

### 33 Timeless Continuity

Everything is deified and becomes a meditation. [#2437]

Afterward I knew that I am the expression of the whole universe, at the point where I find myself. I do nothing, everything happens. [#2384]

Subjectively, episodes of pure awareness are timeless. Objectively, from the third-person perspective of scientific observation, their duration is typically a few seconds or minutes (e.g., if they are periods of full absorption). However, some of our participants have reported a more stable experience of pure awareness that lasts for much longer. Sometimes they even describe a permanent *mode* of experience in which minimal phenomenal experience (MPE) has become the continuous foreground of all conscious experience, or rather something that holds, encompasses, and permeates everything else. It is important to note, however, that terms like “stability,” “permanence,” and “continuity” reflect the scientific third-person perspective of an outside observer. They may often be inadequate from a phenomenological perspective because they ignore the quality of timelessness. For more durable states, the phenomenological prediction would rather be a global mode of “timeless change” (chapter 22) or an all-pervading phenomenal character of “always already” (chapter 31). In such longer-lasting states, the variable contents of sensory perception, bodily movement, thought, and emotion apparently coemerge with that which never changes.

Viewed from the perspective of practice itself, the goal of “achieving continuity” can be seen as a subtle straying. The whole idea of “making pure awareness a permanent state” may be mostly an expression of greed—part of the incessant search for stability and certainty that originates in the egoic craving for existence described in chapter 17. Perhaps timeless moments or brief episodes of what report #1845 on the following page describes as being “temporarily liberated” are all that counts, and the idea of “attaining”

a permanent state is itself a contraction into an egoic perspective, something that actually prevents such moments from happening. On the other hand, we find some evidence that the MPE experience can turn into what the philosophers Timothy Bayne and Jakob Hohwy have called a *mode* of conscious experience.<sup>1</sup> In the introduction and throughout this book, I have said that a mode of consciousness is a global *way* in which reality appears to us. As opposed to a mere *state*, it is not content-specific because it can encompass the flow of many kinds of experiential content. In this sense, “timeless continuity” is not a single MPE state, but rather something like a phenomenological class, a whole category of more permanent MPE modes.

As we will see in this chapter, this longer-lasting global mode of conscious experience is characterized by an all-encompassing phenomenology of clarity, certainty, nonduality, joyfulness, vibrancy, and aliveness. Once again, we also find the quality of virtuality (sometimes described as a “dreamlike” quality; see chapter 28) and the experience of emptiness and epistemic openness, plus a prolonged absence of thought activity. Other phenomenological descriptors of the MPE mode provisionally labeled “timeless continuity” are soundness, connectedness, openness (in a more general sense), unity, deep peace, well-being, nonreactivity, and forgiveness.

The following, and final, selection of eighteen experiential reports is very different from those presented in previous chapters. They are more diverse, and I will simply let you assess them for yourself. I have also deliberately refrained from offering any phenomenological analysis or a wider philosophical context in the second part of this chapter. Here, the reports are simply ordered by their estimated objective temporal duration, and not by the specific phenomenological profile being described. Please note that a few other reports about states lasting in the order of hours are distributed throughout other chapters (e.g., #1612, #1675).

1189 [. . .] In activity it is more and more often the case that even in the most hectic places (funfair, Christmas market, etc.) the experience of peaceful wakefulness is present at the same time. It is a little as if time stands still. It happens that in the morning, before actually waking up, the mind is awake while the body is still asleep. [. . .]

1845 [. . .] at some point I just “knew” that I was temporarily liberated. I didn’t know my name, nor what I was doing. The “knowing” was not knowing in an ordinary sense, it’s hard to describe. I’m an atheist, and this sounds silly, but yes it happened.

2506 [. . .] It lasted several hours. It occurred during a sitting meditation and also carried on afterward. I would describe it as a state of complete clarity regarding

the phenomena of existence. The sequences of events were not extraordinary; perception was fluent and connected with a feeling of contentment and happiness and was free of all doubt. The duality of “I” and “you” or “good” and “evil” no longer existed. The experience of the sensory perceptions was very intense, joyful. There were no more worries or fears.

1243 [. . .] an experience of sensations—very clear and very precise—and feelings and thoughts—very clear and very precise—but without any self-referentiality, without any personalized reference point. Very irritating and partly confusing, because the “I” could not be found anymore. This “selflessness” lasted for about 20 hours, until the “I” slowly reappeared in experience.

2926 [. . .] It was only AFTER I came out in the post-meditation period that I had the most incredible experience of unity and oneness with the entirety of the phenomenal world. Objects had no sense of distance and no barrier to them, no duality. There was no relational experience of me and an object I perceive, but rather things were simply there. In fact, everything was there, and it was extremely vibrant and alive and peaceful, open, inviting, and joyous. There was a sense of intensity and vibrancy and luminosity to all objects and this realization itself was extremely pleasant and I was aware that it was so. This state lasted for about 30–40 hours. I started assuming that it was permanent, but then it started to fade around the second day. It considerably changed the way I viewed the world, but the state itself did not last. Having done long-term retreats I have had many experiences of altered states on the spectrum of consciousness, many pleasant sensations and experiences of illumination and intensely high levels of mindfulness, purity of mind, and equanimity, yet this specific experience was somehow different to all of that. It was an experience of nondual union that felt so natural, extraordinary, yet it was occurring in ordinary mind.

66 One experience was a feeling of a dreamlike state that lasted for a few days, where everything was coherent, all right, easily perceptible, but where I saw myself as being prompted to little or no reaction by what I was experiencing. A special state of vastness that penetrated everything, me, the outside world, my actions . . . (what I had to do . . .) very intense in the experiencing, a feeling of being one and a wholesome, healthy state. Unfortunately it faded after a few days, but since then it has remained something special for me, when I remember it as I am doing now. [. . .]

3485 I remember the two experiences I’m describing as qualitatively identical states in my feelings, in my consciousness, and in my perception. [1] [. . .] A

practical meditation session [. . .] triggered in me a state of complete inner calm and emptiness. During the meditation I was able to maintain a completely thoughtless consciousness. Afterward I was awake, conscious, relaxed, desireless, and satisfied in a way I never had been in my life before then. I've been able to spend several hours of my ordinary everyday life like this. [. . .] [2] Without inducing the described state through meditation, I was able to live my life thought-free for several days. Including going to work, time with social contacts, and other everyday occurrences.

3619 The condition lasted a few days. Feelings like silence, warmth, lightness, everything and everyone forgiven, and in the now. Love within and for the outside. [. . .]

765 The head intermittently becomes completely empty. The space between the thoughts spreads out—to a free space within me. It fills with consciousness and inner peace. This hitherto unknown calm appears to me at first as an entirely natural consequence of the excessive inner activity. But it *remains*. It continues to accompany me—in the following days—and beyond. The last four days—happiness, even without a kick: More and more often and longer and longer I end up in the thoughtless free space. Only occasionally is my mind busy describing and analyzing the exciting process of its disappearance. [. . .] Silence and peace spread out over head and body. Breathing, body perception, and well-being now take precedence and get much more energy and attention than thinking. The thought chatter starts thinking again only when something existentially and emotionally important sets me in motion, when there is a disturbance, an exciting occasion for reflection. Or when creative new thoughts emerge and make me happy. While I was used to the fact that feelings of happiness can be brought about by special kicks and easily disappear again with the kick, from now on I experience this new kind of happiness: a happiness even without a kick. It is the joy of simply being, being an observer.

837 My experience lasted about 4 weeks, I felt a lot of energy, timelessness, a powerful serenity, because the judgments fell away. Everything was as it is. I felt a powerful connection with the people and things I encountered. Everything seemed to be harmonious and flowing.

2437 [. . .] In that Peace, every effort other than what was necessary for functional purposes was painful. Peace was present with eyes closed and eyes open. I started spontaneously perceiving many things through the senses without Peace being affected in any way. [. . .] Every object was myself. Everything was emerging from profound Silence, and was an expression of Silence, and was

returning to Silence. I thought, how foolish it was to think that this world had ever disturbed me! Everything was most beautiful. Ugliness, the opposite of beauty, to be disliked and avoided, was absent. This Peace had come at a time when I was going through intense fear, helplessness, and frustration. It had come after six years of spiritual practice. Having nothing to care for, nothing to be bothered about in this universe, I spent most of the night in the vast garden of the monastery, either walking or sitting. Thoughts were there, but they were mere words emptied of all emotional content, singing the song of Peace from the time I got up in the morning until I went to sleep. [ . . . ] All hankering, including for enlightenment, had vanished. Desires and doubts were experienced as pain as soon as they were born. I was stunned, and wondered what had I been doing all these years, when unfathomable peace was available at any moment without the need for any effort? I knew that this was the end of my sadhana (spiritual practice). When one rejoices in whatever one is doing, there is no need to concentrate on a spiritual practice and divide life into action and meditation. Everything is deified and becomes a meditation. [ . . . ] I did not even worry whether one day this Peace would go away. It was such a simple thing, I thought, how could it just go? I had felt it as my own, as something that could not go. But it did go! In the beginning, this Peace came many times. Whenever this experience came, it always gave me the feeling that it would never go away. I felt that it was so intrinsic and innate, so, how could it go? I knew, if anything disturbed this Peace, it was my own reaction, which I could stop immediately by reverting to Stillness, so, how could it go? How could it go? But, it would always go. [ . . . ] Though the first experience of Peace did not last longer than four or five days, it removed many misconceptions I had had about happiness and spirituality. It also gave me some clues on how to “stumble” upon it. That was the day when Effortless Meditation was born for me. [ . . . ]

3340 [ . . . ] It is now (after long training experience) the usual state of awareness, while disturbance of this state becomes “visible” (experiencing anger, greed, disappointment, ugliness, etc.).

1315 [ . . . ] I have the experience of infinite space and timelessness both in meditation and in sleep and wakefulness, and it is always accompanied by feelings of happiness and lightness. The older, but actually the younger I become, the clearer and more comprehensive this experience of pure consciousness becomes, and permeates every area of life. The intensity sometimes varies. Depending on whether I am tired, or overworked, or traveling, or have the flu. [ . . . ]

1354 My experiences with pure awareness [. . .] have changed over time. In the beginning it was just the experience of restful wakefulness, without thoughts and without mantra. For a short time I simply rested within myself. I think it was the experience of the gap, the experience of pure being, between two thoughts. The place into which a thought disappears and a new thought reappears. Through repeated experiences of this being, it became a peaceful stream that spread more and more into my daily activities, so that I can be dynamically active and at the same time still rest within myself. I am then the silent witness who simply observes the activities. This experience of being a witness now also happens during most of the time of sleeping and dreaming. The experience of pure awareness in meditation has become more and more evident over time and with evolving meditation practice. The experience of infinity and bliss now also occurs along with logical thinking, feelings, and spiritual perceptions.

1405 Since I have been meditating (or rather, “transcending”) regularly every day for most of my life, the experience of “pure consciousness” is deeply anchored in my sense and way of life [*Lebensgefühl*], so that I experience it practically 24/7. [. . .]

2299 [. . .] This had irreversible consequences. A new state of being. I would say here that “pure consciousness recognized itself” and “awakening” happened. Awakening to the SELF. The exit from the dream. The recognition of the world of appearance as an illusion. The world does not exist in and of itself. It is a game of consciousness, a reflection of our “mind” or state of being. The falling-away of identification with the limited person. I am not in the world—the world is in me! I am the space in which everything appears. This is an experience that has remained until today. When e.g. I walk around, I have the sensation of walking around inside myself. It is a sensation of infinity. The body does not end at the obvious body boundaries, it is infinitely large. And there is only one thing. THIS. Everything is THIS, or pure awareness, or pure consciousness or God or presence. The feeling that I MYSELF am everything that appears, this ONE, the WHOLE. There seem to be two states of consciousness running simultaneously. The SILENCE (pure awareness) as the basis of all being is always there and at the same time the processes in the world of form, which however is no longer experienced as different from the SILENCE. Therefore the impression is there that nothing is really happening. Great peace, permanent silent joy, bliss (these are of course words that should be clarified).

However, this has become stable only after a fairly long period (some years, about 10) of integrating the experience. [ . . . ]

2355 I experience Pure Awareness (PA) constantly, i.e., in 1) waking, 2) dreaming, 3) sleeping, and 4) meditation. The experiences are accordingly different. As for 1)—while waking I experience PA all the time. My entire waking activity is pervaded, permeated, by it. All mental, emotional, and physical activity is imbued with it. Yes, in terms of feeling and perception it is even a complete fusion. It requires a conscious activity to separate this complete fusion back out into two components. Everything is completely and constantly united with the PA in one point and in the whole. Everything is PA. Nevertheless it is possible for me to make everyday distinctions if they are necessary. But even then there is no feeling of separation. Since in terms of the feeling I am everything, including all being and doing, I can only very rarely feel myself into the mood of being separated. When I try to do so, a kind of countermovement immediately appears, which instantly and completely captures me again. Practically speaking, I live completely differently from how I used to live in the feeling of being separated. It's difficult to describe it in a way that will help someone understand or relate to it who cannot experience it themselves. On 2), when dreaming I am fully awake and can act self-sufficiently and do almost everything I want. I am the PA and the dream is simply a special lifetime in the night, which I use for varied and interesting activities. I travel in time, live whole lives in other eras, learn a lot, and can also use that in waking. I travel through space and look at everything I want. I meet with many life forms, I can penetrate into them and communicate directly with them and see their inner being etc. Since I am everything, I can cause everything etc. . . . The PA is always there, there is no moment where it is "gone." I am this PA. [ . . . ] As for 3), in deep sleep the activity is present in a different way, because I see how as a body I am in a state, in a special physical mode of consciousness. Many constantly running processes flow, order, and repair themselves. I can see all of this. Many things are just beautiful. I experience myself completely as a body consciousness. PA is body consciousness. It is beautiful, it is again, as in a dream, a unique kind of conscious expression of life. I am still exploring all that is possible and what happens in this state of deep sleep. It is a complete unity of material body and mind. This is surprising and so I am exploring how far this unity goes and how useful it can be practically (health, development, understanding and knowledge about nature, etc.) On 4), in meditation

I simply switch off all moving activities through an intention and so my inner perception is transformed into a field of creation that is eternal, infinite, and powerful. I feel that I am then simply this field of creation, this energy, which is completely still and which contains the whole of creation as a delicate, gently moving structure, as potential. I am all this and I can simply bathe and surf in it. I bathe completely dissolved in myself and know about all this. Normal reality is like a thin sheet of paper on this ocean of Pure Awareness. It is beautiful and very familiar.

3109 [. . .] With time and regular practice, this experience has become more and more stable and refined. Now I have this experience even with thoughts, or in daily life together with dynamic activity. Also in sleep and dreaming this alertness is mostly present. In meditation I experience a lot of light, infinity, and bliss.

### MPE as a Global Mode of Conscious Experience

At some point, when mindfulness and your mind are no longer different entities, everything turns into the nature of mindful presence and it is “smooth sailing” from then on. [. . .]

Instead of recognizing that the training is the indivisible unity of path and fruition and that this fruition is present as a natural possession, the basic straying is to believe that the path is the training, while the fruition will be attained at another point.

—Dakpo Tashi Namgyal (ca. 1513–1587), *Clarifying the Natural State*

In thinking about this last set of reports, let us try to be modest and keep things simple. Nobody knows what “liberation” or “awakening” actually is; nobody knows whether something like this even exists or what all of these traditional terms *really* mean—at least, the author of this book certainly doesn’t. Of course, there are all kinds of people out there who *claim* to know, people who wear funny clothes and have given themselves names, people who have founded organizations, people who teach and bestow titles to each other, people who have “attained” certain things and mutually confirm them to each other. But the epistemic virtue of intellectual honesty is a necessary component of any modern, genuinely self-critical approach to spiritual practice,<sup>2</sup> and it also includes the kind of humility that comes with an openness to empirical data and rational argument. If anything like “liberation” does exist, one of its components must be liberation from tradition and all mere belief systems. In more seriously and radically pursuing epistemic practices like meditation, science, and philosophy, what is needed is not only courage, open-mindedness, and perseverance, but also caution and



temperance. Our future is open, and we shouldn't pretend to know something when we actually don't. I will say a little more about all of this in the epilogue.

For now, let me begin by drawing your attention to one single phenomenological point, which may not have been described quite in this way in the past. Reflexive MPE, the timeless experience of nonegoic self-awareness (see chapter 30), is *free* of the subtle but almost all-encompassing, almost global feeling tone of futility and absurdity that we all try to suppress, more or less successfully—continuously squeezing it out of our phenomenal self-model, as it were. There is no trace of psychological suffering nor any existential despair in MPE itself. On the contrary, we can now loop back to what we saw at the very beginning of this book, in chapter 1, when putting together some new psychometric data and introducing the new phenomenological concept of “existential ease,” which refers to the experiential *integration* of relaxation, lucid clarity, and a state of pure being. Experientially, existential ease is characterized by a complete absence of futility, absurdity, and despair. Everybody who enjoys a moment of pure awareness can verify this simple phenomenological fact for themselves: What I called the “Sisyphean quality” in chapter 17—when we investigated the relationship between impermanence, embodied existence bias, and narrative self-deception—is *not* part of the phenomenal character of pure awareness. In themselves, MPE and reflexive MPE are entirely effortless states, and the Sisyphean quality is completely absent. This seems to be equally true of the prolonged *modes* of experience reported earlier, which I labeled as examples of “timeless continuity.”

Another fact that we can clearly state is that sometimes, on rare occasions, MPE stops being a temporary episode and becomes almost continuous. In this book, I have tried to capture this phenomenological fact by using the somewhat coarse-grained distinction between MPE states and MPE modes: Whereas states of pure consciousness are something local and episodic, something still attributed to an experiencing self (*whose* states they are), we also find more generalized modes of consciousness dominated by an all-encompassing experiential quality—namely, the nondual phenomenal character of awareness itself—as extensively investigated in this book. Examples of such “MPE modes” are provided by witness consciousness (chapter 19), the phenomenon of clear light sleep (chapter 20), and the large variety of so-called nondual wake states described in this and many preceding chapters. I will list five major examples in chapter 34. The new question that this last set of phenomenological reports ultimately raises is this: Do *permanent* modes of MPE exist? This is an important question because if the answer is yes, it might entail the actual possibility of “non-Sisyphean modes” in which all psychological suffering is absent.

Currently, we have no empirical data that could help to decide the issue. I also doubt whether we have the right philosophical tools. I hope that my own conceptual distinction between MPE states and MPE modes has successfully done the simple job that it was supposed to do for this very first phenomenological exploration, but its coarse-grained nature is particularly salient when we look at full-absorption episodes. You will recall that full-absorption episodes are those in which the meditating self has dissolved into pure consciousness and nothing else remains that could be later reported. Full-absorption episodes form a kind of bridge or logical link between MPE modes and MPE states because they can be described as a global mode *and* a state at the same time. They constitute an interesting borderline case in that they may still count as “content-specific,” because there is one specific form of content that remains: epistemic openness, tonic alertness, the silent clarity of MPE itself. If we take objective time as a frame of reference, they mostly have a much shorter duration than many of the experiences described in the first part of this chapter. On the other hand, the specific quality of MPE has now become globalized and all-pervading; it is all that exists. Full-absorption episodes are clearly also nondual (lacking subject/object structure), as well as being internally timeless. Given the additional phenomenon of clear light sleep (which can also be described as a form of absorption; see chapter 20), it is not even clear whether full absorption into MPE should be taxonomized as a special kind of “wake state” or be treated as a separate category of its own (like *turīya*, “the fourth,” in Hindu philosophy).

In making a fresh start, new scientific and phenomenological data will not be enough. We need more philosophical analysis because a number of conceptual ambiguities must be resolved before we can return to the question of precisely what kind of “timeless continuity” permanent MPE modes have—and what their relationships with each other might possibly mean in the wider context sketched out in this chapter and in chapter 17. In this book, however, my only concern has been to take the phenomenology itself really seriously and to provide an open-ended conceptual foundation for the future. In the following chapter, I will summarize some of the main results of our phenomenological investigation. I will also present a short list of empirical and conceptual research goals for the future. Arriving at an empirically validated computational model that describes suffering-free modes of conscious experience should be one of them.

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# The Elephant and the Blind

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

By: Thomas Metzinger

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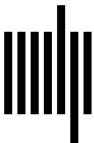
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