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EXPLORING THE NATURE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

CHRISTIAN EXPLORATIONS

Directing awareness inward to illuminate itself is a practice that has been used for centuries in various contemplative traditions in the East and the West. Within Christianity, it can be traced back to the Desert Fathers meditating in Egypt during the early centuries of the Christian church. Hesychios the Priest (seventh century), for example, a priest and monk who lived in a monastery on Mount Sinai, commented on this form of meditation in his treatise *On Watchfulness and Holiness*. A central theme of this meditation manual is attentiveness, which he defined as “the heart’s stillness, unbroken by any thought.”¹ “When the heart has acquired stillness,” he wrote, “it will perceive the heights and depths of knowledge; and the ear of the still intellect will be made to hear marvelous things from God.”² This gives rise to a unique kind of spiritual well-being.

The meditative practice of turning awareness upon itself was preserved by Greek Orthodox hermits from the tenth to the fourteenth centuries. The monk Saint Symeon (949–1022), for instance, counseled aspiring contemplatives to first of all seek three things: to free themselves of all anxiety regarding both real and imaginary things; to strive for a pure conscience, with no lingering sense of

self-reproach; and to be completely detached, so that one's thoughts are not drawn to anything worldly, not even to one's own body.³ Then, after withdrawing one's awareness from all worldly concerns, the attention is focused on one's heart and the practice continues as follows:

To start with you will find there darkness and an impenetrable density. Later, when you persist and practice this task day and night, you will find, as though miraculously, an unceasing joy. For as soon as the intellect attains the place of the heart, at once it sees things of which it previously knew nothing. It sees the open space within the heart and it beholds itself entirely luminous and full of discrimination. From then on, from whatever side a distractive thought may appear, before it has come to completion and assumed a form, the intellect immediately drives it away and destroys it with the invocation of Jesus Christ. . . . The rest you will learn for yourself, with God's help, by keeping guard over your intellect and by retaining Jesus in your heart. As the saying goes, "Sit in your cell and it will teach you everything."⁴

Nikiphoros the Monk lived in the second half of the thirteenth century and dwelled in stillness on the Holy Mountain of Athos. In his treatise "On Watchfulness and the Guarding of the Heart," he emphasized the need to turn inward, letting one's awareness descend into the depths of the heart to discover the hidden treasure of the inner kingdom. Saint Gregory Palamas (1296–1359), who spent twenty years in monastic seclusion on the Holy Mountain, also encouraged those who sought "a life of self-attentiveness and stillness to bring their intellect back and to enclose it within their body, and particularly within that innermost body within the body that we call the heart."⁵ But he made clear that all references to one's awareness descending into the heart are not to be interpreted literally, for our mental faculties, he wrote, are not located spatially inside the physical heart "as in a container."⁶

Although Christian contemplative inquiry into the nature of awareness has steadily declined with the rise of modernity, it has not vanished entirely. As late as the nineteenth century, the Russian Orthodox monk Saint Theophan the Recluse (1815–94) referred to this practice when he wrote, "Images, however sacred they may be, retain the attention outside, whereas at the time of prayer the attention must be within—in the heart. The concentration of attention in the heart—this is the starting point of prayer."⁷ And the contemporary American contemplative scholar Martin Laird clearly describes it as follows:

Shift your awareness from the distraction to the awareness itself, to the aware-ing. There is nothing but this same luminous vastness, this depthless depth. What gazes into luminous vastness is itself luminous vastness. There is not a separate self who is afraid or angry or jealous. Clearly fear, anger, jealousy may be present, but we won't find anyone who is afraid, angry, jealous, etc., just luminous, depthless depth gazing into luminous, depthless depth.⁸

As a result of such practice, Christian contemplatives through the ages have reported exceptional states of inner knowledge and genuine well-being—a kind of “truth-given joy”—that arise when the heart is purified and brought to rest in its own innermost depths.

TWENTIETH-CENTURY INSIGHTS INTO CONSCIOUSNESS

From the early seventeenth century onward, while scientists confined their research to the external world, the inner world of the human soul and consciousness was left to theologians and philosophers. Despite their many ingenious theories, they failed to come to a consensus on even the most rudimentary questions, and in the late nineteenth century scientists began to investigate this unexplored dimension of the natural world. William James was fascinated by this topic, as it can be viewed from scientific, philosophical, and spiritual perspectives, and he rejected the notion that all physical and mental phenomena arise out of some primal stuff called “matter.” In his view, the primal substance of the universe is pure experience, which he characterized as “plain, unqualified actuality, or existence, a simple *that*,” prior to the differentiation of subject and object.⁹

James commented that psychology in his time was hardly more developed than physics had been before Galileo, and despite many advances in the cognitive sciences during the twentieth century, this is still true of the scientific study of consciousness.¹⁰ He added that a topic remains a problem of philosophy only until it has been understood by scientific means, at which point it is taken out of the hands of philosophers.¹¹ The fact that philosophers continue to make a living by writing book after book claiming to explain consciousness is evidence that the West does not yet have an authentic science of consciousness. Scientists and philosophers continue to speculate on the real nature of the mind, as opposed to its appearances to introspection, by

purely logical means, without any compelling empirical evidence. Einstein commented, “Propositions arrived at purely by logical means are completely empty as regards reality. Because Galileo saw this, and particularly because he drummed it into the scientific world, he is the father of modern physics—indeed of modern science altogether.”¹²

Philosophy, literally the “love of wisdom,” is methodologically aimed at overcoming subjective biases and arriving at theoretical knowledge, which must be a central element of wisdom. Historically, this is the whole point of philosophy. But modern philosophers agree on virtually nothing, and they have produced no body of consensual knowledge, implying that their views must be strongly subject to subjective biases, which detracts from the cultivation of wisdom. The primary reason for this failure is that philosophers have become overspecialized and disengaged from practical philosophy. As ingenious as many of their speculations are, they are commonly of little use either in the world of science or in everyday life.

Most twentieth-century behaviorists, analytical philosophers, and neuroscientists shared two characteristics in their approach to the mind: they assumed that consciousness is a physical function of the body, and they devised no rigorous means of observing consciousness itself. In this they are similar to the scholastic philosophers at the time of Galileo, who refused to question the assumptions of Aristotelian metaphysics and devised no rigorous means of observing the stars or planets. As philosopher Daniel Dennett points out, introspection and consciousness itself are features of the mind that are most resistant to absorption into the mechanistic picture of science.¹³ And he adds with striking candor, “With consciousness . . . we are still in a terrible muddle. Consciousness stands alone today as a topic that often leaves even the most sophisticated thinkers tongue-tied and confused.”¹⁴

Some philosophers claim that neuroscientists and behaviorists *indirectly* observe mental events by *directly* observing brain functions and behavior that are related to the mind. If that were true, on the basis of their physical observations, they should be able to tell what the mental events are that they are indirectly observing, without relying on first-person reports of subjective experiences. But they can do nothing of the kind. Without such reports based on the direct experience of the mind, they wouldn’t even know that mental events occur, let alone know what they are or what they are about. This fact undermines the widespread and virtually unchallenged notion that mental events are emergent properties of configurations of neurons, similar to the way a wide range of physical properties emerge from other, more basic physical processes.

One remarkable American philosopher who may have foreseen the confusion about consciousness that characterized twentieth-century scientific and philosophical investigations of the mind was Franklin Merrell-Wolff (1887–1985). After graduating from Stanford University with a degree in mathematics and minors in philosophy and psychology, then studying philosophy at Harvard University, and later teaching mathematics at Stanford, he left a promising career in academia to try to fathom the nature of consciousness for himself. His efforts led to a series of remarkable contemplative discoveries in 1936, when he was forty-nine, the effects of which persisted to some extent until his death in 1985. His contemplative inquiries were inspired in part by the Western philosophical tradition, especially Immanuel Kant, and in part by the writings of the Indian contemplative Shankara (mid-eighth century), who first consolidated the views of the Advaita Vedanta school of Hindu philosophy.¹⁵

Followers of Shankara assert that when we experience an object, this cognition is always accompanied by an immediate self-awareness of the awareness itself. For example, when we see an object such as a pitcher, there simultaneously occurs an awareness of that visual perception. This is called “the witness-consciousness”; it illuminates all phenomena and is infallible, neutral, and eternal, existing independently of anything outside itself.¹⁶ After devoting himself to probing the nature of consciousness by means of such self-awareness, Merrell-Wolff had an insight that he believed played a vital part in clearing the way for the illumination that occurred later. With this insight he realized that so-called empty space was in fact full and substantial, while ponderable objects were a kind of “partial vacuum.” Consequently, he began to experience empty space as the substantial foreground while physical objects faded into irrelevancy. This, in turn, led to the perception of material objects as part of a “dependent or derivative reality.”¹⁷

In his initial spiritual awakening, which occurred a few days after this insight, Merrell-Wolff reversed the outward flow of consciousness so that it returned toward its source without projecting an object in the mind, no matter how subtle.¹⁸ This inversion of consciousness, he reported, occurs at the moment of shifting from ordinary dualistic consciousness to a transcendent state, which he experienced as the ground of being. In this shift, he reported, “one consciousness blacks out and immediately another takes over.”¹⁹ In the transcendent state, the dualism between subject and object disappears so that one feels a sense of unity with whatever is experienced. One’s own sense of personal identity dissolves into a sense of space without any subject-object distinctions. He experienced a sense of depth, abstraction, and great univer-

salinity in the thoughts that arose while in that state, beyond which there was an “impenetrable Darkness,” which he knew to be the “essence of Light.”²⁰ The lingering effects of this realization were a profound sense of contentment, joy, benevolence, and serenity even in the face of adversity.²¹

Merrell-Wolff described his firsthand experiences of transcendent consciousness in ways that are remarkably similar to the accounts of Christian and Hindu contemplatives over the past millennium. Although their interpretations of their experiences are embedded in their respective worldviews, many of these great contemplatives do appear to have tapped into a subtle ground state of consciousness that has thus far eluded mainstream scientific and philosophical inquiry.

THE BUDDHIST INVERSION OF CONSCIOUSNESS

The meditative practice of inverting consciousness—of turning awareness upon itself—was probably first developed in India long before the time of the Buddha, 2,500 years ago, and it was embraced by the Buddha as well. Among the many techniques he taught for achieving *samadhi*, or highly focused attention, he declared that the cultivation of attention directed toward consciousness itself was the most profound.²² In such practice it is important to recognize that the awareness is not confined within the skull or even the body, so the Buddha taught that one should attend to consciousness by directing the awareness above, below, and in all directions without limit.²³

The meditative inversion of consciousness was also adopted in the later Mahayana tradition of Buddhism that flourished throughout India and Central Asia. The eighth-century Indian contemplative Padmasambhava gave practical guidance: “Let awareness itself steadily observe itself. At times, let your mind come to rest in the center of your heart, and evenly leave it there. At times, evenly focus it in the expanse of the sky and leave it there. Thus, by shifting the attention in various, alternating ways, the mind settles in its natural state.”²⁴ As this happens, the physical senses withdraw into mental awareness, so that one becomes oblivious to physical surroundings and even the body, and discursive thoughts and mental images also gradually dissolve into the luminous vacuity of the mind. Although Padmasambhava suggests letting one’s awareness rest “in the heart,” the Buddhist contemplatives, like the Christian contemplatives mentioned earlier in this chapter, do not mean that consciousness is really located in the physical heart.²⁵

The eleventh-century Nepalese Buddhist meditation master Maitripa described this practice as follows:

Sit upon a soft cushion in a solitary, darkened room. Vacantly direct your eyes into the intervening space in front of you. Completely dispense with all thoughts pertaining to the past, future, and present, as well as wholesome, unwholesome, and ethically neutral thoughts. . . . Bring no thoughts to mind. Let the mind, like a cloudless sky, be clear, empty, and evenly free of grasping, and settle your awareness in a state of utter vacuity. By so doing, you will experience a quiescent state of awareness imbued with joy, luminosity, and nonconceptuality. Within that state, note whether you experience any attachment, hatred, clinging, grasping, laxity, or excitation, and recognize the difference between virtues and vices.²⁶

This meditation on awareness itself has been commonly practiced by Tibetan Buddhists for over a millennium. Panchen Lozang Chökyi Gyaltsen described it like this:

By generating the force of mindfulness and introspection, relentlessly cut off all thoughts completely as soon as they arise, without letting them proliferate. After you have done so, remain in this state without letting thoughts flow outwards, and immediately relax your inner tension without sacrificing mindfulness or introspection.²⁷

His instructions on this practice were inspired by the renowned Tibetan woman contemplative Machik Labkyi Drönma (1062–1150), who taught that one should release one's mind in this state of meditative equipoise by alternately concentrating intensely, then gently releasing the awareness, while maintaining an ongoing flow of mindfulness. Unlike in the practice of observing thoughts, described in chapter 7, in this meditation you immediately cut off thoughts as soon as they arise and let your awareness rest in its own nature. The method is likened to a duel between a swordsman and an archer. The thoughts spontaneously flowing from the mind are like arrows being shot by an archer, and the swordsman's task is to flick them away as soon as they draw near.

In the instructions in the previous chapter, you invert your awareness upon itself, concentrating intensely with each inhalation; and with each exhalation you gently release your awareness while cutting off thoughts as soon

as you become aware of them. In this way, involuntary thoughts gradually subside and the mind settles in its natural state. As you settle deeper and deeper in this still, luminous state of consciousness, all memories fade away and your ordinary sense of personal identity disappears. You may have the terrifying sensation that you are dropping into an abyss where you will lose your very identity. If this feeling occurs, simply be aware of the fear without being caught in it. This isn't easy, but it is important to rise to the challenge. As you grow more and more accustomed to the practice, you will see for yourself that there is nothing to fear in that luminous darkness. All that has been lost is your conceptually constructed sense of your own self. This is an artificial construct. As your mind settles in its natural state, the sense of "I am" is gradually dismantled. You have begun to explore the deep space of the mind, using the inner telescope of highly focused, clear samadhi.

SAMADHI, A TELESCOPE FOR THE MIND

With the decline of contemplative inquiry in the West and the rise of modern science, attention was directed away from the inner environment of human awareness and outward to the physical universe. Whereas Christian contemplatives had sought to discover the "kingdom of heaven within," the pioneers of the scientific revolution began to probe the heavens above. And they developed their own kind of "samadhi" for enhancing and refining their observations of the firmament. This was the telescope, first invented by the Dutch, then improved upon by Galileo in 1609. With his first instrument he was able to observe celestial objects with an eightfold magnification, but he continued refining his telescopes until they could enlarge images twenty times. It was a challenge to invent such instruments, and even after he had constructed them, he had trouble steadying them due to his trembling hands and the beating of his heart. In addition, he needed to wipe the lenses repeatedly with a cloth, or else they became fogged by his breath, by humid or foggy air, or even by the vapor that evaporated from his eye, especially when it was warm.²⁸ But Galileo managed to overcome these obstacles and observe the night sky with unprecedented clarity and precision, leading to one new discovery after another.

Since Galileo's time, the science of astronomy has advanced hand in hand with the development of increasingly powerful telescopes. During 2003 and 2004, the Hubble Space Telescope was used to make a million-second-long photographic exposure, taken over the course of 400 Hubble orbits around

Earth. This deep-space probe revealed the first galaxies to emerge from the so-called “dark ages” of the universe, the time shortly after the big bang. The Hubble telescope was directed to a region of space that appeared almost empty to ground-based telescopes. But with the long exposure of a patch of sky just one-tenth the diameter of the full Moon, scientists were able to observe nearly 10,000 galaxies!

Such extraordinary progress in science and technology has revealed the astonishing ability of the human mind to explore the external natural world of the physical universe. But to explore the internal natural world of the mind, one must build and refine the inner telescope of samadhi. The use of highly refined, stable, focused attention has by no means been confined to the contemplative traditions of India, even though they appear to have made the earliest and greatest advances in this field.

Early Christian contemplatives certainly recognized the need to calm the mind and focus the attention, and they made some progress in this regard. Saint Augustine (354–430), for example, described his experience of focused attention as “a state midway between sleep and death: The soul is rapt in such wise as to be withdrawn from the bodily senses more than in sleep, but less than in death.”²⁹ Regarding the contemplative state that arises from inverting awareness in upon itself, he wrote, “It is what the prophet calls our self before we were born and known by God from all eternity: ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you’ (Jeremiah I:5).” Strongly influenced by the writings of Plato, Augustine was convinced that genuine happiness could not be achieved by a transient joining of the soul with the “changeless light” of the mind of God. Rather, the soul must somehow be irreversibly lifted above the realm of change altogether. As described earlier, despite Augustine’s long dedication to spiritual practice, by the end of his life he concluded that contemplation is begun in this life but can be perfected only through death, which is viewed by some Christian contemplatives as the ultimate religious experience. This is a fundamental difference between Christian and Buddhist views regarding the potentials of contemplative practice, for Buddhists have always concluded that the highest states of realization may be achieved in this life, resulting in permanent purification and freedom of the mind.

The belief that the mind can be fully liberated only through death is alien to the contemplative traditions of India, where the development of samadhi began centuries earlier and seems to have reached far higher degrees of subtlety and stability. Long before the time of the Buddha, Indian contemplatives were allegedly able to remain in the deepest states of samadhi for hours or even days on end. On one occasion when the Buddha was asked about the

difference between his own teachings and those of earlier contemplatives, he responded by claiming that his predecessors did not fully understand the practice of samadhi.³⁰ This is probably what he was referring to when he claimed elsewhere to have “awakened to meditative stabilization” (*dhyana*), implying not that he was the first to achieve such an advanced state of samadhi, but that he was the first to fully comprehend both the benefits and the limitations of such experience.³¹

Authentic samadhi, according to the Buddha’s teachings, is a highly focused state of awareness in which all one’s mental faculties are unified and directed onto one particular object. The Sanskrit noun *samadhi* is related to a verb meaning “to put together” or “to collect,” such as when one collects wood to kindle a fire. So *samadhi* literally means to “collect” oneself, in the sense of achieving a composure or unification of the mind.³² The Buddha repeatedly emphasized the importance of bringing the mind under control in this way, so that one can think only what one wishes to think and can control the mind instead of being controlled by it. In this way one learns to subdue the wandering mind, which is likened to taming a rutting elephant.³³

Buddhists generally speak of four stages of meditative stabilization, each more rarified than the last. Many Theravada Buddhists believe that the first, most basic meditative stabilization provides a sufficient basis in samadhi to reach the highest states of contemplative insight (*vipashyana*), which fully and irreversibly liberate the mind from all its afflictive tendencies. According to the fifth-century Theravada commentator Buddhaghosa, once the first stabilization has been achieved, samadhi can be sustained “for a whole night and a whole day, just as a healthy man, after rising from his seat, could stand a whole day.”³⁴ While the mind is thus absorbed, with the senses entirely withdrawn, one may still engage in discursive thoughts and logical reasoning if one chooses to do so. But the mind no longer obsessively spews forth one involuntary thought after another, and one does not compulsively identify with them and fall into distraction.

After his enlightenment, the Buddha commented on his own struggles to achieve the first stabilization as he addressed a group of monks who were apparently having similar difficulties. Even one of his foremost disciples, named Moggallana, needed his assistance in order to attain this level of samadhi.³⁵ Perhaps the most important consequence of achieving the first meditative stabilization is that it frees one from the five hindrances: sensual craving, malice, laxity and dullness, agitation and anxiety, and doubt. The first degree of samadhi temporarily purifies these hindrances while in meditation,

though they are irreversibly purified only with the subsequent attainment of contemplative insight. With the achievement of the first stabilization it is also much more difficult for them to contaminate the mind after meditation. Even then, the mind remains “malleable,” “workable,” and “steady, so that one can easily direct it to seeing things ‘as they truly are.’”³⁶ When things are seen as they truly are by a calm and malleable mind, this vision affects the deeper layers of the mind far beyond a superficial intellectual appreciation, because insights will be able to penetrate those regions and thereby bring about inner change.

The Buddha made it clear that the mind must be freed of these hindrances in order to realize the highest state of spiritual freedom.³⁷ Although scholars disagree as to the minimum degree of samadhi that is needed as a basis for achieving nirvana, there is evidence in the Buddha’s teachings as recorded in the Pali canon that the first meditative stabilization is a necessary prerequisite for attaining enlightenment.³⁸ The Buddha himself did not draw the subtle distinction between the full achievement of this stage of samadhi and “access concentration” to the first stabilization. But later Theravada and Mahayana contemplatives did, and according to many Mahayana Buddhists, this slightly less stable degree of samadhi is sufficient.³⁹

Even with the achievement of access to the first meditative stabilization, commonly known as *shamatha* (meditative quiescence), one can maintain flawless samadhi effortlessly and continuously for at least four hours, though perhaps not for a full day and night. With this degree of stability, one can effortlessly sustain meditative equipoise, free of even the subtlest traces of laxity and excitation. Although this state of mental balance is not permanent, it can be maintained by following a contemplative lifestyle and by keeping one’s attention honed through regular practice.

Buddhist and Christian contemplatives have drawn different conclusions regarding the possibility of completely purifying the mind of all passions and afflictions, directly perceiving the ultimate nature of reality, and reaching the perfection of contemplative insight within this lifetime. Almost all Buddhists maintain that these ideals can in principle be realized in this life, however rare such an achievement may be, while most Christians believe these goals can be achieved only in the hereafter. There are many important differences in their views of the nature and extent of the impurities of the mind as well as the nature of God and nirvana. But the above discussion raises the question: might some of those differences be due to the relative achievements in samadhi by Buddhist and Christian contemplatives? If Christians

had achieved the same levels of meditative stabilization as those claimed by Buddhists, might they have altered their views about the potentials of contemplative practice in this lifetime? These are questions that can be answered only by developing more advanced stages of samadhi, much as the existence of other galaxies can be explored only with high-powered telescopes. Only in this way can the deep space of consciousness, with all its hidden dimensions, be fully explored.