

## 15 Joy, Awe, Bliss, and Gratitude

Figuratively speaking, it is consenting to being. [#151]

The state contains an inner sweetness which is very subtle and which I experience as a kind of “primordial happiness.” [#3464]

Pure awareness as such is not an emotional state. On the other hand, it can trigger a whole spectrum of mostly positive affective states like joy, existential relief, gratitude, impersonal love, awe, and wonder, ranging in intensity from the very delicate and natural to the dramatic and overwhelming. In particular, minimal phenomenal experience (MPE) can sometimes coexist with a mostly subtle but distinctive form of bliss, an experience that has sometimes been described as an “invisible smile.” In addition, this kind of bliss has a pristine and primordial phenomenal character, as described by one of our participants in the second quotation presented here. In pure awareness, we find not only the phenomenology of peace, existential ease, and silence described in chapters 1–3, but at times also different forms of what in German is called *stilles Entzücken* (“silent delight”). As explained in chapter 1, this experiential quality is intimately connected to a calm and entirely undramatic phenomenology of rapture. Personally, I found it strongly resonant with my own experience when one of our participants spoke of “sensationless awe” (#3524), and another of “a very fine and nonsensational sense of wonder” (#3624). In this chapter, we will look at a wide variety of such states.

Interestingly, many meditators explicitly related positive emotional states like joy, existential relief, gratitude, impersonal love, awe, and wonder to childhood experiences of timeless unity. Some of us had such experiences long before we started to practice meditation, and many people know them without ever having engaged in any form of contemplative practice at all. Let us begin by looking at three examples:

3305 [. . .] The experience [. . .] came over me spontaneously in my parents' garden. Perception was crystal clear, my surroundings shimmered, and I became aware of the true timelessness in the world. The body became one with everything. Great happiness flowed through me. [. . .]

2288 [. . .] I experienced in the garden a oneness with nature and everything that exists. I had the feeling that I had already experienced this as a child.

1647 [. . .] 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 pretrauma. [. . .]

In this phenomenological domain, there are elements of innocence, wonder, gentleness, and timelessness. In adults, a specific sense of *relief* also seems to arise when the egoic sense of control is dissolved and the phenomenal quality called “agency” is attenuated. If one looks closely, a whole spectrum of mostly positive affective qualities can coemerge with or be triggered by an episode of pure awareness. Let us take a quick look at this spectrum.

First, we find the inner experience of awe and wonder:

3146 [. . .] There was a quality of gentleness and wonder, not in any words or concepts, but more as a pervasive feeling of “this is it, this is how everything truly is.”

3207 [. . .] Feelings were mainly love and amazement and gratitude. [. . .]

3524 Easy calm, easy completion, sensationless awe, being deeply moved, all-pervading floaty thoughtless state of not searching further, being boundlessly held [*entgrenztes Gehaltensein*], fulfilled without needs.

Joy and existential relief are quite common, but they come in a wide variety of ways:

2056 [. . .]—from one moment to the next, complete unburdening—a slight (almost “childlike”) feeling of joy—[. . .]

2346 [. . .] I achieved this perspective within minutes and quickly experienced an accompanying sense of total relief and freedom. It was quite exhilarating, and I was keenly aware of a center to myself unrelated to my bodily experience or the content of my thoughts. It was immensely relieving and made me quite giddy in a way. [. . .]

2521 [. . .] There was a general sense of awe and joy. In this state, I felt like I would know how to inhabit it forever, but after what felt like 15 to 45 minutes later, I started to feel I was gradually coming back to a normal state, which I did although I still felt joyful. I remained in a somewhat more joyful state for

a few days and then I returned entirely to my normal self with the memory of what had happened. [ . . . ]

[ . . . ] I expanded what I was paying attention to (trees, sound of the wind and cars, sensations of the body) and started thinking “Look for the self. Is there anyone experiencing these things or is everything just happening by itself?” At that moment I started smiling and feeling an unexpected deep sense of joy. It would last a few seconds, but from then on, I was able to invoke that kind of feeling any time I wanted. It never lasts more than a few short seconds and I do need to prepare to make it happen (stop, expand awareness, remember to notice that everything happens by itself). There is a general sense of joy, awe, and a feeling that after all, I don’t really have any real problems. Sometimes the sense of joy feels almost too intense, as if there is tension around an unusual feeling. There’s also an urge to smile. [ . . . ]

2867 [ . . . ] the intensity started to wane, and I was left with a feeling of having been blown away like dandelion seeds on a puff of air. In awe and at peace. Also, a feeling of giddiness, like I had just stepped off a ride.

3186 [ . . . ] The contact and the encounter with your own soul. Simply beautiful and not comparable to anything earthly. Pure joy.

The phenomenal qualities of bliss and timelessness sometimes occur in calm and peaceful states, but they may also arise with complex experiential content:

3236 Deep calm, bliss.

2706 [ . . . ] On the other hand, there are paradoxical spaces of consciousness with a vast emptiness and yet billowing fullness, a presence of being, which open up the deepest serenity and at the same time overwhelming ecstasy and bliss. A great joy and connectedness is accompanied by sorrow and deep compassion for the suffering of beings. Although thoughtless, the desire to share these vast spaces of consciousness is strong, gratitude and humility arise, reverence and lightness, vastness and also silence again, motionlessness, timelessness, solidifying in powerful pulsation.

3074 A sense of deep bliss, the smell of a rose, and colors of pink and purple in the third eye area, timeless, weightless, and at peace.

3110 In general, the pure awareness washes over me with a sense of calm within myself and greater unity outside of myself. It is almost always accompanied by either the sensation of bright colors (usually yellows, sometimes green, red, blue, or purple). Occasionally, there has been a noticeable absence/void of color. The experience has been one of pure calmness and bliss. I think in

actual time it has been very short, but the sensation is one of expanse and timelessness.

3190 After my meditation I went for a walk by a lake at sunrise. It was a wonderful atmosphere. Then I heard voices. Normally it would have destroyed my beautiful experience of nature to hear other people talking, but now this was just the occasion to realize that everything is one, that I am one with everything, that everything is good. The experience went from the lovely harmonious setting to a deep experience of bliss that is endless. At the beginning of my experience the golden light of the rising sun made me happy, but then this light was within me and everywhere and I was everywhere this light, boundless, blissful.

Another phenomenological element is the experience of love:

624 [. . .] You experience the feeling of unconditional love, of being an intrinsic and inherent part of the universe, without separation. I feel life deeply in its pure state, without distortions, without a mind that wants to control everything for fear of pain, I feel perfect as I am, full of wisdom and beautiful in every way (loved and full of love). [. . .]

717 [. . .] It is a feeling of merging with all happiness and all love. It is soooooo soooooo big. . . . ., weightless, the words we have at our disposal here are not enough for the description.

2874 The experience occurred during a sitting meditation and can best be described as a stream of “love” that flooded the body or absorbed the body into itself (qualities of warmth/light/bliss). [. . .] A state of heightened alertness and full consciousness was present. It was also possible to withdraw from this flow at any time and to switch back to the “everyday” phenomenal experience.

Sometimes the positive affect of pure awareness can include gratitude; a sometimes strong, often timeless, at times even bodiless, nonpersonal, uncontracted, and “non-dual” quality of gratitude *as such*, lacking subject and object:

82 [. . .] The dis-identification of thoughts and emotions was amazing, I stopped feeling thought. So was the sense of conscious space. I felt infinite gratitude when I returned to the normal waking state.

1862 The experience is incredibly difficult to describe. It is like taking a thimble of water from the ocean of wisdom; however, I continually felt gratitude, awe, and was completely void of the emotion anger. [. . .]

2687 [. . .] a deep feeling of joy, timelessness, happiness emerged. I could perceive it and had no sense of time. I felt no physical sensations, no thoughts. At

some point I felt my body again, thoughts and feelings came. It could “not be repeated.” I had the feeling that I had been given a gift.

2714 It is difficult to put it into words, in any case through meditation I can create conditions (by relaxing into the moment) and it comes or not, like grace; a strong element of letting go until there is no one left to let go, no inside or outside, no one who is doing well or badly, although in the background there may be a sensation of the body, occasionally thoughts, perceptions of the environment, these are not there and everything at the same time, perfect birth; it doesn't last and has no time; it is completely there and in no place, there is no place where it could be or not be, there is nothing outside this being, which calling being is already too much, often accompanied by tears, and if there is a feeling then gratitude, but not for anything or anyone, rather gratitude as such.

One unexpected detail was that a number of participants in our study reported crying, typically at the end of an episode characterized by particular intensity. Sometimes they emphasized that the crying was not itself emotional:

1081 [. . .] deeply peaceful, moved to tears, as-it-is, the sense of being “home.” [. . .]

1114 [. . .] Something that moves me to tears. [. . .]

1142 [. . .] At this point, tears came to my eyes and I began thinking and the experience dissipated.

1558 [. . .] My body was very relaxed, my mind awake and without thoughts, emotionally I was moved and tears were flowing. [. . .]

1718 [. . .] My breath was deep and slow through my mouth with tears welling in my eyes. I felt relaxed and amazed.

1942 [. . .] Tears run down my face. [. . .]

2071 [. . .] I felt tears running down my face. [. . .]

2234 [. . .] I cried tears of joy during and after. [. . .]

2504 [. . .] Soon the emotion came, tears of joy flowing. [. . .]

2607 [. . .] I came away from the experience and cried tears of happiness for about 15 minutes [. . .]

2742 [. . .] At that moment I was so overwhelmed by this purity that tears were running down my face. [. . .]

2879 [. . .] when, from one moment to the next, I was seized by a kind of different force and tears ran down my face without me being sad. Rather, I was happy, without that perhaps being the right word. It was kind of like being deeply moved. [. . .]

3048 [. . .] Tears ran down my face. This was not connected with any feeling or emotion, it was simple. [. . .]

One interesting result of our study is how many meditators, when asked to describe a single, paradigmatic experience of pure awareness, testified to a deep sense of profundity and existential relevance, but how few of them actually chose to interpret their experience in an explicitly religious way, using religious terms like “grace.” There are some exceptions (for examples using the term “grace,” see #692, #2714, #2983, and #3173; for the idea of a “grace hyperprior,” see chapters 10 and 13). Here are two examples:

692 All that I [ . . . ] was allowed to experience of pure consciousness or awareness is based on pure Divine grace, for which I am infinitely grateful. [ . . . ] One cannot produce these experiences by one’s own conviction or willpower, let alone repeat them on demand. All one can do for this is to purify oneself through one’s daily sadhana (spiritual practice) and prepare oneself so that one is physically and mentally ready and able to endure and sustain [(er)tragen] this pure awareness whenever IT will reveal itself and not get burned in the process.

3173 For myself, I sometimes call this a state of “grace” that is poured out on me, so to speak.

Deep contemplative experiences apparently sometimes involve a quality of what in German would be called *Gottebenbildlichkeit* (godlikeness). This is the experience of being created in the image of God, of participating in and perhaps even existing only by virtue of something radically different from oneself—in short, existing only as “an image-bearer of the Noncontingent.”<sup>1</sup> *Imago Dei*—the ancient theological idea that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God (which we find in some Islamic Sufi groups, in Judaism, and in Christianity)—may have what from chapter 26 onward I will call a “phenomenological anchor,” because it refers to a specific region in phenomenal state space. Transposing the idea into metaphysically neutral terminology, this quality can be described as the experience of being an expression of the whole—if you will, not of *having* a model of the whole in your mind, but of actually *being* such a model. Perhaps one could describe this as a global phenomenology of “self-similarity,” meaning that parts (like yourself) are now experienced as resembling or even locally representing the whole:

2384 Afterward I knew that I am the expression of the whole universe, right in the place where I find myself. I do nothing, everything happens.

Before we proceed to look at seven final examples of verbal reports explicitly using religious terms, allow me to make two related points. First, some of the analogies and new metaphors for pure awareness coined by our participants are open to a theological or religious reading without requiring it: Good examples that we have encountered in this chapter include “*Zustimmen zum Sein*” (#151; “consenting to being”), “*die Berührung und das Begegnen mit der eigenen Seele*” (#3186; “the contact and the encounter with

your own soul”), and “*entgrenztes Gehaltensein*” (#3524; “being boundlessly held”). In addition, there are whole *categories* of state that are relevant in this context, such as the phenomenology of “coming home” (as described separately in chapter 33) and that of “waking up”: for example, “*das Wahre, so wie ein Aufwachen in das richtige Leben*” (#2908; “Truth, like an awakening to life”) or the beautiful notion of pure awareness as “*eine Art ‘Erweckung zum Menschlichen’*” (#1787; “a kind of ‘awakening to the human’”; see also chapter 4).

To conclude, here are some of the relatively rare examples where religious terminology is explicitly used:

267 [ . . . ] It was a very profound experience for me. As if for the first time I had got an impression of what “God” really is.

540 [ . . . ] At the same time the flow of my thoughts lessens more and more and my consciousness becomes very quiet and peaceful. But this is only a transitional stage. Since after some time there is a feeling of increasing expansion not only of consciousness but also of the body. The feeling that comes along with it is love. As a Christian I perceive it as God’s love touching me and at the same time igniting within me my love for him and for all creatures. The feeling of love is the most important thing in the whole experience. It is what I experience as expanding pure awareness, and it encompasses God, myself, and all creatures.

863 [ . . . ] I can describe it as “perfection.” Since then I can imagine that something like godlike energy exists. [ . . . ]

1471 I experienced a state of perfect silence and infinity. I simply felt happy, whole, secure, one with God. I knew that in this state nothing bad could happen to me. I felt devotion and gratitude at the same time. This feeling pulsed in alternation with perfect silence.

3194 I felt completely boundless, merged with the whole, peaceful, fulfilled, connected with the One God.

3218 [ . . . ] When I was walking on the gravel road and seeing insects or little animals passing by, I felt an intense feeling of bliss at their sight. A complete marvel at the perfection and beauty of God’s creation infused my heart. [ . . . ]

3579 Again and again in meditation, I experience a feeling of being one with God and God in everything. This is the God of all religions, not of Christianity, detached from space and time. It is difficult to put into words, because it is first and foremost an experience of unity. There is no more self or not-self. I feel one with the original source, wholly internal and wholly external. All separation is suspended. There is only complete presence. All conflicts, everything, is void and no longer existent.

### Spiritual but Not Religious?

Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. [. . .] Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer. [. . .] Attention alone—that attention which is so full that the “I” disappears—is required of me. I have to deprive all that I call “I” of the light of my attention and turn it on to that which cannot be conceived.

—Simone Weil (1909–1943), *Gravity and Grace*

The relationship between the phenomenology of pure awareness itself and positive affective experience could easily be a whole research project on its own. A first conceptual distinction that we should make concerns whether these phenomenal qualities tend to occur in the midst of a full-absorption episode, while still trying to quiet the mind and gradually access the state of pure awareness, or when moving out of the state into something more complex, thereby integrating additional experiential contents. Here, one important possibility is that many practitioners may actually alternate rapidly between various stages of meditation. For example, some full-absorption episodes could actually be very short and occur rather frequently during a single period of sitting. Therefore, we must consider not only prolonged or dramatic experiences, but also subtle and potentially swift fluctuations in emotional tone.

A second target for future research would be the relationship between MPE reports explicitly employing religious terminology, those describing something we might call a phenomenology that is “spiritual but not religious (SBNR),” and those that are not even describing MPE-related states as “spiritual” in any way, being explicitly secular and metaphysically neutral in nature. The semantics and other linguistic aspects of reports anywhere on this spectrum could be studied in both quantitative and qualitative ways.

Over the centuries, contemplative practice has mostly taken place against a backdrop of religious belief systems like Buddhism or Hinduism, with meditators trying to achieve a soteriological goal like “liberation” or “enlightenment.” Accordingly, the phenomenological taxonomies of such states have been shaped by metaphysical belief systems and an ancient cultural context; they are highly *normative* taxonomies. However, during the last fifty years, a historically new situation has emerged: Millions of practitioners in Western societies meditate on a daily basis, and research by Heinz Streb and Ralph Hood has shown that many of those who do so describe themselves as secular or as “spiritual but not religious.”<sup>2</sup>

In our first survey, the most frequently named religious affiliation was “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR) / “spiritual but not affiliated” (SBNA) (n=632), followed by two large groups of Buddhist and Christian denomination (322 and 320), and then one



last, largish group of participants categorizing themselves as “secular” (188). It is plausible that differing conceptual backgrounds will have an influence on the intrinsic motivations, implicit expectations, and personal goals of meditators (more on this in chapter 17). In general, our data show that for many of our participants, the importance of meditation is much greater than the importance of religion.

From a more abstract, philosophical perspective, I have argued that the opposite of religion is not science but spirituality,<sup>3</sup> and that the possibility (or impossibility) of developing a genuinely “secular spirituality” is one of the most important topics of our time (more on this in the epilogue). On the other hand, the increasingly popular concept of SBNR is derived from a new and slightly ill-defined term that emerged at the end of the twentieth century. A semantic analysis of SBNR based on empirical evidence from psychological research seems to show that in the large majority of real-world practitioners, the actual difference between “spirituality” and “religion” is smaller than explicit distinctions between both concepts may seem to indicate. I will come back to this point from two different angles in chapter 17 and the epilogue.

Referring back to the work by Streib and Hood just mentioned,<sup>4</sup> the Canadian philosopher Evan Thompson has convincingly made the point that the idea of a fully secular spirituality without religious elements could refer in some cases to a form of “privatized experience-oriented religion.”<sup>5</sup> This possibility is a relevant target for future research. It will be important to investigate, in particular, how the presence or absence of spiritual or religious elements (whether private or institutionalized) influences verbal reports and the fine-grained phenomenal character of contemplative experience itself.

In terms of our ongoing qualitative analysis, it is worth noting that you will find many reports of joy, awe, bliss, and gratitude in other chapters of this book. From a purely statistical perspective, four items in factor 2 (labeled “Peace, Bliss, and Silence”) pick out states of positive mood (like “gentleness” or the “invisible smile,” plus the phenomenal quality of “bliss” itself). These typically coemerge with a holistic quality of deep relaxation and pure being—the phenomenal character of “existential ease” described in chapter 1—in connection with an experience of peace and deep, unbounded silence. Interestingly, these items form a cluster that remains stable across six factor solutions, an internal coherence suggesting that precisely these experiential qualities very often co-occur. References to “soundness” and “harmony” and statements to the effect that this was “the simplest kind of conscious experience I know” also belong to factor 2, but they had a weaker loading and were not stable across all six factor solutions.

From a conceptual point of view, one of the most interesting research questions in this subdomain is whether the “primordial” form of happiness and the very subtle, undramatic, unsensational quality of rapture and wonder discussed at the very

beginning of this chapter actually belong to the prototypical core of MPE. But what about the more pronounced, phenomenal character of bliss: Is it a property of pure consciousness per se? Ancient contemplative traditions seem to disagree on this point, as do some present-day experts.<sup>6</sup> For example, the famous notion of *sat-chit-ananda* (“existence, consciousness, and bliss”) clearly makes it an essential component of pure awareness. The term goes back to the *Nrisimha Tapaniya Upanishad* and the *Rama Uttara tapaniya Upanishad*; as a metaphysical concept, it is perhaps most prominently known from Vedanta philosophy, where it refers to the three main attributes of Brahman, the nonpersonal Absolute. On the other hand, many Tibetan Buddhist sources actually warn practitioners that experiences of nonthought (chapter 3), clarity (chapter 5), and bliss (as described previously) are mere “meditative moods,” likely to distract from what really matters if one becomes attached to them. Here are two examples, one taken from the famous *Moonbeams of Mahāmudrā*, the other from *Clarifying the Natural State*:

When any of those experiences of bliss, clarity, or nonconceptuality develop (either altogether or separately), if we take them to be sublime and intentionally cultivate them with attachment and fixation—feeling pleased when they develop and unhappy when they don’t—they will cause us to stray from the abiding state.<sup>7</sup>

Whether it is one of these three meditative moods—bliss, clarity and nonthought—in combination or a part of any of them, you might cling to these meditative experiences as being paramount and train in a way that is fettered by them, being happy when they come and unhappy when they do not.<sup>8</sup>

The Tibetans clearly thought that the experience of bliss can be something dangerous, leading to more or less subtle forms of delusion. This dilemma is also related to the issue of intrinsic motivation, to which we will return in chapter 17: Does MPE in itself carry motivational force—is it a state of consciousness that automatically creates the desire to return to it—or are other, more extrinsic factors more significant in encouraging meditators to sustain their regular practice, sometimes over many years? Is consciousness itself fundamentally *affective*?<sup>9</sup> As to the general conceptual question of whether more pronounced positive affective states are intrinsic to the pure-consciousness experience, we now have a clear interim result. The new phenomenological data presented here show a double dissociation: In meditators, the experience of pure consciousness can definitely occur *without* automatically triggering joy, awe, bliss, or gratitude; and all human beings—meditators and nonmeditators alike—know the conscious experience of joy, awe, bliss, or gratitude in situations where the phenomenal character of awareness itself is entirely absent.

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# The Elephant and the Blind

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

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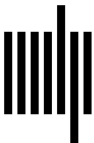
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