

**THE TRANCE CONTINUUM: MEDITATION, BRAINWAVE ENTRAINMENT,
GUIDED IMAGERY, AND HYPNOSIS**

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Great debates repeatedly seem to arise about the nature and properties of hypnosis, especially when compared with other practices to attain altered states of consciousness. For example, repeatedly hypnotists are asked to explain the difference between their practice and that of meditation or guided imagery training. This article proposes a simple way of describing the trance continuum, and attempts to outline some of the defining points of reference on this band of consciousness.

TRANCE is state of focused awareness. Milton Erickson, M.D., the foremost clinical hypnotist of the 20th century, was often fond of quoting examples of what he called “everyday trance.” These were examples of intense absorption, in which other stimuli were only vaguely admitted into the periphery of consciousness, because the person was so intent on the object of their attention. One frequent example occurs when a husband is intently watching a sports event on TV and his wife requests that he take out the garbage. He agrees that he will during the next commercial break. A half hour later, she stands indignantly in front of the TV and demands “Well, when are you going to do it?” He says “Do what?” She says “What you said you would do!” He is mystified, by now having deleted a conversation on the periphery of consciousness, and confused about why his wife is upset, his denial fuelling her disgust.

Another frequent example occurs when we drive our car on a long road journey with a friend and are engaged in an interesting conversation with him. “Where are we? Have we passed such-and-such a town yet?” he asks.

” “I don’t know!” you reply.

“But you’ve been driving all along!” he protests.

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“Yes, but I’ve been totally into our conversation” you reply in bewilderment. You both wait for the next intersection and signage to get your geographic bearings. There are many other examples, too numerous and common to mention, when our main center of attention is so compelling that we forget where we are or what we were supposed to do. This is trance, and it happens frequently in our lives. That is, lapses in concentration are not merely signs of poor memory, but also the result of intense interest and absorption in the point of current focus of attention, or the occurrence of an altered state of lateral thinking, another description of trance.

In addition to trance states induced by intense focus in here-and-now activities, there are altered states of consciousness deliberately induced by the practice of rituals.

MEDITATION is a state of trance usually induced by repetitive understimulation with the dismissal of extraneous thought or interruption. Perhaps the best-known examples of meditation occur **in organized prayer**. In all societies in which there is some form of written history, and even in cultures where the traditions are passed on orally, there is at least one prayer that has these characteristics:

- The adherent is directed to repeat a series of phrases or chants many times repetitively over a series of 20 or more minutes.
- Intrusive thoughts that might interfere with the rhythms of the prayer are not to be resisted or fought, or rationally considered, merely to be dismissed out of consciousness, “Let those ideas come in one ear and go out the other.”
- Thus the brain is discouraged from new data processing, or rapid-wave beta-form activity (14-30Hz), and drifts naturally into the default option, alpha (8-13Hz), the realm of relaxed imagery, and perhaps further into the more mystical and creative theta (3-7Hz) states of consciousness.
- The methods of meditation can include dancing, singing, drumming, chanting, word or sound mantras, visual mandalas of endless interfolding complexity, pre-arranged forms of the martial arts, or any other predictable and redundant stimulation.

BRAINWAVE ENTRAINMENT or BRAINWAVE BIOFEEDBACK TRAINING is the use of Neurotechnology devices to power-assist the process of attaining desired mind states.

Light and Sound Devices accomplish this feat by repetitive pulsating light stimulation and sound tones that simulate powerful meditation mantras to induce alpha and theta mind states.

Brainwave biofeedback accomplishes a similar effect by assisting trainees to identify and prolong or intensify altered states of consciousness using signal tones or other feedback methods when a trainee has drifted into a desired mind state. Often the goal of such training is enhanced consciousness development and access to relaxation and creativity.

GUIDED IMAGERY or imagery training is a structured form of meditation focused on a script describing scenes involving primarily sensory experiences and resulting internal subjective states and attributions. While there is usually less repetition than other forms of meditation, the point of focus moves through a captivating narrative engaging the listener in a fantasy reverie that again encourages states of alpha and perhaps theta as the listener is transported into an alternate reality that has almost dreamlike characteristics, including attributions that are designed to impact the listener in alpha and theta states, favorable to imprinting images and attributions in neural circuitry.

Images can become templates guiding our behavior, and attributions can lead to identity statements that shape future experiences and how they are integrated into self-esteem.

HYPNOSIS is a form of trance induction involving mostly verbal means to assist absorption of attention, dissociation, and thus access to unconscious resources to reframe life experiences in an adaptive manner. Perhaps one of the main distinctions between hypnosis and other parts of the trance continuum is the combined intentionality of the hypnotist and subject to do something of immediate focused benefit to help the subject to make progress toward a mutually defined objective. Therefore, it can be considered to be an intervention using trance to attain a goal defined by the client or subject of the hypnosis experience. One key element in most hypnotic inductions is the invocation of dissociation or separation from our usual ways of experiencing a situation. Separating a problem from the context in which it is usually embedded can allow the hypnotic subject to reframe that experience with new resources to bear upon it effectively. While hypnosis can be used as a process-learning experience, done for its own sake, clinical hypnosis is usually used in focused problem-solving applications.

Summary. The phenomenon called trance can be usefully construed as a continuum of methods to attain altered states of consciousness. Meditation, mind state training using neurotechnology, guided imagery, and hypnosis are specific methods to develop and utilize these states of trance.
