

The nose and altered states of consciousness: Tascodrugites and Ezekiel

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Abstract

The Church Father Epiphanius' description of the Tascodrugite practice of placing the forefinger on the nostril during prayer can be plausibly interpreted as a strategy for inducing an altered state of consciousness (ASC). Anthropological and neurophysiological research on how this human gesture achieves such an effect which is a pan-human potential suggests a similar plausible interpretation for Ezekiel 8:17 and the experience of Jesus in the Garden on the night of his arrest (Luke 22:43-44).

1. INTRODUCTION

Between 374 and 376, Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis in Cyprus wrote his major work, the *Panarion*, or “medicine chest” of antidotes to the poisons of approximately eighty “sects.” (He uses “sect” very differently from its modern meaning. For Epiphanius it rather broadly describes formally organized groups, schools of philosophy, tendencies of thought, or any sort of classification of human beings on the basis of their ideology. For recent discussion of sect, see Elliott 2001; Craffert 2001). Here is Epiphanius’ description of one such group, the Tascodrugites:

But lest we omit anything having to do with the names of each of the sects considered, we shall speak as well about the name “Tascodrugites.” The name

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is found either in this sect or in the one after it called Quintillian, for the name comes from these people. They are called Tascodrugites for this reason: *taskos* in their language means “peg,” and *droungos* means “nostril” or “snout,” so that from their putting their forefinger on their nostril while praying in order to display their downcast spirit and affected rectitude, they have been called by some people Tascodrugites, that is “peg snouts.” But they say that in this sect or in its sister sect, called Quintillian, Priscillian, or Pepuzian, a dreadful, lawless deed is done. In one of their feasts they pierce a very young boy in every part of his body with brass needles and take his blood to use at sacrifice.

(Epiphanius, *Panarion* 48.14)

In a recent study, Trevett (1995:259) calls the finger-to-the-nose gesture a “seemingly bizarre ritual practice.” She notes a similarity to Ezekiel (8:17) where worshipers are said to “hold the branch to their nose” and suggests that the Tascodrugite practice also had a basis in the language of the Bible and other later Jewish/Christian sources. The suggestion is quite likely correct. However the meaning that she (and Epiphanius) attribute to the gesture is probably wrong. Scholars including Trevett (1996:20) admit that Epiphanius is not always a reliable source. The gesture is more plausibly interpreted as a method of inducing an altered state of consciousness (=ASC; on ASCs in general see Pilch 1993, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2001).

In order to gain access to the significance of the nostril blocking behavior reported from antiquity, it might be useful to consider what our scientific culture has to say about blocking the nostrils. After all, if we have anything in common with persons of antiquity, it is the human biological frame, human physiology. A proper starting point for this investigation, as will become clear, is the perspective provided by the study of biological circadian and ultradian rhythms.

2. CIRCADIAN AND ULTRADIAN RHYTHMS

Anyone who has traveled quickly across time zones and experienced jet lag has become aware of the circadian rhythm even if he or she did not know this phrase. The human body experiences regularly recurrent quantitative changes in its variable physiological processes, many of which take place within a twenty-three hour period or cycle (see

Zerubavel), hence the name: circadian, around one day. Everyday alterations of mood, work efficiency, and consciousness are some manifestations of the circadian cycle. The average person usually does not recognize the many subtle changes that are constantly taking place during a normal day, but whether one is aware or not, the changes really take place

Milton H Erickson (1980), a hypnotherapist, discovered ultradian rhythms when he observed that some of his clients did not reach a state of readiness or openness to suggestibility during the customary “fifty minute hour” session reserved for therapy (Rossi 1986:98-99). Through experiment, he found that by extending the time to a period between ninety and one hundred twenty minutes, most if not all his clients attained a quieting down moment, a period of quiet receptivity. At this stage, the client was open to hypnotherapy.

A physiological shift toward parasympathetic dominance manifested by gastrointestinal activity; genito-urinary activation; a slowing of the pulse; peripheral blood flow resulting in a blush or a sudden feeling of warmth; psychosomatic responses; respiration changes like yawns or sighs, perspiring, and the like, all trigger a shift from outer to inner attention. Right hemispheric brain activity now dominates, and consciousness shifts. This shift occurs very subtly yet frequently during the day. Familiar examples are a student dozing in class, a guest staring into the coffee or tea cup, or a traveler arriving somewhere without remembering how.

Erickson called these types of altered states of consciousness “common everyday trance.” They are individualized for each person. Physiological dimensions of the experience vary, but Erickson presented an extensive list of items he observed. Westerners unaccustomed to such experiences tend to dismiss them as unusually vivid thoughts or the flash of an image that disappears as suddenly as it appears. Some people have after images from such experiences, for example, a little fog, a white cloud-like form, or something that hovers briefly in space and then disappears. The questions children ask after waking from a nap (e g “are ghosts real?”) are frequently prompted by these after images.

In brief, the common everyday trance is a natural period of introversion, or a period of nondemanding social relatedness. For some people, these quiet times generate

a transpersonal sense of wisdom that provides a new direction in life or an answer to a pressing personal question or problem. For others, such “distractions” from linear tasks become creative periods during which deeper insight or innovative ideas emerge.

3. THE NASAL CYCLE

While the ultradian cycle of the autonomic nervous system customarily triggers common everyday trance, scientists have thoroughly investigated and documented ancient rituals by which individuals can manipulate the nasal cycle as a technique for altering consciousness. The nasal cycle was observed and named by the German rhinologist, R Kayser (1895). The nasal mucosa of the right and left chambers periodically alternate in their size and shape which affects the flow of breath in and out. Erectile tissue under the mucous membrane swells and blocks one nostril so that the other is free to breathe. The medulla (which controls respiration) and/or the hypothalamus regulate the nasal cycle. Further research discovered that the duration of the nasal cycle is around the routine ultradian mean of ninety to one hundred twenty minutes, though the range is very wide, extending from as little as a half hour to a maximum of eight hours.

The ability to bring the nasal cycle under voluntary control allows a person to alter states of consciousness or change aspects of it, to manipulate autonomic functioning, and to change cerebral-hemisphere dominance. This appears to be essentially what Yogis do. Moreover, research has also discovered that shifting one’s body position in the sitting or lying position can affect nasal dominance. In general, when lying on one’s side, the nostril on the down side becomes congested and shifts nasal openness and dominance to the other nostril.

Electroencephalographic (EEG) testing indicates that in normal waking time, there is a natural alteration in cerebral dominance. Consider that coffee, lunch, and other breaks during the workday of Western culture occur at approximately ninety minute intervals. Triggered by the parasympathetic nervous system, the left-brain hemisphere which has dominated from the beginning of the work day yields to the right-brain hemisphere. Linear thinking gives way to holistic thinking and the possibility of trance. Research also revealed that there is a “direct relationship of cerebral hemispheric activity (EEG) and the ultradian rhythm of the nasal cycle. Relatively greater integrated EEG

values in one hemisphere is positively correlated with a predominant airflow in the contralateral nostril” (Werntz *et al* 1982:226).

Additional research indicated that a person could change nasal dominance by forcing uninostril breathing through the nondominant or closed nostril. This in turn shifted cerebral hemispheric dominance to the contralateral sphere. It became clear that a person could influence the all pervasive autonomic system that regulates practically every major function in the human body. Since altered state of consciousness experiences (ASC’s) originate in the right brain hemisphere, a person could trigger such experiences by intentionally blocking the right nostril. The left nostril feeds air to the right brain and alters consciousness. Again, this is what Yogis and others have done for centuries.

4. ANTHROPOLOGICAL INSIGHT ABOUT THE NOSE AND TRANCE

David Lewis-Williams (1998), of the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa, conducted extensive studies of rock paintings in that country and in France with a colleague, Jean Clottes. They noted that the paintings were not just the result of idle doodling by primitives but rather reflected the content of the visions that people experienced when they entered these caves for that explicit purpose. In fact, many of the figures depicted on these paintings are in postures which anthropologists recognize as strategies for attuning the body to enter trance, to experience an altered state of consciousness, and to pass over into alternate reality (Goodman). Different postures produce different trance experiences. The principal kinds or purposes of trance experiences are: taking sky journeys, seeking the answer to a life problem (divination), working a change in one’s life or the environment (metamorphosis), and restoring meaning to life (healing).

In his research, Thomas Dowson (1992:21, 73), also of the University of Witwatersrand, observed that the hand raised to nose or face is a frequently depicted posture in the rock paintings of South Africa. “Shamans were said to ‘sniff’ out sickness through their noses, and the word ‘nose’ itself was sometimes used metaphorically to refer to a shaman’s power to cure. The posture, then, points to the curing abilities of the shaman” (Dowson 1992:21). In line with the insights we have gathered thus far in this

article about manipulating the nasal cycle in order to alter consciousness, it would seem that the finger to the nose posture in these paintings was also a strategy for inducing trance. All shamans see healing as their major purpose in life, and they frequently heal by going into trance.

5. NOSE-PEGGERS

Trevett (1995:260) believes that those who were nicknamed by some as “nose-peggers” or “nose gaggers” were indeed real, “though the reduction of their practices of peculiar rituals involving nostrils was surely a travesty of the truth.” Moreover, she believes this practice is firmly rooted in monotheism and should not at all be associated with paganism of any stripe, whether Phrygian or any other variation. She takes at face value the association of pricking a youngster’s body to draw blood with the finger to the nose gesture and proposes that they are very likely rooted in Revelation 20. This is plausible, but the South African researchers of rock art observe that figures (presumably shamans) are often depicted in rock paintings with blood streaming from the nose. “Nasal blood is one of the chief features by which to identify trancing shamans” in the rock paintings, just as the finger to the nose posture is an indication of trance (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989:40, 49). It may well be that Epiphanius’ report or his informants misunderstood and/or misinterpreted authentic signs of trance (finger to the nose and nose bleed) and associated these with a presumed pricking of youngsters to draw blood.

According to Trevett, “nose-peggers” were inspired by Revelation 20:4 to tattoo themselves with a mark on the hand as a sign of their election, just as those destined for destruction in Revelation bore the mark or tattoo of the beast. This, she says, would be quite in line with the apocalyptic sentiments of 4 Ezra and its Christian interpolations, the Apocalypse of Peter, and other such traditions popular among believers in the post-apostolic centuries.

Since even Trevett admits that Epiphanius is not always reliable, perhaps it is not unreasonable to shift the focus from pricking youngsters to draw blood back to the gesture she calls bizarre, peculiar, unusual: placing the finger on the nostril. Her suggestion about linking this gesture to Revelation is very plausible, but the link should be to the entire book and not Revelation 20 in particular. The book of Revelation is a

report by the astral prophet, John, of visions and sky journeys he experienced while in trance. The Greek phrase that occurs four times in Revelation and is usually translated “in spirit” (without the definite article: 1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10) should actually be translated “in trance” or “in ecstasy” (Malina & Pilch 2000; Pilch 1993). With his feet planted firmly on the ground, John traveled to high places in order to get God’s view of the cosmos (Rv 5:1, to the throne of God; 21:1, a constellation; 21:10, to a high mountain).

If the “nose-peggers” paid special attention to the book of Revelation and other such materials as Trevett claims, it is plausible to conclude that they were impressed with John’s visions and sky-journeys and desired to experience them, too. It is equally plausible, given the fact that ninety percent of the population on the planet experience altered states of consciousness spontaneously (Pilch 1993) often without any deliberate inducement, that the “nose-peggers” discovered or knew from other sources how to induce trance by stimulating and manipulating the nasal cycle as described above. Epiphanius’ interpretation of this finger to the nose gesture as signaling piety or sorrow may well be mistaken, particularly if he never learned this interpretation from anyone who personally engaged in the practice. It is curious that scholars who admit Epiphanius is often unreliable still seek to interpret this particular passage literally, as it stands. Thus, to use Trevett’s phrase once again, the travesty of the truth might refer less to the fingers to the nose gesture than to the pricking of youngsters to obtain their blood.

6. EZEKIEL

In the light of these reflections, Trevett’s association of the finger-to-the- nose gesture with Ezekiel 8:17 may have merit. Exegetes are quite familiar with this enigmatic passage. An angry God observes: “Have you seen this, O son of man? Is it too slight a thing for the house of Judah to commit the abominations which they commit here, that they should fill the land with violence, and provoke me further to anger? Lo, they put the branch to their nose.”

“Their nose” translates the Massoretic text which many exegetes consider to be an emendation of the consonantal text “my [i e God’s] nose.” It is said that the scribes made this change because they did not want to attribute a nose to God (though other passages

do, e g, Dt 33:10b), or because the phrase “my nose” suggested the men were doing something vile or obscene to God (e g, giving a phallic gesture, interpreting branch as the male organ). To the contrary, Carmel McCarthy (1981:91-97) argues that “their nose” is very likely original because the ancient versions presuppose it.

Following McCarthy’s (1981:91-97) interpretation, it is possible to discard the anachronistic psychoanalytical interpretations of Ezekiel (e g, that of Halpern) in favor of a more plausible cultural understanding (see Pilch 1997). A chiastically structured *inclusio* identifies Ezekiel 8–11 as a unit (A – 8:1a with elders; B – 8:1b God’s hand falls on Ezekiel; C – 8:2-3 ASC begins; C¹ – 11:22-23 ASC ends; B¹ 11:24 – spirit leaves Ezekiel; A¹ 11:25 – he returns to the elders; Boadt *NJBC* 20:30). Ezekiel 8:1-6 sets the scene by describing Ezekiel’s ASC and introduces the content of the vision which took place about 17 September 592 BC, more than a year after Ezekiel’s call to be a prophet. Ezekiel will see “still greater abominations” which he describes in 8:7-18.

The prophet now reports three ritual scenes that appear to describe varieties of non-Israelite cult (Vawter-Hoppe 1991:66-69). Ezekiel considers them travesties of worship. The first (8:10-12) appears to describe something of Egyptian provenance. “All kinds of creepy things and loathsome beasts” (v 10) are unclean animals repulsive to the priest Ezekiel and seem to reflect the theriomorphic deities in the Egyptian pantheon. This would be an unclean ritual, a profanation of the otherness of God.

The second (8:14-15) derives from Mesopotamian tradition: “women weeping for Tammuz” (v 14). Tammuz (Dumuzi/Adonis) was originally a Sumerian deity absorbed into the popular beliefs of Syria and Canaan through Mesopotamia. Vawter-Hoppe (1991:68) suggest that this ritual involved “a manipulative rite of sympathetic magic.” The death of the vegetation god in the heat of summer could be reversed in a resurrection when winter rains bestowed new life on the parched soil. But in the Israelite tradition, it is not human beings but rather God who controls nature. This observation suggests a new understanding of the next scene. In the third scene (8:16-18), Ezekiel sees twenty-five lay-men (not priests), hence all three scenes probably present failures of the house of Israel itself: men and women, princes and elders. The men have their backs to the Temple (oriented West to East) and face the rising sun to worship it. This ritual very likely derived from Canaan. Though the moon-deity dominated in Semitic mythology,

places like Beth-shemesh (house or shrine of the sun) suggest that the worship of the “greater light” (Gn 1:16) was also present. Discoveries at Ebla (Tel Mardikh) reveal that the sun god was prominent in Syria/Palestine at least a millenium or more before Israelites were present in the land.

It is in this setting that the laymen put their “finger (branch) to *their* nose” (following McCarthy 1981:91-97) while facing the sun. The three “greater abominations” that displease God are rituals that seek to obtain from other “presumed” powers what God alone – in the Israelite tradition – could provide. In this third scene, men in the Temple – where an Israelite was confident of seeing/experiencing the Lord especially in ecstatic trance – turn to the sun-god and seek to produce and manipulate an ecstatic trance experience in which to communicate with that deity. ASC’s in which God communicates with believers are God’s to bestow or withhold (see 1 Sm 3:1-21 where neither Eli nor others had experienced God for a long time, but the youngster Samuel experienced God in an ASC in a supine position – perhaps altering the nasal cycle – as he prepared to fall asleep). Believers ought not think that they can manipulate the God of Israel as their neighbors believed they could manipulate their deities.

7. LUKE’S JESUS IN THE GARDEN

In his description of Jesus’ prayer in the Garden, Luke reports two verses which are not in any of the other gospels: “An angel from heaven appeared to him, strengthening him. And entering the struggle, he continued to pray even more eagerly. His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground” (Lk 22:43-44). The manuscript evidence is split fairly evenly, though many if not the majority of modern critics prefer to exclude the verses as inauthentic. We follow Johnson and those who choose to include them on linguistic or similar grounds. We also suggest one correction to Luke’s report which has Jesus on his knees. Luke’s source in this scene is Mark who reports that “Jesus fell on the ground” (Mk 14:35; also Mt 26:39 even more explicitly: “he fell on his face and prayed” – again a supine position with the possibility of blocking the left nostril). In such a scenario, whether this was a factual event or whether the evangelists created it, Mark and Matthew present Jesus in a posture that could stimulate the nasal cycle. If Jesus were prostrate, laying with the right side of his face on the ground, he would be initiating

uninostral breathing in the left nostril. This breathing would stimulate the right brain hemisphere, the locus of origin for ASC experiences. Then Luke's tradition about the angel appearing to comfort him is a plausible description of an ecstatic trance experience. The sweat like drops of blood could be Luke's reinterpretation of a nose-bleed that sometimes accompanies intense trance. If an interpreter prefers that these verses are Luke's (or someone else's) creation, the fact remains that the event is a plausible description of a trance experience and would be credible to the Gospel's original readers. Luke was quite familiar with trance experiences since he reports more than twenty in Acts of the Apostles in addition to those in his Gospel (see Pilch 2004 forthcoming).

8. CONCLUSION

What we have attempted to accomplish in this article is to design a feasible and appropriate reading scenario for giving the reports of Epiphanius, Ezekiel, and Luke's Jesus the most plausible, Mediterranean cultural interpretation available. Information from anthropological psychological research about altered states of consciousness and the physiological underpinning of such experience not only helps to explain their reports of the ancient authors but also enhances the contemporary reader's appreciation for the pan-human potential for such experiences. In Figure 1 below, the first four elements (anatomical; physiological; psychophysiological; and psychobehavioral) are common to all human beings, as we mentioned at the beginning of this article. The fifth element, the socio-cultural conditioning factors, varies from culture to culture, as Clottes & Lewis-Williams (1998), and Dowson (1992) have noted. Despite Western culture's skepticism about and resistance to experiencing ASCs (see Pilch 1993), the culture does possess ASC conditioning factors, which in other cultures such as that of the Ancient Middle East are much more numerous. Those interested in drawing "pastoral applications" from the Bible would improve the plausibility and value of their suggestions by drawing similarly upon such social scientific information absolutely essential to making such cross-cultural transitions.

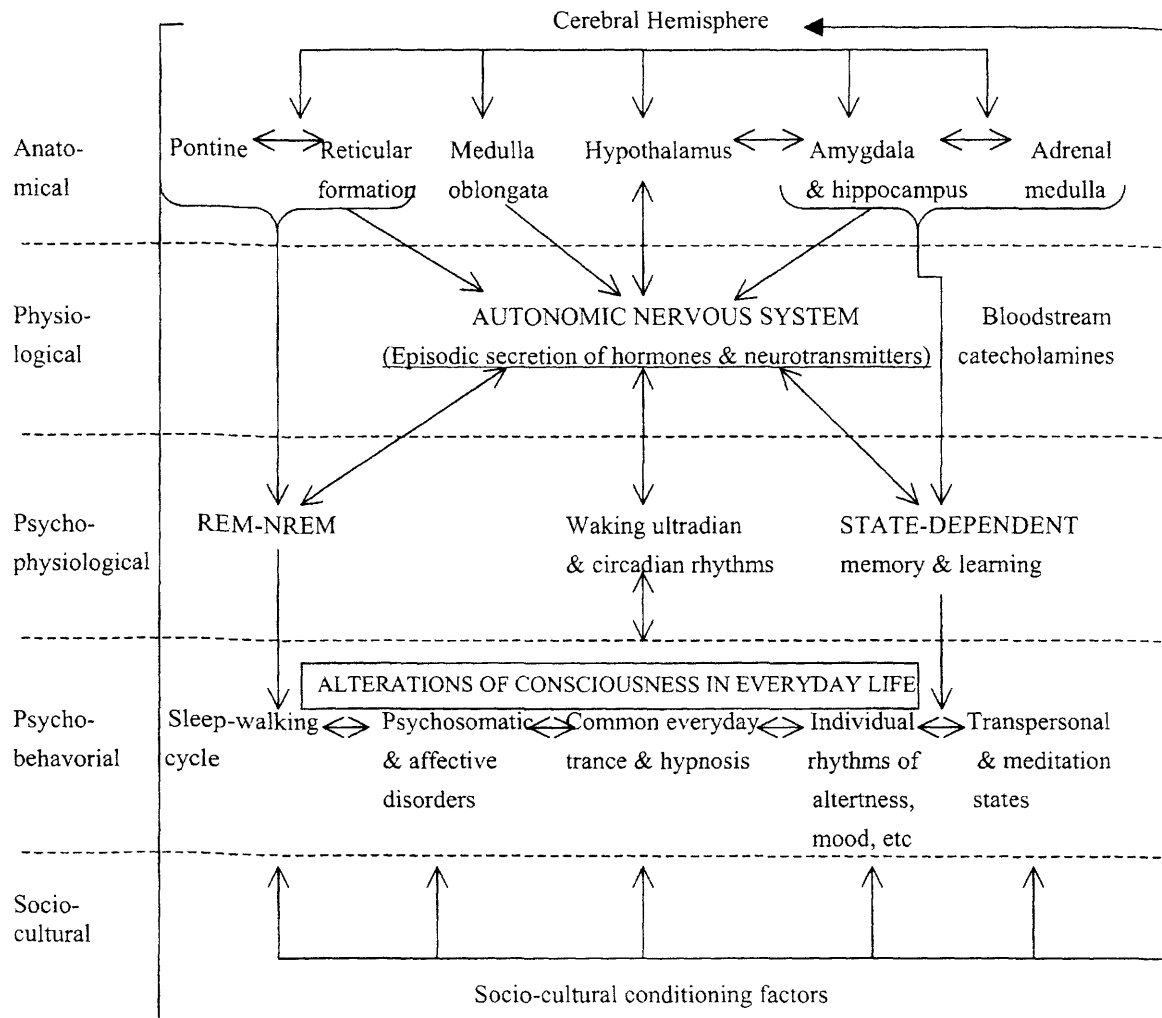


Figure 1. Five basic levels associated with altered states of consciousness in everyday life: anatomical, physiological, psychological, psychological-behavioral, and social-cultural – together with a few of their interrelationships (Rossi 1986:110).

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