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Inside of the Dharma Overground Community

The Dharma Overground (DhO) is an online community where practitioners of different traditions, religious or non religious, discusses their meditative and spiritual experiences. It is a very interesting space, founded by Daniel Ingram, who is a well known writer of the contemporary Buddhist tradition. It is open for everyone from any background, but at the same time it is more incline towards Daniel's publications, therefore I could observe a predominance of Indian Buddhist (Theravada) practitioners.

The forum is organized in a lot of subreddits, which include a lot of different categories like dealing with life and death; books, teachers and a lot of online resources to help the practitioners; the use of medications, supplements and psychoactive substances; retreat spaces, meditation centers and gatherings; discussions about trying to explain or categorize spiritual or meditative experiences of the members of the community based on different traditions framework.

I spent more time in this last subreddit which is called "what was that?", it might be the most important of the community and seems to be the one where people post more frequently. It is very curious and fascinating to see how many rich and unusual experiences people report there and the feedback and advices of the community if also very interesting.

I observed a lot of technical terminology, that came mostly but not only from Daniel's books (and therefore from Theravada Buddhism), that I was just superficially familiarized with and had to research about them a lot of times. They are used in a very empirical way to describe different meditative stages of different practices styles and to instruct practitioners how to proceed on each one of those stages or move to the next and so on.

One of the first ones that I was seeing was a thread from 12/17/2023, called "Strong Spiritual Experience During Fever". Where he described that, as a consequence of the extremely hard physical conditions he was facing, he felt a deep sense of union and connection. He describes having his sense of "self" very much diminished and report a sensation of dissolution into some kind of higher consciousness or "the universe" as he called it.

He was looking for some advice from other people, but it ended up not finding anything specific in this case besides messages wishing him to feel better and recover well. He reported that the experience lasted only for one night and that he was not familiar with any particular theory or framework of meditation or anything that could explain why it happened, but he said it was his most intense spiritual experience in his life.

In this one I didn't observe a lot of technical vocabulary or particular idiosyncratic behaviors of this community, but it drawn my attention because it looked very unusual, and it was easy to comprehend everything that was being said.

On my second observation round that I did on 03/17/24 I saw another very unusual report called "'Epileptic seizure caused by meditation??"'. The user was reporting an interesting experience

where he he lost consciousness after being “overpowered” by an “energetic” sensation where his body was contracting involuntarily and his eyes was doing a rapid eye movement. He had been an epileptic patient who was cured through a procedure in the brain, but since that experience, he started to have epileptic seizures again after 5 years without them.

He received good advice, some users were able to categorize his meditative experience using some technical terminology that is very common in this community. Others were more focused on the health issues, and for sure the best advice was “I would not make and health related decisions based on what 2 guys tell me on a forum”. A user shared some resources to help this user to, including an website of an organization, some recommended him to look for a neurologist.

In this long thread, that they started discussing more the claims of certain meditative achievements than the health issues. When they narrowed down the focus I could see the typical and intriguing investigative behavior, typical of this community: “Figuring out this is actually more in our wheelhouse if you'd like to talk about it. The questions people would ask would be to describe the cessation, ask if you got multiple, and ask what's things have felt like immediately after and also in the weeks since.” They also used some acronyms and detailed descriptions of meditation techniques.

I had to actually consult Daniel Ingram's book *Mastering The Core Teachings Of The Buddha* to understand what they were describing and the discussion got more interesting to me. I got personally more interested and re start a practice routine as I used to have during the pandemic in 2020.

I felt that either observing or participating in this community can be really motivating and clarifying for anyone that is interested in meditation or spirituality and help many facing difficulties or confusions related to that. I also really appreciate this openness to discuss themes that are constantly omitted in other communities to being considered tabus. Therefore I think it was a very nourishing experience to observe this community.

Reflection

I came across this community for the first time a few years ago, it was a very briefly and superficial first contact. It happened when I started studying meditation and heard about the community on a podcast on the youtube as a reference of a space that welcomes people from very different backgrounds and a unique community where people are willing to discuss and talk about anything that is related to the body and the mind of meditation practitioners. It also became famous because of some heated discussions between public figures in the world of contemporary buddhism.

I never engaged on it regularly, but I was always interested about it, so I decided to take one more look at the community to write this essay and it was very fruitful. Personally, it encouraged me to return to a practice and study routine with meditation. And also I discovered a lot of interesting things about practice styles and approaches that I was not aware of, I also had to finally check some of the material written by the founder of the community, which is remarkably good.

I had to adapt a bit to the requirements of the paper as I was looking to the community in a non interactive way, as well as trying to incorporate the other users points of view to my composition which was great to expand my tools and skills as a writer. Taking field notes was an actually new and helpful part of the creative process. It was a very important resource to add density and substantially to the essay