

Talk Mindfulness, Meditation, Hypnosis and Prayer,  
MBS 31 July 2016.  
Anneke Oppewal

First a statement:

I believe that we are created with incredible capabilities. I don't know who or what God is. If the presence I sometimes feel and experience is outside me or inside me. I have learned to live with the uncertainty and ambiguity of that. If it is "only" inside it is amazing what I've got inside me. If there is another "objective" reality outside me, that is equally amazing. And I am grateful for both.

What I try to say I guess is that for me there is an understanding of prayer that does not necessarily presuppose a higher being, and that at the same time I am open to the idea that in hypnosis there is more at work than two people, one of which is trying to help the other.

Bill O'Hanlon, one of the foremost hypnotherapy gurus in the States says: When I do hypnosis with someone I can sometimes feel a presence in the room participating in the communication, opening channels between me and the clients where metaphor and story freely, and helpfully, flow.

Bill is a lapsed Catholic, and that may be resonating somewhere within this statement. Dr. Michael Yapko, another hypnotherapist who travels, teaching doctors and therapists, all over the world said it differently at the workshop I attended in Brisbane at the beginning of this month: Nobody knows how hypnosis exactly works, nobody knows how mindfulness or meditation works, and if you don't believe in supernatural powers, nobody knows how prayer works. But we know that it works, and, through new developments in neuroscience we are starting to get an inkling how.

My own experience, of one that learned to pray first and to whom mindfulness, meditation and hypnosis came a little later, is that all of these practices somehow tap into some deep place of resource within us where healing, creativity, change and inspiration reside. And the way I see it prayer, meditation, mindfulness and hypnosis are all different ways of reaching into that space and utilising what is there for our own benefit and that of others.

## **Prayer**

Prayer in my experience is going in while going out. It is a turning into self, while at the same time reaching out to another, with or without the capital. Although prayer can be ego-centric, because it reaches out to a reality beyond the self, it has a natural propensity to bring people out of themselves and connect to a wider reality than "just" their mind or their being. It can be inward focussed, or it can be more for others, communal and more outward focussed.

There are many different kinds of prayer. Formal, informal, community prayer, personal prayer, prayers of praise and thanksgiving as well as intercessory prayers or prayers of supplication.

What connects it to the other practices we will be talking about tonight is that in prayer, mostly, people will enter a different frame of mind where they become focussed and absorbed in whatever they are praying about, excluding/choosing to switch off from the day to day grind of their existence in the world and focus on something else.

“The Other, God”, with a capital can be a person, or not, but it is a wider/deeper reality onto which we project, or which we regard as the source, of our moral and cultural context and conscience. The gathered knowledge and wisdom, of ethics, community, spirituality and tribe.

Although our prefrontal cortex, our critical thinking, is usually active when we pray, formulating words, meaning, thoughts, questions etc, most of us will, especially when praying becomes more intense and personal, be connecting with our “gut”, with emotion and feeling. We may experience a heightened openness to creative thoughts and ideas, an ability to heal and transform pain and suffering we may have experienced, and, depending on what denomination you are in, prayer will sometimes be used and be good at helping with exactly the same things as hypnosis is so good at: changing unhelpful behavioural patterns, easing physical and mental suffering, and bringing peace of mind and relaxation.

Lets look at the structure of a very simple prayer:

God, we thank you for this food. For rest and home and all things good. For wind and rain and sun above. But most of all for those we love.

We narrow the focus by the first statement: God, we thank you for this food. For less than two minutes that is what we are focussing on, to the exclusion of everything else. We become aware of blessing (for rest and home and all things good, for wind and rain and sun above) and by implication of possibility of non-blessing, finishing with a renewed awareness and attention to what we have and are about to receive.

All elements of what can make up a hypnosis session. But more about that later!

### **Meditation**

How many of you have experience with meditation?

I found this lovely video that explains it very clearly: Silencing the monkey mind (<https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=silencing%20the%20monkey%20mind>)

I started many years ago with Zen meditation. Which is basically about sitting, attending to your breath and being present in the moment and finding inner peace.

Becoming aware and watching your breath is one way of doing that, but it is also possible to distract your mind away from the monkey chatter through guided meditation, listening to the silence, walking, sitting, standing, staring into a candle or any other way that helps you empty your mind and create space. It's like organising a holiday for your mind, taking time out. And research shows that it is something that can improve our focus, effectiveness and serenity in life, that it strengthens our mind, body and spirit, and that it gives us a rest that goes deeper and is more effective than sleep.

In terms of brain space, meditation is practicing the control of your medial prefrontal cortex and stilling and taking more control of the stream of conscious and unconscious chatter that goes through your mind all the time.

### **Mindfulness**

Thich Nath Hanh, a Vietnamese monk, and winner of the nobel peace price, founded the mindfulness movement. It was born from the experience of exile and of war. It started with

the decision to focus on the here and now, consciously creating space for reconciliation, detaching from the past, from feelings of bitterness and anger and creating space for a different future where compassion and positive appreciation of the here and now were consciously chosen to set the agenda.

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xD7i6VUOril>,

Mindfulness is about awareness. Becoming aware and being in the present moment. It involves letting go of past and future. It is learning to appreciate the here and now. It creates a space for attending to the here and now without the past and the future intruding. And especially when that past is painful and the future insecure that can be very helpful. Helping us to, consciously appreciate what is there in the here and now without regrets about the past and angst about the future.

Mindfulness teaches us to be present, to the world around us, to the people we meet, and to take our time to be here, appreciating what we have rather than straining forward to what may be or letting ourselves be pulled back by what has been.

Mindfulness is about focus. Focus on the here and now, bringing it to the front of our minds and temporarily ignore or excluding other thoughts and realities.

### **Hypnosis**

Clinical hypnosis (as opposed to stage hypnosis about which more in a minute) is also about focus, and about becoming absorbed in the present moment, but with the explicit purpose of healing, transforming and changing unhelpful patterns and behaviours of the individual who enters into the hypnotic state, creating a better and more helpful way forward into the future for the individual.

There are certain kinds of prayer that can be specifically aimed at change and transformation in the praying or prayed for or with individual, meditation and mindfulness are definitely less specifically aimed at targeting change and transformation in a purposeful way.

Hypnosis is something we do every day - self hypnosis where we use self talk to gain courage or calm ourselves down, highway hypnosis, where we may get somewhere without consciously remembering how we got there, we have aha moments under the shower that come while we were not thinking, or get that inspirational idea from we don't know where when we are between waking and sleeping. They are all examples of behaviour where the back brain takes over and the role of the prefrontal cortex is less prominent than it usually is.

We go into a "trance", a different state of mind. This is possible simply because we don't need our prefrontal cortex for these tasks. Automation lives in our back brain, as do creativity, memory, patterning, beliefs and our emotional drive and they are able to function without any interference or support from the critical thinking front part of our brain, saving energy and making us more efficient and capable of multitasking. You don't need to think about walking for instance, your back brain is perfectly capable of organising that without you thinking about it.

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OhEgna3UWSU>

I discovered Hypnosis when I was referred to a hypnotherapist by a rheumatologist after suffering from severe chronic pain for many years. Simply speaking that pain had become

patterned into my brain, had become a habit my neuro pathways didn't know how to change back anymore.

Hypnosis helped me relearn that neurological patterning and change it back to "normal" in two sessions. In a way that I, as a minister, immediately recognised as very similar to what I'd been doing in prayer.

A couple of years later I unlearned my fear of flying, mastering a new, and more helpful way of approaching air travel in a twenty minute demonstration session at the course I attended in Sydney.

Simply speaking hypnosis connects to the "back brain" by largely bypassing the prefrontal cortex and connecting more directly to that part of our brain where automation and beliefs, creativity and memory live, making it possible for the brain to adapt differently and more easily than it would be able to in a conscious state with the prefrontal cortex fully engaged.

Nobody knows how exactly that works, but what we do know is that that part of our brain is more literal and open to metaphor and story when the filter of our prefrontal cortex is less pronounced than it normally is. That it becomes easier to influence habits and unhelpful thought patterns and to release creative thinking and find ways towards healing. Using Meditation and Mindfulness techniques and then taking it a step further.

So what happens in a hypnosis session?

Well, after the practitioner and the client have agreed as to what the issues are and what might be helpful ways towards transformation and change in a pre hypnosis conversation, the client is simply asked to relax and focus. The practitioner will help this along by making suggestions about becoming aware of some things to the exclusion of others (breath for instance or the clicking of a clock in the room), or by distracting, confusing, or diverting the attention of the client in such a way that the prefrontal cortex, the critical thinking part of the brain agrees to take a back seat.

The client is encouraged to empty their mind, very similarly to what is practiced in meditation, and focus on the present moment, like in mindfulness. Focus on the voice, and suggestions, of the practitioner. The practitioner is trained to access and communicate with the unconscious mind using metaphor, imagination, and ways of restructuring of thinking and doing patterns. The practitioner seeks to utilise what is there in the mind of the client and helps them to access their resources, suggesting possible ways towards healing, transformation and change they are looking and longing for.

The aim is change in behavioural patterns, invalid and unhelpful beliefs, healing of memories, creating choices that can alter subconscious processes for instance paying attention to one thing rather than the other, correcting globalisations, addressing fear, changing unhelpful thinking patterns, and automations that have become unhelpful, for instance chronic pain or OCD type behaviour.

Suggestions are always delivered in more than one way, so the client has options to chose whatever is most helpful to them while in hypnosis.

Coming out of hypnosis further suggestions are made about possible implementation and further development and growth in the areas that have been addressed. Usually a client will feel, coming out of hypnosis, that they have "been somewhere", but not always. Some

don't feel they have been in trance at all. Whatever is the case, lighter or deeper trance, does not affect the effectiveness of the intervention.

Hypnosis is a guided trip where client and therapist embark on a journey together engaging the subconscious and suggesting ways in which the subconscious can heal and restructure itself away from unhelpful behaviour.

### **Same but different - Same**

For me the comment from Bill O'Hanlon I quoted at the beginning of this talk is proof that I am not the only person that believes all these things are interconnected and working on the same plane. Michael Yapko recently published a book on the similarities between Hypnosis and Mindfulness and comes to the same conclusion: They have a lot in common, although there are also differences.

Meditation, Mindfulness, Prayer and Hypnosis all involve entering a different frame of mind, a different kind of awareness. In all four the activity in our prefrontal cortex becomes less pronounced or is even encouraged to take a back seat. In all four we connect to a part of our brain that we are generally not conscious of - we connect to that part of us where emotion, beliefs about self and the world, habits, memories, cultural connections, instinct, history, new directions, openness to change and suggestion live. All four seek to connect to the resources that lie beyond what the prefrontal cortex offers. Creativity, Healing, Integration, Deeper understanding, Beliefs and Thought patterns all become part of the present moment in a way they are not usually.

What is different is:

The Connection

In prayer there is a clear triangle, there is the recognition, the assumption of a third party present and active in the room.

In hypnosis practitioner and client work together, there are only two, although one could say that the context they share, the moral, ethical, and cultural beliefs and understandings that shape their world are also part of the mix providing resources for both practitioner and client to tap into.

In my experience prayer (healing prayer that has a similar goal as a hypnosis session) is more intensive and demanding on the practitioner. I am not sure why that is so, perhaps because there is a three way communication going instead of two way?

Meditation and mindfulness are predominantly about connecting in, to self, maybe under guidance, but essentially turning in, more than out. Although in Thich Nath Hahn's teaching there is a clear indication that the ultimate goal of mindfulness is a deepening of compassion, something that will of course have its effect on the way the practitioner will interact with the world. Same goes for Meditation, where meditation becomes a means to the end of a calmer, more controlled and less driven by unconscious impulses existence. One could say that Mindfulness is about stopping and taking in, Meditation about creating space, while Hypnosis seeks to work towards purposeful change in that space, while prayer pulls God into that space.

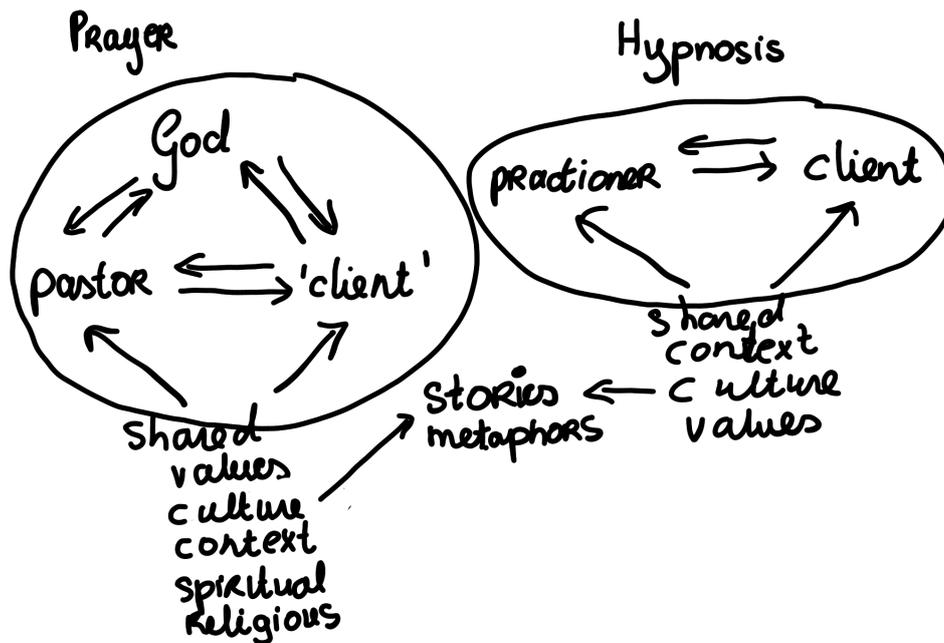
The purpose is different:

Meditation seeks to empty the mind, Mindfulness seeks to fill it.

The purpose of prayer can be varied. Connecting to God, who can be seen as outside or in. Bringing to mind, holding, intercessing, or simply sitting and being and focusing on a reality beyond the day to day, usually taking us into a different frame of mind and being.

The purpose of hypnosis simply to improve the life and functionality of the client

Prayer has an extra dimension, assumes another presence attending.



So to summarise:

Prayer is connecting to your inner resources before God, relating to God, with or without another.

Hypnosis is connecting to your inner resources with the purpose of improving your functionality in life

Mindfulness is practicing awareness to be able to be more present to the world and others - getting out of the racing mindset that keeps us from really being with others

Meditation is emptying our mind to make room for others, practicing compassion.

Background reading:

Michael D Yapko Phd, Trancework, An introduction to the practice of Clinical Hypnosis, 4th Edition, Routledge 2012

Essentials of Hypnosis, Routledge 1995

Mindfulness and Hypnosis, The power of suggestion to transform experience, W.W Norton, 2011

Bill O'Hanlon, Solution-Oriented Spirituality, Connection, wholeness and the possibility for therapist and client, W.W Norton, 2006

A Guide to Trance Land, A practical handbook of Ericksonian and solution oriented hypnosis, W.W Norton, 2009.

Ernest L Rossi, The Psychobiology of Mind-Body Healing, New concepts of therapeutic hypnosis, W.W Norton, 1986

Mindfulness, a practical guide to finding peace in a frantic world, Mark Williams and Danny Penman, Piatkus, 2011

Thich Nhat Hanh, The miracle of Mindfulness, Beacon Press, 1975, Peace is every step, Bantam 1991, Mindfulness Movements, Ten exercises for well-being, Parallax Press 2008

Ian Cowie, Jesus' healing works and ours, Wild Goose, 2000

Stevan L. Davies, Jesus the healer, Possession, Trance, and the origins of Christianity, Continuum 1995

Harold Taylor, Sent to heal, A handbook on Christian Healing, Speedwell Press, 2007.