

10 Presence

A constant still presence that cannot be touched by words,
does not live in the realm of objects. [#789]

I was very present, but not there. [. . .] Pure existence. [#2943]

The quality of “presence” is a central feature of what it feels like to abide in pure awareness. But we must be careful, because “presence” may actually mean slightly different things to different people. One reading of “presence” is “being fully in the present moment.”

2901 A state free from fear and other negative feelings. Being only in the moment and no thoughts about future or past. No judgment, only the moment, free from judgments.

Being fully present as an embodied self while resting in choiceless awareness is a well-known form of contemplative experience. It can be very intense, stable, and crystal clear. However, abiding in a clear state of mind without thoughts, calmly resting in the present moment, is nonetheless a subtle and highly refined form of temporal experience. “Nowness” is not the same as “timelessness.” The same is true of the experience of mere duration, as in Jennifer Windt’s original theory¹ of what minimal phenomenal experience (MPE) might be (see chapter 22 for more on the experience of duration and “pure temporality”), because both forms of time experience still have a thickness to them. “Nowness” means that you locate yourself in a temporal order, as existing at some *point* in time, but in ordinary states of consciousness, this point is never really extensionless, as some kind of mathematical abstraction might suggest. Research has long shown that what we subjectively experience as a single psychological moment actually has extension in objective time, and that extension can vary greatly

depending on context (we will probe this experiential domain further in chapter 22).² Some descriptions of the phenomenology of embodied presence, therefore, may refer to a state where a minimal self is still present, imbued with a silent mind, temporarily liberated from its own inner narrative, mindfully embodied, and calmly located in space and time. So long as the phenomenology of “presence” emerges together with spatiotemporal self-location, a centered Here and a Now remain.

There are, however, additional readings of “presence” that are not directly related to time experience, such as those that relate instead to an experience of “nondual being” (chapter 26). Many intermediate stages appear to lead to a fully uncontracted state of presence in this wider sense. They are not easy to describe. Sometimes the aspects of selflessness and nonduality are not fully expressed, and presence is described as pure awareness, as something within the phenomenal field. But presence may also seem to be something in which everything else is held, something that permeates the whole field, with the meditator “bathing” in it. In his book *The Way of Effortless Mindfulness*, the American meditation teacher Loch Kelly described this process (which can be a form of practice) as “marinating” in the continuous field of awake awareness.³ In attempting to describe the quality of presence, some of our respondents use similar terminology:

1758 [. . .] What’s most characteristic about it is that awareness is a quality as such in the field of experience. That presence can actually be felt and permeates experience. It is not nondual but has a taste of nondual. There is a sense of self but it is light. Feel as if I’m held and bathing in presence. A sense of safety. Comfort. Being comforted by awareness. Still there is emotion and thoughts and stress. But all that is happening in presence. Being held by presence. A sense of a loving field permeating experience. Being the background which is coming forth.

Others described pure awareness as a fully selfless episode of wakeful presence, with or without imagery of immersion:

2565 [. . .] It is a feeling of bright lightness, boundlessly connected to the universe, pure presence without an experience of a self.

3542 My body feels as if it is being infused in fresh spring water. It is a comfortable but also refreshing feeling. Later a state of wakeful presence sets in, a short moment of emptiness that knows no self, the world is one.

The phenomenology of presence can sometimes have a fully nondual character, and at times it can coemerge with other aspects discussed in this book, like luminosity (chapter 18), soundness (chapter 7), and the experience of spatial immersion without self-location (chapter 23):

141 It was as if I was one with a glowing radiant happy warm presence that permeated through me and everything else—no separation in observing and observer—being right in the middle of it and yet not localized—a feeling like looking out—blissfully open and totally satisfied with everything. My surroundings radiated visually too—light-filled vastness, openness, and total harmony. Great joy and gratitude. [. . .]

This kind of presence seems to be a nondual form, not something that the meditator has fabricated. It simply arises. Selfless presence in this sense is an all-pervading, timeless experience of stillness, unity, and emptiness. There is presence, but it is not *you* who is present. Suddenly recognizing that can even be something of a shock:

3431 [. . .] I was perceiving nature perfectly well, but somehow differently from usual. Silent, even though birds could be heard. It felt like standing still and at the same time like total presence, although it wasn't me who was present. [. . .] This is not "relaxed," but also not tense. Simply very present, but not in the sense of "I am present." But even this "present" doesn't really capture it. It's like a "noticing everything" without "paying attention" to anything, that's why it's also not the feeling of being especially "mindful," because it's more that it just "is," nobody has to be mindful anymore. Maybe also because then there's just nobody left who could be mindful anymore. In any case, I'm not (anymore) in that moment. Sometimes there's also something startling about it.

The phenomenology of presence is intimately related to the frequently reported experiential character of existence *as such*, as if it were expanded into a comprehensive space of "nondual being" (more about which in chapter 26):

301 [. . .] It is a state about the knowledge of one's own existence in connection with something indescribable. A kind of presence that expands over everything and also implies everything. There are no questions there, no answers, no time, except the feeling of absolute silence and a feeling of connectedness. [. . .]

3320 [. . .] It was absolute presence in absolute presence of everything, which surrounded and simultaneously contained everything. [. . .]

Another result from this study is that the phenomenology of pure presence can also emerge as a full-absorption episode. In this case, pure presence is a stand-alone phenomenon, described as identical to awareness itself:

3294 [. . .] It was as if everything disappeared, body, mind, space and time, but awareness itself was still present. There were no particular qualities that involved self-reflection, like emotion etc., until after the experience ended

and I was again aware of my surroundings. This particular “pure presence” involved the emptiness of all content except awareness itself. As if awareness is the only thing that exists, but I am that awareness and not separate from it.

Spontaneous Presence and the Dolphin Model of Meditation

Naturally occurring timeless awareness—utterly lucid awakened mind—is something marvellous and superb, primordially and spontaneously present. [. . .]
As for this treasury of phenomenal space, source of everything, Nirvana does not need to be sought; it is primordially, spontaneously perfect.
—Longchen Rabjam (1308–1363), *The Precious Treasury of the Basic Space of Phenomena*

The concept of “presence” plays a central role in many traditional texts directly related to meditation and pure awareness. If we are interested in MPE, one fundamental problem is that these texts often do not distinguish between the phenomenology and metaphysics of pure awareness, but—from a Western, analytical perspective—also don’t offer any convincing argument for why these two fields of inquiry should be conflated. This illustrates how comparative philosophy—sometimes called “cross-cultural philosophy”—has to deal with conceptual schemes that may simply be incommensurable, and in more than one way. On the other hand, the traditional idea is often that “presence” is not a form of experiential content at all; rather, it equates to *manifestation* or “givenness” itself. Is there a meaningful distinction between appearance and reality for “presence,” “manifestation as such,” or “the mere aspect of givenness itself”? I definitely think so, but I could certainly be wrong. In comparative philosophy, we often confront difficult issues of methodological incommensurability, relating to the question of whether and how comparisons between different philosophical traditions can be conducted at all (just think of Western philosophy of cognitive science, *Advaita Vedanta*, and Tibetan Buddhism). Then there is the thorny issue of metaphysical and epistemological incommensurability: In finally developing new forms of cross-cultural philosophy that take not only Western approaches but all of humankind’s traditions seriously, how can we compare their different modes of justification and inquiry (like the epistemic practices of meditation versus rational argument), or even their different theories about what “existence” really is? Could there ever be a truly *global* philosophy of consciousness?

Here is a first example to consider. One central concept in the philosophical traditions of Advaita Vedanta and Kashmir Shaivism is *prakāśa*. *Prakāśa* is that which can never become an object, that which has no content or inner structure; it is the aspect of pure presence or pure manifestation in consciousness itself. Importantly, it also

contains the semantic element of “self-disclosure” or “self-evidencing” (as discussed in chapter 9, in the context of what Wittgenstein said about the inexpressible and the mystical). Here is a description of *prakāśa* from another Austrian philosopher, Wolfgang Fasching, who has done a lot of excellent work in this field:⁴

Yet although it [*prakāśa*] can never be given as an object, it is in no way concealed, rather it is essentially self-disclosing (*svaprakāśa*), i.e. its very being is its own revealedness without any subject–object difference. [. . .] Consciousness is the taking place of presence in which all this object-appearing with all its manifold modes and structures takes place, yet in itself it has no modes or structures, and nothing to analyse. It is utter simplicity.⁵

Using our new conceptual tools, we could now say that, phenomenologically, presence is the aspect of “givenness” that relates to epistemic openness, to wakefulness (as the conscious experience of tonic alertness), and to clarity itself. What becomes present is the same quality of being open to the world that we discussed in chapter 4. Please note, however, that “givenness” itself always remains an unclear and subtly misleading phenomenological term, simply because there really is no second person, no other self, to “do” the giving—the phenomenology of presence simply appears, in an apparently uncaused manner. It is not a social event. In its origin, “giving” is a dualistic personal-level predicate: Person A gives something to person B. “Givenness” can also have a hidden theological connotation (a fact that makes it attractive to antinaturalists) because A might be a personal God who reveals the truth—or “gives” Himself—to B. As the German philosopher Max Scheler (1874–1928) thought, revelation in this sense would be simply the specific type of givenness wherein the divine or the holy is given.⁶ But the world itself never “gives” anything. Nonetheless, the idea of unpersonified “giving” remains a reference point for many feelings of joy, awe, and gratitude (chapter 15), as well as for experiences of spontaneous presence, suchness, and unexpected self-revelation. In this and many other ways, the reports presented here can also be read as describing stages in which the qualities of epistemic openness, wakefulness, and clarity gradually manifest themselves, but without becoming properties of a person. It is therefore not a thing or agent that is present or absent, but rather a process. The phenomenology of presence can be described as the continuous *becoming-manifest* of epistemic openness.

What, then, is the space in which Wolfgang Fasching’s “taking place of presence” happens? From the perspective of modern philosophy and cognitive science, we could say that it is an integrated epistemic space—part of an embodied computational space in our brain, if you will. Different human beings or other conscious animals could certainly have very different inner spaces of this kind. But whenever they are conscious,

they also nonconceptually and thoughtlessly *know* that they currently are possessors of precisely such a space. The space is now represented within itself, it is a *self-presenting* epistemic space—as if it had folded back into itself one more time. “Taking place” means locating yourself. Here, what actually locates itself in epistemic space could be the very model of this epistemic space itself, as explained in chapter 5. That is to say, an image of the space itself becomes manifest within it; the image presents “us”—or at times only itself (see chapter 30)—with evidence for its own existence. It seems as if this inner image of the space of knowing generates and discloses itself, and whenever the meditator oscillates between a dual state and full absorption, the image can be experienced, remembered, and reported. The fact that is reported is that a very special model is manifesting itself, that our integrated state of epistemic possibilities has become present within itself.⁷

To make this clearer, let us look at a second example. Another crucial concept is “spontaneous presence,” found mostly in Tibetan Buddhism. Spontaneous presence (*Ihündrup*) is that aspect of *rigpa* (“knowledge of the ground”) out of which all phenomena arise and into which they are all later absorbed. It is self-caused or spontaneous, which may also mean “having a self-contained origin” or being without origin at all. If we set all metaphysics aside and stay as close as possible to contemplative experience itself, then the term “spontaneity” refers solely to a *phenomenological* spontaneity. According to conscious experience, pure awareness arises without any external cause. Enter naturalism; enter intellectual honesty. It is important to understand that, just as for all other conscious states, experiences of effortlessness, the phenomenologies of “givenness” and “spontaneous presence,” depend on unconscious causal precursors in the brain—anything else would be sheer magic. However, these precursors can certainly be cultivated, strengthened, or triggered in indirect ways, of which meditation is one. In this sense, meditation practice can be seen as an ancient way of doing neurofeedback, using the phenomenal correlates of meditation practice as a user interface. If this practice is done properly, the experiential flow of awareness itself may still be the best and most natural real-time display of brain activity, with many uses for self-regulation.

In 2015, the Ukrainian philosopher and computer scientist Iuliia Pliushch and I published a book chapter in which we introduced the “dolphin model of cognition” as a new metaphor for the interplay between conscious and unconscious processes.⁸ As you probably know, dolphins frequently leap above the surface of water. One reason for this behavior could be that when traveling long distances, jumping can save the dolphins energy, as there is less friction in air than in water. Typically, the animals will perform long, ballistic jumps alternating with periods of swimming below but close

to the surface. “Porpoising” is one name for this high-speed, surface-piercing behavior of dolphins and other species, in which leaps are interspersed with relatively long swimming bouts, often about twice the length of the leap. Porpoising may be the most energetically efficient way to swim rapidly and continuously and keep breathing at the same time. Just as dolphins cross the surface, thought processes often cross the border between conscious and unconscious processing, and in both directions. For example, chains of cognitive states may originate in unconscious goal-commitments triggered by external stimuli, and then transiently become integrated into the conscious self-model for introspective availability and selective control, only to disappear into another unconscious “swimming bout” below the surface. Here is a new question for you: Could there also be a dolphin model of meditation?

The idea here is that many of the things that a human being does and lives through have conscious and unconscious components, and this fact has been almost entirely ignored in meditation research. Meditation is something that human beings do, and as a process, it will inevitably have conscious and unconscious aspects. This obvious fact might also play an important role in homing in on MPE, the experience of pure awareness. The experience of apparently uncaused “self-disclosure” and “spontaneous presence,” which has been reported by millions of practitioners over the centuries, as well as the deep dialectic between meditation and nonmeditation (see chapter 32), can now be seen in a new light, giving us new perspective on ancient philosophical debates. One example is the endless scholastic dispute between “subitists” (proponents of sudden awakening) and “gradualists” (philosophical defenders of the view that enlightenment can be achieved only step by step, through gradual practice). My personal view on this is that (just as in our fable of “The Elephant and the Blind”) they are both right, and the traditional dispute is mostly irrelevant to practitioners. But these new data and the perspectives deriving from them may allow us to intervene more decisively in stale disagreements of this kind, using empirical research to develop an evidence-based rational perspective. All we have to take into account is that, just like every other conscious episode or event, the experience of “self-disclosure” and “spontaneous presence” must have had unconscious causal precursors. Of course, it will also have unconscious causal *consequences*—an experience like this, for example, may make the precursor’s future recurrence more probable by leaving a positive trace in the brain, gradually opening a new path into state space. In principle, it might even become permanent and continuous (chapter 33), or it may contribute to the meditator’s health, indirectly strengthening the person’s physical, mental, and social well-being. We can predict that—just like thoughts that “unexpectedly” pop up in meditation—certain types of silence, clarity, and presence *must* appear entirely spontaneous and uncaused, simply because they

are the first elements in a causal chain that just crossed the water surface. They are the jumping dolphin that we later remember; only as conscious memories can they sometimes become part of our inner life-history. But they are not apparitional experiences or metaphysical mysteries. Dolphins don't have wings; they have strong tail fins, and they always fall back into the ocean. Just like dolphins, we too are fully embodied beings. We are embodied epistemic spaces.

Let me conclude this chapter by giving a third example of the dolphin model of meditation, this time looking at the sense of self. To understand what the sense of self really is, it helps to focus on how the epistemic agent model (the "knowing ego"; see chapter 25) suddenly appears, and also on how it disappears. One thing that our high-level self-model tries to explain away is the fact that the organism harboring it (and *of which* it is a model) is confronted with an endless chain of unexpected events and ugly surprises. The continuous process of attempting to construct a stable sense of self gives rise to an interesting phenomenology of being "ambushed" and "overwhelmed" by sudden distractions, and there is no better way to see this clearly than contemplative practice itself.

I think that a lot can be learned from carefully looking at the phenomenology of distraction. Most people desperately identify with their high-level self-model and do their best to avoid seeing the abundance of attentional lapses and permanent distractions. There may be good evolutionary reasons for this fact. But if you look at what is happening systematically and on a small timescale (e.g., under the microscope of classical insight meditation), then you see how "you," the meditator, the entity that wants to *have* insight, constantly gets attacked from behind, out of the dark, ambushed by the unconscious. The first thing that every meditator learns is that, strictly speaking, the process of being "ambushed," of the very first thought arising, is completely unpredictable and caused by an unknown force. But isn't the same thing true of "waking up" again, of mindfully noticing the *second* thought, of becoming aware of the noticing itself, or even of observing the fact that "I" have already been carried far away for a long time? Waking up in meditation is an inherently unpredictable event because while immersed in the ensuing train of thought, fantasy, or daydream, there is no conscious knowledge that something like "becoming aware again" could even happen. There is no personal-level memory because the original epistemic agent model has been killed in ambush. This leads to the conclusion that the memory of being awake and the anticipation that awakening is at all possible must be an unconscious form of knowledge. This might be a general principle: just like the phenomenology of being overwhelmed from behind and killed in a sudden ambush, the reborn sense of being a "knowing self" is an effect, not a cause. It may have effects later, but it certainly is not something self-caused—to think otherwise would be to acquiesce in an illusion of control.⁹

To see this possibility from another angle, think of the experience of waking up in the morning. The feeling of suddenly “coming to” is clearly something that was caused by unconscious processes in the brain that preceded it. A “knowing self” pops up, but that event itself was quite a surprise—wasn’t it? Waking up is a major discontinuity that happens from one moment to the next, on a small timescale. But this discontinuity is immediately glossed over by the process that in chapter 17 I will call “narrative self-deception”: There is a short moment of pure awareness, but as soon as automatic orientation in time and space has taken place, the organism swiftly orients itself to *person*, activating the high-level model of your life history, of who you take yourself to be, and of what you must do today. Often, this takes less than a second. It is equally automatic, and certainly not something *you*—the content of the personal-level self-model that the organism is currently trying to stabilize—have achieved or ever decided to do. But in an interesting sense, it is now the *organism* that gets overwhelmed, ambushed, and enslaved by the long-term self-model that tries to explain away the myriad of unexpected surprises and discontinuities that happen from moment to moment. The organism is like an elephant that now *imagines* one and the same rider sitting on its back: a knowing self that controls the overall process.

I am confident that a future computational phenomenology of meditation will describe all of this in a much better and finer-grained way. But it is important to understand that phenomenological facts do not determine metaphysics. We might even call this the “M-fallacy”: From the fact that something is subjectively *experienced* as self-caused, as “spontaneously present,” or as uncaused and “unborn,” nothing much follows about its metaphysical status. On the other hand, humankind’s spiritual traditions are right to point out that the experiential quality of presence investigated in this chapter is ahistorical and entirely nonagentive. It has no past and no future. Phenomenologically, it is nothing that could be expected or created by the conscious self. If the conscious self-model manages to explain away its sudden occurrence in the very moment of contracting the selfless clarity of wakeful presence into the model of a person, it may be experienced as a success of contemplative practice, as an achievement of some complacent spiritual ego-manager. But precisely this moment is also the moment in which it ends.

I pointed out earlier that the incoherent phenomenological myth of first-person “givenness” has a subtle theological connotation. Perhaps the old theological idea of “divine grace” was a strategy to prevent this contraction? If you firmly believe in the possibility of free and unmerited favors from God, who may at times unexpectedly operate in your own conscious mind to regenerate and sanctify it (e.g., by absolving you from the internal sin of clinging to dual awareness), then this belief may enable a

quality of letting go, of true effortlessness, a form of *genuine* surrender that is very hard to achieve in Eastern models of self-redemption. While theoretically untenable, there may still be a deep, highly practical form of wisdom buried in this Western model: namely, that setting a “grace hyperprior” via an act of faith opens a space of inner experience that under normal conditions remains almost inaccessible. We will return to this point toward the end of the book, when discussing spontaneity, effortlessness, and the difference between meditation and nonmeditation.

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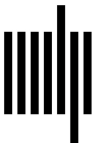
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