



IN THE ISOLATION POD AT FLOAT OM

TANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

A float in the isolation pod will bring you up against yourself,
and you might be the better for it **BY RICK LEVIN**

PHOTOS BY TRASK BEDORTHA

For as long as I can remember, I've been fascinated by the idea of submerging myself in a sensory deprivation tank.

As a kid, I was mesmerized by Ken Russell's 1980 sci-fi film *Altered States*, in which William Hurt plays an abnormal psychologist who repeatedly enters an isolation tank with increasingly drastic and surreal results, eventually emerging as some regressed form of Neanderthal man and then, finally, a big ball of protoplasmic consciousness swirling on the event horizon of galactic nothingness.

I understand the manic urge that drives a person inward on a spiritual search for awakening, and I've made my own stumbling lunges at inwardness and enlightenment: philosophy, meditation, sex, the derangement of drugs — lots of drugs. There were moments of revelation and oneness, to be sure, but for the most part my self-facilitated attempts at higher consciousness were misguided, a kind of greedy spiritual materialism that sought release in exactly what was imprisoning me.

Avatars like Buddha and Jesus had a hard enough time convincing people, way back when, to turn away from trivial earthly distraction and instead seek a meaningful personal connection to the eternal spin of the cosmos. These days, everything is stimulus and response: an endless noisy barrage of input that buttresses a culture of narcissism and pathological distraction. We have lost the ability to be still, silent, unbusy.

So what happens when you remove all stimuli? I don't mean simply putting on your sweats, turning off the television and sitting in your living room with the lights out. In an isolation tank, everything is removed: the water is kept at a skin-neutral 93.5 degrees and loaded with enough salt that you float weightlessly, and all light and sound are absent. In a sense, all that's left is your consciousness, your mind.

And there you are, in the void.

ANKUSH VIMAWALA FOUNDED FLOAT OM Healing Center & Tranquility Tanks in Eugene four years ago. Having studied computer engineering in India before receiving his master's degree in computer science from Oregon State University, a job in software engineering brought Vimawala to Eugene.

After nearly a decade in an office, Vimawala started to burn out. "Gradually, over time, the corporate culture began to make less sense to me," he says. "Being stuck in a cubicle behind a computer screen all day was also starting to feel draining. In 2012, I finally couldn't take it any longer and left."

A student of Theravada Buddhism, Vimawala first heard about isolation tanks during a course in Vipassana meditation. He did his first float at Float On in Portland and was "blown away." After this first experience, he says, "I felt like I would on day three of a 10-day silent meditation retreat."

Like so many consciousness-expanding devices — hello Albert Hoffman and LSD! — the creation and development of isolation tanks had nothing to do with altered states and everything to do with scientific research.

The first tank was developed in 1954 by neuropsychiatrist John Lilly, who wanted to investigate the effects of sensory deprivation on the human mind. (Interestingly, Lilly eventually floated on LSD and wrote about it.)

Since then, floatation tanks have grown in popularity as a form of alternative health care. They are promoted as aiding in the achievement of meditative states as well as a means of relaxation and healing, both physically and mentally. Pro athletes like Olympic runner Carl Lewis and NBA sharpshooter Stephen Curry reportedly use float tanks to help them in visualization techniques.

Float Om has two floatation tanks, one a small pod that looks like a space capsule and a larger shallow pool enclosed in a small room. Vimawala describes his tanks as "light-proof and sound-proof enclosures with about 10

inches of water, with about a thousand pounds of Epsom salt dissolved. The salt water holds you up, like the Dead Sea. People go into the tank and float in darkness and silence for about 90 minutes."

It's suggested that folks prepare for a float by taking it easy on caffeine and cigarettes, and avoid eating anything heavy beforehand; the more calm and meditative you are when you enter, the better.

"When people ask me how best to prepare mentally and emotionally for their float, that is one thing I always say: Let go of any expectations and trust that what is to be revealed will be in exactly the way that it is supposed to be."

HEADING TO MY FIRST-EVER FLOAT at Float Om, I was nervous and excited. My greatest fear was that, removed from all external stimulation and left utterly to my own devices, I would discover that I am indeed just an empty shell of a man, incapable of conjuring a single meaningful thought without the echo of an audience.

I was also afraid I'd be cold the whole time.

Vimawala ushered me into the small room, pointed out the earplugs and the shower, showed me how to open and close the door on the tank, and then left. I stripped down nude, showered, put the waxy mold in my ears and stepped into the pod. I shut the door.

The water felt warmish and slick, almost slimy, but not in a distracting or gross way; in fact, I quickly forgot about issues of cold vs. warm, so it was indeed skin-neutral in effect. The darkness was complete — more complete than when you merely shut your eyes at night. Total blackness, and total silence, which brought out a slight ringing in my ears, the tinnitus of modern life.

The effect of zero gravity felt fantastic on my body. I'd opted for the floaty neck pillow, because Vimawala explained that many people experience strain in their shoulders when floating unaided. I spent a while adjusting to my environment: thinking about it, where I was, what