

22 From Timelessness to Timeless Change

Everything that has been and still is in a timeless “moment,” in an empty “place”
on the tip of a needle in the now. [#1145]

A self-nature that flows without time. [#2426]

We have now looked at the two major contexts in which pure awareness can appear as a stand-alone phenomenon: as a full-absorption episode entered from the wake state, typically during contemplative practice, and as a spontaneously emerging state in dreamless deep sleep. We then proceeded to look at pure awareness during the dream state. In investigating the phenomenology of lucid dreaming, we discovered that the specific phenomenal character of awareness itself, the simple and nonconceptual experiential quality of consciousness per se, can remain after everything else has vanished, and also that there are modes of conscious experience during which it may coemerge with other, often very complex, forms of experiential content. The totality of your lived, conscious experience at this very moment is the content of a model of the world, a complex simulation currently running in your brain. The phenomenal character of pure awareness can apparently coexist with such complete, global models of reality. As we will now see, this coexistence can manifest in a variety of ways.

You may recall that in the introduction, I distinguished between minimal phenomenal experience (MPE) states and modes. Our phenomenological data show that there are not only *states* described as carrying the qualitative character of MPE (normally experienced as personal states—that is, local episodes in the meditator’s own mind), but also specific global *modes* of conscious experience that have this quality. These are entire conscious models of reality dominated by an all-encompassing and non-egoic quality of awareness as such (more on this in chapter 33). For example, witness consciousness (as investigated in chapter 19 and then explored in other guises in

chapters 19 and 20) can be seen as an MPE mode: It creates a whole new model of the world. Now, the world is experienced as resting in the gaze of an ideal observer.

Here, we will continue this line of inquiry by first considering one of the major phenomenological characteristics of pure awareness—namely, the distinct quality of “timelessness”—in isolation, as we have done in many other chapters so far. In a second step, we will look at phenomenological data demonstrating that this quality can actually co-occur with forms of temporal experience. I have termed this the phenomenology of “timeless change.” In chapters 26, 27, and 33, you will find additional examples of timeless change in the context of prolonged periods of more continuous pure-awareness experiences. But there is more. Among a number of unexpected results, one of the greatest surprises in this first study was just how many reports focused on *spatial* phenomenology, not merely on the character of timelessness. I am particularly grateful to our meditators for offering unusually rich descriptions in this phenomenological domain. The current chapter, as well as chapters 23 and 24, therefore, will look at the connections between pure awareness, time experience, spatiality, and “bodiless body-experience” in greater detail. As always, let us go slowly and first try to get as close as possible to the experience itself.

One point of strong convergence is manifest in many experiential reports trying to describe pure awareness: “unbounded space, but no time.” Temporal experience and spatial experience can apparently be separated. Here is one example:

3330 I would best describe my experiences with terms like “stopping of time,”
“perception of space without time” [. . .]

Subjectively, episodes of pure awareness are timeless. Objectively, from the third-person perspective of scientific observation, their duration is typically in the order of a few seconds or minutes, especially if they are periods of full absorption. (Nonabsorbed periods of what in chapter 30 I will call “dual mindfulness” may last longer.) At the outset, it is interesting to note that a phenomenological analog to the experience of timelessness seems to exist in the spatial dimension:

2771 It was an experience of not moving forward, not moving back, neither of
staying still.

In pure awareness, timelessness and motionlessness can also come together:

2721 [. . .] A moment of unknown length or timeless silence, complete motion-
lessness. [. . .]

What is common to both types of experience is the absence not only of motion (either through time, through space, or both) but also of *self-location*. During an episode

of full absorption into pure awareness, there is no self-location relative to a spatial frame of reference, and there is no self-location in a temporal sequence either. The *here* and the *now* have been suspended:

1175 [. . .] What followed [. . .] was a timeless event, without space or perception, a feeling of complete restfulness and peace unlike any other “peaceful” state I had felt before; it was deeper. It felt like I had been sucked down a hole or something. It was neither light nor dark. The only thing I knew about it was afterward when I realized I wanted to go back there, and immediately felt the arising of some excitement. It was the end of the sit & the bell had gone, but it felt like eternity.

2122 [. . .] I would say that I felt as though I was pure awareness, with no intentions or memories. I felt bliss and fully aware, relaxed and full of energy. I would describe the mental quality as like doing a pleasurable activity like painting and finding yourself lost in the activity. All thoughts end. Emotion is positive. Time does not exist.

3268 [. . .] I had no sense of time or space. [. . .] I had neither thoughts nor other feelings, only when you became aware again that you were meditating did I notice that for an indescribable time (seconds or minutes) I was completely without time, space, and thought.

During a fully absorbed experience of timelessness, the inner narrative and all goal-directed mental effort have ended—the meditator’s mind has neither run away into past or future, nor is it focused on the present moment as such. All conscious thought is suspended; sometimes, the breath may briefly stop as well. As an aside, here is one testable empirical hypothesis: There may be a causal connection between the ending of thought, the ending of phenomenal time experience, and the ending of breath. The three may unfold as distinct steps in a causal sequence, in this order or potentially also in other orders. Much more often, however, the phenomenal quality of “timelessness” actually coemerges with other experiential content. The relationship between timelessness and the overall phenomenal field is quite interesting. Let us, therefore, look at a wider variety of concrete examples in which time stops:

3431 [. . .] suddenly during walking meditation in nature the feeling arose that time was standing still, that the whole world was standing still. I stopped. It seemed as if my breath was standing still too. [. . .]

933 [. . .] So I stood outside in nature and at that moment I lost the sense of time. It felt as if I could stand like this forever and no time was passing while at the same time I was fully aware of what I was experiencing. It was a very pleasant experience. I cannot tell you how long I actually stood there. [. . .]

- 3472 In a totally everyday situation an experience of timelessness, motionlessness, silence, and being whole. [. . .]
- 60 [. . .] I did perceive these sensations, but quickly let go again. Between these sensations I felt the pure awareness, which presented itself as a feeling of emptiness but also as a feeling of omni-possibility. Time seemed to stand still until the next thought process. [. . .]
- 1885 [. . .] Immediately I felt the self drop away. The boundary of my consciousness expanded to the room I was in. Time seemed to stop. I was awed by the moment. It dropped away quickly. While it was timeless in the moment, I felt that I could account for time as a reference to the before and after. [. . .]
- 2463 A moment of total BEING-HERE. All sense of time was as if extinguished and at the same time the knowledge of the now-moment as the only existing thing in space and time. I also had an experience of total fusion with a leaf which at that moment was falling from the tree. [. . .]
- 2312 [. . .] “Infinite simultaneity” and wide awake in it.
- 2687 [. . .] a deep feeling of joy, timelessness, happiness. I could perceive it and had no sense of time. [. . .]
- 3132 First, self disappeared, then later time became all one, as in no present existing apart from past from future. Any sense of time disappeared; it was all here, now.
- 3353 [. . .] I don’t know how long it lasted, but it felt like very long, although it could have been only a few minutes, as I reconsider it. [. . .] and suddenly, there was a deep feeling of wholeness in eternity, no physical boundaries, there was no time, there occurred a wholeness, oneness with all and no time nor space, there was only a very broad experience of peaceful oneness which included also here and now in spaciousness, timeless. [. . .] [For] a very long time I could not and did not speak of it, but very often I was very much aware that this had happened, considering it for myself as an eternity experience, there is no time at all, there is only being. [. . .]

Let us now proceed to the special case where the phenomenology of timelessness and actual time representation occur together. Some participants explicitly report experiences of “static flow” and the distinct phenomenal quality of “timeless change.” The phenomenal character of timelessness can clearly coemerge with or “envelop” ongoing temporal experience, which is a highly interesting result in itself:

- 1662 [. . .] There was no one (including me) who “owned” this experience—it just “was.” There was awareness of time passing, but this very sensation seemed insignificant, giving rise to the sense of “static flow.” [. . .]

2303 [. .] I felt a timelessness while also being completely aware of the movement of time. Sensations were heightened.

2426 [. .] Only an all-encompassing “object,” “a self-nature that flows without time,” that is constantly transforming itself (is unstable) and shapes everything through its form, is present. [. .]

2798 [. .] I was standing at a window and looking out to a tall bunch of grasses. It was a windy day and the grass was moving a lot. Then for some period, I coincided with these grasses. Their movement showed (or maybe better: was) the nature of time, the complete ungraspability of the present while at the same time there is nothing else, no past, no future, just this ungraspable now. The difficulty of answering your questions is that there was no thought at all about time or the passing of time, there was just this movement. Only later, in reflection, there came the thought “I saw into the nature of time.”

2820 Sitting in stillness. Life flows through me, around me. Millisecond by millisecond everything changes, nothing changes. Thought is superfluous. Movement or nonmovement is irrelevant. Life is, I am.

2966 [. .] I felt so calm during the sitting meditation. And also, in the moving. As if I could feel every little part of my body. The breathing and moving. There was no sense of time. [. .]

3623 Deep, blissful yet emotionally devoid experiences [. .]. I sense a present, where the flow of time is static and there is an eternal “mental space” my consciousness seems to be in.

The Emptiness of Time Experience

Q: Is this joy something that comes and goes?

A: No. It is timeless. When I contact it you may say it looks as though I am contacting it now and not five minutes ago when we were talking about something else. But when you contact this region, you don't have a sense of returning to it. You have a sense that no interval exists whatever between the occasions of enjoying it. No interval whatsoever.

—Douglas E. Harding (1909–2007), *Face to No-Face*

As a student in the winter term of 1979/1980, I participated in a seminar at the philosophy department of the Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main, led by Gerhard Gamm. The seminar was about the concept of the soul as it had developed in modern philosophy from René Descartes (1596–1650) onward, and it led to an unexpected turning point in my academic life. At the time, I was almost entirely certain that I wanted to drop out of university, mainly because I simply couldn't find anything that

could hold my interest. Then we looked into the *Treatise of Man* and the *Passions of the Soul* (published in French in 1664 as *L'homme* and in 1649 as *Les passions de l'âme*) and the way that Descartes imagined the mechanics of mind/body interaction—how the soul causally related to the physical body. Gamm made me see something pivotal: If consciousness has no spatial properties, then there can be no *place* in the human brain where it causally interacts with this world, be it Descartes's pineal gland, the “liaison brain” of Karl Popper and John Eccles,¹ today's minimally sufficient neural correlate of consciousness,² or any other *region* in the physical universe. The whole research program aimed at isolating this region was misguided. This insight changed my life. It got me hooked on the mind/body problem, and I ended up writing a thesis on recent solutions to the problem from Ullin T. Place to Jaegwon Kim, published in 1985.³

Descartes formulated the classical modern variant of the mind/body problem. I still find his arguments for mind/body dualism intuitively attractive. They actually speak to a robust duality that I can experience within myself—for example, whenever I meditate. Why is this so? What exactly is it about Descartes's ontological distinction between extended, material things (*res extensa*) and nonspatial, thinking things (*res cogitans*) that—even after centuries of philosophical criticism and an endless series of counterarguments—still has intuitive appeal? Where does the deeply rooted Cartesian intuition come from, the philosophical hunch that there is an important sense in which our conscious mind cannot be localized in physical space? The answer is that Cartesian ontology is *phenomenologically* plausible because it directly corresponds to distinct layers in our phenomenal self-model.

Our “phenomenal self”—the way in which we are given to ourselves in conscious experience, subjectively appearing to ourselves as an embodied, thinking, mysteriously unified person—actually has two major parts or layers. They are easy to distinguish. One part, the conscious model of our own body, is represented as possessing spatial properties: We experience ourselves as embodied beings with a well-defined position in space. The other part, the conscious model of our ongoing cognitive processes, appears in subjective experience as well, but as devoid of spatial properties. It apparently has no place in the world—and it is precisely this fact that, on a theoretical level, leads to the most important modern version of the mind/body problem. High-level mental operations like symbolic thought, it was frequently believed, are exclusively serial; we experience them in the phenomenal mode of succession.⁴ Body experience and bodily sensations, on the other hand, are localized and distributed in space; we can experience them in the mode of juxtaposition. This particular feature of our conscious self-model creates an intuitive dissonance in our very own self-experience: If one set of the events in our consciously experienced self is encoded in a spatial frame of reference,

but another set is not, then, according to subjective experience alone, there can be no *place* where the causal interaction between mind and body could take place. The actual mechanism, its *modus operandi*, cannot be observed. We can always imagine one without the other; disembodied existence is conceivable because the two parts of the conscious self seem to be dissociable.

This is where careful contemplative practice can help to clarify matters. You may recall that I argued in the introduction that meditation is really an epistemic practice aimed at self-knowledge—one that operates on a more fundamental level than words and concepts. If we don't just speak as we have been taught to speak, but actually look for the right words, then we discover that, as a matter of phenomenological fact, the *modus operandi* of causal mind/body interaction can never be observed. It simply is not part of our conscious reality. Mind/body interaction is an interesting philosophical concept, but in meditation practice, no such thing is actually discovered. In action initiation, in the spontaneous arising of perceptions and thoughts, the *actual* causal connection between body and mind remains unclear. It is not something that we experience: The dolphin (as discussed in chapter 10) just jumps into the air, and in the very beginning, there is always an element of surprise to it; the jumping itself always happens unexpectedly, spontaneously. The feeling of bodily agency and the "thinking self" are the brain's tricks for explaining away the surprise. Elegantly surfing uncertainty,⁵ the brain swiftly hallucinates a disembodied Cartesian ego, creating the inner image of an abstract epistemic agent (which we will investigate two chapters down the road). In trying to understand Descartes's own solution to the mind/body problem, my first discovery was that—on conceptual grounds—it makes no sense to look for a physical location where something that is apparently not in space can interact with something that is. Taking our own phenomenology seriously, the second important discovery we can now make is that the mind/body problem is actually built right into us: Apparently, a particular computational feature of the neural mechanism generating the representational deep structure of human self-consciousness is what leads to the intuitive dissonance just mentioned, to the "prephilosophical mind/body problem."

The prephilosophical mind/body problem makes us *feel* the theoretical problem of psychophysical causality in our own experience, and it gives rise to the intuition that Cartesian metaphysics and the "hard problem" later exploit: the intuition that certain metaphysical scenarios are perhaps actually (and not merely logically) possible. Thus, the phenomenological dimension ultimately arises from a "technical" problem that our brain has in generating a conscious model of the self: How does a human brain manage to embed mental representations of abstract cognitive processes (e.g., the conscious idea of a *res cogitans* or the Cartesian thought "I am certain that I *myself* exist!")

into a preexisting image of one's own body, which—for obvious reasons having to do with its evolutionary origin—gradually developed from a concrete spatial model of the biological organism as embedded in its behavioral space? And how, then, is the brain supposed to represent within conscious experience cause/effect relationships between such purely cognitive events and specific bodily movements, all of them necessarily embedded in a spatial frame of reference?

It is as if one part of us is inside the world while another one isn't—and of course, many philosophers in the past have said exactly this, jumping from vague phenomenological intuitions to unwarranted metaphysical conclusions. Intellectual honesty demands that we first admit that all of this may feel extremely muddled or hazy for most people most of the time—there may be no real phenomenological fact of the matter. But careful meditation practice can certainly help us explore the phenomenological dimension of what later becomes the “philosophical mind/body problem.” After all, Descartes's dualist distinction between thinking and extended substances is *phenomenologically* plausible for beings like us. It will always remain intuitively convincing because it always already corresponds to the representational architecture of our everyday model of the self.

This leads us back to the experience of timeless change as it can sometimes appear in the context of meditation practice. What many people don't see is that there is an analogous metaphysical problem for any entity that lacks *temporal* properties: If an entity isn't in time at all, what could permit it to influence something that is—for example, some process in the human brain? What *event* could constitute the integration of something timeless with something that has temporal properties like duration? There seems to be a deep philosophical puzzle here, and this was one of the reasons why I included the Harding quote in the epigraph at the beginning of this section.⁶ Once again, we see how metaphysical puzzles and philosophical intuitions are anchored in the structure of inner experience.

Of course, Descartes was wrong, and for more than one reason. He equivocated in his descriptions of the conscious mind, characterizing it sometimes (in introspective terms) as being indivisible and possessing no parts, and at other times (in metaphysical terms) as having no spatial properties. A “fallacy of equivocation” occurs when a key term in an argument is used in an ambiguous way, with one meaning appearing in one portion of the argument, and then another meaning in another portion. One way to sort this out is by saying that the introspective experience of nonspatiality (the representational *content* in the self-model) could, of course, be created by physical activation patterns in the brain (the representational *carrier*) that, from the third-person perspective of science, are extended in space.

Similarly, the conscious experience of timelessness could, of course, result from physical processes in the brain that themselves possess temporal properties—as a matter of

fact, some neuroscientists think that certain time constants will turn out to be a central aspect of the underlying neural algorithm that we will discover in the end.⁷ This point leads us to new questions, to empirically tractable research questions that (despite my youthful fascination) are much more interesting than the armchair metaphysics of the mind/body problem, and much more fruitful too: How can a physical system like the human brain create conscious models of reality that, on a conceptual level, seem to *necessitate* paradoxical descriptions like “timeless change”?

Again and again, taking contemplative experience seriously shows how readily high-level conceptual oppositions like “inside versus outside,” “mental versus physical,” and “real versus unreal” can become meaningless. They simply do not map onto the meditator’s phenomenology. Through practice, the “always already” character of these oppositions is gradually attenuated.⁸ As we have just seen in some of the reports here, this can also lead to paradoxical formulations. We first touched on this problem in chapter 6, and we will return to it a number of times later in this book: In some phenomenological contexts, these oppositional distinctions no longer correspond to the structure of appearance; there is nothing to which they refer. They reflect successful high-level priors that are normally used by the brain to organize its conscious model of reality but are now suspended. Our mental landscape of such priors is the landscape of “beliefs” that we already have about the world before we take the next piece of perceptual evidence into account.

Emptiness—the epistemic openness of pure awareness discussed in chapters 4 and 5—means that this landscape has been flattened. Here, my main point is that this allows us to better understand the paradoxicality of many verbal reports. They are not caused by some poetic form of irrationality; it is just that the conceptual and cognitive instruments that have evolved alongside humankind, and that are now at our disposal to describe and imagine possible inner experiences, have been anchored in that mental landscape of useful shortcuts. For reasons of biological and cultural evolution, our linguistic and imaginative tools are firmly grounded in the terrain of mostly unconscious hyperpriors and beliefs about the structure of reality. We embody the world of our ancestors via our inner landscape of hyperpriors and background assumptions—and if this terrain suddenly turns into wide open space, then all we have left are three options: the noble silence of not speaking at all, the mysterious indeterminacy of neither-nor-ness, or the formulation of blatant contradictions.

Empirically establishing the existence of a phenomenology of timeless change demonstrates this general insight from a new angle: Importing dualistic conceptual distinctions like “timelessness” and “temporality” into descriptions of conscious experience does not do justice to its openness, its richness, or its fine grain. In lived contemplative experience, there are simply so many other possibilities. Phenomenologically, the

distinction between “timelessness” and “temporality” is not exclusive and exhaustive—other possibilities do exist. For example, the atemporal phenomenal character of awareness itself can be quite explicit while being strongly overlaid and seamlessly integrated with different forms of time experience. These include nowness, duration, non-simultaneity, succession and temporal order, being in the past, or being expected in the future—and the phenomenal experience of change itself, including our feeling of the passage of time. This type of superimposition is what I have termed the phenomenology of “timeless change.”

Here is one methodological problem that needs to be solved. In verbal reports referring to temporal experience during meditation, there is often an ambiguous relationship between “being fully in the present moment” or “nowness” and what Jiddu Krishnamurti, in his dialogues with theoretical physicist David Bohm,⁹ called the complete “ending of psychological time,” the actual *absence* of temporal experience. From a scientific perspective, all consciously experienced time—past, present, and future—is an internal simulation. Episodic memory is a simulation of past events in the context of an autobiographical self-model, taking place in the biological brain; planning and thinking about future states of self and world involve active simulations of possible future events; and our conscious experience of the present moment is a simulation as well, one that is “smeared” in time because it does actually have temporal extension.

The global experiential quality of timeless change is an important challenge not only for precise conceptual interpretations by philosophers, but also for scientific disciplines like mathematics, computational modeling, and cognitive neuroscience. As I said in my book *The Ego Tunnel*, I very much like William James’s metaphor as a starting point: The present is not a knife-edge, but a saddleback with a breadth of its own, on which we sit perched, and from which we look into time in two directions. But the physical universe does not know what William James called the “specious present,” nor does it know an expanded, or “smeared,” present moment.

The early Dzogchen scholar-practitioners in Tibet knew all of this very well, but through their own meditation practice: “Nowness” is empty; it is just another virtual representation of time, one of “the three times.” I agree with the Tibetans on this point, and it may mean that some of our phenomenological reports contain a subtle conceptual ambiguity, perhaps even an inaccuracy. Perhaps many committed practitioners do see the virtuality of psychological time and actually experience timeless episodes, but later report “nowness” or “being fully in the present moment,” simply because they learned to speak in this manner when they first learned to meditate. Developing experimental and psychometric methods to resolve this ambiguity is one important research target for the future; creating a computational phenomenology of timeless change is another.

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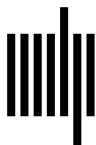
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