

24 Bodiless Body-Experience

A bodilessness in the consciousness of a body [#302]

My body dissolves into a micro-foam of impermanence, zooming into the fractal edge of present which endlessly unfurls fern-fronds of scintillating *now*-fuzz. [#1832]

The experience seems to be similar to a thread which forms a seam and holds on one side the body and on the other side infinity together, so both are there and yet they are not there, because they are put together. [#3218]

This is a long chapter, and for good reason. To me, perhaps the greatest surprise in evaluating the voluntary self-reports from our study was how many of our participants chose to describe pure awareness as involving an attenuation or even a complete disappearance of body boundaries. Unexpectedly, I found that if one asks meditators to describe a paradigmatic experience of “pure awareness,” they frequently devote most of their description not to the phenomenal character of minimal phenomenal experience (MPE) itself, but to extended episodes characterized by a loss of body boundaries, a dissolution of the sense of self, a merging of sensory modalities, and an impression of “becoming one” with the world. They often describe a global *mode* of experience in which pure awareness has switched from background to foreground. It is as if the background has become so dominant that what was previously the foreground now becomes translucent, with some of its structural features gently fading out or vanishing altogether. This is one common way in which body-experience changes in pure awareness. However, if one looks carefully, there are actually many *different* ways for body-experience to change in this context.

Let us take the attenuation of body boundaries as our starting point. What I will call the phenomenology of “bodiless body-experience” is a special case of the experience of

spatiality that we investigated in chapter 23, and it often starts with the body gradually disappearing from the phenomenal field:

3569 I was in a deep, black space totally without boundaries. It was peaceful there and I could hardly feel my body anymore; sometimes I couldn't feel it at all.

In the context of pure awareness, an attenuation or dissolution of body boundaries is frequently reported. However, if we take the phenomenology seriously, this experience is not unitary, and it can actually come in many forms.¹ For example, sometimes the body can still be felt, but its boundaries in space are indeterminate; at other times, body-experience disappears altogether. On the other hand, specific commonalities exist as well. For example, a subtle phenomenal character of “vibration” or “tingling” is frequently reported, while simultaneously the body boundaries begin to dissolve:

2778 [. . .] a completely clear, calm attention like a clear vibration of the whole body, which you feel as such but which is not limited [. . .]

2907 [. . .] then changed bodily sensations appeared, the contours dissolved more and more, there was a strong tingling in my upper body and finally this tingling climbed up my spine and I had the feeling of gliding with my consciousness over a threshold, to a totally different level, as if into another space of experience, whereupon I was also no longer observing the breath, but was merged with it. In this state my knee pain had disappeared and also my sense of time; there was simultaneously a great joy and lightness and the feeling of floating in space. This state was extremely positive and free of worries, effort, concepts. [. . .] I was one with my experience, even if the observer was still in the background. Other experiences that I had later were much calmer and corresponded more to the feeling of plunging into a calm lake, being completely still and at the same time flowing along. Here too, there was often the experience of dissolving, the expansion of consciousness beyond the boundaries of the body.

1926 I had a clear awareness of awareness during one meditation session where I sat down with eyes closed. As I was aware of my attention (going from the breath to sensations in the body and my visual field) I got to the stage where the concept of my body dissolved. In my mind my hands no longer had the shape of hands and my whole body became points of either vibrations, tingling, or temperature. [. . .]

597 [. . .] Shortly before I experience this state, sometimes a kind of swinging or vibrating starts in my body, usually very subtle, but very clear. Then I “lose” the boundaries of my body; I no longer feel it at all. I completely expand into “space” (or shrink to nothing; in a paradoxical way, it's the same thing). I can hardly feel my breathing either—I think I have long pauses between breaths,

but I can't say exactly, because the sense of time has disappeared. Thoughts no longer arise. I "am" then only in an infinite space (which is mostly diffuse, homogeneously dark, sometimes it also switches to bright), or I myself am the space. I am "somehow" everything, and everything is me. But it's no ordinary physical (three-dimensional) space, rather a state of being without the ordinary dimensions like length, width, height (unfortunately very hard to explain). [. . .]

1435 [. . .] the conscious perception of bodily sensations in the present moment, the perception in free flow is like a recognition and understanding and at the same time a dissolving of connections and structures without having or wanting to judge it. It is how it is and is permitted to be, no matter how strong or subtle the sensations are. Suddenly it becomes so clear how everything changes from moment to moment—comes into being and passes away. One moment there was this sensation and then another sensation. But that is not important. I am in the here and now, awake, watching every moment of change with equanimity. I let go, without expectations or ideas. A stream of tingling, pulsating [sensations] floods my whole body, without my attention being focused on a specific spot. Everything spreads out, dissolves, I can no longer perceive where my body begins and ends.

2143 [. . .] brief experiences that can be best described as centerlessness and openness, without any feeling of constraint. Bodily sensations were experienced as pure vibration without any identifiable position in the body. The overall experiences were very peaceful.

1756 [. . .] at some point my internal sense field no longer included clues to my body, it was all just empty space with very faint but uniform tingling occurring in this space. I was just the perception of this all occurring, I had a sense that I was nothing more than just witnessing the existence of this vacuous space. I was the perception point for subjective experience but nothing more.

Related to the loss of body boundaries, a second interesting phenomenological detail is found in reports referring to an experiential quality of lightness or weightlessness. We first encountered it when looking at joy, awe, bliss, and gratitude in chapter 15:

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.

The phenomenology of weightlessness is interesting because we also find this quality when looking at the phenomenology of bodiless body-experience and what in the second half of this chapter I will term "abstract embodiment." "Graviception" is a

biological organism's capacity to detect the Earth's gravitational field. It can have its own phenomenological profile, although most of us do not attend to it in ordinary life, and philosophy of mind has largely ignored it. Nevertheless, in human beings, the conscious experience of embodiment is strongly determined by perceiving the physical body's own weight. A field of background sensations is normally determined by information coming from "graviceptors," giving the biological organism information about its position relative to the local gravitational field. This in turn leads to the background feeling of "being grounded." Closely related to this form of perception is a cluster of phenomenal qualities like momentum, a sense of balance, and our ongoing experience of the relative positions that our limbs currently have to each other in space. And in addition, there exists a geocentric reference frame, which in the case of seeing helps us detect the verticality of an environment through the perception of gravitational pull. Thus, the feeling of our own weight actually influences the way that we see things. Interestingly, the sense of the weight of our own body can be completely absent in some nonmeditative states too, such as during flying dreams or out-of-body experiences.² It is plausible to infer that some of our mechanisms for weight perception can go offline, and that this influences our conscious self-model.

In the context of pure awareness, we often find a phenomenology of "floating" or "light embodiment," or combinations like "lightness and dampened sensations" or "body dissolution and groundless groundedness." Once again, it seems as though the brain's inner landscape of priors and unconscious beliefs about the world (as discussed in the previous chapter) becomes flattened. What were previously striking opposites now seem to peacefully coexist, as evidenced by the fact that many of our meditators use seemingly paradoxical formulations like being "unbounded and earthed," "bodilessly aware of a body," "gone and fully present at the same time," or "weightlessly floating and grounded at the same time." Here are some examples:

39 [. . .] While meditating I entered a bright (nonvisual) mental weightlessness that was boundless and yet offered a nontactile/nonvisual space of security.
[. . .]

302 A bodily feeling of lightness, detached from the bodily sensation, at the same time a perception that strong energy was flowing through the body, especially noticeable in the arms and hands, and especially the palms of the hands. Detached from the sense of space and time, but wide awake during the guided meditation, connected to beginning and end. In summary: a bodilessness in the consciousness of a body.

304 It was as if I were gone and completely present at the same time. I was me and yet part of this infinite universe. I was everything and nothing. Everything was

possible. Everything existed as possibility. I was light and floating and at the same time deeply rooted.

3329 [. . .] My body feels lighter and physical sensations, like sitting or hands on knees, feel as if they are smothered in a thick layer of clothing. [. . .]

1153 It was a feeling of deep calm and peace. My body was as if dissolved, the boundaries were no longer perceptible, simultaneously unbounded and grounded.

The phenomenal character of weightlessness can occur in motion as well as in stillness:

3259 In the walking meditation [. . .] weightlessness and at the same time conscious contact with the underground [. . .]. In the sitting meditation the feeling of wholeness, weightlessness, inner and outer silence, [. . .] considerably slowed breath [. . .].

Weightlessness can also co-occur with density (chapter 6), unity (chapter 26), and timelessness and ego dissolution (chapters 22 and 25, respectively):

306 It was a feeling of weightlessness and simultaneous density. [. . .] It felt like “being one,” but without the usual feelings like love or bliss. Space- and timeless, detached from the “I.”

We also find weightlessness, clarity, and a complete stillness of bodily sensations, leading to an unbounded sense of translucency or virtuality (see chapter 28):

2486 Pure awareness for me is to be weightless, dreamless, and totally aware of the moment. The body is like invisible: not breathing, not moving, no weight, just be still and quiet.

684 [. . .] Tactile and physical sensations acquired a kind of weightlessness or transparency that was not limited. [. . .]

We have encountered the phenomenal quality of unboundedness many times before. Here, it returns coupled with weightlessness, including as “unbounded embodiment,” or in union with the experience of “being held”:

328 I had a state of weightlessness. Of boundless physicality. And of the simultaneous existence of the self, of the consciousness of my self, without limitation in complete peace.

3524 [. . .] penetrating floatinglike thoughtless state of not searching further, limitless being-held [*entgrenztes Gehaltensein*] [. . .].

In the vicinity of full-absorption states, the phenomenal character of weightlessness not only occurs together with emptiness, clarity, and silent unity, but it typically also coemerges with a blurring of body boundaries:

1737 This is really not so easy to describe. [. . .] It suddenly feels as if someone is pressing a forward key inside me, it is a feeling of speed/quickness inside me, my heart also starts beating faster. Then when I let myself fall into it and “go through,” I arrive at a total feeling of weightlessness, emptiness, awareness. It is all incredibly clear. I no longer feel my body, hear nothing more from my surroundings, don’t know anymore where I begin and end or where I am. I also have no sense of time anymore. Sometimes this lasts a few seconds, sometimes an hour.

2467 Dissolving of the bodily feeling, feeling of floating over the body, weightless. Feeling—silence, being one, everything is ok as it is, boundaries blur—[. . .]. [. . .]

Let us now end our investigation of weightlessness and take a closer look at reports about a blurring of body boundaries. At times, this may be a case of what philosophers would call “phenomenal indeterminacy” (i.e., body boundaries are *neither* well defined *nor* absent). As Jennifer Windt has pointed out, such an experience “would be one *neither* of phenomenal embodiment *nor* of phenomenal disembodiment.”³ The philosophy of modern dream research suggests an interesting parallel to the experience of embodiment during the dream state: The body can be absent from conscious experience in a form of explicit disembodiment in which we clearly notice its absence; but much more often, the phenomenology of embodiment is lacking without this fact being explicitly experienced. Large parts of the phenomenal body can go missing in dreams without us noticing, without the absence itself being part of the experience. This fact may be equally relevant for MPE:

2762 The perception of the body disappears without being noticed. As a process of gentle release. One notices the disconnection only when consciousness realizes that it moves completely free as light in an infinite space. This space has a warm, inviting, and comforting endlessness. [. . .] You carry everything within yourself. All needs and thoughts are silent, as if they were completely satisfied and thereby dissolved. Peace and harmony arise, sensation is all-encompassing. There are no more separations.

Famous philosophers of consciousness like Franz Brentano (1874) and Daniel Dennett (1993) have pointed out that the absence of representation is not the same as the representation of absence. Put differently, sometimes there simply is no fact of the matter when it comes to conscious experience itself—and for the case of embodiment, this observation may connect the phenomenology of meditation with the phenomenology of dreaming. Sometimes, there is simple neither-nor-ness.

What is more, there seems to be a phenomenological link to the notion of “epistemic openness” (chapters 4 and 5): In meditation, the body itself can melt or dissolve into the centerless clarity of epistemic openness:

1142 [. . .] There was a deep quality of clarity and ease within me that seemed to blur the lines between my bodily limits and the awareness within my mind so that I was totally comfortable and undistracted in the present moment. [. . .]

1256 [. . .] My body perception was beyond precise and imprecise, my body was everywhere without limits, warmly flowing, expansive, fused, simultaneously awake and with keen perception of every detail without hyperfocus on any one detail. [. . .]

Sometimes, such states are described as a full dissolution of body boundaries:

1329 [. . .] I started to feel an extreme comfort in my whole body (nothing hurt anymore and I didn’t feel the boundaries of my body either), all sensations were pleasant (the temperature of the room and my body were harmonized, the sounds were distant and soft), and I started to feel that I was one with the whole. There was no longer any boundary. The sensations were of total peace and well-being; I felt happiness and at the same time amazement to be feeling what I was feeling. The sense of time and the sensation of gravity disappeared and for a period of time lasting approximately 1 hour and 50 minutes, I experienced a state of consciousness that I have never relived [. . .]. I was simply there; and I was no longer me.

2549 [. . .] sometimes I feel I’ve no edges and free from everything and bliss.

2881 [. . .] To begin with, the breath is only slightly perceptible in the lower abdomen as a movement. Then it is no longer present at all. The border between my body and the surroundings is no longer there. I am everything. I feel as if I’m in the phase between being awake and sleeping. But there is no dreaming involved. I can sustain the feeling of boundlessness for a few minutes. But if my thinking tries to recover it, it does not work.

2890 Feeling of the dissolution of space and time, dissolution of physical boundaries, feeling of unity, unconditional love, timelessness, but always aware and with the knowledge of being in control.

3288 I was sitting paying close attention to sensations in my body. I felt the limits dissolving until I could no longer distinguish “myself” from the surroundings. The sense of time and space also disappeared.

3421 Feeling of growing bigger, expanding, and that the boundaries of the body are dissolving. I am breathed—I don’t have to do anything for it, just observe,

it goes through me, the breath becomes very light and shallow, slow and stretched, effortless. Feeling of looking at myself, of being opened, incredibly present. [. . .]

We have already seen how the phenomenal quality of weightlessness can occur not only in stillness, but also while the body is in motion (#3259). The same is true for the dissolution of body boundaries:

1557 [. . .] An experience of perfect dissolution, or absorption, in what is; this was initially connected with the internal image of “earth”; that is: I was practicing walking meditation outside, on a soft, uneven meadow, so I felt the ground very strongly. And after a while I felt something like an invitation to be absorbed into this earth. At first this frightened me quite a bit, and the need arose for me to decide: Do I allow what is happening here, or do I get out? That lasted for a little while, then I somehow let go of my control and it felt like I dissolved. However, I still knew that I was dissolved while I was dissolved. It was connected with a feeling of fullness, or wholeness, or maybe also emptiness—I wouldn’t know how to tell them apart in this situation—very pleasing. [. . .]

But this is not the final stage, it seems. There can also be a full-blown experience of explicit disembodiment or bodilessness, a global and peaceful state of pure being in which the part completely expresses the whole. Sometimes this may involve timelessness and a disappearance of the entire spatial frame of reference:

680 [. . .] My body was as if it did not exist and belonged to the universe. Time did not exist and it was all peace, my body, my mind did not exist. [. . .]

1054 It is a state of mental calm, vastness, perceived bodilessness, a state of is-ness or being.

51 [. . .] I came into a state that felt completely detached from everything else. I no longer felt my body. There were no boundaries. I had my eyes closed and it was as if my head were open. It felt as though everything inside me had merged into a benevolent and pleasant field. Space (which is actually not a suitable word for it, as perception is limited by it, but I don’t know how else to express it) was filled with love and security. I thought of nothing. I was just there. There was nothing to think. I was just there. It was beautiful and a little bit of me didn’t want it to stop. But I knew it would pass. I was grateful for this experience. It was fulfilling!

2384 [. . .] As I went through my body from top to bottom with my attention, I perceived my whole body as a tingling, vibrating Something. I didn’t know whether my arms were above or below my legs, for example. It was a

“dissolving of the spatial frame of reference.” I heard nothing, saw nothing, and thought nothing. I felt no pain. It was timeless. It was very pleasant. It was soft. [. . .] I then had the feeling that I had not breathed at all, or only very little, the entire time. I had also probably not moved at all. Afterward I knew that I am the expression of the whole universe, wherever I am. I do nothing, everything happens.

A combination of bodilessness and timelessness can lead to a transitory experience of spatial disorientation:

1867 Loss of body consciousness, loss of the sense of time (a few minutes felt like a very long time), contentment and calm, initially disorientation due to the loss of the sense of space. With later attempts increasing calm and pure consciousness.

Loss of body boundaries can lead to a disappearance of all other boundaries as well. It seems that a dedifferentiation of the conscious body image is just *one* aspect of, or one possible starting point for, a wide range of nondual episodes in which people feel they are melting into the whole phenomenal field, experiencing unity or pure being, or dissolving into a global state of epistemic openness. All these aspects will be investigated in chapters 25, 26, and 27. Meanwhile, let us explore examples of cases in which the loss of body boundaries plays a pivotal role because it leads to a loss of all other boundaries:

383 Dissolving of all boundaries—physical and mental. Outside and inside the body, energetic perception that no boundaries exist. On hearing a bird that was chirping outside, “I” was the bird, as well as the tree, the sun, etc.

2085 [. . .] at some point, there was a sense that the boundaries had dissolved. That the sound I was hearing from a nearby refrigerator was no different than sensations. The sense of a body had dissolved, there was just experience happening. I didn’t feel a contracted version of a self, but rather an openness, boundless space. The experience was more peaceful and pleasant. I’ve had a few prior experiences of body lightness and a vibration throughout in other meditation sessions. These sensations were not experienced during this session. [. . .]

When all boundaries have dissolved, an experience of spatiality and unbounded openness can emerge (as in the two preceding reports). However, as already noted, this quality of openness is an *epistemic* openness (chapter 4) because the “knowing” sense of pure awareness, observation without an observer, free-floating attention, and impersonal witnessing are essential aspects:

1582 [. . .] The body felt like it dissolved and what was left was my awareness, being aware of itself. While I was aware of myself, I also was aware of everything else and the boundaries dissolving here too. I felt like I just “was” and my awareness just observed. [. . .]

2093 [. . .] when suddenly the boundary of my body dissolved, and I was everywhere at the same time. Attention floated freely in space between the different mind objects. I felt completely at peace.

3451 [. . .] the breath deepens and it feels as if it happens by itself and as if my whole body is immersed in the movement of the breath, body boundaries dissolve in a warmly pulsating way . . . at some point there remains only perception of “breath happens in space,” no self that perceives, but an impression of “there are impersonal eyes in space.” [. . .]

I found many reports referring to the phenomenal qualities of “emptiness” and “openness,” which at the same time highlight the nondual and “selflessly self-aware” character of MPE (chapters 27, 29, and 30):

1545 [. . .] A very strong sense of connection with something I recognized. The body felt it at times and at other times not, integrating itself into that emptiness as well. [. . .]

3620 In this state there was no self-experience, but sounds were perceptible. My body schema no longer existed. There was no inside and outside, no experience of time, no words, concepts, or similar. Totally a verbal. There was no front-back. No concept of space. Only in retrospect were such categories of description applicable to the occurrence.

There may be a deeper relationship between selflessness, the loss of all distinctions and boundaries, and the experience of open embodiment. I do not know what this relationship might be, but I have deliberately coined the new concept of “bodiless body-experience” to flag this—admittedly still poorly defined and possibly very large—region of phenomenal state space. For example, this subspace contains a very subtle, nondual phenomenology of embodiment, an almost selfless experience of undifferentiated spatial immersion, or bodiless flow:

3340 [. . .] In this bodily state not being “inside” but open, all senses open. This is the awareness of being there without the awareness of an apart “me.” Nevertheless, it is very bodily. [. . .]

1085 [I come] [. . .] into a state of great silence and boundless perception of space. It is a bit like being immersed in some kind of “granules.” On the one hand, all distinctions seem to have disappeared—on the other hand, there is definitely

the ability to evaluate the quality of the moment positively and also in certain categories to make adjustments—e.g., to exhale a little deeper. [. . .]

1056 [. . .] My body was there, delicate, flowing. But actually there was nothing there perceiving it. Perception appeared only once the “event” was fading away. And yet “I” was there, but I don’t know with what aspect, or how. My perceptions were very much weakened and I became conscious of them only toward the end of the event. It was something flowing, bodiless and yet emanating from the body, on a very deep level of consciousness. [. . .]

Bodiless body-experience and pure awareness can also be stages of a longer process (e.g., leading from body dissolution to full absorption and back):

1718 [. . .] The conceptual awareness of my body sensations in space slowed and stopped, with these subtle vibrations no longer mapped by concepts (where in the body they were). The body concept dropped along with the effort of breathing. The separate vibrations gathered into a nebula initially in front of my awareness, as if I was looking at the whole. Then the awareness became the center and periphery of this nebula cloud. There was just a now and a here, and my sense of self was now the nebula, the whole. There was increased brightness and expansion as the sensations/self quickened to pulse/vibrate as one. It became quite intense until an awareness arose within this pulsation of a self that was going to die. My self-awareness returned in a state of surprise/awe, I perceived my body map once again and I felt as though my body would collapse from the sitting position if I “let go” totally. I noticed slight fear (as density in my chest and a pulling in toward my center) and the pulsing/vibrations then dissipated as I felt the location and warm sensations of my body. My breath was deep and slow through my mouth with tears welling in my eyes. I felt relaxed and amazed.

Let us now close this large selection of reports by asking one last question: What would a nonconceptual experience of “social embodiment” look like? In 1903, the German philosopher and psychologist Theodor Lipps (1851–1914) published a paper on empathy, inner imitation, and organ sensations, in which he introduced the concept of *Einfihlung* (empathy, literally “feeling into something” or “feeling something from the inside”). Lipps thought that our capacity for empathy rests on the ability not only to sense something in your own body, but to *feel yourself in an object*.⁴ For example, if you empathize with another human being in pain, or perceive the conscious suffering of another sentient creature, then you do not simply simulate *their* pain in your mind—you actually use your own bodily self-model. What really happens is that you feel

yourself in the model of the other human being that your brain creates; your own inner organ perceptions are transposed into the model of their body. For Lipps, interestingly, such objects could be visually perceived human movements or body postures, but also architectural shapes. The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) later spoke of *intercorporéité* (intercorporeality) and *intersubjectivité charnelle* (carnal intersubjectivity), and today we are beginning to have a much better understanding of how, in social cognition, the bodily self-model in our brain can expand into the social domain. One way that it does so is by allowing the intentions and movement sensations of others to “inhabit us,” turning them into something that we can directly feel within ourselves. The new phenomenological material that we have gathered shows how what I have just termed “social embodiment” can also appear in the context of MPE. The dissolving of body boundaries and merging with the phenomenal field can sometimes happen in the social domain (e.g., as a transitory phase in the process of melting into space and transcending the distinction between inner and outer). Here are four examples:

3243 [. . .] Then a feeling of vastness. Then the feeling of being in the bodies of the people sitting with you. Expanding further, merging into space.

3471 [. . .] Suddenly I felt completely at one (unified) with my participants. Spatially, temporally, experientially there was no longer any distinction. But I was very shocked by this state. [. . .]

1918 [. . .] After hours of practice our group became a cloud / figures / inside of me and outside.

2863 [. . .] walking *kinhin*, I suddenly realize my body is completely in sync with the woman in front of me, the spatial relationship was fixed as one; if she had suddenly done a back flip, I would have instantaneously done one also. My discriminating mind was suddenly gone, had lifted away, and a beautiful openness and energy was all-present and all-pervading. My consciousness delighted in the energy of pure being and soon the entire *kinhin* line was one being with many legs. I felt like my body could have done anything, unlimited, I was all energy or energy was everything. A panoramic vision of the entire room and *kinhin* continued like a giant centipede. [. . .]

What all of this shows is that our everyday experience of embodiment is just *one* variant of a much larger set of phenomenological possibilities. There are many other ways in which human beings can nonconceptually identify with something, in a way that is experientially immediate and direct, by simply *being* it: We can embody space; we can embody the phenomenal signature of knowing; or we can embody MPE, the

phenomenal character of dual mindfulness or even pure awareness itself. And we possess the capacity to embody other feeling, knowing selves—even whole groups of them. We are physically embodied epistemic spaces; conscious embodiment is a *capacity* that we have, and it can be extended to many other domains beyond the physical organism as such.

Abstract Embodiment, Changing Units of Identification—and What Reincarnation Really Is

And Soul is not in the cosmos, but rather the cosmos is in Soul. For the body is not a place in which Soul is, but Soul is in Intellect, body is in Soul, and Intellect in something else. And there is nothing else beyond this such that it would be in that. It is, therefore, in nothing at all. In this way, then, it is nowhere.

—Plotinus (205–270), *The Enneads*, V, 5, 9, 29–33

Pure awareness in the context of bodiless body-experience is an interesting new topic if read against the background of certain ancient Western ideas. Plato (*Gorgias* 493a2–3), probably citing Pythagoras, said that the body is a prison-house, the soul's tomb (*sōma sēma*). Accordingly, the true philosophical sage would always strive to liberate herself from all things bodily, trying to set her soul free. On a purely phenomenological reading, therefore, one would expect that those modes of conscious experience in which all body-experience has disappeared might also achieve a form of *experiential* deliverance, bringing that which is most fundamental—perhaps MPE, perhaps the “true self” (chapter 29)—into the foreground of experience. Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism and the author of the epigraph at the start of this section, thought that in this earthly, mortal life, a part of us is “covered” by the body but we can use the central, essential part of our soul that is not “flooded” by the physical organism to calmly abide in what really is the center of all other things:

Here and now, part of us is, by reason of the body, as though we had our feet in water, with the rest of the body out of the water. When we actually raise ourselves up, by the part not plunged in the body, we fix ourselves, using our centre, to the centre of all things, in a way, like fixing the centres of the greatest circles to the containing sphere; and there we come to rest.⁵

Once again, on a purely phenomenological reading, one would expect those regions of phenomenal state space that are normally “flooded” or “submerged” by body perception to become much stronger in states of bodiless conscious experience. But what is this “center of ourselves” that seems to remain?

“Bodiless body-experience” and “abstract embodiment” are two new phenomenological concepts that I am offering to help us describe the experiences reported in this chapter. We have just surveyed many examples of bodiless body-experience, and it has turned out to be a rich and finely nuanced phenomenon. We could easily expand on these two with a whole series of equally paradoxical concepts to describe specific but often neglected aspects of the phenomenology of pure awareness. Indeed, some of the options already figure in other chapters of this book, like chapter 22, which discusses timeless time-experience. Other possibilities that this book doesn’t explore in detail might include “silence in sound,” “stillness in motion,” and “the emptiness in an arising thought.” It is also interesting to see how often meditators describe paradoxical or indeterminate states in which, for example, they “were there and not there at the same time.”

The paradox of abstract embodiment is a way of nonconceptually experiencing your very own body, of *being it*, even while being abstracted away from the physical organism in time and space. It is not a form of sensory self-perception, like seeing or hearing your own body. As we learned in chapter 18, which discussed the work of Yochai Ataria, it may have something to do with an abstract, nonsensory form of “being in touch with oneself.” I think that human beings have a capacity for *meta-attentional self-touch*: We can actually direct attention to attention itself, including the wandering of its focus and the mere capacity for what today’s computational modelers might call “precision management” itself (see figure 34.1 in chapter 34 to get an idea of this). But strictly speaking, this is not a form of interoception or “inner touch”; it is not about perceiving your body from the inside; it isn’t like sensing the flexing of your muscles and tendons, your breath, your heartbeat, or the sensations originating in your intestines. It is not sensory, nor is it a perceptual experience in the true sense of the word, because there are no specific receptors involved—neither on your retina, inside your blood vessels, or in your gut. It involves no special, functionally adequate stimuli represented in only one special stimulus modality, such as in your intestines, in the vestibular system, in tendons and joints, or via the pain-related “nociceptors” that respond to damage of body tissue. Obviously, abstract embodiment is also not a physical movement experience; it does not relate to what neuroscientists might call “motor content.”

The pure-awareness experience is thus hard to characterize as embodied in the usual senses of the word. Yet it can be fruitfully understood as a particularly deep form of embodiment—not only because it is subtle and profound but also because it represents certain aspects of the bodily process by which the brain activates itself or wakes itself up. We might even go so far as to say that pure awareness is awareness of another kind of body—a “wakefulness body,” if you will—constituted by an abstract level of our

conscious self-model that has transcended or always already preceded the distinction between what is inside and outside our body. This is reminiscent of what Lipps says of empathy: “It is the fact that the opposition between me and the object disappears, or, to be more precise, *does not yet exist*.”⁶ It now becomes conceivable that the phenomenal signature of knowing—the experience of “knowingness” itself—is something that human beings can *embody*.

There are interesting overlaps between knowingness and some experiential qualities that we have already investigated. For example, if you refer back to chapter 7, on the phenomenology of “soundness,” you will find two or three examples in which soundness is actually an embodied form of *insight*, or related to an experience of global harmony in which you “embody the world” after the original, merely physical body image has dissolved. Like the ordinary self-model that we all know, bodiless body-experience is something that the process of knowing can inhabit, something that it can abide and dwell in, and something on which it can ride. Perhaps meditation is like learning how to surf the crest of pure awareness, and then how to embody the ocean?

Let us try to make this more precise. Philosophically, an important conceptual instrument is the “unit of identification.” I first introduced this concept in some of my academic writings on out-of-body experiences, dreaming, and spontaneous task-unrelated thoughts (aka “mind-wandering”).⁷ It may sound complicated, but it is quite easy to understand: The unit of identification is whatever experiential contents lead to self-descriptions of the form “I *am* this!” (if introspective access and verbal report are possible while the experience is still unfolding) or “I *was* this!” (in a retrospective description).

In humans, typical units of identification are the body as felt from the inside, the emotional self-model, and the sense of effort in attentional or cognitive agency. If you say, “I am my body!” then the unit of identification is the conscious body-model in your brain plus the global experience of ownership, which comes from controlling the body as a whole. If you say, “I am that which has feelings!” then the unit of identification is the experiential content supervening on the emotional self-model currently active in your brain, which also includes and arises out of inner body sensations, gut feelings, and the like. If—like René Descartes—you say, “No, I am the thinking self, that which forms concepts and controls thought!” (chapters 22 and 25), then the organism’s unit of identification is the brain’s conscious model of a cognitive agent, including the subtle sense of mental effort that comes with inner actions like mental calculation, logical thought, and the attempt to concentrate (more on this in chapter 30). If you say, “I am that which meditates, that which mindfully brings the focus of attention back to the breath after noticing a stray thought!” then you identify with the subtle sense of effort

that accompanies control of the focus of attention (the quality of “attentional agency”) and with an almost automatically arising model of an entity that has just “done the noticing” (the mindful agent, the successful “meditative self”). And so on.

If a conscious system has *no* unit of identification, then it lacks the phenomenology of identification and has no sense of self. The new and philosophically interesting question that arises from our phenomenological data is whether there can be *nonegoic units of identification*, with no conscious sense of self. One of the main claims that I am making in this book is that our phenomenological data clearly show that there can be. Phenomenologically, the conscious biological organism that you are has the capacity to be something without being it in a *selfy* way. I will come back to this point in chapter 29.

Using the new concept of the unit of identification, we can describe a number of logical possibilities, each of them referring to potential configurations of conscious experience. We might call them “possible phenomenological worlds.” Human beings have known them for millennia. Some of them are directly relevant to the phenomenological material presented here because, far from being mere conceptual possibilities, they actually correspond to *phenomenal realities* that have so far been ignored or described only imprecisely. Here is a short list of the most relevant ones:

- There could be states of consciousness in which there is *no* unit of identification whatsoever.
- There could be states of phenomenal experience during which *multiple* units of identification are simultaneously present or in which multiple units of identification quickly alternate.
- There could be *maximal* units of identification, where we identify with the whole world or the phenomenal field as a whole.
- There could be *minimal* units of identification, where we identify with one very subtle phenomenal quality, with a simple form of phenomenal character.
- There could be *nonegoic* units of identification.

If you had a choice, in which type of phenomenological world would you like to live your life? In the epilogue, I will briefly return to the question of what makes a state of consciousness a *valuable* one, one we may want to cultivate and strive for. Which of the five phenomenal realities listed here would you personally assess to be most valuable? For example, which one would we expect to reduce psychological suffering most effectively? All but one of these phenomenological possibilities are clearly directly relevant to a deeper understanding of what pure awareness might be. The second one—multiple units of identification present simultaneously or in quick alternation—is an interesting,

if partial, exception. It almost never appears in our data set, probably because it would refer either to the psychiatric syndrome of dissociative identity disorder (formerly known as “multiple personality disorder”) or to the normal “unaware” state of mind, in which we are constantly distracted by stray thoughts and attentional lapses, bouts of mind-wandering, and spontaneous daydreams. Yet it is actually possible to abide in a global state of mindful meta-awareness while some forms of spontaneous thought and mind-wandering still take place, but this time without the phenomenology of identification, without actually getting “sucked into” an inner attention sink or being immersed in an inner landscape. So this second option could be useful to explore in future studies of identification and its relationship to mind-wandering. Meanwhile, to gradually flesh out our new working concept of the “unit of identification,” let me now briefly go through the other four phenomenological options one by one.

The complete absence of any unit of identification relates directly to Buddhist theories of nonself (*anattā* in Pali) and nonattachment. For example, we can imagine situations in which, experientially, we would not be “glued” to the body as felt from the inside, not attached to the current content or emotional self-model, as well as states in which the sense of effort and active control in attention and thought had disappeared. But the idea can also be used to describe the phenomenology of some acute psychotic episodes and severe psychiatric conditions like depersonalization or Cotard syndrome⁸ (in which patients claim that they are dead or do not exist). Selfless states without any other unit of identification may also occur during dreamless deep sleep⁹ and partial epileptic seizures.¹⁰ In particular, certain psychoactive drugs such as LSD, psilocybin, and 5-MeO-DMT have dramatic effects on self-consciousness and can temporarily suppress *any* form of self-identification—a phenomenon known in the scientific literature as “drug-induced ego dissolution.”¹¹

Our survey responses make clear that many experiences can be (and are) described as lacking a unit of identification altogether. Chapter 25, “Ego Dissolution: Melting into the Phenomenal Field,” provides some examples; you can find others among the quotations in chapter 8, “Nonidentification,” chapter 16, “Simplicity, Nothingness, and Absence,” and chapter 27, “Nondual Awareness: Insight.” The most interesting question for our purposes is whether pure MPE itself, as it occurs during full-absorption episodes, can sometimes be accurately described as the phenomenological unit of identification. I will come back to this when discussing the fifth possibility later in this chapter.

Then there is the possibility of processes during which *multiple* units of identification are simultaneously present or in which multiple units of identification quickly alternate. We discussed neurological disorders like heautoscopy and the phenomenology of robotic reembodiment in chapter 21. In these situations, the sense of self can

oscillate between the felt, physical body and a visual body hallucinated in extrapersonal space or between the physical body and a robot. In psychiatry, we find the example of dissociative identity disorder (previously termed “multiple personality disorder”), characterized by the maintenance of at least two distinct and relatively enduring personality states and accompanied by severe memory gaps. Here, we have different and alternating sets of personality traits and multiple autobiographical self-models—different inner narratives that the patient identifies with at a given point in time. There may also be a healthy version of this process, in which we display different virtual selves in different social contexts¹² but maintain a sense of control and a high level of functional efficiency.

I think that in normal life, many of us alternate between rapidly changing units of identification (e.g., during nocturnal dreaming or whenever we drift off into a short episode of daydreaming and “come to” again, when haunted by unbidden memories, or when sudden attacks of automatic planning and mental time travel into the future make us briefly lose touch with the present moment).¹³ Meditators, of course, are experts in studying precisely these processes under the microscope of introspective attention, and accordingly, they are generally much more aware of them than most other people. One thing that meditators often begin to see is the utter unpredictability, the volatility, and the degree of discontinuity in the neural processes that create ever-new units of identification, simulated future selves, and sudden trains of thought, like a fountain sputtering out wastewater in the middle of what otherwise would be a large, clear lake. Another thing that meditators begin to see is that the fountain isn’t them. At times, they may find that one can actually *embody* the lake, even while the fountain is still active. This would be one example of what this chapter is all about: abstract embodiment and the rich possibilities for changing units of identification.

Under normal conditions, however, all we ever do is wastewater surfing, and often this actually gets us somewhere; it is functionally useful. But in terms of content, every onset and every ending of an episode of mind-wandering is characterized by an unexpected shift or sudden switch in what I will call the “phenomenal unit of identification.”¹⁴ Here is an example. Let’s say that at first, you identify with the conscious content of an internal model of the self as driving a car, currently waiting for a red traffic light to turn green. Then an internal simulation of yourself as buying tofu and bananas pops up, as you “remember” that you need to buy tofu and bananas. Now you identify with the protagonist of this shopping narrative, jumping into the virtual self that constitutes the center of an automatic inner action simulation. Phenomenologically, and for only a very short moment, you literally “become someone else.” For a brief moment, you “zone out” completely, which constitutes an involuntary and unexpected shift in the unit of identification. A few moments later, perceptual coupling

may quickly be restored, and you reidentify with the “driver” (i.e., a model of the self as an attentional agent), quickly checking whether the lights have turned green. This is the end of your first mind-wandering episode. Phenomenologically, the driver is real again, and the shopper is only virtual—because the shopper is now no longer the unit of identification, but just the retrospective content of a sudden memory popping up, leading to a decision and an action plan.

However, in the very moment where “you” “remember” that you also wanted to buy almond butter and raisins, the unit of identification switches again, and you quickly “zone out” for a fast update, an enriched mental simulation of the shopper and its now extended task list, perhaps involving mental images of shelves and aisles. Traditional phenomenologists might say that you had an “afterthought.” But my point is that really the afterthought swiftly created a new virtual self.

Remembering almond butter and raisins marks the beginning of mind-wandering episode no. 2, and the episode is functionally characterized by another bout of “involuntary mental time travel.”¹⁵ This second episode may again take less than a second to unfold, and as the light suddenly turns green, you “snap back” into the driver model, hastily shifting gears. The snapping-back is the next shift in the unit of identification, and it ends your second mind-wandering episode. There have now been two episodes and four switches. This way of applying our new concept yields another, entirely phenomenological way of understanding what “the cycle of death and rebirth” is. Reincarnation—the functional embodiment of a new unit of identification—is something that happens in your brain every minute of your waking life. But it is also something that can stop happening—for example, during meditation.

Buddhist philosophers have developed an astonishingly plausible theory of mind, but they did so before the theory of evolution by natural selection was conceived in the mid-nineteenth century, and long before modern neuroscience came along. Buddhist philosophers had never encountered the gene-centered view of evolution, which turns individual human beings into a kind of impermanent and disposable copying device through which genetic information is transmitted, selflessly flowing into the future. Early Buddhists also lacked the experimental and conceptual tools of modern cognitive neuroscience, including many of our present-day empirical insights into the biological evolution of cognitive mechanisms in animals and humans—for example, into the existence of a self-model or a “mind-wandering network” in the brain.¹⁶ But they would probably have liked the idea of the physical body itself being a sort of *model*, a mere hypothesis about what was possible in the world of their ancestors; and they would certainly have understood modern ideas about the *conscious* experience of our own body as dependently arising out of a complex mesh of impermanent computational processes.¹⁷

Today, the Buddhist idea of reincarnation looks to many like a philosophical remnant from a different epoch of humankind's intellectual history, like a metaphysical leftover from another time (see also chapter 17). But please note that the idea of a "cycle of death and rebirth" (which is shared by most Indian religions) can also be read as a philosophical premonition of Darwin, and that—interestingly—it can *simultaneously* be applied on the level of individual human brains, on the level of their bodily hosts, on the level of the wandering mind, and on the level of the person as a whole: *Saṃsāra* is aimless wandering, jumping from one unit to the next. But now we are beginning to understand that all of this is a *nested* process that happens on many functional levels and timescales. For example, today we can view rebirth as the cycle of successive existence of ever-new biological copying devices, but also as a transmigration from one conscious unit of identification to the next. *Saṃsāra* in this new sense is a self-organizing biological or mental system going through a succession of states, leading to the impermanent functional embodiment of ever-new units of identification—but in a process that has no direction and no ultimate goal and creates an enormous amount of conscious suffering. *Saṃsāra* is a scale-invariant principle of conscious life. As it happens on many levels simultaneously, in life and in mind, we could call this naturalistic reinterpretation of what the cycle of death and rebirth really is "nested *saṃsāra*." Is there a way to get out of it?

The third new possibility for configuring conscious experience listed earlier is that there could be *maximal* units of identification where we identify with the whole world or with the phenomenal field as a whole. Many of the self-reports presented thus far clearly show that the phenomenal character of MPE often occurs in situations where the sense of self expands and the meditator gradually becomes "one with the world." This type of experience is like a phenomenological archetype of humankind, a timeless classic that has been described for millennia within many cultures. The deeper conceptual question is whether states in which the unit of identification has been maximized to include every other form of conscious content can still count as states of self-consciousness because a self/other distinction is lacking. But as usual, let us try to avoid metaphysical side-alleys and dead ends by staying as close to the reported experiences as possible.

Fourth, there could be *minimal* units of identification where we identify with one very subtle phenomenal quality, with a maximally simple form of phenomenal character. This possibility directly relates to MPE because—at least according to my tentative and empirically falsifiable working hypothesis—the pure-awareness experience as it occurs in meditation is our best candidate for the simplest form of conscious experience.

Matthew McKenzie describes the relationship between nondual awareness (see chapter 27) and the pure-awareness experience or pure-consciousness experience (PCE) very clearly:

The [nondual awareness] experience involves the maximal unit of phenomenal identification: the space or expanse of consciousness as the context of phenomenal contents. In contrast, the PCE involves the minimal unit of phenomenal identification: the simple state of phenomenal consciousness devoid of contents. In both cases, though, there is a shift of self-identification from the typical sense of being a separate subject in relation to an object to a sense of being consciousness itself, whether in its pure form or in its spacious form.¹⁸

Can one *be* pure awareness? Is it possible for you to *embody* MPE, and how would you speak about it later? Please note that during a full-absorption episode, you cannot say “I *am* this!” but afterward you can say “I *was* this!”¹⁹ In any case, many reports in this book show that human beings are able to identify with pure awareness itself, to turn MPE into their phenomenal unit of identification. This means that we now have some statistical data to back up this fourth claim. If pure consciousness turns out to be minimal in an interesting sense, then it could function as a target for the mechanism of identification. This begins to close the circle when looking back at the phenomenology of abstract embodiment and bodiless body-experience: The simple phenomenal character of wakeful, spacious awareness itself can clearly function as the unit of identification, and looking at the frequency of reports of the type presented in the first section of this chapter, it seems as if it might constitute one major category of human contemplative experience.

All of this leads naturally to the fifth possibility, as well as an important philosophical question: Can there be *nonegoic* units of identification? I think the answer is clearly yes, but of course, everything hinges on what we mean by “egoic.” If you know my academic work, you’ll know that there is a lot I could say here, but let us keep things as simple as possible. For now, let us just say that a system is self-conscious in the egoic sense if it currently fulfills one or more of the following three criteria:

- There is a sense of agency on the level of bodily motion, attention, or cognition (i.e., a sense of goal-directed control for the physical body as a whole, the focus of attention, and conscious thought).
- There is an autobiographical self-model (i.e., an inner representation of the system as a whole as having existed in the past, as possibly existing in the future, and as somehow being the same across time).
- There is global sense of ownership, normally for the physical body as existing in a consciously experienced here and now. Most often, I simply own my physical body as a whole, as something located in space and time.

For example, in full-absorption episodes in deep meditation or during dreamless deep sleep, all three criteria are never met. Full absorption cannot be fabricated;

accordingly, no sense of agency is involved. It is timeless, it is not located in physical space, and nobody *owns* pure awareness. Afterward, the phenomenal character of pure, wakeful awareness is the only kind of phenomenal character that can be reported. But whenever—as in some cases of abstract embodiment and bodiless body-experience—a meditator later credibly says “I *was* that!”, we could now say that, phenomenologically, a nonegoic unit of identification had emerged during the episode. This result opens a new line of inquiry, which begins with a fascinating philosophical puzzle: If all of this is correct, can there also be nonegoic forms of *self*-awareness? We will delve further into this question in chapters 29 and 30.

From a scientific perspective, we can say that the unit of identification often represents the best hypothesis that the system has about its own global state. The unit of identification is dynamic and highly variable, and as out-of-body experiences and data from direct electrical brain stimulation show, it does not have to coincide with the physical body as consciously represented.²⁰ Possessing a unit of identification is the central causally enabling factor for many forms of intelligent behavior (bodily and mental) that presuppose the ability for self-reference. Biological systems sustain organismic integrity by preserving the integrity of their conscious self-model, constantly trying to minimize all uncertainty related to their unit of identification. Sometimes even confabulation, delusion, and functionally adequate forms of self-deception can be fruitfully viewed as an organism’s attempts to sustain its integrity and stability across time.

Over the last three decades, I have written a lot about the idea of a conscious self-model, some of which may be helpful when trying to understand bodiless body-experience, abstract embodiment, and changing units of identification. In a nutshell, your phenomenal self-model is a conscious inner image of the organism as a whole. It is not a homunculus, some little person in the head, but rather a subpersonal brain state; it has many layers; and if it is transparent, it creates the phenomenology of identification: You, the organism as a whole, feel as if you *are* the content of whatever the inner image portrays. For example, if the model says that you are not a mere organism, but an enculturated rational individual—a *person*—then you feel that you are a person. However, it is crucial that we distinguish between a phenomenological and a computational reading of the term “self-model.” All of conscious experience is a self-model in the computational sense, but only some of it is a representation of something that could be called a “self” in the phenomenological sense.²¹ Let me briefly explain this conceptual distinction, because it naturally leads to a better understanding of abstract embodiment and the experiences described in the first half of this chapter.

Much of the best current consciousness research converges on the idea of consciousness as a controlled hallucination, and this is relevant to our distinction between the

computational and the phenomenological self-model.²² Our conscious model of reality is an inner state resulting from the brain's continuous attempt to predict the way in which sensory stimuli—such as the firing patterns on the retina as you look at a rose, an iris, or a carnation, as Aldous Huxley did—will change *other instances* of its own inner states (e.g., in the thalamus or primary visual cortex). This model has many layers, its functional architecture has evolved over millions of years,²³ and as you perceive the world, it is continuously updated from millisecond to millisecond.

The model is concerned not with truth but with survival; it is an instrument that the animal uses to achieve the goals of uncertainty reduction and successful procreation. It is a “self-model” in the computational sense because all it can ever do is predict how the organism's own internal states will evolve over time. The model helps to protect organismic integrity, creating a statistical bubble that predicts and actively sustains its own surface from the inside. It has become so good at this that it creates a *virtual* reality (VR) right in your own head. More often than not, it actually “extracts” from the environment those hidden causes that really are responsible for the stimuli impinging on your sensory surfaces, and it does so in such a swift and reliable way that it can be treated as a real-time stand-in, as an inner proxy for reality as a whole—environment, body, and knowing self included. Computationally, it is a self-model; phenomenologically, a whole world appears. But within this world, there is a body. The world-model contains a body-model, at least most of the time.

Do you remember that in chapter 6, I explained how through the “body scan” technique, one can become consciously aware of previously unknown aspects of one's very own bodily experience (e.g., the contact sensations behind our inner eyelids)? Once recognized, they feel like something that has always been there. The phenomenal self-model has been expanded, enriched, and refined. Obviously, the same can be done by cultivating mindfulness toward the outer world: Meditators often report that contemplative practice leads to refined and enriched forms of perceptual experience.

But perhaps one could do the same for an aspect of the computational self-model that is *neither* a mere part of the phenomenal self-model *nor* a part of your environment model. What if you could cultivate awareness of that which temporally precedes and causally enables everything else—namely, tonic alertness, which may be introspectively available as the previously unnoticed quality of wakefulness and epistemic openness? This could be thought of as a special form of body scan that reveals a fundamental and important bodily property. This type of scan would not involve scanning an already existing body-model in the brain (as in classical Goenka-style practice and the eyelid example), and neither would it yet involve integrating the experience of wakefulness and epistemic openness into something that could properly be termed a model of a

“self.” From this new philosophical perspective, *all* conscious experience is a form of body scan. The rose, iris, and carnation in front of you are bodily states that—in the sense discussed in the preceding chapter—*present* themselves as external objects. They are a part of the single computational self-model underlying the totality of all conscious experience, which is physically realized by a part of your own body. In embodied beings like us, this computational model automatically gets segmented into self and nonself. This is what makes the conscious experience of *you* looking at the rose possible.

In neurotypical human beings, the quality of wakefulness and “knowingness” gets contracted into the phenomenal self: into an inner image of a person who has desires and beliefs; an ego possessing her own body and her own emotions; an agent that miraculously always remains the same over time; a transtemporal self who pursues goals—and who now has an invisible “mind” that is wakeful and open to the world. All of this is a fiction. In reality, epistemic openness is a property created by the computational self-model as a whole, not by some sort of ego. (This point can be read as a reinterpretation of the Patañjali quote I presented in chapter 18: “The Seer is nothing but the power of seeing which, although pure, appears to see through the mind.”) At any given point in time, epistemic openness is enabled by—and arguably *identical to*—a subpersonal state in your head, a part of the brain that neuroscience is now homing in on. In this sense, the transpersonal is in fact the subpersonal.

But of course, neuroscience is only one source of insight; it is only one kind of epistemic practice. Meditation is another kind. In its own way, it may show that wakefulness and epistemic openness really are entirely *impersonal* and nonegoic—and yet something that one can actually identify with and embody in an abstract way. There may be more than one way to do this. But at least sometimes, contemplative practice can provide a proof of concept. It can demonstrate that there is a real practical possibility that the computational and the phenomenal self-model can become one and the same.

In case a lot of this has been sounding too theoretical, here is one clear and simple practical instruction given by Sheng Yen (1931–2009), a famous Chinese monk who taught Chan Buddhism in Taiwan. He specialized in a methodless method known as “silent illumination”:

The foundation—relaxation—should be established firmly. Next, be aware of the totality of your body and maintain the simplicity of that awareness. As the bodily burdens and sensations fall away, your sensory field expands so that you can incorporate the environment into your whole being. Do not imagine yourself in the second state merely because it is a progression from the first stage of just sitting. It must be experienced. You are taking the whole environment as your body sitting,

without being distracted by the particulars of sight or sound that are absorbed into the whole. Whatever stage you are in, maintain the principle that silence is not separate from illumination.²⁴

Over time, systematically repeating the MPE experience changes the whole person and the social context around it, and conversely, there are social contexts and personal lifestyles that may either prevent or stabilize its occurrence. Once MPE in the sense of wakeful presence and epistemic openness has been discovered, a number of things can happen. Most likely, it will be immediately forgotten. After all, MPE is a subtle, entirely silent, and very simple form of phenomenal character that plays no role in most cultures on this planet, and at first glance, it may seem to have no practical value. Or it may be contracted into an egoic self-model, creating a “mindful self.” In this case, MPE becomes just another experiential aspect of the self-conscious person that we take ourselves to be and identify with. Now it is a *subjective* experience. But yet another possibility is that it remains uncontracted or gradually expands. This means that while phenomenologically, the clarity of wakeful presence is not attributed to any personal-level self, it may nevertheless later naturally lead to verbal reports of the form “I was that!” This is what this very long chapter was all about: Our phenomenological data show that MPE can sometimes actually turn into what in chapter 29, “The True Self,” I will term a “nonegoic unit of identification.”

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

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Citation:

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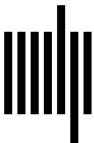
DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/15196.001.0001

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>