

First Isolation Tank Trip - March 17, 1989

The first sound I heard when I walked into the waiting room was the soothing sound of pumps grinding away. The room was dimly lit and one sign said "please, your shoes" and another, "Please speak quietly." After they got the tank ready, a woman about my age took me to the isolation tank room and told what to do. She had to open a door and turn off a pump that ran a swimming pool filter that was connected to the tank so I could use the tank.

The tank was a large horizontal version, but was not wired for sound, as some tanks are. Instead, they had ear plugs to reduce external sounds. She told me that if I had any cuts to put Vaseline on them so that the magnesium sulfate in the tank wouldn't irritate them. Then she showed me where the bathroom was and then left.

I used the bathroom, took a quick shower, climbed into the tank and closed the lid. Except for a translucent plug above my head where electrode wires are inserted for EEG measurements, the tank was totally dark. This light leak was no problem because the lights in the tank room had been turned down very low.

My breathing was so loud that I remembered that I had forgotten to put in the earplugs, so I opened the tank and did so. Back in the tank with lid closed, my breathing still sounded very loud, like the breathing in the movie *2001*. This took some getting use to.

Another thing that was awkward at first was the act of floating on top of the water-magnesium sulfate solution. The 10 inch deep solution in the tank is maintained at 93.5 degrees (your external body temperature) and contains 150 gallons of water and 800 pounds of magnesium sulfate ($MgSO_4$, commonly known as epsom salts) that increases the density of the water to the point where you can effortlessly float on top of it. John Lilly had used sea water, which does not have the density of the magnesium sulfate solution.

First, I tried the John Lilly method of floating by placing my hands on my neck with elbows pointing out. After about 10 minutes, I gave up on this method because hands against my Hippie Hair was robbing me of sensory deprivation in that area of my body. I found that I could relax much more effectively with hands to my sides and quickly learned that there was no danger of my head going under water. Becoming comfortable with the experience took me about the first 15 minutes of the experiment.

I noticed a sense of rotation of my body and realized that this was some kind of illusion because my feet never hit the side of the tank at this point. Later on, I bumped into a side or end of the tank several times but found it easy to re-center my body in the middle of the tank. What I needed was an anchor.

Every once in a while a drop of water would drip from the top of the tank and make a psychedelic sound when it hit the solution in the tank. Because of the ear plugs, I could hear very little noise outside the tank, except for an occasional pump starting or stopping and even this could barely be heard over the roar of my breathing. I concentrated on breathing more deeply and slowly, so I could hear other sounds my body was making.

Near the end of the experiment, I noticed I could hear my eyelids opening and closing. It was so dark in the tank that there was hardly any visual difference whether my eyes were open or closed. Any visions I was experiencing would continue in spite of opening my eyes. The sound of my eyelids operating surprised me since I had never heard them operating before.

Although I could hear my eyelids, I could not hear blood circulation noises, as others have reported. My breathing made such a racket that I could only concentrate on minute sounds between breaths. Because of the

ear plugs, most of the sounds I heard came through conduction through the solution I was floating on. This was why the water drops sounded so loud.

Once gotten used to, the feeling of floating on the solution was extremely enjoyable. I lost all sense of gravity and felt like I could merely float anywhere I wanted to. There is a feeling of drifting along with the flow. It was such a gentle feeling and not an overwhelming one as some altered states of consciousness can be.

After an hour, I emerged from the tank. My first order of business was getting the magnesium sulfate out of my Hippie Hair which now felt like lead. Two shampoo-rinse cycles were necessary to remove all of it. After drying off and putting my clothes back on, I walked down the streets of the Pike street market feeling a high similar to emerging from an Indian sweat lodge. My body felt totally relaxed and my senses were much sharper. Although the isolation tank experiment was an unique experience for me, the end result was it took me to a higher level of consciousness that I had reached many times using other methods. The tank proved to be a safe and effective consciousness booster.

I'm surprised that no one has thought of the isolation tank as being a potential tool in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. I see it is the ultimate Freudian couch. Since the isolation tank can produce a similar state of consciousness as LSD and other psychedelic drugs, therapists can use it as a legal and safe way to induce the psychedelic state.

Although isolation tanks have been around since the late 50's, no one but scientists and their volunteer subjects have had access to them until recently. The old tanks were crude and less safe than the tanks of today. During the 80's, relaxation spas with isolation tanks started springing up everywhere and anyone can use them.

The recent appearance of the relaxation spas may be a sign of the times. The 80's have brought us close to the point of sensory overload, with all sorts of new gadgets to bombard our senses. Cable TV, VCRs, home computers, video games, compact disks and fax machines are only a few examples. With all this stimulus competing for our attention, one can only think how nice it would be to climb into a nice dark tank and get away from it for a while.
