

Neuropsychology

Finding purpose and meaning in our lives

In his 1968 book *This is It*, Zen Buddhist guru Alan W. Watts instructs us on the "path to enlightenment". Years of disciplined meditation can lead us to experience what he calls "cosmic consciousness", an expansive feeling of deep understanding and oneness with the universe. About two thirds into his book Watts tells us that the same experience can be had, with less effort, thru the use of certain hallucinogenic drugs common to California during the 60s.

Canadian psychologist, Dr. Michael Persinger, appears to have found an even quicker way. Using a modified motorcycle helmet he has stimulated the brains of more than 900 volunteers with electromagnetic pulses. The signals are sent to the volunteer's right temporal lobe, a part of the brain that contributes to our sense of self. Powerful images and feelings begin to form.

Persinger's Christian volunteers typically reported experiencing the presence of God, or more correctly, a Christian god. Hindus reported a similar experience but with their own gods. Buddhists, typically, don't experience a god, but they do experience this "cosmic consciousness". Atheists also experience a feeling of deep understanding and oneness with the universe. By varying the pattern of signals people may experience the presence of a dead ancestor, an alien abduction, an "out of body" experience or a typical "near death" experience involving a white light at the end of a tunnel.

It would be interesting if Persinger was to perform this experiment on practising traditional aboriginal people. Central American Indians used a natural hallucinogen, peyote. North American Indians often went on vision quests. I suspect the results would be similar.

I am not as interested in the mechanics of how the experience is processed in the brain as to why so many people from every culture seek it. I think the answer has to do with the need to find meaning and purpose in our lives.

Human beings are meaning makers. We create meanings for purely chance happenings. Is it surprising that we would have a psychological need for meaning in something as important to us as life itself?

Persinger's experiments suggest that, all along, the answers are to be found inside our selves and can be better reached thru rational means.

When I taught at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College at Regina I would ask my students why they wanted to take university classes. The most common answer was "to help my people". That is a purpose. It is called social utility. People have a psychological need to know that they are contributing members of society, contributing to something more than just their own survival.

Surely this is the core of what it means to be spiritual. Why would anyone want to help others they have not even met? Why is it important to ensure that all children are fed? Why bother trying to find a cure for AIDs? What value is there, beyond the money, in garbage pick up?

In a word, "compassion". We want to make the world a better place. We place a value on human life beyond what they can do for us and beyond what they may earn in a lifetime. And when we think about it, we begin to value all life so that we become more respectful of all living things. Extended further we value protecting the entire planet and the importance of husbanding its resources. With awe and wonder we can extend our consciousness to the entire universe.

On the other hand, people who do not value the lives of others end up devaluing their own. It need not be this way.

Thinking about your role in your family, community and society can help protect you from sliding into spiritual devaluation. If you define for yourself your purpose and meaning in life, you will improve the lives of others and of your own in the process.