

# Transcendental Meditation, Reiki and Yoga: Suffering, Ritual and Self-Transformation<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT** *The paper explores three practices of eastern spirituality taken up by westerners for apparently secular purposes. As an 'emic' account that proceeds inductively from the author's experience, it shows how each of these practices is an attempt to change the meaning of suffering through the creative medium of ritual. Rituals are often used as initiations from one form of subjectivity to another. Yoga, Transcendental Meditation, and Reiki are undertaken as means of self-transformation. They may be adopted as 'magical' ways of achieving personal aims, but they also have the potential to take practitioners beyond the ego towards 'sacred' understandings or 'otherness'. The sacred (or 'spiritual'), however, is not necessarily 'the good'. The paper considers the effects of these practices. Do they become forms of self-mastery and power for the individual ego or do they hold out the promise of a more ethical self (in Lévinas's sense of 'ethics')? In other words, do they help resolve the problem of suffering through creating a more communicative body and a self-for-others?*

## Introduction

### *Aims and Methods*

Personal experience motivates academic research more often than researchers acknowledge. Reflection on such experience frequently informs social analysis: the ideas put forward in this kind of academic writing are inductive (arising from events and observations) rather than deductive (resulting from the testing of a theory in a concrete situation). This kind of reflection dissolves the artificial divide between academia and leisure, public and private, ideas and experience, intellectual and physical life. My method in this paper makes the inductive process explicit, in the autobiographical tradition of such writers as Arthur Frank (1991, 1995), Oliver Sacks (1991), John Hull (1990), and Audre Lorde (1985), who use their academic training to explore their own experience of illness. The 'I' in their accounts becomes like the 'I' of literature: a person in whom readers may recognize aspects of their lives and through whom they come to think in new ways about their own concerns. The question I am addressing is also part of that *genre*. It concerns the 'ethics of illness' or how people choose to think, feel, and act in the face of continuing pain and suffering. Gareth Williams (1993) has called this kind of ethics "the pursuit of virtue in everyday life".<sup>2</sup>

In the following article, I first analyse my own use of ritual as a means of reaching towards a 'good' life in the face of chronic pain and the suffering that accompanies it. Next, I consider to what extent practitioners of the three rituals

I discuss are involved in a similar quest. In what ways are Transcendental Meditation (TM), Yoga, and Reiki in Western societies 'magical' and in what ways are they 'sacred'?<sup>3</sup> Does the distinction matter in the pursuit of 'health'? Finally, I ask whether these practices are concerned purely with self enhancement ('ego building')—as critics of the New Age often imply (Kaminer, 1993)—or whether—as their foundations in Eastern religion suggest—they are directed towards the well-being of others and, ultimately, towards union with the Divine, however the Divine is conceived? Are they, in fact, spiritual practices?<sup>4</sup> My reflections are not only intended for readers who suffer from chronic physical illness, but also for students of religious and New Age phenomena, of suffering and of the means by which its meaning is created and transformed in the lives of the ill.

### *Pain, Ritual and Ethics*

A few years ago, I went to a series of workshops on mysticism. The speaker was a Catholic priest and a scholar of Zen Buddhism living in Japan (Johnston, 1995). He emphasized the dark night of the soul, but did not mention the body. I asked: "How do we find ways to live with chronic *physical* pain?" He admitted that he had never really considered the problem. This paper comes in part from my attempts to answer this question, both experientially and intellectually. It also comes from a desire to explore the social meaning of three practices I have adopted in my own spiritual quest, which is also a quest for healing (not as a cure, but as the discovery of new meanings for—and through—suffering). I work as an academic sociologist and practise each of these techniques, not without frequent doubts about both my intellectual pursuits and my efforts towards more embodied ways of knowing. I also suffer from chronic gut pain and bodily hypersensitivity, medically known as irritable bowel syndrome—a problem faced by huge numbers of people, but one for which the causes vary and the solutions are obscure. I am therefore interested in how chronic pain leads people to new ways of being. I have come to understand my three practices as some of the many rituals which humans perform in their quest for release from suffering—in other words, their search for liberation or salvation.

The notion of 'salvation' implies a relation between freedom and health, as not only religion, but also political liberation movements make clear: their search is not to escape painful reality, but to transform it. A similar distinction can be made between 'pain' and 'suffering' (Rankka, 1998: 24). Pain, whether physical or psychological, may be inevitable; but suffering, the distress or disruption caused by pain, depends on meaning and is amenable to change through the powers of the imagination. In *The Body in Pain* (1985), Elaine Scarry argues that physical pain destroys meaning, since pain has no object: it is not 'of' or 'for' or 'about' anything. Therefore, she says, the opposite of pain must be creativity. Every human act of 'making' is a movement away from pain. The antidote to pain is imagination: our ability to make meaning. Scarry, however, speaks of this process of invention as a movement "out and away from the body" (Scarry, 1983: 162), while my experiences of Meditation, Yoga, and Reiki are of moving back into my body and imagining that body, and consequently myself, in new ways. The new awareness in turn leads me to act differently in the world. Scarry's analysis is of material and linguistic 'making'. Mine is about the

re-making of the body and of subjectivity: our sense of who we are and what we do. It is also about the place of ritual in this transformation.<sup>5</sup>

Rituals are the means people use to change the way they live. It is not surprising that the historical development of Yoga, Reiki, and TM has been associated with religion and, therefore, with the idea of 'belief', for—as Scarry points out—'to believe' is to perpetuate the capacity to sustain the imagined object across a succession of days, weeks, and years (Scarry, 1983: 180). In each of the rituals, the 'imagined object' is the changing *embodied self* and the changes to the self—material and spiritual—come from repeated *physical* practices. In the West today, my three practices are often associated with the New Age Movement and, depending on how that movement is judged, may be dismissed as "ego-driven and prosperity-oriented" or as "commendable but blind strivings towards values such as authenticity and humankindness and the re-enchantment of life" (Heelas, 1996: 221). However, if we think of these practices as rituals (the means we all use to move beyond our pain, whatever it may be), a slightly different set of questions arises. In Durkheimian anthropology, rituals exist to create bonds among members of a community and the strength of the emotions associated with ritual gives rise to religion itself (Durkheim, [1915] 1976), but the bonding is not in itself 'ethical' (it could, for instance, be seen as a means of survival). To establish the 'ethical' dimension of my three practices, 'ethics' can usefully be defined in the terms of Emmanuel Lévinas (1984) as the imperative to care for the other ahead of myself. For Lévinas, ethics pre-exists both epistemology and ontology: in other words, ethics is to be discerned beyond our desire to know and to be. I suggest that the discovery or (depending on one's perspective) the creation of a meaning beyond oneself is one of the ways in which pain is often resolved. This is why I ask whether my three rituals necessarily link their practitioners with others in the kind of ethical relations suggested by Lévinas or whether they are used for personal power: the aggrandisement of self at the expense of others.

There is a growing literature on the 'ethics of illness' (e.g. Frank, 1995, 1997, 1999; Radley, 1999; S. Williams, 1998; Turnbull, 1997). It addresses the question of "how to live as a sick person in a healthy world" (G. Williams, 1993), the question of the moral responsibility of the ill and of others towards them. My questions are at least partly situated within this literature. The link between 'healing' (relief from suffering, although not necessarily from pain) and 'ethics' lies in the meaning which each sufferer discovers for his/her pain. What I suggest is that the bodily experience of each of the rituals gives new meaning to suffering: it is no longer an isolated or isolating experience, but one which is shared with all others who suffer. It is the awareness of 'sharing' that constitutes the ethical dimension of ritual. Since ritual operates through metaphor, creating links from one domain of experience to another (Radley, 1993), TM, Yoga, and Reiki become the means of perceiving a connection with others that is carried into other parts of life. When that life includes chronic suffering, the ethical dimension is assimilated to the suffering—it gives the suffering a new and redemptive meaning.

I begin by comparing my three practices, emphasizing their ritual aspects. The descriptions are based on my own experience and on interviews that formed part of a research project on Yoga and Reiki. Next, I consider the importance of metaphor in the self-transformation which the rituals bring about and I make a

distinction between their magic and sacred dimensions. Thirdly, I address the question of their wider significance: whether they help create more ethical forms of subjectivity in contemporary consumerist societies (using Lévinas's conception of ethics). Finally, I return to the question of suffering and healing through ritual transformation of the self. These particular practices have been adopted and adapted from Eastern religion, mainly Hinduism. In this process (a post-colonial appropriation<sup>6</sup>), Westerners have left behind the myths that accompany each ritual: the stories which explain their purpose. Some critics would say that the widespread romanticizing of oriental religious practices, without an understanding of their underlying philosophies, is evidence of a Western desire for a lost spiritual connection. However, is this the only motivation for practitioners of the rituals? How, for example, might I interpret my own experience and observations?

### **Transcendental Meditation, Yoga, and Reiki: A Comparison**

#### *Transcendental Meditation*

I learned Transcendental Meditation (TM)<sup>7</sup> in 1975 on my return from a long overseas trip and at the beginning of a new job. I had just read *Diet for a Small Planet* (Lappé, 1971) and become what is now called an 'ethical vegetarian'. TM (as it is affectionately or perhaps modishly known) seemed an appropriate way to mark these changes. Meditation had few of the negative connotations associated with the church services I had stopped attending some years before, but it filled a ritual void, allowed me to explore a sacred space whose existence I did not doubt and to strive towards the serenity I knew I lacked. The physical consequences of TM were a surprise: when I meditated, I could feel my habitual gut pain dissipate. If you had asked me about my motivations at the time, I might have given very different answers, which is why it is dangerous to rely on the reasons people give for becoming meditators. More important are the reasons why they continue to meditate—the positive effects of the practice—especially the way it is possible to carry the peaceful feelings of meditation into daily life and, as we now say, to 'reduce stress'.

Transcendental Meditation was popularized under that name by the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (most famous for having been the Beatles' guru in the 1960s). It derives from techniques described in the sacred texts of Hinduism. When it is taught outside India, no mention is made of Hindu philosophy, certainly at the basic level of training. In TM, you sit quietly with eyes closed for 20 minutes, twice daily, silently repeating a *mantra* until the *mantra* is replaced by a sense of total peace in which there is no mental noise at all. The effects are like those of a deep, refreshing sleep. Language is used only to describe the benefits of the practice and to teach it, in a brief and formulaic way. From then on, the experience speaks for itself. The training is very short: an introductory presentation followed by questions and answers, an initiation into the technique the next day (taking about half an hour for each person) followed by regular check-ups for reassurance that the proper procedure is being followed without difficulty. The only bodily discipline required is to make regular time to practice. Although it is possible to attend live-in TM weekends, it is not usually a group activity and does not foster communication with others. Its primary aim is to

create a more peaceful person. During and immediately after meditation, people may feel strong emotions of many kinds, usually unexpected, and TM teachers treat this as a normal effect of meditation, explaining it as a release of unconscious and restricting emotions. The 'dam' metaphor currently dominates popular discourse on emotions (Lupton, 1998). Its presence in meditators' descriptions is one example of the way an Eastern practice is modified as it is absorbed into Western culture.

### Yoga

Emotions, I found, accompany yoga, too: a pose can unexpectedly produce anger, sadness, sobs, tears, or elation, as if they have been stored in the body and are released when you become conscious of the body space where they have been locked. I began practising Iyengar yoga in 1991, although I had tried to teach myself from a book, many years before, without realizing the subtlety and complexity of what is involved. Iyengar yoga is traditional hatha yoga (including postures and breathing) as taught in India and now all over the world by BKS Iyengar and teachers trained in his very precise methods. From the beginning, I was attracted to yoga to experience my body in new ways, especially since I had never been athletic, but enjoyed the sensuous side of stretching and physical exertion. I did not begin yoga lessons with my gut pain in mind. It was not until the pain began to interfere first with my practice and then with my lessons that I thought to mention it to the teacher. The poses she recommended and those Mr Iyengar specifically prescribes for this condition make no difference to the frequency or severity of the pain. The effects of yoga are not so direct. What it has taught me, however, is a different attitude to pain and the body in general: ways to cope with pain and reduce its associated suffering by re-imagining it.

Yoga seems to reverse ordinary human behaviour (Eliade, 1958: 362). It often feels as if you are doing the opposite of what life demands: inverted poses like the headstand are a simple example of this; staying in a pose when it hurts is another. Yoga itself can be painful, but this pain teaches us to feel parts of our body we have never felt before. Like all initiations, it mimes death and rebirth to a new body. The *asanas*—the postures of yoga—are rooted in the philosophy and mysticism of India. Iyengar's books (1991, 1993) elucidate the philosophical background, but Australian teachers and students rarely refer to it. In yoga, unlike Reiki and TM, the teacher is a vital figure and the pedagogy of yoga is highly evolved. Language is used in subtle ways that suggest links between the body and the natural world, name parts of the body you may never have thought about, and metaphorically describe movements you could not make without imagining them in these ways. For example, when you perform the difficult *mandalasana* (Iyengar, 1991: 381–385), walking your body through 360 degrees while your head remains anchored to a single spot on the floor, at first it is impossible to locate your limbs or their position in space. It is only by visualising your body from outside, regularly carrying out the *asana* as you have seen others perform it and gradually becoming aware of each body part in the pose that you create a felt image to emulate. Yoga, then, creates a new imaginary body.<sup>8</sup> Simultaneously, you learn to experience and let go a range of emotions

during the pose, especially through your awareness of breath and its metaphorical significance as the sustainer of life.

### *Reiki*

Reiki also places the body at the centre of its practice, but with a greater emphasis on the bodily and psychological well-being of others. I encountered it through one of my fellow yoga students, when I accompanied her to a local 'body/spirit festival', one afternoon when I was doubled over with pain. I tried a single treatment. I lay on a massage table and the Reiki practitioner placed her hands on different parts of my body, beginning with the eyes, ears and back of the head. The feeling was like TM, like *savasana* (the pose of total relaxation at the end of a yoga class) and like a massage I had experienced in Hawaii—and later learned that it was called 'lomilomi', meaning 'love'. Reiki means 'universal energy' and, under that name, was popularized by a Japanese Christian, Doctor Mikao Usui. Usui believed in the possibility of healing through touch and set out to find how it was done. The story told in Reiki initiations is that he discovered it in ancient Sanskrit texts (the same source as yoga and TM), but that he also underwent a form of self-initiation involving the ascent of a mountain and a non-communicable vision. Like TM, Reiki originated in Eastern religion<sup>9</sup> and is found in some form in all religions. Initiates are not taught any philosophical background. The stories of its discovery, transmission, and successful use are the only 'myths' accompanying the ritual.

Reiki involves simple teaching and initiation ceremonies. I attended both. In Reiki 1, a Reiki Master teaches you to place your hands in different positions on the body and, in a brief initiation ceremony, 'opens' you to become a channel for the flow of universal healing energy. In Reiki 2, you learn secret symbols and words with the power to draw this energy in concentrated form, to direct it to 'mental healing', and to send it to others at a distance. The language used depends to some extent on the particular Reiki Master (mine used a lot of New Age terms taken from her experience of other kinds of healing), but the story and the teaching of Reiki techniques was simple and jargon-free. Reiki deals with embodied people: it recognizes the inseparability of body, mind, and self. Like TM, it is taught as a means of healing the whole person, without making much distinction between physical and psychological suffering. Like TM (but unlike Iyengar yoga), it is not strenuous: the only discipline it requires is that of regular practice, either on one's own body or on the bodies of others. If skill increases, it is through the experience of Reiki itself. Reiki can have dramatic emotional effects: people will often see colours, feel warmth and sometimes shake or twitch while receiving Reiki. As in TM and yoga, this is explained as a beneficial 'release' of pent-up bodily memories.

### **Magic or Mysticism?**

When people undertake rituals like these, there is often an element of magical thinking in their motivation: a belief, however 'secular', that regular performance of the ritual will somehow change them and solve their personal problems. This is not just a superstitious hope. Ritual does act through

and change the body. It releases emotions in an uncanny way, facilitates transitions from one state to another, and creates unexpected new bonds among participants and between the social and the material world. Reiki, meditation, and yoga do try to change people for their own good and for the good of their society, and they do aim for some kind of liberation (at least freedom from suffering and, ultimately, freedom from ego). Some of their practitioners call them 'spiritual', while others describe them more prosaically as 'working on myself', but both these descriptions refer to the transformative potential of ritual, to take people beyond their current selves and towards a differently imagined future.<sup>10</sup> This 'other' space is what we call the sacred and we often experience as magical the means we use to reach it.

Magic is the art of creating effects thought to be beyond natural human power. In everyday language we use the word to indicate our scepticism or our sense of wonder about things we cannot explain. Both the sceptical and the wondrous attach to my three practices. 'Sensible' people may find some of their claims unbelievable. Certain elements of their ritual seem designed to mystify and can be deployed in that way. For example, in TM, the secrecy of your *mantra* and the promise of the advanced *siddhis* course to teach levitation and time-travel suggest that these are occult powers to be restricted to initiates and perhaps used for their own ends. In Reiki, the healing symbols and their names are also secret, and it is always possible, although false, to claim these healing powers as personal attributes or possessions. Yoga, too, has always been used by 'fakirs' to gain money and influence. Magic is often about manipulation and control—whether it is 'black' or 'white' magic: destructive or healing. Yet magic relies on metaphor and metaphor is about revelation. Metaphor gives myths their power. Metaphor is literally 'wonderful' in the way it allows us to make connections between apparently unrelated things, to open up new understandings. This is why poets, who speak through metaphor, are often mystics, and mystics so often poets. Mystics find metaphors for spiritual experience: they make connections among domains usually seen as discrete. In doing so, they illuminate both 'spirituality' and the domain to which they have related it (very often, the mundane, everyday world which is thereby sanctified—as in the domestic examples chosen by mystics like Teresa of Avila and Julian of Norwich). Across many cultures, 'spirit' implies connection. Spirit is most richly understood as that which binds the cosmos together and ties us all to each other within it. Magic can be an end in itself, but it can also be part of the broader understanding and aims of a mystical life.

Yoga, TM, and Reiki contain both magical and mystical traditions: that is, the goal of self-mastery and the goal of experiencing the sacred (Eliade, 1958: 360). However, in the Indian mystical tradition which underlies each of these practices, even the magical power of the *siddhis* (taught in advanced TM) must eventually be renounced. Iyengar yoga, too, is ultimately guided, not by the search for magical power, but by a mystical philosophy which never deviates from its central aim: to abandon illusion, penetrate to the 'essence' of things and attain knowledge of the 'real' (Eliade, 1958: 75–76). In this, yoga is an embodied phenomenology and its asceticism is an experiential path to knowledge. Reiki, however it may be used in practice, is linked with a founding myth which names it as a power 'beyond' its individual practitioners and which can only be used for the good. It is the mystical tradition behind each of my practices that

potentially takes me beyond a simple 'body project' or the creation of a new 'self': beyond magical manipulation and towards the sacred.

Sacredness belongs to religion and religious ritual without the connotations of charlatanism or misuse of power that sometimes accompany our thinking about 'magic'. The popularity of TM, Reiki, and yoga in advanced capitalist societies can be understood as a search for the sacred. The respect of practitioners for the body and belief in its extra-rational wisdom is both a nostalgia for the enchanted world of Western medieval Christendom (Mellor & Shilling, 1997: 26) and at the same time a recognition of non-discursive, embodied ways of knowing, which have been discredited by an over-reliance on scientific rationality. In *Re-forming the Body*, Mellor and Shilling (1997) argue that religion has always played a major part in shaping human forms of embodiment—our awareness of and attitudes towards our bodies. In the medieval era, the sacred was immanent in bodies; the rituals of the Catholic Church were experienced, not as symbols, but as materially real. The members of the church community (that is, the whole of society included in 'Christendom') were physically bound to each other through an eating ritual: by sharing the Eucharist they all participated in the body and blood of Christ. It was Protestantism which de-sacralized church ritual, 'rationalized' the body, and made it subject to cognitive control instead: the sacred (known through the body) was replaced by the sublime (located in the Word, of which language could only ever be a poor reflection) (Mellor & Shilling, 1997: 106–108). As a result, the modern era has been characterized by what Giddens (1991) calls 'a radical ontological insecurity'.

It is not surprising that yoga, which teaches us to re-enter and become aware of our own bodies, is touched with sacred significance. It is not surprising either, that few practitioners can express its sacredness in so many words. Meditation, similarly, leaves behind the babble of word-formed thoughts as we rediscover bodily tranquillity. Reiki promises ontological security through the experience of touch—or simply conscious physical transmission of loving energy. Each of the rituals uses metaphor to take us beyond our current subjectivity by progressively revealing aspects of what has been hidden from us: a sacred unknown. Although both magic and mysticism rely on metaphor, the metaphors used in magical practices are like clichés: they show us nothing new. The metaphors of mysticism, in contrast, constantly give us new insights: in the myths they tell and the rituals through which they are enacted. This distinction between magic and mysticism also corresponds, for me, to the distinction between ego-centred and ethical ways of living.

### **Ego or Ethics?**

Like all ritual, each of my practices has a dual potential: it can be used to enhance personal power at the expense of others, to build 'ego', or it can be used to abandon ego by engaging with otherness, to develop 'soul'. Soul is the condition of recognizing and transcending self to be in relation with others and to accept responsibility for their well-being and for that of the natural environment. It corresponds to the distinction between a lack of ethical awareness and the adoption of an ethical stance, as Lévinas defines it: taking responsibility for the other. I take this distinction between 'ego' and 'soul' from the work of the psycho-analyst and social thinker Joel Kovel, especially in his

book *History and Spirit* (1991), crucially subtitled 'An Inquiry into the Philosophy of Liberation'. What he says about 'health ethics' applies to the Western appropriation of my three practices today. He describes the 'imperative of health' (Lupton's (1995) term) as "a recycling of traditional morality under conditions of late capitalism, where the good is transformed into the healthy". Health ethics is also good for business, because it impels us towards commodity consumption, and it is less disruptive to the order of things than would be an ethos of responsibility, that is, one grounded in a sense of the possibility that one's action could make a difference in the world (Kovel, 1991: 135). In other words, my practices performed only as 'health' measures are merely 'magical' and ego-enhancing. What I want to emphasize, however, is that each practice contains a potential for ethical development, for the transformation of self beyond ego towards responsibility for others. This responsibility is best expressed in the radical vision of Emmanuel Lévinas (1984), who makes ethics more important and more fundamental than 'being' or 'knowing', since without our relations with each other, there could be no being or knowing at all. Lévinas sees that we are only free to the extent that we live for each other. This is not escape from self, but a way of living in full relationship with the reality of otherness.

To what extent do my three practices hold this kind of potential and to what extent is it being realized? TM is taught in the West as a technique of 'self-enhancement': its ethical intent is to create a calmer, more 'balanced' and perhaps more compassionate self, but it is also often presented as an aid to career success. Yoga in Australia is predominantly a body project, concerned with personal health and well-being. Unlike TM and Reiki, however, it is an arduous bodily discipline, continually being perfected. It is a constant process of initiation, an ongoing training devoted to deepening knowledge of the body. Yet in the philosophy of yoga (about which the majority of Australian practitioners know little), the ultimate goal is to transcend the body, become free from temporality, and obtain release from the cycles of death and rebirth (Eliade, 1958: xx). Despite practitioners' ignorance of yoga's philosophy, it seems that the discipline of its postures and breathing begins to effect the kind of ethical transformation towards which yoga is penultimately directed (ethics itself being conceived in Hindu philosophy as a step towards ultimate liberation, rather than totally liberating in itself). Practitioners experience more calm and self-control. They also come to understand and be patient with their own bodily frailties and, through this experience and the example of the teacher, to extend both understanding and patience to others. The teaching of yoga, however, emphasizes that bodily awareness and well-being are only a prelude and an accompaniment to ethical consciousness.

Reiki therefore stands out from TM and yoga in being more obviously directed to the good of others. You 'give' Reiki (although some exchange is usually encouraged—which makes sense in Lévinas's terms, since the gift becomes reciprocal). Reiki may create a 'community' of practitioners who meet regularly to place hands on each other, but the numbers of such groups compared with the numbers of people who have learned the technique is small. Two examples demonstrate the potential, if not the actuality, of Reiki in Australia. Among those with whom I learned Reiki was a nun who worked with homeless people. She wanted to use Reiki to alleviate some of their distress.

Several of the Reiki practitioners whom I interviewed for my 'research' told me they had first used it 'to get things for themselves' (as a magical practice), but gradually came to see this as a misuse and simply made themselves channels for its benefit to flow to others. Several continued to seek other forms of ritual, like prayer and Buddhist meditation (forms of mysticism), that also directed their loving concern to the world around them.

There is then a strong connection between suffering, ritual, and ethics. Rituals are practices of embodied persons, created in response to their own suffering, but also to the suffering of others. The popularity of Eastern religious rituals, even in the absence of their accompanying myths, reveals more than consumerist 'nostalgia' for a lost enchanted world and narcissistic obsession with one's own power or even well-being. My experience and inquiries suggest that such rituals can, potentially, transform the meaning of suffering. In chronic illness, instead of losing aspects of myself, TM, Yoga, and Reiki help me to discover new ways of being. In particular, each ritual takes me beyond myself and connects me with the 'other', beyond ego towards ethics, slowly bringing about an ethical transformation.

### **Suffering and Self-Transformation**

When the mystical theologian had no answer to my question about the problem of physical pain, I looked instead to the theological literature on suffering (Rankka, 1998). This, and the anthropological literature on pain (e.g. Jackson, 1994; Valentine Daniel, 1994) gave me three major insights. Firstly, since suffering comes from the meaning we give to our pain, it is possible to have pain without suffering. Secondly, suffering is borne best by those who use it as a means of 'being with' others who suffer; of recognizing their own pain as part of human suffering in all its forms. Thirdly, this realization represents a shift in subjectivity amounting to the creation of a new self. The self-transformation, however, is often presented in the literature as if it happens spontaneously. Instead, it is important to be aware of the process that leads to the changes. In the case of physical pain, the process must obviously include a changed relation to one's own embodiment, as well as to one's relation with others. Reiki, yoga, and TM are three of the ritual practices that can begin to effect this transformation.

The social psychology of chronic illness offers valuable illustrations of the effect of chronic suffering on the self. For example, Kathy Charmaz (1991) studied in intricate detail the psychological and social effects of chronic pain among people of different ages and ethnicities living in northern California. In one of her articles (Charmaz, 1983), she describes the ways in which 'self' is 'lost' during chronic illness and the suffering that results from this loss. Not one of the 75 people in her study had found a 'new' self. Charmaz attributes this to the strength of the Protestant ethic in the USA and its view of the self as what we do, not what we are, so that loss of activity in the world is tantamount to loss of self. The alternative is the discovery, through pain, of a new self in greater communion with others—a sense of connection with those in our immediate circle and with the suffering of all human beings. Making this discovery helps us transcend personal suffering, for—while pain may not have meaning—

suffering can. The true meaning of 'healing' is not the elimination of pain, but its transformation into an occasion for connection, not loss.

Regular repetition of patterns of bodily action directed towards greater self-knowledge and towards understanding human experience more generally, has the power to create and maintain a self-in-connection-with-others that is also a self-for-others. In *The Wounded Storyteller*, Arthur Frank (1995) writes in detail about what is implicit in Charmaz's observations: the capacity of illness to bring about ethical transformation. For him, the ethical call of illness is the call to communicate. It is through their stories that people unite with the suffering of others and discover and reveal that they are not alone. Frank, himself in remission from cancer, practices Tai Chi. He sees regimens such as this as positive to the extent that they produce invigoration and relaxation (Frank, 1995: 42) and to the extent that they begin to create a "communicative body" (ibid: 49). The 'communicative body' arises from our understanding of others through deep awareness of ourselves. In the words of Albert Schweitzer: "I can understand the nature of the living being outside of myself, only through the living being within me" (cited in Frank, 1995: 50).

In adopting the practices myself, I was certainly attempting self-transformation and indirectly hoping for greater physical health. I was also influenced by the 'otherness' of TM, yoga, and Reiki, since that very otherness removed me from forms of Christian ritual which still held painful associations (paradoxically, TM, Reiki, and yoga have led me to a deeper understanding of the Christian rituals of my own cultural background). Such motivations are common, although differently expressed, among my fellow-practitioners. Through the practices, we continue to discover new aspects of our embodied selves and their potential for connection with others. In themselves, the practices are neither ego-centric nor ethical, neither purely magical nor purely mystical: they may be used towards either end. Ritual practice is one of the many paths towards ethical action.

## Conclusions

Rituals are practices of embodied persons, undertaken in response to their own suffering, but also to the suffering of others. The popularity of Eastern religious rituals, even in the absence of their accompanying myths, reveals more than consumerist 'nostalgia' for a lost enchanted world and narcissistic obsession with one's own power or even well-being. Such rituals have the potential to transform the meaning of suffering. In chronic illness, instead of losing aspects of myself, these rituals have helped me to discover new ways of being. In particular, each ritual takes me beyond myself and connects me with the 'other'. Ethics is not culture-bound. Even in their transition from one culture to another, Reiki, Yoga, and Transcendental Meditation retain their ethical potential. They teach practitioners, through their our own bodily experience, about the suffering of others and our responsibility towards them. My three practices are 'spiritual', if 'spirituality' refers both to their magical power and to their ethical potential, but since a spirituality without ethics is dangerous and impoverished, I end this paper with a question: What is it that makes the difference—what impels some practitioners towards ego and others towards soul?

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## NOTES

1. This article has been adapted from a paper presented at the Millennium Critical Psychology Conference, University of Western Sydney, Nepean, on May 2, 1999, entitled "Reiki, Yoga and Transcendental Meditation: Ego-centred or Ethical?". Its revision was made possible by a Women's Research Grant from the University of Western Sydney, Nepean, Australia.
2. Williams's article is a case study of a woman with rheumatoid arthritis; he makes links between her 'coping strategies' (her ways of maintaining a particular moral code which includes independence and cleanliness) and the expectations of her society (Britain under Margaret Thatcher).
3. In the sociology of religion, the practices, as I describe them, could be classified as 'client cults' in which "the relationship between those promulgating cult doctrine and those partaking of it most closely resembles the relationship between therapist and patient or between consultant and client" (Stark & Bainbridge, 1985: 26). Stark and Bainbridge's approach, is, however, deliberately 'scientific', 'theorizing', and 'deductive'. Mine is concerned with the meaning of the practices for those who experience them and with the sources of this experience in the spiritual (although not necessarily religious) traditions of the founders of TM, Reiki, and Yoga. These questions are of particular relevance in the context of healing.
4. The term 'spiritual' is used here in the sense defined by Gary Bouma: "'Spirituality' refers to our experiences of and ways of relating to that which is 'more', 'beyond' and 'greater than' the ordinary, the material, the everyday aspects of life... Spirituality involves those experiences, things, ideas, actions and beliefs that give life meaning..." (Bouma, 2000: 388, my elisions).
5. I do not mean to suggest that the 'creation of meaning' is always liberating. As Scarry demonstrates in her chapters on torture, pain can also be given meanings which enslave.
6. While I have used the word 'appropriation' to refer to a process within Western culture, the *agency* of oriental cultures should not be ignored either. For example, the originators of each of the practices I describe (Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, BKS Iyengar, and Dr Mikao Usui) have actively promoted their dissemination to the West. (I owe this insight to an anonymous reviewer of this article for the *Journal of Contemporary Religion*).
7. Here, I am only considering the practice of TM, not the quasi-religious, corporate institution through which this meditation technique is taught. For a critique of the organization, see Guilliatt, 1999. For a discussion of TM's rise and fall in the USA and debates about its status as a religion at that time, see Stark, Bainbridge & Jackson, 1985.
8. For discussions of the 'imaginary body', see Gatens, 1996, and Grosz, 1994—among others. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer of this article for the following additional insight: "This type of psychosomatic exercise may help in training the practitioners towards a more 'objective' or 'impersonal' perception of their somatic being—something that may be of importance in the context of the treatment of pain and suffering."
9. The reference to 'Sanskrit texts' in Reiki training is vague. These texts need not, of course, be Hindu. They could, for example, be Buddhist or Jain. I have been unable to find further information on this point.
10. For an anthropological and theological analysis of the transforming power of apparently 'magical' thinking and ritual in pilgrimages, see Waddell, 1997.

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