

## 11 Connectedness

It is like a feeling of stepping back from oneself and at the same time being connected to everything. [#221]

When asked about their pure-awareness experience, many meditators report an experience of connectedness, such as a sense of wholeness, a deepening bond to nature, or a direct, nonconceptual insight into the interdependence of all phenomena. This may include an intensified experience of connectedness with oneself and other sentient creatures. Interestingly, many traditional philosophical models claim that what—for lack of a better term—we call “pure awareness” actually underlies and permeates all other forms of appearance: Silence and stillness are always present even within sound, movement, and thoughts themselves.

If this ancient idea were really true, then one would predict a specific phenomenological effect whenever meditators begin to introspectively penetrate into minimal phenomenal experience (MPE)—that is, whenever they start to access the simplest, subtlest, almost implicit level of conscious experience there is by gradually becoming aware of the ever-present “background.” First, one would predict that practitioners will gradually begin to notice a subtle and abstract quality of holistic integration on the level of manifest content *itself*, perhaps as a more concrete form of mutual embeddedness and interdependence. In social contexts—when experiencing the other within a group of human beings—this might manifest itself as a quality of compassion. Second, one would expect phenomenological reports to reflect a nonconceptual quality of connectedness *as such*, a more direct experience of integration and embeddedness itself. Let us have a look at what practitioners actually report:

221 It is like a feeling of stepping back from oneself and at the same time being connected to everything. Harmonious and peaceful, floating, light and natural.

- [. . .] I perceive things in my immediate surroundings as if I were standing next to them. [. . .]
- 269 [. . .] The mind is calm and I feel how I am part of the big picture, connected to everything. Everything is connected.
- 2500 [. . .] Simply being in the here and now, being connected with everything that is. [. . .]
- 1188 I know states of deep calm with simultaneous absolute alertness. Everything merges together. I am everything, there are no boundaries between me and the others. A feeling of being connected to everything. [. . .]
- 1347 I experienced great peace, a silence, and was completely awake. Paradoxically, in part I absolutely perceived my body, but in part I was—physically too—connected to everything, and one. Connectedness is the word that best describes my experience: connected with myself, with all living beings, with all times, with nature, with all objects and sounds, i.e.: not separate.
- 1595 Sitting meditation with open eyes: The primordial source of all being is perceptible and from it all forms of being arise and fall away again. Objects are permeated with vitality—visibly full of light. State of perfect connectedness with everything, in everything. [. . .]
- 2527 [. . .] I suddenly felt my tension in my body and had the insight: Everything is as it is, quite natural. Only I myself hold on. Then the tension let go and a deep silence and connection surfaced. I did not feel separate from the outside world, but was part of the whole, in subtle movement with everything else, like a river, bright and light.
- 2721 [. . .] The silence was so deep that nothing (no self) was there and at the same time I knew that I was sitting in the zendo. There were no emotions like being happy, but there was a feeling of connectedness.

Different people enter pure awareness in different ways. For many, the phenomenal quality of “connectedness” goes along with an opening of the heart, because it has a deeper emotional quality and creates a specific sense of intimacy and compassion—not only toward others, but also toward themselves. The qualities of “self-intimacy” and self-compassion may be intrinsically linked; their phenomenological opposite would be the sense of disconnectedness, emotional numbing, and self-alienation that we find in psychiatric syndromes like depersonalization disorder (for more on this, see the discussion of “witness consciousness” in chapter 19):

- 1717 [. . .] When accessing it through the heart there is a sense of connectedness to the world, embodiment, unity, softness, density, richness, joy, love. I can

access it with my eyes open and boundaries feel blurred and malleable rather than completely disappeared. It's lovely.

3270 I experience pure awareness as a thoughtless moment of connectedness with myself, which often gives rise to a feeling of languorousness and inner kindness in me.

3250 [. . .] It was a strong feeling of connectedness and of "knowing" interrelatedness. It was as if I was on another level and I was different from my fellow meditators but still we were all connected to each other. [. . .]

3569 [. . .] Everything was ok and connected with the rest. The boundary-transcending feeling was that of connectedness to all that is, and perfect love.

3259 [. . .] presence, clarity, deep joy, timelessness, deep connection with myself, with nature, and with life as such, deep peace, a feeling of soundlessness, interwoven with life, complete absence of intention, as if everything was together at once in this moment [. . .]

For some, timelessness and gradual ego dissolution (see chapters 22 and 25), but also soundness and awe (see chapters 7 and 15), are dominant features that accompany the experience of connectedness:

3248 It was an experience of great connectedness with everything, an experience of unity with nature, with everything. It was completely detached from the sense of time. The strongest sensations were astonishment and reverence. And all embedded in a deep inner silence, a feeling of complete inner and outer peace.

3012 [. . .] a feeling of calmness arose, my body relaxed, the breath breathed itself. I had only a weak feeling of "I," in the foreground was the experience of clarity, boundlessness, connectedness with everything.

3003 [. . .] I felt completely open in all senses, everything bright, clear, dynamic, connected with everything, no reference to time or self during the direct experience, everything ok and that's how it is, in harmony with life and the universe, with no separations.

Connectedness and the phenomenal character of abstract, nonphysical spatiality plus "bodiless embodiment" (which we will investigate in greater detail in chapters 23 and 24) are other global aspects that seem to frequently co-occur. But we also find some specific, concrete details that are not present in other reports of this category:

3073 [. . .] I'm meditating, suddenly have the feeling that my body has disappeared, has expanded infinitely and my mind is everywhere. I have a strong feeling of connection with everything.

2362 [. . .] A state [. . .] in which I suddenly felt connected with everything, esp. with above, with the clouds or the sky—perceived something like threads between me and the universe. Yet “I” was as big as the universe.

1942 [. . .] at this moment an enormously strong (cold) wind hits me. At the same time the mountainside opposite is connected very closely to me with strings, or rather a carpet. In the carpet I am visibly clearly enmeshed with houses, the countryside, and the whole world. I stand next to the carpet, see myself and feel very connected with everything. Tears run down my face.

3295 [. . .] In this phase the space expanded and time no longer played a role, there was only pure being, a pure feeling of happiness, which was at the same time a feeling of infinity and the feeling of being connected with everything.

2607 I was in a place that felt infinite and shapeless and colorless. I felt an awareness represented by an orb of light in the invisible fabric of this infinite space. I felt every living thing past, present, and future connected to myself through this space. I felt no human emotion as such; no fear, no joy, no sadness; as I did not exist to feel emotions. However, there was a sense of unity of all things, beings, life, and a sense of love between it all, interwoven into the space and connecting all things. Time did not exist. I came away from the experience and cried tears of happiness for about 15 minutes and felt totally connected to everything around me. It was the most beautiful and important experience of my life and it continues to shape me, five years later.

### Peripersonal Space

That clarity is a beginning place, and almost as soon as this empty gaze into the nature of things reveals existence vast and deep, it reveals something else no less wondrous and unimaginable: there is no distinction between empty awareness and the expansive presence of existence. They are whole, a single existential tissue, which is to say that existence-tissue is our most fundamental self. [. . .] Here in the beginning, there is the existence-tissue open to itself, miraculously and inexplicably aware of itself, when there might just as well be nothing but opaque existence, existence blind to itself! Vast and deep, everything and everywhere—the sheer presence of materiality is open to itself through our eyes, aware of itself here in the beginning. The story of existence is a self-portrait.

—David Hinton (\*1954), *Existence*

From a qualitative perspective, the phenomenology of connectedness reveals a number of interesting details: most importantly, something like an “existence tissue” that has been ignored by mainstream philosophy of mind and cognitive science and seems

intimately related to MPE. For example, some of our meditators speak of an “invisible fabric” and of “interwovenness” (#2607); they describe “strings” forming a “carpet” weaving them “into the world” (#1942) or an experience of “threads” connecting and integrating them with the universe as a whole (#2362); and they report being “interwoven with life” itself (#3259).

To deepen our understanding, there is another interesting phenomenological detail that I would like to highlight here, which could point to an expansion of what neuroscientists call “peripersonal space.” Peripersonal space is the region of space immediately surrounding our bodies in which objects can be grasped and manipulated. Our inner model of this space may help with early threat detection and response, such as via involuntary defensive or other self-preserving movements (think of instinctively protecting your head during sports or in a fistfight, or swatting at a mosquito coming too close to your face, but also the awkward feeling when someone stands too close to you in an elevator). The Indian-Canadian philosopher Mohan Matthen describes peripersonal space as the locus of greatest vulnerability—the zone in which others may intrude with their own body—and calls it the “territory of direct intervention—the area where we probe and shove, the zone of the head-butt and the cross-check.”<sup>1</sup> He also quotes the neuroscientist Michael Graziano, who describes it as the “margin of safety, bad breath zone, duck-and-flinch buffer.”<sup>2</sup>

Neuroscientific research has uncovered how the primate brain constructs multiple representations of space. These representations can be modified very quickly and are centered on different body parts (e.g., there is hand-centered space, head-centered space, and trunk-centered space). The integration of visual information available outside the body with tactile information arising outside the body leads to the creation of an “invisible bubble” that we can sometimes consciously experience, often simply referred to as the “near space” or “reaching space”; this is where our direct interactions with objects take place. Goal-directed action plays a role, as does bodily self-protection (e.g., relative to fast-approaching objects and other animals). A unifying computational model by Dijkerman and Medendorp proposes that our representation of peripersonal space is achieved by binding visual and tactile stimuli together, as they occur frequently in close spatial and temporal proximity, and this depends on the *predicted* sensory consequences.<sup>3</sup>

In a sense, peripersonal space is an invisible extension of the embodied self. It defines what is experienced as being close to us and also what we consciously feel when something or somebody is getting *too* close to us. Peripersonal space has also been called “something like a buffer zone between the self and the world,” and one can sum up a lot of recent research by saying that it “refers to a *special way of representing* objects and events located in relative proximity to what one takes to be one’s

body.”<sup>4</sup> A lot of our own phenomenological survey data show that what one “takes as one’s body” may dramatically change in the context of MPE (see chapters 24 and 29), and that the experience of connectedness changes the spatial experience of proximity (for an example, see #221 later in this chapter). Leading researchers like Jean-Paul Noel and colleagues have described peripersonal space not only as “a multisensory-motor interface between the individual and the environment,” but even as “a spatial extension of the body [that] plays a role in scaffolding a primitive sense of self-awareness.”<sup>5</sup> This is one reason why, in chapter 21, we will briefly touch on fascinating experiments by Laura Aymerich-Franch showing that the sense of self can actually be “smeared” in space. All of this leads me to believe that underlying changes in peripersonal space could play a major role in understanding the phenomenology of meditation. Please note that this will be particularly true for traditional forms of moving meditation like tai chi and qigong, which involve the mindful coordination of slow-flowing movements, as well as the experience of unbounded spatiality and variants on the kind of “bodiless body-experience” that will be investigated later in this book, in chapters 23 and 24.

Importantly, our model of peripersonal space can expand or shrink because the same area of physical space can be portrayed as peripersonal or not, depending on context. Anxiety expands your peripersonal space, as does successfully using a tool or manipulating your sense of agency in a scientific experiment. Testosterone administration in women increases the size of their peripersonal space<sup>6</sup>—as does pregnancy.<sup>7</sup> An important recent finding is that the extent and shape of peripersonal space can be altered in the type of virtual reality (VR) experiment that I described in *The Ego Tunnel*, which aimed to induce illusory ownership toward the location of an illusory body.<sup>8</sup> New results show that the experience of self-location follows the experience of body ownership, and peripersonal space is tied to self-location. Even more interesting in the context of meditation research is the fact that within an impoverished sensory environment and in absence of actions, the boundary of peripersonal space becomes “ill-defined”—that is, the difference between far and near space is attenuated. In audio-visual deprivation, participants reported feeling “lost in space.”<sup>9</sup>

Scientific research has shown that human beings can refer somatic sensations to a discrete volume of empty space, such as by expanding the boundaries of their bodily self-model in a way that makes them feel an invisible hand—even if their visual experience directly contradicts the possibility of a real, physical hand actually being there.<sup>10</sup> This experimental setup creates the conscious experience of owning and embodying a region of empty space, and even the “illusion of having an invisible hand that ‘feels’ touches applied to it in empty space in direct view of the participants.”<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, this “invisible hand illusion” happens only *inside peripersonal space*, but it shows that,

in creating bodily self-consciousness, visual information is not as dominant as previously thought, and also that, according to conscious experience, human beings are capable of having physical and nonphysical body parts. If we think about some of the kinds of “bodiless body-experience” reported by our meditators (see chapter 24), as well as the kinds of radical connectedness that we are exploring in this chapter, this fact is obviously interesting. Further research by Arvid Guterstam and his colleagues has shown that the underlying neural mechanisms can create the illusion of having a hollow, almost transparent, or fully invisible body.<sup>12</sup> In an ingenious experiment, the invisible-body illusion arises when participants wear head-mounted displays and observe a paintbrush moving in an empty space and defining the contours of a body, while receiving simultaneous touches on the corresponding parts of their real body, which is hidden from view.<sup>13</sup> Please note that this differs from the well-documented neuropsychological disorder called “asomatognosia,” in which patients may sometimes feel *no* body at all: In the current case, a body-shaped region of empty space is “owned” and begins to function as the unit of identification.

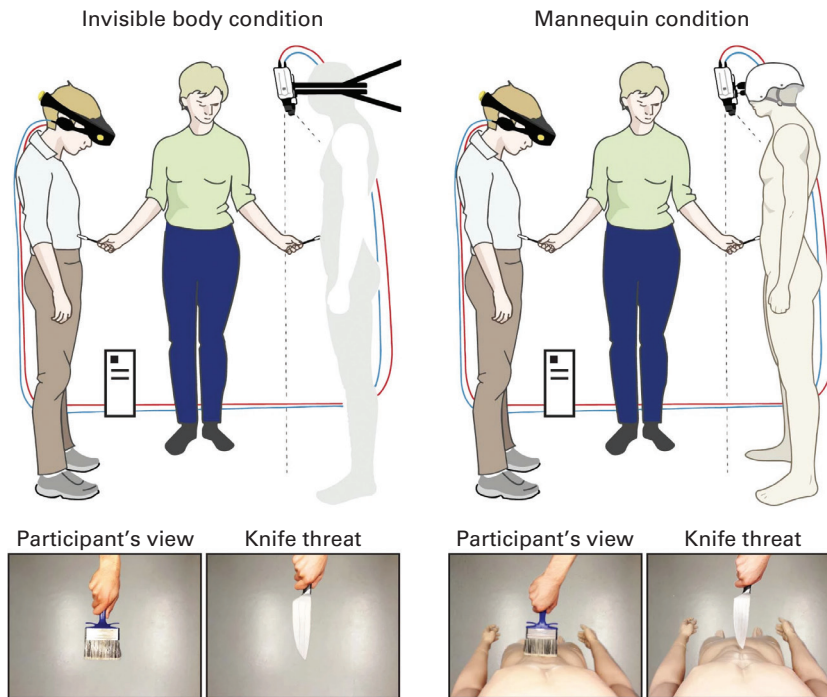
What all of this shows is that human beings can *embody* empty space.<sup>14</sup> You may want to remember this when we look at the equally inventive experiment by Aymerich-Franch and her colleagues described in chapter 21, which shows that the *sense of self* can actually be spread out in space.

In chapter 23, I will present a large number of experiential reports suggesting that the experience of MPE is related to an unbounded space without center or periphery; and in chapter 24, we will look at the phenomenology of body dissolution and “bodiless body-experience.” Plausibly, some of these experiences may be related to a dramatic expansion of peripersonal space. Here is one example:

2619 [. . .] The big awareness was beyond it. I felt like a humungous sphere, that my awareness was not located in my body but sort of in a big sphere around it. Anything I could sense at any distance was within my sphere of awareness and I was identified (though that’s not really correct) with that big awareness.

As always, it is equally plausible to assume that there may be varied paths and intermediate stages into such states. Some aspects of connectedness described here could actually be related to such stages. For example, given an expansion of peripersonal space, one would predict that distant objects could suddenly be perceived as being in “near space.” Recall report #221:

221 It is like a feeling of stepping back from oneself and at the same time being connected to everything. Harmonious and peaceful, floating, light and natural. [. . .] I perceive things in my immediate surroundings as if I were standing next to them. [. . .]

**Figure 11.1**

The experimental setup of the invisible body condition (left panel) and the mannequin condition (right panel). The participants were fitted with a set of head-mounted displays that showed the real-time three-dimensional video feed of a pair of downward-facing cameras that were mounted on the wall (left panel) or on the head of a mannequin (right panel). The experimenter applied touches to each participant's body and the corresponding body part of the invisible body/mannequin using a paintbrush. The grayed-out body in the left panel illustrates the discrete portion of empty space that was meant to represent the invisible body. Two sample frames of the actual visual stimuli presented in the head-mounted displays are shown at bottom, featuring the brushing procedure and knife threat event for the two conditions, respectively. (Figure and caption from Guterstam et al., 2015.)

Perhaps what is usually a multisensory interface for body/object interactions in the brain is more malleable than we thought and can expand during meditation? The functional distinction between what is a body and what is a graspable object, between self and nonself, would then be gradually attenuated in favor of a less differentiated, but much more integrated, holistic model of reality. Here is what a Zen meditator says, criticizing our questionnaire in an interesting way:

117 [ . . . ] I must add that the description in terms of “pure awareness” or “awareness of awareness” only partially reflects my experience. I would better describe



it as a more immediate than usual contact with the world (i.e., less mediated in terms of conceptual elaboration), with less “time delay,” more “inclusive” (a feeling of expansion of peripersonal space to the point of blurring the distinction between “self”/“not self,” but more as a loss of importance of this distinction), and above all with a physical-mental sensation of “presence” alive and vibrant more than usual.

In my semantic analysis of ways in which the experience of pure awareness has been described over the centuries, connectedness was not a very prominent aspect.<sup>15</sup> But from a philosophical perspective, certain phenomenological clusters that appear in a qualitative analysis of contemporary real-life reports—like “connectedness” or “nondual being” (chapter 26)—relate with striking directness to centuries of Western thinking about consciousness. Over the centuries, two semantic elements running like red threads through the Western philosophy of consciousness have been the idea of metarepresentation and the theoretical motif of unity and global integration (for a computational model that unifies both of these aspects, see figure 34.7 in chapter 34). Today, we still have a variety of “higher-order” theories involving some kind of metarepresentation, while unity and integration reappear in some current contenders on the market for theories of consciousness, such as the form of a single “global workspace”<sup>16</sup> that makes conscious contents globally available to the organism, or the idea that a measure of “integrated information” can be used to distinguish between conscious and nonconscious systems.<sup>17</sup> A number of the qualitative clusters presented in this book are directly relevant to mathematically modeling consciousness, including density and soundness (chapters 6 and 7), timelessness and timeless change (chapter 22), and the notion of a space lacking internal structure, boundaries, and a center (chapter 23). The conscious experience of connectedness is another example.

Perhaps most interestingly, from a statistical perspective, the phenomenology of connectedness was not on our radar at all. It simply did not surface in our pilot studies, and accordingly, there was no item in our questionnaire that directly targeted it. This is an example of how qualitative analysis of open-ended reports can lead to discoveries that statistical analysis of forced-choice protocols would not reveal. Nothing in our pilot studies suggested that “connectedness” would turn out to be such a frequent phenomenological feature in reports describing the MPE experience, but the twenty-two reports selected in this chapter clearly show that there is something here—something that should certainly become a target of future research.



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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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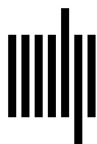
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