

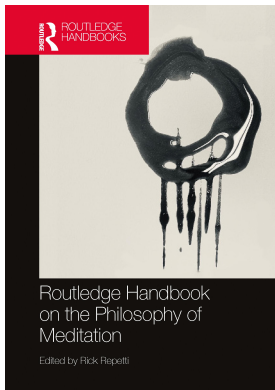
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9

THE EXPERIENCE OF PRESENCE

Meditation and the nature of consciousness

Wolfgang Fasching

1 Introduction

In this chapter, I describe and analyze what happens in the attainment of a deep state of meditation, and argue that the experience enables the practitioner to become aware of consciousness as such, as opposed to one's typical exclusive awareness of the contents or objects of consciousness, and that the awareness of consciousness itself has potential philosophical significance for our understanding of the nature of consciousness, particularly an understanding that diverges from the somewhat widespread view that conceptualizes consciousness primarily in terms of phenomenal qualities. I argue, in short, that meditation and philosophy of mind may be mutually beneficial.

Meditation, in the sense examined here, is primarily an attempt to inhibit all mental activities. Normally, our mind is constantly busy: We think about this and that, strive for things, perceptually explore the world around us, recall and evaluate past events, anticipate future ones, etc. All these are object-directed activities, ways of dealing with what presents itself to our consciousness, which thereby completely occupies our mind. The aim of meditation consists in bringing all this active engagement with the objects of consciousness to a halt. It is, in a sense, an attempt to do nothing at all, to enter a state of utmost mental restrictedness, abstaining from all our habitual reactions to what might appear to our mind. Yet this coming-to-rest of mental activities is not as if one were falling asleep; rather, one is supposed to remain fully conscious. In effect, meditation is the attempt to do nothing at all *except be conscious* (which is, of course, actually not something we “do”, not an activity). The question of this chapter is: What is it we are conscious of when *nothing* occupies our mind any longer and we abide, so to speak, in this ‘nothingness’? The thesis I pursue is that consciousness comes to be experienced in itself (which is normally concealed by all the things we are conscious of that typically exclusively capture our attention).¹

I consider this claim in light of a certain understanding of consciousness – namely, as the ‘taking place’ of presence (Fasching 2012b, 2020). I proceed in three steps: First, I describe the meditative process as a turn from what is present to us to presence itself as such. Then, I elaborate on the *field*-character of presence thus experienced. Lastly, I characterize this presence-field as what abides in the incessant coming and going of phenomenal contents – namely, as the permanent actuality-dimension in which this succession of contents takes place – and thereby the meditative state as an experience of a stillness and non-movement that underlies all movement and change.

2 The experience of thereness

Meditation is, I claim, a form of becoming aware of consciousness as such. Yet this is not supposed to mean that it is a kind of introspection: Introspection is usually understood as observing, instead of external objects, the ‘inner’ goings-on of one’s conscious mind, i.e., the stream of mental occurrences, such as thought-processes, fantasies, sensations, volitional impulses, etc. All this equally belongs to what we are conscious of and is not consciousness itself. What I mean by ‘consciousness’ here cannot be found as one of the objects I am aware of – I cannot scan the field of phenomena presenting themselves to me and then say, “Ah, this one over there, that’s my consciousness!” And it is also not the sum of the ‘inner-mental’ contents in contrast to the ‘extra-mental’ objects, as whose representation (or presentation) they might partly serve. What I mean is simply and strictly consciousness itself: my *being aware* of whatever objects and contents.² And this being-aware is not a further content besides the one I am aware of – rather it consists in nothing but the thereness-for-me of the content (its being present to me). So, what I mean by consciousness here is simply thereness as such, the taking place of presence in which any objects and contents have their givenness.

Normally, we are permanently occupied, one way or another, with objects present to us and tend to be forgetful of presence itself. And what happens in meditation, on my account, is precisely that we become aware of this presence itself as such. Yet, considering what I have just said, this cannot consist in turning our attention away from the outer objects towards some other (‘inner’ or ‘mental’) object. On the contrary, in a seeming paradox, meditation usually consists in intensely *concentrating* on some object (a mantra, one’s breath, or whatever), or – e.g., in Buddhist mindfulness meditation – in simply calmly observing the flow of what presents itself to us. That is, it is not about, in some reflexive activity, “bending” one’s attention back to one’s mind, but simply about looking “straightforward” to the object(s). How can such a forward-looking stance (i.e., simply “staring” at the object or objects of consciousness) bring about an awareness of consciousness itself?

What happens in meditation, I suggest, is that our *attitude* towards the objects is altered. In our everyday state of mind, we do *not* simply abide in the mere presence of what is present to us – just sitting there, silently (i.e., non-thinkingly, non-strivingly, non-evaluatingly) taking notice of this presence – but are constantly actively *occupied* with what is present to us. It triggers all kinds of responses: We react to it, evaluate it, want to find out more about it, to manipulate it. That is, we direct all kinds of activities towards it and are totally immersed in these activities. Obviously, what is relevant here is only *what* is present to us and not presence itself; it is towards *this* that our interest is exclusively directed: It is what demands our attention and to which we have to adjust. Presence itself, in which all these encounters with objects take place – the very fact of the being-present-to-us of things – is simply, yet inexplicitly, taken for granted and passed over in order to immediately jump to the objects themselves with which we are occupied.

Now, in meditation, all these mental activities of being engaged with the objects are supposed to come to a halt.³ We take a non-active attitude: The state at which the meditation process aims (*samādhi*: roughly, meditative absorption) is one of non-thinking, non-acting, non-striving. We are not actively *occupied* with the object: We inhibit all reactions to it; we do not think about, evaluate, or expect anything from it. (Concentration on the meditation-object is not driven by some theoretical or practical interests in the object, i.e., it is not about finding something out about it, let alone about manipulating or using it.) We simply let it be there without doing anything – take it in its mere thereness, calmly and non-strivingly abiding in this mere thereness-for-us of what is there for us. And in this, I claim, thereness as such becomes noticeable in itself. Instead of being interested in what is present to us, we take a step back,

pause for a moment, and become aware of the simple and fundamental fact that presence takes place at all – which underlies all our dealing with things, but is usually not experienced as such.

If thoughts, emotional responses, volitions, etc., do arise (as they unavoidably will, at least in the beginning), the meditator is supposed to take the same distanced, non-involved, merely observing stance: One lets them pass by like clouds in the sky, taking them as just being part of what is present, without letting oneself be carried away by them. The meditator, one could say, retreats to the position of a mere onlooker of whatever goes on in his or her mind. (S)he becomes pure seeing and experiences her- or himself *as* this pure seeing.⁴

This amounts to a shift in the way we experience ourselves. When we are involved in our usual dealing with objects, we are given to ourselves, implicitly or explicitly, as a particular entity with certain physical and mental characteristics, precisely the entity that does the dealing according to its interests and which exists side by side with the objects with which it deals. This means that our normal self-awareness consists in identifying certain constellations of contents of consciousness as forming our ‘self’ in contrast to what lies outside the ‘self’. In retreating from our usual being-immersed in our dealing with objects, we take a distanced stance even to ‘ourselves’ (in this sense). Everything with which we normally identify (i.e., what we take as belonging to our ‘self’: our thoughts, body, etc.) is now simply taken as part of the phenomenal stream of what is there for us, and we experience ourselves *as* this mere happening of thereness as such – the thereness of the whole spectacle of phenomena, encompassing both ‘self’ and ‘not-self’ (the witnessing “of both the seer and the seen” (Śaṅkara, *Ātmajñōpadeśavidhi* III.7, quoted in Gupta (1998), p. 38), as Advaita has it).

What, then, does it mean to speak of ‘thereness *for us*’? What is this ‘ourselves’ to whom phenomena are given? When I introduced the synonymous terms ‘thereness’ and ‘presence’, I had to speak of ‘thereness-for-me’ and ‘presence-to-me’ in order to make clear what is meant here: namely thereness or presence as *consciousness*, as a happening of subjectivity. Yet, actually, this ‘for me’ does not add a thing. Presence has no subject-object structure; it does not happen to some I-entity that could in any way be distinguished from presence itself. Thereness simply happens, and I, *qua* subjectivity, *am* ultimately nothing but this happening of thereness, without there being any additional ‘I’ involved.

Thus, in the meditative state (i.e., when we reach *samādhi*) the subject-object structure in the usual sense – I ‘here’, the object ‘there’ – dissolves. We no longer experience ourselves as an ego-entity standing opposed to the object. The ego has vanished; in a way, there is only the object in its thereness. So, in some sense one could say that one dissolves into the ‘outside’.⁵ (This, I think, is the meaning of the phrase ‘to become one with’ that one often finds in various spiritual traditions.) This might seem paradoxical, given that I have characterized meditation as a turn from the objects of consciousness to consciousness itself. Yet, that which vanishes is the ego-entity that stands opposed to the objects, being directed at them. Now, only the presence of the object happens, and this presence, again, *is* consciousness. There is no longer a ‘here’ and an ‘over-there’, an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’. I am fully ‘over there’, which, however, no longer *is* an ‘over-there’. There is only thereness which is experienced neither as inside nor as outside, since this whole inside/outside distinction constitutes itself within the realm of what is present and does not apply to the happening of presence itself, taken as such.

Thus, we step back into an apersonal layer of our being, an innermost dimension beneath our personality, our egoity. It is apersonal in the sense that it does not possess any personal characteristics or qualities, since it is the mere, transparent happening of the thereness of any qualities. Everything personal belongs to the contents of consciousness (to be more precise: to the contents that form the ego, the empirical self, that I normally experience myself as being), while consciousness itself (thereness as such) is, taken in itself, a purely apersonal happening.

3 The field of thereness

Now, what does it precisely mean to be aware of presence in itself? Does this simply amount to noticing the being-present of these and those contents? This does not seem to get to the crux of the matter. Something else is going on in meditation beyond just carefully observing the phenomena that present themselves to us, detecting that they are present (it would be hard to see how this should be something different from what I called introspection). I formulated above that in becoming pure seeing, we begin to experience seeing as such: consciousness in itself, in which the givenness of any phenomena takes place. What does that mean? What is there to be conscious of beyond the contents of consciousness?

Let us consider once more the meditative process. Meditation, I said, consists in stilling all mental activities. Whenever one notices that one is being carried away by thoughts, daydreams, or the like, one directs, in the case of concentrative meditation, one's attention back to the meditation-object, or, otherwise, simply lets go of them and lets them pass by, without any longer being engaged with them; and by and by the mental unrest decreases, the arising thoughts become ever-fainter, and lose their distracting force. Eventually, one might reach a state, however short at first, in which no thought at all stirs (the state of *samādhi*): a moment of utter mental stillness and emptiness, an "empty interval devoid of any *vritti* [mental activity]" (Deshpande 1978, p. 38).⁶ There is nothing that occupies one's mind any longer: It is as if one were staring into a sheer nothingness – one becomes a mental blank. Yet, nevertheless, one is wide awake, fully conscious. The question is: What is it one is conscious of here? What is this 'emptiness'?

I might still hear a car passing outside or feel some itch in the leg.⁷ Yet none of this attracts my attention or provokes any thought. It is as if I were keenly concentrated on something that occupies my mind so much that none of these impressions can really 'reach' or distract me. And, in a sense, this is indeed the case – only that I am concentrated, so to speak, on nothing at all: on this emptiness, the 'empty interval' between thoughts.

Admittedly, one could say that in concentrative meditation I am obviously concentrated on the meditation-object: After all, I claimed above that in the meditative state I, in some sense, dissolve into the thereness of the object. True, but in a way, I think this is not to the point. What dawns in my mind in *samādhi* is not this object. *Samādhi* is not a curious exploration of the object and its qualities, not about noticing, "Ah, there is this!" and "Ah, there is that!"; I remain totally unmoved by all this. In a manner of speaking, I look 'through' the object into an emptiness that underlies it. The focusing on the meditation-object is but a means to prevent the mind from wandering, from being drawn away by thoughts. That is, the 'fixing' of the mind on the object is not about discovering something about it, but is supposed to simply bring about a particular state of mind: precisely a state of non-thinking, a standing still of all mental activities. Then something might come to the fore that usually goes unnoticed, but this is not the meditation-object. So, again, the decisive question is: What do I become aware of when all thinking, i.e., all being occupied with this or that, comes to a halt? When *nothing* occupies my mind any longer? My claim is that what then – i.e., when all being interested in what is there for us is inhibited – comes to light is thereness as such.

Now, what, precisely, do I mean by 'thereness as such'? So far, I have spoken of the thereness or being-present-to-me of objects or contents. Yet, if meditation were simply about noticing the being-present of these and those contents, one could counter that it is hard to see how this should be distinguishable from merely noticing these very contents (i.e., noticing precisely these contents being present), which would hardly be something particularly special. What I claim is that what the meditator becomes aware of, rather, is presence as such, presence purely in itself – not simply this content being present and that content being present.

My consciousness is indeed the happening of being-present-to-me of what I am conscious of. Yet, as a matter of fact, every moment (at least normally) a manifold of contents is present to me: All those contents share in one presence. Presence is what extends through all those contents – yet not in the sense of a quality they all have in common, for this would not account for the oneness in question. Rather, it is one presence in which the being-given of all those contents takes place: They are all assembled in one encompassing thereness. So, although we cannot find presence *someplace other* than the contents (namely, as some further content), it is by no means some quality of the contents, a quality each content has of its own. Rather it forms a *field*: a field of appearing, a luminous realm, or space of thereness.

This field is not the sum of the contents (which, by juxtaposition, would form one field). What could unite them? This cannot be anything other than their being-present-together in one consciousness. So, this oneness cannot be the result of their unification, but is precisely what unites them. Hence the presence-field has the character of a dimension, comparable to space as the existence-dimension of spatial things, which is neither itself a spatial object nor the sum of the spatial objects (*cf.* Fasching (2012b), pp. 173–5). And when I say that in *samādhi* we become aware of this happening of thereness in itself, I do not simply mean that I then notice the being-present of this content over here and the being-present of that content over there, but that I become aware of this realm of presence in which the being-present of whatever contents happens. Thus, the turn from what is present to presence itself can also be described as a turn from the manifoldness of phenomena to the oneness which underlies it: Whilst what is present to me is manifold, the presence in which it is present is one – one field of consciousness in which all this is there for me.

Does this mean that the consciousness I become aware of in meditation is not actually the being-present of what is present to me, but rather the presence-dimension which forms its basis? Not quite: These are not really two different things. When I am aware of some content, the being-there-for-me of this content *is* my consciousness. But my consciousness is equally the being-there-for-me of that other content – and this is the very same consciousness: It is one consciousness in which both these contents are present. Just as the space that is occupied by some spatial object is not something other than the one space in which it has (together with many other objects) its existence, but this very space itself, insofar as this object is present in it, the thereness-for-me of a particular content, *is* the thereness-dimension itself insofar as this very content is manifest in it.

Hence, what I become aware of in the state of *samādhi* – when I cease being occupied with this or that, i.e., when I am, as it were, occupied with nothing at all – is, I claim, this presence-field as such: this one presence as the realm of phenomenality in which all the manifoldness of what is present to me has its presentness. This is not some particular content, and it is also not the sum of the contents. For our everyday, object-oriented mind it is like a sheer nothing. And indeed, what I am aware of in the ‘interval’ between thoughts seems to be an utter emptiness. Yet this emptiness is not really nothing: It is precisely the field of presence as such in which any appearing takes place at all; it is an emptiness in the sense of an openness, the vast openness of the ‘space’ in which any contents can have their occurrence, the non-content that underlies all contents as their *where*. So, what I become aware of in the ‘emptiness’ between thoughts is, I think, that *wherein* all thoughts happen: the presence-field that is my consciousness.⁸ Zen master Shunryu Suzuki states:

Our everyday mind is like a movie playing on the wide screen. Most people are interested in the picture on the screen without realizing there is a screen That white screen is not something that you can actually attain; it is something you always

have. The reason you don't feel you have it is because your mind is too busy. Once in a while you should stop all your activities and make your screen white. This is *zazen*.
(2002, pp. 50–51)

4 Resting in the present

The field of presence is one, irrespective of the manifoldness of what has its manifestness in it, and it also abides unchanged within the perpetual changes of the latter. So, the meditative turn from what is present to us to presence itself cannot only be characterized as a turn from the manifoldness to the oneness underlying it, but also as one from what permanently changes to that which abides within this change, a step into a stillness beneath the restlessness of the incessant flux of phenomena.

Whilst what is respectively present to me constantly changes, presence as such remains constant: It forms the unchanging dimension in which these permanently new contents gain presentness, i.e., in which the very phenomenal flux takes place. It does not belong to the things that come and go, become present and cease to be present, simply because it is presence itself: that which gives what is respectively present its presentness. It is the existence-dimension of phenomenal contents, their dimension of actuality. For a content to become present (and thereby to come to existence *as* a phenomenal content) means to have its appearance in the experiential realm which is my consciousness, and when this content ceases to be present, the presence-field itself does not sink into the past together with it, but rather the content elapses precisely by no longer being manifested in it. As Dan Zahavi concisely puts it,

whereas the act can become past and absent, the dimension of experiencing that allows for presence and absence cannot itself become past and absent (for me). Whereas we live through a number of different experiences, the first-personal experiencing itself remains as an unchanging dimension.

(2000, p. 67)

As that which gives what is respectively present its presentness, its actuality, presence has the character of “phenomenal nowness” (Klawonn 1991, p. 258), of the permanent now of experiencing. It is, one could say, the way nowness itself is manifest in and as our consciousness. The now is the one thing that is absolutely constant in the incessant flow of time: It is permanently now. One might be tempted to say: Again and again, nowness takes place, each now being indistinguishable from the one that happened before. Yet is this quite adequately put? That something happens ‘again and again’ means that constantly qualitatively identical events *become present* – but the now is presentness itself. Events happen by being present (in the sense of happening *now*), and they become past (cease to exist) by no longer being present. Presentness as such (the now), in contrast, never sinks into the past, but is “temporally indeclinable” (id., p. 251) – i.e., the present itself does not elapse, because to elapse means precisely to *cease* to be present (to happen in the present).⁹

So, the now is not itself a temporal event; rather, permanently new events succeed each other *in* the now: It is one and the same temporally indeclinable present in which the coming and going of temporal events, the flow of time itself, takes place – it is, as it were, the abiding ‘stage’ of existence.¹⁰ So, while events come and go (become actual and cease to be actual), the actuality-dimension itself – the now in which all reality, the very change of events takes place – abides.¹¹

Now, insofar as being-experientially-present is the mode of existence of phenomenal contents, the presence-dimension (consciousness) can be viewed as the abiding now of the experiential sphere: the realm of actuality of phenomenal contents. It is, to quote Klawonn again,

“the specifically phenomenal aspect of the universal-present being of reality” (id., p. 258). So, to experience presence as such means to experience the permanent phenomenal nowness in which the givenness of all the changing experiential contents takes place. Instead of being engaged with the coming-and-going contents (which implies looking back at what is gone and anticipating what is to come), one abides in the changeless actuality in which all this coming and going takes place: the permanent phenomenal nowness which is one’s own innermost being *qua* experiential presence.

In this sense, the meditative experience of presence as such can also be characterized as “resting in the now” (Albert 1996, p. 36) – namely in the permanence of the now in which the whole spectacle of the incessant stream of inner-temporal contents takes place. Normally, we are (as is pragmatically required) occupied with the ever-changing goings-on we encounter, with what comes and goes: This is, after all, what demands our reactions and planning. This is a state of permanent restlessness: Our dealing with things is marked by an incessant striving, driven by our interests with regard to objects. Hence, to be directed at what is present to us actually means to *not* be fully in the present, to not let what comes and goes simply pass by, but to keep what has elapsed in one’s grasp and (on the basis of this) to brace oneself for what is to come and to strive for this and that.

It is only, as Karl Albert formulates, in moments in which “all wanting, all desiring for particular things, all striving is appeased”, in a state of “calm, stillness, and contemplation”, “free of all inner restlessness”, that we begin to experience “what abides in the coming and going of time” – namely, the now as such (id., p. 31). This is precisely what happens in meditation. In meditation, our usual permanent dealing with things is inhibited, and all striving and restlessness implied by it are brought to a halt. We enter a state of not wanting anything, not striving for anything. We just calmly, motionlessly sit in the mere presence of what is respectively present – we become ‘pure seeing’. And this means to be fully in the now, no longer restlessly transcending the present. We let all the permanently changing contents that are present to us simply pass by and abide in the permanence of presence itself – the abiding now of experiencing – in which all this encountering of contents takes place. This is experienced as a state of stillness and non-movement in the midst of all change. It is also sometimes characterized as an experience of ‘timelessness’: “When the present is experienced as the present, this appears as a *standstill of time*” (id., p. 37)¹² – simply because the present (in which the very passing of time takes place) is not itself an inner-temporal event or process (it is neither something that comes and goes, nor something that persists in the usual sense, having temporal phases that become present and past, but is rather ‘standing’, not subject to temporal declination).

When, as is the case in some traditions, it is said that in this, the permanent ‘self’ (*ātman*) is experienced, this does not mean – as Buddhists might object – to balk at the inexorable stream, unwilling to accept the fact of universal impermanence. On the contrary, it means to completely surrender to the stream, without keeping hold of anything. In being fully in the present, without any clinging, without attempting to find stabilities and constancies in the flow, one calmly lets everything just pass by, not looking back at what has gone nor anticipating what is to come. It is precisely in this non-clinging that one experiences a stillness which underlies the flow. This is not a matter of finding some *content* or *object* that remains unchanged – what one experiences as abiding in the midst of streaming is nothing but the permanent nowness itself *in which* this streaming takes place: the permanent actuality of the streaming itself.¹³

Insofar as the nowness experienced in the meditative state can be viewed as the abiding existence- or actuality-dimension in which the flow of events takes place, it does not appear totally outlandish when, in many spiritual traditions, meditation is characterized not only as an experience of one’s innermost ‘self’, but at the same time also of being as such: “absolute *samādhi*”, as, for instance, Sekida asserts, “leads us to experience pure existence” (1985, p. 62). One might say it is

only *one's own* being one experiences here (after all, *samādhi* was characterized as an experience of *consciousness*, of one's own subjective existence), so why pretentiously speak of 'being as such'? Yet, it could be asked what 'one's own' could mean here at all. One could answer: Well, obviously that of the *I*. Yet what is this 'I'? It is not the empirical self. Rather, all 'I' can mean here is nothing but the happening of presence, and presence, as I formulated above, is – as the dimension of phenomenal manifestation – the way the now, or actuality as such (the abiding existence–dimension), is manifest in and as our consciousness.¹⁴ So, if one is prepared to take this step (admittedly, for some this might be an 'if' of considerable proportion), there is reason to say that the 'I' relevant here (with regard to which one speaks of 'one's own' being) is nothing other than the self-revealedness of being itself (*cf.* Fasching forthcoming). It would be misleading to presuppose an I-entity whose being is experienced in *samādhi* – rather, there simply occurs the manifestness of being, this manifestness *being* the 'I'.¹⁵ And, hence, it seems to make sense to say that what is experienced in *samādhi* is being as such – the universal existence–dimension in which everything that exists has its occurrence – in its self-manifestness that is our own being *qua* consciousness.¹⁶

5 Concluding remarks

I think there exists a mutual relevance between philosophy of mind and meditation. The way we understand consciousness will naturally affect our understanding of the meditative state of consciousness – especially when one considers meditation as an exploration of consciousness itself. And what I have undertaken here is precisely an attempt to investigate the meditative state from the perspective of a certain way of viewing the nature of consciousness. However, I think that a consideration of meditation as a practice of merely being conscious (without doing anything else) can, in turn, help us to more clearly understand what we are actually speaking of when we talk about consciousness.

I do not think only meditators can reach the understanding of consciousness employed here, but it is a remarkable fact that in intellectual traditions in which meditation plays a prominent role (e.g., in Indian thought), we also find a concept of consciousness that is strictly distinguished from 'mental states' (*vṛttis*) *qua* introspectively observable 'inner' phenomena, namely as the 'witnessing' (*sākṣin*) of mental occurrences, i.e., that which makes conscious states conscious in the first place.¹⁷ Hence, an awareness of the meditative state of mind offers a broadened experiential background for our philosophical understanding of consciousness and might inspire a clearer grasp of the nature of consciousness in itself, as distinguished from the contents of consciousness.

In present-day Western philosophy of mind, by contrast, consciousness is generally not clearly distinguished from the contents of consciousness. It is rather mostly conceptualized in terms of phenomenal qualities (*qualia*) and the like, *qua* only privately accessible phenomena, in contrast to the publicly accessible objective world, instead of as phenomenality itself as the happening of presence of any phenomena whatsoever. And this, in my view, restricts us from gaining an adequate understanding of what the so-called problem of consciousness is really about (*cf.* Fasching 2020). Hence, I believe that a consideration of meditative states of mind (as a becoming-aware of consciousness or subjectivity as such) might prove to be quite useful in our philosophical discussions about the nature of consciousness.

Notes

- 1 Comparable views can be found, e.g., in Forman (1999), Deikman (1999), and Shear and Jevning (1999), as well as Spackman (this *Handbook*, Chapter 8) and, to an extent, Thapliyal (this *Handbook*, Chapter 7). *Cf.* Stone and Zahavi (this *Handbook*, Chapter 22).

- 2 Accordingly, in the following I use the terms ‘content’ and ‘object’ interchangeably, encompassing anything that is present to us, in contrast to presence itself.
 - 3 Cf. Patañjali’s famous characterization, in section I.2 of the *Yoga Sūtras*, of the aim of yoga as “*citta-vṛttinirodha*”, the bringing-to-a-halt of the mental activities (Deshpande 1978, p. 19). Cf. also, e.g., Lu K’uan Yu’s characterization of Zen practice: “All the devices used in [Zen] Buddhism ... have only one aim: the stoppage of all thinking for the realization of mind” (quoted in Shear and Jevning 1999, p. 194). Or Katsuki Sekida: “The basic kind of Zen practice is called *zazen* (sitting Zen), and in *zazen* we attain *samādhi*. In this state the activity of consciousness is stopped and we cease to be aware of time, space, and causation” (1985, p. 29).
 - 4 I.e., as “witness-consciousness” (*sākṣin*), as it is called in Advaita Vedānta (“the never-to-be-objectified principle of awareness present in every individual”, as Chatterjee (1982, p. 341) formulates). Admittedly, in Theravāda Buddhism we do not find an explicit notion of witness-consciousness (however, cf. Albahari (2006) for a heterodox interpretation, according to which something like a witnessing consciousness is, as a matter of fact, implicitly presupposed in the Pāli Canon), and accordingly in a Buddhist perspective what goes on in (mindfulness) meditation might be described differently: namely, merely as a meticulous and dispassionate observation of the stream of experiential contents, by which one comes to realize the non-permanent character of all phenomena and thereby of the truth of the *anātman* (no-self) doctrine (cf., e.g., Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991, pp. 59–81). Yet, it could be asked who or what it is that does this mere observing and de-identifies itself from the observed phenomena (realizing “this am not I; this is not the Self of me” (*Saṃyutta Nikāya* XXII.59)), if there actually *is* nothing but these phenomena. It seems to make sense to say that what exists ‘in addition’ to the flow of experiential phenomena is the *experiencing* (consciousness) of the phenomena in which they have their givenness and that what actually happens in taking a merely observing stance toward the stream of contents, inhibiting any identification with them, is that one experiences oneself *as* this very consciousness (cf. Deikman 1999, p. 425; Fasching 2008, p. 470) – which cannot itself be one of the experiential contents, but is rather the precondition of their very existence *as* experiential contents. As Albahari says: “[T]he givenness of an experience to a perspective from which it is observed entails the reality of the observational perspective to which it is given” (i.e., of witness-consciousness) (2011, p. 109).
 - 5 “That alone which radiates the splendour of objectivity in its purity and in which one’s identity is reduced as it were to utter emptiness, is called *Samadhi*” (*Yoga Sūtras*, III.3; Deshpande 1978, p. 107). “Usually when you hear a bell ringing you think, consciously or unconsciously, ‘I am hearing a bell.’ Three things are involved: I, a bell, and hearing. But when the mind is ripe, that is, as free of discursive thoughts as a sheet of pure white paper is unmarred by a blemish, there is just the sound of the bell ringing” (Kapleau 1967, p. 153).
 - 6 “And then a stage comes when one sees that the disappearance or absence of *vrittis* continues for a while. This interval devoid of *vrittis* is called *sthiti* – a standstill state” (Deshpande 1978, p. 33).
 - 7 This depends on the deepness of the state and also on the kind of meditation employed. EEG studies suggest, e.g., that in the deepest state of yogic meditation the registration of external stimuli is inhibited, while in Zen meditation this is not the case – with the peculiarity, however, that the usual habituation to repeated stimuli does not take place (Naranjo and Ornstein 1972, p. 196). See Vago (this *Handbook*, Chapter 11), for a comprehensive assessment of the majority of empirical research relevant to the philosophy of meditation.
 - 8 Cf., e.g., Wallace (with reference to Dzogchen): “One lets the mind come to rest like a cloudless sky, clear, luminous, and with no intentional object apart from its own presence” (2000, p. 109). Deshpande writes, commenting on Patañjali,

even if objects are seen, they cease to attract the mind, which is now wholly interested in discovering the reality underlying the objective world. There is now emptiness within and emptiness without. This mind is held in this vast space (*desa*). (1978, pp. 113–14)
- The 12th-century Chinese Zen master Hongzhi speaks of the “field of boundless emptiness” (Leighton 2000, p. 30), as a “bright empty field which lies immanent in us all” (*id.*, p. 2), “the vast luminous space around and beneath [the] thought nodules” (*id.*, p. 20), as Leighton paraphrases. Cf. also: “On the Buddhist version of the horizontal conception, consciousness is a constant luminous background or space within which phenomena ... appear and disappear like clouds in the sky” (MacKenzie 2012, pp. 193–4).
- 9 It is, e.g., not one of the things that happened yesterday: Whatever happened yesterday happened by then having been present. It makes no sense to say, “Yesterday a rain shower and nowness took

place” – and even less to say, “I remember quite clearly that there was a rain shower yesterday, but I do not quite remember whether nowness happened”.

10 Cf. Klawonn (1991), pp. 244–5; Fasching (2012a), pp. 513–15.

11 As Klawonn put it,

Existence – or being – in itself does not get lost; yet the events, states etc. that are in possession of it, come and go – and the transition from existence to non-existence therefore takes place in the form of a “streaming” change “in being” which itself all the time abides as “standing”, as the permanent *presentness/nowness* of what is present (1991, p. 244).

Temporal categories such as ‘ceasing to be’, ‘beginning’, and ‘change’ “have their application to *what exists*, not with regard to *existence* or ‘nowness’ as such” (*id.*, p. 245).

12 “In absolute samadhi there is no time. ‘No time’ means there is only the present time” (Sekida 1985, p. 120). “When all other experiences merge in one experience of the total emptiness of space, time comes to a halt” (Deshpande 1978, p. 114).

13 To be aware of a persisting object means to apprehend ever-changing experiential contents (which therefore have to be retained in mind as they elapse) as manifestations of one and the same object, and this also applies to the empirical self as which we normally experience ourselves. The awareness of the standing presence *qua* experiential nowness is of a fundamentally different nature: It is not a matter of successfully synthesizing ephemeral experiential contents as givennesses of something experience-transcendent, but to simply abide in the standing experiential dimension in which the ever-changing contents have their very being-experienced *as* streaming in the first place.

14 It is, one could say, both the actuality of the phenomenal and the phenomenality of actuality.

15 As Izutsu puts it,

what Zen is concerned with above everything else is the actualization of “consciousness” pure and simple, not “consciousness-of” It is not *our* awareness of the external world. Rather, it is the whole world of Being becoming aware of itself in us and through us. (1977, p. 153)

Man, in this sense [namely as the “actualization” of the “Field of Reality”], is *the* locus of the actualization of the whole universe (*id.*, p. 54).

16 Such a view is only to be expected in Advaita Vedānta with its identification of *ātman* and *brahman* (which is equated with *sat* (‘being’): “Brahman the pure existence”, as Vidyāraṇya says, “can be experienced without any iota of a doubt when all mentations cease [i.e., in *saṃādhi*]” (1967, II.44). Yet, comparable views can also be found, e.g., in Zen Buddhism:

Thus THINKING ... which constitutes the crux of the meditational discipline in Zen consists in man’s plunging into the existential depths of himself But by doing so man is no longer probing the depths of *his* being; he is in reality probing the depths of the metaphysical ground of Being itself which remains eternally untouched by the stream of images and concepts that pass across the empirical plane of consciousness. What is actualized here is neither I-and-Thou nor I-and-it. For there is no longer I as a subjective entity nor Thou or It as an objective entity. There remains only IS, a self-illuminating “is”, which is precisely THINKING. (Izutsu 1977, p. 160)

This experience of the pure existence of one’s being, associated with the recovery of pure consciousness in samadhi, leads to the recognition of pure existence of the external world too (Sekida 1985, p. 30).

So in our practice, we rely on something great, and sit in that great space All these things are supported by something big that has no form or color. It is impossible to say what it is, but it is there, something that is neither material nor spiritual. Something like that always exists, and we exist in that space. That is the *feeling of pure being*. (Suzuki 2002, p. 56; my emphasis)

When we forget ourselves, we actually are the true activity of the big existence, or reality itself (Suzuki 1970, p. 79).

See Thapliyal (this *Handbook*, Chapter 7) and Timalisina (this *Handbook*, Chapter 20) for in-depth discussions of meditation in Advaita Vedānta.

17 This can be seen also, e.g., in the concept of the luminous space of mind as that wherein phenomena appear and disappear, in Tibetan Buddhism, or the ‘field of boundless emptiness’, in Zen.

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