

Letter To Editor

Silence in a Spiritual Master increases vagal tone during two meditative states : A single case study

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Sir,

For thousands of years ancient traditions have recommended the practice of 'silence' for psychological and ultimately spiritual growth (1). The Himalayan Yoga Tradition recommends the practice of silence for introspection as well as for mental and physical restoration and rejuvenation (2).

The present study demonstrates the autonomic changes in a spiritual master (SV) aged 81 years with a background of spirituality from childhood and initiation into the Himalayan Tradition over 40 years ago (3). The Master reported being able to shift his mental state at will from random thinking to meditation and vice versa. The baseline data were obtained when the Master took an oath to remain in silence for 5 years. The signed informed consent was obtained from the participant for the study. The EKG (standard limb lead II, to obtain the heart rate variability, HRV) and respiration rate were assessed in two different meditative sessions (20 minutes each), which were conducted on two consecutive days at the time when the Master entered into silence. These two sessions with similar assessments were repeated 3 months later on two other continuous days after 3 months of silence. The two sessions (assessed in the beginning and after 3 months) were (i) Silence meditation (SM) and (ii) listening to audio recording of 'OM' chanting (OM). The twenty minute recording of each session consists of three epochs with the first 5 minutes of the 'Pre' state, spent in random thinking followed by 10 minutes of 'During' where SV practiced SM or/OM. This was followed by

5 minutes of 'Post' random thinking. In the three months period of silence, SV spent at least 6 hrs/ day practicing meditation with minimum interaction. All communications were written and there was no other distraction.

At baseline during SM the HF decreased by 10.7%, while it increased during OM by 0.3%. After 3 months, in contrast the HF increased by 51.7% during SM, and by 59.4% during OM (Figs. 1 & 2).

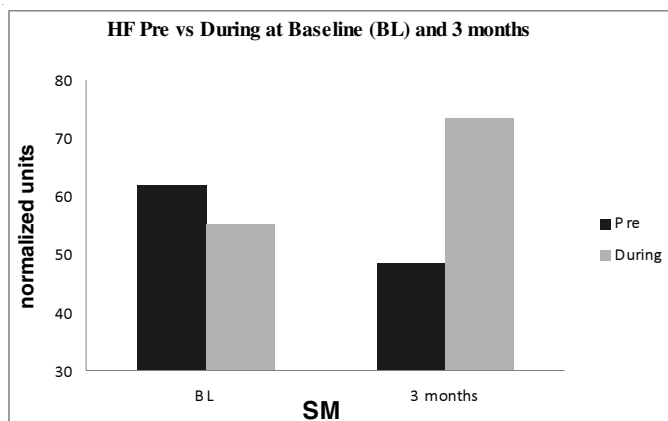


Fig. 1

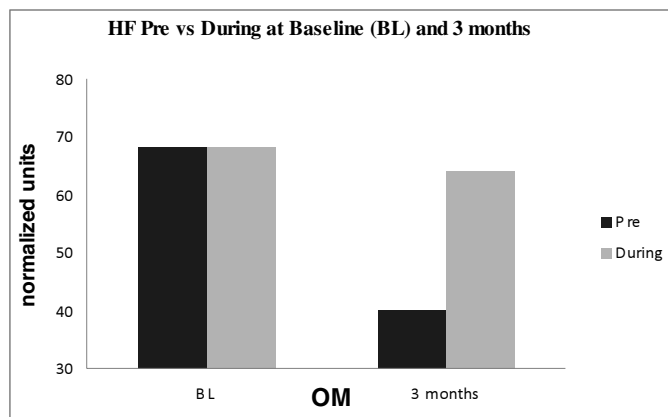


Fig. 2

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After 3 months of silence the HF power increased during SM (51.7%) and OM (59.4). The HF power of HRV signifies vagal tone (4), hence after 3 months of silence the Master achieved a definite shift in autonomic balance towards vagal dominance during

meditation, which is consistent with silence being conducive to rest. These results resemble changes in experimentally induced hibernation where vagal tone was higher following cold acclimation (5); as hibernation is also characterized by energy conservation.

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