

## 5 Clarity

Unreified clarity. [#2561]

The phenomenal character of clarity is intimately related to the phenomenal character of epistemic openness, the spontaneously occurring phenomenal experience of one's own capacity to know. Clarity is described in terms of qualities like lightness and spaciousness or depth and subtlety, as a continuing state of equilibrium, a sense of wakeful presence, a calm and timeless form of stillness, a gentle form of acuity or sharpness, or a form of perception without center or boundaries. One participant metaphorically described it as “[c]lear water—pulsating at high frequency—boundless vastness and splendor” (#693). Clarity is also deeply connected to the phenomenology of “pure knowing,” which we will begin to discuss in the second part of this chapter. Here are nine examples:

1818 [. . .] I turned my attention to everything arising, the pain, emotional qualities, and thoughts, and at the same moment this state of the observer took over and everything opened up and there was just this knowing of sensations coming and going, no bad or good, just watching these sensations do their thing. There was a definite sense of lightness and spaciousness and extreme clarity.

2103 Occasionally, very rarely, I have experienced a brief state of clarity during meditation where the usual case of buffeting between several observed sensations falls into a condition of equilibrium and I am, for just a moment, at a place where my attention is neither tied to anything nor pulled into one or more directions. I'm conscious of this brief state and feel like I'm observing uninterrupted conscious awareness.

2623 [. . .] Clear, awake, present, unmoved, while being aware of very subtle thoughts. Like a full moon covered by a very thin veil. [. . .]

2778 [. . .] completely clear, calm attention like a clear vibration of the whole body that you feel as such but that isn't limited, [. . .] a time- and spacelessness

and yet clear awareness of sounds, without reaction or “something” following. Identity, ego, narrative were not present, the state was clear, alert, nonjudgmental, nonself-reflexive, without a sense of duration, and desireless. Peaceful and without direction, gentle and yet somehow sharp, in a soft clarity [ . . . ]

2602 Clarity, everything is exactly as it is. I don’t have to change anything. The state forms the background to everything that can be experienced.

2747 [ . . . ] clear, pure consciousness, contentless, empty, silent, calm, aware, endless depth—usually in the morning hours [ . . . ].

3052 I can experience pure clarity through the awareness of the presence of Being, without visual perception. [ . . . ]

3156 [ . . . ] Rather cool and boundless like the universe. Within it no self, which formed like air bubbles in water only when the experience faded away. In this universe there was pure knowledge and perception without a center . . . [ . . . ]

3279 [ . . . ] In this state I very often experience Gyan Shakti, a state of *knowingness* that is also present when resting after the meditation and for some time afterward. The experience of pure consciousness is of extremely deep-clear and subtle presence, as well as of wonderful lightness.

### An Unobstructed Epistemic Space

As space pervades, awareness pervades. Like space, *rigpa* is all encompassing, nothing is outside of it. Just as the world and beings are pervaded by space, *rigpa* pervades the minds of all beings.

—Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche (1920–1996), *Vajra Speech*

Space is the example for mind essence, because space is unmade. But mind essence is not totally like space, in that space cannot think. Space has no knowing. Our mind is cognizant emptiness—empty like space, but with a natural knowing. That union of cognizance and emptiness is seen when recognizing. It is immediate, like the example I mentioned of pointing into mid-air. You do not have to wait to raise your arm for your finger to touch space—you are already touching space, all the time. You do not have to move your hand forward; the contact is already occurring and has been your entire life. All you have to do is recognize that it is taking place. It’s the same with mind essence.

—Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche (1920–1996), *As It Is*, II

In chapter 4, we encountered the idea of “epistemic openness.” In this chapter, I want to introduce a second conceptual instrument, intimately related to the first: the notion of an “epistemic space,” a space of knowing. Epistemic openness is the openness of an

unobstructed epistemic space, and experiencing pure awareness simply means having a *model* of this space, nonconceptually knowing that it exists.<sup>1</sup> Pure awareness could be described as the experience of being knowingly poised over epistemic space.<sup>2</sup> In this context, we will also look at the phenomenology of “unboundedness.” The experience of clarity that is the focus of this chapter can be described as the experience of an unbounded space of knowing, a space that is currently unobstructed. It is pure awareness itself, unclouded and entirely open.

In my view, the epistemic-space metaphor is the best phenomenological metaphor for pure consciousness or minimal phenomenal experience (MPE). This metaphor is found in many places in the contemplative literature. Consciousness per se is a model of an all-pervading inner space of knowing, but, as the ancient analogy (presented in the words of Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche at the beginning of this section) beautifully shows, you cannot directly grasp, feel, or touch the space itself by cognitive means. Why is this so? The metaphor tells us why: You cannot grasp and hold physical space with your physical hands. But your hands have always been *in* this space, and every single one of your bodily movements always already took place in it. Physical space cannot be grasped, but it is a condition of possibility for grasping movements, whether you know it or not. It is the same for MPE space: It cannot be cognitively grasped—by forming a concept of it, or thinking a thought about it—but it is the precondition for all cognitive grasping, for trying to conceive of awareness itself by using conscious thought (more about this in chapters 27 and 31). The Latin root of “to conceive,” *conci-pere*, means to take in and hold, and by the fourteenth century, a second meaning had emerged: to take into your mind, to cognitively grasp something. This is what cannot be done to MPE space, but is what MPE space allows us to do to everything else.

“Touching” pure awareness would mean directing and “pointing” the focus of attention to MPE space itself, thereby turning it into an object of inner attention. Thinking is like grasping; attending is like pointing. The focus of attention is like your mental fingertip. Attention is a nonconceptual way of allocating computational resources in the brain, of optimizing for precision. But this cannot work for MPE space: You cannot conceive of awareness itself by using conscious, conceptual thought, and you cannot use the subsymbolic mechanism of deliberate attention either—just as you cannot successfully point the tip of your finger to physical space and thereby “make contact.” In fact, contact has been there all along; you have been “in touch” all the time without noticing. It is the same for what Edmund Husserl called the *Blickstrahl der Aufmerksamkeit*, the “ray glance of attention”: Every single one of its pointing movements always already took place in what I will from now on call the inner “model of epistemic space.” Just like physical space, epistemic space creates an allocentric frame

of reference: It is unbounded and uncentered, even though of course its variable content is perspectival. All the rich content making up the virtual world in which we live our conscious lives, being a simulation of an embodied behavioral space, is egocentric; there are self-oriented perceptual horizons and parallel lines that seem to meet in infinity (more on this in chapter 29). There is a single perspective, but it is a structural feature that ultimately belongs to the level of content, creating a second-order experiential frame of reference. Normally, there may be egocentric-to-allocentric and/or allocentric-to-egocentric mappings of which we are mostly unaware. I think that ordinary states of consciousness are characterized by the fact that the egocentric frame of reference is very dominant because it almost occludes the allocentric frame on which it is superimposed—but which sometimes can be experienced in isolation. We find this at various points in our phenomenological data. One of the participants in our study said: “I am not in the world—the world is in me! I am the space in which everything appears” (#2299). How does this relate to the phenomenology of “clarity”?

Generally, a *space* is clear if there are no obstacles in it, if we can in principle move and navigate in this space freely, if the many potential paths that we could take through it are not blocked and passage is not obstructed. There is an openness. This openness can be consciously experienced. In addition, a clear and unobstructed space holds a very large number of possibilities, a fact that is perhaps reflected in the abstract phenomenal quality of “vastness” reported by many of our meditators. Along with these two global qualities of unobstructedness and vastness, we may also experience the specific potential for expansion: Awareness is a space of knowledge, and of course it can be expanded. In meditation, we can sometimes experience this space itself, as an unobstructed whole, including its potential for expansion. It is not even obstructed by a center; it is unbounded.

The phenomenology of unboundedness is an important and recurring element in published reports about pure awareness. Here are three case studies from the literature:

**Case study #1.** I experience pure consciousness as a state of unboundedness and total ease and deep relaxation. There are no thoughts, no feelings, or any other sensations like weight or temperature. I just know I am. There is no notion of time or space, but my mind is fully awake and perfectly clear. It is a very simple and natural state.<sup>3</sup>

**Case study #2.** [. . .] a state of complete rest, full consciousness without content and unbounded in time and space.<sup>4</sup>

**Case study #3.** [. . .] a couple of times per week I experience deep, unbounded silence, during which I am completely aware and awake, but no thoughts are present. There is no awareness of where I am, or the passage of time. I feel completely whole and at peace.<sup>5</sup>

Phenomenologically, “unboundedness” means that there is no second, finite region to which attention could be directed, and there are no consciously experienced boundaries, limits, or horizon. Importantly, to say that the space of pure consciousness is “boundless” does not imply that there is an explicit experience of infinite expansion or of large distances. Rather, it means that there is no “other side beyond the boundary” to which attention could shift. To give an example, in visual awareness, attention can shift from a red patch into an adjacent green patch, transgressing a chromatic boundary. In the phenomenology of tonic alertness, there is no such boundary because everything outside our inner model of the epistemic space created by wakefulness cannot be deliberately attended to: It is simply unconscious.

Taking meditators’ reports of unboundedness seriously also leads us to an unexpected conceptual point that has a deep philosophical flavor: MPE itself is not only “nondual” (in terms of lacking the internal manifold created by a dynamic subject/object structure; see chapters 26 and 27 for more), it is also not one. This philosophical issue was discovered a long time ago. As a matter of fact, in Śāntarakṣita’s “Ornament of the Middle Way,” the *Madhyamakālaṃkāra*, we find the classical “neither-one-nor-many argument,” which concludes that all phenomena are open in the sense of having no inherent nature at all because in reality, they have neither a singular nor a manifold nature. Śāntarakṣita (725–788) is one of the most important thinkers in the history of Indian and Tibetan Buddhist philosophy. His work has echoed through the centuries and is discussed by logicians to this day.<sup>6</sup> It is plausible to assume that the fact that such intense philosophical debates occurred at all was thanks to the existence of a widespread, vivid, and distinct *phenomenology* that was recognized as being in urgent need of consistent conceptual analysis. Apparently, what I am trying to approximate here as the unbounded and unstructured phenomenal character of MPE was something well known many centuries ago.

So unboundedness seems to be a crucial part of pure awareness, in our reports and in testimony from many hundreds of years ago. But once again, it would be a mistake to interpret the phenomenology of unboundedness as an explicitly experienced and merely quantitative infinity, or as a concrete, endless expanse of some sort. It means only that the subtle experiential character in question includes the *potential* for expansion, and in the experience of pure awareness itself, there is no such thing as a “beyond”—that is, *another* consciously experienced finite region or realm “on the other side” of a boundary. This is interesting because it seems to imply that in the phenomenological domain of MPE, there are no countable entities: The domain is an unstructured space that has neither center nor periphery and cannot be introspectively *individuated* to create smaller, indivisible units of pure-awareness experience—not even a single one. So even if we take a modern and slightly radical bottom-up approach that

starts from real-life experiential reports given by present-day meditators, it seems that we must add “non-oneness” to “nonduality.” The metaphysical neither-one-nor-many principle returns in consciousness research.<sup>7</sup>

Our two new concepts of “epistemic openness” and “epistemic space” refer to an open inner space holding a very large number of possibilities for knowing the world and ourselves. Knowing *as a self*, from an egoic first-person perspective, is only one of these possibilities, one of many possible data formats, although one that has been successful for biological beings like humans, who have all our sense organs and all our effectors (our arms, legs, vocal cords, etc.) united in a single body. In chapter 27, I will call this the “single-embodiment constraint” and will relate it to nondual awareness. Our *behavioral* space is centered on a single creature, and the same is true of the conscious, experiential model of this space that our brain typically constructs: This model has a center, and it has limitations. We are *situated*. But our inner model of *epistemic* space does not share these features. It can be expanded, and a very large number of perspectives and situations can be enfolded within it. It is not egocentric. Perhaps what today we call “pure awareness” is the shared, primordial data format of all sentient beings, some sort of fundamental constant? Is MPE the most abstract data format that conscious beings can use?

By definition, an epistemic space is a space of possibilities: It contains every possible epistemic scenario and every dynamic partitioning of itself that could ever take place—everything that could *potentially* be known and experienced by a given system. An epistemic space contains the repertoire of knowledge states that a given system has. Therefore, it encompasses many ways of accessing world and self, of making reality available to itself, at this specific location in time and space.

An important concept in current debates on consciousness is “global availability.” The idea is that—in purely functional terms—conscious information is globally available: precisely the information that we can access simultaneously with all our faculties, with thinking, with attention, or with selective action control. Indeed, perhaps the earliest of all the recent theories of consciousness, the Global Workspace Theory first formulated by the neuroscientist Bernard Baars in 1988, states that conscious information resides in global working memory; consciousness is simply global availability. Function, however, does not automatically lead to phenomenality.

My own theory goes a step further: Consciousness arises only when a model of this working memory has appeared in global working memory itself. It is not sufficient for the enormous potential of cognitive possibilities—the many different ways of making the world and oneself available—to merely exist. The system must also *recognize* them. We will come back to this point in chapters 9 and 10.

It seems as if this almost infinite potential can sometimes be experienced in meditation, but in a simple, nonconceptual, and entirely undramatic way. As I said earlier, you can be peacefully “poised over it.” Interestingly, we can conclude that the model of such a space would have to be characterized by a very high degree of what some scientists call “counterfactual invariance”: You cannot imagine a scenario where it would be absent because whatever the system could know or experience would necessarily take place within it. You cannot imagine what it is like to be unconscious.

It is possible to generalize to some extent about the nature of epistemic space as one important aspect of pure awareness. But we must also remember not to overgeneralize to the point of inaccuracy, extrapolating a general theory of consciousness from too few empirical facts. We are embodied, physical beings; impermanent products of evolution. All biological creatures have different capacities for knowing the world and themselves, and many of them may not be sentient at all. For humans, the wakeful clarity of pure awareness is related to a specific set of epistemic capacities and the representational space opened up by them. For example, as we saw in chapter 4, the nature of pure awareness for us is tied to “high stimulus-readiness,” “orientation readiness,” plus the mere “capacity for mental self-control” on the level of attention and cognition. What’s more, our experience of this space of possibilities will always come in different degrees of lucidity, clarity, and stability—for two main reasons. First, the epistemic capacity of the biological organism itself varies over time: Certain paths and possibilities may be temporarily blocked and unblocked. When ill with fever, we may not be able to concentrate or think clearly; in a dream state, we are unable to control our attention. But you can think clearly or even try to meditate during a *lucid* dream, when your self-model has changed<sup>8</sup> and you “know” that you are dreaming (chapter 21)—or after you have woken up. Second, the bodily background conditions are variable, resulting in changing stability levels in our inner model of our epistemic capacity itself: Epistemic openness and our inner model of it can be more or less recognizable, either spontaneously foregrounded or receding barely noticed into the background. One of the participants in our study coined the term “Basal Clarity” (see #3058 in chapter 21). It seems that the clarity of empty cognizance is something fundamental, perhaps something on which, unbeknownst to the subject of experience, everything else rests.

Many of the dimensions of silence explored in chapter 3 bear some resemblance to the aspects of clarity considered in this chapter. Yet clarity is not the same as mental silence. In humankind’s contemplative traditions, it has long been known that it is perfectly possible to be conscious and have no thoughts at all while lacking clarity and lucidity. The space of awareness can be stable and unobstructed as low-level perceptual processes and sensorimotor integration run on autopilot, but with lucidity and clarity

nonetheless lacking. This is a well-known phenomenological effect during meditation. If my tentative theory of MPE is right, this happens because there is no stable model of the capacity to know. We are epistemically open, but we do not really *know* this openness. We may describe such sluggish or indeterminate states in terms of “mental torpor,” and empirical psychology has recently begun to investigate the interesting phenomenon of “mind blanking,” in which ongoing perception is uncoupled from attention and cognition.<sup>9</sup> But contemplative practitioners have known about this phenomenological possibility for many centuries: There can be silence, but it may not be a lucid silence; clarity may be lacking. So what is the main difference between the two? One answer is that the phenomenology of clarity, unlike that of silence, seems to need an additional element, a nonegoic form of self-awareness like the one that was statistically extracted as factor 8 in our study and that we labeled “Emptiness and Nonegoic Self-Awareness.” Perhaps this arises only when a silent mind recognizes itself as an open space of knowing (more on this in chapter 30).

Let us say, then, that the phenomenal character of “clarity” involves the existence of an unobstructed space of epistemic possibilities, and that it expresses the *possibility* of knowing on the level of conscious experience. It is lucid openness as such, implied by possessing the property of epistemic openness. If so, it is natural to look for examples of the pure-awareness experience in which we also find the phenomenal character of *actual* knowing. Sometimes this may even involve certainty, the quality of actually knowing that one knows. Can clarity in our narrow sense coexist with the thinking of thoughts, with attentively moving through the physical world, learning, actively gathering knowledge about it, and knowing that one knows?

The answer is yes. We find examples in the selection presented in this chapter (e.g., #1818, #3156, #3279), as well as in the contemplative phenomenology of direct perception (chapter 9), witnessing (chapter 19), nondual awareness (chapter 27), and nonegoic reflexivity (chapter 29), and at many other points in this book. This quality of clarity and “pure knowing” is an experience of subjective confidence; it is the specific phenomenal character of an actual epistemic process currently going on. This process is that of estimating the probability of knowledge possession and the depth of one’s own understanding—but not necessarily with any epistemic object. I think this basic, nondual property of “natural knowing” is what Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche was pointing us to in the second quotation presented at the beginning of this chapter.

Clearly, the phenomenology of pure awareness is often accompanied by a strong experience of insight, but in a nonintellectual and nonconceptual form. I have often termed it “epistemicity,” the phenomenal character of knowledge-possession itself.<sup>10</sup> In chapter 18, we will encounter epistemicity again as the “phenomenal signature of



knowing,” in the context of what has been described as the luminosity of pure consciousness. Taking the phenomenology of contemplative practice seriously demonstrates that epistemicity can occur without a self, without concepts or propositional mental content, and in the absence of subject/object structure and time representation. For example, it is an important component of perceptual awareness, a nonconceptual representation of what in statistics is called “subjective confidence”: the estimated accuracy of a perceptual choice and the congruence with prior expectations.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, the consciously experienced sense of confidence is a property of a model in your brain—and of course, there can also be a model of the overall space of knowing as a whole. Calling this subjective quality “epistemicity” may at first sound very abstract, but despite being an *unstructured* form of knowing, it is also a very concrete phenomenal experience. It is a nonemotional feeling of knowing that is neither cognitive nor perceptual—something that has nothing to do with perceived colors, sounds, or even internal bodily sensations, and that is distinct from any kind of discursive thought. The signature of knowing comes in degrees, and it has a distinct phenomenal character all its own.

This opens up a new perspective for the scientific project of constructing a minimal model of consciousness: The qualitative character of awareness itself could be a “pure” phenomenal experience of knowing, a state of minimal complexity (e.g., in that it has no subject and no object). During a full-absorption episode, there is no knowing self and no kind of juxtaposed, reified “thing” that is being known by this self.<sup>12</sup> This “nondual” nature of MPE will be the topic of later chapters (especially chapters 26 and 27). It is one major aspect of what we mean when we talk about nondual awareness being an *unstructured* experience of knowing—one that is not obstructed by a first-person perspective. Consciously experiencing an uncontracted variant of epistemicity may therefore be directly related to the phenomenology of clarity.



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# The Elephant and the Blind

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

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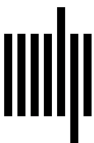
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