

13 Coming Home

The experience is like coming home . . . full, complete, nothing to reach for.
Like a big smile. [#570]

There is a sense of security in it, a sweet, silent calm [. . .] a fullness, a quality
of being-satiated, a permission-to-be. [#2511]

Many phenomenological reports liken entering the pure-awareness experience to the experience of arriving back home or remembering something that had always been there. The aspect that we now turn our attention to can have an affective dimension as well as an epistemic one. Often, meditators speak about feelings of comfort, security, or being sheltered. If one takes verbal descriptions referring to this cluster of phenomenal qualities seriously, abiding in pure awareness seems to be the ultimate way to “take refuge” and the real essence of what it means to do so. In addition, some practitioners point out that “coming home” is much more than a mere feeling; rather, it is a global state of being (see #3218 and #3464 in the following list). On the other hand, entering pure awareness can also carry a specific quality of insight, leading to a distinct phenomenology of recognition or remembrance. In certain contemplative traditions, this experiential quality has been conceptually interpreted as “recognizing one’s true nature.”

But as always, let’s spend some time with the phenomenology first. Here are nineteen examples in which the quality of “coming home” is a dominant feature:

35 Pure awareness is the realization of having finally found home after an eternal search. The pathological searching, the agony of control, comes to an abrupt end, and for the first time you realize what it means to be alive. It is the realization that nothing and no one can hurt you; the true self is untouchable, timeless, and the essence from which all life springs and to which it returns.

- 115 [. . .] I could hardly describe the experience of Pure Consciousness itself. I only know that every time, it feels like coming home or remembering something that was always there and only forgotten. The experience is always connected with happiness, peace, wholeness. [. . .]
- 577 [. . .] It's so clear it's our natural state as it feels so familiar. It's the most important thing to me and I love that I can share and teach the practice to others. To remind them and bring them home. My first experience of it was like a homecoming.
- 808 My experience(s) of Pure Consciousness is/are like coming home to my true home, my origin, and from there recharging, regenerating and letting the weight of internal conflicts escape, dissipate into the vast truth of my higher, interconnected being. It is a state of peace in which I can restore my original state of being and authenticity [. . .].
- 949 During my meditation course I felt all of a sudden very peaceful, not judging, feeling whole, homecoming. I was just there, everything was all right, this was the truth.
- 1081 [. . .] Then in the silence, stillness, spaciousness . . . this experience of changeless, timeless, boundless awareness-emptiness, total openness, with nonlocality, no "me"; deeply peaceful, moved to tears, as-it-is, the sense of being "home."
- 1625 [. . .] I was completely calm and peacefully relaxed. There were no questions or doubts in me, everything was completely clear and I knew exactly where I was: (in the spiritual sense) at home. [. . .]
- 1828 After about twenty years of meditation practice, I can establish the state of pure awareness "at the push of a button" within a few minutes. In the end, this state is nothing special, it is rather like dwelling in the state of precognitive perception, in which the mind generally doesn't yet elaborate any concrete contents, unless I specifically allow this. Since in this way the totality of the current experience is absorbed without any inner psychological or other mental filters, and thus no fragmentation of the experience takes place, a subliminal feeling of "finally having arrived home" automatically arises. [. . .]
- 2071 The experience itself only lasted about a minute or so (I checked the time afterward), but it felt much longer. For the first time in my life I was at complete peace with myself and the world around me. And the best thing is that it felt so right, almost as if I had finally arrived home after being lost for a very long time. I felt tears running down my face. I could no longer hear my breathing. I couldn't even feel my own heartbeat anymore.

- 2764 [. . .] Nothing could be doubted, everything was truth and love and a feeling of arrival.
- 3005 [. . .] Bright and clear, kind of sunny. Silent pure joy. A homecoming. It was the most natural thing in the world. No right or wrong. Just being. Safe and connected.
- 3218 [. . .] That morning there was a complete absence of fear, a state of complete freedom and all possibilities. The state—I can only say state and not feeling, because it was much more than a feeling and really a state of being—of “Mother being at home,” and not only that, but also the child being completely in tune with Mother’s desires and Mother being pleased and content with the child, resulting in mutual nourishment on all levels of existence. The next few days I had more of these “Mother is at home” experiences. [. . .]
- 3305 [. . .] I experience a feeling of unity, of great happiness, of deep peace, of having arrived home. [. . .]
- 3353 [. . .] The first time that I experienced an overwhelming incidence of peaceful happiness and oneness or wholeness, when I was 23 years of age, was something I always remembered, but never dared to talk about. But for a long time, I longed for this kind of being in the world. Since that time, I always felt a longing. The first time that, years and years later, I was sitting on a cushion, meditating, it felt like coming home . . . until this very day.
- 3464 [. . .] The state contains an inner sweetness that is very subtle and that I experience as a kind of “primordial happiness.” This is combined with a feeling of “coming home.” Although I hesitate to speak of a feeling. The state is by no means euphoric, but can lead to euphoria after meditation. [. . .]
- 3493 While meditating in a Buddhist monastery I discovered an inner “place” where I can be as I am without having to do anything or prove anything. I call this place “my inner fortress.” Since this experience it has been possible for me to return there again and again. I can rest in myself, no matter what is going on around me. Since then I really feel free!
- 3497 [. . .] A feeling of safety and boundlessness, like belonging and being accepted and at the same time full of life and in silence, like being eternity and like being joy. Then at some point the perceptible thought and wish that it may remain so. [. . .]
- 3568 My experience rests on a “space of emptiness” . . . Here there was nothing but pure emptiness, silence, connectedness, and the feeling of having arrived in the present. There was no must anymore, no want anymore . . . It was all good as it is.

3615 [. . .] For me it is the overwhelming feeling of homecoming, arriving at a place that is (and has always been) there and here and in me and in everything. [. . .]

Let us now turn to the specifically epistemic dimension of “coming home.” This dimension is characterized by a phenomenology of “remembering” or “recognizing.” Often, what is now remembered is described as fundamental and as something that “had always been there but was forgotten”:

197 [. . .] It felt like getting in contact with something / touching an inner quality that had always been there.

1311 [. . .] Like entering into a completely different state of matter, but one that at the same time is so fundamental that it also feels completely normal—because it was always and in all experiences invisibly present as their foundation anyway. It is this quality of recognition, this “Ah yes—of course!” that is, however, completely unspectacular—because it had never been any different in any case. [. . .]

1426 [. . .] After several days of intensive meditation the sudden realization opened up: Consciousness is empty—and not as intellectual knowledge but as direct experience. The most amazing thing about this experience or state (which lasted for over 2 hours) was how normal it felt, in the sense of “Yes, of course, that’s how it is!” It was also a feeling of recognition.

1482 [. . .] a kind of natural remembrance of a state of being that is deeply personal and at the same time universal in the sense that boundaries have dissolved into an experience of deep unity, characterized by a sense of fully being without any reason whatsoever, free from the dualistic thinking mind. [. . .]

2293 It felt like a homecoming to a natural state forgotten but very familiar. Not in a spiritual way but just a re-cognition.

Recognizing the Unfabricated Baseline

The first characteristic is that it has no boundaries, no fence round it, no edges; it’s absolutely unlimited in all directions. The second characteristic is that it is absolutely clear, clean, empty of contamination. It is utterly simple, totally transparent, empty of everything but itself, empty even of itself, clearer than glass, cloudless, an infinite sky. The third characteristic is that it is also full of the world. Because it’s empty, it’s full—full of the scene, whatever the scene is, absolutely united with it. The fourth characteristic is that it is awake, it’s aware, it’s conscious. And the fifth characteristic is that it is right where you are.

—Douglas Harding, *Face to No-Face: Rediscovering Our Original Nature*

From a scientific perspective, there are three obvious conclusions that we can draw. First, whatever minimal phenomenal experience (MPE) turns out to be, it seems to be a state in which global uncertainty has been greatly reduced. “Home” can be interpreted as the place in which a given system expects the lowest level of prediction error—and it seems as if this place can be not only something in the outer world but also a specific level of information processing and self-representation within the system’s own conscious model of reality. Perhaps MPE is the computational level on which the egoic self-model “bottoms out,” or the region in phenomenal state space where *you* really are? Whatever it is, in an experiential as well as in a computational sense, “home” must be that from which everything originated, the primordial source of invariance, and that which again and again proves to be the place of greatest safety and security.

Second, MPE clearly looks like a baseline state. Perhaps it is related to an affective baseline in early childhood, to homeostatic stability, or to a computational reference point out of which more complex states of conscious experience can be constructed. As you may recall from chapter 1, one report pointed out that “the more I can quiet my physical and mental stress and anxiety the more I can uncover of this baseline reality of experience,” and in chapter 5, we noted that one of the participants in our study coined the term “Basal Clarity” (#3058; see also chapter 21).

Third, taking the phenomenology of recognition at face value, we can say that MPE looks like a state that is not newly fabricated or constructed by the meditator, but rather is something that has been there all along and was only rarely attended to. Perhaps it is like the pattern of sensations of contact, weight, and pressure on the soles of our feet or behind our eyelids, or the humming sound of the refrigerator. It could be something so reliable and invariant that we never attend to it, so it automatically drops out of our conscious model of reality. It may be an internal bodily sensation without a receptor system of its own—the stable but somewhat diffuse background buzz of tonic alertness (chapter 4), the raw feeling that constantly signals epistemic openness to the organism. Perhaps the resulting “epistemic hum” of wakeful, nonconceptual meta-awareness is so reliable and invariant that it drops away? Only if we step on a sharp object and our foot unexpectedly gets pierced from below, if grass pollen has landed on our eyeballs, or if the refrigerator suddenly falls silent do we notice a change. The same may be true for sudden prediction errors related to the phenomenology of wakefulness and epistemic openness: Only if we are in danger of suddenly fainting do we notice that there is something we might lose; only when some stimulant drug—even just two cups of green tea too many—causes excitement, nervousness, insomnia, or a rambling flow of thought and speech, do we notice that there was a baseline of tonic alertness from which one can deviate.

Unfortunately, the classic Buddhist idea of “recognizing one’s true nature” is more difficult to make sense of (we’ll see more on this in chapters 29 and 30). The concept is clearly pointing toward an experience that people have. The phenomenology, the experience itself, clearly exists. But as a metaphysical interpretation of the specific phenomenological element highlighted by the two short epigraphs and twenty-four reports I have presented in this chapter, it contradicts the antiessentialist and antisubstantialist assumptions of standard Buddhist metaphysics, because notions like “true nature” and “the natural state” (see chapter 12) carry a normative meaning. They indirectly presuppose that there is an essence of mental appearances—something that is “true” about them, as opposed to something else that must be “false.” Something is real about my mental state, and something else isn’t. There is a natural state and an unnatural state, but no cogent argument is given for what the difference is. It seems that this type of implicit contradiction exists in some classical and many of today’s popular texts—but then again, superficial observations like these cannot even begin to do justice to more than twenty centuries of Buddhist philosophy.

In particular, in trying to arrive at a modern understanding of the phenomenology of being in “the natural state” and of “coming home,” we might be in danger of committing the E-fallacy and the C-fallacy at the same time. It is indisputable that there can be a quality of insight, a marked phenomenal signature of knowing (chapter 7) that characterizes the conscious experience of “remembering the natural state” or of “recognizing one’s true nature.” But from this fact, it does not follow that any real gain in knowledge has actually been involved. Of course, such an increase in knowledge seems overwhelmingly plausible—but then again, on a scientific level, we are also coming to know more and more about false memories and *déjà vu* experiences. Maybe there are introspective *déjà vu* experiences? What is there that rules out the occurrence of false memories in meditation? What makes us so sure that it always is the *same* state to which we are returning? A recent study involving eighty-four Shamatā practitioners, eighty Thai Forest meditators, and eighty-eight Stillness Meditation participants concluded that, yes, their experiences are “contentless,” in that they have minimal awareness of thoughts and perceptions, but no, they are certainly not *identical* to each other in being devoid of all content, as much of the previous academic literature and many metaphysical belief systems have assumed.¹ The claim that one’s “true” nature has been recognized or that the meditator has made contact with and settled into the “essence” of consciousness is a strong metaphysical non sequitur. From a verbal report about the feeling of knowing, it doesn’t follow that you, the person who provided it, actually possessed knowledge; and just because something *feels* like the essence of consciousness itself, the metaphysical conclusion that we have actually

found consciousness itself is not justified. This is what I mean by the risk of committing the E-fallacy and the C-fallacy at the same time.

I think that the value of the classical motif of “recognizing your own true nature” consists in something else. It is actually not so much a theoretical statement—it is more like a practical instruction for advanced meditators, and probably one that has been highly effective over the centuries. All it does is offer one possible way for the practitioner to look at their own experience of pure awareness and see what happens. It is a new window that provides a new perspective. Perhaps in some cases, it is even an attempt to install a self-fulfilling prophecy of sameness across time in the mind of the faithful, a prediction targeting future states of nonegoic self-awareness that later creates the causal power to sustain such states more and more often. It may be a parallel case to what, at the end of chapter 10, I termed the installation of a “grace hyperprior”—if you will, an intended form of theory contamination that makes the occurrence of nondual states more likely. We could call it the “true-nature prior”: a mostly unconscious belief in the brain that says that (1) you have a preexisting, perhaps innate, true nature; and (2) this nature can be recognized. This belief is a prediction of sameness, the anticipation of “an innate and unconditioned mode of being and awareness, a concealed depth dimension of experience that is implicit in all conscious activity, all phenomena, and is therefore fully present and available to direct perception once the miasma of cognitive and affective obscurations is dispelled.”²

I will say more about this in chapters 26 and 27. For now, we can simply conclude that on this reading—treating it as something aimed at successful practice (not at metaphysics)—the classical motif of “recognizing your own true nature” would really describe the possibility of a shift in the unit of identification: the possibility of pure awareness becoming that *from* which the world is now experienced, as opposed to that *at* which the meditating self looks.

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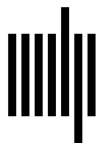
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