

# PSYCHO-SCIENTIFIC FRONTIERS

Selected publications from a variety of subjects of psycho-scientific research. Editor: Rolf Linnemann  
(Certificated Engineer) \* Steinweg 3b \* 32108 Bad Salzuflen \* Tel. (05222) 6558

Internet: <https://www.psygrenz.de/>

E-mail: [RoLi@psygrenz.de](mailto:RoLi@psygrenz.de)

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An interview with *Professor Dr. Klaus Engel*, Westphalian Clinic for Psychiatry, Dortmund.

Title : **Meditation**  
The royal path of mental immersion in the new century

Author : Dieter Wiergowski (Qualified Pedagogue) and chief editor of a newspaper.

Klaus Engel is a doctor and psychologist and lectures at the University of Bochum. He wrote a book titled: "*Meditation: Geschichte, Systematik, Forschung, Theorie*", 320 pages. Frankfurt; Berlin; Bern; New York; Paris; Wien;: Peter Lang, 1995. ISBN 3431483910

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The reason why I wanted to interview Professor Dr. Karl Engel, a doctor and psychologist, was because he recently published book on meditation. More and more people recognise that it is important to work from the ground up when it comes to solving the world's external problems that we live with. Systematic research is naturally still lacking here. I believe that his book represents a good approach to actually bringing the systematic work done in regards to the human consciousness to the fore. And this with solid, empirical scientific research results. This is where the future lies. The following interview gives further interesting information in regards to this.

D. W. : Are you of the opinion that forms of meditation can be extricated from within their ideological context?

Prof. Engel : What is being done in meditation research these days is indeed partially extricated from the religious sphere. I see this as a pro and contra situation.

Let me start with the pro to begin with. I believe that the advantage is that people are reached in this way that have a difficult time with certain background themes that one could call forms of religion. *For instance, many Christians cannot get close to forms of contemplation, because they have a difficult time with church dogmas.* This also applies to certain Indian forms: There are people there that have a difficult time with the idea of reincarnation etc. I therefore see an advantage when meditation is not "over emphasised". This on the plus side.

The disadvantage is at least as great. I believe that on the other side it is enormously important to have one form of meditation within a context. Within a social *and* a belief system. Particularly *because we are prone to push special experiences into the*

*pathological*. Many proponents of spiritual directions had early spiritual experiences in their youth or even in their childhood. Here, within our field, one would simply consult a psychiatrist and make a diagnosis. Whilst the whole thing would rather take on a sacred aspect in the field of religion. For instance, the mother of Poonjajis asked him when he was in a state of emergency as a child: “Did you see Krishna?” Such an experience is naturally completely differently interpreted in this way. I find that this is enormously important.

This is why I personally would not like to decide what is more beneficial in regards to your question: Extricated meditation or meditation bound within its sphere. It is important somewhere along the line that we do not have to jump over high hurdles. At the present, I often drive over to Johannes Kopp, a Christian pastor who teaches Zen. You also know Pastor Williges Jäger from your congress. Both of them endeavour to place Christian views in the background to begin with in order to make meditation accessible.

D. W. : What can be achieved with meditation? What significance would you give it within society?

Prof. Engel : *It represents the central path for the individual*. It makes it possible to reach into one’s own inner depth or as you would say, “THE OTHER REALITY” or we could call it “to become one with God”. I would regard it *as the first and the last truth, the key to many other things*.

There are various grouping in meditation. I for instance think of Sri Aurobindo in Auroville where there is a very strong relationship with the environment. And then there are others that exclusively search the path within in order to deal with social concerns. On the other side are for instance investigations to find the benefits meditation can bring to health. Transcendental Meditation (TM) has for instance performed some *very impressive research*, something that I represented in my book.

D. W. : Have I understood this correctly, you are trying to make the effectiveness of forms of meditation more objective? This entails that a valuation has to take place somewhere along the line. You are therefore going to test different forms of meditation to find the most effective amongst them. Do I see this correctly?

Prof. Engel : We have to qualify this a little more by saying - the most effective form for an individual. I don’t believe that we can simply say that “this is the best” or “this one or that one is the best for everyone”. The question in future will be, “*what is good for whom?*”. The Bhakti approach, ergo *the path of worship* is probably more beneficial for some, whilst the *Karma or work approach* on the other side might be much more suitable for others. Others might find that a pure and deep meditation is beneficial. This is why I find the Yoga system very good, because it simply has a number of approaches and it doesn’t evaluate things. What is good for whom has not been sufficiently clarified.

D. W. : How can you apply meditation here in the psychiatric clinic?

Prof. Engel : I could, but I am not yet doing it. For political reasons - the circumstances must also be right. The whole ideology must coincide with what happens at the clinic.

Something like this is only then possible. If I were to say that I offer a relaxation technique, it would be tolerated. *Medicine and psychotherapy are unfortunately still very much controlled by ideologies.*

D. W. : How do you see the tendency? How long will it be before meditation is generally accepted?

Prof. Engel : This will take a few more years. The way dream interpretation was the royal path in this century, meditation will be the royal path in the next century. It will prevail everywhere, even in the empirical sphere. We already have a whole series of empirical investigations. It will take a little longer in the clinic. But it will become the *central approach*. I am fully convinced about it. And in order to push this through, we require empirical work to be done.

Any analysis in the past asserted itself in a very simple way. We verified for instance that the days off work and the days in hospital were *more numerous before* treatments than after. This means that the state and the health insurance companies save money. This analysis was therefore established as a recognised treatment method. A number of concepts of the TM point in that direction. If we were able to *verify its effectiveness* - the health insurance companies are a priori interested in money - *meditation would come to the fore everywhere*. If we can prove that it helps, that it's effective and that it saves money - its acceptance rate would rise.

D. W. : What form of meditation do you practise?

Prof. Engel : I did TM for a long time. But I have to say that Zen is the focus now. I do this on a regular basis every day.

D. W. : Why is it that a lot of people that have practised meditation and experienced very intensive and beautiful things whilst doing so, give it up?

Prof. Engel : I differentiate here between assumptions and empirical investigations. Up to now, we only have empirical investigations about *how many* give it up. I personally think that there are two factors responsible for termination: One the one side *fear* and on the other side *annoyance*. On the one side a *passive form of opposition to resistance* and on the other side an *active form*. These are usually the things that get in the way so that one feels that one can *only* react with termination. Teachers are very important with such things, because they can show you certain ways and also give you instructions.

I always like to tell the following story: Buddha was a loner and his favourite disciple Arnando asked him somewhere along the line: Is it true that to have good friends means being halfway along the meditative path? Buddha then said: Don't say this Arnando, don't say this - it is the whole path. Someone who promoted the singular path like Buddha, recognised how important friends are. Everyone must naturally do their own work, but things are not all that different with meditation mentoring from life in general. Basically, loners encounter difficulties with meditation. This might be a little exaggerated. But one should always turn to an experienced teacher, one that one can trust when encountering difficulties.

D. W. : But this is where we naturally also encounter difficulties. According to my opinion, so many sects have been established in the meantime that do not adhere to the numerous important principles that lead to spiritual growth. - You emphasize the importance of a teacher. How can one find the right teacher without exposing oneself to the danger of ending up in a dangerous faction?

Prof. Engel : Through my prehistory, I am very much focused on empirical, pragmatical work. I believe that the better one can objectively ask: "What actually constitutes a good teacher?" "What qualities must he have?" "When is he an enlightened one and when is he a charlatan?" the better things will be. The sooner we can precisely define this, the sooner we can say: This is a direction that is rather more beneficial and that is a direction that is rather a hindrance. The tradition was that the pupils principally do not necessarily listen to what their teacher had to say, they travelled with him from place to place for weeks and months and simply *observed* him. What sort of life does he lead? What is he ego like? How selfless is he? It's not what he says - that is something we can only believe. If one looks at this more precisely, one will be able to distinguish between the charlatans and the helpful.

Based on my experiences I *ascertained that the helpful teachers do not differ from one another all that much*. One important factor is that in principal, nothing must be kept secret. A more advanced teacher has nothing to hide. Everyone was able to get access to great meditative teachers. But not everyone can simply assert the claim of being an enlightened one. This is where we must apply a criterium - the way it is already the case with Buddhism - in order to separate the wheat from the chaff. One may certainly test the teachers. When you talk to someone harshly, a teacher for instance, and when you find that *he reacts negatively and emotionally* - he is certainly *not a very advanced human being*.

D. W. : One should therefore severely test a teacher?

Prof. Engel : Yes - I would certainly say so. Particularly in a situation where we encounter a lot of misuse.

D. W. : There are different directions for gaining enlightenment. On the one hand one can gain enlightenment through meditation through *renouncing the world* and on the other hand by *turning towards the world* and by serving others. Do you think that the feelings felt at the end of either path are similar or are there serious differences?

Prof. Engel : I have not yet reached my goal; I can therefore only speculate about it or I can quote. I assume that *various ways lead to the same goal*. To help others more - thereby helping oneself more and others at the same time - are two parallel paths. Some go within and discover in this way the surmounting of the subject-object-division, or one could also say that it is about the disengagement of the ego so that a you and a me no longer exist - or on the other hand the external way, whereby they find the same. Which path to choose depends on the individual himself. It doesn't matter at the end whether you upgrade the you or whether you downgrade the self. Whether you choose an introverted or an extroverted path depends on the type of person you are. *The goal is the same*.

D. W. : Some schools of thought declare that the goals are different. Some say that the final objective is a state of bliss whilst others say that no sensations will be left. The goals seems to be basically completely different - or not?

Prof. Engel : If one takes a closer look one finds that it is not all that different. One has to consider what is meant with feelings, respectively the absence of feeling. Very advanced teachers within any religion would probably not contest the idea that feelings have to be transcended at some stage. But certainly *not at the beginning*. This is the reason why the paths must be accurately described. *When is what ready for whom?* We have completely different stages of experiencing things. One can hardly talk about bliss within certain sections of the path, because calmer forms come to the fore. I don't believe that the goal is all that different.

D. W. : You write in your book that some proponent of your form of meditation are able to convince themselves that they have achieved the specified final stage. With other directions of meditation, it looks as if nobody has ever reached the specified goal and the question whether it is actually attainable remains open. How do we verify whether someone has actually reached their goal or not? How credible are the answers in questionnaires that also play an important role in the systematic examination of states of meditation?

Prof. Engel : I will tell you once again a little story: A bishop was asked to assess a Christian monk. He didn't ask many questions, he dressed himself in a simple fashion and went to the monastery of this monk. Once there, he simply *observed* him. How did the concerned person deal with people? How did he approach them and how caring was his emanation? It has been a tradition to observe very closely. You could probably ascertain a few things with the help of a questionnaire, because one can assume that these pages were filled with a certain amount of credibility. But on the other hand, we naturally have great access to systematic observations.

The social sciences have some sophisticated systems of observation that have never been applied in meditation research up to now. For instance, video camera, tape recorder, speech analysis etc. And we have the broad spectrum of psychological measurements. Someone who asserts to experience Samadhi, must display certain physical phenomena. They have nothing to hide. If we include subjective observation, namely questionnaires, objective observations and also physiological research, we already have three criteria that spontaneously spring to mind.

D. W. : Who can accomplish this? Who is going to deal with it? I think that this would be the most effective way to eliminate charlatans on the one hand and of finding an effective opportunity to find out which path people could take on the other hand. This would virtually kill two birds with one stone.

Prof. Engel : I do believe in the first place that charlatans will *eliminate themselves* anyway. They cannot maintain the whole thing for a lengthy period of time. This is why I wouldn't pay them too much attention in this respect, even though they can do a lot of damage at times. Something else would be much more important, but the time is not quite ripe. *The systematic procedure will prevail by itself*. Let's assume that I am a behavioural therapist and that I have success with meditation; I will naturally *advertise* this. I will therefore introduce myself and make the whole thing public. If

this will really help... or if I am an analyst and I believe that I can help someone, I naturally depict this publicly.

D. W. : You mean that it will develop all by itself?

Prof. Engel : Yes. TM performs a good pioneering function. They try to define things objectively with methodology. This is indeed a rather good way. Methods are being developed in Zen - because we have nothing to hide. If I may dare to make a comparison: We had astrology for centuries. We always had it and we will always have it. Astronomy developed from it later. If we want to fly to the Moon, we can not solely rely in astrology. Astronomy must formulate legalities that are absolutely imperative for such an endeavour.

So why shouldn't this also apply to what you call "THE OTHER REALITY"? We must *formulate the legalities* that apply. What are the initial conditions? What are the implementation conditions and what is the aim? I do believe that we will find a systematic approach through incidental findings.

D. W. : You already rendered considerable ground-breaking work with your book "Meditation - Systematik - Forschung - Theorie".

Prof. Engel : This might be a small contribution. The great meditative people are as it were *natural talents*. Whether you talk about Sri Chinmoy or others, most of them had deep meditative experiences during their childhood and expanded on them later. This would be a Mozart in regards to music. He was already able to write down a symphony that he had heard at age three. The systematic access to meditation, ergo *constant practice*, will on the other hand continue to *gain importance*.

D. W. : I would like to once again deal with the significance of meditation. We do indeed have many problems here on Earth. Starting with xenophobia via drug problems, lots of divorces etc. Let's assume that all people were introduced to meditation. Do you think that the just mentioned problematics and many others besides, would no longer crop up to such a degree?

Prof. Engel : I naturally assume this. You mentioned a few examples, environmental behaviourism is naturally also a part of this.

- *I assume that people that find their inner core are no longer prone to take drugs.*
- *People that no longer separate self from what's outside will naturally deal completely differently with the environment.*
- *People that reach their inner core are no longer exposed to specific dangers.*

D. W. : Would you regard this work as dealing with the root of the problem?

- Prof. Engel : Yes, one could put it like that. The Christian meditation teacher that I often visit, Johannes Kopp, calls his whole program “*Living from the Middle*”. I find “to find one’s own middle” is a nice expression and it applies to the case in point. Others selected a different vocabulary. A person that is *centred* and no longer finds itself involved in its egotistic tendencies, will do *a lot of things differently*.
- D. W. : If one were to pursue this line a little further, would one find that this was an ideal approach to prevent wars for instance?
- Prof. Engel : You know that TM also tried this. They said, give me a specific number of meditators that we can send to the gulf region and we will get the whole shemozzle under control. *But this would have to be put to the test*. Maybe one should have tried this to see whether this will work or not work. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi thinks here that if 1% of the population meditates - and he applies this also in regards to the crime rate etc. - one would be able to reduce criminality considerably. *One would have to check this*. One will then see whether this is idle talk or whether there is something to it. How would this look if 10% would meditate? These things will eventually be tested. As we are dealing with TM, one would have to find out the reason why TM has generally lost its pertinence again. Have all the articles about Yogis flying actually helped or rather harmed TM?
- D. W. : I would say that it rather harmed it. According to my extensive circle of friends, a lot of what has been shown on TV in regards to commercials was very absurd. This is where TM had its greatest chance, if it had *only promoted meditation*, to assert itself. But one went too far here - and this is now hardly repairable according to my views.
- Prof. Engel : Exactly - above everything else, because none of the Yogis could demonstrate that they could fly. If one of them *had demonstrated*, “look here, I can sit for half an hour in the air”, it would have been apparent. But this hopping about seen on TV could not be differentiated. One could now generally say that: *Forms of meditation that are geared to produce any type of effect do rather harm themselves*. This is where another criterium already comes into effect: A *serious* approach would *never* be after such sensationalism. Healing abilities are something different - this simply happened to many wise people and it was not pushed into the foreground. It was not turned into a circus.
- D. W. : And there is something else. There are people that feel harassed by spirit entities. It is always difficult to find a contact person for these people, because many of them do *not* see the WORLD of SPIRIT as a reality and try with their available means to rectify such problematics - but they often fail. Could one get a grip on this by actually taking these so-called “spirit entities” serious, thereby providing *genuine help* to those that are *really* thus affected, help through *holistically* trained psychiatrists?
- Prof. Engel : I would send somebody with these symptoms in the direction that’s appropriate for them. For instance, Christianity or the religious environment that’s appropriate for them. Or if they suffer to such a degree where it becomes pathological, to the *Spiritual Emergency Network* that also exists here in Germany. Therapists from all over Germany got together and this is where I would send the afflicted. You can assume that these people do *not just* have a pharmacological approach to illnesses and regard anything beyond as utter nonsense, they *are open-minded* and they listen

to the phenomena that people tell them about. This is what concretely springs to mind in regards to Germany.

D. W. : I thank you for giving me this interview.

Address:     *Spiritual Emergency Network Germany e. V.*  
                  *Wendlinger Str. 32A*  
                  *D-79111 Freiburg*

*Tel: 0761 / 475846*

*Fax: 0761 / 474646*

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