



Adapted from René Magritte's
"The Large Family"

Hypnosis—Maybe; If It's Like Prayer

Hypnosis can be abusive, or a form of genuine meditation.

by Selma Chaij Mastrapa

The Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man.

—Genesis 2:21, 22 (NIV)

ADAM IN THE GARDEN WAS THE EARLIEST incident of hypnosis. Since then, hypnosis has not always remained as positive as its beginnings. The best gifts and the best qualities given to humanity, such as the capacity to work and to love, sexuality and intimacy, worship and ecstasy, have all been abused and distorted with resulting isolation and distress. Similar abuses of hypnosis have occurred.

For more than 100 years, the scientific

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community has studied at a desultory pace the validity and usefulness of hypnosis. In the Paris Hospital of La Salpêtrière, chief neurologist Jean Martin Charcot (1825-1893) observed how a peasant girl, during hypnotic experiments, would experience whatever symptoms were suggested to her. He concluded that hypnosis was a pathology of the nervous system.

In 1882, at the Nancy Medical School, Dr. Bernheim heard that an unknown physician by the name of Liebeault claimed to have cured a patient of sciatica through hypnosis. Bernheim was incensed, because it was one of his patients whom he had unsuccessfully treated for six years. He went to Liebeault's clinic to expose him as a quack, but instead stayed to study the hypnotic process. His continued experiments with hypnosis at the Nancy Medical School led to a quarrel between Bernheim and Charcot in Paris. Bernheim saw hypnosis as a curative tool, whereas Charcot saw it as a form of mental illness. Eventually the quarrel was settled in favor of Bernheim, partly due to the latter's larger experience (1,000 patients of Bernheim to a

handful of Charcot). Later, Pierre Janet, also of the La Salpêtrière hospital in Paris, explained the errors of his chief, Charcot. Many physicians from other countries came to France to learn more about hypnosis. Among these were Sigmund Freud from Vienna, and Morton Prince from the United States. These physicians continued to study the uses of hypnosis and wrote about their findings.

Nevertheless, the majority of hypnotic events have not been conducted within the objective and ethical boundaries of science, but have often been misused and abused by entertainers, charlatans, and manipulators. Religions have also often used hypnotic trances and hypnotic suggestions in their practices. This has been true in pagan as well as such Christian religions as Christian Science, the Ephrata Seventh-day Baptists, the Shakers, and many others, including some present-day evangelicals.

Hypnosis is a unique ability of the mind to focus and concentrate while in a relaxed state. It is part of a dissociative continuum from light daydreaming, through dissociating feeling, vivid imagery, and finally deep trance. It is not a treatment in itself, but is the means by which a treatment may be delivered or mediated. Thus, it has a dual potential, to bring about positive results, or to be misapplied or mismanaged.

How can we distinguish when hypnosis is appropriate and when it is misused or abused? Rather than answering unequivocally, it would be better to evaluate each event through a series of questions:

1. Is hypnosis a way of avoiding a lengthy or difficult but necessary process?
2. Is it a way to give up responsibility and let someone else do the work?

3. Is it expected to result in an instant, magical cure?

4. Is it for “kicks” or for entertainment?

Any Yes answer to the above questions is a warning that hypnosis may not be appropriate. Other important questions are:

5. Is the hypnotherapist licensed and trained to treat your specific complaint?

6. Is hypnosis the main form of treatment, or is it simply an adjunctive tool with no greater or lesser power?

Whenever there is an over-reliance on hypnosis as a coping or defense mechanism there is danger of prolonged dissociation, such as amnesia, lessened self-control through avoidance or escape, and isolation of negative and positive feelings. Any of these could result in poor judgment and sometimes devastatingly impulsive decision-making.

Perhaps one of the most useful forms of hypnosis is self-hypnosis, whereby a person consciously relaxes and focuses on his or her own thoughts, values, memories, and beliefs about life. This is a process akin to genuine prayer and meditation. It can enhance our spiritual insights, our faith, and our trust in God.

By beholding we become changed. When we relax and concentrate on what we hope to do and to be, we gain self-mastery. Similarly, athletes review each movement while in a relaxed state in order to enhance their performance. Spiritually, we can also gain a deeper experience. We are counseled to spend time each day meditating on the life of Jesus, imagining we are with Jesus, and experiencing his presence in our concerns and in our joys. How much clearer and fulfilling could be our spiritual growth when done in such a vivid relationship with him.