



Institute for the Awakened Mind

Meditation and the Mystic States

States of Consciousness and Paradigms

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Thomas Kuhn (1962), a historian of science, introduced the idea that science functions under the control of paradigm. Since his concept of paradigms is similar in many ways to Tart's concept of Discrete States of Consciousness (which means a specific pattern of functioning of the mind), and since each spiritual psychology is a paradigm for dealing with reality, it is well worth looking into the idea of States of Consciousness and Paradigms.

A paradigm is a major intellectual achievement that underlies normal science and attracts and guides the work of an enduring number of adherents in their scientific activity. It is a kind of "supertheory", a theory or formulation about the nature of reality of such a wide scope that it seems to account for most of all of the major known phenomena in its field.

While seeming to explain most or all of the important phenomena in its field in an overall sense, however, a paradigm is open-ended; there are important subproblems to be solved within that framework, gaps and details in the overall picture to be filled in, so there is plenty of work for scientists to do.

In principle, an ordinary scientific theory is always subject to further tests. A paradigm, however, is so successful after its introduction that it undergoes a psychological change that scientific theories are not supposed to undergo. A paradigm becomes an implicit framework for most scientists working within it; it becomes the "natural" way of looking at things and doing things; it is the obvious way to think about problems in its field.

Once it becomes "obviously sensible", it no longer seriously occurs to adherents of the paradigm to subject it to further tests, and, having become implicit, it then acquires

tremendous controlling power over its adherents. You do not think about rebelling against something that seems like the natural order of the universe; you do not realize that you are controlled by your concepts.

The great scientific revolutions, which Kuhn discusses so admirably, the major breakthroughs to entirely new pictures of the universe, come when someone continues to concentrate on the “trivial” or anomalous kinds of data, and shows that there are indeed discrepancies in the paradigm when it is pushed beyond certain limits, and that there is an alternative way of looking at the universe: a new paradigm.

The great innovators in science have often been considered crackpots for a while, and during periods of what Kuhn calls paradigm clash, when a new paradigm is being advanced against an old paradigm, there is much antagonism and very poor communication between the factions. This does not sound like the “cold rationality” that science is supposed to operate with, and it is not. Rationality is a goal of science, but science is practiced by human beings who have other qualities in addition to some, often inadequate, rationality.

A paradigm and a Discrete State of Consciousness are quite similar. Each constitutes a complex interrelated set of rules and theories that enable a person to interact with and to interpret experiences within an environment. In both cases, the rules become largely implicit, the scientist forgets that his paradigm is a theory and subject to further testing; the person experiencing a d-SoC forgets that it is an arbitrary way of organizing consciousness and comes to think it is simply a natural way of perceiving things. By not recognizing the tentativeness or arbitrariness of either a paradigm or a d-SoC, one becomes almost completely controlled by them.

Kuhn’s concept of a paradigm has far wider applications than to formal scientific theories guiding the investigatory activities of scientists. We all have paradigms, world views, about different areas of reality. We have personal and cultural paradigms about economics, politics, religion, sexuality, aggression, and so on. And, almost all of these are implicit belief systems, sets of rules for interpreting things, thinking about things, acting on things, so we no longer know what the rules are that govern our reactions.

Changing the programme in a computer, changing one’s state of consciousness from one d-SoC to another d-SoC, and looking at the world from two different paradigms are very comparable actions. They give us a totally different understanding of things.