

1 Relaxation

Oh my God! The tension I call Jeff was gone! [#2417]

A deep sense of relaxation is one of the most common characteristics coemerging with the experience of pure awareness. For example, one of our participants conveyed the feeling figuratively, “. . . as if I was floating in water, on my back, under a bright sun” (#2065), while another described it quite simply and literally as a feeling of “Okayness” (#172). Perhaps pure awareness is something like a previously unnoticed baseline state of conscious experience, an inner surface on which we are always “floating,” even though our attention is almost always captured by something else, like the bright sun above us? Perhaps meditation is what enables us to become aware of this invisible inner surface and then move onto it, learning how to effortlessly glide along from moment to moment, like a paraglider who has discovered a thermal, a thin layer of heated air to ride on? In any case, to judge from the phenomenological material that we have gathered, it seems clear that the nonconceptual awareness of awareness itself is something one can relax *into* (or *onto* the surface of) by gradually letting go, gently dissolving all residual tensions in body and mind. One of our participants figuratively described this way of accessing pure awareness as “gently ‘sitting back’ into it” (#2619).

The phenomenology of relaxation and ease is so salient and widespread that I will give just six introductory examples here:

1647 [. . .] Like the more I can quiet my physical and mental stress and anxiety the more I can uncover of this baseline reality of experience. It did not feel like something I could strive to achieve through hard work . . . but more like something I could relax or ease into.

1870 A feeling of complete ease, well-being, and presence with waves of bliss, effortless and with almost no thoughts.

2319 Pure relaxation, happiness.

2620 My sensations become soft and subtle. My body is flooded with this gentleness, it relaxes, muscular tensions are released . . . until I'm hardly aware of it anymore and enter a deep space of silence. [. . .]

3012 [. . .] a feeling of calmness appeared, my body relaxed, the breath breathed itself. I had only a weak feeling of "I"; the experience of clarity, boundlessness, connectedness with everything was in the foreground. Feelings of peace, happiness, "everything is okay the way it is," arose within me. [. . .]

3363 It started as a regular experience, with at first a lot of ideas, images, and "noises." Then a gradual relaxation. Then a beginning of letting go of any self-control. Then rather brief toward the end of the session, a state of peace, clarity, dissolving of body awareness and stillness of the mind.

Psychometrics, Nonsensational Awe, and Existential Ease

The more you talk and think, the farther away you get.

—*Inscription on Faith in Mind*, Seng-ts'an (Third Chinese Zen Patriarch; † 606)

Let us now slowly begin to look at these first-person reports from the third-person perspective of empirical science. We had 1,403 usable questionnaires; our participants had a median age of fifty-two years (ranging from seventeen to eighty-eight) and were roughly evenly split between men and women (48.5 percent versus 50.0 percent stated their sex). The majority of meditators practiced regularly (77.3 percent), were free of diagnosed mental disorders (92.4 percent), and did not regularly use any psychoactive substances (84.0 percent). Vipassanā (43.9 percent) and Zen (34.9 percent) were the most frequently practiced meditation techniques.

Let us look at some of the ninety-two questions we asked.¹ Figure 1.1 shows the statistical distribution of our ninety-two items across the sample of participants. Here, we can see that the experiential qualities of "being at ease," "being at peace," "being in the present moment," and "feeling whole" are even more frequently associated with the experience of pure awareness or consciousness *as such* than "relaxation" itself is. We can also see that in terms of sheer frequency, the phenomenological qualities of ease and relaxation are closely followed by other item descriptions that have a more philosophical flavor, like "pure being," "nonvisual clarity," "unity," and an experience of "deep, unbounded silence."

As you can see, the highest average ratings were given to items related to well-being and relaxation; the overall lowest ratings concerned the presence of pain during the

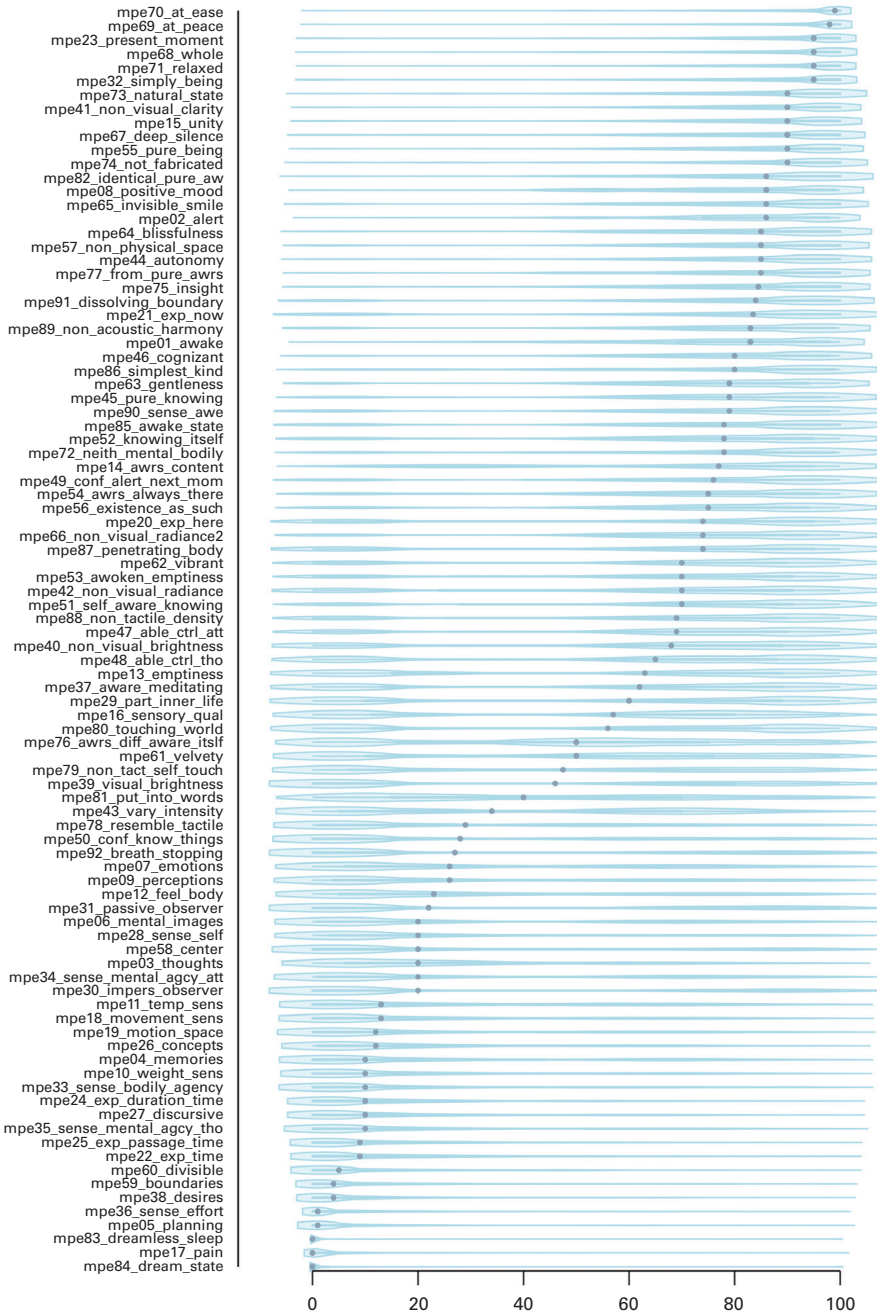


Figure 1.1

Statistical distribution of questionnaire items in our analysis sample (n=1403; dots indicate medians). The published version of this paper, including more color figures and the questionnaire itself, is available for free on mpe-project.info. There, you will also find research updates, free supplementary materials to download, and, in case you want to participate in our research, the latest version of our survey.

experience and the presence of pure awareness in the dream state. We interpreted the material by dividing it into twelve factors, which are groups or clusters of highly inter-related questionnaire items. These factors will be explained in chapter 2.

In the second-strongest item cluster, factor 2 (which we later dubbed “Peace, Bliss, and Silence”), the top three components were feelings of relaxation, peace, and ease. However, this cluster also contained many items via which our participants indicated that the pure-awareness experience was “the natural state” (see chapter 12 for some reports), describing it as an experience of “pure being” (see chapter 26). This cluster could also be characterized in terms of a quality of gentleness and bliss that is strikingly nonemotional (see the following, and chapter 16), while also often confirming the original working hypothesis that this was “the simplest state of conscious experience” that they knew (chapter 16). This seems to imply that there is a specific sense in which the pure experience of awareness itself is the human default state. Again, I will say more about this in the next chapter.

The experience of relaxation and ease is perhaps the best-known effect of meditation practice in general, and it was widely reported in our survey responses. For our respondents, this effect also often involves a simple experience of deep, unbounded silence and “existence as such,” which is described as natural and gentle. In addition, the two items relating to the phenomenal experience of “peace” and “wholeness” show an absence of mental conflict and point to an increased degree of integration associated with relaxation. This is to be expected in all states in which (1) the constant competition of mental processes for the focus of attention has subsided (e.g., because spontaneous, task-unrelated thoughts have stopped arising); and (2) the “contraction” of conscious experience into a first-person perspective has been attenuated (we will return to this point in chapter 8). It is interesting to note that recent research on mind-wandering has generally shown that a wandering mind is an unhappy mind,² while three items in factor 2 pick out positive mood and the phenomenal quality of “bliss” as frequently coemerging with the silent mind of the meditator.

As we will see in the course of this book, although minimal phenomenal experience (MPE) as such is not an emotional state, it can certainly trigger a whole spectrum of mostly positive affective reactions like joy, existential relief, gratitude, nonpersonal love, awe, and wonder.³ In particular, the experience of pure awareness or MPE can sometimes coexist with a mostly subtle but clearly noticeable form of bliss, an experience that has sometimes been described as an “invisible smile” (item 65 in our questionnaire). Factor 2, therefore, includes not only the phenomenology of peace, wholeness, inner ease, pure being, and silence, but also various forms of what in German is sometimes called *stilles Entzücken* (“silent delight”). One report (#1629) described this

subtle yet nonemotional experience like this: “There was also an equanimous joy—not coarse/rugged, but a subtle yet pervasive equanimity with positive intonations.” To be more precise, pure awareness seems intimately connected with a calm and entirely undramatic phenomenology of rapture and “nonsensational awe.”

These observations lead us to the first of two new phenomenological concepts that I want to offer in this chapter. In the course of this book, I will provide a series of new conceptual instruments to help us gain a new perspective on some philosophical issue or to describe the phenomenology of meditation more clearly. “Nonsensational awe” is the first of these new tools. I take it directly from one of our participants (who called it *sensationsloses Staunen* in German, #3524), and it refers to a subtle sense of wonder that some of us, meditators and nonmeditators alike, may have experienced now and then and may even remember from our childhoods (see chapter 15 for more on the experience of joy, awe, bliss, and gratitude; and chapter 32 for the qualities of spontaneity and effortlessness). Another of our participants called this experience “calm awe” (#1662); both terms very precisely pick out the experiential quality I am referring to.

Here is a second conceptual tool to describe the phenomenological character of awareness per se in meditation more clearly, another new instrument that may perhaps prove to be helpful at a later stage: “existential ease.” What does this one mean? Here, my point is that contemplative practice goes far beyond mental or physical relaxation because it often generates a much deeper form of ease and serenity, which I will hereafter refer to as “existential ease.” If we take reports about the fine-grained phenomenology of real-life meditators seriously, then we find not only that the phenomenal qualities of relaxation and ease are statistically correlated with the experience of peace and deep, unbounded silence, and with the aforementioned qualities like gentleness and the feeling of “being whole,” but also that they are intimately connected to states of “simply being” and “pure being.” If we accept our participants’ reports at face value, then they refer to states in which one’s own mere existence *as such* is felt. Again, we will devote a whole chapter (chapter 26) to this aspect later.

A tentative first conclusion is that the phenomenology of relaxation, peace, and ease can be related to those states of conscious experience in which our own being and existence per se, perhaps the sheer experience of aliveness, are pulled into the foreground. There are many kinds of relaxation, such as the dull and/or slightly disoriented relaxation induced by psychoactive substances like alcohol or cannabis or the visceral relaxation that follows a hearty meal. An emotional state of low tension, lacking the arousal triggered by anger, anxiety, or fear, can be pleasant while entirely lacking any sense of mental clarity and any quality of “pure being.” It is the phenomenological *integration* of relaxation, lucid clarity, and a state of pure being that I mean when I refer

to “existential ease.” Pure awareness is sometimes an *existential* experience, but non-conceptually, in a silent and very undramatic way. The subjective quality of existential ease, therefore, could be a second important aspect of what it means to experience the phenomenal character of awareness per se. Perhaps the two experiential aspects of “nonsensational awe” and “existential ease” could function as our first candidates for new qualitative markers of MPE.

In slowly and carefully beginning to approach the experience of pure awareness, we must be acutely aware of the limitations of scientific research, because contemplative phenomenology without intellectual honesty immediately leads us into dead ends (I will say more about this in chapters 17, 31, and 32, and the epilogue). Here is a first example of what we must always keep in mind: We must never forget that we are dealing here only with statistical properties of verbal reports, never with the experience itself. Reports can be strongly influenced by respondents’ background beliefs, by their cultural context, and/or by the specific conceptual tools that were available to them to describe their own experience. Reports may be influenced by a subject’s capacity to even understand the questions in a survey or by changes in the way that responses are given as the questionnaire unfolds (e.g., as a result of gradually developing a putatively clearer idea of “what this is all about”). Experiential reports may also be colored by subtle misunderstandings (like this being some sort of “test” that one has to pass, not just a descriptive survey), by a resulting motivation to please the experimenter, or even by the opposing aim to successfully demonstrate to scientists that, as committed practitioners, they know all of this much better themselves and these questions are all quite dubious and childish—a futile and misguided attempt to approximate something utterly ineffable that of course the subject herself knows with great certainty.

Do you recall the fable of the elephant and the blind? I will come back to it from time to time. Every blind-born person has a different background and comes from a different home, and all the hands touching the elephant look slightly different too. Some of the blind people will be bored, some will be a bit too interested, and some will encounter a rising sense of uncertainty. And some will ask: Who is this king anyway? Who gave him the right to investigate the elephant in this way, sending out his poor servants to drag us all into this slightly awkward situation? Probably most of the other blind guys are crazy anyway . . .

But again, if we took an ensemble of 1,403 blind human beings and asked each of them to touch the elephant ninety-two times, then we could cancel out a lot of local errors simply by statistical averaging. There will always be outliers, but combining semantic analysis of existing, traditional theories of pure consciousness with statistical methods, while also adding a more qualitative evaluation of actual written reports

from different cultural backgrounds, can perhaps help.⁴ It may eventually give us a more robust picture of the experiential landscape. However, my first general point still stands: We must never forget that we are dealing with properties of verbal reports, with concepts and theories, but never with the experience itself.

I do believe that great and important progress can still be made with regard to pure awareness, but we must always be clear about the limitations of science—especially when it comes to contemplative practice itself. As Rgyal ba Yang dgon pa says in his *Song of the Seven Direct Introductions*: “Don’t try to describe this awareness that is beyond thought. Don’t adulterate it with conceptual analysis but give it free rein!”⁵ MPE, the experience of pure awareness, is *the* prime example of ineffability. This phenomenological fact has to be recognized and remembered; at the same time, it is one of the many reasons why the experience of pure awareness should matter so much to all those interested in an empirically informed philosophy of mind. As I will explain in chapter 17 and expand on at many other points in this book, philosophy and science are “epistemic practices,” just as meditation itself is, because they aim to generate knowledge. But there are different kinds of knowing; it is difficult to build bridges; and at least for meditative practice itself, the simple statement presented in the epigraph at the start of this section may well be true: “The more you talk and think, the farther away you get.” Its author, Seng-ts’an—who died in 606 as the third Chinese Patriarch of Chan after Bodhidharma and as the thirtieth Patriarch after Siddhārtha Gautama Buddha—is traditionally honored as the author of a famous poem entitled “Inscription on Faith in Mind.” There is a fundamental problem of ineffability, and this ancient poem gives us the reason why:

When the subject disappears,
There can be no measuring and comparing.⁶

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The Elephant and the Blind

The Experience of Pure Consciousness: Philosophy,
Science, and 500+ Experiential Reports

By: Thomas Metzinger

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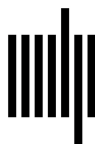
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