

January, 2010

Volume 10, No. 1

Migraine Aura: Suggestions for Spiritual Approaches to Migraine Headaches

By Floco Tausin

Abstract:

In the 1990s, practitioners of orthodox scientific medicine engaged in dialogues with much passion about the reintegration of religion into medicine. It was shown that many complaints and illnesses are soothed more easily if the patient is spiritually active. This article is a contribution to this development. It examines the phenomenon of the migraine aura from a spiritual view and proposes an understanding of migraine as a physical and spiritual condition which corresponds to lived spirituality and, from there, is accessible to conscious alteration.

Keywords: migraine, headache, migraine headache, migraine aura, medicine and religion, entoptic phenomena, shamanism

Introduction

In spring 2007, I received an email from Klaus Podoll, MD, deputy of the Clinic for Psychiatry and Psychotherapy at the University Hospital in Aachen, Germany. He is editor of the Migraine Aura Foundation, dedicated to classifying and understanding migraine headaches and migraine auras in order to help patients and to exploring human brain functioning in cognitive and psychological processes. Dr. Podoll read about my work on eye floaters and spirituality. He wanted to know if I knew about the phenomenon of migraine aura – the subjective visual phenomena preceding migraine headaches – and, if so, what my position about that phenomenon would be.

To me, this was a surprising and unusual inquiry, for my research methods are humanistic and spiritual rather than medical. However, it turned out that Dr. Podoll collects and presents alternative approaches for the Migraine Aura Foundation, including the areas of art and spirituality. He has pragmatic reasons for this, since such approaches can have positive results in the therapy of migraine patients. This may be viewed as an expression of the dialogues about the reintegration of religion into medicine, taking place since the 1990s.

In Western culture, religion and medicine have been closely interwoven for centuries. It was only with the rise of materialistic and empiricist worldviews in the 17th century that medicine shifted to focus solely on empirically verifiable processes, excluding 'supernatural' or spiritual effects on human health. In the last 20 years, however, it was shown in a number of studies that treatment of complaints and illnesses like diabetes, liver disorders, heart conditions, cancer, arthritis and chronic pains are

facilitated if the patient is spiritually active. While the mechanisms for the physical effects of religion and spirituality have not been clarified yet, it is generally acknowledged that religions regulate the feelings of the people and therefore have an effect on the immune system and the psyche (Koenig, 2003; Slager Johnson/Kushner 2001; Niv 2001; Parris/Smith, 2003).

This article is an answer to Dr. Podoll's inquiry and a contribution to the developments in medicine outlined above. It examines the migraine aura from a spiritual view, and explores migraine not only a physical but also as a spiritual condition which is accessible to conscious alterations.

Migraine headaches

Migraine headaches may be unilateral or bilateral, pulsating headaches frequently accompanied by an increased sensitivity to light and noise; by nausea and dizziness; sometimes even by abdominal cramps, numbness in various parts of the body and temporary paralysis. The duration of this condition ranges from several hours up to several days. There are different neurophysiological theories about the causes of migraine, focusing primarily on changes in the blood circulation of the brain or on neural excitation. Genetic factors may also contribute to the occurrence of migraines.



Migraine isn't fun
Photo by makelessnoise

A great number of factors are known to trigger migraines, including stimulants like chocolate, coffee, red wine and salt food; hormonal changes in the body; emotional strains; climatic conditions; and others (Rowland/Frey, 2005; Dalsgaard-Nielsen, 1973). Approximately 12-14% of women and 8% of men are affected by migraine in the industrial nations of Western Europe and the USA, thus causing several billion dollars in costs every year for medical treatments and absenteeism from work (Reuter, 2005).

I find it of note that authors like Stephen King and Steven Sills create protagonists who suffer from migraine to point to events lying ahead, or to start a process of reflection. Wassily Kandinsky, Yayoi Kusama, Lewis Carroll, Giorgio de Chirico, Sarah Raphael and other visual artists have let themselves be inspired to works of art by migraine experiences (cp. Dahlem and Podoll, 16.11.09).

Alternative treatments of migraine

The broad incidence of migraines is reflected in a wide array of treatments outside of conventional medicine. Some of these approaches stem from medieval or pre-Christian European medical systems; others derive from non-Western medicine. Some very old magical and alchemical practices and recipes have been recommended for treatment of migraine (Eggetsberger, 1992; Retschlag, 1934). Other therapies understand "illness as a way" (Dethlefsen and Dahlke, 1997; Schwendener, 2000) and try to find the spiritual causes of migraine. Yet other approaches focus primarily on the spiritual development of man, where the cure of diseases is "only" a welcome side effect. Western complementary and alternative medicine often isolates methodologies from such approaches from their cultural and religious roots for use against migraine. Therapies reporting successes in migraine treatment have included acupuncture and acupressure, homoeopathy, meditation, Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), sensory deprivation, shiatsu, yoga, autogenic training, as well as prayers and spirituality in general (Rowland and Frey, 2005).

The visual migraine aura - an entoptic phenomenon

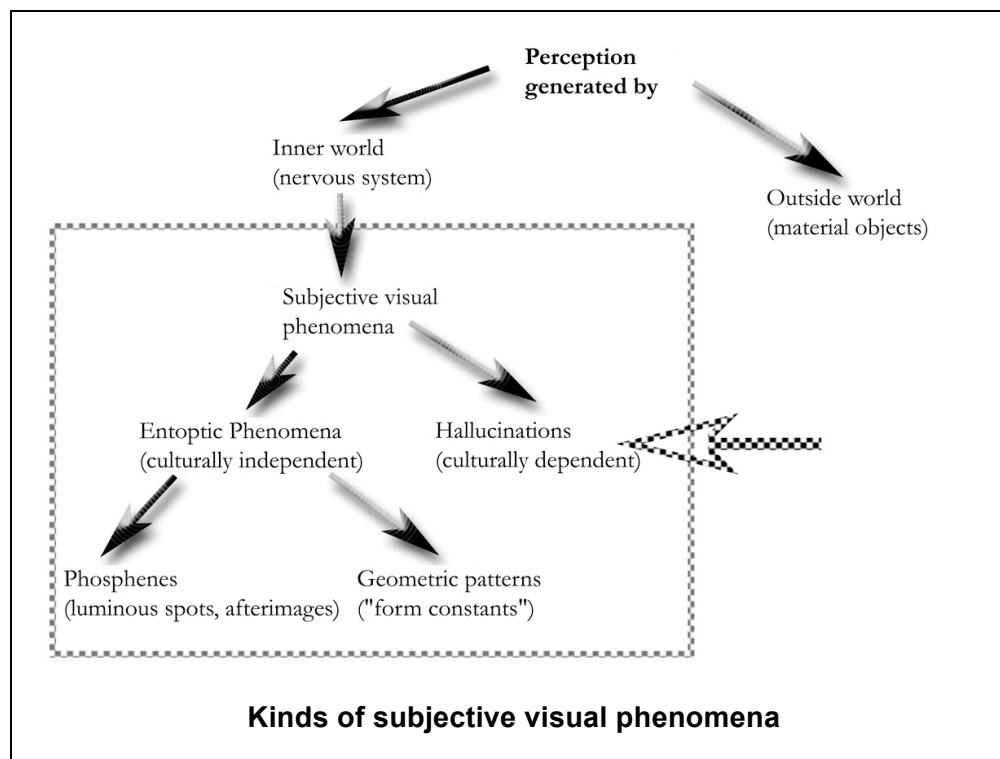
In these alternative approaches, the focus practically never lies on the migraine aura that precedes the migraine in a minority of persons affected (10-20 %). In ancient medicine the Greek term *aúra* described the pre-symptom of an epileptic seizure. In the case of migraine, it serves to describe subjective "imaginary" sensory perceptions, which precede the headaches for one hour at most. Although auras can affect all senses, they usually refer to the visual sense (Göbel, 16.11.09; Dahlem and Podoll, 16.11.09).



Example of a typical migraine aura in the visual field. Drawing of a patient. (Dodick, 2009)

A visual aura may manifest in several different variations, being composed of typical and atypical visual phenomena. Atypical visual phenomena like small bright dots, white, colored or dark spots, zigzags, lines, flashes of light, "foggy vision" and others, are most frequent (Queiroz et al., 1997). Typical visual phenomena include a flicker (scintillation) and the visual field defect (scotoma). Both can extend and move in the visual field.

All these appearances can be understood as 'entoptic phenomena,' a medical term for a specific group of subjective visual phenomena, some of which we know from more common, everyday experiences reported by people who do not have migraines. Entoptic phenomena include 'form constants,' moving geometric patterns; complementary colored afterimages; tiny luminous spheres moving along rapidly in spiral tracks known as 'blue field entoptic phenomenon;' and transparent dots and strings called 'eye floaters' or 'mouches (muscae) volantes' (Tausin, 2006b, 2006c).



Intensity increase and altered consciousness

The interpretation of migraine represented here takes the entoptic phenomena as a starting point. In many cultures practicing ritual forms of deep consciousness alteration, these phenomena are highly valued in their religion, art and society (Bednarik et al. 1990; Tausin 2006a; 2007a). Apart from ecstasy techniques practiced by shamans and seers, migraine can also be a trigger for entoptic perceptions. As early as the 1980s, the doctors J. Dexter and A. Friedman noted similarities in the altered central nervous system of migraine patients and of shamans in states of trance (Dexter and Friedman, 1984). And the ethnopharmacologist Christian Rätsch, in his "Encyclopedia of Psychoactive Plants," draws attention to the perception changes in migraine and in ritual trance states induced by active agents of plants, in both cases triggered by the activation of certain neurotransmitters (Rätsch, 2005).

All of this suggests that migraine sufferers experience a stimulation of the nervous system in the phase of the aura which I call an "intensity increase" or "heightened energy metabolism" (Tausin, 2009a). According to medical reports, this energy surge frequently manifests before the appearance of the aura and engenders a good mood, effusive joy and openness, or intensive sadness, fear and depression in people affected. Bodily sensations like prickling, tingling and shivering, which are frequently experienced by migraine patients during the aura phase, are a further sign of increased energy.

In some religious traditions, such feelings normally appear at moments of intense emotions and are a sign for the openness towards the divine. This temporary increase in energy as well as the ability to deal with that energy is often interpreted as having a spiritual meaning, because it changes the consciousness and the perception of people. This was sought by ecstaticists, mystics, shamans and visionaries of all times and cultures to facilitate contact with the divine (Tausin, 2007b).

While shamans and ecstaticists, however, are preparing themselves physically and spiritually over many years for such intensity increases and perception changes, migraine sufferers are thrown "into the cold water" without preparation or spiritual support. I suggest that some appear able to process this increase in energy, as seen in the fact that in these cases there is no headache following the visual auras (e.g. Waterwolf, 16.11.09). Most migraine sufferers, however, lack the physical and spiritual prerequisites to handle that situation: the increased energy can't flow freely and evenly in the body – which expresses itself as the typical migraine symptoms of headaches, nausea and oversensitivity.

Entoptic spirituality to counteract migraines

From the point of view of the ecstaticists, migraine sufferers are generally more open to altered states of consciousness because they experience frequent energy increases – even if these are uninvited and uncontrolled. This means that if migraine patients are willing to work ecstatically, they have a chance not only to control this increased energy, and thus to get rid of the unwanted migraine symptoms, but also to develop their own consciousness as well.



Migraine Aura. By Joana Roja

We can find the inspirations for this ecstatic-energetic work in religions and spiritual teachings which include entoptic phenomena. According to my previous enquiries, aspects of an "entoptic spirituality" can be found in practices and beliefs of shamanistic societies, in the mystical and visionary traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, as well as in modern teachings like the esoteric aura, the theory of Orgone by Wilhelm Reich, or the mystic teaching of the seer Nestor living in the Swiss Emmental (Tausin, 2006a; 2006c; 2009a).

The phenomena of entoptic spirituality provide at least three helpful suggestions for migraine treatment. First, they reframe entoptic phenomena in personal and cosmic contexts and thus convert them into positive and meaningful experiences. In this way, they provide intellectual frameworks for interpreting migraine auras, and therefore migraines in general, within the religious or spiritual traditions of migraine sufferers. So far, there is no empirical data available to make statements about the efficacy of such specific intellectual frameworks in migraine patients. But the case of U.S. artist Robert Bursik shows the healing power of spiritual explanations in migraine aura patients in general: Bursik connected these perceptions with statements from different religions and assigned the cause to spirit. His headaches disappeared after he had accepted the auras, which at first had generated fears (Bursik, 16.11.09).

Second, entoptic spirituality requires a change in daily behavior. It provides the concrete physical and spiritual practices, suitable to prepare for this recurring situation of increased energy. If integrated into one's daily schedule and exercised for some time, such practices help remove subtle energy blocks, which, within understandings of biological energy fields, may cause pains and other symptoms (Benor, 2001; Brennan, 1988).

Practices of mystics and ecstaticists that may be relevant to treating migraines may include many health-promoting practices:

- healthy, balanced vegetarian food;
- regular walks in fresh air as well as physical exercises aimed at the flexibility and sensitivity of the body, e.g. dance, yoga, tai chi etc.;
- breathing exercises;
- concentration, meditation and relaxation exercises.

Reports from complementary and alternative medicine confirm that these exercises and practices have been helpful in treatment of migraines (Rowland and Frey, 2005). In that way, migraine pains motivate spiritual activity, which again shows the close connectedness of medicine and religion. For many religious or spiritual traditions or philosophies are results of the aspiration to alleviate or transcend pains. That's how the philosopher Marcel Proust's statement on illness helps us understand why religious traditions are often followed with much devotion and zeal when pains are present: "Illness is the doctor to whom we pay most heed; to kindness, to knowledge, we make promises only; to pain we obey."

Third, entoptic spirituality stresses the importance of experiencing and examining entoptic phenomena as consciously as possible, resulting in a kind of meditation (Tausin, 2009b). Similarly, migraine sufferers working ecstatically are encouraged to observe their auras very attentively. In this exercise, the two above mentioned aspects meet: The intellectual framework tells the aura observers that they experience something sacred during these moments; help them to break free from their usual thinking, acting and perceiving for a period of time; and invite them to experience the world in a new way. This is something that ecstaticists and shamans work for all their life. The physical exercises mentioned help to deal with the energy increase and thus to maintain a clear consciousness during these moments. I propose that just as meditation e.g. on eye floaters relieves the anxieties that may be

connected with them (Tausin 2009a), meditation on auras will result in overcoming the fears and anxieties accompanying this condition.

My suggestion is that the combination of these aspects of a specific entoptic spirituality will help migraine sufferers to cope better with their migraine auras and migraine symptoms. There is no data as yet to support this suggestion. Again, Robert Bursik may be taken as a successful example who demonstrates at least some of the above mentioned aspects, including a redefining intellectual framework and close observation of the phenomena. Thanks to the spiritual interpretation and his patience, he has been able to enjoy the auras for three decades:

And if I let it, and take time, and watch it, it slows down, and I can enjoy the simple beauty of it for what it is.

- Bursik

References:

- Bednarik, Robert G.; Lewis-Williams, J. D.; Dowson, Thomas A. "On Neuropsychology and Shamanism in Rock Art". *Current Anthropology* 1990, 31, 1: 77-84
- Benor, Daniel J. *Healing Research: Volume I, Spiritual Healing: Scientific Validation of a Healing Revolution*, Wholistic Healing Publications 2007 (Orig. 2001).
- Brennan, Barbara A. *Hands of Light: A Guide to Healing Through the Human Energy Field*, NY: Bantam 1988.
- Bursik, Robert V. "Migraines: My story – my solution". *Migraine Aura Foundation*, ed. by Klaus Podoll. http://www.migraine-aura.org/content/e27891/e27265/e42715/e42749/e46723/index_en.html (16.11.09)
- Dahlem, Markus; Podoll, Klaus. *Migraine Aura Foundation*. <http://www.migraine-aura.org> (16.11.09)
- Dahlke, Rüdiger; Dethlefsen, Thorwald; Lemesurier, Peter. *The Healing Power of Illness. The Meaning of Symptoms and How to Interpret Them*. (German title: Krankheit als Weg, 1990). Element Books Ltd. 1997
- Dalsgaard-Nielsen, T. "The Nature of Migraine. Delivered in abbreviated form as a lecture at the Annual Meeting of the American Association for the Study of Headache in New York on 23rd June". *Headache. The Journal of Head and Face Pain* 1973, 14(1), 13-25
- Dexter, J./Friedman, A. "The myth and magic of migraine therapy. A look into the shaman's bag". *Progress in migraine research* 2, ed. by F. Rose. London 1984, 265-268
- Duerden, Tim. "An aura of confusion: 'seeing auras - vital energy or human physiology?' Part 1 of a three part series". *Complementary Therapies in Nursing & Midwifery* 2004, 10, 22-29
- Eggetsberger, Gerhard H. *Hypnose. Die unheimliche Realität. Selbsthypnose, Fremdhypnose, Hypnose im Alltag*, Wien et al. 1992
- Göbel, Hartmut; Heinze, Axel; Heinze-Kuhn, Katja. *Die Morgendämmerung der Migräne – die Auraphase*. <http://www.migraeneliga-deutschland.de/die-auraphase.htm> (16.11.09)
- Ilacqua, G.E. "Migraine headaches. Coping efficacy of guided imagery training". *Headache* 1994, 34, 99-102
- Koenig, Harold G. "Medicine". *Encyclopaedia of Science and Religion*, ed. by J. Wentzel Vrede van Huyssteen et al. NY: Macmillan Reference 2003, 552-556
- Monrad, Jorunn. *Entoptic phenomena in contemporary art*. (The original website <http://www.entopticart.com> has expired. It can be retrieved at: <http://web.archive.org/web/20080605024658/http://www.entopticart.com/> (16.11.09))
- Niv, David; Kreitler, Shulamith. "Pain and Quality of Life". *Pain Practice* 2001, 1(2), 150-161
- Parris, Winston C. V.; Smith, Howard S. "Alternative Pain Medicine". *Pain Practice* 2003, 3(2), 105-116
- Queiroz, Luiz P et al. "Characteristics of Migraine Visual Aura". *Headache* 1997, 37, 137-141
- Rätsch, Christian. *The Encyclopedia of Psychoactive Plants. Ethnopharmacology and Its Applications* (German title: Enzyklopädie der psychoaktiven Pflanzen, 2001). Park Street Press 2005
- Retschlag, Max. *Die Alchimie und ihr grosses Meisterwerk der Stein der Weisen*. Leipzig: Richard Hummel Verlag 1934
- Reuter, Uwe. *Pathomechanismen der Migräne. Habilitationsschrift, 2005*. <http://edoc.hu-berlin.de/habilitationen/reuter-uwe-2004-06-21/HTML/chapter1.html> (16.11.09)
- Roach, Mary. "Ancient Altered States". *Discover* 1998, 19, 6.

- Rowland, Belinda; Frey, Rebecca J. "Migraine headache". *The Gale Encyclopaedia of alternative medicine* (2nd ed.), 2005, 1354-1358
- Slager Johnson, Susan; Kushner, Robert F. "Mind/Body Medicine: An Introduction for the Generalist Physician and Nutritionist". *Nutrition in Clinical Care* 2001, 4(5), 256–264
- Schwendener, Urs. *Anthroposophie. Die Geisteswissenschaft Rudolf Steiners. Ein alphabetisches Nachschlagewerk in 14 Bänden*. Oberdorf 2000
- Steiger, Brad; Steiger, Sherry Hansen. "Hallucinations". *The Gale Encyclopedia of the Unusual and Unexplained*, Vol. 3. Detroit et al. 2003: 143
- Tausin, Floco. "Mouches volantes und Trance. Ein universelles Phänomen bei erweiterten Bewusstseinszuständen früher und heute". *Jenseits des Irdischen* 3, 2006a
- Tausin, Floco. "Mouches volantes. Bewegliche Kugeln und Fäden aus der Sicht eines Sehers". *Q'Phaze. Realität ... Anders!* 4, 2006b
- Tausin, Floco. "Zwischen Innenwelt und Aussenwelt. Entoptische Phänomene und ihre Bedeutung für Bewusstseinsentwicklung und Spiritualität". *Schlangentanz* 3, 2006c
- Tausin, Floco. "Entoptic Art – Entoptische Erscheinungen als Inspirationsquelle in der zeitgenössischen bildenden Kunst". *Extremnews*, 2007a.
<http://www.extremnews.com/berichte/vermischtes/396b116f79905e4> (29.1.07)
- Tausin, Floco. "Wenn sich die Haare sträuben. Das Prickeln auf der Haut als universelles spirituelles Phänomen". *Esoteria* 1, 2007b
- Tausin, Floco. *Mouches Volantes. Eye Floaters as Shining Structure of Consciousness*. Bern: Leuchtstruktur Verlag 2009a
- Tausin, Floco. "Open Eye Meditation. The visual way to the development of the inner sense". *The International Journal of Healing and Caring (IJHC)* 2009b, 9(3), 1-10.
<http://www.wholistichealingresearch.com/ijhchome> (28.8.09)
- Waterwolf. "Migraine Symptoms Without Headaches". *Essortment*.
http://www.essortment.com/articles/migraine-symptoms-headaches_104450.htm (16.11.09)

Images

- Dodick, David W, Gargus J. Jay. "Migräne – Leider keine Einbildung". *Spektrum der Wissenschaft* 2009, 10: 52
- Makelessnoise. Migraine isn't fun. Photo by
http://farm3.static.flickr.com/2045/2450239227_ce9850c377.jpg?v=0 .
- Joana Roja. Migraine Aura. (http://www.flickr.com/photos/cats_mom/2758240218/).

The book:

Floco Tausin ,*Mouches Volantes. Eye Floaters as Shining Structure of Consciousness*.

Floco Tausin tells the story about his time of learning with spiritual teacher and seer Nestor, taking place in the hilly region of Emmental, Switzerland. The mystic teachings focus on the widely known but underestimated dots and strands floating in our field of vision, known as eye floaters or *mouches volantes*. Whereas in ophthalmology, floaters are considered a harmless vitreous opacity, the author gradually learns about them to see and reveals the first emergence of the shining structure formed by our consciousness.

»Mouches Volantes« explores the topic of eye floaters in a much wider sense than the usual medical explanations. It merges scientific research, esoteric philosophy and practical consciousness development, and observes the spiritual meaning and everyday life implications of these dots and strands.

The name Floco Tausin is a pseudonym. The author has studied at the Faculty of the Humanities at the University of Bern. In theory and practice he is engaged in the research of subjective visual phenomena in connection with altered states of consciousness and the development of consciousness as such. In 2009, he published the mystical story “Mouches Volantes” about the spiritual dimension of eye floaters.

Floco Tausin
c/o Leuchtstruktur Verlag
P. O. Box 1357
CH-3072 Ostermundigen, Switzerland
<http://www.eye-floaters.info>
floco.tausin@eye-floaters.info



TERMS OF USE

The International Journal of Healing and Caring On Line is distributed electronically. You may choose to print your downloaded copy for relaxed reading.

We encourage you to share this article with friends and colleagues.

The International Journal of Healing and Caring – On Line

P.O. Box 76, Bellmawr, NJ 08099

Phone (609) 714-1885 (519) 265-0746

Email: center@ijhc.org Website: <http://www.ijhc.org>

Copyright © 2010 IJHC. All rights reserved.

DISCLAIMER: <http://www.wholistichealingresearch.com/disclaimer.html>