602. For full biblio, see *Meditation: A Safety Guide*, 2013.

⁴ N Mead, “Why meditation may not reduce stress,” *Natural Health* 23,6 Nov-Dec 1993: 80-85. For full biblio, see *Meditation: A Safety Guide*, 2013.

⁵ Michael A Persinger, “Transcendental Meditation and general meditation are associated with enhanced complex partial epileptic-like signs: Evidence of ‘cognitive kindling’?” *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 76, 1993:80-82. For full biblio, see *Meditation: A Safety Guide*, 2013.

⁶ Michael Murphy & Steve Donovan, *The Physical and Psychological Effects of Meditation*, Big Sur, CA: Esalen Institute, 1989.

⁷ On the dangers of TM (Transcendental Meditation) (a detailed insider report by Joe Kellett), see <http://www.suggestibility.org/>. Another comprehensive insider’s website is www.minet.org.

⁸ Legal suits for damages. John Doe I-VI and Jane Doe vs Maharishi Mahesh Yogi; World Plan Executive Council-United States; Maharishi International University for the US District Court for the District of Columbia, 95-2848, 2849, 2851, 2852, 2853, 2854 (consolidated); Jane Green vs Maharishi Mahesh Yogi et al. US District Court for the District of Columbia, 87-0015-OG. Patrick Ryan vs World Plan Executive Council-United States et al. US District Court for the District of Columbia, 87-0016-OG.

⁹ Problems found in therapy. M T Singer & R Ofshe, “Thought reform and the production of psychiatric casualties,” *Psychiatric Annals* 20,4 1990:189-190.

¹⁰ On the ineffectiveness and problems of TM, see A Lutz, Donne & Davidson 2007:41-43.

In the early years of Buddhism in the US, two approaches were common. The first was *the empty-mind mantra meditation* based on the Hindu tradition. The second, from the Judeo-Christian tradition, is *reflective meditation*, where you reflect as a way of focusing the mind. In the former, a close relationship between teacher and pupil included attention to individual differences and any problems which might arise. In contrast to earlier approaches, meditation today is often being sold by mass marketing, and often by individuals who have no religious affiliation or do not declare it.¹¹

As early as 1967, when **the Divine Light Mission** arrived in the US, it used “meditation” as a marketing strategy. By the 1980s, numbers dropped off due to disillusionment, and its guru Maharaji (Prem Rawat) renounced its Asian trappings and changed the cult’s name to Elan Vital, and went on to seek new converts in third-world countries such as Nigeria. Many more productive lives were destroyed as a result.

In the 1980s, Swami Muktananda, a respected meditation guru and avowed celibate of **the Siddha Yoga cult**, was accused of regularly having sex with his teenaged disciples.¹² Around the same time, Richard Baker, one of the foremost **Zen** teachers in the US, was forced to resign from his leadership of the San Francisco Zen Centre on charges of misuse of funds and having an affair with a married resident female student.¹³

In the late 1980s, **Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh** (also called Osho), the self-proclaimed enlightened Indian “sage,” who owned 30 Rolls Royce, fled the US in the wake of an ugly controversy involving charges of blackmail and murder.¹⁴ In 1981, on arriving in the US, he bought the 64,000-acre Big Muddy cattle ranch in eastern Oregon for US\$6 million, and named it Rajneeshpuram, which he headed as a virtual autocrat.

Rajneesh was renowned for molesting young girls and women to “feel their chakra,” and impregnated many of them. His own sannyasins (religious followers) were known to poison those they perceived as threats. Members of Rajneesh’s own staff were poisoned by his personal secretary, Ma Ananda Sheela, when she thought they knew too much or had simply fallen out of her favour.

In March 1993, a ten-day conference of Western Buddhist meditation teachers was held in Dharamsala in a hotel near the Namgyal Monastery, the residence of **the Dalai Lama**, who headed the conference, themed, “Toward a Western Buddhism.”¹⁵ One of the most important issues discussed was that of Buddhist ethics, and the Dalai Lama strongly emphasized the right, even responsibility, of students to object to any behaviour of teachers deemed abusive, damaging, immoral, or unsuitable for the time and place: “Make voice ... Name names in newspapers!”

¹¹ On various aspects of the commercialization of meditation and pseudoscientific claims, see eg Barry L Beyerstein, “Pseudoscience and the brain: Tuners and tonics for aspiring superhumans” at <http://www.sfu.ca/~beyerste/research/articles/06Pseudoscience-and-Brain.pdf>.

¹² See open letter of an ex-follower, <http://leavingsiddhayoga.net/secret.htm>.

¹³ See Sandra Bell, “Scandals in emerging Western Buddhism,” in Prebish & Baumann (eds), 2002:235-238.

¹⁴ See Hugh Milne (Shivamurti), *The God that Failed*, NY: St Martin’s Press, 1987.

¹⁵ <http://www.mandala.hr/5/6-surya.html>.

Sadly, in early 2006, another scandal arose in Tibetan Buddhism in the West, involving “geshe” **Michael Roach** (b 1952),¹⁶ whose teachings and behaviour were causing controversy and concern within much of the Buddhist community, due to his relationship with female student Christie McNally and his unconventional teachings about Tibetan meditation practices, to the extent of his being rendered as persona non grata.¹⁷

The lesson of such scandals and tragedies is basically that we should avoid unhealthy teacher-pupil relationships, especially those involving *transference* and *counter-transference*.¹⁸ These pathological states lead to the teacher’s exploitation of his pupils, and of blind obedience and of grandiose perception of the teacher on the pupils’ part.

When the teacher is placed above the teaching, there is always the danger of the teacher being misperceived as being more than what he is, and the pupils of being abused by the teacher.¹⁹ Meditation only succeeds when we sit peacefully alone and joyfully rise above our physical senses to a higher stillness within.

R530 Revisioning Buddhism 200

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¹⁶ See <http://www.diamond-cutter.org/>. This section onwards is from <http://www.diamond-cutter.org/geshe-michael-roach/geshe-michael-roach-vows.html>. See **The Three Roots Inc**, [SD 31.12](#) (3.4.7).

¹⁷ See **The Three Roots Inc**, [SD 31.12](#) (3.4.7).

¹⁸ In psychotherapy, “transference” is the displacement of feelings and attitudes applicable to other persons (usually one’s parents, spouse, siblings, etc) onto the analyst or teacher; while “countertransference” is the analyst’s or teacher’s displacement of affect (feelings) (ie transference) onto the client or pupil.

¹⁹ See **The Teacher or the teaching?** [SD 3.14](#).