Luxury Meditation

by HeWhoLives

Body weight: 145 lbs

Ever since my early days of researching psychedelics, when I read about people doing Ketamine inside sensory deprivation tanks, I have wanted to try out a tank. In college my desire was rekindled when my psychology teacher described her extremely hallucinogenic and overwhelming experience in a tank. Since I live in a fairly conservative area, these tanks are not available to me. Recently, however, I went on vacation to another state and got the chance to wet my feet (pun intended) in the float tank experience.

The tank’s owner started a small low key business after floating for the first time and loving it. She bought another house for the tank and decorated it quite comfortably. The house set-up reminded me of a Zen center or retreat center even though it was in a residential neighborhood. It was a very quiet setting.

I bought an hour and a half in the tank for $50. We agreed that after I spent a half hour in the tank, she would start playing a CD that was specially made to facilitate theta brain waves. I wanted to experience total sensory deprivation first and then see where the ‘music’ would take me. Theta waves are given off when you are asleep. If I achieved this state in the tank, I would be in a waking-sleep state. The owner said that the experience was like lucid dreaming.

After showering and covering any cuts I had with a salve to keep out the salt, I stepped into the tank. Up until the point I stepped in, I was pretty nonchalant about the whole thing. When I got in it hit me that I was really in an isolation tank for the first time!

The tank was a Samadhi brand 4’X 8’ tank with about a foot of water in it. The water was the exact temperature of my body and was thicker than normal water, like oil. The thickness was due to all of the epson salts. While the salt was well mixed with the water, parts of my body, like my stomach, that initially got wet and then dried off, were covered in a thick salt crust.

I found it was difficult to get used to the effortless floating. I kept wanting to tense my neck to keep my head from going under even though I was very buoyant. This tenseness stayed with me during the entire float. Stretching my arms over my head toward the end did alleviate some of the tenseness though. The other physical distraction was the air I pushed under the water with my body. Throughout the experience, I kept feeling tiny bubbles run up along my body to the surface of the water. If these physical issues seem minor, they are. I only noticed them because my physical senses had nothing else to focus on.

I needed the full half hour to get used to floating and to relax as much as possible. Once the
CD started I was able to focus more on my mind states. The 'music' was basically just rhythmic drones that I could ride downward and quiet my mind. I was fully expecting to get vivid visuals as I thought that the mind would create its own imagery once its sensory input was removed. The visuals never happened! The visual aspect of it was no different than lying in my bed in the dark. I didn’t even lose the sense of being in a box when I had my eyes open. I thought the experience would feel like floating in outer space.

The interesting things happened when I closed my eyes and tried meditating. A few summers ago, some friends and I used to go meditate in the mornings with the local Zen Buddhists. We would try to empty our minds completely and dismiss every thought as it occurred. I soon learned that if I did not dismiss the thoughts and remain vigilant, then the thought rapidly expanded and I soon fell into a weird day dream/quasi-lucid dream state. This state isn’t as deep as a full blown lucid dream. I’m not ‘embedded’ in the dream like I am when I lucid dream. I’m merely ‘surfing’ the imagination. It’s hard to describe but it’s half way between a day dream and a lucid dream. If I was tired enough, this state would lead me straight into full blown sleep and dreaming.

The same thing occurred in the tank. This day dream/quasi-lucid dream was the closest thing I ever came to any kind of lucid dreaming. It was a very familiar feeling for me and in no way felt like I was tripping. However, in the tank I could focus on my mind states much easier than when contorted into the lotus position. The progression was much clearer. There were subtle but definite mind spaces that I found myself in throughout the hour. It was also much easier to recognize my mind’s escape from its own grasp. At one point, I visualized my awareness, as a white glowing ball, withdraw from my senses and recede to the back of my skull where it hovered for a quiet second and then attached itself to a thought train. This heightened focus made it easier to check my mind’s wandering.

When I got out of the tank, I was groggy and a little disoriented, even though while inside the tank I didn’t feel that the experience was very powerful. After I showered, I discussed my experience, floating in general, and states of consciousness with the owner for another hour over a glass of herbal raspberry tea. This period was a nice ‘comedown’ and resolution of the ‘trip.’

As I drove back to my hotel, I noticed a slight afterglow. This vacation was during my spring break from school and I had been feeling extremely stressed out. I had several papers due at the beginning of May that I hadn’t begun nor had the desire to work on yet. I now felt energized and eager to write these papers. The feeling was a watered down version of the afterglow of LSD or mushrooms-the renewed sense of purpose, confidence, and motivation.

I also noticed a bunch of salt in my ear that crackled every time I moved my jaw. The salt stayed in my ear for at least a week afterward, crackling and annoying the hell out of me. Next time I’ll forget the music and wear earplugs instead.

In conclusion, (damn, I’ve been writing too many papers! ;) ) the float tank was a lot different than I expected. The experience was nowhere near tripping on a psychedelic. My mind is too stiff to spontaneously create it’s own environment without the aid of a psychedelic drug. I would like to eventually try tripping in a tank.

The float tank seemed to be a great tool for mediating because of the lack of outside distractions and the relatively comfortable setting. One of the biggest distractions of Zen meditation for me was the pain from sitting with my legs crossed for a long period of time. My body (other than the tenseness and bubbles) wasn’t an issue. The one friend who continued on with Zen meditation always raved about how great she felt afterwards. All I felt afterwards was pain in my legs. I think that the tank finally enabled me to eliminate enough distractions that I could touch that consciousness the Buddhists experience, if only briefly.

—HeWhoLives