

32 Meditation and Nonmeditation

A bit like balancing a ball on a stick, the moment when it is in balance is characterized by lightness and naturalness, but is at the same time very difficult to hold. [#1457]

It is difficult to put into words, but through meditation I can create conditions (by relaxing into the moment) and it comes or not, like grace [#2714]

This chapter unites three major topics: the phenomenology of effortlessness and the experience of spontaneity, plus the interesting fact that experiences of pure awareness quite often occur *outside* formal meditation practice. Among the most common contexts in which pure awareness arises are informal but still deliberate forms of practice that weave mindful awareness into everyday activities. These include mindfully eating or mindfully washing the dishes, sprinkling brief “micromeditations” throughout the day, repeatedly “glimpsing” a nondual state and then immediately letting it go, or—as discussed in chapter 14—practicing *satipaṭṭhāna*, informally establishing mindfulness during the day as part of living an examined inner life.

Let us begin by recalling that “dual meta-awareness” and “nondual meta-awareness” are two distinct regions within the space of possible states described as the pure-awareness experience. As we saw in chapters 26, 27, and 28, the phenomenal quality of awareness itself can occur in the context of an apparent self looking *at* awareness, as well as in the context of looking *from* awareness or “being the self-aware looking itself.” In the second case, the overall process is often described as entirely effortless. Accordingly, there also exists a phenomenology of nonmeditation, and there are important differences between pure awareness in the context of dual mindfulness and pure awareness in the context of nondual mindfulness.

If we take our participants’ reports at face value, nondual awareness does not feel like something that has been fabricated or created by a meditating self; rather, it feels

like a spontaneous occurrence. This has an unexpected consequence: Some paradigmatic minimal phenomenal experience (MPE) states are *not* meditation experiences. One example is found in full-absorption episodes of “self-cognizing wakefulness” that occur during periods of formal practice originating in the wake state (in which the meditating self has disappeared); another is the clear light sleep discussed in chapter 20. But perhaps there is a deeper philosophical sense in which *all* experiences of pure awareness occur in a state of nonmeditation?

As we will soon see, there is much more to be said about this specific phenomenological aspect. Before we begin to look at our reports, here is a typical practical instruction for how to facilitate an effortless, spontaneous recognition of reflexive MPE. This quote from Urygen brings out the difference between meditation and nonmeditation in a clear and simple way: While meditation is deliberate mindfulness, nonmeditation is the effortless *self-recognition* of pure awareness by itself:

That is called deliberate mindfulness. It is dualistic mind that reminds you to recognize, but the seeing of no thing to be seen is *rigpa*, the awakened state free of duality. This becomes clearly discerned through practical experience.¹

I mention this because, if the goal of the main training is to construct a state in which thoughts have subsided and which feels very clear and quiet, that is still a training in which a particular state is deliberately kept. Such a state is the outcome of a mental effort, a pursuit. Therefore, it is neither the ultimate nor the original natural state.

The naked essence of mind is not known in *shamatha*, because the mind is occupied with abiding in stillness; it remains unseen. All one is doing is simply not following the movement of thought. But being deluded by thought movement is not the only delusion; one can also be deluded by abiding in quietude. The preoccupation with being calm blocks recognition of self-existing wakefulness, [. . .].²

Using our conceptual tools, we can say that meditation as a practice still involves an epistemic agent model (see chapter 25), a goal-directed self that wants to know something (e.g., how best to “abide in quietude”), whereas, phenomenologically, nonmeditation is the spontaneously occurring recognition of pure, nondual MPE itself. We might also call it “undistracted nonmeditation.” Nonmeditation is what comes after the surrender of the epistemic agent model. This is important because it shows that certain aspects are beyond the reach of “spiritual athleticism,” in the sense of willpower, earnest discipline, or any approach based on the application of “techniques.” This fact also has an unexpected consequence: Nonmeditation means stopping trying to understand. This

being said, let us now turn to our own phenomenological data. To begin with, many of our meditators describe a specific quality of effortlessness and mental nonaction:

172 Felt openness, effortless clarity and awareness; sense of ease, spaciousness, timelessness . . . Okayness.

1960 That was a paradoxical feeling of total awareness and at the same time absence of any effort. Like something in my brain had stopped and my frontal lobes relaxed at once. [. .]

2951 It was a long-lasting experience of just being fully “myself” in an open and undefended contact with my surroundings (which included a group of 20 people). It was the most effortless and “simple” way of being, and there was a strong experience of being a crystal-clear vessel, fully capable of being of service for whatever would appear to be needed at that time and place. [. .]

Second, many of our participants’ reports support the classical teachings’ claim that pure awareness itself cannot be fabricated or directly constructed. However, their reports also reinforce the idea that contemplative practice may actually involve an intricate interplay between conscious and unconscious processes—as already proposed in the “dolphin model of meditation” sketched in chapter 10:

1322 [. .] a state that can occur regularly both in meditation and spontaneously in restful wakefulness during the day or in sleep. I cannot provoke it or reach it with a certain thought, intention, activity, or the like. It is there when I “let go,” pause completely. [. .]

2270 The experience comes when I refrain from generating it. It is a feeling of absence of all effort and mental agitation. I am always surprised what the concrete experience is like when things that are otherwise in the foreground disappear. It is actually very easy to experience this. In my opinion, you don’t need impressive meditation experience for this, but rather a kind of basic peace / inner calm, so that this experience is not constantly overlaid and thus not perceived. [. .]

2603 [. .] I never have such an experience early on in the meditation (e.g., the first 10 or 20 minutes); it usually takes a longer period of practice (of direct-ing effortful attention toward my breath, thoughts, feelings, and sensations), perhaps 30 minutes or longer. Then, the experience of pure awareness will arise almost spontaneously, as if the momentum of the mindfulness practice in those 30 minutes got me in the right groove or caused pure awareness to “click into place.” [. .]

The following longer report illustrates how pure awareness sometimes emerges at exactly the moment when the practitioner thinks that she is *not* meditating anymore. It also shows how the state of innocence that is made possible by this disappearing belief that one is meditating is lost again, gradually, by thought creeping in again—by the process that creates what we called the epistemic agent model (discussed in chapter 25), simulating, predicting, forcing itself back into existence:

3624 It began in the very moment when the bell rang and I knew that the meditation period was over. All thought stopped, and a great sense of mental clarity and precious silence descended. It was completely effortless. Crystal clear, yet entirely undramatic. It was as if during meditation there had been something I had always remained unaware of, an unconscious sense of striving for something, to not forget something, a background mechanism that kept checking, continuously trying to sustain something it would then immediately destroy by recognizing it as the state of pure awareness. As I got up, the unconscious mechanism finally relaxed and gave way to a thickness. While I slowly walked back under the trees, attention and the way it settled on perceptual objects had a gentle, almost tender quality to it. There was a subtle and completely undramatic but positive feeling tone permeating this silent awareness, a very fine and nonsensational sense of wonder, of delight, and soundness. Sometimes, I spontaneously stopped to look closely at bark or leaves. Suchness. Then I became attached. A first thought crept in, but quickly dissolved by itself: “Don’t ruin this!” Unfortunately, something was now aware that it very much liked this state. As I slowly walked on and began to lose my innocence, the commentator began to jump in with clever remarks, but didn’t yet manage to destroy the overall state. The clever commentator said: “Whatever this is, one thing is true: As long as I am like that there is not a trace of suffering in my mind! No fireworks at all, but this would actually be the end of all psychological suffering.” As I walked on in silence, I noticed, in an entirely nonconceptual and nonintellectual way, that I am that which never speaks, that which is always silent, that which would never boast about or report an “experience.”

I also became aware that I did not yet want to meet anybody, because this would almost inevitably have interrupted the precious silence, the wonderful clarity. Thinking of other people was also the moment when the clever commentator tried to bootstrap itself back into existence and take over completely. It almost managed to ruin it all by giving a long speech: “We have a completely wrong understanding of meditation, solitude, and renunciation! It is not

because people sat silently in formal practice, did regular walking meditation, distanced themselves from others, and lived in caves and monasteries that they often experienced pure awareness. We misunderstood the direction of causality! *Because* episodes of pure awareness sometimes spontaneously occurred in them, some of these people kept their distance, lived on mountains and in forests, sat quietly under trees, and walked very slowly—in order not to ruin it. Later on, others tried to get into such states by slavishly copying the observable outward behavior that was originally caused in those others by the experience of pure awareness. Going into ‘silent retreat’ was a state of mind, not something you did in the outside world! Rituals, liturgies, some of the daily routine in monasteries and retreat centers actually resembled cargo cults,” the complacent commentator now thought. Self-importantly, he proclaimed: “Being a hermit, renouncing the world, becoming ordained as a nun or monk really are states of mind—and not outward behaviors to be copied and cultivated.” I returned into the crystal-clear silence one more time, but the innocence was long gone and I decided to let it go and start my day. Back at my desk, I took my little notebook and wrote: “If it is really true that I *am* this, then I will never have to meditate again.” After that, it was completely gone.

Long-term practitioners of meditation often experience episodes of pure awareness outside their formal practice. These are not states of full absorption, as in deep meditation or during dreamless deep sleep; they are experiences of silence, great clarity, witnessing, unity, pure being, or nondual awareness co-occurring with complex experiential content. Perhaps the meditator’s brain can learn to unconsciously track the conditions of possibility for MPE?

I believe that the spontaneous occurrence of pure awareness is caused by two factors: (1) a continuous stabilization of the unconscious, functional preconditions of such experiences through formal meditation practice; and (2), more specifically, an improved ability to *recognize* such episodes during everyday life. There is a deep causal dialectic connecting meditation and nonmeditation. Recognition of the phenomenal quality of pure awareness can take place when alone in nature, but also in urban environments, during sleep/wake transitions, under the influence of psychoactive substances, in flow states, sometimes in social situations, during or after physical exertion (e.g., sport or sex), in a breathing class for singing and acting (#2964), or even during acute emergencies. Meditators—who already know the experience of pure awareness from their own formal practice—unexpectedly encounter its specific phenomenal character in a wide range of other, quite different, and more complex situations. Please note that many

other reports referring to pure awareness as a spontaneous occurrence can be found throughout this book (e.g., #2426, #2780, #2936, #3068, and #3146).

Let us begin with twelve examples in natural settings:

1305 Spontaneous appearance of pure awareness during a perfectly ordinary walk where “the world flowed into me.” [. . .] Experiences of the mutual penetration and overlapping of space, and that space moves with it, as well as the realization of not being separated. [. . .]

1313 While walking and being in the wintry forest with snow-covered trees and ice on rocks, it happened to me several times that I was unseparated from the environment, was at the same time observer and not-observer, part of the whole, felt the trees, the ice within me, or was unseparated from them. It was silence. [. . .]

1341 [. . .] a velvety feeling when walking outside and it felt as if the air was going right through me—I felt so light and frictionless. [. . .]

1432 The trigger was the beauty of some black berries in a hedge in winter. The berries, the street, the houses, and me and my movement were just there, were a unity without a name. Only perception. Without limitation. This happens quite often. Only perception, connected to the moment without evaluation.

1531 [. . .] often also quite spontaneously—for example out in nature, but actually in all kinds of situations. These are moments of thought silence, i.e., I have no commenting thoughts, but simply perceive the situation with just my senses, and I am aware of this perception as it happens. [. . .] Sometimes I also spontaneously experience other mystical states, such as those [. . .] in which it is clear to me that I am identical with everything that somehow exists and is conceivable—or experiences of oneness in which I directly sense the oneness of all being.

1575 [. . .] Especially when opening one’s eyes in nature, there is a lightning flash of recognition of how everything is simultaneous, interwoven, inseparable from the seeing one and the surroundings, a kind of spatial experience and penetration, and a kind of noncognitive “knowledge” that it is all experience and silence at the same time. [. . .]

2561 [. . .] The 1st time I was sitting on a hill, with two children playing in the background. From the outside it was an everyday situation. But in my experience a never previously experienced presence, feeling of unity, nonreified clarity. The 2nd situation was in a café with a friend. Afterward I could only tell her that I felt completely existent and completely nonexistent in one.

2691 [. . .] I was walking outside, realized that I was in a very different mental, physical, and emotional state. The best way to describe it is to say that “there was an appearance.” It was blindingly obvious that some things simply were “so.” I stood and “watched” this, but it was not “me” doing the watching. My internal world and the external world were “complete” in and of themselves. I “knew” that some personal beliefs I usually possess and hold were no longer relevant, and a wider understanding of the human condition took its place. I knew what I was experiencing, it was not imaginary, but the knowing was also beyond me. There was a universality about it.

2738 I was lying in a meadow with my eyes closed. I felt safe and secure. As I lay, I eventually fell deeper and deeper into myself (body/mind). It is difficult to describe this quality. It was a falling into and through oneself, through several layers of human experiential worlds down to a layer where nothing and everything was at the same time. I stayed there for some time, I don’t know how long. After I came “back,” my perception of the world was retrospectively changed. I had no need to speak or perform any action. Time did not exist. Everything was only now. After about 2–3h this state wore off and thoughts plus self-reference returned.

3166 [. . .] For example, experiences in nature where I am completely there, one with everything, full of joy and light. Fearless, connected, full of love for everything that surrounds me. Or full of compassion. Everything is beautiful then, even dead trees or suffering.

3243 [. . .] While on a walk I stopped, looked at the sky, a bird flew by. The feeling of just “BEING” appeared again. There was neither this nor that. Without limits . . . [. . .]

3413 [. . .] on the way to the commuter train, crossing a meadow past a small coniferous forest, there arose out of nothing a feeling of merging with the environment, especially the trees. A complete detachment from thinking, although I was still capable of it. I could also feel. But the feelings did not correspond at all to anything I had known before, like fear, joy, etc. It was a moment of incredible energy that was not limited to anything, a connection or unity, a complete freedom. [. . .]

Spontaneous pure awareness can also come about in urban environments:

1277 [. . .] for over a week, during my visits to the city center, I had experienced a conscious separation from my surroundings. At times I felt like a disembodied

being when I walked through the city. Connected with this was a feeling of freedom and amazement. [. . .]

1323 After a meditation I left the house with a deep calm and the inexpressible feeling of contentment, went outside and sat down in my car to set off somewhere. As soon as I was sitting in my car, my surroundings dissolved completely. I was the asphalt under the car, I was the adjacent tree, I was the meadow, I was EVERYTHING and gave no limit. It was a feeling of unbelievable freedom and deepest bliss. This state lasted for about 5–6 minutes (I had looked at the clock before and after).

1381 The experience [. . .] was unexpected. On an ordinary morning I stepped out of my front door into the street—into a space of timeless self-luminous world-penetrating silence. All my sensory perceptions became three-dimensional, sharply contoured, exaggerated, and at the same time I was detached from the perceptions and sensations. I had a physical feeling of heaviness and sinking and opening expanding billowing time. The word I use for myself to describe this state is “silence” or “space.” The silence is not acoustic, the space is not physical. I felt bright cheerfulness, which spread in waves upward and out of me. The whole world was just completely logical and clear, embedded in this glowing fragrant sweet silence. [. . .] Anyway, since then I can easily and almost always enter this delicious silence.

1428 [. . .] so I was in the supermarket, and I was worrying about spending too much money and suddenly my awareness opened up and I didn’t feel my body anymore and there was lightness, it was like something opened up in my chest and dissolved “me” and awareness was just floating there, soon awe came and contentment. It was pretty cool. [. . .]

3356 Nothing else is experienced than being. All sounds and images heard and seen are more intense, connected and stripped of illusions. Nothing more than a very intense feeling of complete union with all and everything. The “quality” of the environment seems unimportant for the occurrence. The strongest experiences even happened in not so nice environments such as a noisy car park under a train station. And they happen always completely unexpectedly. [. . .]

3510 I was sitting in a Chinese fast-food restaurant, eating and killing time before going to the movies. Although I already knew the dish, at first the food tasted better than usual (similar to a shift in consciousness, but related only to the sense of taste, not substance-induced or due to mental illness), and suddenly I experienced myself as abruptly centered and in the middle, which triggered a great inner lightness and joy. [. . .] My movements became slower as I ate,

more conscious and more enjoyable. I didn't analyze and question this very intense moment, but enjoyed the centeredness, the calmness, joy, and lightness within me for about two minutes, although it was loud and hectic around me. Since then I have never experienced it with this intensity again. [. . .]

Spontaneously occurring pure awareness can be recognized during sleep/wake transitions:

1360 Between sleeping and waking up there are "moments" that for me are absolute well-being—complete naturalness on all levels—[. . .]

2964 [. . .] After half an hour of taking slow, deep breaths, I had a moment when I probably fell asleep for about 2 minutes. I don't really remember falling asleep, but I do remember being blank and realizing that I wasn't paying attention to what the teacher was saying. The feeling of clarity and calm was immense. One of those moments when you are aware of what is happening, you can even talk, but at the same time you are "absent," calm, oblivious to everything, and, for the same reason, able to take more details in the expressions, in the tone of a conversation, etc. It is as if you achieve a kind of autonomy over your own thoughts, but thanks to that, you can see clearly and not only what you are predisposed to see with your interests, complexes, expectations, etc. When this happened to me I felt strange, but curious and calm.

3243 In the "falling asleep phase" there was suddenly an awareness of total boundlessness. It is very difficult to think of another word for it. There was neither body nor thought nor emotion . . . just "BEING." [. . .]

Then there are also deliberately altered states of consciousness in which MPE experiences sometimes occur spontaneously. One of humankind's ancient epistemic traditions—at least as old as systematic contemplative practice, but probably even older—consists in the systematic use of hallucinogens in the pursuit of self-knowledge. As the philosopher Chris Letheby, one of the world's leading experts in psychedelics, has pointed out, both epistemic practices—meditation and psychedelic use—promote (1) the unbinding of mental contents from the self-model, (2) a decentered mode of introspection, and (3) a shift of self-related mental content from phenomenal transparency to opacity. His speculative hypothesis is that meditation promotes self-transcendent experiences via decentering and phenomenal opacity, while psychedelics promote decentering and phenomenal opacity via self-transcendent experiences. As Letheby writes:

[. . .] the connection is real, deep, and not solely due to cultural framing, suggestibility, or interpretive bias. It consists, at least partly, in the fact that psychedelics

and meditation can both disrupt self-binding processes, promote decentering, and confer phenomenal opacity on (self-related) mental contents, though the causal pathways involved are, in a sense, mirror images of each other. The similarities and differences between psychedelics and meditation have informed the project of epistemologically analyzing psychedelic experience within naturalistic constraints; thus, we ought to consider whether they might inform the parallel project of epistemologically analyzing meditation practice within such constraints.³

These are among the reasons why some serious practitioners of meditation integrate psychoactive substances into their lives in a sustainable way. Today, there also seems to be a historically new population of committed practitioners who were earnest and intrepid spiritual psychonauts in earlier phases of their lives, but found the psychedelic experience to lack sustainability. First, they tripped, and then they went to India to deepen their search. Now regular meditators, they have given up one epistemic practice in favor of another, with some of them perhaps still on rare occasions repeating the type of experience that got them started in the first place. Here, I will confine myself to four reports given by participants of our study, the first two referring to LSD experiences, the second two to psilocybin:

108 [. . .] Meanwhile there was no *I* [*ICH*], only an emptiness and a cool “breath.”

There was—even during this time—the certainty of having encountered NOTHINGNESS. The only feeling that can be analyzed and described was astonishment, also astonished watching—but from no particular perspective.

2267 The strongest and most vivid experience of pure awareness was on a high dose of LSD with two friends. [. . .] And then at its peak suddenly every boundary dissolved. There was no longer any chatter in the mind, no feeling of *I* myself, no distinction between self and other. The thoughts of my friends were my thoughts, the same as their doing and vice versa. This feeling of connection was present everywhere I looked and I no longer had any concepts of Table or Door or Tree in Mind, there was just experience. And a subtle feeling (no thought) of “this is right.” Since then I’ve had several similar experiences randomly throughout my day where I suddenly was aware again, and very often I just have to laugh or smile when it happens. I no longer meditate to reach that state because I realized that there is no state to be reached. So I just meditate for the enjoyment of meditating.

1926 [. . .] This was an experience I had while on psilocybin. I stared into the sunset and there came this exact awareness of being aware that there was no point from which I was experiencing the sunset or any of the other sensations.

They all became this “one” thing where the only thing that remained was the world in some sense. [. . .]

3470 The experience I used to answer this questionnaire was one I had on a psilocybin journey as part of Johns Hopkins research on long-term meditators. [. . .] With eyes closed and headphones on, however, I experienced an incredibly expansive visual spaciousness that in certain moments went beyond expansive toward limitless. There were also instinctive contractions that seemed to be both physical and mental and that felt like the self trying to stay or come online. With relaxation, those contractions abated, and the spaciousness/expansiveness returned. The spaciousness was not confined to internal visual space but instead also included internal auditory space as well as somatic space. Things were thin. There was very little negative valence. There was an understanding of how the world works and how the self forms. It took place about 4 years ago and I’m not sure what kind of languaging I have onboarded since then, but I do think that the awareness of the roominess had no center. Awareness was everywhere / in no particular place and mapped straight onto experience itself.

“Flow states” sometimes occur when we become deeply immersed in an activity that is challenging but not outside our skill set. They are characterized by total absorption in and concentration on an activity that we enjoy and may be passionate about, sometimes resulting in a partial loss of self-consciousness and a quality of timelessness. The relationship between pure awareness and flow states has long been noticed;⁴ here is one typical report:

2567 In an everyday situation I had an experience of being effortlessly fully on-task with undivided attention, essential pure perception, wakefully surrendered to action.

During spontaneously occurring MPE episodes, we may find that certain phenomenological features discussed in this book are particularly dominant. The following set of examples include the transcendental character of luminous and spacious wakefulness, nonduality, insights into the deep structure of time, ego dissolution, the experiential quality of soundness, and spontaneity and effortlessness. Sometimes these various aspects or features can even be distinguished and invited into the foreground of experience:

1530 [. . .] As I type these words, I can listen to the sound of the keys, reflect on what I am writing, and also tune my attention to the fundamental wakefulness of awareness that both receives and makes possible all these perceptions. If I focus particularly on awareness itself, it begins to pervade all experience. One or other nuance begins to stand out—its knowing quality, or its natural

luminosity or brilliance, or its mysteriousness, or its self-evidence, or its edgeless, centerless all-pervasiveness. All these nuances and others can then be contemplated directly, filling experience, or they can be just the background which the sense of agency rests in and arises from. In this way the sense of pure awareness, or the fundamentalness of awareness as the ground of all perception, stays present, while thought and action and activity can still be engaged in, while being felt as unfolding naturally, effortlessly, informed by the wisdom–clarity–freeness of the awareness that underpins everything.

1573 [. . .] There was a deep and perfect sense of time. As if in a few seconds all time that there is were stuck. As if every action, every encounter that can exist, were contained in this action. There was no “they” and “I.” But also not the thought that the “they” and “I” do not exist. There was only “being.” Completely saturated.

2683 Lately, I get flashes of having “disappeared completely” while the world remains, usually in ordinary settings outside of focused meditation.

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.”

3171 [. . .] Awake (outside of formal meditation)—bright, spacious, vibrant, expansive, happiness, equanimity, unity, ease, thoughtless, without conscious directing of behavior or impulses.

3207 Sitting relaxed in an armchair with a view into a garden. Then, out of the blue, the world, existence—simply everything that exists—opened up into an infinite expanse with a deep and clear, almost absolute and unshakable certainty of the coherence of everything that exists, that is. Everything is in the right place. Everything is all right, just as it is. I—was minimally present in this moment but also all right. Feelings were mainly love and amazement and gratitude. No realization in my life was ever more true, right, deep, or lasting.

3615 This experience is something that I cannot bring about consciously or intentionally. It sometimes arises completely unexpectedly and physically reminds me of an unexpected sudden chill. It is there and I am immediately seized by it. The experience of this awareness is timeless and notions of space and

time and temperature are absolutely meaningless and are in this experience unthinkable. For me it is the overwhelming feeling of coming home, arriving at a place that is and always has been there and here and in me and in everything. This experience has shaped me so much that I can remember it well—but as I said before, I cannot repeat or produce it intentionally. This experience has created an entrance within me in which this overwhelming awareness can fly in like a bird and immediately fly out again. In an unthinking moment it is suddenly there and instantly gone again. But this fleeting moment is overwhelming. It gives me the liberating and ridiculous or humorous realization: If I didn't exist as an organism, I would not be conscious of the awareness—and that too is completely inconsequential and irrelevant in this moment. On the contrary. With every further hint of consciousness, awareness vanishes. I am deeply grateful for this experience—and yet I remain a person with flaws, vanities etc. What remains for me is the realization: Don't worry about "enlightenment," "awareness," etc., and do the next thing that needs to be done in my life. And so I feel again: The entrances and windows to my experience are open again. And maybe I am just out of the house when awareness wants to pay me an unexpected visit :-)

Some spontaneous episodes of pure awareness occur in a social context:

1529 [. . .] My experiences with pure awareness often arise in groups. I repeatedly experience the connection with myself, the people around me, the world and the universe, and again with myself. Awareness appears when I do not expect it in any way—I experience it as a spontaneous state that I also encounter during times in nature. The attempt to formulate the content of awareness disenchants it again.

2773 Out of a certain exhaustion during a very harmonious meeting with colleagues for dinner in a quiet restaurant, a perception of boundless awareness appeared [. . .]. I was shaped by the feeling of being fulfilled, of wisdom and knowledge, without being able to specify it. In meditation I have never experienced it again with comparable intensity.

2814 My strongest experience happened when I stepped onto the stage for a solo concert performance that I'd been somewhat anxious about beforehand, since I was a professional musician but am now no longer active. All the stage fright turned into pure awareness and fell away from me as I came onto the stage. I was nothing but a feeling of feet and stairs, anxious thoughts were completely gone. The state was exhilarating!

3413 [. . .] It was the moment before a lecture in front of about 200 businesspeople. I was overcome by a feeling of fear that began to paralyze me. I sat down in the auditorium, closed my eyes, and observed the fear in all its facets without fighting it. Suddenly there was a complete change, a lightness and freedom. The physical excitement could still be felt, but there was no more fear at all. Inwardly it was like an emptiness. I knew nothing, had no idea what I was about to say. I had prepared beforehand. Then I went on stage and spoke freely for half an hour and worked through questions in a close back-and-forth with the audience, spontaneously. I had the feeling that it's just happening, without me having to make an effort or do anything at all. There was also a great clarity and perceptiveness the whole time. I was receptive and attentive to everything. Perhaps the word "presence" expresses it, absolute presence without thinking interfering in the form of wanting or inner goals. Nevertheless, I had to use my thinking. Otherwise I could not have spoken.

Interestingly, there are also negative experiences of spontaneously occurring pure awareness. You may remember this one from chapter 25:

1690 [. . .] I wasn't meditating, and I was sleep deprived. After putting down a book that was discussing nondual consciousness, I felt a sort of immediacy of experience. The foreground disappeared, and the background was endless. It felt as if it had always been there, and I was just now remembering. But instead of "feeling home" or relief, I felt an immense dread weighing me down like a thick blanket. As I came back to subject/object awareness, I felt like there was no point in navigating space in this manner.

Pure awareness can happen spontaneously during or after sporting activities:

1569 [. . .] During this hike with increasing elevation, my fear of a panic attack accompanied me. At the summit I got a panic attack during which I pressed myself against a rock ledge and became aware that there was no escaping from the situation—and suddenly there it was—pure awareness—the panic attack had disappeared and I went "light as a feather" into the mountain hut. I almost cry with joy when I think about it.

2190 I had just finished working out at an unfamiliar high-rise gym. I decided to go to a patio on the roof of the building to meditate before going home. When I got to the roof, I saw the full moon and immediately fell into the state. I sat there for what turned out to be an hour before I regained normal consciousness.

2341 I was sitting on a bench, looking at the city from above a high vantage point and had just finished my usual running. The air was clear, and the sun was just

setting. I was almost immediately able to achieve said state and was blissed out for like 15 minutes.

2390 [. . .] Meditation comes to me freely at any time. Introspection from swimming for many years has trained me to find a meditative state at almost any location during my life even while moving.

2742 [. . .] A rare runner's high while jogging in the park. Here I had perceptions of my surroundings and yet no thoughts at all. Due to the hormone high a very positive and confident mood.

The experience of pure awareness can sometimes even be triggered by physical emergencies (this can also be true of a *dreamed* emergency leading to MPE in the dream state; see chapter 21):

2862 One of my experiences occurred during a white-water kayaking accident in a remote location. I was pinned underwater, beneath a rock that was undercut. With all of the river necking down before going over a drop to my right, there were a lot of PSIs pressing me into the rock. Feeling like this was probably "it" for me, I supposed that I would be sucking water at any moment as could only hold my breath for so long after all! I thought, "well, this is it!" (how I was going to die). Then, I heard a clear, "Nope, not today." I noted that I was perfectly calm, could not tell if my eyes were open or closed, as I could not "see" or feel anything, even though there were thousands of pounds of cold water bearing down on me, smashing me against the boulder. The voice was like my voice but came from nowhere, as there was "nothing." There was just a texture of brightness and spaciousness, in this emptiness: There was no me, and no anything else. Just a sense of pure existence, like a field of energy. And it was like everything else had dropped away. There was no "I" worried about dying, as there was no place to leave from. No sense of weight or weightlessness, no sense of time, just a sense of pure consciousness that belonged to no one. Having no point of origin or ending. I was later rescued. I did not tell anyone what happened.

Finally, a small subpopulation reports spontaneously occurring episodes long before they turned into meditators. Here are two examples:

2876 When I was 15, I had an experience that happened during a literature class in high school; I was looking at my teacher's ear (kind of spacing out during a discussion), and all of a sudden the world as I knew it was replaced by an experience of absolute oneness and rightness, and I think emptiness, although since I have no visual memory of it, I am a little murky about the emptiness

part. There was no good or bad or other kinds of opposites, and everything was one unity at the same time as each thing completely particular and individual. This was not connected to any prior meditation practice (I had none).

3353 It suddenly occurred on an evening in autumn [. . .], 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 the here and now in spaciousness, timeless. [. . .] It was [. . .] the first time that I experienced an overwhelming incidence of peaceful happiness and oneness or wholeness, [. . .] which I always remembered, but never dared to talk about. But for a long time, I longed for this kind of being in the world. Since that time, I always felt a longing. The first time that, years and years later, I was sitting on a cushion, meditating, it felt like coming home . . . until this very day. [. . .]

Spontaneity and Effortlessness

The mind has to be let loose without directing [it]. Sustained mindfulness has to be cast away without objectifying it. The mind has to be left in its ordinary state without meditating. Thus, with nothing controlling it, the mind is joyous and at ease.

—Gampopa (1079–1153), *Mahāmudrā—The Moonlight: Quintessence of Mind and Meditation*

When the mind is free of all ambition and all belief-supports, that is Dzogchen vision.

Abide in a state of nonmeditation. Realize Dzogchen's goal of nonattainment.

—Shabkar Tsokdrug Rangdrol (1781–1851), *The Flight of the Garuda* (Song Seventeen)

Imagine you are one of the blind people whom the king has called to touch the elephant. After a while, you stop the exploration, end all of your groping movements, and turn around, and one of the king's servants is about to guide you back home. Suddenly you hear a moist snuffle behind you, and then you feel a gentle touch on the back of your head and something slowly sliding down your back. Has the elephant got used to you? Does she perhaps want you to stay a little longer?

According to some metaphysical models, the spontaneous presence of MPE implies that all phenomena arise out of an undifferentiated state to which they all later return. This fundamental level is self-caused, which one may interpret as meaning that it has a “self-contained” origin or has no origin—either of which would make it an

unintelligible mystery that ultimately demands an act of faith. Conceptually, taking the experiential “spontaneity” characterizing the onset of pure awareness at face value, as an objective property of the human mind, would mean accepting it as causally indeterminate. Therefore, like a miracle, it would be inaccessible to standard experimental methods. On a physical or functional level of description, to call something “spontaneous” means to describe it as uncaused and lawless—and therefore doing so without argument or evidence could be seen as a form of hand-waving or deliberate obscurantism. If we try to be intellectually honest, set all metaphysics aside, and stay as close as possible to contemplative experience itself, then the term “spontaneity” can only refer to a *phenomenological* kind of spontaneity. There is an *experience* of spontaneity, and this is what has to be taken seriously. As always, jumping to strong metaphysical conclusions is a way of *not* taking your own experience seriously.

The phenomenological facts that nondual MPE often appears spontaneously and effortlessly, that it has an “ahistoric” quality and cannot be fabricated by applying a mental technique, can be explained with reference to the fact that most of its enabling conditions in the brain are fully unconscious. We do not experience them. Science may be able to find and isolate these causally enabling conditions, but the brain itself doesn’t represent them in its conscious model of reality. There is a parallel case in the phenomenology of volition, of suddenly “willing” something. Many people proceed from the phenomenological fact that, say, the consciously experienced intention to now move their right arm and reach for a beautiful flower seems to spontaneously occur in their mind, “out of the blue” as it were, and interpret this as proof of free will in a strong sense: as demonstrating the existence of what philosophers call “ultimate origination.” Ultimate origination would mean the capacity to start a new causal chain of events in your mind by an uncaused act of will, an act coming from outside the network of dependent origination. But for the experience of free will, as well as for the experience of spontaneously occurring pure awareness, the same principle holds: From the fact that you *experience* something as uncaused, it does not follow that it actually *was* uncaused. Believing or assuming otherwise is another version of the C-fallacy (chapter 12).

Some intelligent systems control their own behavior based on a model of themselves as *agents* in a strong sense. To successfully control their own behavior—which may be bodily or mental—they use a conscious image of themselves as an entity that possesses the capacity for goal selection and ultimate origination. Other intelligent systems don’t do this. The difference is important. We can think of embodied systems intelligently moving through the world, automatically updating and constantly improving their inner portrait of reality, controlling what they will know and what they will not know. But some of these systems—for example, self-aware human beings—sometimes may

use a model of themselves as an epistemic agent, now achieving the same goal by using a special computational device. They would experience themselves as possessing free will, as being agents capable of initiating new causal chains out of the blue. These systems would have an ego in a strong sense.

The underlying distinction between model-free and model-based control may offer another perspective to help us better understand what pure awareness really is. We can now think of intelligent systems automatically regulating their own level of tonic alertness, their current degree of epistemic openness to the world—for example, by controlling the level of cortical arousal and generating their own sleep/wake cycle with the help of some low-level, subpersonal brain mechanisms. And we can think of systems that currently have a *model* of this very subpersonal process and are using it for model-based control of alertness. They *know* their own alertness. These systems would be conscious in a well-defined but entirely nonegoic way: They would possess a subpersonal form of knowledge about their own alertness and nonconceptual knowledge about their own *capacity* to know and the current state of epistemic openness—but this would not be the knowledge of a self. It would appear as spontaneous wakefulness and knowingness, but not caused by any agent. It would appear as the givenness of cognizability, but not as something brought into the world by an actively knowing self.

As we already saw when introducing the dolphin model of meditation in chapter 10, and in light of the rich empirical evidence provided by contemporary neuroscience,⁵ it is more than plausible that the experience of effortlessness, including the subjective qualities of “givenness” and “spontaneous presence,” depends on unconscious causal precursors in the brain.⁶ However, these precursors can certainly be cultivated, strengthened, or triggered in an indirect way—as if meditation practice were a way of doing neurofeedback across a wider time window, using the phenomenal correlates of meditation practice as a user interface. If you are a meditator, I propose a short experiment for you. Next time, when you have sat down and are just about to begin to meditate—don’t. Take a minute to carefully check whether there is something that *has* already been meditating all the time. What do you find?

A few years ago, I had an interesting and somewhat shocking experience. I had to catch a train to an important meeting, I was running terribly late, and I was close to panicking. I was washing dishes and cleaning the kitchen, all in a great hurry. I knew I had to be in my car and wheels turning at six o’clock, it was supertight, and I still had a lot of things to do before then. Suddenly, an even more uncomfortable thought arose in the midst of my cleaning frenzy: “But you still have to do your evening meditation! There is absolutely no time for it, you cannot possibly squeeze it in!” At that moment, something very strange happened. I realized that the whole room was meditating. The

cupboards, the table—the whole kitchen was *already* meditating. There was nothing I needed to do because the whole damn thing was already doing it for me—abiding in the silent clarity of nondual suchness all by itself. Unfortunately, I was so surprised and fascinated by what was happening that my excitement quickly destroyed it. But if you are too lazy to meditate (and/or cooler than I am), there may be a much simpler trick: Just step out of the picture for a moment and let the whole room meditate for you.

It has long been known that there are nonconceptual insights and spaces of consciousness beyond ordinary contemplative experience that not only are extremely hard to communicate but also cannot be accessed by any mental technique whatsoever. As already noted, there is something that is beyond willpower, discipline, and earnestness—something that eludes any systematic, technical, goal-directed approach. Technical approaches introduce a sense of effort and subject/object duality, and if the conditions that the techniques are meant to generate—namely, the functional conditions that reliably enable pure awareness to arise—are *unconscious*, then they cannot be directly targeted by the conscious self. In our own data, we found neither a negative nor a positive correlation between the number of practice hours and the score on either factor 8 (“Emptiness and Nonegoic Self-Awareness”) or item #36 (“Was there a sense of effort?”). Accordingly, the idea of an “expert meditator” (which scientific meditation researchers very much like) may turn out to be a myth because there is something highly important that cannot be measured in hours.

Put differently, there is a deep phenomenological dialectic between meditation and nonmeditation. I would like to propose that some aspects of this dialectic may actually reflect an interplay of conscious and unconscious processes in the brain of the meditator. Meditation practice and the phenomenology of pure awareness may have much more to do with *unconscious* information processing than many practitioners or even scientists tend to think.

Let me briefly explain this idea. It could be that there is a causal interaction between the apparent mental agency involved in meditation practice and automatic processes that are invisible to inner attention. Most of what goes on in our brains during the day remains in the dark, unavailable for introspection—the conscious self doesn’t like to hear this, but it is a well-established fact. Most of our learning is unconscious. For example, canonical techniques like gently and precisely focusing on the breath, returning to a state of open monitoring, or “reversing the arrow of attention and finding nothing” (the “you-turn” discussed in chapter 21) may actually be ways of cultivating certain (as yet unknown) functional properties in the brain, which may then later trigger a “spontaneous” emergence of pure awareness. But again, the term “spontaneity” would then refer only to a *phenomenological* form of spontaneity. The experience of

effortlessness and the phenomenologies of nonmeditation and spontaneous presence would depend on nonspontaneous, unconscious causal precursors in the brain.

The deep phenomenological wisdom in describing pure awareness episodes as “spontaneous” lies not in some murky metaphysics, but rather in the fact that the illusion of control is prevented from arising in the meditator. Human beings largely lack introspective insight into the mechanisms by which they control their body or events taking place in their mind; the illusion of control is our tendency to *overestimate* our ability to control events—for example, by trying harder and then patting ourselves on the back and attributing it all to an invisible entity later called the “self.” This point is directly relevant to meditation practice: Noticing one’s mind wandering may often produce a subtle illusion of control. (“I *myself* just successfully noticed the arising of a stray thought! My attention collapsed, but now *I* have just regained it.”) Jonathan Schooler and colleagues importantly pointed this out more than a decade ago:

Mind wandering can terminate for reasons unrelated to meta-awareness (such as when an external event disrupts the internal train of thought or the action of an unconscious monitoring process). Once the episode has ended, individuals might reconstruct their recent conscious experience and in so doing realize that mind wandering had taken place. In this case the strong sense that we have “caught” our minds wandering could be an illusion of control (“I know I was mind wandering a second ago so I guess I must have caught the experience”).⁷

What I have, in my own academic work,⁸ called the “phenomenal self-model” is precisely the result of the process that Schooler and his colleagues call “reconstructing recent conscious experience.” A lot of our self-model is based on illusions of conscious control. For example, if you drifted into a daydream at some point while reading this book, there may first have been some unconscious word associations that triggered the conscious experience of daydreaming. Unconscious events moved you into a new attentional state, a state of being distracted while also unaware of being distracted—and then the system unconsciously infers the actual state and regains attentional control via a new level of meta-awareness.⁹ On the level of conscious processing, this is an unexpected event. The ensuing conscious sense of self is the brain’s attempt to explain away the occurrence of an unexpected conscious event—the “noticing,” or even an occurrence of MPE. If a meditation teacher manages to install a false belief about uncaused “spontaneous presence” in the conscious self-model of a disciple, this may enable a deeper form of letting-go. The letting-go enabled by the new “spontaneity prior” attenuates the illusion of control, making future occurrences of nonegoic

meta-awareness more probable. It is one way of helping people to try less hard and to stop complacently patting themselves on the back quite so often.¹⁰

Let us stay with actual meditation practice for a moment. Installing false beliefs may work for some people, but I think there is a better, more direct route to effortless pure awareness. When discussing the phenomenon of mind-wandering in chapter 25, we saw that mind-wandering creates an inner affordance landscape. Every single thought can be seen as an action affordance. In one way or another, they all say “Think *me!*” or “Pursue *me*, follow me into the future!” or “Can you remember *this*? Try it!” However, there is one type of thought that is special: the thought of “noticing” that you, the meditator, have strayed; the thought that you, the meditator, have obviously just had an attentional lapse. If Schooler is right, this thought might be an illusion of control. But there is more to be seen.

That thought (“My mind just wandered!”) is an inner affordance as well. It tells you to do something: Return to the breath; bring your attention back to the present moment. If the system falls for it, that special thought swiftly creates yet another agency illusion, a hallucination of what in chapter 4 I called “attentional agency”: the experience of deliberately and actively controlling the focus of attention in a goal-directed manner. It includes a subtle sense of effort and successful mental control: I, the meditator, must act with my attention now because I “have noticed” a stray thought, and as I have learned in the past, I must now bring “my own” focus of attention back to the present moment.

I think that *not* doing this is what is meant by “nonmeditation”; it means not falling for the very last affordance that happened to pop up. There is a deep, but very subtle phenomenological insight to be had: The silence, clarity, and epistemic openness are *already* there. Nobody has to go anywhere; nobody has to do anything, like fabricate some new state. You do not have to act. The “special thought,” the thought of “noticing,” is actually sculpted of that silent clarity, if one looks very closely. This what I mean by the better, more direct route to effortless pure awareness. Perhaps one could say that the noticing itself has already *given* the silence¹¹—and the only thing that could ruin it would be an attempt to meditate.

Let us return from the subtleties of contemplative practice to my hypothesis that there must be an interplay of conscious and unconscious processes in the brain of the meditator. This idea leads to an empirical prediction: If meditation practice is the process of trying to deliberately create the unconscious causal conditions for MPE, then any other way of creating these conditions will also lead to the emergence of an episode of pure-awareness experience that feels spontaneous and effortless. For any

conscious system that has the capacity to undergo a pure-awareness experience, and for any set of sufficient, causally enabling conditions (there may be more than one), if we bring these conditions about, then the experience will reliably appear. But if the process itself is unconscious, this event may later be reported as a surprise, a gift, a conscious event that was entirely unexpected. Put differently, there may be many ways of creating the right causal conditions leading to episodes of pure awareness other than traditional meditation practice itself.

In this context, it is interesting to distinguish between personal and subpersonal levels of description. If you are trying to understand and describe a phenomenon better on the personal level, then you look at a human being as a whole. You look at her desires and beliefs, the social context, and the cultural background against which the phenomenon you are interested in—for example, the experience of pure consciousness—arises. But there are also many subpersonal levels: things that happen “under the hood” and in a person’s brain; unconscious processes that are best analyzed in terms of information processing, different styles of neural computation, biochemistry, or evolutionary origins. My first point is that for most people, meditation practice starts on the personal level, but it attempts to change something that is actually subpersonal, such as the unconscious causal enablers of mindfulness and compassion.

In the beginning, there is a human person who has certain beliefs and desires, who consciously experiences herself as an agent endowed with a robust sense of selfhood. This person fully identifies with her body and her epistemic agent model. Perhaps this person is even engaged in an earnest spiritual search, or in the kind of project that I described in chapter 17 as “meaning-making” or “contemplative heroism.” She reads books, learns and explores various meditation techniques, and begins to experience interesting and at times rewarding altered states of consciousness. Since their enabling conditions are located on a subpersonal level, the fine-grained causal process by which they come about remain invisible to her. The overall process may be slightly enigmatic, at times surprising, and often appear uncontrollable if viewed from the “perspective” of the personal-level self-model—which is not a problem. Our practitioner just keeps going.

But as we have seen in the course of this book, many of these states may later begin to involve degrees of ego dissolution, a cessation of time experience, a feeling of witnessing, or even the spontaneous and effortless emergence of nondual awareness. Now, some of these states can no longer be adequately described on the personal level of description. The phenomenology of ownership is attenuated. They are not *her* experiences because the phenomenology is not a personal-level phenomenology anymore. Sometimes something beautiful happens. There is no need to talk about it. Why should she? She just keeps going.

My first point was that for most people, meditation practice starts on the personal level but tries to change something that is actually subpersonal. My second point is that—in terms of accurately describing the character of conscious experience across a longer time-frame—many contemplative biographies are transformative experiences.¹² In a special phenomenological sense, they begin on the personal level but do not end there—and the conscious self that begins the journey may not exist at its end. It is not only that you cannot know what it will be like to have the experience before you have it yourself—you may not be there to “have” it at all. Of course, it is now tempting to speak of MPE as a “subpersonal” or even a “suprapersonal” stage of conscious experience, but this would only import an external hierarchy of explanatory levels into something that (as we saw in chapters 3–6) fundamentally lacks internal structure. I would rather say that the experience of consciousness per se is neither subpersonal nor suprapersonal, and turn all philosophical and explanatory issues related to the contraction principle (the brain’s misrepresentation of consciousness as an ego’s consciousness) into a target for future research (see chapter 8). Why has the human brain’s misrepresentation of consciousness—namely, as a property of an egoic phenomenal self—worked so well in practice, as we saw in chapter 8? I myself think that it has a lot to do with social cognition. In any case, science will take care of it. And as for our practitioner and the transformative phenomenology of peaceful ego dissolution that unfolds while walking onward through the garden of contemplative experience, I prefer the old Zen saying:

Only here
could a path end surrounded
by parsley.¹³

My third and final point for this chapter is that the cultivation of MPE-like states does not have to start on the personal level at all. It is conceivable that new technologies could directly create the causally enabling conditions for MPE on the subpersonal level, perhaps by using artificial intelligence (AI) and new methods of adaptive real-time feedback to target the neural correlates of consciousness and their computational functions much more directly and precisely. To give a more specific example, we could use machine learning techniques to extract the shared activity patterns underlying every single phenomenology described in this book from the brains of many experienced meditators, and then close the causal loop via neurofeedback. If naturalism is true, this should give future subjects very similar states of consciousness to those described in this book, but elicited in a historically unprecedented way.

I have strong doubts that any of this will lead to really interesting and sustainable changes in the human mind any time soon—let alone in a risk-free way that

acknowledges the ethical dimension of classical meditation practice, and thereby integrates it safely into the wider context of an altruistic, genuinely prosocial epistemic practice.¹⁴ But I may be wrong. We already know that many of the types of experience described in this book can be directly caused by unconscious, subpersonal events in the brain: these include spontaneously occurring early childhood experiences, emergencies, ecstatic epileptic seizures, and experiences of pure and nondual awareness emerging under the influence of psychoactive substances like LSD and psilocybin. There are many other conditions under which local physical events trigger global states that clearly belong to the MPE family. Therefore, beyond classical meditation practice, there are likely to be many causal routes to the experience of pure awareness. We must remain open-minded: It is plausible to assume that many of them are still unknown and will be discovered at some point in the future.

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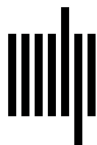
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