



Institute for the Awakened Mind

The Reticular Activating System and Meditation

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The distinguished physiological psychologist, Jouvett, recently showed that it is the anterior portion, that is the top part, of the Reticular Activating System which is responsible for switching the cortex on in sleep and so producing Rapid-Eye-Movement Sleep, in which vivid dreams occur. The anterior part of the RAS is the part which makes a monkey's knee-jerks get stronger when it is stimulated.

Jouvett also showed that the posterior part of the RAS is responsible, during REM sleep, for inhibiting the whole spinal cord, so that the animal does not rush around in its sleep, acting out its dreams. The posterior part of the RAS is, of course, the part which, when stimulated, makes the monkey's knee jerks weaker.

Jouvett showed that if an incision is made in the correct part of a cat's RAS, when it has REM sleep it gets out of its basket and laps up invisible milk, fights invisible dogs, and generally acts out the contents of pussy dreams. We know that REM sleep is the most profound state of sleep, the state in which the greatest muscular relaxation occurs. This is probably because of the blanketing effect of the posterior RAS upon the spinal centres, and accounts for the importance attached to the induction of vivid dreams in the therapeutic use of hypnotic relaxation.

Most important of all, for our present purposes, is that the correct use of the Reticular Activating System provides the gateway to all forms of meditation, creative reverie, and the higher states of consciousness. It is also cooperation between the RAS and the brain cortex which permits us to achieve all the feats of self-regulation claimed by biofeedback and yoga practitioners – in fact, the function of biofeedback and yoga seems to be that of facilitating such cooperation.

What is more, before we look for strange and mystical diseases to explain everyday cases of failing to achieve what man is evidently intended to achieve, we must look to this comparatively simple system which so often is unintentionally misemployed.

So let us not fail in the proper use of our Reticular Activating System, which can stimulate our muscular system to ever greater efforts, or tone it down to ever-gentle manipulations; which switches on the brain cortex at night to consider the problems of the day; which controls our automatic-gain-system so that we hear and see all the things that we should hear and see.