

## 20 Pure Awareness during Dreamless Deep Sleep

There is no waking, there is no sleeping, there is only being. [#1784]

Contemplative practice is related to sleep in a number of interesting ways. First, many dozens of our experiential reports emphasize how deeply relaxing, restful, and refreshing it is to spend a while abiding in the wakeful presence of bare awareness. What is more, the relationship between our subjectively experienced target phenomenology of wakeful presence and the objective property of functional-level wakefulness (also called “tonic alertness”) seems to be symmetrical. It is not only that pure awareness makes you feel more fully awake. There is also a well-known mirror image, with the arrow of causality apparently pointing in the opposite direction: Being fully awake can make pure awareness more likely. This is true in two senses. One of the most important physiological factors enabling episodes of pure awareness is, quite simply, being well rested. Furthermore, it even seems that having a particularly good night’s rest quite reliably causes the phenomenology of pure awareness to emerge, for example in one’s early-morning meditation:

3218 [. . .] The experiences described are much more accessible when I go into my meditation with a completely rested and settled mind and body. But it is remarkable that the experiences are not at all random: Once the conditions of being well rested and settled in mind and body are met, the experiences are there. [. . .] This state of ocean comes relatively regularly during meditation, provided that I am completely rested. [. . .]

Robert Forman edited one of the first and best-known collections of texts focusing on pure awareness, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, first published by Oxford University Press in 1990. In a later monograph about mysticism and consciousness, he writes:

I tend to undergo this phenomenon more often when I have been getting enough sleep. Other than that, I have not been able to correlate this phenomenon with any other process: for example, it does not happen more often when I have eaten certain foods, wear certain clothes, or sit in a particular chair [ . . . ].<sup>1</sup>

Interestingly, a third general observation shared by many committed practitioners is that the quality of sleep *itself* changes over the years, as it does for everyone, but especially during periods of more intensive practice (e.g., during silent retreats). For example, sleep may feel lighter, dream recall may improve, and spontaneous lucid dreams can occur:

1341 [ . . . ] Another more general experience over time is that my sleep is lighter, and I remember my dreams and can control them. I never used to think I had dreams.

We will return to the relationship between meditation and dreams in chapter 21. An interim conclusion from these first three observations is that concepts like “wakefulness” or “awakening” are likely more than mere phenomenological metaphors. In addition, neuroscience provides us with strong empirical indicators pointing to possible causal relationships between minimal phenomenal experience (MPE) and the functional mechanisms by which the human brain reactivates itself, bringing the organism back into a state of being conscious and open to the world. Finally, the phenomenological material clearly demonstrates that human beings enter a state or even a global mode of pure awareness much more frequently when starting from the wake state than from the dream state or even from dreamless deep sleep.

There is an important caveat here, however. From the fact that MPE is *most frequently* accessed from the wake state, it doesn't follow that this is necessarily the *easiest* way to do it. It has been argued that the state is actually more accessible from some dream states, because lucid dreaming is a kind of back door or shortcut into the state.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, the practice in dream yoga of dissolving the content once in a lucid dream could function as a shortcut into what in the second part of this chapter I will also call “clear light sleep” or “witnessing sleep,” whereas accessing that state from wakefulness could actually require more extensive training and practice in meditation. As I have learned in conversation with the neuroscientist Benjamin Baird,<sup>3</sup> MPE states or even prolonged MPE modes may be more commonly experienced during waking periods, partly just because very few people are trained in practices of dream yoga. Baird's point yields another specific, and empirically testable, hypothesis for future research: Pure awareness might be most frequently accessed from the wake state, most rarely from dreamless deep sleep, and most easily from a lucid dream.

Considering the existing evidence for this hypothesis, our data clearly show that the experience of pure awareness during sleep sometimes does happen. It is fascinating to see how in some advanced meditators, the phenomenal quality of wakefulness investigated in chapter 4 can actually occur even during those quiescent sleep stages in which the brain waves are slow and of high voltage, and in which the breathing and heart rate are slow and regular and the sleeper is mostly very calm. We will look at pure awareness during the dream state in chapter 21, while focusing for now on the seemingly paradoxical experience of wakefulness during mostly dreamless, non-rapid eye movement (NREM) sleep.

Stand-alone experiences of “wake sleep” or “witnessing sleep” during NREM sleep are much rarer than full-absorption episodes of pure awareness during standard formal practice like sitting meditation. Out of the 1,403 participants in our study, only 25 unequivocally confirmed that they had experienced pure awareness during dreamless deep sleep. The first finding is that sometimes the phenomenal quality of “luminosity” investigated in chapter 19 can spontaneously coemerge with a strong experience of wakefulness during dreamless deep sleep. One also finds that toward the end of an episode of “wake sleep,” there may be a strong emotional reaction of the type described in chapter 15. As always, let us start slowly, by taking a careful look at first-hand descriptions of this rare experience, such as the following:

58 [ . . . ] The experience itself happened as I was physically asleep. I “woke up” realizing that I was meditating in the sleep state. I had no awareness of my body or the external environment. The level of concentration was very high, magnetlike, and I noticed that I was meditating spontaneously/effortlessly/automatically and that I was awake (in other words, I was in *dhyana* or access concentration). I decided to switch focus to the light and awareness that was present in that moment. The light and the awareness became hyperpresent and I felt more awake than ever during normal waking consciousness. The light was also very intense (it had a visual quality, but could also be described as bright and clear in a more subtle sense if we think of these qualities as belonging more to conscious awareness than to visual light). The main and almost exclusive contents of consciousness were light and awareness. There was no separation between the light and the awareness. In fact, they seemed to mutually fuel each other; as the light became stronger, awareness increased, and vice versa. At an emotional level there was a sense of great awe. This emotion developed into exhilaration, which made the state unstable. I was starting to react to what was happening, and this eventually led to exiting the state and also returning to physical reality. This can be compared to looking into

a bright light becoming increasingly strong; soon you will turn away or close your eyes simply because the light is so intense. [ . . ]

In trying to convey the quality of pure awareness in dreamless deep sleep, meditators use terms that converge on or very strongly resemble those used to describe full-absorption episodes that begin in the wake state: “unity,” “selflessness,” “spaciousness,” “nonduality,” “timelessness,” “luminosity,” “radiance,” “contentlessness,” “unboundedness,” and “vividness”:

75 [ . . ] On a few occasions I have entered the state of deep dreamless sleep consciously. It is in this state where my experiences have occurred whereby I am a simple unified awareness, seemingly without the daytime qualities of ego. I have experienced vast, noncentered timeless space and sometimes light and sometimes pure black or color but can really only put inadequate words to the experiences in retrospect. [ . . ]

3171 In dreamless sleep—bright, contentless, unbounded, vivid. [ . . ]

In some experiential reports, one finds that—just like during episodes of nondual awareness (as investigated in chapter 27)—the phenomenal quality of awareness itself can function as a nonegoic unit of identification, as what some traditional systems describe as the “true self” (see chapter 29 for more):

420 Experiences of pure awareness in NREM sleep [ . . ], with one caveat: the question about the presence of self is not specific enough, i.e., autobiographical, core, or body-based self were absent, but the pure awareness was not someone else’s awareness nor some subtle object/state I was aware of, as in *jhana*. [ . . ] Rather, it is that which is and has been aware all along in all experiences, so in that sense, it is me. [ . . ] Again, it is not something other than who one is.

One practitioner created a beautiful new metaphor, referring to the fact that in some parts of the world, for a full twenty-four-hour period around the summer solstice (approximately June 21 in the northern hemisphere and December 23 in the southern hemisphere), the sun never sinks below the horizon:

1828 [ . . ] As an approximate verbal description: The objectless self appears in the empty space of pure, contentless awareness like a “midnight sun.” [ . . ]

I also found that some meditators had deep and unexpected spiritual experiences *before* establishing a regular meditation practice. For a small subgroup, contemplative practice may really be an attempt to understand and return to something that has already occurred in their lives, spontaneously and unsought, such as in childhood (see chapter 9 on the experiential qualities of freshness and wonder in the context of

suchness and chapter 15 for three concrete examples) or while experimenting with psychoactive substances (again, see chapter 9 and chapter 32 for a selection of four examples). Perhaps, for some, even spontaneously occurring wake sleep can later turn into a phenomenon in search of an explanation:

2387 I was aware that it was night and I was lying in bed. Yet I was absolutely clear and wide awake and detached from my body. For a brief moment I felt myself in the Here and Now and in infinity at the same time. However, as I didn't yet have any experience of meditation at that time, I was so startled and then brought this state to an end.

3273 In deep sleep I can hear the wind or rain. This started when I was 12 years old. My body is sleeping, my mind is awake. In meditation I am one with everything, mind, body, and the world. Feeling of oneness. [. . .] During deep sleep, I can scan into my brain physiology and into my eyes from a point between the eyes and feel the energy in the body going up to the head chakra and I do a big jump.

Not all meditation-related experiences of awareness during sleep are the same. For example, some are crystal clear and may involve a feeling of security and contentedness, while others are accompanied by the often very unpleasant phenomenology of sleep paralysis, anxiety, and social hallucinations—phenomena that are also known from scientific research on out-of-body experiences:<sup>4</sup>

68 [. . .] It might be worth mentioning that I have had numerous experiences of awareness of the sleep state over the years and that I think these are meditation-related. These experiences have, however, been mostly negative (including sleep paralysis, sensed evil presences, etc.) and not characterized by hyperawareness, but rather had a dreamlike quality.

1188 There are situations when I am asleep, or my body is, and my mind is awake and clear. While my mind is awake, only my body needs rest. In this wakefulness I can observe it. Feeling that I am much more than just my body. I am completely relaxed and fresh.

1189 [. . .] It can happen that in the morning, before the actual waking up, the mind is awake while the body is still asleep. A feeling of security, you feel pleasantly wrapped up like in a cocoon or like a mummy and you have the feeling that you could lie like this forever without having to move. It requires a conscious decision to move in order to leave this state (usually reluctantly). It is also possible that you have the feeling of being completely awake, but then you wake up thanks to external noises, or an alarm clock or even your own snoring, and only thereby realize that you were actually still sleeping.

1238 [. . .] I woke up one night and realized with horror that I could not move my body. Then I realized that the body was asleep. After that, I could gradually move it again. [. . .]

1371 [. . .] In waking sleep the body lies as if asleep, while the mind is awake, calm, and satisfied. Such a supposedly sleepless night is therefore a pleasure. [. . .]

2747 In dreamless sleep—it is very difficult for me to judge whether such experiences occur in deep sleep or in other stages of sleep. [. . .]

Sometimes wake sleep is also called “witnessing sleep,” because upon awakening, it retrospectively seems as though a quiet, impersonal observer has been present during parts of the night, but with no conceptual insight into the nature of the state itself. We explored the phenomenology of “witness consciousness” in chapter 19 and will focus on the specific quality of “nondual being” (i.e., the experience of existence itself) in chapter 26. Our data show that the phenomenology of pure awareness during dreamless sleep is often described as a form of witness consciousness, and also as the expansion of a nondual experience of pure being beyond formal meditation practice, into the wake state and beyond:

1423 I meditate daily, but this state of pure being comes when I lie down to sleep in the afternoon, I doze off, and suddenly I am wide awake, but don’t know who I am or where I am, I am only aware of existing. I am there. [. . .]

1354 [. . .] Through repeated experiences of this being, it became a peaceful stream that spread more and more into my daily activities, so that I can be dynamically active and yet at the same time rest within myself. I am then the silent witness who simply observes the activities. This experience of being a witness now also happens during most of the time of sleeping and dreaming. [. . .]

### White Nights: Epistemic Openness and Minimal Consciousness in Sleep

It is neither sleep nor waking but intermediate between the two. There is the awareness of the waking state and the stillness of sleep. It is called *jagrat-sushupti*. [. . .]

Call it wakeful sleep or sleeping wakefulness or sleepless waking or wakeless sleep.

It is not the same as sleep or waking separately. It is *atijagrat* (beyond wakefulness) or *atisushupti* (beyond sleep).

—Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950), *Talk 609*, January 18, 1939

Out of 1,402 participants with valid data on this question, only 25 unequivocally confirmed having experienced pure awareness during dreamless deep sleep; 56 gave a

rating of at least 70 out of 100 possible points when asked, “Did your experience occur during dreamless deep sleep?” In the first group of those unequivocally confirming wakeful sleep, 9 named Transcendental Meditation (TM) as their meditation technique, 7 Mahamudra/Dzogchen, 8 Vipassanā, and 7 Shamata. There were 3 participants each for Zen and Metta meditation, 1 for mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), and 10 “Other.”

Being conscious during dreamless deep sleep sounds like a contradiction in terms, and as an empirical hypothesis, it has a quality of supreme bizarreness. Had I not experienced this phenomenon myself (as a young man, on an intense ten-week meditation course), I would not believe a single word of all this. I would have thought it was just another example of the delusional New Age folklore that surrounds meditation practice—the dangerous, omnipresent nonsense that makes it so appalling and suspect to scientists, critical intellectuals, and everyone who values intellectual honesty as an indispensable part of genuine spiritual practice (more on this in the epilogue). But our data show that conscious experience during dreamless deep sleep exists, and my own experience helps me not write it off as confabulation. I also believe that conscious deep sleep may become an important and decisive focus for research in the future of consciousness studies. It has been described and systematically pursued for many centuries, and our reports show that it is a phenomenon that can appear in a secular context and is not bound to the theory or practices of any single spiritual tradition. Although counterintuitive from the perspective of folk psychology or empirically uninformed Western philosophy of mind, it has been known for centuries that this specific phenomenology does exist, though mostly in very advanced practitioners and only rarely in novices.

In the beginning, you do fall unconscious for a while, you do sleep. Yet within that sleep there is always the possibility of recognizing the nature of mind. When that happens, it’s called “capturing the luminosity during deep sleep.” Experience is unblocked, wide open. Although you do not visibly see what is around you and your body is still asleep, it’s like a wide-awake state that occurs from within the deep sleep. With training, it is possible to become used to that.<sup>5</sup>

Today, conscious deep sleep may be of central importance in the scientific search for an empirically based and conceptually coherent theory of consciousness. We therefore should allocate resources to understanding it. I actually think that understanding the phenomenon of pure awareness during dreamless deep sleep could lead to a decisive breakthrough in consciousness research, perhaps to a minimal model explanation and the formulation of the first standard model of consciousness mentioned in the introduction. I think this because, after pure awareness in waking meditation, it is a good

second candidate for the simplest form of conscious experience that human beings can have.

Please recall that in the introduction, I defined a “full-absorption episode” as a process after which the quality of “awareness itself” is the only phenomenal quality that can be reported. I pointed out that such states of conscious experience are “concurrently ineffable” because any attempt to report them while they occur would immediately destroy their entirely nonconceptual and nonagentive nature. The phenomenology of wake sleep is important not only because it presents us with tentative evidence for a second type of full-absorption episode (a fact that is of great methodological importance), but also because we can use it as a second, stand-alone example to triangulate the minimally sufficient neural correlate of MPE. This would be the set of neurofunctional properties in the brain that (1) reliably brings about an experience of pure awareness and (2) cannot be made any smaller without making the experience disappear.

To explore this idea further, let us distinguish between type I episodes of full absorption, in which MPE is entered from the wake state (usually during periods of formal meditation practice), and type II episodes of full absorption, in which MPE spontaneously occurs during periods of NREM sleep. Type III episodes would start from a lucid dream (as explained previously; see chapter 21 for more). All three of them are concurrently ineffable, and, as we are now beginning to discover, retrospective descriptions of their phenomenal character are somewhat convergent. For example, if we could isolate the neural correlates of the first two types of conscious experience, then this would enable us to determine their anatomical and functional overlap. If we then also developed convincing computational models describing the informational flow in these specific parts of the physical world, we could look for commonalities on a more abstract level of description—for example, by comparing mathematical models of MPE for type I and type II episodes of full absorption. This is the kind of research that in the long run could lead to the formulation of a first standard model for consciousness because it would home in on a minimal description, one that abstracts away from all unnecessary details, screening out everything that is not causally necessary for phenomenal consciousness to emerge. What we might call the Triple Triangulation Project would be the logical first step for the kind of empirical research for which this book and some of the publications preceding it have tried to lay the groundwork.

If we then, in a second step, compare the results of all three triangulations on a formal level, we will already be very close to the minimal model of conscious experience that we have been aiming at all along. The third step would consist in refining and validating our minimal computational model on a more mechanistic level<sup>6</sup> (e.g., via an



**The “Triple Triangulation Project”: Sketch of a possible research strategy**

1. Triangulation One:

- (a) Isolate the minimally sufficient neural correlate for type I episodes of full absorption in neurotypical human beings;
- (b) isolate the minimally sufficient neural correlate for type II episodes of full absorption in neurotypical human beings;
- (c) describe commonalities and overlaps by creating and empirically validating a computational model that, on a mathematical level, allows us to see whether there is a phenomenological “cut set” connecting the two kinds of episode.

2. Triangulation Two:

- (a) Isolate the minimally sufficient neural correlate for type II episodes of full absorption in neurotypical human beings;
- (b) isolate the minimally sufficient neural correlate for type III episodes of full absorption in neurotypical human beings;
- (c) describe commonalities and overlaps by creating and empirically validating a computational model that, on a mathematical level, allows us to see whether there is a phenomenological “cut set” connecting the two kinds of episode.

3. Triangulation Three:

- (a) Isolate the minimally sufficient neural correlate for type I episodes of full absorption in neurotypical human beings;
- (b) isolate the minimally sufficient neural correlate for type III episodes of full absorption in neurotypical human beings;
- (c) describe commonalities and overlaps by creating and empirically validating a computational model that, on a mathematical level, allows us to see whether there is a phenomenological “cut set” connecting the two kinds of episode.

attempt to *re-create* the pure-awareness experience using advanced forms of real-time neurofeedback or even direct stimulation during sleep).

However, before consciousness research can proceed to the Triple Triangulation Project, we need to look at the actual phenomenology with an open mind, as precisely as we can—and we need to do some more philosophical spadework. As well as being one candidate for the simplest possible form of conscious experience, wake sleep is conceptually interesting for a second reason. The term “minimal phenomenal experience (MPE)” was originally coined by Jennifer Windt in a commentary on an important target paper by the Canadian philosopher Evan Thompson that discussed “lucid dreamless sleep.”<sup>7</sup> However, her original use of the term differs slightly from the way I am now using it in this book. In 2015, Thompson wrote:

[. . .] we need to distinguish between ordinary dreamless sleep and lucid dreamless sleep. Ordinary dreamless sleep is the sleep of ignorance, in which awareness is described as being in total darkness. Lucid dreamless sleep is described as a state in which awareness is luminous and without an object (free of thoughts and images). Whereas lucid dreaming consists in knowing that you are dreaming, lucid dreamless sleep is said to consist in being able to witness the state of dreamless sleep and recall its phenomenal clarity upon waking up. Although the background metaphysics of Yoga, Vedānta, and Indo-Tibetan Buddhism differ in significant ways, they all describe lucid dreamless sleep as disclosing a basal level of pre-personal consciousness that lies deeper than the modes of awareness that characterize the ego-centred waking and dreaming states.<sup>8</sup>

In her reply, Jennifer Windt introduced the concept of “minimal phenomenal experience.”<sup>9</sup> One theoretical motivation was the question of what, conceptually, one would have to subtract from a previously existing minimal model of *self*-consciousness—as introduced by Olaf Blanke and me in 2009—to arrive at a minimal model of consciousness itself. Some of us had been discussing this for a long time: How do we get from “minimal phenomenal selfhood (MPS)” to MPE?

For Windt, the shift from MPS to MPE involves subtracting two conditions: (1) a weak first-person perspective and (2) spatial self-location:

The key idea is that while even the simplest forms of dreaming are characterized by phenomenal selfhood, or the experience of being or having a self, the transition from dreaming to dreamless sleep experience occurs when even this minimal form of phenomenal selfhood is lost. While the analysis of dreaming can help identify the conditions for minimal phenomenal selfhood, the analysis of dreamless sleep experience may provide a glimpse of an even simpler (and perhaps even minimal) form of phenomenal experience.<sup>10</sup>

Among the merits of Windt’s approach are that it offers a positive model of the transition from MPS to MPE and that it provides us with the first explicit theory of what MPE really is—namely, something resembling an almost empty and merely *temporal* frame of reference, involving “pure subjective temporality, or phenomenal experience characterized only by the phenomenal *now* and the sense of duration, but devoid of any further intentional content.”<sup>11</sup> Hence, she writes:

The moment at which self-location dissolves—or at which minimal phenomenal selfhood is replaced with the maximum unit of identification—involves a transition to the type of pure subjective temporality that earlier, I suggested might be the

phenomenal mark of dreamless sleep experience. As lucid dreaming gives way to lucid dreamless sleep experience, minimal phenomenal selfhood shades into pure phenomenality, in which phenomenal experience is characterized only by its temporal structure.<sup>12</sup>

Judging from the phenomenological material presented so far in this book, it has become clear that neither explicit embodiment, minimal spatial self-location, nor epistemic agency is a necessary condition for the phenomenal character of pure awareness to emerge. Neither a conscious body image nor even the mere identification with an extensionless point in space (as we find in “asomatic out-of-body experiences” and “bodiless dreams”)<sup>13</sup> is required. Nor is the experiential character of controlling thought and attention (e.g., while engaging in mental calculation or object-oriented forms of meditation practice like *ānāpānasati*, *shamatha*, or body scan). In addition, many of our experiential reports make clear that the space of pure awareness is a space that lacks boundaries and a knowing self forming its center (see chapter 23 for details). It does not even have an egocentric geometry: The phenomenological feature that Olaf Blanke and I called the “weak first-person perspective” is entirely absent.<sup>14</sup> This term refers to an egocentric, visuospatial model of reality that includes a spatial frame of reference plus a global body representation, with a perspective originating *within* this body representation. If you have a weak first-person perspective (even if you are not actively controlling your attention, and even if there is not a single thought in your mind), then there still is a center of projection. According to subjective experience, this center functions as the geometrical origin of the passively “seeing” or “hearing” organism’s perspective.

It seems that for advanced meditators, all these features sometimes can *coemerge* with the quality of pure awareness (more on this in chapters 26, 27, 28, 32, and 33), but they are in no way necessary for it to occur, as most cases don’t include them. Therefore, they will not be part of a minimal model explanation of consciousness. We have also seen that full-absorption episodes during deep meditation, lucid dreaming, and wake sleep are currently the three best concrete candidates for MPE, the simplest form of conscious experience that we currently know. Wake sleep, therefore, may actually come very close to the hypothetical essence of phenomenal consciousness for which many of us are looking.

Windt’s original MPE theory is an excellent springboard for this inquiry because it gives us purchase on crucial interactions among sleep, dreaming, selfhood, and consciousness. However, I think we can now begin to gradually enrich and expand her theory in a number of directions. First, we must do justice to the phenomenology of “timelessness,” which will be investigated more closely in chapter 22. Many of our

reports clearly show that there is no time representation at all in some experiences of MPE. “Pure subjective temporality” is an interesting concept, but the phenomenal now and the sense of duration are clearly forms of explicit temporal experience. They are not part of pure awareness itself. Then there is the highly interesting phenomenology of “timeless change” (just think of Aldous Huxley’s “transience that was yet eternal life,” described in chapter 9). This has to be taken seriously, so it is important to ask whether there are situations in which the experience of duration and the nowness created by locating oneself in a temporal frame of reference can actually be *united* with the timelessness of MPE. We will return to this question in chapter 22.

A second avenue for expanding on Windt’s first model starts with the observation that this model ignores the “phenomenal signature of knowing” set out in chapter 7.<sup>15</sup> As we have seen, MPE is characterized by a silent quality of subjective confidence, a nonconceptual and nondual character of knowing. This, I believe, is another reason why the phenomenology of wake sleep is so interesting: Some of the clearest expressions of this experiential quality are found in traditional terms like “empty cognizance,” “clear light sleep,” and “witnessing sleep.” The phenomenal quality of epistemicity or passive, nonagentive knowing is something that any future theory of MPE will need to explain—and inquiry into the experience of wake sleep may help. How is it possible for the phenomenal signature of knowing to occur in dreamless deep sleep?

Third, any satisfying account of pure awareness will also have to provide an answer to the question of contentlessness.<sup>16</sup> If it is timeless, if there is no temporal content whatsoever, does wake sleep have any other form of content; is there something that it *represents*? To be sure, many traditional theories of pure consciousness say that it has no content at all, that is a completely nonrepresentational phenomenon. From a naturalist perspective, this is entirely possible. For example, take the “mode-neutral brightness” that can be found in wake sleep (see reports #58 and #3171 in this chapter) but is not addressed in Windt’s original account of MPE. Is this nonvisual brightness perhaps a nonintentional property of the state (i.e., one with no quality of aboutness), not content at all (even highly abstract), but a dynamic property of the neural carrier in the meditator’s brain? Could the clear light be like the subtle but entirely contentless hum of an amplifier in a “phenomenal phonograph” in which the turntable and all speakers have been turned off?<sup>17</sup> In 1986, at the end of an important paper on the direct introspection of brain states, the Canadian philosopher Paul M. Churchland wrote this:

[. . .] those of us who prize the flux and content of our subjective phenomenological experience need not view the advance of materialistic neuroscience with fear and foreboding. Quite the contrary. The genuine arrival of a materialist kinematics

and dynamics for psychological states and cognitive processes will constitute not a gloom in which our inner life is suppressed or eclipsed, but rather a dawning, in which its marvelous intricacies are finally revealed—most notably, if we apply ourselves, in direct self-conscious introspection.<sup>18</sup>

The kind of introspection that is relevant for the epistemic practice of meditation is clearly one that does not apply concepts, either old or new. But if science (or a philosopher like G. E. Moore; see chapter 28) tells us that there actually may be something to look for, then this might guide attention into regions of phenomenal state space that were previously eclipsed, finally revealing their intricacies. A first example was given in chapter 6, when I explained how through the technique of “body scan,” I first discovered the contact sensations behind my inner eyelids. Here, it was not science, but an excellent meditation teacher, that helped me feel them. They were now decompressed and elevated to the level of conscious experience—“unsuppressed,” if you will. And please note that after the first discovery has been made, you can choose to abide in the suchness of those sensations (chapter 9), nonconceptually, with a silent mind. They can now be investigated on a finer level. Later, this finer investigation may turn out to be genuinely innovative, yielding new targets for research. Sonam Kachru puts it like this:

But philosophers have also used meditation in various ways to benefit philosophy as a discipline of knowledge by creating experiences and/or experiential skills that produce new theoretical objects or new characterizations of available theoretical objects to incorporate into theoretical explanations. By a “theoretical object” I mean a phenomenon that comes in for attention in the theory and practice of an epistemic culture, like philosophy or science, typically as an element in explanations or as the target of explanation.<sup>19</sup>

My point is that the same could be true for many new concepts that are provided by philosophy, neuroscience, or computational modeling, such as those referring to the quality of timeless change mentioned previously, to the nonvisual quality of brightness, or to the silent quality of subjective confidence (i.e., the nondual character of knowingness folded *into* the process of consciously perceiving the world). Through meditation practice, these implicit qualities can be unfolded. Once we know that there is something to look for, once our attention has been guided, we can investigate what remains if we let go and look *without* applying any concepts at all. Returning to theory, we may then create new and better theoretical objects—and entirely new levels of description. Paul Churchland may be proven right in ways that he probably never thought about, and that many meditators may feel ambivalent about.

Please recall that wake sleep itself is not described as being aware of the fact that we are currently sleeping, nor is it an awareness of being in the dream state—it is just consciousness itself. This is why wake sleep is relevant for the subjectivity argument: It is a prime example of *nonsubjective* consciousness. Witness consciousness itself can also never become the object of awareness; it is a state that cannot be introspectively accessed while we live through it. *You* cannot know it while asleep. It may, however, be a state that “knows itself” (chapter 30), autopoietically modeling the physical conditions of its own existence. While the clear light exists, there is no knowledge of “having witness consciousness,” nor is there awareness of “being in a contentless state.” There is certainly no philosophical concept of “directly introspecting the brain itself” being applied, nor is there a phenomenal quality of ownership, or even a concept of MPE currently being “my own state.” The philosophical lesson to be learned is that from the fact that a mental state is being introspected or remembered, it does not follow that it is necessarily represented as a *state of the subject*. I claim that what makes wake sleep so interesting for the philosophy of mind and cognitive science is the phenomenological fact that it is not merely a nonconceptual, but also a *nonegoic* form of self-awareness (chapter 29). Only after returning to the ordinary wake state can one realize that an episode of wake sleep actually occurred. Later reporting that I myself was in such a state while it occurred may, strictly speaking, be a form of self-deception—a subtle, autobiographical confabulation.

The Spanish philosopher Adriana Alcaraz-Sánchez has argued that Evan Thompson’s original working concept of “lucid dreamless sleep” may actually be a misnomer.<sup>20</sup> Technically, she argues, lucidity is a recognition of the hallucinatory nature of my overall perceptual state, and the phenomenology of clear light sleep does not involve this recognition, either conceptually or nonconceptually. When it comes to the feature of insight, wake sleep is really not equivalent to lucid dreaming (more on this in the next chapter). Alcaraz-Sánchez thinks that there is a minimal condition for lucidity: You must accurately judge that your own perceptual experience is nonveridical while it occurs; there has to be a realization that what you are perceiving right now is not real. More traditionally oriented analytical philosophers would probably insist that this realization has to be a conceptual affair because you must categorize your current state in a certain way, perhaps as a dream or as an ongoing “immersive spatio-temporal hallucination,” as Windt’s well-known dream theory has it.<sup>21</sup> But even if we allow a nonconceptual form of meta-awareness (as Thompson does), there is a phenomenological argument to be made that what *really* characterizes clear light sleep is the experience of pure awareness or a mere “void,” but not the recognition of the hallucinatory nature of my own perceptual state. On the other hand, if we opt to consider the “void” of pure

awareness as some form of minimal perceptual environment, then we are not speaking of a sleep state anymore. Adriana Alcaraz-Sánchez points out that clear light sleep might then be better conceived as an imageless lucid dream.

I think the conceptual insight requirement doesn't apply in wake sleep because, phenomenologically, the second-order level does not exist, so there can be no judgment that the body is physically asleep while awareness persists. MPE is an entirely nonconceptual state, and if it occurs as a stand-alone phenomenon during dreamless deep sleep, then there can be no concurrent recognition of the sleep state as such. There can be only retrospective recognition, the memory that actually, amazingly, "the light was on" during parts of the night—an impersonal, timeless light that had nothing to do with you and the narrative that you like to spin about your life. Even the distinction between "real" and "unreal" or "veridical" versus "nonveridical" was absent; it was not part of the experience. All we may have is the spontaneously arising memory of a selfless state, an active memory that now begins to cunningly weave itself into the story of "your" life as a practitioner of meditation. Gradually, the clear light of MPE sleep becomes an experience that "you" think you have had—an element of your autobiographical self-model that you can even verbally report.

This leads us to an interesting philosophical point. In full absorption, not only is pure awareness concurrently ineffable, but concurrent *unrecognizability* seems to be an additional defining feature of all genuine full-absorption episodes. In the words of Jonathan Shear:

What is it remembered as? Not as anything. One remembers simply that one was, one was awake, *without being aware of any thing*, without even noticing *that* one was awake. Yet one was awake, aware, not unconscious—*this* one remembers. In memory it is clearly distinguished from unconsciousness, as for example, from the "blackout" of deep sleep; it is clearly distinguished from unconsciousness because one remembers being awake, just simply consciously *being*.<sup>22</sup>

In this new context, I wonder whether you remember the "contraction principle" discussed in chapter 8? MPE sleep is a perfect example of conscious experience without contraction. The phenomenal character of pure awareness—the "clear light"—is there, but as it occurs, it is not automatically attributed to an ego; it is not integrated into the self-model that dominates the meditator's waking life (more on this in chapter 25). During an episode of clear light sleep, there is no knowledge of any person at all, of anybody who existed in the past, who perhaps finds himself in a dormitory on a long meditation retreat, who is looking forward to the future. Whenever—as Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche put it in the opening quotation to this section—"luminosity is captured"

during deep sleep, all we have is the suchness of self-evidencing wakefulness because pure awareness is not attributed to anything else. Phenomenologically, it just knows itself, nonconceptually.

On an intellectual level, deep philosophical questions now begin to arise: Is non-conceptual awareness an epistemic state that allows genuine insights, or is the purely phenomenal signature of knowing all we ever have? In highlighting overlaps between the quality of insight in lucid dreaming and insight in meditative practice, the Canadian philosopher Lana Kühle has suggested that we can always interpret the quality of “insight” occurring in meditation or the dream state either as an epistemic state or as an experiential form of insight. We can treat insight as genuine self-knowledge or as something phenomenal, something that might always turn out to have been mere appearance.<sup>23</sup> Kühle points out that if insight is an epistemic state, then it must have an intentional object, something that it is about. But what exactly are the intentional objects of the state of insight? What kind of knowledge does the state of insight involve? Is it just a sudden reduction of uncertainty in the brain, something subpersonal, or should we say that true, epistemic lucidity is always tied to some conceptual self-labeling of the current state as the type of state that it is? Does it therefore need categories, a successful classification—even if this classification takes place only psychologically, not verbally? To illustrate this issue, let me ask a different, deliberately provocative question: Can MPE be hallucinated? As a follow-up question: Could it be that wake sleep as occurring in people who have meditated for a long time is actually a way of *dreaming* about the pure-awareness experience, including the accompanying illusion of insight?

To answer this question, we can put our new conceptual tools to work. A human being in dreamless deep sleep is not epistemically open, and it doesn't matter whether her sleep is currently accompanied by the wakeful presence of MPE. The body is paralyzed and only weakly open to the world. Nothing is heard, seen, or felt—except, during episodes of witnessing sleep, MPE itself. Using the concepts introduced in chapter 4, we can say that stimulus-readiness exists and is internally modeled: There is an experience of wakefulness, but no stimuli are consciously processed. Of course, subliminal perception still works, so an alarm clock or a sudden, loud noise could wake our sleeper up. But during a full-absorption episode of clear light sleep, there is no focus of attention that could be controlled, and the sleeper is completely unaware of her capacity to orient herself in time and space or to remember what person she was, is, and wants to be in the future. Therefore, the degree of epistemic openness is actually very limited.

Of course, in real-life situations, many graded states will exist, states in which absorption is present but not complete. To return to and expand on a novel metaphor



from one of our participants, so-called white nights are not exactly the same as our participant's full-blown "midnight sun"; they occur in those locations where the sun remains less than six or seven degrees below the horizon. Accordingly, people in these places experience midnight *twilight* instead of midnight *sun*—while real midnight sun during the summer months occurs only in places north of the Arctic Circle or south of the Antarctic Circle. Phenomenologically, twilight sleep and clear light sleep may both exist. On the other hand, full-blown MPE sleep as such will always be timeless, nondual, and nonegoic. This observation leads to an interesting conclusion: In rare situations, it is actually possible that while epistemic openness is extremely limited on the functional level, it is nonetheless consciously experienced as pure, self-knowing wakefulness. What we do not know is whether the phenomenology of epistemic openness itself comes in degrees as well.

I think that a more rigorous scientific perspective may help us see that there are more than two options here. There may be a middle way. First, almost all the knowledge embodied in the delicate structures of a human brain is nonconceptual. Our best current theories view it as a system that constantly creates and updates probabilistic models in the form of nonconceptual representations, constantly predicting what will happen next. These models support the organism in protecting its boundaries to the world; they are continuously active on thousands of levels at the same time while being nested into each other on many timescales, relentlessly improving and trying to sustain themselves in a process mathematicians describe as "model selection" or "hierarchical Bayesian updating." Model selection is a local process going on in our brains, turning us into platforms for the survival of the fittest *model* in our minds. And now we have a new perspective on evolution that allows us to see all this as a nested process, a perspective that "casts groups of organisms and entire species as families of viable models that vary in their fit to a particular niche."<sup>24</sup> We begin to see biological evolution itself as a process of Bayesian model selection: Mind and life rest on the same fundamental principles.<sup>25</sup> If these models weren't good models, we wouldn't be here—if anything is knowledge, if anything successfully reduces uncertainty, then it is these nonconceptual models of world and self in our brains. Almost all our conscious knowledge is implicit knowledge in this sense.

Second, almost all the knowledge encoded in our brains is unconscious—just think of the procedural knowledge that helps you tie your shoes or ride a bike. What we experience are the predictions made by the generative model in our heads, predictions about what will probably happen next. One point that I want to make is that the unconscious, procedural form of knowledge that is itself almost never consciously experienced may include the long-term practitioner's knowledge of how to return to the state of pure

awareness again and again, the knowledge that supports her in gradually learning how to abide in it, and perhaps even how to live from it in an effortless way.<sup>26</sup>

Do you remember the “dolphin model of meditation” from chapter 10? If such an unconscious mechanism had been established by years of training, it is empirically plausible to assume that it could also come online in periods of low arousal—such as during dreamless deep sleep. It would have become functionally autonomous. To take a highly speculative example, let us assume that MPE is causally related to a predictive model of the internal signal created by the ascending reticular activation system (ARAS), the part of the brain that triggers the process of waking up in the morning.<sup>27</sup> This predictive model would be the belief that knowing is likely, a statistical hypothesis that says “something can be known.” Pure awareness would then be a form of *subcortical* phenomenology, originating deep in the brainstem. What we consciously experience in ever-fresh wakefulness would therefore not be the unconscious mechanism itself, but rather a continuously self-renewing prediction of epistemic openness: By constantly predicting and thereby controlling the level of tonic alertness, the brain’s ARAS model would contribute to creating the specific timeless quality that Tibetan Buddhists many centuries ago appositely called “ever-fresh wakefulness.” Perhaps the evolutionary expansion of the cortex did not implement consciousness per se, but only superimposed it with content?<sup>28</sup>

Now think of full-absorption episodes. If a stand-alone ARAS model were active during dreamless deep sleep, we would expect an entirely nonegoic and nonconceptual phenomenology of wakefulness to appear, like moonbeams falling into your bedroom at night, impinging on your eyelids and creating an experience of “visual openness” without you actually seeing anything. If the moonbeams were made not of light, but of wakefulness itself; if they came from the interior of the brain itself, then there would be great clarity and a representation of epistemic openness, but nothing else.<sup>29</sup> Given that the underlying model in the brain is a good one—that it is “Bayes-optimal” and from a statistical perspective, it minimizes the probability of misclassification—one can plausibly predict that there should be a robust phenomenal signature of “self-knowing wakefulness.” This would be a new form of insight, perhaps even of self-certainty, an embodied form of nonconceptual knowledge. But the fact that it could in principle be precisely described by future mathematicians from the outside does not in any way imply that the brain itself uses a *conceptual* mode of presentation to become aware of the fact that this new form of knowledge is present, that it currently has insight into its own potential for epistemic openness. Whenever a critical level of tonic alertness is preserved in and represented during dreamless deep sleep, the expected phenomenal correlate would simply be wakeful, passive epistemicity with no other reportable content.

Nevertheless, being identical to a stable probabilistic model, the conscious experience of wake sleep could certainly be treated as an implicit, nonconceptual, and embodied form of self-knowledge that is entirely valid from an epistemological perspective. Hallucination versus insight is not the only choice. There is a middle way: The openness itself may be more like a dream because it does not represent an objective functional fact—but the self-knowing wakefulness itself could really be a form of insight, a very special form of knowledge. Ultimately, we may come to see it as a nonegoic form of bodily self-awareness.



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

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## Citation:

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

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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

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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>