

Consciousness, self-consciousness, and meditation

Wolfgang Fasching

Published online: 19 April 2008
© Springer Science + Business Media B.V. 2008

Abstract Many spiritual traditions employ certain mental techniques (meditation) which consist in inhibiting mental activity whilst nonetheless remaining fully conscious, which is supposed to lead to a realisation of one's own true nature prior to habitual self-substantialisation. In this paper I propose that this practice can be understood as a special means of becoming aware of consciousness itself as such. To explain this claim I conduct some phenomenologically oriented considerations about the nature of consciousness qua presence and the problem of self-presence of this presence.

Keywords Consciousness · Self-consciousness · Meditation · Phenomenology · Mysticism

Many spiritual traditions employ mental practices—usually called “meditation” in English¹—which aim at leaving behind all “images”, all contents or objects of consciousness, whether external or internal, in order to produce a no longer object-directed state of mind.² This is unanimously seen as implying a letting go of one's own self (one's ego) as well. Paradoxically, however, it is precisely this “forgetting” of oneself that is held to lead to a comprehension of one's own true nature. In this paper I would like to present some considerations about the nature of consciousness

¹ With “meditation” I here refer exclusively to what David Fontana calls “*nonideational* meditation”, in contrast to “*ideational* meditation”, the latter meaning “that the meditator holds an idea or a group of ideas in the forefront of awareness, and uses them to stimulate a directed course of intellectual activity” (Fontana 2007, 154).

² For an overview of this phenomenon across a wide variety of (predominantly, but not only, Asian) cultures, cf. e.g. Goleman 1978 (part II), Forman 1990 (part I), Shear 2006, Stace 1961.

W. Fasching (✉)

Department of Philosophy, University of Vienna, Universitätsstraße 7, Vienna 1010, Austria
e-mail: w.fasching@univie.ac.at

and self-consciousness, which might perhaps shed some light on the meaning of this claim.

To put it in a nutshell, I think one must basically draw a distinction between two meanings of “self-consciousness”, namely (1) the self-identification with certain configurations of what one experiences and (2) the self-presence of experiencing itself. My suggestion is that meditation aims at a temporary inhibition of the former—which is, in the view of the before-mentioned traditions, at the same time a self-*concealment*—in favour of the latter which brings to light (and constitutes) our being as subjectivity³. This is supposed to lead to a certain shift in one’s self-understanding and thereby in one’s relation to the world.

In meditation, I would suggest, one ceases to be actively occupied with the objects of consciousness in order to become conscious of consciousness itself (which usually remains “hidden” behind what it is conscious of).⁴ This form of self-consciousness is fundamentally different from the way we usually are conscious of ourselves (for example, when, after having been absorbed in a TV program, one becomes aware of oneself sitting on the sofa and watching TV), which is not really consciousness *of consciousness itself* at all.

Of course there are many quite different forms of (nonideational⁵) meditation and it is not easy to characterise them in general. Nevertheless I think they have something fundamental in common (which might justify the generic term): They all aim at a stilling of the mind, which in one way or another implies a kind of withdrawal from intentional activity dealing with objects. This is not supposed to mean that meditative states of mind are necessarily object- or contentless (actually they are usually *not*). The point is rather that in meditation one attempts to inhibit the usual way of being actively *occupied* with the contents, of *dealing* with them. The most common meditation practice consists precisely in *concentrating* upon an object, but its point is not to investigate the object in order to reveal something about it; rather, this concentration is a means to fixate the mind and help it to abstain from being swept away by mental occupations with whatever might arouse one’s interest. Furthermore, there are other forms of meditation which are not inhibitory in nature at all, but which consist in being choicelessly aware of whatever passes through the mind. Yet, in my opinion, this too can be seen as a form of withdrawal from mental activity, by virtue of being a mode of a mere non-reactive noticing without letting oneself becoming engaged in any mental “occupation” with what arises in one’s mind. Whatever may occur within or outside of oneself, meditation (be it concentrative or permissive) means the sustained refusal to actively pursue it, i.e. to react to it cognitively or practically. So, in a way, meditation is an attempt to “do” nothing, a technique of a quite peculiar mental restriction which aims at a state of utmost stillness of the mind in which all mental activities (in a narrow sense) are brought to a halt—just as in Patañjali’s classical definition of yoga as *nirodha*: as a

³ Cf. Lutz, Dunne, and Davidson 2007, 513–517, 526.

⁴ For a similar claim, though mainly with reference to purely contentless states, cf. Forman 1999; Stace 1961, 86; Shear 1990, 105–106; Shear and Jevning 1999; Rao 2002, 224; Wallace 2000, 109.

⁵ Cf. above, note 1.

“bringing to a standstill”, namely of the activities of the mind (*citta-vritti*⁶; *Yoga Sutra*, I.2, Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957, 454).⁷

One would expect that to be cognitively inactive in this way is to be in a quite dull, if not almost unconscious, state. The surprising fact is that the opposite is the case, it is a state of being wide-awake (cf. e.g. Albrecht 1951, 70–74; Sekida 1985, 30, 79). Consciousness is precisely what meditation is all about: The task is to remain fully awake while letting all intentional activity come to a halt (meditation means to inhibit *everything but* being conscious), one is simply conscious without doing much else. Hence, meditation can be seen as a mental technique of “isolating” consciousness as such [which is Patañjali’s definition of the aim of yoga: the isolation (*kaivalya*) of pure consciousness (*purusha*)⁸]. In being “simply conscious”, one does not allow anything to distract consciousness from itself, so to speak. So what I wish to suggest is that meditation can be seen as a special way of becoming aware of consciousness itself as such—yet not in the sense of an introspective observation of mental processes, but in the sense of consciousness precisely of consciousness itself. In the meditative state of mind one is simply aware of being conscious at the very moment, or, to be more precise: one experiences oneself *as* this very moment of consciousness.

So: What is consciousness?

Consciousness as presence

In most schools of classical Indian thought (an intellectual tradition in which meditative experience plays a more prominent role than in probably any other), consciousness⁹ is expressly distinguished from the mind, the latter comprising mental processes like cognition, perception, and volition (Rao 2005; Dreyfus and Thompson 2007, 91, 92, 113).¹⁰ This distinction corresponds with the yogic claim (which can similarly be found in many other contemplative traditions as well) that consciousness as such would come to the fore not by looking at our mental activities

⁶ For interpretations of *nirodha* as not involving a total cessation of all mental goings-on cf. Whicher 1998 and Deshpande 1978.

⁷ It has to be stressed that when speaking of “meditation” throughout this paper, I refer to advanced states the process of meditation *aims at*. Especially for beginners, the main (and often for quite a while the only) experience during meditation is not so much one of inner stillness, but rather of the incessant restlessness of the mind (cf. Walsh 1984). Yet to expressly *perceive* the mind’s restlessness (instead of just *being* restless) is a first step in withdrawing from it.

⁸ *Purusha* literally means “self”, but is characterised as “pure seeing” resp. “consciousness only” (*Yoga Sutra*, II.20, Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957, 465); cf. Rao 2002, 206; Organ 1964, 69.

⁹ Sanskr.: *cit* or *caitanya*. Consciousness is also often characterised as *drashta* (seer) or *sakshin* (witness): It is, according to Shankara, the witness of the three states of mind (1978, 67)—so it is neither itself a state of mind nor a generic term for such states but rather *wherein* the mind has its manifestation. Similar ideas can be found also e.g. in Tibetan Buddhism (*rigpa*) and in Zen (Lin Chi’s “True Man Without Any Rank”).

¹⁰ One exception is early Buddhism; but, then, it distinguishes different forms of consciousness, some of which “correspond to what is termed mind in other systems” (Rao 1998, 321). Furthermore, Albahari (2006) presents a reading of Theravada Buddhism in which “witness-consciousness” plays a prominent role (though, admittedly, it is not expressly mentioned in the suttas of the Pali Canon).

but rather by letting them come to rest. Hence, this experience of consciousness does not consist in an observation of inner-mental processes or contents and is therefore no “introspection”; rather it is precisely the *non-identity* of consciousness with this alleged “interiority” that is to be realised. This self-realisation does not consist in a consciousness of any objects at all, be they “internal” or “external”, for “the Self is neither within nor without” (Ramana Maharshi, in Sastri 1999, 27). What should one make of such claims?

My suggestion is that they indeed start to make sense as soon as we read them in the light of an understanding of consciousness I wish to unfold here, namely as the *taking place of presence*. What this is supposed to mean might become clearer when we consider what is discussed in philosophy of mind as the “transparency” of consciousness:

We tend to conceive of our consciousness as something we find “within ourselves” in addition to what we encounter as the external, objectively existing world: a subjective “inner world”, so to speak, an “inner phenomenon”. Yet under closer examination it appears to be questionable whether this really captures the way we experience our consciousness. Actually, it can be doubted that anyone has ever found any consciousness within herself, or, to be more precise, whether it is a phenomenon we encounter *in addition* to the outer world.

For example: The desk in front of me is an outer, objective phenomenon. My seeing, in contrast, is something subjective, a conscious act. When I now try to direct my attention to this act of seeing, something strange happens: I cannot *find* my desk-seeing anywhere—still only the desk is there. It seems that nothing has changed; I cannot find another phenomenon.¹¹

It is not quite true that *nothing* has changed: Still only the desk is there, but now it is there *as seen*, *as phenomenon*. When I attend to my seeing I attend to the being-given of the phenomenon. This desk, for example, is given *visually*, and *this* is what is meant by saying that it is given “in my seeing”—but there is no “inner” extra-phenomenon which I could call my “seeing”. My seeing *consists* in the being-visually-present of the seen. My act of seeing is not *another* phenomenon but the taking place of the phenomenality of the seen.¹² “For consciousness”, as Sartre says, “there is no being except for this precise obligation to be a revealing intuition of something” (Sartre 1956, 618; cf. also *ibid.*, li).

Of course we are faced with many phenomena that do not exist in reality, which are imagined, anticipated, hallucinated and so forth. If one wishes, one can call them “inner” or “subjective” phenomena, but the point is that *this* distinction between inner and outer phenomena is made within the realm of objects and is not a

¹¹ This observation has been often made and discussed: Cf., e.g., Moore 1922, 25 (who actually viewed this transparency as only apparent), Searle 1992, 96; Harman 1997, 667; Grice 2002, 45.

¹² Of course this is not supposed to mean that a conscious experience has no features but the features the object is represented as having (as “representationalism” interprets the transparency of consciousness). For example, there is a clear difference between seeing and remembering an object, even if it is both times presented as having the same features (cf. Thompson 2007, 148). Yet still, to remember *means* nothing other than that the remembered appears *as past* (just as, in seeing, the object appears *as visually present*), and it is in this sense that the being of experience is exhausted by the presence of whatever is present.

distinction between *consciousness* and objects. The “inner” phenomena are objects of consciousness, no less than the “real” objects—they are not consciousness itself.¹³ In the words of Hugo Münsterberg: “The objects of dreamers and hallucinated persons are wholly without general validity. But even were they centaurs and golden mountains, they still would be ‘off there’, in fairy land, and not ‘inside’ of ourselves” (Münsterberg 1900, 48–49; English translation quoted after James 1947, 20).

So, by consciousness, we mean here the event of phenomenal presence of whatever is present. The distinction between “real” objects and those that only exist “in our mind” is a subsequent one in comparison. So in a way there are “subjective” and “objective” phenomena, but consciousness is *not* a subjective phenomenon, it is not an “inner world”: It is the being-there of whatever kind of phenomena—whether “subjective” or “objective”. Consequently, consciousness is not a phenomenon among phenomena but the taking place of the *phenomenality* of phenomena. The fact of consciousness is not something in addition to what is otherwise present, it is simply its being present.

It is precisely this basic meaning of consciousness (as the taking place of presence or givenness) which tends to be overlooked in philosophy of mind. For example, the debate pro and contra physicalism deals with the question of whether or not there exists something like an “inner dimension” of conscious beings which in principle eludes any third-personal grasp, and therefore has a purely subjective or mental reality. Anti-physicalists argue that, no matter how completely our behaviour, brain states, and the information-processing that goes on in our brain states are described, something remains left out: namely consciousness itself in its subjective, phenomenal dimension. This can easily be understood as the assertion of the existence of purely “mental” objects that are exclusively present to the respective subject. If the problem is posed in this way, a quite obvious reply would seem to be that we actually have no reason at all to assume that conscious states are only privately accessible: they could as well be identical with brain states (as the discoveries of modern neurology suggest) and as such be objectively accessible; it is only that they are given *in a different way* to the one who is in the respective states than to someone who observes them from the outside—which is, after all, not too surprising. It is simply invalid to deduce an *ontological* difference with regard to what is given from an *epistemological* difference in modes of givenness.¹⁴ In this view, what is given to me “introspectively” (as Churchland 1985 and 2002 puts it) as my own experience is not something different from what is given to the neurologist as a certain brain state; it is only given in a different way. There is no reason to believe that a certain epistemic modality would yield exclusive access to a unique ontological region (Churchland 2002, 369).

However, from the perspective of understanding consciousness as presence, there seems to be something inadequate about this whole approach. By treating consciousness as something that is introspectively given, it is understood as an *object* that is distinguished from the modes of givenness in which it may be given.

¹³ So the arguments from illusion and hallucination (Crane 2006) have no validity against the transparency claim as it is understood here.

¹⁴ This kind of reply can be found, e.g., in Hill 2002, Papineau 1995 and Churchland 1985 and corresponds to what Chalmers calls “type-B materialism” (Chalmers 2002).

Yet, actually, the basic problem of consciousness is not about some allegedly inter-subjectively inaccessible objects of consciousness (some “qualia”, for example)—it is about consciousness itself (cf. Madell 1988, 84–85, 90; Rudd 1998; Rinofner-Kreidl 2003, 23–25): the very givenness of what is given.¹⁵

Therefore, in my view, understanding the problem of consciousness as one of whether something exists that is only privately accessible, in contrast to what is objectively given, puts the question on the wrong track, namely by simply presupposing that something like givenness takes place at all.¹⁶ Philosophy of mind usually treats consciousness as just another (if quite dubious) phenomenon that exists in addition to the other, “outer” phenomena. David Chalmers, for example, calls consciousness “the most vivid of phenomena”, being, however, at the same time “frustratingly diaphanous” (Chalmers 1996, 3). Yet, in light of the above considerations, it might seem questionable whether it is really fully adequate to understand consciousness as “a phenomenon” among phenomena at all: Understood as the event of givenness, it is rather the taking place of phenomenality itself, of all phenomena whatsoever. It is not some “ghostly stuff”, “invisible” to anyone besides the respective subject, which irritatingly haunts the realm of the objective phenomena that can be “seen” by everyone, but rather, it is the very “seeing” itself in which any phenomenon (be it “objective” or “subjective”) manifests itself. It is less a phenomenon than that which makes any phenomenon a phenomenon in the first place. Therefore, consciousness is “frustratingly diaphanous” because it consists in nothing but the being seen of what is seen—it is not something that, by being itself something seen, obstructs the view (cf. Searle 1992, 96–98).

Meditation and its techniques

If we consider consciousness in this way—as the event of presence—it becomes clearer why the thesis that meditation is a kind of becoming aware of consciousness itself does not mean that it is an observation of some “mental objects”, of some “inner phenomena”, in contrast to external ones. Meditation is not the contemplation of a certain phenomenon or succession of phenomena, rather, it is becoming aware of what makes any phenomenon that is present to us present in the first place: presence as such (cf. Shear and Jevning 1999; Deikman 1999). This is not another object. In deep meditation one is “not conscious of the internal world, nor conscious of the external world” (as the *Upanishads* characterise *turiya*, the meditative “fourth

¹⁵ It makes perfect sense to maintain that heat is identical to molecular motion (to take up a standard example of identity theory): This means that what we subjectively experience as heat is really kinetic energy—the difference lies in the way of reference (on the basis of different ways of being given), while the referent (what is given) is one and the same. Yet, it is hard to see how this figure of thought should be sensibly applied when it comes to explaining what subjective experience itself really is: To say subjective experience is actually particular neural events, given “introspectively”, i.e. as we *subjectively experience* them, begs the question. The taking place of phenomenal givenness—which is, in my view, the core explanandum when it comes to consciousness—is simply presupposed.

¹⁶ After all, objective (third-personal) givenness is not something that exists in addition to and independent of subjective (first-personal) givenness—rather it is nothing other than a certain (intra- and intersubjective) coordination of subjective givennesses (cf. Zahavi 2005, 123–124).

state”¹⁷); one looks neither inwardly nor outwardly—one looks “nowhere”, is not concerned with objects at all. This “neither-inner-nor-outer” is nothing other than consciousness itself, which gives any object its presence.¹⁸ Presence as such is not an object that appears among other objects within or outside of us, rather, the distinction between “inner” and “outer” is drawn within the realm of what is present to us. So the meditative process is not a withdrawal from the presence of the world into some “inner sphere”, but a movement into this very presence.

Normally, however, we are occupied with objects that are present to us with such exclusiveness that we are not aware of presence itself and are unable to conceive of ourselves other than as one of the objects (instead of as subjectivity). It requires a special effort to disengage oneself from this object-bound way of conceiving of things, and meditative practice is an attempt to do precisely this. Meditation is the endeavour to withdraw from one’s being occupied with the objects of consciousness in order to become aware of consciousness itself.

The most common meditative technique for inhibiting the mind’s occupation with objects is—in a seeming paradox—to one-pointedly and ceaselessly *concentrate* on some particular object [a mental image, a mantra, one’s own breath, etc.; what is called *ekagrata* (one-pointedness) in Sanskrit]. What is decisive here is not so much the *object* of concentration but the undisrupted concentration itself (cf. Naranjo and Ornstein 1972, 10, 161);¹⁹ it is merely an auxiliary means to bring the mind’s permanent activity of searching, investigating, and evaluating to a halt (cf. Goleman 1984, 324). Whenever the mind begins to occupy itself with something that affects it, it is repeatedly redirected to the meditation-object, until the affective power of the stimuli gradually diminishes and the mental activities come to a rest.

The meditation-object itself is not something one is “occupied” with in the usual sense; no activity is directed towards it. One does not think about it or investigate it; one does not expect anything from it or evaluate it as beneficial or inconvenient. One just abides in its presence and functions *as* its being-present, without opposing oneself to it as someone *dealing* with it in some way. At some point, meditative concentration loses the structure of directedness entirely and the object ceases to be an “object” in the proper sense, namely something standing opposed to oneself (“Gegen-stand” in German).²⁰

¹⁷ *Mandukya Upanishad*, 7 (quoted after Deutsch 1969, 62). Cf. also e.g. Meister Eckhart’s description of a state of “oblivion of all things and of oneself” (sermon *Dum medium silentium*, Eckehart 1979, 420).

¹⁸ Cf. Shankara 1978, 115: “I am neither this object, nor that. I am That which makes all objects manifest. [...] I am neither inward nor outward.” Cf. also Zen master Bassui: “Mind is not within or without or in between. [...] So it is called the abodeless Mind” (quoted after Kapleau 1980, 179).

¹⁹ Cf. Naranjo who claims that the “negative” form of meditation—the “withdrawal from external perceptions and internal experience alike”, i.e. “bringing the goal-directed activity of our ordinary state of consciousness to a standstill” (ibid., 18)—is the “invisible backbone” of *all* forms of meditation, also of the concentrative form (ibid., 75).

²⁰ The formulation that the task is to “become one with” the object is encountered again and again in various meditative traditions. Cf. e.g. *Yoga Sutra*, I.41 and III.3; Naranjo and Ornstein 1972, 27–28; Puligandla 1970, 24; Goleman 1984, 324; Rao 2002, 207–208; and the description in Loy 1988, 204–209. Cf. also the experiments of Deikman who concludes that meditative concentration leads to “alterations in ego-boundaries [...] in the direction of fluidity and breakdown of the usual subject-object differentiation” (Deikman 1963). Similar observations can be found in Gifford-May and Thompson (1994, 124).

In just abiding in the mere being-there of what is present one experiences oneself as the very being-there—instead of positing the object as something one can use, one is disturbed by, one desires, one is curious about, thus positing oneself opposite to it, namely as the one to whom it is useful, harmful, interesting, etc. Such interest-driven object-directedness unavoidably conceals the taking place of thereness as such that underlies this being-opposed of subject and object, i.e. wherein this very opposition occurs and which encompasses both poles of this opposition. In concentrative meditation, this intentional directedness is brought to a halt.

Another method of meditation consists in “mindfulness” (Sanskrit: *sati*). In contrast to concentrative meditation it does not “fixate” the mind, preventing it from wandering, but merely choicelessly and non-reactively takes notice of whatever enters the mind by cultivating “bare attention” (Schwartz and Clark 2006, 133; Naranjo and Ornstein 1972, 86); thus, the meditator becomes “an onlooker to his stream of consciousness” (Goleman 1978, 4). So this kind of meditation *could* actually be seen as a form of introspection, and this is exactly the sense in which, e.g., authors like Varela, Thompson, and Rosch take meditation to be important for the investigation of the mind: as a sophisticated technique in observing its goings-on (cf. Varela et al. 1991; Thompson 2006). I do not wish to deny that trained Buddhist monks might be excellent self-observers, but in my view the decisive point in mindfulness is not so much what one finds out about the observed, but rather the attitude of observing itself: to become “pure seeing” without reacting to whatever enters the mind (not searching, not fleeing). It is a training in detachment (cf. Goleman 1978, 4; Austin 1999, 127). This detachment, this inner motionlessness toward what one encounters is not just a *means* to undisturbed observation, but itself contains the very insight mindfulness aims at. By just observing, one experiences oneself non-observationally as the observing itself, as “pure seeing”—i.e. as the taking place of manifestation. This method is different from concentrative meditation (detached *observation* of the mind vs. mind-control), but in both cases the result is that one no longer sets oneself up against what appears, through interest-driven occupation with it, but functions as the mere dimension of appearance itself. One simply lets what is there be there and is aware of oneself as this very taking place of being-there, which is the fundamental dimension of subjectivity.²¹

The presence of presence

So the suggestion is that meditation in its different forms is a means of becoming aware of one’s consciousness as the event of presence. Yet here, one question

²¹ Perhaps one could distinguish a third major type of meditation besides concentrative meditation and mindfulness, namely that which in Zen Buddhism is called *shikantaza*, “just sitting” (although it might have some similarities to mindfulness meditation; cf. Goleman 1978, 93, 111): It consists neither in focusing on a particular object, nor in attentively observing whatever comes to one’s mind, but in just sitting there without doing *anything*. This is the most direct, “supportless” way to non-object-directedness and is considered in Zen to be a practice for more advanced meditators (cf. Kapleau 1980, 56–57, 132; Wallace 1999, 183). A somewhat similar technique is that of “Open Presence” (*rig-pa chög-zhag*) in Tibetan Buddhism (cf. Lutz et al. 2007, 515–517).

becomes pressing: Is presence something we can be aware of at all? Is presence something that is itself present? If consciousness has no content of its own, beyond what it is conscious of, it is not so clear what we should be conscious of in order to be conscious of consciousness itself.

Normally our attention is simply directed at the respective object and not at the experience of it. To direct it at the latter, a reflective shift of attention seems to be necessary. But how should we accomplish this? And what do we hope to find there? If I wish to shift my attention from the visual object before me, my desk, to my visual *experience* of this desk, where should I look? As stated before, I cannot find anything but the visually given; there simply *is* no extra-phenomenon of “seeing”. Nothing but the seen is there and not the seeing, precisely because seeing is nothing other than the being-there of the seen. Does this mean that there is no consciousness of consciousness, that consciousness is simply consciousness of its object and never something one is conscious of by itself?

Yet obviously something like phenomenological reflection is possible: Instead of attending to the appearing object I can direct my attention to the appearances in which the object is given. When I try to pay attention to my consciousness, still only the object is there, but now, as we have said, it is there as given. It is now there, e.g., as seen from a certain angle, given in certain perceptual perspective appearances (which in fact implies a play of intuitive and non-intuitive givennesses), and so on. Does this not mean that now it is present in its being present?

In a way, yes. But I would suggest drawing a terminological distinction between “appearances” and the taking place of “appearing”, i.e. of presence; and it is the latter that we are searching for as “consciousness” in this context. Appearances are not simply my experiencing itself. Rather, they are that *through which* I experience something. It is true, phenomenological constitutional analysis explains the coming about of the consciousness of an object. Yet that is to say, it discloses how (by means of which coordination of appearances) my consciousness can be consciousness *of this and that kind of object*—but not how it can be *consciousness* of this object. So consciousness is presupposed in every constitutional analysis, it is that wherein all constitution takes place. What we search for as “consciousness” are not the “appearances”, but rather what makes appearances be appearances in the first place—the “luminosity” of the appearances, so to speak: presence as such.²²

But is this “quality” of being present something I can look at at all, something of which I can be specifically conscious?

It is beyond any doubt that in the usual sense I am clearly aware of my experiencing. After all, I am not just anonymously conscious of objective things but also, at least when I take a reflective step back, of the fact that they are experienced by me, that they are given in a subjective way to me.

²² Of course, by conducting such a transcendental-phenomenological analysis I become aware of how the objective world is constituted in consciousness (and thus of the being-present of what is present), and there is indeed a strong analogy between the existential shift aimed at by meditative practices and the epistemological shift of “phenomenological reduction” (cf. Fasching 2003). But there is, I think, a difference between becoming aware of how things present themselves in consciousness and becoming aware of consciousness (presence) itself; i.e., I claim that there is a certain form of becoming aware of presence that is not achievable through merely a reflective attendance to functioning appearances. See below, note 31.

What does this “usual sense” of self-awareness amount to? I am not only conscious of the desk I see in front of me, but also of myself seeing it. This means that I am aware of myself sitting here and looking at the desk and of the fact that the desk appears in this certain way precisely because it is given to me as someone viewing it from this particular angle, and so on. It is obvious that this means that I am conscious of my localisation in the world and of my own body and that I relate the way the objects are given to me to the way my body is given to me. And this is not a contingent fact but of essence to the perceptual givenness of objects, so that in perception I am necessarily co-conscious of myself. By experiencing things that affect me I simultaneously experience myself as being affected.

So object-consciousness essentially implies a self-localisation of the subject within the object-world, the co-constitution of a from-where of seeing, which is indicated by the perspective givenness of the seen (cf. Husserl 1952, 56, 109–110, 144; Sartre 1956, 317; Albahari 2006, 46, 57, 88). The positing of an object (*Gegenstand*) as opposed (*gegenübergestellt*) to oneself simultaneously constitutes a subject that is distinguished from the object as that to which the object is opposed, i.e. to whom the object is perspectively given.

Tactile sensations, for example, can only be the sensual givenness of objective spatial relations because they are themselves localised in space—which means we localise them in our objective body as it is given to us by touch and sight as a perceptual object. So tactile sensing can be the givenness of an object only because it is at the same time the manifestation of our objectively localised body (cf. Husserl 1952, 146–147). And this means, to put it generally, that world-constitution is at the same time and essentially self-constitution, i.e. self-localisation within the appearing world (cf. Zahavi 1999, 105).

Inevitably, one way or another, the from-where of experiencing is co-given with what we experience (this also comprises the “mental” viewpoint the subject takes and through which it is positioned toward things in a particular relation): as a structural necessity, it is part of the field of the objectively given. In this sense, self-consciousness is equi-primordial with object-givenness. – Our consciousness, however, is not a structural part of the field of the objectively given; it is the taking place of givenness itself. Consequently, self-consciousness in the sense of self-localisation is not really consciousness of consciousness itself as such. From early childhood onwards we learn, along with our ability to identify objects, to identify ourselves (i.e. to distinguish the own body as well as one’s private fantasies from the outer objects, to comprehend one’s social role in its interpersonal relations, etc.): We learn to see the difference between what belongs “to ourselves” and what is located “outside of ourselves”—and that means we identify certain configurations of what we experience with ourselves (cf. Albahari 2006, 51, 57, 73). In this way we become conscious of ourselves in contrast to the outside. But this whole inner-outer distinction constitutes itself within the realm of experienced contents—consequently experience itself cannot be located within this “inner realm” (cf. Zahavi 1999, 180). My consciousness is not to be found on one side of this inner-outer distinction, into which what we experience is necessarily structured, but is the taking place of experience itself. So this “being aware of oneself” in the usual sense is not consciousness of consciousness as such.

Yet the notion that we should not be conscious of our own consciousness is still highly counter-intuitive—actually it seems there is nothing we are more immediately acquainted with.²³ But where and how is consciousness itself given?

The taking place of consciousness means that manifold phenomena are present; and among them “I” (as this person) am necessarily present as well, in a quite unique (but nonetheless objective) way; and that’s it. How should presence itself appear in addition to all this? Yet perhaps it is misguided to search for some further phenomenon in addition to what is otherwise present in order to understand the presence of consciousness itself. Rather, the decisive question seems to be: What does “presence” mean at all? Obviously, the “thereness” of the respective content means something different than its mere existence; it means that the content is consciously experienced. What makes an experience an experience is that, as the famous phrase goes, “there is something it is like” to undergo it (cf. Nagel 1979)—and this implies: by virtue of the first-personal presence (i.e. the being-experienced) of the experience itself (cf. Zahavi 2005, 15–16). This self-presence is not something that would in some way be added to experience, but simply what it consists in as experience. “Every conscious existence”, as Sartre says, “exists as consciousness of existing”, this being “*the only mode of existence which is possible for a consciousness of something*” (1956, liv).

The question is of what makes the manifestation of something be a manifestation of this something in the first place—no structures of the phenomenal contents could ever account for their very phenomenality itself. If the presence of something would not itself be experienced (present), it could not be the appearing of anything; there might be objectively transpiring “object-representations” of whatever kind, yet still nothing would be subjectively “there” for us (cf. Hart 1998, 69)—because there would simply be no subjectivity in the first place. The self-presence of manifestation is the medium of any manifestation of something.²⁴

In contemporary philosophy of mind, attempts have been made to explain this being-conscious of conscious acts as their being represented by other acts. For example, David Rosenthal’s “higher-order thought theory” of consciousness conceives of the “intransitive consciousness” (the being-experienced) of a mental state as this state’s being the object of another mental state that is “transitively” conscious of the first-order state, yet not, per se, itself conscious in the *intransitive* sense (Rosenthal 1997). But such an account is hardly convincing: It remains totally unintelligible why something being the object of transitive consciousness should render it intransitively conscious – after all, this is not the case with any other object

²³ And, as a matter of fact, the presence of experience is a *presupposition* of the identificatory form of self-awareness, since the latter consists in attributing experience—on the basis of a certain coordination between experience itself and the experienced objective contents—to an inner-objective psycho-physical entity. Yet it is precisely this empirical attribution (apprehension of experience as being “owned” by an empirical subject, cf. Husserl 1976, 117–118) that conceals the nature and original givenness of experience itself.

²⁴ Cf. Henry 1973, 143: “*Self-manifestation is the essence of manifestation.*”

of transitive consciousness.²⁵ And what *is* transitive consciousness at all? Ex hypothesi, it has, on its own, no experiential quality whatsoever and goes on completely “in the dark”. Then, however, nothing distinguishes it as *consciousness* of an object from any unconscious object-representation (which is precisely the reductionist idea of Rosenthal’s suggestion: *ibid.*, 735)—but why should an unconscious object-representation of an unconscious object-representation amount to the existence of conscious experience? Any computer in whose processing system-internal representational states are again represented would then, as an *analytical truth*, have conscious experience, which is hardly plausible. It is difficult to see how a relation of whatever kind between (intransitively) unconscious states (i.e. states without any subjective-experiential quality) could ever account for the what-it-is-like-ness of conscious experience (cf. Henrich 1970, 262–263; Smith 1986, 150; Zahavi 2005, 25; Hart 1998, 68–69).

Not only does the presence of an experiential state not consist in its being the object of another state—to consciously experience does not mean that the experience is an object of consciousness at all (even if we understand this as an intrinsic feature of the respective act). Therefore, in my view, it is misleading to conceive of it as a reflexive or self-referential structure of an act. The being-conscious of phenomenal presence does not mean that an act, in addition to being conscious of its object, is conscious of itself (as of a marginal “secondary object”, like Brentano puts it): Since object-consciousness is only consciousness of the object by virtue of being itself conscious, to conceive of this self-presence as a case of object-consciousness would lead to an infinite regress.²⁶ In seeing, I am not conscious of the seen thing on the one hand and additionally, as of a second (if marginal) object, conscious of seeing, but the self-presence of seeing is precisely what the seeing consists of. Here, to not be the object of a conscious act does not just mean that we are only “unthematically” or “prereflectively” aware of it [as e.g. Kriegel (2004, 189) understands it; cf. Zahavi 1999, 61; Thomasson 2006; Drummond 2006, 208–209]: Consciousness is not an object we normally do not thematically attend to and which is located “at the margins” of the field of consciousness (out of focus). It is at the very center—but not an object.

So the self-presence of presence is not a reflective subject-object relation—there is no distance involved here, no difference between appearing and what appears (this

²⁵ Rosenthal replies to this objection by insisting that transitive consciousness of a state does not *cause* this state to be intransitively conscious; rather, its being intransitively conscious *consists* in being the object of transitive consciousness (Rosenthal 1997, 739). However, I do not see how this could answer the question of why transitive consciousness should ipso facto amount to its object’s being intransitively conscious in this special case, but not in any other. The nature of this difference remains obscure, and Rosenthal’s restrictions as to the conditions under which a thought about a mental state means that this state is intransitively conscious (it has to be an assertoric and non-inferential thought about one’s own state as being one’s own, etc.) seem to be completely ad hoc.

²⁶ Brentano avoids this regress by conceiving of secondary consciousness as consciousness of the whole act, including secondary consciousness itself (Brentano 1973, 182)—consequently, though, this self-consciousness of secondary consciousness can no longer be conceived of in accordance with the subject-object model (an act’s being related to itself does not make this relation itself a relatum of this very relation). Hence, it becomes questionable why one should not give it up from the start instead of hiding its breakdown within the internal complexity of self-consciousness of self-consciousness. Cf. Pothast 1971, 75–76; Gadenne 1993, 95–96.

is what Michel Henry calls the “immanence” of subjectivity²⁷). The presence of presence is not another presence in addition to the presence of the object, but simply this very presence itself.²⁸ The presence of anything is ipso facto its own presence, or, to put it the other way round, this self-presence is nothing other than phenomenality itself of whatever is phenomenally present.²⁹ (This is precisely the idea of the “self-luminosity” (*svaprakashatva*) of consciousness that we find in Advaita Vedanta, as well as in Yoga and Buddhism³⁰.)

So where is consciousness given to itself? It is not to be found anywhere in particular: it is present in each and every presence of anything. All phenomenal givenness is as such (consists of) the self-presence of consciousness; I (qua consciousness) am not to be found anywhere else. There is no extra-phenomenality of consciousness.³¹

²⁷ That consciousness has, in Henry’s view, its being in a purely “immanent” self-givenness, without any exteriority, does not mean that it is a self-enclosed “interiority” where it would be unintelligible as to how it should ever be capable of transcending itself toward an outer object. Rather, consciousness *is* the being-present of the “transcendent” object, and the “immanence” (the distanceless self-givenness) of consciousness is nothing other than the mode of being of this being-present of the “outer” object itself (the “thereness” of the “out there”; cf. Henry 1973, 226–227)—there is no need to transcend *this* immanence; rather, to transcend it would mean precisely to leave the very being-given of the object (cf. *ibid.*, 258–260; Hart 1998, 65): “Immanence is the essence of transcendence” (Henry 1973, 249).

²⁸ Perhaps this can be elucidated a little by comparing consciousness with light (to use a Vedantic analogy): We never see light in the same sense as we see the things that are visible by virtue of it—yet in another sense we never see anything *else*.

²⁹ Thomasson takes a similar view when she states that intransitive consciousness simply is the mental state’s phenomenal character, which makes us transitively conscious of objects (Thomasson 2000, 204). So the being-conscious of a conscious state is not another consciousness, but simply what makes object-consciousness object-consciousness.

³⁰ Though Advaita Vedanta emphasises that consciousness can never be an object (cf. Organ 1964, 43, 99), this is in no way supposed to mean that it is unconscious: It has its very essence in being “self-luminous” (*svayampakashā*)—i.e., it is not conscious by being an object of consciousness but simply by being consciousness (cf. Indich 1980, 24, 36–39; Loy 1988, 64–65; Rao 2002, 224). A similar view can be found in Yogacara Buddhism (cf. Dreyfus and Thompson 2007, 103–104). Both schools were engaged in debates with the Nyaya school which held that no conscious act is conscious of itself (just as a knife cannot cut itself), and becomes conscious only by becoming an object of another act of consciousness. The Vedantins and Yogacara Buddhists replied that consciousness is less analogous to a knife than to light, which, in revealing other things, shines in itself (cf. MacKenzie 2007, 47). “It manifests everything but is not manifested or perceived by any other light” (Shankara, *Brahmasutrabhashya*, 1.3.22, in Indich 1980, 38).

³¹ As briefly discussed above (note 22), there exists the possibility of a phenomenological reflection on consciousness, i.e. on the modes objects are given in consciousness. But in meditation the task is not to objectifyingly bring into light the ways objects come to presence, but to become aware of the non-objective nature of presence itself—to become aware of its shining-in-itself (which makes phenomenological reflection possible in the first place, but is itself never an object of reflection). The act of presence itself is *always* non-thematic. When givenness becomes the object of reflection the presence and its self-luminosity is located in the reflecting act whilst the reflected is something that manifests itself *in* presence. The self-disclosure of disclosure (the self-presence of presence) is never an object of an “inner (reflective) perception” but the medium of any object-givenness (also, the reflection is performed within the self-disclosure). But it *is* a form of consciousness. In order to render this self-presence explicit it is necessary to employ a procedure that runs exactly in the opposite direction than the usual way of making something explicit (the *Yoga Sutra* (II.10) speaks of *pratiprasava*, “counterflow”): Meditation is precisely a mental operation that attempts to become aware of the non-objective self-presence (i.e. presence), not by making it into an object, but, on the contrary, by inhibiting all object-directed activities (cf. Sharma 1993, 76).

Meditation as self-de-identification

We can now distinguish between two forms of self-consciousness: (1) the identification of oneself with certain configurations of experienced contents as opposed to others, and (2) the self-manifestation of experiencing itself. Meditation aims, in my view, at an inhibition of the former (and is in this sense an act of “forgetting oneself”) in order to uncover the more fundamental latter level, which constitutes our very being as subjectivity. Our normal self-consciousness consists in differentiating ourselves from other things, i.e. in recognizing certain experienced contents “as ourselves”. Yet in this way, we are never really aware of the act of experiencing itself. One can never discover one’s consciousness as an object among other objects: One can only experience oneself as the *presence* of any object. This is not really something one could look at: It is always the seeing, never the seen.³²

Our consciousness is present to ourselves in everything that is present—not as some special content that we are marginally co-aware of, but as presence itself. This self-awareness is nothing that would have to be (or could be) produced, it is not an act I could specifically perform, for it is the very being of each and every act: It is always already there. So the task of meditative self-realisation is not to gain something new (almost all mystical traditions agree on this point). Rather, the meditative movement is one of removing what veils what is always already there without ever being an object; it is a movement of “unconstructing” rather than “construction” (Forman 1999, 109; cf. Albahari 2006, 38).³³ What has to be “unconstructed” is what in Sanskrit is called *asmita*: “I-am-ness” (cf. Naranjo and Ornstein 1972, 78–79). What is meant by this is identificatory self-consciousness in the form of “I am this-and-that”.³⁴ Regardless of whether the true nature of oneself is conceptualised in terms of “self” (*atman*), as for example in Vedanta or Yoga, or in terms of “no-self” (*an-atman*), as in Buddhism, almost every contemplative tradition sees the decisive task in spiritual development in letting go of what we normally take for our “selves” (our body, our mental capacities, our social roles, etc.; cf. Stace 1961, 111–123). That which remains when the “I-am-ness” is suspended is what Ramana Maharshi called “I-I”

³² Cf. the famous passage of *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*: “For where there is duality, as it were, there one sees another; there one smells another; there one hears another [...]. Lo, whereby would one understand the understander?” (II.4.14, after Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957, 82; cf. IV.5.15).

³³ Vedanta, for example, emphasises that the realisation of pure consciousness cannot consist in making it an object, but only in removing its obscuration, which is a process of “desuperimposition” (Indich 1980, 16; cf. Loy 1988, 64).

³⁴ The empirical (inner-objective) self is, in Vedanta, a result of *adhyasa*, the “superimposition” of self (qua subjectivity) and not-self (certain object-configurations). In a similar way, Albahari (2006) interprets the Theravada Buddhist account of the “self-illusion” as its being contributed to by two “tiers”, (non-illusory) witness-consciousness and (illusory) identification with certain *khandhas* (groups of conditioned phenomena).

(Sastri 1999, 31, verse XX)—an “I” without a “me”, so to speak (pure subjectivity).³⁵

If self-consciousness is understood as being aware of oneself as distinct from other things and people, to single oneself out as the particular person one is, then in a state of deep absorption one is not momentarily conscious of oneself. Yet in another sense, one *is* self-conscious: simply by being conscious.³⁶ From the very beginning, consciousness is self-luminosity, and there is nothing to add to this. So meditation is not about looking at some hidden place and discovering something special there. Rather, the meditative process consists in unconstructing the usual ontifying self-apprehension: One becomes consciousness through and through, without attributing consciousness to an “ego”. As the Sufi poet Rumi puts it: “Behold yourself! [...] Dissolve your whole body into Vision: become seeing, seeing, seeing!” (after Harding 2002, 21).

These two forms of conceiving of oneself are quite vividly expressed by the Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki who distinguishes between the “small mind”, which is related to other things, and the “big mind” (Suzuki 1970, 35). He writes: “The big mind [...] is not something which you can experience objectively. It is something which is always with you, always on your side. Your eyes are on your side, for you cannot see your eyes, and your eyes cannot see themselves. Eyes only see things outside, objective things. If you reflect on yourself, that self is not your true self any more” (ibid., 134). But what is this “my side” that corresponds to the “eye”? It seems as if an “I” were opposed to everything and for *that* reason not to be found within the realm of the seen. But Suzuki interestingly continues: “It is big, big mind. This mind is whatever you see. Your true mind is always with whatever you see. Although you do not know your own mind, it is there—at the very moment you see something, it is there. This is very interesting. Your mind is always with the things you observe. So you see, this mind is at the same time everything” (ibid.). So in being on “my side” the “big mind” is not in a different place than the things. “My side” is over there, as the thereness of the over-there. The “eye” is really nothing other than just “seeing”—and the seeing is not “in the head”.

³⁵ As Albahari (2006) quite vividly demonstrates, this de-identification involves a withdrawal of the “emotional investment” (as she translates the Buddhist term *tanha* = “craving”) with which we appraise things according to their value with regard to “ourselves”. This emotional, self-interest-driven evaluation gives rise to the notions of “mine” and “not mine” (cf. ibid., 59, 178–182; cf. also Austin 1999, 43–47). As long as there is mine and not mine, there is naturally a bounded “I”. Consequently the de-identification from this inner-objective self implies a “letting go” of the usual attachment to things. This corresponds, by the way, to Eckhart’s notion of *abegescheidenheit* (= “detachment”).

³⁶ It could be asked whether self-consciousness does not necessarily require a distinguishing of oneself from what one is not. True enough, if self-consciousness is understood as “being-conscious-of-onself-as-of-onself”, this seems to afford a distinguishing identification. But the point is that this self-identification, this consciousness of onself-as, has as its precondition a more basic form of “self-consciousness”, which is prior to any identification. Perhaps one should not even call it “consciousness” if one understands consciousness as consciousness-of-something-as-something. But at the same time it is not unconsciousness. At any rate, it is not just a “special case” of consciousness, but the “consciousness” that underlies any consciousness (-of) (cf. Henry 1973, 264).

So the meditative state of mind qua being aware of presence itself cannot be a *looking* at the presence, for I cannot see my consciousness by looking anywhere other than wherever I look. I *am* nowhere else, no object distinct from other objects I encounter; I am not something “inner” as distinct from external objects. The essence of the meditative process of becoming self-aware is, in my view, a de-identification from what we normally ascribe to ourselves (i.e. what we take to be our “inwardness”). In this sense, meditative self-realisation means not so much to turn oneself inward but is—in the formulation of Byung-Chul Han—“an attempt to de-interiorize the mind” (Han 2002, 67). This corresponds to the famous saying of the 13th century Zen master Dogen: “To learn the Buddhist Way is to learn about oneself. To learn about oneself is to forget oneself. To forget oneself is to perceive oneself as all things” (Dogen 1975, “Genjokoan”). Yasutani Roshi describes this experience of de-interiorization in the following way: “So when the bell rings it is only the bell listening to the sound of the bell. Or to put it another way, it is the sound of yourself ringing. This is the moment of enlightenment” (Kapleau 1980, 160).³⁷ In this way we find ourselves by no longer seeing ourselves anywhere (cf. Laycock 1994, esp. 13–16, 49–50, and Laycock 1999)—just as *Samkhya Karika*, V.6 characterises the experience of liberation as the realisation: “I do not exist, naught is mine, I am not” (Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957, 444; cf. Chapple 1990, 67).

To “forget oneself” means to stop opposing objects to “oneself”. There is no “I” to which things are given, there is just the event of givenness. Thereness as such has no subject-object structure: Consciousness is not something that is directed at something, it is the very being-there of this something.³⁸ There is no such distance that would allow any “directing-at”.³⁹

³⁷ Cf. Sartre’s discussion of Rousseau’s “pantheistic intuitions” (1956, 177–178). Sartre refrains from interpreting this experience as a “merging” with the world: Yet this is only supposed to mean that the presence of the world is neither one of the things nor their sum, and in this sense is clearly distinguished from the world itself—but not as “some-thing else” than the world, for—as Sartre himself emphasises—presence is nothing to be found in addition to what is present in it. There is nothing that separates subjectivity and the world as distinct entities. (The background of Sartre’s insistence on the insurmountable distinctness of subjectivity from the object is his interpretation of the transparency of consciousness as having only a “borrowed existence” (ibid., 79), constituting itself through the negation of the object (the in-itself): It “can establish itself only in terms of the in-itself and against the in-itself” (ibid., 85; cf. 617–618). However, consciousness is thus interpreted as a structural element of givenness, which is, in my view, inadequate.)

³⁸ Cf. Brentano’s determination of “Vorstellung”, the fundamental form of intentionality: To be “vorgestellt” means “Gegenwärtig-sein” (to be present) or “Erscheinen” (to appear; Brentano 1973, 114). On this level, intentionality is not adequately characterised as “directedness” of the mind, as if consciousness were directed at some already existing content. It is “thereness” rather than “aboutness”.

³⁹ Cf. Harding’s description of his experience of “headlessness”: “For, however carefully I attend, I fail to find here even so much as a blank screen on which these mountains and sun and sky are projected, or a clear mirror in which they are reflected, or a transparent lens or aperture through which they are viewed—still less a person to whom they are presented, or a viewer [...] who is distinguishable from the view. Nothing whatever intervenes, not even the baffling and elusive obstacle called ‘distance’: the visibly boundless blue sky, the pink-edged whiteness of the snows, the sparkling green of the grass—how can these be remote, when there’s nothing to be remote from?” (Harding 2002, 30; cf. 97).

It could be objected that conscious givenness is not an objective occurrence, that things are present to me, respectively: This is what creates the subjectivity of conscious presence, after all. Givenness not only involves a “genitive of manifestation” (the given) but also a “dative of manifestation”, to whom the given manifests itself in this and that subjective manner (cf. Hart 1998, 61; Drummond 2006, 200). It is true that conscious presence is not an objective occurrence; it does not just lie about objectively, independently of who looks at it. There is something like an “I” involved, but it is—it seems to me—more correct to say that manifestation happens *as* me rather than *for* me (cf. Loy 1988, 263; Harding 2002, 30, 97). Of course, things present themselves from a certain angle, in a certain perspective, in a certain respect. They are not just there, but given from a certain viewpoint. In this respect every givenness involves a “dative” one way or another, a subject to whom the given is given in a certain way, to whom it is nearer or farther away from, to whom it has this and that meaning, and whose bodily and mental movement accounts for the changing appearances of an unchanging identical object. But this subject, as has been shown above, is a structural element of the field of the given. Consciousness, in contrast, is not such a structural element, but the taking place of givenness itself. So consciousness is not located on one side of what opens itself up as present, and the “subject” cannot be the place wherein consciousness occurs. Again: Manifestation happens neither “in me”, nor “for me”, but “as me”.

It might at first seem paradoxical that such a “de-interiorization” should be brought about by, of all things, not occupying oneself with any objects (just sitting there in some quiet place with one’s eyes closed or half-closed and not thinking of anything). But since the self-localisation of the subject within the realm of objects essentially belongs to the structure of object-givenness, it is first of all necessary to take a step behind the givenness of objects: to enter a form of presence in which no object is posited vis-à-vis a subject that is then simultaneously posited as that to which the object is opposed.⁴⁰ This, I think, is the sense of the non-occupation with objects that is characteristic of meditation. To meditate means to bring the mental activities to a halt (*citta-vritti-nirodha*). Every “act” has the structure of “I direct myself to ...”; it is an attending-to from an opposite standpoint (which is constituted together with the object attended to)—every conscious act (in a narrow sense) is characterised by this polarisation (cf. Husserl 1952, 97–98, 105–107; 2006, 352). Every activity, bodily or mental, immediately localises one’s self within the realm of objects, one immediately differentiates oneself from what one acts upon. Therefore,

⁴⁰ Cf. Yogacara philosopher Vasubandhu (fourth/fifth century): “Through the attainment of the state of Pure Consciousness, there is the non-perception of the perceivable; and through the non-perception of the perceivable (i.e., the object) there is the non-acquisition of the mind (i.e., the subject).” “Where there is an object there is a subject, but not where there is no object. The absence of an object results in the absence also of a subject [...]. It is thus that there arises the cognition which is homogeneous, without object, indiscriminate and supermundane. The tendencies to treat object and subject as distinct and real entities are forsaken, and thought is established in just the true nature of one’s thought” (*Trisvabhavanirdesha*, 36–37 and *Trimshikavijñaptikarika*, quoted after Loy 1988, 29).

in meditation one withdraws in one way or another from all activity and abides in a kind of mental stillness (which, as described above, does not necessarily imply that no motion at all goes on in the mind, but rather—as in mindfulness meditation—that one takes up a detached position with regard to this motion).

In returning to object-directed activity, the “small mind” inevitably returns—the inner-worldly subject that stands in relations to things and is distinguished from them. Yet meditative practice ultimately aims at a transformation of precisely this everyday world-experiencing.⁴¹ With persistent practice the experience of presence as such remains present within activity. The daily object-experience is re-structured. In touching an object, for example, of course I experience myself, together with the touched object, as the touching body. But at the same time, I experience myself as the very event of co-emergence of touched object and touching body in the touch, not as something “within” the body but as the presence of the object as well as of the body.⁴²

In this way—as often described in all contemplative traditions—one experiences oneself within every movement as, simultaneously, the stillness wherein all movement takes place. In this sense, for example, the Chinese Zen master Hui-neng says about “non-thinking” (*wu-nien*) in Zen: “No-thought is not to think even when involved in thought” (Yampolsky 1967, 138). I am there not only as one who is active (who perceives, thinks, desires) but also as the very being of activity (of perceiving, thinking, desiring) itself, which is essentially non-activity in each and every moment of acting⁴³. For self-presence is nothing that is *done* by oneself (cf. Henry 1973, 242, 470; Henrich 1970, 275–277, 283): there is nothing left to be accomplished, no teleology of coming-nearer, no going from here to there within its immanence (cf. Hart 1998, 70; Henry 1973, 284). This stillness in activity is the permanent transformation of experiencing, beyond the transient meditation experience, which meditative practice aims at.⁴⁴

Acknowledgment This article was conceived and written in the framework of the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) research project “Consciousness Without Content” (P18818). I wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers for Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences whose recommendations with regard to an earlier version of this paper were of great help to me in (so I hope) stating things a little bit more accurately and elegantly.

⁴¹ Cf. e.g. Forman 1999, 6; Sekida 1985, 95–96. This is the reason why in Buddhism concentrative meditation is seen as a preparatory training for mindfulness, which is one step closer to this aim (cf. Laycock 1994, 62; Goleman 1984, 332–333; Schwartz and Clark 2006, 125).

⁴² And this is the pre-objective being of my body itself, in the sense of my body-as-subjectively-experienced (*Leib*), as opposed to objectively perceived. My to-be-as-body is not located where my objective body is. My “subjective body” is originally nothing other than the self-givenness of sensuous world-experiencing (cf. Henry 1975, e.g. 92–94), and as such is where the experienced object is, “co-extensive with the world” (Sartre 1956, 318). The localisation of my sensing within an objectively perceived body takes place subsequently on the basis of the coordination of sensing and perceiving (cf. Husserl 1952, 145, 151; Henry 1975, 109).

⁴³ Cf. Henry 1973, 476: “[...] in the manner in which effort is presented to itself, in the feeling of effort, there is no effort. [...] The Being of action is non-action [...]”

⁴⁴ Cf. with regard to this thematic complex, among others, Forman 1999, 131–151; Loy 1988, 97–112; Kapleau 1980, 38; Harding 2002, 95; Goleman 1978, 116–118; Whicher 1998; Shear 2006, 40.

References

- Albahari, M. (2006). *Analytical Buddhism. The two-tiered illusion of self*. Houndsmills, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Albrecht, C. (1951). *Psychologie des mystischen Bewußtseins*. Bremen: Schünemann.
- Austin, J. H. (1999). *Zen and the brain. Toward an understanding of meditation and consciousness*. Cambridge, London: MIT.
- Brentano, F. (1973). *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt, vol 1*. Hamburg: Meiner.
- Chalmers, D. J. (1996). *The conscious mind. In search of a fundamental theory*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chalmers, D. J. (2002). Consciousness and its place in nature. In D. J. Chalmers (Ed.) *Philosophy of mind. Classical and contemporary readings* (pp. 247–272). New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chapple, C. (1990). The unseen seer and the field. Consciousness in Samkhya and Yoga. In R. K. C. Forman (Ed.) *The problem of pure consciousness. Mysticism and philosophy* (pp. 53–70). New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Churchland, P. M. (1985). Reduction, qualia, and the direct introspection of brain states. *Journal of Philosophy*, 82, 8–28.
- Churchland, P. M. (2002). The rediscovery of light. In D. J. Chalmers (Ed.) *Philosophy of mind. Classical and contemporary readings* (pp. 362–371). New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Crane, T. (2006). Is there a perceptual relation? In T. Gendler, & J. Hawthorne (Eds.) *Perceptual experience* (pp. 126–146). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Deikman, A. J. (1963). Experimental meditation. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 136, 329–343.
- Deikman, A. J. (1999). 'I' = awareness. In S. Gallagher, & J. Shear (Eds.) *Models of the self* (pp. 421–427). Thorverton: Imprint Academic.
- Deshpande, P. Y. (1978). *The authentic Yoga. A fresh look at Patañjali's Yoga Sutras with a new translation, Notes and Comments*. London: Rider.
- Deutsch, E. (1969). *Advaita Vedanta. A philosophical reconstruction*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Dogen-Zenji (1975). *Shobogenzo. The eye and treasury of the true law*. Sendai: Daihokkaiakaku.
- Dreyfus, G., & Thompson, E. (2007). Asian perspectives. Indian theories of mind. In P. D. Zelazo, M. Moscovitch, & E. Thompson (Eds.) *The Cambridge handbook of consciousness* (pp. 89–114). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Drummond, J. J. (2006). The case(s) of (self-)awareness. In U. Kriegel, & K. Williford (Eds.) *Self-representational approaches to consciousness* (pp. 199–220). Cambridge: MIT.
- Eckehart (1979). *Deutsche Predigten und Traktate*. Zürich: Diogenes.
- Fasching, W. (2003). *Phänomenologische Reduktion und Mushin. Edmund Husserls Bewusstseinstheorie und der Zen-Buddhismus*. Freiburg, München: Alber.
- Fontana, D. (2007). Meditation. In M. Velmans, & S. Schneider (Eds.) *The Blackwell companion to consciousness* (pp. 154–162). Malden, Oxford, Carlton: Blackwell.
- Forman, R. K. C. (Ed.) (1990). *The problem of pure consciousness. Mysticism and philosophy*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Forman, R. K. C. (1999). *Mysticism, mind, consciousness*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Gadanne, V. (1993). Bewußtsein, Selbstbewußtsein und Reflexion. *Logos*, 1, 82–103.
- Gifford-May, D., & Thompson, N. L. (1994). "Deep states" of meditation. Phenomenological reports of experience. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 26(2), 117–138.
- Goleman, D. (1978). *The varieties of the meditative experience*. London: Rider.
- Goleman, D. (1984). The Buddha on meditation and states of consciousness. In D. H. Shapiro, & R. N. Walsh (Eds.) *Meditation. Classical and contemporary perspectives* (pp. 317–360). New York: Aldine.
- Grice, H. P. (2002). Some remarks about the senses. In A. Noë, & E. Thompson (Eds.) *Vision and mind. Readings in the philosophy of perception* (pp. 35–54). Cambridge: MIT.
- Han, B. C. (2002). *Philosophie des Zen-Buddhismus*. Stuttgart: Reclam.
- Harding, D. E. (2002). *On having no head. Zen and the rediscovery of the obvious*. Carlsbad: Inner Directions.
- Harman, G. (1997). The intrinsic quality of experience. In N. Block, O. Flanagan, & G. Güzeldere (Eds.) *The nature of consciousness. Philosophical debates* (pp. 661–675). Cambridge, London: MIT.
- Hart, J. G. (1998). Intentionality, phenomenality, and light. In D. Zahavi (Ed.) *Self-awareness, temporality, and alterity. Central topics in phenomenology* (pp. 59–82). Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Henrich, D. (1970). Selbstbewußtsein. Kritische Einleitung in eine Theorie. In R. Bubner, K. Cramer, & R. Wiehl (Eds.) *Hermeneutik und Dialektik, vol 1* (pp. 257–284). Tübingen: Mohr.

- Henry, M. (1973). *The essence of manifestation*. The Hague: Nijhoff.
- Henry, M. (1975). *Philosophy and phenomenology of the body*. The Hague: Nijhoff.
- Hill, C. S. (2002). Imaginability, conceivability, possibility, and the mind-body problem. In D. J. Chalmers (Ed.) *Philosophy of mind. Classical and contemporary readings* (pp. 334–341). New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Husserl, E. (1952). *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie II. Husserliana IV*. The Hague: Nijhoff.
- Husserl, E. (1976). *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie I. Husserliana III/1*. The Hague: Nijhoff.
- Husserl, E. (2006). *Späte Texte über Zeitkonstitution (1929–1934). Die C-Manuskripte. Husserliana Materialien VIII*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Indich, W. M. (1980). *Consciousness in Advaita Vedanta*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- James, W. (1947). *Essays in radical empiricism. A pluralistic universe*. New York, London, Toronto: Longmans, Green and Co.
- Kapleau, P. (Ed.) (1980). *The three pillars of Zen. Teaching, practice, and enlightenment*. London: Rider.
- Kriegel, U. (2004). Consciousness and self-consciousness. *The Monist*, 87(2), 182–205.
- Laycock, S. W. (1994). *Mind as mirror and the mirroring of mind. Buddhist reflections on Western phenomenology*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Laycock, S. W. (1999). Consciousness it/self. In S. Gallagher, & J. Shear (Eds.) *Models of the self* (pp. 395–406). Thorverton: Imprint Academic.
- Loy, D. (1988). *Nonduality. A study in comparative philosophy*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Lutz, A., Dunne, J. D., & Davidson, R. J. (2007). Meditation and the neuroscience of consciousness. An introduction. In P. D. Zelazo, M. Moscovitch, & E. Thompson (Eds.) *The Cambridge handbook of consciousness* (pp. 499–551). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- MacKenzie, M. D. (2007). The illumination of consciousness. Approaches to self-awareness in the Indian and Western traditions. *Philosophy East and West*, 57(1), 40–62.
- Madell, G. (1988). *Mind and materialism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Moore, G. E. (1922). *Philosophical papers*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Münsterberg, H. (1900). *Grundzüge der Psychologie, vol 1*. Leipzig: Johann Ambrosius Barth.
- Nagel, T. (1979). What is it like to be a bat? In *Mortal questions* (pp. 165–180). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Naranjo, C., & Ornstein, R. E. (1972). *On the psychology of meditation*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Organ, T. W. (1964). *The self in Indian philosophy*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Papineau, D. (1995). The antipathetic fallacy and the boundaries of consciousness. In T. Metzinger (Ed.) *Conscious experience* (pp. 259–270). Thorverton, Paderborn: Imprint Academic, mentis.
- Pothast, U. (1971). *Über einige Fragen der Selbstbeziehung*. Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann.
- Puligandla, R. (1970). Phenomenological reduction and yogic meditation. *Philosophy East and West*, 20(1), 19–33.
- Radhakrishnan, S., & Moore, C. A. (Eds.) (1957). *A source book in Indian philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Rao, K. R. (1998). Two faces of consciousness. A look at Eastern and Western perspectives. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 5(3), 309–327.
- Rao, K. R. (2002). *Consciousness studies. Cross-cultural perspectives*. Jefferson, London: McFarland.
- Rao, K. R. (2005). Perception, cognition and consciousness in classical Hindu psychology. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 12(3), 3–30.
- Rinofner-Kreidl, S. (2003). *Mediane Phänomenologie. Subjektivität im Spannungsfeld von Naturalität und Kulturalität*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann.
- Rosenthal, D. M. (1997). A theory of consciousness. In N. Block, O. Flanagan, & G. Güzeldere (Eds.) *The nature of consciousness. Philosophical debates* (pp. 729–753). Cambridge, London: MIT.
- Rudd, A. J. (1998). What it's like and what's really wrong with physicalism. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 5(4), 454–463.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1956). *Being and nothingness. An essay on phenomenological ontology*. New York: Philosophical Library.
- Sastri, D. M. (1999). *Sri Maharshi's way. A translation and commentary on Upadesa Saram*. Tiruvannamalai: Sri Ramanasraman.
- Schwartz, J. M., & Clark, B. (2006). *Theravada Buddhist meditation*. In Y. Shear (Ed.) *The experience of meditation. Experts introduce the major traditions* (pp. 119–144). St. Paul: Paragon.
- Searle, J. R. (1992). *The rediscovery of the mind*. Cambridge, London: MIT.
- Sekida, K. (1985). *Zen training. Methods and philosophy*. New York, Tokyo: Weatherhill.

- Shankara (1978). *Crest-jewel of discrimination (Viveka-Chudamani)*. Hollywood: Vedanta.
- Sharma, A. (1993). *The experiential dimension of Advaita Vedanta*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Shear, J. (1990). *The inner dimension. Philosophy and the experience of consciousness*. New York et al.: Peter Lang.
- Shear, J. (Ed.) (2006). *The experience of meditation. Experts introduce the major traditions*. St. Paul: Paragon.
- Shear, J., & Jevning, R. (1999). Pure consciousness. Scientific exploration of meditation techniques. In F. Varela, & J. Shear (Eds.) *The view from within. First-person approaches to the study of consciousness* (pp. 189–209). Thorverton: Imprint Academic.
- Smith, D. W. (1986). The structure of (self-) consciousness. *Topoi*, 5, 149–156.
- Stace, W. T. (1961). *Mysticism and philosophy*. London: Macmillan.
- Suzuki, S. (1970). *Zen mind, beginner's mind. Informal talks on Zen meditation and practice*. New York, Tokyo: Weatherhill.
- Thomasson, A. L. (2000). After Brentano. A one-level theory of consciousness. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 8(2), 190–209.
- Thomasson, A. L. (2006). Self-awareness and self-knowledge. *Psyche*, 12(2), 1–15.
- Thompson, E. (2006). Neurophenomenology and contemplative experience. In P. Clayton, & Z. Simpson (Eds.) *The Oxford handbook of science and religion* (pp. 226–235). New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Thompson, E. (2007). Look again. Phenomenology and mental imagery. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 6(4), 137–170.
- Varela, F. J., Thompson, E., & Rosch, E. (1991). *The embodied mind. Cognitive science and human experience*. Cambridge, London: MIT.
- Wallace, B. A. (1999). The Buddhist tradition of Samatha. Methods of refining and examining consciousness. In F. Varela, & J. Shear (Eds.) *The view from within. First-person approaches to the study of consciousness* (pp. 175–187). Thorverton: Imprint Academic.
- Wallace, B. A. (2000). *The taboo of subjectivity. Toward a new science of consciousness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Walsh, R. (1984). Initial meditative experiences. In D. H. Shapiro, & R. N. Walsh (Eds.) *Meditation. Classical and contemporary perspectives* (pp. 265–270). New York: Aldine.
- Whicher, I. (1998). Yoga and freedom. A reconsideration of Patañjali's classical Yoga. *Philosophy East and West*, 48(2), 272–322.
- Yampolsky, P. B. (1967). *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Zahavi, D. (1999). *Self-awareness and alterity. A phenomenological investigation*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Zahavi, D. (2005). *Subjectivity and selfhood. Investigating the first-person perspective*. Cambridge, London: MIT.