

Ecstatic Body Postures: A Ritual Doorway Into Nonordinary States of Consciousness

by Belinda Gore, PhD

Anthropologist Felicitas D. Goodman discovered among the artworks of hunter-gatherer and horticultural societies around the world evidence of body postures which, when used in the context of ritual, produce a highly specific altered state of consciousness. Her earlier research on glossolalia, or "speaking in tongues" (ref. 1), had identified that the body undergoes physiological changes during the religious altered state of consciousness; glossolalia is a vocalization that occurs in conjunction with those changes in the body. Later she found that when a ritual body posture is coupled with the necessary preparations and a method for rhythmically stimulating the nervous system, it is possible to induce the experience of ecstatic trance. (ref. 2) In this ecstatic trance state, individuals utilize organs of perception different from the familiar five senses in order to witness and experience an alternate reality.

Religious specialists from every culture throughout history have identified some version of an alternate reality. Black Elk, a Lakota medicine man, described it as "the world where there is nothing but the spirits of all things. This is the real world that is behind this one, and everything we see here is something like a shadow from that world." (3) Albert Hoffman, the Swiss chemist who discovered LSD, spoke in similar terms of his chemically-induced altered state: "What impressed me most in my self-experiments with LSD ... was the feeling I had of entering another reality. This other reality was experienced as quite real, even more than everyday reality." (ref. 4)

The beauty of ecstatic body postures is that they allow individuals to enter this alternate reality simply and without the risks associated with hallucinogenic plants or techniques that induce significant stress in the physical body. Physiological changes occur in response to multiple sound frequencies recurring at an even steady rhythm, such as those produced with a gourd rattle or a drum. This rhythmic aural stimulation is believed to block the left

hemisphere processing of the cerebral cortex and simultaneously to stimulate the peripheral nervous system. (5) However, physiological changes alone do not produce ecstasy. Some form of ritual is also required, and the ecstatic body postures provide the ritual.

Dr. Goodman and her colleagues at the Cuyamungue Institute have identified over fifty ecstatic body postures. They have been found among wooden carvings from the Pacific Northwest Indians, pottery from the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico, an anthropologist's photographs from sub-Saharan Africa, and Neolithic cave drawings from France; they are found around the world and from 30,000 B.C to the present day. These postures mediate fairly specific experiences including healing, divination, spirit journeys, metamorphosis (or shapeshifting), and initiations into the mysteries of birth and death.

The posture known as the Bear Spirit posture, for example, is used for healing. Images of it have been found so frequently around the world that it was probably used in many horticultural and hunter-gather societies as an ideogram to convey the message "good health to you!" It is very old; evidence of it has been found as early as 6,000 B.C.

The Bear Spirit posture is a simple standing posture. The feet are positioned about six inches apart and the toes are pointing straight ahead. The knees should be slightly bent. Both hands are gently rolled, as though a small egg was being held in the palm of each hand. The hands form a triangle over the navel, with the first joint of each index finger touching to form the apex of the triangle. The upper arms rest easily beside the body. The head is allowed to fall back, as though one were looking at a point just above the line where the wall meets the ceiling. The eyes remain closed throughout the fifteen minutes of the trance.

In the worldview of hunter gatherer and horticultural societies, healing includes curing disease but also implies the restoration of wholeness and harmony. Problems are created when people live out of balance with the natural world. The consequences may be physical disease, emotional imbalance, or social disorder. Healers in these societies have understood that in order to make things right again, they need the help of the beings who reside in the alternate reality. Calling upon the Bear Spirit through this posture is a powerful way to summon that help for identifying the source of the disease and for restoring physical, psychological, social, and spiritual balance in the patient.

In order to use this or any other ritual body posture, it is important to first select a place that can be made into sacred space, at least for the duration of the trance. It must be a quiet space, not subject to intrusion. Secondly, to prepare oneself physically, it is wise to eat very little prior to the trance. Then a body posture should be selected and practiced so that it can be held comfortably and without distraction. Finally, smudging is recommended. Cleansing oneself with the smoke of smouldering sage or other fragrant herb is a time-honored tradition as preparation for a spiritual undertaking which includes contact with the alternate reality.

In the practice of ecstatic trance developed by the Cuyamungue Institute, we always begin with a blessing for the rattle or drum we will be using to invite the spirits who reside in the alternate reality to join us in our ritual. We usually offer blue cornmeal to awaken the spirit of the instrument, then rattle or drum toward each of the four directions--east, north, west, south--and to the sky and the earth. We then offer cornmeal again to "feed" those spirits who have responded to our invitation. It is with their help and guidance that we are able to safely enter the alternate reality.

Next we recommend a simple concentration exercise to calm and focus the mind. The exercise involves sitting comfortably and focusing on the breath as it enters one's nostrils, then gently releasing the breath. Counting each inhalation and exhalation as

one breath, fifty breaths allow enough time to prepare for the trance.

Be prepared to use either live drumming or rattling, or an audiotape, in which the rhythm of the sound is sustained at 200-210 beats per minute. The sound, which stimulates the nervous system and initiates the change into a nonordinary state of consciousness, should continue for a duration of fifteen minutes once the trance begins. Assume the ecstatic body posture that has been selected and begin the rattling or drumming.

During the fifteen minutes of rattling or drumming, it is primarily important to listen to the sound and to simply notice whatever occurs. As soon as the drumming or rattling stops, move out of this posture and sit comfortably for a few minutes. Many people like to document their experiences in ecstatic trance immediately afterward.

Some people see colors or have visions, as though they were having a vivid dream. Others feel hot or may have visceral or kinesthetic sensations. The perception of sounds and smells may also accompany the trance experience. With the Bear Spirit posture, healing usually occurs in some form, perhaps through adjustments made in the body by heat or flowing energy, through stories that provide insight or a sense of meaning, or through relaxation and a feeling of well-being provided by a release of betaendorphins in the brain.

The practice of ecstatic trance is described in detail in two books, *Where the Spirits Ride the Wind* (ref. 2) and *Ecstatic Body Postures: An Alternate Reality Workbook* (ref. 6) It is always recommended that people learn ecstatic trance from a trained facilitator, then utilize the workbook to continue the practice.

References

1. Goodman, Felicitas D., *Speaking in Tongues: A Cross-cultural Study of Glossolalia*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972.
2. Goodman, Felicitas D., *Where the Spirits Ride the Wind*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990.

Touch For Health International Journal, 1995

3. Neihardt, John G., *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1959, p.71.

4. Hoffman, Albert, *The Transmitter-Receiver Concept of Reality*, *ReVision: The Journal of Consciousness and Change*, 10:4, 1988, p.6.

5. Lex, B.W. L., *The Neurobiology of Ritual Trance*, in E. d'Aquili, ed., *The Spectrum of Ritual: a biogenetic structural analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).

6. Gore, Belinda, *Ecstatic Body Postures: An Alternate Reality Workbook*, Santa Fe: Bear & Company, 1995.

Workshops offered through the Cuyamungue Institute are scheduled throughout the United States and in Europe. For a current listing of workshops, write to the Cuyamungue Institute, Rt.5, Box 358-C, Santa Fe, New Mexico 87501, or in Ohio call 614-227-9903.