At its current young age, Transpersonal Psychology doesn’t have much in the way of historical, physical artifacts or laboratory equipment, but the blue vase, which I have shown against a cloudy background here, is both historical artifact and piece of laboratory apparatus. It was used in the pioneering 1960s study “Experimental Meditation” by psychiatrist Arthur Deikman. Meditation was then largely considered a strange, possibly psychotic-making or psychotic-manifesting activity performed in more primitive cultures. Deikman began the exploration of what might actually occur when Westerners practiced a basic concentrative meditation exercise, interviewing subjects after each session.

The blue vase was the visual fixation object. It was selected by his wife Etta Deikman, an artist, with the instructions that it should be something definite to look at, but be otherwise basically bland and non-specific, to have no symbolic or textual content that might suggest particular kinds of experiences. A few sessions of meditation for the various subjects resulted in many classic phenomena associated...
with mysticism. Reported were experiences such as a more intense visual perception of the vase, distortion of the perceived amount of time in the session, conflicting, ineffable perceptions that were difficult to describe, and the gradual development of attentional barriers so that distracting sounds (deliberately part of the study) became less noticed. The emphasis on exploring the phenomenology of the meditation practice was original and still too little used today, where in our materialistic culture we tend to believe that meditation is not “real” unless we can detect brain function changes.

After Deikman’s passing in 2013, it was his wife Etta again who, in gathering his collected papers, resurrected the pivotal image and metaphor of the blue vase. The efforts resulted in publication during March of 2014 of the book: *Meditations on a Blue Vase and the Foundations of Transpersonal Psychology: The collected papers of Arthur J. Deikman*. Napa, CA: Fearless Press. The book is an important gift to the transpersonal community in that it gathers in one place Deikman’s influential thinking as well as his contributions and legacy to the transpersonal movement. I appreciate the opportunity in this memorial note to reflect upon his life’s works, including how they have influenced and continue to influence me professionally, personally and transpersonally.

I first met Arthur Deikman in person in the early 70s, after having been proud to include his seminal and now classic papers on “Experimental Meditation” and “Deautomatization and the Mystic Experience” in my 1969 *Altered States of Consciousness* anthology. He and his wife Etta, and I and my wife Judy have been friends for more than 40 years, and Arthur was one of the deepest-thinking colleagues and creators of transpersonal psychology I have known. I particularly remember some of the many conversations Arthur and I had over the years about what can go wrong with spiritual groups. I almost always reminded him how apt was the analogy for mindless surrender to teachers and other authority figures that he created in his brilliant analyses of cult-like behavior throughout modern life, his book *The Wrong Way Home: Uncovering the patterns of cult behavior in American society* (Deikman, 1990). He described the transference-like inhibition of critical faculties and emotional satisfaction in such groups as being like the experience many of us had as children, riding home in the backseat of the family car on a rainy night with your parents driving — and the world was fine... That happened to me many times as a child. My parents had friends, with a boy my age, who lived some distance away. It was a long drive home at night, and I just loved lying half asleep on the back seat with the sound of rain on the car roof, the rhythmic beat of the windshield wipers, and the swishing noise the tires made on the wet highway. Life was indeed good!

Too bad none of the several spiritual teachers I’ve studied with, for all the useful things they have taught me, could come up to that archaic level of quality!

Just a bit of background as context: When I finished my doctoral training in 1963, the year Deikman’s article on Experimental Meditation was published (Deikman, 1963), the world was a changing and very interesting place. My research focus up through graduate school had been on hypnosis, sleep, and dreaming, but while this was somewhat “far out” for the psychology and psychiatry establishments of the
time, in our general culture psychedelic drugs were about to have major and widespread effects, especially on young people. Eastern religions, with their practical mystical exercises were becoming available, promising a spirituality based on actual, direct experience rather than a religion based on blind faith. I had been an experimental subject in some psychiatric psychedelic drug experiments while in graduate school, and had also read widely in what were then (and still are now) unusual and practically unknown sources for orthodox psychology and psychiatry, so it was clear to me that our “official” and establishment knowledge of the human mind, thought of as our superior scientific knowledge, while immensely valuable in many ways, was really rather narrow and biased.

I continued my research on hypnosis and dreams for a decade after receiving my doctorate, but as I watched the spread of psychedelic drug usage, the genuine concern mixed with much cultural hysteria about it, and the importation and rapid growth of various forms of Eastern mysticism and meditation into our culture, I realized that if I wanted a better understanding of the mind, I needed to take a much wider look at the unusual things that could happen to human consciousness. This resulted in my Altered States of Consciousness anthology, published in 1969, and two of the most important chapters in the book were by Arthur Deikman: “Deautomatization and the mystic experience” and “Experimental meditation.” Indeed, discovering Deikman’s ground-breaking work was a major delight in my search for scientific literature on altered states, and his work continued to inspire me for the next half century!

After an initial chapter dealing with the definition of altered states, the second chapter in Altered States was Deikman’s “Deautomatization and the mystic experience,” which he had published in the mainstream Journal of Psychiatry (Deikman, 1966). Arthur showed that what we think of as the “normal” functionings of the mind are largely habits of functioning, shaped by culture, automatized, habitualized, and conditioned. In various situations, we automatically and selectively perceive what we are supposed to perceive, what our culture has defined as “normal,” and we feel and act accordingly. This generally works out well if our culture has fully understood what’s important about various situations and developed adequate responses, but leads to great problems as either reality or culture changes, especially when the change is subtle. This automatization process is almost never conscious, and can be so powerful that it amounts to blockages and filters that make us not perceive certain aspects of what could be our richer and more accurate experiences, or distort them in ways to make them seem “normal.” Deikman’s insight was that practices (like some kinds of meditation) that reduce, even temporarily, the power of such automatization could allow us to have new perceptions and epiphanies. Whether such deautomatization is then guided in a creative direction of useful insights or toward illusion or pathology is a separate question. I found Deikman’s concept of deautomatization to be of almost universal usefulness in understanding a wide variety of processes of the human mind.

Deikman’s other paper in the Altered States anthology was “Experimental meditation,” originally published in 1963 in the prestigious Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease (Deikman, 1963). Although I could find only three English-language experimental studies of meditation for my 1969 anthology, (there are now
several thousand because of the finding of physiological correlates of some meditation practices), Deikman’s early study is still a model of intelligence and creativity in more deeply understanding what meditation is about, and is one of the basic studies I have my current students read to learn more about the nature of human consciousness.

To my, and I’m sure my publishers’ astonishment, the Altered States anthology became a scientific and semi-popular bestseller! These kinds of major alterations of consciousness had been almost completely overlooked, and/or assigned to the dustbin of unimportant curiosities or psychopathology by orthodox science and medicine until then. Those who wanted to promote scientific research into these states had little to encourage them, since the few studies that showed such research could be done were widely scattered and unknown to most people. Now a large collection of scientific studies was readily available, showing that we could bring science, psychology, and psychiatry to bear in helping us understand these possibilities of human minds. What I consider one of the most important results of the widespread reading of Altered States was familiarizing people with Deikman’s work on meditation and deautomatization.

One of Arthur Deikman’s most important qualities was his willingness to take on the Establishment when it was wrong about things, although I’m sure it made for considerable difficulties for his career in terms of the academic side of it. I greatly admired his courage. He was a fine scholar and writer, and I often wondered if the reason he devoted most of his professional time to private practice was prejudice in academic circles for daring to question current authorities.

To illustrate, although interest in altered states was becoming widespread in our culture by the late 1960s, I came across a report by the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry (GAP) (1976): Mysticism: Spiritual Quest or Psychic Disorder? The publication offered a consideration of the kind of mystical states that might be induced by meditation or psychoactive drugs. Because of growing cultural interest, the authors, highly prestigious and senior members of the psychiatric profession, felt that their colleagues should know about the nature of meditation and psychoactive drugs.

I was very angry when I read the GAP report. This amounted to an official statement by the psychiatric profession that nothing of what was happening in the culture was not already well understood by us, and our understanding was that all this interest in meditation and altered states was a waste of time at best, and generally quite psychopathological.

My anger wasn’t useful. Psychologists were still very low status compared to psychiatrists at that time, and I doubt that anything I could have written about errors in the GAP report would even have gotten published where psychiatrists would see it. But Deikman took on the GAP Report on and wrote a brilliant rebuttal, exposing its shortsightedness and bias. I practically cheered out loud when I saw his response, and that rebuttal is one of the papers reprinted in his final book, The Blue Vase. Deikman was a brave man to go against his professional establishment like that, and also a very wise man to have a clear idea of where the truth of things lay.
Deikman’s interests were very wide-ranging. His interest in the nature of consciousness, for example, not only included the mystic and altered states end of the spectrum, but the practical aspects of psychotherapy. One of his most interesting articles in his final *The Blue Vase* collection is about his attempts to reform the treatment regimen of a major psychiatric hospital to include and often depend primarily on *practical* psychological work with patients, *respecting them as people*, rather than just giving them drugs and locking them away. As with his rebuttal to the GAP report, this was again going against the establishment, which was rather overly charmed with the possibilities of drug treatment for psychiatric disorders—indeed, some people would say the psychiatric establishment is still quite overly charmed with medication, a problem he and I often discussed—and one of the frustrations of Deikman’s career was that it took many years to get his reports about this published in orthodox journals.

He was also quite interested in what modern science could contribute to understanding consciousness, and I remember a few years ago, when he devoted a year to deeply reading in the literature of modern physics, to see how quantum approaches and the new physics could cast some light on the workings of consciousness. We had a number of discussions about this, but despite some of my early initial training being in the physical sciences, he was way ahead of me in his understandings. Not that he was a narrow minded, physicalist reductionist, who expected that the physical sciences would soon explain consciousness “away” as nothing but electrochemical actions in the brain. There is a physical brain involved in, but not totally identical with consciousness, and understanding its workings is part of a full understanding of the nature of the human mind.

There are many other dimensions of Deikman’s understandings that you can have convenient access to in *The Blue Vase* book, and I will let them speak for themselves. His thought provoking books, giving insightful links between Transpersonal Psychology and the accumulated knowledge of Western Psychology and Psychiatry are:

*The Observing Self*, 1983  
*Evaluating Spiritual and Utopian Groups*, 1988, later revised and republished as *The Wrong Way Home: Uncovering the Patterns of Cult Behavior in American Society*, 1990

*The Wrong Way Home* is a particularly valuable book for society as a whole, as well as a deeply disturbing understanding of the way irrational, cult behavior abounds in all areas of life.

This gentle man, my friend, always impressed and stimulated me by the depth of his understandings. He is greatly missed...

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References


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Charles T. Tart, one of the founders of transpersonal psychology and long standing member of the Editorial Board for this journal, is an Emeritus Professor of Psychology at University of California (UC), Davis, and at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology (Palo Alto), has held the Bigelow Chair of Consciousness Studies at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. In addition to his three now classic books (*Altered States of Consciousness, Transpersonal Psychologies, States of Consciousness*) he has authored *Living the Mindful Life, Waking Up, and The End of Materialism: How Evidence of the Paranormal is Bringing Science and Spirit Together*. He works tirelessly to integrate theory and practice, has earned a Black Belt in Aikido, and practices and teaches both mindfulness meditation as well as Gurdjieff’s Fourth Way awakening techniques.