



The North Texas

Skeptic

Volume 22

November 2008

Number 11

<http://www.ntskeptics.org>

Catch the mental wave

by Prasad Golla

A run of the mill claim by many Swamis, and their followers, is that meditation, especially the group variety, has beneficial effects not just on the individual meditating but also on the group, and others at large.

The effects are supposed to go beyond the group meditating to the society, the city, the country, and the globe. Why stop at the globe, why not claim the universe itself? Well, that's been done too.

A reasonable person would ask for evidence. It seems 'paranormal' to think that a meditating group can affect a whole segment of population even if the population wasn't meditating itself.

It seems to me that the bigger the claim greater the chance that the claim will go untested. This certainly seems to hold for meditation effects when the group size incorporates all animate and inanimate segments of our universe.

To begin with, that meditation has a 'positive', rather than a negative effect, hasn't itself been established. I would go so far as to submit that these effects are positive just by the fact that meditation is a tranquilizing and stress relieving activity, unlike say, working in a busy stock exchange (when the stocks are falling as now).

As recently as last November the result of a study had been published which said that mediation can alter brain waves. Since then the results of this study have been widely circulated. One such article says:

Over the past few years, [Dalai Lama] has supplied about a dozen Tibetan Buddhist monks to Richard Davidson, a prominent neuroscience professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Davidson's research created a stir among brain scientists when his results suggested that, in the course of meditating for tens of thousands of hours, the monks had actually altered the structure and function of their brains. ¹

EVENTS CALENDAR

November Program

Saturday

November 15, 2008

2 p.m.

Center for Nonprofit Management
2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas

Kristine Danowski will give a talk on Skeptical Vegetarianism

Future Meeting Dates

December 20, 2008

January 17, 2009

North Texas Skeptics

Officers

President John Brandt
 Vice President Kristine Danowski
 Secretary Mike Selby
 Treasurer Barbara Neuser

Staff

Newsletter Editor Keith Blanton
 Webmaster John Blanton
 Meetings and Social Director Kristine Danowski

Board of Directors

Laura Ainsworth, Erling Beck, John Blanton, John Brandt, Kristine Danowski, Prasad Golla, Elizabeth Hittson, Jack Hittson, Claudia Meek, Barbara Neuser and Mike Selby

Directors Emeritus Tony Dousette, Ron Hastings, Mark Meyer, John Thomas, Joe Voelkerling, and Mel Zemek

Scientific and Technical Advisors

Joe Barnhart, Professor of Philosophy
 Raymond A. Eve, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology, UT Arlington
 Timothy N. Gorski, M.D., Physician
 Ronnie J. Hastings, Ph.D., Science Teacher
 Anthony P. Picchioni, Ph.D., Licensed Professional Counselor
 James Rusk, Director, Russell Planetarium
 Lakshman S. Tamil, Ph.D., Engineer
 John Thomas, Attorney

The North Texas Skeptics is a tax-exempt 501 (c) (3) scientific and educational organization. All members receive the NTS newsletter and may attend NTS functions at which admission is charged at no or reduced cost. In addition, members will receive mailings on topics of current interest or social events.

Our newsletter, *The North Texas Skeptic*, is published monthly by The North Texas Skeptics, P.O. Box 111794, Carrollton, Texas 75011-1794.

Permission to reprint: Articles in *The North Texas Skeptic* may be reprinted without further permission, provided that *The Skeptic* is credited as the source, the mailing address above is listed, and a copy of the publication containing the reprint is sent to the Editor. Opinions expressed in *The Skeptic* are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of The North Texas Skeptics. Contents and logo © 2008 by North Texas Skeptics.

The study says nothing about the effects of those brain altering waves on others, just that they change the brain waves of the person meditating. I wonder if other human activities change the brain waves also. They seem to.

It is easier to prove, in contrast, that radio and TV waves can have effects on people out there. Recently, I heard over a Desi (Indian) Radio in Dallas about the much awaited visit by a Swami named Sri Sri Ravishankar. He is supposed to be visiting the US again after 6 years. Some of you may know a Sitar maestro by that name. This is not him. This Swami is much younger than the renowned musician (or so he appears). His goals are, none the less, universal in scope (I ask, "What's the value in dreaming small?"):

"Sri Sri Ravishankar, Founder of Art Of Living Foundation, a universally revered spiritual and humanitarian leader, believes that world leaders must keep the promises they made at the United Nations Millennium Summit in 2000. These promises, translated into the Millennium Development Goals can only be achieved if we all participate and raise our voices against poverty and a peaceful world."²

A person who teaches courses (not towards any particular accredited degree³) through 'the Art of Living', named Praveen Singh, was the guest on a music oriented program I was listening to at that time. The primary task of Mr. Singh seemed to be, on this occasion, to drum up the visit of Ravishankar and to advertise that the dignitary will conduct the "Maha Diwali Yagna" in the Dallas Convention Center on October 28th.⁴

As I was feeling a bit of some pity for myself that I would miss this grand event, like almost all of such events, Mr. Singh said something that immediately reminded me of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi of the Transcendental Meditation (TM) fame.⁵ The Yogi (connected to the Beatles in good times) died in February of this year.⁶ I haven't heard any "group experiments" by the TM group lately or in recent years. It sadly goes without saying that I never felt any waves from them ever.

Mr. Singh informed the listeners that the 'group meditation' conducted by the 'art of living' has significantly reduced the crime rates in D.C. by about 25% (I didn't know if he referred to the District of Columbia or if it was a short form for Washington, D.C.). He emphasized that that such a significant event has one in a billion chance of happening by itself.

At that point, I was expecting the host to ask some follow up questions like: "Has the D.C. implemented any crime prevention programs?"; "Are these statistics available from any governmental sources?"; "What's the mechanism by which crime and meditation are connected?"; "Are the government officials around the world dimwitted to concentrate on pumping large quantities of precious resources into crime prevention programs, while they could invest in meditation programs and auditoriums?"

Instead, the host, who seemed to me a believer himself, thanked Mr. Singh for the valuable "data," and moved on.



Ravishankar is a star on the rise. Let's tune in. If not directly – especially if you are contemplating crime — your brain will receive the waves indirectly through the conventional means of radio, TV, and the Internet.

So far the scientific evidence for the beneficial effects of my method of “meditation” seems to be mounting. The brain altering waves of my method of “meditation” have been much better documented. My “meditation” method is called ‘sleep.’ Now, if only the criminals slept more there wouldn't be as much crime, would there?

Dr. Golla is a member of the Board of Directors of NTS and our resident cartoonist.



References

- 1 <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.02/dalai.html>
 - 2 <http://standupspeakoutartshow.blogspot.com/2007/10/art-of-living-and-united-nations.html>
 - 3 <http://us3.artofliving.org/courses/tx/dallas>
 - 4 <http://us3.artofliving.org/events/tx/college-station>
- (Yagna is a fire worshipping Hindu ritual conducted for various purposes other than merely burning timber. Maha means great. Diwali is a Hindu ‘festival of lights’ which falls somewhere around October every year.)
- 5 http://www.tm.org/main_pages/maharishi.html
 - 6 <http://www.rediff.com/news/2008/feb/06yogi.htm>

Coalition defends draft standards in Texas

by Glenn Branch

The following is reprinted from the Evolution education update newsletter for October 24, 2008.

“**T**he State Board of Education’s decisions in the coming months will affect both the college preparation and future job qualifications of our children. Our students deserve a sound education that includes the latest findings of scientific research and excludes ideas that have failed to stand up to scientific scrutiny.” That was the message of the 21st Century Science Coalition’s advisory committee — Daniel I. Bolnick, R. E. Duhrkopf, David M. Hillis, Ben Pierce, and Sahotra Sarkar — delivered in twin op-eds recently published in two Texas newspapers, the *Waco Tribune* (October 19, 2008), and the *Austin American-Statesman* (October 21, 2008).

In their op-eds, after describing the vast amount of scientific research that supports evolution, and the absence of any compelling evidence against it, Bolnick and his colleagues respond to the charge of censorship: “Evolution opponents who promote such phony ‘weaknesses’ claim we are trying to censor them, suppressing free speech. But the entire point of education is to provide students with the best information available, without wasting time on bogus arguments. We don’t teach alchemy alongside chemistry, for example, or astrology alongside physics. We don’t ask students to decide for themselves whether Earth revolves around the Sun or vice versa. Is that ‘censorship’?”

They also emphasize the increasing economic importance of evolution education, writing, “We can’t expect future citizens of Texas to be successful in a 21st-century world with a 19th-century science education. Once our children enter the work force, they will find that understanding evolution is central to many innovations in medicine, agriculture, engineering and biotechnology. Undermining biology education risks driving away biotechnology and other industries from our state.” The *Austin American-Statesman* (October 6, 2008) already editorially agreed, noting that biomedical industries “have not looked favorably on communities that water down science studies with vague and unproven ideas.”

The 21st Century Science Coalition was organized to resist attempts of creationists to maintain the “strengths and weaknesses” language in the Texas state science standards, which are currently undergoing revisions. Already over 1300 Texas scientists with or working towards advanced degrees in

life, physical, and mathematical science have signed the coalition's statement calling on the state board of education to approve science standards that "acknowledge that instruction on evolution is vital to understanding all the biological sciences" and that "encourage valid critical thinking and scientific reasoning by leaving out all references to 'strengths and weaknesses,' which politicians have used to introduce supernatural explanations into science courses."

For the 21st Century Science Coalition's op-eds, visit:

<http://www.wacotrib.com/opin/content/news/opinion/stories/2008/10/19/10192008wacsience.html>

http://www.statesman.com/opinion/content/editorial/stories/10/1022bolnick_edit.html

For the *Austin American-Statesman's* editorial, visit:

http://www.statesman.com/opinion/content/editorial/stories/10/06/1006science_edit.html

For further information about the Coalition, visit:

<http://www.texasscientists.org/>

And for NCSE's previous coverage of events in Texas, visit:

<http://www.ncseweb.org/news/texas>

NCSE's work is supported by its members. Join today!

<http://www.ncseweb.org/membership>

NCSE'S new Website

by Glenn Branch

The National Center for Science Education is the premiere advocate for teaching evolution in public schools. The following is reprinted from the Evolution education update newsletter for October 24, 2008

On October 18, 2008, NCSE proudly unveiled its new website. With its modern look and feel, and its highly improved functionality, it will make it easier for people to find information about the creationism/evolution controversy — and resources for defending the teaching of evolution in the public schools.

NCSE is grateful to the designer, David Board of Stage 2 Studios, and the various NCSE staff and friends who helped to

put the new website together, especially NCSE's Susan Spath, who indefatigably led the effort.

For the convenience of those who wish to refer to the old website, NCSE will be maintaining it at a new domain, ncselegacy.org, but it will not be updated. Those who subscribe to our RSS feed will want to use our new RSS feed, ncseweb.org/rss.xml.

There are doubtless a few broken links and the like remaining on both the old and new websites; we are working to fix a number of bugs still, so please bear with us. Problems with the websites may be reported to webmaster@ncseweb.org.

For NCSE's new website, visit:

<http://www.ncseweb.org>

For NCSE's legacy website, visit:

<http://www.ncselegacy.org>

For NCSE's new RSS feed, visit:

<http://www.ncseweb.org/rss.xml>

New on your Website

by John Blanton (skeptical Web master)

You may not have noticed, but last year we received a note from Amazon.com. Amazon was introducing a new auto-link program to link pertinent text on our Web pages to Amazon products. We have an "associate" relationship with Amazon. We advertise their products, and we get a commission whenever someone clicks an Amazon link and makes a purchase.

It was cool. I would write up a story about creationist William Dembski, and when his name appeared readers would often see a pop-up to a Dembski book on Intelligent Design. Just what you wanted to see, I am sure.

No more. We more recently received a note from Amazon that said, in effect, "We don't do that anymore."

Amazon now offers a page banner that displays pertinent Amazon products. What passes as "pertinent" may be open for discussion. See for yourself. I put the widget Amazon supplied us up on all the Skeptical News pages to see what happened.

From my view the verdict is still out. I have a Skeptical News page that highlights Texas science standards, and I see the banner linking to Vince Flinn's thriller *Extreme Measures*. At least it's not creationism.

Skeptics, let me know what you think. Then click on a link and buy some stuff for Christmas. Or Halloween



The check is in the mail

by John Blanton

I will make this short, because I need to get to the real story.

The front door hardware was looking much too ratty, so we bought a new lock set. Then we could not install it in the door, because the screw hole did not line up. So we fixed the screw hole and installed the new hardware, and it looked great, and it was time to paint the door. Then we discovered the builder had installed a damaged door, and we had to buy a new door and while we were at it, new door hardware. Then we had the other (almost) new door hardware we no longer needed. So we decided to...

Sell it on Craig's list.

That's when my adventures began.

First, nobody bought the lock set. But I got offers.

And such offers. I'm going to disguise the names of the other parties, because I know people troll the Internet for their own names, and I would like to keep this just between you and me. In fact, I am not going to use the actual dialog. I am going to just make it up, because nothing I make up will be more bizarre than the real stuff.

Donna wrote. I have this talent of actually visualizing a person just from their e-mail. Donna is cute:

Seller. I want to buy your item on Craig's list. I want you to take it off the market and ship it to me. I will send you a check to cover the purchase and shipping plus some extra for your trouble.

It was apparent Donna was having trouble with her keyboard. I felt sorry for her, so I tried to be helpful:

Donna. Please tell me what you are purchasing. I have several items for sale on Craig's list.

Donna was an ideal customer, but she did have some problems with her accounting department, as we shall see.

John what is your final asking price. I will have our order dept send you a cashier's check.

Now this was strange. Donna was the one who saw the Craig's listing and made the decision to buy the lock set, or whatever she was buying. How could she so quickly forget? I was persistent:

Donna. You will need to tell me what you are buying before I can tell you the final asking price. The selling price is listed with the item on Craig's List.

What I received next gave the hint Donna was not over bright.

John pls tell me what items you are selling.

Whoa! Donna is the Craig's List dream buyer. "Mister, whatcha got? I want to buy it."

So I mentioned a number of items, including some ceramic pots and the lock set. Donna chose the lock set:

What's your final asking price for the lock set?

Me:

Donna. The price is posted with the item on Craig's List.

Donna next:

My purchasing dept will send you a check by UPS to cover the cost of the item and shipping.

As you may have guessed, I took another look at my (almost) new lock set. It really was good as new, all brass and shiny. And I did pay over \$100 for it. Maybe I was being too quick to shuck it off. Apparently there was a national treasure sitting in the box in my upstairs game room. I could only speculate.

Donna, again:

John there has been a mistake by our order department. They made the check for \$3128.30. When you receive the UPS package take the check to your bank and cash it. Keep \$200 for your trouble,

and send the rest to my shipper who will com pick up the order. (Followed by instructions for sending the funds to the shipper by Western Union.)

Now, I am an honest person as all know, but I was beginning to think that after I took out some money for my personal trouble there might not be any left for Donna's shipper.

"Ding-dong!"

It was UPS and an express envelope. And a check for \$3128.30. It was a cashier's check, too. I knew this, because somebody had typed "Cashier's Check" near the bottom of the check. But, there was a possible problem. I recognized the four-letter initial's of the bank's name, but a quick lookup on Google showed no branch at the address on the check. Maybe I had better not walk this financial instrument to the Bank of America branch around the corner. Some people call me skeptical.

Donna:

John how are you. Have you cashed the check. Pleas follow the instructions and send the left over funds to my shipper by Western Union right away.

All right, enough of the games. By now the reader has figured out the scam. It is well known, and it works like this:

Donna sends you an absolutely worthless check. You take it to your bank, and they know you. They maybe put a lock on the funds for a few days to give the check time to clear. Then they give you the money.

You deduct your promised nuisance fee and hop down to Western Union and wire a sizable sum (your money) to Donna's shipper. Then you wait for the shipper to arrive. And you wait.

The check has been carefully engineered, and it takes several weeks for it to navigate our modern banking system and back to your bank. The paper it is printed on is considerably worth more than the real value of the check. The account does not exist. The bank does not exist or has long since gone out of existence. And your bank wants its money back. And they know where you live. Something that cannot be said for Donna.

For those curious about the UPS express delivery, here is a hint. The U.S. Postal Service makes life miserable for anybody sending fraudulent transactions through the mail. By paying \$19 or so for a UPS express envelope they can avoid such imperial entanglements. The \$19 part is what I enjoy the most.

Since I am wise beyond my years (which says a lot), I decided to have more fun with Donna:

Donna. I can't send the funds to the shipper. I don't have any money from the bank. I will send the funds when I get my money.

From Donna:

Pls let me know as soon as you get the money.

Later, for more fun:

Donna. Please let me know when the check clears your bank.

Donna (a few minutes later):

John I just check with my bank and the transaction has cleared. Now plees send the funds to my shipper by Western Union according to the insturctial that follow.

I thought that was so hilarious. While reading this I knew Donna's check was sitting safely in its original UPS express envelope on my desk. I pushed it:

Donna. My information is different from yours. Can you please confirm the check you are talking about. Send me the following information: Amount, name of the bank, the account number, address of the bank, the person who signed the check.

Hey, when you're retired you are easily entertained.

Now a sad confession. Not only have I not been forthcoming with Donna, I have been unfaithful, as well. There is also Debra, Monica, and, yes, Larry!

You see, this year so far I have posted a number of items for sale on Craig's List, and each time there has been a new listing there has also been a new suck... I mean buyer. The doorbell has dinged five times for UPS and also FedEx. My plan is to continue to sell on Craig's List until I have enough express envelopes to keep me warm in my retirement.

I may be accused of cruelty and malice. I look at it this way: These people are sending worthless checks. If I were to follow their instructions and send my own money, they would pocket the cash and quickly disappear from my life with no remorse. One turn deserves another.

In the mean time, it's still a great lock set. Here is the Craig's List posting:

<http://dallas.craigslist.org/dal/for/856713490.html>

Cash only, please. No checks.



Skeptic Ink — by Prasad Golla and John Blanton. © 2008. Free, non-commercial reuse permitted



Mind body science

by Rodrigo Neely

The soul is a real sacred cow. People hear about the soul, or the spirit, and they don't even flinch. Why?

Do not these same people not stutter when they are talking about using their brains?

There is a serious disconnect here.

First, let us define some terms. By "soul" most people mean some ephemeral, transcendental presence of being — something that could survive death, something indestructible and supernatural.

The brain in contrast is an organ. Pure and simple like any other organ, it is made of cells; these cells have membranes by which all interactions take place using chemical messaging.

The brain has a job, which is to interface all of the information of the body to maintain the necessary equilibrium for life, called by scientist Claude Bernard Shaw, "the internal milieu."

Thinking happens in the brain. One way we have learned this intimately is that when brains are damaged in certain places thinking is impaired in a predictable way. This is how we did much of the original mapping of the brain in neurology.

Now we have this marvelous machine called an fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imager), which can show what brain regions are engaged in oxygenization and presumably activity as a subject completes a task.

You literally lie in the middle of a great big round magnet while it reads your mind.

Now don't get me wrong, fMRI cannot project an image from your imagination onto a screen. But it can tell us what parts of your brain are more active than others, and because of what we are learning about the functional purposes of different

brain regions we can deduce a great deal about what's going on in your mind.

So let me recap. The way your mind works is affected by the physical condition of your brain, and when your mind is doing stuff specific brain regions get activated by what your mind is doing.

So why does anyone believe in the soul?

It is not because they are really thinking about the implications of brain science.

Let me tell you my favorite case study. It is a universal part of any education in behavioral and brain sciences. It is when we began to understand to what depth our brain is responsible for our personality.

It was on September 13, 1848. Railroad foreman Phineas Gage had a terrible accident. Phineas, by all accounts, was an exceptionally good man. He was a leader in his community, and a reliable man to all who he encountered. Then a railroad spike was blasted in through his skull and out the other end, in effect destroying a region known as the prefrontal cortex. If you can imagine the area right behind your eyes, that's about it. In the movie *Hannibal*, during the famous scene in which Hannibal Lecter feeds Ray Liota his own brain, he calls the prefrontal cortex "the seat of good manners."

Well, it turns out we know this because of Phineas Gage. When his prefrontal cortex was destroyed, so was his likable personality. Phineas Gage became a violent and belligerent man, and a pain to be around. This phenomena is universal in all people who suffer prefrontal cortex damage. It really is "the seat of good manners."

That's just one case of many that I can present. Toss that at the next creationist you meet. Maybe they will leave evolutionary biology alone, and come after neuroscience. □

North Texas Skeptics
P.O. Box 111794
Carrollton, Texas 75011-1794

FIRST CLASS

Address Correction Requested

Application for Membership

Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____
E-Mail address _____
Home Phone _____ Work Phone _____
Occupation _____
Special expertise and/or interests _____

Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Membership agreement:

Yes, I agree with your purposes in exploring paranormal and pseudoscientific claims from a responsible and scientific point of view, and while I do not endorse the a priori rejection of paranormal phenomena and pseudoscientific claims, I believe that such claims must be subjected to the fair and systematic testing which rational enquiry demands.

Signature _____ Date _____

The North Texas Skeptics, P.O. Box 111794, Carrollton, Texas 75011-1794 (972) 306-3187

Indicate your choice:

Member: A voting member and newsletter recipient. Family privileges included. Annual dues \$35.00

Newsletter recipient: No membership privileges. Annual subscription rate \$15.00

Receive a \$5 discount on either of the two newsletter subscription levels above by choosing to receive your newsletter by e-mail only.

Introduce a friend to *The North Texas Skeptic*: Let us send a **FREE** three-month gift subscription of *The Skeptic* to this individual (or institution).

Enclosed is a tax-deductible donation to The North Texas Skeptics in the amount of \$ _____.

Bill me: Please bill me for the choices I have made above.

www.ntskeptics.org