

## 12 The Most Natural State

Truth, like an awakening to real life. [#2908]

“Naturalness,” “ordinariness,” and “simplicity” are common phenomenological themes, and all of them are clearly reflected in many of our experiential reports, as well as in centuries of canonical contemplative literature. Many practitioners say that pure awareness is entirely nonspectacular, and some even point out that there is a sense in which it is not even an “experience” at all (for more, see chapter 31). But there is something more to the “natural state,” as it has been called in Tibetan Buddhism for many centuries. There is a deep yet subtle quality of *profundity* that can accompany the simplicity to which we now turn, as if it were even more natural and more real than what we take to be our normal state of lived experience—but in an entirely unspectacular way.

49 [. . .] I sometimes feel everything is more natural than usual. That means that I feel more familiar with the world and the environment around us.

961 The state is characterized by a feeling of peace, of weightlessness. Spectacular descriptions would be inappropriate. [. . .]

1560 In meditation I am often in a state of silent balance, awake and completely in tune with myself. It feels: right, natural, normal, good, complete . . . I am lacking nothing there/here, in fact I would like to be there (in this state) all the time. [. . .]

1784 [. . .] I feel this experience as a very natural state, while I feel the other states of consciousness as unnatural, as long as the experience of this pure being lasts. You could put it like this: There is no wakefulness, there is no sleep, there is only being.

1813 [. . .] It suddenly became sunshine within, bright and warm sunlight. I had to open my eyes since it was a cloudy day that day. It was a sense of ease, lightness, expansion, and that it was the most natural way of being that I have ever

experienced. I could sit with my eyes open and look around just amazed by the feeling of warm softness and silence that everything was held in. I felt that I would never ever lose touch with it again and then I did.

2291 [. . .] It wasn't a revelatory experience, kind of seemed natural. While I was doing it, I was a little bit afraid that I will stay like that for the rest of my life, but I haven't. [. . .]

3464 [. . .] At the same time, the state appears as the most self-evident thing in the world, like a kind of basic state of mind. And, crazily enough, like the only real thing in the world. [. . .]

From very different angles, many of our reports seem to show that what really makes the phenomenal character of minimal phenomenal experience (MPE) so hard to express in words is the *combination* of profundity and simplicity. This is also one of the factors that make it interesting for philosophers. On the other hand, if the combination of profundity and simplicity truly is fundamental, there may be a real phenomenological possibility—perhaps even an epistemological risk—of some subjects only ever seeing the simplicity of MPE, while never recognizing the profundity.

185 Beyond profound, yet utterly ordinary. [. . .] Extra-ordinarily ordinary, and total game changer.

1647 The experience itself was simultaneous extremely profound while remaining incredibly mundane. I was flooded with a powerfully vivid memory of playing in the forest as a young child . . . it felt no more special than the ordinary existence of every child pre trauma.

1739 [. . .] It feels very free and relaxed, but at the same time simple and unspectacular.

2417 [. . .] I had the impression that everything was starkly, profoundly ordinary, just as it was.

### The C-fallacy

The natural state is one which has five distinctions: (1) a primordially pure nature, (2) an aspect of spontaneous presence, (3) an indeterminate essence, (4) an all-embracing quality, (5) and a great [capacity to] differentiate between realization and non-realization [. . .]. It cannot be described in words. Recognizing it cannot be taught.

—Rgyal-ba-g'yang-drung (1242–1290), *Pith Instructions for A Khrid rDzogs Chen*

In Tibetan Buddhism, pure awareness has long been beautifully described as “the natural state” (*rang bzhin gnas rigs*). The existence of a label like this may seem unremarkable,

or it may be straightforwardly useful. But it also presents us with one example of a methodological difficulty, a major obstacle that every scientific approach has to face. In chapter 2, I called it the problem of “theory contamination”: Theoretical assumptions and belief systems may have strongly colored the reports that we received, and the conceptual instruments available to a practitioner inevitably shape the way she communicates her own experience. We find many examples of such contamination in this book: Our meditators spontaneously and more or less innocently use ancient concepts charged with implicit bias, like “suchness” (chapter 9), “emptiness” (chapter 17), “luminosity” (chapter 18), “witnessing” (chapter 19), “nonduality” (chapters 26 and 27), and “nonmeditation” (chapter 32). We will come back to the idea of theory contamination in chapter 17, as well as in a number of other places on our journey. For now, let us begin by looking at two excellent phenomenological reports that are clearly colored by the conceptual framework of a specific contemplative tradition, faithfully reproducing its terminology:

83 I regularly practice Dzogchen and can find the natural state relatively easily.

It is a state of all things falling away. Like the ultimate escape from discursive thought. It is clear, awake, fresh, and the base of all phenomena.

84 Firstly, when recognizing one’s natural state, the recognizer dissolves into its ground. This being the source of all experiences. Mind made meditation is useful to calm the mind in order that it can be observed. Then we relax by letting concentration dissolve into awareness inside time. Discovering the open empty nature of all perceptions, they naturally self-liberate. Looking back at who knows this, one realizes the nondual wisdom. Recognizing this effortless state again and again, we gradually become reawakened. Our natural wisdoms arise automatically as objectless love, joy, and compassion. There is the great peace, boundless space and clarity. That cannot be known by the mind. This view is beyond concepts. [ . . . ] I am just a Vajra Parrot who dances on the Books.

I do not doubt the sincerity or the phenomenological relevance of reports like these in any way; as a matter of fact, they are very precise and summarize many aspects that naturally emerge from our reports. But I want to offer a second logical tool that you may find helpful for thinking about the problem of theory contamination more broadly. Recall that one of the goals of this book is to contribute to the formulation of a more comprehensive model of consciousness, by beginning to lay some of the very first foundations for a *minimal model explanation* of phenomenal experience. What is the simplest kind of conscious experience? Can we isolate phenomenality per se? Is there

something like a prototypical core, perhaps even something resembling the singular experiential essence of our target phenomenon, and if so, how would it reappear on a conceptual level? When asking these questions, it is important to avoid a specific kind of logical error, which I will call the “C-fallacy,” as a parallel to the “E-fallacy” explored in chapter 7.

The E-fallacy arises whenever someone falsely concludes that a consciously experienced feeling of knowing is a reliable indicator of actually possessing knowledge. As we saw in chapter 7, the phenomenal experience of knowing does not entail that one actually possesses knowledge; a strong and robust experience of knowing, or even of absolute certainty, can occur during hallucinations, in dreams, and in psychiatric diseases. This simple point applies not only to “knowing that one knows,” but equally to moral knowledge and the phenomenology of insight into ethical values. As Sonam Kachru has pointed out, “There is no ethical given to be realized in meditation, any more than there are epistemological givens to be revealed in it.”<sup>1</sup> If we take a rational, evidence-based perspective, then “epistemicity” as such—the nonconceptual phenomenal quality of “insight” and “comprehension” or the complex feeling of being a knowing self—is only a phenomenal quality, just as redness, greenness, and sweetness are. Therefore, knowledge claims made in public need independent justification, and the mere claim that something *felt* like knowledge does not count as justification.

The same is true of “phenomenality” or “consciousness.” The C-fallacy arises whenever someone falsely concludes that just because something *feels* like “consciousness as such,” we have actually found or even ultimately understood the very essence of consciousness itself. Unfortunately, therefore, we cannot just go and look for reports in which people *claim* to have experienced “the simplest and most natural form of experience,” the “true essence” of consciousness, or “awareness as such,” and assume that they will give us our answer. Again, there is no doubt about the sincerity and truthfulness of such reports. They deserve our deepest respect because they do their best to convey something that has been characterized as ineffable for millennia. They make a genuine and substantial contribution to research. But if we adopt an intellectually honest and methodologically sound perspective, then “phenomenality” as such—the subjective sense of appearance *itself*, the bare and nonconceptual character of “awareness” or “pure consciousness”—is only a phenomenal quality too, just as redness, greenness, sweetness, and epistemicity are.

Today, the way to go is not to jump to strong metaphysical conclusions in a naively realistic manner, as if the structure of reality itself could be directly read from the structure of certain kinds of conscious experience. Our new model of consciousness must not be constrained only by the phenomenology because other forms of evidence count

as well. The elephant approach must involve a multiplicity of perspectives, because it is attempting to satisfy a whole range of constraints entailed by multiple levels of analysis. Nothing is given here—no direct form of inner perception. The directness, transparency, and experiential immediacy all belong on the level of appearances, as later reported verbally.

As I put it in chapter 7, unfortunately we cannot bootstrap a theory of consciousness out of the “knowingness” that accompanies the pure-awareness experience itself. This is why we need a new bottom-up approach—one that begins by taking the phenomenology more seriously than ever and then proceeds to *empirically* test whether it can figure in a minimal model explanation of conscious experience. A minimal model of consciousness would include only the core causal factors giving rise to the target phenomenon: only those causal factors that make a difference to the actual occurrence and the essential phenomenal character of MPE itself. If successful, this would lead to an idealized model of the universal and repeatable features of *all* conscious experience, isolating its explanatorily relevant and structurally stable properties. This, in turn, could lay the foundations for a first standard model of consciousness. The experience of pure awareness in meditation is, I believe, the perfect scientific entry point, the prime candidate for the simplest form in which our target phenomenon arises. I certainly may be wrong about this. But—given new phenomenological data and many centuries of contemplative phenomenology produced by those who came before us—I would insist that it is (no pun intended) the *natural* candidate.



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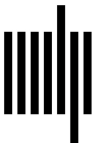
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