

THEOSOPHY-SCIENCE GROUP

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EDITORIAL NOTES

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The main item in this Newsletter is a very interesting detailed summary by Vicki Jerome of the successful **Theosophy-Science Seminar**, organised by Dr. Victor Gostin in and near Adelaide, October 1-4, 2009. Vicki has been an enthusiastic participant in most of our seminars. She has recently been elected National Vice-President of the Theosophical Society in New Zealand.

THEOSOPHY SCIENCE SEMINAR, 1 - 4 October 2009

Summary by Vicki Jerome

The unexpected treat of another Theosophy-Science seminar only a year after the previous one was made possible by the capable and welcoming group of members at **Adelaide Lodge** in South Australia, with the organisation and guidance of **Dr Victor Gostin**. Some thirty members convened for this memorable long-weekend gathering, including five from interstate and two trans-Tasman visitors: Murray Stentiford (National Vice-President) and Vicki Jerome (Vice-President elect, 2010).

INAUGURAL EVENT

The inaugural event was the regular monthly meeting of the Adelaide Theosophy-Science Group in the evening of Thursday 1 October, in the Adelaide Lodge. The guest speaker was **Associate Professor Lynne Hume**, author of the book *Portals* and with a PhD in anthropology, specialising in religion and spirituality. In her talk,

PORTALS: Thresholds and Doorways through the Senses,

Lynne gave a brief overview of her book. Experimental physics now indicates that the ultimate nature of reality is unknowable; Lynne's research into altered states of consciousness has revealed that the experience of moving through some sort of portal, also described as a doorway, gate, veil, cave entrance, ladder, bridge, way and other concepts, into another type of reality is widespread and facilitated by certain techniques. She has studied how people use their senses to move beyond the physical body into other realms of existence, deeper levels of consciousness or union with the divine. In her book she also addresses the symbolic and

practical implications of ‘portalling’, looking into how the techniques of various spiritual practices employ the senses of sight, sound, movement, tactile, olfactory and pain in this way, and pointing out that there are alternative ways of gaining knowledge besides intellect and reason. The sensory effects can range from hyper-excitation to hyper-relaxation – or a combination can even induce trance – or sometimes such other-reality experiences just happen serendipitously.

The notion of surmounting obstacles, or discovering passages albeit fraught with dangers, to access an alternate reality, a sacred dimension, is common in myths.

Lynne discussed shamanism and the importance of cultivating mental imagery in its development, as also in some Western esoteric traditions. She described the physical sensations also often accompanying movement into altered states, such as of flying, being drawn into a vortex or tunnel, or the body vibrating. Lynne then spoke of Sufi Ibn ‘Arabi’s teachings about the mystic heart (‘qalb’), one of the centres of mystic physiology distinct from but connected to the physical heart, and its power in attaining a goal meditated upon and, once unveiled, in understanding divine realities – “like a mirror in which the microcosmic form of the Divine is reflected”. She continued to Western occultism and W. E. Butler’s ideas about thought forms and the ability of emotional thoughts to generate energy, drawing parallels between the two writers.

Lynne then moved on to mental imagery, enhanced by concentration and will and by the training of many mystical and magico-religious traditions such as Buddhism, Sufism and Western esotericism; also the importance of active imagination and visualisation in the attainment of spiritual experiences.

Another physical sense used to heighten spiritual experiences is sound, and Lynne spoke of the power of music and words to evoke emotional reactions and lead to another realm of existence. Thought and sound is also a powerful mix taught by many cultures. Dance, or other bodily patterned movement, is another opening to spiritual experiences – often circular, the rotational movement these dances involve facilitates dissociation. The Sufi Sema ritual performed by whirling dervishes is known as the ‘gate of secrets’, enabling the dancers to pass beyond their normal existence into a knowledge of Truth through a physical, mental and spiritual act of surrender to the Divine – the term ‘dervish’ means ‘doorway’. The Kalahari bushmen also have a practice, called !kia, involving an intense dance.

Lynne then considered the reasons people enter a portal:

- To gain knowledge or a greater energy,
- To progress spiritually;
- To search for other realities or something beyond death,
- Simply from curiosity.

This usually involves more than one sensorial mode. Furthermore the psychological state and environment are also important, as well as support after the experience.

In conclusion, Lynne looked at the relationship between reality and knowledge, and how the nature of these can differ from one individual or culture to another, depending on experiences and perceptions – citing the example of the film *A Beautiful Mind*, about mathematical genius and schizophrenia sufferer John Nash.

An interesting quote here from a Zen monk was that most Buddhists do not consider spirits to be supernatural phenomena, but part of the natural world which has many levels. Lynne

described the beliefs about reality and knowledge held by various peoples throughout the Americas and Canada, and the conflict between the two modes of knowledge, the intuitive and the analytic – the latter as employed in the Western scientific approach, which to a large extent has relegated the former to the realms of superstition.

Lynne ended with the subject of ‘spiritual intelligence’, largely neglected or at least unacknowledged in the West, along with emotional intelligence, both of which can help individuals to function better in their lives.

Lynne’s talk was followed by some animated discussion among members, particularly those from out of town as we renewed old friendships.

FRIDAY OUTING

After this stimulating start, we were treated to an outing next morning to take in some practical examples of geological history at the scenic Hallett Cove Conservation Park on the edge of the ocean. We were guided along the walkway by Dr Victor Gostin, who, as an Associate Professor of Geology and Geophysics, interpreted the varied and dramatic geological features for us. The persistent rain did not dampen our spirits! After lunch at the Surfers’ Cafe, overlooking the beach, we continued to the environmentally friendly home of Vicki van der Linde and Colin Darcey at Macclesfield in the Adelaide Hills, for an interesting overview of their many uses of natural energy sources such as solar and wind power, and an exploration of their tree-covered land, which gave us a healthy appetite for the delicious and substantial afternoon tea provided.

From there we proceeded to the venue for the seminar proper, the **WOODHOUSE ACTIVITY CENTRE** at Piccadilly in the Adelaide Hills. This was a wonderful old stone house situated in a secluded spot in the shade of numerous mature trees, at the heart of a large park containing scout campgrounds. Meetings were held in an ornately carved and decorated room with a somewhat magical atmosphere – reputed to be haunted! – and enhanced by a display of beautiful, colourful and energy-filled paintings by Vicki van der Linde and other members.

The evening began with a warm welcome from **Dr Victor Gostin**, who introduced the Main Theme for the Seminar:

Building Bridges: Science, Psyche and Kosmos

The first talk was:

Scientific-Materialistic and Esoteric Approaches to Consciousness

by Dr Edi Bilimoria

Whether consciousness is an epiphenomenon of the brain, or something more than that, is currently a hotly debated topic in the world of science. Pictures of Einstein’s brain show it as larger than normal, yet some people appear to have no detectable brain and yet have a normal or even high score in IQ tests. Edi explored several current views of consciousness: Does intelligence depend solely on the brain? ‘establishment’ science on consciousness – their paradigms and emotional outbursts at any challenges to their position; ‘uncomfortable’ science on consciousness; esoteric science on consciousness; and a suggested way forward.

The concept of free will remains a major unresolved issue in psychology; and establishment science struggles to explain such things as paranormal phenomena, near-death experiences, out-of-body experiences and so on. Edi identified five postulates for a broader vision on consciousness:

1. The universe is a multi-dimensional, multi-levelled, organic and living entity which:
2. Displays innate intelligence, order and purpose, therefore:
3. Why limit knowledge and experience to just the physical realm or just the five senses?
So also,
4. Consciousness need not be restricted to matter or just to the brain – so may survive death; moreover
5. Consciousness might even be fundamental rather than a by-product of material interactions. It may be unqualified and unconditioned and could display a spectrum of states with matter, its effect rather than its cause.

And what of the ‘brain in the heart’? A memorable quote was “As moonlight is borrowed sunlight, so brain-light is borrowed heart-light”. The heart indeed rules the head. The brain is not the origin of consciousness but is played by it like an instrument.

Edi suggested the way forward is to understand the philosophical implications of the science and esoteric science paradigms and what they are each trying to say about consciousness; and not to denigrate science but to enter the scientific camp and raise it to a higher metaphysics. In closing, he said: “consider the double star of husband Vashishta and wife Arundati – a model couple. There should always be a happy marriage between the two.”

The Theme for Saturday was **Consciousness.**

The first talk was:

The Science of Setting Intention: an open secret

by Rosanne DeBats

She told us theosophy teaches that “Thoughts are things”, and that many spiritual traditions have described ways of setting intention and manifesting, often limited to their esoteric branches. Modern writers and researchers, including Gregg Braden (*The Isaiah Effect*), Lynn McTaggart (*Living the Field*) and John Hagelin (Maharishi University) have been building on these traditions, and developing a ‘technology’ of intention setting. These modern masters use the power of numbers in a group, with the focus being on improving our world, not personal gain. Statistically significant effects have been achieved in such diverse areas as lowering local crime rates, and changing the structure of water. While the process used varies somewhat, in general it involves setting up a conducive environment, going into a meditative state, imaging the outcome as if it has already occurred, believing, and then moving aside. The technology is being refined by looking at how many people need to be involved at the same time; how specific the intention needs to be; the best modality in which to express the outcome (words, images, feelings); and what states of consciousness increase the power of intention. The internet makes possible the bringing together of large online communities for such group intention setting. Of course it doesn’t always work. Mixed messages, the existence of old material in the unconscious, and doubt all interfere with the operations involved.

The technology of intention setting is crucial for the world we are creating. Our current and future challenges are those of the control of consciousness, of active choice of thoughts. Setting

intention is a concrete, directive force. We are doing this in any event with every thought we have. How much more effective it is to do this consciously by joining with others, forming a group and imaging the world we want. The Theosophical Society is well placed to put into action the increasing verifiable knowledge about thoughts as things, to create a service to the world through the formation of intention-setting groups. Will we choose to directly participate?

After morning tea, we watched a video by **Dean Radin**, author of the book *Entangled Minds*, entitled *Science and the Taboos of Psi*, in which he describes how a taboo has arisen in the scientific community about admitting the possibility that so-called psychic phenomena are real. In private, however, more will admit to believing in the validity of these occurrences. 90% of the general population are interested, but only 0.3% of the academic population will confess to an interest in such things. Yet the scientific evidence for psi was repeatedly assessed during the Cold War, and four studies (e.g. by Jessica Utts and Ray Hyman) concluded that ‘something is going on’. The Western view of the brain as creating the phenomenon of mind differs from that of the East, which sees it as receiving mind – leading to the question: does the brain generate or receive mind?

While many reported experiences are not psychic but can be explained in other ways, even effects that are small are still real. Rupert Sheldrake used the Ganzfeld method in testing so-called ‘telephone telepathy’ – when the phone rings and you know who it is before answering – and cumulatively, 88 experiments gave a result 32% above chance. This can increase to 60% where siblings, creative populations and so on are studied. In a series of 19 presentiment studies, 10 showed a significant result.

The next talk was:

Three Mysteries of Consciousness

by Tad Philips

As a philosopher, Tad said that ‘philosophy of mind’ is the viewpoint from which he is approaching this subject, and would call it instead “three problems/questions/unknown areas of consciousness”, his aim being to help the understanding of consciousness, defined by David Chalmers as “the having of perceptions, thoughts and feelings; awareness.” One problem in the investigation of consciousness is the oversimplification or exaggeration by the media of cautious or qualified statements made by scientists. For example, the well-known misconception that we only use 10% of our brains is simply not true – MRI scans show 100% use on occasion, but not all the time. The popular idea of various activities being cleanly divided into ‘left-brain’ and ‘right-brain’, depending on the side of the brain used to do them, is also too simplistic – language requires both sides of the brain, and even maths, notoriously a left-brain activity, uses the left to calculate and the right to compare. For holistic perception, ideally we should aim to use both sides.

Hinduism specifies four states or aspects of consciousness, Mahayana Buddhism specifies eight; ‘philosophy of mind’ lists three: self-consciousness, access consciousness (the direct access to our own thoughts that we do not have to the thoughts of others) and phenomenal consciousness – the various subjective feelings about how we experience things, such as how we ‘feel’ the smell of a rose, or the taste of a banana.

After lunch, the next talk was:

MYSTICS OR MADNESS? Borderlands between spiritual specialists and mental illness

by Associate Professor Lynne Hume

Lynne introduced us to the concept of ‘liminality’ – things that are ambivalent, ambiguous, fall between well-recognised categories – giving as examples the transitional stages of human life such as birth, death and puberty, and the rites of passage some cultures have developed to deal with the latter change. Somewhat related to this is the dichotomy of gender – anomalies do occur, such as hermaphroditism, and are often subjected to surgical modification to align the physical with the perceptions of either the parents or, later in life, the individual. Myths also exist about the anomalous, such as vampires and werewolves.

The focus of Lynne’s talk, however, was on a dichotomy of mind, and the difficulty of making a distinction between spiritual experiences and psychic abilities on the one hand, and what are perceived to be illnesses and labelled psychotic or schizophrenic. She recently participated in a medical research study to discover the genetic and environmental factors underlying behaviours regarded as mentally unstable, involving a lengthy interview with questions widely used by psychiatrists to diagnose psychiatric illnesses. As an example, she listed some of the questions posed relating to schizophrenia, the major indications of which are considered to be hallucinations, delusions, disorganised speech and behaviour, avolition (disinterest in everyday activities), alogia (disinterest in communicating with others) and affective flattening (emotional flatness). Some of these questions mentioned traits that are also observed in or by mystics, shamans or gifted psychics, so in an attempt to ascertain the difference, Lynne first reviewed a variety of definitions of mysticism, in all of which the subjective experience involved a greater sense of the unity of reality than that commonly perceived in everyday life; self-transcendence and an increased sense of unity with a higher order of reality. She then related an interesting example from the abundance of women mystics in medieval Europe, the visionary **Hildegard of Bingen** (1098-1179) from the Benedictine monastery of Disibodenberg, who wrote the book *Scrivias*, presenting a picture of the world in 26 visions. A supernatural sweet fragrance was also said to accompany or follow the death of a saint, such as observed with St Francis Xavier and St Teresa of Avila.

Lynne then described **the characteristics of Shamans**, the healers and people of knowledge found in many cultures, particularly their ability to leave the body and travel through spirit realms to bring back lost souls or knowledge. They are invariably different from others even in childhood, and usually undergo some sort of initiation. Two studies comparing shamanic journey states with those of schizophrenics found that there were major differences, such as the general ability of shamans to control their experiences, whereas schizophrenics are almost entirely helpless victims of their states and experiences. However, it is unclear whether the acceptance of the role of the shaman by their cultures might simply be legitimising their place in society. Another study indicated that shamans also have heightened concentration. Lynne concluded this section with a schizophrenic’s account of his perceptions, and indicated the fine line between the two experiences. The difference between culturally accepted religious behaviour and psychotic behaviour seems to boil down to the affective result of each – mystics generally describe their experiences as ecstatic and joyful, whereas those of psychosis are often confusing and terrifying.

In the modern Western world, what used to be regarded as religious phenomena are now usually attributed to psychology, the physiology of the brain, or body chemistry, and the

existence of spirits and other realms is questioned. Again there is a fine line between so-called ‘spiritual experiences’ and ‘psychotic episodes’, somewhat dependent on the narrator’s viewpoint. To illustrate this, Lynne related Jack Kornfield’s description of the physical and sensory effects of his own spiritual practices, involving concentration and various combinations of meditation, prayer, yoga and breathing exercises, and how these affected his students. Lynne described chronic schizophrenia and possible ways of handling it, and compared this with the experiences of Fred Hanna who experimented with self-hypnosis and meditation, revealing interesting insights. A key difference appeared to be that a transcendental experience should evoke compassion and empathy and reduce egocentrism, whereas personality disorders are commonly accompanied by egocentrism and lack of empathy.

In conclusion, Lynne said that, at the moment the medical profession is reluctant to investigate anything suggestive of the occult, however she hopes this situation will improve for mental illnesses as it has for physical conditions with the acceptance of herbal medicine, acupuncture and other traditional treatments. She finished with the following comment:

“But each of us is a **hair’s breadth away** from making mistakes that might put us in the ‘mad’ category, especially when we enter the realm of the spiritual and dare to speak about those experiences to others. The liminal is a precarious place to be.”

After tea, the next talk was:

Whitehead’s ‘Pansubjectivism’

by **Dr Brian Harding** of Brisbane Lodge

His talk focused on some aspects of process philosophy. This was developed during the 1920s by Alfred North Whitehead, an English mathematician turned philosopher. Whitehead believed that ‘Becoming’ was more fundamental than ‘Being’, a view that can be traced back to the pre-Socratic philosophers in ancient Greece.

Further, as Einstein demonstrated, there is no such thing as absolute time. Whitehead saw time as the flow of experience, so process philosophy is ‘organic’ not mechanistic. Consciousness exists in all entities right down to the simplest particle – all entities experience, from humans right down to quarks. In other words, all entities are ‘subjects’ not just ‘objects’, hence the terms ‘pansubjectivism’ or ‘panexperientialism’.

Because of the centrality of experience in process philosophy, it follows that relationship and interconnectedness are also central ideas. The constitution of entities through their internal as well as external relationships is expressed in Whitehead’s much quoted statement that “the many become one and are increased by one”.

Because all entities are subjects, purpose, value and anticipation become of universal importance, leading us to an holistic attitude to nature – nature has intrinsic value as well as instrumental value. Because of the interconnectedness of all things, “we are participants in the adventure of an unfinished universe.”

Brian concluded his talk with several references to *The Secret Doctrine* showing similarities between HPB’s thought and process philosophy.

In the evening after dinner, a panel discussion was held on the general theme of:

Pushing the Boundaries:
with **Edi Bilimoria, Victor Gostin, Rosanne DeBats and Murray Stentiford.**

Edi first outlined his plans as the new Education Coordinator for the TS in Australia, and spoke of his administrative duties and four main projects – to build a catalogue of TS resources available worldwide; to create a comprehensive syllabus or curriculum covering subjects relevant to the core business of the TS, followed by a bank of courses, lectures, papers and workshops to be made widely available; to work with the National President to write a new course on Theosophy and Science; and to examine the Third Object and trace the trajectory of developments in psychic or psycho-energetic research from 1875 to the present, to see where things stand now in our knowledge of the powers latent in the human being. Edi also looks after the Campbell Library in Sydney. Murray Stentiford then spoke about his NVP role and invited the group to share ideas on possible activities. This led to an interesting discussion on attracting greater numbers of younger members and how members of the audience first came into contact with the TS.

This was followed by a showing of the BBC Horizon documentary, *Parallel Universes*, about M-theory.

Sunday 4 October was declared “Passion Day”,
with speakers invited to talk on a topic of personal burning interest.

This began with:

Possibilities of Sacred Activism in Theosophy and Science

by New Zealand National Vice-President, Murray Stentiford

Murray believes we are already in the process of transformation centred around 2012, and shared a couple of videos of Andrew Hardy, an Oxford scholar and visionary, who believes sacred activism is essential for the extraordinary crisis of a ‘great death’ and rebirth now taking place. This ‘great death’ has seven aspects:

1. Massive population explosion
2. Environmental holocaust of global warming
3. Dangerous growth of fundamentalism in all major religions as people retreat into a narrow tribal vision of God to give them a false illusion of security
4. Massive proliferation of weapons of mass destruction
5. Terrifying lack of coherence and moral responsibility in the global media, owned and created by corrupt conglomerations
6. Addiction to reason, science and technology, leading to a massive worldwide ‘cement garden’
7. Terrifying ‘busyness’ in our lives.

If something is not done soon, humankind will die out and take a large part of nature with us. But a ‘great birth’ is also happening, partly as a result of this crisis. Andrew Harvey sees this as ‘seven stars of hope’:

1. The crisis itself – an immense challenge to humanity to strip away false agendas

2. The massive advances in technology being made, such as new alternative fuel sources being found – wind, solar, hydrogen etc.
3. Certain new advances in the media – spiritual films, books suggesting new ways of living, and the Internet, with the possibility of creating global ‘networks of grace’
4. A mystical renaissance of fundamental sacred wisdom, which has been happening in the West for 30 years now
5. The return of the sacred feminine, cherishing the values of compassion, interconnectedness and harmony
6. Compassionate, non-violent action put into practice with enormous inner strength (e.g. Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela)
7. The Divine itself as our secret ally in creating ‘divine humanity’, the growing belief that God is within each of us.

We can become mystical activists, serving the Divine, ourselves (be grounded in reality), others and our local and global communities. A further video clip of Andrew Harvey listed five forms of service that anyone can do.

Murray also showed a short PowerPoint presentation by Vic Hao Chin, Jr of TS in the Philippines, about the activities of TS founders and early leaders Besant and Arundale in creating schools and colleges. The entire work of the TS is virtually about educating the masses, whether about theosophy, right living or character building.

After morning tea, the talk was:

Consciousness, Fact or Fiction?

by Colin Darcey

He said that no-one knows what it is – we can only try to describe what it does. Colin’s talk covered three viewpoints: scientific, psychological and spiritual. Scientifically, ‘mind’ is regarded as a by-product of brain activity – Colin explained the function of neurons and how nerve impulses travel along axons to connect to other neurons, and reviewed artificial neural networks such as one able to use pattern recognition and facial features to recognise human faces. He then described how different brain areas process messages from the eye, to form concepts and memory, and how neural networks recognise shapes.

The psychological view of the mind, however, is mostly to do with ‘mind-stuff’, such as:

- psi phenomena: as Dean Radin pointed out, scientific experiments have yielded significant results that psi phenomena cannot all be explained by what happens within the skull
- the complexity of human behaviour – we accept sunrise and sunset as matter-of-course, but become excited by the novelty value of fireworks
- self-actualisation/individuation – as written about by Ervin Laszlo and Carl Jung
- the search for meaning – psychology tends to regard this as a type of psychosis.

Science tends to ignore these four challenges, but there is a growing movement of interest. Colin gave a brief history of pioneers in this area, such as Descartes, Freud, Jung and William James.

The condition of schizophrenia seems to straddle the boundary between the psychological and spiritual viewpoints of consciousness. When scientists such as Lang ceased resorting to drugs to deal with this, and encouraged patients to explore their issues, it was found that many seemed to be undergoing a type of mythical journey of death and rebirth, with 10 points:

- Centre – the world cosmic centre, where worlds meet

- Death – dismemberment, sacrifice, crucifixion
- Return to beginning – the beginning of time, creation of the cosmos, Eden
- Cosmic conflict – between good and evil, light and dark
- Threat of opposite – such as fear of the opposite sex
- Apotheosis – as royalty or divinity
- Sacred marriage – a ritual or mythological character
- New birth – of oneself, or a superhuman child
- New society – a new order of ideal or sacred quality
- Quadrated world – a four-fold structure of the world/cosmos.

Such people are often spiritual or creative, such as William Blake and Vincent van Gogh. Maybe we need to be psychotic to achieve spirituality!

The final talk was:

Intelligence: what it is and how it works

by David Warren-Smith

David, a retired engineer from Adelaide, first quoted a typical 6-line definition of intelligence from mainstream science – “A very general mental capacity that, among other things, involves the ability to reason, plan, solve problems, think abstractly, comprehend complex ideas, learn quickly and from experience... [etc.]”. The focus of his talk was on the underlying mechanism that enables humans and animals to function independently. This involves making decisions about our actions, either very simple or highly complex, which is what differentiates us from inanimate objects. The brains of lesser beings, such as flies, work on the same principle as human brains but on a much simpler scale; David’s talk was not about the degree of intelligence but the basics. He explained the concept of the ‘serial universe’, in which everything that happens does so in a series of instantaneous changes – ‘time’ flows past us while it is always instantaneously ‘now’. Memory is another fundamental requirement of intelligence, enabling us to understand what is happening around us, along with the ability to make decisions – the resulting intelligent actions also take place in a series of instantaneous or incremental changes.

But is memory and a decision-making ability sufficient? An alternation between decisions and successive actions, such as required to undo knotted shoelaces, is characteristic of a mechanism called a ‘state machine’ (the ‘state’ referring to what is in the memory), which progresses in a systematic way.

Investigations into the true nature of intelligence continue...

(Readers can access the full presentation in the form of a slide show, on the Internet at: <http://users.senet.com.au/~dwsmith/comment.htm>)

After lunch, we concluded with a plenary session and plans for future meetings.

This report would not be complete without an acknowledgment of the wonderful vegetarian food and cheerful service provided by the staff and Adelaide members, capably led by Chef-de-mission Sheryl Malone, whose droll humour added nourishment for our minds and kept us entertained while doing our share of the chores such as washing-up and table-laying.

We can all look forward to the next TS-Science seminar: 6-8 May 2011 at Springbrook...

Right Thinking Makes it So

Dr Victor Gostin

“All that we are is the result of what we have thought: it is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with a pure thought, happiness follows him, like a shadow that never leaves him.”

– Gautama Buddha, The Dhammapada ~500BP.

Modern science is increasingly aware of the immense potential of our thoughts. Should you venture to try typing in the word ‘placebo’ into the search engine GOOGLE SCHOLAR, you will discover that at least 911,000 published references include this item.

A placebo is a simple sugar pill, or salt solution, that is taken as a substitute for an actual medication. If the patient believes that the substance is really the correct medicine, the effect may prove to be amazingly effective. So, modern medical trials have to show improvement from taking the real drug over and above any placebo effect.

Clearly, this effect must be caused by a mixture of psychological, cultural and personal reasons, but it reinforces the notion that thinking positive, healthy thoughts is a great boon to our general well-being.

With this knowledge, we can better understand why, for example, an expensive pill works better than a cheap one; two pills are better than one; more frequent doses and using popular brand names give improved results. The ‘ceremony effect’ of knowing that one is being treated raises expectations, so injections are more effective than pills. But it is also true that red, orange, warm-coloured pills work best as stimulants; Blue, green and other cool colours work best as depressants.

The extract of *Ginkgo biloba* is a very popular plant extract used to alleviate symptoms of cognitive disorders and social functioning in those suffering from dementia. Using "A placebo-controlled, double-blind, randomised trial of an extract of *Ginkgo biloba* for dementia" Le Bars et al. (1997) showed that taking this extract was safe, and induced modest improvements in cognitive performance.

In contrast to the above, Linde (2006) and others have questioned the real effect of homoeopathic medicines. Placebo effects or not, perhaps any positive results are worth experiencing, especially if we strongly believe in their efficacy.

Using Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) and PET scans, scientists have determined that the area in our brain driving the placebo effect is called the nucleus accumbens, which is that area responsible for our expectation of reward. The placebo (i.e. a strong belief) causes a dopamine boost mainly from this nucleus accumbens. Those of us with the most active nucleus accumbens have the highest effect – so training our minds to believe and expect a positive result is the best attitude we can develop. Clear positive visualisation and sound meditation have long been a popular topic among Theosophists, and modern research has supported these activities.

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