

14 There Is Nothing Left to Do

Like a contented stone [#808]

Everything comes, everything goes. I or rather It rests. There is nothing
I have to do. It is easy. [#2511]

Imagine that you discovered that what really creates satisfaction in life has nothing to do with achieving goals, or even with acting in any specific way. Imagine that you discovered this not in some intellectual or philosophical way, but as an unexpected and entirely nonconceptual form of inner knowledge. Interestingly, many meditators report that during an episode of pure awareness, their goal hierarchy dissolves: All is well; there is nothing left to do. There is a quality of acceptance and contentment, and sometimes it begins to extend into the practitioner's life as a whole. This quality of acceptance and contentment overlaps significantly with the phenomenology of "existential ease" introduced in chapter 1. The need for "narrative self-deception" (chapter 17) may be attenuated, gradually liberating the meditator from her constant urge to stabilize the long-term self-model by constructing a thematically coherent life story in a never-ending search for meaning. Other experiential features typically coemerging with this quality are relaxation and peace, love and gratitude, soundness, ego dissolution, and dignity. Here are six examples:

1661 [. . .] There was simply nothing left to be done. All ambition and grasping seemed absurd and counterproductive. There was deep abiding acceptance of the world as it was, and of myself in the world.

1942 [. . .] Suddenly I realize that there's nothing to do. I don't have to do anything. When I meditate I don't have to do anything. I don't have to seek anything. I notice my thoughts, which could very well go on a search and find

something they could do, e.g., think of something, or plan. But the “knowing” “says”: There is nothing to do. I feel deep inside me a calmness, a “not being driven,” an absolute contentment. Of course I do everything there is to do in everyday life, but this feeling on this other level that “there is nothing to do,” I also feel it over and over in everyday life.

2951 [. . .] There was a “self,” but it had no agenda.

3000 [. . .] Peace, complete relaxation, realization that everything is good, nothing has to be done, nothing has to be wanted, that this is the right thing, gratitude, love for all beings, dissolution, dissociation from the separated I.

3334 [. . .] There was no need to be happy or unhappy because I noticed that everything was and is exactly what it is. It is just right. It just is what it is. [. . .]

2426 [. . .] I felt and thought that for the first time I could perceive reality correctly. For the short moment of the experience (a few seconds) everything was clear and I felt that there was nothing more to do. I thought of loneliness and the concept itself seemed illogical to me, just like wanting to do anything at all. “There’s nothing left to do, everything is there.” During the experience I was serene, calm, hardly emotional, liberated, everything seemed very clear and a little bit cool. Immediately afterward, I couldn’t help crying. I thought: All my life I’ve been under psychological pressure to change something. Human beings are unworthy of all other mental states thanks to the suffering they cause.

Ataraxia

The solution to the problem of life is apparent in the disappearance of this problem.

(Is this not the reason why people to whom the meaning of life became clear after long doubting could not then say what this meaning consisted in?)

—Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.521

But the person who takes no position as to what is by nature good or bad neither avoids nor pursues intensely. As a result, he achieves ataraxia.

—Sextus Empiricus (ca. 160–210), *The Skeptic Way*, book I, chapter 12

Many deep and mostly unexplored relationships connect contemplative practice and ancient Western philosophy—too many to even attempt an overview. Let us briefly look at a single example: the concept of *ataraxia* (ἀταραξία), which is often interpreted as referring to a lucid and enduring state of “imperturbability,” “equanimity,”

or “tranquility.” In ancient Greek philosophy, the term was introduced by Democritus and Pyrrho and then further developed into different understandings and practices by Epicurus and by thinkers in the Stoic tradition. Cicero and Seneca used the Latin translation *tranquilitas animi* (“tranquility of the soul”).

Pyrrho (ca. 360–270 BC) was the first Greek skeptic philosopher and the founder of Pyrrhonism. The ancient skeptics were radical thinkers who also called themselves “those who suspend” (*ephektikoi*), signaling that their investigations involved extreme suspension of judgment.¹ To understand what the tranquil state of *ataraxia* is, we need to know that Pyrrhonian skepticism was initially a solely intellectual enterprise, but it unexpectedly transformed itself into a *practice*. That practice—the suspension of judgment about what is good and what is bad, about what is real and what is mere appearance—is intimately related to the notion of “choiceless awareness,” which played an important role in the teachings of contemporary Indian philosophers like Jiddu Krishnamurti, and also in many classical descriptions of meditative techniques and mindfulness practices. The goal of Pyrrhonian practice was an undisturbed calmness of soul. As Sextus Empiricus said:

The Skeptics hoped to acquire unperturbedness by deciding the anomaly in the things which appear and which are thought, but being unable to do this, they suspended judgment. And while they were suspending judgment, unperturbedness closely followed them by chance, as it were, as a shadow [closely follows] a body.²

The discovery of *ataraxia* was an unexpected one: Any holding of beliefs about how things really are prevents one from attaining peace of mind, whereas suspending all judgment leads to a new state. We might call this state “living a life without belief,” or even use the terms of this book and refer to the philosophical ideal behind it as “conscious experience without theory contamination.” It is interesting to note how—on the subpersonal level of modern computational phenomenology—this ideal returns as the notion of “flattening the brain’s predictive hierarchy,” which we first encountered in chapter 2.³ Back at the level of lived experience, it definitely has to do with the quality of suchness that we have already investigated, and with cultivating epistemic openness. What’s more, engaging in purely speculative forms of philosophical metaphysics now begins to look like the exact opposite of spiritual practice, and simply taking things to be real starts to seem like a form of unawareness (we touch on all four of these points—*seeing what is*, epistemic openness, getting lost in narrative self-deception, and transparency—from a phenomenological perspective in chapters 9, 4, 17, and 28, respectively).

Why is this so? Affirming something that you do not really know (e.g., by claiming to know what is real or unreal) is a form of intellectual dishonesty—a way of not being true to yourself. On the level of conscious experience itself, it means being caught in an automatic mechanism of world-construction, mindlessly acting out your brain's unconscious assumptions about the structure of reality.

Pyrrho's disciple Timon is known for a statement that, at the very end, points to a fourfold indeterminacy that directly mirrors a core insight of Nagarjuna, the most important Buddhist philosopher: his *catuṣkoṭi* (the famous “four-cornered” negation). Aristocles describes Timon's take on Pyrrho as follows:

Pyrrho's pupil, Timon, says that anyone who is going to lead a happy life must take account of the following three things: first, what objects are like by nature; secondly, what our attitude to them should be; finally, what will result for those who take this attitude. Now he says Pyrrho shows that objects are equally indifferent and unfathomable and undeterminable, hence neither our senses nor our judgments are true or false; so for that reason we should not trust in them but should be without judgment and without inclination and unmoved, saying about each thing that it no more is than is not or both is and is not or neither is nor is not. And Timon says that for those who take this attitude the result will be first nonassertion, then tranquillity.⁴

Socrates is famous for having said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Many meditators will certainly agree, but they will also go further, pointing out that, more specifically, an unexamined *inner* life is not worth living. As a matter of fact, the formal practice of classical Vipassanā meditation (which was the single most frequently used technique among our participants) and the informal establishment of mindfulness during the day (*satipaṭṭhāna* or *smṛtyupasthāna*, in Buddhist terms) can be seen as exactly this: the serious practice of living an examined inner life.

Humankind has developed many such meditation techniques—“policies” for precisely those mental actions that lead to the effortless mental *inaction* of minimal phenomenal experience (MPE), as the modern computational phenomenology of meditation might frame them. Some of the blind may touch the elephant with their right hand, some with their left. Some may use both hands at the same time, and some may alternate. Some may run only the tips of their fingers or the tip of only a single finger over its skin; others may gently let the palms of their hands glide over it, or even put their cheek on its flank. Some of the blind may discover by chance that there is something that can be touched with their feet and begin to explore one of the elephant's four lower legs. Figure 14.1 shows the most popular meditation techniques, as well as the ways in which practitioners combine techniques in their quest for the examined life.

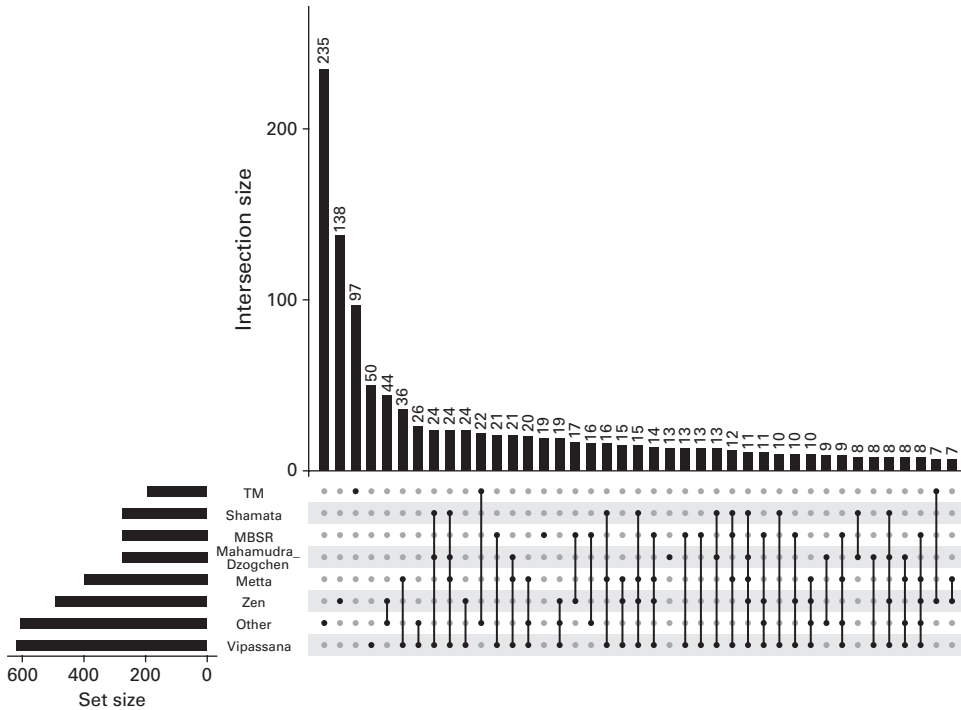


Figure 14.1

This plot shows the combinations of meditation techniques reported as being used by our participants. The top graph is a histogram, with each bar representing the frequency of a particular meditation technique (or constellation of techniques) that are identified right below it. Black dots connected by black lines string together techniques that belong to a given constellation. The bar chart on the left shows the overall frequencies of each technique. MBSR= Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction; TM=Transcendental Meditation.

Genuine tranquillity arises in an existential and entirely nonconceptual way, resulting from a special form of inner investigation. In the meditation technique most frequently used by our respondents, Vipassanā, tranquillity is enabled precisely by the suspension of all judgment and by an effortless cultivation of choiceless awareness, but it also occurs in the context of full-absorption episodes. Of course, such episodes can be generated by many others of the techniques shown in figure 14.1.⁵ *Ataraxia* in this sense is related to the quality that in chapter 1 was termed “existential ease.” It is not the result of taking on some merely intellectual attitude; the kind of examination that is required is of a much more fundamental kind. There is an existential immediacy to *ataraxia*. It seems as though at least some meditators may love wisdom in the

sense represented by the life and death of Socrates, but many of them actually follow through on a deeper, Pyrrhonian level (see also chapter 16). *Ataraxia* is not something conceptual; indeed, it is not a cognitive or intellectual state at all. It results from the cultivation of a specific form of inner attention that leads to an awareness of awareness itself.

Vipassanā meditation is, in more modern terms, the process of being choicelessly aware of the continuous dynamics unfolding in the phenomenal self-model. One of the deepest parts of the human self-model is the goal hierarchy that it represents: the hierarchy of goals to be achieved in this life and their relation to each other, which together constitute the values we live by. What *really* matters? Our goal hierarchy is also a part of the life process itself—something that we identify with and constantly try to make as consistent as possible, maximizing its internal coherence. The decoherence of contradictory goals and values creates suffering. So does the divergence between *what is* and *what should be*. We negotiate with ourselves, continuously trying to dissolve conflicts between long-term goals and short-term rewards. We develop clever forms of self-deception, and we often ignore opportunity costs (i.e., the benefit *not* received as a result of not selecting the next best option), while always remaining on the lookout for livable trade-offs and for *real* relevance, for experiences of meaning (see chapter 17). Vipassanā meditation allows us to observe this permanent source of inner perturbation in an entirely nonconceptual way, gently, precisely, and eventually even without an observer. Meditation prevents us from acting out our goal hierarchy like mindless biorobots.

Of course, we are enculturated beings, and many of our values and goals have been projected onto us, not only through biological evolution but also through our specific cognitive niches, as well as through the more recent social contexts in which we have grown up. But if the only way that we can critically reflect on them is intellectually, the causal force of these values and goals will remain almost unchanged—we will achieve no fine-grained understanding of their actual modus operandi. Achieving such an understanding is what it means to “live an examined *inner* life,” and of course, it is directly related to the practice of nonassertion and the ancient Greek idea of *ataraxia*. It is interesting to note that the continuous dynamics of the goal hierarchy are at the core of our conscious self-model; they are a deep and relentless source of fragmentation, and phenomenologically, they are what most of us *identify* with. Any more radical ending to this process of continuously reorganizing our goal-hierarchy, therefore, would imply a form of ego dissolution (chapter 25). If there is no ego, there is no agenda. If there is no agenda, there is nothing left to do.

I have always thought that in Western antiquity, many indicators point to an intrinsic relationship between philosophy, spiritual practice, and certain altered states of consciousness—new *phenomenal* models of reality resulting from an accompanying existential transformation in the thinker–practitioner.⁶ *Ataraxia* is just one example. The French philosopher Pierre Hadot (1922–2010) said that we can understand early Western philosophy much better if we view it as employing *spiritual exercises*—that is, sets of “practices [. . .] intended to effect a modification and a transformation in the subjects who practice them.”⁷ For example, Hadot pointed out that the Socratic dialogue was really “a kind of communal spiritual exercise.”⁸ He interestingly claimed that in many cases, “[t]he philosophy teacher’s discourse could also assume the form of a spiritual exercise, if the discourse were presented in such a way that the disciple, as auditor, reader, or interlocutor, could make spiritual progress and transform himself within.”⁹

In his detailed historical investigation of how the ancients *really* conceived of philosophy, Hadot found that the earliest Greek thinkers, as well as the philosophers of the Hellenistic period (i.e., the period of Mediterranean history between the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC and the emergence of the Roman Empire) and those of late antiquity, were concerned not just to develop convincing philosophical theories but also to practice philosophy as a way of life.¹⁰ In part 2 of his well-known book *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, Hadot defended the claim that what Ignatius of Loyola later called an *exercitium spirituale* (to cite one example) was “nothing but a Christian version of a Greco-Roman tradition.” He demonstrated that

both the idea and the terminology of *exercitium spirituale* are attested in early Latin Christianity, well before Ignatius of Loyola, and they correspond to the Greek Christian term *askesis*. In turn, *askesis*—which must be understood not as asceticism, but as the practice of spiritual exercises—already existed within the philosophical tradition of antiquity.¹¹

Let me therefore conclude this chapter by giving a second example without further comment—one that is directly related to the topics of ego dissolution and *ataraxia*, the contemplative phenomenology of existential ease (chapter 1), and choiceless meditative attention to the present moment (chapter 22). This example shows that the two themes of cultivating sustained “attention to oneself” and “being fully in the present moment” were both strongly expressed in early Western philosophy. As Pierre Hadot puts it, *prosoche* (attention to oneself) was the fundamental attitude of the philosopher as well as the monk.¹² To be very clear at this point, the Stoic *prosoche* and the Buddhist *sati* (mindfulness) are certainly not simply one and the same thing.¹³ But if one

reads the following longer passage from Hadot—in the middle of which he quotes the famous *Meditations* authored by the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius (121–180)—as contextualized by the background of our own phenomenological data originating in present-day contemplative practice, then it is hard to overlook certain interesting commonalities. The Eastern and the Western approaches can be seen as two distinct epistemic practices that are nevertheless expressions of the same underlying attitude:

Attention (*prosoche*) is the fundamental Stoic spiritual attitude. It is a continuous vigilance and presence of mind, self consciousness which never sleeps, and a constant tension of the spirit. [. . .] It is this vigilance of the spirit which lets us apply the fundamental rule to each of life's particular situations, and always to do what we do "appropriately." We could also define this attitude as "concentration on the present moment":

Everywhere and at all times, it is up to you to rejoice piously at what is occurring *at the present moment*, to conduct yourself with justice towards the people who are *present here and now*, and to apply rule of discernment to your *present* representations, so that nothing slips in that is not objective.

Attention to the present moment is, in a sense, the key to spiritual exercises. It frees us from the passions, which are always caused by the past or the future—two areas which do not depend on us. By encouraging concentration on the minuscule present moment, which, in its exiguity, is always bearable and controllable, attention increases our vigilance. Finally, attention to the present moment allows us to accede to cosmic consciousness, by making us attentive to the infinite value of each instant, and causing us to accept each moment of existence from the viewpoint of the universal law of the *cosmos*.¹⁴

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/15196.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/15196.001.0001)

The Elephant and the Blind

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

By: Thomas Metzinger

Citation:

*The Elephant and the Blind: The Experience of Pure Consciousness: Philosophy,
Science, and 500+ Experiential Reports*

By: Thomas Metzinger

DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/15196.001.0001

ISBN (electronic): 9780262377287

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2024

The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding
and support from MIT Press Direct to Open



The MIT Press

© 2024 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

This work is subject to a Creative Commons CC-BY-ND-NC license.

This license applies only to the work in full and not to any components included with permission. Subject to such license, all rights are reserved. No part of this book may be used to train artificial intelligence systems without permission in writing from the MIT Press.



The MIT Press would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who provided comments on drafts of this book. The generous work of academic experts is essential for establishing the authority and quality of our publications. We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of these otherwise uncredited readers.

This book was set in Stone Serif and Stone Sans by Westchester Publishing Services.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Metzinger, Thomas, 1958– author.

Title: The elephant and the blind : the experience of pure consciousness: philosophy, science, and 500+ experiential reports / Thomas Metzinger.

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, [2024] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023012135 (print) | LCCN 2023012136 (ebook) | ISBN 9780262547109 (paperback) | ISBN 9780262377294 (epub) | ISBN 9780262377287 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Consciousness.

Classification: LCC BF311 .M4725 2024 (print) | LCC BF311 (ebook) | DDC 153—dc23/eng/20230830

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023012135>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023012136>