

The Practice Test: Vision Quest or Meditation?

Edgar W. Harnack

The biblical statement, "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Mt 7, 16) we want to take literally. What are the fruits that people and communities in the field of spirituality really produce? A "Product Testing" for such cultural offerings may not only regard worldly criteria, it has to include the possibility of extraordinary and personal transformational experiences as well. But it must nevertheless be critical in order to separate less useful activities from more helpful ones. As long as there are hardly any scientific criteria for this, our suggestions must be published on the basis of single case reports. In the section "The practical test", an author presents his / her personal experience with an institution or person in (self-)critical reflection. **The report depicts the subjective experience of the author and is not to be understood as an objective verdict.**

In March 2013, I went to a Vision Quest in the Californian Mojave Desert. The Vision Quest is a variation, adapted to the needs of the Euro-American cultures, of an old Indian transition ritual in which young people enter adulthood by spending some (usually four) days alone and fasting in a restricted area in the wilderness and waiting for a vision, which gave them a new, adult identity. The Vision Quest, as it is performed today, is an organized event, which is in prepared and finished in the group, interrupted by a phase of being alone in the wilderness of different length. In the vision quest that I had booked with a provider from West Germany, it was supposed to be a four-day stay in the desert, with a 3 ½ day pre- and post-processing time. For reasons, which I will describe below, I can report about the organized vision quest only insofar as it relates to the first three days.

What struck me most in these days of preparation: the prelude to the actual experience of the Vision Quest follows communication patterns as they were researched and applied as induction of trance experiences by the doyen of mod-

ern hypnotherapy, Milton H. Erickson. Erickson believed that the concept of trance can be translated by the term attention focussing: Trance starts already whenever the communication of a person A calls attention to a person B in such a way that they fall into a state of consciousness providing for a by A intended experience. The induction of a trance is thus an ongoing process that begins when Person B expects to be put into hypnosis and therefore unconsciously already focuses their attention on the target hypnotic state. Whether such a trance induction succeeds or not is, however, dependent on the personality trait of suggestibility: A person, who – as Erickson writes¹ – with vivid eyes and open expectations comes into the doctor's office, shows an increased willingness to engage with those suggestions that lead to a target state. A person, who deliberately refuses, however, the intended target state of a trance experience or wants to keep control, is far less likely to accept the suggestions. This one is difficult to hypnotize.

The desired target state of a Vision Quest is a vision. What is a vision? Obviously, the minimal consensus for a definition of vision is that we call that event a vision, in which such an altered state of consciousness occurs, which allows a special visual experience, although it is not said whether it is an externally or internally perceived experience, a static image or a moving scene, of concrete format or rather abstract (light phenomena, etc.). Instead of a vision an audition (again in the broadest possible sense defined as any audible message) would analogously be a possible desired target state, too. A basic lesson from the practice of Ericksonian hypnotherapy is that hypnotic target states should never be pre-defined too precisely in order to include all of the resulting experiences, which then are not excluded due to a lack of consistency with the definition of the hypnotherapist. Vision in the context of the Vision Quest can therefore just as well mean that the person finds a new perspective, an altered vision of his or her life.

How can the participants of a Vision Quest ideally be led to such a target state? The Vision Quest, as far as I've seen it practically, contained three elements of an induction of an altered state: First of all by practical exercises; secondly by indirect suggestions, including the expectations of the group leader and the group; thirdly, by embedding of the event into a "world model" that has been communicated at least initially in this case. To begin with the third point: The Vision Quest draws its ideological foundation from the importance of specific

¹ Ernest L. Rossi (Ed.). Collected Works of Milton H. Erickson: Volume 1 - Nature of Hypnosis and Suggestion. New York 1980

life stages, which are distinguished by transition stages², and tasks of each phase of life, typical to indigenous peoples. In my own experience, this meant that the Vision Quest was placed in a context in which each individual life problem could be reframed as problems of transition to new phases of life. This subsumption of the individual under the overall context of a regular, process-like sequence of human life phases seems to be so helpful to many people, that we must ask ourselves seriously as a society and specifically as psychotherapists, why we do not give more importance to life stages, life tasks and their transitions by social rituals and therapeutic interventions.³ In order to prepare the participant such workshop-like elements help first, giving the whole following process a cognitive framework within which thoughts and feelings from now on focus on the questions of his own life, the question of 'Who am I now – having become what I am?'.

This question was the subject of the first practical exercise of the first preparation day: go out into the desert and speak to the all you met there, thereby asking what it says about me as an individual. However, this first exercise was preceded by another initial hike that everybody had already to have completed alone before the group appointment, and for which the instruction was to go through a symbolic threshold into nature, "in the knowledge that behind it a different than the familiar world begins – a world in which landscape, events and meetings have symbolic significance." A second practical exercise in the desert linked the question of the position in their own lives with the desert surroundings: Go out into the desert, reminisce there your life and become clear about three types of your life choices: 'What have I done well enough? What have I not done and cannot do anymore? What have I not done yet, but could still do?'. This type of exercise may seem pure psychotherapy, could be presented in self-discovery workshops of another kind also, but on the second day the suggestive context had surprisingly moved already more or less all participants (except myself) not only self-reflection, but to make a paranormal experience by performing the exercise. So it already occurred to many participants in both desert walks that they made synchronistic experiences (that is, experiences of correspondence of interior and exterior with a special quality): the number and type of desert animals that one of the participants met exceeded any likely scale, and the way the desert began to start talking to other participants had become an autonomous process at the second day in such a way, that for many participants it was

² Cf. Victor Turner. *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage*, in: *Proceedings of the 1964 Annual Spring Meeting of the American Ethnological Society 1964*, 4-20

³ Cf. Angelika-Benedicta Hirsch. *An den Schwellen des Lebens. Warum wir Übergangsrituale brauchen*. München 2004.

no longer themselves, but the Other that made them able to listen to the plant, the stone, or the lizard.

Such a willingness of rationally controlled citizens of a Western civilization within two days to produce a dimension of experience that is typical of shamanic contexts must result also from a social framing. Therefore, the preliminary group stage is so important for the Vision Quest. As is known long from social psychological studies,⁴ a group tending in the same direction develops a group dynamic, to which succumbs the overall cognitive functioning of individuals very quickly. We as humans are products of evolution that took place in the horde for long periods. When our hord thinks turtles are dangerous and we do not believe that, then we have poor survival: not because we are eaten by a turtle, but because our horde will ban us. The same happens in all newly forming groups of people over and over again: More or less immediately a group builds norms of cognitive functioning, which are specified by one or more group leaders (in my Vision Quest it was five such normative people!), and are adopted immediately by all newly arriving group members. When we recently started participating in a group, our antenna for what is expected of us work very well.

To these cognitive norms belonged from the beginning that there would be a special experience occurring here, in this special desert environment, away from home, among all participants. The initial hike at home had already prepared that. The uncertainty of the new (a new group, new environment, new experience) was fueled by purposefully keeping the participants in the dark about what expected them the next day. Not only in the indigenous rites of passage, even in today's Vision Quest uncertainty is an element that forms an ideal basis for the purposes of making suggestions more effective: it is the state deprived from every safety that makes open to new ideas, following a suggestion like grasping at straws for re-orientation.

Other suggestions were "When you're out there in the desert, something will happen to you. It's because nothing else is there" (as one of the co-leaders said, so suggesting the certainty of an exceptional experience) or "It can speak to you if you just give ear to it", a suggestion that by vivid narratives (which are also an element of Ericksonian hypnosis induction) from own experiences of the group leaders was amplified. Now, if such suggestions are to act together with the effect of cognitive peer pressure, all participants must cultivate the same expectations. A single oppositional participant spoils all other participants the soup, because he brings the suggestion effects to naught. This participant was me, for

⁴ Cf. the classic experiments by Muzafer Sherif and Solomon Asch or the classic study conducted by Irving Janis.

the simple reason that the gift of dissociation (that ability that allows the human mind to create an own experience out of a given suggestion, which since the Renaissance, under the name of imagination, by the way is known as a main ingredient of magic) I do only possess to a very limited extent. I have been trying for years to keep through meditative techniques my state of consciousness in a clear waking state. Trance experiences, however, are quite the opposite of this state of consciousness.

To substantiate this thesis, it is sufficient to look at two factors which are able to determine a state of consciousness. The first factor could be called *concentration*: A state of consciousness may be more unicuspid, only referring to a single object or sector; or including a wide range of stimuli and objects. Presumably, this factor is inverse (reversed identical) to a factor called *mindfulness*: assimilating everything that happens versus excluding everything except a particular focus of the consciousness field. The second factor we can call *control*: A state of consciousness can oscillate by itself or it can be very controlled and only shift from one object to another by voluntary control. Presumably, this factor is not independent of (mathematically: not "orthogonal" to) or identical with a factor called *witness consciousness (self-awareness)*: Am I aware of my own experience and can I look at myself as if from outside of myself? Meditative experiences are always experiences where the factor control / awareness is highly pronounced, whether it is a single pointed (high concentration factor) or a wide-open meditation practice (low concentration factor / mindfulness high). Trance experiences are always experiences where high absorption (high concentration) is accompanied by low control over the contents of consciousness (low control factor). Trance and meditation thus differ diametrically.

As a meditator you might have extraordinary experiences like many meditators report. However, I believe that the susceptibility to suggestions – for example, the kind of "the desert is talking to you" (translated into consciousness theoretical terms: "You are going into an area of under- / superconsciousness in which the exterior is a symbol for your subconsciousness and on the other hand your superconsciousness communicates with you through synchronistic manifestations") – is basically reduced to meditators. That derives directly from the above mentioned dimensional differences between trance and meditative states (at least according to the Buddhist meditation models!). The same applies to the trance-inducing techniques that do not work in the preparatory phase of the Vision Quest, but in the main phase (alone in the wilderness): sensory deprivation (i.e., lack of stimulus, especially in the desert) including withdrawal from human contact, sleep deprivation (in the hard-core variant there is no sleep for three nights), fasting (solid food, in the indigenous variants, no water was drun-

ken, too), anxiety (due to the wilderness conditions, such as vulnerability without housing), if necessary rituals such as rhythmic rattles, and dancing. All these elements favour the change of the state of consciousness for most people. While the mind of non-meditators, for example, if it does not get sufficient input from outside (or biologically-constructivist spoken: if the prefrontal cortex does not receive much from of the neuronal periphery), produces diversion with a self-created cinema program, the meditative trained mind for a long time can be not or little entertained before the state of consciousness tilts over. However, exactly this stability is undesirable in the Vision Quest. It wants to use the self-hypnotic, trance-creating functions of the deflectable mind precisely in order to recognize yourself in the mirror of the projections of the under- / superconsciousness on the canvas of the desert.

What can the meditator, then, do to experience a Vision Quest and what was it that I did? The group leader had already branded me as an unwanted subject by obviously believing, funnily enough, I was quite possibly not mentally intact, because I have not like all the others been able to speak with stones and listen to their answers. And his assistant had attested already that I had not performed the pre-exercise – the obligatory solitary nature hike ahead of the group event – correctly, even though I had indeed done everything so as demanded by the written statement externally, but had not had an extraordinary inner experience. I can recognize symbolically meaningful occurrences, if they happen. However, I can not to produce them – and on my initial hike unfortunately nothing significant had happened, what I, to their indignation, told the two group leaders frankly. Both had already decided to exclude me as a troublemaker from the normal course of actions (out of the above mentioned very good group dynamic reasons), without being interested in my own kind of desert experience, and without appreciating the deviation from the standard (that the deviation from a standard model leads to cognitive dissonance for all of us, being difficult to bear, is another well-known psychological phenomenon). The different desert experience of a meditator, for which the encounter with consciousness itself was more important than the talking stones, they were not able to integrate.

So I decided to walk the rest of the Vision Quest time into the desert alone. I looked for a secluded mountain near Death Valley, built me a camping place, and remained there five days, at first sight, with the intention of formally meditating. The experience that the relentless master, the desert, demanded something different from me than a concentrated meditation came as a surprise. In a variant of pure awareness, the open novice spirit of Zen, I sat four of the five days (except to sleep) on a hill, looking out into the desert down there and fell more

and more into a state of presence, which contained a single message: it suffices fully just to be there – without conditions, without the need of action (including inner), without futile desires and goals. Compared to the merciless force of the burning sun, the vastness and desolation of the landscape, the inability of the mind to distract itself, there was only one way, namely – as in the vision quest – to make surrender the rational mind and to engage in what just was there. But these for the meditator were not the inner world of images of the visionary, the inner voices of the auditive, it was ultimately the void that is left when everything else has become meaningless. I personally would recommend anyone experienced in meditation to make the experience of unconditional solitude in the wilderness alone. All others I recommend to look for the preparing and subsequent phases in an organized Vision Quest workshop in order to be protected by the suggestive psychotherapeutic preparation from being swamped by chaotic thoughts, feelings, images, and voices.