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The Understudied Side of Contemplation: Words, Images, and Intentions in a Syncretic Spiritual Practice

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ABSTRACT

The science of contemplation has focused on mindfulness in a manner quite disproportionate to its use in contemplative traditions. Mindfulness, as understood within the scientific community, is a practice that invites practitioners to disattend to words and images. The practitioner is meant to experience things as they “really are,” unfolding here and now in the flux of embodied sensations. Yet the use of words and images, together with intentions, is a far more common contemplative practice. The authors present ethnographic research with a syncretic contemplative tradition, Integral Transformative practice (ITP), which grew out of the Human Potential Movement of the 1960s. The authors focus on the practice of “affirmations,” in which practitioners seek to actualize spiritual goals by imagining future possibilities. Our ethnographic account invites new avenues for psychological research to illuminate the role of words and images in contemplation.

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For scientific research, mindfulness, a secularized version of certain strands of Buddhist meditation, has become the exemplar of contemplative practice. As understood in this context, mindfulness is a practice of nonjudgmental attention to the present moment (Bishop et al., 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 2003). The practitioner seeks to focus on an attentional object such as the breath – the act of breathing in and out, the belly rising and falling and rising and falling again – while disattending from any thoughts that arise. To be mindful in the United States today is to attend to the present moment, the world of immediacy, the here and now. Although mindfulness may mean something quite different in some traditional forms of Buddhism (Sharf, 2017; Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011), the idea of mindfulness as a kind of *bare awareness* has played a central role in shaping the growing stream of clinical and experimental research on meditative practice (Creswell, 2017). Those who practice mindfulness are urged to attend to the present moment without conceptual elaboration or emotional reactivity, so that they can experience reality as it “really is,” unfolding here and now in the ongoing flux of embodied sensations. This present moment is usually contrasted with the stories we rehearse about ourselves and the world – our self-narratives, hopes and regrets, spontaneous thoughts, and visions of what might come to pass. Thoughts, images, fantasies – these are described as distractions and distortions. The past and future are *just stories*; spiritual meaning, we are told, lies in the unfiltered present (Braun, 2017).

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In this paper, we explore an alternative approach to contemplative practice: the practice of affirmations, in which practitioners explicitly imagine and affirm desired futures as a vehicle for spiritual growth. We examine how a contemporary American syncretic spiritual tradition – *Integral Transformative Practice (ITP)*, which grew out of the Esalen Institute and the Human Potential Movement of the 1960s – navigates the tension between appreciating the present and cultivating a better future through the practice of affirmations.

In fact, imagination-rich practice has long been treated in various spiritual traditions as a means of contemplation. Many Buddhist and Hindu traditions ask practitioners to hold in their mind's eye abstract geometric forms, like mandalas or person-like forms such as the deity Tara (Beyer, 1985; McMahan, 2013). The practitioner may then shift mental attention from one part of the image to another or to the image as a whole. Mantras are similarly representation-rich practices. The practitioner repeats a phrase again and again. To be sure, the goal of mantra practice is often to lead the practitioner to a point at which the words lose their meaning, but the practice begins with representation. The Jewish mystical practices described as *Kabbalah* are similarly rooted in representation (Idel, 1995). In Kabbalah, a complex image represents spiritual movement (the sephiroth, or the Tree of Life). Practitioners move between various domains in their minds using a combination of words, images and imagined sensations.

Christianity explicitly distinguishes between representation-free spiritual practice and representation-rich spiritual practice. The former is described as *apophatic*, the way of denial, the *via negativa*. The best current example of apophatic practice is Centering Prayer. Centering Prayer often looks very similar to mindfulness. The practitioner focuses attention on the breath and seeks to disattend to thoughts, images, and inner sensations. As the 14th century work Cloud of Unknowing explained, even the concept of God could interfere with the experience of God.

Thought cannot comprehend God. And so, I prefer to abandon all I can know, choosing rather to love him who I cannot know . . . Beat upon that thick cloud of unknowing with the dart of your loving desire, and do not cease come what may. (Johnston, 1973, p. 55)

By contrast, the *via imaginativa* is called *kataphatic*. The leading examples in the Christian tradition are the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises, in which practitioners immerse themselves in imaginative representations of different scriptural scenes. They learn to see the scene from one perspective and then another – now looking at Mary's face, now at the angel. Although not always so intensely imagination-based, most Christian prayers are representation-rich. Those who pray think about God, think about their day, picture the future, and so forth. Apophatic prayer can sometimes even seem dangerous to Christians. In 1989, Joseph Ratzinger, not yet Pope Benedict XVI, published a letter in which he explained that apophatic prayer was an erroneous way of praying and had been a mistake for the desert fathers in their isolation. Ratzinger (1989) argued that the attempt to immerse oneself in a divine that can neither be sensed nor conceived is found deep within the religious impulse of many non-Christian peoples, and the Christian God that one finds by this method is no more real (from his perspective) than theirs.

There are many reasons why people might be drawn to representation-rich spiritual practice. Some may find it easier than bare mindfulness practice. The mind does not jump and start because it is preoccupied with the representations at the center of the practice.

When Dionysius the Areopagite presented imaginative-rich prayer, he did so because the apophatic practices of the desert fathers were perceived to be so difficult (Turner, 1998). Representation-rich practice is also easier to ground in specific goals, as Ratzinger pointed out. It is also far more common than true apophatic practice. (There are many more Christians than Buddhists – and many Buddhists do not pursue a purely apophatic practice.)

It is thus striking that so few researchers have sought to study the effects of representation-rich practice. The emerging scientific literature on compassion meditation is a notable exception to this trend (Hofmann, Grossman, & Hinton, 2011; Weng, Schuyler, & Davidson, 2017). Encouragingly, a recent high-profile taxonomy of meditation proposed by Dahl, Lutz, and Davidson (2015) includes a “constructive” category of meditation, which provides a space for practices that center on constructing desired states or perspectives (such as compassion or loving kindness), as opposed to merely attending to what is or deconstructing the nature of the mind. Still, only a handful of studies on meditation have explicitly studied visualization-based practices (Kozhevnikov, Louckova, Josipovic, & Motes, 2009; Lou et al., 1999). In the domain of Christian prayer, Luhrmann and colleagues explored the impact of visualization practices in Christian prayer (Luhrmann & Morgain, 2012; Luhrmann, Nusbaum, & Thisted, 2013), but most other research on prayer has not discussed visualization.

The lack of scientific attention to imagination-based practices may be related to the embedding of contemplative science within a specific Western modernist understanding of Buddhism, which tends to emphasize aspects of spiritual practice that align with modernist concerns such as rationality, pragmatism, and empirical disclosure (McMahan, 2008). In the secular West, the imagination holds connotations of the fanciful, unreal, or even delusional. As modernists, we tend to think of meditation as something practical, scientific, down-to-earth, a way of seeing the world as it is more clearly. Perhaps this is why we resist the idea that meditation may in some cases involve constructing our reality as much as revealing what was ostensibly already there.

But contemplative practice clearly involves more than just attending to the present moment. Most meditative traditions emphasize the importance of holding the right motivation for one’s practice and the right vision of how one’s practice may benefit oneself and others. These intentions, expectations, and narratives are cultivated deliberately, and often formally through ritual and study. They form part of the cultural context in which contemplative practices are embedded. For example, Buddhist practitioners might ponder over the autobiographies of ancient yogis, systematically contemplate the preciousness of their human birth, or recite a dedication of merit to close their daily meditation. Even within modern mindfulness discourse that is abstracted in many ways from its prior cultural contexts, we find the recurring sense that the practice of present moment awareness is embedded within a broader narrative. For example, during a YouTube yoga class, one often encounters a moment of setting one’s intentions for the rest of the day. How do these acts of narrative and imagination, these reachings out toward the future or the past through the mind’s eye, coalesce with the spiritual aim of mindfully attending to the present moment?

In this paper, we consider a new American syncretic contemplative tradition – Integral Transformative Practice (ITP) – that works closely with the tension between imagining possible futures and accepting what is here and now. This tension dovetails with a related

paradox between actively using imagination as a tool for realizing a particular future path and surrendering one's effort and expectations as the universe sets its own trajectory. Drawing on ethnographic participant observation and phenomenological interviews, we examine the particular practice of affirmations as a lens into these contemplative tensions. We take the practice of affirmations as a case study to highlight how research can begin to investigate the underappreciated role of imagination (and related concepts including visualization, expectation, motivation, intention, and narrative) in shaping the outcomes of contemplative practice.

Integral Transformative Practice: No One Captures the Flag

As leaders in the human potential movement, ITP cofounders George Leonard and Michael Murphy developed a set of spiritual guidelines to integrate a broad variety of embodied, cognitive, social, and moral practices drawn from yoga, martial arts, modern exercise physiology, and other forms of contemplative practice. ITP International is a loosely knit network of small groups of practitioners based largely in the United States who meet regularly to practice the *kata*, a combination of stretching, loosening, and exercise that ask the practitioner to attend to the flow of what they call "energy" in the body. The kata takes about 40 minutes to complete. It closes with meditation, preceded by a practice of collective and individual affirmations. There are specific statements, often spoken out loud and written down in a kind of contract, about how individuals intend to experience themselves in the future: for example, as happy, contented, even as a better golfer or father. (Michael Murphy is a skilled golf player and wrote a famous book, *Golf in the Kingdom*, about the sport as a spiritual endeavor.)

In addition to the kata, ITP practitioners also talk together so as to inspire each other to work on the multiple registers recommended for an integral practice. These include physical exercise, meditation, conscious eating, intellectual pursuits, emotional check-ins, and social engagement. While many of these practices are borrowed from other spiritual lineages (e.g., Hinduism, Buddhism, Aikido), within ITP they are carefully reframed as part of a coherent whole and presented as preparation for a new stage of human capacity. Within ITP, there is a strong sense that consciousness evolves, that people can facilitate this evolution, and that tools for imagining the future, such as affirmations, play a crucial role in this cocreative process.

Two of the authors (JB and ML) conducted 9 months of part-time participant observation with ITP in 2018 and 2019. We joined ITP conference calls, in-person evening seminars, and weekend workshops. We also conducted extended phenomenological interviews with community leaders and longstanding participants. In all, we attended a dozen zoom seminars, six evening seminars, and four 3-day weekend workshops. We spent 25 hours interviewing six long-term community members at length. We were struck especially by ITP's use of affirmations as a form for structuring the imagination that might enable both personal and community evolution.

Esalen: The Context

ITP owes its unusual vision to the syncretic context in which it emerged. The Esalen Institute, ITP's birthplace, is a spiritual hot-springs retreat and research center overlooking the Pacific

Ocean on the cliffs of Big Sur in California. Thousands of contemplatives come to the institute each year to teach, study, practice, and simply rest. Since the early 1960s, Esalen has served as a touchpoint for the influential collection of thinking and practice that has come to be called the Human Potential Movement (Kripal, 2018). This orientation has been accompanied and facilitated by an explicit rejection of any sectarian impulses that might limit practices to those rooted in a single tradition or particular teacher. Esalen is on the edge of the cultural mainstream. Yet also, since the beginning, Esalen's founders have aspired to approach spiritual practice scientifically, with a focus on research-based interventions. This meant that no single form would become especially sacred. As Esalen cofounder Mike Murphy is fond of saying, "no one captures the flag." When Murphy and Leonard set out to develop their own version of practice, which became ITP, they drew from the broad range of contemplative teachers and practices that they had encountered at Esalen (Leonard & Murphy, 2005).

The Practice of Affirmations

Affirmations, for ITP, are present tense statements that are carefully developed through an extended process of introspection, guided reflection, and community discussion. "Our affirmations are clear, straightforward statements of positive change in body, being, and performance," write Murphy and Leonard in their ITP guidebook *The Life We Are given: A Long-Term Program for Realizing the Potential of Body, Mind, Heart, and Soul*. Practitioners are encouraged to carefully consider potential affirmations and reflect on their meaning through a series of questions:

Does the affirmation really represent a change in me rather than in the external world? Am I getting ahead of myself? Is this change a healthy one? How will this change affect others in my life? Do I really want this change? (<https://www.itp-international.org/affirmations>).

After a process of development and discussion with the rest of their local ITP community, each participant claims one or more statements of aspiration (Leonard and Murphy recommend having no more than four at a time), which are then shared publicly and supported by the community. The statements are repeated regularly and integrated into both formal exercises and everyday household activities.

In their manual describing this practice, Leonard and Murphy model affirmations as contracts. Participants are literally expected to have a letter-sized sheet on which they write: "I, Jane Doe ..." Then the affirmations are numbered and listed. Here is their sample (p. 55):

I, Jane Doe, intend to see that the following circumstances have occurred by September 1, 2006:

- (1) I enjoy a profound empathy for people that at times appears to be telepathic.
- (2) At work, I operate in the "flow" all day, working in a state of harmony with my employees and customers.
- (3) I experience illuminations in which I feel a oneness with all of existence.
- (4) My entire being is balanced, vital, and healthy.

Signed, Jane Doe, October 1, 2005

Affirmation statements are central to the formal practice of the ITP kata. Toward the end of the kata, after the body has been opened and relaxed through half an hour of stretches

and calisthenics, practitioners lay on their backs, go through a series of progressive relaxation, and then use their affirmation statements as the basis for an open-ended process of creative imagination. They begin by inwardly reciting an affirmation that they are currently working with and then imagine living in the reality of the affirmation as if it were happening now. The practice is to imagine that the future reality described in the affirmation is already true in the here and now. Practitioners often imagine specific positive scenarios, but they might also bring to mind specific symbols or focus on more diffuse bodily or emotional feelings. There is an emphasis on bringing the inner senses to life. They use the imagination to feel how their body would feel if the affirmation had already come to pass, to hear what they would hear and see what they would see. Affirmation statement are often repeated silently throughout as a kind of anchor. This embodied process of creative visualization goes on for several minutes before a closing period of silent meditation, during which practitioners are encouraged to surrender their focus on their affirmations and relax into nondoing.

Affirmations might be spiritual, physical, or social, something like “my vision is crystal clear,” “I am happy and contented,” “I spread love and kindness,” or “I play par golf consistently and my drives are, on average, 200 yards long.” Murphy and Leonard propose affirmations that change body shape, improve physical performance, increase creativity, and encourage more compassion (Leonard & Murphy, 2005). Beyond that, all ITP practitioners are encouraged to use one shared community affirmation as a kind of foundation: “My entire being is balanced, vital, and healthy.” In group kata practice, this communal affirmation is recited three times out loud collectively at the beginning of the creative imagery period. Because ITP understands the mind as including a structured unconscious that can access a greater spiritual reality, these present tense statements are envisioned as effective tools both for developing the participant’s psyche in preparation for a successful venture and also for connecting to a form of spiritual energy that helps bring the statement into reality. They recommend periodically evaluating in writing whether one has achieved these goals in practice.

ITP affirmations certainly vary. Some affirm business goals. Mike Murphy’s earliest affirmations were about fitness. One of our interview participants, Jim (all participant names are pseudonyms) – tall, athletic, quietly thoughtful, and in his mid 60s – explained that his recent affirmations focus on caring for his family. “I’m a loving, caring grandfather, father, and son,” he repeats. When he makes the affirmation, he finds the care easy. Otherwise, it can be challenging. Affirmation seems to shift his goal setting so that it lacks the weight of daily responsibility. “If I try to create duty around family and duty around my self-care, I get stuck. It doesn’t happen. And then I start to manage it and micro-manage it and then that’s where tension comes in.” Another interview participant, Linda, a long time ITP practitioner in her mid 60s and staff member for the program, frames her affirmation around her capacity to remember, “to pull in information.” When struggling to remember, she thinks of this affirmation: “I have immediate recall at will.” This seems to help. “I just sit and relax and just clear my screen.” She told us that when she does this, her memory seems to open.

The practice thus involves the use of words that represent a future imagined state and deliberate visualizations of that future state. They are meant to be experienced as dual modes of consciousness, one governed by contractual and intentional systems of thought and a second that is ruled by spirit. Thus, affirmations invoke a relatively clear sense of

cause and effect as they “represent a firm contract with ourselves.” The ITP manual asks that affirmations be present tense, realistic, concrete and certainly “not magical.” The community discussion includes moments of rejecting overly extreme affirmations. Yet, on the other hand, along with this careful practical impulse, ITP affirmations are also explicitly aimed beyond conscious causation. “They focus our best conscious efforts on transformations while seeking to enlist powers beyond our conscious understanding” (Leonard & Murphy, 2005, p. 53, p. 58).

ITP affirmations are understood to work by developing an imaginary vision that is assumed to impact the empirically available world directly. “[The affirmation] is an instrument for creating a parallel, present-tense reality in your consciousness.” This “parallel reality” is not measurable by any “known instrument.” Yet, it is thought to have form. “It is nonetheless real. It is organized,” explain Leonard and Murthy (Leonard & Murphy, 2005, pp. 53–54). In one sense, this is a way to say that we don’t fully understand the mind and that there are elements of causation beyond our current ken. But the unknown here is not simply mysterious. It is also imagined as something we can access and work with and thus the site of the capacity to change our embodied selves in very concrete ways. That concrete change is the central aspiration of ITP affirmation practices.

To facilitate this access, practitioners are meant to experience their affirmations while in a state of suspended agency. ITP trainings describe this as *focused surrender*. Focused surrender is meant to involve a “prayerfulness” that aspires to “grace.” This language is clearly borrowed from a Christian lineage, although the word grace here is also an acronym for a meditative process: ground, relax, aware, center and energize. Leonard and Murphy recognize the conceptual challenge within a paradoxical concept like focused surrender. They explain that “grace seems freely given, involving surrender more than struggle. [Yet] at the same time, dedicated, long-term practice seems to predispose us to its gifts.” They call this the “unlikely marriage of trying and not trying,” of both “zeroing in and letting go” (Leonard & Murphy, 2005, pp. 65–66). Their thought is that when words are consciously spoken in the present tense, when the future is vividly imagined, and when the process feels more like release than control, the imagined future might become real.

Our interview participants report that this combination of word, image, and suspended volition had direct effects on their lives. Linda, for instance, describes the practice of affirmations as a space for change, “where we’re evoking that transformed state.” One of Linda’s longest standing affirmations, which she worked with for more than 4 years, was motivated by a general sense of confusion and hesitation when facing challenges in her life. She began by inquiring into this feeling of confusion, trying various language to formulate an affirmation that would feel right for her. One day, after several weeks of this kind of deliberate effort, she was hiking through a canyon when a set of words appeared spontaneously as written script suspended before her mind’s eye: “I readily find the through line and follow it,” she read. She had the intuition that this was the affirmation she had been seeking. Following that surprising episode, which Linda recounts with a sense of vibrancy and even reverence, she began working with this specific phrase, taking it up in her formal practice of affirmation and also repeating it throughout her daily routine. The words then became associated with a particular image. She describes seeing, in her mind’s eye, a flashing line, like a tunnel through the ground, or sometimes like rushing water. It is often tinged in red and always comes with a sense of forward movement and clarity, of moving swiftly toward an endpoint. Repeating this affirmation and the image that comes with it helps Linda achieve a feeling of clarity and composure in moments of confusion.

If I'm befuddled, and I go, oh there it is, that quality, and I say the affirmation, there's a quick sense of confidence. All of a sudden, I feel like I'm standing taller and stronger, more grounded, well-equipped to address the issue at hand. And then I do see that line. I literally see a fast-moving line ... it's like I'm being led to the result, the end goal, and it's a felt sense of mental clarity, assuredness, and relaxation, absent that feeling of "what am I supposed to do now?"

In line with her sense that she experienced a spontaneous intervention from outside of her conscious mind in her canyon epiphany, Linda is especially interested in "where the affirmation wants to take [her]." She believes that is important to allow the words and images to reveal themselves in their own way and at their own pace. It can take several months for Linda's initial impulse toward an affirmation to shape itself into the specific words and images that she intuits to be right for her. However, even when she has established a clear affirmation and is deliberately working with it in formal practice, she describes a process of "surrendering to what wants to come in." As she explains, "In ITP what we like to think about is that there's some unseen forces at work here that can help us cocreate that state that we're affirming, and there's a whole method around this too." Just before speaking an affirmation, she works to get "aligned" with those forces. For Linda, it

might go like this, [I] notice my body ... I'm kind of activating all my many parts ... and then it's in some breath and attention to the hara [energy center in the belly] and even to the heart. I might do a body scan ... It's just like a deliberate making myself available.

After the intensive exercise of the kata, she may experience what she calls a "clearing of the mind" with a "spacious quality in the mind when those thoughts kind of settle." That relaxed and quiet moment is when affirmations are thought to have especially powerful effects.

Affirming (the act of making affirmation) is thus considered distinct from more analytical forms of thought. As Linda puts it, there is "something different about the quality of thinking and the quality of affirming." Affirmations, she explains, involve sensory exploration with an open sensibility. In spite of the present tense and directive quality of what seem like propositional statements, they are not simply words that control the future but instead include sensations and a strong lean toward uncertainty. Affirmations are "about sensing inside," says Linda, as opposed to thought, because "thinking is cutting off the body, in my opinion." Thought can be forceful and therefore is imagined as less effective. "If there's a lot of drive and force around it I think we end up getting constricted, so we have less capacity to work with."

Another long-time practitioner, Cathy, told us that she had used ITP practice to achieve a remarkably concrete goal. Cathy, a woman now in her mid 70s with eyes that are bright and quick with laughter, has practiced ITP for nearly twenty years. She leads two midwestern ITP communities through weekly gatherings, discussions, and kata sessions. A few years ago, she hit a medical snag, one of the normal but difficult moments brought on by aging. "I was diagnosed with macular degeneration, or the beginnings of it, and was told there's nothing you can do about it, it will finally take your vision." Her prognosis was not good. At best she might be able to slow her vision loss. "So, I took on an affirmation that my eyeballs are whole and complete." To be clear, she did not simply ask the affirmation to do the work. Cathy did eye exercises, visited a homeopath, and began herbal treatments. But also, as she says, "I got my intention very clear."

This meant Cathy began a study of the eye. She pored over her copy of the eye scan that showed degeneration, explored textbooks on eye health, and developed a strong mental picture of a healthy eye. The exercise, at first, involved thinking of something other than her eye, something that she could vividly remember, like her first dog, “something just seared into your memory – close your eyes and just see it as if it were right in front of you.” She would repeat this three times, first using sight, then hearing, and then smell, each time accessing senses that were a bit more challenging for her to imagine. After warming up her inner senses, Cathy turned her attention to the task at hand. “I really focused on what would it look like – and how would I feel if it were better.” She didn’t use the word “eyes” but instead developed a picture, right out of the anatomy books that she had been studying, a detailed colored diagram of the frontal view of a healthy eye as if the picture were sketched in colored pencil on her mind. This was the first image for her daily affirmations, which came at the end of her kata practice each day. Cathy would rub her hands and bring the warmth to her eyes. Then she would generate the image of the healthy anatomical diagram. She would hold that thought for about a minute. Image two was a revised version of the medical eye scan, a pixelated screen except with none of the dark blots that had shown the diseased areas. For the last minute, Cathy practiced what she described as emotional imagination, something she developed by envisioning her emotional response to feeling better. “What would it feel like to have that concern lifted?” she asked. Cathy describes emotions as a bit more challenging to conjure than visual images.

It is hard to call that an image, but it really was an image of a relaxed way of feeling about my eye. I was bringing in my emotional image of what it felt like to be completely relaxed and free of concern about this issue.

After developing the affirmation and attuning her imagery capacity, Cathy set up triggers to remind her to practice. The first was simply the kata, which she practices five to seven times a week. Then she added her car door. Every time she enters the car, she is reminded to imagine the healthy eye – a shortened version of her full affirmation practice that keeps the image fresh in her mind.

Cathy did not understand herself to be the one doing the work of healing. In fact, she felt that she loosened her agentic control. She would practice with an explicitly soft gaze and a closing mantra in which she surrendered her personal healing goal “to whatever is the highest and most good.” Cathy described her image from the anatomy textbook as relaxed, as if she were offhandedly leafing through a textbook of eye images. “There’s a lightness to it – it’s almost playful for me,” she explained. But then perhaps “playing may be too far.” To her, the action feels real. “I am in parallel reality,” the place where her eyes are healed, her body feels great, and “there’s no worry, no concern, not any of that heaviness – just this reality my eyes work perfectly.”

It may have worked. As she explains, “I went back in a year with a specialist who said, ‘I don’t know what you are doing here. These scans you brought me cannot be yours. There’s been some mess up.’ ” Cathy is careful not to attribute the success solely to the affirmations. “Maybe they did misdiagnose … Who knows.” Still, she is quite happy with the outcome.

Those who work with affirmations report that they deliver success. “[ITP] produces results,” write Leonard and Murphy (2005, p. 54). Jim, for one, described affirmations as “a huge tool, a practical tool.” He found that describing what he wanted helped him to achieve it.

I think my first affirmation, 5 or 6 years ago, was developing a clear mindful vision. ‘I have a clear and mindful vision.’ So, I go to work and instead of having this sort of clutter fog of okay, this is all the stuff that I need to do, let me get a to-do list. I went beyond the to-do list and just considered that I’m approaching my business with my clear and mindful vision. And reaffirming that I have that has allowed me to proceed with creating direction when I felt I was stuck.”

In fact, ITP practitioners take pains to carefully measure the effects of affirmations. They are encouraged to sign and date their affirmations so as to track changes, for example in a “Record of Body Transformation.” Some even rate their progress periodically on a scale from 1 to 10. Every person we talked to within ITP described affirmations as deeply effective. For the most part, this meant that affirmations helped them to become more kind, more focused, or more happy. Some stories, like Cathy’s, describe very concrete physical change. George Leonard’s wife, once diagnosed with epilepsy, attributed 15 seizure-free years to her affirmations. In the 1992 session ITP leaders recorded a “strong statistical correlation between adherence to the program and progress made towards realizing affirmations.” People reported less body fat, more awareness, and even the full elimination of cataracts. This was a “prescientific” study, as Mike Murphy is apt to say, not a controlled trial (Leonard & Murphy, 2005, p. 28, 33). Still, it suggests that part of the appeal of affirmations comes from the idea that these clear statements concerning the future can be empirically verified as effective.

Possible Mechanisms, Future Research Directions

Why might affirmations work to deliver spiritual, emotional and physical change? In this section we discuss some promising research avenues that may help to unpack the underlying mechanisms. We highlight four fields of research that we believe can offer useful theories and methods to advance our scientific understanding of affirmations, and of the role of imagination in contemplative practice more broadly.

Goal Setting and Motivation

Affirmations are a form of goal setting. A substantial literature ranges from research on goal setting per se (Carver & Scheier, 2001; Gollwitzer, 1990; Locke & Latham, 1990) to a set of practices including the if-then statements of “implementation intentions,” such as “If situation Y is encountered, then I will initiate goal-directed behavior X.” Several studies have compared motivational techniques and shown significant differences in effect depending upon subtle changes in the sentence and motivation structure employed (for a review, see Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006). Goal intentions, for instance, have been shown to generate ironic rebound and ego-depletion for subsequent task performance, while implementation intentions did not. By comparison, implementation intentions also seem especially effective around goals that are difficult to achieve. The most significant effects are seen in changes in the capacity for initiating goal striving, shielding ongoing goal pursuit from unwanted influences, disengaging from unproductive goal striving, conserving self-regulatory capability, changing the sense of access to goal directed activities, and increasing the automaticity (immediacy, efficiency, and lack of awareness) of goal-directed responses. Studies suggest that the strength of intention generally corresponds to 20 to

35% of the fluctuation in goal achievement (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006; Rogers, Milkman, John, & Norton, 2015). This could provide a baseline from which to compare the effects of present- and future-tense affirmations as well as affirmations that are attached to somatic practice as they are in ITP.

Suggestion, Mindset, and Placebo

The practice of affirmations can also be understood as a form of self-suggestion. Suggestions are communicable ideas that generate expectancies for involuntary changes in experience or behavior (Halligan & Oakley, 2014). The scientific literatures on hypnosis, mindset, and placebo effects show that marinating the mind in a specific idea can lead to profound changes in subjective experience, brain function, and behavior (Dweck, 2008; Finniss, Kapchuk, Miller, & Benedetti, 2010; Terhune, Cleeremans, Raz, & Lynn, 2017). Suggestions have been shown to modulate highly automatic and even unconscious processes that are normally immune to volitional control (Lifshitz, Bonn, Fischer, Kashem, & Raz, 2013). In this respect, it is interesting to note that ITP affirmations are usually formulated in terms of changes that the practitioner can make to their own inner landscape or behavior, rather than changes that might come to pass in the external world. Suggestion and placebo effects may play an important role in bringing about these internal changes. It would be interesting to examine the extent to which individual differences in suggestibility may mediate the beneficial impact of affirmations. Of note, responses to suggestions are typically experienced as effortless and involuntary, without a sense of conscious effort (except the effort to tell oneself the suggestion in the case of self-suggestion). This sense of involuntariness aligns with the descriptions of focused surrender, or grace, that ITP practitioners connect to their practice of affirmations.

Mental Imagery in Sport and Music

Athletes and musicians routinely use imagery to train skills. There is a large body of research demonstrating the positive influence of imagery on subsequent performance. Imagery training seems to be especially effective when it involves the body in the process of imagination. Sports research has demonstrated that imagery ability is best understood as a complex multisensory and multidimensional set of capacities – the body and all its senses are part and parcel of imaginative processes in the brain (Cumming & Eaves, 2018). ITP affirmation practices make use of these multiple dimensions and thus might be explored in dialogue with recent innovations in imagery research that explores similarly layered approaches (i.e., Cumming et al., 2017). Likewise, recent research provides a paradigm for exploring the relationships between metaphor generation, motor imagery, and motor stimulation (Cumming & Eaves, 2018; Eaves, Haythornthwaite, & Vogt, 2014; Eaves, Riach, Holmes, & Wright, 2016; Macuga & Frey, 2012; Wright, Williams, & Holmes, 2014). It may be that mental imagery – and words, which likely call up images – work in similar ways in ITP practice.

Embodied Cognition

ITP affirmations are explicitly connected to bodily practices, which include stretching and strengthening, as well as progressive relaxation and the cultivation of interoceptive awareness.

It is possible that this embedding of imagination-based practice within physical activity has effects not solely due to the stretching of muscles. There are of course rich discussions around this topic in embedded cognition (Gallese & Lakoff, 2005), metaphor theory (Kirmayer, 2004), the “interaction hypothesis” (Mahon & Caramazza, 2008), and the “4Es” of embodied, embedded, enactive, and extended (Newen, De Bruin, & Gallagher, 2018). The deep question here is whether present tense assertions of conditions not currently present but desired in the future may have consequences because of the combination of word, image, and suspended volition along with physical activity and a careful attention to the felt state of the body.

Metaphor

Metaphors play a key role in the practice of affirmations and in contemplative training more generally. Practitioners often employ figurative language to describe or evoke a particular embodied feeling connected to a desired spiritual state that would otherwise be difficult to express using more direct language. Recent studies have begun to investigate the importance of metaphors in describing and shaping contemplative experiences in traditions including Tibetan Buddhism and secular mindfulness (Richardson & Mueller, 2019; Silvestre-López, 2017). For example, the metaphor of practice as a “journey” or “path” is prominent in Buddhist and Hindu discourse (Richardson & Mueller, 2019). These metaphors likely shape not only the discourse of contemplative practice but also the embodied experiences occasioned by these practices – a path signals direction, opportunities for change, speed, potential obstructions, and so on. ITP stretches the use of metaphor beyond language to engage somatic experience in a similar kind of associative evocation. For example, ITP practitioners use the bodily act of clenching and releasing muscles to evoke a somewhat paradoxical experiential attitude of “focused surrender,” which is understood to play a key role in the process of affirmations and in ITP practice more broadly.

Conclusion

ITP affirmation practices are not unique. Their insistence on using word and image to bring the future into the present can be found in the self-help bestseller, *The Secret* (Byrne, 2008), which promises that you can get what you want if you wish hard enough, or the Pentecostal prosperity gospel in which a congregant who prays confidently is expected to reap monetary rewards (Haynes, 2012; Marti, 2012). Yet, while *The Secret* and the prosperity gospel are both emphatically individualistic in their orientation toward change, many of the ITP affirmations that we observed in our work focused on communal relationships and social emotions: Tim wanted to be a better father; Cathy, in addition to healing her eye, sought to become a more attentive listener. In addition, ITP affirmations explicitly focus on internal changes rather than external miracles. In this way, ITP affirmations resemble more traditional forms of imagination-rich practice, such as Tibetan Deity yoga, in which practitioners aim to merge the enlightened qualities of a visualized deity into their own body. By imagining a state that does not yet exist, seeing it in the mind’s eye, and feeling its visceral effects in the body, ITP practitioners seek to actualize conditions that they hold to be spiritually meaningful. The imagination serves as a bridge between spiritual ideals and embodied reality. More generally, the use of words and images as part of contemplative practice is central to far more spiritual

traditions than the attempt to disattend to them. We hope that those who study contemplative practice will begin to focus their scientific attention upon them. Bringing these understudied dimensions to light will help to clarify the fundamental role of cultural and narrative context in shaping the experiences and outcomes of contemplative practice (Cassaniti & Luhrmann, 2014; Kirmayer, 2015; Lifshitz & Thompson, 2019; McMahan, 2017).

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Die wenig untersuchte Seite der Kontemplation : Worte, Bilder und Intentionen in einer synkretistisch spirituellen Praxis

MICHAEL LIFSHITZ, JOSHUA BRAHINSKY, UND T. M. LUHRMANN

Abstract : Die Wissenschaft der Kontemplation konzentriert sich in einer recht unverhältnismäßigen Art auf Achtsamkeit im Vergleich zu ihrer Anwendung in kontemplativen Traditionen. Achtsamkeit, wie sie in der wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft verstanden wird, ist eine Praxis, die Praktizierende dazu einlädt, Worte und Bilder zu ignorieren. Der Praktizierende soll Dinge erfahren „wie sie wirklich sind“, wenn sie sich im Hier und Jetzt im Fluß körperlicher Sensationen entfalten. Dennoch ist der Gebrauch von Worten und Bildern, zusammen mit Intentionen, eine viel verbreiterte kontemplative Praxis. Die Autoren präsentieren ethnographische Forschung mit synkretischer kontemplativer Tradition, Integral Transformative Practice (ITP), die aus der Human Potential Bewegung der 1960er erwuchs. Die Autoren konzentrieren sich auf die Praxis von „Affirmationen“, bei denen Praktizierende danach streben, spirituelle Ziele zu verwirklichen, indem sie die Zukunft imaginieren. Unsere ethnographische Beschreibung lädt neue Wege für psychologische Forschung ein, um die Rolle von Worts und Bildern in der Kontemplation zu beleuchten.

STEPHANIE RIEGEL, M.D.

L'aspect sous-étudié de la contemplation : Les mots, images et intentions dans une pratique spirituelle syncrétique

MICHAEL LIFSHITZ, JOSHUA BRAHINSKY ET T. M. LUHRMANN

Résumé: La science de la contemplation a mis l'accent sur la pleine conscience d'une manière tout à fait disproportionnée à son utilisation dans les traditions contemplatives. La pleine conscience, telle qu'elle est comprise au sein de la communauté scientifique, est une pratique qui invite les praticiens à ne pas porter attention aux mots et aux images. Le praticien est censé faire l'expérience des choses telles qu'elles sont « vraiment », se déroulant ici et maintenant dans le flux des sensations incarnées. Pourtant, l'utilisation de mots et d'images, ajoutée aux intentions, est une pratique contemplative beaucoup plus courante. Les auteurs présentent la recherche ethnographique dans une tradition contemplative syncrétique : la Pratique transformatrice intégrale, née du Mouvement du potentiel humain des années 1960. Les auteurs abordent essentiellement la pratique des « affirmations », selon laquelle les praticiens cherchent à actualiser les objectifs spirituels en imaginant des possibilités futures. Notre compte rendu ethnographique invite à de nouvelles voies de recherche psychologique afin d'éclairer le rôle des mots et des images dans la contemplation.

JOHANNE RAYNAULT

C. TR. (STIBC)

El lado poco estudiado de la contemplación: Palabras, imágenes, e intenciones en la práctica espiritual sincrética.

MICHAEL LIFSHITZ, JOSHUA BRAHINSKY, Y T. M. LUHRMANN

Resumen: La ciencia de la contemplación se ha enfocado en el mindfulness de una manera bastante desproporcionada de su uso en las tradiciones contemplativas. El mindfulness, como lo entiende la comunidad científica, es una práctica que invita al practicante a desatender palabras e imágenes. Se espera que el practicante experimente las cosas “como son”, en el aquí y el ahora y en el flujo de sensaciones corpóreas. Sin embargo, el uso de palabras e imágenes, junto con intenciones, son mucho más comunes en la práctica contemplativa. Los autores presentan una investigación etnográfica con una tradición contemplativa sincrética, la Práctica Transformadora Integral (PTI), que surgió del Movimiento del Potencial Humano de la década de 1960. Los autores se centran en la práctica de “afirmaciones”, en la que los practicantes buscan actualizar sus metas espirituales imaginando posibilidades futuras. Nuestro enfoque etnográfico invita a nuevas vías de investigación psicológica para vislumbrar el papel de las palabras y las imágenes en la contemplación.

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