

EFFECTS ON BEREAVEMENT USING A RESTRICTED SENSORY ENVIRONMENT (PSYCHOMANTEUM)

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ABSTRACT: This article reports research using a semi-structured bereavement protocol with 100 participants experiencing bereavement for the death of a family member, friend, pet, or other deceased individual. Apparent contacts similar to spontaneous after-death encounters were reported by 63% of the participants. Repeated measures of bereavement on 20 items (e.g., grief, longing, anger) were taken before the process, immediately after, and one month later. Reductions in feelings of bereavement were statistically significant. Decreases in bereavement correlated positively with increased tendencies toward absorption (Tellegen Absorption Scale, $r = .38, p < .001$). The 3-4 hour semi-structured process included writing, interviews, art work, and mirror gazing (a restricted sensory environment called a psychomanteum booth). Qualitative experiences included mental conversations, messages, questions and responses, memories, imagery, touch, physical sensations, odors, and emotional shifts. ADC, after-death communication, Attachment Theory, bereavement, Continuing Bonds, death, grief, hypnagogia, mirror gazing, Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, psychomanteum, REST, Restricted Environmental Stimulation Technique, Tellegen Absorption Scale.

When a person dies, the feeling of loss is one of the most difficult of life experiences for family and friends who are left. The state of bereavement that results is often one of grief, sadness, and distress. Some bereavement states may be resolved in a few months or a year or two, while others may continue for decades. The purpose of this research was to determine if an experiential process could facilitate an experience similar to the spontaneous after death communication with a deceased person, which is often reported by surviving family members and friends, with an effect on levels of bereavement.

In such situations the feelings of loss may be punctuated by incidents in which a survivor may feel a sense of the presence of the person who has died. There may be a vivid dream in which the deceased appears. One may hear the voice of the lost loved one or have conversations with him or her. There may be spontaneous and unexpected visions or signs that seem to come from the deceased and which are experienced by family members, friends, and sometimes others. Far from being rare, these apparent communications after death occur to many people, and have been studied in medical and psychiatric research. Surveys and the study of apparent contacts have been conducted cross-culturally. An early study by Rees (1971) surveyed all the widows and widowers ($n=293$) in Wales. Contacts with the deceased were reported by 50% of the widowers and 46% of the widows. Kalish and Reynolds (1973) surveyed four ethnic communities (African-American, Latino, Japanese-American, and Caucasian) in Los Angeles, with 44% claiming to have felt a post death

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contact. The experiences of contacts have been reported in many countries and locales, including the U. K. (Bennett & Bennett, 2000), India (Osis & Haraldsson, 1977), Iceland (Haraldsson, 1988), the U.S. (Cleiren, 1993; Greeley, 1987; Klugman, 2006), and Japan (Yamamoto, Okonogi, Iwasaki, & Yoshimura, 1969).

Several studies have gathered data on the phenomenology of the experiences, and the effects on feelings of bereavement. In a random telephone survey ($n=202$) Klugman (2006) found the most common mode of contacts included dreams, sounds, feeling a presence, and having conversations. A sense of presence or contact may be reported in any of the sensory modes, in mental conversation, or somatic sensations (Klugman, 2006; Whitney, 1992). Whitney interviewed 24 individuals who experienced contacts. In the group there were 35 reports of positive feelings (happy, thankful, and blessed) and 17 reports of negative feelings (sad, scared, angry, and crazy); however, the majority of individuals who had negative feelings also had positive feelings. The significance of these contacts was studied by Kwirecki (2011) using an in-depth qualitative textual analysis of 25 published accounts of such contacts. She found that upon having a contact, the percipients felt immediate relief from the grief and the distress at the loss, and they created congruent meaning from the experience. In a study of 596 volunteer individuals who experienced contacts Arcangel (2005) reported that 98% felt they had received comfort from the encounter. Steffen and Coyle (2011) interviewed 12 participants and in a thematic analysis the central themes were feeling benefit in the continued existence of the person who had died, feeling positive about the relationship, and finding meaning, whether existential, spiritual or religious.

In addition to spontaneous occurrences of communication with a deceased person, there are traditions of facilitation in which there is an attempt to evoke the communication. Some of these practices go back to prehistory and early historical times. In ancient Greece there were practices that were intended to evoke contacts with deceased individuals as well as gods and spirit beings (Ustinova, 2011). Such practices often involved elaborate ritual procedures that could produce altered states (Hastings, 1991), and that were possibly enhanced by psychoactive substances. A description of one practice taking several days included “secluded lodging in a small building, cold baths, prayers, special diet, and sexual abstinence, as well as music and dancing” (Ustinova, 2011, p. 67). The actual encounter often took place in a cave or a special chamber. The experiences include contact with individuals, revelations of the future, and messages. In contemporary times, facilitated contacts may be sought through mediums or persons claiming psychic abilities, in some religious traditions and ceremonies, and in shamanic practice in cultures where shamanism continues to exist (Walsh, 2007). Beyond these formalized practices in Western and other cultures, individuals often speak to their deceased friends and loved ones, and feel they have received responses (Klass, 1999).

The process that was developed for this study draws on two current models of reducing grief and healing bereavement effects. The first is Attachment Theory,

in which the task of healing is for the surviving person to recognize that the deceased is no longer alive or present, and to release the attachments and connections with that person, rather than holding them with distress (Bowlby, 1982). The second model is Continuing Bonds, in which the participant maintains a feeling of connection, having a link with the deceased, while acknowledging that it is different from when he or she was alive (Klass, 1999; Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996). This present study can be seen from either perspective. The attachment model emphasizes the value of getting closure on unfinished emotional connections. The continuing bonds model emphasizes the presence of a continuing but reconfigured emotional relationship.

This research did not engage in the question of the ontological nature of the contacts—whether they were really some form of survival after death. These are *apparent contacts*. Sometimes *ostensible* is used in the same sense. The nature of an apparent contact was left to the participant. In this article the word *contact* is meant to refer to the judgment of the participant, which can be open to a variety of interpretations. In some scientific literature (e.g. Bentall, 2000), visual appearances are described as *hallucinations* with a connotation of pathology. The term *apparition* has been used as a non-theoretical term. Kwilecki (2011) uses the phrase *inner visual representation* without speculating on the origin of the experience. The term After Death Communication (ADC) has been coined for apparent contacts with a deceased individual. In this paper this term will be used, but with the understanding that the ontological reality of the contact is not necessarily determined.

This research study attempted to facilitate an opportunity for a contact with a person who has died, similar to the spontaneous experiences, and to gather data on the resulting effects on the bereavement state of the participants. The procedure was based on earlier research (Hastings et al., 2002), but with a larger participant base, a slightly modified protocol, and the inclusion of personality measures. The protocol included writing about the deceased, telling recollections, expressing emotions, doing non-verbal art work, and sitting in a darkened, quiet room (a restricted sensory environment called a psychomanteum; see description below, and Moody, 1992), all of which allowed the participant to review thoughts, feelings, and memories, with the potential to form a new relationship with the individual who has died. This was a 3–4 hour, semi-structured process that was carried out individually and guided by a facilitator. Participants completed questionnaires assessing the intensity of bereavement effects before, immediately after the procedure, and one month later. This article explains the design of the experiential process, presents the statistical results, and describes the qualitative experiences reported by the participants.

PURPOSE

The purposes of this study were to create a process that facilitated an apparent contact with a deceased individual, to assess resulting changes in the intensity of bereavement, and to identify personality factors that may influence shifts in

bereavement. This goal led to several research questions that were explored quantitatively:

- Can an experience be created that will facilitate or induce reports of a contact with a person who has died?
- What are the effects of such an experience on the bereavement state?
- Do scores on personality traits show correlations with changes in bereavement effects?
- Are changes in bereavement correlated with the length of time since the death?
- Is the experience in the booth a restricted sensory environment called a psychomanteum booth an altered state for a proportion of participants?
- What is the experiential (subjective) phenomenology of the procedure?

It is important to note that there was no intention to validate or prove the reality of the contacts with the deceased, nor to establish life after death, but rather to develop an experience that creates an opportunity similar to spontaneous contacts with the deceased, and hopefully to enable the healing effects of such experiences.

RESEARCH DESIGN

One hundred participants were taken through this protocol individually, in a 3–4 hour process. To measure the changes in the effects of bereavement, a standard single group, pretest-posttest design (Cook & Campbell, 1979) was used, with repeated measures of bereavement taken before the experiential treatment, after, and a month later using questionnaires with Likert scales. The Tellegen Absorption Scale (TAS; Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974) and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers, 1995) were used to explore the correlations of change with personality qualities. The qualitative data was obtained via open ended items on the questionnaires, such as “If you could say something to the deceased, what would you say?” and “Please describe what happened in the psychomanteum as fully as you can.” This research was approved by the Human Ethics Committee of the Institute.¹

Bereavement Measures

The effects on bereavement were measured by changes in the ratings of 20 items taken from previous research (Hastings, et al., 2002), using a Likert scale of 1–7, with 7 indicating the most intense level. Five of these were sentences referring to reactions over time, and were in the pre and follow-up questionnaires (See Table 1.). Fifteen brief items were repeated in all three questionnaires (See Table 2.).

Of the 20 items, 16 assessed distressful emotional conditions, such as grief, sadness, and anger. Four assessed positive effects, such as love and peace, for which a 7 rating meant a positive emotional state. A test-retest of reliability of the 20 items with a one week retest ($n = 22$) showed a Pearson correlation of $r = .93$ for participants' total scores.

Personality Measure

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator form G (MBTI; Myers, 1995) was given to all participants. It identifies four polarities of personal functioning: Introversion-Extraversion, Intuition-Sensing, Feeling-Thinking, and Perception-Judgment. It was hoped to learn if the changes in bereavement were correlated with any of the polarities, particularly with intuition, feeling, and perception. The Tellegen Absorption Scale (Tellegen and Atkinson, 1974) was given to the first 48 participants. The TAS indicates a person's fluidity of internal and external perceptual boundaries in areas such as imagery, synesthesia, intuitive senses, and absorbed attention. It was hypothesized that a higher score on the TAS would correlate with a reduction in bereavement.

Participants

Participants were adults from the immediate community, other states, and local educational institutions, recruited through flyers, announcements in newsletters, word of mouth, referrals from therapists and others, and a web site. Persons volunteering for the study were given a screening interview that asked about the individual who had died, and screened to exclude persons if they reported being diagnosed or hospitalized with a major mental or physical illness. Participants were usually asked to wait six months after a death before going through the research process. Two or three reporting less time were accepted on approval by the director. Accepted participants received a package containing a consent form, the prequestionnaire, and the two assessments. This series began in 2003 and was concluded in 2005.

The Experiential Process

In crafting the experience, we hoped to retain individual support and personal attention in the experience. This was not just research but, based on the effects of spontaneous percipients, also a healing opportunity. In attempting to create a facilitating experience, we incorporated (a) remembering the deceased with memories, thoughts, and mementos of the person; (b) activating the feelings of loss, longing, and other emotions of grief; (c) awareness of unfinished issues and connections; (d) nonverbal levels of feeling. The process involved six stages.

Stage 1. Initial Prequestionnaire. The prequestionnaire was a measure of the person's feelings at the beginning of the process and was completed before coming to the session. It asked for information about the deceased and the participant's feelings and reactions. The intensities of 20 effects of bereavement were rated using a 1–7 Likert scale.

Stage 2. Initial Interview. After arrival at the research facility, the participant was interviewed in a counseling room by the facilitator, who asked the participant to talk about memories, feelings, and intentions for the process. The facilitators did not analyze, advise or interpret. Rather, they listened

empathically and asked questions to facilitate the participants' remembrance and expression. Participants were invited to bring photos and keepsakes of the deceased. At the end of the interview, participants were invited to use art materials (pastels, colored pencils, crayons, clay) to reflect feelings in a non-verbal mode. Most of the participants did this.

Stage 3. Sitting in the Booth. The facilitator then led the participant to a booth in another room. The participant sat in a recliner chair, looking at the mirror's reflective surface. The mirror was tilted at an angle, not reflecting the participant's face. A 7-watt light was located behind the chair and a dimmer for the light was on a table with a box of tissues. The instructions were to gaze at the mirror, adjust the light to be comfortable, reflect on feelings, memories, and thoughts about the deceased, and to be open to whatever did or did not happen. If the participant wished to say something, it could be said mentally or aloud. The facilitator sat in an adjacent room and was available if needed.²

Stage 4. Post Interview. After 45 minutes the facilitator re-entered the booth room and led the participant out to the previous counseling room. The facilitator asked the participant to tell about the experience in the booth and how it affected him or her. At the end of this interview, the art materials were again offered.

Stage 5. Postquestionnaire. Staying in the same room, the participant filled out the postquestionnaire, reporting on the experiences in the booth, and repeating the Likert ratings of bereavement feelings.

Stage 6. Follow-Up. Four weeks after the session a follow-up questionnaire was sent to the participant asking about the impact of the experience, and a repeat of all 20 Likert ratings.

This was not a mechanical process, but required careful facilitation and respect for the person participating. The intention of the carefully sequenced protocol was to create an opportunity for a state of mind that would allow a shift in perception, feelings, thoughts, and behavior, and which would come in response to the participant's own unique needs. It was not possible for us as facilitators to predict what kind of experience the participant would have. While some researchers may focus on the booth and mirror as a technique, it is important to remember that the mirror gazing was only one element among many variables in a process which intended to create a subjective environment that promoted change.

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

Demographics

The series was closed at 100 qualified participants. Only first-time sessions were included in the analysis. Sessions were excluded if the prequestionnaire or postquestionnaire data were missing. Not all participants completed the follow-up questionnaire despite two requests, and the follow-up analyses (only) were based on 69 returns.

The gender distribution was male 26, female, 74. The mean age was 47.4 ($SD = 12.8$), and the age range was 23–81. The mean age of 47 indicates this is largely a mature group that may be expected to have more contact with close deaths than younger individuals. The range of years passed since the death of the sought person was 0.1–88 ($n = 89$), with the mean being 15.8 ($SD = 18.2$). (The 88 year session was for a great-grandfather never known by the participant.)

The religious orientations reported consisted of Christian Catholic 17, Christian Protestant 16, Buddhist 11, Jewish 6, Spiritual 6 (2 added “not religious”), Agnostic/Atheist 4, Unitarian 3, one each of Muslim, Hindu, Unity, Mormon, Episcopalian, Sufism, “other” 11, none or NA 8, and blank 12.

The participants identified predominantly as Euro-American. The ethnicity of participants was Euro-American 81, Latina/o 4, Asian American 3, African American 1, Other/Blank 11.

Reported Contacts with the Deceased

The first research question asked if contacts would be reported. The postquestionnaire asked, “Did you have a contact with the deceased?” Of the 100 participants, 63 answered Yes, 27 answered No, and 10 were blank or “not sure.” This distribution is statistically significant: X^2 , ($df\ 1, N = 100$) = 6.760, $p\ .009$. Asked if there were other persons who appeared, 34 responded Yes, 57 No, and 9 blank. The mean decrease in brief item scores pre to post for persons who reported a contact was 1.19, and for persons who reported no contact was 0.82, indicating more reduction in bereavement effects for persons who felt there was a contact. Because all participants experienced the same “recipe” of the multicomponents of the process, the difference possibly relates to a specific effect of the contact experiences.

Changes in Bereavement Ratings

The changes in pre to post bereavement ratings were analyzed using a Wilcoxon Matched Pairs Signed Ranks test with Analyze-It software (www.analyse-it.com). The Wilcoxon test is an appropriate nonparametric test for paired variables. It calculates the change based on (a) did the participant’s rating of the item go up, down, or remain the same? and (b) how large was the change? The effect size was calculated by dividing the z value by the square root of the number of participant observations (200 for pre to post, 138 for pre to follow-up).

The global change for the 100 participants showed that 92 decreased in bereavement qualities, 1 was the same, and 7 increased, with z score 8.25, $p < .001$, effect size $r = 0.58$. The pre to follow-up change for the five sentence items ($n = 69$) showed 54 decreased in bereavement ratings, 6 increased, and 9 were unchanged. The z value was 6.13, $p < .001$, effect size $r = .52$. The analysis of the pre and follow-up measures in Table 1 shows significant reductions in bereavement for all five sentence items. Means are not used in the Wilcoxon analysis, but are shown in the

TABLE 1
Changes in Means, Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Analysis of Changes, and Effect Size for Five Bereavement Sentences, Pre-questionnaire to Follow-up Questionnaire

Sentence	Mean (SD)		Wilcoxon <i>z</i>	<i>p</i> value two-tailed	Effect size
	Pre	Post			
I have unresolved feelings about this person.	4.23 (2.06)	2.84 (1.65)	5.22	< .001***	0.45
Unresolved issues in regard to this person or his or her death affect my ability to accomplish my daily activities.	2.24 (1.64)	1.59 (1.22)	3.71	< .001***	0.34
Unresolved issues in regard to this person or his or her death affect my general quality of life.	3.00 (1.91)	2.01 (1.44)	4.32	< .001***	0.36
I feel the need to improve my relationship with this person.	3.85 (2.20)	2.26 (1.57)	5.21	< .001***	0.44
I feel good about the status of my relationship with this person. ^a	2.34 (1.57)	3.38 (1.96)	3.00	< .01**	0.25

Note. Means are shown for comparison only; they are not used in the Wilcoxon analysis. For the first four sentences, a decrease in the mean indicates less bereavement distress.

^a This item has positive emotional value. An increase in the mean indicates less distress.

n = 69. ** *p* < .01. *** *p* < .001.

table to illustrate the magnitude of changes. The need to improve the relationship item showed the greatest reduction.

For the 15 brief items, 14 of the items demonstrated statistically significant reductions ($p < .001$) in bereavement after the session. The exception was the item of “Love” which already had high ratings in the initial questionnaire, and was thereby constrained at the upper end (See Table 2). The greatest change was shown for need to communicate, followed by sadness, loss, peacefulness, and anger.

Personality Correlations

The Judging-Perception function on the MBTI was correlated with the global changes in bereavement ($n = 100$) on the post questionnaire, showing a Pearson $r = 0.24$ ($p = .019$). This means that the higher the Perception function, the more a reduction in bereavement was experienced. Correlations with other MBTI scales were non-significant. The TAS correlated with post changes in bereavement ($n = 48$) with $r = .38$ ($p = -.008$). This indicated that the higher the TAS score, the greater the reduction in bereavement.

Time Since Death

The fourth research question considered whether the length of time since the death was a factor in the changes of bereavement. For example, perhaps deaths farther in the past would show more reductions in bereavement effects from the passage of time. Conversely, perhaps participants with more recent deaths would be more motivated to resolve feelings or to contact the deceased. To test

TABLE 2
Changes in Means Rating Shifts for 15 Brief Items, Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Analysis, and Effect Size, Prequestionnaire to Postquestionnaire

Items	Mean (SD)		Post changes in ratings ^a	Wilcoxon z	p value two-tailed	Effect size
	Pre	Post				
Grief	3.61 (2.04)	2.65 (1.77)	55, 36, 9	5.17	< .001***	0.36
Missing the person	4.53 (1.99)	3.51 (2.09)	50, 36, 14	4.69	< .001***	0.33
Anger	2.69 (1.91)	1.51 (1.07)	46, 51, 2	5.80	< .001***	0.41
Worry	2.26 (1.71)	1.56 (1.16)	40, 48, 12	4.37	< .001***	0.31
Guilt	2.88 (1.99)	1.86 (1.37)	46, 48, 6	5.45	< .001***	0.39
Sadness	4.81 (1.71)	3.09 (1.94)	72, 9, 0	7.09	< .001***	0.50
Resentment	2.54 (1.88)	1.38 (1.05)	46, 50, 4	5.28	< .001***	0.37
Loss	4.78 (1.85)	3.29 (2.00)	63, 33, 4	6.63	< .001***	0.46
Peaceful ^b	2.63 (1.90)	4.04 (1.85)	66, 21, 10	5.93	< .001***	0.42
Need to communicate	5.00 (1.56)	3.25 (1.99)	72, 17, 9	6.56	< .001***	0.42
Love ^b	2.04 (1.63)	2.11 (1.60)	22, 64, 13	1.10	.344 ns	0.08
Fear	1.96 (1.52)	1.47 (1.27)	30, 63, 5	3.56	< .001***	0.28
Longing	4.03 (2.12)	3.03 (2.12)	48, 38, 14	4.76	< .001***	0.34
Anxiety	2.30 (1.66)	1.67 (1.44)	40, 38, 12	3.37	< .001***	0.23
Resolved issues ^b	2.47 (1.47)	3.61 (1.70)	54, 27, 11	5.25	< .001***	0.39

Note. Means are shown for comparison; they are not used in the Wilcoxon analysis. A decrease in the mean indicates less bereavement distress.

^aThe first number shows how many participants rated the item lower in the postquestionnaire compared to the prequestionnaire rating; the second number indicates no change; the third number indicates a higher rating. ^bThese three items have positive emotional value. An increase in the mean indicates less distress.

n = 100. *** *p* < .001. *ns* = not significant.

this influence in either direction, a Pearson correlation was calculated for the length of time since the death in relation to the changes in the bereavement means between pre and post questionnaires. The correlation, $r = .02$, was not significant, nor was there a significant correlation with the bereavement changes at the time of the follow-up questionnaire, $r = -.11$.

Another test of this question was to compare the number of apparent contacts with the deceased for the first quartile and fourth quartile of time since death sorted by length of time since death. For each quartile ($n = 22$), there were 14 reported contacts. (Twelve dates of death were missing.) It appears that the time since death is not a factor in these results; they are not due simply to one's feelings changing over time.

Altered Time and Consciousness

The postquestionnaire asked participants to rate the booth experience as an altered state (research question five). Using the Likert scale, the mean rating was 4.47 (SD 1.78, $n = 97$). A second indication of an altered state was changes in the sense of time. The 45 minutes of booth time was perceived as shorter by 60 of the participants, 11 wrote that there was no sense of time and several wrote that they were surprised when the time was up. Two felt that the rate

varied, 11 reported the time as longer, and 11 considered it to be of normal duration.

Multiple Variables

With 20 variables, it might be expected that one or two items would show significance at the .05 level, if chance alone were responsible. However, an inspection of the table shows that 19 of the 20 variables were statistically significant, and at a level far beyond $p = .05$. This is well outside what might be attributed to chance.

Follow-up Measures

The 69 returns for the follow-up questionnaire were analyzed to learn if the reductions in bereavement were sustained. The overall mean of the follow-up questionnaire's 15 items was compared with the mean from the postquestionnaire. The follow-up mean rating was 2.42 (SD 0.90), slightly higher than the postquestionnaire mean of 2.35 (SD 1.01). A Pearson correlation between the post and follow-up rankings showed a correlation of $r = .77$. Because not all of the follow-up questionnaires were returned, the possibility of selective returns should be kept in mind.

SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCES AND PHENOMENOLOGY

The questionnaires provided qualitative data on thoughts and feelings about the deceased person, first hand descriptions of the session in the psychomanteum booth, and the meaning of the experience. Participants were given individual identification numbers, and the transcripts of the questionnaires were typed into the HyperResearch (www.researchware.com) qualitative analysis program.

A phenomenological thematic analysis (Creswell, 2006) was used to identify themes and patterns. The author and two members of the research team developed an initial set of codes (a word or phrase) for information and themes that would be expected to find in the transcripts, such as date of death, messages from the deceased, memories, and visual imagery. Each transcript was read through and the phrases and sentences were tagged with matching code labels. Further codes were identified as the transcripts were read. The team added these to the codes and re-analyzed transcripts for their occurrence. To get consistency, the coders reread and recoded each other's transcripts until there was approximately a 90% agreement for recognizing the same elements in a transcript consistently.

The qualitative data describing the booth experience, written by the participant in the postquestionnaire, depended on the memory of the participant, and was undoubtedly affected by state dependent memory, but

the immediate post interview helped to keep the experience fresh for the participant to document it.³ The oral interviews were recorded but have not been included in this report. However, Merz (2010) has conducted an in-depth qualitative analysis of the post interviews of the twelve individuals who changed the most in the sessions.

Themes that appeared relevant for the research were identified and the software program was used to mark all the appearances of each theme in the words of the participant. There were no responses that were universal, but rather some common themes mixed with unique elements. The following sections describe the frequent or important themes with examples and summaries. Quotations have been occasionally edited for paragraphing, punctuation, and spelling. Parentheses are in the original. Brackets indicate edited additions.

Experiences in the Psychomanteum Booth

To obtain qualitative data, the participants were asked to describe the experience in the booth. A blank space was allotted on the page for writing this, with the invitation to write on the back of the page if more space was desired, which occasionally was the case. The written reports included subjective and possibly objective phenomena. No single universal pattern emerged. There were common elements, but the diversity within these elements was extensive. Further discussion of experiences in the booth will be found in Merz (2010).

Four Experiences

To provide a sense of the sessions in the booth, four experiences will be described in part or whole. The first is a participant [P147] who was seeking to contact her father who had died 53 years previously. Her experience illustrates elements of meaningful imagery, mental conversation with the deceased, feelings of gratitude, image of a night sky as a sign, and a synchronistic ending.

The participant wrote that when she first sat down she felt a sense of peacefulness and openness. Looking at the mirror she saw clouds moving across the surface. Then the clouds took the form of a graceful, majestic bird gliding through the night sky, entering from one side of the sky [mirror] and then the other. She assumed it was an eagle, and felt as though it was quietly and peacefully announcing something.

I found myself initiating a dialogue with my father—a dialogue in which I spontaneously recalled the many gratitudes which I experienced in our relationship. Gratitude for his love, his unequivocal acceptance, his delight at having me as his daughter. I recalled memories, many large and small shared joys together. I thanked him for many things I hadn't realized would remain long in my memory and accompany me throughout my life. There

was a sense of not knowing if he could hear, so I asked if he could hear, to make a sign. The stars appeared in the night sky—sparkling brightly. It felt like a response! [P147]

The “conversation” continued and I could “hear” his words of gratitude in return – though I was also aware I couldn’t remember what his actual voice sounded like any longer. (That was bothersome and puzzling, but it felt like a connection in spite of the technical problem!) The exchange continued, the sky was filled with stars until, suddenly the screen [mirror] went blank and there was a palpable emptiness and a complete void [underlined]. (The energy as well as [underlined] the visual picture suddenly left.) [P147]

Two or three seconds after the “screen” went blank, she heard the facilitator’s voice softly ask if she would like more time. But her father was gone and she felt the exchange was complete. She wrote, “The starkness of the departure was quite remarkable” [P147].

The meaning of the experience, the participant wrote, was that “The relationship remains intact – filled with love and comfort after 43 years. I heard/felt assured of being on the right track in my life, with my Dad’s wish he could have been here longer to meet his grandchildren and great grandson-to-be” [P147]. There were 33 other instances where the participant reported mental conversations with the deceased.

Participant 120 was seeking her brother, who had committed suicide. No dialog or conversation took place, but instead the participant felt she was intentionally shown positive memories to change her feelings of guilt and remorse. This is an example of a sudden feeling of peace or relief, mentioned in spontaneous ADCs (Kwilecki, 2011).

I was a bit worried about trying so hard that I would miss out on the connection with my brother. I tried hard in the beginning and then felt—heard a voice that told me to stay in my heart, to contact him heart to heart. Once I did I could feel tears rolling down my cheeks as memories/ images of the times I was less than compassionate to my brother came rushing in. I experienced a big headache in my forehead (third eye)... I felt the pain and sadness of my brother in those times that I had hurt him. [P120]

Then from a place that I can not explain or pinpoint, came a rush of peace and relaxation. I felt tired and closed my eyes just to see in my mind’s eye a variety of the moments in which I had been caring and compassionate to my brother. I relaxed into those images and absorbed them without even noticing. [P120]

I feel I made contact with my brother through the images he fed me. Of course I was expecting a different kind of contact, but what happened was the perfect, kind, and compassionate way of my brother telling me that he is okay, and that he is aware that I love him very much. He has the clarity of

mind “to remember the good times; until now, I just remembered the pain.” [P120]

Some sessions were coherent experiences that could be described as being messages in themselves, and may or may not have had an explicit sense of the deceased. Participant 76 wrote that he was “trying to understand more about the origins of my family’s anger and rageful attitudes towards children.” He reported that in the booth the illumination level changed back and forth from light to dark several times at the beginning. He did not report a contact, but saw images in the mirror.

I saw faces in the mirror – sometimes entire faces, sometimes just the mouth, or eyes, or one eye. I had a feeling from the faces that the people were full of delight – bursting with joy and pure pleasure – unmitigated from worry or sorrow. The faces would appear one at a time, fill in, linger a short while, then fade. There were about 10 or 20 in total. The faces were unfamiliar – I could see them with clarity – more sharply than if it were a person at that distance. [P76]

He wrote, “I didn’t receive any verbal information, but I realize that I received a proprioceptive message – something about the joy and delight that fills the universe” [P76]. It should be remembered that the mirror was tilted away from the participant so it would not show his or her reflection. A few other participants saw faces in the mirror, but this session was remarkable in number, clarity, and their emotional expressions.⁴

Another session that could also be called an experiential message was reported by participant 90. Notice the spontaneous and dramatic shift in perceptions of the participant.

I was immediately in a space of talking to my father, in my mind.... I went over the things he said to me when I was a child. He would call me “no good,” would say I never could do anything right.... I cried and pleaded with him for explanations for his behavior toward me, rejecting behavior. [P90]

After about 20 minutes of pleading, he became aware of himself looking into the mirror. He wrote “the mirror and I sort of became one.” He seemed to be in deep space and the mirror was showing clouds of stars. Suddenly he began to experience the situation with his father from a deeper, more all around perspective.

I began to see how he viewed our experience as a family.... I entered into his view and expectations of us.... He expected that we would provide us [i.e., the family] with the love and acceptance he was looking for. He saw himself burdened with duties and responsibilities that he had not wanted and blamed my mother and myself for this scenario.... I was expecting him to show his love for me. He was expecting I would love him. Like he could not show me love until he got it first. [P90]

This appeared to be a transformational experience for the participant.

I saw all this inside me while gazing into the mirror. I could see his expectations from his viewpoint. I became him... looking forward to marriage, children, love and happiness and not finding it. Seeing this from his perspective has answered a lot of questions at once for me. Seeing and accepting his view has given me a whole new perspective on my old view of our life relationship [P90].

On the follow-up questionnaire, the participant wrote that since the experience he had “further memories, sense of presence, a reorientation of childhood experiences in the light of my experience in the psychomanteum.” He also wrote that the session “has eased off my blame toward him and helped me accept myself”. He explained, “My abuse was not because there [was] inherently something wrong with me as I was told, but had more to do with my father’s own view of himself, his life [P90].” No one else reported an experience of merging.

Other Experiences

Visual sensory experiences reported included streams and patterns of light, tunnels, grids, visual images, animals, the starry sky, and visual memories. Physical sensations of energy (see Radin, 2001), warmth of the heart, touches, and odors occurred. Positive feeling states were gratitude, love, peacefulness, calm, relief, forgiveness, tears, and reassurance. Negative states included anger (which sometimes shifted), disappointment at a non-contact, and regret. The communication events involved mental conversations, speaking aloud, hearing a voice, “ESP,” memories, questions and answers, and receiving messages, advice, guidance, and humor. See Merz (2010) for examples of other phenomenology experienced in the sessions.

Transpersonal Experiences in the Booth

Many of the exchanges and conversations were concerned with the everyday life of the participant and the deceased. However, there were also experiences and encounters that could be categorized as transpersonal, that is, going beyond the ordinary physical reality and sense of self (Hartelius, Caplan & Rardin, 2007). To begin with, the possibility of contact with someone who has died would be considered by many persons to be beyond the personal and into a spiritual or transpersonal realm. Participants did not usually comment on this; most of them appeared to accept the possibility, and only a few pondered whether they were making this up or not. Transcendent metavalues (Maslow, 1962), such as unity [106] and beauty [P51] were experienced or appeared in messages. Similarly altruistic emotions in the experience such as forgiveness and gratitude displayed transpersonal qualities. Direct experiences of unconditional love [P108] and profound peace, mentioned above, are qualities of mystical experiences, as are

timelessness [P103, P106], and light that was called the “brightest ever seen, but is not of the eye” [P45]. Angels [P45, P58, P117] and spirit guides [P63, P68, P102] appeared in some sessions. Reports of the presence of Jesus were given by two participants [P82, P102].

Sessions Without a Contact with the Deceased. Twenty-seven participants indicated they had not had a contact with the deceased, and 10 left the item blank. These sessions had mixed qualitative results. The reports included disappointment, sadness, and abandonment, as well as acceptance of the situation, resolution of issues, insights, peace, and calmness. These participants as a group reported the same sensory phenomena as the contact participants, such as changes of illumination in the booth, streams and spirals of light in many colors, intense internal body energy, visions of the night sky, touches, and hypnagogic imagery. Some participants reported drop-ins by other deceased beings rather than the person sought.

The non-contact sessions were usually different from the sessions which included an apparent contact. A sense of the deceased, whether by dialog, touch, imagery or signs, seemed to engage with the emotions and needs of the participant, and this usually gave the session coherence, structure, and meaning. Without a sense of the presence, the participants’ emotions were left without a response to their reactions.

Eighteen of the non-contact participants reported speaking to the deceased, mentally or aloud, even though the conversation was one sided. Some participants recalled memories. Here are excerpts from such a session in which the participant played a creative and active role.

I began by thinking of fun experiences we had shared together, specifically a trip we had to New York, a trip to London, and past birthday parties and celebrations. Thinking these and speaking out loud how much I enjoyed these experiences with her brought back a flood of positive memories and made me feel emotionally warm. During this time I was trying my best to stare into the mirror to see if there was “anything visible....” I did not see anything out of the ordinary. [P115]

Even without a sense of contact, participants often reported insights or resolution of feelings from the experience. The vision of faces from participant 76 (see above) is one example. Here is another:

I had a good bit of dialogue with myself about the issues with my father. Can’t change the past, can’t make someone be regretful, are the conclusions I came to. Can’t make someone be something they aren’t. [P87]

Disappointments and discomfort were also experienced. One participant who shed tears wrote that that the experience “seemed to be the next obvious step in my process. It took me to a place of abandonment that I would not have been able to recognize otherwise” [P139].

Long Term Follow-up

The follow-up questionnaire asked “Have you had any subsequent experiences that follow up your psychomanteum session, for example dreams, further memories, visions, synchronicities, sense of presence?” Twenty-five answered in the negative. Ten participants indicated they had relevant dreams. Participants reported 29 other experiences including sense of presence, feeling more at ease with the relationship, further memories, more awareness of grief, reorientation of childhood feelings, thoughts of the deceased, synchronicities, and greater peace and calm. Regarding shifts, one wrote, “I miss my cousin still, but with a lesser degree of sadness” [P123]. Another commented, “I was able to let go of the angry feelings I had towards my father” [P124].

She [Grandmother] shows me the life connections, me, my mother, my father, herself, my daughter. The threads go way back, even some nonhuman beings are on these threads, different landscapes and sensing of selfness. [P130]

The question also stimulated some participants to put together a message from their experience, even if it was not given overtly.

I’m clear that it was meant for me to know that I am surrounded by love and peace when I think of [the deceased]. [P66]

I learned a lot from this experience about my need to be more open in my life.... There was a question whether my grandfather was proud of me in my mind and I realized that only I would be the judge of whether I was proud of myself. [P127]

DISCUSSION

Contact with a Deceased Person

The data show reports of a contact with the deceased from 63 of the participants, with no contact reported for 37 others. This gives a positive answer to the first research question. However, a contact was not experienced by everyone; this is not a universal response. The contacts are at least similar in several aspects to spontaneous ASCs, with conversations, messages, personal guidance, questions and answers, and insights.

Effects on Bereavement

The data for the second research question showed that the experiences reduced the level of bereavement significantly, that the TAS had moderate correlations with reduced bereavement, that time since the death did not influence the changes in bereavement, and that the process created an altered state in the booth. The personality measures indicate statistically that persons with higher

scores on the Tellegen Absorption Scale (Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974) and on the Perception function on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers, 1995) are likely to have more reductions in bereavement. These correlations indicate that perceptual fluidity and openness to new data are helpful in going through the process. The study replicates the research of Hastings, et al. (2002), and gives support to the observations of Moody (1992) and Roll (2003).

The quantitative results of this study show that the bereavement process significantly reduced distressing effects for almost every participant. The qualitative phenomenological analysis of the subjective experiences corresponded to the statistical findings. Participants reported decreases in emotional feelings such as sadness, grief, longing, incomplete communication, regret and remorse, and increases in positive feelings of understanding, appreciation, gratitude, love, and forgiveness. There were common elements and themes, but the content of each experience was not predictable in advance. The sessions in many cases seemed tailored exactly to the uniqueness of each individual.

Altered Consciousness

The participants rated the experience in the psychomanteum booth as an altered consciousness state. Various kinds of altered states are associated with the occurrence of transpersonal experiences, religious ceremonies, transformational change and non-ordinary perceptions (Cardeña & Winkelman, 2011; Tart, 1975, 2008). There is a need for more research here to learn how such states may induce changes and be utilized in accessing unconventional yet functional thoughts, feelings, and behavior.

Considerations

These results should be qualified in that the participants were self-selected and need-oriented to resolve bereavement in their lives. The volunteer nature of the research may have limited participants to individuals who were ready to engage and explore painful feelings associated with bereavement and who had a desire to attempt contact with the deceased. This separates the participants from individuals who would be reluctant to expose their feelings to an outside person, who do not believe in the possibility of after death communication, or who would be fearful of the process. The process was not intended to address persons with traumatic experiences (or posttraumatic stress syndrome) around the deaths. A related treatment addressing traumatic deaths, using Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing (EMDR) has been reported by Botkin (2000). In short, it is not known if this process would be helpful to all who are bereaved.

A control group was not used in this study. However, in a single group with repeated measures design, control groups are often omitted, and the pretest is used for a base line. Statistically a correlation analysis showed no correspondence between the changes in bereavement or contacts and the

length of time after the death. Regarding the possibility of a spontaneous change in a short time, the reliability test-retest of the Likert scores gives some assurance that participant scores do not change significantly in a week's time.

Hypnagogia

Some of the imagery reported can be recognized as hypnagogic (Mavromatis, 1987; Schacter, 1975; Sherwood, 2000). This refers to spontaneous images that occur as a person is moving into the first stage of sleep. These are mostly visual (with occasional auditory and tactile features) and have a wide and impressive spread, from faces, buildings, objects, and animals, to elaborate and fantastic landscapes. These appear to be not related to the viewer, are not interactive, tend to be brief, and may be realistic or cartoonish.

Sherwood (2000) suggested that some of the visual imagery in the psychomanteum could be of this type. Of the 81 imagery reports there were 28 individuals whose imagery seemed to have some hypnagogic qualities. Such images included an old pick-up truck circa 1930–1950s, fried eggs on a plate, a pair of animated ducks (the female one wearing a blue hat and collar) having a conversation, a bathroom sink with two tortoise shell combs, small animals, a landscape with a blue light behind it, a feather, wolf, crescent moon, an ancient scripture, and a goddess type archetype. The participants did not report associations to such imagery and the images did not appear to play any part in the bereavement dynamics.

The Role of Preparation in Imagery

There is a small amount of research on techniques for facilitating imagery in restricted sensory environments. Hood and Morris (1981) gave explicit instructions to enhance imagery for one hour sessions in a sensory isolated floatation tank. One group ($n = 20$) was instructed to imagine religious figures, situations, and settings. The second group ($n = 20$) was instructed to imagine cartoon imagery. The differences of the target imagery between the two groups were statistically significant. The results supported the hypothesis that the set of the instructions would produce more of the intended imagery for each group.

Terhune and Smith (2006) have shown that different preparation suggestions can act as demand characteristics and influence imagery in a psychomanteum booth. One group ($n = 20$) was told that the booth facilitated anomalous effects such as unusual body sensations, visions, sounds, separation from the body, and presence of another. The second group ($n = 20$) was told that the study was to see what types of experiences they might have, that they should not try to elicit any experiences, and that it was okay not to have unusual events. Each participant spent 45 minutes in the dimly lit booth, while a white noise sound track played. The experimental group reported significantly more visual images ($p = .033$) than the control group and approached significance

with vocal effects ($p = .51$). The experimental group reported visual images (reported by 90%), odors, temperature changes, touch, sudden emotions, unusual body sensations, mystical beings (10%), and communication with the dead (10%). They concluded that it is possible to evoke imagery through preparation of the participants, and that an extended preparation period is not necessary.

The above studies and this present one show that inner imagery can be facilitated with various techniques, usually involving an altered state, and sometimes suggestive of hypnagogia. Except for this present research, there seem to be no studies in which the phenomenology involved goal-directed, interactive imagery and meaningful events. In these studies it is not possible to draw any theoretical conclusions about the nature or origin of the imagery or its functional content. There is room for more research into these questions.

A case can be made that change appears to take time to prepare outside of consciousness as well as cognitively, and this may have been part of the facilitation. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James (1936, Ch. 9 & 10, especially pp. 202–06) discussed the need for subconscious preparation in any radical change of the self, and it is possible that both conscious and unconscious feelings and thoughts went through a process of readiness for a change.

The Psychomanteum Booth

Moody (1992; Moody with Perry, 1993) developed his psychomanteum room based on ritual oracles from Western classical times. However, it is similar to sensory deprivation studies in psychology which have been given the name Restricted Environmental Stimulation Technique or REST (Suedfeld, 1980; Suedfeld & Borrie, 1978). In addition to floatation tanks of the 1950s and the use of complicated padding and ear plugs, the REST studies found that dark, sound proof rooms and supportive beds were sufficient for reduced sensory states. Research has shown the REST conditions can relieve anxiety, stress, and pain, assist smoking cessation, enhance creativity, and provide therapeutic gains (Suedfeld, 1980). The protocols usually have preparation or facilitation to direct the participant toward the desired goal, similar to this study.

Mirror gazing is an addition to these arrangements that comes from cultural traditions. Mirrors appear as openings to another reality in fairy tales, children's stories, various religious traditions, and folklore, such as the practice of covering mirrors in a home where someone has died. Mirrors are found in shamanic practices, where reflective surfaces (including mirrors, water, and polished surfaces) are used for contacting spirits, divination, and entering shamanic states of consciousness (Lang, 1910; MacDonald, Cove, Laughlin & McManus, 1989; Tart, 2008).

The preparation and the conditions of the booth appeared to facilitate apparent dialogues with the deceased and qualities such as alterations of time,

facilitation of memories of the deceased, a sense of calm or peacefulness, spontaneous imagery (possibly hypnagogia), and shifts in kinesthetic feelings. There is no claim here for the mirror or the booth having magical properties, but rather the suggestion that the psychological preparation and the altered state from the reduced sensory environment enable an experience that promotes change, whether from within or outside the self.

There is some similarity in this experience to the ancient Greek practices, such as the ritual procedures, the use of caves and special chambers, and the likely altered state that ensued. Participants rarely mentioned the booth or an altered state, but one compared it to a floatation tank. At least two felt that they had merged into the mirror [P90, P154]. A few participants turned the light completely off or closed their eyes, which indicates that mirror gazing is not a *sine qua non* of the process, though some referred to the mirror as a source of imagery. Further research might explore sitting in an ordinary dimly lit, quiet, peaceful room, with and without a mirror, rather than the booth arrangement.

Paths to the Shifts in Bereavement

It is possible to infer from the qualitative data several of the ways that bereavement was lessened. Some of these depended on a contact with the deceased, but others did not. In some cases the shift seemed to occur through the release of a key condition, e.g., the need to say goodbye. In others it was a question that was answered. Sometimes the change was a widened perspective, or the restructuring of the participants' thoughts. The participants did not appear to deny that the person had died and was no longer with them. They knew that. Rather, it was a feeling of incompleteness that precluded emotional closure. Taking 45 minutes to tie up loose feelings, to receive reassurance, to express love and feel forgiveness, or seek explanations: these facilitated a shift. Merz's (2010) detailed analysis of the 12 participants with the most change shows how each had an individual way of making meaning from the experience.

It did not appear that participants became desirous for continued guidance from the deceased. A few participants asked for more sessions, the data from which were not included in this study. The impression of the facilitators was that multiple sessions led to further resolution with unfinished issues or were seeking additional deceased individuals.

In terms of models of healing bereavement, these shifts can be explained either in terms of Attachment Theory or Continuing Bonds theory. With the attachment model (Bowlby, 1982), the task of healing is for the surviving person to recognize that the deceased is no longer here, and to release the attachments and connections with that person, rather than holding them with distress. What this bereavement process does is to enable the surviving family member or friend to resolve or release unresolved issues, rather than leaving

them fixated. If there is survival after death, perhaps the exchange also releases attachments of the deceased.

From the view of a continuing bonds perspective (Klass, 1999; Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1966) the bereavement process allows the participant to maintain a connection, but in a different form, one that includes feeling a link with the deceased, while acknowledging that it is different from when they were alive. The continued connection appears to be healing. From this perspective, it could be said that when a person dies, the relationship does not necessarily end. It continues, but in a different form.

Are the Contacts Constructions of the Unconscious or Genuine?

Given the effects of preparation and priming on our participants, and the above research studies, it might be suggested that the imagery experienced by the participant is a construction created by some part of the self, similar to techniques used in psychotherapy such as active imagination and guided visualization. The phenomenology could be related to hypnagogia (Mavromatis, 1987; Sherwood, 2000; Schacter, 1975). The emotional preparation and openness could influence some part of the mind to construct a healing scenario which interacts with the participant just like a contact with the deceased. This gets some support from the imagery techniques mentioned above, but there is no model of the mind that spells out how this might be actually done, and such phenomena tend to get attributed to a subpersonality or the unconscious, which in themselves need explanation.

Another explanation is that at least some of the experiences are genuine contacts with the deceased. This research was not designed to investigate that question. However, if there is some form of consciousness beyond death, the emotional openings facilitated by the procedure, the lowering of defenses, and the altered state of the booth may make the person sensitive to such communication. The reports of our participants are similar to spontaneous visionary contacts and apparent after death communication from spouses, family members, and friends. This present research could go further to study this possibility.

There is now a body of serious, open minded research along with popular treatments on apparent contacts from a deceased person (Arcangel, 2005; Bennett & Bennett, 2000; Braude, 2003; Guggenheim & Guggenheim 1995; Klugman, 2006; Osis & Haraldsson, 1977; Rees, 1971), A general public belief in life after death is found in Europe and in the U.S., where it hovers around 70% (Haraldsson, 1988; Pew Forum, 2011). At this point both models (construction and spirits) offer explanations, but both resort to unknowns as a part of the theory. Each explanation has its virtues, and also its limitations. The best current discussion of this issue will be found in Braude (2003).

So far as I know, none of the participants asked the facilitators if the contacts were really the spirits of the deceased, and on this question, the facilitators were trained to say that this had to be decided by the participant. Indeed, the facilitators themselves held various viewpoints on the nature of the contacts, from active imagination, to psychological constructions, and real visitations. The results show that shifts in bereavement did not necessarily require the presence of the deceased. In the research reported here, the possibilities were kept open.

NOTES

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² Our psychomanteum booth was a reduced sensory environment similar to sensory deprivation chambers and based on an arrangement by Moody (1992). It was a free standing curtained booth, 8' long, 7' high, and 5' wide. It was placed inside a windowless, sound-insulated room which had an oriental rug on the floor and aesthetic wall decorations. A recliner chair was about four feet from the mirror. Although participants were sometimes nervous when going into the booth, they told of adjusting and often reported feelings of calm and peacefulness. There were no reports of claustrophobia.

³ State dependent memory refers to recall being linked to a particular condition or state of consciousness, and not accessible when the state is significantly changed (Tart, 1975, 2008). The booth was a restricted sensory environment that produced an altered state for most of the participants, as indicated by their ratings, reports of time alteration, and phenomenology. Several participants, when they stepped out of the booth, or arrived back at the interview room spontaneously commented, "Nothing happened." Two even wrote this in their report [P45, P98]. This may mean that nothing of apparent importance or contact happened; however, it seemed in most cases that the person in leaving the altered state booth also forgot many phenomena that occurred. The facilitators learned to bridge this state dependent situation by saying, "So, I let down the curtain and left the room. What did you do then?" This usually took participants back to the memory of sitting down, the dark room, and dealing with the adjustment to the booth. They would begin to remember their thoughts, feelings, and behavior, and recalled more as they relived the experience.

⁴ Elmer Green (personal communication, 2007) told me that one of the research team in his anomalous electrostatic phenomena research (Green, Parks, Guyer, Fahrion, & Coyne, 1991) saw hundreds of different faces (some with different costumes) appearing in a large polished copper sheet used like a mirror, which was vertical to the person's face. Experimental research by Slakey (2007) found that Green's mirror arrangement facilitated vivid imagery of faces radically different from the viewer. Another reference to faces in a mirror is described by Luce (1975) as an exercise in a Buddhist training program for Westerners.

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